From pixels to protest: Using the Internet to confront bias at the societal level

Eric M. Gomez and Cheryl R. Kaiser
University of Washington, Seattle, WA, United States

Chapter Outline

The rise of online activism 321
Limitations to online activism 322
The platform itself is sexist 322
Slacktivism 324
Egalitarian norms 327
Conclusion 329
Applications 330
References 331

On January 21, 2017, a day after President Donald Trump’s inauguration, nearly half a million people converged on the nation’s capitol for the Women’s March in the largest single-day protest in US history (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2017; Wallace & Parlapiano, 2017). Galvanized by Trump’s sexist remarks throughout his campaign, protestors united in an effort not solely against Trump but to confront the pervasive sexism that has long plagued the United States. Nearly 50 years before, Asa Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, lifelong social activists, had planned the March on Washington, the pivotal protest that catalyzed the civil rights movement. However, the 2017 Women’s March did not start in a meeting room, but online, in a Facebook post from Teresa Shook, a retired lawyer who had no social organizational experience but only an idea forged into pixels (Stein, 2017). This idea, represented in a Facebook page calling for a day of protest, spread through online social networks like wildfire, stirring the passions of millions of people who signed up online and later showed up offline. The extent of the impact and long-term effects of the Women’s March remains to be understood, but the message from its protestors was clear: supporters of women’s rights were ready to step up and fight.

The 2017 Women’s March is just one example of how the confrontation of sexism originated and spread on the Internet. From online blogs and communities to social media movements, these collective confrontations against sexism have fortified a stronghold in the World Wide Web. The power of the Internet to confront bias has been utilized by social movements beyond sexism as well. For example,
the phrase “Black Lives Matter” started as a trending hashtag on Twitter and has s
since become a nationally recognized movement combating police brutality (Blow, 2015). In 2010, activists of the Egyptian Revolution successfully used social media to not only raise awareness but also to mobilize people into action by organizing protests and demonstrations (Vargas, 2012). The Internet has proliferated ideas and discourse and catalyzed communication exponentially, helping democratize collective action. No longer is it necessary for a person to have the social capital or networks to mobilize wide scale protest and collective action— anyone with a conviction and a computer can amplify their voice and instigate a movement.

In this chapter, we review relevant historical, theoretical, and empirical scholarship to contextualize the contemporary state of online activism, with a particular focus on challenging sexism. We then discuss limitations to the Internet’s potential in successfully confronting bias: bias on the Internet platform itself which may act as a barrier that prevents people from engaging in online activism, “slacktivism” as a threat to a movement’s long-term success, and the pressure to conform to egalitarian norms as a limitation of the strength and authenticity of a movement. Finally, we offer some practical suggestions on how to overcome these limitations and maximize the potential of online activism as a tool for confronting sexism and other forms of bias.

Online activism can resemble many familiar forms of activism, such as signing online petitions, joining online communities, and donating money online. Online activism also offers many new ways to engage in activism such as clicking “like” on Facebook or symbolically changing one’s profile picture and tweeting about a social issue on Twitter. One particularly novel form of online activism arose from the protest at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation against the Dakota Access Pipeline, where over a million people checked in on Facebook at the reservation (but were not actually physically present) to show solidarity as well to attempt to make it more difficult for police to locate the protestors on the ground (Kennedy, 2016). These various online forms of activism can require varying levels of effort and commitment (e.g., changing one’s profile picture to show commitment to an issue is more costly than signing an online petition) (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010).

Online activism can be both similar to and distinct from confrontation as typically described in the psychological literature. Confrontation occurs when an individual who experiences or witnesses prejudice expresses verbal or nonverbal discontentment to the perpetrator of bias (Kaiser & Miller, 2004; Swim & Hyers, 1999). Czopp, Monteith, and Mark (2006) further differentiate between interpersonal confrontation (e.g., directly confronting a perpetrator) and noninterpersonal confrontation (e.g., not directly confronting a specific perpetrator). Individuals can use online activism similarly to interpersonal confrontation, such as when they use electronic media to sign a petition or confront sexist individuals, including public figures such as politicians. Online activism can also be noninterpersonal confrontation, such as sending discontentment into the larger world, without targeting a single individual. This is akin to confronting the status quo of the world, such as when tweeting #BlackLivesMatter. When these online behaviors of confrontation inspire others to act as well, they can transform into a larger movement. These
Online movements have recently been studied in the literature as collective action, which are acts that are intended to advance the position or status of a group (Foster, 2015; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002).

