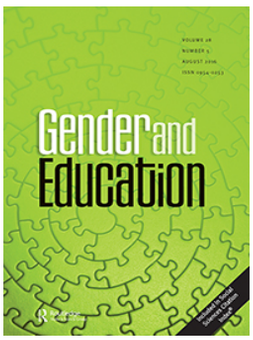

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Is feminism trending? Pedagogical approaches to countering (Sl)activism

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ABSTRACT

As they say in social media, feminism is 'trending'; feminist conversations, grassroots movements, and activism mark a fourth wave of feminist practice and theory defined by digital spaces. This article considers the effectiveness of using social media as both a course assignment and as a conduit for civic engagement. I analyse survey results of college students who used the blogging platform Tumblr in their *Introduction to Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies* courses. Data collected from the participant sample indicate that Tumblr users are connected to viewpoints different from their own and are instilled with a sense of activism they wish to incorporate in their offline lives. In conclusion, social media is a promising tool for social justice, feminist, and/or leadership-focused praxis.

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Introduction

Searching for answers after the mass shooting outside of Santa Barbara College in the spring of 2014,[1] American television pundits and journalists revisited conversations on gun accessibility and the quality of mental healthcare. People asked, 'why did this happen?' They all seemed blindsided to answers given via social media site, Twitter, by millions of users: misogyny.[2] The hashtag #YesAllWomen united people who took to a global stage to share their personal history of misogynistic experiences. Through Twitter's 140-character limit, writers publicly vocalised how unequal pay, harassment, interpersonal violence, stalking, and rape were daily occurrences in a culture of violence deeply intertwined with the subjugation of women. Twitter users linked their examples to the murderer's own rationale behind the campus shootings. In YouTube videos, the young male mass shooter ranted extensively about being ignored by all the women he encountered, who, in his eyes, chose sub-par men with whom to share their lives. In retribution for these perceived slights, he took their lives.

Whilst this paper does not delve into a conversation on violence and misogyny, I will discuss the common thread connecting hashtag #YesAllWomen and students in my introductory women's studies courses: the use of social media to create a community of awareness. Both the killer and those using the hashtag employed social media (YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, etc.) to begin an important conversation and to draw attention to

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the spectrum of misogyny. Hashtag users convened online in an effort to stymy any occurrence of future violence. Social movements have always been most effective when conducted by large oppositional groups; visibility is important to our causes, as is sharing stories to link our communities (Dobash and Dobash 2003; Lim 2012; Taylor 1989). How can we use social media to not only draw attention to feminist concerns like the wage gap, street harassment, and political rallies, but to teach those unfamiliar with feminism how to enact social change?

To answer this question, this article shares results of a study regarding undergraduate usage of social media site Tumblr as a required assignment in their *Introduction to Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies* (WGSS) course. Data indicate that those who use Tumblr are greatly connected to viewpoints different from their own and are instilled with a sense of activism to incorporate in their daily lives offline. This leads to the conclusion that social media is a promising tool to incorporate into curriculum for social justice, feminist, and/or leadership-focused praxis. Online activism cannot be defined as a lesser-than tool of civic engagement. Critics of online engagement term such activism, 'slacktivism'. They claim it has little-to-no widespread impact and, therefore, that it 'slacks' in its activist aspirations. While this study's participants somewhat agree that limits of social media exist, they also think its usage enables access to conversations, ideas, and personal stories that might otherwise go ignored.

Social media, social justice?

Tumblr, a blogging site different to many other popular social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest, stands as an alternative, potentially effective pedagogical and activist resource. Founded in 2007, Tumblr hosts just fewer than 200 million blogs.[3] As a blogging platform or website whose users work with templates to create and host their own blogs, Tumblr is highly visual and differs from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram in that it has a smaller user demographic, more equally divided among genders. Facebook and Instagram users are primarily female; Twitter has slightly more female than male users; LinkedIn, a business-networking site, has more male than female-identified users.[4] Tumblr also differs from Twitter in that users have no limits to their text length. Tweets – Twitter's name for the short posts each user sends out into the world – can only be 140 characters at maximum length.

In my *Introduction to WGSS* courses, I require all students to create a blog on Tumblr and maintain it during the 15-week semester. The blog serves not only as an artefact of their real-time learning (reflections on course readings and discussions can be posted), but also as a means to search for course-related topics written about by other Tumblr users. Students can search tags (like '#YesAllWomen') to locate users who are writing about the things they care about; they can also follow each other to broaden their perspectives about their fellow classmates. I, as the instructor, keep a course blog in which I post comments about discussions we had in class, topical news links, and campus events that might be of interest to course members.

On Tumblr, students cannot join social groups in the same way they would on Facebook, but they can follow individual users' blogs that share an individual's interests. Posts can be searched via tags, linking users – and many savvy marketing corporations – to one or two keywords. By requiring students to keep a Tumblr blog, or, in blogging

vernacular, 'a Tumblr', during the semester of their WGSS course, students are already involved in offline conversations about social justice movements and activism when not in our class environment. The assignment is fashioned to instill a sense of agency and feminist civic engagement by requiring students to blog about our course readings and discussions in time spent outside the classroom. I insist that students look for outside examples of sexism, racism, classism, etc., to include in their postings. These requirements do two things, both connected to stimulating civic engagement: it shows students our course topics are relevant inside and outside classroom environments; it provides an established, supportive online activist community.

