Lurking as a mode of listening in social media: motivations-based typologies

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Abstract

Purpose – In this study, the authors aim to probe the relationship between listening and lurking and discuss types of lurking that occur on social media sites based on the motivations driving them. Although listening is a significant practice of online attention, intimacy, connection, obligation and participation as much as voice is, it is yet to receive the kind of attention voice is given in the context of social media. In the rather limited studies on online attention, the concept that has gained consideration is "lurking", and this practice has often been treated as a derogatory non-activity or as passivity. The interest to study lurking is based on the premise that lurking is a significant ground on which listening occurs in social media and through which voice can be given attention.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopted a phenomenological approach to understand motivations for lurking in online spaces. Phenomenological research involves data gathering through inductive, qualitative methods with the aim of explaining specific phenomena from the perspective of research participants. In this research, the lived experience studied was lurking and what drives lurking. A total of 12 members of the Licence to Talk project, a research project based at the School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, South Africa, took part in the study. They shared their personal experiences of online lurking through a critical reflective writing. Based on the experiences shared, the authors identified and categorised the various types of lurking based on the varied motivations driving them.

Findings – Through the phenomenological approach, the study has theorised a more useful understanding of lurking as a form of online listening by identifying and categorising seven lurking behaviours that are nested within the lurking activity. This study, thus, provides a tentative framework for studying online lurking by bringing to bear listening theory and by reasoning that lurking is a needs-based activity that has purpose imbedded within it.

Research limitations/implications – The authors recognise that this study is limited by its small number of participants. Nevertheless, as researchers with a strong grounding in listening theory, the authors thought it valuable to interrogate their own practices on social media and to develop a more useful understanding of what lurking might entail and, on the lurking-listening relationship. A larger study would provide stronger evidence to test the hypothesis about lurking as a very interesting form of listening with a relationship to complex behaviours and needs.

Introduction

Digital media research has often focused on voice (metaphorically used here to mean expression), most conceivably because of the philosophy underpinning the creation of digital/social media, which is to facilitate the creation or sharing of information, ideas and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks (Obar & Wildman, 2015). The attention given to voice has largely relegated listening to the background, although listening is central to any kind of communication, including social media discourse. Listening is "an effort to make room for a variety of expressions which may surprise and challenge" (Bickford, 1996, p. 154). It is a conscious determination to pay attention to information, speaker or content for meaning or substance. And according to Bickford's definition, the information obtained from listening could potentially cause the listener to change their opinions or thoughts or cause them to consider other possibilities of an issue.

Listening is as important as voice or speaking. It is, in fact, related to the concept of the "right to be understood" for the reason that "a collective right to be heard and understood has a more far-reaching reform than the individualistic claims for the right" (O'Donnell, 2009, p. 425) "to utter, to publish, [and] to broadcast" (Husband, 2009, p. 441). According to Lacey (2013), although the act of listening, which is implicit in the word "audience", is seldom acknowledged, listening is at the core of communication and public life and is crucial to any communication, including mediated communication.

Study significance

Although listening is "a significant practice of intimacy, connection, obligation and participation online" (Crawford, 2009, p. 527) as much as voice is, it is yet to receive the kind of attention voice is given in the context of social media research. The concept that has gained research consideration is "lurking". This term, for those who are present in online spaces, but who do not post or leave traces of their opinions and feelings, has been treated as a derogatory practice. Crawford (2009) says that "lurking" connotes being *passively* present in public online spaces and this attitude fails to sufficiently explain the varying experiences, degrees and modes of attention in the online sphere. In 1996 when online communities became a feature of the internet, Kollock and Smith described these participants as "free-riders" and "non-contributing, resource-taking members". There have been attempts to substitute the name lurkers with "peripheral participants" (Zhang & Storck, 2001) and "non-public participants" (Nonnecke & Preece, 2003), in a bid to make the activity less disparaging.

There are also researchers [mostly those who are interested in how human-computer interfaces promote interactions on the internet, such as Osatuyi (2015)] who take issue with the Kollock and Smith terms. Bishop (2007) developed a framework to understand the complicated drives and desires which lie behind lurking but did so for the purposes of persuading such people to participate and involve themselves visibly. Other researchers have recognised that like the "silent majority" in life, those who lurk online do constitute the majority population and have many nuanced reasons for their non-engaging, non-visible behaviours. The negativity associated with lurking is interrogated and an appeal made to understand the personal, situational, technological and community-based reasons why lurkers choose not to engage overtly (Popovac & Fullwood, 2019; Nonnecke & Preece 2000;

Preece *et al.*, 2004). Edelmann (2013) goes further in reclaiming lurking as a positive practice and links it to listening, while Dennen (2007), researching this behaviour by students on online learning platforms, links it to an old and very acceptable practice from legacy media and book publishing – "reading". All these researchers consider lurking a complex activity worth studying and understanding and unworthy of its negative associations.

