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Shaping Student Activists: Discursive Sensemaking of Activism and Participation Research

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Abstract: As social media becomes a more potent force in society, particularly for younger generations, the role in activism has been contested. This qualitative study examines 35 interviews with students regarding their perceptions of the use of social media in social change, their perceptions of activists, and their level of self-identification as an activist. Data suggest that students use media to engage in offline participation in activist causes because online interactions present a "safe" place to begin their involvement. Findings also point to the unified pejorative connotations of the term "activist", yet also demonstrate ways that students transform the negative stereotype of activists in a way that creates a more positive image. Most participants in the study were able to see sufficient positive characteristics in behaviors they associated with activism to prompt the students to identify themselves as "activists" or "aspiring activists". We offer 3 practical recommendations for teachers who seek to increase service learning vis a vis activism in their classrooms.

Keywords: Social Justice, Social Media, Membership Categorization, Service Learning

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Activism and advocacy are among the fastest growing topics taught in modern day curriculums. Teachers eager to instill positive changes in students disseminate lessons on activism in a multitude of creative service learning techniques that extend beyond traditional classrooms. Studies indicate long-term positive response from students exposed through guided hands-on scientific methods (Mueller et al., 2014; Willermet, et al., 2011), through music (Levy & Byrd, 2001), and through faculty-led field trips (Galizzi, 2014).

External sources (i.e., outside the classroom,) present opportunities for teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue about activism with students. Turning on the television, browsing the news on a cell phone, or logging on to social media sites almost always guarantees exposure to causes, or movements begging for participant attention. Teachers looking to utilize current events as a model for students to engage in activism through service learning have vast opportunities to open dialogues based on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Buzzfeed) feeds alone. But before teachers can engage in meaningful examples of service learning *vis a vis* activism in the classroom, they must overcome obstacles. First teachers must understand the ways in which students' sensemaking of activism is socially constructed. Most literature examining communicative aspects of activism focus on activist strategies. Studies have examined perceptions of activist tactics and strategies (Barnett, Ropers-Huilman, & Aaron, 2008), identification tactics of activist groups (Sommerfeldt, 2011), and the role of narrative in activist groups (Atkinson & Cooley, 2010). Little attention, however, has been paid to the sensemaking process used by emerging activists—particularly the processes of students. Second, teachers must recognize challenges that hinder seamless dissemination on activism—specifically related to channel and perceptions.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how teachers can use student perceptions about activism to enhance service-learning teaching. We adopt Chambers and Phelps (1993) definition of activism as, "the active participation of individuals in group behavior for the purpose of creating change… Change can be directed towards individuals, groups, and/or systems" (p. 20). The delay of adulthood in industrialized societies makes the college years, especially time spent in the classroom, important to identity formation (Cox & McAdams, 2012). The extent to which emerging adults come to value making efforts to participate in and change their social worlds is central to citizenship (Nam, 2012). Additional benefits of student participation in activism are argued by Hartnett, Wood and McCann (2011) in that college student involvement in activism causes is an important "growth opportunity" that is "life affirming" (p. 348).

Research clearly identifies the strength of activism *vis a vis* service learning, but often disregards the various process by which students conceptualize their role as "activists." The following paragraphs provide the role of social media in activism, motivations for student involvement, and student sensemaking concerning perceptions of activism.

Literature Review

Social Media and Activism

Controversy abounds regarding the extent to which individuals can actively participate in activism via social media. Although there is no shortage of social media outlets with which students can engage, an article in *The New Yorker* by Malcolm Gladwell (2010) stated that social media does little to advance social causes. Gladwell contends that online denizens are content with merely supporting causes online (e.g., 'liking' a Facebook page) without participating in activism offline.

Technology has become a widely adopted vehicle for communicating *about* soliciting participation in activist causes, particularly in the United States (Harlow & Harp, 2012). The term "slacktivism" (a portmanteau for "slacker" and "activism") has been used by some to characterize the passive participation of some who solely participate online (Marichal, 2013). Negative reactions to Gladwell's article in the popular press included Mirani (2010), who argued that social media provides more possibilities for activist groups than merely 'liking' them. Mirani attributed the organizational tools of platforms like Facebook and Twitter to demonstrations in Iran, Iceland, and Egypt. By providing a platform for horizontal communication, citizen journalism, and marginalized or repressed voices, social media has become an integral medium for activists. Research by Hooghe, Vissers, Stolle, and Maheo (2010) also demonstrates how online activist outreach can promote as effective results as offline, face-to-face organizing.

