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Online and On-Campus: Student Navigations of Activism in an Age of Social Media

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ONLINE AND ON-CAMPUS: STUDENT NAVIGATIONS OF ACTIVISM IN AN AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

SENIOR HONORS THESIS: SUBMITTED BY ALEXANDRA KUROFF

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how student activists at a liberal arts campus in Southern California navigate online and in-person spaces in the context of their activism. While existing literature emphasizes that online spaces are being used as alternative “counterspaces” for activism, this study reveals that students’ social lives are entangled in the interactions that occur in both spaces, and their online activism is directly informed by the particulars of the university space itself. This study reimagines and utilizes the theoretical framework of a counterspace to include a more dynamic, fluid approach to how social space is constructed in the lives of students. The three methods of data gathering included individual and group interviews, participant observation, and social media data. Themes—(a) being an ‘activist’ (b) ‘othered’ bodies (c) cultivating allyship (d) educational opportunities—explore how online actions can be described as a reimagined ‘counterspace’ that allows students to enhance their practices of activism in some cases.
INTRODUCTION

During one of the routine Black Student Union (BSU) meetings at the University of Kenwood, a black woman pulled out her journal and began reading a poem in front of a room full of other black women. The poem, “For Black Men” described this woman’s frustration with men of color in general and the disrespect she had felt from black men in her life, some of whom were likely University of Kenwood students. As she spoke, her audience began to pull out their phones, open Snapchat, and record this woman reciting her poem. “I’m always used as a means, never an end,” she said in a short video snippet that only lasted nine seconds but would soon circulate across the online social worlds of college students at the University of Kenwood. 1

Among those who saw this Snapchat video was a group of black men from the University of Kenwood who knew this woman. They felt offended by her words and decided to express their grievances with her poem by ‘crashing’ the BSU meeting that was already in progress, where the woman had been reciting her poem only minutes prior. These black men came into the meeting and confronted the woman about her poem that had now been circulating the internet. They felt the poem misrepresented black men, and they were quick to defend themselves against their portrayal in the poem video. The women felt blind-sided by this group of men coming into the BSU meeting, and they responded to their critiques by saying that it was fully in this woman’s right to creatively express her feelings in this way. The women began questioning the men by asking why this was the first meeting they showed up to, and claiming that they only reason they showed up was because they felt offended by her comments. This group met

1 The University of Kenwood is a pseudonym for the university in southern California in which this study took place. All student names featured in this study have also been protected by pseudonyms.
frequently, yet this was only at time these men decided to enter into the space these women had created to cultivate activism on campus.

Increased engagement with social media platforms among college-aged students means that activist practices, such as creatively expressing critique to gender inequality through poetry, are not as anonymous or abstract as they may be in the world outside a university campus. Particularly in small campuses like the University of Kenwood, both online and in-person relationships are embedded in the “bubble” of campus space. Students’ sociality is constructed and informed by the entangled nature of interactions in these spaces. The interactions between campus space and the online social space activate particular kinds of activism practices for students and, as illuminated by this story, a culture of activism that is deeply informed by the interpersonal relationships that exist in small communities.

Existing studies on the relationship between student activism and social media describe the use of social media as a “counterspace” intended to challenge oppressive societal narratives by creating a new kind of space that supports psychological wellbeing (e.g., Case and Hunter, 2012). “Counterspace” literature has illuminated how marginalized populations in particular navigate and challenge oppressive societal narratives and pressures by creating “counterspaces” where they feel more empowered (Solorzano, 2009). The literature has also revealed how student activists in particular have used online “counterspaces” as a way of enhancing their activist practices because of micro-aggressive behavior they experience on their campuses (Mwangi et. al. (2018). However, a flaw in these existing studies is that they tend to describe in-person activism and online counterspaces as having a binary, rather than fluid, relationship. They don’t include a discussion of the tricky navigations between online and in-person activism, and how these spaces mutually inform and interact with one another. Although there may be a shifting of
in the way actions are performed online, social media for these students is not an entirely separate space for doing activism than in-person. This study argues that rather than conceptualizing social media as a counterspace that is separate from in-person interactions, we need to consider how in-person and online sociality are being dynamically integrated through the interweaving of students’ social worlds. Students’ activist practices are being enacted ‘in place,’ meaning that their actions are responses to the particular dynamic of the space itself.
BACKGROUND

A HISTORY OF ACTIVIST RESEARCH

Throughout American history, activist practices have evolved in part due to the increased prevalence of universities and advent of new technology. Starting as early as the colonial period, American universities were one of the primary spaces that cultivated activist practices (Broadhurst, 2014). Broadhurst claims that universities have encouraged activism by providing funds for student organizations, and since students are in similar age cohorts, they share a common bond. In the 19th century, students were primarily focused on enacting change in the internal aspects of the university. For example, Broadhurst describes multiple incidents of students revolting and protesting due to negligence of behalf of the administration (2014).

During the 20th century, however, students began focusing their activism outside the university as well and began paying attention to struggles of the working class. The formation of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society (ISS) in 1905 is an example of how students attempted to propagate social reform, advocate socialism, and fight the existence of military programs on-campus (Broadhurst, 2014). Anti-war sentiments amongst college students were prevalent throughout the 20th century, although the patriotism that followed Pearl Harbor somewhat crippled the Peace Movement (Broadhurst, 2014). The period surrounding the Vietnam War was filled with strings of student protests and riots concerning not the draft. This increasing outcry from students escalated in May of 1970, when members of the National Guard opened fire on students at Kent State University who were protesting the US invasion of Cambodia. American universities have historically been spaces where students are able to engage with a community of other activists, but in some cases, they have been battle grounds that have contributed to the silencing of student voices.
The increased accessibility of televisions during the 1960s prompted activists to consider how new technology could be mobilized for social change. Television programs greatly increased the visibility of protests in Selma, Alabama in the 1960s, which brought the realities of the fight for racial equality into the living rooms of America (Bonilla & Rose, 2015). Television coverage transformed the riots into a national event by escalating and enlarging the scope of the struggle (Bonilla & Rose, 2015). Television coverage also allowed for the increased visibility of the harsh realities of war. During the Vietnam War in particular, anti-war sentiments were enhanced by the appalling war images that inundated television screens at nighttime (Broadhurst, 2014). By bringing actual footage into people’s homes, televisions became a way of increasing national awareness, and for some outrage, surrounding the Civil Rights Movements and the Vietnam War.

Other scholarship argued that social media has given a voice to issues of racial injustice that may otherwise not be recognized by popular media (Bonilla & Rose, 2015; Gerabaudo, 2012). In the context of the Black Lives Matter Movement, Twitter became a site of citizen journalism after the killing of Michael Brown in 2014. When up to date information was posted concerning the trial of the police officer, Darren Wilson, it was followed with ‘#Ferguson.’ This wide use of the hashtag caused it to gain ‘trending’ status on Twitter, and it was only then that the story was seriously picked up on by the mainstream media (Bonilla & Rose, 2015). In this way, social media was used as a platform for sparking a national conversation concerning the Black Lives Matter Movement and connecting activists online. Scholars also propose that social media strengthens activism because it provides a safe space for people who might otherwise not participate in on-the-ground activism because of the corporeal or emotional risks. During the Egyptian Revolution, the strict policing of public space and the criminalization of public
opposition made ‘taking to the streets’ a matter of life or death (Gerbaudo, 2012). Facebook became the only permissible social space for spreading awareness about the movement which is why it became an alternative space for activism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The sections of this theoretical framework situate the concepts of activism, counterspaces, social media, and the university in the context of this particular study. Contextualizing these different concepts within how they have been studied in the past and how they will be used as units of analysis in this study is fundamental to setting up the analysis that follows. Additionally, these sections seek to emphasize that relationships with these concepts are deeply intertwined, not isolated, when it comes to the lives of these students.

Activism

The concept of ‘activism’ is steeped in a variety of meanings and has been contested and reimagined throughout history. According to Broadhurst, activism is organization that is intended to alter systems of oppression (2014). Broadhurst describes activism as having primarily an organizational function, although he is not specific as to what exactly is being organized (people, money, ideologies, demonstrations, or communities, for example) in order to alter systems of oppression. Other definitions of activism provide more clarity as to what kind of organization is considered ‘activism.’ Jones (2017) argues that ‘true’ activism is achieved through practices such as marching, protesting, writing, donating, attending, educating, and
volunteering. Morozov (2009) rejects the idea that practices that happen online through social media can be considered activism, and refers to them instead as ‘slacktivism,’ because they have little social or political impact. Morozov is defining activism as practices that, when enacted, have social or political impact, and Morozov claims that doing activism online only gives the illusion of this kind of impact.

Although using social media as a platform for activism has been critiqued, it can be argued that methods of activism are not limited to on-the-ground practices such as protesting, demonstrating, and marching any more. The potential platforms for doing effective activist work are being reimagined with the current generation of students. With the increasing usage of social media, there has been increased defensiveness as to the effectiveness of practices that are within the traditional, on-the-ground paradigm of activism practices. Yet when students in this study describe their experiences engaging in activism, they discuss practices that may not be seen as ‘traditional’ aspects of on-the-ground activism that Jones (2017) describes. Their positionality as students on a particular campus is directly related to how they define and describe what it means to engage in activist practices.