In our view, lurking is a kind of silence in online communication, because it leaves no traces of "voice", "agreement", "disagreement", "involvement" etc. The theorists of silence talk about how difficult it is rhetorically to interpret silence because it can mean such a range of responses from indifferent, disengaged, resistant, refusing through to in agreement (Ferguson, 2003; Glenn, 2002). They insist that each rhetorical situation must be interpreted using its cues, and it is not possible to interpret silence generally for a meaning across situations. Interpretation of silence is helped when the communication is face to face because the body and face of the listener are always also used to interpret responses, but online, the face and body are missing and the electronic traces are so few or none at all that are visible to others using the platform that interpretation is greatly hampered. In these cases, it has become common sense to assume that this means a negative reaction or indifference to the communication, but the silence theorists push us to understand the great complexity in interpreting silences and to withhold this rush to judgement.

Porten-Cheé and Eilders (2015) lean on the "spiral of silence" idea proposed by Neuman-Noelle which says that people don't speak up if their views are not in the majority, however our research shows that people have multiple motivations when they are lurking (not speaking up) "politically", yet within social media (i.e. WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) users may be silent (lurk) for varies reasons. Consequently, this study takes the stance that lurking behaviour in social media is grounded in specific motivations and can have positive connotations.

Our interest in lurking is based on the premise that lurking is a significant ground on which listening occurs in social media and through which voice can be given attention. We argue that lurkers have agency and the agency results from the motivation to keep silent and to listen to assess the "voices" on social media. When listeners lurk, they have specific reasons for doing so, we argue. As a significant and critical part of social media engagement (although somewhat invisible and inaudible), we believe that lurking is consciously done with intent and should not be merely considered as passively or apathetically being present online. Thus, our interest is in understanding these behaviours through a listening frame as it pertains to lurking interaction within social media platforms. Our study is thus important because it provides an empirical and theoretical/conceptual basis for further investigations into this pervasive mode of online attention.

Study objectives and research questions
In this study we reflect on our own experiences with lurking and studies that have come out of listening research, we probe the relationship between listening and lurking and discuss the types of lurking we have engaged in on social media (i.e. WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) based on the motivations driving them. Thus, this article addresses two questions: What is the relationship between lurking and listening? and; what are the various types of online lurking (listening) based on the motivations driving them?

Literature review
Lurking as a form of listening in social media
Consuming social media content without direct exchanges, for instance scrolling through news feeds and reading or viewing posts (Verduyn *et al.*, 2015) is considered "passive" social media usage. The act of consuming social media content without direct exchanges is what we refer to in this study as lurking. Lurking has also been defined by Varis (2014) as "invisible

observation, connoting that those who lurk do not register their presence in the online space but observe the goings-on without other participants knowing or realising that they are present online. Accordingly, the online Jargon-Dictionary (2001) defines a "lurker" to be "one of the "silent majority" in a[n] electronic forum; one who posts occasionally or not at all but is known to read the group's postings regularly. This definition suggests a clear picture of what lurking is: non-participation or occasional participation in an online group. We contend, however, that non-participation does not mean inactivity, as lurkers tend to read posts by others and possibly react to them in other ways, instead of commenting or providing direct feedback or responses online. Besides, if lurking is considered a listening activity, it means that lurkers have a reason to listen in and consequently benefit from lurking.

Nonnecke and Preece (2001) consider lurking to be a usual practice among social media users and not assigned or dedicated to a select group because almost every social media user lurks at one point in time. Having been identified as accounting for participation inequality, lurking can be explained by the 1:9:90 rule, with 90 representing the 90% of online users who do not actively contribute to online discussions and content; nine representing the 9% of users who may contribute by way of commenting, liking or editing occasionally; and one representing 1% of users who create much of social media content (Garfield, 2020). With limited studies on lurkers as compared to social media participants who post content, react or comment on post, there is an obvious bias prevailing in the study of online communities, evidenced by the 1:9:99 rule, indicating that minimal attention is being given to the silent majority of lurkers (Tagarelli & Interdonato, 2014) who listen in social media spaces.

Undoubtedly, lurkers provide audiences for content posted on social media. It can, accordingly, be assumed that content lurkers consume may influence their actions in real life and other online activities. According to Govender, the amount of attention given to social media content by lurkers and the extent to which content consumed influence their offline lives "suggest that the choice to lurk is far more active than assumed" (Govender, 2017, p. 2). Therefore, it is important to understand how lurkers relate with content on social media and what they gain from listening in (lurking) on social media (why they lurk). This understanding could be the basis on which suitable online spaces can be designed for "non/less-active participants" in online groups and spaces. Besides, without a good understanding of why lurkers lurk, it results in an incomplete appreciation of the dynamics within online groups. Also, since many online participants have the tendency to lurk, ignoring, dismissing or misunderstanding lurking distorts the comprehensive appreciation of life online (Nonnecke & Preece, 2001), necessitating attention being given to why lurkers lurk and to the different types of lurking that occur in the digital sphere.

