

Chapter 10

Applying Critical Theories to Social Media Mining and Analysis: #WokeAcademy

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ABSTRACT

To add to the limited higher education research that seeks to explore the riches of social media as a space for data collection, this chapter provides an example for how to use social media mining in combination with critical theories as an exploratory tool. This study is designed to apply critical theories to social media mining techniques in order to examine how membership organizations have engaged in discourse around racial issues and social inequities in higher education. This chapter will examine how associations engage particular social media contexts for the purpose of influencing educational research and praxis and provide future directions for using social media to expose social injustices.

INTRODUCTION

There has been exponential growth in the use of social media among universities and the students they serve. Universities have admitted to using social media for student recruitment, student engagement, and for monitoring student impressions as related to the campus environment (Barnes & Mattson, 2010; Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Canche, 2012; Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker, 2009; Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016). However, there remains a dearth of research in higher education that relies on the technologically advanced research techniques social media can provide. To add to the limited higher education research that seeks to explore the riches of social media as a space for data collection, this chapter provides an example for how to use social media mining in combination with critical theories as an exploratory tool.

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At the 2018 conference for the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), Dr. Lori Patton, gave a presidential speech encouraging members to further explore the systemic structures that limit the production of “woke” scholarship. “Woke” refers to a heightened sense of consciousness concerning societal issues with the purpose of dismantling power structures that disproportionately effect minoritized populations (ASHE, 2018). In addition to envisioning a woke academy, Patton used social media visualizations in a call to action for creating innovative forms of inquiry that acknowledge oppressive structures and identify inequitable policies and practices. Not only did social media give Patton the tools to illustrate her message, but conference attendees also took to Twitter and other platforms to express solidarity.

Although higher education research has seen an increase in critical epistemologies and methodologies designed to examine campus environments (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009), understand faculty/student interactions (Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015), and explore student experiences (Patton & Croom, 2017), Patton encouraged more research with an eye for exposing social injustice (2018). Inarguably, there will never be enough research to fully gauge the importance of social justice issues, however, this researcher seeks to determine how far educational research has come. Although the research produced to examine social inequities exists, the question remains as to whether associations of higher education have allowed the existing research to inform their message and whether the research has impacted higher education praxis. Moreover, Patton’s use of social media and call for innovative inquiry suggest that the research that does exist may perpetuate the very inequities they were designed to expose. Therefore, this study is designed to apply critical theories to social media mining techniques in order to examine how membership organizations have engaged in discourse around racial issues and social inequities in higher education. This chapter will also examine how associations engage particular social media contexts for the purpose of influencing educational research and praxis, and provide future directions for using social media to expose social injustices.

Mining and analyzing the social media of higher education associations with a critical lens allows researchers to identify power dynamics that lead to the dismantling of inequitable structures that can cause real harm. Social media mining paired with critical theories can be an innovative way to approach higher education research for the purpose of disrupting oppressive power structures. For this chapter, the researcher seeks to use social media to confront societal ills in the form of social discourse associated with inequities. Employing a Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTD) (Brock, 2012) of historical social media content associated with major higher education associations, the researcher will examine how past sentiments held by these associations may have led to Patton’s vision for a more woke academy. Moreover, the researcher will identify any recent changes in discourse since Patton’s call. Because these associations act as spaces for leaders, faculty, and students to explore innovations in the field, the language and activities highlighted on their social media pages could impact member attitudes, and potentially embolden inequitable ideologies on college campuses.

BACKGROUND: “WOKE” SCHOLARSHIP

Prior to Dr. Patton Davis’ speech, a significant amount of higher education research was developed using critical lenses for the purpose of dismantling systems of oppression. Studies addressed perceptions of campus climate for racially and ethnically minoritized students (Griffin, Cunningham, & Mwangi, 2016; Harper & Hurtado, 2007), the impact of racism and power on theories of student development

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