One example of effective outreach includes the December 17, 2010, incident of Tunisian produce vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi who set himself on fire in the streets of Tunisia. Bouazizi's self-immolation became viewed as a reaction to government corruption, police extortion and economic hardship, thereby igniting the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and what became known as the Arab Spring (Lotan et al., 2011). The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions displayed a prolific use of social media, using Twitter hashtags to index information about the revolution to the entire world, in addition to Facebook groups to recruit members and share event information for demonstrations.

Although the effectiveness of gaining student involvement beyond an online context is widely debated, the evidence for the fact that students do engage through social media is strong. The following paragraphs outline student motivation for activism in a service learning, social-media context.

Student Motivation

Scholars have identified a multitude of information pertaining to conditions that would influence participation, as well as catalysts that would increase student participation in activist causes. Conditions that were likely to influence participation pertained to motivation, experience, and access. From a motivation standpoint, students who exhibit a strong sense of motivation to defend the status quo are less likely to engage in forms of activism such as protesting (Jost et al., 2011). Swank and Fahs (2011) discovered that activism was more prevalent among students who were further along in their college career. Nonetheless, the strongest predictor of involvement in activism was access to an activist network and peer attitudes toward activism—specifically through social media

Catalysts for increase in participation include ease of mobilization, familiarity with other members, and vested political interest. Because online social networks are made up of offline friends and acquaintances, they may impact offline behaviors. Close friends have a strong influence on mobilization (Bond et al., 2012). Social networking is an integral part of online mobilization as political messages hold considerable sway when accompanied by familiar faces and informal conversation. For example, the breadth of online social networks is positively correlated with online political participation, such as subscribing to a listserv, writing to a politician, or making a campaign contribution (Valenzuela, Kim, & Zuniga, 2012). Such online participation requires little effort beyond a few keystrokes, therefore making mobilization much easier than in face-to-face exchanges or demonstrations.

The impact of close social networking ties on online mobilization resonates with other studies. Like other online groups, activist groups online with a certain threshold of 'followers' or 'friends' on social media networks are inclined to receive more followers due to popularity—also known as the bandwagon effect (Xu et al., 2012). The bandwagon effect can explain why a user decides to join a group on Facebook after seeing a friend join. The hyperpersonal nature of online exchanges also serves as a means for breeding feelings of familiarity when individuals have never met (Walther, 1996). Even though a face-to-face meeting may not have occurred, an admirer of a heavily involved activist may participate solely on the basis of admiration.

Vested political interest also acts as a catalyst for participation in activism. Offline engagement often occurs after establishing trusted ties within social networks (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009). Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, and Bichard (2010) found a correlation between individuals' reliance on social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, and an increase in civic involvement in local communities. Syed (2011) found a positive correlation between the use of social networking and participation in offline activism during the Arab Spring, noting that participants who engage in political activity on social media are more inclined to participate in activism offline. Valenzuela (2013) also found a positive relationship between participation in social media and in offline protest among Chilean participants. These correlations demonstrate the power of activism promoted through social media as a catalyst for engaging student attention to offline endeavors.

Sensemaking "Activism" Through Talk

Students have come to understand what constitutes activism but often have a difficult time sensemaking their role as activists. Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) entails an ongoing, social, and plausible-over-accurate, cognitive process of understanding how one fits within a socially bound parameter. In other words, a student who is unfamiliar with activism, makes inferences based on each observation and experience correlated with activism—hence the ongoing nature as observations and experiences are not bound by time, but are instead sorted into categories. Membership categories devices (MCDs) involve how people make sense of others, or construct a classification of people. In interaction, certain categories, such as 'Asian,' or 'doctor,' are invoked to describe a member of the population of a larger collection of categories. The MCDs for 'Asian' and 'doctor' are 'ethnicity' and 'occupation,' respectively. Categorization is constructed and embedded in conversation, which contribute to sensemaking (Butler, 2008). Categorization is important because categories are said to have inference-rich properties (Sacks, 1972). As McHoul (2007) suggests, the inference-rich properties of a term, such as "activist", "accomplishes its moral work by inference and implication, rather than direct mention" (p. 462). Merely referencing the term tends to have some commonly understood meanings. Because of expected common understandings of certain terms, some implications of that term "go without saying".

