**Celebrity, sex, fashion ... and feminism?: Exploring the
relationship between popular feminist media blogs and
perceptions of feminism**

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the intersections of online media and popular feminist discourse by looking at how young women perceive feminism and are engaging with feminist media blogs—that is, blogs with a focus on women-positive and feminist perspectives that challenge narrow mainstream media messages. Employing a qualitative methodology, this thesis investigates the subjective experiences of young women (18 and 19 years old) who read, and engage with, online feminist media blogs including: *Jezebel*, *Feministing*, *Racialicious*, *Ms. Magazine* and *Bitch Media*.

As an extension to current research on online feminist media that focus on feminist media websites, my research focuses on the user's experiences and perspectives on the role the medium plays in their everyday lives similar to early research on readers of women's magazines (Budgeon, 1999; Hermes, 1995). The results from the interviews reveal three themes: the role of entertainment and information in feminist media blog content; emerging feminist consciousness of the participants; and, finally, blurred online and offline boundaries. Ultimately, I argue that feminist media blogs can be a transformative space for some young women who have little initial exposure to feminism. Feminist media blogs can disperse the idea that the need for feminism continues despite postfeminist claims to the contrary. I conclude that such sites engender this possibility by virtue of being accessible and entertaining and thus should not be discounted as apolitical and/or ineffective.

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Dedication

For Mom and Soraya.

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Introduction

Situating the Research

Again and again, bloggers described pop-culture posts to me as a “gateway drug” for young women ... like *Feminist Ryan Gosling*, a blog that features the adorable star of *Drive* “citing” poststructuralist philosopher Judith Butler. Is it a joke? A turn-on? A sly carrier for theory? It doesn’t really matter, because it’s the perfect viral pass-around. (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 2)

Having been born in the late 1980s myself, I was among a generation of young Canadian women who spent a significant part of their adolescent lives online. Along with my peers, I became a young adult amidst the influx of online popular culture, much of which conveyed values and assumptions that caused me to reflect upon my own identity as a feminist. Eventually, I stumbled upon *Jezebel*, which is an online feminist media blog not unlike *Feminist Ryan Gosling* that Emily Nussbaum (2011) mentions in the above quote. Although part of my interest in *Jezebel* was the guilty pleasure I received from popular culture news and celebrity gossip, it also exposed me to discussions of feminism and thus helped to shape my newfound feminist values. From *Jezebel*, I found my way across a multitude of online feminist resources as well as other feminist media websites. I also quickly found myself more engaged in feminist class discussions because I felt my opinion was better informed and grounded in contemporary and critical understandings of current events. Even today, I store all my bookmarked feminist websites on my RSS reader, and every morning I check the feed to update myself on current news happenings from multiple perspectives.

Popular feminist media blogs are an important avenue of sociological analysis because they are widely read in the blogosphere – the connected network of blogs on the Internet. For instance, *Jezebel* received 8.4 million reads each month last year

(*Gawker Media*, 2013). Through a preliminary review of the literature, however, it became apparent that existing research exploring *Jezebel* and other feminist media websites was rare and focused on content and textual analyses (Wazny, 2010; Ferguson, Kreshel, & Tinkham, 1990) similar to research on young women's magazines (Budgeon & Currie, 1995; Evans, Rutberg, Sather, & Turner, 1991). Rather than emphasizing what the medium does to communication, more scholarship was needed on what people do with the medium (Hermes, 1995; Baym, 2010; boyd, 2008; 2014). For instance, while viral photos of Ryan Gosling citing Judith Butler may make feminism popular to a wide audience, what do readers do with this information and, how does this content impact their perception of feminisms?

My research, therefore, asks three interrelated questions: What role, if any, does online feminism play in the everyday lives of young women? What are the perceptions of their own feminism, and feminism more generally that the participants hold prior to and during the consumption of online feminist media websites? And, finally, whether these online media sources have helped young women understand feminism, and whether their ideas about feminism have changed with the consumption and engagement with these sites. The purpose of this project is to gain a more nuanced understanding of how feminist media shapes one's knowledge, perceptions and opinions about feminists' concerns, such as gender inequality and its intersections with other vectors of oppression. The research pays specific attention to the role that online media plays in shaping young women's narratives of feminism. Moreover, this research aims to add to the body of scholarly

literature on the implications of disseminating feminist voices through feminist online media websites for young women in an age where we are immersed in technology like no other previous generation has been. Ultimately, I argue that online feminist blogs, as forms of entertainment, play a significant role in disseminating feminist commentary, practical information and breaking down postfeminist¹ discourses because these blogs are accessible and provide multiple feminist perspectives to many readers.

My experiences with online feminist media, as well as the popular claim that we live in a postfeminist era where it's valid to ask "Is Feminism Dead?" (*Time Magazine*, 1998) and to assert, "Why Women's Studies Needs a Makeover" (Tietel, 2013), have led me to consider further the relationship between feminist online popular culture and young women's perceptions of feminism. Further exploring this relationship is especially relevant at a time when scholars have been paying close attention to young women and young feminists' role in political participatory culture (Harris, 2008; Zaslow, 2011). Scholars such as Anita Harris (2008), Shelley Bugdeon (2001) and Christina Sharff (2012) have paid particular attention to young women's perceptions of feminism and reported that although young women often refute a feminist identity they also seem to support feminist ideals such as gender equality. According to Shelley Bugdeon (2001) and Imelda Whelehan (1995), feminist ideals are commonsensical in the everyday realities of many young women but are not explicitly or actively termed "feminist;" as a result, feminist ideals and feminist

¹ I understand postfeminism to be a cultural sensibility that is promoted through contemporary popular culture that acknowledges the successes of feminism and simultaneously repudiating feminism (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004; Sharff, 2012). Postfeminism will be further discussed in Chapter Two.

identities do not necessarily go hand-in-hand.

Budgeon (2001) argues that young women's resistance to embracing a feminist identity may be caused by disillusionment with the notion that feminism represents all women equally. This change is often argued to be due to a generational divide between "old feminism" and "new feminism", because the issues important to the women of yesterday are no longer the central concerns for young women today (Budgeon, 2001). But many feminist writers contend that old and new feminists share many of the same ideologies. Many contemporary feminist writers are one group who specifically reprint and cite second wave writing such as: do-it-yourself health care, and rearticulating how cultural products are represented in mainstream media (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010; Piepmeier & Zeisler, 2009). In this way, many new articulations of feminism draw from older feminism and articulate the same goals in a different cultural context, but they also break from these with a focus on lived experiences, personal stories, and popular culture to name a few (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010; Walker, 1995). Consequently, Anita Harris (2010) contends,

[w]hat is required, I think, is an openness in our ideas about what constitutes feminist politics today, especially a greater understanding of the function of micro-political acts and unconventional activism in this historical moment as well as recognition of links with past practice. Such an approach might enable us to yet move beyond generationalism to forge a new feminism we do not yet know. (p. 481)

I adopt Harris's critique and aim to explore a potential new feminism that is online and that is engaging with young women who are also online. This study, therefore, focuses on the subjective experiences of young women because young adulthood is a time when young people are trying out different political, religious,

ideological values (Turkle, 2005). In this context of adolescent development, I am interested in the role of feminist media blogs for transmitting an array of feminist values and perspectives to those who are more likely to be regularly negotiating their identities and political values. For young women in particular, the Internet and their interactions with it tend to be experienced as second nature and different from those in earlier generations (Harris, 2010; Turkle, 2005). In addition, my research considers the ways in which girls and young women have been marginally excluded from much of feminist scholarship. As girlhood studies is a relatively new area of scholarly inquiry, I aim to complicate assumptions about girls as apathetic citizens by focusing on the subjectivities of young women and emphasizing their perspectives through in depth interviews.

At the same time, feminists must make themselves a part of mainstream discussions so that an accurate history of feminist theory and praxis can be passed down and made useful to a new generation of young women. In this current context, some young women have taken to the digital frontier and have taken up feminist media blogs as producers, consumers, commentators of feminist content, or some combination of the three. The questions, though, of why readers engage with these blogs, and to what effect, drive the current study.

The focus of this project is on young women readers of feminist media blogs. Blogs, in general, are an important site of inquiry for many reasons. Blogs (from the term, “web logs”) are online journals that can be kept private or public and, further, can be customized to express the creative interests of each blogger. Many blogging platforms allow for easy uploads of multimedia including written content, photos

and videos in order to allow for the bloggers to express their content creatively. Some bloggers may use their blog as a private, but online, journal whereas others may choose to make their blog public to receive comments and potentially connect with other like-minded users in an online community. Blogging allows for individuals with access to a computer and the Internet to produce their own content to share with the public. The beneficial output for everyday citizens is that it brings to light and disperses localized knowledge (Sunstein, 2007). The beneficial output for feminist creators of blogs, then, is that it disperses the creators' preferred knowledge to a potential global audience (Castells, 2007).

Although today, journalists and scholars are calling feminists' interactions with technology and online media "cyberfeminism," "online feminism," "digital feminism," or, "networked feminism," I suggest that all four are similar in their purpose. However, cyberfeminism is specific to the cultural context of the 1990s and the rise of Web 2.0 platforms position the feminist media blogs I discuss as a new generation of cyberfeminism. Cyberfeminist activists are primarily concerned about gendered space in cyberspace. Online feminism, on the other hand, refers to the active use of online media and digital technologies to "discuss, uplift and activate gender equality and social justice" (Martin & Valenti, 2013, pg. 3). Online feminism is an under-researched area in academic literature, but it is discussed widely amongst online feminist journalists. For this reason of online feminists seeming to take up the term to self-identify, I will also use this term to refer to the current cultural space where everyday citizens use online media, social networking platforms, and self-publishing platforms (such as blogs, wikis and *YouTube*) to make and do feminism.

Situating the Researcher

My perception of feminism shapes my understanding and analysis of this research project. As such, I identify as a racialized, middle-class young woman and a feminist with a broad desire to dismantle existing power inequities related to gender and the intersections of other oppressions such as race, class, sexuality and ability. Throughout this thesis, I will discuss feminisms (plural) instead of referring to a monolithic feminism to highlight that there are multiple women's movements taking place simultaneously (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010; Mitchell, Rundle & Karaian, 2001). I mean, here, that feminism holds different meanings for individuals based on their positionality. Although I do not view women, or in this case, young women, as an essentialist category, I believe that there are commonalities shared between those who identify as young women and who grew up during the same period and location. Likewise, I understand both technology and knowledge to be cultural products, and cultural practices in that technology and knowledge do not exist in a vacuum – rather, technology and knowledge are intertwined with the community that interacts with them. In this way, as cultural practice, we take up knowledge that is produced and inhabit them in our everyday realities, although shaped by our individual experiences and knowledge.

The Five Feminist Media Blogs

In this section, I briefly summarize five feminist media blogs (*Bitch Media*, *Feministing*, *Jezebel*, *Ms. Magazine*, and *Racialicious*) that will be discussed throughout this thesis.

Bitch Media started as a zine entitled *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* in

1996 that sought to create a “public forum” as a response to the ways in which gender and feminist politics are represented in the media (*Bitch Media*, 2013b, n.p.). The founding editors, Lisa Jervis and Andi Zeisler, were very much influenced by the previously popular feminist *Ms. Magazine* and *Sassy Magazine* publications. *Bitch Media* is a nonprofit feminist media organization that “use[s] feminism as a lens through which to view pop products—and to offer ways for readers to speak up and talk back to the culture at large” (*Bitch Media*, 2013, n.p.).

Feminist writer Jessica Valenti created *Feministing* in 2004 to provide a space for younger feminists’ voices to be heard (Valenti, 2011). She writes, “I was a 25 year-old who found it profoundly unfair that an elite few in the feminist movement had their voices listened to, and that the work of so many younger women went misrepresented or ignored altogether” (Valenti, 2011, n.p.). *Feministing* editors, Samhita Mukhopadhyay and Gwendolyn Beetham, state that blogging about feminism was partly due to their academic feminist training and partly to the fact that they wanted to “create something more fun and accessible—a new type of grassroots theory that young women of a variety of backgrounds could latch onto to inform their lives” (Greyser, 2012, p. 838). *Feministing* blog posts focus on content that presents popular culture through feminist eyes while critiquing sexism that arises out of mainstream media messages (Blackstock, 2010; *Feministing*, 2013). They do so by employing third wave feminist strategies, such as informal language and attention to popular culture news, to reshape dominant political narratives (Mowles, 2008).

Anna Holmes, a news writer based in New York City, created *Jezebel* in 2007. The online blog was attached to *Gawker Media* and was meant to better serve

Gawker's female readers. With their tagline, "Celebrity, Sex, Fashion for Women. Without Airbrushing," the blog sets out to be a website for women that offered celebrity and popular culture critiques while avoiding misogynistic words about women (*Jezebel*, 2013). The website content focuses on celebrity culture, fashion and tabloid news-like stories from a woman-centered and, generally, a woman-positive perspective.

Similar to *Bitch Media*, ***Ms. Magazine*** began as a print magazine in 1972. The magazine sold out its first issue in eight days despite critics' resistance to a demand for a feminist magazine (*Ms. Magazine*, 2013). *Ms.* was "the first national magazine to make feminist voices audible, feminist journalism tenable, and a feminist worldview available to the public" (*Ms. Magazine*, 2013, n.p.). The magazine moved to an online blog and post format in 2010 and still continues to print magazine issues alongside its blog.

Finally, ***Racialicious*** focuses on the "intersection of race and pop culture" (*Racialicious*, 2013, n.p.). Carmen Sognonvi and Jen Chau founded the blog in 2004. Very little scholarship has been reported on *Racialicious* itself and I chose to include this blog because it often focuses on feminist popular culture, and unlike the others presented, there is a specific focus on the intersection of gender and race.

The goals of these popular feminist media blogs are to present current and popular culture news from a feminist perspective or a woman-centered and woman-positive perspective.² Moreover, the popularity and marketability of this feminist discourse entangled with consumer goods (by focusing on popular culture and

² The methods as to how I chose and identified these five feminist media blogs as a sample are discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

advertisements) make these websites highly accessible to young women “within the context of their everyday lives” (Budgeon, 2001, p. 18). I situate these five feminist media blogs as being located in tension with a postfeminist era of popular feminism.³ Given the popularity of particular feminist media blogs and the way in which these sites are structured to share content across multiple platforms, an important avenue of inquiry is the role that feminist media blogs play in young women’s everyday lives and how they shape their perspectives on feminism. Furthermore, an analysis of readers’ experiences moves towards an understanding of how young women interact with, share, interpret and identify with online feminism.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter One, I survey the literature across disciplines related to: how the media influences one’s perceptions of feminism; how feminism has used the media to provide their own feminist perspective in the mainstream sphere; and finally, how young women consume media to understand their realities. This survey will help me to situate my research question regarding the role that online feminist media blogs play in the everyday lives of young women and their perception of feminism. I draw from a previous generation of feminists from the 1970s, 80s and 90s who took up self-publishing to highlight feminist perspectives and ideologies through magazines and zines. Then, I show how the rise of Web 2.0 properties allows for feminists to create feminist spaces on the Internet and that feminist media blogs are an extension of feminist magazine publications. Finally, I conclude by addressing the gap in the

³ The concept of popular feminism is discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

literature that my research aims to fill: a consideration of the role that feminist media blogs plays in the everyday lives of young women and their perception of feminism.