Theoretical framework: active-passive use of social media (the active-passive model)

Cross sectional studies have found that the more users consumed social media content, such as those found on Facebook without direct exchanges, the worse they felt about life and their subjective well-being over time (Kross *et al.*, 2013; Krasnova, Wenninger, Widjaja, & Buxmann, 2013). An experimental study by Verduyn *et al.* (2015) found that while this is true, "passive" Facebook usage (i.e. consuming Facebook content without direct exchanges or in a less active manner) has a delayed, and not instant, impact on affective wellbeing. This means that, by extension, affective wellbeing will decline when non/less-active users of social networking sites ruminate on information they consume without direct exchanges (lurking).

Drawing from results of previous studies, the Active-Passive Model suggests that passive or non-active consumption of social networking sites (SNSs) leads to negative wellbeing, the opposite being true (Verduyn, Ybarra, Résibois, Jonides, & Kross, 2017). But Verduyn, Gugushvili, and Kross (2022) propose a revised model (Extended Active-Passive Model) arguing that previous studies predicting negative consequences of passive/less active use of

SNSs may not have been grounded properly to make such claims. They submit that non-active consumption of SNS does not necessarily lead to negative wellbeing since active use is not always beneficial and passive use is also not always detrimental for well-being.

In this study, we argue that at the time of lurking (i.e. consuming social media content without direct exchanges), lurkers have certain motivations and needs they intend to fulfil. Lurking is therefore done to achieve certain ends, the consequences of which may be positive rather than purely negative. Again, we argue that associating lurking with passivity means lurkers are assumed to have not have agency or motive, and that is why it is assumed that lurking leads to negative consequences. The Extended Passive-Active Model, thus, provides evidence that lurking is not necessarily passive, but a conscious choice made by social media users to realise certain needs. This study, therefore, offers additional decomposition dimensions of the so-called passive use of social media, which may also explain the relationship between social media use and well-being – that lurking is a conscious attempt to listen in online spaces and is grounded in positive motivations and therefore likely to have positive outcomes.

Methods
This study adopted the phenomenological approach to understand motivations for lurking in online spaces. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that focuses on studying individuals' lived experiences within the world (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). In this research, the lived experience studied was lurking and what drives lurking.

Data collection techniques
Phenomenological research involves data gathering through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions and participant observation, with the aim to explain specific phenomena from the perspective of research participant(s) (Lester, 1999, p. 1). This study used the critical reflection/reflective approach to collect data from participants. Specifically, participants were asked to do a reflective writing on their experiences with lurking and what motivates their lurking behaviour. They were given a week to do so and to email their write-ups to the principal investigators.

Critical reflection/reflective writing is usually used by researchers to reflect on their practices and to recount their experiences with a phenomenon. The use of oral or written reflections and its use within qualitative research as a data source and within the analytical processes is a well-documented data collection method (Mohan, 2020; Morley, 2008). Thus, the approach has increasingly become acknowledged as central to methodological processes within qualitative research studies, with some arguing that this approach must be recognised as an essential part of qualitative methodology (Jasper, 2005). This study found it worthy to use the critical reflective approach to give participants enough room to reflect on and to recount their experiences with lurking and the motivations driving it, without any form of influence that may occur in an interview or focus group discussion.

Participants
It has been proposed that the ideal sample size for a phenomenological study is between 30 to 50 participants when using semi-structured interviews as a data collection technique, while using unstructured interviews is said to usually involve a relatively small number of participants (Morse, 2015, p. 1318). Literature on phenomenology based on critical reflective writing is yet to have any prescription regarding number of participants. Nonetheless, Morse (2000) argues that the sample size used for a phenomenological study largely depends on the purpose of the study. Yet again, Ellis (2016) suggests that a sample of between 6 and 20 individuals is sufficient for phenomenological research (Ellis, 2016).

In this study, a total of 12 members of the Licence to Talk project, a research project based at the School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, South Africa [1], took part in the study. This number was considered appropriate because all participants shared a common understanding of what lurking is and as defined in the study, which was a prerequisite for taking part in the study. This was achieved through their regular meetings to share and discuss literature on lurking as well as their personal experiences with lurking. Besides, the study being exploratory, it did not necessarily require many participants. Thus, going by Ellis's (2016) assumption, a sample size of 12 was thought to be adequate to explore the typologies of lurking behaviour based on motivations. Also, each participant involved in the study was a frequent user of WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and engaged in lurking behaviour from time-to-time. WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are listed as some of the frequently used social networking sites/applications in the region they were based (Statista, 2021).

