

THESIS

TALKING BACK ON TWITTER AND BLOGS: EMERGING FORMS OF  
CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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## ABSTRACT

### TALKING BACK ON TWITTER AND BLOGS: EMERGING FORMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

This thesis examines the emerging communicative spaces of new media and their utility in fostering consciousness raising in the modern women's movement. Through this study, I answer the following questions: How does the Internet provide a new communicative space for consciousness raising in the modern women's movement and how can it help members ignite change? What is the communicative value and significance of new media in this context? The new media artifacts I examine include two Twitter campaigns, entitled #NotBuyingIt and #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter, and two blog sites, *Feministe's* "Shameless Self-Promotion Sunday" and *The Feminist Wire's* "The Personal is Political." Following a literature review in which I cover scholarship in social movements, the women's movement, and new media, I analyze the artifacts using a close-textual and inductive analysis to identify emerging themes. I engage other communication studies theory, including critical feminist and narrative theory, the Theory of Motivated Information Management, and bell hooks' notion of talking back, among other material. Ultimately, I determine that consciousness raising is enacted in these online spaces by women of multiple identities using an array of techniques. Additionally, new media is sufficiently equipped to foster a connection among participants that leads to click moments of understanding that in some cases promote feminist activism. This activism can in turn lead to tangible change to meet goals of the women's movement, including justice for people of subordinated identities.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	v
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Literature Review.....	4
Social Movements: The Center of Political Life .....	4
Consciousness Raising and the Women’s Liberation Movement.....	5
New Media: Digital Democracy or Enlightened Exploitation?.....	7
Method and Data.....	12
Forms of Consciousness Raising .....	14
Method .....	23
Choice of Artifacts.....	24
Twitter Campaigns: #NotBuyingIt and #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter .....	25
Feminist Blogs: <i>Feministe</i> and <i>The Feminist Wire</i> .....	27
Organization.....	27
Chapter Two: Twitter and Conversations on Social Media—Sites for Consciousness Raising....	29
Critical Feminist Theory: Re-envisioning Social Realities .....	31
Narrative Theory as a Collective Rhetoric.....	33
Theory of Motivated Information Management .....	36
We’re Not Buying GoDaddy and Where Are All the Smart Women on Twitter? .....	39
The #NotBuyingIt Campaign.....	39

The #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter Campaign .....	41
Analysis: Twitter as a Consciousness-Raising Space .....	42
Critical Feminist Theory at Work: Naming and Responding to Sexism .....	42
Telling the Story: Identifying and Collectively Calling Out the Villain .....	49
Answering Calls-to-Action: Consciousness Raising as Catharsis .....	53
Discussion: Consciousness Raising as a Tool for Social Change .....	58
Chapter Three: Feminist Blogs—Feministe and The Feminist Wire .....	59
Blogging as an Alternative: A Feminist Interpretation of Reality and Experience .....	60
The “Personal is Political” and “Shameless Self-Promotion Sunday” .....	63
<i>The Feminist Wire</i> .....	63
<i>Feministe</i> .....	64
Analysis: Blogging as a Communicative Space .....	66
Confronting Differences, Articulating Identities .....	67
Talking Back .....	71
Calls-to-Action .....	76
Consciousness Raising and Validation .....	78
Discussion: Blogging as a Space for Articulating a New Reality .....	81
Conclusion Chapter: New Media and Consciousness Raising .....	83
Artifacts .....	83
New Findings for Social Movements, New Media, and Consciousness Raising ..	85
Conclusions and Future Research .....	93
Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research .....	93

Final Thoughts .....	96
References.....	97

## Chapter One: Introduction

*“Feminist consciousness—understanding that women can and should be whole human beings, not measured in relationship to male supremacy—is, was, and will always be the soul of feminism”* (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, p. 11).

*“The practice of consciousness-raising is one that exemplifies the process of giving individual experiences new meanings by moving them into the realm of social reality. Consciousness-raising has long been theorized as a process that makes the personal political”* (Dubriwny, 2005, p. 401).

It is undeniable that the Internet has emerged as an ever-present, highly influential form of communication in our culture. Twitter “hashtags” are splashed across news media and television programs to encourage conversations among viewers; companies and nonprofit organizations collect followers for their Facebook pages to disseminate information; entire social movements have galvanized online, including the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 and the Arab Spring shortly before it; and seemingly anyone with Internet access can start a blog or Tumblr to voice his or her opinion.

The reach of the Internet has rapidly spread and expanded around the globe in the last three decades. It is a prevalent part of our culture and an undoubtedly permanent vehicle for our communication. Additionally, the Internet offers a persuasive space that has the world paying attention and participating in its growth and change. For this study, I am interested in exploring one particular aspect of the vast World Wide Web; specifically, I look at how the Internet can serve as a tool of communication in social movements—particularly in consciousness raising—which may possibly result in positive action for a movement. Consciousness raising is the act of raising awareness about a social issue and sharing related personal experience through gathering people together in a shared space or writing about the issue with others to have a conversation.

At its very essence, consciousness raising is a powerful social movement tool. The education and storytelling that takes place during consciousness raising can be a motivating force for people to become activists. Consciousness raising allows for marginalized people to have a platform from which to share previously unvoiced experiences with others, which in turn empowers them and their audiences to become agents of change (Campbell, 1983, p. 105). Dubriwny (2005) cites a “collective rhetoric” that springs from consciousness raising, which changes audiences into “active participants” (p. 398). Whether conducted through group communication, written communication, or myriad other forms, consciousness raising brings people together for a social cause and spurs lasting change. In this thesis, I specifically examine how the Internet offers a communicative vehicle through which members of the women’s movement can raise consciousness, both locally and globally, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Indeed, people across the world are using the Internet to spread knowledge about social issues. In this process, the Internet essentially serves as a virtual gathering space across geographical distances. I am particularly interested in the ways women are actively working for social change through galvanizing followers via posts, tweets, and comments. These actions have resulted in many benefits, including the recruitment of members to the women’s movement. The Internet also allows for women to educate feminists about the movement in its more dispersed Third Wave. Lastly, actions committed through the Internet have led to positive change for women on a personal, national, and even global level. On an individual level, change occurs when women feel positive identification through the movement. For example, Baumgardner and Richards (2000) explain how conversations among groups of women can spark a “click” experience, or a moment of recognition in which individuals understand for the first time that they are not alone in their feelings about sexism and that they can voice their anger in this safe

space among other women (p. 11). On a wider level, change occurs when steps are taken to protect women by entities that are not involved with the movement, such as when powerful companies such as the Virgin Group and Facebook are pressured into removing harmful, sexist advertisements. For example, organizations such as The Representation Project and Name It, Change It use the social networking sites Twitter and Facebook to voice their rejection of sexist advertisements produced by popular companies and to call out sexist media coverage of female political candidates and other public figures. Major companies have been called out for sexist marketing and for allowing content advocating violence against women. For example, Virgin Mobile removed an advertisement released in 2012 that seemed to suggest through a misuse of humor that rape was an acceptable act (Williams, 2012). In another case, Facebook was under fire for allowing people to form groups that advocated violence against women. As a result, Facebook pledged to enact a more protective hate speech policy (Siddiquee, 2013). Exposure of these companies through new media has resulted in corporate apologies, removal of the offensive material, and a change in policies that addresses Facebook posts that are shockingly misogynistic (Siddiquee, 2013).

Such use of new media for activism is a rhetorical phenomenon that involves the manipulation of symbols that are at work in the world. My goal is to explore how they work, and why, in order to contribute to our understanding of the social and political powers and functions of new media. In essence, this project contributes to our understanding of the communicative and persuasive value of new media, the role of consciousness raising, and how these two are at work in this moment.

The research question that guides this study asks, How does the Internet provide a new communicative space for consciousness raising in the modern women's movement and how can

it help members ignite change? Additionally, what is the communicative value and significance of new media in this context? In order to begin answering the question of how consciousness raising looks and works in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I begin by reviewing previous scholarship to establish who has studied the phenomenon of activism online, and more specifically how consciousness raising through new media can work to promote lasting change.

### **Literature Review**

A study of contemporary activism that takes place through Internet communication should begin with looking at new media and social movements, especially as they relate to rhetoric of the women's movement. Thus, I limit my summary with this framework in mind while recognizing that there are many valid research articles on new media and social movements that are beyond the scope of my study. I examine each concept in turn, beginning with existing scholarship about social movements and the emergence and utility of new media.

#### **Social Movements: The Center of Political Life**

Social movements are communication phenomena that are "central to political life" (Downing, 2008, p. 43). In fact, communication scholars have been studying social movements for decades, with an increased interest since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. According to Stewart and Smith (1989), a social movement is "an organized, uninstitutionalized, and significantly large collectivity that emerges to bring about or to resist a program for change in societal norms and values, operates primarily through persuasive strategies, and encounters opposition in what becomes a moral struggle" (p. 17). Downing (2008) adds that "not all significant social change [springs from] social movements, but they are a core component of that central dimension of our world" (p. 44). Members of social movements organize around an overarching cultural and political goal that they value as having utmost importance.

Members of social movements use a number of tools to recruit new members, inspire current members to action, and share their message with the public. Scholars have increasingly explored the intersection between social movements and the use of media. Downing (2008) claims that members of social movements tap into media “to help get their viewpoints across” (p. 43). Lee (2009) explains how “recent years have witnessed a tide of Internet-based activism demonstrating the potential of new media and information technologies adopted for social movements” (p. 1). Essentially, media offer a platform for social movements to disseminate their rhetorical messages. The U.S. feminist movement<sup>1</sup>, which has been working for social change for centuries, is a social movement whose members utilize rhetorical tools to accomplish their goals of ensuring social, political, and cultural equality for women in society, and who rely on consciousness raising to achieve these goals, often with the use of new media. Understanding the role of social media in social movements is one goal of this study, as we see a shift in more social movement work online.

### **Consciousness Raising and the Women’s Liberation Movement**

Consciousness raising has been a crucial part of the women’s movement in the United States from its earliest history to today (Campbell, 1983, p. 104; Sowards & Renegar, 2004). Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (and probably before), women have gathered in private spaces to voice and explore challenges faced by their gender. Women had little opportunity to

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<sup>1</sup> Considering the ostensible overarching goal of feminism to include voices of all women, I would like to pause here to explain certain conscious choices I make throughout this thesis in essentializing groups of women. The circumstances of this project do not allow me to fully account for the diverse range of voices from women of many multiplicities of identity. Thus, in the spirit of Diana Fuss (1989) I attempt to “activate” essentialism or engage strategic essentialism throughout this work (p. 20). With this strategy, I aim to conduct my research on the women taking part in these conversations while recognizing that each woman has her own unique perspectives and experiences to contribute. The terms “feminism” and “women’s movement” that I apply throughout this work might imply that there is one monolithic understanding of feminism and the women’s movement, while in fact there are many interpretations and practices of feminism. Thus, I openly acknowledge that I incorporate essentialized descriptions of a multitude of perspectives and am not be able to individually account for the many interpretations of these terms. My intention is not to disregard each woman’s unique identity, and I attempt to share these unique perspectives as much as possible throughout this work.

communicate in the public sphere because of what bell hooks (2004) labels an “imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist [and] patriarchal” culture (p. 17). In other words, this system values the views and opinions of men, and additionally privileges white men of means. Power is afforded members of this group, and women are subordinated and denied access to certain rights and opportunities, including the right to speak in public, as a result. Thus, women have turned to private spaces to voice their concerns and frustrations.

Consciousness raising essentially creates a space for women to share experiences that they could not discuss openly in society due to cultural gender expectations. Dubriwny (2005) explains how gathering in a shared space allows for women to bring unspoken issues to light. As a result of consciousness raising, many women are able to feel a commonality with one another, promote identification, and feel affirmed when they hear of experiences similar to their own. From a feminist standpoint, these previously unheard stories serve to reject the dominant hegemonic story about women. Women hear a different script through the communicative act of consciousness raising than what has been presented through media and culture, and perhaps for the first time in their lives imagine different ways of living outside of the boundaries put forth by a patriarchal system.

Through consciousness raising, women can find empowerment as their experiences are validated by other women, which translates into a greater feeling of agency (Dubriwny, 2005, p. 400). As previously unspoken stories of individual women’s experiences are shared and brought to light, women in the audience might identify with the experience, which makes them feel validated in a way they have not felt before. As more and more experiences break through the silence, more women are empowered to share their stories. The goal is that these women will then join together to raise a greater awareness of the issues under consideration such that tangible

change is achieved on both a personal and larger level. According to Baumgardner and Richards (2000):

Consciousness raising was designed to be a radicalizing process, a way of spurring women to change the world and of transforming the personal into the political....Whenever women are gathered together there is great potential for the individual women, and even the location, to become radicalized. (p. 14)

In other words, women must identify and name issues that plague them by first holding discussions about them in a safe space. Then, through hearing their shared experiences, they will be motivated to act to promote change in both their personal lives and in the public sphere.

### **New Media: Digital Democracy or Enlightened Exploitation?**

Communication and media studies scholars have begun to explore the role of new media in constructing social communities and their utility in creating agency within those communities. New media, also known as Web 2.0, refers to social networking sites, blogs, and other Internet-based communication sites that allow interaction by Internet users (John, 2013, p. 167). Nascent research on new media has studied the use of social media and websites in social movements, specifically how these media are employed in community building and consciousness raising online.

New media offer an unprecedented discursive space for social-movement consciousness raising across geographical distances (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012). As previously discussed, consciousness raising is essentially a social movement tool that raises awareness about a cause among members of the movement through sharing stories of lived experience, which were first brought light by the women's liberation movement (Sarachild, 1973, p. 144-150). Today, through new media, information about a movement can be quickly disseminated online through a webpage or blog posts, which can be sent to others through a link or through posts on social networks. It is easy for those with an Internet connection to become engaged in a movement—

posting comments, receiving information, and recruiting new members—with the click of a button. With this advanced technology, individuals and entire social movements have unprecedented access and shared space to promote their message.

Previous research has found that in addition to their ability to increase the accessibility and speed of communication, the use of new media serves an emotional and community building function. Stavrositu and Sundar (2012) studied the use of blogging by women and determined that there is a significant relationship between the act of using this media repeatedly and an increased sense of community and a psychological empowerment for participants. They sought to understand “the relationship between type of blogging, motivations for blogging and bloggers’ level of perceived psychological empowerment” and if this relationship is “mediated by SOC (sense of community) and/or SOA (sense of agency)” (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012, p. 372). Stavrositu and Sundar claimed that their “findings provide solid evidence for self-reported psychological empowerment benefits of blogging” (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012, p. 376). Stavrositu and Sundar concluded that their study corroborates “the ability of blogging to psychologically empower users” and offers “evidence for the role of SOC and SOA in mediating the relationship between blogging and psychological empowerment” (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012, p. 380). In other words, they found that users were given “ways to develop a competent, confident and assertive voice (sense of agency) as well as the ability to enter into dialogue with others (sense of community)” through this new media platform (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012, p. 372). Cirucci (2013) made a similar assessment of the psychological impact of social networking sites, describing them as “public spaces that help users build identity and learn social norms. Users can learn more about themselves and their potential identities by using trial and error and certain actions online” (p. 48).

Beyond creating a sense of self and of community, researchers suggest that new media act as a political resource for women that can serve as a social leveler, engaging more people in a discussion than is possible with traditional media. Harcourt (2011) explains how new media can be adopted on an international scale by populations who did not have access to the Internet even ten years ago:

The Internet has emerged as a tool that can be navigated and shaped by women's movements around the world in their struggle for rights, justice and social change. In the last decade women's networks have increased and strengthened with the connections made possible through the Internet, Web 2.0, imaging, writing, sharing, lobbying, connecting. New strategies for greater equity and feminist transformation that respect cultural difference are being crafted from these global connections, ultimately creating new structures of power and new forms of culture. (p. 20)

Harcourt references a media literacy campaign for girls called "Take Back the Tech!" as one example of this change taking place through the Internet. "Take Back the Tech!" sponsors annual workshops worldwide that call on women and girls to "take control of technology" using new media such as blogs, Twitter, digital storytelling, and petitions to raise awareness about violence against women (p. 21). Through these efforts, young women are encouraged and empowered to use technology for social change at a young age, which goes beyond the assumed function of social media as a domain of informal conversation and connection with friends online.

New media are now key components in generating awareness about social movements, as well. Facebook pages and Twitter accounts of activist organizations aim to collect followers and disseminate information, just as social movements have done for centuries through letter writing, in-person meetings, and public demonstrations. There are many scholars who cite the activist function of new media, including Gillen and Merchant (2013), who examined Twitter as a place for political activism through their dual auto-ethnographic study (p. 55). Gillen and Merchant analyzed the design of their own Twitter accounts to examine how Twitter is used as social

practice. They concluded that “Twitter has become an exemplary mode of communication to study, instantiating so very clearly a dialogic understanding of communications processes.... This insight can readily illuminate Web 2.0 practices in particular, in which meaning-making can shift moment-by-moment between acts of “reading” and “writing” in digital literacy practices” (Gillen & Merchant, 2013, p. 57).

Vitak and Ellison (2013) describe interactions on Facebook and similar online platforms as building “social capital.” Specifically, Vitak and Ellison were interested in adult Facebook users’ perceptions of the site’s utility for exchanging support-based resources and adult Facebook users’ perceptions of the site’s utility for exchanging informational resources. Vitak and Ellison concluded that social network sites “appear to be a valuable channel for supporting informational and support-based exchanges,” which in turn foster social capital (Vitak & Ellison, 2013, p. 254). Deluca, Lawson, and Sun (2012) also assert that social media offer a new vehicle for social engagement around a cause, “[creating] new contexts for activism that do not exist in the world of traditional mass media organizations. With social media, the grounds of possibility for activism have been multiplied and transformed” (p. 500).