Chapter Two presents my methodology for this study. Here, I explain how I chose a sample of five feminist media blogs to advertise to prospective participants and, the recruitment method I used to find participants. I discuss my decisions in conducting a semi-structured interview format and in following Braun and Clark's (1996) analytical procedure for conducting a thematic analysis of my data. A thematic analysis was decided upon as the best analytical resource for this research project because of the project's goal to explore the subjective experiences of the interviewees and its flexible nature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I then present an overview of the six participants I interviewed for this study. Finally, I consider some of the ethical concerns present in my research project and my position as an insider and an outsider as a reader of these feminist media blogs.

In Chapter Three, I present the key findings resulting from my analysis of my data. These findings relate to my line of inquiry regarding the role that online feminism plays in the everyday lives of young women and on their perceptions of feminism. Specifically, I draw out three themes. The first theme is the role that entertainment and information play in the participants' everyday lives. A writing style and tone that is informal and opinionated is more appealing to certain participants, whereas other participants prefer reading about feminism that is thoroughly researched. Despite these individual differences, these readers are consuming feminist material that is relatable to them because the content is accessible and provide multiple feminist perspectives. The second major finding that

I present is that the participants' perceptions of feminism shift noticeably with their consumption of online feminist media blogs. Each participant initially defined feminism based on negative stereotypes; however, exposure to feminist media blogs invited reflection and a space to become more aware of relevant contemporary feminism. The final theme I present is based on what the participants do with the information presented on feminist blogs after they have been consumed. The participants' discussions suggest that they are not sharing content widely (i.e. broadcasting) in the ways that the sites intend for content to be spread. At the same time, though, the participants share their stories of sharing the information from the content through careful sharing practices (i.e. narrowcasting), which suggests that feminist media blogs provide information for feminist micro-politics. These themes and their implications are further drawn out in this chapter.

In the concluding chapter, I summarize my findings and my argument that feminist media blogs can be a transformative space for some young women who have little initial exposure to feminism. Feminist media blogs can disperse the idea that the need for feminism continues despite postfeminist claims to the contrary. I conclude that such sites engender this possibility by virtue of being accessible and entertaining and thus should not be discounted as apolitical and/or ineffective. Despite the fact that the content of some of the most frequently consumed of these particular blogs tend to focus on the lives of relatively privileged women and what some might consider "fluff" issues, I nevertheless suggest that consumption of online feminism works towards disrupting a postfeminist media culture for these readers. I

discuss the limitations and scope of my research and, finally, I reflect on some of the findings and offer suggestions for future research in this area.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Outside of women's studies classes provided in North American post-secondary institutions, young women often learn about feminism either by being born into feminism through their families and community (Henry, 2004), by attending and participating in consciousness-raising groups (hooks, 2000a), or by personal experiences of sexism (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010). For many feminists who fall into the former camp of being born into feminism, Henry (2004) posits that there was no need to choose feminism because feminism, for them, was a given. For the many other young women with little to no feminist influence in their life, feminism is an active choice rather than a given, and something they must first be introduced to (Henry, 2004). In today's digital age, one's introduction to feminism commonly takes place through mainstream media, where young women are subjected to varying portrayals of female empowerment and depictions of feminism, many of which may lead them to believe that we are in a postfeminist period wherein feminism is irrelevant or archaic (Gill, 2007; Harris, 2008; 2010). For this reason, the ways in which feminist knowledge and theories are disseminated in mainstream and online popular culture are of particular interest.

In this chapter, I examine a body of interrelated scholarship on young women, feminism and the role of the media. In particular, I am interested in how these three areas relate to feminist media blogs. Feminist publishing throughout different generations is the first point of departure for my examination of feminism's complex relationship with media. I position my understanding of popular culture through a cultural studies perspective to actively engage the role of the audience. I

then highlight the practices and goals of popular feminist publishing in the form of magazines and grrrl zines prominent during the 70s, 80s and 90s of US history in order to draw connections to feminist media blogs and earlier dissemination of feminist messages. I focus on *Ms. Magazine* and *Bitch Media* because they are popular North American feminist publications with a wide readership.

In the second portion of this chapter, I examine the affordances – those properties or characteristics of an artifact that make possible certain types of practices (boyd, 2008) – of a sample of five feminist media blogs and present an overview of the current research of feminist media blogs as a part of online feminism and contemporary feminist politics. Finally, I examine and critically analyze the body of literature on how young women use media. In particular, I draw from boyd's (2008; 2010; 2014) detailed ethnographic research to identify three commonly held assumptions regarding teens' use of social media. I conclude this chapter by recognizing the limitations of this literature and outlining how this thesis aims to address these limitations.

Contextual History

This first section of the literature review will focus on contextualizing the history of feminist media publishing in order to situate feminist media blogs as a contemporary form of feminist media publishing. In order to support this claim, I begin by interrogating the role that popular culture plays in disseminating political values and ideologies. I then turn to a brief history of feminist media publishing in the form of magazines and grrrl zines to illuminate how feminists have used popular

culture mediums and content to disseminate feminist messages to reach increasingly wide audiences.

Interrogating popular culture. Interactions with popular culture is an area of interest for feminist cultural scholars because it offers an opportunity to explore how individuals and groups make sense of their surrounding culture. One particular interest is in the ways in which women are portrayed and represented in popular culture. Another interrelated avenue of inquiry, though, is how feminism is portrayed and represented in the popular culture by mainstream media. In *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, Catherine Driscoll defines popular culture as culture that is “very widely circulated in a given field” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 175). However, for the purpose of this research project, this simple understanding of popular culture is vague and unidirectional. There are two common ways of understanding the power relationships embedded in popular culture that are worthy of discussion in length: they can be understood as top-down where popular culture comes from dominant powers, or as being bottom-up and coming from marginalized people (Storey, 2003). Rather than rely upon any of the aforementioned descriptions, I understand popular culture as a political and social domain working both from the top-down and the bottom-up (Hermes, 2005) that consists of constant transformations and struggles involving marginalized groups and dominant powers (Fiske, 2001; Hall, 1980; Storey, 2003).

Popular culture is a social and political domain because “the world, history, relationships between people, and so on, are represented to us by means of codes and conventions all of which have their own historical lineage, and that we interpret

using the particular cultural knowledges that result from our biographies” (Hermes, 2005, p. 4). Popular culture, Hermes argues, “allows political issues to be raised” and therefore provides an alternative space to raise such issues (Hermes, 2005, p. 4). Thus, popular culture offers a space for the public to listen to political and social issues. But the public that Hermes (2005) speaks about is unclear. For whom is popular culture a social and political domain? Stuart Hall (1980) and John Fiske (2001) provide a thorough understanding of the distribution of power and the role that marginalized people in particular play in popular culture.

In his seminal piece “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular”, Stuart Hall (1980) critiques two common definitions of the “popular” in culture, and then provides his own definition that better characterizes the distribution of power inherent in popular culture. The first common definition that Hall takes issue with assumes that mass media has influence over people. This deterministic view positions people as cultural dupes with little control over the influence of the mass media (Hall, 1980). The second commonly held definition of popular is simply a descriptive account of what people do or have done (Hall, 1980). For Hall, this definition is too inclusive where anything can be thought of as being popular and thus, without opposition. However, Hall introduces a third definition of the popular that looks to “forms and activities which have their roots in the social and material conditions of particular classes; which have been embodied in popular traditions and practices” (p. 449). This definition preserves the descriptive aspect of the second definition but also focuses on the tensions that exist to the dominant culture. With this definition of popular culture, the “relations of dominance and subordination are

articulated” and seen as a site of struggle instead of a site where the people consent to the exercise of power over their own lives (p. 449). Hall describes this as the double movement of containment and resistance within the study of popular culture:

“Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured” (p. 453). For Hall, the danger in thinking that culture is purely out to influence is the assumption that it works as a whole, which he posits as being deeply contradictory. Rather, I understand this definition as a dynamic understanding of popular in that preferred content is not fixed, but always changing due to constantly shifting power relations between marginalized people and the elite who influence media messages. John Fiske (2001) builds off of Hall’s understanding of popular culture by arguing that popular culture can be progressive at the micro-level even if not evolutionary for society.

By understanding popular culture as a site of social and political struggle where hegemony is decided, widely circulated cultural artifacts within popular culture present a preferred message from those in control of the media message. Mediums such as TV, radio and magazines communicate messages through a vertical network in which one person communicates to many (the audience) (Castells, 2007). In this way, political personalities, for instance, hold power in the form of influence over the audience. They often gain large audience’s trust in ways such as relying on messages that are easily digestible for an undecided voter. As Castells reports, “[c]itizens do not read candidate platforms. They rely on media

reports” (p. 242). Thus, media reports strategically play a significant role in conveying political messages to a potential global audience. However, their audience does not passively absorb these preferred messages (Hall, 1980).

Feminism’s relationship with popular culture, then, is just as complicated. If feminist messages make it into popular culture, it does not necessarily mean that feminists have “made it”. But, by studying popular culture, the role of influence and power in the media over messages are interrogated. Further, technological innovations help to provide a platform upon which everyday citizens can insert their voices into mainstream media to present alternative views of persistent and problematic popular culture artifacts. Feminists’ use of publishing commentary and criticisms of popular culture from a feminist perspective is one such way.

Feminist media publishing. Media reports from mainstream media exist in tandem with alternative media reports because of the increased accessibility of self-publishing. The goal of some feminists making use of self-publishing technologies for the purposes of disseminating feminist messages is to work to regain control over feminist messages, to impact upon perceptions of feminism, and to build a larger feminist community. The ability of feminists to insert themselves into media with discussion of critical media reports and a feminist perspective shows promise of bringing awareness of feminist concerns to a wider audience.

Feminism, throughout all its waves in North American history, has employed the use of community building, or raising feminist consciousness, through publishing in addition to face-to-face group meetings between women (Hanisch, 1969; hooks, 2000b). Scrapbooking, for instance, was a prevalent practice in the nineteenth

century (Piepmeier & Zeisler, 2009). Scrapbooking by feminists was often used for more than creating an arsenal of personal resources; in fact, Piepmeier and Zeisler discuss how scrapbooking “offered a space for girls and women to comment on mainstream culture and also to construct community and solidarity” (p. 30). Moreover, feminists during the 1960s and 1970s in the US adopted the new technology of the mimeograph for their informal printing needs, which allowed them to affordably make multiple copies of informational pamphlets or fliers (Piepmeier & Zeisler, 2009). This use of technology to spread information quickly became prominent with second wave feminists until magazine printing emerged and women became involved in their own magazine printing. Feminists are eager to use and adapt new technologies to their various publishing needs.

While there is a rich history of self-publishing throughout all waves of feminism, for the purposes of this thesis, I focus on key popular feminist publications. These popular feminist publications were created in the 1970s and the 1990s and they were specifically created to be in direct conversation with anti-feminist sentiments expressed in mainstream popular culture messages. Examples of popular feminist publications such as *Ms. Magazine*, and the grrrl zine *Bitch* are considered here.

The very first issue of *Ms. Magazine* was released in 1972 and sold out in only eight days (Farrell, 1998). *Ms. Magazine* promised a feminist community that would act as a resource for the Women’s Movement in the United States. Farrell (1998) asserts that within the history of *Ms. Magazine* lies the creation of what she calls “popular feminism” –feminism that is widespread and developed from popular

culture (Farrell, 1998, p. 186). Although some feminists criticized the magazine for being tied to popular culture, it became a “locus point for the articulation and redefining of the meaning of the women’s movement” (p. 2). What Farrell means, here, is that *Ms. Magazine* presented a particular rebranding of feminism, one that was shaped by what is timely and reasonable in addition to an emphasis on the values of self-help and sisterhood. Further, its aim was to disseminate feminist consciousness because transformation of consciousness is necessary for any social movement (Cooley, 2007). The status of the *Ms. Magazine* as both a feminist and a mass media magazine allowed their reach to expand but, at the same time, it became a contested terrain as the organization had to deal with conflicting corporate demands from advertisers if they wanted funding for resources to continue the magazine. Gloria Steinem (1990) stated from her experiences with the *Ms.* publication that in order to retain advertising funding, content that is about the subordination of women (depressing topics) have to be upbeat, short and not illustrative.⁴ For women readers, then, who are new to feminism or “beginning to see their own oppression, the act of consciousness-raising had a particular saliency, as all the activities traditionally *labeled* “female,” and thus “private” and/or “unimportant,” were given status as political and significant” (Farrell, 1998, p. 64, emphasis theirs). Consequently, *Ms. Magazine* was consumable and impactful.

Grrrl zine *Bitch* began in 1996 as the Riot Grrrl movement in the United States was slowly fading. The zine’s two authors, Jervis and Zeisler, wanted the zine to function as a guide to consumers to critique popular culture images and intervene

⁴ Accordingly, Steinem (1990) declared that women’s magazines are no place for real women’s reporting.

through activism (Piepmeier & Zeisler, 2009). One inspiration for the start of the zine was communicating their irritation that the once popular young feminist magazine, *Sassy*, was co-opted by mainstream culture and as such prioritized selling beauty products and neglected any feminist commentary.

Bitch was able to insert itself into direct conversation with popular culture news through professionalization (Piepmeier & Zeisler, 2009). What is meant by professionalization here is that the creators held a set of professional skills that helped them to expand the reach and success of the zine. Jervis and Zeisler were attentive to professional details of their production, which differentiated it from other zines that are often printed at home as cost-effectively as possible. *Bitch* was intended to grow into a magazine and to reach more than just those young feminists at a regional or local level.

There is a stark difference between print materials that are made on a small, regional scale or on a large, national scale. For *Ms. Magazine* and *Bitch Media*, one of the reasons why these magazines were able to successfully reach a wide, almost national audience is due to resources to publish professional looking print media (arguably to be taken seriously as a women's resource amongst a plethora of other print media readily available). If the aim of print material was to allow any individual to voice their unique issues and experiences, the success remains only as effective as its reach. With small-scale zines, individual young women are able to go about the most cost-effective means to creating a zine and they are able to do so with limited resources (Piepmeier & Zeisler, 2009). However, with greater tools and financial resources, publications have the potential to reach a larger audience to have

a greater effect in spreading feminist messages, impacting upon perceptions of feminism, and growing feminist communities.

