

# Young feminists, feminism and digital media

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## Abstract

Over recent years, young feminist activism has assumed prominence in mainstream media where news headlines herald the efforts of schoolgirls in fighting sexism, sexual violence and inequity. Less visible in the public eye, girls' activism plays out in social media where they can speak out about gender-based injustices experienced and witnessed. Yet we know relatively little about this significant social moment wherein an increasing visibility of young feminism cohabits a stubbornly persistent postfeminist culture. Acknowledging the hiatus, this paper draws on a qualitative project with teenage feminists to explore how girls are using and producing digital feminist media, what it means for them to do so and how their online practice connects with their offline feminism. Using a feminist poststructuralist approach, analyses identified three key constructions of digital media as a tool for feminist practice: online feminism as precarious and as knowledge sharing; and feminism as “doing something” on/offline. Discussing these findings, I argue that there is marked continuity between girls' practices in “safe” digital spaces and feminisms practised in other historical and geographical locations. But crucially, and perhaps distinctly, digital media are a key tool to connect girls with feminism and with other feminists in local and global contexts.

## Keywords

young feminists, feminism, activism, girls, feminist digital media, social media

## Introduction

The media spotlight on young feminist activism in contemporary times is unprecedented. Jessie McCabe and June Eric-Udorie's successful online petitions to include women composers and feminist thinkers in school curricula attracted world news headlines (Khomami, 2015; McTague, 2016) and Malala's advocacy

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for girls' education has assumed prominence in media around the globe. Often less visibly, teen girls harness social media to challenge the sexism, sexual harassment and sexual violence they encounter in their everyday worlds (Edell, Brown, & Tolman, 2013; Rentschler, 2014). Alongside this strong presence of teen girls' feminism in and out of the public eye, popular culture abounds with the notion that teenage girls are the vanguard of a "new wave", announcing them to be the "new faces" of feminism. The 2016 issue of *Teen Vogue*, for example, featured Amandla Stenberg on the cover with the heading "Power Girls: The New Faces of Feminism". The rise of the teen feminist in popular culture can be situated within a considerably broader popularisation of feminism in the media. Once invisible, oft overwhelmingly maligned, feminism is now staged as "cool" in mainstream media where it glows with a new "luminosity" and exerts an elasticity that seemingly enables "just about anything" to be "(re)signified as a feminist issue" (Gill, 2016, p. 619). Shadowing this celebratory media fascination with feminism, however, rape culture proliferates off and online and anti-feminism is a burgeoning presence in mainstream and online media (Keller, Mendes, & Ringrose, 2016).

In this article, I shift the lens from the visibility of feminism in the media to the everyday online feminist practices of young school-aged feminists. Clearly, the cultural "cool" of feminism and the wide dissemination of feminism and feminist activism via mainstream and digital media are a significant discursive resource for young feminists' understanding of self and others as feminists. So too does an antagonistic anti-feminist culture provide a significant context in which young feminism must somehow be navigated. At the same time, there are no obvious signs of postfeminist fatigue in popular culture (Gill, 2016). It is this somewhat murky brew of feminism, anti-feminism and postfeminism that creates a significant social moment in which to examine a seemingly unrivalled identification with feminism amongst girls who have grown up with a saturated postfeminist culture. Thus, an important goal of this article is to explore the complexions of feminism amongst teenage girls in the contemporary social moment. In the same way that research with girls themselves has usefully informed feminist debates about empowerment and sexualisation (e.g. Jackson, Vares, & Gill, 2013; Renold & Ringrose, 2011), exploring feminism from the perspectives of girls can similarly advance our knowledge, theorisation and understanding of evolving feminisms and their relationship (or not) to postfeminism. Digital media feature prominently in the contemporary feminist landscape and although a rapidly expanding feminist literature has begun to probe feminists' use of social media (particularly to counter sexism and rape culture), this work has largely been dominated by textual analyses (Kearney, 2006); very little research has explored digital feminism *with* young women, despite their high use of digital media (boyd, 2014), and such studies with teenage girls are particularly rare (with notable exceptions Keller, 2015; Retallack, Ringrose, & Lawrence, 2016). Addressing the hiatus, this article draws on a qualitative research project with teenage feminists to explore the ways they engage with digital media as a tool for feminist practice. First, however, I situate girls' feminism within a broader account of young women's relationships with, and expressions of, feminism.

