

# “Oh, She’s a Tumblr Feminist”: Exploring the Platform Vernacular of Girls’ Social Media Feminisms

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## Abstract

As avid social media users, it is perhaps unsurprising that feminist teenage girls use their favorite platforms to engage in various forms of feminist activism. Yet, existing research has not explored how a growing number of social media platforms and their technological affordances uniquely shape how girls engage in online activism. I address this oversight by asking the following: Why are girls using particular platforms for feminist activism? How do certain platforms facilitate distinctive opportunities for youth engagement with feminist politics? and How might this shape the types of feminist issues and politics both made possible and foreclosed by some social media platforms? To answer these questions, I draw on ethnographic data gathered from a group of American, Canadian, and British teenage girls involved in various forms of online feminist activism on Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr. These data were collected as part of two UK-based team research projects. Using the concept of “platform vernacular,” I analyze how these girls do feminism across these different platforms, based on **discursive textual analysis** of their social media postings and **interview reflections**. I argue that teenage girls *strategically* choose how to engage with feminist politics online, carefully weighing issues like privacy, community, and peer support as determining factors in which platform they choose to engage. These decisions are often related to distinctive platform vernaculars, in which the girls have a keen understanding. Nonetheless, these strategic choices shape the kinds of feminisms we see across various social media platforms, a result that necessitates some attention and critical reflection from social media scholars.

## Keywords

feminism, girls, platform vernacular, activism

Facebook is a more conservative platform, that’s where you share news about family, or like, you know, I got accepted to Oxford, as opposed to Twitter where I can use curse words and be a little more free in what I say!

The above quote is from Marlo, a 19-year-old sophomore at a large state school in the Midwest United States. I’m speaking to her about her use of the hashtag #CropTopDay to protest gendered dress codes that unfairly target teenage girls. Originally used by a teenager in Toronto who was reprimanded for wearing a crop top to high school, #CropTopDay trended in the late spring of 2015 when hundreds of teens globally adopted the hashtag to express their own dissatisfaction with sexist dress codes (see Keller, 2018). An avid Twitter user with over 6,000 tweets at the time of writing, Marlo learned about the hashtag via her Twitter network and was eager to “spread the message” that the policing of girls’ bodies through dress codes is unjust.

Marlo was adamant that Twitter was the best social media platform for such a message. Her characterization of Facebook as “conservative,” a platform used by her grandma and “her parents’ generation,” meant that sharing her feminist views on Facebook posed a risk of a family dispute. “Because a lot of my family is very conservative, I feel more comfortable to share things that are of a certain controversial nature on Twitter than I do on Facebook,” she says. Marlo’s evaluation of Facebook isn’t exactly new. There has been popular buzz about teens abandoning Facebook for the past several years, with a 2015 *Washington Post* article declaring that “teens aren’t just bailing [on Facebook]—they’re

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refusing to buy into Facebook in the first place” (Lang, 2015). Academic studies have found similar trends (Miller, 2016), suggesting that teens are opting for platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and Whisper over Facebook.

But what might this diversity of social media platforms and their technological affordances mean for teenage participation in politics, specifically feminist activism? We may ask the following: **Why are girls using particular platforms for feminist activism? How do certain platforms facilitate distinctive opportunities for youth engagement with feminist politics? and How might this shape the types of feminist issues and politics both made possible and foreclosed by some social media platforms?** To address these questions, I draw on ethnographic data gathered from a group of American, Canadian, and British teenage girls (ages 14–19) involved in various forms of online feminist activism on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. These data were collected as part of two UK-based research projects, as I describe below. Using the concept of **“platform vernacular”** (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015), which calls attention to the **unique communication genres that develop in accordance with platform affordances**, I analyze how these girls do feminism across these different platforms, based on discursive textual analysis of their social media postings and interview reflections. I argue that teenage girls *strategically* choose how to engage with feminist politics online, carefully weighing issues like privacy, community, and peer support as determining factors in which platform they choose to engage. These decisions are often related to distinctive platform vernaculars, in which the girls have a keen understanding. Nonetheless, these strategic choices shape the kinds of feminisms we see across various social media platforms, a result that necessitates some attention and critical reflection from feminist media scholars.

The aim of this article is not to make definitive statements about particular platforms being “better” or “worse” for doing feminism; instead, I aim to uncover and analyze some of the nuances offered by three popular social media platforms for teenage feminisms. In this sense, I am also not making an argument based on technological determinism, but attempting to attend to both the *technological/material* and *social/creative* aspects of what Carrie Rentschler and Samantha Thrift (2015) call “doing feminism in the network” (p. 3). In doing so I aim to encourage scholarly discussions about online feminisms to more seriously consider **the vernaculars of social media platforms**. Thus, this research mobilizes a specifically feminist perspective to build upon existing scholarship that interrogates social media platforms as political spaces that are shaped by the competing interests of users, companies, advertisers, and policymakers (Gillespie, 2010).