The rise of online activism

In this section, we discuss a variety of ways in which people have used the Internet as a platform to confront sexism. Prose is one powerful way for individuals to directly express their opinions and values through writing. Research in social and clinical psychology suggests that expressive writing promotes personal healing from trauma (Pennebaker, 1997). The psychological benefits of prose might explain why it is a popular strategy for confronting bias. Feminist websites such as Jezebel and Feministing bypass traditional barriers in newspapers and magazines and allow women to be their own gatekeepers. The success of more independent and radical blogs, such as Black Girl Dangerous, suggests that there is enough room for a diversity of thoughts and opinions to find a niche online. Online prose also provides a convenient virtual space for people to congregate, discuss, and organize. For example, the invite-only Facebook group “Pantsuit Nation” allowed Hillary Clinton supporters to affirm their beliefs and build a shared sense of identity by sharing their personal stories and beliefs in a safe space. Online comment sections of blogs such as Jezebel allow readers to become part of the conversation and to express their support (or objections) to what they read. These less formal ways of writing allow virtually anyone to participate in writing as a form of resistance, while also expressing and validating their experiences. When these messages take hold, public discourse can be influenced and public awareness about bias can be raised, which help catalyze social change (Weeks, Boles, Garbin, & Blount, 1986).

Another way people have successfully used the Internet to confront sexism is by contributing to more formal online social movements. Online activism can take many forms, from Facebook statuses and Tweets to changing one’s profile picture to express support for an issue (e.g., changing one’s Facebook profile picture to show support for Planned Parenthood; Gladu, 2016). One of the most popular methods involves the use of “hashtags,” whereby millions of people can join forces and project their message to society. For example, numerous allegations of sexual harassment and violence against Harvey Weinstein, a powerful Hollywood executive, revitalized a social media campaign, “#MeToo,” where people shared their own stories in solidarity (Zacharek, Dockterman, & Edwards, 2017). The “#MeToo” movement thrusted Weinstein, along with other alleged sexual harassers and abusers, into the public limelight and resulted in reprimand (Zacharek et al., 2017). The Internet instigated and quickly amplified public outrage, prompting punishment faster than the legal system ever could.

These online activism examples illustrate how the Internet can be used in a collective effort to confront sexism: just like protests and marches, online movements gain strength in numbers. Individual online acts such as Tweeting become part of a
larger collective effort. From online writing and communities to social media movements, the use of the Internet to combat sexism is multifaceted and, in many recent examples such as the #MeToo campaign and the Pantsuit Nation Facebook group, is popular and at the very least raising awareness and making an impact in public discourse.

Despite these recent success stories, many online movements are met with less successful results, including criticism and even counterproductive consequences. For example, *Kony 2012*, a documentary film about war criminal Joseph Kony, saw meteoric viral success and spread awareness about his injustices. However, controversy surrounding the video and the organization behind it eventually overshadowed its initial viral success (*Taylor, 2014*). In addition, the movement failed to guide people into any meaningful subsequent action—people were not given concrete ways to help beyond sharing the video to their online networks. Consequently, the act of sharing the video may have led some people to feel like they had done enough to address the problem, rather than seeking out future activism (*Taylor, 2014)*. Also, the rapid popularity of the video (e.g., reaching 100 million views on YouTube in 6 days) may have pressured some people to share the video just because others in their social network were sharing it, making one’s participation in the movement motivated by conforming to a norm rather than by intrinsic beliefs (*Kanczula, 2012*).

What makes an online movement successful in confronting bias, and what are the barriers that keep these movements from reaching their full potential? Understanding the psychology underlying these barriers and taking steps to overcome them can facilitate online activism and, ultimately, help to enact social change.