## Contemporary young feminisms

Young women have historically been the excluded outsiders to feminism, their perspectives and concerns in feminist debates “virtually absent” (Budgeon, 2001, p. 12; Keller, 2015). An outsider status is particularly deepened for teenage girls through their construction as Other to feminism’s womanhood (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009). This exclusion is also more broadly a youth issue wherein young people have been left out of “what counts” as politics and constructed as apathetic and apolitical (Harris, 2008). Young women’s non-identification as feminist has often been (mis)read through a similar lens of political apathy and rejection of feminism (Frith, 2001). Seemingly consistent with this view, until quite recently feminist researchers were largely reporting young women’s distancing from feminism, in particular their (postfeminist) views of feminism as outmoded and unnecessary in a world where they purportedly have (more) equality with men (Budgeon, 2001; Scharff, 2010; Sharpe, 2001). Young women’s reluctance to identify as feminists can readily be understood in a discursive context where the meanings of feminism confer an abject, tainted identity as unfeminine, a man-hater or a trouble-maker (Frith, 2001; Ruddolfsdottir & Joliffe, 2008). Nor is disavowal of feminism surprising in a context of a tenacious postfeminist environment (Gill, 2016) that greatly complicates the feminist terrain through an individualising language of choice, rights and freedom. On the other hand, Budgeon argues that within this postfeminist environment we need a different lens with which to view young women’s (non)engagement with feminism. She ventures that young women practise a micro-politics at the level of everyday interactions using “a mixture of individualism wedded to feminist ideals” (p. 18) and that they use feminism as an “interpretive framework” that enables them to understand their social location in the gendered, inequitable society they inhabit. Anita Harris (2010) similarly contends that young women’s feminisms and activism are practised altogether differently within the marginalised and non-adult spaces they can safely occupy. Whereas young women may not label their practices and activism as feminist (Budgeon, 2001; Frith, 2001), they engage in feminism through involvement with wider activism (Taft, 2011).

A recent Special Issue of *Feminism & Psychology* (2016) amplifies this broad activism in a collection of articles that illuminate the strikingly diverse ways young feminists think about and practise feminism in different locations and from different cultural, social, ethnic and sexual perspectives. In contrast with feminisms of earlier historical locations, contemporary young women’s feminism strategically engages with media, technology and popular culture while extending its interests beyond gender and power (e.g. to environment, multiple oppressions) and its practices beyond traditional forms of activism such as protest marches and sit-ins (Aaopola, Gonick, & Harris, 2004). This focus on intersectionality, diversity and a politics of difference resonates strongly with a “third-wave” feminist agenda (Sowards & Renegar, 2004). Both the breadth of engagement and forms it takes may often make young women’s feminist practices less visible and so deemed apolitical within traditionally recognised forms of political activism (Harris). This is

particularly true of young women's participation in feminist activism in digital spaces.

Young feminists have a history of using media, popular culture and the internet as tools of feminist activism (Harris, 2010). During the 1990s the riotgrrls set out an agenda for a new, "girl-centred feminism", one focused on concerns expressed by girls and that blended feminist goals with "grrrlpower," "sassiness" and "autonomy" (Aaopola et al., 2004; Keller, 2015). Riotgrrls largely practised their activism in their own grrl-spaces, raising their resistant voices in the fanzines, webpages and punk rock music they created. In many ways, contemporary feminist activism in digital spaces can be seen as developing out of this history. Contributing to or creating their own spaces to give voice to their concerns, sometimes anger, and critiques characterises the presence of many contemporary young feminists online. Harris (2008, p. 482) argues that technology has enabled "new directions of activism" and facilitated political engagement for young women. Recent literature highlights some of the forms that these "new directions" take, from blogs (Keller) and hashtags (Eagle, 2015) to YouTube, Tumblr and mobile phone apps (Rentschler, 2014). Keller describes the online as an "alternative, parallel discursive arena" where girls can "talk back" to a mainstream culture in which their voices strain to be heard. It is also a space for resistance and a space to connect with other young feminists. Both Harris (2008) and Keller adopt dana boyd's (2008) notion of a "counterpublic" to characterise young activists' online spaces not only as a site for "agitation" but also for sharing, consciousness-raising (politicising personal experiences) and being part of a fluid, mobile feminist community.

Recently, the "new directions" in feminism enabled by new technologies, social media in particular, have been claimed as a "fourth wave" of feminism (Munro, 2013). Retallack et al. (2016, p. 86) characterise the "fourth wave" as "a sharing of voices, engagement with global politics, focus on intersectionality". Whether or not we have arrived at a "fourth wave", it is clear that the internet has increasingly become a key site of political practice amongst young feminists. It is, however, a somewhat contentious site; critics question whether online feminism can effect social change, privileging the offline as a site for "real" politics (Christensen, 2011; Harris, 2008). Conversely, Baer (2016, p. 18) suggests digital media "offer great potential" for (re)shaping feminist discourse and nurturing new modes of feminist activism. Following Baer, the capacity of social media to garner support precisely organised around agitating for change is now well established and, as documented in the introduction to this article, young feminists have successfully mobilised "networked publics" ("spaces constructed through networked technologies" that encompass the "imagined community" accessed; boyd, 2008, p. 9) to achieve social change via online petitions and campaigns. But, as Harris points out, young women's politics must also be understood more broadly than conventions of petitions and protests. Young feminists themselves have identified information sharing, education and building community as important platforms of their online feminism and activism (Keller, 2015; Schuster, 2013). Such practices may also effect change at the level of a "micro-politics", enabling young women to bring

feminist politics to ways they understand their own everyday experiences of sexism, racism, misogyny and homophobia (Budgeon, 2001; Harris, 2008).