**Social Media**

This study incorporates media theories to understand how social media is a communicative, spatial world that is a large part of students’ social experience that they use for the purposes of activism. Studies have shown how different social media platforms allow for certain types of communication, and the needs of student activists, in relationships to these platforms—such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube—is ever-changing. For example, the desire for visibility and fast paced information flow could be why some of
these students are turning from Facebook to Twitter, for example. Bonilla and Rose (2015) studies the differences between how Facebook is yesterday’s news, and Twitter is today’s news. People are aware of the implications of using certain social media platforms for certain types of communication. Gershon (2015) describes how people have certain media ideologies—how people understand and perceive media—that cause them to think about mediums in specific ways and communicate on them accordingly. The idea that students are aware the extent to which they are able to communicate on a variety of platforms means that these platforms are informing their communication and their social worlds. This study further explores how social media is intertwined in students’ navigations of their social worlds based on knowledge of how these platforms operate.

The limitations of communication on media is also central to understanding the extent to which students are able to engage in activist practices on social media. Acks (2019) describes social media as an insular ‘bubble’ that encourages confirmation biases, meaning that people will naturally choose to engage with those that do not challenge their opinions or beliefs. By characterizing the space this way, Acks engages in an important dialogue as to whether or not people are willing to engage in educating themselves on social platforms. Pennycook and Rand (2018) also theorize that the tendency towards laziness, rather than people’s biases, is what causes the perpetuation of ‘fake news’ and misinformation on social media platforms. People do not have the desire to engage critically in material that is posted, so this limits the ability for social media to be a space where students can effectively adapt to the on-campus challenges of activism by creating a counterspace. This study seeks to explore how the insular ‘bubble’ of social media, as described by other researchers, may create unique challenges to the ability to practice activism online. By describing social media as a ‘bubble,’ the existing literature sets up
an irony that will be further explored in this research, that the campus is also considered to be a ‘bubble,’ so how does these two insular spaces work together to inform students’ social worlds?

**Counterspace**

This study builds on vast literature that has researched how “counterspaces” like social media are created as an adaptive response to structures and narratives of oppression. In Case and Hunter’s (2012) analysis, they claim that ‘challenging’ oppression through a “counterspace” happens through three processes: narrative identity work, acts of resistance, and direct relational transactions. Linder et. al. (2016) describes counterspaces as places of enhancing strategies of activism, and also claims that people engage in counterspaces particularly because of the consequences of engaging in activism in the already existing space. Linder et. al. (2016) used internet-based ethnographic methods to examine how students engage in the process of “challenging,” to use Case and Hunter’s (2012) definition, sexual violence activism on college campuses through creating counterspaces. They found that social media enhances activist strategies, particularly by interrupting power dynamics that may deter minority groups from participating in on-the-ground practices. A study by Mwangi et. al. (2018) used counterspaces as theoretical framework to study the ‘I, Too, Am’ movement at Harvard University and University of Oxford. This study uses the particular setting of two universities and compares the use of social media as a counterspace on both. Mwangi et. al. argues that counter-spaces can be “created and maintained virtually” for the purposes of challenging “institutional hegemony and racism,” (p. 149).
While “counterspace” literature provides a framework for understanding why and how counterspaces may be created to combat forms of oppression, it describes social media and in-person spaces as binary. These existing studies on how students use social media as a counterspace don’t include a discussion of the tricky navigations between online and in-person, and how these spaces mutually inform and interact with one another. This project expands upon the findings presented in these studies by exploring how on-campus and online interactions are deeply interwoven due to the size and structure of the university. While social media may be a counterspace for enhancing these student’s activist practices, these students operate socially in particular ways given their particular campus environments and position as students. Though in some ways the on-campus space or the social media space may be more conducive to certain aspects of cultivating activism, this study does not follow the existing paradigm that social media is a response to in-person interactions, and not vice versa. This is not to say that there aren’t times in the study that social media is characterized as an effective or not-effective space for doing activism work. I use the term of a counterspace to suggest that oftentimes social media actions are activated in particular ways due to the specific structure of the campus itself.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used as a framework for understanding how institutional and social oppression can trigger the creation of counterspaces. Solorzano (2000) describes how CRT can be used as a strategy for understanding how race and racism operate in educational institutions. CRT is a framework of insights that seeks to analyze how educational systems maintain hegemonic racial positions “in and out of the classroom,” (p. 25). This project draws on CRT as a framework for understanding the pattern of the ‘othering’ of racialized bodies that activists on this campus reported during interviews. Solorzano (2009) examines micro-aggressions on three university campuses and explores how Latina/o students respond by
building community and developing navigational skills necessary for psychological wellness. Solorzano (2009) found through developing community and navigational skills, these students are able to create empowering spaces, counterspaces, for themselves.

There have been a variety of ethnographic studies of how ‘othering’ of bodies contributes to sparking the creation of a counterspace online, which also inform this study. Through researching the #Ferguson movement on Twitter, scholars Bonilla and Rosa argue that the particular racialization of black bodies cause them to be systematically “stereotyped, stigmatized, surveilled, and positioned as targets of state-sanctioned violence,” (2015, p. 9). When certain bodies become labeled, this can lead to policing, which makes activism more dangerous for certain groups. Scholars describe how queer individuals and people of color have been disproportionately criminalized for civil disobedience and the consequences of arrest are often much higher for them (Mogul et. al., 2011; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Scholars have described how public spaces are organized to best encourage heteronormative attitudes, ideologies, and behaviors, so activists that represent minority populations are engaging in spaces that were not created with them in mind (Valentine, 1993). Pain discusses how many women have a fear of violent crime which determines how they operate in public spaces. Pain describes a ‘virtual curfew’ that society encourages and often requires women to have at night in certain spaces. These perceptions and realities of danger for certain groups can limit them from feeling safe engaging in activist practices where they would be temporarily appropriating public spaces.

The College Campus as a Space for Activism

The ethnographic site in which this analysis is situated is the University of Kenwood, a private, liberal arts campus in Southern California with approximately 3,000 undergraduate
students. By contextualizing these students’ actions by engaging with the particular environment of the university, this research was able to query why students might do this or that in terms of activism. For example, nearly every student that was interviewed mentioned that the University of Kenwood was a predominately white university (PWI) and that this impacted their activism. However, this is technically not true. The University of Kenwood is 42.1% White, 29.6% Hispanic or Latino, 6.13% Asian, 5.52% Black or African American, 4.26% two or more races, .63% American Indian or Alaska Native, and .51% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders (Data USA). 2 As a comparison, another small, private, liberal arts college in a similar area of southern California, which we will call Sycamore College, is closer to a PWI than the University of Kenwood with a student population that is 48% White. The University of Kenwood has more students of color than white students, even more so compared to Sycamore University, yet the perception for many students is that they attend a PWI. This could be happening for a number of different reasons, one of which is that the majority of the students I interviewed were a part of the mere 5.52% of the campus population that is Black or African American. The statistics that show the racial demographic information of the University of Kenwood are not necessarily more ‘true’ than how these students perceive the space to be, but it is presents an interesting irony and complicates a spatial analysis of this campus. The perception of the University of Kenwood as a PWI will be further analyzed as an activism-activating factor in the each of the “Findings” sections.

The small size of the undergraduate population, 3,000 students, also makes this campus a particular kind of place to study student activist practices. Although there might be a general assumption that online actions are anonymous, meaning, people don’t interact regularly with the

2 All statistics are taken from Data USA (2019) and are from the year 2016.
people in their social media ‘circle,’ being a student on this campus means that the online and in-person social worlds are deeply intertwined. This lack of anonymity causes activism as a university student on this campus a particular kind of experience, one that they may not experience in the outside world after leaving college. Indeed, the college campus for students is a liminal space. It is a space of transition between being dependent children to independent adults, and it is a space they will only exist in for about four years. The fact that this campus is private also informs these students’ experiences tremendously. There are many beliefs on the campus that the university is a business, and they are paying for certain services by paying for and attending school here. This is particularly true when it comes to students being disappointed with the lack of full time staff in the center for Campus Diversity and Inclusion. The student activist feel entitled to having staff that advocate for them and their needs in this particular space which, again, to many feels like a PWI. When met with these disappointments on behalf of the students, the administration claims that they are trying to make long-term decisions on behalf of the university, and although they claim student input is important, the students are only on campus for a temporary amount of time, so they shouldn’t be involved in running the university. This tension between administration and students in how they understand and experience this particular campus space deeply informs the kind of activism that students engage in.