Supporting the claim that social media offer a vehicle for engagement with a social cause is the fact that new media and the Internet have fostered an online community of feminists that aids in the creation of social capital: “New strategies for greater equity and feminist transformation that respect cultural difference are being crafted from these global connections, ultimately creating new structures of power and new forms of culture” (Harcourt, 2011, p. 20). For example, numerous feminist blog sites, including *Feministing* and *Feministe*, offer discursive spaces for community building as Internet users contribute content and share links to articles. Other sites like MissRepresentation.org link to other forms of new media, including Facebook

and Twitter, to spread the word about their mission of promoting realistic representations of women in media. In this way, the site creates a web of connectivity through which a growing community can expand to reach users on multiple new media platforms.

Simultaneously, however, there are notable limitations to new media providing tools for social movements. New media can at times feel less personal than face-to-face communication. Also, privacy of information shared online is a concern for users who may be less inclined to disclose information in online spaces (Vitak & Ellison, 2013, p. 252). Additionally, social movements might require more than just an online presence to gain traction with potential supporters, suggesting that new media alone is not enough to create a community of activists. Moreover, the information shared may be limited to users who do not have the same level of access to new media (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013, p. 279). Still other limitations may exist that have yet to be fleshed out through ongoing research on the utility of new media.

Additionally, there are scholars who disagree with the notion that the Internet is a great equalizer that provides “digital democracy” for all people, especially for those who were voiceless before the Internet debuted in the late 20th century. Harcourt (2011) describes how the Internet offers a space for women’s empowerment while simultaneously enabling the exploitation of the very groups it is meant to uphold, as rampant pornography, hateful comments, and displays of violence against women reaffirm dangerous and extreme patriarchal attitudes (p. 19).

Hindman (2009) also challenges the claim that the Internet is a fully democratizing space that will “amplify the political voice of ordinary citizens” (p. 6). Instead, he suggests that the Internet has not increased opportunities for political discourse. For example, he cites gatekeepers and filters as a first barrier, in addition to lack of access through the digital divide (Hindman,

2009, p. 11). In other words, certain people are in control of the content displayed online and can filter it, suggesting that the content is limited to some degree. Additionally, people might be limited in their ability to even join the conversation, depending on whether they have Internet access or the skills to participate online. Hindman also notes how a lack of readership means that just because a voice is “speaking” does not mean it is “being heard” (Hindman, 2009, p. 16-17). As Hindman summarizes: “If we consider the ability of ordinary citizens to write things that other people will see, the Internet has fallen far short of the claims that continue to be made about it. It may be easy to speak in cyberspace, but it remains difficult to be heard” (Hindman, 2009, p. 142). Hindman reveals some general considerations as to how the Internet can actually be more limiting as a communication space than previously believed. Clearly, there are ongoing barriers to everyone’s involvement and political activism online, and yet some voices are getting through regardless.

### **Method and Data**

Consciousness raising is in no way a new phenomenon. Throughout the women’s liberation movement, women have expressed frustration at circumstances that oppressed them. In the first wave, for example, women spoke against limitations preventing them from fully participating in the public sphere due to the gendered notion of the “Cult of Domesticity” (Anderson, 1999; Campbell, 2001, p. 301). This cultural construct established the norms for proper women’s—predominately white women’s—behavior, in U.S. American society. Women were expected to eschew participation in public affairs and instead remain in the home with the primary role of caring for their family, while men freely participated in public life through employment and politics. Anderson (1999) describes this phenomenon by stating:

The cult of true womanhood reinforced the notion that it was unnatural for women to possess and exercise public power. Even after women in the United States achieved legal

access to political and professional realms, cultural norms of femininity persisted, curtailing women's political agency. (p. 606)

Into the mid-nineteenth century, the public participation of women in the United States was a rarity as they remained confined to the private, domestic sphere. Women experienced disenfranchisement, had barriers to property rights upon marriage, and were denied access to most areas of higher education and gainful employment (Wood, 2009, p. 67). Women of color experienced added oppressions, and those of a lower socioeconomic status often had to work outside of the home while still facing discrimination preventing them from participating fully in public life. At this time, there was no public forum for women to express dissatisfaction and anger at these inequities, regardless of their economic position or racial and ethnic background. Naturally, then, the political and personal concerns of women of this time were rarely discussed or brought to light in public discourse.

In light of these challenges, consciousness raising emerged as a rhetorical vehicle through which privileged women could communicate and connect through their shared experiences. It is important to note here that this historical picture of consciousness raising was limited primarily to white, middle- to upper-class U.S. American women. Women of color and women of low socioeconomic status were generally excluded or segregated from such interactions with middle-class, white women. It is likely that consciousness raising occurred among these excluded groups, yet the historical record is fairly silent as to how and where this took place.

The notion that some groups of women were excluded from much of the First and Second Waves is partly why I am interested in looking at how the consciousness raising methods of the Third Wave may offer space for a more racially and economically diverse demographic of people to have their voices acknowledged through the women's movement. In order to understand how women of color enact consciousness raising, we need to look at other channels

and more recent outlets including writings from women of color, such as works released by feminist presses from the 1960s to the 1980s. *This Bridge Called My Back* from Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa is just one example of anthologies produced by women of color. These publications provide evidence of consciousness raising by women of color and working class women, who used the written word to express their struggles under the status quo and to connect with other women. Women of color were raising consciousness at this time as well as white women, but only the efforts of the white women of the feminist movement are widely featured in traditional discussions about the women's movement. I highlight consciousness raising from multiple groups in the discussion below.

### **Forms of Consciousness Raising**

From the first wave of the United States women's movement in the nineteenth century, consciousness raising both locally and across geographic distances played an integral role in communication among members of the women's movement through written and group communication. Women created a discursive space that allowed for feminist voices to be heard despite geographical distances and social confinements through written communication. Simultaneously, women connected in interpersonal settings in groups throughout the women's liberation movement to share their experiences and frustrations. The dual methods of written and group communication have combined in the third wave to form the modern consciousness raising space of today: the virtual consciousness raising space of the Internet. Next, I lay out the major themes of feminism that motivated women to perform consciousness raising and the types of communication that served as channels for consciousness raising in each wave of feminism.

**First wave consciousness raising.** The first wave of feminism, which existed from approximately 1840 to 1925, was concerned with securing voting rights for women, abolishing

slavery, promoting temperance, and establishing child labor laws (Wood, 2009, p. 66-69).

During this period, middle- to upper-class women, who were typically confined to the domestic sphere, could only participate in public conversation in limited ways, including the production of written communication such as letters sent to women's suffrage magazines (Campbell, 2001, p. 301; Carver, 2008). As stated above, women of the first wave were generally prevented from speaking in public and, when consciousness raising events for the women's movement occurred, women were often unable to attend due to geographical or social barriers. However, there were safer ways to enter into a conversation with other women through the more accessible forum of women's suffrage journals (Carver, 2008). Letter writing to journals was a way in which women could participate in public discussions without the consequences they might face by voicing their opinions in more outwardly public settings, such as women's demonstrations. Carver (2008) studied the consciousness raising performed when women wrote letters to the editor of the *Woman's Journal* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. She claims:

Women violated their female role when they chose to write letters to be published in a newspaper because the role of rhetor requires independence and self-confidence, qualities that were not associated with a woman's traditional role. Writing such a letter broke through the cultural idea of what it meant to be a woman. (p. 17)

In addition to offering a new space for women's voices, such letter writing served as a motivating function to create women as agents in their communities, what Carver (2008) calls a community of "geographically separated believers" (p. 16). Through reading about the movement and responding with letters to the editor, these women found identification with others in the suffrage movement "from which further discussion could blossom and persuasion begin" (Carver, 2008, p. 18). Thus, written communication to women's journals, and the material in the journals themselves, became a rhetorical vehicle for consciousness raising in the first wave of feminism.

Group communication occurred during gatherings of women beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Campbell, 1983; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Sowards & Renegar, 2004; Wood, 2009). Specifically, women gathered in groups with the goal to educate themselves and to protest the status of women as inferior to men in the public sphere. We first see this form of consciousness raising in early meetings organized by women in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century over social and political injustices identified by women. The issue of slavery agitated black women to write and speak in public about the need for abolition, including Sojourner Truth and Maria Miller Stewart, the first woman of any race to address a crowd of mixed genders (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p. 25). Stewart covered many issues of interest to the feminist movement that emerged shortly after her time speaking in public, including the importance of allowing women access to education and to the public sphere through increased legal privileges and employment opportunities. Stewart's bold use of public address served to enlighten the masses that came to hear her speak, raising consciousness about issues of import that were sympathetic to the feminist movement. Shortly following Stewart, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton saw a need for public debate and awareness raising on women's status in the United States, organizing the historic Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 that is more widely credited as launching the first wave of the modern feminist movement (Campbell, 1983; Sowards & Renegar, 2004; Wood, 2009). In the setting of the Seneca Falls Convention and the annual conventions that followed, as well as during less formal gatherings, women could express rage over their condition as subordinate individuals. The group setting became a platform for women to raise consciousness and to motivate one another to protest the unequal treatment of women in a forum where their voices could finally be heard.

**Second wave consciousness raising.** The second wave of feminism, which spanned roughly 1960 to 1995, was concerned with civil rights, equality for women in the public sphere, reproductive rights, and the liberation of women in non-Western countries (Wood, 2009, p. 70-73). Consciousness raising in the second wave of feminism also involved letter writing to women's publications, but there were other, more extensive writing projects that also served a consciousness raising purpose that affected women across the United States. This wave saw a similar iteration of consciousness raising when women wrote in to feminist publications such as *Ms. Magazine* that were dedicated to achieving women's equality in public. Founded in 1971, *Ms. Magazine* was a radical, activism-focused women's magazine that unabashedly covered a range of feminist issues including equal rights and violence against women. The magazine boasted a "Letters to the Editor" section to which women could write. The magazine also featured feminist advertisements and allowed only feminist contributors to publish articles (*Ms. Magazine*). Another radical feminist publication that only ceased publication in 2008, *Off Our Backs*, was launched in the same period as *Ms.* and provided a platform for feminist rhetoric. The major goals of this publication were to promote feminist and lesbian culture and inform the world about the status of women around the world. The founders of the publication also wanted to provide a voice for women from a variety of identities, not just the women whose voices had been previously privileged in publication. Finally, *Off Our Backs* was launched to serve as a sounding board for women to share their experiences with sexism in the hopes that women could identify with one another as a collective and benefit from knowing that other women shared their struggles (*Off Our Backs*). Women were not only educated about the feminist movement through these two publications, but were encouraged to join in the conversation surrounding the greatest women's issues of the time.

Simultaneously, novels and compilations on the subject of women's liberation emerged as another platform for women to raise consciousness. Betty Freidan's groundbreaking *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, showcased the increasing resistance women were feeling to traditional gender roles that confined them to the domestic sphere and prevented their participation in the public sphere. The book was picked up by mainstream culture and is widely credited with spurring the second wave of feminism (*New York Times*, 2006). Similarly, Hogeland (1998) lays out the significance of fictional feminist novels that appeared beginning in the 1970s. She claims that novels such as *The Color Purple* "enabled a wider circulation of ideas springing from the women's liberation movement by moderating those ideas, by softening their political edges, [and] by personalizing and novelizing feminist social criticism" (ix). The Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, launched in 1980, was a groundbreaking publishing company co-founded by Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde to give voice to women of color whose writing would otherwise have to conform to dominant standards of publication in order to be printed (Smith, 1989, p. 11; Olson, 2012, p. 126). Published by the Kitchen Table Press in 1981, *This Bridge Called My Back* was just one example of a revolutionary anthology that featured the previously marginalized voices of feminist women of color that complicated the Anglo-American understanding of feminism (Alarcón, 1994). *This Bridge Called My Back* articulated the multilayered oppression that women from different walks of life experienced, illuminating the concept of intersectionality (Chávez & Griffin, 2012, p. 6). These works granted greater representation to the perspectives of women of color and offered a platform for making previously-unheard feminist voices more visible. Also during this time, Barbara Smith's contemporary Audre Lorde spoke and wrote about feminist issues related to the intersections of race, sexuality, age, class, and the like.

Finally, feminist scholarship during the second wave gave voice to ongoing issues in academia for women through articles such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's (1973) groundbreaking piece "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron" and later scholarship including Carole Spitzack and Kathryn Carter's (1987) "Women in Communication Studies: A Typology for Revision." Later, members of the Chicana movement and black feminists challenged traditional Western feminist theory, claiming that these theories were developed under the assumption that all women fit the experiences and standpoints of an archetypal white woman. They called for the development of theories that represented women of color and avoided a monolithic understanding of sexism as the only oppressive force preventing equality, but also the social and cultural subordination of women of color (Flores, 2000, p. 689). These women boldly identified continuing inequalities for women in academia through their scholarship and by telling stories that had not yet been heard in this setting. In all of these examples, the written word served as an avenue for women to raise consciousness about the issues affecting them in the second wave.

Consciousness raising in groups also emerged as a potent vehicle for organization around women's issues in the second wave of feminism. Much like the women who gathered to raise consciousness in the first wave of feminism, women's groups in the second wave communicated interpersonally to not only validate their experiences as women but to then rally around their cause (Campbell, 1983, p. 104; Reger, 2004). Beginning in the 1960s, consciousness raising groups appeared in the form of "rap groups" and women's organizations, which emphasized the importance of personal experience and strategies to rethink the status quo (Dubriwny, 2005, p. 398; Wood, 2009, p.71). These groups of women formed a "free space" to share stories about feminist concerns of the day, including equal pay for equal work and a woman's access to birth

control (Campbell, 1983, p. 104; Reger, 2004). Radical feminists employed rap groups that encouraged all participants to “talk informally about personal experiences with sexism and to link those personal experiences to larger social and political structures” (Wood, 2009, p. 71). Simultaneously, groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) formed as a rhetorical space for feminists to gather and raise awareness about their cause. Reger (2004) claims that for NOW, which was founded in 1966 and remains active today, consciousness raising served as the “organizational process” that helped “transform personal emotions into a collectively defined sense of injustice,” which had “the potential of creating actors dedicated to chapter activism” (p. 206).

The hope for organizations like NOW is that women will have a “click” moment while hearing these stories when they realize that sexual discrimination affects their personal well-being and social opportunity (Reger, 2004, p. 212-214). The notion of consciousness raising through groups of women in personal spaces about political injustices, gender inequities, and the like is reminiscent of the rallying cry of the second wave of the women’s movement that the “personal is political,” meaning that what women value and experience in their own lives is and should be considered worthy on a public and political level. Personal issues are political issues, because women are held back from fully functioning in society alongside their male counterparts under the status quo (Wood, 2009, p. 78). Through the end of the second wave of feminism, written and group communication continued to operate separately as consciousness raising platforms.

**Third wave consciousness raising.** The third wave of feminism, however, bridges group and written communication to create a new consciousness raising platform. This current wave of feminism emphasizes inclusion and advocates equal opportunities for women from all racial and

cultural identities, from diverse economic backgrounds, and all sexual orientations (Wood, 2009, p. 85).

Books and magazines still serve as a powerful space for discourse, as publications like *Ms. Magazine* endure today (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 11). Third wave feminism also continues to incorporate interpersonal communication, as women share personal experiences of empowerment and resistance in their own lives on a local level (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Wood, 2009, p. 87). Group communication continues to form the basis of consciousness raising for gatherings of women's groups, as well as in the classroom and in peoples' homes, in a new era of feminism that Sowards and Renegar (2004) characterize as having "the rhetorical problem... [of] how to address the cultural context of a society that has afforded young women new opportunities, but at the same time, created new barriers" (p. 538). Feminist groups such as NOW still exist, and others have emerged in the third wave, including groups that raise awareness about a number of relevant topics to women, including domestic violence, and policy groups that seek changes in legislature to benefit women (Wood, 2009, p. 85). These groups are formed to raise consciousness about the ongoing gender inequalities that persist despite earlier accomplishments of feminists.

Another third wave consciousness raising space arises in organizations on college campuses, wherein women's groups gather to discuss relevant issues and then stage "speak-outs" on campuses to raise public awareness (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Dubriwny, 2005). The classroom serves as yet another group communication location for consciousness-raising according to Sowards and Renegar (2004), who cite women's studies classes and feminist theory classes as "responsible for creating a generation well-versed in feminist theory, ideas, and

activism” (p. 542). Baumgardner and Richards (2000) also argue that the classroom is a new educational space for conversations that raise awareness about the importance of feminism.

Baumgardner and Richards (2000) cite one additional meaningful space for consciousness raising, which is in our own homes. The process of storytelling by women that occurs in safe spaces, such as an all-female dinner party among friends, may foster an “epiphany” or a “click of recognition” during which women realize they have endured the same discrimination, sexism, or other form of adversity as their sisters. These women may not have given voice to these issues before entering this relatively safe space (p. 11). Consciousness raising in these settings is powerful because “honest communicating among women is a revolutionary act, and the best preface to activism” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 15). After learning from one another, women are then empowered to perform personal acts of change in their day-to-day lives, and at times, on a greater political level.

In the current third wave of feminism, however, these two forms of communication have also merged in the discursive space of new media online. Presently, groups are formed virtually through written communication platforms such as blogs and posts on social networking sites (Sowards & Renegar, 2004; Wood, 2009). This new form of consciousness raising online deserves attention because it is an emerging form of communication that allows for engagement by activist individuals despite geographical distances. This new platform also allows for feminist expression and commentary on a massive scale through highly accessible websites, blogs and social networks (Wood, 2009, p. 87). Sowards and Renegar (2004) cite the additional advantage of the Internet as a space for sharing stories “not accessible through friends and family” (p. 542). This new platform may also allow for previously unrepresented voices to participate in public conversation, leading to the potential empowerment of women. If new media indeed offer an

equalizing platform for women's participation, then such a consciousness raising space is consistent with the goals of the third wave to promote equal access for women from a variety of subject positions.

### **Method**

For this study, I rely on the foundational information in the areas of social movements, new media, and consciousness raising introduced above to conduct a feminist analysis of new media artifacts from the women's movement that are examples of contemporary consciousness raising. The examination of these artifacts is unique because I bridge together multiple subjects of interest in communication: new media, social movements, and feminism.

Indeed, I have not found a comparable study of third wave feminism and technology that thoroughly explores multiple platforms for consciousness raising. Scholars have examined elements of consciousness raising or individual types of social media tools that are used to raise awareness, but the angle of the contemporary feminist social cause and the examination of multiple available platforms for this project shade new light on a burgeoning, highly relevant topic of communication.