Although there is an emergent literature about young women's digital feminist practices that tells us what they are doing online and where, we know relatively little about what such participation means for their feminism or sense of self (Keller, 2015; Retallack et al., 2016). This is especially so for high school age girls whose engagement with feminism is remarkably under-researched (Taft, 2011). Drawing from a broader study with high school feminists, I ask in this article: how are girls using and producing digital media as part of their feminist practice, what does it mean for them to do so and what do they see as digital feminism's constraints and potential? I use the term "digital media" to denote all forms of online sites but use social media (sites that enable sharing of content) where it is specifically the platform used by girls. In line with boyd (2014), I view the on/offline as two of the many different social contexts that teens inhabit and the relationship between them (and within the online) as seamless, a relationship greatly facilitated by smartphone technology (Hjorth & Cumskey, 2013).

## **Description of the study**

In this article I draw on data from an interview study which was part of a larger project about the meanings and practices of feminism amongst girls who participated in high school feminist clubs. School-based feminist clubs, particularly those that are student initiated, appear to be a novel, recent phenomenon, and their existence provided a unique opportunity to explore feminism in high schools within a safe context for the girls. The project comprised three parts, each with a different purpose: feminist club meeting observations provided a way to build a relationship with the girls and to document feminist club activities; focus groups broadly aimed to illuminate what feminism meant to girls and how they experienced it within the personal and social spheres of their everyday lives; individual interviews, on which this article is based, aimed to explore digital media as a platform for both consumption of feminist content and production of it (as in posting, blogging, reblogging feminist content) in relation to young feminists' activism and practices.

Three schools with feminist clubs, located in two large New Zealand cities, agreed to students participating in the project. I negotiated my research process with the leaders of each feminist club, including consent to observe meetings and recruitment of participants. Uniformly, the process involved a presentation about the research at a club meeting, after which girls were given a brochure about the research and consent forms (including a consent form for parents to sign if they were under 16). Girls were advised that they could consent to either digital media interviews or focus group discussions or to both. Thirty girls took part in focus groups that ranged in size from seven to nine participants. Although 17 girls agreed to individual interviews, school timetabling at the end of the year precluded opportunities to interview five of these girls. All girls interviewed had participated

in a focus group, and thus a relationship had already been established prior to the interview. The youngest participant was age 15 and the oldest 18, but the majority were aged 16–17. Girls' self-reported ethnicities spanned at least one of the following: NZ European (19), British (2), Sri Lankan (2), Maori (1), Fijian-Indian (1), Iranian (1), Polish (1), Russian (1), Australian (1) and Chinese (1). Four participants were immigrants (Iran, Sri Lanka, Fijian-Indian); the remainder were New Zealand born. All participating schools drew largely on economically advantaged populations, but assumptions cannot be made about individual students.

The girls who participated in interviews were representative of participants as a whole in terms of age, ethnicity and school of origin. They were able to choose their venue, and all but one took place in a school office (one girl chose a café). Using a laptop loaded with screen-recording software, girls were invited to share and talk about the digital sites that formed part of their regular engagement with online feminist media. Each site was then discussed, guided by an invitation for girls to talk about what the digital site offered them in terms of their feminist interests and concerns. An open-ended interview structure allowed me to respond to, comment on, and query girls about the content they showed me. Girls were also asked to share any posts, reposts or blogs that they had produced and to elaborate the situation that had led them to post/repost an item. Both the interviews and the focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. In compliance with the researcher's university code of ethics, both school and participant data were anonymised through pseudonyms at the point of transcription to protect confidentiality.

The central interest of the project coheres around what feminism and feminist practice mean for young women and the part played by digital media in developing, informing and sustaining these meanings. Using a feminist poststructuralist approach (Gavey, 2011), I understand young women's sense-making of digital feminism as both an agentic practice and one that is necessarily constrained, and also complicated, by the discursive resources available to them. Specifically, and analytically, this means I value girls' expressed views whilst also understanding them as informed (and possibly limited) by the myriad of feminist, postfeminist and anti-feminist discourses that are available to them across diverse media platforms and other social contexts (including feminist clubs). For the purposes of this article, I selected thematised data from the larger interview dataset that could answer the central question of interest here: what role do digital media play in young women's understandings and practices of feminism? Working with extracts within thematic codes of activism, safety and confidence, pedagogy and intersectionality that connected with this question, I then used discursive analyses to identify ways girls constructed feminism and feminist practices in relation to digital media, the discursive resources implicated in those constructions and the ways girls constituted themselves as young feminists through the discourses available to them. Three discursive constructions dominated girls' talk: digital feminism as precarious, as knowledge sharing and as "doing something" on and offline. I discuss each of these in the following section.

