

**EVERYDAY FEMINISM IN THE DIGITAL ERA:  
GENDER, THE FOURTH WAVE, AND  
SOCIAL MEDIA AFFORDANCES**

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

The last decade has seen a pronounced increase in feminist activism and sentiment in the public sphere, which scholars, activists, and journalists have dubbed the “fourth wave” of feminism. A key feature of the fourth wave is the use of digital technologies and the internet for feminist activism and discussion. This dissertation aims to broadly understand what is “new” about fourth wave feminism and specifically to understand how social media intersect with *everyday* feminist practices in the digital era. This project is made up of three case studies –Bumble the “feminist” dating app, private Facebook groups for women professionals, and the #MeToo movement on Twitter— and uses an affordance theory lens, examining the possibilities for (and constraints of) use embedded in the materiality of each digital platform. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups with users, alongside a structural discourse analysis of each platform, the findings show how social media are used strategically as *tools* for feminist purposes during mundane online activities such as dating and connecting with colleagues. Overall, this research highlights the feminist potential of everyday social media use, while considering the limits of digital technologies for everyday feminism. This work also reasserts the continued *need* for feminist activism in the fourth wave, by showing that the material realities of gender inequality persist, often obscured by an illusion of empowerment.

For Riley, my favorite girl

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Continuing the wave metaphor of the women's movement, scholars, activists, and journalists have commented on the recent rise of feminist sentiment, dubbing the current era the "fourth wave" of feminism (Baumgardner, 2011; Chamberlain, 2016; Cochrane, 2013; David, 2016; Munro, 2013; Rampton, 2015; Rivers, 2017). Central to the fourth wave is the use of digital technologies and the internet for feminist activism. Nicola Rivers (2017, p.1), in her book *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave*, writes:

The announcement of the arrival of a new wave of feminism raises multiple questions. Not least, what is it about the fourth wave that's new? How does it differ from the waves that came before? And what are the conditions of its arrival?

These are questions that this dissertation grapples with, specifically examining social media's role in this wave. Social media (websites as well as mobile apps) afford user agency, interactivity, and possibilities for new connections that help strengthen collective feminist activism, such as protest organization (Eckert & Steiner, 2016). However, at the same time as the internet is being used for overtly feminist politics, everyday digital practices link the personal to the political in less explicit, but still significant, ways (Highfield, 2016). Studying the everyday uses of social media is thus fertile ground for feminist research, and the focus of this study.

This dissertation aims to broadly understand what is "new" about fourth wave feminism and specifically to understand how social media technologies affect feminist practices in the digital era. Throughout this project, I simultaneously interrogate the

demarcation of the fourth wave as a new era, engaging with cultural debates about the wave metaphor more broadly and situating this analysis within historical discussions of feminist politics. I critically examine the links between the personal and the political in the fourth wave through case studies of everyday uses of digital technologies – Bumble, Facebook, and Twitter – specifically paying attention to the affordances, or possibilities for use, of each platform. The three case studies sit on a continuum from private to public and center on everyday digital uses of these platforms in relation to feminist goals, outcomes, and practices. This dissertation takes a multi-pronged approach to the study of fourth wave feminism on social media, looking at the physical structure of the technologies themselves, the content that users share, observing and talking with users about their experiences with these technologies, as well as examining the broader cultural context.

In the first case study, I examined Bumble, the “feminist” dating app. Here, I combined the walkthrough method for apps (Light, Burgess & Duguay, 2016) with user interviews, observations, and focus groups of women to understand how Bumble, as a self-designated “feminist” technology, is used in developing personal relationships within a patriarchal social system. During the walkthrough method, I focused on how the features and perceptions of the platform enable, guide, and constrain uses of Bumble. In the second case study, I looked at private Facebook groups for women used for professional purposes, such as networking and career development. Here, I conducted a structural discourse analysis (Cirucci, 2014; Papacharissi, 2009), interviews, and digital focus groups with members of these groups. In the final, third case study, I conducted a textual analysis of the first week of the trending hashtag #MeToo on Twitter, as well as

conducting a structural discourse analysis to understand the affordances of Twitter as a mediating platform for feminist discourse. The broad research questions guiding this project are: What is the role of social media – and particularly their affordances – in contemporary feminism? What is new about the fourth wave and how does technology affect this “newness”?

### The Rise of the Fourth Wave: Everyday Politics and Digital Media

The core defining feature of the fourth wave is the use of the internet and digital technologies for feminism. The fourth wave is visible in discussions of feminism and women’s issues online, including on blogs and through “hashtag feminism” such as the recent #MeToo movement, which drew attention to the pervasiveness of sexual assault and harassment. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide numerous features for the fast and efficient dissemination of feminist information across time and space (Chamberlain, 2016; Eckert & Steiner, 2016). Thus, social media, defined as “computer-mediated communication software that enable users to create, share and view content in a publicly networked one-to-one, one-to-many, and/or many-to-many communications” (Hopkins, 2017), are fundamental to this most recent wave of feminist activity.

This project aims to contribute to the scholarship on the fourth wave specifically from a new media materiality perspective, including engaging with critiques of technological determinism in the definition of the fourth wave, as well as considering debates about conceptualizations of the wave metaphor more broadly. The fourth wave in this research project broadly refers to a current upsurge in feminist activity and sentiment

through digital means. Because intersectionality – taking seriously differences in experience based on race, class, sexuality and so on (Crenshaw, 1991) – is central to the fourth wave, this project uses a digital intersectional theory lens (Tynes et al., 2016) in the examination of the role of social media in contemporary feminism.

The link between social media and collective, public, political activities, such as elections and protests, is a prolific area of study (see Hill, 2013). However, Highfield (2016) suggests that scholars should also pay attention to the intersection between digital media and “*everyday* politics, how political themes are framed around our own experiences and interests” (p.3). Further, everyday activities that are not overtly political are, too, valuable objects of study because “the political can be present within the personal, without needing to be framed as explicitly political” (Highfield, 2016, p. 10).

Feminist scholars have indeed suggested that certain online practices, such as blogging, even if not explicitly labelled as such by those partaking in them can be viewed as *feminist* practices. For instance, Taylor (2011) argues that single women who blog are partaking in a feminist practice by challenging privileged narratives around heterosexual coupling in broader culture. Digital platforms, then, allow individuals to challenge gender norms, share experiences, support each other, and ostensibly continue offline feminist practices through their everyday online activities. This study explores how the personal, everyday uses of certain technologies can be linked to broader feminist politics.

However, this study also considers that, at the same time as digital media technologies allow increased explicitly feminist activism and women’s less overt “everyday politics,” they also make easier the expressions of sexism and misogyny that women experience offline (Mantilla, 2013). In fact, Banet-Weiser (2015) claims that a

rise in digital “popular feminism” is mirrored by the parallel rise of “popular misogyny” online. Women who express feminist opinions online are routinely harassed and intimidated, including instances of rape and death threats (Chasmer, 2016; Mantilla, 2013). But this digital version of sexism and misogyny is not reserved for women who identify as feminists. A 2014 Pew Research Center survey found that women *as a group*, and specifically young women, experience particularly sinister digital harassment, with 26% being stalked and 25% experiencing sexual harassment online (Duggan, 2014).

This backlash against renewed feminist – and even just female – activity in the public sphere is, of course, not a new phenomenon (Faludi, 1992); feminism as a movement has been met with vitriol throughout the succession of waves, beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. However, this contemporary moment is a particularly interesting clash of feminist and anti-feminist sentiment, precisely because of the interactive digital technologies that enable both: “As a result of...the dialogue facilitated by the Internet, possibly for the first time women are able to *engage directly with the ‘backlash’*” (Chamberlain, 2016, p. 462). Accordingly, central to my study is the role of social media in empowering (and constraining) women in relation to the rise of both popular feminism and popular misogyny. Analyzing the affordances of digital media technologies is a useful lens to gain nuanced understandings of how technologies and their users interact in the context of the wider social (patriarchal) environment.

#### Vernacular Affordances of Digital Media Technologies

Social media is a space designed for connection; they are “those technologies that enable the building and maintenance of relationships” (Massie & Cirucci, 2017, p. 116). The technological architectures and features of social media provide “diverse



functionalities to enable networking and communication with other members, to establish groups, and to have discussions” (Carstensen, 2014, p. 487). Such connectivity and other functionalities are what scholars call *affordances*. Affordances represent the opportunity for an interaction between the physical properties of an object and the actions of a social agent (Gibson, 1979). Affordances, in the context of media and communication technologies, refer both to technological affordances – the design features and material structures that allow certain actions – and to social or communicative affordances – what the technology allows its users to do socially (for instance, allowing users to communicate virtually with like-minded people) (Hutchby, 2001). Technologies, of course, do not exist in a vacuum; how they are designed and what people do with them is embedded in the wider context of hegemonic social power structures. Consequently, affordances present possibilities for both aligning with social norms and subverting them (Highfield, 2016; Shaw, 2017).

Nagy and Neff (2015) argue that the concept of affordances is not merely objective, by putting forward the notion of “imagined affordances”; “imagined affordances,” they contend, sit at the intersection of “users’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers” (p. 1). What people do with a technology, then, depends both on the objective features of a technology and also on what an individual *imagines* a technology is for. Thus, in order to understand interactions between technologies and their users, it is important to ask users *themselves* about their experiences and imaginations of digital technologies – getting at what McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015) call “vernacular affordances.” Understanding vernacular affordances

also leads to an understanding of the “platform vernacular” (Gibbs et al, 2015), the “shared conventions and grammars of communication” specific to each social media platform – thus contributing to the literature on platform studies. Accordingly, I conducted either a walkthrough or structural discourse analysis of each platform to map out affordances, but I also spoke with women themselves about their conceptions and uses of these platforms.

In the context of digital feminism, affordances are a particularly useful analytical lens, because they allow the consideration of questions such as: what possible feminist actions do technologies allow that are different from face-to-face or other mediated communication? How has offline feminism moved online? Has digital media created new obstacles for feminism? How much has changed because of new technologies? How much has stayed the same? I attempt to answer these questions throughout this dissertation.

### Using a Feminist and Cultural Studies Approach

Speaking with women directly about their uses of technologies in large parts of this dissertation (two analytical chapters) was a conscious choice aligned with the feminist epistemology guiding this project. Feminist research is “research on, by, and especially *for* women” (Stacey, 1988, p. 21); using a feminist methodology means that “women’s perceptions, meanings and experiences are taken seriously and valued” (Foss & Foss, 1994, p. 39). Accordingly, interviewing women brings their own words and understandings to the forefront of this dissertation research. Further, feminist research is grounded “contextually in the concrete realm of women’s everyday lives” (Stacey, 1988, p. 21) and is particularly concerned with interpreting the everyday life experiences of

women that are usually not scientifically studied. By interviewing women about their everyday uses of Bumble and Facebook, this research aims to contribute to the body of feminist scholarship that legitimizes lived experiences of women as a form of knowledge production. Complementing the interview method of the first two cases is the third case, which used a textual analysis to study the first week of the #MeToo movement of Twitter. Exploring the content of the #MeToo discourse in conjunction with an analysis of Twitter's affordances demonstrates how Twitter as a platform mediates feminist discussions and outcomes during everyday practices.

The decision to focus on the everyday in this dissertation is based on a cultural studies approach to media and communication research. Cultural studies scholars contend that media is embedded in every aspect of human existence and not an entity that can be extracted and studied apart from a wider cultural context (Baym, 2010; Miguel, 2018). There are two core assumptions of cultural studies that locate this dissertation in a cultural studies paradigm: firstly, there is an emphasis on how people *consume* cultural texts (such as media texts) and increasingly, in the digital age, how they *interact* with media and technologies (Shaw, 2017); secondly, cultural studies emphasize the importance of studying culture of ordinary people and their mundane experience of everyday life, because "culture is ordinary" (Williams, 2002 [1958]).

Audience studies as a body of research focuses on the experiences of audiences, with researchers speaking directly with audiences to find out how they engage with media texts and technologies, using interviews, focus groups, surveys or ethnography (e.g., Bird, 2003; Darling-Wolf, 2004; Hight & Harindranath, 2017; Radway, 1984). Audience studies add another dimension to researchers' analysis of texts and production

practices, creating a rich holistic understanding of how media and communication are shaped by and shape society. The importance of audience studies specifically in the digital age is highlighted by Hight and Harindranath (2017, p.1), editors of *Studying Digital Media Audiences*, who write:

insights gained from audience research are an essential contribution to debates over the nature and significance of digital media... [particularly as there is] scarcely an area within contemporary modern societies which is untouched by digital media in one form or another.

The emphasis on the ordinary is a valuable area of study (Kitch, 2008) and produces research that explores ordinary people's mundane interactions with media and technologies as they go about their daily lives (e.g., Ang, 1985; Bird, 2003; Radway, 1984). In a classic reception study, Radway (1984) asked women what they thought about the romance novels they read in their leisure time. Similarly, Ang (1985) analyzed viewer responses to the soap opera *Dallas*, specifically looking at the ways that watching *Dallas* could be valued as a pleasurable activity in women's lives. Intersectional and global approaches to reception studies include Bobo's (1995) study on African-American women's consumption of films and novels created by black women, such as *The Color Purple*, and Acosta-Alzuru's (2003) explorations of Venezuelan audiences' understandings of feminism in telenovelas. Moving into the digital realm, Gray (2009) shows how offline and online spaces connect, in her research on queer rural youth's usage of digital media as places for queer identity construction. Baym (2010), in her study of personal relationships online, argues that technologies have become incorporated into the daily routines of people and that in order to understand digital technologies as researchers, it is important to study the everyday lives of people.

This dissertation takes a feminist cultural studies approach and answers the call for more research on the “everyday” uses of digital technology (e.g. Baym, 2010; boyd, 2014; Brabham, 2015), specifically located at the intersection of vernacular affordances of social media platforms and everyday feminist politics. Overall, I intend to contribute to a newly-emerging area of scholarship that merges technology and everyday life, linking this to social movement studies focusing on feminist politics.

### The Three Case Studies

This dissertation examines the affordances of social media – Bumble, Facebook, and Twitter. The three case studies sit on a spectrum from private to public everyday uses of social media. Examining Bumble, the mobile dating app, provides insights into the personal, one-on-one uses of technology in the daily lives of women. Studying the participation of women in secret Facebook groups sheds light on the dynamic of communities of ordinary women coming together around shared interests. Analyzing the #MeToo Twitter hashtag campaign offers a nuanced understanding of the daily experiences of women made public.

#### *Bumble, the “Feminist” Dating App*

Bumble is a “self-proclaimed feminist” mobile dating app with over 40 million users as of September 2018 (Boorstin, 2018). It was created by Whitney Wolfe Herd, co-founder of the popular dating app, Tinder (Darwin, 2015; Yashari, 2015). Wolfe Herd calls Bumble “100 percent feminist,” because, after matching, women have to start the conversation, flipping gendered dating norms (either person can make the first move in same-sex connections on Bumble). In contrast, on Tinder and other dating apps, either party can make the first move, but the strongly-held cultural assumption is that the man

should do it (Bennett, 2017). Bumble has been touted as a new technology that provides a digital “safe space” for women, where they have more control of their interactions with men than they would in other online spaces (Bastow, 2016). Because a woman reaches out first, the man “doesn’t feel rejection or aggression – he feels flattered”<sup>1</sup> (Yashari, 2015). Harassment and abuse by men who have been ignored or rejected on dating apps is a well-documented phenomenon (Holmes, 2017), with the Instagram account ByeFelipe highlighting some of the more extreme cases (ByeFelipe.com); Wolfe argues that women starting the conversation “guides the conversation in a very different way.” Indeed, Bumble has a very low abuse report rate for a dating app and takes abuse reports seriously, recently even writing an open letter calling out a documented abuser and blocking him from the app (Paiella, 2016).

#### *Private Facebook Groups for Professional Women*

A current cultural phenomenon is the proliferation of private Facebook groups, closed or secret groups on the social networking site, groups in which conversations are not visible to non-members (e.g. Cuen, 2017; Dreyfuss, 2017; Krueger, 2015; Roberts, 2016). Although closed Facebook groups are of course not limited by gender – anyone can create one – anecdotal evidence points to a significant number of groups being created specifically as spaces *exclusively* for women (Cuen, 2017; Roberts, 2016). Private Facebook groups can be used by women for professional purposes (e.g., networking), for friendship and support (e.g., a neighborhood moms’ group), as well as more broadly for the connection to others with shared interests (e.g., a knitting circle group sharing knitting

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<sup>1</sup> This male-centric approach problematizes the conceptualization of Bumble as feminist. Issues like these are discussed in my analysis.

patterns online). Involvement in a secret women-only Facebook group may be read as a digital feminist practice, through its very formulation as an exclusively female collective space. The focus of this research are private Facebook groups for women for professional purposes, such as career development and networking, particularly in creative, media, and tech fields. Because these industries largely rely on freelance/project work, secret Facebook groups provide an informal platform for career development and networking, which are particularly important in the absence of job security in these fields.

### *Twitter and #MeToo*

Hashtags on Twitter use a specific phrase to link conversations around the same topic and make it searchable. Hashtag activism thus creates public conversations around social issues (Blay, 2016). The #MeToo movement on Twitter started in October 2017, when actress Alyssa Milano tweeted for women who had experienced sexual harassment or assault to tweet #MeToo, to publicly show the magnitude of the problem. The hashtag quickly went viral and conversations using #MeToo continue on Twitter over a year later. #MeToo was not the first hashtag to highlight the ubiquity of gendered violence; #YesAllWomen and #WhyIStayed, amongst others, were earlier feminist hashtag campaigns that increased public awareness of sexual assault, and particularly its misogynistic components (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2019). #MeToo, however, has proved a watershed moment in hashtag activism, with a wider reach and more sustained public discussions than previous campaigns, in part due to the celebrity factor (Milano has over 3 million Twitter followers) and the cultural climate surrounding the Harvey Weinstein scandal. Weinstein, a powerful Hollywood producer, was toppled earlier that October by accusations of decades of sexual abuse by over 80 women

(Farrow, 2017; Kantor & Twohey, 2017). Baer (2016) argues that digital campaigns, such as #MeToo, “have begun to re-establish the grounds for a collective feminist politics,” and are thus in a sense “redoing feminism” (p. 19), following an era of postfeminism (a contemporary ideology asserting that there is no more need for feminism because gender equality has already been achieved – see Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009).

And so, Bumble, Facebook, and Twitter provide a variety of possibilities and constraints for activities related to the personal and the political online. The findings show how the various affordances of each platform can be used strategically for feminist purposes. For instance, women on Bumble feel empowered to challenge normative rules of dating and also “negotiate” the app’s ideal environment of use to maintain control and safety during their interactions with men on the app. Private Facebook groups for women professionals are used as a women’s version of the “old boys’ club,” as safe spaces for marginalized communities, and as mediated consciousness-raising platforms that support offline feminist actions. Twitter, using the #MeToo movement, affords feminist outcomes such as empowerment for survivors of sexual assault, support, raising awareness, and resource sharing. The limitations of each platform in feminist politics are discussed in each analytical chapter. Overall, this research highlights the feminist potential of everyday social media use.

These findings also point to some distinguishing features of the fourth wave of the women’s movement, tied directly to social media. Social media shapes contemporary feminism by providing opportunities for alerting people about gender inequality and the continuing *need* for feminism, actively countering the postfeminist myth that gender equality has been reached. This research empirically exemplifies how women and men in



this “wave” –whether self-identifying as feminists or not –are becoming increasingly *aware* of what Sara Ahmed (2017) terms “gender as a restriction of possibility,” how gender has material effects on our lives. Thus, an important aspect of fourth wave feminism on social media is making more widely visible these continual gendered material inequalities.

This research also shows how social media affordances not only spread awareness, but also provide women with possibilities for new strategies to navigate existing material inequalities based on gender. For instance, social media affordances can be used advantageously to help women avoid harassment and overcome discrimination through their interaction with digital technologies. Such everyday online strategies can be viewed as *feminist* practices because they work towards fighting sexist oppression through women’s lived experience.

Finally, this work reveals that the fourth wave encompasses *both* the individual empowerment discourse of the third wave and a renewed interest in collective feminist action of earlier waves. There is value, then, in conceptualizing the waves of feminism as radio waves (Hewitt, 2012), with different frequencies and wavelengths all existing simultaneously, rather than as oceanic waves. This research shows that the fourth wave is complex and often contradictory, illustrating how feminism as an ideology is always “living, breathing, and evolving” (Fudge, 2005).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Defining Feminism

Feminism has been variously theorized as an ideology, a lifestyle, an identity, and a practice. Whelehan (1995, p.3) reminds us that feminism is interdisciplinary, complex, and “[resistant] to easy categorization.” In fact, the use of “feminisms” in the plural is becoming increasingly common, to account for the multitude of ways of conceptualizing feminism (e.g., Hackett & Haslanger, 2006). At the core, feminism is “rooted in the belief that women suffer injustice because of their sex” (Whelehan, 1995, p. 11). Feminist scholarship, like this dissertation, analyzes “gender as a mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them” (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 3).

This current research uses bell hooks’ (1984) definition of feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation and oppression.” This definition focuses on sexism, an ideology or system, as the problem which affects *all* genders; “feminism’s aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men” (hooks, 1984, p. 240). hooks points out that both men and women can be sexist and anti-feminist, and both men and women can be feminists. Hence, not all women are feminists simply by virtue of being women; “one does not become an advocate of feminist politics simply by having the privilege of having been born female” (hooks, 2015, p. 7).

This is an important distinction for this research, which focuses in large part on *women’s* uses of social media and locates these everyday practices in a broader context of

*feminist* politics. Even though in the first two case studies (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) I interview *women* specifically, I am not asserting that these female users are necessarily feminists or that only women can be feminists.

The decisions to explore Bumble and private Facebook groups as part of the fourth wave of feminism were purposely made on the notion of them being ostensibly feminist *spaces*. Bumble explicitly calls itself (and is written about in popular media) as a “feminist” app and so I was interested in interrogating this assertion. I interviewed women users only, as the app calls itself feminist *because* it is women-friendly; that is, women are the imagined audience for the feminist uses of this app by the designers. Facebook groups for professionals, the second case study, were interesting to me as bordered spaces reminiscent of feminist consciousness-raising groups. The exclusion of cisgender men is a defining feature of these groups, and so only women could be interviewed as members of these groups.<sup>2</sup> The decision to look at the #MeToo movement on Twitter was made because this is broadly considered a hashtag feminism *movement* (to end sexual violence), rather than specifically because women were taking part in the conversations<sup>3</sup>. Overall, throughout this dissertation, I am exploring how female *users*, feminist digital *spaces*, and feminist *movements* are interconnected in the discourse of fourth wave feminism, and how feminist *practices/outcomes/goals* play out on specific social media platforms.

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<sup>2</sup> Non-binary/gender non-conforming individuals were recruited in the call for participation – as these groups often allow anybody who is not a cisgender male to be part of the group - but only self-identified cis women came forth to take part in the study.

<sup>3</sup> The problematizing of the #MeToo discourse in terms of the gender of victims of sexual assault is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

### *Feminism as Intersectional and Non-Essentializing*

Another important aspect of the definition of feminism that this dissertation rests on is that feminism must be intersectional, always actively considering the differences between women's experiences based on race, class, sexuality, and so on (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, a black, lesbian woman has a completely different experience of oppression to a white, straight woman. Social identity factors such as race and class are not additive (one is not black *and* a lesbian), but intersect, creating a unique experience of being “a black lesbian.” Patricia Hill Collins (2005) has similarly argued that gender, sexuality, race, class, age and other identity markers work together in oppression and domination (in what she calls “the matrix of domination”), and that the study of any oppression and injustice has to consider the “intersectionality” of these ... ‘systems of power’” (p.11). As Adrienne Rich (1984, p. 12) explains:

Patriarchy exists nowhere in a pure state; we are the latest to set foot in a tangle of oppressions grown up and around each other for centuries. This isn't the old children's game where you choose one strand of color in the web and follow it back to find your prize, ignoring the others as mere distractions. The prize is life itself, and most women in the world must fight for our lives *on many fronts at once*.

Rich is arguing that the politics of location –acknowledging the unique circumstances, characteristics, histories, bodies, cultures, etc. of different women—is important to authentic feminist inquiry. Accordingly, this research uses a digital intersectional theory lens (Tynes et al., 2016) throughout the analysis, paying attention to different experiences of different groups of women as mediated through digital media. Intersectional approaches disrupt the monolithic entity of “women” as a collective group in feminist

theorizing, through the acknowledgement of differences between women. Tangled up in this, however, is the broader question, what really constitutes a “woman”?

### *The Identity of “Woman”*

Feminists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when considering differences between men and women, distinguished between *sex* (biological/physiological attributes such as hormones, genitalia, secondary sex characteristics) that occur naturally, and *gender* or *sex roles* (culturally normative expressions of femininity and masculinity, such as clothing, gestures, personality traits) that are socially constructed. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) famously proclaimed in her book, *The Second Sex*, that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...” (p. 283). Thus, many feminists reject the notion that gender is an essential, natural quality and instead point to cultural/social influence on constructions of womanhood and femininity. In line with this, Ahmed (2017, p.14), who writes that “feminism requires supporting *women* in a struggle to exist in this world,” proposes that “women” should be conceptualized as “all those who travel under the sign women,” including trans women and any self-identified women in the category. This dissertation uses Ahmed’s inclusive definition when discussing “women.”

Later, feminist theorists troubled the distinction between sex and gender, some claiming that the lines were too blurry while others arguing that the distinction itself is not necessary. For instance, since the 1990s, feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler (1990, 2004) has provocatively questioned the existence of the natural category of “woman.” Instead, Butler argued that the split between gender (as socially constructed)

and sex (as biological) is arbitrary. She insisted instead on viewing *both* gender and sex as constructed, and importantly, viewing both as placed on a spectrum rather than being discrete categories. She also argued that gender is not a stable concept; rather, she explained, gender is constantly constructed through *performance* – through a “stylized repetition of acts” (p. 179). Butler posits that because gender and sex are constructed on a daily basis, there is no ontological reality in a “body,” instead it is made up of “the various acts which constitute its reality” (p. 173). The body is thus a boundary in which acts of sex and gender are performed. Butler argues for the rethinking of norms around gender and sexuality by highlighting the constructed nature of the “natural,” specifically destabilizing the myth of identity categories, such as “man” and “woman.”

Butler further argued that feminism as a political strategy in fact *creates* the subject “woman” instead of simply representing it. Although as a scholar I subscribe to the notion that gender falls on a spectrum, and that sex and gender are performative, this research takes place in a world that still largely subscribes to the gender binary system, and, where self-identifying and/or being identified as a woman (whether cisgender or trans) by others has material effects. This occurs partially because people embody their gender (construct it through repeated stylized acts) and difference becomes visible on bodies (for instance, in presenting as a woman or as a man). This difference impacts social difference – how people are treated by others (Alcoff, 2006; Butler, 2004). As black feminist Kimberle Crenshaw (1991, p. 1296-1297) writes:

[To] say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in our world. On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others. This project attempts to unveil the processes of

subordination and the various ways those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged by them. It is, then, a project that presumes that categories have meaning and consequences. And this project's most pressing problem, in many if not most cases, is not the existence of the categories, but rather the particular values attached to them and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies.

Gender may be socially constructed, but the effects of categorization into the dominant gender binary system have “social and material consequences” (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1297). Thus, the category “woman,” although engaged with in a critical way throughout, is a central organizing category of this project which interrogates feminist practices. This project foregrounds women's experiences precisely because it is a study of everyday practices wherein the “social and material consequences” of the gender binary system play out.

Feminists have theorized that the category “woman” is placed culturally in opposition to “man” – not only in opposition, however, but also as inferior (de Beauvoir, 1949). Man is the universal subject, the norm, and woman is defined by what she lacks in relation to the norm and thus becomes the “Other” (de Beauvoir, 1949; Bordo & Jaggard, 1989). The gender binary thus places different social expectations on, and provides different opportunities, for men and for women – with the balance of power tipping towards men, creating a patriarchal society. Even though feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression seeks to benefit all genders, historically and now *women* are disproportionately negatively affected by the patriarchy – “institutionalized sexism” (hooks, 2015). While the goal of feminism is ultimately for gender to not matter, the need to fight for women's rights specifically remains in a largely gender-binary legal, political, and social world, as does the need for the challenging of binary gender classifications and

paying attention to the differences between women. A way to recognize intersectionality and the constructed nature of gender *and* the material, lived inequalities connected to the “woman” category of gender is the use of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak, 1996).

Strategic essentialism is a strategy in which marginalized groups temporarily present a united front publicly for political gain, while engaging in debate about difference amongst themselves and in less politically-charged contexts. Thus, in order to change the material inequalities rooted in the gender binary system, feminists can temporarily come together as “women” for political gain, while theoretically destabilizing the gender binary.

### *Feminism as an Everyday Practice*

Finally, this research views feminism as a *practice*. Indeed, feminists have debated whether self-identification as a feminist is necessary to the feminist project, with some suggesting viewing feminism as a *practice* rather than an identity (e.g. hooks, 1984; Heilmann, 2011). hooks (1984, p. 29), for instance, suggests avoiding “the phrase ‘I am a feminist’ and [stating] ‘I advocate feminism’” instead, shifting the focus from feminist identity to feminist activities. This definitional shift changes the question around feminist activism from “who is a feminist” to “what are feminist activities” more broadly. For the purposes of this research, feminist activities are those that lead to the primary goal of ending sexist oppression, by “reducing gender inequality” and “promoting the interests of women” (Walby, 2011, p. 2), for individuals or for women collectively – regardless of whether the actors describe themselves or their actions as feminist or not.

Based on the notion that feminism can be seen as practice, this research shifts the spotlight from formal feminist organizing onto the everyday. Studies of feminist activism



tend to focus on explicitly political, overt activism by individuals and organizations that self-identify as feminist. While acknowledging the crucial need for explicitly political feminist organizing, this research emphasizes how everyday activities can also have political impact and resistance does not have to be visible or intentional to be effective (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Vivienne, 2016).

Scholars have also highlighted the importance of studying activism as it is “increasingly individualized, personalized, and embedded in everyday lives” (Simi & Futrell, 2009: 90), as “everyday politics” (Highfield, 2016) or “minimal politics” (Macgilchrist & Bohmig, 2012), rather than formalized “normal activism” (Simi & Futrell, 2009, p.90) centered in social movement organizations. Everyday activities are valuable objects of social movement studies, precisely because “the political can be present within the personal, without needing to be framed as explicitly political” (Highfield, 2016: 10). Specifically discussing feminism, Melucci (1996, p.134), evoking the second wave slogan of “the personal is political,” argues that “women’s collective action is nourished by...everyday experiences and does not express itself only through public mobilizations; it develops through the shared apprenticeship of difference and resistance in *everyday times, spaces, and relationships*” (emphasis added). Similarly, Walby (2011, p. 24) argues that activities that “include the pursuit of feminist goals but are not explicitly labelled as such” can be considered feminist. This research shows how certain everyday practices on social media can be considered “everyday feminism,” because they work towards the goals of “reducing gender inequality,” “promoting the interests of women” (Walby, 2011), and challenging the gendered status quo, ultimately working towards ending sexist oppression (hooks, 1984).

## The Waves of Feminism

Popular understandings of feminism – including journalistic, activist, and academic discourses – in the U.S. classify the women’s movement as a succession of waves, periods in history of heightened activism around women’s issues (Hewitt, 2012; Rampton, 2015). The first wave of the women’s movement refers to the period from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century where activists focused predominantly on political representation, particularly on gaining the right for women to vote (Whelehan, 1995). Women were granted the right to vote on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1920, with the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, marking the most well-known victory of the first wave and the start of the mass movement for “collective action in the fight for women’s equality” (Whelehan, 1995, p. 4).

The second wave refers to activism from the 1960s to the 1980s, focusing on collective action to change structural inequalities and oppressions around, amongst other issues, reproduction, employment, sex roles, and sexual violence (Mendes, 2012; Rampton, 2015). The second wave was marked by the slogan “the personal is political” which signified the link between women’s individual lives and a wider collective movement for women’s rights, showing that “the private was of very public concern” (Whelehan, 1995, p. 13). Consciousness raising – women getting together in groups, sharing stories of their personal lives, and discovering similarities in their experiences of oppression based on gender – was a key practice in making the personal political (hooks, 2015).

The start of this wave is often attributed to the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, where she wrote about “the problem with no name” – why

women who were married with children and living comfortable lives in the suburbs were still unhappy. Friedan argued that women may need to find fulfillment outside of motherhood and domesticity, sparking debates about gender roles in society. Feminists in this wave, then, started to question what it means to be a woman, including critiquing idealized notions of femininity and beauty, gender role expectations, and the division of public and private spheres into masculine and feminine (Bordo & Jaggard, 1989; de Beauvoir, 1949).

Second wave feminism has been loosely theorized as “strands,” such as liberal, Marxist, radical, lesbian, and black feminism/womanism (for a comprehensive guide on different strands of feminism throughout history, see Fudge, 2005). Despite the key focus areas of the different strands varying, there was an underlying similarity in all feminist activism – a recognition of the power imbalance of social structures and a drive to remedy this imbalance. Nonetheless, “one of the major sites of difference [between different factions of feminism] ...is in defining the ‘oppressor’ and locating the source of oppression” (Whelehan, 1995, p. 25). The oppressor is variously categorized as the patriarchy (liberal and radical feminism), capitalism (Marxist and socialist feminism), compulsory heterosexuality (lesbian feminism), ethnocentricity/imperialism (black feminism) and even women themselves (all the strands refer to women as sometimes complicit and sometimes unconsciously participating in their own oppression).

The two main factions in *popular* understandings of feminism that originated in the second wave are liberal feminism and radical feminism (Dow, 1996; hooks; 2015; Whelehan, 1995). Liberal feminism aims to gain women equal rights to men in society *as it already exists*, whereas radical feminists aim to change the societal structure as a

whole. Liberal feminism focuses on discrimination against women in the public sphere, such as wage inequalities, while radical feminists focus more on critiquing sex roles and the patriarchy. One of the core features of liberal feminism is its mainstreaming of feminist rhetoric to appeal to the broadest audience of “normal” women. Because liberal feminists aspire to make women equal to men in society as is, they do not need to challenge the existing structures of society, and hence try to use the prevailing guidelines for access to these structures. As such, liberal feminists use moderate, “logical” arguments to allow women into the liberal meritocracy that is naturally available to men (Whelehan, 1995). Liberal feminism is often the first strand of feminism that women (particularly white, middle-class women) come across in the media and through social interactions and has been the most publicly visible faction in the U.S. over the years. It is often seen in popular feminist rhetoric of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for example, in Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg’s (2013) concept of “leaning in,” where she encourages women to promote themselves in a “man’s world” in order to succeed professionally. Liberal feminist rhetoric is closely tied up with the contradictions – of both validating and denouncing feminism as a collective social movement – present in postfeminism (discussed in more detail below).

In the late 1980s, a third wave of feminism emerged, a feminism that embraced individual differences and took seriously the intersections of race, sexuality, class, and other axes of identity in the experience of varied oppressions<sup>4</sup> (Bronstein, 2005;

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, intersections of race, sexuality, class, and so on, were already core features of more marginalized feminist strands of the second wave, such as lesbian feminism, black feminism/womanism, and Marxist feminism.

McRobbie, 2009; Mendes, 2012). Bronstein (2005) states that “[t]hird wavers position themselves as different from second wavers, particularly in the areas of sexuality and bodily aesthetics, and in terms of activities that constitute feminist resistance” (p. 1). Third wavers embraced embodied politics, working to change gender issues in their everyday lives (for instance, through having discussions with their friends about challenging gender norms) rather than taking part in collective social activism and protest (Fixmer & Wood, 2005; Sowards & Renegar 2009). The body became an important location of feminist thought, for example, theorized as a site of modern social control through ingrained normative, habitual rules and practices focused on the body, such as eating and dressing in specific ways (Bordo, 1993).

With third wave feminism focusing on more “personal acts of resistance” (Fixmer & Wood, 2005, p.238), less attention was paid in the public sphere (including in the media) around this time to societal systems and structures that continued to affect women negatively. The third wave has been critiqued for this focus on individual empowerment as depoliticizing the feminist project (Munro, 2013).

The 1990s, then, alongside the evolution of the third wave, saw the rise of postfeminism, rooted in neoliberal sentiment, particularly in the media and popular culture (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Gill (2007, p 151-152) defines postfeminism in popular culture as “a distinctive *sensibility*, made up of a number of interrelated themes [including]... a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment.” Postfeminism, a complex contradictory concept, consists of an “entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes” (Gill, 2007, p. 155). Vavrus (2010, p. 222) proposes that adding the

prefix “post” to a social movement emerges out of “a belief that our society has reached a moment in which we are living out our lives on a level playing field.”

In this postfeminist era, then, feminism is seemingly “taken into account” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 1), as a number of feminist values and ideas have been incorporated into society. For instance, in postfeminist culture, previous waves of feminism are acknowledged for bringing choice into women’s private lives (e.g. a woman can choose to be a mother or to work outside the home or to do both), and the rhetoric of choice infuses public discussions around gender issues (Gill, 2007; McCarver, 2011). In fact, choice is often used as a synonym for feminism itself in postfeminist discourse (McCarver, 2011). However, many scholars argue that the rhetoric of choice and the focus on individualism and empowerment obscures structural issues that affect gender inequality and weaken the collective feminist movement (McRobbie, 2009; Rivers, 2017). Furthermore, the focus on individual choice and empowerment in feminism serves predominantly white, straight, middle-class women who have the option to “lean in” (Sandberg, 2013), with better access to resources and fewer structural hurdles to success than poor women, women of color, and LGBTQ individuals.

### *The Digital Fourth Wave*

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a “new, or renewed, commitment to feminist activity [and] the celebration of feminist identities that have culminated in the swell of activity increasingly being defined as the fourth wave” (Rivers, 2017, p. 5) The fourth wave of feminism, starting circa 2008, is made up of “instances of public commentaries in popular media reasserting a need for feminism in some form or another” (Phillips & Cree, 2014, p. 938). Digital media are central to discussions of the fourth wave, which is

“defined by technology: tools that are allowing women to build a strong, popular, reactive movement online’ (Cochrane 2013), through key affordances such as “immediacy, rapidity, dialogue” (Chamberlain, 2016, p. 462).

Martin and Valenti (2013, p. 17) note that “the Internet has allowed for a more open space of accountability and learning, helping to push mainstream feminism to be less monolithic.” The centrality of digital technologies in the fourth wave means that intersectionality moves to the fore in contemporary feminist theorizing. Intersectionality is the idea that different social features, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect to produce unique oppressions within broader social structures (Crenshaw, 1991). Fourth wavers increasingly define themselves as “intersectional feminists” who “attempt to elevate and make space for the voices and issues of those who are marginalized” (Cochrane, 2013, para. 17).