I begin this article by outlining my methodological approach, which I anchor in the notion of critical “digital socialities,” a concept that is useful in its recognition of the various qualities of social relationships online and their fluidity and movement across both digital and non-digital space

(Postill & Pink, 2012). Next, I outline key scholarship related to digital feminisms, girls’ participation and contributions to these feminisms, and the affordances and vernaculars of social media platforms. My analysis is situated in the intersection of these literatures, and explores teenage girls’ use of Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr to engage in feminist politics. These platforms were popular with the teenage girls I interviewed at the time of this research. I conclude by reflecting not only on the strategic use of social media by girls to engage in difference forms of feminist critique and activism but also on the ways in which my analysis affirms teenage girls not as victims of the seductive lure of social media but as strategic, discerning, knowledgeable, and savvy users of such technologies.

## Mapping the Digital Socialities of Girls’ Online Feminisms

My methodological approach draws on John Postill and Sarah Pink’s (2012) concept of **digital socialities**, which refers to the **multiple qualities of social relationships that transverse online and offline spaces**. As Postill and Pink (2012) note, the concept of digital socialities allows researchers to move beyond the oft-used framework of the “online community” which suggests a distinct, bounded group that can easily be identified, approached, and studied (also see Keller, 2015). Instead, digital socialities attends to the fluidity of the web and the movement of users across platforms and between online and offline spaces, acknowledging the “shifting intensities of the social media landscape” (Postill and Pink, 2012, p. 11). In this sense, digital socialities provides a productive framework for considering how teenage girls engage in feminist politics that are often dispersed across several social media platforms and variable in terms of the affective investments and intensities that they produce.

As a feminist media studies scholar, I would also add the word “critical” to digital socialities, understanding **critical digital socialities** as a concept that recognizes not only the multiple qualities of social relationships facilitated through digital media but also the *uneven power relationships* that often shape these encounters. Critical digital socialities then attunes us to the structural inequalities exploited by the design of the Internet (Harvey, 2016), which results in widespread practices of gendered harassment, including trolling, revenge porn, and doxxing (Citron, 2014; Jane, 2014; Phillips, 2015). Girls are not naïve to this context and are very much aware of the Internet as a risky space due to these uneven power relationships. Yet, it is **how they navigate this risky space** to engage in feminist politics that remains unexplored and is the focus of this article.

Using critical digital socialities as an undergirding methodological framework necessitates a different approach to gathering data, one which privileges the use of multiple methods that can be deployed across differing social

contexts. To employ this approach, I draw on ethnographic data gathered from two team-based research studies. The first study, “Feminism in Schools: Mapping Impact in Practice,” aimed to explore the potential for the integration of feminist politics into UK secondary schools via the inception and running of feminist lunch and after-school clubs.<sup>1</sup> As part of a research team funded by Cardiff University, I assisted in the development and/or facilitation of three London-based feminist clubs which met weekly for 6 weeks in the summer of 2014. The project culminated in a “Feminist Saturday” event which brought together approximately 20 students from the London-based clubs to discuss what they’d learned and participate in several workshops and seminars about feminism.

At the conclusion of the project, participants from all three London-based schools were interviewed in small focus groups of between four and seven girls, which lasted approximately 1 hr. Girls were encouraged to use their mobile phones during the focus group to provide examples of some of the incidents and practices they were discussing, and participants voluntarily sent the research team screen shots of their examples to illustrate their points. Thus, this project generated a substantial amount of observational, focus group, and textual data for analysis. The data I discuss from this team project here were purposefully selected based on a discursive thematic analysis that focused on the girls’ use of social media to engage with feminist politics (see Ringrose & Renold, 2016, for additional analysis from this project).

The second study from which I draw data is an 18-month research project with Kaitlynn Mendes (University of Leicester) and Jessica Ringrose (University College London, Institute of Education [UCL IOE]), called “Documenting Digital Feminist Activism,” which explores the ways in which girls and women use digital media technologies to challenge rape culture.<sup>2</sup> The project focused on six case studies, of which two of these, the hashtag #CropTopDay and a school-based feminism group, explicitly focused on girls’ activism and generated a substantial amount of interview, focus group, and textual data. From the #CropTopDay case study, I focus my analysis on the responses from individual semi-structured interviews with one American and two Canadian teenage girls who participated in the hashtag in May 2015. Participants were initially contacted via the direct message function on Twitter, with interviews conducted over the phone and lasting between 30 and 50 min. I will also discuss data collected from three focus groups, whose participants were part of a feminist lunch club at a London high school.<sup>3</sup> The group functioned as a case study for how girls used digital media to challenge rape culture within the institutional context of the school, primarily around dress codes. All three focus groups were conducted in July 2015 by myself, Jessica Ringrose, and our graduate research assistant Emilie Lawrence. The focus groups lasted approximately 75 min and consisted of girls aged 14 and 15.

