#Activism: Understanding how Student Leaders Utilize Social Media for Social or Political Change

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Social media has shifted the landscape of how individuals create social or political change. Previous forms of activism relied on in-person methods such as petitioning, rallies, and letter writing (Barnhardt, 2014). Modern technology pushed activism increasingly online, as 19% of internet users have posted material about political or social issues (Smith, Lehman Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009). Through online tools, individuals spanning vast geographical distances immediately respond to concerns (LaRiviere, Snider, Stromberg, & O'Meara, 2012). The range of available platforms caters to a diverse array of users and functionalities, including sharing information, gauging interest, and building relationships (Biddix, 2010; Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). Activists now have multiple tools available for instantaneous, widespread impact.

For college student leaders, defined as those holding leadership positions in clubs and organizations on campus, social media facilitate attempts to create social or political change through strategies of resistance (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014). Previous studies focused on social media-supported activism within higher education to join national protests for racial justice (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015); to challenge discriminatory government actions (LaRiviere et al., 2012); to illuminate microaggressions (George Mwangi, Bettencourt, & Malaney, 2016) and victim blaming (Hall, 2015); and to

respond to oppression and bias (Senft & Noble, 2013). However, less is known about how student leaders choose to engage in social media when pursuing these goals.

The 2015-2016 academic year saw student movements against injustices at campuses as diverse as Yale University, the University of Missouri, and the University of Cincinnati (Wong & Green, 2016). At Research University (RU), a large public research institution in the northeastern United States, student activism addressed issues of racial injustice and institutional investment in fossil fuel companies. While students launched events such as sit-ins and rallies to support these causes, little information existed regarding how students viewed such efforts to create social and political change, how their approaches were impacted by leadership roles they held on campus, and their use of social media for organizing. As the field of student affairs considers ways to better support student activism (Bourke, 2017), additional information is needed to inform practice. Not only is such understanding crucial to promote student development and to address inequity on campus, but also to align broader institutional commitments to social justice that vary widely in implementation (Warikoo, 2016).

Using the framework of the Social Change Model (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI]; 1996; Komives & Wagner, 2017), this pilot study explores the ways that undergraduate student leaders approached and engaged with social media as a tool. Specifically, I ask the research question: how do student leaders use and perceive social media as tools to create social or political change? The pilot provides an initial understanding of these concepts that can be used to develop institutional assessments of students' experiences working towards creating change on campus. Such assessments are imperative to inform student affairs administrators in improving leadership

development on their campuses for burgeoning student activists and to promote organizational learning to better implement institutional missions (Bourke, 2017; Schuh, 2015).

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the ways in which social media have been used to challenge inequality and the efficacy of such approaches. Here, I use the definition of social media provided by Junco (2014) as "applications, services, and systems that allow users to create, remix, and share content" (p. 6). Thus, social media activism is the act of using such platforms to achieve social or political change.

Uses of Social Media for Activism

Social media platforms have provided opportunities for widespread engagement and instantaneous feedback with few resource constrictions. Applications and websites offered a range of functionality to students, with specific capabilities in constant evolution to meet the needs of users (Biddix, 2010). Students used platforms to share information, hold each other accountable, and foster learning opportunities (Biddix, 2010). Moreover, these spaces operated beyond traditional communication hierarchies, providing users with a high degree of utility and access. For example, social media has facilitated student activism through in-person and online action for both individuals and groups (e.g., George Mwangi et al., 2016; LaRiviere et al., 2012). Through these uses, participation in social media resulted in formal and informal learning, spanning interactions with peers and campus offices (Junco, 2014; Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014).

Individual identity–particularly gender, race, income, and education levels (Junco, Merson, & Salter, 2010; Swank & Fahs, 2011)–influenced social media usage.

Socioeconomic status has determined one's access and ability to engage online (LaRiviere et al. 2012). Past research identified gender differences, as women pursued personal connections online while men valued invitations and announcements (Biddix, 2010). In terms of race, African Americans experienced higher levels of diverse online contact and spent larger amounts of time on social networking sites (Tynes, Rose, & Markoe, 2013). One explanation for this discrepancy is that social media allowed marginalized students to form connections beyond their physical environments (LaRiviere et al., 2012), such as Black students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). However, social media sites also perpetuated issues of oppression (Senft & Noble, 2013). It is perhaps unsurprising that white students reported more desirable racial climate experiences and lower levels of online stress than their peers (Tynes et al., 2013). Nuance across different social media platforms suggested that students select different online environments based on pre-existing social networks, reaffirming connections with like-minded or similarly-identified individuals (Hargittai, 2007). As this research sought to understand how students use social media to promote change, it is important to note the existing digital landscape.

