

#TrendingFeminism: The Impact of Digital Feminist Activism

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This work is dedicated to my grandfather, who, upon being told that I was planning to attend graduate school, responded, “Good, you should have more education than your father.”

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## Abstract of Thesis

### #TrendingFeminism: The Impact of Digital Feminist Activism

As the use of online platforms such as social networking sites, also known as social media, and blogs grew in popularity, feminists began to embrace digital media as a significant space for activism. Digital feminist activism is a new iteration of feminist activism, offering new tools and tactics for feminists to utilize to spread awareness, disseminate information, and mobilize constituents. In this paper I examine the intent, usefulness, and potential impact of digital feminist activism in the United States by analyzing key examples of social movements conducted via digital media. These analyses not only provide useful examples of a variety of digital feminist efforts, they also highlight strengths and weaknesses in each campaign with the aim of improving the impact of future digital feminist campaigns. In addition, I illuminate the interplay between digital feminist efforts and offline organizing in order to illustrate alternative ways in which digital feminism may or may not have lasting impact. With this research, I aim to uncover possibilities for future digital feminist activism to promote effective social change.

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## #TrendingFeminism

In April 2012, UK-based activist Laura Bates created the Everyday Sexism Project on Twitter in order to document everyday experiences of sexism perpetrated against women. She sought to create a simple digital space that would allow for women to share their experiences; yet within a year, Bates received over 25,000 entries from 15 countries (Carter 649). Responses include accounts of sexual assault, sexist jokes, victim blaming, and workplace sexism. While the tone of each message ranges from angry to ashamed, almost all connote a sense of injustice and the desire to produce a feminist response, especially to those who perceive women as having already achieved equality. Now catalogued and disseminated via a website, the project has endured and expanded over the past two years. The website encourages submissions from any interested party:

The Everyday Sexism project aims to take a step towards gender equality, by proving wrong those who tell women that they can't complain because we are equal...If you have experienced sexism, just everyday, small, so-used-to-it-you-almost-just-accept-it sexism, please share your story so we can prove how widespread the problem really is. And nobody will be able to say we can't talk about it anymore. (Bates)

Bates continues to accept submissions for the Everyday Sexism Project via Twitter or its website, offers an online subscription, and has a published book of collected stories.

The Everyday Sexism project provides just one example of the ways that feminists have utilized digital media for activist purposes. As the use of online platforms such as social networking sites, also known as social media, and blogs grew in popularity, feminists began to embrace digital media as a significant space for activism.

Digital feminist activism is a new iteration of feminist activism, offering new tools and tactics for feminists to utilize to spread awareness, disseminate information, and mobilize constituents. Like feminist activism at large, it is based in a larger critique of structural inequalities and issues and may have much to offer the overall movement. Digital feminists have engaged in activism through a variety of digital media, from liberal news sites such as *Huffington Post*, blogs such as *Feministing* and *Jezebel*, online magazines such as *Everyday Feminism*, to social networking sites or applications such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram. Digital feminism also includes mobile activism, where participants utilize new platforms such as smartphone applications (apps or app) to engage in feminist activism. Some writers have even proposed that digital feminism may be indicative of a burgeoning fourth wave of feminism in America (see Jónsson; Munro; Benn), suggesting both a shift in how scholars and activists classify feminist activism and a perceived need to intensify activist efforts. Whether or not digital feminist efforts have produced a paradigm shift (Jónsson) or if digital media is simply a useful tool for feminists remains a contested question.

Despite feminists' rapidly increasing use of digital media and devices, there is a dearth of research considering the impact and efficacy of this new form of activism. As articulated above, some authors have posited that digital feminism may be founding a new wave of feminist activism, yet these positions are not formulated through any detailed exploration or analysis. To begin to fill this gap, in this paper I examine the intent, usefulness, and potential impact of digital feminist activism in the United States. With this research, I aim to uncover possibilities for future digital feminist activism to promote effective social change. The efficacy of digital activism is often difficult to

measure due to the ephemeral, intangible nature of online and mobile spaces; however, I will construct a definition that will allow me to more fully assess the possible impact of digital feminism, as elaborated below.

### **What This Paper Is, and What This Paper Isn't**

This paper is organized by analyzing key examples of social movements conducted via digital media. These analyses not only provide useful examples of a variety of digital feminist efforts, they also highlight strengths and weaknesses in each campaign with the aim of improving the impact of future digital feminist campaigns. In addition, I illuminate the interplay between digital feminist efforts and offline organizing in order to illustrate alternative ways in which digital feminism may or may not have lasting impact. In order to fully understand and define the impact of digital feminist activism, before my textual analysis, I consider essential components of digital efforts, including the varying forms of digital spaces, challenges to this mode of feminist activism, and unique aspects of digital public spaces.

While some authors believe digital feminism indicates a new wave of feminist activism (Jónsson; Munro; Benn) as mentioned above, I propose that digital spaces merely provide another useful tool for feminists to use to spread their messages. Therefore, digital feminism is not necessarily producing a fourth wave of feminism, but remains an important tactic for engaging in current feminist efforts through information dissemination and community engagement. Similar to the ways political messaging spread upon the invention of the printing press nearly six hundred years ago (Olson and Nelson 50), social justice advocates are utilizing digital media to advance critiques of

economic, political, and cultural issues; furthermore, this phenomenon is not new, as activists have utilized the internet for activism for over two decades (Tierney 8). Activist efforts may be created offline and moved into digital realms, but many also originate in online or mobile spaces. In order to focus on the digital impact of these feminist projects, I focus on analysis of texts that exist online with the understanding that offline texts and conversations have an inevitable influence on their construction and evolution.

These texts are situated in the U.S. context, although I consider anyone's participation in these feminist campaigns, regardless of their location. This will likely result in an analysis of texts originally written in English as the majority of people who engage in these digital feminist texts use English in order to reach a broader audience within the United States. The range of digital feminism employed by activists around the world varies widely; focusing on the U.S. context will allow me to narrow in on digital feminist activism related to U.S.-based feminist activism at large. In addition, because digital texts are constructed within particular cultural and social contexts, they may reveal power structures and their relationship to society (McIntosh and Cuklanz 268) in the United States. For example, the #NotBuyingIt campaign not only critiques objectification of women, but also points toward a critique of late capitalism within the United States. Further research must be undertaken to analyze the ways in which U.S. digital feminism may be useful transnationally or unintentionally participate in imperializing activities across borders (J. Alexander).

Feminists have embraced the use of digital spaces to conduct significant forms of feminist activism. Much transnational feminist work considers the use of digital spaces for global feminist work; for instance, Mary Queen offers an insightful analysis of digital

circulations of representations of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan. In addition, many feminists have utilized digital media to advance political agendas (Schuster 9), such as misogyny within politics (McLean and Maalsen), and offer critiques of political and economic matters (Penny). Although these digital texts offer important feminist activity, these topics fall out of the purview of the U.S. digital feminist activist efforts that this paper analyzes. Furthermore, although corporate feminist campaigns such as the Dove® Campaign for Real Beauty or Always' #LikeAGirl campaign have resonated with many, these feminist efforts are intricately linked with a consumerist, capitalist message that advances ideal beauty standards (see Stampler; Kelly). These brands co-opted the language of feminist social movements in order to sell products (Kelly), thereby troubling ideas of intended impact and definitions of activism; therefore, I also will not consider these texts or forms of “feminism”. Additional research should be conducted in order to identify the possibilities and implications of these specific efforts.

### **Feminism is Trending: What Do I Really Mean by “Digital”?**

Due to the great amount of research that has been and continues to be conducted on digital technologies and practices, there is a wide variety of terms used to describe these activities; it is important to unpack digital terminology before considering digital feminist texts. The term “digital activism” provides an exhaustive framework for understanding practices that use digital network infrastructure (Joyce, “Preface” viii). This terminology includes a broad range of digital tools, such as mobile phones and offline digital devices; terms such as “online activism” or “cyberactivism” refer only to

internet activism. Other terms such as “e-activism” stem from electronics and thus include irrelevant, outdated practices such as VHS tape recorders; digital identifies specific technologies. While certainly other terms may be relevant, digital activism best captures all instances of social and political campaigning practice that use digital network infrastructure (Joyce, “Preface” ix).

Digital activism has proliferated in countless projects on a multitude of platforms and has been utilized as a tool for activism for years. While the context of activism has been altered by digital technologies such as social media (Tierney 9), digital media have not caused a complete paradigmatic shift in activism; rather, “as new media were incorporated into the ongoing practices of core groups of activists, they helped diffuse new dynamics of activism” (Juris 260). Digital technologies provide new discursive channels or tools for activists to create collectivities and promote social change. Conducting collective action in digital spheres often involves less cost for quicker dissemination on a larger scale (Earl and Kimport 5). While the practical features of digital sites attract users, activists also utilize digital technologies for their networking abilities; as Papacharissi illuminates, “The flexibility of online digital technologies permits interaction and relations among individuals within the same networks or across networks, a variety of exchanges and ties, variable frequency of contact and intimacy, affiliation with smaller or larger, and global or local, networks formed around common matter” (307). Put differently, “when large numbers of citizens are able to more easily connect to one another, to send and receive original content, and to coordinate action, they are able to create effective political movements” (Joyce, “Introduction” 2). Furthermore, activism is not just limited to one-off political projects or messages; it also

includes trying to change digital spaces themselves (Carstensen, “Struggling for Feminist Design”) to promote more fluid, transformative, and equal public spaces. Many understand that the internet often reproduces social inequalities in a digital context, yet activists work to promote justice and equality through these digital spaces as they have been shown to have great potential to disrupt power relations; this work includes the hope that increased digital equality could lead to increased equality in other public spaces.

This is not to say that nothing has changed with the advent of digital spheres. Digital media, and particularly social media, have had considerable influence on almost all societies around the world. Tierney investigates this concept through an analysis of social media, finding that digital media changes the context of publicness. She states,

The networked structure of social media and mobile technologies create an expanded public by connecting members and thus inspiring political agency vis-à-vis shared knowledge... Whether mundane or revolutionary, social media creates a distributed community, not in its material culture, but in the creative practices of knowledge sharing and the acknowledgement of that collective awareness. (10)

This expanded publicness leads to further collectivity, greater input of information (albeit not always factual), and interconnection through its “distribution” of information across social networks. As boyd summarizes, “social media has reshaped the information and communication ecosystem” (6). In many respects, most U.S. residents are constantly connected to digital spaces – for example, consider how many people live-tweet events, take images and upload them to platforms via their mobile phones, and update their social media statuses on the go. McLean and Maalsen surmise, “The ubiquitous quality of this technology partially facilitates the continuation of [political] movements” (254). This

connectivity and immediacy allow for ample opportunity for feminists to engage the broader public.

For feminists, digital public spheres foster feminist efforts to spread information about feminist causes and other social justice issues and mobilize constituents for online and offline activism. Feminists have used digital spaces as sites of activism for years, but as the internet's capability expanded from static web pages to flexible sites such as social media, so did the potential for greater visibility of feminist messages; Clark details, "Most significantly, the embeddedness of social media and mobile technologies in everyday life allow for more personal feminist politics than ever before" (1110). Furthermore, some scholars see digital technologies as revitalizing feminism, reinvigorating feminist thought and action through information sharing, debate and dialogue, and community building (McLean and Maalsen 243-244; A. Harris 215; Martin and Valenti 9; see also Munro). Jónsson even argues, "the participation in feminist activism and criticism has grown manifold due to the invention and popularization of digital media technologies." Carstensen informs that the "visibility of feminism on the web has increased in proportion to the recent successes of feminist campaigns" ("Gender and Social Media" 490). As feminists successfully engage like-minded individuals and spread information through digital media, the broader public also becomes aware of feminist issues.

Just as digital feminism varies in its style, form, and content, digital feminist activists also use a myriad of platforms to spread their messages. In analyzing online and mobile feminist activism, I reflect on the types of platforms that digital feminists choose to use and highlight the variances of each; this may help to elucidate the impact level of

activism. I consider variances such as an activist's ability to disseminate information to a broad audience, the ease of using the platform, the trendiness of the platform (as visibility fluctuates depending on the popularity of the medium), and the ability for the audience to engage in the message being disseminated. All of these variances in platform usage may make a considerable difference in the level of impact for particular texts. To better understand how these variations affect the impact of digital feminism, it is useful to explore two important facets of digital activism: social networking and mobile technologies.

### *Social networking*

Although feminists and other social justice activists use a variety of digital sites, mainstream activism largely occurs on social media. The high level of visibility on social networking sites benefits activists; as of January 2014, 74 percent of online adults utilized social networking sites ("Social Networking Fact Sheet"); this does not include underage populations who widely engage in social media use. Furthermore, as social networking user populations have grown, more of those users are engaging with political or social issues via these sites (Smith). There are countless social networking sites, but activism most often occurs on the most popular platforms, which include Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. These are also the primary platforms for digital feminist activism, despite the fact that they are purported by the creators or owners to be politically-neutral sites. Just as social media platforms work to connect individuals, they also intertwine with one another, facilitating cross-platforms engagement among users.