Taken together, these data represent a diversity of teenage girls between the ages of 14 and 19 from three countries (Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States). However, the majority of the girls identified as middle-class and White, which points to the need to understand this analysis as not representative of all girls but of a select group of girls whose privileges may make feminism more accessible through substantial leisure time, institutional resources, or disposable income (Keller, 2015). For example, the London school in which we conducted focus groups in summers of 2014 and 2015 is located in an upper middle-class borough and has the financial and cultural resources to operate a regular feminist group every 2 weeks over the lunch period—a privilege not afforded to every public London secondary school.

Finally, this article is not making claims about teenage girls in general, but instead focuses on girls who are not only interested in feminism (as evidenced by their willingness to participate in a feminist group or hashtag) but regularly engage in feminist politics on the Internet. By this, I’m referring to a number of different practices that I’ll explore throughout this article, including reading about feminism online, posting about or tweeting feminist sentiments, or challenging sexist posts on social media platforms. Indeed, this article aims to parse out these varied practices and analyze how they’re employed by teens across multiple social media platforms.

## Understanding Digital Feminisms and Platform Politics

Within the past 5 years, there has been an increasing interest by both feminist scholars and the public in the ways in which digital media has facilitated the visibility and spread of contemporary feminist politics. Indeed, publications ranging from women’s commercial fashion and lifestyle magazines like *Elle* (Zerbisias, 2015) and *Chatelaine* (Giese, 2014) to prominent national and international newspapers such as the *Globe and Mail* (Vincent, 2016) and the *Guardian* (McVeigh, 2013) have featured stories about the ways in which girls and women are using digital media in various ways to engage in feminist activism, such as hashtags like #BeenRapedNeverReported and crowdsourced websites like the Everyday Sexism Project. Feminist media scholars have also studied many of these media practices, including feminist blogging (Keller, 2012, 2015, 2016; Shaw, 2012), the creation and circulation of feminist memes (Trakilovic, 2013; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015), the popularity of feminist hashtags (Clark, 2016; Keller et al., 2018; Loza, 2014; Portwood-Stacer & Berridge, 2014; Rentschler, 2014; Thrift, 2014), and the use of other social networking platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Tumblr to produce feminist messages, images, and identities (Lawrence & Ringrose, 2018; Retallack, Ringrose, & Lawrence, 2016;

Thelandersson, 2013). Recent research has also explored the relationship between these forms of “popular feminism,” the capitalist marketplace, and digital culture (see Banet-Weiser, 2015; Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017).

As a whole, this body of research points to the importance of digital media for contemporary feminist politics. Girls and women use digital platforms to explore their emerging feminist identities (Keller, 2015, 2016), create feminist solidarity and collectivities (Keller et al., 2018; Retallack et al., 2016), cultivate new modes of feminist cultural critique (Rentschler & Thrift, 2015), challenge normative beauty and body standards (Pham, 2015), and learn, as well as teach, feminist history (Keller, 2015). Much of this analysis demonstrates how girls and women use social media to share personal experiences and, in doing so, raising awareness about (previously) taboo topics that include gendered violence, street harassment, and other forms of misogyny, including online sexism (Clark, 2016; Keller et al., 2016; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2019; Rentschler, 2014; Thrift, 2014). Ultimately, digital media offers girls and women the chance to “talk back” (Keller, 2012) to sexism in everyday culture.

To be clear, I am not suggesting this research focus is an entirely new phenomenon. While this research is exciting and seemingly “new,” it is important to highlight that this work has roots in earlier research on cyberfeminism (Plant, 1997; Shade, 2002) and technofeminism (Wajcman, 2004), which was significant in discursively establishing girls and women, including girls and women of color (Gray, 2015), as digital technology users and critics of the masculinization of new media technologies. For example, research by Doreen Piano (2002) shows how girls and women in the 1990s created “feminist pockets or zones in cyberspace” that functioned as “congregating spaces” for them to develop feminist activist communities and political interventions (para. 18). In this sense, the recent research on girls’ and women’s feminist digital cultures continues a scholarly and activist legacy interested in the relationship between girls and women, feminist politics, and new media technologies.

Despite the growing range of literature, a relatively small proportion of this work on feminist digital cultures focuses specifically on *teenage girls* and their use of digital media technologies to engage with feminism. There are a few noteworthy exceptions: my book, *Girls Feminist Blogging in a Postfeminist Age* (Keller, 2015), examines the ways in which US-based teenage girls engage in feminist politics as bloggers, focusing specifically on how these young bloggers navigate and perform girl feminist identities across digital space. Hanna Retallack et al. (2017) explore feminist activism among London high school girls, who’ve used social media to challenge hegemonic feminine body norms through digital “inspiration paragraphs” and networked public protest. Other research has focused on “young women” (Rentschler, 2014; Harris, 2012) and “young people” (Sills et al., 2016) which arguably includes teenage girls and the ways in which they’ve used social media technologies to

challenge rape culture and develop a public voice. Overall, this small (but hopefully growing) body of research suggests that like many of their older counterparts, teenage girls are using digital media, including social media platforms, websites, and apps, to not only participate in feminist movements but also generate and publicly articulate their own politics as *feminist girls*.<sup>4</sup>

While there has been increasingly scholarly attention to online feminisms, there has been little analysis of the ways in which the digital platforms as technological structures shape the ways in which online feminism is practiced and circulated. This lack of attention to the specificities of platforms has resulted in generalized discussions about “online feminisms” without a clear articulation of the varied feminist practices that are made possible, encouraged, foreclosed, or even monetized by different platforms. While this article aims to fill this gap, it is worthwhile to understand how platforms have been conceptualized in academic literature beyond feminist activism specifically.