Much research explored the ways that social media have facilitated activism. Features that allowed users to like, share, and comment aided individuals in publicizing issues or mobilizing for action (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). Twitter gave rise to hashtag activism, or #activism, in which users express opinions, share information, and connect to others by using a shared phrase and tag denoted by the # symbol. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) noted that hashtags allow users to organize their comments and to participate in dialogue. They cited campaigns on Twitter aimed at challenging police violence towards Youth of Color as examples of resistance to racialized victim-blaming within the media.

Even changing one's profile picture has emphasized broader solidarity with an issue (Vie, 2014). Although online support has been critiqued as less valuable, even dismissed as slacktivism, these actions challenged microaggressions and highlighted important causes (Vie, 2014). Thus, social media served varied functions depending on the cause and participants.

Efficacy of Social Media for Creating Change

Marginalized individuals experienced invisibility, tokenization, and misrepresentation daily within higher education (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012). Social media have spread biased or oppressive content widely while silencing individuals harmed (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014). However, social media also provided spaces to respond to instances of oppression and bias (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). The various formats supported by social media allowed individuals to attempt difficult conversations from within their comfort zones. Senft and Noble (2013) cited examples of YouTube videos that exhibited funny and smart responses to racist incidents to critically examine current events and to offer an alternative perspective. George Mwangi and colleagues (2016) examined the I, Too, Am social media campaign that began at Harvard in 2014 as a tool for Black students to resist microaggressions and to address hostile campus climates through online counterspaces. In another example, Hall (2015) shared the idea of a cue card confessional in which individuals used images and writing to subvert the gaze to which they were subjected. Aligned with other forms of campus speech that have both problematic and positive manifestations, social media highlighted similar challenges with a larger reach.

For students attempting to engage in online activism, these challenges and benefits have impacted how effective social media were in creating social or political change. Hashtags linked unrelated information to causes, obscuring relevant information (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Online movements struggled to move forward without clear organization, stymied by their flat and decentralized nature (LaRiviere et al., 2012). There also have been individuals barred from engaging in social media activism due to limited online access or time (LaRiviere et al., 2012). Finally, it is important to note that social media activism have had mixed results based on individual values and approaches. Kristofferson, White, and Peloza (2015) contrasted meaningful and token support, defining the former as requiring cost, effort, or behavioral change to tangibly benefit a cause. Unless a public action aligned with individual values, then private measures were more indicative of continued support and involvement. In a social media context, individuals without a commitment to a specific cause were likely to engage in future support if they participate in a private gesture (e.g., reading an article) rather than a public gesture (e.g., a status update). However, for people whose values are consistent with the cause, a public gesture can affirm support and connection. Such findings have suggested nuances related to social media that are important to understand social change.

Conceptual Framework

This study utilized the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI, 1996) Leadership Model for Social Change, later deemed the Social Change Model (Komives & Wagner, 2017). The model examines how co-curricular experiences "create powerful learning opportunities for leadership development through collaborative group projects that

serve the institution or the community" (HERI, 1996, p. 16). Action is driven by seven values across three different spheres: (a) an individual level focusing on the consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment; (b) a group process that focuses on collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility; and (c) a societal value of citizenship. These seven values have a reciprocal impact. Together, they lead to an eighth value, social change. Leadership is an emerging process shaped through interactions across the spheres.

In examining social media usage, these spheres related to the elements of individual retrospection (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014), group engagement (LaRiviere et al., 2012), and societal connection (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015) that occur as student leaders engage online to create social or political change. This study expands upon the Social Change Model by examining how social media expand traditional boundaries to create immediate feedback loops and decentralized communities that shape individual and collective experiences.

Design and Method

This study used a convergent mixed method design to explore undergraduate student leaders' attitudes and behaviors regarding social media as tools for social or political change (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Quantitative survey responses and qualitative interview data were collected concurrently and integrated during data analysis to gather a more comprehensive understanding of the topic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This study uses a pragmatic paradigm to draw from both quantitative and qualitative traditions to answer the research question (Creswell, 2014).