**METHODOLOGY**

This research is based on a combination of four qualitative data gathering methods: individual interviews, group interviews, participant observation of workshops and discussions, and an analysis of social media data. The first interviews were thirty to forty-five-minute with eight undergraduate students at the University of Kenwood who were described by others, or
themselves, as activists on campus. These students’ activism revolved around a variety of different topics, including mental health, racism, and LGBTQA+ issues. Overall, these students identified themselves as liberal and people of color. I connected with the first two interviewees after attending a Black Student Union (BSU) meeting. This meeting consisted of ten women and one man, and there were two white students, including myself. The meeting was held in a classroom, and Rebecca, a student with an executive position in BSU, was leading a discussion of the recent film, “The Hate U Give,” which I had watched the previous week. I connected with Rebecca and Vanessa, another woman who had an executive position in the BSU club, and I asked if they would be willing to talk to me further about their experiences as activists on campus and how that related, or didn’t relate, to social media. These first two interviews were exploratory and relatively unstructured, and the goal of them was to gain information that could help me formulate more pointed questions for the others interviews. In these interviews, I asked general questions including, what kind of activism do you practice, how do you use social media, and do you use social media for activism purposes? I also asked them questions that related to what I had read in the existing literature about students using social media as a counterspace for activism. To this end, I inquired, do you consider social media to be a safe space and is activism safer online or not? What I found in these first two interviews was that Rebecca and Vanessa were not considering social media to be more or less safe than in-person activism. They claimed that there can be backlash in both spaces for being an activist. What became clear through these two preliminary interviews was how the binary paradigm of on-the-

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3 All interviews were recorded with the permission of interviewees. The environment of the individual interview varied by location, some occurred in a small, private study room and others were conducted in a public space on the bottom floor of the library where there was light background noise.
ground versus on-line activism did not resonate so much with students. They didn’t see these two spaces as being mutually exclusive; rather, interacting in these two ways was a part of an interconnected processes of cultivating activism as students.

The next six interviews with Zara, Margo, Matthew, Maria, Sara, and Emma were focused on following up with other students about certain themes that came through in the first two interviews. The six interviews after the two preliminary ones were found through a snowball sampling method, which involved me asking my first two research participants to suggest other students I might interview (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003). They based their recommendations off who could speak to the topics of social media and activism. This method of having current participants recommend new participants was helpful in positioning me as someone interviewees could trust. By having interviewees self-select, I was also able to have access to a sub-culture of activists on campus that I did not know existed. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, by having peers recommend one another, it prevented me from making assumptions about the type of people on this university campus that were involved in activism. This practice would have had the potential consequence of stereotyping individuals’ values based on their racial or sexual identity or who they associated with, a practice that many of the interviewees cited as being an issue of stigmatization that they faced on campus.

I also organized a group interview session with four of the eight original interviewees (Zara, Rebecca, Margo, and Sara) during lunchtime at the Race on Campus event. After compiling data from the individual interviews with the eight students, I still had follow up questions such as, how does this university space in particular inform your activism? What kind

4 These themes included how social media and on-campus activism were interconnected, how specific social media interfaces allowed them to do different types of work, and how the dynamics of online and on-campus complement, challenge, or inform one another.
of activism practices do you perform here on campus? Who are you trying to reach with your activism? How might your answers to these questions be different if you were at a larger, public university (or somewhere with a structure different than the University of Kenwood)? These interviews were instrumental in clarifying some of the remaining questions I had concerning the complexity of the term ‘activism’ in general and how students perceived this university space as activating certain types of activist practices, and how this might complicate or deepen my analysis of what they do online. The group interview session was also incredibly informative because it showed the extent to which these students’ lives as activist were entangled not only in on-campus practices (the four of them were there participating in Race on Campus together) but also on social media. This became evident when Margo mentioned that she was constantly inspired by Zara’s posts on Instagram, which particularly encouraged and affirmed her, giving her strength and energy to continue in her own fight against oppression. By observing the group dynamics of the interview, I was able to see that this group of activists were engaged in each other’s social worlds online, and that this was not inherently separate from what they were doing in-person at Race on Campus: coming together to build community by resisting societal narratives that feel oppressive.

In addition to individual interviews with eight student activists, this research also employed participant observation through participating in the Race on Campus event. Race on Campus was organized by one of the student activists, Maria, that was individually interviewed. On the Facebook page, this event was described as: a self-organized collective of undergraduate students committed to anti-racist activism in higher education. The event consisted of a student and professional keynote speaker, performances, and a variety of breakout sessions including workshops and discussions. I attend one workshop called “Craftivism: Your Craft, Your Voice”
and one discussion called “Where Do We Go When Everyone is Gone?” The craftivism workshop was led by a University of Kenwood alumni who is currently working in the fashion industry in downtown L.A. The workshop was intended to teach students practical skills of sewing and reusing their own clothing in order to reduce purchasing new clothing. This alumnus talked about how the fashion industry is the second largest polluter in the world, and claimed that crafting your clothing in new ways can be easy, fun, empowering, and, most importantly, sustainable. During this session, I took notes about how the workshop was presented and discussion afterwards. I paid specific attention to the way that activism was described, and how this alumnus bridged the concepts of fashion and social media, which actually came up in his presentation without me asking about it specifically. I also asked the presenter follow-up questions while others were examining the clothing scraps he brought for people to use to practice sewing.

The discussion I attend, “Where Do We Go When Everyone is Gone,” was initiated by a University of Kenwood independent newspaper article. Being a participant in this panel discussion was important in situating how the more recent occurrences at the university, including the silencing tactics of the newspaper, might threaten the way students feel they are able to raise their voices and actually be heard through student journalism. This context was valuable because it situates students’ activism practices in a particular space and time.

Lastly, this research employs an analysis of the social media data provided to me by interviewees. Many anthropologists have employed an internet or social-media based ethnographic method where the research site is actually online. This particular research site is “filled with text and/or connections between entities,” (Postill and Pink, 2012, p. 124). What makes digital ethnography unique is that researchers study social media interactions by engaging
in “routines, movements, and sociality” in an online field site by collaborating and participating in posts and online groups (Postill and Pink, 2012, p. 123). My analysis of social media did not directly use an internet-based ethnographic approach, as I didn’t participate in online social groups and monitor the posts of my informants as a method of research. The posts that I will be analyzing were not ones that I witnessed go ‘live’ in real time; this social media data was posted sometime in the past, and I worked with my informants to go through their archives to find examples of the kinds of things mentioned in their interviews. My method does pull from internet-based ethnographic approaches in that it analyzes elements of language, interaction, and visual images in order to create a more informed analysis of what these activists are doing online.

The addition of social media data to this analysis was the last step in my methodology. I reconnected with interviewees after forming my analysis to collect specific examples from them of the kinds of things they said they did on social media during their interviews. What I found when looking at these examples was that what they say they do, and what they do, are not always consistent. Social media data was an important piece of the puzzle for the question of, how are activists actually using these spaces, and are they alternative, additional, or enhancement spaces, or none of these things at all? The social media data allowed me to triangulate between how students perceive their actions and rationalize them and what is happening given the social media itself. All of these pieces help answer the question of why students do this or that in a more holistic sense. Since this study placed the university space under examination for the ways in which it activates activism practices, it made sense that the social media itself should be examined as a ‘space’ in its own right.
The decision to employ a “grounded theory” approach to qualitative research stemmed from my knowledge that I didn’t know enough about the contemporary conversations on my own campus surrounding social media and activism to develop a meaningful hypothesis before beginning my research. I was researching this culture of student activism from an etic, or outsider’s perspective, as I did not consider myself a student activism, nor did I relate to my participants on the basis of the identity as students of color. Grounded theory allows researchers to generate a meaningful hypothesis out of data that is collected, rather than starting a research project with a specific hypothesis to test. (Glaser and Strauss, 1965). Grounded theory involves developing theories of meaning based on what emerges from the qualitative data itself (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003). This theory emphasizes that participants are experts due to their lived experience regarding the research topic, which means that oftentimes researchers do not have the capacity to know enough before beginning research to develop a meaningful and informed hypothesis (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003). This is the reason I decided to conduct two exploratory interviews at the beginning of my research; I wanted to gain emic, or insider, knowledge as to the symbolic, material, and contextual ways that these people experience activism and social media in their lives as students. By using a grounded theory approach, I was able to constantly reanalyze my data in light of new questions, themes, and vocabulary that emerged in my research along the way. This is also what made going back to some of my earlier interviewees for a group interview essential: my questions changed as I gained insider knowledge about the topic, and I wanted to revisit some of the conversations I had early on from a more informed perspective.
LIMITATIONS

The goal of this research is to not make sweeping statements about the kinds of activism that happen in campuses across time and space. Indeed, this study was situated in the context of a particular campus environment, which provided a unique analysis that certainly cannot speak to the experiences of student activists across America. This campus has particular conditions, its size, location, and racial composition, that provide a unique kind of analysis. If this study were done at another university, it would certainly produce different kinds of themes that are specific to the particulars of that university. However, this paper does make a meaningful contribution to the literature in that it analyzes the ways that students are navigating their social worlds of the campus and social media to create a unique brand of activism that works for them.

This study is based on three distinct methods of data gathering: interviews, participant observation, and social media analysis. Conducting interviews as my primary mode of data collection presented limitations in that students continually contradicted themselves during the interviews. Although I initially found that to be highly problematic, I later determined that these contradictions are part of what it means to be in these student’s shoes. They are constantly trying to negotiate their own existence as students, as adults, as activists, all within the context of the particular university space which activates particular kinds of problems for them in their work.

The greatest limitation of the interviews was the snowball sampling method I used to find participants for my study. Although this method was beneficial to my creating trust surrounding me as a researcher and this project (see methods section), finding participants in this way most certainly impacted the breadth of qualitative data I was able to collect. I reached out to people who my other interviewees suggested because they considered them to be activists, which means that it is possible that I didn’t receive diverse data from the experiences of activists on campus.
For example, the activists I spoke to would generally characterize themselves as liberal, rather than conservative, and people of color, rather than white. All of my interviewees were also students of color, and all but one of them identified as women. I recognize that due to the snowball sampling method, I was interviewing activists who were involved in the same communities and in many cases, involved in the same kind of activist work. This limitation of not having a cross-section of students who might be considered activists reflected in the study is that it leaves unresolved questions such as, how do conservative students navigate these social worlds in light of their own activism? How might these processes of negotiating their identity as a conservative present unique challenges on this campus?