Participants reflected on their past and present practices of lurking and the motivations behind the practice. Some of the experiences shared through the team's regular meetings were noted and later incorporated into the analysis. However, as a primary data collection technique, participants wrote down narratives of their past and present experiences with lurking, why they lurked and the benefits they gained from lurking. These were sent via emails to principal investigators and later thematically analysed. Conceptualisations regarding the motivations-based typologies of lurking which are being proposed in this study were inductively generated from data analysis and guided by relevant literature.

Results: types of lurking

It is generally assumed lurking is a non-active pastime, but we were interested in whether lurking could present itself as a conscious mode of online attention and participation rather than a passive activity. We were also interested in whether "lurking" had a relationship to listening in the way it is conceived within listening theory as an active role and activity. Much as there is an internal and/or external need-based motivation for online participation (Freeland & Atiso, 2015), so is motivation at the core of listening. Therefore, behind the choice to lurk is a motivation. In order to arrive at a considerable appreciation of this non-active-but-conscious mode of online participation and attention, we turned our attention inward to our own behaviours to theorise a more useful understanding of lurking and listening. Categorising our lurking behaviours online as well as referring to previous research on listening on social media, we came up with the following types of behaviour that are nested within the lurking activity:

(1) Leisure/pleasure-motivated lurking

(2) Current affairs-motivated lurking

(3) Curiosity-motivated lurking

(4) Anxiety-motivated lurking

(5) Opinion detachment-motivated lurking

(6) Cognitive apprenticeship-motivated lurking

(7) Political participation/activism-motivated lurking

These types of lurking are not distinct from each other; many can be present in one instance of social media use. It is also important to note that behaviour does not map onto one researcher, but these types emerge across behaviours as consistent.

Leisure/pleasure-motivated lurking

This mode of lurking is borne out of wanting to do away with boredom, the desire for entertainment or passing time and not wanting online networks to realise or notice one's

presence or, simply, not registering one's presence online. It typically starts off with a social media user wanting to fulfil a desire to alter a monotonous activity or routine to gain some excitement or pleasurable feeling. With this impetus, a social media user goes on social media, looking out for specific posts which have features that will offer or satisfy the pleasure being sought; he then reads them, listens to them or watches them for pleasure.

According to a participant who wrote on how this mode of online attention (listening) is carried out:

> It can be likened to someone walking into a room. They survey everything happening there, then, settling on those who have something amusing to offer to them, they follow them around (or, at least, their eyes follow them) waiting for them to do something that will entertain them – Study participant

Similarly, the leisure/pleasure motivated lurker upon logging on social media, surveys the space ("room") and knowing what almost every person has to offer, summons specific posts of other social media participants that will help satisfy the pleasure he is in search of. Likening it to the case of legacy media, when someone wants to have a good laugh by watching a movie, for example, they would flip through television channels until they get to the channel which has movie content. The viewer may even decide to settle on a particular genre, depending on what kind of emotions they want to feel or what excites them at that point. This is not different from pleasure/leisure-motivated lurking on social media. If social media lurkers with this motivation want to have a good laugh, they consciously scan through posts, and give attention to the ones that they reckon will make them laugh, taking a cue from the titles/headings and ignoring the ones that do not come across as holding the potential to give them the kind of pleasure they seek at that moment.

Social media network users, who are in the habit of posting funny content or pleasure-related content, are likely to attract leisure/pleasure-motivated lurkers to their pages. This is because lurkers motivated by pleasure or leisure visit such pages or look out for specific posts by particular social media users who are in the habit of posting funny or entertainment content. For example, a WhatsApp user who usually posts funny content on her status is likely to attract another user who is feeling bored and wanting to have a good laugh by watching WhatsApp statuses. The lurker may not comment on any of the statuses viewed, even though she finds the content amusing and laughs so hard about them privately, neither will she publicly share anything on her status for others to view. The one who posted it will also not know how the lurker reacted to it because the lurker opted not to give any feedback by commenting. The lurker was able to satisfy her pleasure and very much benefitted from viewing the status of the active social media participant, but the lurker may not be regarded as an active participant on social media due to her silence (non-perceivable reactions) when online.

Lurkers also read comments and people's reactions to posts. These become additional pleasurable content for them to indulge themselves in. As "conscious" lurkers, they react to posts in ways that are not noticeable to other social media users or participants but in ways that are obvious to those who are physically present with them. They laugh about funny posts, comment on them, let those physically present with them also watch them, read them out to them or possibly forward the same to others privately. These are some of the ways they react to posts in the "privacy" of their physical environment but opaque and obscure to those online.