**Limitations to online activism**

*The platform itself is sexist*

While the Internet is largely democratic—anyone with access can voice their opinions—not everyone feels safe doing so. People, especially women and other low status group members, may fear prejudice and backlash when they engage in online activism. Indeed, backlash is a well-established barrier to confrontation (*Kaiser & Miller, 2004*) and a reality for those who confront sexism and bias offline (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Dodd, Giuliano, Boutell, & Moran, 2001; Kaiser & Major, 2006; Kaiser, Hagiwara, Malahy, & Wilkins, 2009; Mallett & Melchiori, 2014; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Glick, & Phelan, 2012; Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998). Women may receive backlash for confronting sexism because the act of confrontation is agentic and violates norms and communal expectations of how women should act (*Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Rudman et al., 2012; Phelan, Moss-Racusin, & Rudman, 2008*) and because it also violates the oft-held ideology that the status hierarchy is legitimate (*Kaiser & Major, 2006*). In this section, we discuss the ways in which sexism and backlash permeate the Internet itself, which can act as a barrier of entry for women to use the Internet for combating sexism.
A quick search of online forums and comments sections on websites such as YouTube often reveals an ugly side of humanity—obscenely offensive language that is often rife with sexism and racism. Online sexism exists in many forms, such as people making sexist and misogynistic jokes about women in general, or specifically targeted toward individual women. For example, in 2014, several high-profile women in the video game industry received violent threats via websites such as 4chan, Reddit, and Twitter, in what became known as “Gamergate” (Rott, 2014). In less than 24 hours, “Tay,” a Twitter “chatbot” designed by Microsoft and powered by artificial intelligence to carry out casual conversations with people, had started unleashing racist and sexist sentiments. Sifting through millions of Twitter interactions with the goal of learning how humans (at least those who use Twitter) engage with each other, Tay “learned” how to talk with other Twitter users in their own vernacular and soon declared statements such as “feminism is cancer” (Dobuzinskis, 2016). Similarly, human social biases were revealed in analyses of over 800 billion words from the Internet. Much like how the Implicit Association Test (IAT) has revealed subtle biases, analysis of text from the Internet revealed similar biases. While the IAT measures implicit bias by participants’ differential response times of pairing two concepts [e.g., race (European American vs African-American) and valence (good vs bad)], the Word-Embedding Association Test measures the relationship between two groups of words (e.g., pleasant words and White names). For example, “pleasant” words were more likely to appear next to White names than with African-American names, and female names were more likely to appear next to family than career words, compared to male names, a finding also supported by IAT data (Caliskan, Bryson, & Narayanan, 2017).

Sexism may be particularly pernicious online because of an online disinhibition effect, whereby people feel more comfortable behaving in typically unacceptable ways because the Internet provides a perceived shield of anonymity and psychological distance (Diener, Fraser, Beaman, & Kelem, 1976; Le Bon, 1895; Suler, 2004). The rampant sexism online may be a barrier to women taking advantage of the Internet to confront sexism, because entering in the online world means having to deal with an overwhelming amount of sexism. Literature on coping with prejudice and stigma has identified avoidance as one strategy people employ when faced with the prospect of bias. For example, some women avoid sexist people or situations altogether as a strategy as opposed to engaging and confronting (Cohen & Swim, 1995; Miller & Kaiser, 2001; Swim et al., 1998). Similarly, survey data from our university suggests that college women are significantly more likely than men to agree with statements such as “Sometimes I avoid engaging in online activism because I am worried about my physical safety” and “Sometimes I avoid engaging in online activism because I am worried people will react negatively” (Gomez & Kaiser, unpublished). Not unlike the offline world, these concerns of facing sexism in part deter women from engaging in conversations online. For example, comments on the New York Times website are overwhelmingly from typically male names (Pierson, 2015), suggesting that men may dominate online discussions in part because women feel reluctant to join the conversation.
Slacktivism

Previous research provides important insights into factors that lead individuals to engage in collective action (Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). For example, perceiving injustice, believing in one’s efficacy to make change, and one’s social identity (being a member of a disadvantaged group) all predict engagement in collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). However, this scholarship has largely focused on single instances of initial activism (e.g., signing a petition). While this “one and done” approach to studying collective action provides knowledge about what motivates activist behavior, it leaves important questions about what sustains activism in the long-term unexplored (though see Van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012, for a dual-process model that explains how activism can motivate further activism). Social change requires sustained commitment to a cause, and to the extent that psychological work focuses on single actions without exploring subsequent action, it may provide an overly optimistic picture about how social change is achieved.