However, Rivers (2017) shows how, frequently, in online culture “intersectional feminism becomes an aspirational ‘brand’ rather than a theoretical tool or mode of activist practice” (p. 123), essentially paying lip service to the consideration of differences between women. Furthermore, some scholars argue that certain digital feminist campaigns – most notably the recent #MeToo movement – fail even at the surface level to consider the differences between women (NYU Law, 2018), showing how the tendency to view all women as a homogeneous group (a long-standing critique of mainstream second-wave feminism) persists in digital spaces. Subsequently, it is important to study online feminist practices through a digital intersectional theory lens (Tynes et al., 2016).

In addition to a focus on intersectionality, the fourth wave is marked by renewed emphasis on *collective* political activities, due in large part to the affordance of “publicness” of new technologies. For instance, fourth wavers use digital technologies for action, such as using Twitter to organize offline protests such as the Women’s March or lobbying Facebook to change its moderation policies with consequences for misogynistic content creators (Cochrane, 2013). Some argue that the rise in collective feminist activism suggests that postfeminism is over (Retallack, Ringrose, & Lawrence, 2016). Others (e.g., Gill, 2016) contend that the fourth wave is in fact “perfectly in keeping with postfeminism” (p. 618): The new collective activism, seen in hashtag campaigns for instance, sits firmly alongside a popular “feminism lite,” which “frequently [reinforces] the advancement of the individual and [centers] the seductive notions of ‘choice,’ ‘empowerment,’ and ‘agency’” (Rivers, 2017, p. 24) – think #nomakeup selfies shared on social media.

This debate highlights a classic distinction in feminist thought between the focus on individual empowerment/agency/choice and systemic/structural change through collective action. Is the ideal outcome for feminism individual empowerment (e.g., mentoring individual women to move forward in their careers) or collective change (e.g., changing gendered hiring practices broadly)? Is feminist action that which happens at the level of the individual or is it best understood as collective effort? Should the targets of feminist actions be individuals or society? For instance, Susan Faludi (2017) argues, using the #MeToo movement as an example, that “fighting the patriarch and fighting the patriarchy are...distinct”; calling out individual perpetrators of sexual assault is not the same as working to change rape culture that normalizes sexual assault. She further argues



that the former is far easier than the latter, which requires a lot of effort and collective organizing. This dissertation works on “unraveling the slippage between understandings... of postfeminism” (Rivers, 2017, p. 4) and feminism, and the distinction between the individual and the collective, in the shaping of the fourth wave, which is “fractured and complex” (Rivers, 2017, p. 24).

*New Foes in the Fourth Wave: Popular Misogyny*

Paralleling this rise in feminism is an increase in anti-feminist sentiment online and what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015) calls “popular misogyny.” She explains that “while for many a broader acceptance of feminism as an identity, concept, and practice is exhilarating, this acceptance also stimulates fear, trepidation, and aggression for those who find feminism to be a threat” (para. 6), and this is expressed increasingly online. Digital platforms that give feminists an opportunity to connect with each other and a wider audience also give the opportunity for sexist, misogynist, and anti-feminist sentiment to be disseminated publicly (Benn, 2013; David, 2016; Rivers, 2017; Vickery & Everbach, 2018).

Aside from the vicious online trolling and harassment of individual feminists (Mantilla, 2013), the digital environment also provides affordances for the dissemination of anti-feminist opinion. For example, the Tumblr blog “Women Against Feminism” features women holding up signs explaining why they do not need feminism (e.g., “I don’t need feminism because my son is not an excuse for your daughter’s bad choices”; “I don’t need modern feminism because I don’t need to be superior to men in order to feel confident.”) (<http://womenagainstfeminism.tumblr.com/>). Clearly, both feminist and anti-feminist sentiment is increasing in the fourth wave, and it is precisely digital

technologies that enable both. So, “the Internet allows for simultaneity of activism and backlash” (Chamberlain, 2016, p. 463), creating urgent, new research opportunities for digital media scholars interested in gender and social movements.

*Muddying the Waters: Complicating the Wave Metaphor of Feminism*

Many scholars assert that the wave metaphor is not useful, because it creates false boundaries between generations of feminists, reduces the complexity of the feminism, and gives the illusion that the movement does not seamlessly continue, minimizing the efforts of long-term (quieter) feminist fights (Dean & Aune, 2015; Faludi, 2010; Fudge, 2005; Hewitt 2012; Rivers, 2017). Indeed, discussing each wave separately in the history of feminism is “both a reductive and distinctly narrow depiction of the feminist movement, which in fact includes as much difference of opinion and debate within waves as between them” (Rivers, 2017, p. 31). Arguably, the wave metaphor is a somewhat artificial demarcation. However, its usefulness as an analytical tool for this project stands: “the wave’s presence within popular culture and mainstream journalism, even while it is being problematized within the academy, ensures that the symbol is still relevant to the movement” (Chamberlain, 2016, p. 458-459).

Hewitt (2012), conceding that, despite its problems, the wave metaphor is firmly entrenched in the popular imaginary, suggests the need to “recast the concept of waves itself in order to recognize the multiple and conflicting elements that comprise particular periods of activism” (p. 659). She suggests thinking of feminism as radio waves (instead of oceanic waves) with various frequencies (different feminisms existing all at once) and wavelengths (how far and long over time their reach is), to bring back complexity and agency into the wave metaphor. This dissertation adopts this more nuanced analogy as

the foundation for exploring the intricacies of fourth wave feminism. For instance, it is important to note that the idea of a generational break is arbitrary and that each wave in reality encompasses multiple generations of feminists. Those who were young and active in the second wave are still presumably engaged with feminist politics in this “fourth wave” (one doesn’t just stop being a feminist at a certain age!). Further suggesting a “recasting” of the waves, Chamberlain proposes that the waves be “untethered from feminist identity” and instead “associated with the socio-political and technological contexts in which they arise” (p. 460). This project also takes up this suggestion, by making the technological context of the fourth wave central to inquiry. Overall, this dissertation actively engages throughout with debates about the wave metaphor, including discussions about feminism being defined variously as a lifestyle, as an identity, as a practice, and as a product of a specific cultural context.

### Everyday Feminism on Social Media

Debates about digital feminism question its effectiveness; some see online political participation as “slacktivism” (see Christensen, 2011), others argue that there is “no uniting focus” in social media activism (Blevins, 2018, p. 97), leading to questions about whether internet activism in the fourth wave in fact enacts much real change – or “transformative political action” (Munro, 2013, p. 24). However, studies of feminist activism – including those that find digital feminism lacking (Munro, 2013) – tend to focus on explicitly political, overt activism by individuals and organizations that self-identify as feminist. For instance, Eckert & Steiner (2016) examined how both individual feminists and feminist organizations used social media platforms to “discuss structural gender issues, aspects of identity, daily practices, provide motivational material, and both

justify and defend intersectional feminisms” (p. 210). In contrast, the current study presents the argument that it is important to study the less explicit ways that feminism – as a movement to end sexist oppression (hooks, 1984) – takes shape online through *everyday* practices, by *ordinary* people who may not call themselves feminists or see their actions as feminist activities. I take a broad view in this research of what counts as feminist practices: any activities that “reduce gender inequality” and “promote the interests of women” (Walby, 2011, p. 2), for individuals or for women collectively. I also include activities that challenge “how things are normally done” as men and women in the social structure, activities that subvert normative gender roles and identities.

Everyday digital practices that focus on personal experience have political potential. For instance, Highfield (2016) shows how feminist bloggers are often overlooked as being political, because they “[discuss] domestic and everyday issues, long-running social debates that might especially have personal relevance and decidedly non-political topics” (p.16). Of course, the notion that the personal *is* the political is central to feminism, because women’s daily lives play out in the context of societal structures and institutions that affect the everyday. Sharing personal experiences with sexism and misogyny publicly makes the personal political; for example, Thrift (2014) argues that “by virtue of participating in the feminist meme event, #YesAllWomen contributors make everyday acts of misogyny and sexism eventful” (p. 1091). A key feminist intervention, then, is challenging dominant social norms around sexism, racism, class, privilege and so on, such as calling out sexism and misogyny.

However, even content that does not explicitly challenge the status quo can be regarded as feminist. The mundane becomes political when placed in opposition to the

normative; thus, simply discussing social norms (and making them visible and less “normal”) can in itself be seen as a feminist act. Indeed, feminist scholars have shown how everyday online activities can be viewed as a continuation of collective politics using new digital tools, particularly activities on blogs for women, such as mommy blogs (Anderson & Grace, 2015) and sex blogs (Wood, 2008). For example, Taylor (2011) argues that single women who blog are doing both cultural and political work, through everyday discussions of singleness as normative. She contends that even though these bloggers do not necessarily explicitly identify as feminist, challenging notions around heteronormative coupling, through the telling of their personal stories and engaging with readers, is “implicitly feminist” and reminiscent of consciousness-raising groups in the second wave.

Similarly, Lopez (2009, p.732) argues that “mommy bloggers” are “creating a different picture of motherhood to what we see in the mainstream media,” contesting the normative discourses around motherhood and thus challenging the gendered status quo. They combine “radical acts” with everyday online activities that are not explicitly political. Online everyday activities can also be areas of everyday intersectional politics. For instance, Black gossip sites are used by Black women to “talk back” (hooks, 1989) to the systems of patriarchy and White supremacy present in mainstream entertainment media (Steel, 2016). Thus, the personal can become political on social media sites through everyday uses and practices that are not designated as political by those participating in them.

Central to this dissertation is the notion that women’s everyday practices on social media shape the discourses around the fourth wave of feminism. Accordingly, activities

that are labelled explicitly as feminist, implicit feminist actions (challenging norms through personal stories), but also nonpolitical everyday practices, such as dating and networking –that is, simply living (and struggling) as a woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – are all considered valuable to feminist knowledge production in this project. Ultimately, feminist research is concerned with “making the invisible visible, bringing the margin to the center, rendering the trivial important, putting the spotlight on women as competent actors, understanding women as subjects in their own right rather than objects for men” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 248). This project aims to explore the connections (and disconnections) between women’s daily lives on social media and the broader context of feminist politics without preemptively imposing boundaries between what “counts” and what “doesn’t count” as relevant to the wider feminist project and to the fourth wave specifically.

#### The Essential Newness of Fourth Wave Feminism:

##### Breaks from and Continuations of the Past

The capabilities of digital technologies are central to discussions of the fourth wave, delineating this wave as “new” because of the technology at its center. Banet-Weiser (2015) argues that it is specifically technological developments that are central to both popular feminism and popular misogyny: “[I]t is precisely technological access and a flourishing of a “public” culture of comments and feedback that makes this moment feel different” (para 10). Martin and Valenti (2013) too contend that “harnessing the power of online media for feminism.... has transformed the way advocacy and action function within the feminist movement” (p. 3, p.6). Accordingly, this dissertation centralizes an analysis of the social media platforms themselves.

The question about whether digital technologies really create a “new” wave of feminism echoes wider debates around the newness of digital media in the context of media history. As Hight & Harindranath (2017, p. 2) summarize:

On the one hand, much of digital media is informed by continuities with earlier media structures and content patterns.... A contrasting perspective emphasizes the emerging configurations of online, mobile and platform-based media encompass distinctive new forms of media experiences.

Perhaps thinking about the separation of form and content is a helpful way of simplifying this debate for analytical purposes. For instance, the idea that the creation of communities is a key feature of social media “is not new or surprising” (Highfield, 2016, p.16) – communities around shared interests and needs have always been a part of human social existence – the difference is the *form* this practice takes and the enhanced abilities this form provides, for example, creating groups with a further geographic reach. As Schrock (2015, p. 1233) points out “communicative affordances likely do not create the goal an individual is trying to achieve. Rather, they enable a *new way* to accomplish it.” (emphasis added). Baym (2010) argues, in the context of building relationships, that “mediated communication is not a space, it is an additional *tool* people use to connect into daily life” (p. 152). That is, new media technologies, “deeply embedded in and influenced by the daily realities of embodied life,” (p. 152) mostly *augment* the actions of humans that were already a part of “real life” instead of providing completely new possibilities. Similarly, Vivienne (2016) stresses that everyday activism – such as storytelling – is simply amplified by digital media. Thus, new media changes the *form*, but not the practice itself.

*Continuations and Similarities in Practices: From Offline to Digital Contexts*

Indeed, scholars emphasize the many similarities between online feminism and offline feminism, both those practices of earlier waves and the offline feminist practices of the contemporary moment. For instance, all three platforms in this study (Bumble, Facebook, and Twitter) provide the affordance of a kind of “safe space” for women online, a space that “implies a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance” (Kenney, 2001, p. 24). However, online safe spaces were preceded by offline spaces – both physical places and spaces as a metaphor for communities of women – which originated within the second wave women’s movement (Kenney, 2001). Emphasizing the continuation of “old” (offline) politics online, Taylor (2011) maintains that single women who blog use similar tactics and rhetoric (such as consciousness-raising and identity politics) to the second wave. Wood (2008) too highlights this persistence of old politics in contemporary feminism, showing how sex blogs are a continuation of second-wave politics in the form of women claiming control over the dissemination of sexual knowledge (similar to women in the 1960s spreading information about abortion and contraception through pamphlets). Likewise, Bennett (2014) explicitly links the slogan “the personal is political” to hashtags such as #YesAllWomen, calling them the “the modern-day equivalent” of consciousness-raising.

In addition to sustaining “old” feminist practices, online environments reify challenges from the past. Hamilton (2009) researched feminist anti-prostitution and anti-pornography blogging and found that the blogosphere provides new opportunities for networking and community, continuing more traditional feminist practices. However, she



also found that blogging “simultaneously re-creates old forms of exclusion and division within feminism” (p. 1), by positioning sex workers as victims rather than agentic and taking a side against the sex-positive movement. Fotopoulou (2016) similarly argues that digital practices in long-established (offline) feminist organizations can serve to reproduce exclusionary elements online, re-drawing and boldening the boundaries between generations of women. Goldberg (2014) too shows how heated disagreements between feminists have transferred from offline worlds to online spaces. For instance, different groups of feminists (e.g., radical, liberal, lesbian, black, etc.) clashed in the second wave and continue to do so in online spaces, for example, in “online trashing,” the call to “check your privilege” of feminists whose activism is deemed not inclusive/intersectional enough by others (Rivers, 2017).

Discussions about whether the fourth wave of digital feminism is truly new can be extended to more broad interrogations of women’s practices online. Do women’s experiences using social media differ that much from women’s experiences both throughout history and offline in the present moment? For example, women coming together in groups separate from men (as is the case in secret Facebook groups) – for leisure, business and politics – is not a new phenomenon. The Women’s Clubs Movement in the United States gained momentum during the Progressive era (1890s-1920s), when women came together for literary and arts discussions, as well as to campaign around social issues such as education and family planning, creating what Bowden (1930, p. 257) called “altruistic services and self-help groups.” Although the movement was popular in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bowden traces the first women’s club opening to 1735 in New York City. More recently, in 2016, The Wing, an

exclusive social/networking club for women, opened its doors, also in New York (Evans, 2016). Along a similar vein, book clubs for women have, particularly since the 1980s, provided groups for discussions, support, and friendship (Burger, 2015).

Even online, the idea for women's-only organizations and spaces did not start with Facebook or Twitter. Places where women could build community and share resources have been abundant on the web since the 1980s, including discussion forums and mailing lists, such as Sisters, a private mailing list for women working in computing, which started in 1987 (Camp, 1996), and BlogHer, an exclusive online community for female bloggers, which started in 2005 (Lopez, 2009). Looking to history thus complicates the “newness” of new media and online practices.

#### *The Role of Social Media as Tools for Feminist Practices*

In the feminist context, then, new media provides a *tool* for different ways of doing the same things that feminists have been doing throughout history. Despite arguing overall that blogging practices of single women signal a continuation of “old” politics, Taylor (2011) distinguishes between earlier and current politics by pointing out that the affordances of blogging are allowing women “to say [what] may not be *sayable* in other spaces” (p. 81) – hence, emphasizing the changed *form* of the practices, not necessarily the content. Maclaran (2015, p. 1734) makes the historical continuation of the women's movement explicit, arguing that fourth wave feminism is about activists who “try to blend the micropolitics that characterized much of the third wave with an agenda that seeks change in political, social and economic structures much like the second wave” – but importantly, she also points out that this blending is done using a new form: online

media. Martin and Valenti (2013, p. 6) too contend that, regardless of debates around online feminism, at the very least, “technological tools have made it infinitely easier for people invested in social justice to play their part.” Keller (2016), who argues that girls’ blogs can be understood as feminist activism, shows how blogging is a continuation of the offline practice of diary writing; however, the *tool* changes from paper to digital, impacting how the core practice is done (Rivers (2017) suggests that the primary difference between diary writing and blogging is a matter of audience.) Accordingly, the *affordances* of new technologies (for instance, the degree of privacy/publicness they offer) can be seen as enhancements of, or even simply different channels for, the core activities of earlier waves of feminism. The differences in the activities, then, position technologies as “mediators” of “old” feminist practices.

Digital technologies, in addition to providing opportunities for new ways to do “old” politics, also deliver new obstacles to the feminist project, challenges which arise out of the materiality of the technologies themselves. For instance, Fotopoulou (2016) found that those in traditional (offline) feminist organizations are driven to pursue digital practices out of a felt urgency to stay relevant, rather than gravitating towards new technologies for the opportunities they afford; feminists “felt they *ought* to be producing digital texts, or else the world will pass them by” (p. 997). The reliance on digital technologies as central to feminist work brings with it additional digital labor, in the form of maintaining social media profiles and interacting with audiences online, activities that were not part of feminist work before the internet. In addition, new technologies in fact widen the generational gap, as older feminists are worried about the digital literacy gap between them and younger activists (Fotopoulou, 2016). That digital spaces can provide

either uncertainty or empowerment for women, based in part on their digital literacy skills, points to the importance of understanding affordances of technologies that are being used for feminist purposes. And so, this dissertation examines social media specifically as *tools* or *forms* that mediate feminist practices and the experiences of women.

### *Contemporary Feminist Practices Offline and Online*

Moving beyond discussions of old and new practices impacted by digital technologies, research shows that the boundary between offline and online feminist practices in the contemporary digital era is also not clear-cut. Long-standing women's organizations (such as those that are part of the Women's Liberation Movement in the U.K.) are indeed aware of the possibilities of digital, networked technologies in continuing feminist activism, including new benefits for more effective campaigning and communication (Fotopoulou, 2016). Such organizations are allocating more of their resources to creating and maintaining their digital platforms, considering them essential to their feminist work. Importantly, however, these women stress that such uses *complement* rather than replace feminist work being done offline (such as face-to-face meetings). Baer (2016), discussing hashtag campaigns, also complicates the online/offline debate, locating the new feminist politics of the fourth wave at the intersection of digital practices and local (on the ground) activism. Rivers (2017, p. 109) too highlights this link in her analysis of the Steubenville rape case and the activism surrounding it, stating: "Despite the association of fourth-wave feminism with online activism, the distinction between online activism and feminism operating 'in the real world' is blurred, with online campaigns frequently influencing offline activity and

events.” In the current era then, “feminist politics, although in dialogue with the digital, are not subsumed in the digital” (Fotopoulou, 2016, p. 1001).

In sum, digital media and technologies afford both new opportunities and challenges for “old” feminist politics, but also complement offline practices. The issues and practices of feminism remain largely the same online, that is, broadly, challenging the status quo and aiming to end sexist oppression. They may not be fully new, but they do “take new dimensions and directions in a socially mediated form, shaped by the wealth of platforms and voices (supportive and antagonistic) able to participate” (Highfield, 2016, p.17). Accordingly, in order to understand how exactly digital media augments women’s everyday practices, we have to turn to looking closely at the technologies themselves and at women’s experiences of them.

The connections between offline and online practices, the personal and political, and the private and public are highly connected; “the offline and online are closely interlinked and impact upon one another” (Highfield, 2016, p. 6), in the same way that “the personal and the political are not mutually exclusive, and separating the two is both impossible and impractical; they are closely interlinked, encouraged by the conventions and norms of social media” (Highfield, 2016, p. 15). This project aims to explore these connections as holistically as possible, without reducing their complexity, using the lens of affordances. Through interviews with users and textual analysis complemented by structural discourse analysis of the platforms themselves, I aim to present a nuanced, rich understanding of the ways that everyday uses of social media connect to feminist politics in the fourth wave.

## An Affordance Approach to Everyday Politics

Proposing an affordance approach as a useful tool for studying everyday politics, Highfield (2016) explains that “to understand everyday politics *on* social media, we also need to understand the practices, logics and vernacular *of* social media” (p.10). Banet-Weiser (2015), discussing popular feminism and popular misogyny, locates technology as the center of these movements, and argues that, because of its significance in these zeitgeists, “we need to interrogate technology for its architecture” (para 16). Wajcman (2010, p. 150) too suggests, from a feminist science and technology studies perspective, that looking at technology itself is important because “the materiality of technology affords or inhibits the doing of particular gender power relations.” Thus, the social media platforms themselves – in their functions, features, designs, that is, their *affordances* – are an important part of research on the intersection between women’s everyday practices and digital media technologies.

Affordances provide a theoretical middle-ground between technological determinism (the idea that technology drives social change) and social constructivism (the notion that social structures and interactions shape technological developments) (Hutchby, 2001; Neff et al., 2012). Psychologist James Gibson coined the term affordances to describe the latent opportunities present for action in a physical environment, describing affordances as “a combination of physical properties of the environment that is uniquely suited to a given animal” (Gibson, 1979, p. 79). For instance, a large rock physically offers the opportunity for sitting (an affordance) to social actors. Actors perceive an environment in terms of its utility; thus, a person will not perceive a rock as just a rock, but as a place to sit. Gibson theorized affordances as

“always present” in the environment, waiting to be observed and acted on by social actors. Importantly, however, Gibson did not view affordances as simply physical properties – he stressed that they are relational. That is, affordances exist *between* the physical environment and the social actor – both have to be present for the affordance to be materialized; “an affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer” (Gibson, 1979, p. 121). Thus, the affordance of sitting is only actualized when a person or animal sits on the rock.

Later scholars, in fields ranging from design to technology to communication studies, variously reworked the conceptualization of affordances, extending affordances to include the design aspects of human-made objects, instead of seeing affordances as the features of a natural environment. Norman (1988), in contrast to Gibson, theorized affordances not as relational, but as “the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used” (Norman, 1988, p. 9). Thus, for Norman, affordances are the materiality and design features of objects, such as the buttons on a remote control, that allow social actors to use them in specific ways. Adapting the concept for design studies, Norman suggested the term “perceived affordances” to capture how designers must think about what actions will seem possible to the end user of a technology. Norman contributed to the field of affordances by highlighting the notion of perception as important in the interactions of physical objects and humans. Accordingly, in order for the opportunity for action to be realized, the social actor (animal or human) has to be *aware* of the affordance.

Expanding on Norman's conceptualization, Gaver (1991) distinguished between three types of affordances— perceptible affordances, hidden affordances, and false affordances—based on whether or not they exist and what information about them is visible. Perceptible affordances are the easily seen and understood features of an object; hidden affordances are those capabilities of an object that are not outright apparent but nevertheless exist; and false affordances are those that are perceived as attributes, but that the object does not in fact have. Gaver (1991, p.80), moving beyond perception, stressed action and interaction when thinking about affordances, defining affordances as “properties of the world defined with respect to people's interaction with it.” He emphasized that, after a social actor perceives an affordance, he or she has to have both the capabilities to actualize it (ability) and the desire to realize the action (that is, to feel that it is a relevant action) (Gaver, 1991). Gaver also highlighted that affordances do not exist only between the object and the actor, but they also provide “possibilities...for social interaction” (p. 114). Consequently, object properties and human actions shape and are shaped by the wider culture.

Hutchby (2001), developed the term “communicative affordances” to describe the “possibilities for action... [in] technological forms” (p. 30). Hutchby argues that affordances are both functional (they allow or constrain action) and relational (different social actors can perceive the same affordance differently). The emphasis on the relational is important here, because Hutchby points out that the same object provides different affordances to different social actors. This idea is particularly pertinent to this study and research on the affordances of social media, which Bucher and Helmond



(2018, p.3) define as “the perceived range of possible actions linked to [the] features of the platform.”

Social media platforms provide different affordances to different individual based on cultural identity factors, such as gender, race, sexuality, and so on (Cirucci, 2017; Highfield, 2016). Further, users flock to particular platforms for the specific affordances they perceive the platforms to provide, depending on if they fit their desired outcomes. For instance, Highfield (2016) illustrates how Black activists use Twitter specifically because of the affordance of hashtags and wordplay, to gather solidarity and raise public awareness around Black issues. The asexual community uses Tumblr because of certain affordances, such as the de-emphasizing of commenting which lowers trolling for this marginalized population (Renninger, 2015). However, as much as affordances are possibilities for use, they are also *constraints* on action, limiting different individuals in unique ways. The internet is not a neutral space; it is “a system that *reflects*, and a site that *structures*, power and values” (Noble & Tynes, 2016, p.2). The internet broadly, including specific social media platforms, is designed with a white, male, heteronormative, cisgender worldview (Brock, 2011). Through their very design and architecture, then, digital technologies can limit the experiences of underrepresented groups (Daniels, 2013, 2016).

Furthermore, as Nagy and Neff (2015) highlight, imagination is a key component of affordances; users interact with technologies based on their imaginations around what that technology is for and how it should be used. The way people perceive a technology impacts how they use it. So, women, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, and other underrepresented groups may perceive a certain technology or digital space as not being

“for” them, regardless of the objective functionalities and features. For example, Blackmon (2007) found that Black students were “technologically tentative” because of what she calls “historical access,” which includes “the access that students *allow themselves* based on past personal and cultural experiences with both computer technology and the hegemonic power structure that it is seen as representing” (p. 158). Black students have a fear of technology as not being “for” them because of a history of oppression and mistrust. Hence, there is variation in social media use among various identity groups: “users’ social context, abilities, and purposes define their interactions with technologies” (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 6). Studying how specific groups of people use digital technologies is valuable to understanding the intersection between technology and the wider societal context.

Important to this research is the fact that the same affordances may be used by different groups for completely oppositional purposes. As Highfield (2016, p.24) points out: “social media and online platforms are employed for articulating identities, for challenging and subverting societal norms and for providing a voice (and safe spaces) for individuals and groups who might variously be marginalized, ignored or under-represented elsewhere.” However, the same opportunities on social media are present for privileged individuals, who may use these platforms to harass, discriminate, intimidate, and de-legitimize marginalized groups.

The interaction between affordances and users is mutually shaping. For instance, boyd (2011) argues that “affordances do not dictate participants’ behavior, but they do configure the environment in a way that shapes participants’ engagement” (p. 1). Thus, users can use social media in a variety of ways (including ways not anticipated by

designers) but are ultimately constrained by the materiality of digital platforms (Shaw, 2017). Moreover, the policing of platforms with regard to what content or use is deemed acceptable or unacceptable further constrains users (Cirucci, 2017; Highfield, 2016). For instance, MacAulay and Marcos (2016) argue that Facebook's "real name" policy discriminates against non-normative people (LGBTQ, sex workers, Indigenous people, etc.) and that the accountability and safety the site promotes in the argument for using one's real names is actually a way of "rendering users transparent to markets and the state." Thus, the designers and owners of platforms create affordances that may seem as if they have many possibilities (for instance, the affordance to use a fake name exists on Facebook), but in fact those who do not adhere to the normative ways of actualizing these affordances are punished. On the other hand, it is important to remember that users choose their specific social media practices and that these practices do in turn shape digital platforms over time (for instance, algorithms are configured based on user feedback).

### *The Importance of Imagination and Vernacular Understandings*

Affordance studies tend to focus on analyzing the design features of a particular technology or on exploring the social aspects, what users are afforded by the technology. This theorizing does not fully consider "the complex socio-technical systems" (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 2), for instance, algorithms, that act without direct human action. Most importantly, Nagy and Neff (2015) assert that such a conceptualization does not adequately consider how users' imaginations (in the form of perceptions and expectations of a technology) shape how affordances are actualized. Nagy and Neff (2015, p. 3), proposing the concept of "imagined affordances," contend that affordances are "both

environmental and perceptual, both conceptual and imagined” and suggest that scholars working in affordance studies should also address “how people form expectations toward technology” (p. 4). It is important to study perceptions because they in fact guide the use of technologies (Bucher, 2017). Nagy and Neff (2015) also highlight the importance of affect in affordances – that is, emotions affect how people use technologies. Specifically, “users project certain emotions on technologies” (p. 7), highlighting the importance of interpretation – affordances are not rational and static.

An important aspect of affordances is that they arise through *practices*; “architecture shapes and is shaped by practice in mediated environments just as in physical spaces” (boyd, 2011, p. 15) and so “affordances are made sense of in and through practice” (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015, p.2). A study of affordances then has to consider practices, that is, how do people in actuality use the technology. To get at that question, as well as to understand “imagined affordances,” it makes sense to talk to people about their uses of technology, analyzing “vernacular affordances” (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). Because possibilities for action require perception and intent, vernacular affordances illustrate how users actually interact with technologies.

#### *Frameworks for Studying Affordances: Low-Level and High-Level Affordances*

Bucher and Helmond (2018) provide a simplified, useful framework for thinking about affordances as empirically studied phenomena: high-level and low-level affordances. In this conceptualization, affordances can be either abstract, high-level –the “dynamics and conditions enabled by technical devices, platforms and media” (p. 12)—which focus on communicative practices enabled through particular technologies, or concrete, low-level affordances, the material aspects and technical features (buttons,

character-limits, profile pictures, etc.) of a particular technology. Nagy and Neff's (2015) "imagined affordances" can be either low-level or high-level. Thus, this framework encompasses materiality (design and features), social uses, as well as the "imagined" expectations of and perceptions towards technologies. Social media affordances, then, include the capabilities and *material* features of a particular platform, users' *perceptions* of a platform, as well as *practices* that emerge out of interactions with the platform infrastructure.

Researchers have studied both high-level and low-level affordances of communication technologies, including social media (e.g., boyd, 2011; Majchrzak et al, 2013; Schrock, 2015; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). High-level affordances explain what the technology affords beyond the material low-level affordances of technologies. For example, boyd (2011) delineated four high-level affordances of social network sites: persistence (stuff put online stays online forever), replicability (copies can be made), scalability (the potential to be seen is huge) and searchability (other can search for your stuff). Similarly focused on high-level affordances, Schrock (2015) developed a typology of affordances of mobile phones: portability, availability, locatability, and multimediality. Schrock highlights how affordances of mobile phones signal distinctly new possibilities for human interaction; for instance, portability allows the communicative practice of talking to others during a commute (something which was not previously available). Other scholars have focused on low-level affordances. For instance, Postigo (2014) examined the technological features of YouTube to understand how the YouTube economy works in the context of videogame commentators. Similarly, Papacharissi (2009) analyzed the "structure, design and organization" of Facebook, LinkedIn, and

ASmallWorld, mapping what she calls their “architectures.” Cirucci (2014) too analyzed the technological or design features of Facebook, such as its “real-name” policy and profile picture field, and connected these to identity construction.

This dissertation aims to explore both low-level and high-level affordances, including “imagined” affordances, of Bumble, private Facebook groups, and Twitter, through structural discourse analysis of these platforms, combined with interviews, focus groups, and textual analysis of content. Such an approach is loosely based on Cirucci’s (2014) method of analyzing affordances, in which she combines structural discourse analysis with focus groups. Such a combination of methods is useful because “pairing an analysis of presented, non-neutral tools with users’ experiences with these tools provides a dynamic look into the negotiation and interaction that is affordances” (Cirucci, 2017, p.3). This methodological approach aligns with the epistemological assumptions of the theoretical underpinnings of this proposed research: cultural studies and feminist theory.

### *Blending Cultural Studies and Affordances*

This project takes a cultural studies approach to the study of digital technologies and the fourth wave of feminism. Moving away from effects research (research that aims to understand particular effects of a specific message on an audience), cultural studies as an approach to media and communication research highlights the enmeshment of culture, media, and everyday life. Thus, cultural studies views media and communication technologies and their audiences and producers holistically, considering changes over time and the complexity of society as a system. A critical cultural studies approach also highlights the importance of ideology and power in culture, often emphasizing how power dynamics (based on differences in gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.) play out in

cultural (media) products, their production, their messaging, and their consumption (e.g. Hall, 2007[1973]; Williams, 2002[1958]).

Working from a cultural studies perspective, Bird (2003), in her book showcasing various case studies of television audiences, emphasized the importance of studying the daily lives of audience to understand the influence of media, not only focusing on specific, isolated interactions with media products and technologies. This importance on the everyday study of culture enmeshed in daily life is echoed by scholars working in digital media. Baym (2010), researching how people form relationships online, shows how technologies become incorporated into the daily routines of people and argues that in order to understand digital technologies, it is important to study the everyday lives of people. Baym further argues that it is precisely through exploring affordances – the possibilities and constraints present in technologies for social interaction - that we can trace how technologies are integrated into daily life. Along the same vein, Brabham (2015) argues that scholars pay too much attention to “the highlight reel” of social media, focusing on viral or high-profile phenomena and people. He argues that “the vast majority of what happens on social media is unremarkable” (p. 1) and calls for research on “normal, everyday topics” (p. 1). Brabham, similarly to Bird and Baym, gives priority to the method of interviewing, urging researchers “talk to people” (p. 2), instead of focusing on big data sets and making generalizations about trends. Interviews as a method of studying culture as embedded in everyday life allow researchers to get at “the nuance of human experiences” (p. 2).

An important tenet of cultural studies is that audiences are not passive dupes who simply absorb media messages delivered to them. Hall (2007) [1973]) developed the

encoding/decoding model, indicating that audiences are able to negotiate or outright reject the meaning of messages in the media, in a “struggle over meaning.” Hall proposed that audiences take on different “reading positions” when interacting with a media text: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. Dominant readings are when the audience decodes the (hegemonic) message in the same way as it was intended by the producer of the message; negotiated readings are when the message is partially accepted (preferred readings), but partially interpreted in different ways (resistant readings) to the sender’s intention; and oppositional readings are those that reject the meaning of the original message. Through this model, Hall illustrates how power circulates through culture. The producers of messages are typically more powerful, and produce hegemonic messages aimed at maintaining the status quo and preserving their dominant positions in society. Audiences, which include marginalized groups (such as women), have agency in either accepting, rejecting or subverting dominant meanings of messages. Despite the relative agency of audiences, interpretations can only be made within a wider hegemonic system that constrains complete agency; as Bird (2003, p. 3) points out: “We may be able to make creative, individual meanings from this torrent of messages and images, but we can still only work with what we’re given.”

Shaw (2017) argues for the theoretical and methodological value of merging Hall’s encoding/decoding model (and more broadly cultural/audience studies) and the concept of affordances in new media studies. Specifically, she suggests that Gaver’s (1991) conceptualization of perceptible, hidden, and false affordances can be mapped onto Hall’s (2007[1973]) dominant/hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional reading positions. Shaw emphasizes that reading positions are particularly relevant when thinking



about the interactivity afforded by new media technologies, which means that audiences, rather than simply reacting to texts, are actively involved in their use. She contends that thinking about affordances in light of the various reading positions can allow scholars to get at “how certain types of interactivity are promoted or discouraged by new technologies and platforms” (2017, p.1). Similarly to how the meaning of texts arises through interaction between a text and its audience, so does an affordance actualize through the interaction between a user and a technology. Shaw suggests the term “using positions” when thinking about affordances: dominant/hegemonic use (technology used as intended), negotiated use (used correctly but not exactly as intended), and oppositional use (unexpected use of technology).

Shaw argues that affordances map onto audience studies as a middle ground approach – technologies shape and are shaped by social interaction, and users can do various things with and to technology, *within boundaries* (not all interpretative positions are possible and interpretative positions are constrained by technological features), just like audiences who oppose dominant messages can only do so within the limits of their hegemonic lived reality and the culture surrounding them. As Shaw (p. 8) points out, “what counts as a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional use is intrinsically linked to who has the power to define how technologies *should* be used.” Here, a further separation of form and content may be useful for analytical purposes in this dissertation. Affordances of new media platforms, it seems, can be said to either uphold or challenge “understood practices” (norms) of everyday life in two ways. Firstly, users can either explicitly uphold or challenge social norms in the *content* they post on social media (e.g., point out sexism). Secondly, they can also uphold or challenge (subvert) the intended affordances

of the platform through oppositional *use* (for instance, using Bumble to promote one's business profile instead of looking for a dating partner).

Winner (1980) argued that technologies are not neutral and that power is embedded into a technology's (or object's) design. Cirucci (2014) too argues that social media platforms are non-neutral mediators and that they promote a narrow "correct" identity through their affordances. Further, Cirucci (2017) shows that users with different social power status (in terms of identity characteristics such as race and gender) do indeed use digital technologies variously in dominant, negotiated or oppositional ways, with those with the most power adhering to the intended uses of the platform and those with less power subverting the affordances of the platform. Shaw's model, then, is particularly useful for feminist research, like this dissertation, because it emphasizes ideology, power, and resistance embedded in technologies. Accordingly, I incorporated this model (dominant/negotiated/oppositional uses of technologies) throughout my analysis.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

#### Research Design

To answer my research questions from a feminist standpoint, I talked to women about their experiences, “putting the spotlight on women as competent actors” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 248), in conjunction with examining the affordances of the social media platforms, as well as doing a textual analysis of content (in various combinations across the three case studies). I wanted to see, broadly, how the everyday use of various social media technologies relates to feminism, in terms of goals, outcomes, and practices.

For my three case studies, I conducted in-depth, repeat interviews and focus groups with 14 female Bumble users, repeat in-depth interviews and focus groups with 26 women who were members of secret Facebook groups for professionals, and a textual analysis of a sample of #MeToo tweets from the first week of the movement. Alongside this, I examined the material architecture of each medium by conducting a structural discourse analysis (Cirucci, 2014)<sup>5</sup> of Facebook (particularly the “groups” feature) and Twitter, paying attention specifically to low-level affordances (their technological features and design characteristics) and high-level affordances (the dynamics, conditions, and cultures) of the platforms themselves. I also conducted a walkthrough of Bumble,

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<sup>5</sup> After completing the data collection and analysis, I came across a methods article by Andre Brock (2018) proposing the method of “critical technocultural discourse analysis.” This method “combines analyses of information technology material and virtual design with an inquiry into the production of meaning through information technology practice and the articulations of information technology users in situ... [providing] a holistic analysis of the interactions between technology, cultural ideology, and technology practice” (p. 1013). Essentially, this current research used a “critical technocultural discourse analysis” (without being aware of this method when analysis started).

loosely following the guidelines set out by Light, Burgess, & Duguay (2016) for app walkthroughs.

Berger (2016) argues that “it’s best to think of academics as spending their careers trying to prove that their way of looking at whatever portion of the world they look at is correct” (p. 20); thus, scholars use their research materials as evidence and use several strategies of analyzing these materials to develop “valid” interpretations that support their arguments. In order to develop a valid interpretation, qualitative researchers often use more than one method – for example, interviews and textual analysis – to “get at” different angles of the phenomenon and see if both methods yield similar findings. This “use of multiple methods, or *triangulation*, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 7).

Triangulation does not have to be done using two different methods: researchers can, for instance, combine two theoretical perspectives or have multiple investigators in the study to validate their findings. Importantly, triangulation can also work in qualitative research in a contradictory (to developing validity), but still valuable, way: triangulation, instead of supporting a specific finding, can be used to reveal the truths of multiple realities, in line with constructivist ontology (Brennen, 2013).