Tumblr has the distinction of having a social justice-oriented user base. Its users routinely discuss timely events with themes of racism, sexism, ableism, etc. Tumblr is distinct in a few other areas: while its users' gender demographics are near equal, women are slightly ahead of men. Most users are also between the ages of 18 and 24. These young women are predominantly from lower class backgrounds (reporting annual family incomes between $0 and 50,000 USD), with some or no higher education. Their racial makeup varies: White, Hispanic, and African American races claim the top categories.[5] With users in the hundreds of millions and page views within the billions, a young, female, slightly working-class audience distinguishes Tumblr from its counterparts. Many political essays and blogs with male authors reach greater audiences than those essays and blogs written by women, and yet social media spaces with social justice content are termed more personal than political when its authorship and readership is female (Keller 2012).

Much like Twitter and its #YESALLWOMEN movement, Tumblr can birth a zeitgeist. During the American Presidential campaign of 2012, Republican candidate Mitt Romney attempted an appeal to female voters by remarking that he had knowledge of the struggles of working women, as he had 'binders full' of female employees. This off-the-cuff remark, made during a nationally televised debate, turned into a Tumblr blog entitled 'Binders Full of Women' within minutes of his blunder; its seemingly overnight popularity gained network news coverage.[6] Women submitted pictures of themselves to the blog, playfully – but poignantly – stuffed into life-sized binders, while concurrently urging each other to vote for a different candidate more aligned with the struggles of all types of women. A conversation, however tongue-in-cheek, began with Romney's ability, or lack thereof, to reach female voters.

Background

Critics question whether blogging, being on Facebook, or Tweeting incites social change (Bennett 2012; Lim 2013). Kristofferson, White, and Peloza, authors of an influential study on online activism, think not. They define slacktivism as a virtual, 'relatively costless display of token support' (2014, 1149) with brief shows of public support of a cause via Facebook or online petition signing. Such acts enable individuals to display their political and/or personal ideologies with other social media users. The authors distinguish a 'token support' type of online activism – signing an online petition, liking a Facebook post or group, retweeting a post, etc. – from 'meaningful support' which they define 'as consumer contributions that require a significant cost, effort, or behaviour change in ways that make tangible contributions to the cause', such as donating money, time, or skills (1150). Consequently, slacktivism is defined as all types of small, symbolic online support of a

cause (token support) whilst meaningful support can be quantified in larger measures, financial donations, and in offline spaces. Bennett claims that such token support is symbolic of the twenty-first Century 'me' generation computer users, who are too individualistic than collectivistic (2012, 28).

Lim encourages scholars to think of social media activism as a form of pop-culture proliferation, not entirely separate from the broader institutionalised media system and that struggles to 'mobilise complex political issues' (2013, 653). However, to negate the possibility of spreading awareness via social media or to confine meaningful social engagement solely to those who can afford displays of meaningful or mass-mobilised support is limiting in scope and practice. Such theories invalidate learning, reading, and listening to others' points of view as forms of civic engagement. As Kristofferson et al., Lim, and Bennett define activism in this way, their research does not consider the contextualisation of a gender-studies course and the civic engagement praxis which can stem from it. By extension, gender studies curricula, as forms of civic engagement and manifestos for activism, also are dismissed as purveyors of 'slacktivist' or 'token' support (Bargad and Hyde 1991; Bickford and Reynolds 2002; Stake and Rose 1994). A social media assignment given within context of a WGSS course provides a unique springboard unlike other forms of Internet activism.

Social media as pedagogical tool

Educators can employ social media usage to strengthen learning outcomes among their students. Twitter, as we have seen with the #YesAllWomen and #FergusonSyllabus[7] hashtags, quickly unites users around a common cause. It can provide professors with instant feedback during class (DeCosta, Clifton, and Roen 2010; Dunlap and Lowenthal 2009). It can unite educational conference-goers and share new research with outsiders (Shiffman 2012). As part of an active learning strategy, which includes face-to-face debates, reflective composition, and group projects, students can use Twitter to build informal networks and continue conversations among students and faculty outside of class (Kassens-Noor 2012). In fact, collectivistic attitudes and group problem-solving skills increase with the addition of social media to a course (Junco, Heiberger, and Loken 2011; Kassens-Noor 2012).

College student communities and peer sub-groups strengthen with the introduction of blogging and forum posting (Bold 2006; Gikas and Grant 2013; Top 2012). These virtual safe spaces expand the traditional feminist classroom enclave, or 'safe space' (Davies 2004). If younger social media users reach a large enough audience with their writing, social justice movements can spurn international change (Harlow 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012).