Emerging scholarship on online activism has begun to explore this limitation of single action forms of activism. Both scientists and lay people have criticized online activism as “slacktivism,” a pejorative term suggesting that online activism is a lazy way for people to expend a minimal amount of effort toward fighting important issues online, and then fail to take further steps to sustain their movement or engage in offline behaviors that follow from their online action. Is online activism a gateway activity that promotes future offline activism? Or is it “slacktivism,” a process that actually impedes social progress by allowing people to click from a computer and then disengage from further action?

Intuitively, it might make sense that engaging in online activism encourages future action based on consistency theories in the social psychological literature. For example, online activism can be viewed through the “foot-in-the-door” effect (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) such that agreeing to engage in a low-effort task (online activism) might increase the likelihood of engaging in a higher effort task (offline activism). Similarly, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962; Dickerson, Thibodeau, Aronson, & Miller, 1992; Stone & Fernandez, 2008) would suggest that engaging in online activism increases subsequent action in an effort to maintain consistency. Self-perception theory, which posits that our attitudes are formed by analyzing our previous behavior (Bem, 1972), would also suggest a consistency effect, whereby initial acts of online activism would shape people’s attitudes to be in align with that social cause, which would result in future activist behavior. Indeed, a few studies support this consistency hypothesis for why engaging in online activism might encourage subsequent action. For example, people who reported using Twitter to communicate about protests were significantly more likely to attend the first day of protests during the “Arab Spring” (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Similarly, when participants were given the option to sign an online petition (vs not given the opportunity to sign), those who signed the petition were significantly more likely to later donate money to a similar cause, whereas those who did not sign the initial online petition were later more likely to donate money to a different cause (Lee & Hsieh, 2013).
However, not all research reveals a consistency pathway, and some scholarship reveals that online activism may instead discourage subsequent action. For example, writing a supportive comment to be posted to an activist website was found to decrease participants’ likelihood of signing up to attend an in-person activism panel (Schumann & Klein, 2015). Similarly, joining a Facebook activism group was found to decrease subsequent support for that social issue (interest in volunteering to stuff envelopes for a mail campaign) when the Facebook group was public rather than private. This suggests that people who take part in online public displays of activism may be less likely to engage in subsequent action because the initial act may be motivated by impression management goals instead of intrinsic attitudes (Kristofferson, White, & Peloza, 2014).

Possible moderators and mediators of slacktivism

These conflicting findings suggest that there may be important moderators and mediators that explain under what circumstances online activism encourages or discourages subsequent action. Like many social phenomena, slacktivism is likely influenced and explained by a number of moderators and mediators, respectively. Here, we hope to provide some future directions for researchers to better understand slacktivism by reviewing related psychological theories and some preliminary empirical work.

Group membership is one potential moderator of consistency versus slacktivism such that those who belong to a group that is the target of bias are more likely to show a consistency effect whereas those who belong to a group that is not the target of bias may be more susceptible to slacktivism. This divergent pattern may occur because those who are directly affected by an issue are likely to stay committed because it is an issue that personally affects them and their group, whereas those who are not directly affected function as allies and have less personally and collectively at stake. Previous research has suggested that group membership can affect confrontation. For example, compared to women, men are less likely to perceive acts of sexism (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001) and rate blatant acts of sexism as less serious (Drury & Kaiser, 2014; Rodin, Price, Bryson, & Sanchez, 1990). Thus, in the context of confronting sexism, men may be more likely to demonstrate a slacktivism effect whereas women may be more likely to show a consistency effect. This does not necessarily mean that women will not be susceptible to slacktivism at all, perhaps just less so than men. For reasons we discuss below, there may be more general properties of online activism that lead both men and women to engage in slacktivism. Further, individual differences among women may also predict slacktivist patterns. For example, women who believe sexism is pervasive are more likely to condone confronting sexism compared to women who believe sexism is less pervasive (Garcia, Schmitt, Branscombe, & Ellemers, 2010).

Next, we discuss two psychological processes that may explain why people might exhibit slacktivism: moral credentialing and overestimating one’s influence on events. We further theorize about the role of group status in slacktivism.
One potential explanation for why online activism might discourage subsequent activism is because of moral credentialing, a process where people’s past actions “credential” them to act differently in subsequent behavior (Monin & Miller, 2001). For example, participants who initially disagreed with sexist statements later expressed more sex discrimination in a hypothetical hiring task (Monin & Miller, 2001), relative to participants who were not initially given the opportunity to disagree with sexist statements. Monin and Miller (2001) argued that disagreeing with sexist statements morally credentialed people so that they could later be sexist. Similarly, people may be morally credentialed when they engage in online activism and feel licensed to disengage from subsequent action.