Research Site and Sampling Procedure

The sample site was a large public research institution, referred to as Research University (RU), in the northeast United States. RU has a rich history of student activism on campus. Of the approximately 21,000 undergraduate students enrolled, nearly two-thirds of the population lives on campus. During the 2015-2016 academic year, RU listed over 500 student organizations registered with the Student Activities Office (SAO; pseudonym), classified into approximately 20 subgroups. Due to the focus on social and political change, I recruited student leaders within the approximately 100 organizations categorized as advocacy/political, cultural, religious/spiritual, service, or student governance by the institution. Participants' involvement in organizations served as a proxy to indicate a value for social or political causes.

I sent a recruitment email explaining the research study and providing the link to the survey to the primary student contacts listed within the SAO organizational database. To be eligible, participants needed to be over the age of 18, enrolled as undergraduate students, and hold a leadership role in a registered campus organization. As RU only identified one student leader per organization, snowball sampling was used to recruit additional participants by asking the initial contact to forward study information to peers in leadership roles.

Data Collection

A survey was used to gather information on participants' attitudes and behaviors (Fowler, 2014). The survey instrument was piloted with similar demographics prior to use to support reliability and validity (Fowler, 2014). Questions fell into five categories:

social media usage, social media activism, attitudes and beliefs, organizational involvement, and demographic information. Examples of questions included (a) which platforms a student used, (b) how much of a student's social media activity focused on social or political change, and (c) the importance of social media as tools for social or political change. The online survey platform software Qualtrics was used to administer surveys and to maintain confidentiality. Approximately 165 students received the initial recruitment email to complete and to share with other leaders in their organization. A total of 53 students responded.

The final survey question asked students to indicate their interest in participating in a follow-up interview on their experiences and beliefs. Four students agreed. Interviews utilized a semi-structured protocol comprised of questions about participants' definitions of social media activism, their interest in social or political change, and their views on the efficacy of different social media platforms. All interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

As a pilot study, analysis of the quantitative data primarily used Qualtrics software to generate descriptive statistics. Only complete and near-complete cases were analyzed. Listwise deletion was used to remove cases with more than 20% missing information (final n = 49). Data was not weighted. Qualitative data were coded through constant comparative analysis, a technique originally developed as part of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and expanded across qualitative research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) outlined key steps of the analysis as: (1) *open coding* in which the researcher examines initial materials and notes down any items that could be useful; (2)

axial or analytic coding to group together comments that are similar; (3) continual revisiting of these codes with new documents to add to the master list; (4) construction of categories and themes that capture patterns across the data. My approach was both inductive, to examine themes emerging from the data, and deductive, to compare new data to see if it matched with the emerging framework. After analysis on both data sets, I integrated quantitative and qualitative findings.

Data Quality and Limitations

To maintain data quality, I triangulated quantitative and qualitative information (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). For the qualitative interviews, I shared the final analysis with participants so that participants could comment on what was learned with and about them (Roper, 2015), strengthening the authenticity and accuracy of findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also engaged in peer debriefing with experts on student activism to test emerging findings.

Nonetheless, the study has several limitations. The data came from a small sample size from one institution. Participants self-selected into the study and were students that felt passionately about social media and activism. The size and sampling strategy limited the complexity of statistical analyses that could be conducted on the quantitative data beyond descriptive statistics. Identity can impact social media activism (Hargittai, 2007; Swank & Fahs, 2011; Tynes et al., 2013). Here, most participants identified as White and information such as social class was not reported. Thus, this study does not capture the full nuance of how identity may impact social media use for social or political change.

Findings

The survey respondents spanned undergraduate class years, with 18.37% identified as first-year students, 16.33% as sophomores, 30.61% as juniors, and 34.69% as seniors. Most participants identified as women (71.43%) and White (73.47%). While individuals could hold multiple leadership roles across organizations, the most common was president, director, or vice president category (55.10%). The most popular organizations included student governance (23 participants), advocacy/political (14), cultural (13), or service (11).

Four students agreed to participate in qualitative interviews (Table 1). All names are pseudonyms, while organizations and roles are aggregated to protect participant anonymity.