Along this vein, Richardson and St. Pierre (2008) argue that the imagery for “validity” in qualitative research should not be a triangle, but rather a “crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach” (p. 478). Richardson (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008) proposes the concept of “crystallization practices” to build authenticity and credibility in qualitative accounts. This research uses various

combinations of interviews, focus groups, textual analysis, and structural discourse analysis as such “crystallization practices” for this project.

For the interviews and focus groups, I limited the number of participants according to guidelines set out by feminist qualitative scholars, who suggest 10-20 participants per study as a sample size in a big project (Braun & Clarke, 2003). This research is not meant to be generalizable. Rather, the goal of this project was discovery, with the aim of providing a depth of understanding about specific practices; accordingly, “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) and quality (depth) was emphasized over quantity. I stopped recruiting new participants when I reached the point of saturation, i.e., when I kept hearing the same things in the last few interviews and focus groups, and so no new knowledge was being produced (Brennen, 2013).

#### *Structural Discourse Analysis and App Walkthrough*

To fully answer my first research question, regarding the materiality and affordances of social media platforms, I conducted a structural discourse analysis (Cirucci, 2014) of Facebook’s secret group feature and Twitter, and followed the “app walkthrough method” for Bumble. For Facebook and Twitter, I amended the method of “discourse analysis” (Fairclough, 1995), which critically examines how power structures work in language. Instead of analyzing content, however, I analyzed the architecture – what Papacharissi (2009, p. 205) defines as the “structure, design and organization” – of each platform. I loosely followed the methodological process outlined in Papacharissi’s (2009) analysis of the “virtual geographies” of social networking sites, and Cirucci’s (2014, 2017) analysis of the structural affordances of Facebook. Here, I mapped both low-level and high-level affordances of each platforms (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

Firstly, I systematically navigated each platform as a user, noting what it allowed me (or discouraged/constrained me etc.) to do based on its objective design features and the way it is organized. This first navigation, or affordance mapping, noted the general functionality of each platform, taking into consideration both the technological and social affordances presented by each platform to its users. I then analyzed each architectural part in more detail, including the *suggestions* for use embedded in the technological structures. Here, I loosely followed Shaw's (2017) model merging encoding and decoding with affordances when evaluating the connections between the structural discourse analysis and the interview data, to understand the using positions of my participants in relation to each platform.

In addition, I kept in mind throughout my project some criteria put forth by scholars of affordances. For instance, Davis and Chouinard (2017) outline "how artifacts afford, for whom and under what circumstances" (p. 1). They contend that there are gradations in the mechanisms of affordances, arguing that technologies can *request*, *demand*, *allow*, *encourage*, *discourage*, and *refuse* in relation to the user. For example, the difference between *request* and *demand* can be seen in the request for profile pictures on Facebook (which are recommended, but not necessary to have an account) and the *demand* for choosing a gender identification (which must be done in order to start an account). Further, they argue, affordances are actualized under the following conditions: perception, dexterity, and cultural and institutional legitimacy. That is, a person must be aware of what the technology can do, must also be able to use the feature, and the use must be legitimized by social norms (e.g. having a driver's license to drive a car). I considered these theorizations during my analysis of each platform.

For Bumble, because it is a mobile app, I specifically followed the “technical walkthrough” part of Light, Burgess, and Duguay’s (2016) “app walkthrough method.” Here a researcher engages with the interface of an app, working through screens, tapping buttons, exploring menus, and so on. There are three stages of the app walkthrough: registration and entry (here is where the “dominant use” (Shaw, 2017) is communicated), everyday use, and leaving the app. During the walkthrough, the researcher pays attention to the “mediator characteristics,” which include the arrangement of the user interface, functions and features, and the textual content and tone. To contextualize these findings, the researcher also pays attention to the vision of the app (what is this app designed for), its operational strategies (how does it make money), and governance (how is it regulated), in the context of user practices.

#### *Bumble Case Study: Interviews/Focus Groups*

In addition to the walkthrough, I interviewed users of Bumble, to add a user experience dimension to the architectural understandings of the app. I recruited the interview participants predominantly using social media promotion, by posting a status “Looking for women and gender non-conforming/non-binary individuals who use Bumble to interview for my dissertation research. Please DM me or share with your networks!” on my Facebook and Twitter accounts in October 2017. I wanted my sample to be inclusive and participation to be open to anybody who did not identify as cis-gender male. I also attended a Bumble Bizz (a new service from Bumble connecting business partners instead of dates) launch party in Philadelphia in October 2017, where I recruited two participants who used Bumble for dating purposes. There were 14 participants in total, all self-identifying as cisgender women, predominantly white (n=11), majority

straight (n=13, one identified as bisexual), between the ages of 26 and 42, and almost all based in Philadelphia (n=12, two lived in New Zealand).

I conducted one-on-one, in-person initial interviews with all the participants based in Philadelphia in October and November 2017. These interviews took place in coffee shops around the city and lasted between 45 minutes and 120 minutes each. Two interviews with participants from New Zealand took place over Skype in November and lasted 45 to 60 minutes each. I recorded each interview with the participants' consent and have used pseudonyms and left out identifying features in the analysis. I then conducted follow-up one-on-one interviews with three participants and one follow-up focus group of nine participants in February 2018. The interviews were between 45 and 60 minutes each and the focus group took three hours. During the second round of interviews and the focus group, I asked follow-up questions that expanded on and clarified the initial conversations (see Appendix A for list of questions from both rounds of the study). I decided to use a mixture of interviews and focus groups both for the convenience of my participants (in terms of their schedules and privacy preferences) and as a "crystallization practice" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008). Further, focus groups are a particularly valuable feminist methodology, because these small groups made up of women give them a with safe space to talk about their daily lives and raise awareness of the similarities of their experiences. In this way, focus groups can become makeshift consciousness-raising groups and empower women. It was important to me as a researcher that my interviewees gained some tangible benefits from partaking in the research; indeed, many of my participants told me during and after the focus groups how these groups had changed



their perspective or validated an experience, and how valuable they found the experience of taking part in my research.

The interviews and focus group were unstructured (Brennen, 2013), using a short list of “open-ended process reflection questions” (Charmaz, 2006, p.679) to start each interview. In this way, the interactions were more like conversations to get at the participants’ experiences and reflections in their own words. I asked the set questions in Appendix A but in varying orders for each participant, depending on the natural flow of conversation. I added more questions specifically tailored to each participant based on their answers to the initial set of questions, letting our discussions develop organically. I transcribed the interviews and used a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to interpret my data inductively, using the constant comparative method – moving between the interview data and literature – to analyze my findings (Charmaz, 2006).

#### *Facebook Case Study: Interviews/Focus Groups*

I recruited participants for the Facebook groups case study interviews and focus groups primarily through Facebook, including through posting in a few secret Facebook groups for women professionals I was a part of (for privacy purposes, the names of the groups studied are not reported). I used purposive sampling, selecting people who already belonged to these groups. Because these groups had rules for membership based on sex, all participants were self-identified women. Though these groups were also open to gender non-conforming or non-binary people (see Chapter 5 for further discussion), none of my participants identified as such. I used three criteria for including groups in this study: they had to be (1) secret or closed Facebook groups for (2) specified for women, (3) used for professional purposes. The contacts from these groups then referred me to

women in other groups (again groups that fulfilled the above criteria), creating a snowball sample. I also attended two offline monthly meetings of female entrepreneurs in Philadelphia who knew each other through a secret Facebook group, in November 2018 and December 2018. During these meetings, I recruited five participants.

There were 26 participants in total, predominantly freelancers or independent workers in creative, media, and tech industries (journalism, media production, PR, tech), and entrepreneurs and business owners. The size of the eight groups studied varied widely: the smallest group had eight members, the largest 44,000+. The sample was majority white ( $n = 21$ ), straight ( $n = 22$ ) women living in urban centers in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand, and aged between 19 and 46 years, with most in their late twenties and early thirties.

Taylor (2011) suggests caution “when making broader claims about how new technologies act to empower women, as it is only ever *some* women who are thus empowered” (p. 82). Indeed, taking intersectionality – the different experiences based on an intersection of identity characteristics, such as gender, race and sexuality – into account is crucial in any feminist research, to avoid universalizing assumptions about women’s experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). Throughout the recruitment process, I attempted to diversify the sample multiple times, by specifically asking for people of color, gender non-conforming, and LGBTQ individuals to take part in my study, on social media; nonetheless, the majority of this sample ended up being white, middle-class, cis-gender, and straight. The makeup of the sample guided my analysis, in that I was careful to explain how the findings were pertinent only for some women. I also tried to critically

analyze and contextualize Facebook groups as normative, white, heterosexual, cisgender spaces, using a digital intersectionality theory lens (Tynes et al., 2016).

I interviewed seven women individually over Skype, phone, or in person; each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. I held a Zoom video call interview with three women. These interviews were recorded with the participants' consent. Despite the notion that phone or Skype interviews are thought to lack intimacy and provide less useful information, Bird (2003, p. 13) was "surprised and delighted to experience rich, personal conversations" over the phone. Indeed, in the current age of ubiquitous technology, most people are used to engaging in intimate conversation through technological means. Bird also argues that phone or Skype interviews lower the power imbalance between researcher and participant that would be more obvious in a face-to-face setting.

The rest of the participants (16) were interviewed in groups (between three and five women per group) using Facebook messenger and closed Facebook groups created for this purpose. These asynchronous discussions continued over at least a month each, with me posting questions and the women responding to my questions and commenting on each other's responses at their convenience. I made the decision to use the combination of individual interviews and focus group interviews using a variety of mediums for the convenience of my participants: because this research foregrounds women's voices, it was crucial to hear as many of these voices as possible, in whatever way they found easiest. The different interview styles provided varying benefits for my analysis. The interviews over Skype and in person allowed for more in-depth discussion of certain topics, while the Messenger and Facebook groups allowed for insightful

interactions between group members (for instance, group members talked to each other when I wasn't online and guided the conversation in unexpected ways, allowing me to see the natural progression of topics without a researcher present). All names are pseudonyms and identifying features have been removed to protect the participants' and the groups' privacy. In the same manner as the Bumble case study, I once again used an unstructured interview format (see Appendix B for a list of open-ended interview questions), exploring "respondents' feelings, emotions, experiences, and values" (Brennen, 2013, p. 28). I then transcribed the interviews and used a grounded theory approach – drawing on feminist theory and affordance literature – for the analysis.

#### *Twitter Case Study: Textual Analysis*

I focused on the first week of the #MeToo movement, starting with October 15, 2017 and ending with October 22, 2017. I randomly sampled 150 tweets that used #MeToo from the homepage of Twitter for each day that week, using the search function on Twitter itself. However, when a tweet included replies and comments (i.e., became a "thread"), I analyzed all of these related tweets on the entire thread as well. I screenshotted every tweet thread individually and pasted these into a Word document, as it was important for me to capture images, emoji, etc. and not just text. Accordingly, the corpus for analysis consisted of 1,063 pages of tweets – including pictures, links, replies, comments, etc. I carefully paid attention to the various parts of each tweet, such as profile pictures, hashtags, URLs, emoji, pictures (low-level affordances that Twitter provides), as well as the broader communicative affordances of Twitter (high-level affordances, such as searchability, connectivity, visibility, etc.). Alongside this structural discourse analysis, I conducted a textual analysis (Brennen, 2013) of the tweets, looking for

patterns and themes in the discussions around #MeToo, using a feminist lens. Looking at *both* the affordances of Twitter and the patterns in the discourse shed light on how Twitter serves as a unique mediator of digital feminism.

Ultimately, the goal of this study was to place the materiality of technologies and people's experiences of them front and center of analyses, to look at platforms as *mediators* of everyday experiences (Nagy & Neff, 2015). It is, however, important to note that social media are constantly evolving and it is impossible to map precisely all affordances of these platforms. This study instead is meant to produce a snapshot in time, an analysis of Bumble, Facebook, and Twitter in 2017-2018.

#### A Feminist Methodology

This project is a feminist endeavor and accordingly uses feminist methodology. The specific interpretive commitments of feminist methodology center broadly on the importance of researcher subjectivity, multiple reciprocal relationships and voices, and theory and praxis grounded in everyday experiences and action. Feminists adhere to the notion that one should state one's positionality outright when presenting interpretations of their research findings. Feminists should "not disavow the subjectivity (emotions, politics, and standpoint) that we each bring to bear on our research, but rather own it, disclose it, and critically engage with it" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010, p. 27). Thus, my position as a white, middle-class, educated, heterosexual woman in her mid-thirties (as well as someone who is or has been a user of all three platforms under study) was reflected on throughout this project.

Feminist scholars acknowledge their positions of power as privileged in studying their "subjects." Feminist research, then, aims to disrupt the hierarchical relationship

between the researcher and the researched: a feminist methodology is participatory, that is, knowledge is seen as the co-construction between the researcher and the subject (Reinharz, 1992). Because feminist methodology is collaborative and reciprocal, building empathetic, trusting, personal relationships between the researcher and the researched is key to authentic research. England (1994) argues that, especially in line with feminist goals of social justice and caring, “those who are researched should be treated like people and not as mere mines of information to be exploited by the researcher” (p. 82).

Throughout this study, I have considered my participants as co-creators of knowledge and have sought to build personal, caring relationships with them over repeat interactions with them, to the best of my ability based on circumstances (for instance, I interviewed many women digitally, through Facebook pages and Messenger, where the building of rapport was more difficult than in face-to-face conversations.)

A feminist paradigm rejects positivist ideas and instead sees reality as made up of multiple, constructed, partial truths. Accordingly, many feminist researchers work with feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1987), the idea that people have different views on the world depending on their social position in the world, for instance, how men and women occupy different positions and have different experiences, different access to resources, and so on. Because different people claim different standpoints, a multiplicity of voices is important for the co-creation of collaborative, authentic interpretations. Reinharz (1992) suggests that feminist researchers, in line with ideas about manifold realities, should try to access different standpoints, that is, start research from their own experiences and include multiple voices in their research. Through the inclusion of 40 interviews, I gathered a variety of viewpoints in this research.

In line with this notion, Foss and Foss (1994) argue for the validity of the use of “personal experience as evidence” in feminist studies. Personal experience, defined as “the consciousness that emerges from personal participation in events” (p. 39), as data is useful for gathering what Haraway (1988) calls situated knowledges, a collection of partial perspectives from particular embodied positions, reflecting multiple truths and realities. Haraway argues that situated knowledges collectively produce *a valid form of knowledge(s)*. Another benefit of personal experience as data is that researchers gather not only *knowledge* but also “a capacity for insight, empathy, and attentive caring” (Foss & Foss, 1994, p. 41) and can more fully “know” the participants. Finally, talking about personal experience also allows participants to “discover their own truths” (p. 41), developing a “critical consciousness” (p. 41) – therefore empowering participants, collaboratively, through research. Throughout this project, the data gathered is largely the personal experience of my participants. This study foregrounds their voices, their motivations, their imaginations, and their emotions as related to social media and technology use. Further, because I am or have been an active user of all three platforms and because of my lived experience as a woman in the zeitgeist of the fourth wave of feminism, my personal experience has too shaped this research. I spoke with my interviewees candidly about my own experiences and we discussed how our experiences were alike or differed. I see this not as a flaw in this research design, but instead as another way of producing valuable insights through personal experience.

However, the commitment to co-creation of knowledge from different standpoints, using personal experience and multiple voices brings with it problems of control and authenticity in interpretation. For instance, researchers can “[privilege] their

own experiences or at least their interpretations of experience over those of their participants” (Foss & Foss, 1994, p. 40; Stacey, 1998). Foss and Foss argue that feminist researchers have the authority to *present* data, they have “presentational expertise,” but should try to maintain the authenticity of the respondents’ voices. Ultimately, however, the research is the researcher’s product, so she should be particularly careful in her interpretations to balance the participants’ voices with her own (Stacey, 1988). Reinharz (1992) suggests using ample quotes, as well as paraphrasing, so that participants’ voices remain central to the text and, also, so readers can make up their own minds about what was said. Foss and Foss too advocate “constant dialogue, negotiation, and critical reflection” (p. 41) in discussing interpretations with participants. Researchers using feminist methodology must keep these commitments in mind if they want to develop valid *feminist* interpretations, which was the intention of this research. Indeed, I have used plentiful quotes throughout to foreground my participants’ voices and discussed my findings with my participants throughout the process.



## CHAPTER 4

### EXAMINING EMPOWERMENT ON BUMBLE:

“I LIKE THE FACT THAT IT’S... MY CHOICE AND  
IT’S MY CHOICE A COUPLE DIFFERENT TIMES”

#### Introduction

The mobile dating app Bumble was launched in December 2014 by Whitney Wolfe Herd, co-founder of the popular dating app, Tinder. Bumble has 40 million users as of September 2018 (Boorstin, 2018). Fifty five percent of users are women (Burke, 2015) and seventy two percent of users are under 35 (Sola, 2017). Wolfe Herd left Tinder amid a sexual discrimination and harassment lawsuit and decided to start Bumble partially as a response to her unpleasant gendered experiences at Tinder (O’Connor, 2017). On Bumble, only women are allowed to start the conversation – and they must do it within 24 hours of matching with someone or the match disappears forever. The reasoning behind this feature is to empower women to take control of the dating situation and also to quickly get rid of matches who are uncommunicative or not serious about dating.

Bumble has been publicly lauded as a “feminist Tinder” (Anwar, 2015; Mei, 2015) because it “allows for women to take control of the dating game” (Anwar, 2015, para 1) by making the first move. Wolfe Herd shared her impetus for starting Bumble, and her branding of the app as feminist, in a 2015 *Vanity Fair* (Yashari, 2015) interview:

We are 100 percent feminist... If you look at where we are in the current heteronormative rules surrounding dating, the unwritten rule puts the woman a peg under the man – the man feels the pressure to go first in a conversation, and the woman feels pressure to sit on her hands... If we can take some of the pressure off the man and put some of that encouragement

in the woman's lap, I think we are taking a step in the right direction, especially in terms of really being true to feminism.

Throughout this chapter, I interrogate the assertion that Bumble is a feminist dating app, analyzing the affordances of the platform as well as talking with women who use it. The data here is gathered from 14 women, using repeat in-depth interviews and focus groups. I show that online dating is a series of choices for women, choices that simultaneously 1) try to lead towards a love match and 2) steer away from harassment and abuse, so that Bumble fulfills a double function, of being both “matchmaker” and “protector.” Female users balance trying to find a partner on Bumble with trying to prevent uncomfortable or threatening situations, through every step of use, in ways that extend far beyond the “women-friendly” features that Bumble explicitly markets as such. The felt imperative to constantly consider safety while navigating the app to look for love creates additional, largely invisible, labor for women who use Bumble (and online dating in general). Dating has always been a lot of work, offline and online, for those seeking partners (Weigel, 2016). This study highlights the particularly *gendered* nature of this invisible dating labor in the *digital* context. Online dating thus extends the gendered labor – including emotional labor and household labor – that women perform in offline contexts (Cirucci, 2018; hooks, 2015; Hochschild, 1989). I end with a discussion of how the ways in which women use Bumble, and the ways in which Bumble guides these uses, relate to contemporary feminism.

#### Technical Walkthrough: How Bumble Works

A technical walkthrough of an app maps its various features and functionalities, navigating through three parts of use: registration and entry, everyday use, and stopping

use (Light, Burgess & Duguay, 2016). I loosely follow this structure in the following description of the app. Here, I also use Davis and Chouinard's (2017) typology of gradations of affordances, that is, showing how Bumble *requests, demands, allows, encourages, discourages, or refuses* certain actions of the user through its interface design.

### *Registration and Entry*

Immediately on downloading, Bumble users are presented with a screen with a picture of a blonde woman in sunglasses, with a bee-shaped key icon, and the words "On Bumble, ladies hold the key." Below are the steps showing how Bumble works (cited here verbatim):

- 1) Two people like each other & it's a connection
- 2) The girl has to make the first move by starting a chat within 24 hours
- 3) If she doesn't chat, the connection disappears forever

Below this, greyed out, is a link that says "Wait...but I'm not looking for men" – when clicked on, this link explains that in same-sex matches, either party can make the first move.<sup>6</sup>

At the time of data collection, the only way to access Bumble was through Facebook<sup>7</sup> – thus Bumble "demands" (to use Davis and Chouinard's (2017) typology) the action of signing up through Facebook. Once users exit out of the welcome screen, a new screen prompts them to "continue with Facebook." There is a question mark

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<sup>6</sup> Only one woman in my sample was bisexual, the rest all identified as heterosexual and so the use of Bumble for same-sex relationships was not brought up in the interviews.

<sup>7</sup> The data collection occurred in October and November 2017. Bumble has since amended its sign-up options, allowing users to create an account using just a phone number, citing privacy concerns arising from Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal (see Plausic, 2018 for more on the decision).

underneath the prompt with the words “Don’t worry! We never post to Facebook,” and then at the bottom of the page, there is a link to Terms of Service.<sup>8</sup> When the question mark is pressed, a speech bubble comes up saying “We use Facebook for accuracy and security. You don’t want bots or spam and neither do we. Facebook authentication helps us make sure you get the best experience possible.”

Once a user logs in to the app through Facebook, her Bumble profile is automatically populated with her Facebook data: college attended, job details, age, as well as her last six profile pictures – the app in this way “encourages” the use of Facebook data, though it does “allow” users to manually change some of this information if they so wish. Users can show up to six pictures in their dating profile as well as a short text blurb in an “About Me” section below the photos. The profile publicly shows the user’s name as well as the fields: Occupation, Education (college name), Age, and Location. If a user does not have an occupation listed on Facebook, Bumble directs them to a screen of “General Occupations,” with pre-populated options (e.g., Accountant, Club Promoter, Professor) that users can select. The app “refuses” the ability to type in a custom occupation. The user also selects a gender when creating a profile, but this is not listed on the public profile – instead, it is used algorithmically to present users with potential matches based on the selected gender/s<sup>9</sup> that they are interested in. Users are

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<sup>8</sup> Clicking on the Terms of Service (TOS) redirects the user to “Bumble Terms and Conditions of Use” online. The TOS starts with “Hey guys! Welcome to Bumble’s Terms and Conditions of Use (these “Terms”). Our lawyers insist that we impose rules on users to protect all of our hard work. This is a contract between you and Bumble Trading Inc and we want you to know yours and our rights before you use the Bumble application (“App”).” This informal, friendly tone is present throughout Bumble’s design, setting up an informal “platform vernacular” (Gibbs et al., 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Currently, the gender options on Bumble are binary: male or female. The app does not cater to non-binary, gender-fluid, trans, etc. users.

also “allowed” to link their Instagram (photo sharing social media platform) and Spotify (music curating platform) accounts to their Bumble account.

Finally, the user has the option (the platform “encourages” this with on-screen prompts) to verify their account. In this verification tool, users are prompted to “show us yourself(ie)” by taking a selfie where they are copying a gesture that is auto-generated by Bumble, and then submitting it to Bumble staff to verify that this “real” self matches the photos in their profile. (Bumble was the first dating app to add a verification feature like this in the U.S.) This verification tool is meant to combat catfishing, “the practice of creating a false online identity” (Chang, 2016, para. 1).

After a profile is created, a screen pops up, “encouraging” users to sign up to the paid features of Bumble for \$9.99 per month (Bumble is free to use otherwise):

“Introducing Bumble Boost – upgrade for extras! But don’t worry, Bumble is still free. 1. See who’s already liked you 2. Rematch with expired matches. 3. Get unlimited extends.”

There is also a section in one’s profile called “Bumble Coins” where users can purchase coins, instead of the Bumble Boost subscription, on a one-off basis to unlock special features.

Next, the user decides on settings: to keep their Public Profile on or off (“turning your Public Profile off hides you from everyone except the people you’ve already connected with”); an “I’m interested in” section, where a user can choose “Men”, “Women”, or “Everyone”; an age selection for matches (between ages 19-100); and distance for matches (between <1 mile and 100 miles). Bumble is a location-based matching app – a type of “people-nearby application” (Toch & Levi, 2013) which are “mobile systems that allow users to discover new people using geographical proximity

search and online communication” (p. 540). Thus, Bumble “demands” that users have their GPS turned on to use the service. In the settings section, users can also decide whether to have push notifications on or off (being notified of new matches and messages); here, they can also send feedback to Bumble, and look at the Terms of Service and Privacy Policy.

### *Everyday Use*

After setting up an account and adjusting their settings, users swipe through the profiles of other users (these are limited by location, gender, and age according to both users’ preferences), looking at their photos and text blurb. If a user “likes” another user, she swipes right; if she doesn’t, she swipes left. If a user that one has “liked” “likes” one back, the two users are matched, and the woman then has 24 hours to start the conversation (using text or a picture). If she doesn’t start the conversation within 24 hours, the match disappears. Initially, the man had unlimited time to write back, but in April 2016 Bumble added a clock for the response, so now the man also has only 24 hours to write back before the match disappears (McGoogan, 2016). This new feature is supposed to stop the unpleasant practice of “ghosting” by men – “when you stop talking to someone you met on an app without offering an excuse” (McGoogan, 2016, para. 2). There is a section listing the various matches and conversations, with thumbnails of a picture of each match and their names. Before a person writes back, their thumbnail is encircled in a ticking clock that counts down the 24 hours. Conversations can be filtered by “unread,” “recent,” or “nearby.”

When you click into a specific conversation (which then shows the text and pictures that have been exchanged), there is an option to “view profile, block & report,

unmatch.” “View profile” takes one to the matched user’s profile. If you click “unmatch” (and follow the prompts asking whether you’re sure), the chat disappears from your match queue and you cannot be matched again with that user. Clicking on “block and report” provides users with several options, with the default option being “don’t report abuse,” and others being “stolen photo,” “inappropriate content,” “rude or abusive,” “sending spam,” or “scammer.” Once you choose your reason for blocking and reporting, there is a space to write a more detailed report to send to Bumble. Users who are blocked and reported are banned from the app overall, at the discretion of the Bumble team, who monitor these reports and feedback. A Bumble exec explained in an interview the reasoning behind banning:

Basically, the key to determining whether or not somebody is banned is, would we want to run the risk of them treating another user this way? And the odds are, if they're going to treat one person that way, they're going to treat others that way, and they're not allowed on the app. (Jalili, 2017)

### *Leaving the App*

Users have three options to exit the app: logging out (this is a temporary halt, as it keeps the app on the phone, but stops notifications), uninstalling the app (this removes the app from the phone, but the account and user data remains “virtually” and can be logged into when the app is re-downloaded), and deleting the account (which removes the account and all the user’s data permanently).

### *Other Features and Guidelines for Use*

In March 2016, Bumble launched Bumble BFF, a platform like the dating interface, but instead of matching with potential romantic partners, users match with potential same-sex friends (Burlacu, 2016). In October 2017, Bumble launched Bumble

Bizz, a women-first networking platform to remove “the soliciting nature and the sexism that exists in networking” (Wolfe Herd, quoted in O’Connor, 2017). All three interfaces are accessed through the Bumble app and users can choose to change their profiles for each one or to keep one profile for all three. These two features have further extended Bumble’s “feminist” offering, in the connecting and empowering of women in both the social and work contexts.

In October 2016, Bumble released new photo moderation rules that included a ban on mirror selfies, photos of people in underwear or swimwear (unless on a beach or by a pool), and obscured faces. These rules are meant to make sure that Bumble is “a safe, friendly place to meet new people. Bumble is not a place to act differently than you would IRL [in real life]” (Bumble HQ, 2016, para. 5).

Through the various features (such as women talking first, verification, and blocking and reporting function), rules and guidelines, as well as monitoring users, Bumble markets itself as an app that makes dating better/safer/more empowering to women. In a 2016 move that *Entrepreneur* called “totally on brand” (Belanger, 2016), Bumble blocked and wrote an open letter to a male user who harassed a female user after she asked him what he did for work as part of small talk. The man suggested that the woman was trying to figure out his salary and said that he didn’t have time “for entitled, gold-digging whores” (Belanger, 2016). In its letter condemning this man, Bumble said that “We are going to continue to build a world that makes small-minded, misogynist boys like you feel outdated.”

In August 2017, the app announced on its blog that it will work with the Anti-Defamation League to add technology to Bumble that will “identify and categorize hate



symbols.” Any users who are found to have hate symbols in their profiles will be banned from the app. Bumble explained how this move added another tool to its “female-friendly” toolbox and stemmed from a neo-Nazi media article urging harassment of Bumble’s offices “given Bumble’s stance towards promoting women’s empowerment” (Bumble HQ, n.d.).

Thus, Bumble presents specific features and takes specific actions that are both meant to empower women and to keep them safe, leading to the “feminist dating app” public discourses surrounding Bumble. This chapter interrogates this “feminist dating” discourse through interviews and focus groups with users of Bumble.

#### Bumble as a Series of Harm-Prevention Tools

Online dating provides unique affordances to users that were not present in dating before the internet – the primary one being the ability to be connected with large volumes of curated potential partners in the comfort of one’s own home. However, online dating also brings with it the potential of increased risks, for the same reason – bringing people into virtual (and later, face-to-face) contact with different, previously-unknown others. Research shows that people on online dating balance presenting personal information to appeal to potential matches while at the same time applying rules to judge the credibility of others in an online context (Heino, Ellison & Gibbs, 2010).

As Gibbs, Ellison and Lai (2011, p.71) write:

online dating participants face pressures to reveal personal information, both to conform with social norms and because of their own desire to form romantic relationships. Yet they also must consider the risks of sharing such information with strangers absent confirmation that others are being honest in their disclosures, which could result in emotional or physical distress.

Gibbs, Ellison and Lai 2011) found that increased “protective information-seeking behavior” (p. 90) – such as verifying information that others disclose online, using various social media platforms –occurs when online dating participants are worried about their personal safety, worries which often stem from online harassment. Harassment on online dating is much more common for women, with 57% of women versus 21% of men reporting experiencing feelings of harassment on online dating apps (Burgess, 2016). Online harassment specifically in the form of sexual advances from strangers is a gendered phenomenon: women, particularly young women, experience online sexualized abuse much more frequently than men (Duggan, 2017). One in five women aged 18 to 29 say they have been sexually harassed online, whereas only one in ten men encounter digital sexual harassment. In addition, 53% of young women have received unsolicited explicit images online (Duggan, 2017). Importantly, women are more affected emotionally by online harassment than men: 35% of women said they found their most recent harassment experience “extremely upsetting” or “very upsetting,” whereas only 16% of men described harassment encounters in such strong affective terms.

Online sexual harassment of women is not a new phenomenon. Brail (1996, p. 142) writes about how in AOL’s chat rooms in the early 1990s “should you enter a chat room using a woman’s login name, you’re likely to find yourself the target of a wanna fuck ‘instant message’ from some man you’ve never even heard of.” Of course, dating apps differ to the wider online context, in that there is some form of future sexual interaction expected; that is, most people on dating apps are looking for a romantic/sexual

partner. Online sexual harassment occurs when the line is crossed from consensual flirting to unsolicited sexual advances.<sup>10</sup>

Toch and Levi (2013) found that *all* interactions on location-based apps are tinged with uncertainty about the ability to trust users. Accordingly, both genders use “uncertainty reduction mechanisms,” such as blocking, to stop online harassment (Toch & Levi, 2013). However, women on “people-nearby apps,” like dating apps, report lower levels of trust and higher levels of negativity when interacting with others on these apps; in addition, women are much more likely to experience violent harassment on these apps than men (Toch and Levi, 2013). Eckert (2018) found that many female bloggers experience online harassment and they deal with this digital abuse in various ways, including moderating or blocking comments. She also found that experiencing online abuse has a chilling effect, in that bloggers start keeping a low profile or avoid certain topics. Given these and other findings on online harassment that point to it being a gendered phenomenon (Mantilla, 2013), particularly in sexual contexts, women must balance opportunity with risk on online dating. Women in particular must balance the pull towards finding a match with the need to shield themselves from unwanted advances and uncomfortable situations that also come with “putting oneself out there.”

To avoid negative interactions and feelings, women make carefully considered decisions at various steps of the online dating process. When making choices on online dating, women must balance being authentic, sharing personal information, and

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<sup>10</sup> Women I interviewed about their use of private Facebook groups (see Chapter 4) often spoke about how they got random messages from strangers requesting sex on Facebook messenger, highlighting how the practice of asking “wanna fuck” is prevalent on other social networking platforms and not just dating sites.

connecting with multiple people, to attract the right matches, but they are also navigating a system where at any point the communication situation can take a darker turn. The various affordances that Bumble provides to facilitate love matches are also used by women subversively to prevent or mitigate uncomfortable situations arising from their initial online (and later offline) interactions with men. Thus, although the intended use of Bumble is for men and women to connect (albeit giving women more control in certain parts of the process), women use the technology *holistically* in subversive ways, to constantly stay one step ahead of possible negative interactions – illustrating what Shaw (2017) terms “negotiated use” when thinking about the affordances of a communication technology.

*Choosing Bumble: Culture and Audience on “Feminist Tinder”*

The first way that women used Bumble as a system to prevent negative interactions was through the actual choice to use the app. All the women interviewed considered Bumble as part of an ecology of dating apps, comparing various apps, their features, and their reputations. The choice to use a particular dating app or apps was made in relation to other dating platforms. Bumble, then, is considered in the totality of the dating app ecology, similarly to how users of other social media decide what content to post on different platforms by considering all the platforms available and their unique affordances (Zhao, Lampe & Ellison, 2016).

Most of the women said that they started using the app in part at least because of its reputation – including advertising and media discourses – as being women-friendly. For instance, Margie explained that “it was definitely advertised that way, of like, the feminist app, you get to make the first move, no more creepy guys thing.” Similarly, Edie

confirmed that “the fact that it was referred to as, like, feminist dating, I think probably did push me to try it.” Zee said that she saw ads for Bumble “popping up” on Facebook and Instagram, and after researching it a bit decided to try it because “it was a lot different than other things, where the girl obviously has to speak first.”

Women were often “pushed” towards Bumble and its promises of being a more women-friendly dating app through their negative experiences with other dating platforms. Most women spoke about how the “women talk first” affordance was what drew them, particularly because of the agency and control that Bumble gave them in comparison to other apps. Zee further explained:

I think in other dating apps, whether it’s, like, Tinder or eHarmony or whatever else, I think the initial thought for women is that they’ll create their profiles and curate it to the point where they think that this what guys want to see and they’ll wait. For Bumble, there’s no waiting... it’s like, we start to realize we don’t have time for waiting. Or we don’t need to wait for a man to come find us. Like, we’ll figure it out.

However, several women noted that it was not the “women talk first” feature that was the most important to them, but the swiping function, as Blake noted: “I think the “talk first” is important, but... I don’t think that’s the main point. I think the main point is that I’m not allowing conversation to happen until you’re both saying it’s okay.”

Comparisons were made with older sites, such as OKCupid and Match.com, that were in the format of web pages with very detailed profiles, where anyone with an account could talk to someone else, whether the other person was interested or not. Aidan explained how Bumble was “better than when I did Match because I had more control over [the connection] ... I initially liked the person.”

Women were particularly annoyed that on the legacy sites, men much older than them would routinely reach out. Diana said of her Match account:

I hated it. It's a lot of older men, people reach out to you. You know that nothing's going to come of it, I was like, why are you wasting all of our times right now. We're not even 20 years into the same age.

The age selection feature on Bumble was deemed useful not only to find a suitable partner in one's age range, but also to filter out "creepy older men" looking for sex. Women moved to Bumble, then, to avoid unwanted contact, alongside their desire to find a match. Importantly, the swiping function is not exclusive to Bumble, as Tinder (and some other apps) follows the same model (except on these apps, either party can make the first move after both people have swiped right on each other). However, Bumble was often chosen over Tinder (or alongside Tinder when a person used multiple apps) regardless, for attributes beyond the swiping function, detailed below.

Comparisons of Bumble to Tinder were particularly frequent in the interviews, perhaps because of their similar design and the media discourse of Bumble being a "feminist Tinder" (Anwar, 2015; Mei, 2015). The comparison to Tinder, as an app that was used for harassment and aggression, was particularly common. Vanessa moved to Bumble from Tinder because "a lot of guys on Tinder were not polite. Like, they would initiate sex, the second that they matched with me." Rachel similarly explained:

I like this one, because the hour that I had Tinder, I was, like, very turned off by it. I don't know, I just felt like it was very aggressive, like the guys on there are very aggressive and almost had no shame, so I was like, oh my gosh, this is, it just didn't feel like a good fit kind of thing. And I liked Bumble, because the woman had to initiate, so I could kind of *control the amount of aggression* that was directed towards me. (emphasis added)

Sadie, too, stated that “I heard that women make the first move and I liked that because I used to get daily messages and comments on the other sites, like Tinder, and sometimes they were kind of threatening and uncomfortable... Bumble sounded safer.” Edie recalled how she had started online dating on Tinder but “it was just not a good experience overall.” She went on to say how she thought there would be “more people I would be interested in on Bumble than on Tinder and it didn’t have that stigma [about being a hook-up site].”

Indeed, the idea that Bumble was different to Tinder in its platform culture was repeated throughout the interviews. Users felt that Bumble provided a different “feel” or “flavor” – a high-level affordance in Bucher and Helmond’s (2018) typology or a specific “platform vernacular” (Gibbs et al, 2015) – to other apps; Bumble was known as a relationship rather than a hook-up app. Tinder was “for trashier dating” – Ellie said that she used Bumble because it was “a little bit less sleazy” than Tinder – while Bumble was “really classy” and had a “reputation of being more about relationships.” These differences drove user behavior: Diana stated that eventually she went back on Tinder “because I wasn’t looking for a relationship.”

Women also imagined that Bumble had different users compared to other apps, highlighting how each social media platform has a different “imagined audience” (Litt, 2012). The imagined audience is “the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating” (Litt, 2012, p. 331) and contributes to the feel or culture of the platform. For instance, in line with Bumble’s reputation as a relationship app, many of the women referred to the men being “nicer,” “more polite,” or “better quality” on Bumble – compared to the men on Tinder who “oozed non-commitment.” Men were also

seen as having better careers on Bumble, again contributing to the idea that Bumble was better for those seeking stability and long-term relationships. Research shows that men are typically on dating apps for more casual encounters than women, particularly when age is considered (that is, older women seek more long-term relationships) (Tyson et al, 2016). So, finding an app that seemed more relationship-friendly was a big draw to women.

Even though women spoke of how Bumble was different to other apps and was their “preferred” app, most of them conceded that they in fact used multiple apps, “to cover all my bases” (Margie). This corroborates previous findings that most online dating users are on multiple apps to maximize their chances of finding a partner (Burgess, 2016). My interviewees also pointed out that, despite the apps being considered different, they saw the same men across different apps – there was “overlap.” Edie summed up, after conceding that she had seen the same profiles on several apps: “Clearly, realistically, when you get down to it, they're probably the same, but [Bumble] has this aura of respectability that Tinder still doesn't.” In addition, women were emphatic about different “core” qualities of men on Bumble – but they disagreed on what these core qualities were. For instance, Aidan felt that Bumble was for “younger crowds” but Vanessa insisted that the men on Bumble were “a little bit older too... and they look like they've got it together.” These contradictions highlight how high-level affordances relating to the feel and culture of a platform, as well as the audience on different platforms, are largely imagined, rather than being based on objective differences – illustrating the role of imaginations in social media affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015).