## Analysis and discussion

Girls in the study each had their preferred online sites for accessing feminist-related content, but all used the club Facebook page. Sites such as BuzzFeed, Huffingtonpost (Woman), Rookie, Everydayfeminism and feminist club Facebook pages functioned as “hubs” from which girls located links to sites and items related to their areas of feminist interest. Contrary to popular discourses positioning young people as online addicts, girls commonly mentioned their use of “hubs” as maximising the limited time they have to spend online. Girls’ newsfeeds on Facebook also expanded their access to feminist content via having previously “liked” an item. But it is also important to underline girls’ use of online news media as a well-used source of posts to their social media sites both for critique and commendation. Indeed, this attention to news media was part of a wider pattern wherein girls noted that they often located items of feminist interest or concern on sites that were not explicitly feminist (e.g. BuzzFeed; Rookie, TED talks).

Acknowledging the intertwining media consumer/producer relationship as a crucial dynamic, the following sections focus more on the (re)producer arm of the relationship. All of the girls were active in sharing feminist posts to the various social media sites they engaged with but relatively few posted to public sites. The data presented in the following sections provide a way to understand how social media may function as a tool for girls’ feminism and activism. The first two sections, respectively, explore social media use as a precarious practice for feminism and as a tool for sharing knowledge about feminist issues and concerns. The third section illuminates the centrality of “doing something”, both on and offline, to feminist identification.

### *“Social media’s a bit risky”: Online feminism as precarious*

In general, girls articulated a strong reluctance to participate on public social media sites to re/post comments or items about feminist concerns or issues. This reluctance contrasted starkly with their regular participation in the closed Facebook pages for their respective feminist clubs, which girls identified as a key site for their involvement as consumers and producers of feminist content. One source of girls’ expressed reluctance to post on public social media sites stemmed from doubts about their ability or level of feminist knowledge. For example, some girls considered that what they had to say would not be important or good enough to be read (and “followed”/“liked”) and that posting on open sites could be “intimidating,” whilst others expressly mentioned a lack of confidence. A girl’s self-confidence doubts may readily be understood within a wider “uncertainty about her place in feminism amongst those who seem experts” (Kennelly, 2009, p. 266; see also Taft, 2011) and also her status as the excluded “other” to feminism’s womanhood (Currie et al., 2009). More broadly, the contemporary neoliberal social moment is marked by precarity or uncertainty that feeds into anxieties about whether one is a “good feminist” or not or “doing” feminism correctly

(Householder, 2015). Thus, girls may view posting on public sites as a risky venture that will reveal their assumed insufficiency as feminists.

However, girls' reluctance to re/post on open "networked publics" primarily connected to their perception of them as emotionally unsafe spaces to participate. This construed lack of safety emanated from girls' witness to, in their words, the "rude", "horrible" comments and "attacks" both on feminism and the person who created the post. A body of media and literature references the "toxicity" of exchanges about feminism, not only from anti-feminists and misogynists (Horeck, 214) but also between feminists (Thelandersson, 2014). Amaya and Roksana want to avoid such vitriolic experiences:

Sue: So would you ever post things on social media?

Amaya: I always like I'm quite like actually quite quiet on social media because I tend to think like I think it's better to stay a bit like abstinent in social media because social media does get a bit like out of control and like and you know social media's a bit risky as well if you think about it you know. (Sri Lankan, 17, Coney Girls)

Roksana: I really hardly post on facebook, I sort of yeah, I don't really post anything of myself

Sue: Ok but like if we, like this kind of thing would you post that on your facebook page? (viewing video *Oppressed Majority* on YouTube)

Roksana: I think yeah, yeah I guess like in all honesty I guess I would be worried about what kind of comments it would get, which is sort of, isn't a really good thing to be thinking because how else am I going to learn how it is if we don't take risks and do it, but yeah this would be the kind of thing that I would. (Pakeha [Maori term for white person], 16, Coney Girls)

Amaya's construction of social media may be understood as mobilising anxiety-laden discourses situating social media as an "out of control" and risky presence in young people's lives (Keller, 2015). But for Amaya and Roksana, the implicit risk and "worry" centres on vitriolic attacks from the anti-feminist, misogynist commentators who might respond to any opinions they post from a feminist perspective. Some scholars have argued that the anonymity of the online grants safety for feminist participation online (Harris, 2008), but anonymity cannot provide a shield from abusive responses. Young women in Schuster's (2013) study spoke of being adversely affected by "severe criticisms" of their comments which impacted on their willingness to engage in further online activism. Nonetheless, Roksana recognises value in posting despite the "risks", in that it may further her own "learning" as a young feminist. A strong pedagogical discourse in which girls positioned themselves as students learning and "growing" in their feminism through digital media commonly threaded girls' narratives, and this discourse is elaborated in the second section of the analysis.