Print media is vital to feminism. Print materials document the cultures and theories of feminisms to unite feminist ideas and spread this information. By spreading this information, receivers of this print material are able to inform themselves about important women's issues and can take action collectively or individually. The shared feminist information is pertinent to building the feminist community and in potentially shifting inaccurate perceptions of feminisms. Additionally, print media allowed for feminist messages to spread further than to familial and peer networks. Where Riot Grrrl zines were passed around at specific Riot Grrrl meetings to share feminism in an intimate setting, zines such as *Bitch* and magazines such as *Ms.* reach a wider audience. However, although these popular feminist publications directly insert themselves into popular culture with the goal of building a larger feminist community by disseminating feminist information and perspectives on popular culture, Hall (1980) reminds us that readers do not always passively absorb preferred meanings of messages. In this way, research on readers' experiences with reading feminist publications is an important contribution to the complex role of feminism in popular culture.

Reading women's mags and *Ms.* Little research has been conducted on the role that zines and magazines, let alone feminist media blogs, play in the everyday lives of the readers. Although an argument can be made that ideological representations of women in media act as a powerful force on the reader because those representations colour the way the audience chooses to dress, act, and live,

those representations lack an appreciation of social context, and are deterministic because they does not leave room for the critical agency of the reader (Hall, 1980; Fenton, 1998). As Fenton (1998) explains:

Feminist researchers reacted against the simplistic conception of the process of mass communication as one of linear transmissions from sender to receiver to claim that female audiences play a productive role in constructing textual meanings and pleasures. Women do not simply take in or reject media messages, but use and interpret them according to their own social, cultural and individual circumstances – the audience is involved in making sense of the images they see – the message does not have the total monopoly on meaning. (p. 90)

Research conducted on women's reading of magazines provides one avenue of understanding women's active role in reading about women's issues. Joke Hermes (1995) emphasizes reading magazines as an everyday media practice. Her analysis of interviews conducted with women who read women's magazines suggests that practical tips and personal stories from the magazines invite readers to fantasize about an ideal self. Ytre-Arne (2014) suggests another possibility in addition to Hermes's ideal self. She reports that the readers she interviewed consistently interpret the texts to find meaning in their own lives. She concludes, "[a] reflexive positioning of the self was therefore crucial to their mode of interpretation" (Ytre-Arne, 2014, p. 237). Merja Mahrt's (2012) insights on the differences between open texts and closed texts provide a further understanding here of how reading magazines is understood: "people do not universally use magazines to reinforce their values. But some periodicals have the potential to do so, either because they offer value patterns clear-cut enough to be perceived concurringly by readers or because their contents are sufficiently open to readers' interpretations and projections" (p. 871). Given the politically charged content of feminist publications as well as their need to reach a

wide audience that will have various levels of feminist knowledge, feminist publications, therefore, rely on an open text format so that it may be interpreted by readers from an ideal self and from a reflexive point of view as Yre-Arne (2014) and Mahrt (2012) suggest.

Published and archived letters to the editors provide some additional insight into *Ms. Magazine*. For readers who sent in letters to the publication, Farrell (1998) identified two interrelated relationships readers had with *Ms. Magazine*: reciprocity and identification, and resistance and contestation. For those readers who identified positively with the magazine's contents, their letters were written as though they were writing to a friend or a relative. Farrell (1998) found that these readers used the letters section in the magazine to "validate their changed perceptions of the world" for the better and, arguably, their changed perceptions of feminism as well and how feminism works towards a better world (p. 160).

On the other hand, readers also expressed frustration with the magazine's inability to be an open forum of feminist dialogue (Farrell, 1998).⁵ Many readers wrote letters expressing their disdain for consistent representation of views from liberal, White, middle-class, heterosexual women when *Ms. Magazine* uses the term "sisterhood" to represent their inclusion of all women's voices. Moreover, some readers pushed for cautious and conservative views of issues in the magazine. For example, some readers urged *Ms. Magazine* to not include content on lesbian women

⁵ It's important to know that *Ms.*, along with many other magazines, was not only accountable to their readers in terms of content, but also to their advertisers. In this way, the writers, readers and corporate media have a complicated and interrelated relationship, which has an impact on the magazine itself. As an organization with the intent to make a profit, *Ms.* had to attract advertisers, which, as a radical women's magazine in the 1970s, was no small feat (Farrell, 1998).

because it would seem “too radical” (Farrell, 1998, p. 80). For some of the readers, *Ms. Magazine* is a closed text where they are unable to locate themselves, whereas for others, *Ms. Magazine* is too open to the voices of others. Despite their unhappiness, readers took the time to write in to express these comments perhaps with hopes of having their own voice published and included in the dialogue of feminism in a feminist community.

These tensions between the readers writing letters directly to the editors allow readers to participate in the dialogue of the magazine and also provide the readers with a meaningful claim on the magazine (Farrell, 1998). In this way, *Ms. Magazine* was a resource to the women’s movement in the 1970s and 80s as it was giving readers what they wanted: that is, content that could be easily digestible for a broader audience (i.e. content that was not deemed too radical). Of course, as alluded to, only those letters that are privileged by the editors make it into the Letters to the Editors section in *Ms.*, and the ones that are excluded would add to a more nuanced understanding of women’s relationship to and engagement with reading popular feminist magazines.

Contemporary Feminist Politics with Popular Culture and Young Women

My focus on contemporary feminist politics concern young women’s involvement with feminism and simultaneously young women’s involvement with popular culture media and online media. One significant reason discussed in the Introduction chapter of this thesis as to why young women shy away from a feminist label is due to their limited understanding of feminism and how feminism relates to their own lives (Budgeon, 2001; Sharff, 2012). A limited and skewed understanding

of feminism is often attributed to postfeminist messages in popular culture. In the following section, I contextualize what a postfeminist sentiment means in the context of popular culture. I then turn towards a discussion of online feminism as an evolution of print media and how it provides the potential to interrupt postfeminist discourses and shift perceptions of feminism. Finally, I highlight research on young women's consumption of media to demonstrate the need to explore young women's unique experiences with online feminist media.

Contextualizing postfeminism. Postfeminism plays a significant role in how feminism is represented in mainstream media. This influences how society understands feminist ideologies and values. The notion of a postfeminist era has been debated since its inception in the cultural space of the 90s where feminism was displaced as a political movement (McRobbie, 2004; Genz 2006). It is commonly discussed as an historical shift within feminism (Braithwaite, 2002), and a backlash against feminism (Faludi, 1991; Gill 2007; Whelehan, 2000). However, an historical shift within feminism is unable to explain the “active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255). Moreover, Gill (2008) argues that postfeminism is more complex than a ‘backlash’ because it is contradictory in nature: entangled with both feminist ideas and with antifeminist themes. Ann Braithwaite (2002), though, argues that discussing postfeminism as solely antifeminist positions the understanding of the term on the basis that it represents one stable form of feminism:

The insistence that something is anti-feminist too often reflects an equally problematic belief in and desire for a definitional stability to the term feminism itself, for that time when feminism supposedly had a stable meaning – and, one presumes, a stable agenda – rather than the kind of polysemy or

multiple meanings that exemplify it today (and arguably always did in some way). (p. 337)

Gill (2007) also disagrees about the assumed stableness of anti-feminism and feminism because they both exist together and not just as anti-feminist. In this way, postfeminism is best thought of as a sensibility where there are stable properties of postfeminist discourse:

the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (p. 149)

For Gill (2007; 2008) and McRobbie (2004; 2007), postfeminism is a response to feminism and the relationship between the transformations in feminism and the transformations in media culture. It is different than *prefeminist* and feminist constructions of gender, but it is also more than just a backlash against feminism because it entangles both feminist and anti-feminist discourses; it is ripe with contradictions, but it is in those contradictions that the discourses can be seen (and the patterned nature of the contradictions that make it a sensibility rather than a backlash) (Gill, 2007). A difference between media culture today and that of the 70s and 80s is that feminism is “now part of the cultural field” (Gill, 2007, p. 161). However, the media has not adopted a feminist perspective, rather it incorporates specific attributes of feminism that align with neoliberal discourses in a revised and altered form that is depoliticized (Genz, 2006; Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2004). For instance, popular texts normalize postfeminist gender anxieties so as to police and

regulate young women by means of the “language of personal choice” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 262).

The notion of postfeminism as a sensibility contributes to unpacking postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2007): “This approach does not require a static notion of one single authentic feminism as a comparison point, but instead is informed by postmodernist and constructionist perspectives and seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media” (Gill, 2007, p. 148). Postfeminism then is understood with an emphasis on personal choice, neoliberalism, capitalism, consumer society and a decreased interest in politics and activism (Genz, 2006; Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2004).). In this sense, postfeminism represents a shift away from collective action of second wave feminism towards individuality in the 21st century where “feminist concerns have entered the mainstream and they are articulated in politically contradictory ways” (Genz, 2006, p. 337). As a reaction to postfeminism since the 1980s, some feminists have pushed to include their own voices through alternative media. With the technological innovations available to many everyday citizens today, feminist media self-publishing has found a new home in the online world of online feminism.

New affordances: From feminist magazines to feminist blogs. The maturation of a postfeminist sentiment in the last decade happened alongside the birth of online feminism. Online feminism, as described in the previous chapter, is “harnessing the power of online media to discuss, uplift, and activate gender equality and social justice” (Martin & Valenti, 2013, p. 6). Feminist media blogs, *YouTube* videos featuring feminist content, and *Twitter* campaigns such as “Everyday Sexism”

are just a few examples of what makes up online feminism, and the rise of Web 2.0 software is one significant way in which self-publishing is more accessible than before that gave rise to online feminism.

Changes to the World Wide Web happen at a rapid pace. The 2000s witnessed a significant change to mediated communications because of, what is often termed, the rise of Web 2.0. The rise of Web 2.0 signals the second generation of the Internet in the early 2000s that led to the evolution of: dynamic websites over static ones (for example, websites that incorporate hyperlinks or use RSS feeds); self-publishing platforms (such as blogs, *Wikis* and *YouTube*); and, social networking platforms (such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*) resulting in a complex shift in power relations in cyberspace (O'Reilly, 2005). These changes to the ways in which users interact with the Internet have fostered the growth of mass self-communication and made it easier for users to enter into dialogue with mainstream media and to produce and share their own content through horizontal communication networks that connect both the local and the global (Castells, 2007).

It is within the mass self-communication that feminist media is able to insert feminist messages into the mass media. Castells (2007) identifies this horizontal form of communication as mass self-communication because messages and information spread through peer networks on the Internet, and it is self-published and self-directed. The domain of social communication, such as feminist media that exists in the public realm because of the “ongoing transformation of communication technology”, becomes the site wherein “power relations, that is the relations that constitute the foundation of all societies, as well as the processes challenging

institutionalized power relations are increasingly shaped and decided in the communication field” (p. 239). Herein lies the potential of the Internet for feminist media makers to make feminism more accessible to a potential global audience by self-publishing online (boyd, 2008; Carstensen, 2009). The potential to communicating feminist messages widely is built into the blogs’ software and format, and each blog and website differ slightly in how they use the potential for mass communication.

Based on observational cues, I briefly discuss the five feminist media blogs I focus on in this study (*Jezebel*, *Feministing*, *Bitch Media*, *Ms. Magazine Online* and *Racialicious*). I examine how they differ from the popular feminist magazines from the 1970s and how they are constructed to disseminate their content as part of their mission to share a feminist perspective on popular culture and current news topics. This is determined by considering Baym’s (2010) characteristics of differences between mediums as well as the affordances of networked publics described by boyd (2008). From these characteristics, blogs differ from magazines in ways that are positive for the dissemination of feminist messages by feminists.

Blogs have the potential for increased interactivity, storage, replicability, reach, and time delay between messages. For instance, blogs invite interactivity with their readers if a comments section is enabled. The content of both blogs and magazines can vary between producing lean and rich media. However, the main differences in communication between blogs and magazines are the ways Web 2.0 expands the access and reach of information. Blogs allow for easily sharing and spreading information because of the multiple levels of interactivity. Not only are

technologies interacting with each other (i.e. embedded sharing features on blogs to easily post content across platforms), but the ways in which audiences interact with these technologies are also further complicated. Unlike magazines, blogs are easily storable and replicable over the Internet. Magazines vary in their reach depending on where they are sold or displayed and, lastly, are only as mobile as the person carrying them wishes them to be. The reach is also dependent on individual blogs, but the potential global reach over the Internet is more than the reach that many magazines can aspire to.

All of the feminist media blogs on which I focus actively create and maintain an online community with their readers but do so in different ways. For instance, one unique factor for *Jezebel* and *Feministing* readers is the need to sign up for a third party account in order to contribute to submitting comments, but not to reading them. *Bitch*, *Ms. Magazine* and *Racialicious* allow readers to comment by only providing a name and a valid email address. Feminist media blogs, then, are one way in which feminists create feminist spaces in cyberspace. The affordances on the blogs allow for a variety of engagement levels from their reader depending on the particular blog they visit.

Apart from the blogs themselves, each of the five feminist media blogs also shares their blog content on their official *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts. Not only does sharing content via *Facebook* and *Twitter* profiles increase the likelihood of content being shared and seen by new and current audiences through presenting the content across multiple platforms, it also invites another way for current readers who follow the blog via one of these platforms to “like”, “comment”, “retweet” or

“share” the post onto her personal *Facebook* page, thus spreading information to the reader’s peer network. However, *Facebook Pages* limits how much content is shared to those following the *Facebook* page (Bucher, 2012). Similarly, *Twitter* followers have to see the post in order to retweet it, but posts can easily be lost to a user within all the content that is being shared.

Not only are feminist media blogs, therefore, a different medium of sharing similar feminist content based on the affordances, but Andi Zeisler, co-creator of *Bitch Media*, explains that contemporary feminism centered in new media has more impact on mainstream media messages and perceptions of feminism (Zeisler, 2013). For one, from Zeisler’s point of view as being in the online feminist community, online feminism provides countless alternatives to a monolithic version of feminism passed down through a one-to-many (or vertical) network such as through magazines. Furthermore, she states that online feminism connects through feminist iterations of the past because online feminism often incorporates consciousness-raising and community-mindedness (Zeisler, 2013). Thus, for Zeisler, feminist media blogs are not only just a different medium than magazines but, more specifically, an evolution of format through which feminist messages (through popular culture) are disseminated. This suggests that there are many ways to become active in (online) feminist spaces that warrant further research.