The method for analyzing these artifacts is developed from the literature on new media, social movements, consciousness raising, and feminist criticism and theory. My goal is to conduct a close-textual analysis of each text, looking for several elements related to consciousness raising. First, I identify the moments of consciousness raising present in each text: those moments in which women verbalize the "click" of understanding that leads them to validate their experiences and identify with others through sharing their own and hearing others' stories. Second, I trace the evolution and process of consciousness raising evident in the texts: this involves tracking the conversations, reasoning, and process of moving from the telling of an

experience to the application of it to a larger social, political and feminist consciousness. Here, I look for the narratives told as I attempt to explain the internal logics that individuals use to make the move from the personal to the political. I ask, “What are the circumstances or motivations that cause a person to share a personal moment and then decide that what they experienced is actually a public issue about which they want to give voice?”

In my analysis, I also identify as many feminist “calls-to-action” as I can find in each text. Calls-to-action might include asking women to perform a feminist action, such as sign a petition, “Like” a link on Facebook, or use their buying power to boycott a company that demeans women. I identify these calls-to-action, group them into similar categories or kinds of call-to-action, and then look for themes to see if there is a coherent type or grouping that emerges in order to understand what sort of calls are happening, and how they are being enacted, in response to consciousness raising. My goal here is to discover the following: once a person’s consciousness is raised, does she actually do something as a result? In other words, is consciousness raising a precursor to motivating people to social action? This piece of my analysis helps me explain how acts of consciousness raising and their enactment (the move to activism) illustrate the power of social media exchanges with respect to social movement and third wave feminism.

### **Choice of Artifacts**

The artifacts featured in this thesis were chosen for several reasons: for their consciousness raising nature, their alignment with the goals of the women’s movement, and their ability to inspire people to action. They are the new media spaces in which I have identified an act, or acts, of consciousness raising because they are virtual platforms for raising awareness about social issues that allow the participation of women who share their stories. My artifacts are

consistent with the goals of the feminist movement in that they call for women's equality. They feature content related to the women's movement and call out sexism, a problem that the women's movement is working to eradicate. They also feature a personal-political component, encouraging women to see sexism as a problem in their own lives, potentially fostering a "click" moment consistent with consciousness raising. The artifacts also include calls-to-action that are meant to galvanize members into political action, such as a call to women to spread the word about injustice or to avoid supporting a company that is harmful to women.

I focus only on artifacts that range from the year 2011 to 2014 that feature writing and consciousness raising from women of multiple positionalities as I attempt to highlight voices that may not be as well known in the feminist movement today.

### **Twitter Campaigns: #NotBuyingIt and #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter**

The first consciousness raising artifact I examine is a moment of consciousness raising during the #NotBuyingIt Twitter campaign from Miss Representation.org. Twitter is a social networking site and communicative space that allows users to post a "tweet," or short message, of 140 characters or less. Users can post links to other websites or images in this post. Additionally, users can cause a topic to trend by incorporating a "hashtag" symbol, such as #NotBuyingIt. The hashtag marks that tweet as part of a larger conversation, meaning that others are posting about the same topic that other users can then go and explore. Finally, if Twitter users put an "@" symbol next to another user's name, for example @MissRepresentation, then that user will see another user's tweet populating on their Twitter feed, or message board, and they will see the message.

The #NotBuyingIt Twitter campaign is a valuable artifact for this study because the campaign offers an example of consciousness raising from the beginning stages of raising

awareness, to women acting in response, to tangible change resulting from these actions. The #NotBuyingIt Twitter campaign calls on women and men to post a tweet using the campaign's hashtag "#NotBuyingIt" when they come across a company or organization that uses sexist advertising to sell products. The goal is to alert other feminists of the nature of the advertisements, so that women can then use their financial power to punish companies that choose to advertise with content that is harmful to women. For this project, I look specifically at the #NotBuyingIt campaign's focus on the company GoDaddy, a web domain service that releases high-profile sexist advertisements, often during the highly visible Super Bowl. Though Twitter users have been pressuring GoDaddy since the #NotBuyingIt campaign was launched in 2011, the amount of tweets calling out sexist approaches like GoDaddy's increased by 2 million in 2013, with more people using the hashtag for the #NotBuyingIt campaign than ever before (Siddique, 2013). Indeed, the company has begun to pay attention, and announced in September 2013 that they are rolling out a new advertising strategy that is a move away from the well-known sexist advertising of GoDaddy.

I also explore another Twitter campaign that serves as virtual interpersonal and written communication spaces for consciousness raising, #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter, a hashtag that was created in response to a lack of representation of strong black women in the media (*Essence*). When users place that hashtag next to a post, they are drawing attention to the fact that they are tweeting about a smart black woman who deserves recognition, thereby making black women's accomplishments more evident in culture. This is a consciousness raising act in itself because the Twitter users can use this platform to raise awareness of black women whose voices and accomplishments are traditionally marginalized in media.

## **Feminist Blogs: *Feministe* and *The Feminist Wire***

Following a discussion of social media sites, I describe the consciousness raising functions and opportunities of blogs (weblogs). Blogs are defined as “first-person, frequently updated online journals presented in reverse chronological order” (Hindman, 2009, p. 102). Webpages that host blogs may also include a comments feature, in which readers can post responses and questions to the blog author. First, I examine a popular feminist blog, *Feministe*, which professes to gather women around the cause of feminism and offer a space for feminists to voice their stories. I follow this discussion by examining more specifically the consciousness raising spaces inherent in blogs written by women of color, including *The Feminist Wire* blog posts, which are politically-focused and heavily feature women of color.

### **Organization**

This thesis is organized by topic area, with each chapter covering separate, but related types of new media that will aid in answering the research question. I analyze and interpret these contemporary consciousness raising artifacts, determining how they operate and what they communicate as consciousness raising tools.

Chapter Two focuses on social media sites as modern-day spaces for consciousness raising. These new media spaces, which include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and other websites, offer a powerful social movement space as users post about issues in their lives and join group pages of causes they care about. Activist organizations also use these channels to generate new members and raise awareness among current members. Here, I focus on the Twitter campaign #NotBuyingIt and the use of the #SmartBlackWomen hashtag as my case studies in order to examine how these forms of new media offer platforms for consciousness raising. I

explain and apply critical feminist theory, narrative theory, and the Theory of Motivated Information Management to examine the utility of the artifacts for consciousness raising.

In Chapter Three, I examine the use of weblogs (blogs) as sources for individual and collective consciousness raising. The specific artifacts of study include the popular, self-identified feminist blogs *Feministe* and *The Feminist Wire*. Both blogs are unabashedly feminist in their views and encourage contributions for posts from readers and fellow feminists. Specifically, I engage Hill Collins' (2009) notion of the matrix of domination and hooks' (1989) act of "talking back" to examine the "Shameless Self-Promotion" feature on *Feministe* and the "Personal is Political" feature on *The Feminist Wire*. Both features call on users to submit their own narratives and other written work to their fellow readers through blog posts.

The final chapter summarizes the findings from this rhetorical analysis and examines the implications, both positive and negative, of having the powerful practice of consciousness raising online available to members of the women's movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I ultimately claim that new media may serve to empower women as they negotiate their complex identities in a continuously patriarchal, hegemonic world.

## Chapter Two: Twitter and Conversations on Social Media—

### Sites for Consciousness Raising

In 2011, the Internet domain distributor GoDaddy.com began receiving flak on the social media site Twitter for the advertising campaign strategies used by the company. For years the advertisements, typically commercials for television, featured thin and buxom women, scantily clad, and depicted in sexually suggestive positions. This advertising strategy continued into the spring of 2013. Meanwhile beginning in 2011, a Twitter campaign, called #NotBuyingIt, called on consumers to voice their objection to GoDaddy's sexist advertising and increased pressure on the company until more than two million Twitter users had been exposed to messages about boycotting the company through the social networking site. In September 2013, the CEO of GoDaddy released a statement that, in response to objections from consumers, the company would follow a new advertising strategy that moved away from the sexualization of women (Siddique, 2013). The company's response to consumer outcries is the result of the process of consciousness raising, which made people aware of the issue of sexist advertising.

In August of 2013, another Twitter campaign made headlines over the Internet when people responded negatively to an article that online business magazine *Fast Company* had posted, entitled "25 Smartest Women on Twitter" (*Fast Company*, 2013). The list, published on August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013, lacked a single woman of color and featured exclusively white women on Twitter. A *Huff Post Black Voices* article remarked simply: "Another list, another moment of 'unintended racism'" (*HuffPost Black Voices*, 2013). There was an ensuing outcry on Twitter from women of color and their supporters in response to the article, which was organized through the use of a new hashtag, #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter, created by Twitter user

Sarahfeminista (@FeministaJones), a prominent African American feminist blogger who has a large Twitter following of more than 21,000 people (Jones, 2013; Twitter, 2014). Twitter users posted continuously throughout the day on August 27<sup>th</sup>, the day after the Fast Company list was posted, and continued to post for the following few days. Fast Company responded with a tweet of apology on the afternoon of August 27<sup>th</sup> through their Twitter handle, @FastCompany: “Thanks for all the feedback on yesterday's Twitter list. We agree with you. You're right. Full post coming from us very soon” (*HuffPost Black Voices*, 2013). On the same day, the Fast Company staff released an article entitled “More On Those Smartest Women On Twitter” that featured 18 women of color who did not make the original list. The article referenced the Twitter response to the original list and the emerging hashtags created to call attention to the smart women of color who are active on Facebook, including #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter and #SmartLatinaWomenOfTwitter (*Fast Company*, 2013). Thus, the company felt pressured to revise their earlier list in response to the outcry on Twitter. Like the GoDaddy event, this campaign demonstrates how people’s consciousness can be raised and companies can respond through the sharing of information and calls-to-action on social media sites.

In this chapter, I argue that social media sites like Twitter create a virtual consciousness-raising space for women to raise awareness about issues such as sexism and the erasure of women of color perpetuated through media. To understand this phenomenon, I explain how this consciousness-raising platform provides a powerful tool to address the pervasive problems of sexism and racism by conducting a rhetorical criticism of the #NotBuyingIt campaign’s successful pressure on GoDaddy’s sexist advertising. I then analyze the rhetorical and social significance of the messages calling out cultural racism through the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter conversation. First, I introduce the artifacts of study, the

#NotBuyingIt and #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter campaigns, in further detail. I then demonstrate how I identified themes that emerged throughout the conversations. Finally, I apply elements of critical feminist theory, narrative theory, and the Theory of Motivated Information Management (TMIM) to inform my close-textual analysis and to explain the collective storytelling that occurred in the Twitter space throughout these two campaigns. In order to articulate the rhetorical function of social media for these movements, I begin with an overview of critical feminist theory, narrative theory, and TMIM, which offer a springboard for consciousness raising. I chose to apply this combination of rhetorical and interpersonal theory to gain insights into both the persuasive and psychological aspects of consciousness raising.

### **Critical Feminist Theory: Re-envisioning Social Realities**

In order to understand the significance of social media for the women's movement, I begin with an overview of critical feminist theory, which offers a springboard for my analysis of consciousness raising on new media sites. Critical feminist theory is rooted in the general definition of feminism provided by Julia T. Wood (2008): “Feminism is the belief that men and women are equal and should have equal respect and opportunities in all spheres of life—personal, social, work, and public” (p. 324).<sup>2</sup> Historically because of sexism, women have had little opportunity to communicate in the public sphere because they have been living in what bell hooks (2004) labels an “imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist [and] patriarchal” culture (p. 17).

Not only is critical feminist theory concerned with overturning oppression due to gender, but some theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2009) remind us that intersecting elements of

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<sup>2</sup> This definition informs my use of the term “equality” throughout this thesis. Equality in this context refers to the idea that all people, regardless of their gender, racial, ethnic, or any other identity, should be afforded the same rights and privileges in culture so that they are not discriminated against in any form in social, political, personal, and public settings.

identity such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality commingle to create a “matrix of domination” (p. 26). This notion of intersectionality considers that women hold unique standpoints as a result of elements of their individual identities intersecting in culture, which ultimately affords them varying privileges and experiences with domination and structures of power.

In essence, critical feminist theory’s practical aim is to seek out the power structures and cultural practices that fuel the unequal treatment of women and, simultaneously, devise new equitable options for all members of a culture (Wood, 2008, p. 325). First, critical feminist theorists deconstruct communicative events in order to identify moments of inequality. Then, they may make suggestions for how to change the situation to make it more just for all involved. Essentially, critical feminist theory offers strategies for identifying and challenging sexist practices. Wood (2008) explains that a feminist strategy is to “give voice to what has not been voiced” in order to name women’s concerns, which may not have been defined outwardly before, since women’s experiences have been historically undervalued in culture (p. 323; Spender, 1984a, Spender, 1984b). As one example, Wood (2008) explains that it is a “feminist move” to name phenomena that are common in women’s experiences. The practice of “naming” assigns terms to certain social practices that have previously gone unnamed, which Wood says “is a prerequisite to having those experiences and women’s coding of them counted in cultural life” (p. 323). For example, until the late twentieth century, the term “sexual harassment” did not exist in the English language and, therefore, unwelcome and aggravating sexual attention paid on women continued without punishment. However, once the activity was voiced publicly and given a name, laws were enacted to protect women against such harassment (Wood, 2008, p. 323-324). Thus, critical feminist practices have led to publicly-sanctioned action in favor of

women. It is crucial for members of the women's movement to gather and share experiences in order to continue identifying underlying cultural practices that reify sexism and its accompanying intersecting layers, including racism. The act of consciousness raising creates the space for women to share their experiences, which leads to naming.

As I argued in the introductory chapter, with the advent of the Internet, women have turned to new media such as blogs, websites, and social media (Twitter, Facebook, and the like) to voice their stories and opinions. The Internet users who participate in these computer-mediated conversations form the virtual groups that conduct consciousness raising, but across geographic distances rather than through traditional practice in groups at home. With their words, women also use written communication online to express their experiences with sexism and racism. In my analysis, I apply critical feminist theory to investigate how this emerging practice of consciousness raising online and the change that results can begin to subvert the patriarchal system that upholds dominant interpretations of what constitutes reality in culture. Narrative theory can also help elucidate how consciousness raising has tangible benefits for women who participate in online conversations.

### **Narrative Theory as a Collective Rhetoric**

Because consciousness raising is predicated on the telling of stories, narrative theory can help explain why the practice of storytelling through virtual platforms resonates for women. In particular, we can make predictions for what fosters a "click" moment or moment of realization for women when they hear each other's stories during consciousness raising. Thus, examining the telling of narratives as a collective, identity-making process can help us understand why consciousness raising is so meaningful for women who participate in the process.

Research demonstrates that it is partly through narrative that women identify with one another and form as a collective in a safe space. Women can also solidify their identities as feminists through stories. According to Kellas (2008), “relational partners negotiate the story itself or the history and ‘reality’ of their relationship together” through narrative (p. 247). Though Kellas is describing a partnership here, we can reason that members of a group will also form ideas about their relationship together through shared stories. Indeed, Dubriwny (2005) cites a collective rhetoric through which women listen to one another’s stories and then add their own. More specifically, she claims that “consciousness-raising discourse provides an instructive model of how persuasion functions in a collective manner through the articulation of the lived experiences of many individuals” (p. 396).

Among feminists, generally, there is an overarching narrative about how women have been historically and continue to be denied equal rights with men. This narrative, which rejects the dominant sexist cultural understanding of women’s status, marks a relationship among all of the women who subscribe to a feminist narrative. Many women, as they tell this story and share their own, are co-constructing a narrative and weaving themselves into a collective movement as feminists.

The notion of collective rhetoric can also explain why members of the women’s movement would take stock in one another’s stories and be persuaded by them. Dubriwny (2005) explains that this phenomenon “models a process of persuasion that envisions the creation of novel public vocabularies as the product of the collective articulation of multiple, overlapping individual experiences” (p. 396). She explains that telling these individual stories and receiving feedback in groups can empower oppressed audiences and persuade them through a “validation of their lived experiences” (p. 400). With this knowledge, one can reason that through

identifying with others, women are more likely to feel validated and perhaps motivated by sharing their stories, and thus be more readily persuaded to take action.

The notion of collective rhetoric plays out in consciousness raising as women begin to relate to one another through storytelling. First, women value each other's individual stories, because they find the stories to be true in their own lives and consistent with their understanding of struggles with sexism. From critical feminist theory, one can expect these stories to feature a plot in which the villain (sexism and racism) wronged the storyteller in some way: "I was paid less than my male colleague for the same job" or "Did you know women are statistically much more likely to experience violence than men in their lifetime? That scares me." As these stories are shared, they will likely resonate in the minds of other women participating in the consciousness raising act who have experienced the same disadvantages.

As previously discussed, critical feminist scholars suggest that the moment in which stories told by members of the women's movement resonate in each other's lives is called a "click" experience, or a moment of recognition and identification in which individuals understand for the first time that they are not alone in their feelings about oppression and that they can voice their anger in this safe space among other women (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Dubriwny, 2005). The idea that women feel enlightened through storytelling aligns with Kellas' (2008) assertion that:

telling of stories of one's life may help to socially construct identity as well as . . . revise those identities in ways that benefit our psychological and relational well-being . . . Stories provide people with a means for creating new interpretations and for improving their understanding of their lived experience. (p. 249)

As women come to the realization that they can have a different life experience other than what has been culturally prescribed to them, they may begin to feel validated by hearing the stories around them. Dubriwny (2005) makes a similar claim: "the telling of personal narratives such as

those used in consciousness-raising sessions provides a way in which lived experiences are "translated" for both a wider audience *and* for the teller of the story" (p. 401). One can imagine that realities are reimagined and retold through the discourse used in these group conversations. My analysis explores how this participation in building identity through narrative can empower people whose voices have previously gone unheard. The retelling of the dominant, hegemonic story in a feminist light may persuade members of the movement as they identify with one another through their shared narrative.