Importantly, the “encouraging relationships” culture of Bumble was not only used to draw in those seeking relationships. Many chose Bumble strategically to prevent negative experiences in online dating in general, because women thought that men looking for relationships would be less likely to harass, be sexually explicit without consent, or create uncomfortable situations.

*Signing-up: Authentication and Information Management Through Facebook*

When setting up a profile on Bumble, women deliberately considered what information they were providing, trying to carefully balance self-disclosure to present as attractive and genuine, while limiting personal information. For instance, Bumble automatically uses information from Facebook to auto-populate a new user’s profile, including information such as college, job title, age, and photographs<sup>11</sup>. Bumble states that it uses Facebook data to verify that its users are real people and not bots; so, the expectation on Bumble is that users will A) have a real Facebook profile and B) will not change the information provided from Facebook, to maintain this verification system. Indeed, users of online dating find the connection to Facebook lends others on the app a sense of authenticity and promotes a culture of trust (Duguay, 2017).

Bumble encourages users to use Facebook information by auto-populating their profiles, which is “helpful” because users do not have to “start from scratch” (Aidan). However, there was much “negotiated use” (Shaw, 2017) of this feature, through women manually changing this information in their profile according to privacy concerns. For instance, Aidan’s profile automatically populated with her specific job title and the name

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<sup>11</sup> As mentioned earlier, in late 2018, Bumble added the ability for users to sign up using just a phone number, citing privacy concerns around Facebook’s data collection policies.

of her company; she said, “it got me a little worried, because ‘oh crap, they know where I work! I was, like, ‘nope, I’m going to change that.’” Edie, who re-downloaded Bumble during our interview, walked me through the process as she decided to change her information that had been pulled from Facebook: “It’s put up random photos up from Facebook, that’s fine. I’m just going to take down my specific job, because why do you need to tell people where I work...” So, there was distinction made between what information was fine to leave up (photos, for the most part) and what was a privacy or safety violation.

Sharing where one worked was seen as particularly unsafe by multiple interviewees, because this information was linked to the physical location of the user. Users only divulged details about where they worked after developing a trusting relationship over time, which included meeting face to face. As Lily explained:

I’m still quite reserved about things that I tell people when I’m chatting to them, like I’ll tell them what my role is and a brief summary of what that actually means, but I won’t tell them where I work.

When prompted why, she answered: “Because I don’t want them to come and find me if I decide that I don’t like them.” This fear, that men could try find them in real life when they did not want to be found, and linking this to personal safety concerns, was prevalent throughout the interviews.

Some of the women who were concerned with online privacy more broadly said that they kept “pretty clean” profiles so that they didn’t have much personal information on Facebook anyway – because they were aware that Facebook collects data. However, there was a distinction made between privacy in terms of the platform itself and privacy in terms of the users who have access to your data, echoing Cirucci’s (2014) distinction

between “little p privacy” (related to other individuals) and “big P Privacy” (related to platforms themselves and broader culture).

Lily, when pressed on why she limits sharing on Bumble, explained:

[You can be] stalked, harassed, catfished – you’re quite vulnerable. Without realizing... all our information is collected online, but that’s by some anonymous corporation or government that you can’t do anything about, but when it’s an individual you’ve to be quite careful about that. I don’t know what their capabilities area and I don’t know what they would actually use that information for.

There was a perceived difference of control regarding privacy. Most women were resigned to the fact that Facebook and other social media platforms collect data. Vanessa explained further: “I was hesitating at first, because I don’t want all the people to see my information. I’m quite a private person. But honestly, this is the digital era. Everyone can know about everyone in a matter of minutes. Just... Google. So, I don’t mind anymore.” As reluctantly accepting these women were of Facebook collecting data, they felt that they could (and should) control information given out to potential dates much more closely.

Bumble explains that using Facebook for signing up is supposed to ensure that the person in the profile is “real.” Indeed, Facebook was used to verify the “realness” of matches; Trudy stated, “there is still some feeling of risk with, like, meeting strangers and Facebook does just give you the feeling of ‘this is a real person,’ I could theoretically find them and they probably have like 400 friends or whatever.” However, a few the women mentioned that linking through Facebook was not actually foolproof, because fake Facebook profiles can be used. Sadie explained: “I don’t think it makes me feel safer necessarily, because I feel like people can put whatever they want online.” Margie said

that people “end up on dates all the time with someone... who doesn’t look like their picture or isn’t who they said they were. It’s catfishing, like, 101.” Also, many women have two separate Facebook profiles, one which is more curated and has limited data (a “faker” version) and the other which is a more authentic version of themselves. Indeed, Rachel had two Facebook accounts, one for her work (she worked in social media) and another personal account. She linked Bumble to her work account and she said she felt as if she was “cheating the system” because the “likes on that page are so fake” and it’s presenting an “idealized version of my professional self” which was not authentic. But, this “faker” profile had the significant benefit of limiting information about her and consequently limiting the risks presented by strangers accessing that information

Bumble allows users to link other social media to their dating profile, such as Instagram and Spotify. Users can also put social media handles, such as Twitter or Snapchat handles, in their blurbs. The women I spoke with restricted their linking of other apps, to limit the amount of personal information about themselves that they shared. Aidan for instance said that she found it “weird” when men had Snapchat on their profiles because “it’s a little too personal.” She went on to say that she ignored a lot of requests by dates to be connected on Snapchat, because “I don’t want them to be involved in my snaps and see what I’m doing.” For Aidan, Snapchat was only for her “closer friends” to “make them feel more connected” to her.

This ranking of various communication technologies, from public to private, was illustrated by how a couple’s communication moved through various technologies as the relationship developed. For instance, women felt more comfortable giving men their numbers only after they had exchanged a few messages on Bumble itself. Some even

reserved number exchanges for after the first date. Adding potential partners to other social media platforms, such as formally adding someone as a “friend” on Facebook, was seen as appropriate only much later on in the relationship. These findings corroborate Toch and Levi’s (2013) findings that people switch to other communication platforms when there is a “step forward in an uncertainty reduction process” that signals trust, a process that develops over time.

Therefore, by strategically curating and limiting the amount of information that they put in their profiles, my participants were trying to present enough to ensure some good matches, but at the same time, trying to maintain their privacy, in case things went wrong. Conversely, women wanted men to put as much information into their profiles as possible, so that they could effectively use that information to further vet their matches, as is discussed below.

*Swipe Left, Swipe Right, Verify: Weeding Out Harassers on Bumble*

Men are three times more likely to swipe right (“like”) than women are on online apps (Bilton, 2014; Tyson et al 2016) – so women are far more selective in who they choose to connect with. Indeed, the women I spoke with mentioned how all their male friends are “very liberal with their swipes” and “basically swipe right on every profile.” This leads to many matches for women, even if they selectively swipe (almost all swipe rights for women are “a match”).

Tyson et al (2016, p.1), exploring how men and women use Tinder differently, argue that because women are highly selective and men far less discerning, a “feedback loop” is created “whereby men are driven to be less selective in the hope of attaining a match, whilst women are increasingly driven to be more selective, safe in the knowledge

that any profiles they like will probably result in a match.” My findings show, however, that women are not only selective because they are sure of their prospects, but also because they have to incessantly monitor dating interactions to maintain their comfort and safety – and being selective in swiping is a way of avoiding men who could potentially be harmful.

Women using Bumble had a plethora rules for how to avoid men that would harass or be “fuckboys” (men who are disrespectful and sexually aggressive), rules that they would apply when screening pictures and text on profiles. Blake stated that she could weed out “95% of harassers” through careful screening:

I feel as though it’s very limited where there are harassing messages from people if you’re good about reading their profiles and looking at their pictures and understanding who they are from their profile [and not matching with them].

Certain types of pictures or words were thought to be an indication of a man’s personality and his proclivity towards harassment or unwanted sexual advances. Vanessa explained how she “learned how to avoid the guys who would harass you” on online dating through looking out for the following:

If the pictures show his body a lot, they’re more likely to be ‘fuckboys.’ They’re more good-looking, they appear to be more successful, but [if there is a lot of body] they’re also fuckboys. And in the profile, if there is very little information about them. Little to none.

Women were particularly careful to not swipe on men who had nothing written in their profile, because it showed that these types of men “don’t really care,” are “lazy” or “boring,” and “might be there just to hook up.” Pictures were also used as a vetting tool – most women swiped left on men who only had pictures with sunglasses on, mirror selfies, guns in their pictures, gym pictures, or obscured or blurry pictures. One woman even

came across a man who had a swastika tattoo on his face (she swiped left)! Women felt that these pictures were indicators of possible future problems – for instance, sunglasses were deemed to be not trustworthy because you “could not see the person’s eyes.” Thus, both pictures and text were used to decide whether a man had potential to be a good match (a pull function), but also whether the interaction could turn sour (actively aggressive or sexually uncomfortable – *not* simply “not compatible”).

Beyond having swiping “rules” for pictures and text in the profiles to weed out the wrong types of men, women also paid attention to Bumble’s verification feature to make sure they were not being catfished. The verification feature is a blue check mark on the profile of a person; to be verified, a user takes a selfie in a particular pose randomly ordered by Bumble and is then authenticated by Bumble staff to be the person they said they were in their profile. The catfishing/verification feature was seen as “an added bonus,” an “honesty and transparency thing” in terms of the person looking like their pictures. However, women often mentioned that the verification tool did not in reality mean that much for safety, because as Carrie said, “I don’t think someone looking like and being who they say they are makes them any safer... it’s like, ‘this is who I am, but I’m still gonna kill you.’” So, the verification feature was used more as a compatibility/attractiveness confirmation rather than a safety feature.

As mentioned earlier, even though women put out limited information about themselves in their profiles, they preferred men to have more information that they could then verify outside of Bumble. Women used the information that men disclosed to “stalk” them on other social media, in line with previous findings about online dating and protective information-seeking behavior (Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011). So, women

scrolled through their matches' linked Instagram accounts and Googled their names, alongside colleges and professions, to find out more information. As Edie summed up "I do always try to find out about them, just because, I don't know, it does feel safer." *When* this additional information-seeking occurred in the online dating process varied. Some women did additional checking after matching with someone, but before actually writing to them; others checked only after agreeing to meet on a date. One woman, Diana, in fact did a whole round of vetting research before even *swiping*:

So, like [I go on] Facebook if they have an open profile, or LinkedIn, to find out what they do for a job if it's not on there. Just Google and just try and find out. And I've found out like really interesting stuff before, really good reasons not to swipe, that you would want to know before.

She said she did this also to find out "stuff that's going to be a real deal breaker." She took this "risk averse approach" because she wanted to "avoid having to deal with that further down the line and it causing me chaos in my life of any kind, then I'd rather do that up front." Thus, women were not only driven by an attraction approach to dating, trying to sift through profiles for love and the "perfect" matches, they were actively at the same time trying to avoid bad situations, whether it be sexually aggressive situations or simply matching with someone who might cause "chaos" in the future.

*"Changing the Dynamic": Women Talking First on Bumble*

The "women-first" design is the main feature that differentiates Bumble from other dating apps and is the feature that makes Bumble ostensibly "feminist." Bumble states in their FAQs that the "women talking first" feature is supposed to stop initial harassing/spamming messages that women get on other apps. When there is no swiping function – i.e., on sites like Match.com, where anyone can message anyone without first



matching –women get a large volume of messages, sometimes between 50 to 100 messages per hour (Holmes, 2017). However, even on Tinder, where both parties must agree to match before conversation starts, women are inundated with messages due to their high volume of matches.

This feature is also meant to “to counter the age-old and often outdated ‘guys always have to make the first move’ idea!” (Bumble FAQs, 2017). Thus, Bumble is supposed to be feminist both because it stops harassment and flips gendered norms – and these two ideals are seen as related. As Wolfe Herd has said in interviews, women talking first subverts gender expectations and supposedly “guides the conversation in a different way,” which then in turn limits harassment. Indeed, one of my interviewees, Trudy, agreed that the women talking first feature “definitely does change the dynamic” in terms of dating interactions going forward.

Women had to get used to making the first move, but ultimately this feature was seen as empowering. Trudy, who never messaged men first on Tinder, realized that “once you accept that you just have to message first” it can be “liberating... it’s easy to just shoot out five messages, and be like, ‘I’m kinda witty, I’m clever here,’ and let’s just see if anyone bites.” A number of women stated that it helped them gain confidence in approaching men. Vanessa described her experiences after being on Bumble for a few months: “At least for me, it gave me the confidence of talking to a guy first. It doesn’t make me think ‘oh I have to play hard to get’ anymore, if I’m interested in somebody I can just go talk to him.” In this sense, the app flipped cultural gender norms of women having to be wooed and men being the pursuers. Further, the app was not only seen as beneficial for increasing confidence in dating relationships, but also for increasing

confidence in life in general. Zee confirmed that “I feel like I have a change in my confidence because of it.” Thus, Bumble was seen as empowering to women, fulfilling its feminist goal, at least in terms of individual gains.

A frequent theme in the interviews was how the “talking first” feature gave welcome additional control to women in the dating process. The fact that the man could not write first was seen as beneficial; this gave the woman the chance to examine the man’s profile in more detail or think about the potential match for a bit and choose to not contact him at all. Kathryn explained:

I liked the fact that it’s my kind of choice if I want to reach out to someone, even after the initial swipe right. So, the first swipe [is] if I find someone attractive, and then you wait to see if it’s a match, but then even if it is a match, I get, like, a second chance, to decide if I want to reach out.

Women chose to use Bumble specifically because of this additional perceived control in the relationship. As Kathryn summed up, “I like the fact that it’s...my choice and it’s my choice a couple different times...it gives me an extra step of control over the men that I would be interacting with.” Edie, too, said that she liked the “extra layer of control.” This extra layer of control, or “extra filter” (Sadie), was often discussed in the sense of producing a “safer” experience for women.

The “talking first” feature was especially useful in providing an additional barrier to the harassment that women routinely experience on online dating. The women interviewed had all experienced various degrees of harassment on other dating apps, ranging from repeated requests for meeting up to sexual innuendo to verbal abuse to rude emoji to “dick pics” (pictures of male genitalia). The fact that this was a very common occurrence, basically an accepted “side-effect” of dating for women, was widely

acknowledged by my participants. For instance, Margie got a slew of messages that she perceived as harassing and detailed them as such: “Just things like, ‘girl, what does that mouth do?’ Things like that. Dick pics, comments, the *typical things that women deal with* on Tinder and social media” (emphasis added).

My interviewees thought that Bumble lowered the percentage of initial harassing messages that they received. Edie said that she appreciated Bumble’s “attempt to level the field by having women contact first, I think it cuts down on receiving abusive messages... aggressive messages.” Rachel explained how the “women talk first” function limits initial harassing messages. She had gotten “dick pics” a number of times on online dating. When prompted to think about which dating app she received these through, she said, “I think it was Tinder, just because it was unsolicited. So, it was just... there was no stopping anybody that wanted to do that. And then with Bumble, I guess, I’m kind of a line of defense for myself.” This idea, that women talking first provided an additional, almost physical, “line of defense” or “barrier” to harassment, was echoed throughout the interviews.

My interviewees also felt that by starting the conversation off “right” led to less harassment on the app. Kathryn explained that when women have to start a conversation, the conversations are “more mellow.” She went on to say:

It’s much rarer to get something like “you wanna come spend the weekend in my bed.” That’s much rarer in my conversations on Bumble than it ever was on Tinder. Getting something that’s out of the box like that or a little startling, happens much, much, much less frequently. So, the nature of the conversations are a little more holistic, if you will.

First messages, even if not sexual or inappropriate in nature to begin with, were seen as gateways to harassment; when women did not answer this first message, a man

could perceive this as unfair rejection. Brail (1996, p. 150) notes that “most forms of online harassment are mere annoyances... [but] the problem is when the date requests (or “wanna fucks”) continue after you’ve said no twice, or when you’re sent repeated email messages calling you a ‘bitch’...” Thus, particularly stressful harassing situations are those when men refuse to take no (or silence) for an answer. Aidan recalled an instance when she didn’t respond to a man’s first message “and he kept sending messages, like, ‘you’re being so shallow, I’m a really great guy, I can’t believe girls’ ... blah blah blah...” Carrie, too, had a similar experience, when a man messaged her “the middle finger emoji several times because I hadn’t answered.” Wolfe Herd (Yashari, 2015) spoke about this dynamic as part of her decision to make women talk first: “On Bumble, by having the lady make the first move, [the man] doesn’t feel rejection or aggression – he feels flattered. That one little shift, that one little change, makes all the difference.”

Kathryn explained how the talking first worked to minimize harassment from men related to rejection as a “two-step verification” of interest: “So the first step is you both swipe and the second step would be me messaging, which means that I’m interested in potentially meeting you.” By showing men interest twice, “they are maybe a little less intense, because they know that obviously you swiped and now *you’re* saying something.” Zee similarly noted that “usually” men are expected to make the first move, so they feel “the pressure of what to say;” but if the woman has to talk first “he’s like, okay, the first round is fine. All I have to do is respond. Because obviously she’s slightly interested.” Zee said that “the tone” of the ensuing conversation changed compared to conversations started by men. Thus, Bumble’s talking first feature was seen to work in part because it placated men and made them feel more secure in the interaction.

The notion that women have to talk first indeed saved men from feeling rejected (and possibly getting aggressive). However, aside from problematically placing men's feelings front and center of this "feminist" app, this feature transferred the burden of rejection onto women, who were also affected when men they reached out to didn't respond. Rachel explained how the idea behind the "women talk first" feature was good in theory, but not in practice: "I liked the idea of being empowered, but it turns out the guy still totally has all the power, because they can still choose to ignore you, so..." Women, however, were much less likely to keep trying to talk to a man if he didn't respond. In fact, the only woman who said she would send a second message after not getting a reply to the first one was Aidan: she would check in a few days later with the man to make sure he was not interested and then, if he didn't respond, would simply unmatch.

#### Harassment on Bumble

Though initial harassing messages on Bumble are eliminated by the app, harassment not surprisingly still exists in the form of replies to the women; as Kathryn noted "a guy who is going to be that aggressive is going to do it anyways [whether on the first message or not]." My interviewees explained that their first messages they sent were designed to attract interest, but also to judge values and serve as another way to expose potentially harmful or creepy men. For instance, Kathryn used a topical line that she sent out to all her matches on any given day. On Columbus Day, she sent the first message: "Columbus – hero or villain?" One man responded that Columbus was a hero because he founded America and Kathryn responded (politely) with a possible alternative way of viewing the actions of Columbus. The man responded with a wall of text ranting at her

stupidity and calling her a “libtard” pushing her agenda on him. She went on to block and report him. This nasty “turn” in the conversation made Kathryn feel “very uncomfortable.”

On a note of reflexivity, when I was using the app for dating, I sent a man, who had spoken about frequent travel in his profile, the first message “What’s the last country you visited?”, to which he responded, “If you weren’t into cats [listed as a like on my profile] I’d totally sleep with you haha.” Even though not technically harassing or abusive, the unprompted “turn” to a sexual conversation on the first encounter left me with a sour taste in my mouth and I promptly unmatched him. This “turn,” the sinking heart feeling, where you feel vaguely uncomfortable and “icky” about something that’s been said, sometimes without being able to pinpoint why exactly, seems a common experience for women. Messages like this, although not directly threatening, can make women feel uncomfortable and make the dating experience as a whole unpleasant – we are constantly on guard for that “turn.”

Harassing messages were almost always sexual and/or sexist in nature, and not surprisingly, women of color received both racist and sexist messages. For instance, Vanessa, who is Vietnamese, had an incident on Bumble where a man responded to her initial message asking about his travels with “you’re hot for an Asian girl.” She unmatched him because “what does that mean, that Asian people are ugly?” She also repeatedly received responding messages “saying hi to me in some weird languages. I’m not Chinese! Why do you assume I’m from this country?” Vanessa’s experiences highlight how race and gender intersect to produce unique, intersecting experiences of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991) for women of color on online dating.

### *Blocking and Reporting*

To sever a connection between two matches, Bumble provides the option of unmatching or of blocking/reporting. All three of these options are presented in the same drop-down menu on the platform; however, blocking and reporting is listed first, encouraging women to consider blocking and reporting before unmatching. Unmatching simply gets rid of the match, whereas blocking and reporting can potentially get the user banned from accessing Bumble as a whole (the decision to ban someone is up to the Bumble team based on the report they get). Bumble takes harassment seriously and has a “team of hundreds of live representatives” monitoring reports of abuse (Holmes, 2017). My interviewees used the unmatching function predominantly to “clear” their matches of the connections where conversations had fizzled out or that were boring.

Interestingly, however, going against what the platform “encouraged,” most of the women I interviewed chose to also unmatch, rather than block or report, those who sent harassing or sexually explicit messages. For instance, despite getting multiple unsolicited dick pics from various men, Rachel explained: “I’ve never been harassed to the point where I’ve been like ‘I need to block.’ Usually I unmatch you and you get the message.” Similarly, Zee viewed repeated requests for “coming over to cuddle” as “pretty harmless” so she chose to unmatch. Thus, many women see harassment as “par-for-the-course” on online dating and many women who get harassed do not see their harassment as serious enough to warrant blocking or reporting.<sup>12</sup> Choosing to not block or report could also be

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, this feeling of harassment not being serious *enough* was echoed in the #MeToo discourse I analyzed, when women deliberated writing #MeToo because they thought their experiences didn’t “count,” compared to horrific rapes detailed by others. Also, women often used private Facebook groups for professionals to deliberate with others whether an uncomfortable experience was “valid” or whether they

due to the longer process involved in those two options compared with unmatching. Both blocking and reporting require typing in an explanation why you were doing this action rather than simply making the problem “disappear” with no further elaboration, as unmatching does. This illustrates what previous research has found (e.g., Cirucci, 2014) – that certain design features (for instance, requiring additional typing) discourage certain user behaviors. So, the placing of the “block and report” menu option first encouraged this action in some ways, but the additional labor of having to write out an explanation discouraged it.

However, some of my interviewees discussed how the recent #MeToo movement combined with the political climate in the U.S. under the Trump administration empowered them to actually block and report, rather than simply unmatch, men who made them uncomfortable. Margie explained:

In this political climate, I’m so angry and bitter all the time and I feel everything is so much to the forefront. I think everything about it is pretty terrible, but the one thing I feel like it’s made me more comfortable in is voicing my anger and discomfort. So, I would say that a couple of years ago, stuff like that [dick pics] I would find disgusting, but also just be like, ‘whatever, I don’t want to deal with it.’ Whereas now, I’m so riled up all the time, it’s much easier for me to be like, ‘nope, let’s make a thing about this.’ Because you’re just going to do it to someone else... So, I feel like now I would be much more likely to [block and report].

Thus, the cultural climate filters down into women’s private lives, prompting them to make changes in their personal interaction and impacting the normative use of various features of dating platforms. Importantly, here women were often thinking of the collective benefit, how reporting someone would prevent other women from experiencing

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were overreacting. These findings point to how the patriarchal system of rape culture works at various levels in invalidating women’s experiences.



their bad behavior, highlighting how individual actions link to broader collective feminist goals.

Blake recounted a particularly disturbing story of when she blocked and reported someone on Bumble who was very aggressive about meeting up. At first, she found it flattering and told him that unfortunately she had plans to go to the theater with her friends; he responded by saying he was going to come to the theater and meet her there:

I'm like, 'no I'm with my girlfriends' and he was like 'they'll understand when they see me roll up in this car' and I was like 'oh my god, no. Please.' It was very aggressively, like, 'I'm going to stalk you down.'

Blake said that she blocked and reported the man because "he was stalking me down at my known location." The fact that he knew where she would be was particularly frightening for Blake, mirroring a general pattern in Bumble dating: women are more worried about the "real life" interactions that occur as a part of the online dating process than they are about online conversations. Indeed, Edie said that she wished she could have reported dates "in real life" because "that was when most of the odd behavior came out, after meeting them."

Women who worry about dangerous interactions through online dating, such as being "raped and murdered," are not in fact being hysterical. The rise in online dating has been linked to a six-fold increase in reports of rape (National Crime Agency, 2016). The majority of these assaults happened on the first "real life" date following meeting online. The National Crime Agency (2016, p.3) states that online dating is creating these threatening situations, because the offenders are "less likely to have criminal convictions, but instead exploit the ease of access and arm-chair approach to dating websites." Another factor that is presumed to lead to increased sexual assault in online dating is that

victims do not see the stranger as a stranger, because they have met through an online dating context which encourages a faster route to personal sharing and the concordant increase in trust and intimacy. Indeed, once a man has been thoroughly vetted and a pleasant conversation has flowed for a few days, women might consider moving on to a more personal technology, such as giving the man her number or adding him to her Instagram account, signaling an increase in trust (Toch & Levi, 2013).

Eckert (2018, p. 1283) argues that offline and online worlds are “enmeshed” and that “understanding online abuse requires including incidents that occur offline due to someone’s... presence online.” Although my participants varied with when they felt comfortable moving to a new technology (some would not share their phone number before they met someone – because “that’s, in particular, when you get aggressive”), the biggest concern was not the leap from technology to technology, but from online to in person. The women I interviewed went to great lengths to try to protect themselves when meeting with online dates in real life, illustrating the porous borders between offline and online in the context of sexism and misogyny (Mantilla, 2013; Manne, 2017; Vickery & Everbach, 2018). A number of the women insisted on only meeting for coffee and not having alcohol, because “that could potentially put me in a worse situation” (Aidan). Zee explained her specific strategies for feeling safe when an online date moved to a face-to-face scenario:

I think that’s more so obviously when you meet somebody, you have to pick a public place. I actually always bring my pepper spray. You just never know how they’ll be. I tell people, I tell my friends, my sister, I’ll drop a pin on my location for where I am, and be like “hey, this is where I’m gonna be, I’m meeting this guy, this is what he looks like,” and I let them know I have my pepper spray. But you just hope for the best. I actually get there... usually on dates I’d get there a little earlier, more so

just for my benefit of getting there on time and not having to look for the person, but I also just check out the vibe of the place, if it's easily escapable.

Women used various technological affordances of their mobile phones to manage their fears about meeting up in real life. Like Zee, a number of interviewees dropped “pins” (used geo-mapping features on their phones) at the location of their date and shared this with their friends, so that their friends could remotely track their whereabouts during a date. Interviewees also often mentioned that they would screenshot (take a picture of their phone's screen) a man's profile and send it, with personal information about him (such as his last name), to a few friends before going on a date, so that friends would know “what he looks like in case I'm raped and killed.”

Even though these are serious concerns and not unfounded – given the high rate of sexual assaults in dating situations – the women couched their worries about safety in humor, minimizing them by laughing or referring to themselves as “crazy” or “over the top.” However, the frequency of safety worries coming up in our conversations illustrates how these fears are something that many women go through, but which are normalized as being overblown or extreme to the degree where women say they feel silly for even bringing them up. Ultimately, Bumble – or any online dating platform – only gives women control for a very limited period in the relationship; it provides affordances that are “barriers” to harassment online, but, unfortunately, it cannot help with the most violent harassment that happens offline.

Even though women spoke about the affordances of Bumble in general in a positive light, particularly the affordance of making available lots of potential matches in a convenient way – as Carrie said “you can sit in your room and meet 30 people in a way

that you never could have before” – women were also aware that these same affordances could be materialized in “oppositional” ways. In fact, some women pointed out that Bumble and other dating apps, through their very existence, “provided a whole new medium [for] harassment” that had not existed before, by connecting together large volumes of strangers. This highlights how digital media technologies are simultaneously tools for “popular feminism” and “popular misogyny” (Banet-Weiser, 2015).

#### Troubling Bumble as a “Feminist App”:

“It’s Not Necessarily *Not* Feminist, It’s Just Not Particularly Feminist Either”

When asked to define feminism, Kathryn stated that it “is really empowering women, all women all of the time, to actually take control over things.” In this sense then, Bumble can be seen as providing a feminist platform for women in their dating lives. However, a number of my interviewees noted that Bumble, upon closer examination, is not as feminist as it purports to be.<sup>13</sup> Some spoke about the app as being protective of women; Lily said that she liked that “Bumble seemed to be looking out for women more.” However, a couple others (the minority of my sample) pointed to Bumble putting women first as in fact stripping women of their agency. Diana said that she thought Bumble automatically put women in a position of being “weak and needing to be protected” by adding special features to stop harassment and not acknowledging that women already have control of their lives. She argued that “you’re somehow giving up your own agency, letting the app take care of it for you.” Trudy similarly said, “I don’t need to be saved from assholes...I can curate my own sex life, Bumble, thank you very

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<sup>13</sup> At the end of the interviews, I asked the women directly: “So, in your opinion, is Bumble a feminist app?” This section deals with these answers.

much.” Diana also bristled at Bumble’s denial of her agency, saying she “never felt unsafe on Tinder” because if someone is “trying to solicit sex or whatever, I have agency to just say no.” She said that women should personally take a stronger stance against harassment and she pointed out that other apps already provide women with the tools to limit harassment:

I feel like it’s good for a woman to feel like it’s okay... it’s not *okay*, but, like, you don’t have to be afraid of a man saying those explicit things to you because you can just tell them no. And then you can block them or whatever.

This shows how the postfeminist logic of individual choice and agency can guide user behavior online.

Aside from aiming to stop harassment, Bumble aims to flip gender norms; Wolfe Herd states that by creating Bumble she was trying to rewrite the “unwritten set of rules around how a woman could interact with a man” (Yashari, 2015). In a sense, Bumble is inverting gendered norms of women having to wait to be pursued and men being the pursuers. However, some of my interviewees pointed out how Bumble really “reinforces gender stereotypes” despite purporting to flip norms, particularly because of its reputation as “the relationship app.” Trudy explained:

It's just a very heteronormative idea of dating that, like, all the men on [Tinder] are going to be predators and women are not interested in hook-ups and they just want to get to the marriage part of it.

A number of the women pointed out that Bumble cannot be a feminist app because gender roles on it are not “completely reversed.” Others pointed out that even though “women have the power to message first,” there are still plenty non-feminist users on the app. Rachel explained that “to be truly a feminist app is an impossible thing to achieve”

particularly because of pandering to the user base. She highlighted how apps are beholden to their users, in that they want as many users as possible, so an app is not going to ban non-feminist users. (Here, women equated non-feminists with Trump supporters frequently – and talked about the “Trump filter” that men used on their profile pictures on Bumble, paradoxically signaling women to avoid them.) Sadie similarly pointed out that there might be people on Bumble who are “are just as sleazy as people on Tinder.”

Equality was mentioned as a core tenet of feminism by almost all of the women interviewed, and they tested this definition against what they knew about Bumble. Margie thought that Bumble was “parading as a feminist app” and could not be really feminist, because women and men were not on an equal playing field using the interface (because women *had* to talk first). Many noted how the onus on the woman to talk first makes the dating process actually harder for women and “guys have learned that it’s just easier for them,” because they do not have to do any work. In some ways, several the women noted, Tinder could be considered more feminist, because it put men and women on an equal footing, rather than forcing women to make the first move.

A few of the women saw Bumble’s feminist stance as a marketing gimmick; Ellie said that “it’s a bit of a bullshit thing... it wants to hang its hat on that, as a ‘big wow.’” But she didn’t see a “meaningful difference” between Tinder and Bumble in terms of stopping harassment. Margie called it “manufactured feminism... corporatized feminism” because “using the thought and concept of feminism to, like, get your dating app to be popular” and to make money, so it is not “organic, true feminism.”

Some women took even more umbrage with Bumble labelling itself as feminist. Edie explained that the feminist label in the context of a dating app could be considered

as detrimental to women because there was a societal assumption that “feminists... are just really into casual sex” – so men use Bumble to “get a certain type of woman” and “never contact her again.”

Finally, Blake pointed out that Bumble is not feminist because she wouldn't “consider anything to do with dating a feminist expression” because that supports heteronormative ideals of monogamy and partnership. She explained: “it's leading into a society where you need a partner in order to be accepted, to be considered an adult, to be considered successful” and those ideals, she suggested, are at the core, “anti-feminist.”

Though few of my participants actively used either Bumble Bizz or Bumble BFF, many agreed that the new platforms are where Bumble's feminist potential lies. As Margie noted:

It's, like, to meet girls that you have stuff in common with and you think look cool. That excites me more than this dating thing. And like moving my career along, that's awesome. I haven't had time to even consider using either of those, but that definitely feels more feminist to me.

Zee similarly said that she would recommend Bumble to other women because of the additional features: “A lot of my friends recommended to me, because they met their boyfriends through it. But they also met their best friends through it, through BFF.” Thus, overall these women had ambivalent feelings toward Bumble and women's empowerment, saying it is “not necessarily *not* feminist, it's just not particularly feminist either” (Rachel).

#### Gendered Labor on Bumble: “You Have to Put in the Work”

Online dating overall is a labor-intensive process; as Rachel explained “I guess it's like anything, you have to put in the work and the effort if you want to get anything

out of it.” Tailoring one’s profile to be enticing took up a lot of time and effort, as Diana told me, “you have to have your peacock feathers out on the dating apps, like, I need to show off, I need to attract a mate... *I need to do all this work to attract a mate*” (emphasis added). Bumble users spend an average of 62 minutes on the app daily (Yashari, 2015), but these statistics broken down by gender are not released by the company. However, given the additional vetting that women feel compelled to do as they move through the app, it is highly likely that women do more labor on online dating – and because the “harm prevention” mindset is so rationalized and normalized, this additional labor is largely invisible.

On signing up, women set up their profile in a way that limits information, changing the auto-populated profile from Facebook, such as taking down their jobs; this consideration – of how much to disclose to balance being attractive and being safe – takes energy. Vetting all men by carefully looking through all their pictures and reading their profile before swiping also takes additional time and effort. The act of swiping then created decision fatigue; Diana pointed out:

You’re swiping through like a hundred people on like a given day and you match with however many of those and then you have to make decisions about every one of those people and like how many times in your life can you say you’re making decisions about thirty people in one day?

“Stalking” matches on Google and other social media to find out more information about them was also hugely labor-intensive. Women matched with a large volume of men, despite being selective, in line with previous findings (Holmes, 2017); having a lot of matches was seen as a chore. Vanessa said how she had “so many” matches that she had to stop online dating because “I don’t have the time to do this.” Zee



similarly said of her decision to stop Bumble, “it’s a little too much, to continue to swipe and balance all of that.”

A number of women particularly noted how the feature to talk first, touted as the most feminist feature of Bumble, was “added pressure” because they “don’t know what to say.” Instead of feeling empowered and in control, some women were annoyed that now they had to take time to come up with pithy conversation starters while men could just sit back and let women do all the work: “Guys like Bumble because they don’t have to put in, they don’t feel like they have to put in more work. All the guys I know like Bumble because it’s easy. They just have to match, and the girls have to make the first move” (Margie). Thus, Bumble took the pressure off men, but put it on to women, along with the labor that goes into deciding what to write to start the conversation.

Gender norms played out here, with participants feeling that women need to say more than just “hey” (which was the perception of how male users coped with having to initiate messages on other apps). So, women felt compelled to take a lot of time to “craft my first line so that it’s really grabbing and enticing.” To be “less boring than hey,” women would often mention something in the man’s profile or picture and ask a question to get the conversation started. Despite not explicitly referring to this as “work,” women shared various strategies to help them minimize the labor of initiating these conversations. Aidan, for instance, explained:

I just copied. I'll write it out, I'll copy it. I'll make sure I have the right name in there and just kind of... so I think that day I matched with four or three different guys, so it's basically just the same line, only because it's just easier that way.

Lily did a similar “bulk approach” of copying and pasting to all matches. Kathryn did “the opening line of the week” which she brainstormed with friends weekly, a line relevant to current events to start the conversation. For example, the week of the solar eclipse, they used “damn boy, are you a solar eclipse, because I’m trying to get your number before you disappear” (referring to the 24-hour period before a match disappeared on Bumble). Sadie used wave or smile emojis, “just to kinda bookmark them” before time ran out, as a “kind of, like, saying, ‘hi, I’m interested’” and hoping that the man would then write back something to start the conversation. A few women also used GIFs, as an interesting “shortcut” first message.

In terms of blocking and reporting, the app “isn't reading through every one of your conversations, so it's really up to *you* to step it up and tap on that ‘report’ button when you see something uncool” (Jalili, 2017). Therefore, Bumble provides the tools, but women still have to do the actual work of managing their harassers. This is similar to how women are told to be careful to not get raped in wider culture instead of men being told not to rape – the onus to end the uncomfortable situation is still on the victim. However, Toch and Levi (2013, p.546) argue that “users assume that other users are aware of these features [blocking and reporting] and take the cooling effect of these features on the whole community.” It is difficult to ascertain how much harassment is prevented on Bumble by simply having the mechanism of blocking and reporting – and the company taking these reports seriously – as part of the app.

Feeling overwhelmed by matches often led to decision fatigue, which led to women stopping using the app and even stopping online dating altogether, to have “just a little bit of a break.” Women reported feeling burnt out from the work of dating. Diana

said that she would “overload” herself and “get exhausted.” Aidan conceded that Bumble “wasn’t as bad as other dating apps, but it did get to be a psychological drain a little bit.” Edie stopped Bumble completely because “the stress that online dating was kinda making for me wasn’t worth the process.”

However, despite all this additional work, women were resigned to using online dating – Edie wondered, “then again, where am I going to meet someone?” – but they wished they did not *have* to use it to find someone to love. As Margie put it “I miss the days, I wasn’t even alive when this was, but like you met someone at a bar and that’s how connections were built.”

### Conclusion

The interviews and focus groups that I conducted with women about Bumble show that in some ways, through the affordances that it makes available to its female users, Bumble can ostensibly be considered a “feminist” dating app. Women are drawn to Bumble because of its female-friendly reputation and of the feelings of control and empowerment that Bumble provides, particularly in using the “women talk first” feature. However, online harassment prevalent on dating apps “creates a layer of negativity that people must sift through as they navigate their daily routines online” (Duggan, 2017) – and this intensifies for women, who are much more often harassed. Thus, women engage with Bumble with a “harm prevention” mindset throughout their use of the app, using *all* the features of Bumble (not just the ones designated as such) to maintain control and steer away from possibly difficult or harmful situations. To effectively use Bumble, then, women must constantly balance opportunity with risk. This naturalized need to use various strategies to stay safe, online as well as offline, adds tremendous amounts of

additional, invisible labor to women's navigation of Bumble – and, by extension, to women's uses of online dating in general. This digital labor is an extension of gendered labor offline, such as emotional labor (maintaining solid emotional relationships with loved ones) and household labor (cleaning and looking after children), that disproportionately fall on women in society.