**THEMES**

The interview and social media data revealed four themes in the ways that students navigate online and in-person activism on a college campus. First, the idea of identifying as an activist is embedded in tensions regarding connotations and expectations of the term. Second, students practicing activism in an ‘othered body’ on campus means that people may assume that they are activists, but they are actually able to choose to forefront their identity as an activist online. Third, student activists are able to cultivate allyship through intentionally and unintentionally operating between in-person and online platforms. It is the bridging of these platforms that allows students to ‘meet other students where they are’ by engaging through a variety of social outlets. Lastly, student activists respond to the institutional ‘bubble’ of the university by creating avenues of engaging with other activists online that can challenge them and provide additional educational opportunities they don’t receive on campus.
Being an ‘Activist’

Though these students engage in a variety of activist practices, these engagements can be broadly described as performing acts of resistance that challenge societal narratives present in their campus space. When asked about their work as activists, students describe some processes that are similar to what Broadhurst (2014) claims about ‘organization’ as being the center of the activist’s goals and intentions. These students are the leaders of clubs on-campus, volunteers who educating youth in juvenile detention centers off-campus, and facilitators for panel discussions with administration. They bring speakers to campus, host open-mic nights, and organize large-scale conferences such as the recent, multi-day ‘Race on Campus’ event.

Beyond what they are doing organizationally on and off-campus to facilitate activism, these students are also speaking up about important topics in class, affirming one another by reposting content on social media platforms, and creating content online to talk about their unique experiences as people of color or members of the LGBTQA+ community, for example. According to these students, their main goal isn’t to “preach to the converted,” (Rebecca), meaning students who are already involved in their clubs or organizations. Rather, they want to reach people who don’t care about activism causes and who “have access to privilege.” However, another important part of their activism that they actually focused on more in the interview discussions has to do with how their create a tight-knit community amongst themselves as activist. A form of resistance to the societal narratives on campus that make them feel isolated is to come together as a group and support one another. In this way, not all of what these students consider part of their activism falls under a traditional paradigm of organizing on-the-ground initiatives. However, they are very things that these students emphasized when asked about what they do as activists on this campus. This study presents an exploration of these students’ varied
forms of resistance, which includes engagements with the world of social media, to oppressive societal narratives they encounter.

Although students were quick to refer to their peers as ‘activists,’ when they were asked, “do you consider yourself an activist,” there was a real reluctance to claim this title. When I asked Sara, a student who focuses a lot of her energy on raising awareness about mental health, about being an activist, she responded: “I have weird feeling about the word…I guess I kind of consider myself an activist.” After receiving a similar response from students across the board about being ‘activists,’ I began to ask more pointed questions about their lack of clarity concerning the term and their reluctance to self-identify as activists.

Asking students about the tension or confusion around the term activism revealed that the word ‘activist’ doesn’t have a clear-cut definition, yet it is loaded with expectations and students are reluctant to claim that label for themselves for fear they will not meet the ambiguous, unspoken expectations of the word. Emma, one of the students I interviewed, has an interesting story: she was the only fourth-year student I interviewed, and she described how she became drained from trying to do activism work on campus and became burnt out by her junior year. In our conversation, she described how it makes sense to call someone like Angela Davis an activist because she has had a long career building that title for herself, and this makes it feel bizarre for Emma to refer to herself as an activist. It seemed as though Emma was comparing the idea of being an activist to being a saint because like the way she described activism, other people cannot appoint themselves with the title of “saint” and people are usually designated a saint only after they are dead. When I asked Sara if this felt like a fair comparison to the way she was describing activism, she was quick to agree. She claimed, “we can’t say that we lived our life that way until we get to the end…it’s the same thing with activism.” The title of activist is a
thing these students aspire to in many cases, and it is most valuable when someone else assigns them that label. Self-identifying as an activist could have the consequence of prematurely claiming the kind of social or political impact (based on Morozov’s (2009) definition of activism) one has had on the world.

These expectations of impact and consistency go through these students’ minds when trying to decide what their relationship is with the term activist. Their ambivalence can be due in part to an insecurity that they aren’t doing enough, or they are being hypocritical in some way by claiming to be an activist. Questioning their own title of being an activist were particularly prevalent in discussions that had to do with capitalism. During the group interview, Rebecca, a second-year student and president of the Black Student Union (BSU) asked the question: “where do I draw the line between my values and the fact that we live in a capitalist society?” She followed this up by saying, “nobody is perfect, especially since we are all consumers.” A University of Kenwood alumnus who lead the Craftivism workshop during Race on Campus expressed a similar discomfort in navigating the world of capitalism while trying to be a craftivist, which he described as anyone who crafts with the intention of engaging with a movement, whether that be anti-capitalist, environmentalism, feminism, etc. He works in the fashion industry, which he notes in the second largest polluter in the world. Although he claims that the place he works aligns with many of his values as an activist in the fashion industry, he quickly pointed out that they still do problematic things like use the cheapest possible textiles in order to yield the greatest profit. This illuminates how students are constantly negotiating their relationships with being an activist through being critical of their actions, and who and what they support. What seems to be the biggest threat to these students claiming the title of activist is that they are not doing enough, and if they are holding themselves to the standards of people like
Angela Davis, then it will certainly feel as though they will never be deserving of that title. There are additionally complicated factors that contribute to students’ relationships with the word activism, particularly among students with ‘othered’ bodies who may be designated as an activist simply because of their politicized identity.

‘Othered’ Bodies

Students with ‘othered’ bodies respond to the challenging expectations, pressures, and fears that are presented in the social world of the campus space by engaging in a social media counterspace that allows them to actually cultivate their activism without being confronted by assumptions about their identity. Although students claim that the purpose of the counterspace is to potentially shield their identity, they actually use it for processes of reclaiming titles for themselves and finding physical safety. The terms ‘othered’ or ‘others’ have been used by scholars to describe bodies that are “marked off or driven out” by the way individuals construct themselves through process of inclusion and exclusion (Clark and Sponsler, 1999, p. 61). The term ‘othered’ was used without prompting by a student, Maria, in one the interview when speaking about the process of disregarding or silencing bodies that represent marginalized experiences, specifically in the trans-community. This study uses the term ‘othering’ to suggest that the stereotyping of bodies happens in regard to race but also sexual and gender orientation and disabilities.

Interviewees described classroom experiences where they consistently felt the need to speak up as a person of color in a PWI, this is again a perception rather than a statistical reality, but they also perceived that the power of their voice was limited when they spoke up because of racial stigmatization. Margo is an international student from South Africa, and she primarily uses
Twitter as a platform for her activism because it allows her to stay more informed about news than other platforms like Instagram, Facebook, or Snapchat. She spoke to the effect she feels being at a university that feels like it is predominately white has on her ability to choose the terms under which she wants to be an activist:

It [being a student at the University of Kenwood] affects my activism because first I'm at a PWI, so I feel as if I have no choice but to be an activist. Right? Because a lot of the time I would be one of the few students of color in a classroom.

Margo’s describes feeling of being obligated to speak up as the only person of color are specifically situated in the university context. She believed that her perspective as a person of color in her classroom wouldn’t be voiced unless she spoke up. Margo mentioned this in the context of describing a time she was in a feminism class, and the syllabus did not include intersectional or black feminism. When she raised her hand to ask the professor whether or not they were going to discuss black feminism, she worried whether the professor or other students would take her point seriously because of her blackness. She described, “so that’s what I was questioning when I was bringing it up, not the validity of what I had to say but whether it would be taken with importance because I’m the one that’s saying it.” Next, she described how she felt relieved when a white female in her class agreed with her and brought up the point to the professor again in class: “And I was just like, okay, yay. That means someone understood and is bringing it up, and now it will actually be brought into like a conversation that people would want to be a part of.” Margo’s story reveals her concern that the professor and other students needed validation from a white student that her idea was sound. She felt that others in the class could have disregarded what she said because they didn’t value her perspective or questioned the credibility of her comments because of her racialized and politicized identity.
Margo’s story about feeling as though she would be the only one in her class to potentially speak up about expanding the syllabus to include the experiences of marginalized groups, such as black women, was echoed by many other participants. This practice of engaging in class dialogues that concern diversity and inclusion is one of the scenarios that these students brought up when asked about what it is like to practice activism on this campus. For them, choosing to speak up in academic settings is one form of resisting narratives of oppression. Practicing resistance is again one of the many ways activism has been described throughout history and is also described this way by my participants. For many of the Black or African-American students I interviewed, choosing to speak up in class didn’t feel like a choice. There is a real felt sense of obligation when it comes to speaking up, and a fear that if they don’t, no one else will.

The obligatory feelings associated with speaking up in class stem from the same kind of fears that cause students to feel the need to hold leadership roles within camps focused on diversity and inclusion. There is a sense of responsibility that these students of color feel to hold leadership positions because if they don’t, they feel no one else will. Rebecca, the president of BSU claimed:

I feel so drained all the time…so much work falls on the individuals…we are leaders of organizations and the community…because I put a lot of responsibility on myself.