Facebook was initially created in 2004 to enhance social networks on college campuses, but it soon expanded to include anyone who chooses to create a profile; individual user profiles are the norm but Facebook also allows for group pages and fan pages. Facebook has become the leading social networking site, with 71 percent of online adults reporting use, and is also the primary social media channel used to learn about and participate in social issues (“The 2014 Cone Communications Digital Activism Study). Established in 2006, Twitter is the premier microblogging site; stemming from traditional blogging, microblogging is a means for users to broadcast short messages to other subscribers of the service. On Twitter, users post via “tweets”, which can be posted by text message, mobile applications, third-party applications, or the internet using 160 characters or less. Tweets may also be reposted or forwarded by other users as “retweets.” In her research, Small finds that Twitter is mainly used for personal updates or daily conversation and information sharing (875). Although not innate to Twitter, hashtags became popular through their usage on Twitter; they categorize tweets by a common topic or idea. Moreover, the use of Twitter is highly intertwined with other social media platforms (Lenhart and Fox, qtd. in Small 883). Due to its unique structure, “Twitter use may be a technological variation of consensus mobilization” (Foster 3); it is therefore a common platform for activist engagement. Founded in 2007, Tumblr is a blogging platform that, unlike traditional blogging platforms, allows users to “reblog” posts from other users (similar to retweets on Twitter). Like other blogs, Tumblr posts often contain a combination of text and multimedia and allow for other users to comment on each post. In addition, users can follow Tumblr blogs for new posts, which appear in a

main Tumblr feed. Like Twitter, Tumblr is used primarily to share information and provide personal updates.

There are many reasons that activists choose to utilize social media platforms to disseminate messages and mobilize constituents. Social media can provide a space for multiple and diverse voices to broadcast political messaging. As Juris states, “social networking channels are mainly used by activists for microbroadcasting, that is to say, they allow individuals to quickly, cheaply, and effectively blast out vast amounts of information, links, and updates via person-to-person, ego-centered networks (group pages and accounts also act as individual nodes), taking advantage of powerful ‘small-world’ effects to generate massive viral communication flows” (267). Moreover, several studies have focused on social networking sites’ ability to enhance a sense of community, specifically by bridging and bonding social capital; “Bridging social capital involves connecting more heterogeneous groups of people to bring about social and political change” (Putnam, qtd. in Johnson et al 189). This sense of community and coalition building are key facets of digital feminism; thus, social media platforms facilitate important networking opportunities for digital feminists.

Feminist practice has been particularly enhanced by the use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter; “feminist campaigns on social media have become a platform for important conversations that have a real and positive impact on the lives of women – on and offline” (“Science Says Calling Out Sexism”). With the increased visibility and spreadability found in social media spaces, digital feminism now has considerable opportunities for information dissemination. Crane finds that social media has granted broader access to feminist debates, bringing together people who

might not otherwise have an opportunity to be engaged (14). Carstensen usefully summarizes, “Social networking sites facilitate exchanges of information, discussions, and comments. They provide spaces for users to empower each other, to establish events and protests and mobilize for political action. The design of social media enables a dense interdependence of feminist discussions” (“Gender and Social Media” 489). Furthermore, some scholars find that utilization of social networking sites helps reconfigure digital spaces; “Using social media as a form of online activism to advocate on feminist issues is one way to reclaim space and turn it into a feminist space” (Sabol 22). Digital feminists utilize social media to engage with a broader public, share information, foster a sense of community, mobilize constituents, and claim public space for feminist praxis.

### *Mobile technologies*

Mobile technologies are increasingly adapted into everyday life (“Mobile Technology Fact Sheet”; Duggan and Brenner; Frizzo-Barker and Chow-White). Mobile phones may now be seen as embedded into society. Ninety percent of U.S. American adults have a cell phone and 58 percent of U.S. American adults have a smartphone (“Mobile Technology Fact Sheet”), and that number is expected to increase. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of cell phone owners use their mobile device(s) to go online (Duggan and Brenner), including conducting internet browsing or going on social networking sites, and the amount of digital content generated and consumed is accelerated by mobile phone usage (B. Alexander). Mobile phones have become integral to society and everyday life in the United States. Furthermore, now that mobile technologies “access the

web and encourage the use of participatory media, they have enabled new social practices” (Tierney 62).

As mobile usage has increased, individuals in the U.S. have also increased their political and social civic engagement both online and offline (Smith; “The 2014 Cone Communications Digital Activism Study”; Radovanovic); Juris finds, “as new media were incorporated into the ongoing practices of core groups of activists, they helped diffuse new dynamics of activism” (260). This coincides with a report from the Pew Research Internet Project, which stated, “Once someone has a wireless device, she becomes more active in how she uses the internet...mobile users go online not just to find information but to share what they find and even create new content much more than they did before” (Zickuhr and Smith). Digital activists use mobile technologies to improve and expand campaigns, better coordinate activities, increase awareness about social issues, and connect instantly with colleagues, supporters, and outsiders to the cause (Cullum 47). Mobile phones are also now distinctively multipurpose (Middleton et al 504), offering a multitude of uses beyond phone calls; as mobile phones continue to collapse multiple uses into one device, activists may use a variety of mobile tools to engage constituents, including text messages, video, images, location-based networks such as FourSquare, and apps such as Twitter.

Mobile phones are often the most effective mode of communication globally (Cullum; B. Alexander); yet this does not mean that barriers do not exist for mobile phone usage, particularly in relation to activism. While mobile devices have been shown to lessen “digital inequality” (Radovanovic 113) – where marginalized individuals and groups often have less access and ownership to digital technologies – in the United

States, issues of access still persist, especially for senior citizens, adults who prefer to speak in Spanish instead of English, adults with less than a high school education, and those living in households with less than \$30,000 in earnings per year (Zickuhr and Smith; Valenzuela et al). Additionally, individuals with disability may be less able to incorporate mobile technologies into their daily lives (Zickuhr and Smith). As Zandt elucidates, “Mobile technologies do present extraordinary *potential* tools for advancing fundamental change, but, I would argue, they are not the magic bullet that’s going to solve our structural, societal woes” (26). As many social justice activists, especially digital feminists, actively seek to address issues that affect marginalized groups, activists must be cognizant of digital differences regarding use of mobile technologies. In addition, digital feminist activists must consider macro-level barriers to mobile use, including government surveillance (Cullum) and intervention.

### **Challenges Found in Digital Spaces**

While digital spaces may offer “the potential to destabilize these entrenched views on the status of (some) women by educating wider publics about the struggles they otherwise do not themselves face or hear of via their communities or families” (Jónsson), many challenges come with this form of activism as well, including the gendered construction of mainstream media and its messaging, digital inequality and issues of access, government and corporate surveillance, privatization of digital spaces, harassment and burnout rates of digital feminists, and maintaining engagement with publics. Furthermore, digital spaces allow feminists to make their voices heard, but mainstream media reporting and other users often alter or convolute these messages. Feminists must

not only deal with these challenges on a regular basis, but work to reduce or eliminate them.

Web 2.0, the latest form of digital usage that emphasizes user-generated content, usability, and interoperability, has been associated with hopes concerning user participation and user-centered design, information exchange and sharing, and boundless participation and collaboration without hierarchies; however, it must be noted that, like most technologies, digital spaces are structured by offline power relations (Carstensen, “Struggling for Feminist Design” 170, 173). As Carstensen details, “Designers (unconsciously) inscribe different views of female and male users and uses into technology, and by this they reproduce their ideas of gender relations” (“Gender and Social Media” 485); Adams further argues, “Cyberspace cannot escape the social construction of gender because it was constructed by gendered individuals, and because gendered individuals access it, in ways that reinforce the subjugation of women” (qtd. in Luckman 36). Many purportedly neutral digital sites reinforce societal gender roles and norms; therefore, many digital feminist users work to oppose existing design and develop ideas for alternative design through discourse, protest, requests, and petitions (Carstensen, “Gender and Social Media” 489). Activists have struggled to make their concerns known, but have garnered successes; after activists petitioned Facebook for years to move beyond the mandatory binary male-female gender option for user profiles, Facebook altered the category to include 56 gender options, of which up to 10 can be employed at any given time (Weber). Carstensen summarizes, “Social media have become male domains in which gender stereotypes and inequalities are reinforced, but also have provided opportunities for the articulation of feminist politics, as well as

providing new spaces beyond stereotypical gender constructions...Feminists who use social media become more visible, which may help to mobilize a broader audience for their aims” (“Gender and Social Media” 490). Sabol concurs, “Using social media as a form of online activism to advocate on feminist issues is one way to reclaim space and turn it into a feminist space” (22). Digital feminists must continue to address the gendered constructions found in digital spaces from both designers and fellow users, especially in purportedly neutral sites such as Facebook or Twitter.

Analyzing digital feminist texts also demands a careful consideration of access to digital media and digital inequality, or problems that continue to affect users in impoverished and working-class communities that are often overlooked by mainstream views of digital technologies. More recently, researchers and developers have argued that the term “digital divide” fell short of describing the extent of social exclusion (Radovanovic 113). Radovanovic describes the adoption of “digital inequality” as a term that better recognizes “the role that literacy, education, socio-economic conditions and access to information, knowledge and freedom of expression play in creating divisions that are then replicated online” (113). Even proponents of digital feminism as a fourth wave of feminism, who often express an optimistic view, caution that “the key problem that this ‘4<sup>th</sup> wave’ will face will be the disproportionate access to and ownership of digital media devices” (Jónsson). The Pew Research Internet Project reported that 20 percent of U.S. American adults do not use or have access to the internet; age, a lack of a high school education, and low household income are the strongest negative predictors for internet use (Zickuhr and Smith). Mobile technologies appear to be increasing access, but feminists and other advocates must be aware of the impact of digital inequality and

work to include these parties in their campaigns; as Zandt declares, “Diversity in the social network sphere is critical for generating fresh perspectives on old problems, to help us avoid replicating on the Internet what we’ve done for hundreds of years – marginalizing or otherwise ignoring voices that can share ideas for systemic change” (19). Feminist media scholars must consider new avenues of exploitation that digital media facilitates in order to keep from mining marginalized people as resources (Mann 294-295) and to promote truly critical research and activism. Some even connect this to feminism’s social justice politics, stating, “This digital divide focus [is] an expression of a more collective feminist politics” (Schulte).

Other more elusive issues that digital feminists face are social and government surveillance and a corporate, privatized public. The U.S. public often assumes that surveillance occurs as a global, not domestic, phenomenon, but the U.S. government also tracks digital users within its borders in a variety of ways. For example, hashtags are used for tracking, where users are categorized into groups and tracked via use of specific hashtags; certain groups are then monitored for suspicious activity. Furthermore, mobile phones allow governments to easily access users’ locations via geotracking even if the phone’s location tracking setting has been switched to off; smartphone applications store messages and track location regardless of phone settings and platforms asking to access contacts automatically download geotracking through the program. These localizations can be used to track individuals who have been categorized as “suspect,” sometimes due to their offline activities but also based on their digital actions.

Surveillance concerns may be impacted by agreements with corporate digital network companies; “As long as a social media platform is held privately, it is subject to

government coercion and surveillance” (Tierney 15). As Joyce states, “today the online environments with the highest traffic are owned by a handful of corporations” (“Introduction” 22). Yet while feminists may utilize a wide variety of platforms to disseminate their messages, the visibility and spreadability (boyd 11) of their messages increases with use of these privatized networks; “If you want your video to get seen by large numbers of people, it has to be on YouTube...[activists] reach the largest audience only on those money-driven social blockbusters” (Joyce, “Introduction” 22). In other words, digital feminists may face a double bind of sorts – they advocate for equality in spaces that are often linked with privilege and control. Tierney usefully describes this as a “privatized public” (13). She states,

As much potential as the Internet has to connect dispersed social communities, there is not enough recognition of the structures of power that lie behind the screen. Facebook, as a form of computer-mediated communication for social for financial interactions, extracts data on individuals’ lives (both public and private) and packages it to external sources. (73)

These sources may include the government but also are largely comprised of other corporations such as Facebook. In addition, digital technology and social networking companies often incorporate smaller companies (for example, Instagram, one of the top photo and video social networks for smartphones, was purchased by Facebook in 2012); this leads to increased corporatization and monopolization of the most popular social networks. “There are harms due to visibility or exposure as well as the exploitation through the monetization of every aspect of participation in media networks. Both kinds of harms are familiar to those whose bodies and experiences have long been the subject

of commodification and objectification” (Mann 294). Feminists who engage in digital spaces push for changes in design or openness through agendas such as net neutrality, yet they must also contend with surveillance and privatization when constructing their campaigns.