Research exploring the social nature of online communities demonstrates that the same kind of feelings achieved through storytelling and consciousness raising in physical, in-person gatherings can be achieved online through virtual groups. As I already demonstrated in my literature review, the Internet offers a rich communication space in which users of new media can connect with one another and receive positive psychological feelings from the interaction. I argue that through tweeting about sexism, Twitter users are creating an online community that may result in similar psychological and emotional benefits.

### **Theory of Motivated Information Management**

Thus far, critical feminist theory helps explain the underpinnings of the feminist practice of consciousness-raising online. Narrative theory offers clues for why the practice of storytelling is so meaningful for women because sharing stories forms the glue that holds the members together in the movement and it is a vehicle for women to identify with one another through communicating their experiences. The Theory of Motivated Information Management (TMIM) may help explain why individuals are motivated to begin the process of consciousness raising. Additionally, the information gathered during consciousness raising may even motivate participants to commit acts of change.

TMIM posits that people can be motivated to act to due to an “uncertainty discrepancy” they feel between the amount of uncertainty they have about an issue and how much uncertainty they want to have. The theory conceives of three phases that individuals may undergo to deal with uncertainty: the interpretation, evaluation, and decision phases. Experiencing a felt discrepancy in the amount of uncertainty one has versus how much uncertainty they want to have is the first phase of uncertainty management, which Afifi and Matsunaga (2008) term “interpretation” (p. 126). The theory posits that if the uncertainty causes enough anxiety in a person, he or she will act to manage the discrepancy through various strategies. One way of reducing the feeling of uncertainty is to gather more information about a situation (Afifi and Matsunaga, 2008, p. 126).

The second phase of information management, “evaluation,” involves people gauging their ability to collect information and how effectively they believe they will manage the information once it is gathered. A person’s perceived ability of whether they will be able to cope with the information they discover is deemed their “coping efficacy” (Afifi and Matsunaga, 2008, p. 127). Thus, if a person feels she can cope with uncovering negative information about a situation, for example discovering that the disease that she has is severe or that the problem of sexism is very pervasive, then the person will continue with seeking information. If the perceived self-efficacy is low, then she may avoid seeking more information.

The evaluation a person makes ultimately leads him or her to make a choice about whether to manage uncertainty and how to do so. Afifi and Matsunaga (2008) call this the “decision” phase. At this point, people coping with uncertainty may make the decision to cope with their uncertainty by seeking information. In addition to one’s perceived efficacy, Afifi and Matsunaga (2008) note that interactions with others during the process of uncertainty

management can influence the three stages and lead to varying outcomes, suggesting that in the case of this study, participants involved in consciousness raising could influence each other's movement through the phases (p. 128).

The theory's focus on interaction with others in the process of uncertainty management might illuminate why women are motivated to share information about their experiences online, and also explain how they make decisions about how to proceed from those information exchanges. After exposure to a critical feminist perspective and through hearing the stories women are telling about their lives, women may begin to feel a discrepancy in the way they want to be viewed in society and their actual treatment by society with sexism as a cultural practice, which would reflect the interpretation phase of TMIM. In addition to causing them to seek more information, this uncertainty might spark certain feelings and emotions within individuals, such as frustration or anger, which might agitate them to the point of wanting to act out to produce change. Additionally, gathering in groups (both in-person and virtually) may increase feelings of self-efficacy for women as their feelings and proposed actions are encouraged by other members of the movement. As a result, they may make changes in their own lives as a way to cope with this discrepancy. Through this framework, TMIM can help explain the effect that messages about sexism and inequality have on the participants of consciousness raising. This understanding may in turn illuminate why consciousness raising serves as a powerful social movement tool as women may make decisions to minimize the discrepancies they feel through not only seeking information, but also by taking action and raising awareness about injustices perpetuated through cultural artifacts such as media.

## **We're Not Buying GoDaddy and Where Are *All* the Smart Women on Twitter?**

The #NotBuyingIt campaign's efforts to raise awareness about the sexist advertising practices of GoDaddy.com and the tweets posted using the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag offer excellent examples of moments of consciousness raising.

### **The #NotBuyingIt Campaign**

The #NotBuyingIt campaign is part of a larger online movement called the Representation Project, which was known as MissRepresentation at the time of the 2013 Super Bowl but has since been renamed. The Representation Project promotes positive representations of women in media by raising awareness of sexist cultural practices and by encouraging both women and men to take part in calling attention to these issues. The #NotBuyingIt campaign argues that women hold considerable economic power that can send a powerful message to companies that threaten gender equality. The campaign therefore calls on members of the movement to boycott businesses and organizations that use sexist advertising to sell their products or that produce goods that demean women.

The #NotBuyingIt campaign has targeted GoDaddy.com for their notoriously sexist advertising since the Twitter campaign launched in 2011 (Siddique, 2013). During the 2013 Super Bowl, GoDaddy released two commercials that were the focus of the Twitter campaign. The first advertisement featured model Bar Rafaeli sitting next to a "nerdy" young man named Walter. The characters represented the "sexy" and "smart" sides of GoDaddy, respectively. The two sloppily kissed for 10 seconds after spokeswoman Danica Patrick explained that "together, they're perfect." The second spot featured several heterosexual couples sitting on their couches in their homes. Each woman in the couple nagged her partner about when he was going to put his "next big idea" online. The commercial ended by depicting a man, who had posted his idea

online ahead of all of the other men, on a private jet asking a “sky waitress” for more champagne (Judkis, 2013).

On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, the #NotBuyingIt campaign called on members to tweet about these commercials during the football game to call attention to the negative portrayal of gender and the sexualization of women promoted by the company. In order to participate in the campaign to call out the sexism in these advertising spots, Twitter users simply needed to include the hashtag #NotBuyingIt in a tweet they posted with an “@” symbol next to the name of the company that they wished to call out. In this case, users were called on to use “@GoDaddy” to make sure that the company saw the message along with their “followers,” or the other Twitter users who follow the posts of that individual.

I analyzed a total of 355 tweets posted on February 3, 2013, the day of the 47<sup>th</sup> NFL Super Bowl in the United States, during which the two GoDaddy advertisements were aired. The tweets contained both the #NotBuyingIt campaign hashtag and @GoDaddy, which marked the tweet as part of the #NotBuyingIt campaign and would have ensured that the GoDaddy Twitter account managers would see the tweet. I did not include tweets posted after February 3<sup>rd</sup> in order to keep the size of the data manageable for this project. However, the tweets from that day represent the most immediate responses to the GoDaddy commercials and thus provided ample information to move forward with the study.

I began my analysis inductively by first reading all of the tweets in date order to look for recurring concepts related to the existing literature, which became themes that I used to examine how women use this communicative space to raise consciousness. The three most prominent themes that emerged included the need for feminism and equality, telling the feminist story, and

call-to-action to use economic power. Each theme contained key words and phrases that led me to separate them into appropriate theme categories, which are shared below:

Table 1: #NotBuyingIt Themes

Theme	Key Words and Concepts
Need for Feminism and Equality <sup>3</sup>	Ad is disrespectful to women, objectifies women, promotes gender stereotypes, women deserve better representation
Telling the Feminist Story	GoDaddy as villain, “worst offender” of the Super Bowl ads, sexist ads, attack on company, attack on advertising, anger and disgust at company
Call-to-Action: Economic Power	Switch domain companies, instructions on changing web domain service, threat of switching domain service

### The #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter Campaign

On August 26, 2013, the website FastCompany.com released a list of the “The 25 Smartest Women on Twitter” that sparked the creation of the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag. Though it was not the result of a formal awareness raising campaign like #NotBuyingIt, people began using the hashtag to voice their unhappiness with the article and what the list implied—essentially that there are no women of color worth following on Twitter.

In order to gather data to examine, I used my personal Twitter account and searched for posts that included the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag, as well as two variations of the hashtag that people used, #SmartBlackWomenonTwitter and #SmartBlackWomen (*Huff Post Black Voices*, 2013). The search generated a total of 256 tweets which I analyzed for recurring themes. A total of three prominent themes emerged as a result, including the need for equality: society is the problem, telling the black woman’s story, and call-to-action: participate and connect. These themes and their accompanying categorical characteristics are detailed in the chart below:

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<sup>3</sup> When using equality here, I am referring to the fact that the #NotBuyingIt participants are advocating for fair, non-gender stereotyped representations of women in the media.

Table 2: #SmartBlackWomen Themes

Theme	Key Words and Concepts
Need for Equality: Society is the Problem <sup>4</sup>	Racism is a systemic problem that excludes women of color, Fast Company’s list is the latest example
Telling the Black Woman’s Story	Education and awareness, here’s <i>our</i> list of smart black women
Call-to-Action: Participate and Connect	Who are the smart black women you know? connect with other women, love the hashtag and use it

### **Analysis: Twitter as a Consciousness-Raising Space**

The conversations that occurred on Twitter are reminiscent of a consciousness-raising act as there are ample examples of Twitter users putting critical feminist theory in action. When they wished to enter the conversation, Twitter users joined in by employing the #NotBuyingIt hashtag and @GoDaddy or #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag and @FastCompany. Much like in a conversation at the kitchen table or through writing a letter, participants voiced their experiences and frustrations online.

### **Critical Feminist Theory at Work: Naming and Responding to Sexism**

As women expressed their frustration with the advertisements or the lack of women of color recognized as people worth “following,” we see calls for more accurate and fair cultural representation emerging from Twitter users and key terms that draw attention to the feminist cause. Twitter users also participated in the naming of issues related to sexism displayed through GoDaddy advertisements and the exclusion of women through lists. Finally, there was a message of empowerment and an encouragement for women to find a sense of agency in the tweets.

**Call for equality and naming.** In the case of the #NotBuyingIt campaign, concern for better representation of women and addressing sexism in the GoDaddy advertisements are

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term equality to refer to the argument present by the #SmartBlackWomen campaign participants that women of all identities deserve to be represented and counted in cultural artifacts; white women were privileged in the FastCompany list, which is unjust and should be rectified to be more inclusive.

evident throughout the Twitter conversation. Using the criteria identified in the “Need for Feminism and Equality” theme presented above, I identified a total of 148 out of 355 tweets containing references to the feminist ideals of equal gender representation and eliminating cultural sexism (Twitter.com/search, 2013). First, women shared their experiences of feeling frustrated and angered by the advertisements because of their misogynistic content. Just as they might in a more traditional consciousness-raising context, women were able to add their opinions and stories to the conversation by tweeting. Tweets in which people called forth the ideas of feminism by encouraging equality between men and women and discouraging sexism in the advertisements, were abundant. The following examples represent the commentary coming from participants that illuminate the anger women felt over GoDaddy’s exploitation of women to sell their product:

Jennie @KnottjustJ 3 Feb: @GoDaddy your internatlized [sic] sexism is evident in your misrepresentation of women. Stop using our bodies to sell your product #Notbuyingit

Tiff C @TiffC1999 3 Feb: A part of my soul died. @godaddy you are the epitome of the "war on women" #notbuyingit #Superbowl

Gail Dudley @GailDudley 3 Feb: @GoDaddy #NotBuyingIt I'm joining women and girls to fight misrepresentation of gender in the media.

In these representative samples, it is evident that women were using the Twitter platform to draw attention to issues that are important in their lives. For example, Gail drew attention to the problem of misrepresentation and how it harms women. Jennie brought forth the argument that when companies use women’s bodies to advertise products, it is a personal affront to women. Tiff mentions the “war on women,” which refers to the notion that there are institutionalized practices that demean and disadvantage women.

A second noteworthy result of this Twitter conversation is that the feminist strategy of naming a practice that hurts women is evident in the tweets as users equated GoDaddy’s

advertisements to sexism at work. Until people named these advertisements as sexist and harmful, they could exist in popular culture without a critical read of the potential damage they could cause. Twitter users employed the #NotBuyingIt hashtag to critically examine the commercials:

Laurel Pederson @iheartcmp3 Feb: @godaddy, don't you know that 50% of people are female? #sexist advertising isn't exactly good business sense, because we're #notbuyingit.

Connie Hieatt @chieatt3 Feb: Your SuperBowl commercials so [*sic*] not appropriate for how you represent women @GoDaddy I'm #NotBuyingIt

Stephanie Lemmons @StephLemmons 3 Feb: #NotBuyingIt #notclassy @godaddy #SB47 commercials, please learn to respect women in your ads...

Through these tweets, women give name to the idea that advertising is a purveyor of sexist ideals and that it is in fact a major threat to women's equality. Thus, the GoDaddy commercials, which may seem like a harmless joke to some, serve to uphold patriarchal understandings of gender and the roles afforded to men and women culturally. Prior to this kind of naming and identification of the problematic nature of these advertisements, people may not have been tuned in to how harmful these commercials could be.

Through the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag, women expressed their anger over the lack of women of color represented on the "25 Smartest Black Women On Twitter" article, citing the inherent racism in the article through the exclusion. Many of the tweets that responded to the lack of representation for women of color called forth the need for equal representation and implied or stated directly that black women should not have to be categorized separately from other women. In fact, 51 out of 256 tweets echoed some form of a need for cultural equality. User dream hampton wrote "Thanks to everyone who put me on their #SmartBlackWomenOnTwitter list. That's a long ass hashtag. One we shouldn't've [*sic*] had to create" and Ava DuVernay stated "We don't need third party authentication. We have our vibrant

selves. Thank to those celebrating our heroines w/ #smartblackwomenoftwitter” (Twitter, 2014). These tweets suggests that women of color should not even be placed in the position of needing their own hashtag to point out smart black women, because they should be considered smart women naturally rather than in another category than white women. Ensuing tweets made a similar argument:

Jamilah Lemieux @JamilahLemieux Aug 27: Just figured out what #smartblackwomenoftwitter is about. Folks gon' learn to stop ignoring WOC [Women of Color], man.

Pia Glenn @PiaGlenn Aug 27: It might sound like a cop-out but my TL [timeline] is so overrun with #SmartBlackWomenOfTwitter I don't even know where to start. We are not invisible.

Awesomely Luvvie @Luvvie Aug 27: The hashtag I'm using is #SmartWomenonTwitter b/c we aren't just #SmartBlackWomenonTwitter. We are smart women who happen to be Black.

In addition to expressing their anger and frustration, these examples demonstrate how women were naming the practice of exclusion as a racist act that serves to erase women of color from prominent social and cultural positions. Through these tweets calling out Fast Company’s limited list, the Twitter users brought to light the ongoing cultural inequalities faced by women of color.

**Empowerment and agency.** In addition to offering a sounding board for feminists, the Twitter space can serve as a source of encouragement for women in the movement. As their ideas are validated by other users, participants may feel the same level of support that they would receive from an in-person consciousness-raising event. Not only are people given a space to openly voice their opposition to deleterious cultural artifacts, such as the commercials produced by GoDaddy, but they can also receive feedback and support from other Twitter users. In fact, Twitter has a “retweet” function that can aid users in validating each other’s words. If a user wishes to retweet someone else’s post, she or he selects a “Retweet” button next to the user’s

comment, and the comment is automatically loaded into a response box. The retweeting user can then add her own message in addition to the message she is retweeting, including an @ symbol next to the user's name from which she got the original tweet to show that she retweeted that user's comment. This demonstration of support of other contributors' words occurred frequently throughout the Twitter conversation about GoDaddy, as several tweets were re-posted numerous times. Some of the most popular retweets included messages about equality, sexism, and a call for change:

Miss Representation @RepresentPledge3 Feb: How to switch your domain from @GoDaddy: <http://bit.ly/WIlfW1> #NotBuyingIt (Retweeted 36 times)

Tara Tuttle @taratuttle3 Feb: Hey @GoDaddy, your #SuperBowl ad is sexist. Stop demeaning women to sell your product - I'm #NotBuyingIt #SB47 (Retweeted 13 times)

Miss Representation @RepresentPledge 3 Feb: .RT @MasculinityU: @GoDaddy always has an overt way of reinforcing the principal that women cannot be smart. #NotBuyingIt (Retweeted 4 times)

In addition to the retweeting option, users employed the "@" function to respond to one another's tweets and to demonstrate support for each other's ideas. The conversation detailed below occurred through the Twitter platform and illustrates the kind of interpersonal exchange performed in this consciousness-raising space:

Lisa-Jo Baker @lisajobaker 3 Feb: @BarRefaeli I think I need to get my hands on some mind bleach @godaddy #NotBuyingIt

Tsh Oxenreider @tsh 3 Feb: PREACH, @lisajobaker. #SuperBowl #NotBuyingIt @GoDaddy <http://bit.ly/VJTgDR>

Lisa-Jo Baker @lisajobaker 3 Feb: @SimpleMom You'll teach me how to switch my domains away from @godaddy come March and renewal time, yes? #NotBuyingIt

Tsh Oxenreider @tsh 3 Feb: RT @lisajobaker: You'll teach me how to switch my domains away from @GoDaddy come renewal time, yes? #NotBuyingIt //Yep! Love @namedotcom.

In this exchange, user Tsh Oxenreider acknowledged user Lisa-Jo Baker's tweet that the GoDaddy advertisement featuring model Bar Refaeli was offensive. Later, Tsh Oxenreider retweeted the request that Lisa-Jo Baker made of another user to teach her how to switch off of her GoDaddy-supported domain and then offered her or his own preferred domain distributor as a helpful option when she does move her business. This is just one example of the ways in which people supported one another through the consciousness-raising space of Twitter. It is likely that women found empowerment as their experiences were validated by others and as they were offered support through suggestions and resources to make the change called forth by the movement.

A supportive environment also existed during the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter conversation and is demonstrated through retweeting, making shout outs to other users, and the frequent use of identifying other smart black women using the "@" function. The most commonly retweeted message was the headline about the Fast Company article, spreading the message to Twitter users' circles. For example, this tweet posted by HuffPost BlackVoices was retweeted 19 times, the most of any tweet from August 27<sup>th</sup>: "#SmartBlackWomenOfTwitter erupts in response to @FastCompany's list. Here are our picks <http://huff.to/1fh28Iy>" (Twitter, 2014). Other retweets included "Fast Company's 25 Smartest Women On Twitter List Excludes Women Of Color <http://ow.ly/ojWaZ> #SmartBlackWomenOnTwitter" (contessa @contessalouise, August 27) and "Women of Color Ignored by Fast Company's 25 Smartest Women on Twitter List, Twitter Reacts with #SmartBlackWomen <http://ow.ly/olaeA>" (Philippa Willitts @PhilippaWrites, August 28). These latter two tweets were only retweeted a handful of times each, but still may have reinforced the message to hundreds of Twitter users who follow the people who tweeted. The retweets served to reinforce and spread the message of

FastCompany's exclusion into others' networks, effectively creating a ripple effect that exposed more and more people to the message.