Table 1. Qualitative Participants

Pseudonym	Year	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Organization Type	Leadership Role
Bobby	Third	Man	White	Advocacy/Political	Membership Coordinator
Kate	Senior	Woman	White	Service Advocacy/Political	Event Coordinator President
Fred	First	Man	White	Student Governance	Executive Council
Maeve	Senior	Woman	Middle Eastern-American	Cultural Advocacy/Political	President President

Usage of Social Media for Activism

Consistent with national trends (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016), quantitative findings revealed that Facebook was the most popular social media platform (97.96%). The next popular were Snapchat (75.51%), Instagram (71.43%), and YouTube (67.35%).

Most participants (75.51%) logged in to social media all seven days a week. When asked how much of their social media use is related to activism, most (85.71%) stated less than half. In describing their engagement in social media activism, most participants cited publicizing events, connecting with like-minded individuals, and learning about current events as the primary functions utilized (see Table 2).

Table 2. Engagement in Forms of Social Media Activism

Uses of Social Media	Frequency	Percentage of Total
Publicize events	44	89.79%
Connect to like-minded individuals	43	87.76%
Learn about current events	42	85.71%
Organize action to take place in person	38	77.55%
Share resources	37	75.51%
Express solidarity with other causes	35	74.47%
Connect to differently minded individuals	34	72.34%
Organize action to take place online	21	43.75%
Obtain financial support	12	27.27%

Qualitative participants described using social media to respond to current events and to find their voice during a time of growing awareness. While Kate and Fred arrived on campus hoping to create social change, all four participants shared that exposure to new ideas during college increased their desire to confront inequality. The Social Change Model defines this individual value as consciousness of self, in which individuals are aware of beliefs and values that motivate their actions (HERI, 1996). For Maeve, exposure to programs on sustainability led her to shift career goals and advocate for conservation. Early in his time on campus, Fred impacted a campus policy through a role in student governance that fueled his desire to facilitate local politics. Kate described higher education as a call to action for herself and peers:

> There are so many social movements going on right now with our generation, and college, and I think that people are really into these big ideas of change. People seem more willing to post things they feel strongly about on their own pages.

Amidst growing individual awareness, there was a sense that participants used social media to respond to current events and to develop their opinions. These actions allowed participants to be congruent across their thinking, feeling, and behavior (HERI, 1996). Forums such as Facebook allowed individuals to formulate and edit ideas prior to sharing them, providing both introspective and public experiences. Fred connected news to his personal experiences, noting "I'll sometimes write what I think about it beforehand, and then I'll post the article and share it. Sort of like a hook or something so it's more personal." Bobby expressed a similar sentiment, in which writing a status update was an opportunity to reflect. He shared,

> I've spent a lot of time trying to be more conscious about how I write and what I'm saying specifically because I understand that there are people who disagree with me. I don't want to just sound like somebody who's being a blowhard, but that I've thoughtfully considered what I'm talking about.

Maeve and Bobby carefully cultivated what they shared to fit their personal approaches. Bobby was selective and intentional, highlighting one key issue per day. Maeve also described her approach as selective, but relied on humor,

> I don't post too, too much. I don't post any opinion stuff. I will definitely post things that imply what my opinions are…It is once in a blue moon that I will comment on something that I disagree on. The only time that I did it was when it was my best friend's boyfriend posted something that was personally offensive to me, so I just commented something like "watch it."

In this way, participants utilized individualized approaches to address key issues.

Additionally, multiple participants integrated the organizational social media accounts used in their leadership roles with their individual profiles. Maeve and Kate directly oversaw the social media pages for their organizations, while Bobby was in the process of assuming leadership for his political/advocacy group's accounts. These participants saw their work in organizations as an extension of personal efforts to create change, often sharing content across pages to draw maximum attention. Not only did this show congruence across multiple aspects of their identity, but allowed them to demonstrate their commitment to social change (HERI, 1996). Maeve described,

> I use Facebook for my club. I share things from my club's account instead of my own and then sometimes I will then share it from there. I do that to get people to like the page. Then, people who already like the page will see whatever is there.

Working in tandem with organizational pages helped participants to reach a broader demographic. Rather than viewing personal and organizational social media platforms distinctly, creating synergy between the two helped participants to facilitate their goals.