While digital platforms afford greater visibility (boyd 12) for feminist campaigns, aggressive online harassment and “gendertrolling” (Mantilla) is a key challenge for digital feminists. Although feminists have always encountered misogynistic, postfeminist, or anti-feminist responses, “[digital] feminist views are often met with greater rejection and aggression” (Carstensen, “Gender and Social Media” 490) due to the same ease and accessibility that digital spaces provide feminists. Mantilla defines a particularly vicious form of online harassment against women: “While aggressive online behavior – trolling – is present across internet cultures, it is worth naming specifically misogynist variants as ‘gendertrolling’” (563). She finds gendertrolling often expresses sincere beliefs held by the perpetrators. Features of this type of harassment often occur as a direct reaction to women speaking out and include participation, often coordinated, of numerous people; gender-based insults; vicious and graphic language; credible threats; and unusual intensity, scope, and longevity of attacks (Mantilla 564-565). While feminists have long dealt with misogyny in public physical spheres, digital spaces provide a more relentless and personalized attack; in fact, a 2014 report from the Pew Research Internet Project finds that over 25 percent of women have experienced sexual harassment or stalking online (Duggan). Mantilla connects the digital and physical landscapes, reminding that “the harassment is about patrolling gender boundaries...It is important to recognize and acknowledge the phenomenon of gendertrolling for what it is:

something above and beyond generic online trolling and a phenomenon that, not dissimilar to street and sexual harassment, systematically targets women to prevent them from fully occupying public spaces” (568-569).

Often due to the intensity of digital misogyny and harassment, as well as resistance from other postfeminist or anti-feminist parties, digital feminists often experience burnout. Martin and Valenti describe their increasing alarm by the severity of burnout they perceived among fellow feminist bloggers and online activists (1). They found that digital feminism as currently practiced is transformational, but unsustainable:

Bloggers and online organizers largely suffer from a psychology of deprivation – a sense that their work will never be rewarded as it deserves to be, that they are in direct competition with one another for the scraps that come from third-party ad companies or other inadequate attempts to bring in revenue. As a result, they are vulnerable, less effective, and risk burn out. (3-4)

Digital feminists face intense gendertrolling and online harassment and often lack infrastructure and resources, especially time and revenue. Crane affirms, “With social media activism, financial challenges are the unsung back story” (15). With these considerations, Martin and Valenti advocate for institutional support from grants and corporate partnerships, as well as digital feminist partnership and training (30-33). While Martin and Valenti’s ideas on feminist partnership speak to current solidarity efforts (however problematic and fraught), their push for reliance on institutional funding is worrisome; participating in capitalist power structures will not promote the far-reaching social change for which feminists advocate. Digital feminists must seek out new methods of sustenance, continuing to push for revolutionary change; Martin and Valenti’s

suggestion of digital feminist resource sharing (30) may be their most useful recommendation as it allows for time for rejuvenation and recharging for activists.

While many scholars have debated or debunked ideas of “slacktivism,” or the idea that online activism offers little impact due to users’ low-level engagement (see Joyce, “Introduction” 27-28; Gerbaudo 7; Schuster 10; Neeson; Gladwell), many digital feminists do not find themselves challenged by an apathetic public; rather, with all of the promotion of political causes in digital networks, feminists must work to maintain engagement with interested but harried constituents who occasionally suffer from “attention fatigue” (McLean and Maalsen 245). Furthermore, digital feminists attempt to not only maintain constituencies, but also to attract and educate the broader public on feminist causes. Yet Schuster finds that social media may actually provide a greater ability for individuals to participate in activism due to its flexibility, easy access, and low costs, although she warns that older feminists may be excluded (23). Digital feminists must actively work to engage users, but it is important to remember that participants who seem only loosely engaged often take further action in both online and offline campaigns as they become involved in digital activist efforts. In addition, “By lowering the barriers to activism, they make it possible for more people to take small steps as part of a larger movement. When expressed through social media in much larger numbers, public opinion has the potential to influence those in power and to give emotional momentum” to struggling parties (Neeson).

As Carstensen writes, “Feminist interventions into content production can be successful but they must deal with differences, attacks, negotiations and opposing views at the same level – the users’ level” (“Struggles for Feminist Design” 175). Issues such as

digital inequality, harassment, social and government surveillance, and user engagement remain challenges for digital feminists, but as activists continue to conduct their work, they find new solutions; furthermore, partnerships and solidarity with other activists often re-energize feminist efforts. Digital feminists must work to support one another and include constituents embodying a variety of differences, sharing strategies and resources in order to conduct meaningful activism.

### **What Exactly IS Impact?**

*It is clear that new media influence how movements organize and that places, bodies, face-to-face networks, social histories, and the messiness of offline politics continue to matter...The important questions, then, are precisely how new media matter; how particular new media tools affect emerging forms, patterns, and structures of organization; and how virtual and physical forms of protest and communication are mutually constitutive. (Juris 260)*

As discussed above, a distinct challenge to this research is defining and assessing efficacy in relation to digital feminist activism; as Mary Joyce states, “The value of digital activism is not always clear, even when an evaluation is based on the objective effects of digital practices” (“Introduction” 10). The impact of digital campaigns may be defined in various ways, depending on the user’s goals; for example, those who employ digital projects for marketing purposes often look at digital analytics such as the number of “likes” on Facebook or the number of “followers” on a blog. Yet digital analytics provide only limited information, such as the number of persons who read a feminist article, commented on a feminist post, or signed an online petition. These numbers may appear to provide numbers of engagement, but they do not yield more in-depth information, such as whether or not a user engaged with the text on the web page or merely left the page upon opening. As Marres asserts, “online digital environments are in

need of alternative measures that can provide a counter-weight to dominant popularity metrics” (157). Therefore, these numbers are useful in garnering some sense of user participation, but they do not address the less tangible effects of digital activism.

In order to perceive the seemingly unmeasurable impact of digital feminist activism, I purport that ideas of efficacy must also include a campaign’s ability to cultivate future conversations or consciousness-raising of feminist topics; usefully, Clark notes, “Researchers have likened feminism’s online presence to the consciousness-raising circles of the American second wave” (1109). While this definition may be problematic to some due to its openness, I believe this mode of analysis allows me to consider how seemingly incremental forms of digital activism may foster further, loosely connected activism in the future. These threads are essential to digital feminism, which often allow activists to engage those who do not consider themselves feminists in ways that may gradually persuade them to support feminist causes. This wide definition of impact is also difficult to measure. Not only is it challenging to trace digital conversations as they branch off into related threads, but it may be nearly impossible to gather how many offline conversations occur as a direct or indirect result of digital feminist activist projects; as Foster states, “there is evidence that online activism and offline activism are related” (14). Some consideration of publics, counterpublics, and networked publics provide some insight into this matter.

### *Networked (counter)publics*

Digital feminism, including activism conducted via mobile phones, is significantly impacted by Michael Warner’s ideas on publics and counterpublics. Warner

identifies publics as the integral relation of a text to its audience (50); in other words, he highlights the ways in which a public text is not considered “public” until audience members engage with it and it begins to circulate. For Warner, a text does not exist until circulated (66), and therefore, the audience of a public is actively involved in its creation. In order for a text to be public, it must undergo continuous, reflexive circulation. Therefore, once the audience stops circulating a feminist text, or stops engaging with a digital feminist platform such as a feminist mobile app, that text is no longer oriented to a public. This has great implications for the impact of digital activism, as it focuses the impetus of a text on the integration of text/creator and audience/reception.

Furthermore, a public is a relation among strangers (Warner 55). Not only do strangers exist within our public, we treat them as familiar within that realm. Publics, in fact, make “stranger-relationality normative, reshaping the most intimate dimensions of subjectivity around co-membership with indefinite persons in a context of routine action” (Warner 57). For example, feminists interpellate strangers “in a venue of indefinite address and hope that people will find themselves in it” (Warner 59); feminists attempt to persuade them to participate in, or at the very least understand, their cause and its related social issues through a variety of discourses and platforms. This is exponentially true for digital feminists who can create online communities that span across the world. At the same time, these individuals are not indefinite strangers (Warner 56); they are always linked by some means of shared social space (e.g., friend of a friend, two individuals in the same city, utilization of the same social network). This may grant somewhat easier impact as it allows for some measure of commonality between parties in a public.

Yet Warner's broad notions of publics relate to hegemonic mainstream ideas; therefore, of greater importance to this paper are his ideas on counterpublics. According to Warner, counterpublics are also publics and work in similar ways by circulating ideologies, but counterpublics specifically position themselves as counter to dominant social groups. By attempting to engage as a public, counterpublics find themselves in conflict with dominant social groups and the norms that create dominant culture as a public (Warner 80). Furthermore, as dominant publics disseminate hegemonic ideas into public, reinforcing mainstream views, they can take their discourse for granted, but counterpublics understand that they do not have the same privilege; because of this limitation, they hope their circulation will be transformative, not merely replicative (Warner 88). Because feminist activism addresses issues of inequality and marginalization for a wide myriad of figures – and is in fact aware of its subordinate status – most, if not all, feminist activism can be considered counterpublic. Addressing feminism as a counterpublic creates new frameworks for feminists, who have to craft their activism carefully in order to maximize the level of circulation, or impact, of feminist discourse. In addition, moving a feminist counterpublic into a digital realm does not remove its counterpublic status – digital technology merely provides a new platform for counterpublic feminist discourse. Anita Harris finds that female-centered websites are important practices of counterpublic construction as they are sites for debate and political and social engagement by those who are traditionally marginalized within mainstream political debate (215). This also does not mean that digital publics do not have their own distinctive qualities; this is generally called “networked publics,” as elaborated below through boyd and Tierney.

danah boyd expands on Warner's concept of publics to consider the unique publics of social networks and other online spaces; she calls this "networked publics" (see also Tierney). This is crucial to understanding the impact of digital feminism as feminists have increasingly turned to social networks to conduct activism. According to boyd, networked publics are publics restructured by networked technologies, combining both the space utilized and the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice. Therefore, social media and digital networking create networked publics that allow people to see themselves as part of an imagined community (boyd 9, expanding on Benedict Anderson's concept). This reflects back on Warner's ideas on stranger-relationality. Organizing and community building has long been a crucial part of feminist activism; digital feminists can and do incorporate the components of networked publics in building communities online and sharing information.

In addition, networked publics offer different characteristics than traditional physical public spaces (boyd 11). boyd finds four characteristics, or what she terms "affordances," that shape mediated environments created by social media: (1) persistence, the durability of online content; (2) searchability; (3) spreadability, the ease with which content can be shared; and (4) visibility, the potential audience who can bear witness. Each of these affordances has distinct effects and consequences for digital feminism. Persistence allows for feminists to catalog feminist discourses online; this may also include backlash against activist efforts, as can be seen with Lindsay Bottos' compilation of hate comments she received online (Vingiano). Related to the durability of digital activism, feminists and others now have the ability to search for specific texts, which may

both preclude issues of access and promote greater knowledge. In addition, texts are easily shared across social networks, blogs, news sites, apps, and other forms of digital media; in fact, sharing across networks has become the default norm. This is particularly relevant for feminist activists, for as boyd states, “Spreadability [of texts] can be leveraged to rally people for a political cause” (12). Papacharissi also finds, “The flexibility of online digital technologies permits interactions and relations among individuals within the same networks or across networks, a variety of exchanges and ties, variable frequency of contact and intimacy, affiliation with smaller or larger, and global or local, networks formed around variable common matter” (307). These shared instances can also lead to less measurable, but essential offline conversations. Tierney finds that engagement in networked publics often enables local offline social relations (8), which challenges the usefulness of traditional digital analytics. Visibility as an affordance, however, is potentially the greatest avenue for digital feminists to have impactful campaigns; the more visible a public is, the more opportunity it has to spark dialogue and create potential for change or disruption of the norm.

A unique condition of networked publics are the ways in which counterpublics are able to utilize dominant public spheres to circulate their text. As boyd states, “Rather than being seen as a subcultural practice, participating in social media became normative” (7); the methods and platforms utilized by digital feminists are the same as those utilized by dominant publics. This is not to say that counterpublic groups did not engage in dominant spheres before digital environments became prevalent, but rather to illustrate the far-reaching abilities of digital technology. Stranger-relatedness remains an important component of networked publics – in fact, boyd postulates that the majority of people an

individual interacts with in online or mobile spaces are people that he or she engages with in offline spaces regularly – but the reach of connections in digital spaces often expands; this is encompassed in boyd’s concept of visibility. As an individual connects with another individual on a social network, that person has traversability (Tierney 61), the potential to reach far more “related strangers” than if they were to connect with that person only in offline settings – then multiply that contact by the immense number of digital connections made on a regular basis. In this sense, digital feminist activism may have considerably greater impact than it may appear to have on the surface, or perhaps even beyond traditional measurement, and may outweigh the concerns that digital challenges raise. To better understand how impact may be measured in less tangible spaces, this paper now turns to its main theoretical research methodology: cultural studies.