Gender studies as civic engagement

Piepmeier, Cantrell, and Maggio (2014) acknowledge that once feminist classroom discussion opens students' eyes to the inequalities experienced by many different individuals, it is difficult to avoid seeing inequality in spaces outside of the classroom. The authors use the example of disability; disability access or lack thereof becomes much more apparent, especially for those students who live, work, and study on a campus not fully committed or accessible for all individuals once discussed in class (2). Much like Piepmeier, Cantrell, and

Maggio, who stress the value of real-world theoretical application, Naples and Bojar (2013) combine feminist theory with feminist practice by implementing community activist projects into their undergraduate WGSS curriculum. By having their students perform service work in the community, the authors fulfill, in their words, an integral part of progressing feminist movement outside of an educational institution. This service work, in turn, aids in student comprehension of feminist theories (3). Large studies indicate that feminist activist praxis, like those conducted by Piepmeier et al. and Naples and Bojar, strongly resonate with undergraduate students, resulting in the continuance of such activist involvement by undergraduate students (Stake 2007, 43).

Feminist praxis as social activism

Scholars agree on two common themes when evaluating whether online engagement 'counts' as activist behaviour: more young adults than older adults participate in politically charged issues via social media; and many social media sites like Facebook, Pinterest, and Tumblr have large female and/or female-identified users, lending to a possible feminist well of community building (Bridges, Appel, and Grossklags 2012; Harris 2008; Keller 2012; Munro 2013; Schuster 2013). Schuster (2013, 23) concludes that a current generational divide exists among feminist communities with many young activists first building online networks and organising virtual events in quick, cost-effective ways that older activists cannot relate to because they lack similar online engagement or digital fluency. Bridges, Appel, and Grossklags locate a self-fulfilling prophecy type of behaviour in which young activists engaged online assume that their work will carry no political influence on older, less virtually engaged figures, so younger activists disengage with older activists (2012, 172). To paraphrase one participant in the authors' study, individuals felt as if outsiders viewed their online activism as not 'real' or good enough and their any offline work would be equally insignificant (172).

The over-representation of female or female-identified, feminist bloggers counters a more longstanding underrepresentation of women or women-identified activists in traditional forms of political engagement (Harris 2008, 481). As such, the disparagement of online activism as 'slacktivism' could be read as a form of sexism. As both Harris (2008) and Keller (2012) note, young women tally significant online involvement in political and social spaces dedicated to activist conversations or methods; educational, media, and political institutions, however, rarely recognise such online presence as activist work. This is significant as the masculine-leaning discourse surrounding computing still exists (Clegg 2001). As traditional institutions become more involved in social media and build their organisations to include online networks, educators can support social media sites by using them in social justice-oriented curricula to teach, and become a method for, delivering feminist activism.

Method

The study

To examine the effectiveness of using blogging as a feminist pedagogical tool, I conducted a mixed-methods quantitative survey analysis of past *Introduction to WGSS* students and qualitative content analysis of blog posts between two participants.

Participants

The initial participant pool consisted of 200 students at two universities in the United States: one public research university; one private, liberal arts university. I emailed all former students to solicit study participation. All individuals who agreed to participate in the study had completed an introductory WGSS course within a two-year period from the study's commencement. These courses required social media blogging via Tumblr as one of their assignments.

The data sample referenced in this article consists of 38 former students enrolled in one of two US universities' gender studies programs. Student university year ranged from first- to fourth-year students. The sample is smaller than the 200 participants contacted because these 38 students completed the survey in its entirety. All 38 participants identified their gender: 31 female; 1 male; 4 gender-queer individuals; 2 gender non-conforming. Self-identified racial makeup was varied: African American or Black (18 individuals); Caucasian or White (13); Hispanic, Latin American, or Mexican American (4); Asian or South Asian descent (3). Sexual orientation was not asked of participants, but it was a primary topic of social media activity. Socioeconomic status of each participant was not requested to anonymise responses as much as possible.

The two universities in which participants were enrolled are distinct with regards to socioeconomic composition: University S is a small institution with under 5000 students; suburban in location; privately funded and highly selective in its enrolment. Its yearly tuition for full-time students ranges from $39,000 USD to nearly $47,000 USD. These fees do not include room and dining costs. University U, by contrast, is large with over 30,000 students. The institution is situated in an urban area, and it receives funding from both individual donations and the government. University U's enrolment acceptance rate is significantly higher – over double that of University S – and more diverse across racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds than University S. To alleviate this discrepancy, University S works to diversify its student population rates by implementing comprehensive financial aid programs unrivalled by University U. In comparison to University U., annual tuition fees undergraduate students range from $5,000 USD to nearly $13,000 USD and, like University S, do not include boarding and dining costs.

These differences are important to note because socioeconomic status could affect students' access to course-required social media assignments in distinct ways: whether a student owns, borrows, or can access a personal or shared computer or smartphone capable of using the Tumblr application; how often students are able to engage with social media (free-time and/or time not otherwise occupied by schoolwork or part-time/full-time jobs); and what topics are raised with frequency in their blog posts. As previously mentioned in this article, user data for Tumblr indicate the majority of its users are from lower to middle class backgrounds, demographics more aligned with the students of University U.