Additionally, through the use of the "@" function, many women tweeted their own list of smart women on Twitter and included each other in the conversation in an act of recognition to counter FastCompany's harmful list. In order to call one another out, the women included the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag and an @ symbol next to the Twitter users that they wanted to celebrate. One example from user Val Everett (@BadHg21) mirrors the tweets of many, which call out smart black women in their networks: "@Fastcompany: @angryblacklady @feministajones @joyreid @antheabutler @mharrisperry @goldietaylor to name very few #smartblackwomenoftwitter" (Twitter, 2014). In many tweets, women included @FastCompany to send the names of smart black women to the Twitter account run by Fast Company employees.

The continuous cycle of support and encouragement continued since, as a result of these shout-outs, scores of women expressed feeling touched and honored to be mentioned as belonging to the virtual list of smart black women being created online. Women also expressed their enthusiasm over the creation of the hashtag. It was evident from the tweets that the practice of identifying smart black women and participating in the call to use the hashtag created a sense of support and of gratitude among participants:

afrobella @afrobella Aug 27: I love this #SmartBlackWomenOfTwitter hashtag and I love being included on these lists! Putting me in amazing company

Franchesca Ramsey @chescaleigh Aug 27: flattered to be included in so many #smartblackwomenoftwitter tweets. combing my replies to find other smart women to follow! thx!

Jasmine Burnett @Blkfeminst Aug 27: Echoes of beautiful energy to @FeministaJones 4 introducing the most refreshing 5 words #SmartBlackWomenOnTwitter Thank you sis! #admiration

Through the act of re-tweeting and making shout-outs, women demonstrated their support for one another and created a virtual community celebrating the women who were left off of Fast Company's now infamous list.

### **Telling the Story: Identifying and Collectively Calling Out the Villain**

A major tenet of narrative theory is that stories help individuals understand their realities and experiences. One way in which people can make sense of their lives is by following tweets—or microscopic stories—online. In the case of the artifacts presented through this study, the Twitter platform serves as a vehicle to help users tell the story of sexism and domination in the U.S., to strengthen the collective narrative surrounding these inequalities, and to empower participants in the movement.

**A collective narrative.** The Twitter conversation about GoDaddy that took place on February 3<sup>rd</sup> was a moment of storytelling about the cultural inequality of women perpetuated by popular media. Similarly, the response to Fast Company's exclusionary article told a story of how media and the larger culture continue to oppress women of color. In both instances, members of Twitter presumably from all over the country chimed in to tell the story of sexism and racism in a very public place. They used this platform to tell the story of the cultural oppression of women, with sexism and racism as the oppressing forces. In the case of the #NotBuyingIt example, the Twitter users may have considered themselves the protagonists who were working to defeat the villain, and GoDaddy was the villain because the company was the source of domination. The tweets consistently attacked the company and its advertisements directly. The story looked slightly different for the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter users, who

implicated culture and society as the villain and source of maltreatment, focusing less on Fast Company as the perpetrator and more on systemic issues as culpable for the erasure of black women's voices.

The first narrative unfolded on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013 as Twitter users contributed their experiences to the campaign to raise awareness about boycotting GoDaddy. The Twitter users who took part in the #NotBuyingIt campaign were the protagonists in this story as they worked to defeat the villain, or to discredit GoDaddy as a company, through their actions. They participated by telling the story of how the company was threatening gender equality through its sexist commercials, and that the tactic needed to be stopped. The way to do this was to post as many tweets from as many people as possible and affix the hashtag #NotBuyingIt and symbol @GoDaddy. As the number of tweets increased, people from the #NotBuyingIt campaign headquarters (including Imran Siddiquee who worked for MissRepresentation) began updating the Twitter community on how many thousands of tweets had already been posted calling out GoDaddy, and other participants in the campaign began to re-tweet these numbers. For example, Siddiquee (@imransiddiquee) posted: "Now over 4000 #NotBuyingIt tweets directed @GoDaddy during the #SuperBowl" (Twitter.com/search, 2013). At the close of the day, the total had climbed to more than 7,400 tweets (Siddiquee, 2013). The actions of the protagonists together created a huge presence to attract attention to GoDaddy's practices. The story was persuasive because it contained elements of the familiar narrative of patriarchal cultural practices oppressing women and the notion that women and men must rise up to shift the cultural attitude about what is an acceptable gender portrayal. In this narrative, Twitter users came together virtually to send a powerful message for change.

On the other hand, the narrative told through the Twitter conversation about smart black women cited overarching cultural practices that disadvantage women of color as the villain. Instead of citing gender discrimination as was done through the tweets about GoDaddy, the conversation was largely focused on how women are excluded systemically based on their racial background.

In this story, the Twitter users could be considered the protagonists who rallied together to call out ongoing cultural discrimination based on race. For example, Erica L. Williams tweeted about the role of culture in silencing women of color: “#SmartBlackWomenOfTwitter reminds me that when society tears us down we can affirm each other. Love-fest, needed and deserved” (Twitter, 2014). Other users directly called out the systemic problem of racism affecting women of color. Jasmine Burnett (@Blkfeminist) stated that “Folks are getting intimidated due to how we define and locate each other. #DontHate #SmartBlackWomenOnTwitter” (Twitter, 2014). The same Twitter user harkened back to the ongoing struggle that women of color have faced both historically and at present when she shares the following tweet: “#SmartBlackWomenOnTwitter had to be out of a collective dream of the radical Black women activists before us. <http://bit.ly/14YXs5h> #AMAZED” (Twitter, 2014). Through this post, she evoked a historical record of oppression and made the claim that this trending hashtag on Twitter is an extension of the work that has been done already to seek justice for women of color. Tying Fast Company’s exclusion to historic and current oppression weaves this event into the longtime struggle women have faced for just treatment when they have been denied opportunities because of their racialized gender.

Notably, the stories were constructed with the use of the #NotBuyingIt and #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtags with the help of a collective group of people, meaning

that the stories were co-constructed by members of each respective movement. The notion of stories ringing true and making sense to participants ties in closely with the idea of identification among group members. Since the stories were familiar and true to the people involved, they helped foster identification because participants could find commonalities with one another. As they entered their story into the conversation, they could see the stories of others that rang true with them. Thus, this interaction through storytelling seems to have strengthened the ties among communicators and served to build momentum as the number of tweets calling out inequality and injustice increased.

**Coping with difficulty.** While Twitter serves as a platform for a storytelling, consciousness-raising space, it can also serve the function of helping people cope with difficulty. If women are grappling with sexism and racism, they can cope by telling their stories in this shared space. Interpersonal research employing narrative theory explains that jointly telling stories can help people face difficulty in their lives. Kellas et al. (2010) explain how narrative sense-making, or telling stories about one's experience with difficulty both individually and as a collective, can have psychological benefits that help the storyteller cope with the difficulty they experience (p. 175). The positive qualities of storytelling cannot be denied in the case of the Twitter conversations. Women participate in the collective storytelling of the fight against sexism, for example, and, as a result, may feel a sense of catharsis and understanding in their own lives as they find identification with others. The act of changing the advertising practices of GoDaddy is a story that can be told and retold as women continue to push for equal representation. Throughout the day of the Super Bowl, users posted tweets updating other members of the progress of the movement, creating a positive environment that encouraged activism on the part of those participating in the consciousness raising. User Tamaera L.

expressed her gratitude for the day of activism, stating “Thx, @RepresentPledge et al., for the myriad #NotBuyingIt tweets today. ♥ (I have to agree that @GoDaddy & @Audi were the worst offenders.)” (Twitter, 2013). For users like Tamaera, the real-time retelling of the story of the day’s progress could have served as an uplifting and motivating moment for those following the movement, creating a community environment and encouraging the ongoing fight against oppression.

The supportive atmosphere fostered in the conversation about GoDaddy was reflected in the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter tweets as well, arguably encouraging others to join the movement and have their voices heard. The shout-outs could also serve to validate the women who were personally addressed as smart black women on Twitter. Overall, women demonstrated excitement about the movement, encouraged one another to use the hashtag, and discovered other smart black women as a result.

### **Answering Calls-to-Action: Consciousness Raising as Catharsis**

Critical feminist theory and narrative theory have explained what is motivating women to raise consciousness on the Twitter platform and how it serves as a means to cope with the issue of sexism. However, women are also choosing to respond to calls-to-action put forth by other members of the movement as a result of consciousness raising. The Theory of Motivated Information Management may help shed light on why women are spurred to action as they learn about the problem of sexism and feel an uncertainty discrepancy in the way they are represented in culture. By considering the events taking place on Twitter through the three stages of TMIM, we can trace the evolution of consciousness raising from information gathering to choosing to participate in acts of change when people answer a call-to-action to minimize uncertainty.

Storytelling through consciousness raising sparks the first phase of uncertainty management: interpretation. As women receive information about their misrepresentation in media and the cultural treatment of women as subordinate, they may begin to feel that there is a discrepancy in the way they wish to be treated (as equals) and how they are treated in reality. User Elizabeth Plank demonstrated her frustration with the representation of women presented by GoDaddy when she tweeted “Is it just me or did Go daddy just go out of its way to remind us that women can't be smart? #SuperBolwXLVII #NotBuyingIt,” as did user Julie Anne St. Cyr: “@GoDaddy, I'm offended both as a woman and a smart person. Tell your creative to try being, you know, actually creative. #NotBuyingIt #SB47.” Tweets from the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter conversation echoed similar sentiments of frustration: “Discovering so many new smart folks to follow makes me \*almost\* glad this BS happened <http://bit.ly/16L2Ato> #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter” (Lori Adelman @Ladelman) and “‘25 of the Smartest Women on Twitter’ has no black women. Twitter responds with #SmartBlackWomenOfTwitter. Best reaction to worst thing” (Molly Knefel @mollyknefel). Storytelling through consciousness raising can foster this “click” moment for women in which they realize that there is a discrepancy in the way they feel and the way they want to feel. By listening to others and sharing their own stories in the case of the Twitter conversation in both cases, women may have had a click moment and therefore decided to seek more information about the issue.

Seeking information to cope with an uncertainty discrepancy is termed the evaluation phase, in which women must consider how they should collect information. This stage may be influenced by the level of involvement each individual may have in the consciousness raising process. Kellas et al. (2010) explain how self-regulation theory suggests that storytelling can

serve a self-actualizing purpose through which individuals undergo a “mastery experience” that can increase their confidence in their self-efficacy. In other words, through writing about their experiences and harnessing their emotions, participants may come away with a higher sense of self (p. 188). For example, #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter user Spectra Speaks (@spectraspeaks) posted: “I’m so moved by all the #smartblackwomenontwitter love I’ve received today. Don’t know who started the hashtag, but it’s amazing-thank you!” (Twitter, 2014). A positive sense of self-efficacy, stemming from the validation and catharsis experienced through consciousness raising, could explain why women may have felt ready to participate in the #NotBuyingIt campaign or #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter conversation after seeking information and sharing their own stories about their experiences with sexism and racism.

This leads into the last stage of decision, in which people determine how they want to proceed: whether to manage the uncertainty or avoid it. Indeed, since thousands of women entered the Twitter conversation on February 3<sup>rd</sup> and hundreds participated in the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter campaign, it may be assumed that these Twitter users felt they needed to participate in order to add stories of their experience and gain more knowledge from others. Additionally, however, many women also decided to take an extra step beyond information gathering, which was to respond to a call-to-action from the movement.

There were two major calls-to-action made by the #NotBuyingIt campaign: the first was a call for women to participate through tweeting and the second was a call for women to move their business away from GoDaddy, which are exemplified in this tweet from Heather Coleman Voss (@HeatherEColeman): “Spread the word! RT @RepresentPledge: How to switch your domain from @GoDaddy: <http://bit.ly/WIlfW1> #brandbowl #adbowl #notbuyingit.” Many users echoed the call-to-action to stop buying or to switch from using GoDaddy domains, including

Baily Warman: “Use the media for good this super bowl sunday! hash tag #notbuyingit to let companies like @GoDaddy [know] that sexism wont sell & you arent [*sic*] buying” (Twitter.com/search, 2013). One hundred and eleven tweets from people echoed this sentiment. They either shared that they had moved their domains or offered encouragement and instructions on how to move a domain away from GoDaddy. Because they knew that they were participating in an online community that was supportive of their actions, thereby increasing their self-efficacy, these women perhaps decided to act on the information that they had about GoDaddy as a result of consciousness raising on Twitter.

Similar calls-to-action were put forth in the case of those who employed the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag as they called on one another to recognize and discover more smart black women to add to their networks and to check out articles related to the issue under discussion. The first call-to-action, which called on women to shout out the smart black women they know on Twitter using the hashtag, was answered enthusiastically. Users posted hundreds of tweets with their recommendations for Twitter users to follow in answer to calls-to-action such as “Wake Up my followin folks! #SmartBlackWomenOfTwitter is where its [*sic*] at! @FastCompany couldn't come up with one. How Many Do YOU know?” (Awake Black Woman @AwakeBlackWoman) and “There are many brilliant voices & profound truths in #SmartBlackWomenOfTwitter - check out the hashtag, you'll be glad you did...” (Kim Hernandez @wiredifferent). It is evident that women did discover one another by participating in these calls-to-action:

Lori Adelman @Ladelman Aug 27: “Discovering so many new smart folks to follow makes me \*almost\* glad this BS happened <http://bit.ly/16L2Ato> #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter”

Franchesca Ramsey @chescaleigh Aug 27: flattered to be included in so many #smartblackwomenofTwitter tweets. combing my replies to find other smart women to follow! thx!

Amadi @amaditalks Aug 27: Joyously mining #smartblackwomenoftwitter tweets to surround myself with amazing sisters. How did I not know about some of you?

These tweets demonstrate that the calls-to-action to recognize women of color and then connect with one another were answered by many of the users who followed the hashtag, and that they enjoyed virtually meeting one another through the process.

A second call-to-action involved users calling on one another to read more information about the issue of exclusion sparked by the Fast Company list and to seek additional literature about smart black women. Several tweets pointed people on Twitter to a *Huff Post Black Voices* article that accused Fast Company of racism and then offered a new list of the smart women on Twitter that featured twenty-five women of color (*HuffPost Black Voices*, 2013). Additional links pointed to an article released by the feminist blog *Feministing*, links to writings by women of color, articles about civil rights figures Josephine Baker and Rosa Parks, and users' personal lists of women to follow on Twitter.

In both the #NotBuyingIt campaign and the movement to employ the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag, the Twitter users were sufficiently motivated to answer calls-to-action put forth by the organizing entities. Perhaps the discrepancy that women felt coupled with the encouragement they received from others motivated them to act in a way that they believed would help fight the problems of sexism or exclusion, thereby minimizing their uncertainty not only through seeking information but also through taking action. Women who tweeted through the #NotBuyingIt campaign raised awareness about and boycotted GoDaddy, the purveyor of sexism, as a coping mechanism. Women who used the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag raised awareness about how excluding women of color is

a harmful act and took matters into their own hands to recognize smart women of color on Twitter, generating a response that ultimately raised awareness about their cause and forged new connections online. Simply put, women in both cases probably felt better after acting in response to the information that they learned by taking control through individual activism.

### **Discussion: Consciousness Raising as a Tool for Social Change**

This analysis demonstrates that there is a form of consciousness raising manifesting online through new media such as Twitter. People are gathering to spread awareness about issues at the forefront of efforts to eradicate sexism and racism. Twitter acts as a vehicle for building these connections among participants, much as gatherings and writings by feminists in the past would create conversations about issues that mattered to the participants. Ample examples from this analysis show that as women employed the #NotBuyingIt or the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag, they connected with other women and shared their stories. Thus, there is evidence that women can form relationships online through their disclosures to one another, much in the same way they would through more traditional forms of consciousness raising. Indeed, the narratives told in this consciousness raising venue foster identification among participants and enlighten them, potentially causing a click moment. Ultimately, women may be motivated to manage their uncertainty with their cultural positioning as inferior by acting for change.

In Chapter Three, I explore the role of blog sites in providing an emerging consciousness raising space to further examine the communicative and social value of online collectives. I discuss and engage these artifacts by applying Hill Collins' (2009) matrix of domination and hooks' (1989) political method of talking back.

### Chapter Three: Feminist Blogs—*Feministe* and *The Feminist Wire*

Blog websites exist on an endless number of subjects. Alongside political and popular culture blogs on an array of topics, feminist blogs are used to tell the feminist story and cultivate a community of engaged feminists online. These virtual platforms offer a space for the feminist movement to be explored, shaped, and formed with participation from perhaps more voices than ever. As Travers (2003) succinctly reminds us, “All publics are socially constructed, and cyberpublics are no exception” (p. 227). In these spaces, a virtual community is built through posts sharing experiences of feminism from individual contributors.

In addition to serving as the platform for a virtual community, these blogs offer a prime consciousness-raising space as contributors engage with members of the blog community and as these followers comment back and interact with one another. Blogs provide a space for women to negotiate their stories together through consciousness raising, fostering a feminist understanding of women’s way of being that is created through a collective rhetoric. Jaggar (2013) asserts that “When certain emotions are shared or validated by others . . . the basis exists for forming a subculture defined by perceptions, norms, and values that systematically oppose the prevailing perceptions, norms, and values (p. 387). This provides alternatives to the dominant portrayal of women’s experiences presented through media and culture and raises awareness about the feminist cause.

In this chapter, I argue that blog websites offer a platform for consciousness raising. They do so by constructing a community of bloggers through the telling of feminist stories and allowing users to co-construct a narrative of feminism and its related issues, resulting in a click experience for members of the community. I identify moments where the story unfolds through

the blogs and then the click moments that result from learning about and co-constructing this information. Specifically, I study content from two feminist blogs to examine the role of blogs in consciousness raising, community building, and potential activism through blogs.