### *Cultural studies*

To inform my reading of digital texts, I engage with cultural studies, which undertakes “the study of culture and its meanings, uncovering the political, social, and even economic implications of those meanings” (McIntosh and Cuklanz 265). Texts vary widely and include film and television, magazines, advertisements, and digital media, but overall, cultural studies focus on symbolic meanings and ideologies that permeate throughout the texts such as representation, power relations, and identities. As Van Zoonen identifies, these texts are often mass-mediated and filter discreetly through everyday life. Feminists have engaged in cultural studies and textual analysis in order to “produce a cultural critique that contributes to a better understanding of relations of

power and exclusion which may even turn out to be inspirational to undermine them” (Van Zoonen 6). Furthermore, cultural studies attempts to analyze the ways in which media discourse circulates as a social process embedded in existing power formations (Van Zoonen 8). Critically examining digital spaces and texts through a cultural studies lens will highlight how the media constructs femininity, masculinity, and gender relations (Gill 1) and the inter-relationships between these relations (Carley 292), as well as elucidate opportunities for feminists to promote gender equality and other social justice causes.

Feminist cultural studies largely considers texts from popular culture through an identitarian or representational gendered lens. For example, Angela McRobbie reads teen magazines to consider adolescent girl communities; her work encompasses traditional feminist cultural studies, which critically analyzes popular culture and how it interpellates us. While I am influenced by traditional cultural studies such as McRobbie’s work, my research moves beyond this; rather than merely analyzing what the text is saying, I focus also on what the text is *doing*. This makes my textual analysis more complicated as it moves beyond defining a text to adding functionality and utility to the text as well. This review adds an additional layer of engagement with texts than traditional cultural studies provide and will allow for greater consideration of a text’s potential impact. I now turn to analyzing several textual examples of digital feminist activism in order to identify areas of impact and potential uses for future campaigns.

## **Feminist Smartphone Applications**

Mobile phones generally connect to the Internet in one of two ways: (1) a specially designed Web browser, and (2) a mobile-specific application, or app (B. Alexander). Mobile apps have grown in popularity for activism; as of 2014, over half of individuals in the U.S. use mobile apps to engage around social and environmental issues and see apps as tools for powerful change (“The 2014 Cone Communications Digital Activism Study”). This may be explained through the collapsing uses of mobile phones, particularly smartphones. As Middleton, Scheepers, and Tuunainen state, “One of the most powerful aspects of mobile computing is the ability to work across contexts...Mobile devices enable multiple use contexts, and change the ways that [information systems] are experienced by their users” (507). In other words, where technology once offered singular uses, digital tools such as smartphones now combine multiple purposes into one technology. Apps provide an ordering principle of sorts (Briggs and Bauman), bringing a structured platform to often chaotic discourse. Activists use a variety of apps to reach constituents through the use of multiple media; for example, “The combination of Twitter and smartphones, in particular, allows individuals to continually post and receive updates as well as to circulate images, video, and text, constituting real-time user-generated news feeds” (Juris 267).

While many digital feminist activists may utilize mobile apps to support or advance their efforts, they typically utilize (purportedly) neutral apps used by a broad public (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). It can be difficult to find mobile apps that are distinctly feminist, or apps that work specifically to address and combat gender issues. Using “feminist” as a search term in app stores on mobile devices does not necessarily

result in feminist applications. For example, a recent search of “feminist” I conducted on the Apple App Store returned some results for feminist magazines, but also an app for “news and entertainment for women” (Bustle: News & Entertainment for Women) and a tarot deck for witches (Beth Seilonen’s Witches Arcana). Furthermore, the majority of feminist mobile apps form insulated communities, downloaded and used only by those who already support the cause. These caveats are not meant to criticize feminist mobile apps, which are often created with great intentions, but rather to address perceived limitations of such apps in promoting larger social change.

Yet considering a specific, insular audience often helps organizations to construct their feminist mobile apps in particular ways. For example, organizations who build apps with a background in feminist discourse may tailor features or app interfaces based on user feedback or relevant aspects of unrelated apps. Feminist mobile apps are often created with distinct intentions, such as disseminating information, creating a space for like-minded individuals, or mobilizing constituents. This can be related to ideas of genre (Bauman; Briggs and Bauman). Genre can be invoked in mobile apps “as a category or type of speech act or event” (Briggs and Bauman 138); in other words, feminist mobile apps are a specific platform used in feminist activism. Furthermore, Hanks considers genre to be “an orienting framework for the production and reception of discourse” (qtd. in Briggs and Bauman 142-143). In this light, feminist mobile apps provide a distinct digital framework for feminist discourse. This works because, as Dundes notes, form remains relatively stable, but content within genre is a variant element (qtd. in Briggs and Bauman 137); in feminist mobile apps, the platform (the app) and the overarching message (feminism) – or in fact, the public – are relatively stable, but the content varies

between specific apps. Therefore, although each feminist mobile app may provide a unique service, the overarching idea remains feminist. Users may engage simply by reading or learning more about material or they may choose to take more direct action, such as uploading video or organizing an offline event via mobile apps, but they engage in feminist ideals simply by using a feminist app; they belong to the public by merely paying attention to it (Warner 53).

Feminist mobile apps did not materialize out of nothing; they were, and continue to be, created out of a mesh of previous feminist efforts and current technologies. Bauman notes that “a genre is a speech style oriented to the production and reception of a particular kind of text” (79); furthermore, as Briggs and Bauman find, the process through which discourse of a particular genre is produced and received is mediated through its relationship with prior discourse. In other words, feminist activism conducted via mobile apps may only be produced, received, and understood through previous efforts or discourses on feminism and gender relations. Warner reiterates this idea when he finds that “a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. It is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time” (62); it is the collection of feminist discourses, including mobile activism, that creates a feminist counterpublic. Feminist mobile apps have often been carefully constructed by creators who are deeply immersed in other forms of feminist discourse and activism. In this light, feminist apps may also provide a powerful platform for shaping feminist discourse into ordered texts.

This may imply that feminist mobile apps maintain a certain element of control over feminist discourse; however, a key feature of mobile apps is their ability to simply

provide a tool or platform for users to articulate feminist values. Because feminist discourse is produced and received through the user's interaction with the app and is mediated through the user's previous relationship with feminist discourse(s), the user is also involved in producing feminist discourse. For example, a user may choose to share and critique an image of a sexualizing advertisement; this user is producing feminist discourse that is built upon his or her previous engagement with the topic and using the app as the platform for engagement. Therefore, both users of mobile apps and producers of feminist discourse often actively construct and reconfigure apps and their utility. Users of networked publics are often actively constructing their social and cultural worlds, and this includes participation in feminist counterpublics. Of course, creators and users alike must consider the power implications of this--who controls the process of this discourse and how this relates to race, class, and other social statuses should remain of key importance to feminist activists. Yet for this same reason, some scholars feel that digital technologies may reduce marginalization as more individuals and groups have access to discourse (Martin and Valenti; Zandt).

To further consider the impact of mobile feminist activism, I will review three U.S.- or Canadian-based smartphone apps: (1) #NotBuyingIt, (2) Hollaback!, and (3) Not Your Baby. Not all apps are created equal or are equally empowering; therefore, it is crucial to analyze multiple apps to consider the unique potential and limitations of each app, and of apps in general. Each app is free and available for download for both Apple and Android operating systems. It is important to note, however, that smartphone apps are often limited to specific mobile operating systems, such as Apple or Android. This leaves users of other mobile operating systems, which are often more affordable, unable

to engage in feminist mobile apps; a problem that digital feminists must consider in their activist efforts.

### *#NotBuyingIt*



*Figure 1*

In late 2011, the national nonprofit The Representation Project created the #NotBuyingIt hashtag campaign on Twitter to “challenge brands and companies which rely on misrepresentations of gender and extreme sexual objectification to sell their products” (“The ‘Not Buying It’ App”). Due to their success of the hashtag campaign, The Representation Project crowdfunded the #NotBuyingIt app to create an online community of users who could continue highlighting offensive advertisements (“The ‘Not Buying It’ App”; O’Connor; Gander). Bauman finds this to be a common trend as the intertextuality of texts or discourses allow for adaptation of frameworks; the #NotBuyingIt app seemed a logical combination of emergent digital technologies and a successful feminist campaign. After garnering much attention (see articles by Gander; O’Connor; Plank; McPherson; Badahur, “#NotBuyingIt App”), the app was launched on January 22, 2014. Once downloaded, the app allows users to upload sexist or

stereotypical images and tag it with #NotBuyingIt; users may also use the hashtag #MediaWeLike to tag images that represent positive messages or advertisements that accurately reflect women (McPherson) and other genders. Users may also scroll through media posted by other users and connect to Twitter to engage directly with companies (“The ‘Not Buying It’ App). The app’s activist potential stems from the interaction between the event, or app, and the discourse as posited through the app as a platform; in other words, the app is intended to provide a platform for feminist discourse, but that discourse stems directly from engagement with the app and its community.



Figure 2

Initial reviews and response for the app were largely positive and hopeful; the app has been called empowering (McPherson), cutting-edge (Plank), and community-building (Badahur, “#NotBuyingIt App”). After 10 months, however, reviews on the Apple App Store were mixed. The comments range widely, but were largely highly positive or negative (few were neutral). Most positive reviews discussed the intention and message of the app. One user stated, “I love this app and all it stands for. It makes making a positive difference simple, and allows those of us who ache over damaging media join together. We’re not alone, and we CAN make a difference” (A. McLaughlin in *Apple*

*App Store #NotBuyingIt* review). Most complaints considered the usability and engagement of the app, such as the inability to comment on images or a lack of monitoring for appropriate usage; one user felt that the app stalled the cause. Many complaints also surrounded technical problems that occur with the app, such as an inability to connect to tabs or create an account upon downloading; it is unlikely these issues have been resolved as only one update has occurred, which was before the reviews were left. These issues stem from expectations surrounding the generic framing device (Bauman); users carry certain connotations regarding feminist mobile apps based on prior experience with feminist discourse and mobile apps at large.

Considering the #NotBuyingIt app through the lens of impact and efficacy as described above provides an alternate view of the campaign tool. As mentioned by the reviewers, the app does not provide any avenue for users to comment on others' images; this fails to foster conversation between feminist users on image content, media reception, marketing strategies, or gender and sexuality. This issue is not unusual with mobile apps; just as they can provide structure and order, they can also create fragmented results, particularly when creators do not have the time or money to update the app based on real-time feedback. Furthermore, while the app works to build a community of like-minded individuals, it fails to interpellate a greater audience or may fail to foster future conversations outside of the app. As Valenzuela et al state, "decentralized communication using digital tools can fragment public opinion, causing people to close themselves within an information bubble corresponding to their beliefs" (8). In other words, if dialogue (of some form) only happens with those who download and use the app, then users are only engaging with individuals who already hold similar beliefs about

women's and gender rights. While being surrounded and engaged by a community who shares similar values may be inspiring and uplifting, it likely does little to invoke material social change when compared with the accessibility and reach of other platforms. What the app may provide, however, is a digital archive of media images and critiques surrounding gender and sexuality, achieving boyd's affordance of persistence. This is an albeit expensive archive – it costs a great deal of money to create an app, but also costs money to maintain one – yet it may provide feminists with an alternate tool for cataloging and critiquing mainstream sexism.

*Hollaback!*



*Figure 3*

Hollaback! is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to ending street harassment, working to better understand street harassment, to ignite public conversations, and to develop innovative strategies to ensure equal access to public spaces (Hollaback! website). The organization is powered by local activists who establish Hollaback! chapters in their cities (Hollaback! website); there are 22 chapters in the United States as of this writing. In 2010, Hollaback! developed a mobile app to empower

women and LGBTQ-identified individuals by offering them a platform through which they can document their incidents (Epstein, Price). The Hollaback! website states:

The explosion of mobile technology has given us an unprecedented opportunity to end street harassment... By collecting women and LGBTQ folks' stories and pictures in a safe and share-able way with our very own mobile phone applications, Hollaback! is creating a crowd-sourced initiative to end street harassment. Hollaback! breaks the silence that has perpetuated sexual violence internationally, asserts that any and all gender-based violence is unacceptable, and creates a world where we have an option—and, more importantly—a response.

In addition, Hollaback! partnered with the New York City (NYC) Council, the lawmaking body of NYC, to address street harassment; this allowed for an additional feature in the app for NYC-based users starting in 2011 (Zara; Price; Ohikuare; Epstein). NYC-based users may choose to have their stories sent to the NYC Council when submitting incidents through the app. The NYC Council then uses the stories to collect data and develop strategies for combatting street harassment.