We have found some preliminary evidence for this possibility. In an online experiment, participants were told they were helping create an algorithm to identify sexist online comments on websites such as the New York Times. Participants read an article about sexual assault on college campuses and were then presented with an ostensibly random selection of online comments about the article, which were real comments we found online. Participants in an online activism condition were asked to read through these comments and select ones they found to be sexist and should be removed, whereas the control condition just read these comments. Participants in the online activism condition reported that participating in this action made them feel like a good person more than participants in the control condition, suggesting that online activism may provide moral credentials (Gomez & Kaiser, unpublished).

Interestingly, in Monin and Miller’s (2001) research, moral credentials produced more agreement with sexism among men but not women. This suggests that the moral credentialing effect may be moderated by group membership. Because men are acting on the behalf of another group, they may perceive their action as doing something morally good, whereas women may perceive their action as directly helping themselves and their group. Alternatively, this difference may be explained by a “shifting standard” (Biernat & Manis, 1994), where men and women evaluate their own morality compared to others in their group. Because men may perceive other men as unlikely to advocate for women, men who engage in online activism may evaluate their action as especially morally good. In contrast, women may not feel especially morally credentialled when they advocate for women, because they presume that doing so is normative for women.

Online activism might also discourage subsequent activism because people might overestimate the impact of their online actions, leading them to believe that they have contributed enough and no more involvement is necessary. People often overestimate their influence on events, even when those events are beyond their personal control (Anderson & Berhadli, 2002; Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Illusions of personal control may be exacerbated under conditions where individuals feel like they are particularly powerful. In one study, participants reflected on a time when they had power over people (high power condition) as opposed to when other people had control over them (low power condition). Participants in the high power condition were significantly more likely to choose to roll the dice themselves in a dice game,
as opposed to allowing the experimenter to roll the dice, demonstrating how feeling like one has power may lead people to overestimate their influence on events (Fast et al., 2009). Group membership may also moderate this relationship such that men (in the context of women’s rights) may be more likely to overestimate the impact of their online actions than women. Engaging in online activism on the behalf of low powered groups may remind people of their own power, which may in turn lead them to overestimate the impact of their actions. For groups of relatively higher status (e.g., men), overestimating their impact may lead them to disengage from further action because advancing a low status group’s interests might come at a cost to their own group, causing them to pull back when their actions might upend the status hierarchy.

**Egalitarian norms**

Another potential limitation of using the Internet as a way to combat sexism is the pressure of egalitarian norms that compel people to align their online selves to fit with normative, socially conscious standards (Crandall, Eshleman, & O’Brien, 2002; Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002; Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996). Confrontations online may represent attempts to satisfy an egalitarian norm or create a favorable impression of oneself rather than reflect strong, internally held beliefs, making these actions inauthentic. The possibility that people may Tweet one thing but say or do another—or nothing at all—in the offline world poses a threat to the efficacy of online activism as a way to confront sexism. Online activism may be an easy, low-cost way for people to meet these egalitarian norms or create a favorable impression of themselves compared to more time-consuming ways (e.g., protesting, volunteering). Unlike slacktivism, where people who engage in online activism feel like they have contributed enough and then disengage from further action, egalitarian norms may motivate people who never intended to be activists in the first place to engage in online activism. In this section, we discuss potential psychological reasons why people’s online activism may be inauthentic, and implications for online activism as a way to confront sexism. We review relevant psychological theories and empirical studies to speculate on how they may impact online activism with the aim of providing possible future directions for researchers seeking to contribute to this understudied literature.