Current affairs-motivated lurking
This type of lurking is mostly motivated by the quest to familiarise oneself with or get to know what is happening by way of news and current affairs. The social media user who lurks with this motivation gives attention to posts with news content. Current affairs-motivated

lurkers purposively go to social media pages that post news content, such as social media pages of news organisations. They also get to read news stories on their timelines if they follow social media pages of some news organisations. Apart from reading stories or posts, the reactions/comments on posts become another source of information for them:

> I read them to understand meanings people make of the stories shared. Through those commentaries, I also get additional information that help put the stories in the right perspective or context, should I have missed out on previous stories which may be related to current stories being read – Study participant.

Although they may have their personal opinions or views on stories, current affairs-motivated lurkers typically do not comment or react to posts, so what they make of the stories are not made known to other readers, unlike those who openly comment on stories on social media. Sometimes, some of the stories and views may sound unrealistic to them; they sometimes read stories with scepticism; however, they do not express their views and reactions online. Lurkers can have extensive discussions with offline networks on news stories shared on social media; they put up counter arguments, run commentary on the comments and reactions of people, among others However, they hardly openly do that in the social media space. They rather do that with offline networks.

Curiosity-motivated lurking

Curiosity-motivated lurking emanates from inquisitiveness. Such lurkers largely want to keep tabs on what their physical and social media contacts are up to. Social media profiles and posts are like an open book of people's activities, so curiosity-motivated lurking is an easy means of obtaining information about what contacts, long-lost friends and even people one does not have close relations are up to, on the basis of what they post online. Typically, the offline (physical) networks are people that the lurkers have been out of touch with over a period. Leaning on the affordances of social media, lurkers go online in search of them to know where they are and to get acquainted with what they have been up to. They go to the pages of these networks (social media friends), read their profiles, look through their pictures, their posts, statuses and make their own assumptions. Just like the other motivations for lurking, these lurkers do not comment on posts but may discuss what they make of the posts with those physically present with them or when they meet other offline networks.

> Picture this: you are sitting quietly in a dark corner of a busy room. You are warm and comfortable in the corner, and except for an inconspicuous outline of your face, there is absolutely no way of telling who you really are. You watch some of the people you know and have known walk through the room, making conversations, sharing parts of themselves, sharing achievements, ideas and photos with everyone else. You peek every now and then, trying to make sure that you see what those in the room have to offer and to understand what it is they are trying to communicate. The feeling of knowing what people are feeling, thinking and doing without having to ask or being forced to share the same information in return intrigues you. – Study participant

The scenario above is how curiosity-motivated lurking works as described by one of the participants of this study. The busy room is social media and the person sitting in the dark corner of the busy room is the lurker.

Paradoxically, what is posted on social media as the basis of making assumptions about people's lives and activities may not necessarily be a true reflection of reality. For example, due to the two-dimensional nature of photographs and the predominantly "positive" photos one chooses to post on their social media pages, social media users only represent certain aspects of an event which is both curated and performed for an audience. Accordingly, a participant wrote:

For example: a Facebook user is sitting behind her laptop screen in her pajamas. She has not brushed her teeth or hair in days. She has biscuit crumbs on her cardigan from another day spent comfort eating in bed. She is feeling depressed, insecure, hopeless, lonely and numb. In attempt to feel better, she logs in to her Facebook account and updates her profile picture. In the new profile picture, she is standing with her friends in a nightclub, arms raised to the ceiling in apparent excitement. She is smiling widely and appears healthy and happy. Despite the Facebook user's present physical and mental state, in her profile photo, she chooses to depict her ideal state of being that her friends' will hopefully perceive as her current reality. She is very much aware that her friends may visit her page out of curiosity, and it is important to keep up a certain appearance for them.

Obviously, Facebook users' digital stories may be disconnected from their reality, including their psychological, emotional, physical and mental state of mind, and may not be an adequate reflection of their current circumstances. However, curiosity-motivated lurkers go on social media pages to satisfy themselves with what their networks have been up to, even though it may only be a false impression.

Anxiety-motivated lurking
The lack of confidence to actively participate online could render some people lurking ofttimes rather than posting or commenting in social media spaces. For example, in WhatsApp groups, some participants read posts, but may not respond to them because they may be somewhat overwhelmed with other participants' comments or they basically get lost in reading other comments and simply let go of theirs. Lack of confidence could also stem from uncertainties about how one's comments or posts would be received by other members in the online community. Besides, sometimes, people fail to catch up on posts early enough to comment when the level of interest of participants is obvious and rife. If posts are read late, such people may opt not to comment because they assume the level of interest has died down.