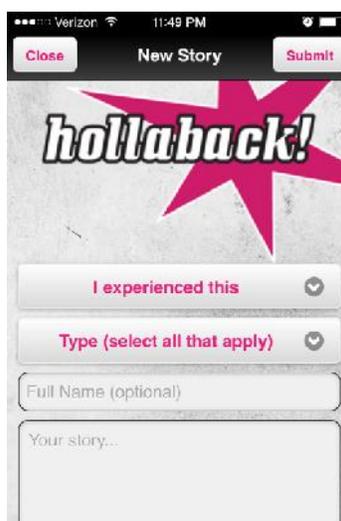


Figure 4

In the Hollaback! app, users describe instances of street harassment that they encountered, whether they experienced the harassment themselves or witnessed the incident. Users are able to categorize the incident by multiple types, including physical categorizations such as assault and stalking and cultural categorizations such as homophobic and racist. The user writes up the experience in 500 words or less and has the option to upload a photo to accompany the story. The incident is then located either manually or via global-positioning systems (GPS). Stories are submitted to leaders of local Hollaback! chapters, who then post the story to the local Hollaback! web page (the user is not required to provide a name and no race or class identifiers are included) if near a local chapter. If a chapter has not been formed in a user's area, the story is posted to Hollaback!'s general website. Despite Hollaback!'s intentions, the app remains purely an informational platform rather than a community as it does not offer space to interact with others; while other digital spaces allow users to connect to one another to discuss and share their experiences, Hollaback!'s app merely provides a space for reporting and/or receiving a one-way stream of information.

While the app provides a safe and share-able platform and space in which individuals can report street harassment (Hollaback! mobile app), the app itself does not show any stories or provide resources for individuals affected by street harassment. Hollaback! claims that their app breaks the silence surrounding street harassment and asserts that street harassment is unacceptable (Hollaback! mobile app), but the mere presence of a reporting mechanism that is not affiliated with the legal or criminal justice system does not necessarily promote social change or substantial impact for individuals impacted by street harassment. The app does not appear to engage the user in any manner

and seems to only take from the individual rather than create a community-oriented digital space. Users must engage with their local Hollaback! chapter's website in order to read stories. Furthermore, for NYC-based users, the option to submit their story to the NYC Council makes some users trepidatious (Ohikuare). Some users did, however, feel that reporting offered a way to speak back to street harassment (dizfox, hollaGIRLlovelove, MsFeministBecca in *Apple App Store* Hollaback! reviews) despite its individualized functionality. Other users reported technological issues such as blank screens (Breelo19, Blahsdzech, Lindy Blue in *Apple App Store* Hollaback! reviews). Overall, the app brings street harassment to light and provides a safe reporting tool for individuals affected by street harassment, but does not promote much further collective action.

### *Not Your Baby*



Figure 5

In July 2012, Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC) launched the Not Your Baby mobile app, a sexual harassment response generator based on ideas, experiences, and stories from 238 people who

responded to a survey released in partnership with Hollaback! (METRAC; see also Gunraj). The app was created based on feedback from surveyed individuals who stated that they had a difficult time thinking of ways to respond to harassment when in the moment (“Not Your Baby App”). Despite being located in Ontario, the app is intended to be helpful for users internationally (Whitelocks). Overall, METRAC intended that the app will illustrate the reality of gender-based harassment (Gunraj) and provide support for those who face sexual harassment.

Similarly to Hollaback!, the Not Your Baby app is intended to address sexual and street harassment; however, Not Your Baby offers multiple levels of engagement. This correlates again with Briggs’ and Bauman’s ideas on generic structure, where they find that a morphological structure (or overall framework or platform) may define an entire genre, but textual structures (specific components of apps) organize individual texts; while Hollaback! and Not Your Baby are similar in their overall messaging, they vary drastically in use features. In the response generator, Not Your Baby provides users with a variety of actions to take or responses to give to their harassers. Users select options regarding the harasser’s relation to them and the location of the harassment; for example, a user may select “boss” and “social situation” as their options. Upon selecting a person and location, the app provides a response for the user; for the example listed above, the app suggests that the user search for relevant labor laws regarding sexual harassment. The user may also refresh the responses to receive alternate suggestions or suggest a response. Users may also review and submit personal stories of sexual harassment, but unlike Hollaback!’s stories, these anecdotes are centered around the responses to harassment; by highlighting stories of action, the app offers users examples of others’ bravery, which

may help them to not feel alone or to address sexual harassment they encounter. Finally, the app provides resources and organizations for those who have dealt with an incident of sexual harassment.

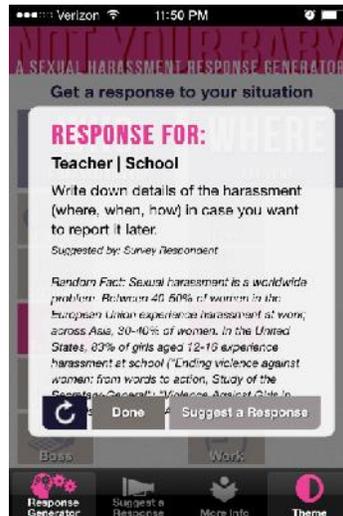


Figure 6

Of the three apps considered in this paper, the Not Your Baby app seems to have the most potential for impact as it offers multiple avenues for users to directly engage in combatting sexual harassment, such as generating responses to a variety of situations when one might encounter harassment, facts on varying types of harassment, and offering advice and tips for supporting those who have been affected by sexual harassment. App users receive individualized responses and guides for addressing sexual harassment in their lives and communities and supporting loved ones who have been affected by sexual harassment, providing a virtual space to find support in the face of harassment (“Not Your Baby App”). This does not mean the app is ideal. Although the creators hoped that the app would be useful before, during, and after an incident of sexual harassment (Whitelocks), the timing required for an appropriate response is often limited and fraught. When faced with sexual harassment, a user may not consider immediately opening the Not Your Baby app to generate a response; even if she or he did, the response would be

delayed and likely less impactful. Unless a user goes through each response option before encountering a situation, it is unlikely that a user will have a response readily at hand, even after reviewing the response generator. Furthermore, the majority of the resources that Not Your Baby provides are Ontario-based as METRAC is based in Ontario; while this is understandable, it makes the resources less useful for those who are not near Ontario. Overall, however, the app may provide users with support and a means of feminist action on an individual level.

### **Digital Feminist Campaigns and Projects**

Digital feminists create and implement a variety of feminist and/or social justice digital campaigns, also referred to as “e-movements” (Earl and Kimport 8). These are similar to offline feminist campaigns in that they often have an informative or consciousness-raising purpose, but these projects largely circulate via digital spaces; since a public does not exist without circulation (Warner 66), one could surmise that digital spaces therefore increase the publicness of a text. Online and offline conversations often conflate in the creation of digital feminist campaigns, making the origination point hard(er) to decipher. Yet each project relies heavily on and is often constructed around the visibility of digital spaces (boyd 11-12); some feminist campaigns begin within a classroom or feminist group and disseminate online, while others begin with a post on a digital platform and expand exponentially to incorporate offline organizing. Therefore, it is important to consider the ways in which digital spaces impact online and offline strategizing and allow for greater dissemination.

The platforms used in digital campaigns and projects vary widely, but often utilize purportedly neutral platforms such as Facebook or Tumblr for disseminating information in order to maximize the visibility of their texts. Social networking sites such as Twitter often provide greater exposure, both to like-minded individuals and the broader public. Feminist activists therefore often rely on digital spheres to broadcast their events or spread relevant information about campaigns. As Tierney states, “Social media platforms play an important part in the process of building consensus, providing a sense of community, recruiting a critical mass, and mobilizing action beyond the virtual and into the physical realm” (18). Furthermore, “information and communication tools can be used to develop new methods of distributed grassroots decision making. By enabling practices of assembly, alternative online publics can organize as if their constituents are gathered in virtual public spaces” (Tierney 9), particularly if activists are mobilizing constituents for offline events.

Gerbaudo usefully illustrates that a key reason for the success of certain digital social justice campaigns is an emotional choreography:

This practice is made visible in the use of social media in directing people towards specific protest events, in providing participants with suggestions and instructions on how to act, and in the construction of an emotional narration to sustain their coming together in public space...Social media have been used to create a sense of commonality among participants essential for the mobilisation (sic) of a spatially dispersed and socially diverse constituency. (12, 14, emphasis original)

This ability to mobilize constituents through affective virtual solidarity on digital networks has become a key component to garnering support for offline events. Although this often works to build solidarity, it can also elide differences among participants; digital feminists therefore must work to construct their campaigns in an effective manner that does not homogenize or marginalize its constituents.

The feminist projects analyzed below have many similarities: each campaign has received national and/or international attention, each campaign has been replicated across the nation or globe, and each utilized digital spaces in order to mobilize constituents and spread relevant information both before and after the offline events occurred. Furthermore, each campaign continues to have relevance, being replicated and expanded upon throughout the internet and localized sites. Finally, each project tackles an issue(s) of great importance to feminists, appealing to constituents via affect: The continuing need for feminism, victim-blaming and rape culture, and sexual assault on college campuses.

*I need feminism because...*

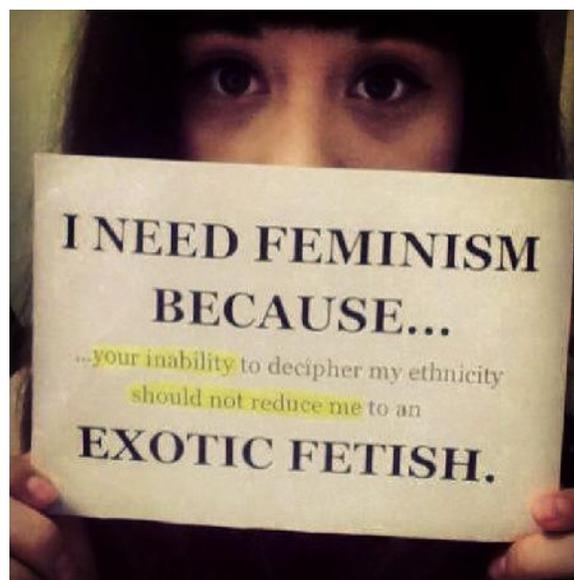


Figure 7

The Who Needs Feminism? Campaign, also known as the “I need feminism because...” campaign, has exploded into a transnational social media campaign (Seidman 549), addressing the diverse issues that women face around the world. Posts decry a considerable variety of feminist critiques of society, popular culture, and power structures, including equal pay, expectations of feminine individuals, female representation, and violence against women. What started as a classroom project at Duke University has taken on national and international dimensions (Seidman 552). The Who Needs Feminism? project originated as a classroom project as an attempt to help young women connect the history of U.S. American women’s activism to debates, issues, and challenges they currently face (Seidman 549). Students collaborated to create a project that opened new dialogue on “power, privilege, linkages between racism and sexism, and the enduring need for an intersectional feminist movement” (Seidman 550) outside of the classroom, where they often faced antagonistic reactions. The Who Needs Feminism? campaign was thus created to illustrate that feminism was necessary, that it could be leveraged against a variety of oppressions, and that there was no singular or stereotypical feminist, but rather quite diverse feminists (Seidman 551).

Students began by recruiting friends and acquaintances from different backgrounds, having them finish the phrase “I need feminism because...” and having their picture taken with the complete phrase; these photos were then plastered across the Duke University campus and joined with an op-ed in the campus newspaper describing the project. The students thus incorporated historical methods of feminist organizing (e.g., poster campaign, publication in local newspaper) into their initial campaign, yet broadened their efforts to include digital dissemination as well. Students created a

Tumblr website to display their photos and shared them on Facebook via their personal networks; digital activists often utilize personal networks for activist efforts, blurring the personal and political. While the campus community also responded to the campaign, the viral nature of digital spaces propelled a local project into an international feminist phenomenon; Seidman states, “The combination of a digital world, a combustible political moment, and the clever simplicity of [students’] approach meant that what happened next went far beyond anything we expected or had prepared for...the students’ campaign went viral and quickly took on national and international dimensions” (552).

Within days of the initial campaign dissemination at the Duke University campus and digital networks, the Facebook page had received thousands of likes and people from around the world began sending their own responses to the “I need feminism because...” prompt. Participants included a variety of diverse individuals, ranging from military personnel to grandmothers, and represented many genders, races, sexualities, and nationalities. Their responses are particularly poignant; as Seidman relates, “Their statements address a wide range of concerns, from rape jokes, body image, and street harassment to pay inequity, homophobia, and racism. They convey pain, anger, and confusion, as well as confidence, pride, and defiance” (552). Although the class has ended, the students have continued the campaign and allowed it to flourish online; the Facebook page currently has over 38,960 likes (“Who Needs Feminism?”) and thousands of submissions from to the Tumblr site come from around the world (Seidman 555-556). Students created a guide to starting a Who Needs Feminism? campaign and coordinated with campuses around the world to launch their own campaigns (e.g., Cambridge University and Anglia Ruskin University, the University of Texas at Austin). This

proliferation has both propelled the Who Needs Feminism? conversation and allowed it to expand as needed by diverse participants in local, national, and international spheres; the campaign continues to perpetuate in digital spaces across the world, both centralized in physical places and widespread in public digital spaces.