Socially, individuals use the cues of others as a means of understanding how to act in a particular context (Weick, 1995). Each cue brought about in the news, through social media, through conversations with peers, etc. plays a role in constructing a salient picture of the topic as a means of making sense. Conversation with peers plays an important aspect in the social world. Talk expresses our "identities, realities, social order, and social relationships" (Baker, 2004, p. 164). Cox and McAdams' (2012) study of college student service found that the way students talked about their experiences of service was associated with their willingness to engage in future service.

Plausibility over accuracy entails that sensemaking is not about undergoing a process to find the truth. Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) state that, "sensemaking is not about truth and getting it right. Instead, an emerging story is redrafted to become more comprehensive, incorporate more observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism" (p. 415). These sensemaking processes affect the ways in which students view their own roles as activists, and can hinder participation when viewed negatively. Although there is evidence for positive outcomes stemming from activism depicted through social media, there are also studies indicating that student perceptions of activists yields consistent negative descriptions associated with the term.

Sensemaking is apparent in the way that students describe their perceptions on activists. Cermak et al. (2011) found that students involved in service-oriented activities tended to describe activists as confrontational radicals involved in protests and strikes. Accordingly, these students sought to distance themselves from identifying as activists, viewing the label as stigmatized and too extreme for their personality. Additionally, the students interviewed had limited experience with activism and "had difficulty articulating a clear definition of activism" (Cermak et al., 2011, p. 12). The impressions regarding negative attributes of activism can cause students to shy away from identifying as activists. Students do not always have a clear concept of what activists do.

The ambiguity concerning "activist" can lead to plausible rather than accurate accounts, especially when oversaturated with negative media depictions. Feminism, for example, is often portrayed negatively in the media and studies indicate a negative identification from students. Bashir et al. (2013), revealed that students assigned negative stereotypes to feminist and environmentalist activists, viewing them as "militant" and "eccentric." Other studies of student perceptions of feminists (Arias & Leaper, 2011; Arnold, 2000; Aronson, 2003; McCabe, 2005; Olsen, et al., 2008) demonstrate a relationship between one's perceptions and either identification with or rejection of the label 'feminist.' Participants who held negative perceptions of feminists were less likely to self-identify as feminists (Arias & Leaper, 2011; Olsen, et al. 2011). Likewise, women who labeled themselves as feminists were more likely to define feminism positively, such as working towards enhancing gender equality (Arnold, 2000). Olsen et al. (2008) found that even among participants who identified with the values of feminism did not necessarily self-identify as feminists. The stigma of labeling oneself as "feminist" was a driving force for refusal to embrace the term. (Aronson, 2003; McCabe, 2005). The case of "feminist" demonstrates how a lack of information provided to students can skew perceptions and force non-involvement. Students with negative perceptions leading to non-involvement about activism can pose a challenge for teachers who are seeking to engage students in service learning projects.

Sensemaking processes from students about how a member of a group is categorized guides expectations for performance, or what Sacks refers to as category-bound activities (CBAs). One's membership in a category comprises a set of assumptions about expected member behaviors, responsibilities, practices, rights, and actions (Butler, 2008). In Sacks' famous example, 'The baby cried. The mother picked it up' (Sacks, 1972), the statement prompts the hearer to infer that the mother is the baby's mother because both "mother" and "baby" belong to the family device, and caring for a baby is a category-bound activity of a mother. While the mother and baby example demonstrates clear MCDs and CBAs, assumptions about activism can lead to inferences about members that may not be accurate, but may be plausible—conditions that must be managed by teachers trying to overcome negative associations with service learning.

Teachers can rely on tactics that work towards mediating negative perceptions of activists, including honest discussions about MCDs and CBAs within the context of activism. Barnett, Ropers-Huilman, and Aaron (2008) discovered more positive perceptions towards activists after

they built alliances with mainstream student organizations, and when they worked "within the system" rather than demonstrating on the streets. Given the potential benefits to be gained by participation in activism, concern arises as to the negative perceptions of activism and how the negative perceptions of activists may be overcome. The preponderance of communication-focused research has focused on communicative techniques of activists, specifically based on influence by social media. The focus of this study will be on how participants cast people, including themselves, into categories and what activities they associate with the members of those categories. Applying the issue of category-bound activities to the context of activism prompts us to ask the following research questions:

> RQ #1: What category-bound activities do students associate with activism-based social media use?
> RQ #2: What category-bound activities do students associate with "activists"?
> RQ #3: To what extent do students identify themselves as "activists"?