As such, academic interest in the role of online feminism has expanded in recent years. Yet, at the same time, the relationship between the readers and the content remains undertheorized. Based primarily on contextual analysis, current research suggests that feminist blogs are counter-hegemonic (Shaw, 2012) serving as

a feminist community specifically through connecting with young women using humor and irony in the language and critical readings of popular culture (Bailey, 2003; Blackstock, 2010). In addition to the characteristics mentioned, the *Bitch Media* and *Feministing* blogs specifically employed third wave strategies of intersectionality and multivocality (Bailey, 2003; Mowles 2008). As well as praising feminists blogs, this current research also critiques *Feministing's* lack of diversity on contributing writers and global feminist issues (Blackstock, 2010); lack of contribution to political action or policy change (Mowles, 2008), and issues of the digital divide, and access to the blogs in the first place as well as presumed knowledge in interacting with the blogs (i.e. understanding sarcastic tones and irony in the content). This body of research suggests that feminist sites employ characteristics of discursive (online) political activism (Young, 1997, as cited by Shaw, 2012) all the while making it, and therefore feminism, appealing to a targeted younger audience.

It seems unlikely, though, that an online community can be built based on a one-way interaction in which creators are sharing their information. The impact of online feminism for Zeisler (2013) on young women new to feminism is clear: "If you are new to feminism overall, it may mean that you will simply come to feminist theory in a completely different way than women before you" (p. 183). In other words, without understanding how readers are interacting with the content, the online communities of feminist media blogs are merely online websites. Since the targeted demographic for many feminist media blogs is primarily young women readers, the experiences of young women reading feminist media through a blog medium needs to also be taken into consideration for a more nuanced understanding

of how feminist media blogs disseminate feminist messages, shift perceptions of feminism, and foster a feminist online community. This view of the role of feminist media blogs is not enough to base our understanding of how the content is being used by young women readers and how this may impact their perceptions of feminism. Since spreading feminism through popular culture media to attract this demographic, a more nuanced understanding of the different populations of readers will help illuminate the role of feminist media blogs and the role of online feminism for contemporary feminist politics.

Young women consuming media. Blogs are only one popular avenue of media consumed by young women. However, as self-publishing online communities, the relationship between young women consuming media via blogs is of particular interest. According to Pew Internet Research data collected in the United States, young adults (from 18 to 24 years old) are much more likely to be politically active via their social networking platforms than older adults (Smith, 2013). This finding may suggest that because young adults are online more than older adults, then they are politically active in the ways in which their everyday lives are structured. Additionally, cyberspace has become a hub for young people to participate online in new ways because of how the Internet has become embedded in the lives of a younger generation (Turkle, 2005). This distinction is partly due to the ease of entry into online spaces (boyd, 2008, 2014; Keller, 2012) that are well suited to discuss personal opinions, political activism, art and anything else related to the user's personal interest (McRobbie, 2008). Accordingly, it has been suggested that young people participate in online spaces, such as feminist blogs, as possible substitutes for

their inability to participate in offline spaces that are often run completely by and for adults (Keller, 2012).

The democratic potential of blogs, given the ease of self-publishing and reach, is technologically deterministic and does not leave room for how users are engaging with the content. danah boyd has done prolific research in the area of social networking sites and teens' usage. From her rich ethnographic research, boyd (2008) unravels three basic assumptions of research on teens' use of the Internet: blurred private and public boundaries; inherent digital skills; and, the idea that teens' use and adults' use of the Internet work in the same way. These assumptions are useful in painting a clearer picture of how teens and younger adults may approach feminist-specific information through their social media practices. boyd's (2008; 2010; 2014) insights add nuance to the capabilities and potential of the Internet for many feminists today in sharing their message with a wider audience. Although these feminist media blogs may be allowing for the spread and accessibility of messages by their integration of other social networking platforms, the way in which the readers, specifically young readers, use the information is a significant part of uncovering how feminist media is being engaged with.

First, boyd (2008; 2010) contends that the boundary of what is public and what is private on the Internet is blurry because there are no digital walls to keep the two separate. For instance, when online messages are intended to be public, shared with a global audience, there is no certainty that these messages will spread as far as intended. Although the accessibility and ease in blogging for some allows for greater participation by those with little computer programming ability, only a few blogs will

ever be widely enough read to reach popular status (Du & Wagner, 2006). A shift from broadcast media (one-to-many communication) to networked media (many-to-many communication) has also shifted the power of who holds attention because almost anyone can create and publish a message to spread to a potentially wide audience (boyd, 2010). The message needs to attract the attention of individuals, and individuals need to pay attention to what interests them regardless of what is presented to them (boyd, 2008).

A second assumption regarding how teens and young adults engage with online media that boyd (2014) complicates is the notion that all young persons from a certain age are inherently digital *natives* in the context of a digital divide. A digital divide is often framed as differentiating individual access to a computer by socioeconomic factors (those who have access to a computer and the Internet and those who do not), age (Prensky, 2001), and skill level (Hargittai, 2002). boyd (2008; 2014) reports that younger individuals should not be assumed to be more advanced computer users than adults:

The teens I met knew how to get to Google but had little understanding about how to construct a query to get quality information from the popular search engine. They knew how to use Facebook, but their understanding of the site's privacy settings did not mesh with the ways in which they configured their accounts. (boyd, 2014, p. 22)

Her insight suggests that teens and young adults are often assumed to have a certain level of technical knowledge. However, a more accurate depiction would be that their interests and priorities differ as broadly as those of other generations. In this regard, young women readers may have different insights into interacting with

feminist media blogs than research examining adult women, who read magazines or blogs suggests.

In relation to the previous assumptions, the final assumption boyd (2014) breaks down is the assumption that teens use and navigate the Internet the same ways in which adults do. boyd (2008; 2014) examines the affordances that shape social networking publics. Her findings suggest that although teens with access to the Internet participate in social media and social networking as a normative practice, these practices sometimes differ from how the artifact in question (i.e. the social networking platform) has been understood originally. For instance, privacy and surveillance are important aspects of the Internet that affect all users and producers of Internet content. For teens, though, boyd reports, “[u]nlike privacy advocates and more politically conscious adults, teens aren’t typically concerned with governments and corporations. Instead, they’re trying to avoid surveillance from parents, teachers, and other immediate authority figures in their lives” (boyd, 2014, p. 56). The concerns of teens drastically differ from those of adults and would impact how social media engages with their younger demographics.

One reason young women, in particular, may be attracted to online feminist communities is because, historically, they have been excluded from feminist activism on the front lines. Specifically in regard to young women who actively blog about feminism online, Harris (2008) and Keller (2012) posit that, when participating in online feminist communities, girls can express their own agency in ways that they would not otherwise be able to express offline. In fact, Keller found that online feminist spaces act in a similar way as subcultures that young girls tend to turn to “in

order to express gender politics because of the adult-centric approach taken by mainstream feminism” (Keller, 2012, p. 435), such as in the case of hip hop or punk subcultures. Thus, the technology underlying the feminist online community offers a means for girls to find, attach themselves to, create and mobilize because it allows girls to communicate with others who are similar to them, to express their ideas around feminism, to learn more about feminism from other young girls, and to potentially shift their feminist perspective. However, Keller (2012) interviewed girls who blog about feminism. The subjective experiences of how girls perceive feminism from engagement with feminist blogs are still missing.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated two key ideas from compiling this literature review. One idea was to demonstrate how feminist media blogs are an evolution of feminist media publications from the 1970s and 1990s. Second, although alternative (to the mainstream), feminist media insert themselves into the public domain as a voice of popular culture and cultural studies have long established the dynamic role audiences play in absorbing messages from the media. As identified earlier, assuming that all young people use the Internet in the same way because they are all digital natives is not useful in understanding how and why young women consume feminist media. What remains to be demonstrated, then, is how young women, who make up a large demographic of media consumers, are using and making meaning of the content of feminist media blogs.

There are many questions that arise from the literature review that are worthy of future inquiry. First, what characteristics of these blogs tend to attract female

readers and serve to maintain their continued engagement with blog activities?

Second, presumably websites such as *Feministing* are likely to attract young women who are specifically looking for a *feminist* alternative media blog. Given that many young women tend to be afraid of identifying as a feminist, what is it about those sites, which do not promote themselves as being committed to a feminist lens (whichever feminist lens that may be), that attracts and maintains a feminist readership? How do websites such as *Jezebel*, which is feminist and woman-centered but does not explicitly promote itself as being feminist, help to disseminate feminist language and ideas that may begin to construct young women's media awareness and literacy skills as feminist? Further examination of blogging is a significant topic for further research because it will illuminate the force of feminist consciousness-raising efforts for online users. In order to address these questions, young women's perspectives of their own engagement with such feminist media blogs will be explored.

Chapter Two: Methodology

I employ a qualitative methodology approach to answer my research questions: What role, if any, does online feminism play in the everyday lives of young women? What are the perceptions of their own feminism, and feminism more generally that the participants hold prior to and during the consumption of online feminist media websites? And finally, whether these online media sources have helped young women understand feminism, and how.

My research goals are to explore the lived experiences of university-aged young women's interacting with online feminist media websites. I draw from a qualitative methodology to provide insight into the constructions of feminist perspectives. I understand all knowledge to be positioned within ideological systems. Therefore, I am interested in the experiences of young women's interactions with these feminist websites and the way they understand these experiences. With this in mind, an in-depth, semi-structured interview procedure is the best method to begin to understand these experiences. Moreover, a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews was employed as an analytical tool because of its flexibility and suitability for exploratory research such as this one (Braun & Clarke, 2008). A thematic analysis can be used in many research projects and can be used through many different theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

This chapter begins with presenting how I chose five feminist media blogs to sample for the advertisements in my recruitment methods, followed by a portrait of the six participants involved in the study, and then the procedure I followed for the interview process. In concluding this chapter, I discuss my analysis process and how

I confronted ethical considerations and my opinions and attitudes about the research project by keeping a self-reflection journal.

Choosing a Sample of Feminist Media Blogs

For the purposes of this thesis, I identified feminist media blogs as those blogs that report on popular culture content, including current news topics, politics, film, TV, fashion, music and celebrity gossip, via their own particular feminist lens. This feminist lens can be explicitly advertised either in the name of the blog (e.g. *Feministing*) or implicitly in that the content is specifically woman-positive and the content acts primarily to counter misogynistic messages prevalent in mainstream media news coverage. Additionally, the particular blogs I focus on are those that are run by a group of editors instead of an individual blogger; produce content daily; critique popular culture; host an online community who can participate in the blogs via commenting and/or sharing across social networking platforms; and, are popular in the sense that they are reaching a wide readership as supported by the high number of *Facebook* and *Twitter* followers of each blog.⁶ Because of the popularity of these websites, they are often crossposted on each other's sites, their related websites (such as *Gawker* for *Jezebel*) and alternate websites, such as the *Huffington Post*, *Reddit*, *Upworthy* and *StumbleUpon* to mention a few which further expands the reach of the content.

⁶ The communities of *Bitch Media* and *Ms. Magazine* include blogs on their websites, which also feature content from both their print magazines, podcasts and e-store, to name a few. The blog content from these websites will be the focus for this project, and not the other features of the website.

A search on *Google's* search engine of the top feminist media blogs brings up three widely read feminist media websites: *Jezebel*, *Feministing* and *Bitch Media*.⁷ *Jezebel* is the only blog out of these five that identifies as a site for women and not specifically for women who identify as feminists. Although *Jezebel* makes no claims to be a feminist website, I included it based on the feminist positions taken by the editors and community of writers that make up *Jezebel* (Wazny, 2010). Additionally, the creator of *Jezebel*, Anna Holmes, stated that her hopes for the women who read *Jezebel* were to be more critical of how women are represented in popular culture news (Johnson, 2007). Therefore, I added *Jezebel* as a feminist media blog that would serve the purposes of this research study.

I included the blog of *Ms. Magazine* because it has been the longest-running feminist magazine from the US, and the blog component provides content on popular culture and current news topics, which fit into my chosen criteria. I decided to also include *Racialicious* as a popular feminist media blog in this project because not only does this blog provide a feminist response to popular culture, it also brings an intersectional racial analysis on entertainment and current political news stories to the fore unlike the other feminist media blogs mentioned.

⁷ In terms of reach, each feminist media blogs had the following user base as of July 31, 2014 (in order of popularity): *Jezebel* (Facebook likes = 516,917, Twitter followers= 208,000); *Ms. Magazine Online* (Facebook likes = 206,204, Twitter followers = 68,600); *Feministing* (Facebook likes = 141,281, Twitter followers = 132,000); *Bitch Media* (Facebook likes = 134,975, Twitter followers = 75,100); *Racialicious* (Facebook likes = 9,932, Twitter followers = 33,400).

Recruitment

I conducted two rounds of recruitment between the months of October and December 2013. As this research project focused on the subjective experiences of young women who attended a post-secondary institution in Ottawa, Ontario, I recruited six female volunteer participants between the ages of 18 and 19 years old who explore feminist media websites and blogs. I focused on the experiences of participants within this age group as an acknowledgement of commonalities that exist between those who grow up in the same generation. My intention is not to generalize the results of the study but rather to understand some of the common experiences faced by the participants.

I accessed this age group through permission from first-year professors to forward an email describing the study and the participants required that was approved by the University Research Ethics Board (see Appendix 1). These courses were chosen based on the large quantity of female-identified students typically enrolled who are most likely 18 and 19 years old. Some professors did not reply to my initial email or politely rejected my request. The courses taught by the professors who agreed to distribute the recruitment advertisement included: Introduction to Criminology; Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies; Introduction to Criminology; Introduction to Political Science; Introduction to Human Rights; Introduction to Social Work; Introduction to Communications; and Introductory Biology.

In an attempt to reach more diverse young women of this age range at this university, I also displayed an advertisement around the campus advertising the

research study (see Appendix 2). These posters included: the topic of the study; the stipulation that prospective participants were to be between the ages of 18 and 19 years old; be required to have had interaction with feminist media websites that they perceived as being both feminist and media-oriented; and the examples of such feminist media website such as *Jezebel*, *Feministing*, *Bitch Media*, *Racialicious* or *Ms. Magazine*. By allowing the participants to self-identify and self-select the sites they perceived to be feminist, my own knowledge, or lack thereof, would not be a limitation to the study. For instance, if I were to only require participants who accessed the five feminist media websites that I previously mentioned, I might be missing out on other websites I never knew existed that follow a common theme.

During this first round of advertising, I received two responses from prospective participants over a period of three weeks. At this time, it was decided to provide a financial incentive (one \$10 Tim Horton's gift card to each participant) to help recruit participants in compensating their time for the interview. The financial incentive proved effective as the second round of recruitment advertising the incentive was successful, and I secured the rest of the participants for the project. Although I had hoped to interview more participants until no new codes and themes emerged from the interviews (Morrow, 2005), I recruited six participants in the time allotted for recruitment. Using too few participants might compromise the external validity of the participant data and the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population (Berg, 2004).