Also, some people may be stunned by the online culture and may not count themselves as being able to fit in well with the culture and competent enough to engage in the online culture and thus simply remain lurkers, reading, watching and observing the happenings in the online space. They generally lack confidence to comment online and prefer to run commentary on what happens online within the familiar offline culture and with offline networks they are used to and comfortable with. For others, it is the fear of having their comments shutdown or feeling they do not have something worthy to contribute to an online group.

You have seen people being permanently cancelled from the room and even the worlds outside of it because of ideas and thoughts they shared many years before they knew better. So even when there is a trinket you are interested in you capture it quietly and leave the room with as little trace as possible to ensure that your ghost remains an empty silhouette of a person. – Study participant

Opinion detachment-motivated lurking
Sometimes, the cost of posting or commenting freely on social media could be enormous, causing many to simply lurk rather than become active participants on social media. This is because social media spaces, as eventful and seemingly active as they are, are as equally static as a room can be. Thus, long after one has grown, learned from previous mistakes, changed or died, the ghosts of one's life which once existed on social media are left hanging on the walls of that space, waiting to be summoned by anyone with an interest. There are many instances when social media users have been denied or lost out on opportunities due to what they posted online, although they may have possibly changed their minds about them. A celebrated Disney director, James Gunn, for example, was fired in 2018 over social media posts he made between 2009 and 2010, that is, nearly a decade earlier.

Many people avoid posting in overly politicised social media spaces or social media platforms where one's views may be easily ideologically or politically categorised. As social media posts become "a theoretical open book into one's state of mind, opinions, religion, personality and social connections" (Elgan, 2017, para. 26), albeit sometimes only an erroneous impression, many people may rather exercise caution, restrain themselves or shy away from publicly sharing their opinions or posting on social media when it comes to highly sensitive issues like politics. Although individuals may have their personal political views and ideological stances, they restrain themselves from delving into such issues discussed on social media. Opinion detachment-motivated lurkers commonly avoid sharing their political views on social media or posting things which may easily give an indication of their stance or position on something of political nature.

According to a participant who lurked on political posts rather than openly express her views on them within the social media sphere, "*a lot of the time, social media users put tags on individuals based on their comments*." So, when it comes to political posts, even though opinion-detachment motivated lurkers read them and possibly share their views with those physically present with them, they hardly comment within the social media environment to avoid being needlessly labelled. Such lurkers may take that stance because of the nature of profession they find themselves in which makes any slightest demonstration of their political stance to possibly work against them. Hence, they do not want to be publicly associated with any political party and conceivably want to be regarded as neutral to avoid being branded or labelled. The best way of demonstrating that, to them, is not actively engaging in political and ideological discussions on social media, even though they have their personal views. They thus tend to lurk rather than be active participants on social media. Although they lurk online and their reactions to posts may not be obvious to those online, they react to posts in the privacy as well as the publicness of wherever they physically find themselves and not in the online environment where whatever is posted has a longer shelf life.

They may have extensive discussions with their offline networks on political news stories shared on social media, run commentary on the comments and reactions of people, but they do so decisively, taking account of having a good sense of who is present with them. On social media, one can never tell who will chance on a post and use it to make assessment and decisions, sometimes inaccurately. The online networks/friends of opinion detachment-motivated lurkers may have an indication that they are online, but they are not likely to have a sense of what they do because they do not show it online. So, even though those physically present with them get to see their reactions to posts and get to hear their commentary on posts and possibly know their political stance, their online networks do not.

Cognitive apprenticeship-motivated lurking

While some studies have identified lurkers principally based on their non-participation (Neelen & Fetter, 2010; Nonnecke, Andrews, & Preece, 2006), Lave and Wenger (1999) regard lurking behaviour in a community of practice as a form of cognitive apprenticeship, which can be perceived as legitimate peripheral participation. So, while in an online community, even though peripheral members like the cognitive apprenticeship lurkers may be less visible, they benefit from knowledge exchange and contribute as much as no peripheral members (Zhang & Storck, 2001). Cognitive apprenticeship-motivated lurking is watching or observing online activities and interactions with the purpose of gathering specific data, analysing it and making meaning of it in order to answer an empirical or practical problem or to add on to knowledge.

This type of lurking is legitimate and beneficial because it is a quest for knowledge based on which pertinent decisions and further knowledge can be made and obtained for human and social development. An example is the opportunity a then master's student

(now a member of the Licence to Talk project team and a participant of this study) had spending 30 months of her time on social media (Instagram), under the academic guise of gathering data as part of her master's thesis. With the online world reimaging physical cultural norms, using Instagram as her virtual-café-study site was a worthy idea which shed light on the uniqueness of culture that is lived there.