Method

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to assess student perceptions of activists; the influence of social media on student involvement in social or political causes; and student identification with the label "activist." Hence, the interview collected data on the participants' class standing; extra-curricular involvement; regular social media usage and the social or political groups followed on social media platforms; student perceptions of the effectiveness of social media in influencing them to participate in social causes offline; and the obstacles that prevented students from being (more) involved in activism.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a convenience sample. Thirty-five students at a large southeastern public university provided the data for this study, twenty-three of which were digitally recorded. Of the recorded interviews, fifteen were women and eight were men; all students were above the age 18. Interviews ranged from 4-23 minutes. Students were interviewed face-to-face during the summer and fall semesters in 2012. All participants gave verbal consent to participate, including an informed consent form. Most participants claimed involvement in a wide range of groups that support social causes, including political groups on campus, human rights groups, fraternities or sororities, and LGBT groups. Interviews were conducted at the library and around the student union on campus in order to get a diverse cross-section of participants. No extra credit was awarded.

Data Analysis

Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, producing approximately 52 pages of single spaced data. Data were reviewed by two coders who examined data for significant category bound activities which related to the research questions. Category bound activities of the participant's use of social media in conjunction with activism were examined. The interviewer had asked participants what they thought of when they think of an "activist". Any behaviors cited in this portion of the interview were deemed category bound activities of activists. In analyzing data,

patterns in descriptions of category bound activities were identified through thematic analysis. The thematic analysis was conducted using Owen's (1984) criteria of forcefulness, repetition, and recurrence. Patterns in behaviors assigned to individual participant usage of social media *vis a vis* activism and the behaviors of activists were discussed by both coders until consensus was reached.

Results and Interpretation

The following analysis examines: (1) the ways students described the category-bound activities of social media users participating in social issues; (2) category-bound activities of "activists"; and (3) category-bound activities of students' own participation as activists.

Category-Bound Activities of Social Media Users

As a means of understanding the social media-based CBAs students were asked how they used social media to engage with their groups and topics of interest. Data indicates that participants: assess familiarity of networks, find information, and make decisions based on information as CBAs associated with social media.

One of the most common uses of social media described by participants as a means of assessing familiarity of networks was following a group's Facebook page. One student described how she will use the Facebook page, saying "*during the semester, I will just to check on the events and things like that so it does help for things like that*". Another student described how she could track events as well as who would be in attendance through the Facebook page, saying "*if I see my friends are going, I should go too. They'll be there*." These students indicate uncertainty reduction behaviors for the more reticent participant to check whether acquaintances will also be in attendance as a means of reduce apprehension.

Social networking sites were also described as resources for information gathering. Some participants described the use of social media as a means of safely gathering information and finding like-others. One atheist student, who noted negative perceptions about atheism, saw the campus atheist Facebook site was a place where "*everybody can just log in to see what's new with us and can converse with us in a safe environment where they know they are not going to be exposed*". Several participants acknowledged they involve themselves with Facebook more as a "lurker" where they can gather information and "*see what other people have to say*." These examples demonstrate participants' desire for reduced risk of conflict that face-to-face interactions may not afford.

Other participants described social media as a good opportunity for self-education on certain issues as "*a great tool to get people to know about an issue and then hopefully they'll work their opinion from there*." Another student who acknowledged a high level of involvement in specific social issues stated, "*Twitter is best for me when I'm like trying to get instant news from like legitimate sources.*" The efficiency and directness of communication via social networks constituted a definite asset for those seeking information.

Those who chose not to post or disclose on social media shared a similar concern that prevented their participation: fear of conflict. One participant made a generalization about using social media at all, explaining:

> I'm wary about voicing my opinion too much on anything when it comes to online things because it's just so easy to attack. It's so frivolous kind of so I'm not really

> sure voicing my opinion really matters unless, you know, it's a whole slew of people voicing their opinion.