Procedure

Although my research goal is to explore the role of feminist online media in young women who are involved in being online, I opted to interview young women of these sites, individually and face-to-face. In particular, a semi-structured interview format was used for in-depth questions while at the same time, keeping the interview questions in tandem with the research agenda (Berg, 2004; Esterberg, 2002). A semi-structured interview format allows for further insight into how the participants reflect back on their engagement with the feminist media sites and, at the same time, allows space for the researcher to further probe into those themes. It is also flexible enough to allow for open-ended questions (e.g. *"Tell me about ..."*) (Berg, 2004; Esterberg, 2002). Fewer open questions allow space for participants to provide stories that will elicit richer meanings as well as a space to invite reflection upon and an exploration of their personal experiences (Morrow, 2005). The interview process, through a critical feminist lens, places the participants, young women, as experts on their own experiences.

I screened prospective participants via email to make certain they were 18 or 19 years old, identified as female and had read at least one of the listed five feminist media websites. Three prospective participants were turned away for not meeting all of the criteria.⁸ Prospective participants were told that the nature of the research study was to explore young women's experiences with interacting with online feminist media websites. After agreeing to participate, I met each of them individually at an agreed-upon time in an office space on campus. At this point, I

⁸ One prospective participant did not meet the age requirement and two did not have any exposure to feminist alternative media websites.

went over the informed consent form with the participant. Participants were told they could withdraw from the study at any point of the interview with no consequences and that they had the right to refuse audio recording of the interview. Only after the consent form had been signed did the audio recording of the interview begin.

At the beginning of the interview process, I informed each participant of the goals of my research project (to gain an understanding of their use of feminist media websites) along with my reasons for pursuing this research. As my participants are younger students, my position of a graduate student might have added to any power relations that existed during the interview process. Therefore, I recollected my own initial experience with *Jezebel*, but limited my stories so as to not prime them too much with my research agenda and thereby missing out on their individualized story. Revealing your biographical stories to participants reduces the hierarchies of power and authority as researcher and participant (Pillow & Mayo, 2012).

After being introduced to the format of the study, each participant was invited to ask any questions of the research study or to address any concerns. Following the opening remarks and any questions, the researcher asked questions about the participants' demographic backgrounds (e.g., age, program of study) and progressed to asking about the participants' use of specific feminist media websites. Additional questions were asked about how they engaged with the websites and how their understanding of feminism/feminists may have changed through their interactions with the websites. The questions I chose to ask began as a simple open-ended question (e.g. "*Tell me about your experiences with this feminist blog*") to hear as much

about their experiences as possible. Probing questions were asked to gain a better understanding of specific aspects of engagement (interactions with the blogs such as sharing via social media; face-to-face; contributing via comments; and, level of interaction with the individual online communities tied to the websites).⁹

Interviews were transcribed using Express Scribe software to aid in the slowing down and pausing of the audio recording.¹⁰ Those participants who wanted their transcript sent back to them to clarify any details were sent their transcript. No participant changed or altered any of the details from the interviews. Additionally, a methodological journal was kept to keep track of all analytical decisions made by the researcher. For instance, I recorded all levels of coding and how I organized them into larger categories or themes.

A data-driven thematic analysis approach was used for my research project as an explorative method on this topic since little research has been conducted in this area (Braun and Clarke, 2008). The benefits of using a thematic analysis for this project is that the analysis is not necessarily tied to a particular theory and, therefore, provides the freedom to provide a rich and complex understanding of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2008). A thematic analysis, therefore, fits well with this research project that is not tied to a specific theory, but rather aims to explore the data that emerges in the research area.

The first step in Braun and Clarke's (2008) thematic analysis method is to become familiar with the data. Transcribing the data as well as re-reading each

⁹ See Appendix 4 for the complete interview schedule.

¹⁰ Half of the young women (3 out of 6) were more talkative than the others. Interviews lasted between 15 and 40 minutes.

interview many times allowed me to familiarize myself with the data before progressing to the second step of generating initial codes. Initial coding was data-driven, meaning that codes were determined and identified from the data rather than interpreted (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Each transcript was coded line-by-line and context was kept in the code as much as possible so as to not lose any contextual meaning of the particular code. During this coding process, initial thoughts on potential themes and interesting findings were recorded in the methodological journal. Multiple sweeps of all transcripts were conducted until no new codes were noted. I created 192 individual codes at this first level. After initial codes were named, themes were identified and the codes were compared, contrasted and categorized into key themes. Key themes are those that develop from the codes in the data set and are related back to the original research question (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Key themes were named and given a definition so that codes could be categorized easily into the themes. Codes could fit into one, many or none of the key themes. This process was completed until themes related to the research question could no longer be further categorized into themes. For this research, three major themes were recorded and are discussed in the following chapter.

Participants

Overall, the six young women who participated in this study were first year university students who had read at least one of the five advertised feminist media websites. Four of the young women were Caucasian while the other two chose not to identify their ethnicity for the research study. The participants were enrolled in programs of Law, Human Rights, Women's Studies and Social Work. This

representation was clearly based on those in humanities and liberal arts courses.

Table 1 summarizes the feminist media blogs read by each participant in my research project as well as how often she reads the blogs.

The individuals who make up the six participants of my research project are volunteers and a convenient and targeted sample. Volunteer participants, or those who responded to the advertisements through the department emails or the posters, were representative of the entire population. These participants had their own agendas for participating in the study and had a unique perspective from those who either did not see the advertisement or who chose not to participate in the study. The participants were also a convenient and targeted sample because I was only recruiting on one campus in Ottawa, Ontario; therefore, I left out diverse participants, for example, those of the same age who did not attend this post-secondary institution. Given that this research study was new and explorative in the field of study in online media, this sampling method was just one way to initially recruit participants (Berg, 2004). A large portion of 18 and 19 year old women attend University, and although many also do not, this convenient sample was an appropriate fit for the needs of this research study (Berg, 2004). This research was limited, however, because it missed those young women who do not attend university at 18 or 19 years of age and who might experience these feminist websites in a completely different way.

One of the participants presented as a negative case in this research study, that is, a case that does not fit with the other participants' experiences. Mary expressed that it was her Philosophy class the previous term that had introduced her to *Bitch*

Media and *Feministing*. During a discussion in class, a student had brought up an article from *Bitch Media* to add to the discussion. From there, she had also alluded to another article from *Feministing*. Mary stated that she looked at the articles mentioned during the class to follow along. From scrolling through the contents primarily of *Bitch Media*, Mary recounted to me that she thought the site was extremely biased in its feminist position. She did not find anything on the blog compelling to read again. As a negative case, she still meets the criteria of having read at least one of the advertised feminist media sites. However, she differs the most from the other participants because she read the site once and confessed to not like it based on its feminist nature. Negative cases are a positive aspect in qualitative methodology as it assures that researchers are constantly analyzing discrepancies to ensure optimal quality data while avoiding simplistic interpretations of data (Morrow, 2005; Morse, et al., 2002).

Confronting Ethical Concerns

I obtained informed consent, including consent to record audio and consent to recontact following the study before beginning the interview process. As part of this consent I explained the participants' rights including the right to withdraw from the study at any time, to omit or add information at any point until December 2013, and their right to confidentiality. To protect the participants' confidentiality, they were asked for a preferred pseudonym to be used in the interview transcript and summary reports of the findings. All participants were then debriefed orally about how this research would be used and were asked if they had any final questions. Finally, participants were asked if they wanted a copy of their transcript to look over

providing them with a chance to change any details mentioned during the interview up to a week after receiving it back in order to allow me ample time to analyze the data in a timely manner.

Feminist research principles and feminist epistemology informed my understanding of my own positioning within this research project (Harding, 2012). I anticipated flowing between being an insider and an outsider throughout my research practice because of my closeness to the subject area; therefore, practicing a reflexive methodology was my main concern (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). I saw myself as an insider in that I shared similar experiences of reading such blogs with the women I interviewed. As boyd (2014) suggests in her work with teen girls, I took great care to immerse myself in current popular culture news so that I could easily identify references made by the participants. I did so by reading all five of these blogs daily. I also saw myself as an outsider because I am seven and eight years older than the participants and, therefore, have different experiences with new media, for instance. For this reason, it was important that throughout the interview process, I listened carefully to their words and asked follow-up questions to any reference I did not understand.

I kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process. These journal entries have helped to situate my opinions in relation to the research project. The journal entries were also a space for me to reflect on my position in the research project, my interactions with the participants and my initial interpretations of the data collected. Furthermore, being reflexive of my role throughout the process allowed for multiple realities and perspectives from the young women interviewed to

emerge from the research instead of my own perceived truth (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). In this journal, I often wrote about the similarities and differences the participants shared with each other and myself. For example, Kate and Lana who are frequent readers of *Jezebel* made similar comments about the blog as I do: that we take pleasure in reading about celebrity culture from a feminist perspective. With this in mind, I felt compelled to explore the reasons *Jezebel* was received as pleasurable in a different way than the other blogs and how this strategy may play a role in young women's perception of feminism.

At the same time, my opinions differed from Mary's. Mary stated that she thought that feminist media blogs are "biased in their opinion" and therefore cannot be taken as serious news coverage. Although the point of these feminist media blogs is to present a biased, feminist perspective, I found it difficult to understand her point of view. However, after writing an entry about this in my reflection journal, I realized later while going through her transcripts again, that I think positively of feminist media blogs and that her opinion is just as valid even though it is different than my own and those of the other participants. I realized after contemplation that Mary's statements were useful in helping to identify why some people are not drawn to feminist material, which I may have disregarded without careful reflection.

Chapter Three: Findings

Three salient themes emerged from my conversations with the six participants about their interactions with feminist media blogs and their perceptions of feminism. These themes relate to the structure and tone of feminist media blogs; the participants' shifting perceptions of feminism and their own identification with feminism; and the blurred boundaries between their perceived online and offline feminism.

The first theme that I present is the role of entertainment and feminist information. Within this theme, participants gravitated toward particular feminist media blogs because of their content and style. Participants who preferred *Jezebel*, for example, appreciated its focus on current events and its “sassy” style of writing, while participants who favored *Bitch Media* felt that the content was broader and the articles were focused on facts rather than opinions.

The second theme I present is on the participants' expression of an emergent feminist consciousness. Participants' ideas of feminism were originally expressed as a distancing from feminism before encountering feminist media blogs. However, exposure to online feminist content appears to have invited critical thinking and an expanded notion of feminism.

Finally, the third theme concerns the blurred online and offline boundaries in which participants discussed their participation in the online feminist community. Participants expressed hesitation in widely broadcasting online feminist content to large audiences. They were more comfortable with narrowcasting the content. Narrowcasting refers to the act of sending content to one person rather than many. It

is interesting that these participants used the content and shared it in unexpected ways.

The Role of Entertainment and Feminist Information

According to the participants in this study, *Jezebel* is primarily a form of entertainment news. Participants were split; either they loved reading *Jezebel* or, after an initial encounter, they appeared not to have read it again. This polarizing quality of *Jezebel* highlights one way in which online feminism works to attract and maintain readers. On the one hand, two participants enjoyed reading *Jezebel* for its writing style and content. Lana expressed that she keeps coming back to *Jezebel* because of *Jezebel's* writing style. She stated that she came across *Jezebel* through her regular consumption of the entertainment blog, *Gawker*, of which *Jezebel* is a sister site. She discussed that, "I was clicking through their sister sites and came across *Jezebel* and really liked their standpoint and viewpoints, so I kept reading that." When I asked Lana what it was about *Jezebel's* standpoint that she enjoyed, she replied:

it's sassy, which I love. I find that they offer like just a commentary on things that are going on ... they don't really hold back on language. If they want to use the word 'vagina', they'll use it, you know what I mean? Whereas the *Ottawa Citizen* you might not see that ... [the *Jezebel* articles] are well thought out, they are smart, not typical so they're more interesting and they definitely grab me.

Lana's comments suggest that her attraction to *Jezebel's* content is associated with *Jezebel's* use of humour and casual language and tone. Feminist writers such as Rebecca Walker (1995) and Baumgardner and Richards (2010) view activism to include nontraditional forms of protest, such as strategic humour (Sowards & Rengar, 2006). In this regard, humour is used to uncover and undermine the everyday occurrences of sexism exposed by bloggers on *Jezebel*, rather than relying

heavily on depressing news coverage (Sowards & Rengar, 2006). Content that uses casual language implies a strategic purpose from the blog. The difference between *Jezebel*'s use of the such language informs us about how blogs are conducive to drawing in audiences in ways unlike those of larger news corporations, such as *The Ottawa Citizen*. The layout of *Jezebel* is more similar to a magazine format than the newspaper, *The Ottawa Citizen*, and can be considered more as a part-blog and part-magazine (Hendrickson, 2009). Moreover, the targeted audience for *The Ottawa Citizen* is different than that of *Jezebel*. The newspaper "is favoured by those who have grown up with a paper slapped on the porch" or, rather, an older generation than that of the participants in this research study and the target demographics of the feminist media blogs (Post Media, 2014, n.p.). Whereas *The Ottawa Citizen* is more likely to report news using the term "vagina" when the content is about medical concerns, *Jezebel* uses the term vagina to discuss everyday women's health issues, fashion, art, and entertainment that are more relevant to young women. But for some readers, "sassy" and informal language can repel them from the content. The writing style of feminist media blogs is strategic in attracting and retaining a specific demographic to their blog.

Similarly, *Jezebel* is appealing to readers like Lana and Kate because it can be read leisurely. Lana, a self-identified "lurker" of *Jezebel*, derives pleasure from reading the articles as a passive absorber of information. She read *Jezebel*: "if class is kinda dry, I'll just kinda check what's going on." Unlike *Ms.* and *Bitch Media* where other participants read those articles for facts, and a non-biased perspective, *Jezebel*'s use of opinions, humour and "sass" make the blog more appealing when dealing

with feminist topics. Feminist topics tend to be about “serious stuff” as Kate explained. A “lighthearted tone stops everything from being dark and depressing and sad. And I mean there are other news sources if you want that type of news but you know, I find if I come home from a long day, I just want to sit and be informed, but not, you know, not too much heavy stuff.”

Taking pleasure in reading news sources that center around entertainment and leisure is common. boyd (2008) states that particularly in an “attention economy” where there is so much news and information to access, people pay attention to what interests them. She further states that the mass media is very aware of this because “the antics of Paris Hilton or David Beckham sell more papers than details of who voted for what piece of legislation. Gossip is alluring; war is depressing” (boyd, 2008, p. 243). *Jezebel* provides this gossip form of news from an informed feminist perspective; the content for two of the readers is lighthearted, but still feminist. Many of *Jezebel*’s articles are feminist because they focus on self-empowerment and critiquing mainstream media’s anti-feminist perspectives on celebrity and entertainment culture (Wazny, 2010). In this way, Kate felt like she was being informed on current news and politics in a feminist and fun fashion.

D’Enbeau (2009) describes three particular themes through textual analysis of *Bust Magazine*, another feminist media publication, in regards to its use of language. One of these themes includes humour as a means of resistance and control. D’Enbeau (2009) concludes that: “To truly be-speak the world into being, women need the ontological courage to combat their own alienation from their true Selves. *Bust* begins this process, using language to combat patriarchal, grammatical social

control” (p. 31). In this way, *Bust* redefines femininity by being humourous and sarcastic and likewise, *Jezebel*’s use of language, style and humour work in the same fashion to make feminism knowable as relevant and current.