*Figure 8*

As with any feminist campaign that pushes hegemonic structures, Who Needs Feminism? has also sparked extensive backlash, both misogynistic and postfeminist in nature. Misogynist responses included posting sticky notes changing the message to statements like “I need feminism because sandwiches won’t make themselves” on campus or threats of physical violence via Facebook comments (Seidman 554). Seidman focuses on the positive aspect of the attacks, stating, “The aggressive nature of some of the responses launched important conversations about the nature and purpose of public dialogue and about how to understand its role in social change” (555). Yet postfeminist

responses, or responses that indicate a belief that women have reached equality within society, often provoked a stronger reaction from the Who Needs Feminism? campaign participants. Reactions spread on a newly-created Facebook group called “Women Against Feminism,” which highlighted images of postfeminist responses to the revised prompt “I don’t need feminism because...” (“Women Against Feminism”). Responses disavowed perceived feminist ideals, reproducing stereotypes about feminists as man-hating, entitled, and whiny; others focused on current perceptions of having equal rights without interrogating social privileges or systemic barriers. Feminists have combatted postfeminist proclamations for decades, yet the visibility of digital spaces works to broadcast the postfeminist responses as well as feminist ones. Proponents of the Who Needs Feminism? project reacted quickly, decrying the responses as misguided (Krantz) at best and producing and disseminating further images on the need for feminism. Reactions to postfeminist responses to Who Needs Feminism? often invoke anger and confusion, but also a call for education; Krantz writes, “as the smoke coming out of our ears clears, we thought it would be best to hop on the Tumblr-inspired train and make it clear why we here at Bustle need feminism.” Reactions have sparked further conversation on feminism’s necessity; “this project has proved that we are not living in a post-feminist world” (Seidman 562).

Similar to Kendall’s musings on reactions to the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag, “like every truly honest discussion of differences, it has been incredibly contentious”; furthermore, Seidman acknowledges long-held challenges for feminists, stating, “learning when and how to engage with those who disagree and, just as importantly, knowing when to walk away from an unproductive diatribe, are essential

skills for anyone who maintains positions that challenge convention and authority” (558). Eventually, the students formed clear guidelines for participation in the debates, attempting to structure the debates as dialogue and reduce or eliminate hostile provocations, and considered the intertwining complexities of online and offline activism. Seidman drafted a summarization of the project, complete with lessons learned (e.g., When is censorship appropriate? What constitutes civil dialogue and what is merely attack?). Overall, she declares, “We all learned gut-wrenching lessons about resistance to social change, misogyny, and the complexities of negotiating the online public sphere” (555). Seidman’s summarization is not unique to counterpublic groups, who often struggle to negotiate to disseminate their messages and counter resistance from the dominant groups.

These attempts at backlash, especially postfeminist responses, have also received significant criticism from parties such as writers and editors at Bustle, who proclaim “mentalities like ‘I don’t need feminism because my sex life is not a political agenda’ are deeply, deeply misguided” (Krantz), and confused cats against feminism, a satirical Tumblr page dedicated to mocking postfeminist responses via images of unrelated “(post)feminist” statements from cats (“confused cats against feminism”). In fact, the campaign may have even grown in popularity due to viral reactions to the Who Needs Feminism? backlash as feminists attempt to inform others about the perceived ignorance in many “I don’t need feminism because...” statements; these responses often highlight the continued relevance of feminism and “combated [sic] some of the lingering ideas that feminism is outdated or elitist...abuse...simply increased our resolve to stand up and put

across our message that feminism is needed” (Langsdale, qtd. in “We Need Feminism Because...”).

Despite backlash against the Who Needs Feminism? images and the contentiousness of the conversation, the project’s ongoing vitality speaks to its impactful nature; campuses and organizations continue to reflect on reasons they *still* (a simple but important expansion of the original project) need feminism; as janeclaireh writes, “Yeah, you’re right. We won’t shut up.” Seidman has proposed a number of reasons the Who Needs Feminism? project garnered such success, including current social and political antifeminist activity, the visually compelling nature of the photos, the authentic and honest nature of the images, and the students’ resistance in defining “feminist”; furthermore, she states, “By asking “Who needs feminism?” rather than “Who is a feminist?” the participant’s statement moves away from a claim of feminism as an identity and toward an idea of feminism as a toolkit, a community, a philosophy on which one can draw” (553). Others have stated, “The women’s campaign is one of the most vibrant and engaged campaigns...and I think this comes from its willingness to interact with anyone who approaches it, as the photos we took clearly demonstrated” (Langsdale, qtd. in “We Need Feminism Because...”). The Who Needs Feminism? project’s openness and honesty draw in a wide variety of participants eager to include their voice and provokes dialogue, however fraught, about the ongoing necessity for feminism.



*Figure 9*

The SlutWalk movement originated in 2011 in Toronto as a response to victim-blaming in sexual assault cases after local police officer Michael Sanguinetti told the audience of a campus public safety forum that women should “avoid dressing like sluts” to avoid being sexually assaulted (see Whyte; Cook and Hasmath; Sollee; Crane; Darmon). Outraged and exasperated feminists responding quickly, creating the SlutWalk movement with the goal of raising awareness about sexual assault revictimization; “Because we’ve had enough” became the official rallying cry (Whyte). SlutWalk criticizes victim-blaming and the lack of perpetrator accountability within law enforcement; participants focus on the necessity of consensual sexual relations.

Co-founders Heather Jarvis and Sonya Barnett began the movement by disseminating information about the initial protest via their Facebook page (“SlutWalk Toronto”), then via a Twitter profile (SlutWalk) and WordPress website (*SlutWalk Toronto*); it is also important to note that Jarvis first heard of the offending incident via Facebook. Jarvis recalled that the movement attracted “a lot of people who have never engaged in activism and protests” (qtd. in Crane 14); the pervasiveness and gravity of the issue mobilized feminists and other progressive activists to respond. Due to the visibility of social media and the ability to connect to like-minded individuals, the initial SlutWalk event drew about 4,000 participants. Although the rally was intended as a singular affair (Hill 47), due to the overwhelming response and level of participation, the event became an annual event; in addition, within a year, over 200 cities around the world had organized their own local SlutWalk events (Crane 14) with active digital social networking profiles and websites.

The SlutWalk movement has since expanded further, with local organizers in hundreds of cities across the globe mobilizing local offline SlutWalk events and conversations via digital spaces, often beginning by incorporating the hashtag #slutwalk and the location. As Hill states, “Of course, the organization of an event takes more than merely declaring its existence online, but hashtag activism makes it easier for groups all over the world to become part of a network without needing to be part of the same organization as those who founded it” (49). Digital spaces allow for immediate dissemination of SlutWalk announcements. Furthermore, this allows for specific regions to adapt the movement to reflect local issues; Hill asserts, “A distinctive feature of the Slutwalks [sic] has been the way in which many of them have taken on a local character

and focused on local issues” (50). The original SlutWalk Toronto movement has persevered as well, continuing to organize an annual SlutWalk event with regular, active participation.



Figure 10

As Juris elucidates, “Although social networking tools allow activists to rapidly circulate information and to coordinate physical movements across space, they are perhaps most effective at getting large numbers of individuals to converge in protest at particular physical locations” (267). Gerbaudo elaborates, “social media have been chiefly responsible for the construction of a *choreography of assembly* as a process of symbolic construction of public space which facilitates and guides the physical *assembling* of a highly dispersed and individualised [sic] constituency” (5). SlutWalk organizers engage individuals and call for collective mobilization via digital platforms such as Facebook. Much like the U.S. #Occupy movement, SlutWalk participants appropriated and resignified urban spaces such as public parks and streets as arenas for

public assembly and democratic expression (Juris 268). Furthermore, although digital platforms are still used to coordinate mobilization for the annual events, the platforms have also evolved to disseminate stories and information about victim-blaming and violence against women. Cook and Hasmath elaborate,

Although the Facebook web pages initially provided spaces for the founders of the sites to convey information about upcoming marches and rallies to interested parties, these pages have also become spaces for engagement with the central aims of the movement: the reclamation and reappropriation of discourses concerning expressions of gender and sexuality, and the vaguely stated aim of ‘inclusiveness’. (976)

SlutWalk digital pages therefore both engage in collective mobilization and online and offline consciousness-raising.

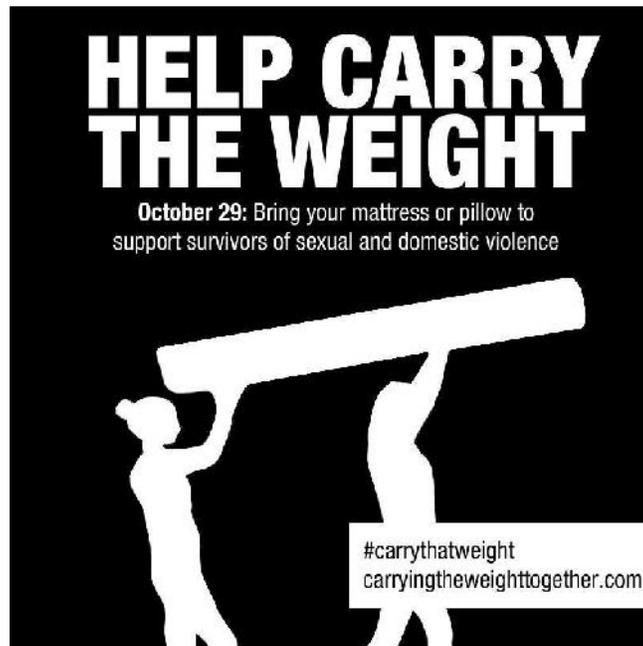
Although lauded by many scholars – Hill declares, “It is hard to think of any other activist movement that has spread so quickly across boundaries of race, religion, culture, class, and national borders” (51) – SlutWalk has also received a variety of criticism, which varies depending on location and context (Sollee). Some have criticized the movement as racist and/or transphobic, although Sollee warns that no criticism holds true across the board as each movement operates in different ways. Other activists are engaging in the same event, but changing the name to offer greater inclusivity, stating that “Slut Walk” is not historically inclusive of all genders, ethnicities, and orientations as “slut” is a term generally used to belittle white women (Gatto). Other critiques claim SlutWalk reproduces objectification of women instead of reclaiming the body and sexuality or taking actual political action; yet Darmon finds that many who decry the

sexual nature of the movement actually strip away its political element. As with the Who Needs Feminism? campaign, many critiques of SlutWalk come from postfeminists who assume further activism is not required as equality has been achieved, although Cook and Hasmath illustrate the ways in which SlutWalk has been conflated with “competing and yet overlapping discourses of third-wave feminism and ‘post-feminism’” (976) through a discussion of negotiated identity construction and performance. Furthermore, Darmon warns that “the privileges that online spaces potentially offer feminist activists for self-representation are not necessarily carried into other spaces...they are often represented by others [e.g. mass media] through a post-feminist-tinted lens” (701), hindering SlutWalk’s political purpose; for example, media messages often demonize the perceived sexual nature of the event, rather than describing the movement’s radical attempt to illustrate that one’s clothes and actions should not have weight in a sexual assault claim. Yet Darmon is not critiquing the SlutWalk movement; she advocates for “a model for assessing the relationship between feminist online protest and the post-feminist mass media, to further our understanding of the extent to which online platforms create and sustain the privilege of feminist spaces and how these spaces can, in turn, promote feminist causes both on- and offline” (703).

The SlutWalk movement’s impact is linked to feminist notions of discursive reclamation and reappropriation (Cook and Hasmath 984). Cook and Hasmath expound, “the potential for deployment of a successful act of resistance was located in the use of ‘slut’ in a way that denaturalized and challenged the dominant way that it was perceived” (984). Although feminists have long engaged in linguistic critique, attempting to reclaim words (e.g., slut, cunt, bitch) for decades, SlutWalk organizers utilized digital spaces to

propel the movement and mobilize constituents; “The online manifestation of the Slut Walk [sic] movement incorporated bids for mass resistance, enacted through appeals to collective solidarity” (Cook and Hasmath 985). As Darmon states, “The SlutWalk protest movement uses both on- and offline activism to speak out and protest against the realities of slut shaming and rape-victim blaming in the physical world” (703). While digital spaces make it easier for critics to attack the movement, they also promote constructive discussion and dissemination of information. The negotiation of sexual politics found in the SlutWalk movement, both in digital spaces and offline, spark conversations and push back against hegemonic gender constructions.

*Carry That Weight Together*



*Figure 11*

Some digital feminist campaigns draw inspiration from offline projects that are publicized online. Carry That Weight Together began as an individual art thesis; Columbia University senior Emma Sulkowicz, who was sexually assaulted in her

sophomore year, began carrying her mattress everywhere with her around campus until her perpetrator is no longer at Columbia, whether he is expelled, chooses to leave, or graduates in May 2015; her project protests Columbia's poor handling of sexual assault cases. Her project has garnered national attention, even leading to Sulkowicz's attendance at the 2015 State of the Union address as Senator Kirsten Gillibrand's guest (Swann). Sulkowicz titled her thesis "Carry That Weight" (Johnston), a name which was expanded by fellow campus activists to Carry That Weight Together in a show of support and solidarity. Activists praise Sulkowicz for her bravery and willingness to showcase a salient issue for universities; Rickard declares that Sulkowicz's "project is powerfully transgressing public/private boundaries and bringing into the public sphere trauma and violence that survivors so often suffer with by themselves in isolation" (qtd. in Nathanson).