Psychologists have long studied why people sometimes behave inauthentically offline, and they are just beginning to understand why people might do so online. Gergen (1991) postulated that advancements in technology (e.g., the Internet) expose people to a proliferation of ideas, opinions, and ways of life, which provide people with an ever-increasing amount of possible selves, or ways of being. Online social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have only increased the possibilities. People maintain and curate online profiles to ostensibly project their identity to the world, but do these digital selves accurately represent their “actual,” offline selves? The research on whether people’s general online and offline selves are equivalent is mixed.
One school of thought posits that online selves are simply extensions of offline selves—that is, people’s offline selves manifest online. A diary study found that college students report using online social media as a way of expressing facets of their identity, such as their political views (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Content analyses of Tweets suggest that personality traits such as The Big Five are associated with linguistic online behaviors in predictable ways (e.g., those high in extraversion used more pronouns than those low in extraversion) (Qiu, Lin, Ramsay, & Yang, 2012). Similarly, elements of identity such as sexual orientation, personality traits, and intelligence were predicted by people’s Facebook “Likes” (Kosinski, Stillwell, & Graepel, 2013; Lee, Ahn, & Kim, 2014). People also can accurately rate a person’s “actual” offline personality from their online social media profile (Back et al., 2010; Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011; Vazire & Gosling, 2004). Together, this research suggests that people’s online personalities and behavior are true representations of their offline selves, providing evidence that online activism may be largely authentic and we should expect online activists to sustain their activism offline.

In contrast, research has also suggested that people fabricate online identities that differ from their offline identities, questioning the authenticity of online behavior such as online activism. Heterosexual men and women misrepresent themselves in online dating profiles (e.g., women misrepresent their weight and men misrepresent their height; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). In an avatar study, both men and women designed avatars to be consistent with societal ideals of beauty, and introverts and women high in neuroticism were more likely to create more attractive avatars (Dunn & Guadagno, 2012). Low self-esteem predicts the likelihood of people providing a false presentation of themselves on Facebook (Gil-Or, Levi-Belz, & Turel, 2015). Inauthenticity in behavior is a pervasive phenomenon in everyday offline life but may be exacerbated online because online behaviors are more difficult to falsify than offline behaviors. According to this perspective, online activism is not activism at all, but rather compliance with egalitarian norms, and we should not predict that online activism will lead to sustained offline activism. While the research is mixed on whether people in general accurately portray themselves online, there are a few psychological insights that would lead to the prediction that online activism, in particular, can be inauthentic.

For example, online activism may be inauthentic because of social norms and conformity. People conform to social norms to help achieve belonging and acceptance in their social worlds. Inauthenticity may occur online because of pressure to comply with egalitarian norms, so people may say that they are committed to a cause, when in actuality they are not (or to a lesser degree). Just as people regularly alter their behavior to gain favorable impressions from others via impression management (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Tedeschi, 2013), a similar process may occur for some people with online activism. This may be especially true for those who seek to appear open-minded and socially conscious in part to look like a good person to their online peers. Some research on offline activism has found that acts such as donating money are done in part to look and feel good (Harbaugh, 1998),
so online activism such as Tweeting or changing one’s profile picture may similarly be done to project a positive image of oneself to others.

People also, on average, exhibit homophily in their social circles, meaning that they prefer to associate themselves with people who are similar (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Online social networks are no exception: despite the increase in connectivity that online social networks provide, people’s social networks are most likely to be with people of similar ideologies, forming a “social echo chamber” (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014). This context may encourage people to express online views that are prevalent in their online circles, even if they do not personally believe in them strongly (or at all). For example, a liberal person with a predominantly liberal social network might feel pressured to show their support for various social movements in order to fit in. Conversely, a person who privately holds liberal beliefs but has a nontrivial number of conservative friends in their online social network may avoid using the Internet as a channel to confront sexism through online activism. As an example from another domain, while over one million people joined the Facebook Save Darfur Cause, over 70% of people did not recruit others in their social network to join (Lewis, Gray, & Meierhenrich, 2014).

Conclusion

Recent examples of online activism, such as the origination of the 2017 Women’s March and social media movements such as “#MeToo,” demonstrate the power of the Internet as a way to confront sexism. However, psychological barriers may hinder the potential impact of online activism. First, particularly offensive sexism plagues the Internet, partly because of the online disinhibition effect where the Internet empowers people to act in ways they would not in person because of a sense of anonymity and psychological distance. This pervasive online sexism may prevent people from using the Internet as a tool for sexism altogether out of fear of facing online harassment. Second, online acts to confront sexism may be short-winded, as people may confront sexism in low-cost tasks such as using a hashtag or changing their profile picture, which may actually lead them to disengage from action because the initial action morally credentials them or they overestimate the impact of their online actions. Future research should empirically test these potential explanations specifically in the domain of online activism, as well as what other factors (such as group membership) predict a consistency or slacktivism effect. Lastly, the possible discrepancy between online and offline selves, driven by impression management and adherence to egalitarian norms, may also undermine the impact of online activism as a tool to confront sexism. People’s online identities and actions may not truly reflect their actual/offline behaviors and identities, because of psychological factors such as impression management and influence from egalitarian social norms. Despite these limitations, the Internet has played an important role in the collective confrontation of sexism and will likely continue to do so.
Online activism is becoming increasingly popular, and some preliminary evidence from an online survey we conducted suggests that college students prefer online over traditional offline activism (Gomez & Kaiser, unpublished). Also, US and Latin American samples report that online activism is an important part of activism (Harlow & Harp, 2012). The effort to confront sexism will require both online and offline efforts. In some cases, for example, for particularly vulnerable groups, online activism may actually be more ideal because offline action may pose a threat to their physical safety. Here, we provide a few suggestions for how to best use online activism to confront sexism (and other forms of bias).