The growth of web 2.0 since the turn of the millennium, and social media platforms in particular, has led media scholars to consider what Tarleton Gillespie (2010) calls the “politics of platforms.” That is, social media platforms are not inherently open, neutral, or egalitarian but instead discursively situated amid the competing interests of users, companies, advertisers, and policymakers. Indeed, this understanding of social media platforms points to the need to understand platforms as *designed spaces* (see Harvey, 2016) with particular technological affordances that are built into the hardware and software of social media platforms, delimiting particular modes of user engagement and actions (Gibbs et al., 2015; Gillespie 2010). While the concept of affordance has been used by social media scholars in multiple ways (see Bucher & Helmond, 2017), my approach draws on what Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond (2017) describe as “vernacular affordances,” where “affordances become as much part of users’ experiences and perceptions of technologies as of the technologies themselves” (p. 16). This conceptualization is particularly apt given my ethnographic approach and interest in teenage girls’ own articulations of their digital media practices.

More specifically, I use the concept of “platform vernacular” to guide my analysis, which Martin Gibbs et al. (2015) describe as the “unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics” that constitute what might be considered a popular genre of communication (p. 257). They contend that these communication genres develop not only from the affordances of particular social media platforms but also from the mediated practices and communicative habits of users. Thus, the concept of platform vernacular mitigates against a charge of technological determinism by recognizing the “ongoing interactions between platforms and users” and the creativity of users to repurpose platform allowances and limitations for particular modes of expression (see also Burgess, 2006). Significantly then, platform vernacular as a concept allows



us to not only examine the specificities of social media platforms and understand the particular forms of participation on them but also attend to the registers of meaning and affect that are produced within platform-based social networks (Gibbs et al., 2015).

While he does not use the term “platform vernacular,” Bryce Renninger’s (2015) analysis of asexual communities on Tumblr illustrates the importance of understanding the role of platforms in online sociality. Renninger (2015) explores the ways in which the affordances of Tumblr have fostered the development of asexual counterpublics online. For example, he interrogates the ways in which Tumblr’s flexible personal profiles, often structured around pseudonyms rather than “singular” or “real world” identities, allow users to experiment with marginalized identities they may want to keep private, while easily connecting to likeminded folks. Renninger’s analysis then points to the ways in which users have developed platform-specific social norms based on Tumblr’s affordances, which has allowed for the platform to become especially popular with feminists, queers, trans people, and other marginalized youth (Cho, 2015a; Renninger, 2015; Thelandersson, 2013; Warfield, 2016) who are looking for privacy, community, support, and respect online.

While others then have reflected on platform affordances and vernaculars (see Bucher & Helmond, 2017), few of these studies have attempted to analyze how *social media users themselves* have understood and articulated their use of particular platforms for specific purposes (two exceptions are Cho, 2015b, 2018; Warfield, 2016). Thus, this article aims to articulate the necessity of listening to users, particularly those with marginalized identities such as girls, to better understand the complex relationship between media users, political engagements, and social media platforms.

## Twitter: The Perils of Publicity

Marlo’s quote at the beginning of this article highlights the freedom that many of the teenage girls interviewed associate with the social media platform Twitter, which at the time of this writing has approximately 313 million monthly active users (Twitter, 2016). As a micro-blogging platform, Twitter limits its users to produce short bursts of content (referred to as “tweets”), no longer than 280 characters and often organized around thematic “hashtags” (using the # sign) that group tweets to enable conversation between users. Thus, the platform facilitates quick moving content that may be original or retweeted (content that is being recirculated or, to use the language of Facebook, shared, from another user). While it is impossible to comprehensively discuss the broad scope of Twitter here, it is important to note for the purpose of this discussion that the platform is frequently used by feminists and many hashtags have been developed over the past few years to call attention to feminist issues such as gendered

violence, racism, and reproductive rights (see Keller et al., 2018; Loza, 2014; Thrift, 2014).

Upon finding out about the Canadian #CropTopDay protests via the feminist accounts she follows on Twitter, Marlo photographed herself wearing a crop top and tweeted the selfie alongside the hashtag #CropTopDay to show support for the movement. Marlo’s tweet was retweeted by several of her Twitter followers and she tells me that everyone, including some of her friends who follow her on Twitter, was supportive. She explains,

I don’t think I encountered any negativity, mostly because, Twitter is different from Facebook and different from Instagram, and different from other social media sites that I use. Like, I’m significantly more reserved on Facebook, my family’s on there. So I probably wouldn’t have put. . . I don’t know, I probably would have shared something like that on Facebook but I think the response may have been different. I feel more comfortable to share things that are of a certain controversial nature on Twitter than I do on Facebook.