### **Blogging as an Alternative: A Feminist Interpretation of Reality and Experience**

Blog sites offer an alternative channel and source of information for women to tell the stories of their lives and construct their own interpretations of women's experiences outside of mainstream culture. Media from traditional outlets such as magazines, television, film, and websites offer an "ideal" image of what women should be like and how they should act that is often unrepresentative of many women's experiences. Media representations of women communicate oppressive societal expectations, limited understandings of beauty, and monolithic constructions of what it means to be a woman (Keller, 2012). Without a doubt, media conglomerates shape what messages are presented to women about who they should be and how they should act.

The editors and writers of mainstream publications for women such as *Seventeen* and *Cosmopolitan*, and the producers of film, television, and other media, are beholden to the wishes of the companies that advertise with them. The advertisers balk at feminist content that may seem "radical," including articles that tackle complex political and social issues such as abortion and rape, which, as a result, are undesirable and infrequently covered (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, p. 110). Additionally, feminism has been vilified in mainstream media, as publications run articles that question the need for feminism or its potential detriment to women. As a result, feminism is portrayed negatively and political and social gains achieved through feminism remain unattributed to the movement (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, p. 94). With these restrictions in mind, blogging offers an online source for women to access information

about feminism and/or to become involved in the conversation. Blogging fills a gap in existing resources for women and girls who seek to turn away from mainstream constructions of culture that serve to limit women.

In fact, blogging and other online forums have indeed emerged as counter-spaces to existing media. Blogging is inexpensive and therefore independent of the corporate advertising that confines the content of larger print and online publications. As a result, these blog sites become unique spaces where women can express their own visions of a feminist world. Keller (2012) posits that blogs serve as an arena “where girls are enacting political agency and blurring the lines between producing and consuming” (p. 431). Women and girls have more choices to decide what to read and consume as a result of this new media. Moreover, they can become active contributors themselves, shaping the content that is meant to describe their own experiences moving throughout the world.

The ability to consume alternative media, as well as contribute to it, allows space for previously silenced feminist interpretations of reality to be heard and offers a new platform to grapple with ongoing social and political inequalities from a feminist perspective. Travers (2003) suggests that feminists are uniquely equipped with the ability to re-envision the Internet as a space free from the elitist, masculinist, confining nature that has dominated the Internet and other media (p. 227-228). As a result, these spaces may serve as sources of information, community, and even political action unavailable through mainstream sources. There is evidence that online spaces can foster political participation, suggesting that blogs offer the space to promote activism by sharing news of what is relevant to the feminist community. As one example, Bakker and Vreese (2011) found a link between young people (ages 18 to 24) who digest news and information online and an increase in political activity both online and offline (p. 465). Blogs are

a source of similar information and may lead to more informed, active feminists. Keller asserts that “[activist] strategies use technology in ways that both extend historical uses of technology by feminists, while also using it in new ways to address contemporary concerns, especially in regard to community-building and networking” (p. 433). Modern, third-wave activism exists through a multitude of platforms that bridge old and new feminist techniques of consciousness raising, and blog sites serve as a location for these activities.

Much as we saw in the Twitter examples in the previous chapter, there is a conversation forming online through blogs. Blogs present a prime discursive space because they are interactive. In addition to a blog feed that features posts in chronological order, blogs typically allow for comments following posts for readers to offer feedback. The nature of blogs fosters a “participatory culture” that may offer more agency than other more traditional communication outlets that are more formal and structured (Keller, 2012, p. 434). Users of the site can offer feedback directly to the author and receive a response from the author and from one another, allowing ample opportunities for interaction. Keller (2003) makes a comparison between the “Comments” section offered by blogs to the conversations held by consciousness raising groups of the 1970s (p. 438). Rather than meeting with individuals who are locally connected, or sharing thoughts over months through letters, these online interactions are almost immediate. Blog spaces may also grant users the opportunity to connect with a broader range of participants because the Internet is faster and more accessible to people than traditional print zines and publications produced by feminists before the advent of the Internet.

Considering the consciousness raising opportunities with the interactive nature and availability of blogs, the goal of this chapter is to further elucidate the potential for blogs to present an alternative, feminist reality for women that is co-created by the blog authors and their

readers. I also examine the conversations taking place to identify click moments and calls-to-action that could result in meaningful personal and political activism.

### **The “Personal is Political” and “Shameless Self-Promotion Sunday”**

Though there are a slew of feminist blogs online, I chose to limit my artifacts to two blogs to keep the information manageable. In the following analysis, I examine elements of *The Feminist Wire* and *Feministe*, which are blog sites that are self-identified as feminist and allow for participation from guest bloggers in addition to posts produced by their core blogging teams. The missions of both blogs reflect general feminist ideals discussed in Chapter One. Due to the high volume of data offered by each blog, I limited my study to one feature, or column, from each blog that call on the public to post their stories and ideas. They also allow for responses to the writings from the public through comments sections. I begin by describing each artifact in more detail and specify the features of each that I examined for my analysis. Then, I turn to my analysis.

#### ***The Feminist Wire***

*The Feminist Wire* features several columns that reflect its mission, including “Feminists We Love” and “The Personal is Political.” The mission of *The Feminist Wire* is:

to provide socio-political and cultural critique of anti-feminist, racist, and imperialist politics pervasive in all forms and spaces of private and public lives of individuals globally. . . . *The Feminist Wire* seeks to valorize and sustain pro-feminist representations and create alternative frameworks to build a just and equitable society. (*The Feminist Wire*, 2014)

I chose to analyze fifteen blog posts from the “Personal is Political” column because of the section’s focus on women’s individual stories and experiences coping with adversity in a patriarchal world. The pieces that I examined were posted during January and February of 2014.

*The Feminist Wire* website describes the “Personal is Political” feature as the following:

This section honors personal narrative as a source of politics, analysis, pedagogy, and survival. Thus, in keeping with the feminist legacy of naming the private and personal as sites that are no less political than the public, we are committed to making space for explicating and interrogating the interior lives of feminists as well as the space necessary to offer self-reflexive analyses. We will publish first-person essays, autobiographical accounts, memoir, and other forms that pay homage to and elevate feminist lives, lived experiences, and stories. (*The Feminist Wire*, 2014)

As I read through the articles and comments written in response, I looked for narratives that challenged topics of dominant cultural discourse. In particular, I searched for stories that covered issues of importance to feminists, such as violence against women, inequality faced by people of non-conforming identities, and representations outside of mainstream conceptions of women.

### ***Feministe***

*Feministe* was founded in 2001 as a personal blog, but has since grown to include co-bloggers who post regularly and also features guest bloggers frequently (*Feministe*, 2014). The mission statement reads: “Feministe is a blogging collective which prioritises [*sic*] women’s voices. This blog is where we share our opinions on anything and everything, as the mood takes us. Each of us speaks only for our individual selves unless otherwise specified” (*Feministe*, 2014). The *Feministe* blog has a policy that the site is meant to serve as a “safe space” for the exchange of ideas consistent with feminist ideas. *Feministe* has a range of blogging features, including columns maintained by regular contributors, guest bloggers, and a “Shameless Self-Promotion Sunday” opportunity through which anyone is invited to contribute content (*Feministe*, 2014).

I examined 92 posts and responses generated through the “Shameless Self-Promotion Sunday” features, which appeared every Sunday from January 5, 2014 to January 26, 2014. This feature calls on people to post a link to what they have created, written, or done over the past

week. Because it is an open space to post, women are called on to share stories and experiences from their own lives in their own words.

For this analysis, I again invoke the bell hooks' articulation of a white, capitalist, patriarchal conception of reality as the standard against which women must negotiate their realities. As women move through this male-dominated world with their complex identities, they may employ certain strategies to cope with the idealized images of women to which they are exposed. One such strategy is what hooks' deems the act of "talking back," a Black feminist strategy that involves responding to dominant voices through language (hooks, 1989). She claims that the practice of talking back is a move "toward a liberatory vision—one that transforms our consciousness, our very being" (p. 29) and adds that "our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance" (p. 28). I argue that the act of posting to a blog and a sharing a narrative of one's experience is a way of talking back—of rejecting dominant notions of women and introducing a new conception of reality that is more in tune with feminists' experiences.

Particularly, the posts generated through the "Personal is Political" and "Shameless Self-Promotion" features certainly told a story apart from this conception of a normal or ideal way of being in the world. The bloggers provided a non-mainstream, generally anti-hegemonic conception of reality for the women reading and responding to these stories. The world created by this blog featured stories from women of complex racial, sexual, and gender identities who do not subscribe to binary conceptions of these concepts. In these posts, difficult topics were discussed that evoked difference by stepping out of the mainstream narrative. For instance, women's experiences with abuse, violence, incest, depression, abortion, fat-shaming, and racial and ethnic oppression were addressed head-on in these narratives. hooks (1989) says that "not enough feminist work has focused on documenting and sharing ways that individuals confront

differences constructively and successfully. Women and men need to know what is on the other side of the pain experienced in politicization” (p. 26). In this space, the authors confronted these differences by expressing their non-normative identities and presented issues that challenge patriarchal conceptions of reality.

### **Analysis: Blogging as a Communicative Space**

By studying feminist blogs that are actively engaging people around the world in conversation, we can begin to understand their effectiveness in fostering an ongoing conversation about feminism. To tie this study back to the larger thesis, I demonstrate how these blogs served to reconceptualize the dominant narrative from a feminist perspective through consciousness raising. I argue that through the blog posts I examined, women talked back by telling their stories.

In the following analysis, I first demonstrate how women used the blog space to embrace their differences and articulate their identities through narratives about their experience. Next, I explain how the act of telling one’s story is a way for women to talk back to dangerous cultural normalizations of violence and power. Storytelling is also a way for women to express how they are challenging these dominant conceptions of reality through everyday acts and by coming into themselves. Next, I identify calls-to-action that emerge from the two texts. Finally, I look for moments of understanding, or “click” moments, that result in a shift in women’s consciousnesses as a result of participating in this forum and forging connections in this consciousness raising space.

All fifteen posts that I examined in “Personal is Political” were written from a first-person perspective. Each post included a personal account from the author. The 92 posts made through the “Shameless Self-Promotion” feature were also written from a first person

perspective, but the stories were much shorter. The posts read almost like tweets on Twitter: they were short, to the point, and meant to encourage users to click on links to other Internet pages.

First, I examine how these spaces served to help women come into their own identities.

### **Confronting Differences, Articulating Identities**

The blog spaces offered by “Personal is Political” and “Shameless Self-Promotion” served as sounding boards for women to express their complex identities and move beyond a homogenous understanding of women’s realities. Hesse-Biber and Yaiser (2013) explain how feminist knowledge gathering at times has reflected a larger patriarchal structure, in that women’s experiences have been universally categorized as homogenous, to the point where “differences in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, culture, and patriarchy are ignored” (p. 104). Hill Collins’ (2009) notion of the matrix of domination reminds us how these categories are in fact interconnected and unique to each person (p. 26). The concepts of difference as forming identities are invoked in the first-person narratives on a diverse range of topics featured in the articles and through users’ responses to these narratives through the comments feature.

The topics covered in seven of the “Personal is Political” articles and in many posts from the “Shameless Self-Promotion” feature evoked Hill Collins’ matrix of domination. They demonstrated how each aspect of identity relates to the other, and that everyone has a unique set of identities, countering the notion of women as having universal, monolithic experiences and identities. The topics ranged from sexuality and gender identity to nationhood, race, and ethnicity as ways of expressing differences in identity. Interestingly, very few posts generated through the “Shameless Self-Promotion” even mentioned race; rather, there were primarily posts from people expressing their sexual and gender identities. The primary themes that emerged were related to sexuality and gender, and then race, ethnicity, and nationality.

**Sexuality and gender differences.** The aspects of difference in sexuality and gender as forming one's identity were discussed in several of the "Personal is Political" blog posts. First, Brittany Chávez wrote about her experience "coming-in" to her queer, gender non-specific identity and why these aspects of identity matter. She detailed how she always felt out of place growing up and navigating heterosexual relationships. Later in life, Chávez abandoned the societally-imposed conception of herself as a heterosexual, cisgender, feminine woman and chose to identify herself as she felt most comfortable: as a "genderqueer-androgynous-masculine of center-butchtopy person who loves women" (1/28/2014). She described her experience throughout this transition and how she came to honor her need for different understandings of self: "My coming out was actually more like coming IN. I came IN to who I have always desired to be." Chávez's description of how she had to reconstitute herself and come "in" presents a non-conforming, rich identity that challenges dominant conceptions of women and celebrates their differences (1/28/2014). Rosa Cabrera also wrote about her experience taking part in a non-traditional emotional and sexual relationship with a couple (1/4/2014). Her story elaborating on her time spent dating the couple presents a new conception of how sexual relationships can unfold, which also challenged dominant ideas of relationships as two opposite-sex partners.

Like Chávez and Cabrera, several of the authors of posts to the "Shameless Self-Promotion" feature called attention to aspects of their identity related to gender and sexuality. Rimnom pointed readers to two pieces he wrote related to LGBTQ issues: "On Coming Out To My Grandmother" and "Butches, Trans Men, And Me – I am a man. I used to be be [*sic*] a stone butch" (1/12/2014). Later, Rimnim posted a link to an article entitled "Why Transition?" with the tagline, "Of course, we transition because we are transgender/transsexual. But that doesn't completely explain it, does it?" (1/19/2014). Tigto also evoked aspects of trans identity by

posting a link to a piece entitled “The ethics of scolding the dying” which contains themes related to “transphobia, transmisogyny, outing, [and] suicide” (1/20/2014). Sue also wrote about trans issues and the need for the representation of transgender people in discussions of equality in Pittsburgh (1/19/2014). Other authors similarly discussed sexual identities: Jess Eagle shared an article entitled “‘You mean like a panda?’ On Being Asexual” (1/19/2014) and BroadBlogs highlighted a section of a book that made her start thinking about how “women can be mistaken for their sexuality. Or, women make their sexuality work for them” (1/26/2014). In each of these examples, the authors expressed an aspect of their sexual and/or gender identity that had social and political consequences as they articulated moving through the world in ways that are “different” by mainstream standards.

**Racial, ethnic, and national differences.** In addition to sexuality and gender, layers of racial and ethnic identities were expressed by certain authors. Several articles posted through the “Personal is Political” column spoke to the intersections between nationhood and sexuality and culture (Tugbiyele, 2/13/2014) and nationhood as an internal and external identity (Gehl, 2/6/2014). Other writers grappled with the consequences of race in society and found solace in writings by women of color and identified as “the Black mother” (Parmar, 2/18/2014; White, 2/18/2014).

Lynn Gehl and Adejoke Tugbiyele expressed how their national identities influence their outlook and work as they have become attuned to the way that power is exerted by and over their homelands. Gehl shared how her “internal sense of sovereignty and nationhood” are shaped by her traditional name, her clan responsibilities, and her homeland. Her story suggested that individual’s identities are situated in relationship to their nations and cultures, which can consist of indigenous tribes and lands. Gehl’s self-reflection on her identity tied to her nation motivated

her to seek knowledge about the “colonial, institutional, and structural power” surrounding her indigenous experience, and, in turn, to educate others about domination, or as she put it: “to get up and speak up” (Gehl, 2/6/2014).

The way in which aspects of identity are interwoven became evident in Tugiyele’s post “Sexual Identity and ‘Nigerian Culture,’” in which she wrote about the challenges of growing up Nigerian in U.S. American culture. She claimed that “survival depended on how well I could code-switch between American and Nigerian culture” (2/13/2014). Her identity proved further challenging when she came out to her religious Nigerian family and when Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan passed the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act, which included severe punishments for homosexual behavior. Tugbiyele articulated in her post how her national identity is complex since she must vacillate between her U.S. and Nigerian cultures.

Additionally, she feels conflicted about her position as a lesbian and a feminist when she claims her Nigerian identity given the recent anti-gay and -lesbian legislation in the country.

Other bloggers spoke to their racial and ethnic identities and how these aspects influence their lives. Pratibha Parmar, who lives in the United Kingdom, explained how writings by women of color, including *This Bridge Called My Back* and the work of Audre Lorde, offered a lifeline for women of color like herself when she experienced discrimination from academics. She claimed that these writings “resonated” with her experience as lesbian, feminist woman of color (Parmar, 2/18/2014). Again, Parmar’s experience as a woman of color is closely tied to her identity as a lesbian as she described how writings by feminist women of color finally spoke to her experience more than White and/or mainstream feminists could.

Ness White also invoked the words of Audre Lorde in articulating her journey of discovering her identity as a lesbian and self-described “Black mother” (2/18/2014). She

explained the deeply impactful experience of her mother rejecting her as a lesbian. To cope with this rejection, White, who is a Black woman, learned to “mother herself” and take on the persona of a Black mother to serve as her “poet” and to help her break the silence she has kept around her identity. She says that “we can and do learn to love ourselves, which allows us to love others—along with and aside from our mothers—across our differences” (White, 2/18/2014). In short, White called for honoring our differences by explaining her own experience grappling with the dual identities of lesbian and Black, and her mother’s rejection of her identity. Her words were hopeful and communicated that differences in identity should be celebrated, not erased or ignored.

In all of these posts, complex and varying aspects of identity were expressed and celebrated, unpacked and complicated. The blog post forum provided the means for these ideas to have space and to constitute realities based on individuals’ unique experiences. White astutely summed up the importance of finding one’s own identity and valuing others’ by stating that we must “unite across our differences, to develop community, if we are to become free” (2/18/2014).

### **Talking Back**

A majority of the posts on the “Personal is Political” feature and many posts from “Shameless Self-Promotion” blog raised complex issues that served to “talk back” to dominant interpretations of reality. The normative, patriarchal treatment of women was challenged by several of the authors featured as they expressed how, in their own worlds, violence persists, discrimination is rampant, and women are not free to express themselves as they truly are. The personal stories offered resistance to the dominant narrative told about women and served as a means of talking back to the social and cultural practices that uphold this narrative. The themes

of violence and power as well as identity and coming into self emerged most prominently in the blog posts.