Research design

Participants received an emailed link that took them to a secure website to complete an online survey about their experiences with Tumblr in their WGSS course. The website collected no identifiable information other than what the participant willingly divulged

(gender, race, etc.). To gauge if students used social media as a tool of civic engagement, this study had to include measures allowing participants to leave open feedback outside of the quantitative-based Likert scale. Based on these needs, the research design focused on a mixed methods approach wherein a survey was provided to participants who could answer on the Likert scale, but also each participant had the opportunity to provide written, in-depth feedback to questions at the close of the survey. This analysis includes both quantitative data formulated from reviewing statistical relationships between student involvement with online activism and student comprehension of course theories and qualitative data sourced from open-ended interview questions and content analysis of participants' blogs that uniquely demonstrate the effectiveness of employing blogging as a pedagogical and activist tool.

As the study's theoretical framework is based upon feminist activism and pedagogical approaches to civic engagement, the clear benefit of using a mixed methods approach in survey design lies in its 'potential to assess the complexity of feminism within a particular context', the context being our course in which blogging was assigned (Harnois 2013). These online interview questions required participants to elaborate on their social media involvement and activism to better understand the complexity behind their responses given earlier in the survey. By implementing a concurrent mixed methods design (Creswell 2013), I could reach out to a diverse audience of former students and provide a scale to guide responses regarding their involvement within the course and its activist potential.

While data from this survey cannot represent all undergraduates in every WGSS course, it can provide a loose framework for social media implementation in similar courses, with curriculum designed for individual instructors and students.

Measures and analysis

All participants were required to create and maintain their own blog throughout the 15-week University term. Students sent their blog link to me and I could track their progress. The assignment guidelines stipulated that they could post to their Tumblr as frequently as they liked, adhering to a minimum writing requirement of 1 blog post per week. All bloggers who participated in the study met these basic assignment requirements. Participant-created blog content included topics related to the course, such as: rape culture, sexuality, racism, and gender portrayals in the media. Topics were not limited to these areas, but these were the issues more frequently blogged about. I assessed student blogs through a qualitative content analysis. This resulted in two themes: users connecting to viewpoints different to their own and examples of students taking online activism into their offline lives. For the theme of connecting differing viewpoints, I tabulated frequent, sustained interaction between participants of differing views. Sustained interaction meant the participants engaged with each other during the entirety of their blogging assignment, 15 weeks. To assess examples of students' offline activism, I monitored and tabulated the frequency of involvement by students in campus-centred events like protests, silent vigils, or petition signing.

The quantitative aspect of the study consisted of participants answering a short eight-question survey regarding their Tumblr usage. Participants responded on a Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree) to indicate their level

of agreement with questions and statements 1–6; participants could write their own responses to questions 7 and 8. Survey questions and statements were, as follows:

(1) Is Tumblr an appropriate assignment in a WGSS course?
(2) Tumbler is a safe space to discuss controversial topics.
(3) Tumblr is an easy form of activism. You feel involved in social justice issues by reading, blogging, and/or re-blogging on Tumblr.
(4) Tumblr aided comprehension of course topics.
(5) Tumblr connected you to your classmates.
(6) Tumblr connected you to the outside world.
(7) Do you continue to use Tumblr?
(8) What thoughts about this assignment would you like to share?

Limitations

The small, United States-specific sample used in this study limits the generalisability of results. To broaden analysis of future studies similar in nature, the author would solicit students outside of gender studies fields regardless of their geographic location or curriculum. Any higher education course curriculum that mandates the usage of social media by its students would source more widely applicable results. While technology usage among university students was the primary focus of this study, this inadvertently limits the age demographics of participants. While age was not asked of participants either during their survey completion or in the qualitative content analysis of their blogs, no participant was over the age of 25.

Results

Participants used Tumblr both to learn and disseminate knowledge about the fluctuating social statuses of women and, in particular, women of colour. Topics frequently written about on participants' blogs included[8]: rape culture; violence prevention; assault survivor networking; equal rights for LGBTQ people; trans*[9] awareness; media (miss)representation of women; and economic, gender, or racial privilege. From these data, two distinct themes emerged that provide both incentivising and cautionary results for usage of social media blogging in social justice-oriented curriculum: firstly, students indicated a strong correlation between using Tumblr and increased comprehension of course topics. They also overwhelmingly agreed that blogging could be a 'safe' space in which to discuss controversial subjects. Such types of discussion, in their view, equated to feelings of involvement in, and awareness of, social justice activism. Secondly, the data also point to a disengagement within interpersonal student relationships when social media usage is increased; that is, blogging did not connect classmates to each other and strengthen conversations begun within the classroom. Rather, it connected students more strongly to environments and people outside of their immediate campus setting.

Appropriateness of Tumblr as a pedagogical tool

Data reveal the participants define Tumblr as a pedagogical tool to reinforce topics learned in their course; that virtual environments are safe spaces wherein they feel free to engage

in controversial or personal subject matter; and their involvement in online discussion, knowledge building, and/or blogging constitutes a form of social justice activism within which students can easily engage.

The survey's opening question gauges the participants' evaluation of assigning blog Tumblr in an introductory WGSS course. While blogging is mandatory, students have freedom to choose topics, sources, and presentation styles. All students are provided with both the teacher's goals for the assignment and an assessment rubric. These guidelines have specific standards for successful, basic completion (what steps to take to achieve, at minimum, a passing grade).