Within a largely antagonistic, anti-feminist environment for feminist expression on public social media sites, it is not surprising that girls predominantly post on sites they perceive to be safe and supportive (Keller, 2015; Sills et al., 2016). For all the girls in this study, the feminist club Facebook page was such a site. Zoe explains how her club's Facebook enables girls to post with confidence, knowing that the



site is free of the “not necessarily nice attitudes” they might encounter if they posted on a public space.

Sue: Yeah, yeah so that makes it all the more important I guess to have a site like [fem club site], where yeah as you say it’s a safe, a safe space in which to kind of

Zoe: Yeah and I think that’s why people feel a lot more confident posting in it like expressing themselves more freely than they would, like people wouldn’t necessarily share to that public profile what they would post on [femclub site] because if you, you know post it in a public profile anyone can comment on it and a lot of it...not necessarily nice attitudes. (Pakeha, 16, Sheppard Girls)

Zoe’s identification of the club Facebook page as a site where girls can post with “confidence” underscores the importance of a “girls-only” space for them to express their feminist views. Within such a space girls may develop what Keller calls “relational agency” which refers to the way in which connections with other supportive friends and activists enable girls’ feminist politics. Relevant to Zoe’s comments, Keller also makes the point that girls’ online communities provide the only safe space for exploration and sharing of feminist ideas. Girl bloggers in her study tended to comment only on *F-Bomb*, an online feminist community expressly for high school girls. In the remainder of the paper, I explore girls’ participation in safe (closed) “networked publics”.

### *“My way of helping is knowledge”: Online feminism as knowledge-sharing*

Young women’s online feminist activity commonly involves practices such as knowledge sharing that are not recognised as “real” feminism (Harris, 2008). Yet for the girls in this study, “getting the word out” about issues and topics of importance to feminism held a highly valued status. For most, knowledge sharing involved reposting to the feminist club Facebook site or, less often, to a closed personal Tumblr or Facebook page. Many girls were concerned about feminism’s “bad press” and, in particular, the misinformation that proliferated online as well as in their school, friendship and family networks. Not surprisingly, then, the desire to correct misconceptions and “spread the word” about feminism inspired some of the girls’ online activity. Although not particularly active online herself, Roksana underlined posting and blogging as important feminist practices:

Roksana: Yeah, I mean speaking of a hypocritical oath it would I think definitely we should be posting and blogging, and trying as much to get it out, which sounds a bit hypocritical because I’m not so much doing it myself

Roksana affirms information sharing as a feminist tool “to get it [feminism] out”, to make feminist concerns visible, whilst admonishing herself as a hypocrite for not doing so more often. Yet, as explored in the previous section, making oneself visible as a feminist in open “networked publics” through posting or blogging is not an easy practice for these teenage girls, and Roksana’s limited

participation may be understood, in part, within the context of a hovering presence of anti-feminist hostility in a (public) social media environment. Within sites girls constructed as safe, however, the desire to share knowledge about feminist issues characterised much of what it meant to be a feminist. This pedagogical function of social media assumed particular importance for Aione:

Aione: So this is my Tumblr, I don't know I just kind of post things I like where I see that I think are important and I add like more people. Cause I think with feminism I think when people are against it they don't know what it means or they're just not educated in the whole meaning or they have an understanding of it semi but don't realise how it affects everyone.

.....

It's just knowledge is the best way of spreading these ideas and concepts is just letting everyone know that this is happening and sort of why it's happening.

.....

It is always hard because you don't know how. I suppose my way of helping is knowledge I suppose and that's kind of all I've got at the moment so I continue.  
(Irish, 16, Coney Girls)

The meanings of feminism for Aione weave through these three selections of her interview talk. One thread that constitutes her feminist practice is posting “things” she thinks are “important” to share with others, extending her list of contacts to further the reach of what she posts. She implies that the people she shares “things” with are those that are not educated in the “whole meaning” of feminism or who only have a partial understanding of it. In common with young feminists in other studies (Keller, 2015; Taft, 2011), Aione sees educating others about feminism as an important tool for creating awareness; in her words, this involves “spreading these ideas and concepts” to inform better understandings of “what is happening” and “sort of why”. Aione speaks from a position of agency as the bearer of knowledge; she is the “knower” in contrast to the less informed “other”. A second thread to her feminist practice is the notion of “helping”, the context for which is a strong desire for others to know about issues such as inequality and sexual violence that she articulated preceding the extract. Aione views sharing knowledge as the “only” tool currently available to her in order to “help” make some kind of difference in a world of gendered inequities. Keller observes, “Girls’ activist practices are shaped by their social location as girls” (p. 70) and so they must rely on the resources and skills that are available to them. For Aione, Tumblr provides an accessible tool that enables her to channel feminist knowledge to others. Moreover, the potential power of knowledge as a tool of change is something Aione has first-hand experience of as a student immersed in education but also from her own experience of learning about feminism (“I was like wow why doesn't everyone stand up for so many people”). Like Aione, Taylor similarly identified knowledge sharing as part of her online feminist practice:

Sue: Is there any one particular thing that you've read on this, maybe something just recently that you thought was just absolutely excellent?