Sulkowicz's project soon garnered significant support from students at Columbia University and other college campuses. Fellow Columbia students started by helping Sulkowicz carry her mattress, showing solidarity and support. Their support, like Sulkowicz's original project, soon went viral on digital platforms such as Facebook; students around the United States organized to participate in a national day of action. On October 29, 2014, activists at over 130 schools participated in the Carry That Weight Day of Action in solidarity with survivors of sexual and domestic violence on campuses to protest for campus sexual assault policy reform (Nathanson). Although the event occurred offline, almost all mobilizing efforts and information about the event was spread via digital networks such as the Carry That Weight Day of Action Facebook page ("Carry That Weight Day of Action"). Students, faculty, and staff participated in local public

rallies, carrying bedroom objects or signs and speaking publicly to the crowd about the prevalence of campus sexual violence and university negligence.



Figure 12

Furthermore, participants at Columbia University left 28 mattresses on Columbia President Lee Bollinger's doorstep, one for each student who had signed a Title IX complaint against the university; the activists also issued a public statement to Bollinger, which was also posted online (Brink). The university responded by disposing of the mattresses and fining the activist group \$471 in damages. This response garnered further national criticism for the way that Columbia and other universities address concerns of campus sexual violence. The campaign continued to gain traction after the national day of action and after Columbia's reaction; activists have created a website to disseminate information and mobilize participants (*Carry That Weight*) and organized a second day of action on April 13, 2015 at universities across the nation.



Figure 13

Much like the SlutWalk movement, Carry That Weight Together mobilizes constituents and carries out feminist consciousness-raising via digital networks; as Gerbaudo details, “modern media have always constituted a channel through which social movements not only communicate but also organise (sic) their actions and mobilise (sic) their constituencies” (4). The campaign works to provoke an emotional choreography; “Facebook messages, tweets, and blog posts have constituted not simply channels of information but also crucial *emotional conduits* through which organisers (sic) have condensed individual sentiments of indignation, anger, pride and a sense of shared victimhood and transformed them into political passions driving the process of mobilization” (Gerbaudo 14). This is not to suggest that the Carry That Weight Together participants display false emotions, but rather to illustrate that digital projects often focus on the affective nature of feminist campaigns in order to mobilize constituents in both online and offline activism.

Although the Carry That Weight Together project seems to have received less criticism than other projects, it, like all feminist projects, has been subject to critique. The initial campaign requested that participants carry mattresses, not other bedroom items, on the day of the event; this drew criticism from those who felt it excluded participants with disabilities. This is not uncommon; “the downside of this construction of unity [online] against a corrupt and brutal system is a tendency to elide the differences among participants” (Gerbaudo 14). Activists of the Columbia University event responded to the critique favorably; Ridolfi-Starr stated, “That is an absolutely, 100 percent valid criticism, and it’s really important to address that because people who are differently abled or disabled experience sexual violence at much higher rates than people who are fully abled” (Nathanson); the guidelines were revised to incorporate these concerns. Furthermore, while critics have noted that Sulkowicz’s project and the Carry That Weight Together campaign would likely not have received national attention if not for its originating location at an Ivy League campus, Sulkowicz and campus activists have acknowledged their positions of privilege and work to direct that attention on other schools (Nathanson).

Activists are quick to highlight that Carry That Weight Together has not been a catalyst as dedicated advocates have worked on the issue of campus sexual assault for years; they attribute the campaign’s symbolism and visibility to enhanced dialogue and attention to the issue. Nathanson finds, “That visibility is the campaign’s crucial contribution to the movement, helping to connect organizers across school lines. For those not involved with national groups, it provides an entry into the dialogue.” Carry That Weight Together engages in boyd’s affordance of visibility (12), utilizing digital

spaces to disseminate information and raise awareness about sexual assault and campus accountability. Furthermore, although organizers sufficiently utilize boyd's affordance of spreadability, they focus on attracting participation and coalescing events at universities; this focus both ensures participation in crucial offline spaces, continuing to hold universities accountable, and attracts the most likely constituents for the movement. The movement's ability to mobilize around intensely affective, current political issues on campuses nationwide signifies its greatest impact.

### **Hashtag Feminism**

Hashtag activism is a community-driven tagging system used on social media platforms to aggregate and track content through use of a hash (#) symbol followed by a keyword, or tag (Joyce, "Glossary" 219; see also Small); hashtag feminism then catalogues feminist content. Clark defines, "Hashtag feminism is the latest iteration in a long history of feminist conversation-expansion tactics that politicize personal experiences with all forms of patriarchy, including media" (1109), while Sarah Kendzior describes, "Hashtag feminism makes visible what was never truly invisible, but what people refuse to see" (qtd. in Loza). Although hashtags were not an innate feature of Twitter, their accessibility and functionality complements Twitter's microblogging structure; as Small states, "hashtags are central to organizing information on Twitter" (873)...as they help to organize tweets around a single topic" (879). When hashtags become popular, they are considered to be "trending," and become viral, or rapidly and widely spread across digital networks. This makes certain hashtags particularly visible across social networks; the top trending hashtags are featured on Twitter feeds.

Hashtagging (the act of using a hashtag) has been found to be of particular use to political campaigns, often used to inform users. Small poses, “The value of a political hashtag, or Twitter more broadly, derives from the real-time nature of the information shared” (874); additionally, Frost indicates that hashtags “raise awareness and foster discussion about specific issues and causes via social media.” Users and followers are able to respond to tweets through @replies, often creating essential dialogue on political topics. In addition, users may repost others’ tweets by “retweeting” to share information; in this sense, users “re-broadcast information” (Small 886). While receivers may not have to respond to senders’ tweets at all, parties on the receiving end may take actually senders’ comments quite seriously (Carr), especially when the sender is a consumer of the receiver’s product or if the receiver gets hundreds or thousands of tweets. Therefore, tweets and hashtag activism may in fact create possibilities for a stronger culture of accountability (Martin and Valenti 15) due to a perceived loss of stakeholder engagement.

Some critics of hashtag activism, or digital activism at large, critique the ephemeral, short-lived nature of hashtags and tweets. Yet transient hashtags often spark dialogue and promote offline and online conversations. Furthermore, while some hashtags trend quickly and then disappear, not all hashtags fade into obscurity. Quoting Fitton et al, Small notes that “A ‘hashtag that catches on forms an instant community around it. Most of these are short-lived. Others become ongoing conversations, recurring real-time events, or events entire movements’” (879). #NotBuyingIt, as analyzed below, is a key example of a long-lasting hashtag campaign. Critics of hashtag activism have also criticized the oversaturation of hashtag activism; as Carr states, “I have to admit I’m

starting to experience a kind of “favoriting” fatigue – meaning that the digital causes of the day or week are all starting to blend together.” Yet others have described social networking sites as locations where participants can learn and spread information (see Small; Tierney; boyd), picking up on relevant or interesting pieces while tuning out others. Feminists are thus challenged with providing accurate, interesting activism via digital campaigns. Furthermore, “Whereas 1970s consciousness-raising groups attracted self-identifying feminists, today’s hashtags reach far beyond the feminist community, and...may even enter into the realm of mainstream media” (Clark 1110).

While feminists may face significant challenges with hashtag feminism, such as constructing impactful campaigns or handling digital harassment, recent research has indicated that tweeting about sexism may actually enhance women’s well-being (Foster; see also “Science Says Calling Out Sexism”). The study results revealed that this may occur for two reasons: confronting a perpetrator in anger has shown to improve well-being over time (Foster 2) and collective action and consensus mobilization against injustice appears to benefit well-being (Foster 1). Researchers found that Twitter was an effective platform for engaging in collective action: Foster states, “women asked to tweet about sexism were indeed tweeting in collective ways...both public and private tweets exhibited collective intent and attempts to mobilize consensus that sexism is wrong” (12). Furthermore, the study reports, “inaction did not benefit well-being” (Foster 12) and even postulates that refraining from tweeting about sexism may leave users more at risk for burnout due to digital harassment (Foster 14). Foster rejects “slacktivism” critiques of digital activism, stating, “such a criticism underestimates the power that positive psychological consequences may have on motivating future collective action” (14). She

argues that “identifying effective tweeting methods may be valuable for enhancing thriving, both socially and psychologically” (2).

Below, I analyze three hashtags: #NotBuyingIt, which promotes feminist consumer critique of objectifying and sexist advertisements; #YesAllWomen, a hashtag responding to misogyny and violence against women; and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, an intersectional critique of mainstream white digital feminism. Each hashtag trended for different amounts of time, yet have lasting resonance with users and remain in commission; some are cyclical while others are referred to in conversation with other related campaigns. Each of the hashtags below were created with specific intent and were disseminated with the purpose of promoting dialogue and social change.

### *#NotBuyingIt*



Figure 14

As mentioned above, in late 2011, the national nonprofit The Representation Project created the #NotBuyingIt hashtag campaign on Twitter to “challenge brands and companies which rely on misrepresentations of gender and extreme sexual objectification to sell their products” (“The ‘Not Buying It’ App”). Hashtags are often used by feminist activists to raise awareness and foster discussion about issues via social media (Frost); this hashtag campaign draws attention to and critiques the portrayal of stereotypical gender roles and objectification within advertisements and media. These critiques are

often coupled with an emphasis on an unwillingness to consume products advertised using sexist marketing strategies, as is reflected in the hashtag itself. In order to participate, a user shares an offensive ad, picture, article, and so forth, on Twitter with the accompanying hashtag #NotBuyingIt (Frost); users often also attach or link to the company's profile. The Representation Project identifies their campaign as "putting the power back in the hands of the consumer" ("The 'Not Buying It' App"). The campaign was launched after release of the documentary *Miss Representation*, focusing its efforts on sexist 2012 Super Bowl ads (Grinberg) as "This highly anticipated collective viewing ritual generates a huge amount of chatter on social media before, during, and after the game" (Clark 1109); The Representation Project felt it would be an ideal time to address sexist and hypermasculine culture. The campaign exploded in popularity, generating more than 10,000 tweets during the 2013 Super Bowl (Grinberg) and more than 15,000 tweets during the 2014 Super Bowl (Bahadur, "Super Bowl Ads"; see also McPherson), and was used by both male- and female-identified Twitter users. The hashtag is most popular around the annual Super Bowl, but continues to be deployed year-round.

The popularity of the #NotBuyingIt hashtag may be a key component to its success. Clark highlights that while The Representation Project ignited the #NotBuyingIt campaign, "the nature of Twitter is such that no one organization's message could dominate the protest; rather, the hashtag's power manifested in the sheer number of viewpoints shared" (1110). Often considered their greatest success due to the sheer number of tweets deployed (over 7,500 during the 2013 Super Bowl), The Representation Project led the charge on convincing GoDaddy to change its branding strategy from sexual objectification to entrepreneur advancement (Frost; Janus; Badahur, "Super Bowl

Ads”). In addition, The Representation Project lists several successes in their Kickstarter campaign to expand into an app, including pressuring Amazon.co.uk to remove a line of t-shirts promoting rape in under 24 hours, pressuring a solar company to rescind a sexist ad campaign, and helping get Hallmark to remove a sexist greeting card in under 24 hours (“The ‘Not Buying It’ App”). They attribute these changes directly to prolific use of the #NotBuyingIt hashtag, focusing on the way audience reception may impact advertising and consumer culture; they state, “For too long mainstream media has been a one-way stream of images and information. They create, we consume. But with modern technology it no longer has to be that way: we have the right and opportunity to talk back and influence the media we buy” (“The ‘Not Buying It’ App”). Other scholars find, “#NotBuyingIt made headlines for harnessing the power of female consumers and for forcing companies to acknowledge feminist critique” (Clark 1109); the hashtag may have proven to be an effective means of promoting feminist messages. The Representation Project declares that their hashtag campaign works to “shift media culture” (“The ‘Not Buying It’ App”)



**Rebecca Woolf** @woolfwoolf · Mar 4

I'm [#NotBuyingIt](#) or anything from [@ArnottsDublin](#) until they show women are customers, NOT merchandize. [@RuhamaAgency](#)



5

3



[View photo](#)

Figure 15

While it may be easy to dismiss the somewhat idealistic nature of these claims, it is important to note that companies *have* changed their practices upon receiving hundreds or thousands of tweets that critique sexist advertisements or products. Some companies have directly attributed their changes to receiving customer backlash such as via the [#NotBuyingIt](#) hashtag (J. Harris). While the [#NotBuyingIt](#) hashtag may not be the sole factor in these changes, continued criticism that “challenges brands and companies which rely on misrepresentations of gender and extreme sexual objectification to sell their products” (“The ‘Not Buying It’ App”), and specifically the implied threat that a customer will no longer purchase from the company as a result of these practices, puts pressure on companies to listen to consumer demands and alter or remove products and advertising. As Frost indicates, “Take away one customer? No big deal. Take away many customers, and companies start to listen...By proving that our displeasure will hurt their profit margins, we can force companies to change their content.” Certainly users who use the [#NotBuyingIt](#) hashtag may continue to buy from the offending company in the future,

but the company would have to go to extreme lengths to obtain that information. Other users advocate a commitment to refraining from purchasing from offending companies; Frost writes, “our strategy needs to be not only awareness but annihilation – let’s call out sexist and damaging media and commit to not buying what it’s advertising.” Overall, the hashtag conveys multiple intents: (1) users literally refuse to buy the product being sold in a sexist or objectifying manner, (2) users refuse to buy the values the company is promoting, and (3) users share their stance with the world and encourage like-minded individuals to participate (Frost).