Not all of the participants found *Jezebel*’s sassy style appealing. For three of the participants, *Jezebel* was perceived as “amateur” or having “more opinions” than factual news. Sarah, for instance, compared the articles from *Ms. Magazine* and *Bitch Media* to those written in *Jezebel* and explained:

the way the website, *Bitch Media* or *Ms. Magazine*, they were laid out, like the articles, the headlines and everything, it just seems so much more that someone knows that they are talking about almost. They have statistics almost like that I read and that backed up what they had to say and everything and it’s not just like all opinion.

The participants’ preference for fact-based sources of feminist content on popular media blogs may imply that these young women did not perceive the use of informal language and opinions as a credible feminist resource. Likewise, Jane enjoyed reading the content in *Bitch Media* over *Jezebel*. She commented that she “prefers the facts and not the bitchyness of [feminist news]”. Although many of *Jezebel*’s articles are well-informed pieces of writing, Jane’s perspective on *Jezebel* is that the feminist blog is too opinionated and is not viewed as being as credible as *Bitch Media*.

Whereas *Jezebel* is commentary focused, the content that the other three participants preferred from *Bitch Media* and *Ms. Magazine* was interest-driven. That is, the participants stated that they preferred to read about particular topics related to young women’s experiences such as: education, sex education, women in the workplace, and women in the media. They typically accessed and consumed feminist media as a form of research that was based on their interest in the subject concerned.

Consequently, feminist media blogs such as *Jezebel* were not as appealing to these participants who viewed the content as fun but not rigorous. This critique of *Jezebel*'s style of providing feminist content is reminiscent of popular critiques of third wave feminism in which entertainment style of feminism, such as *Jezebel*, is akin to a version of watered-down feminism (Hayword & Drake, 1997; hooks, 2002a). Many feminist activists, writers and scholars critique watered-down feminism because a watered-down depiction of feminism is often far removed from feminist theory and the history of feminism (hooks 2002a). However, based on my conversations with those who read *Jezebel*, *Jezebel*'s content was understood as a useful introduction to feminism.

Kate and Lana, who preferred *Jezebel* to *Bitch Media* or *Ms. Magazine*, were not uncritical of the content. On the contrary, Kate, a self-identified intersectional feminist, was critical of *Jezebel*'s content but still chose to read the blog every day. Kate explained that “[*Jezebel*] is kind of enjoyable in its trashiness. I wouldn’t say it’s the height of feminist literature.” Apart from the articles on *Jezebel*, both Lana and Kate identified the comments section of the articles as being what they read the most for their own information. Lana stated, “usually, like nine times out of ten I will click and enlarge the comments so I can read through. I do read a lot because half the article to me is the commentary ... they bring up different points that weren’t mentioned in the article sometimes and I’m like “hey yeah that makes sense.” Similarly, Kate found the comments sections on *Jezebel* a good and informative community:

[the articles] talk a lot about celebrities and they talk about fashion and the articles are not always very well written or even well researched and

occasionally have grammatical errors. But what I really like is to be able to read the articles and then to cross-reference that with the comment section ... the comments sections are usually not the most nicest place. But I find here they have a very good, actually good community where people will say funny things or they will correct things in the article or they will say 'let's look at it from a racial issue instead' in addition to a feminist lens, and I guess I can say that I feel like that helps me think more critically.

The participants' reflections on blog comments suggest that additional information provided by the wider community of readers is a significant value with respect to *Jezebel*. In the same regard, feminist websites and blogs are notorious spaces for negative and trolling comments, responses to the threat feminism poses to the status quo. Goldberg's (2014,) work on the "toxic Twitter wars" reveals that such debates can be helpful in understanding the complexity of feminist politics (p. 1). However, they can also prevent readers from engaging in feminist discussions because of a fear of being attacked. Lana and Kate's experiences with *Jezebel* fit with Goldberg's observation. Not only did they find the comments helpful and informative, the participants were critically engaging with feminism through triangulating the information and opinions with which they were presented.

Jezebel appears to be unique in this regard. Perhaps because the site uses a third party application for their commenting or because of their tight restrictions on commenting, comments on the blog invite related discussion. First, in order for a reader to comment, she has to set up an account. Additionally, readers moderate the comments. Comments that are made on articles can be "favourited" by other commenters and readers and, based on observation, favourited comments are the first comments displayed in the comments section. In 2008, *Jezebel* posted an article entitled, "A Girl's Guide to Commenting," detailing the differences between good

comments and bad comments (*Jezebel*, 2008). According to the article, a good comment entails: “insight/additional information; intelligent critique; wit/humour; calm courteous reasoned disagreement, either with the opinions/facts presented in a post itself or with other commenters; sharing of relevant, personal anecdote (within reason)” (*Jezebel*, 2008, n.p.). This detailed list not only sets the tone for readers who engage with *Jezebel* online, but also works to provide meaningful content in other ways outside of the blog post itself.

The implications of this are that *Jezebel* helps to foster an online feminist community that collectively adds to the information being written on, and some readers value this information significantly. This commenting community allows for other voices to chime in with their opinions. However, some technical knowledge is required to make a comment and even to favorite one. This limits the contributions by some readers who want to also have their voices heard and also limits the mobility of unpopular but perhaps important information relevant to the article. But by critiquing the articles they read and comparing it with the online community’s comments, I suggest that these readers of *Jezebel* have an understanding of intersectional issues.

The two participants’ comments about consuming *Jezebel* suggest that both entertainment and useful information are important aspects for them as they consume online feminism. However, it is dependent on the reader. For some of the other participants, the information content is more valued than the author’s style of writing, while for others, the humour and the sass are pivotal to their experience reading online feminism. It seems as though *Jezebel* is able to attract a wide audience

with its format, but it maintains a strong readership for these participants because it uses both entertainment and information. Without still providing useful information, blogs such as *Jezebel* may be glanced over, as is commonly the case. However, Kate and Lana share that the useful information is within the comments section, and they share the pleasure from reading feminist commentary on current news as opposed to more well-researched articles that may not be accessible to all individuals. Well-researched articles can easily become too academic for some individuals. Given that all of these participants are university students, they are likely to be used to reading high-level content and understanding them, but this also becomes a barrier for those readers who may not have as high an education as these participants.

Regardless of which blogs they routinely consumed, the participants' comments reveal the importance of accessibility for their understanding of feminist issues. By accessibility, I am referring both to the writing style and to the sites' availability through online channels. Almost all of the participants came across these feminist media blogs through "crossposting" on social networking platforms such as *Tumblr* and *Facebook*, and through meta-media sites such as *StumbleUpon* or *UpWorthy*. Further, when participants were asked about subscribing to the print copies of either *Bitch Media* or *Ms. Magazine*, participants expressed that "it's just easier online" and "I don't read all of the time, just once in a while ... maybe if I was more into [feminism] I'd subscribe to them later." Four of these participants expressed that they read feminist media blogs only once in a while; thus, the participants' hesitation with print subscription shows that online feminism is more accessible to a large audience because for these participants, it is unlikely that they

would have come across feminist media material in magazines or zines as easily as in these feminist media blogs. However, it is important to note that while most popular magazines generate income by selling their audiences to advertisers, many feminist websites, such as *Bitch Media* for example, rely on hard copy subscriptions to stay in business as a way to avoid exploitation of their readers (Budgeon & Currie, 1995).¹¹ Thus, *Bitch Media* works towards engaging with audiences in a different way than *Jezebel* because it relies on a different strategy to stay online.

Accessibility to feminism is also dependent on content becoming viral – that is, highly shared content. In order for content to be highly shared, which is one of the goals of online feminism (i.e. to reach wide audiences with feminist material), the content must fight for users’ attention in an environment where everyone online is trying to attract and hold users’ attention (boyd, 2010). In general, online users prefer to consume content that is positive (boyd, 2010) and that evokes a strong emotional response, whether anger or awe (Berger and Milkman, 2011). Interestingly, all six participants relayed that their initial encounter with one of the feminist media blogs resulted from being attracted to an article that was shared with them by a peer, usually over social networking platforms. Kate found out about *Jezebel* through crossposting on her *Tumblr* account and “getting the links on there for articles over

¹¹ Despite the ease in accessibility of feminist media blogs compared to magazine and zine publishing, funding is a central concern for feminists organizing. *Bitch Media* is just one example of a feminist media blog that relies on subscriptions and donations from readers to maintain their activities. However, this source of funding is unstable and unpredictable especially in an attention economy, where individuals need to have heard of *Bitch Media* in the first place before they would be able to donate or subscribe to it. Feminist media blogs should not be unfairly criticized for prioritizing profits when Government support for women’s and feminist organizations are always decreasing (Martin & Valenti, 2013). Writers who contribute to blogs should be paid for their labour and there exists costs associated with maintaining a website and online presence.

and over again and eventually you just start reading the article.” Although she was unable to recall the exact article, the content was viral as it had been shared with her multiple times over *Tumblr*.

As highlighted previously, *Jezebel*'s content and style are different from the other four feminist media blogs I discuss. Its entertainment-style approach goes partway to explaining its popularity, as well as the sustained criticism that the site has faced from feminists and academics. Participants also appreciated its “sassy” style of writing and content. Despite the entertainment-focused style of writing, readers are still consuming critical feminist commentary. On the other hand, participants described *Bitch Media* and *Ms. Magazine* as being informational hubs of feminist resources, which is to say that they acted as sites for feminist resources. These differences aside, each of the blogs offers content that is not just appealing, but accessible to the study's participants. These blogs also present multiple feminist perspectives to their readers. Rather than dismiss blogs for deploying an entertainment style approach, we should be trying to better understand how feminist entertainment, through the role of entertainment and information, shapes perceptions of feminism held by these young women.

All five blogs are different in their own ways, of course, and these participants have shown that they are attracted to what interests them. However, the role of entertainment and feminist information work together in making online feminism accessible to as high a readership as possible by drawing them in, and retaining some with various strategies. But as most women come to feminism through personal experiences (Baumgartner & Richards 2010; hooks, 2000), I would add that the

entertainment conveyed through writing style, language and content should be positive, arousal-inducing and a personal story that relates to many young women readers. Although some participants have different preferences than others (information-based over humour, for instance), I contend that the content of online feminism is purposefully presenting a multiple feminist perspective to attract and retain a high readership.

Emergent Feminist Consciousness

Exposure to texts from multiple feminist perspectives invites readers to define feminism for themselves and to decide which theories and experiences are particularly resonant. This emphasis on diversity, as well as the use of popular culture is characteristic of third-wave feminist consciousness (Sowards & Renegar, 2004; Wong, 2003). Throughout my discussion with the participants, it was clear that their perspective on feminism was changing as they consumed feminist media blogs and that the content of their blog of choice broadened their thinking about feminist issues.

Because I am interested in their perspectives about feminism in relation to reading feminist media blogs, I first asked each participant if they identified as feminists. Five of the participants did, although they also noted that they had not been serious about feminism or feminist issues until very recently. The sixth, Mary, distanced herself from feminism. I followed up by asking if they could recall how they thought about feminism and feminists before their exposure to feminist media blogs. As an aside, four out of six participants reported that feminist media blogs were their first exposure to online feminism. In this section, I argue that these young

women expressed a postfeminist sentiment in their previous understandings of feminism. However, feminist media blogs played a role in these young women becoming more gender aware and aware of contemporary feminist issues that face them.

Even though three participants had some previous connection to feminism before encountering any of the feminist media blogs that ranged from a “natural inclination towards feminism” to being exposed to feminist discussions in school groups, all participants shared similar sentiments about feminism based on popular stereotypes.¹² Phrases such as “self righteous,” feminism as a “joke,” “women who hate men,” and, “hairy armpits” were used by all participants to describe their original perspective of feminists and feminism which suggests that their understanding of feminism was limited to expressions of femininity, and in this particular case, anti-femininity (Butler, 2013). Further, participants shared their original opinions on feminism such as: “we already have rights,” “women just want more power,” and, “women want men to be inferior.”¹³ In their comments, two competing perspectives emerge. The first identifies feminism as being necessary in the past but redundant today. The second argues that feminism has gone too far in reaching the goal of gender equality. These two stances are similar to Christina Sharff’s (2012) findings in her interviews with young women regarding their repudiations of feminism. She found that these repudiations stem from a postfeminist

¹² As participants were all fairly new to feminist media blogs, they were able to recall their previous perceptions about feminism.

¹³ See Christina Scharff (2012) for research about the performance of femininity in relation to young women’s rejecting feminism.

sentiment, in which feminism is viewed as supported, redundant and extreme at the same time.

For those participants who identified as having become recently aware of feminist issues, their ideas about feminism and feminists changed with the consumption of feminist media blogs. The way that they defined their current feminist perspective varied to some degree, but they all emphasized that feminism was women having equal rights with men and that complete equality had not yet been achieved. Kate was the most explicit in referring to the role that the Internet played in opening her up to feminism. However, all of the participants alluded to reading about feminism as helping them change their perspective on feminism. Moreover, they identified reading feminist media blogs as playing a role in their emergent feminist consciousness:

Before [reading feminist media blogs], I thought that everyone thinks of [feminism] as a joke kinda thing, like how most people thought about it and I went along with that but then I got more into seeing ... and reading more about it, like just me being more exposed to it so before reading about it I was still like on the fence thinking like “oh, its like the world is really great for women, like it’s not that big of a deal” kinda thing so I think reading about it just got me more exposed to [feminism]. (Sarah)

They’ve taught me to look at things from a feminist perspective, question things and be like “is this written by someone who is being kind of not-so-woman friendly?” and just generally a new perspective. (Lana)

I think I get a broader view of it, because the more I read about it, the more engaged I become in it, I guess. And the larger view I have, it’s not just like, it’s a global thing, not just a North American society where it’s about certain things, there’s more of a developing country idea of feminism and I find that they are a little bit different and so I’m kind of coming to understand all of it. (Red)

I’ve always been kind of oriented towards [feminism] just a natural inclination, so I guess I just had access to more information about it as I started being on the Internet more and reading news and started getting into

more theories and started reading up more on it ... It's been very informative, especially in the beginning. I got almost all of my information from reading on the Internet and reading the comments and synthesizing different arguments. And I mean, I haven't taken a women's studies class until this year and I was able to come in and I knew almost all of the information.
(Kate)

Changes in feminist perspectives, such as the ones described at length above, are an indication of a movement towards a feminist transformation. Budgeon (2001) discusses the role that micropolitics play in the transformative and the emancipatory power of feminism. For one, although her informants do not identify as feminists, their recounting of scenarios of facing gender inequality demonstrate a shift at the individual level. Although this shift does not often lead to collective action, which is a vital part of the feminist movement, Budgeon recognizes a feminist transformation. The young women in both Budgeon's (2001) and Sharff's (2012) research conflated ideas of feminism with those of postfeminist and larger neoliberal contexts. Thus, the content from the feminist media blogs, along with the online feminism surrounding the community (i.e. the commenters on *Jezebel* and those who crossposted articles on *Tumblr*) provide a space for feminist consciousness to develop in a similar manner as face-to-face consciousness-raising meetings¹⁴ reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s but with a greater potential to reach a much larger audience simultaneously across multiple locations.