Participants positively rated the statement, 'Tumblr is an appropriate WGSS assignment', with an average rating of 4.28 on a scale of 5 (25 agree; 12 strongly agree). To clarify, the study defined 'appropriateness' as being an effective/ineffective learning tool for issues of civic engagement surrounding race, gender, sexuality, class, etc.; for example, how effective was Tumblr in helping the participant learn course material? Did Tumblr enable the participant's engagement with social activism/social justice issues? The question was not meant to garner answers that spoke to the validity of the assignment as being appropriate for certain ages, ethnicities, classes, races, or political persuasions. It was, however, meant to quantify respondents' attitudes towards the congruency and synergy with course topics.

Thirty-two (32) out of 38 respondents strongly believe Tumblr to be a 'safe' space, one in which they cannot be targeted for identification, abuse, or mistreatment for discussing subject like sexuality, assault, and gender identity. These results echo the supposition that offline feminist classrooms are environments open to cathartic, political engagement between participants (Barrett 2010; Dylan 2012; Guillard 2012; Motta 2013; Wink 2005). Digital and traditional classrooms, whilst not free of conflict, are ripe for participatory pedagogy. Students and teachers alike will find their viewpoints and experiences challenged, but the challenges are often welcomed because of collective consent by all members to engage in difficult discussion without threat of personal, physical, psychological, or emotional attack.

The efficacy of Tumblr as an assignment or comprehension tool in WGSS (or similar) courses could be solidified because of its users defining and experiencing it as an additional form of 'safe' space beyond the classroom, that is, a virtual safe space. This high association with Tumblr and safety could cause the high correlation between feeling involved in social justice issues and viewing blogging as a form of activism.

Participants (48.65% strongly agree, 37.84% agree) claim blogging enables them to easily engage in conversations on social justice issues and debates. As this article has established, news travels quickly through social media channels. Since the blogging assignment required students to gather stories and opinions from those very channels, this empowered students to rapidly build their blog to include posts from myriad sources, opinions, and topics relative to our course. A participant elaborated why Tumblr, more than other blogging or course management systems used by many higher education institutions, engenders feelings of participatory research, education, and democracy:

> Tumblr provides as easy to use platform that, unlike the Blackboard interface, Blogger, or other similar mediums, allows discourse to take place freely. I blogged most often about the

> privileged use of certain words used to oppress, and about the biological and social influences on dominant/inferior sexes and genders. By using Tumblr not only to voice my own opinions but also to read and to respond to the opinions of others, I gained a broader understanding of those topics.

Gaining a broader understanding of the of course topics and discussions, both within and outside of the classroom, seems to be exemplified in the data for this statement. Much like the affirmation of Tumblr as an effective pedagogical tool, only small differences arise in data between statements 1 and 4. As two participants noted at the conclusion of their survey in questions 7 and 8:

> Participant A: 'I found that my blog was a great accessory to learning this [WGSS] content; so much so that I still actively run what was my class blog more than a year later.'
> Participant B: 'Tumblr has a lot of great resources that allow for a crash-course immersion into some of these topics that you can't really get from anywhere else.'

While not as strong of a positive response as Statement 1, a majority of participants (68.43%) claimed that Tumblr helped further their learning of topics specific to gendered, sexual, and racial identities; the remaining 28.95% of participants indicated Tumblr was of neutral value as a comprehension tool, while one participant disagreed with its effectiveness as a learning aid. This neutrality and disagreement could be due to one or more factors: students might not have viewed conversations on Tumblr as directly aligning with course topics Disagreement or neutrality could also relate to varying levels of frequency or participation in in the course, including this assignment. Or such results indicate that Tumblr, and other virtual environments, cannot similarly replicate traditional learning environments and/or methods, for example, offline analysis of course topics.

Tumblr as a tool for social activism

If we compare results from two survey questions related to the usage of social media as a connection tool, it is evident that these students feel more connected to individuals online than those with whom they have offline relationships when discussing topics related to WGSS (e.g. racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.). Blogging connected them to individuals and, potentially, activism not found in their offline environment(s), including the WGSS classroom.

> Statement 5: Blogging helped you connect to your classmates
> SD: 5.26% (2); D: 15.79% (6); N: 28.95% (11); A: 34.21% (13); SA: 15.79% (6)
> Statement 6: Blogging helped you connect to the outside world.
> SD: 0%; D: 10.53% (4); N: 7.89% (3); A: 28.95% (11); SA: 52.63% (20)

If students associate Tumblr with learning or deepening their knowledge of feminist theories and activism, how could that virtual world be viewed as separate from their day-to-day realities and the people that fill those environments? While this sample is small in scope ($n = 38$), the data demonstrate that a majority of participants – while enthusiastic about the appropriateness of Tumblr as a tool itself – further feel that social justice conversations on social media are distinct from those offline. Furthermore, social justice activism takes place in virtual environments or in places that are not in college classrooms or on college campuses.

Do You Continue to Use Tumblr?
Yes, content not related to WGSS (16.67%)
Yes, content related to WGSS topics (50%)
No (33.33%)

While the participants felt engaged with communities outside of their immediate surroundings through their usage of Tumblr, the final survey question data showed that 1 in 2 students continued blogging WGSS-related issues after the course finished. Therefore, half of the students' activism ended with the assignment's completion.