Bumble calls itself feminist, and in some ways, it is: women indeed have more control over their interactions with men on the app and, through initiating conversations, they subvert normative ideas about gender roles in dating, challenging the cultural status quo of how relationships should work. They also have a set of features, a toolset (whether explicitly stated as such or not), to minimize the gendered risks inherent in online dating. However, Bumble is embedded in a neoliberal system, where it is still up to the individuals themselves to use these tools. Overall, Bumble provides minimal impetus to change the underlying system steeped in sexism, misogyny, and gendered norms, a system in which women endure harassment and even simply discomfort as a side-effect of interactions with others. Instead, the onus is still on individual women to protect themselves and minimize risk in an online dating context. Bumble could be said to more plausibly ascribe to the *postfeminist* values of empowerment and choice (although I argue that empowerment and choice have real potential to contribute to the feminist movement to end sexist oppression, particularly when combined with collective action – this is discussed in more detail in the conclusion). As Banet-Weiser (2015) aptly points out, there are limits to negotiating uses of a technology:

we tinker at surface changes, such as blocking mechanisms on Twitter, but those don't change the technological infrastructure that enables popular misogyny to circulate in the way it does. Superficial technological

adjustments also don't change the social infrastructure of online spaces, where women simply do not feel safe on the Internet (much like many public spaces before the Internet). (para 16).

Furthermore, Bumble adheres to a limited conceptualization of gender (male/female) and excludes non-binary, gender-fluid, queer, trans, etc. folks. Thus, through its very design in limiting gender identification for users, Bumble is not intersectional or inclusive, limiting its contribution to a fourth wave feminist project. This analysis shows how the notion of Bumble as a "feminist" dating app, particularly in the fourth wave, can be troubled. It also highlights how the affordances of the online environment really sit alongside real-life experiences for women (Eckert, 2018); digital tools only minimally change the fundamental experience of women's everyday life, for instance, in the experiences of sexual harassment – and sometimes even exacerbate them.

CHAPTER 5

FEMINIST AFFORDANCES OF PRIVATE FACEBOOK GROUPS FOR  
PROFESSIONALS: “A GROUP THAT’S JUST WOMEN  
FOR WOMEN TO HELP OTHER WOMEN:”

Introduction

In June 2017, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, changed the mission statement of the social networking platform to read: “To give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.” In an interview with CNN, Zuckerberg explained that simply making “the world more open and connected” (part of Facebook’s old mission statement) is no longer enough; instead, “building common ground” is vital for humanity in the digital age (Kelly, 2017). The tool that Facebook provides for bringing the world closer together, Zuckerberg declared, is the “Groups” feature. Groups, launched in 2010, was being used by a billion people in 2017 (Kelly, 2017). Facebook groups, specifically closed/secret groups, serve as particularly useful spaces for women (Lepore, 2018).

Groups are virtual, closed-off spaces on Facebook that users join to be connected with other users, in line with their interests and needs. There are groups for different industries, for specific events (such as conferences and concerts), for hobbies, for social movements, and so on. Users must first join and then they can take part in conversations with other members on the group’s page, by posting (words, pictures, links, GIFs), commenting, “liking” (clicking the “thumbs up” button), or using a “reaction” (emoji showing emotions such as “laughing,” “sad,” or “angry”) – similarly to how users would

interact on their personal Facebook pages. Groups have administrators, moderators who run the group, approving members who ask to join and having the power to remove members. Moderators also determine the mission of the group and the rules for participation, and then curate posts and comments according to this mission and rules.

Groups have three privacy settings: public, closed, and secret. Anyone can join a public group, and the conversations, as well as the members of a public group, are visible to all users of Facebook. In closed groups, the name and description of the group, as well as the members, are visible to the public, but the conversations in the group are not visible to non-members. Secret groups have similar features to closed groups, except that they are not searchable – so, in order to join, a user has to be invited by a member already in the group. The majority of groups discussed in this chapter are secret groups, though some are closed groups; for ease of discussion, as many of the women interviewed were part of more than one type of group, I use the term “private groups” and “closed groups” interchangeably to mean either closed or secret groups.

Lepore (2018, para. 1) argues that 2017 was an especially important time where private Facebook groups “helped women come together, find their voice and make profound changes in the world.” Facebook groups are useful for virtual friendship and support, but they are also particularly valuable for women’s careers, as gender inequality in the workplace persists. Although the pay gap is the most well-known inequality – White women earn only 80% of what men earn, with Black women earning 62%, and Hispanic women 54% (Calfas, 2018) – nearly half of all working women report experiencing some additional form of gender discrimination on the job (Parker & Funk, 2017). Almost a quarter say they have been “treated as if they were not competent,” 15%

say they “received less support from senior leaders than a man doing the same job,” and roughly 1 in 10 say they have “been passed over for the most important assignments,” “felt isolated in the workplace,” or “been denied a promotion” (Parker & Funk, 2017). In addition, as the recent #MeToo movement made clear, women frequently experience sexual harassment at work (Bennett, 2017).

In the face of these experiences of discrimination, women are creating women-only private Facebook groups for professional support, networking opportunities, and career development (Lepore, 2018; Segal Block, 2016). Some notable closed groups include Tech Ladies (“If you identify as a woman who works in tech (non-binary and trans folks welcome with open arms!) please consider joining us”) with 22,000+ members; Women in Post Production (“According to the latest statistics, only about 25% of people working in Post Production are women. I hope this can be a group to ask questions, post jobs, and have a safe environment to have female centric discussion about all aspects of television, web, and film finishing”) with 2,000+ members; and Women Writers, Editors, Agents, and Publishers (“The goal for this networking group is to become the largest WOMEN ONLY group in the writing arena where we can help each other succeed”) with 6,000+ members. In this chapter, I examine how and why women use such groups, paying particular attention to the technological and social affordances of Facebook’s “groups” feature.

The data for this chapter come from interviews and focus groups with 26 women who use private Facebook groups for professional/career purposes. The women interviewed were predominantly freelancers or independent workers in creative, media, and tech industries (writing, journalism, TV production, communication, PR, tech,



advertising) or entrepreneurs and business owners. The size of the groups varied widely: the smallest group had eight members, the largest 44,000+. Most of the groups had between 50 and 2000 members.

My analysis shows that private Facebook groups for women professionals function as three overlapping online spaces: 1) a women's version of the "old boys' clubs" used for networking, career resources, and as a virtual professional community; 2) safe spaces for women and gender non-conforming people to have their voices heard online; and 3) mediated consciousness-raising platforms for action beyond the groups' borders. Women mobilize the affordances of professional closed Facebook groups to benefit them professionally, but these groups are also valuable to women in their personal lives. Private Facebook groups provide women with some tools to achieve tangible positive outcomes in their own lives *and* collectively for women, making them fundamentally, if not explicitly, nascent feminist spaces.

However, these groups are limited in their usefulness for the wider feminist project through their myopic focus on "gender" as a difference category and lack of engagement with the intersectional ethos of the fourth wave. The white, heteronormative, middleclass, and cisgender cultures that underlie private Facebook groups for women professionals exclude women across lines of difference such as race, class, and sexuality. This study illustrates empirically how social media is used for everyday politics (Highfield, 2016), contributing to understandings – including the possibilities and limitations – of the digital fourth wave of the women's movement.

## Facebook Groups as Professional Resource Spaces:

### “Our Version of ‘The Old Boys’ Club’”

Private Facebook groups provide multiple affordances for professional activities. At the most basic level, these groups link geographically distant people based on similar career interests and experiences. As Kelly pointed out, Facebook groups allow “people to gain access to a network that they might not otherwise have access to,” a network where “you have at least one thing in common with every person who’s a member of these groups.” Because private Facebook groups provide affordances for linking people in the same industry, they are valuable for activities such as networking and sharing resources that have traditionally been done offline. So, these groups become a virtual version of “the old boys’ club,” an “informal system[s] of friendship and connections through which men use their positions of influence by providing favors and information to help other men” (Nelson, 2017, para. 4). Such networks provide informal career assistance to members (usually white, high-status men), placing women and underrepresented groups at a disadvantage for career opportunities (McDonald, 2011).

This affordance, of virtual “people linking,” is particularly valuable to women; as Joan explained, by creating “opportunities... and communities...that were not previously open to women.” Indeed, my participants frequently mentioned how private Facebook groups countered historical imbalances seen in exclusive clubs for men. Anya mused:

[T]hink about it, men have been doing this for centuries: golf clubs, before women were allowed membership in certain fraternities or professional groups... They have been doing it for much more longer than we have and why not have a group that’s just women for women to help other women?

My interviewees explicitly viewed private Facebook groups as a women's "online equivalent of the old boys' club." For instance, Leslie, a journalist, recounted how at her previous workplaces there were always offline "boys' clubs": "there was no support for members outside of those groups. I imagine [private Facebook groups] are what that looked like from the inside." Importantly, women identified private Facebook groups as *uniquely* qualified to serve as a virtual old boys' club – a more informal space for professional purposes – compared to other social media platforms for networking. For instance, Caitlyn, a poet, compared LinkedIn with Facebook, saying LinkedIn is "an online resume" whereas private Facebook groups are: "more of a community, cheering each other on, giving advice, celebrating achievements. It's been said before that it's our version of the 'Old Boys Club' [sic]<sup>14</sup>, and I'd agree with that sentiment."

The comparison to LinkedIn was used often, with women shunning LinkedIn because it was a "corporate tool," "bland," "sterile," and "sale-sy." Kim, a TV editor, didn't like that people use LinkedIn just to "self-promote" and went on to say that "it's not really a place for conversation; it's a place for stuffy business-card networking." Instead, women chose Facebook groups for professional purposes, because, as Kelly, a PR professional, said, "it just allows for a more human connection." Facebook is, as Michelle stated, for "frank conversations;" Hillary noted it is "dynamic and personal;" Anya said it is "more conversational." Karen, a finance professional, explained she had "deeper networks and connections on Facebook" because you get a "personal referral aspect" on Facebook, whereas LinkedIn is like "cold searching." Others compared

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<sup>14</sup> A number of these interviews and focus groups were conducted online, textually; in these cases, I use the quotes verbatim.

private Facebook groups to Twitter in the context of their careers. Kim, for example, said that her “Twitter persona” was more “my personal brand” because it was “more public” and “less conversational,” as opposed to Facebook, which was “more mate-y.”

Thus, women gravitated towards Facebook for professional purposes over other social media platforms in part because of its unique “relational” culture – what Bucher and Helmond (2018) term high-level affordances of a social media platform and what Gibbs et al (2015) deem its platform vernacular. The words that women used to describe private Facebook groups (“personal,” “deep relationships,” “conversational”) are terms that are frequently stereotypically associated with the “feminine” in western society. Thus, the feminine culture of private Facebook groups – its relational, community-based culture – was deemed to be particularly conducive to a “*women’s* version of the Old Boys’ Club.” This illustrates how members of different groups are driven towards platforms that they perceive as fulfilling their specific social identity needs (Highfield, 2016), based on their perceptions or imaginations of the platform (how it “feels”), rather than simply objective features (Nagy & Neff, 2015).

#### *Using Facebook to Find Work: Networking in Private Groups*

One of the primary functions of closed Facebook groups for professional purposes is bringing together employers and employees. Depending on where they were in their careers, the women I interviewed often used private Facebook groups to either look for work or to post about job openings. For instance, Nicole, a senior TV editor, said that she wanted to increase the ratio of women working in technical roles in the industry. She posted job openings at her company in women’s private groups specifically:

because it can be really hard to find women to apply for jobs when (white) men are out there in droves applying for gigs they're only a tiny bit qualified for. But we can't go in public and specify that we want to hire women without someone threatening us. So, we have this space...

A number of the women pointed out how private Facebook groups provided certain technical (low-level) affordances that made them valuable personalized referral spaces.

On seeing a job posting, a woman could "tag" (virtually create a link to someone's profile which notified that person of the posting) an acquaintance, friend, or previous employee in the group whom she thought would be a particularly good fit for the job. Often, people wrote a few words of recommendation to the poster along with the tag. Michelle, a young reality TV editor, found this tagging particularly useful because:

it seems that when people post jobs in Facebook groups for TV, they are more willing to take a resume that they have gotten a direct referral [tag] for, they're more willing to look at resumes of people who maybe don't have a ton of credits yet but who have the skills...I found a lot of work that way, either through people I didn't know or people I kind of knew of, but had never met personally and then, from those jobs, I've met people in person whom I've gotten referred to for other jobs.

Sometimes members of very large groups would mine the wealth of connections in the group by explicitly asking for introductions; Marisa, a digital marketing strategist, described how people would post "does anyone have a connection to Bill Gates?" or like some hot-shot in the startup world, and someone is always like, 'oh yeah that's my friend.' Everyone is so well connected." These referral processes demonstrate how the informal networking function of an "old boys' club" works virtually, through specific low-level affordances, such as adding multiple members and tagging, in private Facebook groups for women.

Despite these groups being specifically for professional purposes, some (especially those for entrepreneurs) had strict rules about explicit self-promotion; as Karen noted, “you can’t be, like, spammy or sales-y” because “you don’t want to be just getting sold to all the time.” Mae described how:

one of the unspoken rules there is that you don't go in with the intent to sell or get coverage or get a job or whatever. You go there to hang and be with colleagues in a semi-professional, casual space. Once you do that, you get jobs and coverage...

In line with this “unspoken rule” prevalent in some groups, when women did use these groups for self-promotion and finding new jobs, they did so in more subtle ways. For instance, Coco, a web designer who ran her own small design business, belonged to a Facebook group for female entrepreneurs. When someone posted a technical question about web design in the group, Coco would answer the question and then suggest that they connect over email or direct message, if they needed more help. If the person contacted her, she would then offer her professional services for a reduced fee. The informal nature of work connections formed in these groups echoes the casual way that old boys’ clubs function to promote career success.

#### *Sharing Resources and Advice in Closed Groups*

Not only were groups useful for finding jobs and getting referrals, they were also beneficial for sharing resources, such as documents, related to professional activities. For instance, one small group of women, who all knew each other offline, regularly uploaded their resumes to the group for other members to comment on. In another group, Hillary, a young writer who had just started freelancing, was given a Word template for an invoice by another member, to help her create her first professional invoice.

Women also often used these groups to “share knowledge” (Coco). Often women asked for job-specific advice, including technical questions, such as “what type of technical equipment are you using, or what tools did you use? What was your experience with it? Did you like it? Did you not?” (Michelle). Groups were also used as a place to “keep...in the loop about what is going on in the industry” (Karen) where people could share news articles relevant to that career field and start discussions. For instance, Nicole recounted how “when the WGA (Writers’ Guild of America) threatened to strike, there was discussion about how to prepare for a dry spell of work.” Other industry-specific advice that might not be common knowledge was also shared in certain groups; for instance, Michelle noted how, after the California wildfires in 2017, someone posted in a post-production women’s group how “people can reach out to the Motion Picture Television Fund for assistance...when they’re dealing with a natural disaster or a family emergency...”

Private Facebook groups were viewed as spaces where women could also get less “tangible” advice and more just “a woman’s perspective” on important professional activities, such as learning how to negotiate or dealing with “tricky situations” with clients, co-workers, or bosses. For instance, Joan recounted a time when a member of her group “had problems with people reporting to her not necessarily respecting her authority” and her supervisors not taking these issues seriously. In the group, they talked about:

different techniques that she should use in talking to her management...  
and the different ways that she could try to assert herself with her direct

reports in a way that would make them respect her without thinking that she was being mean.<sup>15</sup>

The woman ended up getting a promotion and feeling respected as a “young manager” – and she explicitly credited the group discussions for this outcome.

There was an oft-voiced assumption that talking to other women was important, because women “do business differently,” such as being “less aggressive and more creative” in their business dealings (Marisa). This falls in line with previous findings that show that gendered assumptions inform much entrepreneurship discourse (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). Angela pointed out how connecting personally with women at various levels in a specific field to get advice was invaluable:

It’s not stuff that you can Google. It’s not stuff that you can ask the person in the next cubicle. It’s almost always stuff, where, I think that, as a 46-year-old who has been in this profession for more than two decades, I have perspective that the people asking generally don’t.

Such sharing of experiences and perspectives by different women provides a variety of “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1988) that are produced from an individual’s viewpoint on the world. Sharing situated knowledges is important as women can learn from each other to successfully navigate gender discrimination in the workplace.

Because content shared on social networking sites (SNS) has the affordances of *persistence* and *searchability* (boyd, 2011), shared information – such as document templates, media articles about the industry, or career advice – is stored digitally and available as a future resource for members in these groups. Facebook, as a specific SNS,

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<sup>15</sup> This is an interesting gendered logic, illustrating the double bind that women face in professional spaces, of having to balance being feminine (kind, nice, empathetic) while at the same time showcasing masculine qualities (assertion, confidence) in order to be taken seriously (see work on the “social dominance penalty” by Rudman et al, 2012).



provides a number of unique affordances for organizing material. The ability to upload files (such as resumes or manuscripts) was seen as very beneficial by my interviewees. In addition, a number of the women spoke about the benefits of the “threading” function, where you can see an entire conversation, with the original posting and all the comments and likes, easily in one place.

Angela found hashtags particularly useful, because “you can indicate whether you’re asking a question [#ASK], whether you’re offering something [#OFFER], whether you’re letting people know about a resource [#RESOURCE].” Other members can then search using a specific hashtag to yield results relevant to them. However, not everyone found this feature useful – women in smaller groups thought that tagging was a waste of time, because “we want to see *all* of the content, because these are people that we care deeply about, no matter what they’re posting about” (Anya).

Tagging people, as was common in referrals, was also utilized for simply connecting members. For instance, Joan used tagging when “there is something that’s like ‘hey, I hear what you’re saying...I don’t know if I have something to offer, but I’m going to tag Anya, who had a similar experience.” Certain prominent, senior members in some groups were also tagged “for my opinion on things” (Kim). However, sometimes tagging was viewed as an annoyance. Marisa, a well-known digital marketing strategist, would remove herself from tags, because she was overwhelmed with requests for help. Thus, women could negotiate how they used particular features of Facebook groups.

The “search” function was frequently used to search for previously-posted resources, such as an article discussing a particular invoicing system. However, some found the search function lacking because, as Chloe mentioned, “it doesn’t do very

associative or Boolean searching [a type of search that allows the use of keywords such as AND or NOT to produce more specific results].” Joan similarly mentioned other limitations with search:

I know I posted a link about... “being better organized in the way that your workflow is,” but because I didn’t in my post say, like, “being better organized” it’s, like, almost impossible to find, because it doesn’t search for the name of the link, it only searches in the text that you posted.

Thus, Facebook provides certain affordances for organization of work materials, but is limited in some ways, highlighting how users are constrained in their potential uses of a technology by the materiality of digital platforms (boyd, 2011, Shaw, 2017).

*“Let Folks Know They're Not Alone”: Community on Facebook Groups*

Aside from providing networking opportunities and an easy way to share and organize career resources and advice, private Facebook groups provide another very important social affordance for professionals: that of creating a virtual community, a sense of “being-together” (Wilson, 2006). Wilson (2006, p.1) defines a community as a “grouping of people with various attributes while also inferring that it is or contains something that is *emotionally enriching and valuable*” (emphasis added). Indeed, private Facebook groups provided women professionals with emotional support, combatting loneliness and self-doubt, giving a sounding board for ideas, and helping celebrate successes in their career endeavors.

Social networking sites in general “carry expectations of sociability, meaningful connection to others, conviviality, perhaps even empathy and support” (Parks, 2011, p. 106). These expectations are amplified when using the groups function on Facebook, which provides a private space for strangers with similar interests to interact. Indeed,

closed groups are used as replacement work communities, bringing together “colleagues” who work independently, on disjointed projects, on their own businesses, or from home, and who, through the nature of their work, are isolated from their peers.<sup>16</sup>

At the most basic level, as Kelly noted, these groups give “people someone to talk to if they’re working alone most days.” Kim noted how she often used her private Facebook groups to simply have conversations, because she felt so isolated in her job as a TV editor. Thus, private groups create communities that combat loneliness. These groups are also useful for bringing together peers who share similar work experiences that women might have a difficult time finding in real life. For instance, Angela, a computer scientist, joined a private Facebook group for women in tech, because “senior women in tech are scarce. So online or IRL [in real life], I take every opportunity to find the women I can relate to and learn from as peers and mentors.”

A significant affordance of these groups as “community builders” is the provision of tools for asynchronous communication, allowing busy professionals working odd hours to take part in the groups as their schedules allow; as Joan said: “Facebook is a platform that we can come to on our own time.” Certain affordances, such as notifications of new comments on a particular thread, allowed people to be reconnected to relevant conversations after not being on Facebook for a while. At the same time, however, Facebook provides affordances for synchronous communication, such as showing “someone is typing a comment...” in real time, as a placeholder until the commenter hits “post,” visually signaling immediacy. As Angela noted, “Facebook is definitely making it

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<sup>16</sup> By nature of their industries (creative and cultural industries, entrepreneurs), the majority of the women interviewed were independent workers, as these industries are increasingly gig-based.

possible to have a much closer to real time group conversation” – if people happen to be on the platform at the same time. Being able to move between these two communication modes – asynchronous and synchronous – was brought up frequently as being extremely useful for creating a sense of community.

The sense of community built up in these groups allowed women to get emotional support through difficult aspects of their careers. Chloe, a writer and editor, used private Facebook groups as “a place to vent” about career problems and she particularly appreciated the “buoying each other through rejections.” Self-doubt was a common theme in the interviews. Coco remarked how, particularly when starting one’s own business, there is always some insecurity or “that question of ‘am I capable of doing that?’” However, she noted that this is “more exaggerated for women” because “men’s voices and men’s places always held more value, societally speaking.” She thought that private Facebook groups for women were particularly valuable for empowering women and “really helping each other see the value that we each have.”

Women also used private Facebook groups for feedback, brainstorming, and as professional sounding boards. Caitlyn said that her group of writers was useful to “get feedback from all kinds of perspectives” because of the “variety of people – different types of writers, different age groups, different backgrounds and goals” in the group. Groups in general were, as Coco noted, useful for getting an outsider’s perspective, “brainstorming ideas of things that would be helpful to think about or to prompt people to explore, resources or directions that they could go in, that maybe they wouldn’t think of on their own.” Indeed, Kim would often just “have a conversation” to “hash” things out,

“to see what other people think.” Angela noted how having a community was especially important when an idea was “controversial”:

[S]omething that you’d be uncomfortable saying out in the bigger internet, to be able to say it in the safe environment and have people ‘say yes, I agree with you,’ is a really reassuring thing, a strengthening thing, that can then lead to being more comfortable saying it more openly. It’s a safe place to try out your ideas before you push them out of the nest.

In a sense then, these groups were incubators for business project ideas, “introducing it and practicing it and seeing that it’s really working” (Coco) in the community before doing it “for real” offline. Groups were also useful for making tough decisions about one’s career. Jackie recounted a specific instance when her group was particularly helpful:

A couple of years ago I had two different job offers and I was working through like, ‘what do I do here?’ And it was this albatross...And I had this platform where, 24 hours a day, if I had a thought in the middle of the night, I could post on it and be, like, ‘but what about this thing that we haven’t talked about yet?’

In addition, more senior women actively mentored others in their groups who were just starting out in their careers. Kim, a senior TV editor, pointed out how “actual IRL mentorship is actually impossible these days” (because workers are dispersed as contractors/freelancers in the gig economy) so she offered mentorship using the specific affordances of Facebook: “I have made it publicly known [in private Facebook groups for women] that anyone can DM [direct message] me and ask me questions and a lot of people do that. Probably three or four times a week, I have people reaching out.” Nicole, who belonged to some of the same groups as Kim, explained how senior women in the TV industry would also “use the group to build momentum behind public facing career-oriented things, such as nominating each other for awards and recruiting others to do the same.”

Women in the groups who were not in a position to formally mentor expressed a desire to “give back” to their groups in the form of showing support and validation by commenting on or “liking” others’ posts. Hillary noted that “people sometimes just comment to wish each other luck.” Caitlyn said, “I try to always like and comment as an acknowledgement and a thank you.” Alice stated that she would respond to [comment on] posts where women shared intimate or personal stories “to let folks know they're not alone.” An important affordance of Facebook groups is the quantifiable *tangibility* of support. Angela explained how she really liked “being able to see the ‘like’ count” on her posts. She said that this was akin to “getting the confirmation that you’re not a lone lunatic, but, in fact, other people, other people that you know something about, and maybe you’ve seen their posts so you respect their opinion...agree. Seeing the counter go up is reassuring.” This shows how metrics such as “likes” and “friends” have become a new form of social capital in the digital age (Gandini, 2016).

Importantly, these groups were often used by women to discuss issues either at work or in their private lives that were more personal, emotional, and intimate. Kim described these as places:

where people have something in common, they basically do the same work, and they can talk about their woes. It’s like therapy, kind of a way, in a safe space... to be able to just chat about what’s going on.

Many women used these groups to talk about “other stuff going on in our life... like relationship stuff... mental health stuff, life changes... kids” (Anya). Indeed, some women shared extremely personal stories. For instance, Abigail decided to share about her experience of sexual abuse as a child in her private group. After she shared this, other women in the group came forward to talk about their experiences and they ended up

creating a new subgroup specifically for that topic. A core aspect of this feeling of community, and feeling comfortable being so vulnerable, was the fact that these groups were exclusive, bordered “safe spaces,” spaces with other supportive women and without cisgender men.

#### Facebook Groups as Safe Spaces: “A Place With ‘Like-Minded Ladies’”

The women I interviewed repeatedly brought up the importance of having a space with other like-minded women but also, importantly, a space away from men – both online and in real life. Private Facebook groups for professionals were seen as “a way to meet some like-minded ladies” (Stephanie) – but the fact that men were not allowed in these groups was crucial and presented a significantly different dynamic to coed groups.

Although many of my participants were also part of coed professional Facebook groups for career advice, they particularly valued being in an exclusive community of women, because, as Kelly explained “women just have a very different shared experience than men do.” Having a designated space is important for any marginalized group (Blackwell, 2018), but the (problematic) understanding of all women sharing the same experiences was frequently echoed throughout the interviews. Notably, most of my participants were white, middle-class women, using these spaces to tackle perceived inequalities rooted predominantly in sexism, but not engaging with intersectional concerns (intersectionality in these groups is discussed in more detail later).

To join a private group, members must either be invited or send a request to join the group. Groups have “administrators” who run the group, approving or denying members who ask to join, and who guide group conversations by providing rules for conduct and monitoring comments. Users who want to join women-only groups are

vetted by their profile pictures and names for gender adherence by administrators – “they only let women in, as long as they can obviously see some identification as a woman” (Kim). Despite this assertion, most of the groups in this study stated that they were for “women” in their group name, but in the detailed description of the group highlighted than “self-identified women,” “trans,” “non-binary,” and “gender-non-conforming” people were also welcome. In online spaces then, these groups – at least in their formal rules for membership – create borders based on non-cis male identification to illustrate inclusion of marginalized social identities. This exclusion of cis men was, not surprisingly, the core low-level affordance of women-only groups. Importantly, not allowing cis men provided the imagined affordance of a safer culture compared with private Facebook groups that had both male and female members.

Dr. Anita Borg, computer scientist and founder of Syssters, a mailing list for women in computer science that started in the 1980s, argued 20 years ago for the need for women-only groups in professional spaces online (Camp, 1996). She (cited in Camp, 1996, p.123) listed four reasons for why there is a need for women-only groups online. Firstly, “women need a place to find each other” in a global community, particularly in male-dominated industries. Second, “women need female role models and mentors” to succeed professionally. (These two needs were discussed in the previous section on private Facebook groups as a women’s version of the old boys’ club.) Thirdly, “women need a place to discuss our issues,” issues that are unique to women. Finally, “women need to discover our own voice” in a world where men’s voices disproportionately dominate discussions. Indeed, these final two needs were brought up continually throughout my interviews as motivations for using private Facebook groups. The ability



to discuss women's issues and to hear women's voices made these groups "safe spaces" within the broader realm of the internet and within society in general (IRL). A significant reason these were deemed safe spaces was these groups' active exclusion of cis men.

Closed Facebook groups for professional purposes with both male and female members were often formed by workers to "talk about our jobs without being observed by the bosses that we were working for" (Abigail). However, splinter groups for women-only would frequently form from these groups either because "sexism...reared its head in that group" (a push motive out of coed groups), or as Beth stated, "there are sometimes online discussions which are more intimate and vulnerable than can be shared in a "regular" [coed]...closed group" (a pull motive to women's-only groups).

#### *Facebook Groups as Safe Spaces Without Men*

Women often spoke about the need for online safe spaces exclusively for women because of wider societal power imbalances, whether in specific fields or in society as a whole. Women saw the exclusion of cis men from these groups not as a privilege for women or as harmfully "exclusionary" to men (an argument that many of them had heard from their male colleagues), but as a necessity, "given the sexism inherent in our society" (Alice). Beth suggested that these groups levelled the playing field more broadly: "until we have equal rights by law in the USA, and equal political representation, I think we're going to need our "safe spaces" that are women-only." Mae too conceded that these groups were exclusionary to men but "rightly so" because of "historic injustice and all that... men have been excluding women for-freaking-ever."

Others pointed to the need for exclusionary groups because their fields were dominated by men. Nicole, who worked in film and television, "a very misogynistic

industry with a lack of representation of women,” said she joined closed Facebook groups for women because “we all needed an outlet of like-minded women to compare and contrast and build each other up.” Some justified exclusion in more personal terms. Abigail explained that she felt “kinda bad even excluding cis men, because there are some cis men who don’t identify with masculinity and where do you draw the line?” However, she conceded that she “benefitted from spaces that exclude cis males” and that she found it “necessary to my well-being.” She summed up: “we need that, our little world... the whole reason these groups exist is because we can’t have these conversations when men are present.”

#### *Differences Between Co-ed and Women-Only Groups*

Coed professional Facebook groups, especially in certain male-dominated industries such as tech and entertainment, were “dominated by men” who considered themselves experts in their field and kept trying to prove their expertise. In these groups, women were often made to feel as “lesser” professionals and their voices were drowned out in technical discussions. Women flock to women’s-only professional spaces in response to these dynamics, because “they don’t want to deal with the rack of male elephant-seal-like trumpeting and jostling for status” (Borsook, 1996, p. 41)

Accordingly, Chloe noted, the choice to use women’s only groups was often “less about safety and more about confidence that your audience is empathetic.” A very important consideration for many women was the ability to ask professional questions “without being judged;” Chloe noted she used women’s groups “so that I don’t feel dumb for asking a stupid question” such as “hey what’s the name of X device?” Mae similarly said how her desire to use women’s only groups stemmed from the fact that she could

“ask ‘dumb’ questions about my industry without getting crapped on.” Nicole too conceded that “it’s nice to ask other women so you don’t get mansplained some simple aspect of the issue which doesn’t solve your problem, which happens so much in other [coed] groups women hardly post.” In general, women felt they could discuss technical issues in women-only spaces without getting “burned” like they would in coed groups.

Private Facebook groups were seen as spaces where women’s issues could be focused on, rather than first having a discussion on “what the issues are,” a common occurrence in coed groups. This made communication in female groups “a lot more efficient” because the foundations of “experience and understanding” were already there and the focus on certain issues did not have to be explained. Angela noted how such spaces are rare in the open environment of the internet: “Not having to defend your right to focus on your particular group’s issues is important. It’s a weight you don’t realize you’re carrying until you get to set it down.”

The exclusion of men also allowed for discussion of issues that uniquely affect women in the workplace, without having men’s (often irrelevant) input; as Camp (1996, p.115) writes: “on the Internet, as in life, men dominate discussions about women.”

For instance, Michelle shared how men derail conversations that are not about them – such as discussions about the pay gap – in other online spaces:

In the women’s only groups, it feels like we can let it all hang out as much as we choose to, in terms of talking about pay and in terms of griping about it and saying like ‘this is not equal’ and ‘this is what you should watch out for.’ Because then it’s just people who are sort of commiserating and asking for advice and not having to worry about being smashed down by somebody who’s like, ‘oh well, women who work where I do *never* run into that and I’m a guy.’

Hillary, too, recounted how “because it’s just women” she felt that she could comfortably “share articles about the #MeToo campaign, about other issues affecting women in the workforce, without getting into arguments with the Annoying Internet Man that always seems to happen in the comments of those articles.”

Many women spoke of the difference in comfort levels in coed and women’s groups, which they related to shared life experiences; as Vivi explained, “a big part of it is just the emotional support of, like, other females *who know what it’s like*” (emphasis added). Mae similarly said that these groups meant that she could “have camaraderie with people who get the frustrations of my daily life.” Additionally, because these groups often had hundreds if not thousands of members, “there’s just a much higher likelihood of finding someone who understands what you’re talking about” (Abigail) – even if one’s experiences were not that common. Women’s groups were deemed to have “that empathy feeling” (Mae).

Anya explained that “as women we experience different issues that men can’t always relate to” and so having the presence of men would “make folks more hesitant to share,” thus stifling their voices. For instance, Abigail found women-only groups useful for discussing issues such as gender discrimination at work:

that was really useful because when you try to talk about it in the coed group you’d start to feel like ‘oh maybe I am just making this up’ or ‘I can’t hack it and I’m not tough enough’ and you’d start to doubt yourself and feel all this anger and confusion and frustration. And then in the women’s groups it was like, ‘oh I’m not crazy, like, other people are experiencing this, and the men are trying to silence us.’

As Leslie pointed out: “I like being in a group for women because it feels safer. No weirdos are sending me messages because I shared something I wrote about breastfeeding.” Women simply felt more comfortable without men.

In fact, my interviewees frequently noted that coed private groups for professionals could “actually be quite aggressively anti-women.” Women-only groups, then, were spaces where not only did women feel heard, but spaces where they were shielded from negative reactions from their male peers and where they could discuss their issues without “the concerns of how it will be interpreted by men.” (Coco). Angela summed up how the two main benefits of women’s only groups were “acceptance” and “safety”:

Contentious [women’s] topics can be discussed without needing to start from Feminism 101; they will be taken seriously, not immediately derailed by trolls; and I can speak out with reasonable expectation that my body/family/life won’t be threatened as a result.

#### *Private Groups as Safe Spaces from Harassment Online*

Private groups provided a bordered safe space away not only from toxic environments in coed groups, but from online harassment in the “wild west” of the internet in general. Online harassment and trolling of women, particularly when they are discussing women’s issues, is not new, nor is the need for women-only havens to get away from it; in the early 1990s, *Systers*, the women-only mailing group for women in computer science was described as “a sanctuary on a hostile net” (Camp 1996, p. 121). Women’s experiences of harassment in other online spaces, beyond Facebook groups, limit productive discussions with other women. As Brail (1996, p.148) writes, “Men don’t usually have to jump through a hoop of sexual innuendo and anti-feminist backlash

simply to participate. They use their energy for posting, while we often use ours wondering if we'll be punished for opening our mouths." A number of the women spoke about how they experienced far less harassment in women-only groups than they did online more broadly. Kim shared that in closed groups she didn't get trolled, whereas "the kind of abuse that I get online [in general] is kind of insane." Facebook groups were thus a safe space from harassment and abuse for women.

However, women also pointed out that the same affordances, of semi-privacy and semi-anonymity that created "safe spaces," allowed people to form private "hateful" communities, "antithetical" to the ethos of women's groups. After hearing about a group for sharing offensive content – "violent, hateful memes, ones that depict rape, violent crime, gore" – during the course of our virtual repeat focus groups, Caitlyn mused:

for the first time I find myself thinking that as much as it allows progressive communities to organize, it [Facebook] does the same for rape culture, for racists...I mean, I knew it was out there, I just assumed it was mostly on anonymous platforms, not under people's more public identities.

She went on to explain that the closed nature of these groups allows people to share violent content, because they cannot be reported as they are not sharing publicly – thus, a group like this becomes an "unmonitored" space. Hillary, discussing similar offensive groups, got the sense that they were gendered – "men retaliating against feminism" – but also "about race" and political views: she called these groups a "safe haven for those who feel that the 'liberal snowflakes' are taking over." These examples highlight how digital spaces are tools that can be effectively used both for feminist practices and misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Benn 2013). Thus, the same affordances can be materialized for opposing purposes according to needs of different actors (Hutchby, 2001).

### *Affordances for Feeling Safe in Private Facebook Groups*

Women not only spoke of Facebook groups as safe spaces because of the absence of men; they also mentioned how these *specific* communities of women, combined with the affordances of Facebook's group feature, made them feel safe. The internet started out as a space for anonymity, but with the emergence of social networking sites, people started interacting online with people they knew offline (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Facebook groups are uniquely positioned as safe spaces, because they combine the affordance of anonymity of the broader internet with the solidarity and shared experience of more personal connections. Kim stated that "it's semi-anonymous because it's online and most of the people don't really know each other professionally." This allowed for maintaining some level of anonymity and not feeling too vulnerable in sharing personal stuff. But, because these groups were women-only and members were vetted before joining, they also provided support from like-minded others.

*Member verification in Facebook groups.* The feeling of safety was in part created by the strict borders of the groups, guaranteeing both sex exclusivity and the person's professional authenticity. To join a private group, members have to either be invited or ask to join. Before allowing a member to join, administrators would confirm the new member's gender and confirm that her credentials and experience indeed made her a "writer" or an "editor." Sometimes, in order to join, potential members have to answer a couple of questions, such as "what are your reasons for joining the group?" which were considered in membership decisions by administrators. Some groups were very strict with making sure members were professionally verified. For instance, Michelle explained:

since one of the conditions is that you need to be working in the specific part of the industry that their group is for, a lot of times they will check. And since I don't list my employer information in my Facebook profile, I think people probably checked my LinkedIn.

Indeed, using LinkedIn as a verification tool was common. In addition, the admins of the groups I spoke to talked with each other to verify if someone knew of that person and could vouch for them being in that industry.

Administrators on Facebook groups also curated the content that members posted to make sure they abided by group rules. They also had the power to discipline members for posting incorrectly – for example, by tagging them and asking them to edit their posts if they didn't use the right hashtag. Finally, administrators could delete posts that they deemed inappropriate for the group altogether. Some women found this “policing” an additional layer of safety against unpleasant interactions; Sandy said that “how admins handle group conversations makes me feel more comfortable rather than the familiarity or anonymity in the group.”

*Anonymity as safety.* Despite knowing a few friends or acquaintances in these groups, most women did not know the majority of the members in each group. This anonymity actually increased the feeling of the groups being a “safe space.” As Abigail said, “it was a safe space to just say stuff that I wouldn't feel comfortable saying to people that I knew personally.” Thus, the distance from people in this space was beneficial for feeling like one could share intimate parts of oneself and one's life, and not worry about the emotional consequences of such sharing. Abigail explained, for instance, that if someone had a negative reaction to something she posted:

that negative reaction is not coming from best friend, whose opinion I really value. I can just ignore it if I don't like. I mean it still affects me but



not in the same way. Or if someone says something that's really upsetting to me, I can shut my computer down and walk away, I'm not in a room with them, so it's far less confronting in that way.

These groups were contrasted with other aspects of social media where “you're so connected” to everyone. Private Facebook groups, then, because they were “totally closed and private,” were a way to circumvent what Marwick and boyd (2010) call “context collapse,” the idea that audiences from various parts of your life (home, work, friendships, dating etc.) are all on the same digital platforms and so it is difficult to keep different areas of your life separate. Women further maintained this personal/professional boundary on private Facebook groups for professional purposes by not requesting, or rejecting requests, to be “friends” (connecting their personal profiles outside of the group on Facebook) with other members.