¹⁴ Women's consciousness-raising groups are not to be confused with therapy groups, which would assume that the women involved are sick and are in need of a cure from a professional. Rather, these groups consisted of women coming together to discuss issues of personal struggle based on their gender. The intention, Hanisch (1969) stresses, is to find connections between their experiences and not to solve their personal problems but to see it as a political problem. In this way, the discussions and realizations of common concerns based on gender are a form of political action.

Furthermore, many young feminist third wave writers discuss their “lightbulb” or “aha” moment in their identification with feminism when they are able to articulate their own experiences of gendered oppression. Lana was able to recall a particular “aha moment” of her own. She discussed an article on *Jezebel* about Miley Cyrus’ Video Music Awards show in 2013 which showed how the mainstream media critiqued Miley’s performance as in essence “slutshaming” her.¹⁵ By reading this, Lana stated that it made her think differently about seeing how her other friends made the same slutshaming remarks about Miley and slutshaming was not something she wanted to take part in. She asserts:

the main thing about the Miley Cyrus post was that it opened up my eyes to the fact that me saying that her rubbing against Robin Thicke’s junk was like appalling, was slutshaming her which I wouldn’t want anyone to do to me. (Lana)

Her comment demonstrates a willingness to complicate a narrative that views Miley Cyrus as a mere victim of sexualization and patriarchy and denies any possibility of her sexual subjectivity.

The article’s opinion on how mainstream media’s derogatory judgments and comments about Miley Cyrus’s sexual performance provided Lana with the vocabulary and the insight into slutshaming. This shift she experienced is a shift away from a postfeminist sentiment on sexuality towards a feminist, pro-sex stance. Although the *Jezebel* article in question also mentions the many other problematic

¹⁵ At the Video Music Awards show in 2013, singers Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke performed together. Their performance received a lot of attention and critique as the two performers enacted sexual imagery in their dance routine. The critiques from mainstream media in particular focused on the actions of Miley Cyrus and ignored the part that Robin Thicke played, thus leading to slutshaming Miley Cyrus by blaming her for the hypersexualized performance. The article in question was entitled “Miley’s Need to Shock Was the Least Shocking Thing About It” (Dries, 2013).

features of the VMA performance, such as the appropriation of women of color, Lana picked out the critique of mainstream media slutshaming Miley Cyrus because it related to her everyday life of being a young woman. Making use of the strategies discussed in the previous section, the *Jezebel* article's opinion urged her to reflect on and challenge her initial ideas about young women's sexuality and, consequently, exposed Lana to the relevance of contemporary feminism in her life. This form of transformational learning also occurs when women participate in women's groups (Cooley, 2007; Hanisch, 1969).

The participants' interest in feminist issues and participation in online feminism complicate claims made by Scharff (2012) and other girl studies scholars that young women dis-identify as feminists. Further, their understanding of wider and global perspectives shows that the content they read is not simply "trash" but rather, again, providing multiple perspectives on feminism packaged to some extent as entertainment. While the experiences of these participants cannot be generalized to all young women readers of feminist media blogs, their interest in identifying as feminists and being more aware of feminist issues that affect them directly and indirectly show that feminist media blogs act as a feminist consciousness-raising for these participants. When individuals consume third wave writing on popular culture, consciousness-raising is produced via internal dialogues and readers develop critical perspectives (Sowards & Renegar, 2004). The shift in perception that the participants reported, specifically in regard to developing a critical perspective, suggests that online feminism plays an important role in consciousness-raising for these participants and that online feminism can successfully permeate the walls of

postfeminism. This suggests that postfeminism is an unstable sentiment; one that can be broken down.

As previously mentioned, though, not all participants displayed a changed perception of feminism. Mary was the only participant who resisted a feminist label. Similar to other participants, she identified feminism as a perspective in which all women want to be superior to men. She stated: “No [I’m not a feminist]. I mean I’m all for rights but ... there are so many women that are like ‘men cannot hit women’. I fully agree with that. But I don’t agree with women who start hitting men and then, the first thing they say is ‘you can’t touch me.’ ... I’m not that type of feminist.” By acknowledging gender equality and equating feminism with wanting (physical) power over men, Mary’s perceptions of feminism reflected a postfeminist discourse similar to that expressed by the other participants (Gill, 2007; Sharff, 2012). The difference, however, in Mary’s experience and perception of feminism from the other participants is that the other participants’ postfeminist comments were an earlier perception of feminism. As the interview with Mary continued, it became clear that she had little to no experience with any feminist media blogs, or feminist media at all.

Given Mary’s understanding of feminism as advancing women’s rights over men’s, neither *Bitch Media* nor *Feministing* were able to attract and retain her attention to pull her into the blogs. Mary recounted that the “subliminally feminist bias” in the content was not appealing to her. She preferred content that was “well-rounded” and “provides all the perspectives”. Unlike the participants who preferred the facts of *Bitch Media* and *Ms.* blogs, or the humour and commentary from *Jezebel*,

Mary expressed that neither style were appealing to her. While individuals had varying interests, both Kate and Lana also expressed no inclination towards feminist interests before coming across the websites. It is possible, though, that Mary's limited exposure was only her initial exposure, and as participants expressed previously, sometimes articles from feminist media blogs had to be shared multiple times before they even read them. Thus, her resistance to feminism prevented feminist consciousness from developing.

The discussions from the first group present support for the assertion that exposure to feminist media blogs may play a role in expanding the feminist consciousness of the participants. The example of Mary, by contrast, reveals that feminist consciousness is unlikely to occur when it is being resisted. Nevertheless, she can also be seen as perceiving of feminism in a way that can be classified as postfeminist, given that her perception of feminism was based on an understanding that feminists have "gone too far." As such, I suggest that feminist media plays a role in feminist consciousness-raising in similar and different ways than magazines and zines played for readers decades ago. However, given their format and content, the shift in perceptions of feminism can be understood as a shift from a postfeminist to a more liberal and/or third wave conception of feminism.

Blurred Online/Offline Boundaries

The previous two sections established that feminist media blogs play an important role in the feminist consciousness of the participants in this research project by providing useful feminist information that is accessible and seen through a variety of feminist lenses. Thus, I was surprised to discover how rarely they shared

the online feminist content that they consumed. When participants chose to share articles from these feminist websites with their networks, they did so with care, indicating the existence of a deliberate and reflexive process of sharing. What's more, they often shared material in ways that ran counter to the intentions of the designers of the feminist media blogs.

Some of the participants shared feminist content on more populated forums like *Facebook* or *Tumblr*. In my interview with Red, she relayed that she often posts articles on her *Facebook* page:

I post them anyways in hopes that someone else will see it, just in case. And that way I can always go back and look at them if I want to see [the article] again. So it's like a Facebook archive of all the things that I like. I'm just like "oh what was that one article I posted a while ago?" and I can go back and read it.

On the one hand, Red used her *Facebook* page as a way to share feminist content with her *Facebook* network suggesting that she was not content to keep her feminism to herself, but rather, she wished to share feminist ideas with peers even though her friends might not see it or read it. At the same time, *Facebook* functioned for Red like an archive enabling her to maintain a record of her reading and, if desired, to return to a particular content. Kate also shared material widely, using her *Tumblr* account. She explained her decision-making process as follows: "When you find the ones that are very well researched and very comprehensive and look at things from a multitude of different views or if it's something I haven't seen a lot of on *Tumblr* then I will post it [on *Tumblr*]." While Kate stated previously that she consumed *Jezebel* because she enjoyed the "trashiness" of it, she was careful to share feminist content that was the

opposite. This distinction suggests that she shared content in hopes that it would be useful to her peers rather than merely entertaining.

Not all of the participants shared material so widely. Jane, for example, only emailed feminist content she viewed online to her aunt who is also a feminist. Jane was comfortable sending feminist material to a close relative and a declared feminist, but not necessarily to others. Participants may not have been broadcasting content to their online peer network because it took time for individuals to make the connections between their experiences and the experiences of others, and further, to internalize their understanding of feminist issues. First, as most participants were able to recall their recent perceptions of feminism being negative and it may be possible that their peer networks shared a similar sentiment. Hogan (2010) discusses the lowest common denominator approach in making sense of how individuals present themselves on niche sites such as *Facebook* and *Tumblr*. That is to say that individuals are likely to share content that is similar to most of the online network. For the participants in my study, it may be that the lowest common denominator of content shared through their social media platforms did not consist of feminist content. With this understanding in mind, it seems likely that new feminists may hesitate to broadcast feminist media content for fear of stigmatization.

Moreover, it may take some time for individuals to understand the complexity of systemic oppressions that they face in their everyday lives. As Hanisch (1969) asserts: “It took us some ten months to get to the point where we could articulate these things and relate them to the lives of every woman. It’s important from the standpoint of what kind of action we are going to do” (n.p.). Here, Hanisch

(1969) discusses the importance of discussion and critical thinking as the first step of consciousness-raising. It takes time for individuals to draw out the connection between personal experiences of oppressions, especially since doing so would mean questioning the status quo, which can be destabilizing for some.

While fear of stigma may shape how people choose to share content, existing work in the field suggests that the nature of the content is also important, Berger and Milkman (2011) argue that practically useful content, such as DIY content, and topics that are of interest to other people are typically shared through niche marketing, such as email. Commentary type content found on blogs, on the other hand, is not typically content that is emailed, but rather broadcast. Consequently, commentary-focused content from *Jezebel* should be broadcast more than the content from *Bitch Media* and *Ms. Magazine*.

Even if participants in this study were hesitant to share feminist content online, the ideas they encountered on feminist media blogs did not remain on the site. Rather, participants “shared” this content in other ways. Lana recalled a discussion with her mom about Miley Cyrus’s VMA performance as her mother had just read about it in the newspaper. Lana stated that she used some of the points from the aforementioned *Jezebel* article on Miley Cyrus to bring up the concept of slutshaming and to explain the concept to her mom as well as how slutshaming hurts women. The opinion on slutshaming Lana read about on *Jezebel* became an internalized value for her and she used her new understanding to help expand the awareness of this issue to others. In this one-to-one, offline approach to sharing information, Lana was able to engage in the issue and potentially influence the other

person. Sharing online or offline is still valuable for online feminism, but even though feminist media blogs make it easier to share with multiple people across time and location, one-to-one sharing also works. Lana, for example, increased her feminist consciousness and the consciousness of others through one-to-one sharing.

The various ways in which the participants in the study engaged with online feminist content invites further reflection on youth participation in the digital realm. Ito et al. (2008) identify three modes of youth participation: hanging out, messing around and geeking out. Whereas “hanging out” refers to youth primarily connecting with peers on online platforms and “geeking out” refers to a committed uptake of a specialized knowledge group, my participants aligned more with those who would fit under the genre of “messing around” (Ito et al., 2008, p. 18-28). Messing around refers to largely consuming media but not producing any and involving “experimentation and exploration with relatively low investment” (Ito, et al, 2008, p. 20). They conclude that youth are pursuing their interests and learning through their online activities. In a similar way as internal dialogues are an important part of third wave feminist consciousness, reading and exploring information online can lead to learning even if the information is not shared in a measurable way via social media platforms. Consequently, these participants were using feminist media blogs to explore their feminist identity and not to find an online feminist community with which to engage. This is different from those young women who write their own feminist blogs, in order to both explore their feminist identity and to actively create support for like-minded young women (Keller, 2012).

Although a critique of third wave feminist practice (in this case, creating feminist media blogs for the purposes of engaging a wide audience with respect to the relevance of contemporary feminism) is that there is too much of a focus on individualization and not enough on the collective feminist movement. Through in-depth interviews with the editors of *Seventeen*, Keller (2011) reported that the editors of *Seventeen* magazine disguise feminism and make feminism fun for their readers. Her finding adds nuance to Budgeon and Currie's (1995) previous research on *Seventeen* magazine that suggested that the contradictory discourse of feminism and nonfeminist messages actively construct a postfeminist sentiment (Gill, 2007). However, despite editors' attempts to incorporate disguised feminist content in their magazines aimed at teen girls, the attempts were not enough to challenge social inequities, and thus the editors were also focused on the individual reader instead of a collective community for collective change (Keller, 2011).

However, Anita Harris (2010) recommends that contemporary feminist research must take into account the changing cultural context and consider how feminist activism may now take another form from one that older feminists are used to. Specifically, she suggests that it is within "narratives of choice and individualization, conditions of decollectivization and globalization, a pervasive media culture and the emergence of new information and communication technologies" where feminist scholars must situate research on young women and feminism (Harris, 2010, p. 481).

With Harris's (2010) insight, the subjective experiences of these six participants provided nuances to the current understandings of the role of online

feminism for young women readers today. It seems likely that the participants who are still new to feminism will immediately be apt to participate in larger feminist politics. The participants in my research are still new to feminism and exploring feminism for themselves (Gillis, Howie, & Munford, 2004). I argue that first these readers related to feminism individually and then their internalized understanding of sexism, for instance, was projected outwards to their peers for a potential collective feminist movement. Feminist media blogs acted as a tool in connecting these young women participants with the personal side of feminism.

Similarly, perhaps because four out of six of the participants claimed to be new to feminism, they are still exploring feminism for themselves and are more compelled to consume rather than to engage with the content in a direct way, such as providing comments on the articles or sharing with peers. Another possibility in support of these participants “messaging around” with online feminist content is that four of the participants accessed feminist media blogs once in a while, which identifies their low investment in engaging with feminist media blogs in the way that the blogs are capable of being engaged with. Occasional reading of feminist media blogs and little sharing indicate that these readers were using the Internet for educating themselves on feminist issues. Although broadcasting feminist content would strengthen support for feminist media blogs to reach a large audience, it seems as though the content from these blogs is being consumed for personal use, and it invites readers to explore their own ideas about feminism. First, feminism is personal and then it becomes political for these participants who are new to feminism.

Conclusion

I suggest that feminist media blogs are a medium through which young women gain awareness of feminist issues in a fun and entertaining way. As the blogs help young women build this awareness, they simultaneously poke holes through postfeminist discourses in way that the young women can relate to and take up. Feminist media blogs know their targeted audience and provide content to pull them in with the hopes that these new readers will become aware that feminism is still relevant today (and to also make a profit).