Perceptions of Social Media

Quantitative data showed that participants believed the most important functions of social media for activism were publicizing events (81.63% of participants rated the activity as very important) and learning about current events (71.43%). Participants saw social media as important for activism broadly, but even more than for their individual efforts (see Table 3). Most participants (67.35%) stated that liking (e.g., showing agreement with statements) a post, group, or page served as a form of social media activism.

Table 3. Value of Social Media for Activism

Item	Coding	M	SD	Min	Max
Important in my daily life	1=Strongly Agree 4=Strongly Disagree	1.75	0.75	1	4
A valuable tool for activism	1=Strongly Agree 4=Strongly Disagree	1.33	0.51	1	4
A valuable tool for my activism	1=Strongly Agree 4=Strongly Disagree	1.69	0.81	2	4
Connects me with the campus community on issues of political or social change	1=Strongly Agree 4=Strongly Disagree	1.47	0.70	1	4
Connects me with people outside of the campus on issues of political or social change	1=Strongly Agree 4=Strongly Disagree	1.67	0.84	1	4

In interviews, participants viewed social media as tools to serve a diverse range of needs and to gauge larger social opinions. Kate cited numerous hashtag campaigns that promoted awareness and advocacy. Fred emphasized the importance of sharing information that directly connected to forms of action, noting "I think of petitions. I think about getting the word out to start a conversation. I think about getting people to call their legislators and to read articles, and to come to events like rallies and sit-ins." Bobby cited examples such as "campaigning, viral video, viral newsfeed, news

information, Facebook statuses, profile picture changes, liking things." Social media could be used to spur action as well. Maeve shared an example of her cultural group in which members used social media to advertise a meeting and to develop a response to an act of injustice. The limited time, money, and/or resources required made such activism accessible for various populations. As Bobby noted, "10 minutes on Facebook might be a short amount of time but it shows that [an individual] still cares, they still think about it." Thus, social media could be a place for not only individuals to show a value of commitment, but for groups to collaborate with one another or to show engagement in a common purpose (HERI, 1996). The wide range of time and energy associated with different actions allowed individuals to work towards social change while still being mindful of varied priorities.

Supporting the quantitative findings, all four interview participants agreed that liking a status or article could serve as a form of activism. Participants noted that liking was a public act, visible to others through features such as Newsfeed in Facebook. As a result, liking showed an individual's congruence and commitment to pursuing social or political change (HERI, 1996). Kate noted, "It will show up on someone else's news feed that you liked that post. It's less passive than it could be if it didn't do that." Liking could also make a news item more prominent, helping to amplify its reach. Fred shared his belief that liking an item may impact Facebook's analytics to make that post show up more frequently for others. Finally, Bobby added the cumulative impact of likes may be able to demonstrate broader social opinion and emphasize forms of solidarity. He noted:

> It's a way of being able to keep track of everyday action of people and their thoughts instead of just a loud minority. You can get more passive

> information better, and so you can get a better aggregate sense of what people are thinking.

However, even while arguing that liking could count, the participants still noted that it was the least meaningful of the potential actions that individuals could take. While a commitment, it was minimal (HERI, 1996). Maeve shared, "People are going to read and support what they think that they read and support." Bobby and Fred mentioned the idea that there may currently be a disconnect between gaining collective input through likes or comments and actual action. Both argued that must legislators and decision makers use social media to gauge public response. Fred shared that, "I know the politicians that are in office right now, a lot of them are not in the millennial generation. Some of them don't have social media. They don't necessarily see the amount of likes necessarily, so they're not going to be influenced." While liking was valuable, its impact was limited.

While social media platforms aided communication and demonstrations of solidarity, the tools were ineffective to change others' beliefs. While the two men hinted at this belief, taking care to post information that individuals would consider, the two women were explicit about these limitations. Maeve noted, "I personally don't see a lot of value in having Facebook debates where only two or three people are going back and forth. Nobody else is really reading it and nobody is going to budge." Kate shared, "It's easy to make something sound legitimate when it's not, especially if you're telling people who wouldn't know either way." The Social Change Model describes the group value of controversy with civility as "respect for others, a willingness to hear each other's views, and the exercise of restraint in criticizing the views and actions of others" (HERI, 1996,

p. 23). Here, participants did not feel that social media platforms were fruitful spaces to engage in difficult dialogue. They were also cognizant that social media activism could fuel complacency and deter individuals from more impactful actions (Kristofferson et al., 2015). Kate and Maeve explained that social media could lull individuals into a false sense of impact, with the former describing the ability to "fall into a pit [in which] a lot of activism is happening online and nothing is happening in the real world." Participants saw value in online actions, but only when integrated with in-person actions.