Another feature of these groups that provided an extra layer of anonymity if needed was the ability to directly message administrator with a question, which they would then post to the group anonymously (under a tag such as #Anon or #HelpASisterOut). This prevented a question being linked to the asking member's profile. Women used this feature when they had questions they were nervous about asking publicly (even in a private group) because of possible negative consequences, for instance, when talking about a harassment situation in a current job.

However, some women conceded that while these groups preserve some anonymity, people were more “known” than in public spaces because they were connected by industry (including connections shared IRL) and because they had to use their real Facebook profiles to join. This semi-anonymity stopped people from “being dicks” (Kim) too much, because, if someone wanted to, it was easy to get to know more

about the individual members in a group. The ability to search through member lists and visit individual member's public profiles was a valuable affordance for reducing anonymity if so desired. Others searched the member lists before posting something that might get back to them IRL, especially in very large groups. For instance, Michelle would check member lists to see if her "immediate supervisors" were in the group, before she posted anything related to her current work. Nevertheless, this method was not foolproof, because, as Michelle noted, "you never know who else is in that group – maybe they don't even work for your company but they know your supervisor." Thus, Facebook provided affordances for a "variable scale" of anonymity, where women could to some degree choose their level of anonymity (though, of course, there were still large levels of anonymity in most groups, especially the ones with more members).

*Privacy and confidentiality concerns in Facebook groups.* There were rules for sharing the content of the groups beyond its borders; in most groups, members were explicitly (written in the official rules) not allowed to share content posted in the group publicly, to ensure a degree of privacy and confidentiality. There are, of course, however, limitations to the privacy of closed Facebook groups – and members were aware that the boundaries of a group, as with any participation space, are "mutable, permeable and subjective" (Taylor-Smith & Smith, 2018, p.1). Because it is impossible to know all the members in large private groups, women were posting to an "imagined audience" (Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2010). Mae pointed out that one can never "guarantee confidentiality in a group that size... especially not when relative anonymity is possible." Members may talk to those outside of the group regarding what was shared privately; as Dreyfuss (2017) wryly notes, "The first rule of secret Facebook groups is you do not talk

about secret Facebook groups. The second rule of secret Facebook groups is that someone, inevitably, always talks about secret Facebook groups.” Indeed, Caitlyn and Hillary both mentioned separate instances of “people taking screenshots [of conversations inside the groups] and sharing them with non-members” – despite strict rules prohibiting this.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, many women held back, to some degree, what they would share in private groups. Hillary explained: “I never let my guard down completely on the Internet. This is just a space where I mostly let it down, you know, except for that tiny little nudge in my brain telling me to be careful.” Mae pointed out that “private groups are safer still, but I am always aware this is the flippin’ internet.” Chloe voiced similar concerns: “it’s still the internet and just because it’s a smaller room doesn’t mean it’s impenetrable.” Michelle felt uncomfortable letting it all out on private groups and she would “sanitize” her content and “keep it positive,” so if it was shared beyond the confines of the group, it wouldn’t be a problem for her. Not only were women worried about other members sharing content, they were worried about the platform of Facebook itself.

Most women were aware, for instance, that Facebook collected their data and so nothing said in private groups was actually completely private and confidential – this fact made them “uncomfortable.” Some women were reluctant, as Jackie intimated, to put “a lot of personal or private information on a platform like Facebook who owns all your content.” They were also worried about the privacy settings on Facebook itself. Marisa explained how she would never post something controversial in these groups; she didn’t want “a paper trail” because she “know[s] someone somewhere can find anything [about

her].” Angela stated that she didn’t “trust Facebook to maintain privacy perpetually” – and because of this, “there are some stories that I can only ever tell offline.” Kelly too said that she wouldn’t post anything that was “damaging or surprising.” She went on to say, “I definitely curate what I post on social media because I realize that it is a public forum and that that data, or that content, even if it’s quote unquote private, it’s still in the public domain.”

A number of the women would circumvent these concerns by “taking it offline” – that is, moving more intimate conversations to other means of communication without a written record – phone calls or meeting in person. So, members had privacy concerns both because of the platform itself and because of the other members in the group. However, they conceded that they couldn’t stop using platforms like Facebook, because, as Joan decreed, that is “the way that the world is and how our lives are and where we live and all that, you know, it’s sort of the best way around that.” Ultimately, the benefits of closed Facebook groups for professional purposes were deemed to outweigh the privacy risks.

### *Safe Spaces for Which Women?*

Despite being described frequently as “empathy places,” Facebook groups were not always harmonious; the tensions between different groups of women present offline were often replicated within the groups. Although the formal descriptions of the groups embraced people of many different identities (aside from cis men), oftentimes the conversational practices and focus within the groups set different boundaries. For instance, Mae mused that “transwomen and POC [people of color] probably think long and hard before they join a group like this (or any group predominantly cis and white)”

simply because of the space not being “for” them. Even the very naming of the groups as “women-only” limited diversity. Users are “interpellated” (Althusser, 1971) by and respond to online spaces that are deigned “for” them. Thus, through the decision to promote only one feature of cultural identity, the creators of these groups “interpellated” users based only on gender. This symbolically excluded other subjectivities, those who identify with race, sexuality, ability, and so forth as equally as important and intersecting with their gender identity. Through not mentioning race or other features of cultural identity in the naming of the group, these groups designated “Whiteness” and “heterosexuality” as unmarked human categories (Nakamura, 2002) and so retained the “normative Whiteness” of the broader internet (Daniels, 2013).

Through discussions in the groups, differences between women – and the concomitant exclusionary practices – became magnified. As Hillary pointed out, “groups that are solely women often amplify the woman vs woman problem that the patriarchy has handed us. It’s a double edged [sic] sword.” My participants, mostly white women, perceived significant divisions in their groups around race. Claire conceded that such spaces “can often exclude women of color” and ascribe to “white feminism,” focusing on issues that affect white, middle-class women, such as discussing the wage gap using statistics for white women, without acknowledging the much bigger gap that women of color encounter. Abigail too noted that hers “was not always a harmonious group, there were a lot of discussion and fighting” and that “a lot of it was around race issues.”

However, a couple of my participants noted how discord around race in their groups was “a huge social justice awakening.” Sophie said that having conversations with women of other races “transformed ... the way I think about things and have

conversations with people and learning to manage my defensiveness and actually listen to people with different experiences. It was really impactful.” Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that, as a white person, Sophie had the choice to engage in a conversation around race, whereas for people of color that engagement is not optional, whether welcome or not: “White people often interpret our mere presence in a room as an opportunity to talk about race, and these are not conversations we always want to have” (Blackwell, 2018).

Some of my participants perceived problems with age diversity in their groups. A few of the professional groups had a significant number of older women who were “more experienced in their fields” – and Michelle even said that “professional groups have a bigger mix age-wise than some social groups.” Nevertheless, this was not the overall perception of my participants; most thought their groups were lacking older members – though of course, this could at least in part be due to the higher rate of Facebook use by younger women in general (“Social Media Fact Sheet,” 2018), rather than deliberate exclusion. However, in one instance, a very small group of eight members who all knew each other offline decided to not allow a potential new member in, because she was “about a decade older than most of us” and people felt “uncomfortable” because “her career was much more advanced” and she wasn’t the right “fit” for a group. Nicole pointed out that deliberate exclusions like this in some online groups helped to redress *offline* inequalities between women. She described the demographics in the television industry:

In our industry, there are a lot of older, privileged White women who think that we just need to “lean in” per Sheryl Sandberg and we’ll make it. They organize luncheons that are too expensive and are at times of the day

when working class women are, like, at work. And if you go to the luncheons, they tell you, “you lack confidence.” They don’t acknowledge privilege. They don’t try to help women of color or younger women.

Thus, she explained, younger women, working class women, and women of color flocked to their own networks of private Facebook groups to help each other succeed. Because many women often found the primary online private groups in their industries lacking, they would form smaller professional subgroups, or “splinter groups,” specifically based on intersectional identities, such as “black women and the same for trans women and sex workers and you name it.” Abigail explained that sometimes people would stay in the original group, to keep up with the larger conversation, but also become part of these “more identity-specific subgroups” to discuss intersectional topics related to their professional life. Syssters, the mailing group for women in computing in the 1990s, similarly had “sublists for specific affinity groups” (Camp, 1996), illustrating how underrepresented groups have always had a need for their own spaces, where they can be their “authentic selves” away from the dominant hegemonic culture (Blackwell, 2018).

The white women I spoke with agreed with the need for subgroups that better fit the needs of different women, but they largely saw these as “special interest” groups, rather than reflexively thinking about normative whiteness as a construct in the primary groups. (Interestingly, none of the few people of color I interviewed mentioned race relations as a problem in these groups. This could simply reflect the small sample of people of color in this study.)

Subgroups also formed for other reasons. For instance, Sophie said that her post-production group was too “U.S.-centric” – the job postings were not useful to her and “the advice not always relevant.” So, she joined a local group in the U.K. where she was

based. Also, if a topic was deemed “not relevant to the core group” – such as discussions by young moms or about hobbies – subgroups were formed for “people who want to talk about a certain topic” (Michelle).

In other instances, discord in the group did not fall along identity lines but was based on disagreement on how the groups should run, for example, whether the group allowed the naming of names of discriminatory employers or sexual harassers in the industry. Accordingly, some administrators were deemed to have deleted “valuable conversations.” Nicole recounted an instance in her group where there was a lot of tension:

A member was telling about a sexual assault/harassment situation she was in and warning the rest of us about the guy involved so we wouldn't work with him. [The admin] told us we weren't allowed to name names. The rest of us were like well, what is the point of a secret group if we can't protect each other by naming names?

In another instance, a writer I interviewed was hounded out of a women-only group for admitting that she preferred writing male characters. Even though she wasn't formally kicked out, she was made to feel very uncomfortable, as the other members accused her of being swayed by her “internalized misogyny” and so she left. Thus, as much as Facebook groups allow women to come together in bounded spaces, they also reset old and develop new boundaries between women.

#### Facebook Groups as Mediated Consciousness-Raising Platforms:

“Would It Have Happened This Way if I Weren't a Woman?”

An essential yet unstated function of private Facebook groups for women is consciousness-raising, a feminist practice popular in the second wave of the women's movement in the 1960s and 70s. Consciousness-raising occurred when women got



together in small groups, specifically separate from men, to talk about their personal experiences and, through this, realized that they shared a lot of similar experiences, that their problems were structural (Campbell, 1973, 1999). Consciousness-raising works when you talk about your problems to “similar others”, i.e., women in this case (Campbell, 1999, p. 141).

Hanisch (2010, para 2) states that consciousness-raising during the second wave “was a way to use our own lives – our combined experiences – to understand concretely how we are oppressed and who was actually doing the oppressing.” Women shared personal experiences that addressed larger issues, those of “legal, economic, and social inequality” (Campbell, 1999) and thus moved the personal into the political, public realm. A key aspect of consciousness raising was that “*actions* – large and small – also resulted from these discussions” (Hanisch, 2010, para. 8). These discussions then equipped women with the tools to change their own lives, for instance, getting a divorce, or to collectively seek change for equality, such as organizing protests about discriminatory labor laws.

Scholars have identified a shift in consciousness-raising (and the resultant actions) from the second wave to the third wave (late 1980s and 1990s): “from seeking social activism to seeking self-empowerment” (Anderson & Grace, 2015, p.945; Sowards & Renegar, 2004). Feminist media scholars have written about how digital platforms can serve as “mediated consciousness-raising platforms” (Wood, 2008). For instance, sex blogs allow women to share sexual knowledge and experiences with other women, serving as a “sex commons” with useful resources (Wood, 2008). Mommy blogs and Facebook groups serve as spaces where women can develop a voice and learn – both in

terms of practical issues and emotional experiences – from other women about parenting. (Anderson & Grace, 2015; Lopez, 2009). Anderson and Grace (2015, p. 945) found that the consciousness-raising efforts of mommy bloggers in the digital realm included aspects of both the second and third wave, “shar[ing] personal experiences, within a more public space, to provide focus on personal *and* social injustices” (emphasis added). Private Facebook groups for women are such “mediated consciousness-raising platforms” focused on both social activism and personal empowerment – making these groups fundamentally, if not overtly, feminist.

Private Facebook groups for women professionals are used for consciousness-raising in that they allow women to band together and discuss their individual experiences of gender discrimination in the workplace, without the presence of men. These groups are particularly effective for sharing of knowledge about pay rates and the discussions of sexual harassment in the workplace. Crucially, from a feminist standpoint, these discussions lead to tangible outcomes beyond the borders of the group – there are “actions from the new consciousness” (Hanisch, 2010, para. 8).

### *Tackling the Pay Gap*

In January 2018, *Hollywood Reporter* ran a story, “TV Writers Launch Anonymous Pay Survey Amid Push for Salary Parity,” detailing a “sharable Google doc” that was circulated in the industry for writers to share their pay anonymously, alongside social identity characteristics, such as gender and race (Goldberg, 2018). The story attributed the impetus for this survey to the recent Time’s Up initiative and the discussions around pay parity that dominated the 2018 Golden Globes. However, my

interviews show that such anonymous wage surveys have been circulating in private Facebook groups since their inception in 2010.

Kim, a senior TV editor with years of industry experience, was part of many industry-focused Facebook groups, both groups for women only and coed groups. Every year for the past five years, she used these groups to run a survey of wages within the industry, by circulating a spreadsheet where people could add their gender, experience, location, job, and rates, which she then made publicly available, including sharing it back to the groups. Her impetus for this was simple: “so people can see what other people get paid.” Kim went on to say that this spreadsheet “tends to be the most valuable to women in the industry” because it highlights, using recent crowdsourced data, the very real gender pay gap in television. As she explained, this spreadsheet made the pay gap tangible and personally relevant to the women in the groups:

the gender gap is always this idea, this concept that we believe and we kind of know it’s there, but it’s a concept. And then when you see it like that, when I go through every single line and I see it every single time, coming up at different levels and just being like, ‘fuck, man, it’s real, it’s there, it’s right in front of me.’

Indeed, multiple women I spoke with said that such pay comparisons shared in their private Facebook groups were extremely useful for thinking critically about their economic conditions.

These spreadsheets were particularly valuable in industries where salary and wage data were not transparent or when individuals set their own freelance rates, because this information spread a “general awareness” of what going rates were. This knowledge gave women the power to negotiate, because as Michelle said, “now you *know* you’re getting a lower rate than somebody who’s a guy, but you’re working in the same position.” Abigail

pointed out that sharing this information was not only useful for individuals, but also had “consequences that impacted the industry” because “it wasn’t like here and there, it was, like, across the board – once that group emerged, people raised their rates.” Importantly for action, this pay rate sharing was buttressed by other advice shared in the groups. Many women spoke of how they discussed salary and contract negotiation tactics within the groups, even sharing line-by-line scripts for negotiation. Ultimately, then, sharing personal pay information alongside negotiation strategies worked to enact change both for individual women and for women more broadly in particular industries.

### *Discussing Harassment at Work*

Discussions of workplace harassment and other inappropriate behavior in the industry – “putting creeps on blast” – were very frequent in private Facebook groups for women. Women would share personal experiences of sexually inappropriate or discriminatory treatment with bosses, co-workers, and clients – just a “heads up, this person is a misogynist” – raising awareness that experiences like this were a common phenomenon. For instance, Vivi shared a story of a writing collaborator, who, after some disagreements on the direction of their material, sent her a passive-aggressive note about her work ethic with a link to a “nasty, nasty porn video,” leaving Vivi “dumbfounded.” When she confronted him about it, he passed it off as a “joke.” She went on to her Facebook group to “vent” and she got a lot of support:

I needed to share this, I needed to get it off my chest. It's gross, I feel awful and it sucks. And it's just an outpouring of support, like ‘what a creep, I can't believe it, I'm so sorry, it happens.’ It's just, like, a support group.

An important part of sharing stories was the validation that the discomfort in certain situations was warranted, particularly where experiences were not explicitly harassing and could be perceived ambiguously. Kim stated that Facebook groups were a place where women could ask “questions about workplace stuff in terms of relationships and the way they’re being treated and [ask] ‘is this normal or should I kick up a fuss?’”

Joan described a “situation” where she was terminated and:

there was always this, like, kind of hint that there was something gender-y going on, but nothing had ever been explicit. It’s helpful though to even have the group to parse and to say ‘this thing just happened, and it was weird. Would it have happened this way if I weren’t a woman? Or am I overreacting?’

Different Facebook groups had different formal and informal rules for “naming names” of harassers or discriminatory bosses. In Vivi’s “porn video” case, her group had a “kind of, like, code” that women did not share names of the men on the group’s page, “but if you really want to know then message that person directly and they’ll give you their name.” Chloe, however, shared a harassment experience with an editor, where she named him, publicly within her poetry Facebook group. This sharing “ended up in an outpouring of similar stories, which gave me the confidence to post more publicly.” Because a number of women in the group “echoed” her experience with this man and “bolstered” her, Chloe broke the story publicly and the editor ended up shutting down his business because of the negative publicity.

However, Abigail had a negative experience in her group naming names. She wrote a letter to a boss she worked with on a particular project, who kept making inappropriate sexual comments at work, and she shared this letter in the group before

sending it to him, “to get that feeling of support around me so I wouldn’t feel alone with it.” After she shared it, she faced unexpected backlash:

it turned out that of course there were women in the group who had worked with him...some women who felt the exact same way and were like ‘thank you for writing this letter’ and some women who loved working with him and were like super angry and showed it to him.

After this experience, Abigail was hesitant to share personal things in the group. Alice also recounted a time when a white woman in her group shared stories about three harassers and got backlash calling her racist. Even though she didn’t name names, “she called out two men of color and made it quite clear who they were [because of their unusual names], while the white man she called out was granted some anonymity, because his name was like John. D. or something.”

Indeed, a few other women mentioned that they would not post about harassment in these groups because of fear of backlash and lack of trust. Kelly said, “it’s not something that I would feel comfortable about in a forum where I don’t personally know the overwhelming majority of the people.” Marisa similarly said that “the last place” she would post about harassment would be a Facebook group. She said instead she would “reach out to specific people that might work for that person.” Nevertheless, the majority of women I interviewed had either personally shared harassment stories or had witnessed stories being shared in their groups and viewed this sharing as useful for women generally.

My participants frequently referenced the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements in relation to workplace harassment. Kelly noted that there is a “huge movement” along the lines of #MeToo happening in advertising groups for women: “there’s a group of women

who are kind of leading the charge and exposing some of the perpetrators that have been repeat offenders and have been creating toxic environments for years.” Michelle discussed how many women posted links and stories in private Facebook groups after the Weinstein scandal. She used these groups “to keep up with it, because I wanted to see what people were saying about work conditions.”

However, a number of women pointed out how women had “always” shared information about harassers – “a misogynistic or inappropriate colleague or supervisor” – in networks of women, including Facebook groups; as Hillary stated, “what was once only happening within the groups is now happening outside of them as well.” Caitlyn explained further:

What I find me too [sic] did was make public conversations that my peer group were having privately in person about the harassers in our academic and literary circles. *We had been passing this knowledge as gossip, now it's news* (emphasis added).

Caitlyn went on to say how private Facebook groups played a significant role in keeping the #MeToo movement rolling forward once it went viral:

[the #MeToo conversations] carried into private groups where people organized and discussed what they wanted to do in public... it gave people the freedom to react, but also to plan the public response they wanted to give with input from others.

A key point is that these stories of harassment and discrimination, both before and after #MeToo, raised awareness of the systemic nature of the problem and, crucially, empowered women to *act*. Abigail explained:

discovering that has been both, like, super depressing and disempowering on the one hand to find out, like, ‘omg we’re almost all experiencing this,’ this is so depressing and hopeless. But the flipside of it is, ‘ohmygosh, we are not alone and together we can start to build a new reality.’

Not only did women share their experiences of gender discrimination at work, they also gave each other advice for dealing with specific issues, for instance, what steps to take with HR when a boss makes repeated uncomfortable comments. Thus, Facebook groups served as “incubators” for public outing of harassers, as well as leading to more personal consequences for harassers, that impacted not just individuals, but whole industries of women.

Beyond sharing pay information and harassment stories, women used these groups as incubators for other actions beyond the groups’ borders. For instance, a number of groups organized activist campaigns for specific issues that members were having. Others organized panel discussions at industry conferences with members of the groups. For example, Sophie organized a panel for editors on “really harmful and regressive stereotypes” found in reality TV after conversations with women in the group. A few groups were used to “correspond and coordinate responses to things that happen to us online” (Nicole), such as harassment. Michelle explained how, if someone saw something “blatantly endorsing of sexual harassment” in a coed group, for example, women in the women-only group would “flock over there” and start posting arguments on the post. Also, if a woman was “getting a hard time” in a coed group, women would “rally the troops” and get members from women-only group to go support her virtually with supportive comments and argue with her harassers, in what Kim called a “pile on” of defending somebody.

Equally important was the incubation of confidence that was raised through consciousness-raising in private Facebook groups; as Abigail explained “it built up this great confidence in me that I could voice my opinion in mixed spaces.” She went on to



say how she also started speaking up at work about things that bothered her or she found offensive, for instance, when there was a particularly stereotypical storyline in a show she was working on. Abigail stressed the importance of women-only groups in building up her confidence through the creation of community and sharing experiences:

I couldn't have started out talking about this stuff in public, because when I tried to do that, I was just shut down and made to feel insecure, so it's like I needed that incubator for me to grow my confidence, learn who my allies were, build my tribe, my circle of support, in order to have the confidence to speak publicly and not get the wind knocked out of me.

Thus, private Facebook groups for women professionals served as consciousness-raising spaces for sharing experiences that then led to tangible action beyond the groups' borders.

I asked the women about what constituted feminist practices online. The women were largely dismissive of "feminist" online efforts, making distinctions between "slacktivism" – that is, "liking" and "posting" about women's rights – and actually *doing* activism. A number of the women spoke of their own actions as not feminist enough, or at least not feminist in the context of women-only Facebook groups; Marisa asserted "I know I'm not as active as I could be. Like attending these marches or raising money for Planned Parenthood..." Kim saw her feminist activism online as arguing with men in mixed spaces, ("being a social justice warrior"), but she viewed what she did in private Facebook groups as just having "conversations."

Despite these dismissals of their own actions, the activities of women in private Facebook groups had "very practical and personal implications beyond the group" (Coco) for women as a collective. As Caitlyn explained:

I see some *real action* in these groups with payrate sheets, offers to vet resumes/pitches/etc., encouraging women to step forward for particular roles in workplaces...it has made a big difference in the number of job opportunities I see, for instance, and I do wonder what effect that has on the total number of women even just applying for these roles. (emphasis added)

As MacKinnon (1989, p. 101) stated, “Consciousness-raising...shows women their situation in a way that affirms they can act to change it.” Activities in private Facebook groups made women’s individual lives better, but the groups also spurred collective action that created “erosive social change” (Vivienne, 2016, p.1) for the benefit of other women professionally.

#### Crossing Boundaries: The Importance of Offline Spaces

Closed Facebook groups do not exist in a vacuum; as digital technology is increasingly embedded in our day to day lives, the borders between online and offline worlds become permeable (Baym, 2010). Indeed, a number of the groups in my study had offline components, showing how “virtual communities are often simply the online extension of geographically situated offline communities” (Parks, 2011, p. 121).

Some online groups started from an offline gathering of women; the smallest group was started by eight women who all knew each other offline. They began having monthly meetings to talk about their careers, but then found that “people’s schedules were really hard to coordinate” so they moved to Facebook, which enabled them to “talk to each other all the time any time.”

Conversely, a number of the groups that had started as online spaces later started holding regular meetings in real life; these were particularly valuable for meeting local “like-minded ladies,” because when “everyone knows each other” in real life it’s easier to

share gigs or “refer someone.” These meet-ups deepened the connections that women felt within their digital communities; as Coco mused, “the group was created online as a point of connection, but the part that makes it feel authentic is the in-person meetings.”

Most of the time, people from local groups met up for professional networking-type events, to “talk shop”; however, occasionally, some groups were used for more personal reasons, such as meeting up with other “trusted” women while travelling. Marisa even stayed with women that she had never met in person, but knew through these groups, when she went on vacation to Mexico and France. Thus, the groups provided tools for different types of virtual connections, but did not fully replace in-person connections, which were still deemed very valuable by women professionals.

### Conclusion

Closed Facebook groups for professional women serve multiple purposes. They are a virtual “old boys’ club” for women, used for networking and career resources; they are “safe spaces” where women can talk with each other comfortably and find their own voices; and they are “mediated consciousness-raising platforms” where women “incubate” actions to take beyond the groups’ borders (for individual empowerment and collective change). So, many activities in private Facebook groups spur actions that reduce gender inequality and promote the interests of women in the work context, working ultimately to end sexist oppression.

The fourth wave is often discussed in the sense of a distinct generational break; fourth wave feminists are seen as young, media-savvy activists, who are interested in different core issues to the previous waves. Benn (2013) argues that what is most unusual about the fourth wave is how “predominantly cultural” the issues raised by young

feminists are. That is, fourth wavers tend to focus on representation, sexualization, and violence against women, rather than material feminist concerns, such as the pay gap and other economic issues. However, this research shows that private Facebook groups for professional women are actually very much about economic concerns (what Benn typifies as “second wave”), particularly in the efforts around closing the pay gap. Thus, this case study troubles the demarcation of certain issues as second wave or third wave, showing instead how feminist “waves [are] overlapping and operating simultaneously” (Rivers, 2017, p. 133).

These findings highlight how social media can and do provide affordances for everyday feminist practices, even though these groups are not overtly designated as “political” or “feminist.” As one of my participants, Hillary, noted, “to me, these groups are feminist – creating spaces for women to be women and support each other and counteract the patriarchy. But it’s not explicit in the message.” It is important to think critically about the goals of these groups in terms of individual success and collective effort. On the surface, these groups are highly individualistic – after all, women join them predominantly for individual career support. There are places where “empowerment” and “choice” – postfeminist buzzwords – abound. And they are all about self-branding and self-promotion to succeed at one’s career goals. At the same time, however, these groups are collectivist spaces, that are being used to disrupt patriarchal social structures, for instance, through challenging norms around workplace harassment, demanding better pay, and ensuring more women are hired in particular industries. Private Facebook groups are, in practice, then used for *both* individual empowerment and collective dismantling of the system of sexist oppression.

However, it is also important to note the limitations of private Facebook groups as feminist spaces. These groups reaffirm whiteness, heteronormativity, cisgender identity, and middle-class values as normative, because they “create social worlds that retain ideologies born of physical, temporal, and social beliefs” (Noble & Tynes, 2016, p. 7). In addition, the digital divide creates access issues to the Internet for poor, less educated women in rural areas (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Thus, it is important to recognize that the benefits of private Facebook groups are not equally available to all.

Further troubling the emancipatory potential of these groups is the fact that interactions on social networking sites are “*always labor*” (Cirucci, 2018). Women contribute emotional labor by engaging in discussions in private Facebook groups – labor that is not required of men who have naturalized access to supportive career networks and opportunities in their offline lives. What is more, as much as these groups are touted as “private,” it is important to recognize that conversations within these groups are never truly confidential because of the “surveillance network” nature of Facebook as a platform, “which [is] regulated and searchable, and can be forced to provide information to government agencies” (Shaw, 2014, p. 276).

In addition, hooks (2015) argues that feminism should include men. Women separating from men to discuss their issues does not change hegemonic power structures, where men are unaware and/or unwilling to take part in systemic changes to reduce gender inequality. For instance, as men still hold most of the positions of power (in leadership, management, etc.), it is important that they become aware of discrimination issues that women face at work and that they start considering diversity in hiring and

promotional practices. The onus cannot be on women to drive all the changes for a just and equal society.

## CHAPTER 6

### #METOO, TWITTER AFFORDANCES, AND FEMINIST OUTCOMES:

#### “WHY IS IT SO HARD TO JUST BELIEVE WOMEN?!”

##### Introduction

On October 15, 2017, actor Alyssa Milano tweeted: “Me too. Suggested by a friend: ‘If all the women who had been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too.’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.’ If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” Milano’s tweet came in the wake of the storm of sexual harassment allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. Earlier that month, *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* ran explosive investigative reports, detailing decades of harassment and abuse of female entertainment industry workers by Weinstein (Farrow, 2017; Kantor & Twohey, 2017). These reports fueled public conversations, including commentary both in mainstream media and on social media, around women’s experiences of harassment and assault – not only in the glamorous film industry, but in “ordinary” workplaces, too.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the social climate, Milano’s timely tweet quickly went viral. In the first 24 hours after she tweeted, the hashtag #MeToo had been tweeted almost half a million times (Gilbert, 2017); within nine days, it had reached 1.7 million tweets and was being used in 85 countries (Park, 2017). This enormous volume of tweets in such a short period of time highlighted the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and abuse in women’s lives all around the globe. In the following months, women called out a string of powerful men in media and entertainment industries – including comedian

Louis CK, actor Danny Masterson, and NBC anchor Matt Lauer – for sexual misconduct in the workplace (De & Ceron, 2018). Many of the accused have faced career repercussions – being fired from their shows or having distribution platforms such as Netflix and HBO refuse to air their products.

Conversations using #MeToo on social media discussed these high-profile scandals alongside women’s expressions of their own harassment experiences. Although much of the public scandal around the hashtag was focused on the workplace, many of the stories shared using #MeToo on social media discussed sexual harassment and abuse in spaces outside the workplace, including in dating situations, at home, and in public spaces, such as cat calling on streets. Throughout 2018, major entertainment industry events, such as The Golden Globes and The Oscars were dominated by discussions of #MeToo – on the red carpet, on stage, and in the associated media buzz. Indeed, research shows that #MeToo stands out as “uniquely viral” compared to other hashtags documenting sexual harassment and abuse, such as #YesAllWomen and #EverydaySexism (Ohlheiser, 2018); the data also show that #MeToo has been a sustained, stable conversation on Twitter – a platform where conversations frequently fizzle out – for over a year.

#MeToo is an example of “hashtag activism” (Gunn, 2015), a form of online protest using hashtags to draw attention to social justice issues; more specifically, #MeToo is an example of “hashtag feminism.” Digital feminist scholars argue that hashtag feminism (such as #YesAllWomen and #WhyIStayed) has significant discursive power, shedding light on and challenging normative discourse about issues such as violence against women and rape culture (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2016;



Clark, 2016; Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2019). Feminists scholars have shown how these hashtags form networks in which:

women tell their own stories, women are believed, male and celebrity allies helped to elevate ordinary women's voices, and women — experts in their own lives — offer nuance to all too often oversimplified and inaccurately reported issues of violence and victimhood (Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles, 2019).

However, hashtag feminism is not without its problems, perhaps most notably the harassment and threats from trolls that feminists face as a result of speaking up about women's issues online (Cole, 2015; Eckert, 2018). Also, survivors (of rape, abuse, etc.) can be negatively affected (e.g., triggered) by exposure to hashtag feminism (Woods, 2014).

Literature on hashtag feminism focuses primarily on meanings and themes within tweets themselves, using methods such as “feminist discourse analysis” (Clark, 2016) or “hashtag ethnography” (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015) – without much focus on the materiality of the Twitter platform itself. Eckert and Steiner (2016) list the following as “dimensions and functions” of *hashtags*:

searchability, collectability and archiveability; information sharing; visibility, especially of women of color and diversity; consciousness-raising and awareness of women's issues; mutual support and collaboration; critique of dominant narratives; dissemination of counter-narratives; direct address to journalists, companies, politicians and the public; calls for action; international outreach and pressure; creation of attention; and speed and convenience of use” (p. 214)

However, in reality, it is a *range* of technical features and functionalities (beyond the hashtag itself) of Twitter that work together in creating these “dimensions and functions” or affordances, and in shaping hashtag feminism. So, it is important to pay attention to the full materiality of the medium when analyzing “hashtag feminism.”

To address this gap in the literature, this chapter provides a textual analysis of #MeToo tweets alongside an analysis of the affordances of Twitter (both the low-level features and the high-level communicative possibilities) to understand how Twitter *as a whole* mediates the formation of a social movement. This material approach combined with textual analysis maps the “sociotechnical shaping of issue publics” (Burgess & Matamorosa-Fernandez, 2016, p. 93) around the issue of sexual assault and harassment.

The data for this chapter come from a random sample of Tweets from the first week of the movement, starting with October 15, 2017 and ending with October 22, 2017. I randomly sampled 150 tweets from the homepage of Twitter for each day that week; the corpus for analysis consisted of 1,063 pages of tweets – including pictures, links, replies, comments, etc. Alongside this affordance analysis, I conducted a textual analysis of the tweets, looking for patterns and themes in the discussions around #MeToo.

The findings show that the affordances of Twitter manifest in four feminist outcomes around sexual harassment and assault: 1) *empowerment and expression* for individual survivors; 2) *support and solidarity* by allies; 3) *societal awareness* of the issue, including providing context and debate; and; 4) *information/resource sharing* for actions beyond social media. These feminist outcomes occur both at the level of the individual (for instance, in empowering women to break their silence) and at the collective level (for example, publicly challenging societal myths that support rape culture). It is important to note that these categories overlap substantially in the discourse – for instance, the act of a survivor sharing a story using #MeToo can have multiple simultaneous outcomes, including promoting solidarity, raising awareness, and

dismantling the status quo. These categories of outcomes are only presented separately in this chapter for analytical purposes.

This study shows that, as Twitter has moved from being a text-based medium to a multi-media format (allowing images, URLs, emoji, etc.), it increasingly provides various affordances – such as posting screengrabs – that help effectively and publicly present *evidence* and build *credibility* in sexual assault and harassment discourse. This is particularly important given the context of sexual assault survivors frequently not being believed (Manne, 2017). Twitter is a “personal public” space, meaning that interaction on it can be “at once intensely personal and highly public” (Weller et al., 2014, p. xxxii). Overall, this chapter shows how the blurring of private and public on Twitter means that the personal becomes increasingly political, through everyday uses of social media.

#### Empowerment and Expression on Twitter

The hashtag #MeToo is, at the most basic level, “an easily personalized storytelling prompt” (Clark, 2016, p. 796), which helps elicit and focus survivors’ stories. Through the use of the hashtag, individual women were encouraged to share their experiences, essentially “‘announcing’ oneself” (Eckert & Steiner, 2016, p. 222) to the public as a survivor. One primary outcome of #MeToo was the cathartic, individual benefit of ending the silence around sexual assault and abuse for survivors. Many users chose to simply tweet the words #MeToo as their status without further elaboration on the circumstances of their experience. Others shared more details, such as what happened, who the perpetrator was (in general terms – a neighbor, a boyfriend – or in more specific terms, naming names or identifying the person through their relationship, e.g., my father), at what age the harassment happened, how people reacted, how they feel now, and so on.

The experiences ranged from discomfort, such as unwelcome sexual comments from colleagues at work, to instances of violent rape. For example, one user wrote: “I was 8 or 9. He was an adult neighbor. He stopped just shy of fully penetrating rape. There, now that’s a thing that you know. #MeToo.” Some users listed the lasting repercussions on their lives to highlight the severity of sexual assault: “#MeToo. I can’t stand being touched. I only walk behind people. I don’t like sleeping in front of windows. It’s hard to sleep in the dark.” Some users wrote more abstract poems or musings exploring their feelings and reactions rather than concrete facts of their experiences. Yet other chose to share images, emoji, or GIFs, such as the below (Figure 1), while others chose to film themselves discussing their experiences or to share songs that particularly resonated with them regarding their assault.



Figure 1. A #MeToo tweet using a GIF.

Thus, Twitter provided a variety of low-level affordances for sharing stories in multiple formats – including words, images, videos, and emoji– encouraging creative, individual expression of thoughts and feelings around sexual assault and abuse.

### *Negotiating the Constraints of Twitter's Character Limit*

During the first week of the #MeToo movement, the character limit of Twitter posts was 140 characters, including words, hashtags, emoji, and URLs (in November 2017, Twitter increased the limit of posts to 280 characters). So, sharing an assault or harassment story on Twitter was, theoretically, limited to a sentence or two, along with the hashtag #MeToo. However, the character limit of Twitter did not stop those who wanted to share their stories in more words. The variety of ways that users negotiated this constraint – an example of Shaw's (2017) "negotiated use" of a technology – are detailed below.

One popular way of saying more despite the constraints of Twitter's character limit was for users to post numbered consecutive status updates or 1/7, 2/7, etc., so that others could read their full story as a *series* of tweets on their profile page. Another way of showing continuation of tweets was using ellipses at the end of one tweet and at the start of the next one. Tweets are time-stamped to the minute, but when a user tweets quickly in succession it is often within the same minute, so these tactics were necessary to show chronological progression of thoughts in a thread. Also, though tweets do appear on the user's page in chronological order, the home page of Twitter randomly selects tweets – so a tweet from the middle of a longer thread was often shown out of context on the home page. The ellipses or numbering thus signaled to audiences scrolling Twitter's

home page that they would need to go into the original poster's profile page thread to see the story in full. A number of users even wrote \*Thread\* or THREAD alongside the numbers (1/2, 2/2) to more overtly signal the start of a longer message over multiple tweets.

Others creatively used the affordance of being able to post images to share much longer, more complicated statements. Here, users took screenshots of longer stories (using many more than the 140 characters allowed) that they had previously written in the “notes” section of their smart phone, in a Word document or in an email, and then posted this screenshot as a single tweet. Even though technically *images* were being posted, these were *pictures of words*, allowing for detailed stories to be shared. For instance, on October 18, Olympic gymnast McKayla Maroney shared her story about being molested by Dr. Larry Nassar, the Olympic team doctor. She shared an image of a statement that she had typed out on a page. Users tweeted not only pictures of screenshots of typed out words but also pictures of words created through other mediums, such as handwritten pages. The feminist outcome of this “hacking” of the Twitter character limit was that marginalized voices that had long been silenced had the space to speak, and, most importantly, to speak their stories in detail, to express themselves more fully and with more nuance than a simple 140-character tweet would allow.

#### *Screenshots as Evidence in the #MeToo Discourse*

The ability to post screenshots as a Twitter status not only provided individuals with more physical space to share their detailed stories, but also allowed survivors to provide *evidence* of sexual harassment. Survivors frequently shared screenshots of private conversations they had had over text, instant messaging, or email. For instance,

one transgender woman posted two pictures of a text conversation she had had with a straight male acquaintance. This conversation started innocently discussing a recent get-together with friends, but soon the man started being sexually inappropriate and commenting on how beautiful she was. The woman posted this conversation to Twitter with the caption “here’s a taste of sexual harassment I’ve received as a transgender woman #MeToo #TransWomenAreWomen.” At the bottom of the screenshot she wrote “If anyone ever tells you that transgender women aren’t real women or that we don’t experience life like cis women do, feel free to show them this. In addition to transphobia, we are subject to the same misogyny, sexism, and harassment that cis women are.” These screenshots provided a firsthand account of sexual harassment, bolstering the credibility of the survivor’s claims and allowing her audience to be a direct witness to her experience. In addition, this tweet showed the importance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), highlighting awareness of another social issue – the exclusion of trans women in discourses of sexual harassment and assault in general. Ultimately, this screenshot served a double purpose, of building credibility for the *individual* story of sexual harassment and of building credibility specifically for *trans* women’s stories of sexual harassment, collectively.