**Violence and power.** The interwoven themes of violence and power were present in posts by many of the authors, demonstrating that violence against women endures and must be outwardly challenged for social change. Melinda Goodman cited poetry as a “means for dismantling the ‘master’s house’” and as a “means for survival and as a way to bring about change in a violent society” (2/27/2014). She invoked the force of dominance by using the term “master” and enthymematically implicated the master in fostering a society of violence. An anonymous author and Sarah Brent also linked dominance and violence in their posts (2/11/2014; 1/30/2014). The anonymous author shared her experience growing up with a sexually and physically abusive father by writing a letter to Dylan Farrow, a woman who took Woody Allen to trial for abusing her. At the beginning of her post, the author blamed society and culture for encouraging abuse within families. Popular cultural figures such as celebrities are excused for sexual abuse while survivors of abuse and incest are treated with “disrespect, suspicion, and even disgust.” She supported this claim in stating that “many prominent theorists . . . have demonstrated that the ongoing legacies of exploitation, rape, and murder of women have shaped contemporary gender relations” (2/11/2014). The author offered her own story of experiencing abuse in a show of solidarity to other victims and to implicate society for its role in perpetuating violence.

Brent also articulated how violence rocked her family when her mother recounted stories of her father’s horrible abuse (1/30/2014). Her mother explained that their relationship was never about love, but about her husband exerting his power. When she approached the authorities about her husband raping her, the sheriff’s department claimed that the rape was not a crime because

the person who raped her was her husband. The painful story that Brent told evoked both the power that is inherent in violence, and how society is complicit in maintaining this relationship of power and dominance over men and women. Brent's story served to inform others of these injustices and to talk back to the people who enacted violence on her mother: larger culture should be implicated along with her husband.

The "Shameless Self-Promotion" posts echoed the notion of violence as culturally accepted and perpetuated by sharing stories of experiencing violence. Kasey Weird posted a link to a piece "exploring the problems with insisting that rape is always about power, or that rape and sex are even necessarily different things" (1/26/2014). The post called attention to the fact that the concept of rape as being about power and not sex serves to simplify the complicated violent act, according to the author. Others described violent events in their own lives or the lives of friends and loved ones. For example, Sue shared a post that dealt with the themes of "stalking, abuse, 'creeping', harassment, discrimination, ableism" and Broadblogs wrote a piece entitled "Women as Prey, Men as Predator" (1/26/2014; 1/19/2014). Amanda wrote about an ongoing story she has covered about a woman who was harassed by two men after she shared her story of her sexual assault. Amanda called the harassment a form of silencing over the issue of sexual assault (1/19/2014). Broadblogs also shared a piece by one of her students who wrote about having a relationship with an abuser who "stayed in the relationship because she lived (and still lives) in a culture that supported her abuse and kept her from questioning it" (1/12/2014). Apart from this last post, these blog posts do not all necessarily blame culture outwardly for these sexual assaults, but they certainly bring light to the issue and imply that culture is a culprit for allowing the practice of violence against women to endure.

**Identity and coming into self.** Many “Personal is Political” authors expressed how they have been prevented from expressing who they really are in culture as a result of their subordinated identities. El Jones talked back about her experience as a black woman negotiating the societal expectation that she will be an “angry Black bitch.” She claimed that when she speaks, her words are construed as violent, and this image is used to shame Black women into silence. She shared that as a way to fight back against this negative image, she instead decided to “reclaim” the notion of being called bitchy as Black women’s power: “When we overcome the fear of being ‘the bitch’, we begin to recognize all the words buried inside us that were protecting us and supporting us all along” (2/27/2014). With these words, Jones’ post served to talk back to the negative perceptions of her embodied race. She called on women to embrace their strength and own their power, rather than censor themselves every time they wish to speak.

Chavéz’s piece also served to challenge society’s treatment of her identity. She talked back in her post by bluntly stating that “there is everyday violence and fear that comes with gender and sexual non-conformity,” and that it is deeply harmful. She expressed that rather than presenting herself as someone she is not, she would talk back by openly owning what she called her “radical queerness” and by “remaking” herself through many strategies. She explained how she seeks “radical liberation from the heterosexual matrix of the gaze,” which involves many strategies including the following:

It means standing on the frontlines of the political struggles I believe in, and going to bat for my comrades. It means standing proud when others would call me an embarrassment. It means never starting a sentence with an apology. It means never dressing to prevent the stares. It means embracing the complexity of my pluri-positionality.

Chavéz concluded by claiming that to “remake ourselves is still a radically political act today” (1/28/2014). She provided tangible ideas and words of encouragement for others to talk back to mainstream views of complex identities such as hers.

White also talked back to the dominant narrative and the resulting adversity she faces in her post by rejecting her mother's view of her as inadequate and by instead "mothering" herself in her mother's place: "In essence, my act of mothering—of loving myself is also a threat to my mother, who still looks to the dominant, capitalistic world as her safety net, a place where she is most comfortable" (1/18/2014). White also encouraged women to mother themselves as she did. She claimed that the act of mothering oneself is a "subversion of power" and a "threat to the dominant capitalizing world we live in" (1/18/2014). It is evident in her post that White knew that the act of finding peace within herself and rejecting her mother, who is a representation of the strict standards being imposed on her, serves as a means of talking back.

The "Shameless Self-Promotion" posts also served to talk back to elements of dominant society that are problematic, including racist, sexist, and sizeist practices, among many others. The posts also called out women's needs that are not addressed under the status quo and pulled in feminism as a necessary movement for society. For example, Marsha mentioned a link between feminist practices and animal protection and Heather expressed her frustration that feminism is attacked in mainstream media while important feminist issues that need discussion are ignored (1/26/2014; 1/12/2014). Delegar shared an article entitled "Against Marriage," which criticizes the institution of marriage, while Sue shared her experience coping with mental illness and gender oppression (1/26/2014). Anna wrote about accessible methods for birth control and how it is unfair that birth control options are mainly available for and usable by women, rather than men (1/19/2014). Heather wrote about the stigma surrounding STD testing, a practice that keeps women healthy and safe (1/19/2014). Broadblogs responded to mainstream conceptions of beauty, claiming that "beauty doesn't have to be one shape or fake" (1/12/2014). Finally, Sue tied together sexism, homophobia, and human services in her post as a way of talking back to

ongoing inequalities in her own life (1/12/2014). These posts with links to more information, which are only a sampling of the content offered through “Shameless Self-Promotion,” talk back to dominant understandings of reality as they critique the status quo and call out inequalities that deserve attention.

### **Calls-to-Action**

Feminist calls-to-action manifested in both artifacts but unfolded somewhat differently for each feature. The “Personal is Political” blog posts sometimes called on women to further investigate issues under discussion, to comment, and to reach out to others, but featured less-direct calls-to-action. The “Shameless Self-Promotion” feature offered more immediate calls-to-action, since each post essentially implied a call-to-action for readers to click on a link to view more articles and ideas created by the author of the post. The most common calls-to-action included a call for women to write about their own experiences and to take action in their own communities.

**Speak out and write for change.** Telling stories of individual experiences and expression of realities through language are important steps in fostering change according to many of the authors on the “Personal is Political” blog. El Jones claimed that “racism has conditioned our relationship with our own language” and so “We need to teach ourselves to stop being afraid of speaking out, to love and nurture our words not [*sic*] matter how angry and ‘ugly’ they feel” (2/27/2014). Chavez similarly wrote that “it’s time we start shifting public discourse to make room for these and other stories—to make room for radical revisions of self” (1/28/2014). Rachel Edwards, who critiqued established pedagogical practices and in response called for a “thinking and feeling” approach to knowledge gathering, claimed that she “came to understand how teaching and writing are inextricably linked to the wide dissemination of

provocative and alternative truths” (2/25/2014). These authors called on readers to write and share their own stories, as well as listen to others’ stories, as a means to present a reality and a truth that counters limiting understandings of women’s lives.

**Take action.** In her “Personal is Political” column, White called for a collective reevaluation of how we interact with one another to “creatively connect our diverse talents, purposes, and consistently aim toward the collective goal of betterment for ourselves and the world we live in . . . a world in which our daughters will be free, free to mother themselves, free to expose—to celebrate—the Black mother within” (1/18/2014). This was the only direct call-to-action in the “Personal is Political” posts.

Other direct calls-to-action came from the “Shameless Self-Promotion” bloggers, whose calls ranged from asking people to click on links to feminist and activist materials to donating to a cause. Lauren asked readers to donate to her Kickstarter fund that was created to help fund a trip that she and her daughter plan to take to Europe for a research study (coincidentally about how the Internet affects social interaction), claiming that the film will likely have “feminist scenes” in it (1/12/2014). Alyx pointed readers to more than 300 educational links to information on social justice topics, including feminism, anti-racism, and anti-cissexism, while Marsha provided a link for teachers with “6 lesson plans exploring prejudice & discrimination” to ostensibly incorporate into their own classrooms (1/12/2014; 1/26/2014). Lastly, blogger mk called for submissions to a blog entitled “The Toast” that was hosting a series of trans-related blogs posts (1/27/2014). Overall, the posts on “Shameless Self-Promotion” called on readers to click through, learn more, and engage with the largely feminist knowledge they learned. They offered readers easy ways to get involved beyond simply reading the content offered or engaging with the blog community.

## Consciousness Raising and Validation

The posts I examined did not stand alone; instead, they were the beginning of a feedback process in which the authors posted their shared experiences and their readers responded. This process essentially created a shared interpretation of reality. Many readers responded with encouragement to the posts while others expressed how the stories have validated their own experiences. It is through these exchanges that we can unpack how these blogs serve as virtual gathering spaces for women to articulate their experiences that counter the mainstream. Here, I take a closer look at the exchange of ideas and thoughts as blog authors and readers engage with one another to promote a new reality centered on women's experiences.

In general, the "Shameless Self-Promotion" feature did not allow for a lot of back and forth responses or comments. Moderators on the website would post that a conversation had been moved elsewhere since the space was meant for simple, to-the-point posts with links to information. Thus, it was difficult to track responses from readers to these posts, and, as such, I focus predominately on the "Personal is Political" artifact for this section. The "Personal is Political" blog allowed unlimited comments responding to posts and also gave the authors of the blogs the opportunity to respond in turn, offering a large number of exchanges in the community. I share the click moments that emerged and then explain how feelings of gratitude, appreciation, and connection likely sparked these click moments among the blog community.

**Click moments.** A number of women expressed moments where they identified deeply with the authors' words and seemed to have their consciousnesses raised about the issue under discussion. The first article posted to the "Personal is Political" blog announced the debut of the column and called on readers to hold tight until the first post was created. Support began pouring in for the blog from a handful of *Feminist Wire* readers. A. Reese responded positively when she

stated “This is so great, especially for women who have been told (explicitly or implicitly) that their own stories don’t matter or that their stories don’t have a place in academia.” Samantha evoked click moments when she wrote “Great addition. Particularly as this is where the feminist journey begins, somewhere personal before we articulate externally—before we name it” (1/7/2014).

As the blog posts increased in number, and in response to the authors’ stories, women began posting their own struggles with the adversity they have faced. This identification mirrored consciousness raising in other settings through the coming together of women who validated one another’s stories and responded with their own. Myra and mishanti2 both seemed to have a click moment when reading Chávez’s story. Myra wrote “Thank you for sharing this. I too have struggled both with my sexual orientation and gender identity . . . I do have times I am self conscious or afraid around others.” Mishanti2 echoed Myra’s response when she said “Thanks so much for writing this. I had some of the same experiences that you are talking about” and launched into her own story (1/28/2014). Myra and mishanti2 felt confident enough in this space to share their own stories, thereby raising the consciousness of other readers while also having the presumably healing experience of bringing their own experiences to light.

Cabrera’s piece about unconventional relationships ending in hurt also evoked strong responses from readers. The post deeply resonated with Meli, who was inspired by Cabrera’s courage:

I wanted to write because [your post] resonated a lot with me. I have also been in the same situation . . . I too am a writer and have been at a loss as to how to start my own public means of expression without knowing how to reach in to the deepest recesses of me...and you’ve given me courage to be bold as I once was. To be myself because there is at least one person who has screamed out in the same vibrato which shakes within me every day. For in your words... I found a friend. Thank You. (2/4/2014)

Here, Meli evoked the click moment that comes with consciousness raising by expressing how Cabrera's piece offered a turning point for her in which she will perhaps express herself again through her writing as a form of coping with her own struggles. Other respondents were also moved in this manner, including Kendra Hunter, who wrote that Cabrera's experience resonated with her, as well (2/4/2014).

Many commenters echoed the statements above in saying that a blog post touched them and inspired them to face struggles in their own lives. Santy Baidal responded to Gehl's piece about nationhood by claiming the following: "This article really helped me and reassured me that I can be in both places at once in my state of mind. Thanks!" (2/6/2014). Others were moved by the anonymous piece about sexual abuse and incest, including Amita Swadhin who wrote the following:

Thank you for speaking out. I hope many more of us will share our stories publicly, because the worst part of this experience for me was growing up thinking I was the only one...healing comes in community, and there are (sadly) SO many of us. Sending you lots of love. (2/11/2014)

It is evident from this small sample of the "Personal is Political" feature that blog spaces are ripe for connection, inspiration, and consciousness raising.

**Gratitude, appreciation, connection.** Almost every post was followed with at least a few comments thanking the author for sharing her story and complimenting her work. Additionally, many people also called out to one another to exchange information and connect outside of the blog space, demonstrating the vibrancy and support cultivated in this consciousness raising arena. Bose called Tugbiyele's work "Awesome" and "a brilliant analysis," while Teresa Rodrigues complimented the post by responding with the statement "How many things do we learn and come to know by reading this text" (2/13/2014). Other powerful responses emerged for the anonymously written post, including this from Brooke

Axtell: “I deeply respect your decision to voice your truth in this space. I stand with you and support your healing path. May you thrive in every way” (2/11/2014). Bard Commodore supported Gehl’s work when she called her a “hero” and “a glowing example of what one can accomplish with sheer determination. Much respect” (2/6/2014).

Some blog authors chose to respond to the comments made to them, including Rosa Cabrera, who expressed her gratitude for people’s enthusiastic comments about her post: “I’m so taken aback at how receptive folks have been to this risky piece here and on facebook, twitter! Thanks y’all” (2/4/2014). These demonstrations of understanding and support from all sides undoubtedly served to validate the authors’ stories and confirm that these stories are important and worth sharing as they so clearly resonated with readers. What resulted was a consciousness raising space that celebrated the dissemination of ideas outside of the mainstream that obviously resonated for many women and led to feelings of respect and support for all parties.

### **Discussion: Blogging as a Space for Articulating a New Reality**

I have shown through this analysis that blogs serve a number of functions for women who wish to express subversive ways of being in the world. Through blog spaces, women openly share their differences by articulating their sexual, gender, racial, ethnic, and national identities, among others. Next, bloggers talk back to the master narrative by calling out ongoing violence and power perpetuated by culture. To challenge the status quo, women discuss how they have embraced their identities and come into themselves with strategies like mothering themselves and sharing their stories with others through writing. Beyond providing a platform for consciousness raising about alternative identities, the blog spaces are also ripe for women to call on one another to participate in the process through calls-to-action. These include encouraging women to speak about their experiences through writing and to take action steps in their own

communities to get involved. Finally, these stories and calls-to-action seem to foster click moments in women who relate to the experiences shared by the women before them and feel motivated to the point where they share their joys and frustrations through their own narratives. A community of like-minded individuals forms as women share their stories. They also demonstrate their gratitude and appreciation of the bloggers' words. A deep connection is forged as positive, inspiring comments flow. The participants are even moved to connect beyond the blog forum through email, maintaining the conversation beyond the immediate gathering space.

The information generated in these blog spaces counter the dominant narrative that contain women, and importantly, are created by and for women. By their very nature of resisting corporate influence, blogs have the ability to foster a community more free of the limited cultural representations that confine women. Instead, women's voices are highlighted, no matter what the issue, and serve to challenge existing narratives that prove unrepresentative and containing for many. Authors' experiences are validated through positive comments from readers, and blog readers are in turn exposed to new conceptions of reality, or new consciousnesses. The authors and their readers identify prevailing power structures that serve to oppress people of non-dominant identities and also offer people the chance to talk back to dominating forces. Ultimately, feminist women's consciousnesses are raised through the robust and meaningful conversations fostered through online blogs.

In the closing chapter, I draw on the evidence gathered here and in previous chapters to make final assertions about the nature of consciousness raising in online spaces. I discuss potential positive and negative implications of this emerging communicative space, as well as share some of the limitations of my research.

## **Conclusion Chapter: New Media and Consciousness Raising**

This study examines how new media has emerged as a platform for consciousness raising among members of the women's movement. Using critical feminist theory, social movement theory, and new media literature as a foundation, I have crafted the following research questions: How does the Internet provide a new communicative space for consciousness raising in the modern women's movement and how can it help members ignite change? Additionally, what is the communicative value and significance of new media in this context? In this conclusion chapter, I summarize the study's artifacts, methods, and findings. Then, I reflect on the significance of this study for the communication studies field related to existing literature, including new findings of import for social movements, new media, and consciousness raising. Finally, I discuss limitations of the study and suggest directions for further research.

### **Artifacts**

I chose each new media artifact because they allowed for a virtual conversation among participants. They were also predicated on feminist notions of equality that emphasize that all people should have equal opportunities and fair treatment in culture regardless of their identities. The #NotBuyingIt and #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter campaigns both advocated for improved treatment of women. However, the campaigns unfolded in slightly different ways. The #NotBuyingIt participants called on women to use their economic power to pressure powerful companies to remove sexist representations of women. The #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter conversation, in contrast, indicted the societal treatment of race that privileges white women over all other women and called for more inclusive representations of all women.

Methodologically, it was at first difficult to find a fitting approach to analyze the artifacts of study given the nascent nature of scholarship on new media as a communicative space. I decided to conduct a close-textual analysis of each artifact informed by the theory articulated in my literature review to help answer the research questions. Then, I applied the method of inductive analysis to find emerging themes in each artifact separately. I then considered the two artifacts in each chapter together (Twitter campaigns and blog sites) and commented on intersecting and diverging themes that emerged.