First, when deciding between online and offline ways to confront sexism, the aims of the confrontation should be considered. If the purpose is to raise awareness about an issue, online methods may be particularly useful because they can easily reach a wide audience. The Internet’s unparalleled potential to disseminate across billions of people can be harnessed in consciousness raising, whereby raising awareness can be a first step toward building and strengthening community by catalyzing group identification. For example, the #MeToo movement may not only raise awareness about sexual assault but also increase some women’s group identification with other women because they can resonate with the issue. If concrete actions or offline behaviors are desired, using the Internet may be an effective first step but precautions should be taken to avoid a slacktivism effect whereby initial actions online may actually lead people to disengage from further action.

Second, to avoid slacktivism, organizers of online social activist movements should make the next step after an online activism task such as Tweeting or symbolically changing their profile picture obvious, easy, and necessary. Facilitating subsequent action such as voting, donating, or showing up to a protest after online action is critical for the long-term success of a movement. In order to successfully inspire subsequent behavior, organizers should seek to make the path to action clear and simple because it can be easier to change behavior by removing obstacles and barriers rather than adding externalities such as incentives (Lewin, 1947). For example, making organ donation the default (“opt-out”) as opposed to an “opt-in” decision is associated with higher rates of organ donors, in part because it makes being an organ donor easier and less costly (Davidai, Gilovich, & Ross, 2012). Organizers of social activist movements might not be able to make people “default” activists, but they can remove as many barriers to action as possible to make the process of future action as easy as possible.

Third, because sexism online is so pervasive, which may deter some individuals from utilizing the Internet as a tool to confront it, steps should be taken to reduce sexism in online spaces. Moderating online forums and comments sections, as well as letting people “upvote” or “like” comments, can elevate more substantive and productive comments and minimize offensive ones. Allowing people this agency may be a form of activism in of itself, as preliminary data from our lab suggest that flagging offensive comments leads people to feel good and like they have made a difference (Gomez & Kaiser, unpublished).
Finally, practitioners like campaign and protest organizers should take online numbers with a grain of salt because of the problem of disparate online versus offline selves (e.g., the number of people Tweeting about a particular issue might not accurately reflect the magnitude of actual concern). Providing anonymous ways of engaging in online activism may be helpful in avoiding online inauthenticity. Allowing people to respond to a perpetrator or donate anonymously could avoid encouraging people to engage in these behaviors as a function of conforming to norms or impression management. Anonymous online activism may be especially appropriate for vulnerable social groups when confronting in the “real world” can be potentially dangerous. For example, Mallett and Melchiori (2014) found that women were much more likely to confront sexist job interviewers during an interview conducted via online instant messaging than was found in previous studies where interviews were conducted in person.

These application suggestions are just the beginning. As the Internet continues to evolve, more research will be necessary for understanding how to maximize the potential of online activism. Important questions about online activism remain unanswered: Does online activism discourage people from further action (does online activism make people “slacktivists”)? How can online actions be disingenuous and how might online inauthenticity from conforming to norms or seeking to create a positive image of the self hinder the efficacy of online confrontations and activism? Confrontation is necessary as long as there is still prejudice and bias, so it is critical to understand whether and when online activism curbs online confrontation in the long run. As online confrontations and new online movements occur with frequency, there are opportunities to critically evaluate these movements to determine which were relatively successful like the Women’s March and the Egyptian Revolution and which were less successful like Kony 2012. By understanding the attributes of these movements, we can further our understanding of how to best confront online.

References


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