This responsibility that Rebecca and other students put on themselves is a response to how white-dominated the space feels to them. Although the University of Kenwood isn’t technically a PWI statistically speaking, the fact that it still feels like one means that these students may feel that they don’t have allies or that the consequences for certain students of color is more drastic than for others. For example, even though the University of Kenwood is predominately people of
color, only 5.52% of the population identifies as Black or African American. Since the university is small to begin with, with only 5,000 students, marginal racial populations, particularly for Black or African-Americans students, may feel more like outliers. These students may also feel that the space is predominately white because that statistic doesn’t take into account the racial demographics of faculty and administration. It is also important to consider the hegemonic structures of power that are a part of these students lives living outside of the university. For example, living in America, these students are constantly confronted with the realities of predominately white leadership in the national political system. None of these elements are reflected in the statistic that the University of Kenwood is predominately people of color, and it could provide an explanation as to why the space, to these students, feels predominately white.

Not only does the perception of the University of Kenwood as a white space cause students to feel responsible for speaking up in classes and taking on leadership roles, but it also causes them to question their relationship with the title ‘activist.’ This is reflected by Margo’s story about how she felt that she would be dismissed by her contributions because people ‘assumed’ she was an activist and was going to say something related to racial disparity. Many of the students of color discussed feeling as though having a politicized racial identity caused people to actively or passively give them pressure to embody a certain role as a minority. For many of the women of color, this pressure was a stereotype that they would be an ‘angry women of color’, if they spoke up about topics of activism. Most commonly, students describe how their politicized identities cause others to see them as activists, even if that label doesn’t feel true for them.

Rebecca was recently asked in an application to answer how she considered herself an activist. She allowed me to take a look at this application, and on it she wrote:
As a Queer Black woman, I do not have the privilege of being apolitical. My existence is inherently political due to the identities that I hold and has tied me to the world of resistance and activism since I was a child. Therefore, it goes without saying that I consider myself an activist. Recently though, I’ve been thinking a lot about what the word ‘activist’ truly means, and what it means to claim that label. I’ve been participating in activism seriously for about seven years now, and I try to continuously reflect on how much I’ve grown as an organizer as well the various ways in which I could still improve.

Here, Rebecca differentiates between how others perceive her politicized identity and don’t afford her existence the privilege of being apolitical and how she has intentionally worked to cultivate her role as an activist. She mentioned later in the interview that as a Queer, Black woman, ‘being who I am…that is a radical enough act.” The way Rebecca describes her identity as being an ‘act’ implies that by being herself, she is making a statement or expression. However, there is a clear difference in her statement between how others perceive her and what she actually does.

Rebecca says that when she thinks about ‘claiming the label’ of an activist, that is a difference process than accepting the label that others give her when they are confronted with her politicized identity in-person. On Rebecca’s social media, Rebecca chooses to forefront her identity as a Black, Queer woman.
This is a screenshot taken from Rebecca’s Instagram profile. Underneath her name in the description box there are three symbols, a rainbow flag, a yellow heart, and a brown fist. The rainbow flag and the brown fist are two symbols that most people understand as being connected to the Gay Rights and Black Lives Matter Movements. Rebecca’s decision on social media to forefront her alliances with certain activist movements in her description box makes them of primary importance on her page. For Rebecca, social media is actually a space where she gets to choose to be an activist by forefront her alliances with certain movements. This is different than people on campus assuming she is an activist because of her identity as a minority. On social media, these student activists actually have to do something in order to be an activist rather than simply exist. In this way, on social media students can serve as a counterspace that allows students to challenge the societal narrative that tells them what they believe by claiming this for
themselves through a curated social media page. The students’ have more agency over what they do or do not foreground about their identity.

Zara, a third-year student at the University of Kenwood, also felt that her identity as a person of color labeled her to others as a certain type of activist which limited her freedom to express herself. Zara is involved in an integrative living-learning based community, a space where she regularly initiates activism-related practices such as hosting forums and conversations amongst community members. Her relationship with social media has changed throughout the years, and she has chosen to take breaks from posting from time to time because she felt she was no longer being challenged, only affirmed, in her beliefs on social media platforms. She also claimed that constantly engaging in arguments over social media took a toll on her mental health. Zara said she focuses on issues of race in her activism work, although that is not the only type of activism she is interested in. One of the main challenges she has when trying to be an activist during in-person interactions is that people label her as the ‘race person,’ and she doesn’t feel as though she is able to engage in the range of intersectional topics that she is passionate about. She describes:

I guess one reason I use social media is because here in [this integrative learning community], I pretty much am labeled the race person. There's so much more to me and there's so much more that I want to talk about and there's so many more experiences that I struggle with that other people struggle with that I never get to talk about in [this integrative learning community].

Zara also had an experience where she felt her academic credibility was brought into question due to her racial identity:
This morning in class I said something that was hard for me to say because it was going against the grain I guess and was a controversial opinion, but I thought it was important. So I was shaking and even my friend who was sitting next to me noticed, and I said this whole long speech, and my teacher was nodding the whole time and was excited about what I was saying. But he didn't say anything like, good job or yes, he like cut me off, and changed the subject….so then this white girl raised her hand and said like a small fraction of what I said… basically just said what was on the board, which he wrote after I spoke. And then he was like, ‘wow, like you're a genius. Yes, exactly, you nailed it.’ And was praising her, um, for just repeating what I was saying.

Zara’s experience of not receiving the same feedback for an original contribution, compared to the white student, seems to be a realization of the fears Margo was having about being shut down when bringing up intersectional feminism in her class. Zara similarly describes an internal conflict, “I was shaking and even my friend who was sitting next to me noticed,” when deciding whether or not to offer a perspective in class. The stress of questioning how she would be perceived and whether or not her comments would be taken seriously was an embodied experience for Zara, and the situation may have actualized the fears she had before speaking.

Critical Race Theory (CTR) helps illuminate how the racialization of the bodies of people of color foster micro-aggressive climates on campuses and can result in students seeking alternative spaces (counterspaces) to challenge institutional and social hegemony (Solorzano, 2000). Solorzano (2000) found that Latina/o students at three selective universities experienced three types of microaggressions: interpersonal, racial jokes, and institutional. Solorzano describes interpersonal microaggressions as verbal or nonverbal racial affronts, and describes how these cause Latina/o students to feel as though their presence ‘disrupts’ the ‘natural’ state of
the university. Solorzano also describes how Latino/a students could not shake the sense that
their “every word would reaffirm racialized assumptions and cast doubt on their academic
merit,” (2000, p. 669). The anxiety of being associated as a racialized ‘other’ is consistent with
Margo and Zara’s experiences of worrying how others will politicize their bodies before they
begin to speak for themselves.

The social media engagements of Rebecca reveal that when confronted with micro-
aggressive behavior on campus that Zara describes, activists will not always use the counterspace
of social media to shield the very things that cause them to be politicized and stigmatized in-
person. Using social media as a counterspace, a space for resisting societal narratives, is actually
about them claiming titles, labels, and identities for themselves. Mwangi et. al (2016) reveals that
turning to online counterspaces enables students of color to challenge “invisibility, tokenization,
and misrepresentation” that occurs on campuses (p. 147). Although students aren’t using social
media as a space to brush off their politicized identities, as seen with Rebecca, it can be a place
of promoting psychological wellbeing due to the nature of the platforms themselves being behind
a screen (Case and Hunter, 2012). Margo discussed the feeling that her body is politicized when
she is interacting in-person with others, and that can lead to feelings of unsafety. She says:

I feel like as a black body I am a political statement all the time. Right? And so if
anything, social media is more of a safe space for me because like you can't see me and
you can't attack me. Like living in a very white space where there's a lot of people who
do not…I don't want to say agree with my existence…but in terms of like safety wise, I
don't know…social media is a place where I can be freer and complain about more things
and talk about more things.
In trying to convey her point, Margo suggests that it isn’t that people don’t agree with her existence, it is that they are threatened by her existence because they interpret it as an immediate political statement they must support and reject. And if they reject the political statement her racialized body makes, then they are in a way rejecting her existence. This is related to how Solorzono (2000) describes racialized bodies as a disruption to the natural existence of hegemonic structures within the university. Labeling the body as a ‘statement’ is a part of the process of stereotyping and labeling someone as a racialized ‘Other’.

Multiple studies have explored how this racialization of the body contributes to feelings of unsafety, and a fear of being policed triggers an adaptive response to engage in social media counterspaces. According to Bonilla and Rose (2015): “It is surely not coincidental that the groups most likely to experience police brutality, to have their protests disparaged as acts of ‘rioting’ or ‘looting,’ and to be misrepresented in the media are precisely those turning to digital activism at the highest rates” (p. 8). Their study refers to how the racialization of black bodies, in particular, causes black activists to turn to social media rather than participate in on-the-ground traditional activist practices such as protesting or demonstrating. This is because on social media platforms, the perceived consequences of engaging in activism are different than in-person practices. Margo claimed: “If you don't like me and then what tweet at me, I can block you easily. Cause like if you say something to me that's like hateful, it makes me uncomfortable.” Margo is describing how there is a way of safeguarding oneself online from certain interactions and attitudes by having control over who is in your social media ‘circle.’ Although this may impact the ability for social media to be a conversational platform (see section on ‘cultivating allyship’), it is important to recognize that Margo’s actions of turning to a counterspace because
there it feels safer is consistent with trends of counterspaces researched by other scholars
(Bonilla & Rose 2015).