These blogs are popular because they are using proven effective strategies that mainstream media uses to attract audiences. The goal of feminist media blogs such as these is not necessarily to pull readers in and completely away from mainstream media, but rather to invite readers to read the feminist blogs in tandem with their other interests. This double reading invites them to think critically about their experiences as young women. Therefore, it is unlikely to expect that with these comments, the participants will turn to feminist online sources completely and disregard their accustomed blogs or online reading material/news of interest.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

Discussion

The feminist media blogs discussed in this thesis are an interesting medium of study as they use popular culture content and celebrity gossip to present sexism, inequality in workplaces, and social injustices based on gender, sexuality, race and class. Although these blogs are not engaging in feminist practices in a way akin to studying theoretical and historical feminist contributions, these blogs offer a step towards informing readers that feminism is still very much alive and needed today. The six participants in my study shared their stories of why and how they interact with the feminist media sites and attempted to answer how their ideas about feminism had changed, or not, while they consumed these sites. For two participants, the additional issues brought up from discussions in the comments section highlighted how blogs are indeed engaging with feminist issues, sharing their information while potentially furthering the reach of feminist issues to their peer networks. The feminist messages that these feminist media blogs create act as a resource for these young women who want to keep up to date on current news and popular culture news. In this sense, these participants were participating in micropolitics – politics impacting their everyday lives – by engaging with feminist media blogs.

This research project locates the examination of young women's relationship to feminist media blogs within current research on feminism and the role of the Internet in feminist practice to answer the following research questions: What is the role of online feminism in the everyday lives of young women? And, what are their

perceptions of feminism given the frequency of their accessing online feminist media websites?

Starting from the premise advanced by earlier studies on women's engagement with feminist magazines, this research sought to understand how popular culture online is consumed and used by young women in order for them to understand and disseminate alternative social norms and values. Given the differences between this medium and those that have preceded it, I suggested that further exploration of feminist media blogs present an important avenue of study for those interested in young women's perceptions of and engagement with feminism. In an effort to compliment the contextually and textually based research on this topic conducted to date, my project sought to address a gap in the literature by focusing on young women's actual consumption of and engagement with feminist media blogs rather than on the sites' potential to be used and shared.

I employed a qualitative methodology and practiced feminist reflexivity through six semi-structured interviews. I turned to Braun and Clarke (2008) for analyzing the interview transcripts due to the flexible nature of their analysis as well as its suitability for exploring themes of a newly researched area. As a result, my research highlights three main themes: the role of entertainment and information in feminist media blogs; emergent feminist consciousness; and blurred online and offline boundaries.

Although there are similarities between the ways in which feminist media blogs, magazines and zines build feminist consciousness, the online nature of the former has had a profound impact on how the content was being used by the

participants. On one hand, all three types of publication use popular culture mediums and content embedded with feminist values and ideas; on the other hand, online feminism is available to a wider and more diverse audience. Feminist media blogs are, therefore, more an evolution of, than a departure from, the magazines and zines from feminism's publishing history. The accessibility, entertainment, multiple feminisms, personal stories and, further, Web 2.0 affordances allow the blogs to reach a larger audience.

At the same time, the sites act primarily as a consumption tool for the participants, rather than one used for engaging with the wider online feminist community. Instead, the participants primarily engage with the material through internal dialogues and critical thinking. Accordingly, online feminism creates a fun and entertaining space for this group of interest-driven young women readers. However, this space is not a utopic online feminist community. As participants have demonstrated, youth may engage with new media in unintended ways, and it is by understanding the nuances of online feminism from the experiences of young women readers that researchers can understand the plethora of ways young women come to understand and identify with feminism.

Limitations

Further to the limitations of my research study discussed in Chapter Two, this research project is limited in its design due to time constraints. I interviewed six participants only because of the limited time in which to conduct a Master's thesis. Additionally, due to time constraints, I opted for a conveniently targeted sample of university women. My recruitment method could have been extended to other post-

secondary institutions in Ontario and, also, to 18 and 19 year old women who do not attend post-secondary schools for a more accurate portrayal of young women reading these blogs. The population of young women not attending post-secondary institutions may be starkly different than those who do attend and, therefore, my research is limited to representing only those participants I interviewed and cannot be generalized to other groups. However, due to the feminist perspective of each of these blogs, specifically with regard to *Feministing*, as stated earlier, there is an assumed higher level of education involved, and university-aged women are not too far from the intended audience of the blogs.

Contribution

The contribution this thesis has made to the literature surrounding young women's readings of feminist media blogs is that this is indeed an important avenue for further inquiry. Feminist research critiquing popular culture studies only provide one part of the role feminist media blogs play in the lives of the readers. By interviewing readers of these sites, I was able to ascertain why, despite its "trashiness", blogs like *Jezebel* are so popular and liked. Although the answer is specific to the outcomes of this research project, the participants have made a case that feminism can be learned in an engaging and entertaining way.

Despite the criticisms of feminist media blogs being sites of entertainment and "light" issues, feminist politics still permeated the content by being relevant to the young women readers I interviewed. It was clear that through exposure to feminist media blogs, their perceptions of feminism changed. At the same time, however, this group shared their feminist ideas and perceptions strategically through narrowcasting

and offline intimate encounters suggesting that their feminist consciousness was expanding the consciousness of others as well. Although these blogs in particular may not fuel direct political action, altering the micropolitics of everyday lives of young women contributes to their becoming active and political citizens.

Reflections and Future Directions

The most challenging part of interviewing the participants was in their lack of ability to recall specific posts or articles in their discussions of their interactions with feminist media blog content. I anticipated that this would be the case as it is difficult to recall specific posts when a lot of time has passed. However, I found that this difficulty contributed to less in-depth interviews with some participants over others. With some interviews, I found that it was easy for them to divulge anecdotes about how they use the feminist media blogs and with whom they share their information. For some of the participants, however, it was difficult for them to recall particular posts they liked, or did not like, and to carry on a conversation about feminist media blogs. Recalling particular articles is a difficult task for anyone, and if I were to conduct additional interviews, I would provide participants with questions beforehand so that they may have more time to think about their usage of the sites. However, a concern with this method is that interviewees may then have time to fabricate stories that will impact the research results.

To conclude, I address areas for future research that connect my thesis to broader studies of contemporary feminist and Internet practices. There are four topics that arose from my research that could not be addressed in this thesis but are pertinent to further inquiry. First, none of the interviewed participants read

Racialicious or *Feministing*. I included these two websites in my advertisements because *Feministing* is one of the most popular and award-winning websites on feminism and popular culture that is specifically written by third wave feminists targeting a younger audience to engage with online feminism. None of the participants having heard of this website or reading it may be another indicator of little awareness of feminist issues. If a participant had heard about *Jezebel* or *Ms. Magazine*, for instance, they stuck with that website and were not interested in seeking out more (or may not have known that there were other websites of a similar nature). *Racialicious*, on the other hand, is a feminist website that specifically focuses on the intersections of gender and race in popular culture. Arguably, this website purports to use more of a critical feminist lens by submitting intersectional analysis to news media. This may be another indicator that the six participants had little awareness of feminist issues, as the websites they liked to read were less intersectional in the ways in which race plays out in popular culture messages about women and feminism.

However, not reading these two feminist blogs is not an indicator that the participants are not knowledgeable about the intersections of race, class, and age with gender. By critiquing the articles they read and comparing it with the comments of the online communities, I suggest that they did have an understanding of intersectional issues. Perhaps another reason as to why the participants had not heard of either *Racialicious* or *Feministing* may be due to lack of crossposting on similar feminist media blogs, such as *Jezebel*, *Ms. Magazine* and *Bitch Media*. Future research should explore how popular feminist media blogs that are similar in content

and style work towards building an online feminist community by cross-posting and link-building to each other's websites.

Secondly, rather than interviewing young women and asking them to reflect on how they engage with online feminism through anecdotal accounts, an alternative approach would be to gather participants who would be willing to share their public posts and comments on multiple social media platforms in order to gain a more nuanced perspective of their everyday practices. Third, future research may also want to include the experiences of young men readers of feminist media blogs. As this research study focuses on feminist perspectives of a particular generation of young adults, men who engage with feminist media sites would enrich this discussion. However, I chose not to include men in this particular research project because women's voices and experiences should initially be expressed in these areas of study for fear of having men's voices dominate the dialogue. Furthermore, explorative research should begin the process based on the lives of the disadvantaged (in this case young women) as part of a feminist standpoint methodology (Harding, 2012).

Fourth, and finally, given the connections drawn between the positive implications of Internet usage furthering feminist messages, the role of software designers and developers in creating platforms to share and spread messages should also be interrogated for a fuller picture of how the Internet can continue to be used positively for feminist activism as well as for spreading feminist content to potentially emerging feminists. To address the role of designers and developers, I plan on

incorporating this aspect in my proposed research on search engine software for my future doctoral research.

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Tables

Table 1

Feminist Media Blog Read by Each Participant and by Frequency

Feminist Media Blog	Jane	Kate	Lana	Mary	Red	Sarah
<i>Bitch Media</i>	XX	-	-	X	X	XX
<i>Feministing</i>	-	-	-	X	-	-
<i>Jezebel</i>	X	XXX	XXX	-	-	XX
<i>Ms. Magazine</i>	-	-	-	-	X	XX
<i>Racialicious</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other	<i>StumbleUpon</i> (XX)	<i>Alternet</i> (X) <i>Psychology Today</i> (X) <i>The Mary Sue</i> (X)	-	-	<i>UpWorthy</i> (XXX)	-

Note. X = read once; XX = read occasionally; XXX = read frequently.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Letter of Invitation

Hello (name);

I would like to thank you for your interest in this study, which I am completing for the fulfillment for my MA thesis. This study is about young women's relationship with feminist alternative media websites. Previous research has focused on analyzing the content of these feminist media website but not on how these websites are actually used by young women. I have designed my study to focus on exploring how people interact with these websites and how they understand the feminist messages and values that they may receive from such websites.

Your participation will consist of a 30 to 60 minute conversation about the feminist media website(s) that you are familiar with. I will be audio recording the conversation to analyze them for common themes that emerge. These recordings will be kept strictly confidential as only I would have the file and all recordings will be destroyed as soon as the audio is transcribed. Your real name will not be used as part of the transcription, but rather, you may choose a pseudonym that only you and I will know your real name.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can stop the interview at any time without any consequences. The information provided by you to that point will not be destroyed and not included in the research findings. If, after reading this, you are still interested in participating in this study, please respond with your contact information and I will try to organize a time and date for the interview that best works for your schedule.

After the completion of the interview, you will receive a \$10 Tim Horton's gift card for your participation.

My thesis supervisor for this project is Dr. Lara Karaian and she can be reached at lara_karaian@carleton.ca if there are any questions or concerns. This project has been reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board and questions or concerns may be sent to the chair Prof. Andy Adler at 613-520-2517 or ethics@carleton.ca.

Thank you again for your interest. If you have any further questions, please contact me at nasreenrajani@cmail.carleton.ca.

Sincerely,
Nasreen Rajani

Appendix 2: Call for Participants

Receive a \$10 coffee card from Tim Horton's!
**Seeking participants for 30 minute to 1 hour study
exploring young women's engagement with feminist
media websites**

Do you read the following websites:

**Jezebel
Feministing
Bitch Media
Racialicious
Ms. Magazine Online**

Are you:

Female and/or Female Identified?

18 or 19 years old?

If you are interested in participating or would like
further information, please contact:
nasreenrajani@cmail.carleton.ca

This project has been reviewed and cleared by the
Carleton University Research Ethics Board and
questions or concerns may be sent to the chair Prof.
Andy Adler at 613-520-2517 or ethics@carleton.ca.

Appendix 3: Informed Consent

This study has been approved by the Carleton University Ethics Committee and given number: 100382

The purpose of this informed consent is to make sure that you, the participant, understand all aspects of this study. It will enable you to make an informed decision as to whether or not you wish to participate in this study. The form contains information about both the purpose of the study and your role in the study, if you choose to participate.

Principal investigator: Nasreen Rajani (nasreenrajani@cmail.carleton.ca)

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Lara Karaian (lara_karaian@carleton.ca)

Purpose: This study is being done to better understand of young women's relationship with feminist alternative media websites.

Task Requirements: In this study, you will be asked to take part in a 30 - 60 minute digitally recorded interview in which you will be asked about your interactions with the feminist media websites and your understandings and opinions of feminism through these websites. This interview will take place at Carleton University.

\$10 gift card: You will be given a \$10 Tim Horton's gift card for your participation. If you wish to stop the interview at any time, you will still receive the gift card.

Right to withdraw: You have the right to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from this study *by December 2013* reason without explanation. You also have the right to remove your data at this time after the interview has been conducted.

Anonymity/confidentiality: You will be asked to provide a pseudonym that can be used to protect your identity in any presentation of the findings based on this interview. In addition, the audio recording of the interview will be destroyed upon completion of the study and the typed interview and other research materials will not have your name or the name of anyone you mention on it. Anything linking your name to the research materials will be stored in a locked filing cabinet accessible to only those associated with the project and will be destroyed upon completion of the project.

If you have any ethical concerns about how this study was conducted, please

contact: Prof. Andy Adler, Research Ethics Chair for Carleton University at 613-520-2517 or ethics@carleton.ca

Signatures

My signature indicates that I agree to participate in this study.

Date: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Consent to Audio Record

My signature indicates that I grant my permission for the interview to be digitally recorded for the purposes of accuracy and that I realize that the recording will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Date: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Received \$10 Tim Horton's gift card

My signature indicates that I have received the \$10 Tim Horton's gift card for my participation.

Date: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Appendix 4: Interview Schedule

Consent: Review and sign.

Face sheet: Participant pseudonym:

Interviewer:

Date and location of interview:

Length of interview:

Participant age:

Follow up call permission: Yes / No

If yes, contact info: _____ Date call made:

Wants final results? Yes / No

If yes: Contact info:

Warm Up: What are the feminist alternative media websites you frequent?

Which most often?

When and where do you look at the sites?

How often do you visit these sites?

Feminist messages: What drew you to these sites?

What do you like about these sites?

What do you not like about these sites?

What brings you back to visit these sites?

How have these sites helped you understand feminism? (Have they?)

What have these sites taught you about feminism?

What did you understand about feminism before you started frequenting these sites?

What did you think about feminism (or feminists) before you started frequenting these sites?

Have these ideas changed for you?

How would you define/describe feminism?

What has been your experience with feminism/feminists?

Usage and consumption: Do you share any posts from these sites to friends or family?

If yes, how so? What are some reactions you get from friends and family when you share posts from these websites?

If not, why not?

Have you ever commented on any of the posts or threads of these sites before?

If yes, how often and when? Can you tell me about one particular instance?

If not, why not?

Wrapping Up: Is there anything else about your thoughts or experiences with wisdom that you would like to share?

Additional Info: Would you like to receive a summary of the findings? If yes, email address:

Can I email you in two or three days to see if there is anything you want to add or delete from the interview or to clarify anything that's unclear to me? _____