Discussion

This study examines the research question, how do student leaders use and perceive social media as tools to create social or political change? Findings show that participants use social media to act upon a growing awareness of social and political causes by using their voices to support concerns and enhance visibility. While participants consistently described social media as important for their activism, qualitative interviews illuminated the need to avoid complacency with online activities. Instead, participants emphasized the need to use social media amongst many tools to work towards change.

Connection to Social Change Model

The Social Change Model suggests that action occurs across individual, group, and societal spheres (HERI, 1996; Komives & Wagner, 2016). In this study, participants engaged across these levels through social media, often simultaneously, in ways consistent with on-campus leadership development (Skendall, 2017). However, the data collected by this study focused primarily on individual values of consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment (HERI, 1996; Komives & Wagner, 2016). Of the

qualitative participants, only Maeve provided a concrete example of group values when her cultural organization worked collaboratively and with a common purpose to confront injustice on campus (HERI, 1996; Komives & Wagner, 2016). Otherwise, elements of group and social values were relegated to the background of participants' experiences. As such, these findings focus primarily on one sphere of the model.

For students using social media to engage in social or political change, all three individual values worked collaboratively to support leadership efforts. The first value, consciousness of self, requires students to be aware of personal beliefs, values, and attitudes (HERI, 1996; Skendall, 2017). Participants experienced a growing awareness of social and political issues upon their arrival at RU. However, there was some divergence around how much social media activism played a role in developing students' awareness across the quantitative and qualitative results. While survey respondents stated that social media educated them about current events, interview participants highlighted the ways in which information posted on social media could be misleading or ineffective. It is important to note that this study took place during spring 2016, during the campaign period leading up to the presidential election of Donald J. Trump. The national discussion on available misinformation (e.g., fake news) had a pervasive impact on how individuals viewed current events and made important decisions (Maheshwari, 2016). This finding affirms other research on the ways that social media enables individuals to share such misinformation or express solidarity without a corresponding examination of the factual nature or potential biases present (Vie, 2014). The impact of false statements can create a bandwagon phenomenon, in which people make choices based on their perceived popularity (Xu et al., 2012). A clear

outcome of this research is the importance of teaching students to be critical consumers of information as part of individual development and awareness.

The second two individual values in the model, congruence and commitment, worked symbiotically to shape student efforts. As participants encountered growing awareness, they made decisions aligned with those values (congruence) and pursued subsequent actions (commitment) (Skendall, 2017). Examples of action included posting statements, organizing events, sharing information, or voicing agreement. While Bobby posted information about important causes, he deliberately focused on issues individually and prefaced his content to encourage others to engage. In this way, he demonstrated his commitment while being congruent with his desire to prioritize dialogue. Maeve demonstrated congruence by seeking out organizations focused on sustainability and environmental responsibility. This congruence fueled her commitment as she undertook progressively responsible leadership roles and became more vocal in her personal life. For participants, online actions complemented in-person efforts. This fluidity across spheres reiterates examples of specific campaigns in which social media tactics and in-person action were mutually sustaining to support a holistic strategy of social change (e.g., George Mwangi et al., 2016; LaRiviere et al., 2012).

Social Media Activism

In contrast to critiques of slacktivism, participants emphasized that even minor actions such as liking a post are important for social and political change. These findings aligned with Vie's (2014) conclusion that changing one's profile picture can show virtual support and counter microaggressions. Participants viewed the act of liking as a public

declaration of their opinions and as a way to enhance the visibility of a cause. However, several participants also identified the potential of superficial actions to contribute to apathy if not connected to larger meaningful action (Kristofferson et al., 2015). For undergraduate students, it may be important for educators to connect online actions with in-person communities or actions that can foster continued growth. Involvement in a student organization was one form of meaningful engagement for participants. Other sources could be cultural centers, service learning, coursework, or volunteer activity in the community.