As with all digital campaigns, the #NotBuyingIt hashtag receives criticism, both fair and unreasonable or unrelated. Frost, an avid supporter of #NotBuyingIt, cautions users to deploy the hashtag appropriately in order to maximize its impact and lessen backlash. She warns users to verify the legitimacy of the ad before spreading it; furthermore, she hesitates to utilize the hashtag to “boycott” an item that the user would not purchase in the first place (e.g., an Aston Martin car) as she feels these critiques are less effective at pressuring companies to change their practices as she feels it reduces the threat of refusing to purchase the product in question. Others have defended against the “slacktivism” critique, citing the many benefits of online activism (Janus; Foster 14). Despite the simplicity of dashing off a tweet (Frost), the #NotBuyingIt campaign inspires collective action and consensus mobilization (Foster) and through its prolific use and public denunciation. As Newsom states, “It’s the kind of collective action that we must continue to do until the media hears our message.” Meanwhile, it provides critique of media culture and capitalist-driven consumerism, which have been feminist campaigns

for decades. #NotBuyingIt provides a key example of ways in which digital media have allowed feminists to utilize a new tool to engage in activist efforts.

### *#YesAllWomen*



*Figure 16*

In May 2014, Elliot Rodger posted a misogynist rant on the internet and then went on a shooting spree that killed six people near UC Santa Barbara. After the attack, the hashtag #NotAllMen began to circulate, both counteracting Rodger's hateful speech to distance themselves from the perpetrator. Digital feminists felt the hashtag derailed important conversations about violence against women ("Science Says Calling Out Sexism") and responded quickly, creating the #YesAllWomen hashtag to illustrate the widespread sexism and violence that women face in U.S. American society (Lindsay). The hashtag went viral immediately, gaining nearly 61,500 tweets in the first day

(Lindsay) and nearly two million tweets in four days (Johnston), even receiving contributions from well-known figures such as Nancy Pelosi and Neil Gaiman (Decker 28). As Johnston describes, “Women used it to share stories and experiences of misogyny, sexual harassment, and violence against women”; #YesAllWomen tweets often focus on violence against women in some manner. The hashtag has since been created into a Twitter account that, much like Everyday Sexism, posts collected stories (#YesAllWomen Twitter profile) and is even advertising #YesAllWomen-branded products such as cell phone cases (“Limited Edition”).

The #YesAllWomen hashtag has also since spread offline. Local consciousness-raising groups have been formed, such as the Yes All Women Boston volunteer group, who states,

Yes All Women Boston is a movement of feminists, many of us musicians, to unite people of all genders in creating safe, supportive environments where women’s voices can be heard through music, art, spoken word, and in their everyday lives. We seek to empower women, educate the public, and engage communities in building a world where all women can be free of violence, oppression, and fear. (Marotta)

In addition, New York University student Nicola Clarke recently launched a theatre project based on the #YesAllWomen movement in order to open community discussion and potential healing (Johnston). These shifts to offline engagement are often viewed as community consciousness-raising of feminist issues; Saraswathi Jones declares, “#YesAllWomenBoston is 21<sup>st</sup>-century feminist praxis. We are taking what we

understand about the systemic violence against and intimidation of girls and women, and fighting it by occupying public spaces, starting with the stage” (qtd. in Marotta).

#YesAllWomen proponents often describe its call for equality for women and its ability to foster solidarity and inclusion; Lindsay states, “All-inclusive and inspiring, #YesAllWomen has become the rallying cry of feminists around the world.” Yet despite its popularity and well-intentioned responses, #YesAllWomen has sparked much criticism from feminists for portraying a monolithic experience for women. While the hashtag was meant to refer to shared experiences of women, critics find that the hashtag continues to implicitly support only white, straight, cisgender, and non-disabled women (Heideman). For example, Heideman relates the efforts of Stephanie Woodward, a woman with a disability who incorporated her disability into the #YesAllWomen campaign only to be rebuked with hostile messages from other activists accusing her of detracting from the real issue to make it about disability. Her article continues on to emphasize the ways in which ableism filters through mainstream feminist campaigns such as #YesAllWomen, and calls for acknowledgement of privilege. Other users constructed their tweets to both engage in the #YesAllWomen campaign while providing a simultaneous call to incorporate intersectionality, such as below:



Figure 17

Although the #YesAllWomen movement fosters useful discussion and may lead to online and offline consciousness-raising, feminists must be cautious of making claims that

universalize the experiences of women. While the movement has gained considerable traction and has retained popularity, it continues to portray a monolithic woman and feminism that also hinders the feminist movement.

*#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen*

Advocates For Youth and 8 others follow  
 **Sarah Felts** @sarahfelts · Feb 8  
Sh\*t White Feminists Say to Black Feminists [bit.ly/16rGxPD](https://bit.ly/16rGxPD) (via @ForHarriet)  
[#solidarityisforwhitewomen](#)

 For Harriet



**Sh\*t White Feminists Say to Black Feminists (and How to Counter Them)**

By For Harriet @ForHarriet

White Feminists, you gonna learn today. But it's not a Black Feminist's job to educate you.

[View on web](#)

← ↻ 4 ★ 11 ⋮

Figure 18

One of the greatest strengths of digital feminism is its ability to include marginalized voices (Martin and Valenti 17). Much digital feminist activism challenges other feminists to create dialogue and open spaces for more diverse projects; “new media, especially social media sites like Twitter and Tumblr, have become important sites of black and other women of color media-making and media critique” (Mann 294). Hashtag feminism often provides a crucial platform for such accountability; “hashtag feminism has unleashed a multiplicity of voices that demand recognition of differences across intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and class, so that more effective coalition building might occur” (Clark 1109). One such hashtag is #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, which focuses on the ways in which current mainstream feminist activism continues to center the issues of white women and ignore how issues of race also impact feminists (Kendall) and promotes intersectional feminism (Okolosie 92). Upon frustrations of white digital feminists’ reactions to Hugo Schwyzer’s public meltdown on Twitter, Mikki Kendall launched the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag in 2013 in order to create a discussion highlighting the ways that mainstream white feminism elides racism and other discrimination within the feminist movement. The hashtag quickly went viral, tweeted over 75,000 times in four days (Topsy, qtd. in Loza) and drawing a wide variety of Twitter users into the conversation. Kendall declares, “Feminism as a global movement meant to unite all women has global responsibilities, and – as illustrated by hundreds of tweets – has failed at one of the most basic: it has not been welcoming to all women, or even their communities.” #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen seeks to problematize this phenomenon and foster greater feminist activism; “The #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen

hashtag reveals fractures in American feminism” (Gay in “Twitter Sparks a Serious Discussion”).

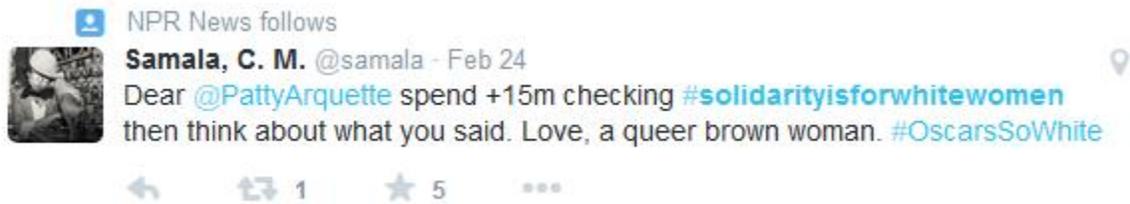


Figure 19

Loza further considers how seemingly promising social media platforms such as Twitter have not reformed mainstream American feminism. Although digital platforms can provide spaces for diverse voices, most mainstream digital feminist efforts continue to focus on a singular, homogenizing feminism. Loza analyzes the contentious nature of the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag and looks more broadly at white feminist backlash against Twitter campaigns led by women of color. Overall, she remains concerned about the vitriolic nature of the conversation, focusing not on the productive aspects of feminist discussion of gender and racial politics. Furthermore, she hesitates to define the discussion as a “women of color” debate, finding that women of color who fall out of the white-black binary find their struggles excluded; quoting Ramirez, she states, “When we don’t recognize that even our own practices can be essentialist and exclusionary, we cannot claim that we are doing solidarity, intersectionality, or even feminism better.” Loza provides useful deliberations on #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen and encourages the campaign to acknowledge its own privileges while calling for all users in the discussion to listen to one another. Yet despite her concerns, she concurs that, “Like their feminist predecessors of color, hashtag feminists have found common ground and are beginning to build coalitions across profound cultural, racial, class, sex, gender,

and power differences” (Sandoval, qtd. in Loza), and that such campaigns have promise if articulated with precision and if all parties listen to each other rather than simply defend their positions.

Hashtags such as #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen highlight important critiques of mainstream white feminism and push for a stronger, more complex feminism. Digital spaces such as Twitter may provide a useful platform for fostering conversations to invoke change; Mann elucidates, new media have “the potential to undermine hierarchies of authority and power” (294), but digital feminists and researchers must actively work to bring these conversations into the open. The #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag challenges mainstream feminism in a public manner and engages a variety of users to discuss gender and racial politics in digital spaces. As Kendall states, “An honest conversation between feminists about feminism and its future *is* happening, and like every truly honest discussion of differences, it has been incredibly contentious. Hopefully it will also be productive: despite the natural brevity encouraged by Twitter, any conversation that can span a full day [or years!] must generate some change” (emphasis original). Furthermore, the efforts of #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen may be spreading offline; Gay calls for movement beyond #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, avering, “It’s time to build on the important work rising out of the hashtag” (qtd. in “Twitter Sparks a Serious Discussion”). #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen continues to be referred to in digital conversations, and promotes significant, albeit contentious, discussions about feminism and other social politics.

### **All This Means...What?**

Overall, digital feminist projects allow feminism to garner greater visibility, bring more people into conversation, and mobilize community. This paper illustrates the ways in which certain digital projects have greater impact for feminism than others. A key component of impactful digital feminism remains in its ability to inspire conversation and provoke further activism. While digital analytics such as Facebook likes may provide some idea of user participation, they fail to denote whether or not a user engaged with the text; feminist campaigns must also work to cultivate future conversations. Feminist hashtags such as #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen work to create dialogue, inspire change, and expand the limits of feminism as it is currently deployed, while digital campaigns such as Carry That Weight Together provide consciousness-raising and collective action.

Furthermore, successful digital feminist campaigns embrace the affordances offered through networked publics: (1) persistence, (2) searchability, (3) spreadability, and (4) visibility (boyd 11). Digital campaigns such as the Who Needs Feminism? project and Slutwalk permeate digital spaces, encouraging sharing and engagement; furthermore, activist efforts expand and adapt the original projects to be more applicable to local offline settings. Meanwhile, explicitly feminist smartphone applications such as #NotBuyingIt fail to reach widespread audiences; although they catalog sexist imagery, thus having persistence, they lack spreadability or visibility. This is not to say that distinctly digital feminist smartphone applications cannot be impactful – for example, the Not Your Baby app provides a myriad of useful resources and information – but rather to emphasize that such projects may have less impact for feminist activism over time.

Digital feminists may find greater impact by paying attention to these particular affordances that networked publics offer when constructing future activist projects.

Feminists have been incorporating digital landscapes into their activism for over a decade and have only increased in their participation and the level of sophistication in their campaigns. As Martin and Valenti state, “the Internet has transformed not just the lives of individual feminist activists, but of activist movements as a whole” (1), while Schulte finds that “what the most recent internet scholarship suggests is that feminists of all forms should consider writing dynamic media activism into their future plans.” Offline activist efforts are still essential to promoting feminism, but researchers can no longer ignore consideration of digital feminism’s impact. In order to understand the full possibility of digital feminist activism and to promote more impactful online and mobile campaigns moving forward, feminist researchers must be attentive to this new(er) method of feminist engagement. Additional study may also contribute to increased understanding of digital inequalities, leading to greater access to digital technologies for all individuals. As Coleman suggests in ideas on hacking and digital activism, attention to digital sociality and activism can help foster greater understanding of what a feminist digital politics might mean, along with its potentialities and limits.

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