In both Twitter campaigns, conversations emerged that fostered calls-to-action from those people involved in the movements and there was evidence of participants providing support for one another. Twitter users also demonstrated enthusiasm for the conversation as the campaigns collected more participants. The blog sites I examined, the Feminist Wire's "Personal is Political" feature and *Feministe*'s "Shameless Self-Promotion Sunday," also carried a feminist goal of highlighting women's voices and experiences. To study the two blog features, I read through both texts numerous times to identify how each artifact reflected themes gleaned from the literature review of identity, narrative theory, and critical feminist theory. I determined that the artifacts engaged women in conversation in different ways. The "Personal is Political" fostered much more of a conversation through the comments feature. In addition to having space for a lengthy post on this site (roughly 1-3 pages), authors could interact with the people who responded to their stories. The "Shameless Self-Promotion" feature operated differently in that it only allowed users to post short posts which contained links that directed readers away from the blog post. If people attempted to comment at length or engage in a conversation with one another, moderators would step in with a message that they had moved the comments to another section of the site. As a result, this space was inadequately structured to foster conversation

among readers beyond the original post. Ultimately, the posts and comments in the “Personal is Political” feature involved calls-to-action among bloggers, demonstrated support and care among users, and had clear signs of click moments. The “Shameless Self-Promotion” posts offered calls-to-action and hints of support, but did not feature the same robust demonstrations of support due to a lack of an option for users to respond. Thus, it seems that the structure of the new media artifact (e.g. whether it has a comments feature) plays a large role in its utility as a consciousness raising space.

### **New Findings for Social Movements, New Media, and Consciousness Raising**

When considering consciousness raising on these platforms, each artifact contributed to our understanding of modern consciousness raising in different ways that shed light on the communicative value of new media for this practice. I delve more deeply into the areas of social movements and new media and explain how this study has contributed knowledge to these concepts by examining their utility in the practice of consciousness raising.

**Social Movements.** Both the blogs and the Twitter campaigns examined for this study demonstrate that there is an activist presence online through these new media platforms. Women are agitating for change not only in their local communities, but also in these spaces. They are demanding equal treatment of gender in society, and also seek justice for people of non-dominant identities, including women of color and people of all sexualities. In addition to raising awareness about inequality, women are calling for others to join them in this movement through fostering click moments of identification and making calls-to-action.

While click moments were not immediately evident in all of the artifacts, they were clearly demonstrated in the blog posts on the “Personal is Political” page. Readers of many of the blogs expressed openly how they could identify with the author’s story, and/or that the blog

author's story had inspired them to tell their own story or move through the world with a greater understanding of their own experience. Some readers and authors even exchanged contact information to continue the conversation. Both the authors and readers appeared to receive a mutual benefit of learning and inspiration from the conversations in the blog space.

Though the other new media artifacts lacked obvious click moments, we can infer that the feelings of connection, identification, and reciprocation could be felt across consciousness raising platforms. Though the nature of Twitter limits the length of messages, the tweets circulating about the lack of women of color being recognized were engaged by others, as they tweeted back and became part of the conversation. The same response emerged through the #NotBuyingIt campaign, as thousands of participants tweeted about cultural artifacts that threatened women through their sexist representation during one of the most-watched television events of the year in the United States. Women in both cases were moved to participate, suggesting that they experienced click moments in response to the tweets that came before theirs.

Unlike click moments, calls-to-action were evident across all artifacts. The Twitter campaigns called on participants to take very specific activist measures to address the problems under discussion. The #NotBuyingIt campaign encouraged people to take steps to communicate a strong message to GoDaddy that their advertisements were demeaning to women. Members of the movement called on other Twitter users to shout out their dismay directly to GoDaddy and also to spread the message to their networks about how GoDaddy deserves retribution. Beyond raising consciousness about the dangers of the advertisements, women called on one another to take an active step to cease doing business with GoDaddy, and several people tweeted instructions on how to switch domain hosting sites. The calls-to-action generated through the #SmartBlackWomen campaign also encouraged the participation of Twitter users in spreading

the word about FastCompany's exclusion of women of color. Participants called on one another to list the smart black women in their Twitter feeds to make their own lists in response to FastCompany. Users also encouraged one another to read more about FastCompany's mistake and to put pressure on the company because of their exclusionary actions. Lastly, participants invited other Twitter users to click on links to read more about smart black women in their lives or to seek more information about the issue.

The calls-to-action made by the bloggers on "Shameless Self-Promotion" and "Personal is Political" were unique to each blogger, rather than stemming from a larger campaign's goals, and also included specific calls-to-action. The calls ranged from personal, independent actions that could be taken to suggestions of collectively-oriented strategies to foster change. Each post made through the "Shameless Self-Promotion" feature included the call-to-action for readers to click on a link with more information about the subject introduced in the post. The blog posts essentially served as "teasers" to incite readers to click through to read blogs featuring personal stories on a range of political and social subjects, including but not limited to sexism, racism, transgenderism and transsexuality, body image, and sexual health. The "Shameless" feature served as a launching off point for readers to explore topics of interest, but offered less of an immediate conversation space than the "Personal is Political" blog site.

The "Personal is Political" feature included authors who made calls-to-action that included writing about their experiences and embracing themselves and their identities. Mainly, the bloggers called on their audience to tell their own stories and raise awareness about issues of violence and racial and gender inequality. Several bloggers urged oppressed people to tell their stories as a means to raise awareness about ongoing injustices perpetuated by culture and society. Other calls-to-action encouraged women to look within and love oneself as a means of fighting

back, such as when authors proposed that one should embrace her unique identity no matter how society has devalued her. In each call-to-action, the blog authors called on women to take charge in their own lives to fight against dominant portrayals of women's realities.

**New Media.** From the impactful conversations that occurred in these spaces, it is evident that new media offer a tool for fostering connection and advocacy around a social cause.

Whether through Twitter, blog pages, or even other platforms that I did not have the space to explore, these are emerging vehicles for consciousness raising. Women are not only gathering in their homes, but are meeting virtually to exchange information and provide support.

First, both the #NotBuyingIt and #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter campaigns unfolding on Twitter effected change on a large scale when the companies under attack capitulated to the advocates' demands. GoDaddy committed to changing their advertising strategy, while FastCompany released an updated list of women of color to follow on Twitter. These victories were accomplished all through the new media site of Twitter. There were features of Twitter that aided in making these pushes for change successful, including the "@" function, the option to retweet, and the ability to link to other material online. Through the "@" function, Twitter users in both cases could catch the attention of the companies under fire by including an "@GoDaddy" or "@FastCompany" in their tweets. Additionally, they had the ability to spread the information to specific people in their network by including those people's usernames in the tweets. Users could also support one another and increase the reach of their networks using the retweet function to pass on an original tweet to their own networks. Finally, the ease of including a link as part of a tweet was significant, as it granted Twitter users the opportunity to visit another Internet site with more information about an issue that was not immediately available in a tweet. Indeed, scores of users in both campaigns shared vital information such as how to switch a web

domain from GoDaddy or a link to the original FastCompany list that incited such anger among Twitter users.

In contrast with Twitter, the “Personal is Political” blog acted as a consciousness raising platform which allowed for lengthier posts and offered an opportunity for longer comments in response to blog posts. The ability to link to other websites was crucial to the “Shameless Self-Promotion” feature, since it operated simply as a space to advertise work by people on other sites rather than as the main host for more extensive information. The ability to post lengthy blog entries on the “Personal is Political” allowed the authors to delve into rich detail about their experiences and thoughts, unlike the truncated messages circulated on Twitter. The interactive nature of the blog space also fostered lengthy conversations between authors and readers that are unachievable in Twitter spaces. As demonstrated previously, the feedback among the participants in the conversation led to feelings of support, identification, and encouragement. In the case of the “Shameless Self-Promotion,” the space was more reminiscent of Twitter, since generally shorter messages linked readers to longer posts on other pages, but failed to engage readers and authors immediately on the site. A comparison of the two blogs sites suggests that traditional blog spaces may foster more productive interaction than blog sites that simply collect links to other, individual blogs.

Considering the information above, I assert that new media is a truly powerful tool for activism. While the utility of using only social media to advance activism online has been brought into question in past research (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013, p. 279), this study featured artifacts that demonstrated that new media serves as a sufficient platform for activist change for the contexts discussed here. The conversations occurring on Twitter led to tangible actions on the part of harmful companies, and the feedback on the blogs show evidence that connections made

through electronic media offer space for women to negotiate their identities and to bolster their confidence in an oppressive world.

**Consciousness Raising.** Simply put, these new media platforms offer space for women to recreate realities. They allow room for authors to tell an alternative story and to articulate feelings of a woman struggling with sexism, racism, classism, or any other identity-related adversity. Blogs can also serve as a source of support for someone who has heretofore been unable to find someone like herself in the pages of *Cosmopolitan* or while watching the *E! Network*, let alone in political coverage and the news. This meaningful consciousness raising occurring online was reflected most evidently in the “Personal is Political” comments section, where words of gratitude followed every blog post. Yet, all four platforms fostered the ability to name injustices in society, to tell a story of one’s experience, and to make lasting connections that demonstrated a strong sense of support and gratitude. The study also complicated our understanding of modern consciousness raising by demonstrating that people’s awareness can be raised in many locations in addition to small groups and in writing; the Internet is another prime space for connection and activism.

Every artifact featured women who conducted the feminist act of openly naming an unjust practice in culture that harmed women. The Twitter campaigns called out racism and sexism through exclusion and misrepresentation. First, #SmartBlackWomen named the practice of excluding women of color from a list as a racist act. The #NotBuyingIt campaign stressed how unequal gender representation served to undermine women’s worth and respect. The blogs featured many instances of naming, as well. The “Shameless Self-Promotion” blog allowed posters to share their stories struggling with coming out, with racist cultural practices, and other personal challenges, which were all ways of naming moments in their lives as difficult. In the

“Personal is Political,” women named issues of violence and identity perpetuated by culture. The authors openly implicated society as supporting the violence that affected their own lives, both the physical violence and the violence of oppression exercised in response to having a non-dominant identity, such as being non-white and/or a lesbian. By naming these acts of oppression in society, these women are raising awareness of struggles in their own lives and bringing voice to harmful practices that may go unnoticed by the larger society.

Indeed, the stories told by women through these new media were powerful because they offered a non-dominant, reframed narrative for women to follow. The Twitter campaigns showed how women need not put up with unfair representations of how they should look or behave. In these online communities, women of color fought to be valued and receive support from one another as they advocated against racism and sexism in culture. The stories told through blogs illuminated the struggles of oppressed women as they shared their experiences of embodying their race, sexuality, ethnicity, and so forth. Transwomen and men also had a platform to share their stories on “Shameless Self-Promotion” and the “Personal is Political.” Simultaneously, readers had the opportunity to lend their support, to show solidarity, and to continue the cycle of storytelling to reveal alternative realities to what has been promoted by culture. These new realities and perspectives offer awareness of how one might live apart from the dominant narrative.

Finally, there was a powerful sense of support and gratitude emanating throughout these new media spaces. On Twitter, people retweeted one another’s words in a show of solidarity and shouted out to one another. This was especially evident in the #SmartBlackWomen campaign, in which users called out smart black women in their own circles through Twitter. The blog spaces featured ample examples of women moved by the blog authors’ experiences, particularly in the

“Personal is Political” feature. Commentators told their own stories in response to the authors and/or thanked them for their bravery in speaking up. It was clear that women identified with one another in these spaces through the collective storytelling of their experiences. Though it was less evident in the “Shameless” feature, my hope is that people who are drawn to click on links in posts that interest them could also feel a similar sense of connection with blog authors posting on the site.

This study has also shed further light on the many forms of consciousness raising and the diversity of voices participating in the practice. Much as there is no simple, clear-cut understanding of the women’s movement or women themselves, consciousness raising does not reflect one monolithic concept and instead takes on many forms. Though this project has called for the strategic essentialism of women at times, it is important to note how each individual involved in these conversations holds a different standpoint and one’s positionality can influence consciousness raising in particular ways in relation to those individuals’ experiences. Particularly, it is clear that consciousness raising is conducted by women from a multitude of identities. It is not a practice reserved to any one particular group of people, such as the privileged white women who are often associated with the traditional women’s movement, a misconception that serves to erase other women’s voices.

In addition, we have seen new forms of consciousness raising through this project in which traditional written and small-group forms of raising awareness are now joined by women who are raising awareness online in several locations. Today, the emerging platforms on which women raise consciousness can range from new media including Twitter and blog spaces like those examined in this study, and in likely many more new media platforms that I have not discussed here. It is clear that consciousness raising can occur both through a 140-character

tweet and a 1,000+ word blog post and through subsequent comment threads. As a result of this study, the definition of consciousness raising has expanded to include a multitude of spaces and forms perhaps previously unimagined.

### **Conclusions and Future Research**

Ultimately, this study has shed light on rich communication spaces online that lead to social and political action on both personal and political levels. Before concluding, I want to share limitations of the study and discuss opportunities for future investigation.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

Like any study, this analysis was not without its limitations. First, I focused on predominately female Twitter users as they participated in the #NotBuyingIt campaign. This exclusion was made for the purposes of length and focus, and in no way is meant to deny that there are men in the movement who are also working toward gender equality and racial justice. In fact, it is important to mention that male voices were present in all of the artifacts studied for this project. For instance, some of the users who tweeted about their frustration with GoDaddy and with the lack of inclusion of women of color in the Fast Company article were men. Out of the 148 tweets directly referencing women's equality and the problem of sexism in the GoDaddy study, 10 were identified as posted by men and in #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter, 20 tweets were posted by men (and possibly more: some names were gender neutral or posted by an organization). This analysis offers evidence that men are participating in the conversation online and supporting this movement by calling out injustices alongside women.

When considering the "Personal is Political" and "Shameless Self-Promotion" analysis, it is also worth noting that a handful of the people who contributed their voices to these platforms were men. Through the "Personal is Political" feature, two men shared their stories of navigating

difference. The first, Chris Rupetus, identified as a white, heterosexual male who is moved by the words of Audre Lorde to educate his students about inequality and to guide his parenting as he and his wife raise children of a different race (2/25/2014). The second male contributor is Andrew J. Young, an openly trans man who shares his experiences transitioning from female to male and grapples with his role as a feminist and his newfound privilege as a white man (2/20/2014). Men's voices were also present in the "Shameless Self-Promotion" blog posts. Most notably, user Rimonim was a trans man who offered stories of how he negotiated his identity as a trans person (1/19/2014; 1/12/2014; 1/5/2014). These stories clearly illuminate how difference is felt by people of all backgrounds and positionalities. However, for the sake of scope and space for this project, I mention these contributions here to recognize them but chose not to analyze them with the same depth as other blog posts.

In addition to the lack of analysis of male voices, this study did not focus on the potentially negative effects that participating in social media such as Twitter can have on participants. I did not account for any backlash that members of the #NotBuyingIt campaign or users of the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag may have experienced from posting potentially controversial tweets. There may have been supporters of GoDaddy or Fast Company who could challenge the beliefs and values of members of the women's movement and could negatively impact the feelings of empowerment felt by participants. In general, however, I did not come across any notable negative feedback that could have challenged the women's feelings of community and support in my immediate data for the study.

Future research on the consciousness raising utility of new media may consider the impact of male participation in the movement, and whether it unfolds in the same way and with the same results as female users' participation. The analysis could also account for negative

comments made in consciousness raising spaces to see if they may shift the feelings of support felt by participants. More broadly, researchers may wish to examine how the findings of this study may translate to other social movements. Particularly, a researcher could explore whether the motivation and action that result from consciousness raising could translate into activism in other social movements as it has for the women's movement. Future studies could also examine the long term effects of Twitter movements. For example, while the #NotBuyingIt hashtag is still used by thousands to call out inequality in the media, the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag was used most heavily immediately following the publishing of the article that sparked the response, and then petered out to the point where only a handful of users were using the hashtag in early 2014 (Colt, 2014). I recommend further exploring the long-term effects of a hashtag's use in social and political campaigns to raise awareness about an issue.

Overall, this project presented more questions about the nature of consciousness raising online as it unfolded: What might we lose and/or gain by communicating in these virtual spaces instead of around a table at home? Are fewer women gathering in person to raise consciousness because of these online spaces? Is this online awareness raising reaching more people than traditional methods would? Finally, must women join together only through shared experiences and common identities, or can they empathize with others' experiences of oppression and support them because of consciousness raising, even if they have not experienced the same difficulties? For example, as I was reading the blog posts, I felt deeply for the women who have suffered from violence. Though I have not personally experienced this, I was profoundly touched by the stories and I imagine others were, too. Thus, I wonder if by hearing the stories, and sharing the experience through another's account, women may be motivated to agitate for change even though they may not have experienced the same challenges themselves. These questions are

difficult to answer, and I present them here as a potential launching point for future investigation by communication studies scholars.

### **Final Thoughts**

In sum, this study demonstrates how the new consciousness raising platforms offered through social media sites may have substantial consequences, at least in the short-term. The consciousness raising practiced through the #NotBuyingIt campaign offers a prime example of how this strategy can begin to overturn sexist practices in our culture. The use of the #SmartBlackWomenofTwitter hashtag pressured Fast Company to issue a revised, more inclusive list of smart women on Twitter and for women to forge connections with one another online. The “Shameless Self-Promotion” feature acted as a repository for personal stories on social justice topics that begin to reshape the dominant narrative and offers a lifeline to people who previously felt alone in their struggles. The “Personal is Political” blog also painted a more inclusive picture of women’s lives apart from the dominant narrative. The interactive comments section allowed women to connect, demonstrate support, and to raise consciousness about the experiences of women. These artifacts offered constructive calls-to-action that were successful in making change on a larger cultural level, but also in individual’s own lives.

These cases demonstrate that if enough people are made aware of a social problem and are motivated to act, tangible change can occur. Ultimately, this analysis has shed light on how consciousness raising online through new media can begin to call out and subvert oppressive practices, including racism and sexism, in the 21st century. By encouraging more and more people to participate through these new consciousness raising platforms, members of these movements can continue to galvanize people into social action for positive change.

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