Marlo’s discussion is interesting because it reveals how girls conscientiously evaluate their social media platforms in relation to the specific kind of post they are producing—in this case, one with a feminist message. Marlo is confident that Twitter was the best place for her feminist #CropTopDay photo, and hesitated to put a similar post on Facebook. Particularly, she understands that each platform affords her a different kind of “imagined audience” (Marwick & boyd, 2011) based on the connections afforded by the platform vernacular of Twitter (one way “follower” relationships) and Facebook (“friends” that must be mutually accepted by both parties). Indeed, Marlo’s comments challenge widely held discourses that suggest girls are uncritical participants in a social media landscape where they become victims of vicious virtual attacks by both peers and strangers (see Sales, 2016). These discourses are often perpetuated by regulatory education programs that suggest girls are irresponsible social media users and must learn to better manage themselves online (see Dobson & Ringrose, 2016). In contrast, Marlo illuminates how some girls are carefully weighing not only the type of digital content they post but also to what platform and audience.

Girls not only turn to Twitter to avoid contact with particular antifeminist family members or friends on their Facebook, but also as a way to network with other feminist girls outside of their local communities. Karlie, a 15-year-old from Eastern Canada, first learned about feminism from Twitter when she was 13 and now follows several feminist Twitter feeds and Tumblr blogs that she checks daily. At the time of writing, Karlie has tweeted close to 9,000 times and has over 400 followers. She describes how she’s used Twitter to connect with feminist girls from other Canadian provinces who like herself are also engaged in dress code activism at their high schools. In doing so, she’s been able to

understand her own experiences with sexist dress codes as a widespread structural inequality rather than an individual problem. While Karlie most often uses Twitter to engage her feminist politics, she recounts how a post she made about #CropTopDay on Facebook resulted in a negative comment on her feed from her grandmother, a Facebook “friend.” Annoyed, Karlie tells me that “I just had to delete the comment because I don’t think she understands what the movement is for.” For many teenage girls then, including both Marlo and Karlie, Twitter provides a portal outside the walls of their high school, family, and peer groups in ways that other platforms such as Facebook do not allow.

Nonetheless, while Twitter was recognized as a platform that was good for publicly “spreading the message” as Marlo stated, it also carried certain risks. While the expansiveness of the platform afforded teenage girls freedom to engage in feminist politics such as dress code activism or develop networks with other feminist girls outside their local communities, it also made girls more publicly visible. This public visibility and the interaction it generates are profitable for Twitter, which, as Alison Harvey (2016) notes, has monetized interactions, including those that may be considered harassment or trolling (Shepherd, Harvey, Jordan, Srauy, & Miltner, 2015). Consequently, harassment—including antifeminist harassment—has become a part of Twitter’s platform vernacular which teenage feminists must consciously navigate. For example, the London-based teens described the Twitter landscape as rife with antifeminist trolls, making confrontations about their feminist politics a daily threat. Indeed, the British students (who at the time ran a collective Twitter account based on their participation in the feminist lunch club) reported that they began receiving trolling messages almost immediately after setting up their Twitter account, which explicitly stated they were a group of feminist girls.

One student, Su, says, “We were told to kill ourselves actually. . . a group of boys attacked us and they all got their mates involved. And it actually got quite nasty and it was quite unpleasant.” The girls reported that this comment, from a group of boys they did not know, was particularly “threatening” and “hurtful” and made several of the girls question the usefulness of Twitter as a tool to educate and engage people outside of their feminist communities, a goal that several girls mentioned. Su continues, “I think it’s very difficult to engage boys on Twitter,” to which her classmate Myelle responds, “Yeah. Facebook would be easier” (see Keller et al., 2018 for further discussion). I now turn to consider what Myelle’s comments may look like in practice by exploring how girls are using Facebook as a tool for feminist activism.

### **Facebook: “You Always Get Those Ignorant Kind of Facebook Jokes”**

Despite remaining the most popular social media platform globally with over 1.86 billion monthly active users in 2016 (Facebook, 2016), there has recently been indications that

fewer Western teenagers are using the social media platform to communicate with their peers (Lang, 2015; Miller, 2016). However, at the time of our research, almost all participants we spoke to had an active Facebook account and used it somewhat regularly, logging in at least 2 to 3 times a week and thus making it important to consider when analyzing teen’s online feminist practices. While the platform seemingly provides users a less public forum than Twitter (as I’ll discuss below), many of the girls felt that the familiarity of peers allowed sexism to flourish in the form of “jokes,” as one British teen commented, “you always get those ignorant kind of Facebook jokes.”