Though students use social media as a place to actually claim the identity of an activist
for themselves, as seen with Rebecca’s Instagram bio, this is not consistent with how students
describe the benefits of using social media as a counterspace. Maria has been involved in
activism for most of her life, yet engaging in activism through social media platforms is a new
process for her. In high school, she used word-of-mouth to tell others about activist-related
initiatives, and she claims it was her small community that allowed for that kind of coalition
building. She described the move into a larger campus community as necessitating the use of
social media for her activism work. She felt that over social media, there were less of the in-
person pressures of racialization that causes the body to be the primary message, rather than
people’s words. She said:

You do get racialized based on the context that you're in. What you're wearing and who
you're standing with affects how you got racialized and on social media, if your Avatar is
like this small, like, hey, it doesn't matter as much, right? Like you can curate the way
that your page looks and the way that you're presenting yourself in a way that's more in
your control than you like get the chance to in person.

Maria uses the specific image of the Avatar—the small icon with a profile picture—on Twitter to
suggest that the physical evidence of someone’s racial identity is small and somewhat shielded
on this platform in particular. She claims that this allows individuals who may be ‘othered’
because of their identity perceive they are able to put content onto the internet without feeling
silenced as they might in person:
There's like this power that you get to reclaim by creating a space for yourself, where in other instances you would be ‘othered’, you know, you would become like, 'othered' by talking about these things. Like I'm thinking specifically about the trans community and how, um, my friends and I who also are into activism have used platforms like Instagram Live videos, um, and YouTube videos to explain or just discuss topics like the Intersex community and talking about top surgery and discussing what it means to experience dysphoria…

Maria emphasizes that the Avatar image is the primary indicator of racial identity on platforms like Twitter which allow students to be shielded on social media. However, this does not explain why students like Rebecca take the opportunity to actually do something on social media to claim they are activists. These activist actions are more holistically understood by a close examining of the space itself—the university setting—which social media is countering. Students claim their identity as activists on social media in response to the context of their marginalization in the university space, which puts the expectation and label of activist on them without them doing anything to cultivate that behavior. The perception of the university as a PWI is directly connected to students’ experiences of the space, which activate certain responses online.

**Cultivating Allyship**

Cultivating community among allies was a key goal that many of the student at the University of Kenwood described for their activism. The in-person and social media channels students operate in together cultivate community building because they are entangled in student’s social worlds. Social media platforms do allow student activists to do narrative identity work,
which is one of the processes that characterizes the creation of a counterspace (Case & Hunter, 2012), by sharing their own identity without becoming someone’s ‘teacher’. However, without translating social media work into on-the-ground conversations, students are not able to develop allyship solely through social media. This is because social media platforms can limit the ability to cultivate allyship because they aren’t generally conducive to honest conversation, which these activists said is needed in order to cultivate allyship. Instead of social media serving as a counterspace, or alternate space, in its own right, it is an additional space in which, combined with in-person interactions, can be an incredibly beneficial tool for connecting and growing activist communities across campus.

Matthew was only male I interviewed. When asked about his activism work, Matthew said that he actually doesn’t consider himself an activist ‘yet,’ even though he was suggested to me by multiple interviewees as an activist. He prefers to use the term ‘ally’ when referring to his social justice engagement. He uses his platform as a man of color and an intern in the Title IV office to increase awareness among men of color about sexual assault and consent. Matthew’s definition of being an activist is to be an ‘accomplice,’ a person who is ‘in the trenches’ (a phrase he learned from a transgender comedian who visited campus) with the people who are actually suffering. Matthew said he needed to do more to put himself on the front lines to experience suffering alongside others. Matthew’s breakdown of the differences between allyship and activism were helpful in understanding the perception that within the idea of activism there is a sliding scale of engagement.

Through this interview with Matthew, I began to theorize how cultivating allyship was deeply connected to having vulnerable conversation with others, and this understanding was echoed by other interviewees as well. Matthew claims that not having the hard conversations
makes you an ‘ally from afar,’ because it separates people from truly seeking solidarity with a certain group. Matthew spoke to how he leads with example by being vulnerable when having these conversations:

If you're facilitating the conversation, you have to take it on yourself to say, I'm going to be honest. I want to really speak about how I've thought about the world for however long: for 18 years, I was the stereotypical toxic male because that's all I knew it. I mean I'm still trying, but I have to be vulnerable. Even with that I tell people my mind is not liberated. I'm not, I don't have all the answers. I never will. I love telling people I'm learning with you. It's not a lecture. It's a conversation.

The process of having vulnerable conversations with others requires people to actually be willing to engage in those conversations. Many interviewees said that a challenge at this small, liberal arts school is that although there are many ways to get involved, students tend to divide their time between multiple commitments. This is not to say that the University doesn’t provide spaces and opportunities for people to be involved in deep, vulnerable conversations concerning activism-related topics. In fact, Margo claimed that getting involved in being a part of conversations is rather easy. She says:

It can just be on your campus, you know, attending something or doing something small, writing a poem, attending a certain talk…

Though student activists, and the institutional structure of a Campus Diversity and Inclusion Department, provide a structure for allowing students to engage in conversations regarding activism, it is difficult to get students to attend events, particularly students who aren’t already involved in activist work. Maria describes trying to bring in new faces to the Race on Campus event she hosted this year:
We felt like we were putting all this effort and energy into creating these events that we hoped, um, people outside of our set community would come and learn and ask questions and interact and engage, and what we were seeing was like the same people who organize it plus like their friends, and there weren't very often many new faces.

When Maria hosts events related to activism topics, she found that the same allies, people who were already engaging in these deep conversation, continually showed up and it was difficult to attract new people to meetings. Maria developed a theory that this was because people in her community felt less inclined to show up to meetings because they weren’t being held accountable for going. She found that making a personal connection with the members of her community, what she called “meeting them where they were,” was essential in fostering that accountability. Putting details about the events up on social media wasn’t enough to get other students to attend activism-related events. It took reaching out to people in-person to create connection and accountability.

Although one of the goals that activist shared in cultivating allyship was reaching out to people outside their set community, students also mentioned that creating a tighter-knit community amongst themselves was also an important aspect of that. Although students said that cultivating allyship required in depth, in-person conversation, their social media data and group interview conversations revealed that it was actually possible to achieve this on social media through encouraging and affirming posts. As mentioned before, students in leadership positions on campus feel obligated to be in those positions because very few students want to do the work of being an activist leader on campus. This can be due to the fact that it is too damaging on someone’s mental health to feel they must constantly confront and challenge the spaces they are in. In my conversation with Emma, she claimed: “it takes a very specific type of person to be
constantly challenging that all the time. I didn’t find the balance between mental health, self-care, and working in my community. I wish I did.” For the activist who do chose to do what Margo calls “the things that suck about activism,” it can be hard to find community amongst other activists on campus because they are spread between different causes represented by different clubs.

During the group interview, I realized that these activists from different facets of campus knew of each other, but they didn’t necessarily engage in-person on a regular basis. When they began to talk together about what it looks like for them to engage in activism on social media, many of them talked about the process of posting something on Instagram, either on their story or on their regular feed, that was encouraging or thought-provoking. Margo mentioned during the interview that something that made her feel encouraged in her own activism work was when Sara, sitting across from her in the interview, posted something that affirmed the way Margo was feeling.
Much of Sara’s posts like this have to do with topics of self-care and encouraging people to be thoughtful about how their actions effect other people. Considering what many of the students said about feeling burnt out and tired from the exhausting work of trying to be an activist in a space that feels like they are the only ones, it makes sense why this particular kind of response would be activated through Sara’s social media. It can also explain why the other students in the group interview described having such a powerful response to seeing Sara’s posts. Finding allies amongst other activists who you already have entangled connections with as students, and also social media users can be an incredibly powerful, life-giving force for these activists that can sustain them in what oftentimes feels like a difficult push to persist in their work. This solidarity that can be created in person and sustained online when in-person transactions between student activists aren’t as frequent can be described as an important aspect of connecting existing allies across space, not necessarily cultivating allyship among non-activist populations.

One of the barriers to cultivating allyship in-person is feeling the need to be a constant teacher, which can be emotionally laborious for activists over time. Maria, for example, describes how posting something over social media does the work of one conversation yet it reaches multiple followers. She claims not needing to have multiple conversation to explain a topic or a specific identity, even, can save activists from the emotional labor of constantly answering questions. She says:

Allies can read something [on social media] without having to necessarily make you their teacher… when you're posting these things on social media it feels different than if you didn't have social media and someone is constantly asking you like, what does the word
Queer mean? And having to use just like this emotional labor to answer that question every single time.