Those who chose not to continue their blogging or blogged on issues unrelated to feminist, gender, and sexuality issues, specified a few reasons for this lack of involvement. Namely, that social media provides 'breadth at the expense of depth' (Tumblr is a great primer for justice news and issues, but in-depth conversation and action occurring offline in real-world environments satisfies their needs); metaphorical phrases that continuing this type of activism is 'beating a dead horse' or 'preaching to the choir' of like-minded individuals (change will not occur when we talk to those who blog about similar issues); and that, much like the criticism aimed at classroom spaces purported to be safe environments, 'there is no virtual space that's truly anonymous or free [from attack]'.

On the contrary, for those who continued to blog, their blogs grew to include new topics both relevant and also unrelated to those topics breached in their WGSS course:

> I mainly blogged about the objectification of women, and now that I have kept it going [blog], I have moved into sexual assault, rape, victim blaming, slut shamming [sic], and other 'women's issues' (though Jackson Katz would say, it's also a 'man issue').

If data indicate Tumblr aided in comprehension of course topics, we could surmise that social media engagement either provides the base for, or is the extension of, traditional forms of learning like those found in college classroom seminars. It is, however, a 50/50 chance that students will continue engagement with such offline knowledge building and social justice activism. How can we strengthen the odds towards online and offline engagement and activism?

It might be most advantageous to encourage these kinds of conversations within our classroom spaces. To change someone's mind about a particular topic or groups of people carries consequences that can have long-range impact.

Peer-to-peer interaction and social (media) engagement

Two participants, Lucas and Kia, in the study had a unique relationship to each other. Neither student knew the other offline, as they had not been within the same section of the WGSS course. Yet, they conversed regularly over the 15-week term on Tumblr. Their views clashed, sometimes strongly, but their correspondence indicates the power of social media to open conversations between differently minded individuals. I chose to highlight an exchange between these students because of their differing demographic representations (racial, gender identification, sexual orientation, gender expression, etc.) and the frequency with which they used the blogging platform as a way to process their comprehensions of course material.

The following excerpted conversation occurred after Lucas posted a picture, Figure 1, to his blog. Lucas, a fourth-year student and self-described 'science nerd', admitted in the

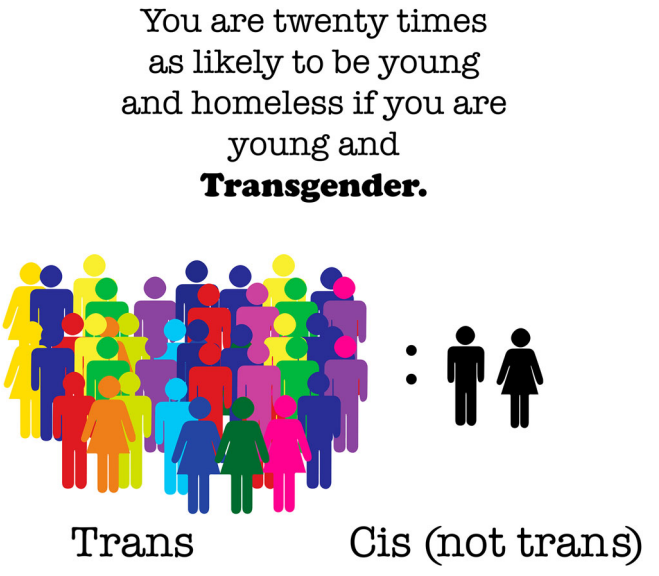

Figure 1. ArtivismProject.com.

accompanying blog post that he struggled to view things metaphorically or from nuanced perspectives. He readily admitted that the WGSS course was out of his comfort zone. Course material and classroom conversations pushed Lucas to engage in ways and on topics that were quite different from his chemistry and biological background. Feminist, gender, and sexuality discourse was a new language to him. In contrast, first-year student Kia was savvy to such discourse and feminist theories.

> LUCAS: I can't help but feel, as a 'Cis' man, somewhat insulted by this image [Figure 1]. My issue doesn't stem from the statistic on the hardships of Trans individuals; it's undeniable that they, as a group, undergo more adversity for their sexuality and gender than Cis people. I dislike the fact that Cis individuals are represented in the image by the same dull grey colour while members of the Trans side embody many, vibrant colours
> KIA: I'd like to respectfully point out that I find this response to the poster extremely problematic. The point of the poster is to raise awareness for trans* homeless youth and your take away is that you feel your side deserves brighter colours. I think you should consider why you believe that your representation is more important than theirs, especially in regards to an issue that doesn't concern you.
> LUCAS: I didn't want to come off as crass, or super pro-Cis or anything, but I still felt like by representing Trans members in wonderful, vibrant colours, and Cis individuals as a dull grey that the poster was in fact misrepresenting the Cis community and in a way metaphorically dulling their colour as well – because Cis people have colourful personalities too! … i know i'm assuming a little here, if you consider yourself an ally to the LGBTQ cause, then you should be wary as to be so bold to say that I, personally, cannot, or should not, concern myself with an issue of this nature simply because I'm a Cis man. Thank you for your post, I look forward to our future conversations.