Consequently, for teenage feminists, Facebook provides both risks and opportunities. Many of the teenage girls interviewed echoed similar sentiments to those made at the start of this article by Marlo; Facebook is risky not because of anonymous troublemakers that the British teens discussed in relation to Twitter, but because the people that the teens are mutually connected to, or “friends” with, including parents, siblings, other relatives, and school peers, are people that they have social connections outside of the platform. Indeed, this is a key part of Facebook’s platform vernacular; anonymity is designed out of Facebook, and one is required to present an “authentic self” via a “real” first and last name when creating a Facebook profile (Bivens, 2015). Profiles deemed “fake” are frequently removed by the company, who, Rena Bivens (2015) argues, profits financially from providing a user base of “real” people to advertisers eager for demographic data. Consequently, Facebook’s desire for a regulated platform marked by “authentic selves” shapes the kinds of social interactions, including feminist activism, taking place on the platform.

For the most part, teens were selective in what they chose to post on Facebook, carefully considering their “imagined audience” (Marwick & boyd, 2011) and the types of reactions they’d receive from their “friends.” This is not surprising as previous research (Duguay, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2014) has demonstrated that young people are sophisticated in their negotiation of the “context collapse” of social media, where spatial, temporal, and social boundaries are flattened across social media (boyd, 2011). Yet, I am suggesting that it is important to revisit this idea in relation to girls’ digital engagement with feminist politics, as it points to the ways in which feminist identities are mediated through context collapse and the imagined audiences in which they produce, which has been unexplored in existing research. For example, while some girls, such as Marlo, opted to publish feminist content on alternate social media platforms to avoid confrontation with conservative family members and friends, others kept certain types of feminist sentiment away from Facebook for other reasons. To wit, while there has been an increasing number of girls and women who use digital technologies to document personal experiences of sexism (see Keller et al., 2018), many of the British teens reported that they would “definitely not” use Facebook to share a personal experience

of sexism. Interestingly, girls were very attuned to, as Jos puts it, “the repercussions of putting [your encounter with sexism] on a Facebook page and having people reply.”

Rhea, a regular Facebook user with over 500 “friends,” says that she avoids reporting on personal incidents of sexism on Facebook because “it’s [not] going to do anything but worry my nan.” Here, Rhea acknowledges that she doesn’t want her grandmother to worry about her, a possible repercussion that is likely based on both Rhea’s gender and age. In this sense, girls like Rhea emotionally manage their Facebook friends by carefully selecting not only if they disclose their feminist politics, but in what ways they articulate them digitally. Thus, while the British girls agreed that personal encounters with sexism were off-limit to Facebook, they were more apt to “repost” (sharing content that another user has uploaded) less “personal” examples of feminist critique, such as a sexist advertisement or a comical feminist meme, content that would not cause too much controversy, alarm, or worry among friends and family.

However, this does not mean that teenage girls shy away from conflict with Facebook friends; one incident in particular highlights the ways in which conflict and opportunity operate simultaneously for teenage feminists on Facebook. In a London-based focus group session in summer 2014, several participants described a recent experience in which a male peer and Facebook “friend” had posted a rape joke to another boy’s Facebook wall. The post upset the girls, and one of them, Robin, responded by commenting, “Are rape jokes funny? \*winces\*.” Underneath Robin’s comment, another girl and focus group participant, Amelia, posted her agreement with Robin’s critique, sarcastically writing, “Yes, rape, that hilarious topic. Everyone loves a little rape.” However, the comment thread quickly turns violent when the poster of the rape jokes calls Amelia a “f-ing bitch” and tells her to “shut the ‘f’ up” for suggesting he think of the consequence of such a joke on someone such as his younger sister. Another focus group participant, Maria, entered the discussion thread, supporting Robin and Amelia by telling the poster that “As girls we start hearing about this threat of rape from quite a young age and when people treat something that we’re taught to be genuinely scared about as a joke, it’s like [WHAT] ???” Amelia then posts again, “It’s just that one in six of the women who read this post are going to be, or have been raped and you are treating that mockingly.”

As myself and Jessica Ringrose have previously discussed (see Keller & Ringrose, 2014, 2015), this exchange is interesting because it reveals the opportunity for community-building and support that Facebook provides, in part because one is virtually connected to one’s peers. In this sense, girls who were already building solidarity through their participation in their lunchtime school feminist group could enact this solidarity on Facebook; they were already connected on the platform (as they were with many schoolmates not in the feminist group) and had already established a support system for dealing with sexism. The connective capabilities of

Facebook then provided a space for the girls to easily “come together” to challenge rape culture in their daily lives. In describing this incident at the focus group, Maria tells me that “we just came down on [him] like a ton of bricks!” Her choice of expression is fascinating, as it suggests not only the metaphorical weight produced when girls work in solidarity but an affective heaviness that rape culture generates in which the girls are struggling against.

While anonymity is often celebrated as providing opportunities for teens to be themselves on social media, here a *lack of anonymity* on Facebook may have inspired the girls to challenge their male peer because they knew him—he was not an unknown troll. Unlike Twitter trolls whom the girls know they will never meet in person, the teens have a personal investment in engaging with this male peer, as someone who is part of their daily lives in school. Thus, while several of the girls acknowledged that the antifeminism they encounter on Facebook “feels more personal” than what they encounter on Twitter, they claim that the platform nonetheless provides some important opportunities to work collectively to challenge sexism, likely due to the mutual, often “off-line” connections that in which Facebook operates.