On social media, activists are able to create content by writing posts, creating videos, showcasing artwork, or providing links to articles, which they perceive sends a message to their followers on social media that explains their identity, story, or a certain topic. Maria felt that social media gives activists the ability to ‘teach’ on their own terms and in their own words, without feeling the pressure or experiencing the emotional labor that may come with explaining themselves multiple times in person in order to cultivate allyship through increased understanding and consciousness. Maria finds that freedom over social media to be empowering, rather than oppressive, to activists: “There’s so much power in that, in being able to learn and to grow and to better yourself without it being at the expense of another person.”

It is worth examining, however, what kind of conversation these ‘teaching’ moments might be. As already mentioned earlier in this section, allyship is cultivated through having deep, vulnerable conversations with others that allows them to ask questions. When activists are posting these materials, is there a one-way, two-way, or another kind of conversation happening online? And if there is not transactional communication occurring, can it be said that social media is an effective counterspace for cultivating allyship? Although activists can receive feedback on social media posts by people ‘liking,’ ‘commenting,’ ‘re-posting,’ or ‘direct messaging,’ how might this lead to a different kind of communication than in-person? Gershon (2015) describes how the actual mediums that are used to communicate shapes the message that is being sent because we have ‘media ideologies’ that shape the way we think about certain media (p. 3). Gershon claims that people consider these media ideologies when deciding which platforms to communicate over, because each platform is associated with different kinds of
meaning. In addition, media ideologies vary from person to person, and generation to generation. For example, she says that email is thought of in her generation, Gen-X, as informal, yet students, Millennials and Gen-Z, think of it as a formal mode of communication (Gershon, 2015). People use specific mediums based on how it allows them to communicate with others. For example, in Gerson (2015) students preferred that if someone broke up with them over a media platform, which they considered a formal and serious action, they do it via a platform that was the most like in-person conversation by “allowing for conversational turn-taking,” through simultaneous conversation (Gershon, 2015, p. 38).

This analysis speaks to how students may be trying to cultivate vulnerable conversations that lead to allyship over social media, but there can be barriers of social platforms to be conducive to that type of connection. If they are being ‘trolled,’ which my interviewees described as personally attacked rather than engaging in a productive, vulnerable conversation, it is easy to remove people from your social media circles. According to Margo, “if you don't like me and then tweet at me, I can block you easily. Cause like if you say something to me that's like hateful, it makes me uncomfortable.” The ability to ‘block’ people on social media, while allowing bodies of color in particular to curate perceptions of safety online (see section of ‘othered’ bodies), is one way of preventing future conversations from unfolding. The ability to have control over which voices to interact with over social media is what has led to social media being referred to as a ‘bubble.’ According to Acks (2019), the ‘bubble’ effect of social media encourages a confirmation bias, which he defines as “the tendency for people to interpret, remember, and specifically seek out information that confirms beliefs they already have” (p. 4). This confirmation bias works the same in engaging with people; on social media, people tend to seek out followers who have beliefs that are consistent with theirs and reject others who do not.
It is difficult to have meaningful conversations over social media that cultivate allyship because connecting with those with different beliefs isn’t naturally built into the way most people think about curating their own social media space.

Although social media alone may not be able to do the deep work of cultivating allyship, social media can serve to prompt in-person action in the campus community which can lead to opportunities for conversational among students that could result in developing allyship. The “For Black Men” poem that was described in the Introduction is an example of how social media action drove students to interact with one another. During a Black Student Union (BSU) meeting that was being held at the University of Kenwood, one of the black women in attendance began reading a poem she wrote that revolved around the frustrations she had with men of color in her life. Other women in attendance pulled out their phones and took videos on Snapchat of her performing the poem. They recorded her in as a show of support, not to embarrass or ‘other’ her. However, the video went viral within minutes, and pretty soon a group of black men were watching the video together. They were offended by the woman’s words, and they felt that they needed to defend themselves although it was not clear whether the poem was written about one of those men in particular (the interviewees suspected it was written about this woman’s father). This group of men descended upon the BSU meeting, where they were greeted by a room full of black women. According to Rebecca, one of my interviewees who was at this exact meeting, she had “never seen such a fast turnaround between something happening online and then in-person.”
This confrontation between the black men and women at the BSU meeting prompted a conversation that started out with the men being defensive about the poem and ended with the women asking them why this was the first time they had even considered coming to a BSU meeting. The women were frustrated by the fact that these men never made time to attend BSU meetings, but now that they had a problem with them, they had time to have a conversation. However, the women in the group interview who were at this meeting actually look back on the event with an air of success. They said that the fact that the men showed up and engaged in a conversation with the women was incredibly powerful and productive. It took the viral video of the girl reciting her poem to prompt these men to in-person action that ended up allowing for a deep conversation concerning how the black community on campus can best support itself.
Social media in this case was a necessary ‘alternate’ or counterspace that worked alongside the structure of an in-person activism meeting to cultivate allyship.

Although that is an example of the intersections between social media and in-person sociality was utilized unintentionally for cultivating allyship, students can also choose to leverage the power of social media by intentionally bridging the social worlds. Many of these students showed me examples of how they use social media to advertise the in-person events they host to promote allyship-related conversations.

These are two examples of promotional posters that these students post on their pages in order to connect people to on-the-ground initiatives that promote conversation and, ideally, allyship. The poster on the left advertises a diversity and mental health forum and the one on the
right advertises an open mic night that showcases the stories of women of color (“Black and Brown Femmes to the Front”). Each of the posters has a specific time and place included in the design. It is clear in looking at these promotional ads that the end goal of the act of posting this is not just for their followers to see it. These posts are specifically meant to connect followers to on-the-ground initiatives that are happening on campus. Social media is being used as a strategy to organize opportunities for students to engage in-person and hopefully have meaningful conversations that cultivate allyship. In this, social media is serving as an activist strategy for creating visibility in hopes to engage more people on-the-ground. Seeing this post connects students to an on-campus event, which implies the post is a means, not an end to the activist practice of cultivating allyship. Rather than being a counterspace for activism, in this way, social media enhances activists’ abilities to operate on the ground, but it in no way replaces them.

**Educational Opportunities**

Although the perception among students is that social media can provide a counterspace for educational opportunity because of the accessibility of information, users’ proven lack discernment to spotting misinformation prevents social media from being entirely effective in this way. Yet, social media can be used to expand the social limitations of the ‘bubble’ of the University of Kenwood by connecting students with opportunities for growth and education in their areas of activism. Additionally, there are still social pressures that exist online that complicate what activists are doing and what otherwise be described as ‘fake-wokeness’ by student activists.

Zara claims that she learned early on in her activism work that if becoming educated about activist topics isn’t accessible, people won’t do it. She says that students believe that
engaging in activism is more work than it ‘actually’ is, which prevents them from wanting to become involved in campus events. She perceives social media as bridging the gap of inaccessibility of information because, “I know we grew up in a time where if things aren't easily accessible, we're not really going to go out of our way, especially if we are busy.” She believes posting on social media increases the flow of information around activism topics by using social media as a counterspace for education. One of the ways she does this is by attaching links to educational articles in her posts. This way, interested followers simply have to click the article and they are directed to them, where they can become educated about perspectives she endorses.

However, studies have shown that people are susceptible to believe inaccurate information due to laziness (Pennycook & Rand, 2018). Even if someone were to post a partisan ‘fake news’ article, people would believe it because we employ a lack of reasoning, rather than biased reasoning (Pennycook & Rand, 2018). This means that people use analytical thinking on social media less than activists may perceive, and the increased accessibility of information may not mean that people are actually becoming more informed and educated. It takes someone doing the research to actually endorse information that is accurate. Margo describes a time when she was called out for accidentally publishing a ‘fake news’ article on social media:

I saw this article, I completely believed it and I shared it. And then people commented on it and people shared it as well. And then I had someone like call me out for it. Like it was one of my friends that he was just like, why would you spread this, this as false information? And then I was like, oh my goodness, I was very embarrassed and so I apologize and I deleted it. But I felt very embarrassed and I was like, goodness, I have just helped someone spread false rhetoric and continued this like viral motion at this article when out.
Margo’s comment about the ‘viral motion’ of false rhetoric provides an interesting image as to how quickly information spreads, and how one must actually slowdown that motion in order to be sure they aren’t spreading false information.

When discussing how social media increased educational opportunities, most student activists actually discussed how social media gives them, rather than their followers, the opportunity to be educated through engaging with other activists around the world. Being at a university provides connections that students wouldn’t have had otherwise, but it can also cause activists to feel like they exist in a ‘bubble’ because students are in similar age cohorts and share similar backgrounds, in particular, related to socio-economic status. This is ironic considering how social media is also considered a ‘bubble’ of sorts. Rebecca, the president of BSU, has found Twitter to be the most constructive platform for her activism work, because it is more ‘conversational’ than other platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram. Her experience of Twitter being more conversational is consistent with Bonilla and Rose (2015) which claims that Facebook is yesterday’s news, and Twitter moves faster. According to this study, that is the reason why Black Lives Matter activists took to Twitter to post up-to-date information regarding the killing of Michael Brown. The pace of information circulation is not only faster on Twitter, but the platform allows people to see the progression of topics of following the evolution of specific hashtags such as #blacklivesmatter.

In Rebecca’s experience, platforms like Twitter allow her to communicate with activists who are older and have diverse experiences. After bringing a famous activist to campus, she connected with him on social media, and they have continued to build a supportive relationship ever since:
We have been talking since then and I've been seeing his posts and he's been, you know, replying to mine and it's just been like a very beautiful, like relationship of support and like, um, almost like collaboration.