Taylor: There was, I think this one, ‘what’s wrong with cultural appropriation’, it might not have been this exact article because they might have done another one about it, but because it’s such a complex issue that like (*Yeah*) like when I first heard it I was like, I felt like I didn’t understand it, so was trying to research into it, and then if a friend, I could have a conversation with them and they don’t get it, then I will send them this article because it’s (*Yeah*) the way they talk about it is really clear, I’m like it just makes you understand it (*Yeah*) because it is quite complicated. (NZ European, 16, Edgar Co-ed)

Cultural appropriation had been a much discussed and debated topic in Taylor’s recent feminist club meetings. The topic meshed with the importance Taylor placed on feminism as an intersectional concern throughout her interview and subsequently, like many of the other girls in the study whose online activity focused on intersectionality, her online interests centred on issues related to race and non-normative gender and sexuality identifications.

Although an important issue for third wave feminists, intersectionality in a so-called fourth wave of feminism is characterised by the use of social media which has enabled diverse, marginalised women’s voices to be relayed across the globe (Munro, 2013). In the above extract Taylor has selected an item on cultural appropriation as an example of a post that she found to be, in my words, “absolutely excellent”. The value of the article appears to be pedagogical in that it makes this “complicated” concept accessible through its clear explanation. Two aspects of the pedagogical status of the cultural appropriation article are of particular interest here. One is the way in which Taylor positions herself as an active “student” of feminism, using social media to “research” and learn more about topics that, for her, are part of what it means to be a young feminist. The construction of feminism within a pedagogical framework was striking, both in the interviews and the focus groups. Girls commonly located themselves within a developmental trajectory as “growing” in their feminism through using social media sites as a learning tool. Both Keller and Taft similarly report a learning discourse amongst their participants. For Keller’s (2015) girls this pedagogical discourse was drawn on in an empowering way that granted them space to “make mistakes” and to explore feminism. There is a sense of Taylor’s “research” as a similarly empowering activity that is further strengthened by the agency evident in her positioning as a feminist educator who uses social media to enable her friends to also learn more about feminist issues. However, the online is not a privileged tool in this educative process. Rather than mutually exclusive, Taylor’s narrative underlines the complementarity of the on/offline where the online works in tandem with face-to-face conversation as a pedagogical tool.

**“We still have to go away and do something”:  
Feminism as “doing something” on/offline**

This third and final section of the analysis explores the forms and meanings of activism that sometimes complicated and at other times appropriated the on/offline

binary. Despite the clear evidence to suggest the online facilitates changes and/or resistances in the offline, the notion of the online as an apolitical space disconnected from the “real” world is persistent (Christensen, 2011). This privileging of the offline reflects the stubborn persistence of a masculinist, traditional construction of politics that equates activism with on-the-ground agitation and protest (Harris, 2008). These traditionalist views of politics haunt my conversation with Alice:

Sue: . . . amongst the debates is that, this idea that because like because this is kind of limited to the online world, that it's not, it's not activism, that that's not feminist activism. (Alice: It's clicktivism) What do you think? (Alice: Yeah) I know it's been called, it's rudely being maligned as slacktivism

Alice: Oh yeah, yeah I think that there is, like at times it can be really helpful, and it can like when you're working with something online that's a problem, you need to work online to change it, so I think that's where it can be important, and it allows [fem club] to have that other dimension, that we expand wider than just the meetings on Friday, but it is at the same time really important to do stuff out of the internet, like if I was to sign this petition, and it went to the government, my name would be, like striked off because I'm not on the electoral roll, so there's no point in me signing a petition, but I feel like I'm doing something, so I suppose that's good but at the same time . . . (European, 17, Sheppard Girls)