## Tumblr: A “Proper Black Hole” of Feminism

Unlike Facebook and Twitter, less people are familiar with Tumblr, a micro-blogging site that launched in 2007 and which was purchased by Yahoo in 2013 (see Renninger, 2015, for detailed discussion). Yet, the platform is particularly popular with young people, with approximately 69% of 550 million monthly users identifying as millennials (Heine, 2015; Smith, 2017). The platform differs from other social media in several ways; perhaps most importantly, there are no personal profiles or networks of “friends,” meaning that many “Tumblrs” are anonymously created and owners are difficult to identify. As Cho (2015a) highlights, Tumblr users favor communication through images, functioning more as content curators through posting both original and “reblogged” content. In this sense, Tumblr could be understood as a platform that prioritizes aesthetics, amplified through its allowance of user-customized short-form blogs and reflecting its original positioning as a creative community.

It is not surprising that the anonymity of Tumblr was an important reason as to why many teenage feminists choose to use the platform. In a focus group conversation with several of the London-based girls, it seemed as though there was unanimous agreement that Tumblr was the easiest digital space to practice feminism as a young person. Dara, a 14-year-old who uses Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr regularly, says,

Even in the past when I have experienced [sexism], I don’t really feel like putting it on Twitter because I just feel like I’ll be attacked for it. And actually, I want to put it out here so people



know this stuff is going on, but I don't want to do it to have about three or four guys replying you're a liar, you're a whore, like, that's not what I want. I'd rather just not say anything.

When we ask Dara if she'd consider posting about her experience with sexism on another platform she says, "I might put it on Tumblr because I feel very anonymous on Tumblr and I like that. . . . Even though it's quite anonymous on Twitter, I just feel like on Tumblr, just nobody knows who anybody is." Her friend Rhea chimes in: "It feels much deeper, like a proper black hole on Tumblr." Dara continues, "Yeah, it feels a lot safer."

This exchange hints at a quality of Tumblr that's difficult to describe; it's not just anonymous—indeed, as the girls point out, so are many Twitter handles—but it's deeper, darker, more hidden, or hole-like. This characterization of Tumblr aligns with other descriptions of the platform, including Cho's (2015a) analysis of Tumblr as a "disorienting" experience, a "massive churning machine of evocative photos" where there was "no clear way to traverse or search the network" (p. 43). Indeed, the platform's affordances, namely its de-prioritizing of searchability in the site's design, grant users a sense of freedom from the constraints of more traditional networked social media—like being in a black hole, you just keep going without knowing what you're going to find.

Indeed, this characterization of Tumblr as an anonymous, disorienting, and deep space also points to the issue of *privacy*; despite not using this word specifically, the girls' discussions of Tumblr in relation to Facebook and Twitter suggests that maintaining some social privacy is necessary for teens to do feminism online. Social privacy refers to the ability for an individual to exert control over how information flows, who has access to it, and in what context, and in doing so, control social situations and manage relationships (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Nissenbaum, 2009; Vickery, 2015). Thus, we can understand the concept of social privacy as moving beyond a simple binary of "access" versus "no access" and instead attending to the complexities of social context. As Jacqueline Ryan Vickery (2015) notes in relation to her research on non-dominant youth's negotiations of social and mobile media privacy, teens "share personal information in specific contexts on specific platforms, that are intended for specific audiences [and in doing so] maintaining expectations of social privacy" (p. 283).

Significantly then, the expectation of social privacy is related to the platform's design affordances and vernacular. Jos, a British participant, tells me that Twitter's "layout" makes it much easier to find yourself in an argument on Twitter than it is on Tumblr, which offers users a substantial amount of control over their interactions with others. She says,

You can choose whether something comes up on your Tumblr or not. So whereas with Twitter, you can't really delete something that someone has said to you—you can block them [but] other

people can still see what they've replied to, and I think that that's kind of embarrassing to be shamed for something that has happened to you. [But] you can stop something from coming up on your Tumblr.

Here, Jos not only demonstrates an understanding of the design affordances of Tumblr but also suggests that she strategically decides whether to post something on Twitter or Tumblr based on her ability to control the resulting interactions—or the amount of social privacy she feels she has. In this sense, we can understand platform design as *matter*ing to teenage girls in terms of how they judge both social privacy and risk of privacy breaches.