Rebecca showed me a private message that this activist sent her on social media, which included him asking her to keep each other in mind if projects and opportunities to work together in the future become available.
These messages document how the famous activist, who Rebecca met by connecting with him when he came to campus to speak, reached out to her over social media to maintain a supportive working relationship with her. Rebecca was one of the activist who felt that she needed to be in a leadership role at the University of Kenwood or no one else would because of the low percentage of Black and African American students on campus. For her, developing this relationship with another activist who exists outside the university social network was incredibly impactful. It shouldn’t be lost that the reason Rebecca is able to engage social media as a counterspace for growth with this activist is because of an in-person connection that she made when he was on-campus. The on-campus dynamic of bringing the activist worked alongside the social media to create an alternative kind of space where Rebecca gets to grow and learn from an experienced activist outside her university social world.

Learning from experienced activists and investing in long-term relationships with them is something that activist considered important in fostering their own ability to be well-informed, encouraged activists. Finding these connections can become difficult when their isn’t much diversity among peers in terms of age and life experience and expertise. This is especially difficult in the university context if there are not faculty and administrators who are able to mentor students and support them in their roles as student activists. College is a transitory time for students, and occasionally faculty and administration also experience high amounts of turnover. High numbers of administrators actually left the Center for Campus Diversity and Inclusion (CDI) this year, leaving many students who had relationships with the staff and the clubs that were funded through CDI without the support they used to have that was central to their success. Student activists felt as though they not only had to be full-time students and host activist-related events for students on campus, but there were no formal support structures in place to help them
succeed in these developing systems of support on campus which they needed in order to survive. Currently, informal structures of power are having to step in to roles in CDI because of the mass exodus of administrators.

Attending the discussion “Where Do We Go When Everyone Is Gone?”, during Race on Campus also illuminated how the small size of the university may initiate certain types of community-building behavior online outside the campus ‘bubble.’ This discussion was based on an article written by the university’s student newspaper detailed how the administration responsible for the Center for Diversity and Inclusion (CDI) on campus had been leaving the University of Kenwood, leaving CDI unstaffed by full time faculty. The journalist who wrote the article examined why this might have happened and the effect it has had on students who use CDI support services. During the discussion, students voiced their concerns about not having full time faculty to be liaisons between students and the rest of the administration. They felt as though students did not have the ability to constantly plan programming regarding issues of diversity and inclusion. This panel was particularly interesting because it brought up the ways in which students felt that University of Kenwood campus specifically silences and buries student voices by censoring the newspaper. Many students saw the most important aspect of the newspaper as being an outlet for student voices, which can be an important aspect of activism because it is a way of practicing resistance to structures of power (see theoretical section on defining activism in the context of the university).

The moderator for the discussion claimed that, “a lot of things on this campus rely on one or two people and then when they are gone it hurts,” meaning this small university has a delicate system in that when one faculty/administrator leaves, there is an unfilled position and the student body suffers from that loss. Student activists, particularly at this time in the university, crave for
there to be long-term investment in the success of minority groups of students, and they don’t believe it can be left up to the students to allocate resources and do the job of a full-time CDI faculty member, because they also need to benefit from the structure of CDI in order to be successful.

Social media can connect activists around the world if users take advantage of it, and for Rebecca this has inspired her with ways to improve her work for BSU on campus. Twitter specifically acts as a think tank space for her where activists of different experiences, ages, and socio-economic backgrounds who wouldn’t normally be in one another’s circles have the ability to share ideas and stories. It allows students like Rebecca to metaphorically ‘pop’ the insular bubble of the University by connecting with an international community of people seeking solidarity around the world:

There's a whole section on Twitter called ‘Black Twitter’ and that is like if you use that Hashtag you can find more people in the black community who are using Twitter like all around the world.

Vanessa is a social media connoisseur; she studies marketing at the University of Kenwood which gives her incredible insight as to how to manage the many social media club pages she is responsible for. When she described developing social media pages for BSU, she focused on how she curates the page to match the branding and aesthetic she wants for the organization. She posts on different social media platforms depending on what she is hoping to communicate to her audiences, which is consistent with Gershon (2015) which claims our ideologies about certain media determine what we chose to communicate on those platforms. Like Rebecca, Vanessa uses social media as a way to do research, or become more education, about how BSU clubs in other universities run their social media pages:
I would say that following [other users] is important just to heighten the awareness whenever you are hosting or providing information on such topics. So I follow a number of BSUs [Black Student Unions] at other schools just to be informed of things and events they are doing or even ideas sometimes to see how they're coordinating their pages and, you know, draw upon ideas because I'm a constant learner, you know, I'm gonna pool from each experience I have in my life.

One might believe that a secondary effect of these activists becoming more educated over social media is that their followers will, by association, also become educated. However, it can be difficult to gauge whether or not the followers of activists are actually increasing their education from reading or interacting with the content. This is because social media is not completely devoid of the social pressures that exist at the university to be ‘woke’ or ‘cool’ by engaging in the occasional activist practice. Matthew describes being ‘woke’ as being an ‘ally from afar,’ meaning that people do not choose to ‘be in the trenches’ with those who are suffering. The concept of ‘wokeness’ and ‘fake-wokeness’ was brought up in multiple interviews, though they were defined differently from interview to interview. Rebecca describes both of these terms as being purely social media concepts. She said activists don’t refer to themselves as being woke, because the word ‘woke’ comes from this idea that someone is ‘awakened’ to a certain reality. Rebecca describes being ‘fake-woke’ as claiming to be conscious of a problem, but this consciousness or the action attached to that consciousness is situational, temporary, or convenient. She contrasts this with the idea of what it means to be an activist, which is constant, often inconvenient, and potentially highly consequential.

Many of the interviewees claimed that social media encourages a culture of being ‘woke’ which is more focused on gaining social media ‘clout’ or popularity rather than actually becoming an educated ally. In fact, Matthew claims that the pressure to ‘hop on the bandwagon’
of certain movements is what caused him to get rid of his social media all together. This relates back to Zara’s story about how a white woman in her class was praised for bringing up something that Zara had already mentioned. It may be ‘cool’ or ‘woke’ for non-activists to post articles, and followers may express those sentiments through liking or commenting, yet people who are perceived as activists do not receive the same kind of recognition or attention. Zara claims her followers who are white receive more recognition than her, a person of color, because she believes people characterize her online actions as ‘too aggressive’ because of stereotypes of women of color bring ‘angry.’ Zara showed me an Instagram story (24 hour, temporary) post that she made on Thanksgiving that shared information about how the holiday disregards the genocide of Native Americans. It consisted of two images back-to-back:
After Zara posted these two images on her Instagram story, she said she “watched people unfollow her.” She compared the backlash she received from this post to the reaction that one of the white students in her living-learning community received after posting that she was going to fast on Thanksgiving as a way of not celebrating the holiday. Here are the commented responses that were connected to the post:

This girl’s post is filled with comments that affirm her decision to fast on Thanksgiving, which she refers to as a Day of Mourning. Zara responded to this by saying:

I see white girls in [my living-learning community] posting the same type of message… like pretty much saying the exact same thing [as me], but none of the resources and none of the information to support…. It was more like reposting, like a Shaun King tweet or something like that. I saw a couple of different white people do this and everyone praises
them. Everyone's like, wow, you're so cool. You're so caring. You're so woke, you do so much. Um, and I know that I'm being too political the second that I do something like that.

Zara perceives that her peers who are white are being placed on a pedestal when they are post something activist-related on social media. Zara claims that the rules that run the game in person when it comes to dismissing someone because of their politicized identity still exist in online spaces, and therefore they are not entirely capable of being a counterspace that allows students to resist the limitations of educational opportunity on-campus.
CONCLUSIONS

This study finds that students struggle to claim the title of ‘activist’ for themselves because it is embedded in connotations and expectations which create an ambivalent relationship with the term. Students who practice activism in ‘othered bodies’ are especially aware of the expectations ‘assigned’ to them to be activists on campus, and social media gives them the opportunity to forefront their identity in nuanced ways. Additionally, students cultivate allyship—a core element of their activism—by bridging, intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, in-person and online social spaces to bring people together for honest conversations and community building. Lastly, students navigate social media and in-person efforts to increase their own education in addition to the education of other students.

All of these practices can be characterized as forms of resisting societal narratives students experience in the particular University of Kenwood campus, which is private, small, liberal arts, and with a particular racial composition. It would be worth doing a study on a larger, public, research-based university to see how students engage in their social worlds in-person and online in different ways. Additional studies should be done on diverse populations of activists, including white conservatives, for example, in order to illuminate the range of experiences students have on college campuses.

This study situates the research in the particular campus space and queries why students do this or that due to this unique context that inform their social moves. This research emphasizes the fluidity of students’ social spaces to analyze the in-person and online actions as engaging in the same social world, simply through different platforms. This study argues that rather than conceptualizing online actions as the creation of a counterspace that is separate from in-person interactions, it is necessary to consider how in-person and online sociality are being
dynamically integrated through the interweaving of students’ social worlds. The nature of the spaces needs to be analyzed in order to understand the terms of sociality, the factors that make the space what is it, which activate certain functions and purposes in online action.
REFERENCES