This participant essentially analyzes the risk of disclosing, being attacked, versus the possible benefit of doing something that matters. This student concludes that voicing an opinion is not likely to matter, but instead, disclosure could result in leaving the speaker open to attack. Another participant similarly balances the use of social media as beneficial to obtain information, but also concludes that "*there's always going to be people who like to creep or just go on there to instigate problems more than like talk about it*". Again, the participant is dissuaded from voicing views due to CBAs of other users who "instigate problems". Participant interest in making a positive difference was counterbalanced by perceptions of threat of negative CBAs of others.

Category Bound Activities of Activists

Category bound activities of activists fell into two categories: negative activities and positive activities based on what images came to mind when they thought of "activists". The negative activities included carrying picket signs and (loudly) protesting. Participants noted, "*I think of protests, I think of signs, I think of people shouting out what they think is right and what they think is wrong and having a community formed together for a common goal.*" The reference to expressing opinions was recurrent across interviews, as evidenced by the participant who responded "*someone holding up a sign, um, just an outspoken person*". Another participant explained that activists were "*Picket people. People with little picket signs*."

Those who offered a positive CBA of activists often seemed to focus on non-picketing types of taking action, as exemplified by the notion of having "*community formed together for a common goal*". Others noted positive CBAs such as "*sacrifice*", "*someone who is not afraid to stand up and speak*", "*mobilize people*", "*initiating discussion*", and "*doing research*". A recurrent positive trait involved references to activists' passion or commitment to a cause. One example from a participant was "*someone talking to people about something they care about.*" Although the behaviors had varying negative and positive connotations, students were able to pinpoint activities that were considered category bound behaviors of activists.

Student Activist?

When students were asked about the extent of their participation, responses varied with different degrees of self-identification with activist. All participants were asked, "Do you consider yourself an activist?" Of the 23 audio-recorded participants, 8 responded that they were not an activist. Two had indicated that they did not know what an activist was, so they are included in the "not activist" category. For these participants, the dominant image of "activists" was sufficiently negative to preclude identification with the term. One student explained:

> Like an activist is more uh zealous so not in a derogatory term, not in a negative connotation just like someone that actively goes to meetings just basic things, where like I believe in improvement, I turn off the lights when I'm not using them, I don't turn on the air conditioning really high, I recycle, things like that. but I'm not like you know people against like furry-ing I'm not going to break into a lab and slash fur coats you know, nah that's not my thing, sorry.

In the example here, the passion held by an activist is expressed in more negative terms as the activist is seen as “zealous”.

Given the force of the stereotype of the activist as loudly vocal and carrying a picket sign, it seemed surprising that some participants identified with the term. Five responded that they were, indeed, activists. Another ten expressed partial identification with the term. In fact, early in the interviewing process, two students rejected providing a “yes” or “no” to the question, “Do you consider yourself an activist?” Instead, the participants identified themselves as “*aspiring activists.*” Seven students responded that they were an aspiring activist or partially an activist. One noted that “*there is a little activism in me*”. Another noted, “*I think I’m maybe almost halfway there*.” Not surprisingly, those who did identify partially or wholly as an activist often supplied not only the dominant stereotype of activists and vocal, aggressive picketers, but also some of the more positive terms. Those partially identifying with the term described conflicting demands of school and work as the reasons for not displaying a higher level of commitment to issues of importance to them. One participant explained, “*I get kinda sidetracked by other stuff in my life*”. For the participants who partially identified with the term, the tendency to become absorbed by other things made them feel as though they lacked the passion to label themselves activists.

While even those students who fully identified as activists demonstrated awareness of the negatively valences of the stereotypical activist, they further demonstrated an ability to think beyond the stereotype. An excellent example was provided by one student who offered the same negative depiction of loud picketers before elaborating:

> When I think of myself as an activist I may not be the person that's on the frontline and with a sign and yelling or whatever. But I always try to talk to people, trying to be, like, "hey!" using a very personal approach. That's because that's how I've been taught as an activist. For example, during like voter registration or signing petitions, it's always better to go up to someone and be like "hey, how are you?" like, make it very one-on-one, as opposed to yelling "sign my petition!" or like, you know what I mean. …I'm always getting people to do things they probably ordinarily wouldn't do but I just met them like ten seconds ago … that kind of interaction I think is what being an activist is all about.