An expectation of (more) social privacy on Tumblr both shapes and is shaped by the platform's particular vernacular. Consequently, Tumblr's platform vernacular invites more radical iterations of feminism, a kind of "Tumblr feminism" that Marlo refers to at the start of this article. In this sense, Tumblr seems to offer a space for girls to engage in a wider range of feminist politics that extend beyond more hegemonic forms of liberal feminism or "equality politics" (Duggan, 2003). Indeed, one girl described Tumblr feminism as "quite controversial" for its acknowledgment and challenging of patriarchy through discussions of personal experiences with sexism, as well as topics like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) rights and the prevalence of rape culture. This, of course, does not mean that these topics never arise on other platforms (as we can see in relation to the girls' challenging of the Facebook rape joke), but many girls felt that they could discuss these topics more freely on Tumblr without fear of trolling. As Olive, a British teenager, reflects, "It's scarier trying to challenge rape culture than it is a lot of other stuff because there's always so many people that are willing to defend it." To girls like Olive then, Tumblr provides an alternative space to Twitter and Facebook where platform design around features like anonymity and increased user control grants girls more opportunities to agentially engage with a wide range of feminist topics they may not deem suitable for other platforms.

## Conclusion: Girls' Digital Feminisms in Dangerous Times

While there has been a growing scholarly interest in social media feminisms, there has been little sustained attention to the various ways in which social media platforms invite particular forms of feminist engagement through their specific platform vernaculars. This article has begun this conversation, focusing on girls' use of Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr to engage in feminist politics. Thus, I contribute to the growing body of literature on platform affordances (see Bucher & Helmond, 2017) by suggesting the need to better understand the concept of affordance through a feminist lens, which can shed light on the gendered operations of power across various digital media platforms, as I've highlighted in



the examples above. I do not aim to suggest that a particular platform is “better” or “worse” for feminist girls; instead, I attempt to map both the intertwined opportunities and limitations that each platform offers girls for feminist activism. These include opportunities to participate in feminist politics by strategically engaging with different social media platforms to publicly perform as feminist activists, mobilize community and peer support, and maintain social privacy when necessary. Yet, girls’ social media practices remain limited by the ways in which gendered power relations operate online, most notably in the form of sexist harassment, which means that being a feminist on social media is never guaranteed to be trouble-free.

However, this analysis cannot be definitive, as platforms change, their popularity among young people shifts, and new platforms are introduced. Thus, this article also highlights the need for continued research on this topic, especially as other platforms with different platform vernacular, such as Snapchat, become popular among teens. As resistance to feminism continues to flourish online, future research may also explore the platform vernaculars that allow antifeminism to circulate, such as those that shape misogynist spaces like Reddit and 4Chan. How might their platform vernaculars both resemble and differ from spaces like Tumblr and Twitter? Finally, my conclusions are also limited to the select group of girls studied, most of whom are relatively privileged in terms of class and race and are located in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Consequently, there is ample opportunity for future research to expand upon the conversation I have begun here (see Mendes et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, two key insights emerge from the data I’ve examined. First and perhaps most importantly, teenage girls are savvy social media users, demonstrating keen knowledge about the platforms they regularly use and how they work. They make conscious decisions about what to post and where, weighing issues like public visibility, peer support, anonymity, and social privacy before they upload content. In doing so, girls actively choose which platform will serve them best for their feminist politics; we see Marlo choosing to use Twitter to show her support for #CropTopDay, while Dara prefers the anonymity of Tumblr for posting about personal experiences with sexism. This finding is particularly significant as it suggests that contrary to popular discourse, girls are not naïve about the workings of the social media they use; instead, they not only understand social media platform affordances but actively use this knowledge when doing feminism online.

Second, these data highlight the different potentialities for feminist activism that emerge from the platform vernaculars of Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr. For example, girls find Facebook to be a useful platform for engaging in peer education around feminist issues—such as the British girls’ use of the platform to confront a sexist comment made by a schoolmate. Twitter, on the contrary, cannot serve this purpose according to the teens, as its expansive public nature and lack

of mutual connections make it more difficult to cultivate collective responses to sexism. Nonetheless, both Twitter and Tumblr offer opportunities for moving beyond one’s local community, granting girls the opportunity to mobilize around issues that may be seen as too “extreme” by their family and friends, such as acknowledgment of and activism around rape culture. As I documented, this is especially true for Tumblr, which offers a distinctive social privacy to feminist girls, providing a sense of cover from both family and friends and anonymous trolls. Consequently, Tumblr has gained a reputation, as alluded to in the title of this article, as a feminist-friendly space where sophisticated discussions about intersectionality, patriarchy, and protest frequently occur.

While the growth of feminist engagement online by girls is inspiring and encouraging, we must understand this research within our current political reality marked by anti-feminist, White supremacist discourse. Indeed, social media platforms are often used to circulate such hate, placing feminist girls and women—especially those who are of color, queer, disabled, undocumented, or poor—at risk for increasing harassment online. Thus, while I point to a sociality of feminist resistance online, the ongoing harassment of girls and women (as well as other marginalized people) continues to remind us that no platform is “risk-free” when practicing feminism in these dangerous times.

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3. This feminist lunch club was one of the ones in which we studied the previous summer, although some of the student participants were of course different.
4. I have chosen the word “girls” to describe my study participants based on their own use of this word to describe themselves in interviews and focus groups.

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