At this point in the blog conversation, Kia took one day to respond to Lucas despite his polite invocation. Her response was heartfelt, as she clearly felt insulted to be perceived as a non-ally to LGBTQ communities. In her follow-up post, Kia detailed the hardships of

her closest friend, a female-to-male transgender man. This friend had experienced homelessness and duress because of his gender identity. She connects his struggles to national statistics on transgender violence and homelessness that the WGSS course covered. After relaying those connections, she implored Lucas to reject what she read as his superficial scrutiny of the poster:

> KIA: The point of the poster is not to represent both cisgender and transgender youth equally, it is to shed light on a subject that most people are unaware of and raise awareness. … you SHOULD be concerned by the astounding number of lgbt homeless youth in the US, but the issue is not about you. It's not about making sure your feelings aren't hurt, it's not about making sure you're represented accurately, it's about representing people who aren't represented at all. … This poster is a space for trans individuals, not cis individuals, and it is important to me that you understand that. I'm not trying to be rude, I just feel that your preoccupation with what colour you are represented as misses the point of the poster completely.

Lucas then responds in a manner that takes Kia by surprise:

> LUCAS: So it took some time to get through my thick skull, but I think I finally get what you're saying, Kia. In our WGSS lecture today, we discussed how privilege is invisible to those who have it – and as a white, cis, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class, educated male, I have all the privilege in the world. So I think being ignorant of that fact led me to make a statement on a subject that was in fact misguided and ultimately insulting to those with less or even without any privilege. I want to thank you for helping me realise that with this conversation. And I want to point out that you're not only right in saying that I missed the point, but also that you helped me see my ignorance for what it really is.
> KIA: Can I just say that I'm very proud that you were able to recognise this in yourself and admit that you were wrong? I have had this same conversation with many other people who pointedly refused to see their own privilege and insisted on their own opinions. I'm really happy that you were open minded enough to first state your opinion and then you allowed it to become a discussion … Thanks for listening and not dismissing me completely.

This exchange, one of over 20, represents the type of interactions between Lucas and Kia. They passionately but consistently challenged each other to understand their perspectives within the context of course material and their individual experiences. They were not alone in this, as most study participants frequently reblogged and commented on their fellow participants' blogs (27 out of 38 participants). These comments and re-blogs debated hot topics such as violence on university campuses and sexualisation of women in the media. Such high rates give qualitative credence to the survey statement that 'Tumblr is a safe space to discuss controversial ideas'. It also demonstrates that students entered into emotionally charged conversations not to validate their points-of-view, but to open themselves to change.

Moving from online to offline civic engagement

A more disappointing result to share can be located in the analysis of students' offline activism. During the course of this study, the United States underwent a period of several months' social unrest following the unjustifiable homicides of Black men, women, and children by police. Participants at both Universities S and U blogged about these deaths using the hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter and joined in a national conversation of outrage. But while that hashtag was used by others to quickly mobilise offline protests in major US cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles, it failed to garner the mobilisation of most

students in this study. This is not due to lack of protests or vigils happening in their respective city, but rather a lack of interest in getting engaged beyond social media.

Only 4 participants out of 38 attended a silent vigil held on campus honoring the lives lost to violence and signed petitions pledging to end racism. It should be noted, however, that one participant of the study coordinated the silent vigil that drew large, University-wide participation. So while this study's participants as a whole could not demonstrate that their blogging led to increased, offline activism, the quality of civic engagement by the few who did move beyond blogging was notable. It should also be noted that students might not feel as safe to engage in controversial or emotionally charged events as they would on their blogs.

Discussion of social media as feminist activist praxis

As #YESALLWOMEN connected Twitter users across the globe and snowballed into public discussions which led to learning opportunities about violence and harassment towards women, so, too, does the potential for academic users of Tumblr. Why might Twitter and Tumblr users view online conversations and the resultant spread of awareness as virtual activism, but not view the consciousness-raising in the community setting of a classroom as activism?

Results of previous studies on students first learning about social institutions and the injustices within them mirror this article's data (Naples and Bojar 2013; Piepmeier, Cantrell, and Maggio 2014; Stake 2007). That is, participants in this study, and in others, do not view their learning as activist behaviour but do view any ethnographic engagement (however virtual or real-world) as a type of experience equal to placing themselves in someone's shoes, which could *cause* subsequent activist behaviour.

But have these forms of scholarship – important and essential as they are – confined social justice education and civic engagement to separate and unequal hemispheres of valuation by both practitioners and pupils alike? Without initial conversations occurring in classrooms regarding inequities experienced by individuals, stories would remain unheard, injustices buried, and change stultified. We need only to look at the increasing shift of corporations that adjust policies based on online petitions signed by hundreds of thousands of customers, or how viral photographs and video can affect the political winds, to grasp the potential of so-called virtual 'slacktivism'.[10] In truth, hashtags, memes, and blogs could be the widely accessible, twenty-first century autoethnographies and phenomenological experiences; information users both disseminate and absorb via Tumblr and Twitter could be equivalent to accessing, processing, and evaluating multiple mini autoethnographies and phenomenological essays in the classroom. By writing, in short sentences comprising 140 characters on Twitter or in longer blog essays, participants engage in the cataloguing of present histories experienced across boundaries, in multiple time zones, and with varying levels of social access. This form of engagement sets the stage for social change.