The above poster shared her private conversation with the name of her harasser blacked out, maintaining his anonymity and using the post to focus on her experience, rather than on calling him out. Many users, however, used the ability to post screenshots not only to reinforce their accounts of harassment, but also to name perpetrators. Below, the user shared a private email including the name of the harasser (Figure 2):



Figure 2. A #MeToo tweet that names names.

The naming of names further bolstered the claims of survivors, by showing how real, verifiable people, not just faceless, nameless harassers, were responsible for sexual harassment and abuse. A few users even went so far as to post photographs of their abusers alongside their names. This had a similar effect to how sources “going on record” in journalistic reporting increases the veracity of a story, compared to using anonymous sources (Berkowitz, 2009). The practice of naming names, within screenshots and otherwise in tweets, also served as a practical warning system for other women to avoid harassers and abusers.

Of course, naming names is risky, inviting possible retaliation from both the accused and from spectators. Acknowledging this risk, many in the Twitter community commented on statuses like the one above praising the poster on their bravery in sharing names. Not surprisingly, many users actively chose *not* to share the names or identities of their abusers publicly. On one exchange, after someone revealed that they had been



molested by a family member, another user asked them what the relation of the family member was. The original user responded, “no, sorry, but I don’t want to bring that info onto social media.” So, survivors showed varying degrees of comfort in how much they shared on a public medium like Twitter. They often withheld certain information from their *stories* in order to maintain privacy. However, many additionally chose to share very detailed stories while not disclosing information about *themselves*, in order to maintain anonymity. Discussed below are some creative uses of Twitter’s features and functionalities to share #MeToo stories while remaining largely anonymous.

#### *Anonymity as an Affordance for Safely Sharing Stories*

A way of sharing publicly but not specifically to one’s own followers – thus maintaining some degree of anonymity – was to comment on others’ tweets to share one’s own experiences. For instance, one user wrote on someone else’s thread: “*I could never write this on my page.* But the only male attention I ever received was from my father from ages 9-16” (emphasis added). Another (male) user commented repeatedly on a thread highlighting how men and boys suffer from abuse too, saying “sorry for all these replies interrupting your thread. Just feels like a safe space to put some of this awfulness I’ve been pushing down.” Because “Twitter can be used strategically to achieve different levels of publicness and publicity” (Bruns & Moe, 2014), users had the benefit of cathartically sharing their own stories and showing solidarity without the repercussions of being identifiable in their own social media space.

Creating profiles on Twitter is another feature of the platform that allows for users to maintain anonymity. Users do not have to use their real photos or names in creating a Twitter account (in contrast to Facebook’s “real name” policy) and so can maintain

anonymity, while still being able to share their #MeToo stories. Some survivors asked other Twitter users to share on their behalf. One male user shared: “Someone close to me wanted to write a thread for #MeToo but couldn’t bring herself to do it; she can use my voice instead.” He then went on to recount two instances of his friend’s sexual assault, in the first person. This allowed the survivor to share her story – to get it out there – without being identified.

Being able to share publicly but anonymously is particularly important for women. Women endure both higher levels of online harassment, particularly when they talk about women’s issues (Lewis, Rowe, & Wiper, 2016) and higher levels of sexual assault (“Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics,” n.d) – a crime that is vastly under-reported because victims are rarely believed and frequently blamed for their abuse. The affordance of anonymous sharing available through Twitter, then, allows women to both avoid online harassment and to not suffer the blame and credibility issues of sharing a sexual assault story as a known entity.

#### *The Importance of Images in Sexual Assault Discourse*

On the other hand, many users regardless shared images of themselves as part of their #MeToo status; this ability to post photos was another affordance that lent credibility to survivors and provided evidence of sexual assault and abuse. For instance, childhood sexual abuse survivors shared photos of themselves as children. One user shared a photo of herself with her dog, writing that she was 10 at the time the photo was taken and “already a survivor of months of abuse.” She went on to say: “This is why moralizing crap about ‘the importance of modesty’ gets me especially hard. I was a little girl when it first happened to me.” By pairing photos of children with memories of abuse,

users pushed the sexual assault narrative away from victim blaming (how could an innocent child be complicit in her abuse) and also highlighted how the problem lasted throughout a lifetime. The affordance of being able to post photos on Twitter can thus be seen as a “tool for contesting victim-blaming” (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p.8). Another user, a journalist, shared a graphic selfie of her face after she was beaten during a sexual assault. The photograph – showing a close-up of her face bleeding profusely, a gaping wound on her eyebrow – was powerful visual evidence of the violence of sexual assault. This photo illustrated “how the seemingly vacuous practice of taking “selfies” (i.e., photos of oneself) can become politically meaningful” (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p.8).

Sometimes survivors shared images not of themselves, but of symbols that reflected their identities, using ethos (convincing the audience of the credibility of the author) as a persuasion strategy to represent their experiences as valid. One female veteran shared an image that boosted her credentials as an honorable, respectable, *believable* human (Figure 3). The act of speaking out on Twitter (which included words, images, GIFs, videos, and emoji) about experiences that had been unspeakable for so long was empowering to survivors, who frequently expressed how using the #MeToo hashtag “actually felt kind of freeing.” Twitter being an “immediate” platform, with real-time, public posting, lent urgency to the sharing of these stories. Many users explicitly evoked time as part of their statuses: “NOW is the time to speak,” “TODAY it ends,” “we’ve kept silent for too long, no more.” One user even used the hashtag #NotMyShameAnymore as part of their #MeToo status. Using #MeToo seemed personally beneficial to individuals, a cathartic, confessional act that enabled victims to

work through shame and denial that had not been previously expressed. What's more, using the hashtag allowed them to do this publicly, with the support of others.



Figure 3. A #MeToo tweet aiming to prove credibility of character.

Most importantly, instances of sexual assault and harassment reporting have increased significantly since #MeToo (Chiwaya, 2018) and have been attributed to the movement. As bell hooks (1989) pointed out 30 years ago, “Daring women to speak out, to tell our stories, has been one of the central life-transforming aspects of feminist

movement” (p. 14); #MeToo indeed transformed lives, empowering women individually not only to “speak” on social media, but to act offline.

### Solidarity and Support: Building Connections Through Twitter

Strength found in numbers, such as in the #MeToo campaign, is “crowdsourcing power” (Manne, 2017, p. 239) which brings about “*social support* itself, as well as the prospect of *enhanced pattern recognition*” (p. 239, emphasis added). Through the connective potential of Twitter, users could support survivors sharing #MeToo stories. This support came from allies and from other survivors. Using trending hashtags such as #MeToo to share common experiences also resulted in “feminist cataloguing” (Ahmed, 2015) where, as women, “we begin to identify how what happens to me, happens to others. We begin to identify patterns and regularities” (Ahmed, 2015). That is, hashtags can connect people having similar experiences; #MeToo materialized this affordance to “promote gendered solidarity” (Berridge & Portwood-Stacer, 2015, p. 341). This section discusses the affordances of Twitter that allow for *support* from allies and *solidarity* among survivors.

### *Supporting Survivors: Affordances for Digital Care*

Twitter as a platform provided multiple affordances for others to show support to those sharing stories of sexual abuse and harassment. The most obvious way for allies to show support was to click on the “heart” reaction button to statuses that posted #MeToo; #MeToo posts usually received a lot of “hearts” indicating virtual support. Interestingly, even people with very few followers on Twitter got an outpouring of support from strangers. For instance, the user @Niasis has only 41 followers, but her tweet in the #MeToo conversation, sharing that she suffered PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)

after being raped, garnered 1000 “hearts.” This highlights how the hashtag #MeToo, because it is searchable and indexes stories around the same topic, affords the expression of support from strangers, widening the circle of caring around survivors.

However, many users noted how the ability to “heart” (“like”) posts was a constraint of Twitter’s design for showing support for difficult topics, as one user details below (Figure 4):



Figure 4. A tweet noting the lack of suitable affordances for showing support in #MeToo.

Given the problems of “liking” people’s abuse stories, users adopted other means to support a #MeToo tweet. One more appropriate way of showing support was commenting on a #MeToo post with supportive words. Some simply tweeted #MeToo or “I’m so sorry;” others tweeted messages of solidarity, such as “I have been there” and “you are not alone.” Yet others thanked and praised the posters for their bravery in sharing, encouraging others to do the same: “Speaking publicly takes real courage. Good for you.” Others used internet or text speak, such as XOXO (kiss hug kiss hug), YGG (you go girl), or “I’m glad u r here and hope the very best 4u,” more easily adhering to the 140-character limit of Twitter while expressing support.

Much of the support came from internet-specific low-level affordances that are incorporated into Twitter as a platform. Aside from using words in the comments, many chose to use emoji to symbolically show their care, such as the praying hands emoji, the hugging face emoji, the sad face emoji, and the heart emoji. Some used emoji such as the power fist bump, a flexing bicep, or clapping hands. These emoji correspond with non-verbal gestures signaling support and strength, enriching the communicative nuance potential of computer-mediated communication (Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008; Lo, 2008).

Others used additional hashtags such #WomenWhoRoar, #hugs, #bestwishes, #Ibelieveyou, in conjunction with #MeToo, to show their support for the victims. Some of these (such as #WomenWhoRoar) were trending tags that collated stories around a particular topic related to #MeToo; others, such as #hugs or #keepfighting, were responses not connected to any specific movement or event, but simply a general gesture of care.

The Twitter community often schooled users on the various affordances that the platform provided to allies, as detailed in the interaction in Figure 5. Users could also show support by retweeting somebody's #MeToo statement, signaling tacit support of the original poster. Retweeting simultaneously served another function: making the original tweet visible to one's own followers, thus amplifying the sole voice of the survivor and bringing increased awareness to the issue. Importantly, retweeting means that references to other users are "visible" but also "navigable." That is, "people can follow the retweet link to see the context of a conversation or the background of a particular user" (Schmidt, 2014, p. 5). Through retweeting, then, allies not only increased awareness but allowed new supporters access to the original poster, widening the possible circle of support.



Figure 5. A tweet suggesting suitable user responses to #MeToo.

Care was also expressed in the images tweeted using #MeToo. Many included pictures of people holding hands in solidarity or multiple hands raised in fists, visually linking the movement to political solidarity and standing together. Other common reactions were “virtual hugs” GIFs or still images in the comments section (Figure 6). Because many users use photographs of themselves as their profile pictures, this “real person” support could also be automatically created simply through commenting on or liking a post. Every time a user posted #MeToo, their post would show up in the Twitter feed with a numerical and symbol summary of the retweets and likes that post had garnered. But clicking on someone’s post and maximizing that thread showed the above symbols, next to worded documentation (129 retweets, 408 likes) and icons of ten profile pictures of the users who had liked that post. Thus, the poster not only got validation in



the form of metrics (number of likes and retweets), but also was provided *visible* support from *actual people* (as verified by their profile pictures).



Figure 6. A “virtual hug” GIF used frequently in the #MeToo discourse.

Aside from lending human faces to the virtual support for victims, gender embodiment, visible in profile pictures, was an important tool for lending credibility to the movement. For example, men who used their real photos and names on Twitter tweeted support for the movement from a male perspective. Their real names and pictures, verifying their masculinity, showed how male allies were important to the movement. They wrote messages such as “Guys, it’s up to us to educate ourselves and other men and boys so no girl or woman ever has to say #MeToo,” showing how gendered sexual assault and harassment are not just a women’s issue.

The feature of direct messaging (DM), which allows two users who follow each other to message each other privately on Twitter, was also used to offer support. People often commented on #MeToo statuses stating that the poster should DM them if they wanted to talk to somebody. So, survivors had both public support and the opportunity for further private support using the Twitter platform.

The Twitter community supported both survivors who had tweeted #MeToo and those who hadn't. Some users were adamant about the need to encourage other survivors to speak, for instance, one user wrote, "speak your truth even if your voice shakes." Supporters were vocal in helping those who thought their stories were not big or important or severe enough to tweet #MeToo. The below image (Figure 7) encouraging women with "small" stories to speak out was widely circulated, often with written words of encouragement such as "all stories are significant."

Yet others acknowledged that survivors did not owe anyone their stories, and tweeted support for the "silent survivors" too. One user wrote "For those carrying their #MeToo with them silently, you are loved, cherished, and believed. You do not owe your story to anyone." These tweets recognized that not everybody would be comfortable sharing on Twitter, but that they could get support there anyway, through reading the messages of support collated using the #MeToo hashtag.



Figure 7. A frequently used illustration tweeted during the #MeToo movement to show that all sexual assault stories deserve to be heard.

It must be noted that the public sharing of #MeToo stories did not always create an outpouring of support. Some users shared that they had lost followers (a literal withdrawing of support/interest) since they posted their stories. One wrote “Wow. Since I posted my #MeToo, I’ve lost almost 1000 followers. Not sure if that says more about them or me. Either way, I won’t be silent.” Thus, although the Twitter community was largely supportive of the #MeToo movement, there was some backlash from and for individual users.

A lot of support for the #MeToo movement came not only from individuals, but also from a diverse range of organizations, such as the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Olympic

Team, Women’s Health Magazine, and Girl Scouts. Some organizations stated their support outright, for instance, the Department of Women in South Africa tweeted, “Department of Women supports #MeToo campaign. We encourage women to speak out on the heinous crimes committed against them. @GovernmentZA.” Some organizations, instead of tweeting generic messages of support chose to show support for specific cases. For instance, NARAL Pro-Choice America (a pro-choice non-profit) tweeted their support for one of their employees (Figure 8).



Figure 8. A tweet from NARAL Pro-Choice America expressing support for one of their employees as a survivor of sexual assault.

Many of the organizations were non-profits or government entities concerned with social justice and women's issues (e.g., The National Sexual Violence Resource Center, UN Women, Planned Parenthood) and so their support for #MeToo was not surprising – they posted pictures of phrases (“You are believed #MeToo), links to their organization websites, quotes from their leaders, and so on, to show care and provide resources to survivors.

However, there were many posts from “neutral” organizations or even organizations that had a negative valence in the #MeToo discourse. For instance, Cambridgeshire Police tweeted the following: “If you have been a victim of sexual assault you can report it to us. You will be believed #MeToo.” This statement directly addressed one common complaint of survivors of sexual assault: that going to the police to report sexual assault is often not taken seriously. Thus, Cambridgeshire Police's tweet did double work, of supporting victims and also directly challenging hegemonic discourse around police not accepting sexual assault as a serious crime.

These organizations used official logos as their profile pictures – such as the green Girl Scouts logo – and their accounts were verified (the little blue check next to their name confirms that Twitter has independently found the account to be authentic) showing that *official*, established organizations supported survivors. In this way, the voices of millions of ordinary women were supported and amplified by well-known organizations and entities around the world, lending increased legitimacy and credibility to the #MeToo movement in the public sphere.

### *Solidarity: Connecting Survivors and Consciousness-Raising*

Many users expressed how hard it was to talk about their experiences of harassment and abuse and how reluctant they were to post. In the end, however, survivors often decided to post to show solidarity with others, even if it made them personally uncomfortable, because “this wave of awareness is helping us all.” Sharing individual stories brought comfort and encouragement to other survivors, who now saw, as one user wrote, that there were “so many women. I’m not alone.” Through this pattern recognition, Twitter became a mediated consciousness-raising platform (Wood, 2008), allowing women to become more aware of similarities in their experiences.

Although different women have different experiences based on social identity factors such as race and sexuality, women as a group (which, though socially-constructed, has material, lived implications) experience sexual harassment and assault at a far greater rate than do men (“Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics,” n.d.). The global, immediate reach of Twitter allows women “to feel like they are united across both space and time” (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 7). So, women using #MeToo connected across the world, highlighting the universality and pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault.

A key low-level affordance of Twitter that facilitates global connections among women is the “translate tweet” function that appears under any tweet that is written in a different language to the user’s set language preference on their account. This function allows users to translate tweets, removing linguistic barriers to solidarity between different groups of women. However, research shows that automated web-based translation features, such as Google Translate, are more accurate for languages that use the roman alphabet (Patil & Davies, 2014), which may have implications of exclusion of

speakers of non-Western languages in the #MeToo discourse. In this way, linguistic barriers between Western and non-Western women might be amplified rather than reduced. Another way that users connected across linguistic barriers was through using hashtags in other languages, such as #YoTambien in Spanish and #BalanceTonPorc in French, while also using the hashtag #MeToo to link the conversations happening under both hashtags together.

In addition, news organizations, such as PBS.org, shared stories from around the world, such as “Women in India are also saying #MeToo,” amplifying awareness of the global nature of the movement. The affordance of being able to share URLs and images to international audiences connected geographically distant survivors. Each story shared, even though tying into the wider #MeToo narrative, had a local flavor, with details relevant to that particular culture. For instance, women in India shared stories about frequent assault on public transport. In this way, local tweets produced “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1998) – a particular viewpoint of sexual harassment and assault from a local perspective, that nevertheless illuminated universal experiences of oppression and domination (Mohanty, 2003). Already in the 1980s, Haraway herself emphasized the need for “an earth-wide network of connections” (1988, p. 580) to mobilize situated knowledges – and Twitter provides the infrastructure for such a network. Sharing such “situated knowledges” across the globe is important for the feminist project, because it helps women to “devise ways to use each other’s difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles” (Lorde, 1984, p. 122). Of course, it is important to recognize that these “situated knowledges” were limited, sharing the middle-

and upper-class experiences of those who have social media access and also, despite the global reach, still predominantly English-speaking survivors.

Twitter also has the affordance of allowing people to “mention” (by typing @username in a tweet) other Twitter users in a post. This affordance notifies other users of a conversation that might be useful to them or that they might have something useful to contribute to. Frequently, users carried on previous digital and offline conversations to Twitter by mentioning specific people in their #MeToo posts, thus connecting survivors and supporters through literally bringing them into pertinent conversations.

A common way of fostering solidarity and support simultaneously was to post a selfie expressing one’s own experiences alongside a message of “standing with survivors,” as shown in Figure 9. Posting selfies had the effect of providing the support of real people – amplifying and verifying the support as coming from “real” others, rather than just the faceless “imagined audience” (Litt, 2012) of social media.

#### Awareness, Education, and Debate Using #MeToo

An important feminist outcome of the #MeToo movement is awareness of sexual harassment and assault. Hashtags have an “indexing function” (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015), that is, they collate all tweets that use the hashtag. Because hashtags are searchable, anybody can go on Twitter, search for #MeToo, and be shown all the tweets that have used that hashtag. Thus, hashtags provide a way of viewing all the conversations about a particular topic in one place, publicly, creating a “searchable archive of experiences” (Clark, 2016, p. 798). People using the trending #MeToo hashtag in their status assured that “the message has the potential to reach well beyond the user’s existing number of followers” (Bruns & Moe, 2014, p. 17). #MeToo provided visibility to survivors in the





**Najwa Zebian** @najwazebian · 20 Oct 2017

I stand with them.  
I believe them.  
I was one of them.  
And I will no longer carry shame because I am not the one who should carry it.

#metoo



I · STAND · WITH  
THESE · WOMEN > #METOO

Figure 9. A tweeted selfie showing support for survivors of #MeToo.

public sphere and made tangible the pervasiveness and scope of the problem of sexual harassment and abuse through the collation, visibility, and searchability of tweets.

Tweets that brought awareness to sexual harassment and assault included those from survivors sharing their stories, but also those that discussed #MeToo more broadly. These users did not share personal stories, but instead used the platform to comment on sexual assault and harassment. These included tweets from individuals but also tweets from organizations, particularly news organizations that reported on the movement once it became viral. Awareness is important so that survivors are taken seriously and perpetrators are punished, but also so that the broad culture that supports such problematic behavior can change (Clark, 2016).

#### *Twitter Affordances for Scope Awareness and Amplification*

Users actively reminded other users of the best ways to make sure #MeToo reached the widest audience possible, showing a desire to actively and most effectively spread the message using the various features of Twitter. One user copied the original #MeToo post “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote...” but then she added “P.S. It’s meaningful to see “me too” in your comments to this post, of course, but *please copy this to your status as well*” (emphasis added). With more people tweeting #MeToo from their own accounts, the volume of tweets increased, gaining visibility for the movement.

#MeToo tweets frequently used numbers to provide awareness of the scope of the problem, for instance: “1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men in the U.S. had been victims of attempted or completed rape. Some stay silent, for that I’ll say #MeToo 4 them.” Another said “every 98 seconds, someone is sexually assaulted. It’s time to let victims know they

are not alone.” Graphs and other images were used as visual aids to present the scope of the problem in an easily-digestible manner. For instance, one user posted a RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) graphic of six figures of women with one colored in green (the rest all grayed out) with the words “1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime.” The sources of the research that came up with the numbers were also presented, further boosting the credibility of the statistics, e.g., “Research by Cornell professor on street harassment: 85% of women in the US experience street harassment.”

Awareness of sexual assault and harassment using #MeToo was amplified because social media users interact in a social media ecology (Zhao et al., 2016); in other words, there is significant reciprocity across various social media platforms. For instance, 90% of Twitter users also use Facebook (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Accordingly, many users engaged in cross-platform posting using the #MeToo hashtag. Interestingly, many did not use the feature provided by Twitter and Facebook that encourages users to share by clicking a button that automatically posts the same content on both platforms. Users instead posted a #MeToo status on Facebook and, only after it had gathered some likes or comments there, they would repost a screenshot of this status onto Twitter. Perhaps the outpouring of support on a more private platform like Facebook, where most people in a network are known to each other (boyd, 2011), encouraged users to share their status more publicly on Twitter. One user wrote “Posted this to private FB, but decided it was important to speak up here as well. Thank you all who have done already. #MeToo,” and then posted their Facebook status, for which they had taken a screenshot of a typed-up page detailing their experience.

Indeed, users often alluded to the public nature of Twitter and the huge visibility afforded by the platform as being part of their consideration for cross-posting. When using a hashtag, Twitter users create an “imagined audience” (Litt, 2012), because (unless an account is private) anyone who searches for that hashtag on Twitter is able to view the tweet. Many of the #MeToo users imagined that the audience for their tweets was very large. One user posted “After my #MeToo tweet, a friend asked if I ever told anyone. My response, “Yes, I just told thousands.” In reality, this tweet only garnered 30 likes and 10 retweets (6 months later when this data was collected), highlighting how affordances of platforms are often “imagined” by users (Nagy & Neff, 2015), but still guide behaviors on social media platforms.

The celebrity factor of #MeToo helped spread awareness of the scope of the problem for a couple reasons. Firstly, Alyssa Milano, who sparked the viral campaign, and other famous women who tweeted #MeToo have huge numbers of followers – for instance, actresses America Ferrera (223K followers) and Anna Paquin (204K followers), journalist Katie Couric (1.74M followers), and pop star Lady Gaga (77.5M followers). So, celebrities tweeting #MeToo automatically ensures the message is visible to millions of people. Secondly, because celebrities are more newsworthy than ordinary people, legacy news organizations such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Guardian* paid more attention to the #MeToo movement than they did to previous hashtag campaigns highlighting sexual violence, such as #YesAllWomen, which did not have as many celebrities involved (Ohlheiser, 2018).

Not only did legacy media cover the social media movement, they also shared their coverage, in the form of URLs linking to the stories on their websites, back on

Twitter, using both organizational and individual journalists' accounts. This cross-sharing amplified the conversation around sexual assault in the public sphere. News organizations also retweeted stories from other news media, expanding the discussion to a broader audience. For instance, KQED News tweeted a public letter signed by women involved in California politics (uploaded as a picture, with a link "read more at kqed.org") and was retweeted by NPR (National Public Radio). A number of news organizations, such as CNN, also asked audiences to text their #MeToo stories directly to them, which they then collated and shared back on Twitter using the official CNN account. This ensured that the individual voices of #MeToo survivors were given a broader platform and a wider audience than they would have had simply sharing #MeToo on their personal accounts. Through these symbiotic practices between individuals and organizations, and between social and mainstream media, the scope and importance of the conversation was magnified.

On October 16, the day after Milano tweeted, a #MeToo Twitter Moment (a feature run by Twitter which posts "curated stories showcasing the very best of what's happening on Twitter.... Showing current topics that are popular or relevant, so you can discover what is unfolding on Twitter in an instant") was posted. The moment read: "How 'me too' is showing the magnitude of sexual assault," with a picture of three fists. It was shared from the official Twitter Moments account, using the hashtag #MeToo Moments. As an officially trending feature, this moment cemented the movement as a *viral* phenomenon and was frequently shared by users commenting on the scope of the movement on social media itself.

*Awareness: Recognizing the History of #MeToo*

On October 16, 2017 – a day after her initial viral #MeToo tweet – Milano posted about having been made aware of the original founder of Me Too: Tarana Burke. In 2006, Burke, a black female civil-rights activist, founded the Me Too movement. She started using the phrase “me too” to raise awareness of the frequent occurrence of sexual assault and to connect sexual violence survivors. Public knowledge of Burke’s contribution sparked discussion on Twitter about why white celebrity feminists were getting credit for a movement that was in fact started by a black woman years ago. Historically, women of color and their contributions have frequently been downplayed in the broad feminist movement (hooks, 2015), and this pattern has continued in hashtag feminism (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2019). For instance, not many people know that #YesAllWomen was started by a biracial Muslim woman (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer, 2016) or how the black queer women who started #BlackLivesMatter were erased from the discourse about the movement as it grew (Tynes et al., 2016).

Feminist activists frequently tweeted about the importance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) in #MeToo. Sophia Bush wrote “As women who are for other women, we must make sure our activism is intersectional. Acknowledge #TaranaBurke in the #MeToo #WOCaffirmation.” Twitter users – including individual users and organizations – used two specific affordances of Twitter to acknowledge Burke: 1) the sharing of photographs and 2) mentions. Users attempting to rectify the “whitewashing” of #MeToo used photographs of Burke as part of their tweets, specifically photographs of her in a “me too” shirt (Figure 10). These photos literally brought Burke’s black body into the conversation, by linking her name and photograph with the hashtag, and additionally

through visually linking her to the phrase on her shirt, physically asserting her place in the #MeToo discourse.



Figure 10. Activists tweeted pictures of Tarana Burke, the Black founder of Me Too, to bring her into the #MeToo conversations.

Another way that Burke was physically “brought into” the conversation was through mentions, that is, writing a status using #MeToo and tagging @TaranaBurke. Tweets like this not only linked Burke’s name to the #MeToo hashtag, publicly giving her credit, but also, because she was notified of each mention, these tweets signaled support and acknowledgement to her personally. On the other hand, it is also important to consider that through such strategies, Burke was brought into these conversations without

her consent, reducing her agency in *choosing* to be part of the discourse. There is a fine line between giving credit to and including people of color and placing unwanted focus on them or forcing them to be part of the conversation (Blackwell, 2018).

*Awareness: The History and Context of Sexual Assault*

Not only did Twitter users share awareness of the history of the #MeToo movement, they also tweeted about the historical context of sexual assault and harassment more broadly. Many shared stories of previous generations of women, showing how sexual assault and harassment are not modern phenomena: “Even my grandmother was harassed as a teenager. It has to stop. And my grandmother was born in 1892.” Users posted both about the past and about the future. A number of women shared pictures of their daughters, or of themselves and their daughters, with captions such as: “let’s vow to use our voices & strength for our daughters & sisters. This stops now. Let’s trend: #NotHer.” The ability to use a combination of hashtags in one tweet, and so cross-index topics, was an important affordance that helped contextualize #MeToo in broader societal discussions, what Bonilla and Rosa (2015, p.6) call “the interdiscursive capacity to lasso accompanying texts and their indexical meanings as part of a frame.”

One user shared a tweet of herself and her daughter, standing together, with the mom’s shirt stating #MeToo and the daughter’s stating #Feminist (Figure 11). This tweet used multiple hashtags and mentions to contextualize #MeToo within the women’s movement, linking #MeToo with feminism, the more generic “resist,” as well as mentioning the specific account for the women’s march. It also visually linked #MeToo to the wider feminist movement in the two hashtags on the mom’s and daughter’s attire,



as well as visually showing the generational continuance of sexual assault and harassment in the photographic representation of two generations of women.



Figure 11. A tweet using various affordances of Twitter to connect #MeToo to broader social movements.

Beyond personal histories, many linked #MeToo to historical events highlighting sexual harassment, such as the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal. An interesting way of bringing this past event into the present was through users posting photos of old newspaper pages with headlines of the scandal from 1998 (Figure 12). This combination

of old media and new media literally placed the past in the current context. Further, because the newspaper front pages were from reputable legacy media, the posters automatically built credibility into their claims.



Figure 12. A tweet of a photo of a 1998 newspaper reporting on Bill Clinton’s impeachment following the Lewinsky scandal, contextualizing #MeToo within a historical context.

Historical context was also created through users tweeting URLs to news stories about the distant past and contextualizing them in the present #MeToo movement. For instance, *The Washington Post* published a story about a slave who murdered her abusive owner and users shared it widely, commenting how it was an early version of #MeToo reckoning. A number of articles were shared with black and white photos, for instance, of

women campaigning against sexual harassment in the early 1900s. Another photo that was shared frequently in media think pieces was that of Anita Hill testifying against Clarence Thomas. Miss Representation, an account for a non-profit organization advocating for fair representation of women in the media, tweeted a San Francisco Chronicle article, with a black and white photo of Hill (visually placing her in the past) with the headline “#MeToo – believing survivors of sexual abuse should always be trending.” Tweets actively linking images and words from the past to #MeToo on Twitter showed the importance of contextualizing issues like sexual assault and bringing awareness to the historical roots of the current movement. These showed how #MeToo and other hashtag feminist campaigns such as #YesAllWomen can be conceptualized “not simply as isolated contemporary phenomena but as long-standing systematic forms of violence ...” (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 10).

The ability to screenshot was another way that users brought history into the #MeToo conversation, as is seen in Figure 13. Here, the user used a screenshot of a Wikipedia page and used the cursor function to highlight a particular part of the page that talked about writer and activist Emma Goldman’s rape. The user then started a thread, commenting on her initial status, explicitly stating how the current movement should highlight the experiences of women from the past who could not write #MeToo for themselves, by using the hashtag #HerToo. Through uses of the hashtag #HerToo and #NotHer alongside #MeToo, users not only spread awareness of the problem to wider society, but also provided support both to future and past generations who were not taking part in this current moment.

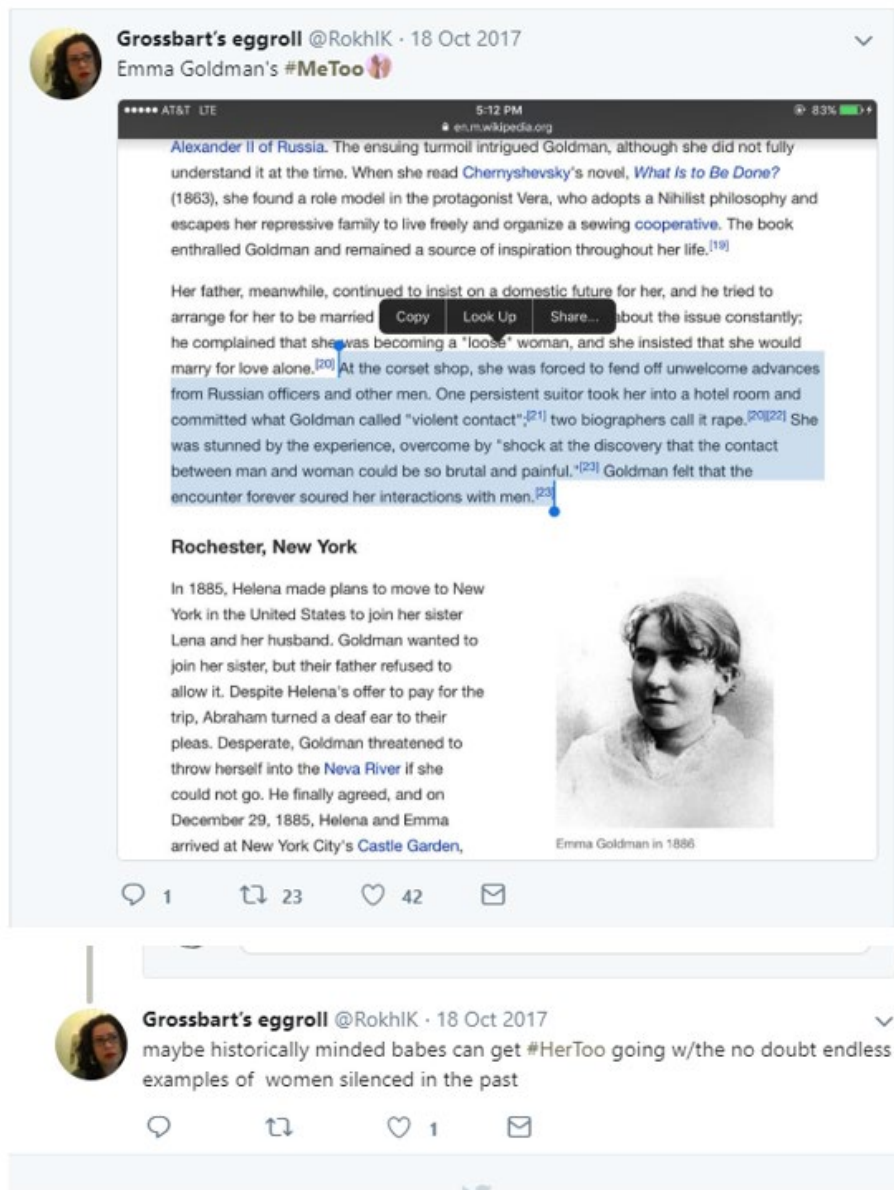


Figure 13. Tweeting screenshots of Wikipedia and highlighting were used to contextualize the #MeToo movement historically.

### *Dismantling the Status Quo: Challenging Rape Myths*

Not only was #MeToo used to spread awareness of the scope and historical context of sexual assault and harassment, the movement was also used to challenge pervasive myths of rape culture, such as justifying men's bad behavior with "boys will be boys" and victim-blaming women, for instance, by focusing on what they were wearing during their assault. Many users criticized how the discourse focused on survivors and instead called for the creation of new hashtags to flip the focus onto perpetrators of sexual harassment and assault and make them accountable: "So there's #MeToo, but I'd also like to have a hashtag where men admit to harassing and abusing women. Cause for every me there's a he." One user suggested "instead of calling it #ViolenceAgainstWomen we start calling it #MaleViolence;" yet others suggested #HimThough and #IDidThat. Thus, the low-level affordance of using multiple hashtags in one post brought attention to the multiple actors involved in cases of assault and harassment.

The difficulty that sexual assault and harassment victims experienced in being believed was a frequent topic of #MeToo conversation. One user tweeted how she was "tired of having to prove that it happens...why is it so hard to just believe women?!" The response to this tweet was: "Because sometimes they lie." Libertarian journalist John Ziegler expanded on this, "Gee, I wonder if this #MeToo hashtag might facilitate some false accusations & culture which creates more wrongful convictions" #ScaryStuff." To counter this common criticism of the movement—that automatically believing victims opens up the opportunity for increased false accusations—people shared statistics and

links to studies. One user posted: “false accusations of rape are between 2-8%. The same as every other felony. Only 3% of rapists spend a day in jail #MeToo.” Another question often asked of #MeToo posters was “why didn’t your report it?” One user answered this question by sharing a link to a study that found 75% of women who report sexual harassment in the workplace are punished. Organizations took part in the discourse, providing easy-to-follow arguments using graphics, tables, and statistics, that supported the need to believe victims, as shown in Figure 14.



Figure 14. Some organizations used graphics and statistics to spread the #MeToo message.

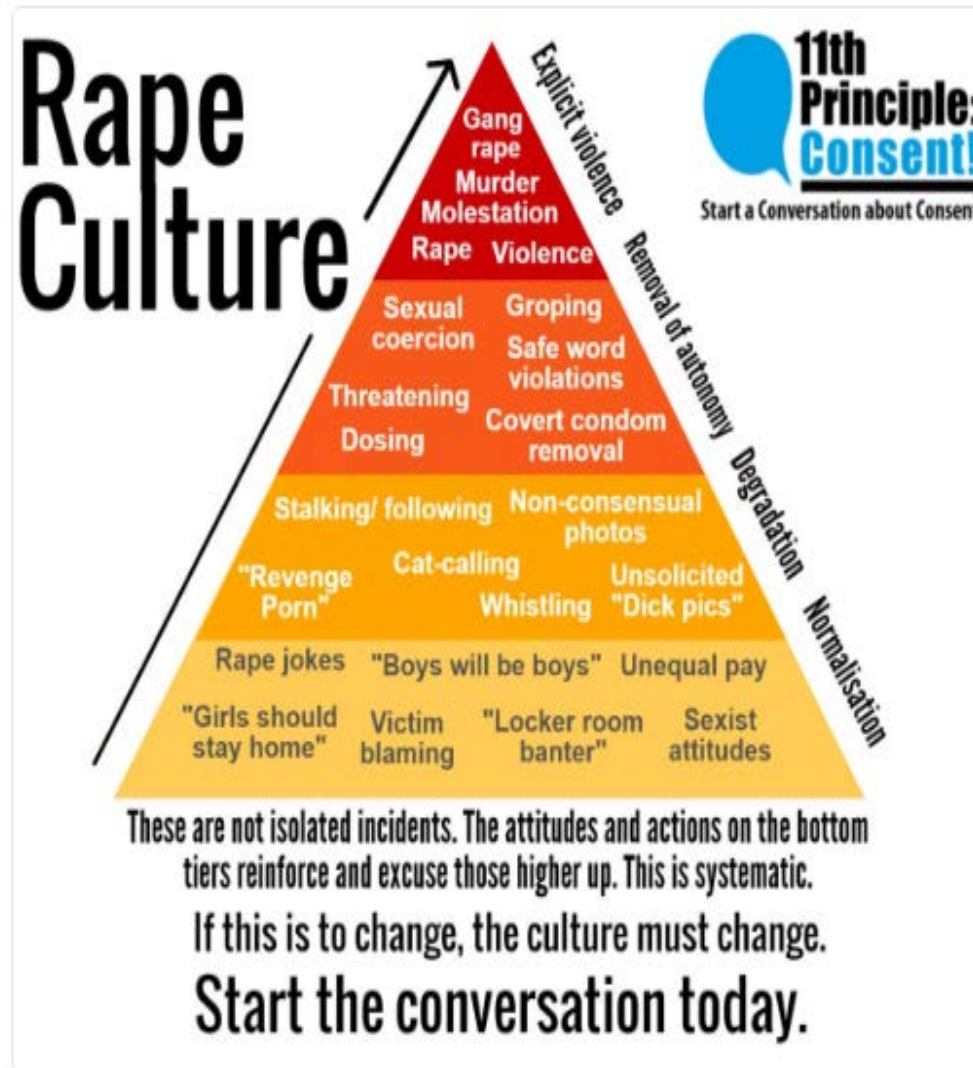
Many users also shared URLs to news stories and opinion pieces about rape culture and broader power structures that propagate sexual harassment and assault, challenging the myth that rape is in its own category of crime, separate from more “minor” harassment and gender relations in society. One piece shared widely with the hashtag #MeToo was from *The Washington Post*: “Perspective “What school dress codes have to do with Harvey Weinstein, sexual harassment and abuse.” Often these pieces were shared with personal commentary, such as “Don’t be afraid to call out “little” things.” Graphics and images were also useful as visual education aids in blurring the boundaries between rape and more “minor” violations. For instance, the pyramid graphic in Figure 15 visually shows how certain normalized behaviors and attitudes prop up sexual violence.