Conducting research in online social media spaces sometimes requires the researcher to lurk in order to understand what goes on there in its natural settings. In that instance the researcher has no choice than to lurk. According to a participant who engaged in this type of lurking:

> Following in the footsteps of other online ethnographers, I initially adopted the role of 'lurker.' In so doing, I could be certain my presence in no way altered the behavior of those I observed. – Study participant

However, because data retrieved in the process of online observations are that of individuals and their habits on social media, it is important for researchers to comply with ethical data practices. If it is an online closed group that is being studied, the researcher needs to brief the group members or, at least, the administrator of the group prior to the study.

In the participant's Instagram study, it was not a closed group that was studied, so obtaining permission was not a major issue of concern; however, the researcher ensured that her personal preferences did not influence the subject matter (Ferguson, 2017, p. 689). In being sensitive to the risk of bias in data collection, resulting from Instagram algorithm which displays posts based on: the level of engagement, past behaviour, how recently the post was shared; and the frequency of logging on and level of engagement (Cooper, 2020), an attempt to prevent the data from being too heavily influenced by her personal online habits, five other accounts were used to aid the process. She created three new Instagram accounts, as well as used her already existent account and her 23-year-old sister's account. The process involved entering #BlackGirlMagic into the Instagram search engine which then populated all the posts containing the hashtag, both in the original post or as part of the comments. From this she was able to identify themes and create meaning.

Cognitive apprenticeship-motivated lurking is very useful because it affords researchers the opportunity to conduct pertinent empirical studies to obtain evidence for societal behaviour. This contributes and adds on to knowledge and to societal development which, ultimately, goes a long way to empower humanity. Consequently, both lurkers and active social media participants benefit from this type of lurking.

Political participation/activism-motivated lurking
Lurking on social media could also be informed by lurkers wanting to familiarise themselves with issues at the centre of political protests or social activism in a careful, silent and measured manner in order to decide whether to participate in an activist movement/protests or not. By critically listening in on social media, the lurker is able to arm herself adequately with the right information and has a clear sense of what the activism/protests are about and consequently makes an informed decision to partake in protests, be it online or offline. In this instance, lurking gives lurkers the opportunity to acquire the awareness, content and consciousness needed to be able to participate (have voice) in any kind of political or social activism. This is because in order to be analytical and to convincingly and actively voice that position or "criticism", be it on social media or offline, one first needs to be conscious and aware of the subject matter that they are forming an opinion about" (Govender, 2017, p. 132).

Social media lurking, in this instance, political participation/activism-motivated lurking becomes a pertinent and effective means to get people interested in a social cause to listen in, learn and to carry online content to offline spaces through protests. It also provides a platform

for people to listen in and gather information about the ideas behind a protest or political or social activism and to decide whether to join or not. For example, during the 2015 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests, some students of Rhodes University took a conscious decision to lurk on social media before participating in the protests. Lurking afforded those who opted to do so the information they needed to be more conscious and critical of the shortcomings of the institution they were part of (Kazeem, 2016) and around which the protests revolved. Armed with all the relevant information through listening in to all the various sides of arguments in favour of and against protests by way of lurking, lurkers also became more critical of the issues they were protesting about. Online content they lurked on became the basis for partaking in offline protests and/or online protests.

Political participation/activism-motivated lurking during protests also helps protesters to stay abreast of protest progress and to learn from what is being discussed online. Those who do not have the confidence to put themselves out in public, although they are in support of a protest, lurk in order to know how protests are going. Anxieties about the extent to which they will be protected should they join offline protest also account for political participation/ activism-motivated lurking. In the Rhodes University protests Carissa Govender found that: "*apart from avoiding speaking online, many students avoided offline protest activities because of fear*." Such students predominantly lurked to keep up to date with happenings because they were in support of the protests, despite their fear of participation.

Essentially, political participation/activism-motivated lurking becomes a means of listening in to what is being discussed online which informs actions protestors or activists take offline or online in the spirit of activism and/or protests. Moreover, during online protests, when participants voice their concerns, lurkers become the audience (listeners) to those who speak online. This, in a way, authenticates and empowers the protesters (Govender, 2017).

Discussion

In social media, much as participation (talking/voice) occurs, so does listening. This is because "discussion itself requires a pattern of call and response, with turn-taking and listening being as important as contributing thoughts to the dialogue" (Dennen, 2007, p. 1625). So, while social media contributes to activities of participation (Isin & Nielsen, 2008), such as posting, liking and commenting, lurking holds a great potential to be an indication of an active state of listening (Dreher, 2010) that occurs and which is a crucial part of communication. Lurking as a form of online participation (listening) is a principal means through which "an online group can benefit from its members" (Nonnecke, 2000, p. 6) by giving attention to online content. Therefore, sharing content on social media should not be the sole pointer of participation.