Conclusion

This article's data show students' enthusiastic responses to social media usage and, in particular, its connection to the fields of women's, gender, and sexuality studies. In contrast to some scholars' fears that social media activism is merely superficial engagement with

complex topics (Bennett 2012; Kristofferson, White, and Peloza 2014), participants who used social media in their WGSS courses strengthened their interactions with each other and with course content (similar to other scholars' work [Junco, Heiberger, and Loken 2011; Kassens-Noor 2012]). Users reported feeling at ease with blogging and transferred their offline discussions within the safe space of their WGSS classroom to online spaces, echoing Piepmeier, Cantrell, and Maggio (2014) and Stake's (2007) insistence on employing multiple forms of pedagogical praxis in WGSS courses to ensure feminist civic engagement.

For future implementation of social media assignments in similar curricula, this primary goal should be clearly stated: students are documenting their autoethnography within their *Introduction to Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies* course and any resultant knowledge production is in itself a phenomenological experience. To gain exposure to and truly comprehend others' virtual autoethnographies or experiences sees them actively participating in the application of their learning. Social media can turn the observer's lens back on the student, as someone elsewhere in the world could be looking at their in-class consciousness-raising or documentation on Tumblr as a mini-ethnography. The student – and their story – is not exempt from this modern form of autoethnography. Once students understand their inherent connection to our social ecosystem they, too, can use their experience and thought knowledge as a gateway to both virtual and real-world social change. Students should be encouraged to view social media as one of many tools for civic engagement rather than to view it as a 'lazy', modern form of feminist activism. Such positive regard for social media usage could counter the self-fulfilling prophecy reported by Bridges, Appel, and Grossklags (2012) by the largely young, female user social media population: any type of civic engagement matters, especially if a user cannot be involved in other types of activism (Harris 2008; Keller 2012). While offline interaction is still necessary – and social media action cannot replace such types activism – the blogging tools used in this study uniquely were effective.

Continued, frequent usage of social media in higher education must occur if we wish to decrease the demarcation between activist/non-activist, activism/slacktivism. It is the onus of feminist, anti-racist, and gender studies scholars to incorporate social media engagement that may enable activism into their classroom. The most effective method might be for instructors to blog specific examples of local injustices and, in particular, those occurring on campus and surrounding communities. Require or suggest that students attend any real-world civic engagement events happening within their communities *and* blog about it. This could increase offline activist participation, as this article demonstrates it is still a needed aspect of understanding feminist praxis (Naples and Bojar 2013, 3). Such an assignment would not only fully engage students but also enable them to comprehend that they inhabit a world in which they both study and shape. Educators can combine local, national, and international social media to highlight students' individual potential for efficacy.

To be clear, social media is not a panacea and its potential as an activist outlet has not been fully realised. So while knowledge can be gained and awareness can spread online, without offline engagement with others who may or may not have such knowledge or awareness, communities will continue to suffer. Change will not occur without significant face-to-face involvement because we do not live our entire lives in complete virtual isolation. That is, an individual can connect with many people through many blog posts,

but if that user or an audience member neglects to change their own thinking or actions in the community (like using offensive language; resorting to violence; not signing petitions or volunteering with organisations in need), such 'activism' falls short. This stoppage becomes representative of true slacktivism or ill-conceived autoethnography with no philosophical introspection and no pragmatic implementation for praxis. The benefits of online exposure for a cause or an individual, however, still outweigh the detriments: it is relatively cost-effective (public access and internet connections continue to be built in remote regions) and somewhat safe (although psychological violence, verbal threats of violence, and physical violence do occur). While token slacktivism surely exists, it does not negate the wide-reaching effects of social-movement-spurring work occurring at this very instant in spaces online and worlds virtual.

Notes

1. Good, Sandell, and Vega (2014).
2. Pachal (2014).
3. 'About Tumblr', *Tumblr*, 2014, https://www.tumblr.com/about
4. Duggan and Brenner (2013).
5. Duggan and Brenner (2013).
6. Gross (2012).
7. In the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown, a young Black American man, who was killed by a White police officer, scholars, teachers, and journalists used this hashtag to open dialogues and receive pedagogical advice to bring into their classrooms.
8. Listed in order of frequency in participants' blogs.
9. Trans*, rather than the prefix trans (no asterisk), encapsulates a wider, more inclusive spectrum of genders, including, but not limited to transgender and transsexual. Jones, Addie. 'Bridging The Gap – Trans*: What Does the Asterisk Mean and Why Is It Used?', 8 August 2013. http://www.pdxqcenter.org/bridging-the-gap-trans-what-does-the-asterisk-mean-and-why-is-it-used/
10. Recent online petitions, photo campaigns on Instagram, and hashtags on Twitter caused major corporations and/or governments to meet the demands of activists: Moms Demand Action supporters caused Starbucks and Target to ban the open possession of guns in their stores; the Twitter account @TahrirBodyguard coordinates citizens to mobilize against sexual violence in Egypt's Tahrir Square.

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