Some tweets focused on exposing mainstream media’s role in the propagation of an ideology that supports rape culture, for instance, in criticizing how media report on sexual assault. Users engaged multiple affordances of Twitter for this purpose. One user uploaded a picture of a physical newspaper’s “Letters to the Editor” page, where a letter writer pointed out the use of euphemisms and biased language that led to victim blaming in an earlier article in that paper about a child sex offender. The poster wrote “In the wake of #MeToo, the media have responsibility for the way they report sexual assault & violence against women.” The posting of the original letter allowed for a more nuanced argument than would be possible in 140 characters, as well as highlighting that this has been a problem in media historically, not just in the digital age. Another user juxtaposed two *Time* magazine covers, one of Hugh Hefner and one of Harvey Weinstein, writing “does it seem strange that our society wants to celebrate ‘the life & contributions’ of one



**The Techno Hall of Fame** @liamsanagan · 16 Oct 2017

If you know someone who is a total creep around women, talk to him now. Send him this image. It's a start. #MeToo 🙋



2 10 13

Figure 15. A tweeted graphic showing how rape culture is normalized.



and act shocked at the actions of the other? #hypocrisy [sic] #objectifyingwomen #metoo.” This tweet provided visual evidence of the different treatment of two men, both problematically powerful over women’s bodies, in the same magazine; this tweet explicitly linked the normalization of sexualization of women with sexual harassment, using celebrities and a well-known magazine to make the point. *Intersectional Contestations: Who is #MeToo for?*

One frequent point of debate in the #MeToo discourse was “who is this hashtag for,” particularly around gender. In her original tweet, Milano appealed to *women* specifically, writing “If all the women who had been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too’ as a status...,” thus interpellating (Althusser, 1971) female users explicitly. Indeed, #MeToo on social media and in the news focused largely on women’s experiences of sexual assault and harassment. The gendered aspect combined with the normality of assault was captured by this tweet: “It’s part of being female on this planet 😞”

However, as the movement unfolded, many users started highlighting that sexual assault and abuse is not just a women’s issue: “It can happen to male or female. Any age, any outfit, any circumstance. Abusers could be your family I know, because it happened to #MeToo.” Another user tweeted “sexual assault can happen to men and women by men and women. #MeToo includes #MenToo.” Users also highlighted that not only can men be victims, but that women can be abusers. Some tweets moved the conversation beyond the gender binary, to be more inclusive of all genders: “#MeToo. I hesitated. ‘women & men’ dominating this discourse but non-binary people face sexual assault &

we're often invisible. We're here." These types of contestations dispelled the myth that sexual harassment and assault only happen to women.

However, the evidence shows that the majority of sexual harassment and assault does indeed happen to women ("Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics," n.d), i.e., that self-identifying or being identified as a woman exponentially increases the risk of being sexually assaulted. A number of users defended the movement's focus on the "specific misogynistic component to rape culture, from harassment to assault" while not dismissing the experiences of male and non-binary victims of assault. Activists frequently shared statistics to reassert the necessity of focusing on *women* as victims of sexual harassment and assault such as: "90% of assault and rape victims are female."

Beyond gender, intersectionality was a recurrent focus in the #MeToo discourse. Many criticized the use of the hashtag as being exclusionary in focusing on the experiences of straight, white, middle-class or wealthy women. Users shared their own stories, as well as stories from the mainstream media, that showed how different groups of people experience sexual assault and harassment differently. For instance, a number of people pointed out that members of the LGBTQ community (male, female, and non-binary) experience higher rates of violent assault than straight people. Others highlighted how women of color, particularly in poorer communities, are even less likely to have their stories of sexual assault believed. Through such contestations, the Twitter community inserted the experiences of a wide range of underrepresented individuals into the discourse, amplifying the intersectional ethos of the fourth wave. However, some scholars have argued that "the brevity" of Twitter as a format is not "the best platform for nuanced analysis" of intersectional concerns (Rivers, 2017, p.123), and instead here

intersectionality can be used to “signal a hierarchy of oppressions, which are presented as static and fixed, suggesting that factors such as race, class, sexuality, and gender are not intersecting, but are in fact competing” (Rivers, 2017, p.123).

#### Information and Resources: Moving Beyond Discourse

The #MeToo hashtag, combined with various low-level affordances of Twitter, was also regularly used to provide practical information and resources (moving beyond discourse) both to victims and to society more broadly. Many individuals and organizations shared contact numbers for helplines for The National Sexual Assault Hotline and for organizations such as RAINN. When survivors shared #MeToo and voiced their desire for practical resources to help them, others commented on their statuses, offering self-help solutions, such as reading a particular book or self-care tips. Frequently, organizations shared links to resources related to that organization that would be useful for specific populations of victims. For instance, Surrey Police shared a page from their site titled “Stalking and harassment: Advice for victims who are being or at risk of stalking or harassment [sic].” The US Olympic Team released a statement: “The USOC is supportive of the people identifying with #MeToo, and wishes to remind Olympic and Paralympic Movement athletes that they can report sexual misconduct to the U.S. Center for SafeSport, safesport.org.” The New Mexico Secretary of State tweeted how “victims who feel unsafe” should enroll in “a program that allows victims to use a fictitious address to avoid attackers,” along with a link to the details of the program.

One user, Kaivan Shroff, founder of Millennial Democrats, started a popular “resource thread.” This thread included resources such as the number for the National Sexual Assault Hotline (written in bold between two bright red telephone emoji); a URL

to a page by Equal Rights Advocates detailing “Sexual Harassment at Work” – which included a PDF document of a “Know Your Rights” guide; another URL to tips from RAINN (the nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization) on how to talk to survivors of sexual assault; and another URL linking to best practices for journalists writing about sexual assault. This thread used multiple affordances – such as the ability to share URLs, to post images, and to use emoji –to provide collated practical help (rather than emotional support) to both survivors and to society at large.

Through the feature of direct messaging (DM) that allows Twitter users to talk directly to each other in private, survivors shared names of perpetrators if they were not comfortable sharing them publicly as their status. This was particularly useful for specific industries and specific projects, where an original #MeToo poster would give away just enough details that people in that particular industry would be aware that there was a possible sexual harasser in their midst. They could then DM the poster to find out the name of the person, so they could avoid them. This use of Twitter was similar to how women in private Facebook groups for professionals (see Chapter 4) used these groups to share names of harassers with each other in private spaces. Thus, social media can serve as a practical early warning system for women, allowing them to theoretically avoid harassers.

Organizations and individuals both shared information about events that might be of interest to the #MeToo community, such as The Women’s Convention and National Vigil for Survivors of Campus Sexual Assault. One user posted an open invitation to a “zine jam” at a theater to “talk, listen, create & together #speakout” about the #MeToo

movement and abuses of power in the theater industry. A couple of weeks later she posted the finished product, as seen in Figure 16:



Figure 16. A tweet of a physical copy of a #MeToo zine.




Showing a photo of the physical product of the zine highlighted how #MeToo was not just “slacktivism” but in fact had tangible results. The call to “DM if you’re interested” presented a resource for others to have access to the zine. Tweets like this digitally located dispersed people and brought them together offline, showing how “face-to-face and digital forms of activism work in interrelated and aggregative ways” (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p.10).


Users also shared practical information on what individuals could do to change society at large. Some shared petitions, for example, the Green Party in the UK tweeted that because of #MeToo they had started a petition to make misogyny a hate crime and asked users to sign the petition. Amy Siskind, an activist and writer, shared a list of actions that men could “pledge” to do to help combat rape culture (Figure 17). This tweet used multiple affordances that lead to feminist outcomes –the hashtag #WithYou to show support, a suggestion to retweet (RT) to amplify the message and pledge support, the ability to post images and, in that way, share suggestions for men to follow in many more words than the 140-character limit.

However, a number of accounts shared resources that were ostensibly for survivors but were in fact co-opting the #MeToo movement to sell products and/or troll users. One link that appeared on multiple #MeToo threads was a URL to “cheap abortion drugs for victims of #MeToo.”<sup>17</sup> Another frequent post was the one shown in Figure 18, selling surveillance cameras. Tweets like this illustrate how political movements in general and feminism in particular, are becoming increasingly commodified, diluting the power of collective action for social change (Zeisler, 2016).

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<sup>17</sup> It is hard to discern whether this is a real link or a scam without clicking on the link –and exposing oneself to the possible virus of the link, so I chose not to do this.

 **Amy Siskind**    
@Amy\_Siskind Follow

Shared by a guy friend on my FB page in reaction to [#MeToo](#) .

Hoping guys here can read & RT to signal their sign-on to this pledge.

[#WithYou](#)


This "me too" movement of women who have been assaulted or harassed posting "me too" has really lit up my feed, dozens and dozens of my friends & family breaking the silence. I'm sure all decent men are wondering what they can do. Here is my suggestion:

Men: it is your turn. Time to step up and have the courage to pledge to do your part. Here is your pledge:

I pledge

- never to pressure or coerce any woman into sex
- never to keep going when she is not into it
- never to use any sort of power differential to bully or harass a woman sexually
- never to touch any woman without her enthusiastic consent
- never to try to get a woman drunk/drugged
- never to stand by while other men do any of these things
- never to make/laugh at rape jokes
- never to defend or minimize rape or sexual assault
- never to watch or defend pornography that advocates violence/degradation.
- never to attend strip clubs or hire prostitutes
- never to blame rape survivors, ask what they were wearing, question their veracity, or paint accused rapists as victims
- never to talk about women owing men sex for any reason
- never to use the term "rape bait" to describe a woman
- never to whistle or shout come-ons at women I see in public, tell women to smile, comment on the appearance of women
- If I am a "leader" & I am informed of a rape on my premises, never fail to report it to my superiors.
- If I am a "leader" or a pastor, never fail to provide therapy/pastoral care to the victim and their family.
- If I am a "leader" or a pastor, never direct other leaders/clergy to deny

9:25 AM - 17 Oct 2017

**2,166** Retweets **3,089** Likes 





 254  2.2K  3.1K 

Figure 17. Using different affordances of Twitter, including hashtags, retweets, and screenshots to pledge support for #MeToo.

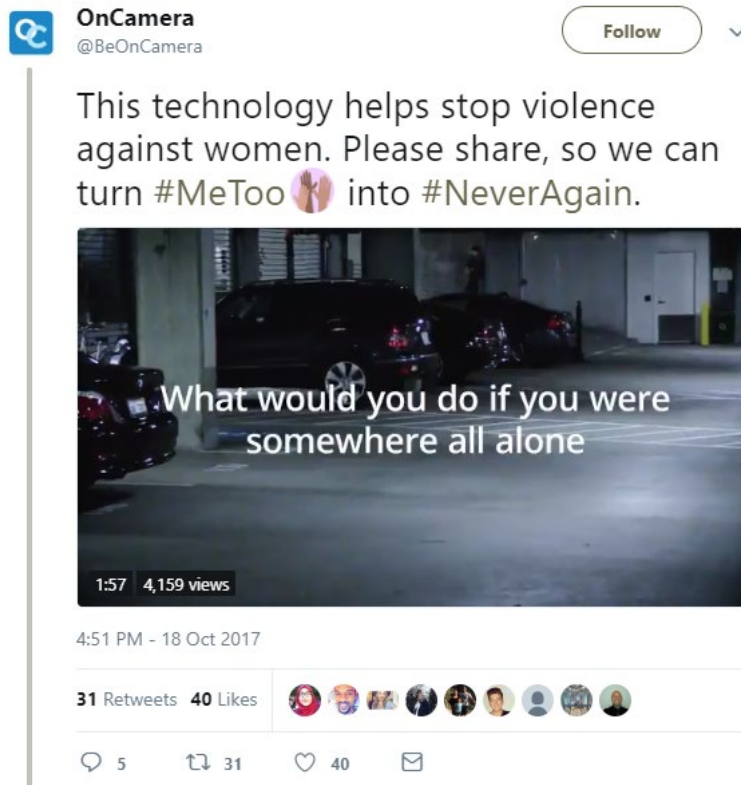


Figure 18. Co-opting the #MeToo movement to sell surveillance cameras.

### Conclusion

This chapter outlines how the various low-level affordances (such as the ability to post images, “like,” comment, and retweet) as well as the high-level affordances (visibility, connectivity, anonymity) of Twitter shaped the #MeToo discourse, resulting in four feminist outcomes: 1) *empowerment and expression*, 2) *support and solidarity* 3) *societal awareness* and; 4) *information/resource sharing*. These feminist outcomes occur both at the individual and collective level, showing how the personal and political intertwine through everyday use of social media.



However, there are a number of limitations to the use of Twitter for feminist outcomes in the #MeToo movement. Firstly, not surprisingly, the same affordances that allowed for feminist outcomes also provided opportunities for trolling survivors and derailing the movement. Frequently, users would comment on posts detailing horrific rape stories with such dismissive comments as “lol. You got raped.” Others wrote their own dismissively “joking” #MeToo statuses, such as “#metoo and it was hot” and “Just molested myself, as I was feeling left out #MeToo” One user posted the following image (Figure in an attempt to victim blame (insinuating that only young, conventionally attractive women are harassed). Examples like this illustrate how “popular feminism” is met with an increase in “popular misogyny” in digital spaces (Banet-Weiser, 2015).



Figure 19. Trolling #MeToo survivors with victim-blaming rhetoric.

Secondly, access and reach are barriers to Twitter's possibilities for everyday feminist activism. Not everyone has the same access to the internet in the first place (for example, those living in rural areas, those who do not have the finances to purchase computers, etc.). Moreover, those that have easy access to the internet may not use certain social media platforms. For instance, only 24 percent of US adults use Twitter (compared to 68 percent that use Facebook) (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Thus, the usefulness of Twitter as a platform for feminist practices is limited because of its limited user base. As a case in point, in the first 24 hours after Milano's tweet, half a million people tweeted #MeToo – but Facebook revealed that 12 million posts and comments went up on its site in that same time period (“More than 12M “Me Too” Facebook posts, comments, reactions in 24 hours,” 2017). Future studies might compare the affordances of multiple social media platforms using hashtags for social change.

This research illustrates Twitter's evolution as a medium, from a primarily text-based platform to a fully multi-media format, which has implications for hashtag feminism. In particular, the increased range of features and functionalities of Twitter allows for the building of *credibility* and providing *evidence* in sexual assault and harassment narratives. Whether through victims sharing screenshots of uncomfortable text conversations, through verified, established organizations tweeting support for survivors, or through activists posting graphics of sexual assault statistics, Twitter mediates sexual harassment and assault discourse, rendering it ultimately *more believable* than it has been historically. The specific materiality of platforms is important to consider in research on digital social movements, because, although “social media is not the

movement itself... it certainly amplifies and clarifies the work of organizers and offers a mean for disrupting the silences and erasures” (Tynes et al., 2016, p. 37).

This case study of #MeToo discourse also empirically sketches two particular features of fourth wave of feminism. First, the fourth wave on digital media pays robust attention to intersectional concerns. The #MeToo discourse on Twitter was flooded with explicit references to the varied experiences of different individuals, showing how feminist activism in the digital age is increasingly addressing exclusionary critiques from the history of the women’s movement.

Secondly, this study shows how digital media is being effectively used in everyday settings to disrupt dominant structures of power. Faludi (2017) critiqued the #MeToo movement in her article “The Patriarchs Are Falling. The Patriarchy Is Stronger Than Ever,” questioning the value of hashtag activism in challenging structures and system. However, this sample of tweets shows how the millions of expressions of #MeToo on Twitter raised awareness of sexual assault and harassment and challenged rape culture myths, creating “erosive social change” (Vivienne, 2016, p. 1) and challenging patriarchal values. This study shows how social media is used for “everyday politics,” highlighting how feminism does not need to be organized, overt, or explicitly political to create positive social change.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

#### “THE LITTLE CHANGES AND THE LITTLE EMPOWERMENTS MAKE A BIGGER PICTURE”

##### Summary

My interest in this dissertation has been developing for years, as I was noticing more and more discussions of feminism, social justice, gender inequality, and women’s empowerment in my own daily conversations and in news stories, popular media, and online. It struck me that this swelling tide of feminist sentiment was often part of everyday, mundane conversations and practices rather than explicit feminist organizing or activism. I decided that I wanted to study this everyday feminism by ordinary people (not activists, politicians, celebrities, etc.), and I selected social media as a site to study because of its ubiquity and embeddedness in our daily lives (Baym, 2010). I focused on the materiality of these technologies and user interactions on these platforms, to answer these questions: What is the role of social media –and particularly their affordances – in contemporary feminism? What is new about the fourth wave and how does technology affect this “newness”?

This research presented three case studies of everyday use of social media, placed on a continuum from private to public, examining interpersonal (Bumble), group (Facebook), and mass communication (Twitter). Bumble, the “feminist” dating app provides women with more control during their dating interactions and allows for the challenging of gendered dating norms through women initiating conversations. Bumble

also provides women with a toolkit of affordances that they can strategically use to maintain personal safety while searching for partners. However, this “negotiated use” (Shaw, 2017) means that women who use online dating partake in vast amounts of additional, invisible labor. Further, the onus is on individual women to seek safety, rather than the app challenging the broader system of patriarchy that enables sexual harassment of women, troubling the notion of Bumble as a “feminist” app. Private Facebook groups for women professionals are used as 1) a women’s version of the “old boys’ clubs,” for networking, career resources, and virtual professional community; 2) safe spaces for women and gender non-conforming people to share their voices online; and 3) mediated consciousness-raising platforms for offline action. However, these groups serve only *some* women, excluding others based on race, age, class, sexuality, geography, and sex. Twitter, as evidenced in the case study of the #MeToo movement, serves as a unique mediator of digital everyday feminism. Twitter affords four feminist outcomes, tied directly to its materiality, in the discourse of sexual harassment and assault: 1) *empowerment and expression* for individual survivors; 2) *support and solidarity* by allies; 3) *societal awareness* of the issue, including providing context and facilitating debate; and; 4) *information/resource sharing* for actions beyond social media. However, the same affordances that Twitter provides for feminist outcomes are used as part of the #MeToo movement in distinctly anti-feminist ways, for instance, through the trolling of survivors using the hashtag.

This study contributes to the understandings of the complex role of social media in contemporary feminism. These three case studies outline empirically how *everyday* uses of social media, such as dating, connecting with colleagues, and blogging about

everyday experiences, intersect with feminist politics. While not discounting the valid critiques of social media—including privacy issues and data collection (e.g. Shaw, 2014), online harassment (e.g. Duggan, 2017), and digital labor by users (e.g. Duffy, 2017)—this research shows how social media can and do provide affordances for feminist practices as a “contemporary social movement... [that is] intimately interweaved with *everyday life and individual experience*” (Melucci, 1996, p. 9, emphasis added). Further, this research challenges critiques of social media activism as “slacktivism” (Christensen, 2011), showing how social media use can lead to tangible feminist outcomes. Everyday feminism on social media leads to changes for both individuals and collectively, illustrating how the fourth wave is complex and contradictory, encompassing values and issues of previous waves as well as postfeminism.

#### What is the Role of Social Media in Contemporary Feminism?

The key finding of this research is the detailing of how social media platforms are *tools* which provide a variety of low-level and high-level affordances for everyday feminist practices and outcomes that strive towards the feminist goal of ending sexist oppression. Crucially, new media does not create a new feminism, per se; rather, it is a *tool* for “old” feminist practices. Perhaps most importantly, social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, provide opportunities for solidarity and connection between women, so they can learn from each other and help each other, allowing for a network of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988). For instance, private Facebook groups allow women at various levels of seniority in specific industries to connect with each other for mentorship and career development opportunities, while the #MeToo hashtag connects survivors of sexual assault with a caring audience for support and encouragement.

### *Intersectional Feminism on Social Media*

Social media platforms also provide the potential for the engagement of intersectional concerns and for creating a more inclusionary contemporary feminism; “the public nature of the web and technological infrastructures that enable virality have introduced new possibilities for... the centering of women most at the margins (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2019). For example, the #MeToo hashtag brings public awareness to intersectional differences between survivors of sexual assault. Marginalized women create their own secret Facebook groups, a necessary safe space of their own (Blackwell, 2018). However, just because this *potential* exists in the form of technological affordances, it is important to recognize that marginalized people may perceive certain online spaces as not “for” them. So, some people may choose to not use some digital spaces due to the hegemonic power structures that these spaces are seen to represent—whiteness, heteronormativity, cisgender identity, and middle-class values (Blackmon, 2007).

In addition, social media access is not available to all equally, for instance poor, less educated women in rural areas are much less likely to use social media, limiting its potential for an inclusive feminist project (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Further, the social media apps studied here were all created in the U.S., and this U.S.-centered focus is reflected in both design and content (for example, how the biggest secret Facebook groups for professional women are based in the U.S. and so provide job opportunities only to those living in the U.S.). This leads to cultural exclusions based on geography, regardless of the affordances available to physically connect with people across the globe (Eckert, 2018).

There also exists the potential of using social media, and particularly its affordance of “publicness” (presenting a broad audience to users), in simply paying lip service to intersectionality in feminist practices; as Rivers (2017, p. 151) cautions: “the fourth-wave solution to practicing ‘proper’ feminism has been to label one’s feminism as ‘intersectional’ and move swiftly forward, frequently without engaging prior or existent feminist debate or indeed attending to the particularities of intersecting identities and experiences.” So even though social media affordances *can* be used to bring the “margins to the center,” (hooks, 1984) it does not mean that they always will, or that they will effectively.

### *Digital Misogyny and Anti-Feminism*

One of my participants, Carrie, noted that “social media has the ability to do good, but I also think it has the ability to take us backwards” in terms of feminism. Indeed, this research highlights how social media can be used for *both* feminist and anti-feminist practices, showing how “online spaces remain a double-edged sword for women” (Eckert, 2017, p. 1284). Social media platforms such as Bumble, Facebook, and Twitter act as mediators, providing key affordances that can be used strategically for everyday feminist actions and outcomes. At the same time, however, these same platforms enable new strategies for digital harassment and popular misogyny, exposing marginalized users to harm (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Shaw, 2014.) Bumble exposes women to myriad strangers who can harass them using the platform’s affordances, such as sending unsolicited “dick pics,” despite the “women talking first” feature built into the technology for women’s protection. Facebook, through its closed and secret group options, also allows for misogynists, racists, and homophobes to create private spaces



where they can share hateful rhetoric and strengthen their stereotypical beliefs towards underrepresented groups. Trolls on Twitter use the same hashtags that are used to spread awareness and support for sexual assault survivors to mock and harass them. As Rivers (2017, p. 115) writes “if social media is being hailed as a possible format for new forms of feminist activism, then abusing women until they no longer engage via this medium becomes an effective tool for silencing feminists.” The fourth wave, then, is characterized by both feminist resistance and anti-feminist backlash using the same affordances of social media platforms.

#### *Individual and Collective Politics on Social Media*

Social media affordances can be materialized for women’s individual empowerment as women negotiate their uses of digital technologies in specifically gendered ways. For example, women use the low-level affordances of Bumble dating strategically to minimize their experiences of harassment on the app. Others use Twitter to cathartically express their #MeToo stories. Further, through social media use, women frequently become empowered to take offline action. Reporting of sexual assault has drastically increased and has been attributed to #MeToo (Chiwaya, 2018). Indeed, many of my interviewees explained how private Facebook groups for professional purposes were used to talk about sexual harassers in certain industries and to make decisions about whether and how to go public with these accusations, including how to formally lodge complaints. Women who used Bumble for dating also said the #MeToo movement emboldened them to report harassment, on the app and in real life, from romantic partners. Empowerment, choice, and agency are typically associated with postfeminism, which has been vigorously critiqued as limiting the potential of the feminist project (Gill,

2007; McRobbie, 2009; Rivers, 2017). Arguably, even though women felt encouraged to formally report sexual harassment and assault through their use of social media, these actions did not directly dismantle the patriarchal culture that supports sexual harassment in the first place nor tangibly change the experiences of women as a group right there and then.

However, it seems to me, particularly after talking to many women about contemporary feminism during the course of this research, that as long as empowerment narratives do not overshadow the need for collective politics, as long as structural inequalities are acknowledged and women still work together to chip away at the patriarchal system, and as long as empowerment initiatives consider the needs and experiences of different women, there is value in the embracing of individual empowerment as *part* of the feminist movement to end sexist oppression. After all, the personal is political and individual actions and benefits work in tandem with collective action to reduce gender inequality. Such everyday, individualized activism contributes to “‘erosive social change’: changes in attitude that take place slowly over extended time frames, profoundly reshaping social norms as they diffuse among networked publics” (Vivienne, 2016, p. 1). Challenging gendered, ingrained structures of power - “the tearing of small rips in what is considered possible in the current constellation” (Macgilchrist & Bomig, 2012, p. 89) – even if slowly, rip by rip, person by person, is still beneficial to the wider feminist project in the long run.

Further, social media is certainly not only about individual empowerment; social media affordances are frequently deployed for everyday feminist practices that benefit women collectively. For instance, sharing pay information across industries in secret

Facebook groups effectively allowed dispersed workers to “unionize” in demanding higher wages. Also, the #MeToo movement brought a general awareness to the public of the ubiquity of sexual harassment and challenged hegemonic understandings of rape culture. Some organizations even shared petitions using the hashtag to enact changes in law triggered by the outpouring of #MeToo stories. And so everyday social media use supports collective feminist politics.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to the everyday use of social media for the feminist project. Firstly, as Cirucci (2018) points out, interactions on social media platforms are “*always labor.*” For instance, women partake in emotional labor by liking, commenting, and posting in private Facebook groups—labor that is not required of men who have naturalized access to supportive career networks and opportunities in their offline lives. Similarly, women who use Bumble strategically to avoid “creeps” also engage in substantial invisible labor—the labor of figuring out and manipulating the app settings to “protect” themselves during all aspects of use. Thus, everyday feminist practices require vast amounts of invisible labor by women. Relatedly, the user-generated content on social media platforms that requires this labor provides valuable data—and related financial gain—for the companies that own these platforms. And so, the feminist project, through everyday practices on social media, is in some ways commodified and antithetically upholds capitalist structures.

#### So, What is New About the Fourth Wave?

These findings point to two core features of the fourth wave that ostensibly distinguish it from previous waves of the women’s movement, beyond its focus on the digital and intersectionality. Firstly, contemporary feminism is *embedded* in women’s

daily lives, precisely because of the ubiquitous daily use of digital technologies. And so, feminist practices in the fourth wave are also those that are subtle, *everyday*, diffused, and not necessarily labeled as feminist by those partaking in them, but that still do important social justice work. Secondly, the fourth wave is a complex amalgamation of previous waves, encompassing *both* the individual empowerment rhetoric of the third wave and postfeminism, and a renewed interest in collective feminist action of earlier waves. Of course, as noted earlier, the division of the waves into “collective second wave” and “individual third wave” is reductive and artificial, as, in reality, the women’s movement has always encompassed fighting simultaneously for changes in individual lives and in social structures. For instance, the slogan “the personal is political” – stressing the need to consider individual experiences in political action—emerged during the second wave. Furthermore, it is in practice difficult to disentangle the two – individual change by many often leads to structural change at a broader level and of course structural changes impact individuals. One of my participants, Courtney, explained her view on contemporary feminist politics, with its interconnectivity between individual and collective as well as personal and political, as such:

I think living is political. We always act within a system, and our actions influence that system: whether that is consumer capitalism, the patriarchy, etc., there are always hierarchies of power at work. As a feminist, I see my role as *disturbing these structures through my actions and interactions with the world*, whether that is choosing to buy a more eco-friendly brand, engaging in self-care, writing letters to government, choosing to interact in spaces that promote and enhance voices that are traditionally undercut by power... (emphasis added)

Perhaps because “there are many feminisms that are shaped through organized activism, collective action, and individual empowerment” (Rivers, 2017, p. 122), then, rather than

declaring what is specifically new about this fourth wave, this research illustrates the value of rethinking the wave metaphor. For instance, Hewitt's (2012) recasting of the wave metaphor as radio waves is a conceptual model that allows for different feminisms –including different issues, focus, and practices –to exist simultaneously. Along a similar vein, Rivers (2017, p. 22) envisions the women's movement as a wave over time (rather than separate waves); “rolling back as often as it rolls forward, gaining strength from what it brings with it rather than losing momentum due to what it leaves behind.”

The issues of the movement to end sexist oppression, to promote the interests of women, and to reduce gender inequality remain largely the same at the core. Social media provides new *tools* for doing feminism, particularly in everyday activities. One of the primary ways in which social media is shaping contemporary feminism is not through specific feminist practices, but simply through spreading awareness of the *need* for feminism, challenging the postfeminist myth that equality has been reached. As Rivers (2017, p. 135) writes “the two most cited influences of the fourth wave are a growing disillusionment with the rhetoric of postfeminism and a dawning realization of the social, political, and cultural inequalities still faced by many women.” This research empirically exemplifies how women –whether self-identifying as feminists or not –are becoming increasingly aware of “gender as a restriction of possibility” (Ahmed, 2017, p.7), how gender has material negative effects in their lives. Ahmed (2017, p. 12) contends that feminist living includes “how we work with, as well as on, our hunches, those senses that something is amiss, not quite right, which are part of ordinary living and a starting point for so much critical work.” Importantly, much of this awareness of “something amiss” spreads online; as one of my participants, Courtney, noted when asked about

contemporary gender inequality: “I think now there is a clear need for more [feminist work], I think things are becoming more transparent in general because of the internet.”

Of course, this renewed awareness of gender inequality must be placed in context. I started collecting data for this research in October 2017, around the time the #MeToo movement started and one year into the presidency of Donald Trump in the U.S. Since Trump was elected, discussions of sexual harassment (including accusations against the president), sexism, misogyny, and women’s rights and issues have spiked in the public sphere. This era has also brought a marked increase activism and resistance, particularly by underrepresented groups, in the form of marches, petitions, and other organizing for social justice. The overall increased awareness of gender inequality and a sense of urgency in fighting for social justice was prevalent throughout my collection of data. My participants noted frequently how they felt that “societally-speaking it’s a very unique time in history.”

This awareness by participants of gender as a shaping force in their lives, often in negative ways, was present throughout my research. Female users of Bumble have resigned themselves to using the platform’s features strategically to minimize possible harassment and assault and are aware that men on online dating have a different experience. Women who choose to become part of private Facebook groups for career purposes do so deliberately, because they are aware of gender discrimination at work and a lack of career development opportunities offline in their fields. The #MeToo discourse on Twitter was littered with evidence supporting the argument for focusing on the specific *misogynistic* component of sexual assault and rape culture, and recognizing that women are disproportionately affected by sexual violence. So, even though I personally

subscribe to the belief that gender is a social construct, is performative, and is best understood as a spectrum (Butler, 2004), this dissertation demonstrates how the gender binary persists as a normative system of gender classification in society and further how women (whether self-identified or assigned this identity by others) are materially disadvantaged in this system. Thus, the need for feminism as a movement against sexist oppression, with gender as its core issue, remains –and this message can be spread effectively using social media.

This study also sheds light on how social media is just *one* tool in the contemporary feminist toolkit, despite the foregrounding of the digital in discussions of the fourth wave (Cochrane, 2013; Rivers, 2017). Social media practices, such as the sharing of #MeToo stories on Twitter, sit alongside offline practices, such as reporting sexual harassment formally. Not only do online and offline everyday feminist practices work in tandem, but women’s issues, such as sexual harassment in dating, are, too, “enmeshed online *and* offline” (Eckert, 2018, p. 1297). For instance, women who use Bumble in strategic ways to minimize their risk of harm from strangers similarly amend their offline actions to try stay safe (for example, scoping out the exits at a dating venue). Further, social media platforms are not used in isolation from each other or from mainstream media. The fact that #MeToo was brought up repeatedly, unprompted, throughout my interviews about Bumble and Facebook illustrates how social media and legacy media constantly work together in a vast media ecology.

## Limitations and Future Directions

A significant limitation of this research is the white, cisgender, straight, and middle-class identity of the majority of the interview participants (despite efforts to recruit a more diverse sample). Future research should focus specifically on digital intersectional spaces, such as professional Facebook groups for Black/queer/trans women, examining how underrepresented groups use these spaces in different ways to the hegemonic culture of social media spaces studied in this dissertation. In addition, this research focuses largely on the English-speaking Global North (U.S.A., England, Canada, and New Zealand) because of my location in the U.S. and the use of snowball sampling. It would be valuable to extend this research to other cultural contexts, to understand how transnational everyday feminist practices intersect with social media use.

It would also be interesting to speak with men about their understandings of and experiences of contemporary feminism; as hooks (2015) points out, men should be involved in feminism as a movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression, because it affects them too. It would be particularly fruitful to speak with male users of Bumble, to understand if and how this “feminist” app impacts their everyday experiences of online dating.

The methods used in this dissertation could be combined with other ways of gathering data, to present more holistic understandings of the role of social media in contemporary feminism. For example, Cirucci (2017) highlights the importance of speaking with designers when studying affordances, to understand what she calls “three-pronged negotiation” (p. 2) between users, material artefacts, and designers. Thus, speaking to the designers and developers of Bumble regarding their ideal (“dominant”)



perceived uses for the app would be a useful context to apply to the user experience interviews of women who use Bumble. It would also be helpful to be able to analyze the actual content in secret Facebook groups for professional women—though of course there are ethical issues in using “secret” spaces for research that will be accessed publicly. Finally, alongside analyzing tweets, speaking with those who tweeted #MeToo could yield productive insights into the motivations for taking part in the movement, as well as the “vernacular affordances” (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015) of Twitter as a medium in the fourth wave.

While remaining cautious and even critical of social media’s potential for everyday feminism, this research shows empirically how social media *can* be used for everyday feminist politics. Much research on feminism in the digital age focuses on formal activism by people and organizations calling themselves feminists. This research illustrates how “not all feminist movement is so easily detected” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 3; see also Schuster, 2013); instead, feminist action in the digital age can be more diffuse, smaller, “like ripples in water, a small wave, possibly created by agitation from the weather; here, there, each movement making another possible, another ripple, outward, reaching” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 3). The affordances of social media provide both possibilities and constraints for individual women and for the feminist movement more broadly. On the one hand, social media platforms, while not without their problems for the feminist project (and beyond), ultimately “offer the *potential* or opportunity to build feminist communities across social, cultural, and global boundaries, and create feminisms that are nuanced, representative, and effective in establishing political and cultural change” (Rivers, 2017, p. 128). On the other hand, users have some agency in interacting with

social media and can negotiate how they engage with this potential. Ultimately, this project aims to show that there is no “right” way to do feminism. Of course, this research does not mean to minimize or discount the vital work of overt feminist organizing and activism, through official feminist organizations and by feminist activists, both offline and online. However, it is also useful to pay attention to the everyday, to “the little changes and the little empowerments [that] make a bigger picture” (Hillary, one of my participants).

This project reasserts the renewed value of identity politics in contemporary feminism and conceptualizing “women” as agents of feminist politics, with a strategic (political) focus on commonalities based on gender (Spivak, 1996), in a post-structural era where gender is increasingly theorized as constructed. Centralizing women’s lives and everyday experiences is crucial to understanding both the contemporary material issues that women face based on their gender and their responses to these issues, which can inform both feminist theory and practice. The three case studies in this dissertation clearly illustrate how substantial material inequalities around (binary) gender difference persist, over a century after the first wave of the feminist movement and despite increasing contemporary challenges to the gender binary classification system. Specifically, this project shows how those “who travel under the sign women” (Ahmed, 2017, p.14) continue to face discomfort, harassment, and potentially serious harm just by going about their everyday lives, be it during dating, networking, or walking on the street. Fourth wave feminist theorizing must, then, consider the everyday strategies that ordinary women are required to use to navigate existing inequalities, to resist subordination in a patriarchal society, and to, practically, stay safe in their day-to-day lives. Everyday social

media practices such as coming together in groups separate from men, discussing sexual assault publicly, and adding protective barriers to interactions between men and women are everyday feminist practices, because feminism is about supporting “women in a struggle to exist in this world” Ahmed (2017, p.14).

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## APPENDIX A

### BUMBLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### Initial Interview Questions

- When did you start using Bumble?
- Why did you decide to use Bumble over other dating websites?
- Do you still use it? If not, why not?
- Have you or do you use other dating websites?
- How does Bumble compare to other dating apps?
- What features does Bumble have that other apps don't?
- What features and functions of Bumble do you enjoy?
- What features and functions of Bumble don't you like?
- Take me through how you would move through Bumble, open it up...
- If you could change or add certain features to Bumble, would you?

#### Follow-up Interview Questions

- Take me through a typical dating scenario in 2017/2018, thinking specifically about the various technologies you would be using, through the finding a person stage to the first date to the relationship stage (e.g., match on a dating app, exchange some messages on there, move to phone, etc.).



- Do you think dating apps have changed how we date offline or how dating used to be before these technologies?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of online apps for dating compared to meeting people offline?
- How do you think a male approach and a female approach to dating differ, both offline and online?
- Do you approach men first in real life? Do you talk to men first on other dating apps?
- Do you have “rules” for swiping left or swiping right? Pictures? Text?
- What do you usually write first? E.g. GIFS, hey, something about their profile?
- Do you ever take photos directly through the app? Do you send photos? Of what?
- Bumble connecting to other social media – Instagram, Spotify, Snapchat, Facebook – yay or nay? Why?
- What are your safety considerations in using online dating? Are men safer than women in dating?
- Have you heard that Bumble calls itself a “feminist” app? Would you agree with this statement?

## APPENDIX B

### FACEBOOK GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Tell me a little about this Facebook group.
- When did you join?
- Why did you join?
- Are you an active member or do you mostly lurk?
- What sort of things do people typically post about? (broadcast outside events, ask for jobs, advertise jobs)
- What sort of things do people typically post – links, pictures, written thoughts?
- Why is it important for you to be part of a group for women specifically?
- How has this group been helpful for you professionally?
- Why do you choose to use this group instead of other social media for networking?
- Does what you say in the group feel safer or more private than using the internet more broadly? Do you think what is posted in the group is kept confidential?
- Thinking of the technical features of a Facebook group – such as the fact that it is closed and limits members, the fact that there is a wall you can scroll down, being able to comment and like, what features do you like or don't like, or find useful or not, when using the group?

- Can you message other members directly? Do you use this feature?
- Can anyone add members?
- Do the administrators manage what sort of content is posted or taken down?
- Negatives of the group?
- Are private groups more beneficial for women who freelance, do project work, or own their own businesses than for women working in traditional jobs? Why or why not? What different benefits do private groups give to these different groups of working women?