Although lurking is largely considered to be non-active online participation and lurkers non-active and non-public online participants, lurking is often driven by the desire to listen in to fulfil a need. In certain instances, as in the case of participation/activism-motivated lurking, the need is public-focused and has political intentions. Consequently, a lurker benefits from this form of listening, although she does not contribute in the same moment to online/social media content or discussion. As we have demonstrated in this article, "listening [through lurking] allows for learning, it enables one to experience the other, it allows people to change their reference points and be shocked into thinking differently" (Govender, 2017, p. 128). Leisure/pleasure-motivated lurking, curiosity-motivated lurking and current affairs-motivated lurking help lurkers to fulfil their desire to pass time, learn about what people have been up to and to get informed. Cognitive apprenticeship lurking helps lurkers to obtain evidence and to understand the full extent of a situation in order to find answers to things that are unknown, to increase our understanding and make relevant suggestions for the benefit

and development of humanity or society. Political participation/activism-motivated lurking affords lurkers the opportunity to listen in to learn from the communities they lurk on and to make decisions about actions to take regarding protests or activism, whereas opinion detachment-motivated lurking, and anxiety-motivated lurking provide a means to distance oneself and yet learn from the communities lurked on.

The types of lurking discussed in this article demonstrate that as motivations and needs change; lurkers take on different types of lurking. So, a lurker cannot be simply associated with a particular type of lurking, neither are the different types of lurking designated to core groups of lurkers. It is the motivation in the moment driving the lurking activity that informs the type of lurking a lurker decides to engage in. Besides, there is no core group of social media users who are considered lurkers and another group who are considered active social media participants; even an active social media participant or user lurks sometimes. Basically, the type of lurking done is entrenched in a motivation to fulfil a need, just as active social media participation is driven by an external and/or internal motivation. Thus, all the typologies of lurking outlined above can be associated with internal and/or external needs-based motivations for online participation (Freeland & Atiso, 2015).

In addition, the fact that lurkers' online activities are not obvious to other online users does not mean they are passive consumers of social media content and completely inactive online. It needs to be acknowledged that lurkers may share and comment on social media content with other social media users privately and not openly on social media. They also react to social media posts within the offline environment with their offline networks. Also, social media algorithms recognise lurkers' online activities. It is in recognition of their online activities that personalised recommendations are made to them based on what content they have been lurking on. This shows how important they are to the social media community and the need for research attention to be directed to lurking/lurkers.

Consequently, it is not enough to merely study communication patterns of social media exchanges, such as frequency of hashtags used, how people are engaging and the quality of conversations (Govender, 2017), but it is equally important to pay attention to those who are listening in on social media content/exchanges; what meanings they make of content they lurk on; and how they benefit from listening in (lurking) online.

Conclusion
This study has provided a tentative framework for studying online lurking by bringing to bear the listening theory and by reasoning that lurking is a needs-based activity that has a purpose imbedded within. Lurking is, thus, larger than simply using up time or being mildly entertained or amused (or annoyed). We argue that if lurking is considered as a listening activity which occurs online for specific reasons, there are multiple types of lurking (of which we have distilled seven) which occur within the social media space.

Theoretical contribution and practical implications
This study has provided an important framework that fills a gap which speaks to the covert agency of lurking, highlighting another dimension of lurking, rather than associations of passivity which have been the basis on which previous empirical studies on lurking have been conducted. As an active, yet invisible mode of online attention, lurking could positively contribute to social media users' psychosocial wellbeing. Thus, the motivations-based typologies framework can benefit related literature and practices by serving as robust basis on which this listening activity within the online sphere could be explored further, while taking its possible psychosocial affordances into account.

Limitations and recommendations for future research
We recognise that this study is limited by its small number of participants. Nevertheless, as researchers with a strong grounding in listening theory, we thought it valuable to interrogate our own practices on social media and to develop a more useful understanding of what lurking might entail and, on the lurking-listening relationship. A larger study would provide stronger evidence to test our hypothesis about lurking as a very interesting form of listening with a relationship to complex behaviours and needs. Future research could also consider the relationship between the design of algorithms so as to manipulate attention – which is at the heart of the modern web's business model – and lurking. A further context for exploration would be the role that socio-political-economic structures play in affecting the agency and behaviours that lurkers may be able to draw on.

Note

1. The Licence to Talk research project focuses on using listening theory to explore ways of rethinking the over-reliance in public sphere theory and democratic theory the protection of speech. These theories, through their emphasis on voice and on their insistence that the "voiceless" speak up, tend to devalue the role of listening by the powerful. Listening theory offers a critique of the power imbalance inherent in contexts for the expressions of voice and offers practices that address this power imbalance.

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