Alice signals her familiarity with a discourse that dismisses online activism as ineffective – her term “clicktivism” conveys the same sense of minimal involvement as “slacktivism” (Christensen, 2011). But her construction of the online as a space for activism concurs more with discourses of the “fourth wave” (Retallack et al., 2016) and with a youth politics (Harris, 2008) than with dismissive critics of the online as a political tool. As several scholars (e.g. Horeck, 2014; Rentschler, 2014) remind us, the online has enabled new forms of feminist politics and given expression to multiple feminist voices, but it is also a site where sexism and rape culture have equally proliferated. Alice recognises that such “problematic” online content requires an online feminist activism in response. At the same time, however, her valuing of “doing something” “out of the internet” constructs the insufficiency of an online-only feminist activism. So, interestingly, even though challenging problematic online content has “importance” it does not meet Alice's criteria for “doing something”. Given a discursive context in which young women's online politics are dismissed, or treated with contempt, it is perhaps not surprising that Alice might not consider online activism to be “doing something”. Petitions, on the other hand, seem to accord with her understanding of an active activism, although the fact that they are now largely managed online calls into question her meanings of “offline”. Possibly, it is the potential for bringing about a change offline that differentiates the petition from activism related to online content. Elsewhere in her interview, Alice revealed she had petitioned Facebook and YouTube to take down sexist videos and posts, actions that clearly position her as a feminist activist, “working with something online that's a problem”. In this excerpt she refers to sharing a petition to the feminist club Facebook page that may arguably effect an offline change (the

petition sought an apology from the Prime Minister for his comments about the sexual abuse of women). Despite the impotence of signing a petition because she is not of legal age, the act of signing and sending the petition nonetheless fulfils Alice's desire to be "doing something" about something she cares about. Like Alice, bloggers in Keller's (2015) research understood activism to be "doing something", the active expression of feminism, and they also named petitions as examples of such activism. Yet through their social location, girls like Alice are often shut out from forms of activism considered to be authentic, such as protests and signing petitions. However, Alice's action in posting the petition to the club page constitutes an act of fostering political awareness amongst feminist club members.

Similar to Alice, Caitlin viewed feminist activism confined to the online as a limited practice. She was highly critical of a particular online practice that reduced feminism to a politics of the "problematic" through its focus on critiques of language use.

..... and it's all about language as well especially, not so much about actions which annoys me because it's, which is what, it's what kind of feminism's become a lot, because we do so much of it online when we're writing out words, so it's about what you're saying not what you're doing, and it's about picking apart what people say and stuff, which like yeah it annoys me, it is like it's actually about the doing, but how we get to the doing is by this [referring to the online sites viewed] (Sue: *From this yeah*). But we still have to go away and do something, like you cannot just be a feminist by being online and, I mean you can being online but and just picking apart what celebrities say, because it just, it's not really doing that much  
[NZ European, 18, Edgar Co-ed]

A feminist club leader, Caitlin produced content for meetings and organised protests and fund-raisers for community organisations such as Rape Crisis and Family Planning. This background of activism inside and outside of school-based feminism contextualises her critiques of a form of online feminism that is "all about language, not so much about actions" and involves "picking apart what people say". Caitlin's critiques are shared by some feminist scholars. Thelander (2014), for example, critiques online policing that calls out and blames other feminists for "offensive terminology". For Caitlin, "doing" feminism means more than "writing words" online, which she constructs as a dominant practice amongst girls, herself included (although possibly her "we" extends to feminists more generally). In common with Keller's (2015) bloggers, feminism requires "doing something," but in Caitlin's case this "doing" must extend beyond the online. As discussed earlier, constructions of activism as an offline activity inhabit traditional, masculinist, adult-centred discourses of activism that work to erase and marginalise girls' online practices of activism. The privileging of offline forms of activism provides one way of understanding Caitlin's construction of "doing something" as requiring more than online feminist activity. However, it is not the case that Caitlin privileges the offline over the online but rather that (i) online critiques focussed on language are a very limited form of political practice and (ii) the online

can work as a conduit and/or precursor for action offline (“how we get to the doing is through this”; see also Harris, 2008)). Later in her interview Caitlin provided an example of the latter, using the club Tumblr she had created to organise a protest outside the city’s abortion clinic where “right to life” protesters harangued women entering the clinic. Caitlin emphasised the connection with other feminists in the wider community achieved through using Tumblr to gather on the ground support for the protest. This capacity for social media to build a sense of belonging to a feminist community has been identified as important to young feminists and works to offset a sense of isolation (Keller, 2015; Schuster, 2013).

## Concluding commentary

In this article I aimed to illuminate practices of feminism amongst a population that has largely been invisible in research about feminism – teenage girls. Against the sticky persistence of postfeminism and increasingly vitriolic anti-feminism on and offline, the girls who feature in this article embrace a feminist identification online and within their schools. It is very clear from their narratives that digital media form an integrated part of their feminist practice and that it is a key mode for sharing information, learning about and researching feminism, critique and protest. But girls’ participation in digital feminism is not experienced or practised in a uniform way, reflecting that feminism itself is not monolithic (Scharff, 2010). For some girls, like Amaya and Roksana, engagement with social media is minimal; for others, like Alice and Caitlin, it is an integral and integrated part of their everyday feminism; and for yet others, like Taylor and Aione, it falls somewhere in between. In the remainder of this article, I theorise meanings of girls’ digital feminism within a framework of feminist politics and highlight ways it connects with feminisms practised in other geographical and historical locations.

