

Chapter 10

The Phrase Has Been Hijacked: Studying Generational Communication on Feminism through Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Previous scholarship has identified that as digital media platforms evolve, the potential of intercultural and cross generational communication continues to grow. Digital social media, in particular, has proven to be a valuable channel for users of different backgrounds (and ages) to communicate and speak with each other, often articulating and discussing cultural tensions. Previous research has identified the ubiquitous nature of digital social media as benefiting cross generational communication, as generational groups are often isolated from each other in the physical world, but connected in the digital field. This connection, therefore, provides an opportunity for intergenerational communication to take place, giving a platform for users of different age backgrounds to discuss topics previously quiet in the limited physical interactions.

INTRODUCTION

The popularity and growth of digital media and social networks provides scholars a unique insight into intergenerational communication and feminist identity formation. The Tumblr page, “Women Against Feminism” was one such instance of Millennial users sharing their views on historical and current waves of Feminism. Through a frame analysis, this study explores how young users articulate and describe their views on Feminism. This study finds a set of six frames used by users to describe feminism: representation, I don’t hate men, Feminism failed(s), Feminism succeeded(s), no reason, and countenance. The analysis concludes that although many Millennials reject the label of Feminist, they enact the practices of the group.

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Previous scholarship has identified that as digital media platforms evolve, the potential of intercultural and cross-generational communication continues to grow (DeRidder, 2015). Digital social media, in particular, has proven to be a valuable channel for users of different backgrounds (and ages) to communicate and speak with each other, often articulating and discussing cultural tensions (Aarsand, 2007). Previous research has identified the ubiquitous nature of digital social media as benefiting cross-generational communication, as generational groups are often isolated from each other in the physical world, but connected in the digital field (Correa, 2014). This connection, therefore, provides an opportunity for intergenerational communication to take place, giving a platform for users of different age backgrounds to discuss topics previously quiet in the limited physical interactions.

In summer 2014, one such iteration of intergenerational communication occurred facilitated through the social media platform Tumblr. The Tumblr page “Women Against Feminism” asked users to submit images of themselves holding up signs that explained why they felt they “no longer needed Feminism.” Since this initial request, the page received approximately 5,000 posted images submitted from women around the world. Further, the page was shared over 1.5 million times (as of October 2015). These primarily young women were not just sharing messages for the good of other submitters, they were writing as if in a conversation with another generational group: Feminists from the second wave.

This study uses the Tumblr page “Women Against Feminism” as a case study to look at the perception of Feminism by the Millennial generation. Particularly, it uses the archived images to interpret how young women perceive previous Feminist movements (and leaders) and their role in contemporary society. Further, it gives insight into how Millennial women choose to represent themselves in relationship to contemporary issues facing women which are traditionally addressed through Feminism. These include inequality in pay, traditional gender roles in romantic relationships, and family planning. Important questions addressed in this study include: Who is the intended audience of these messages? How do these messages incorporate and discursively construct age in Feminist movements? How does the social media platform facilitate these messages and provide a space for potential collective reflection on Feminism?

Through a frame analysis of the complete corpus of images and messages shared on the “Women Against Feminism” page, this study seeks to build deeper understanding of how Millennial women view the role of Feminism in contemporary society. Further, by researching the messages shared on the social media platform, the study also contributes to the understanding of how social media facilitates intergenerational communication. Importantly, this study challenges previous theoretical work that concludes the internet is a place of intergenerational conversation, equality, and understanding (Correa, 2014; Cullen & Fischer, 2014). This research holds findings relevant to scholars in Feminist and Media Studies, generational and age communication, and computer mediated communication.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Tensions between Feminist Movements

Feminist movements closely delineate social norms, intentions, and aims of Feminists at different periods of time (Byers & Crocker, 2012). While there has been much scholarly debate over the names, dates, and points of transition for historical “waves” of Feminism, there is agreement that each wave is associated with a different generation of Feminists (Cullen & Fischer, 2014). Each wave represents the energy, intentions, and political nature of a generation of Feminists. In America, most scholars agree that

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