The respondents of this study were primarily White women. However, the usage of social media can vary across different identity groups (Junco et al., 2010; Tynes et al., 2013). As marginalized students experience hostile campus climates, online spaces that act as sites of resistance and community are particularly important (e.g., George Mwangi et al., 2016). Moreover, students from marginalized groups may have already experienced the consciousness-raising necessary to develop a social change agenda (Kezar & Maxey, 2014) that makes them more likely to engage in activism. Here, Maeve was the only qualitative participant that identified as a Student of Color. She spoke of using social media to engage with the Middle Eastern community on campus, which included a community response to a bias instance. Her experiences echoed prior literature that examined ways in which Students of Color used social media to challenge racial oppression (e.g., Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; George Mwangi et al., 2016; Senft & Noble, 2013).

Educational attainment is a predictor of activism (Swank & Fahs, 2011), suggesting that those with more coursework are more likely to engage. It is also true that

juniors and seniors are more likely to assume leadership roles on campus within organizations due to their familiarity with campus culture and their seniority. Moreover, these leadership opportunities come at a time when students are developmentally prepared to engage in difficult decision making (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). In this study, seniors like Kate and Maeve were directly involved in leading their organizations and overseeing organizational social media. If students become more involved later in college, institutions might benefit from targeted measures of support for these students that integrate past experiences and connect to opportunities post-graduation.

Implications

A key goal of this pilot study is to inform future institutional assessment. As institutions strive to better promote social justice and diversity (Warikoo, 2016), empowering students as change agents is a natural extension of institutional missions. Understanding how to support student leaders in creating social and political change, particularly in the prevalence of online environments (Junco, 2014), must be a priority for student affairs administrators. As a pilot study, findings from this research provide several nuanced understandings (Sampson, 2004). First, the Social Change Model (HERI, 1996; Skendall, 2017) clearly aligns with student leaders' online actions for social and political change and provides a natural framework to gauge students' learning and values through leadership roles and activism. Simply put, the theory provides a clear framework with which to ground institutional assessment.

However, a clearer integration of student-learning outcomes is necessary to create a robust assessment that could be used to enhance student learning (Green et al., 2008).

At RU, the Social Change Model was not widely used by the Student Activities Office. Without a clearer connection to learning-outcomes and pedagogy in co-curricular spaces, efforts to understand student perceptions and behaviors are disconnected from the desired cycle of evaluation, decision-making, communication, and planning associated with assessment (Roper, 2015; Upcraft & Schuh, 2002). Additionally, the Social Change model encompasses action across the individual, group, and societal spheres. In this study, the individual sphere was most salient for student leaders. However, other institutions have learning outcomes more clearly tied to group and societal impacts. Practitioners must identify which areas of social change are most targeted through involvement opportunities to create corresponding lines of inquiry.

Second, the dynamic nature of social media makes it difficult to create a stagnant assessment as platforms, functionality, and user interface evolve. Any inquiry into students' social media usage must constantly evolve alongside social media to remain relevant, and would benefit from construction with students themselves who are best equipped to explain the digital landscape. The centrality of student voice and input is clear here. The richest findings are qualitative as participants discussed the nuances of platforms and functionalities that the survey could not capture. As such, this study reaffirms the importance of using multiple methods of data collection (Green et al., 2008) and suggests new possibilities for research methods that more directly center participant agency, such as participatory action research.

The goal of assessment is to guide good practice (Upcraft & Schuh, 2002). This pilot study suggests that rather than shying away from the topic of social and political change, practitioners can actively help co-construct environments that illustrate examples of

successful student activism (Swank & Fahs, 2011). Moreover, conversations about strategies for activism can serve as a teaching tool to help students learn from past examples (Taha, Hastings, & Minei, 2015). Such dialogue can reframe deficit views on student activism to instead focus on ways that individuals can create forms of social and political change. Education on activism supports the personal development that occurs amongst students as they engage with social media (Junco, 2014). For example, students in this study saw organizational and personal social media accounts linked in many ways. Thus, practitioners may consider exploring these themes with students to help them navigate between their multiple roles, the nuance of which grows increasingly complicated as students move into professional jobs and careers. Intentional engagement can support students in their development as change agents.

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