As Keller (2015) suggests, when girls take up a feminist identity it is a resistant, political act. Doing so resists postfeminist discourses of feminism’s redundancy, it troubles discourses of youth as apathetic and apolitical, and it collapses the abiding passive, good girl femininity of girlhood discourses. As the girls’ data compellingly show, digital media provide an important tool for constructing an active political identity as a young feminist through the production and reproduction of posts related to feminist issues. Keller reminds us that girls must work with the limited resources they have, as girls, to create an activist, feminist identity. Digital media comprise a familiar, readily accessible resource for girls to participate in feminist politics. For girls featured in this article, feminist club Facebook pages, and to a lesser extent personal Facebook and Tumblr accounts, provided a key hub for sharing information, educating others and critiquing culture. At the same time, however, their narratives underlined that being a “girl” sometimes works to constrain girls’ participation in feminist politics online. Although the lurking presence of trolls and anti-feminists online risks attack for young and older women, girls’ status as girls and their “newness” to feminism may arguably undermine confidence in their ability to deal with attacks. Similarly, concerns about making comments that might be criticised by older, more experienced feminists operate to limit

sites of participation. A history of girls' exclusion and marginalisation within feminism frames confidence issues as unsurprising, although girls' self-positioning as inexperienced feminists, who use digital media to learn more about feminism, does not necessarily constitute them as lacking agency. Rather, consistent with a Foucauldian theorisation of discourse as both enabling and constraining, girls may embrace their status as active learners with permission to "make mistakes" (Keller, 2015; Taft, 2011) as part of the process of becoming feminists. Nonetheless, girls do confront age-based limitations to political activism. As highlighted in Alice's account, as much as girls may wish to support a cause by adding their name to a petition, they are denied a voice until they are of legal age.

To recognise the online feminist activities of the girls in this study as political it is essential, as Anita Harris (2008) argues, to expand understandings of "political" and "activism" beyond practices, protests and lobbying in the public eye. Girl bloggers in Keller's study defined the essential element of activism as "doing something", the desire, in participant Julie's words, to "change hearts and minds". For girls in Taft's (2011) research the "actually doing something" incorporated a desire to create change in order to make the world a better place for others. These sentiments are not vastly different to those of a more traditional political perspective, but the processes of change differ markedly from marches and protests: education, mutual support, and creating inclusive and equitable school communities more typically characterise young women's activism (Harris, Taft). The findings from both Keller and Taft's studies bear close resemblance to the feminist practices highlighted in the girls' accounts presented here. Practised largely within the safe, closed sites of their feminist club Facebook or Tumblr accounts, the girls' feminist politics are invisible to outsiders. It is this invisibility in online spaces that props up suggestions that young women are disengaged from feminist politics yet, as Harris argues, their participation in adult/regulation free spaces and communities is undoubtedly political. The shape of that politics for the girls whose narratives appear here is marked by different contours and accents. "Doing something" can mean spreading awareness about feminism to others outside the feminist club; it can be sharing information about topics deemed important to a girl's feminism, such as cultural appropriation; it can be working to change or challenge online "problematic" representations; and it can be learning and researching about feminism. However, for Caitlin and Alice "doing something" also required an offline publicly visible activism. Although it could be argued that these girls were pulled towards discourses that construct the online as apolitical and privilege offline activism, I would suggest that the girls' construction of complementarity interrupts an on/offline binary to alternatively embrace a feminist politics of "and" that appropriates both the digital and the offline.

Although some commentators argue that feminist practices online distinctively mark out a new, "fourth wave" feminism, the girls' narratives contain many resonances with feminisms practised in other geographical and historical locations. Feminism has long been concerned with political agency and I would argue that girls' access to digital media production enables an agency, where girls are particularly empowered by a feminist pedagogy – gathering and passing on

knowledge – and by “doing something” to address social injustices. So too have different expressions of feminism emphasised community, for example within the consciousness-raising groups that featured strongly in feminism during the 1970s. Feminist club Facebook and Tumblr pages create a supportive online community for girls to share knowledge, express critiques and to organise offline events. These safe spaces thus work as “a means for developing political consciousness, a space that can legitimise girls’ issues” (Garrison, 2000, p. 152). Some of those concerns overlap considerably with the injustices voiced by feminists through history: rights to abortion, sexism, rape and sexual abuse. A focus on intersectional concerns arguably relates more expressly to a “third wave agenda” (Sowards & Renegar, 2004), as indeed does the use of digital technologies as part of a feminist practice. Digital media clearly work to connect girls with feminism and other feminists in both local and global contexts. Yet to construct a binary between online and offline feminism would be a mistake: there is no switch to turn feminist awareness or values on or off; emerging young feminisms seem to be urging inclusiveness, attuned to feminism as plural and practices that blur the off and online.

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