Due to the pejorative connotations of the MCD “activist” and the negative CBAs that make up the stereotypical behaviors of the activist, those who do identify themselves as activists have had to develop a more nuanced sense of what activism entails. In this student’s explanation, her CBAs that are congruent with activism include “*going up to someone*” for a cause and “*getting people to do things they probably wouldn’t ordinarily do*”. In this way, the student activist puts passion for an issue into action and makes a difference, but does so without conflict or off-putting behavior. None of the students who identified as activist or as an aspiring activist associated their own behaviors with the negative CBAs commonly associated with activists.

The identification of category bound activities concerning activism in students can be helpful for teachers who wish to utilize service-learning *vis a vis* activism in their classrooms. The discussion section addresses the ways in which students make sense of activism in three ways. First we outline the category bound activities identified by students as a means of uncertainty reduction, second, we describe the category bound activities that students associate with activists, and third, we identify the ways in which students identify with activists as an ongoing and social sensemaking process. We conclude this section with practical recommendations for teachers who

wish to engage students in successful service-learning projects as well as out limitations and suggestions for future research.

As a reminder, this research sought to answer the following question: What category-bound activities do students associate with activism-based social media use? The data indicate that students use social media as a means of uncertainty reduction by assessing familiarity of networks, information gathering, decision making. Participants voiced both appreciation of and concern for using social media in order to become involved in social issues. The data also showed that they had formulated perceptions of their own social media use as well as the category-bound activities of "others" present on the same sites. Social media could be used to get information, view the opinions of others, and learn about upcoming events. When the social medium, such as Facebook, included an attendance list for an event, individuals had the capacity to join those events their friends were attending. Xu et al. (2012) described a bandwagon effect in which people may demonstrate a greater tendency to join a Facebook group if a friend does so first. By the same token, some data from this study suggest that accessing guest lists online may serve to reduce the threat of attending a face to face event due to the presence of friends. The information on schedules and information about the specific social issue prepares message recipients for actual participation in activist events and discussions.

In addition to learning about how the students themselves used social media, the data suggested perceived "threats" inherent in the social media due to the category-bound activities of others. CBAs of online discussion participants included repeated concerns about those who seek to "attack" the statements of those who post comments on these websites and "instigate problems". As Hardaker (2010) indicates, internet-based communities are particularly threatened by trolling when the members are "inexperienced or vulnerable" (p. 237). By virtue of their age, college students are likely to be inexperienced members of many activist communities and our data confirm that they feel vulnerable about voicing their viewpoints online. This result presents a particular predicament for organizations promoting activist causes that value freedom of speech on their website, yet may experience particularly detrimental effects to the sense of community.

Our second question addresses: What category-bound activities do students associate with "activists"? Although there were reports of positive CBAs regarding activism, participants in this study perceived "activists" in negative terms, consistent with previous research (Bashir et al., 2013; Cermak et al., 2011). The predominant CBAs of activists included carrying picket signs and yelling about their viewpoint. These CBAs appear to create a stereotype among all participants familiar with the term "activist", regardless of whether they see themselves as an activist. Other CBAs regarding activists showed greater variations. When students described category-bound activities of activists that demonstrate their passion, positively imbed activities, such as "sacrifice" and "mobilizing people" could be seen in contrast with negatively imbued descriptions of a "zealot" who yells and engages in illegal activities such as "break into a lab". The significance of this finding underscores the lack of expanded knowledge by students regarding the definition of activism. We cannot know where the stereotypes (either negative or positive) originate from, but we can understand that the behaviors play a role in way in which students make sense of behaviors associated with activists.

Our third question asked: To what extent do students identify themselves as "activists"? Interestingly, the response to this question often paralleled with the responses to the category-bound activities of activists. While almost all participants expressed the shared initial reaction of the picketing and yelling activist, the responses given in further elaborating the insights into the actions of an activist paralleled the likelihood to self-identify as an activist. Those who maintained

a harsh view of activists as loud, pushy, law-breakers were unlikely to label themselves as activists. Those students who recognized the role of activists in guiding others to engage in behavior they normally would not engage in, or described themselves as driven by a passion were more apt to see themselves as activists or aspiring activists. While previous research pointed to the tendency to avoid embracing stigmatizing labels (Aronson, 2003; McCabe, 2005), the study of the language used by student activists showed the importance of re-defining the category-bound activities of activists beyond the shared stereotype of picketing and shouting. The introduction of the phrase "aspiring activist" by participants points to a strong level of respect garnered by activists acting upon their passion to create social change.

Practical Recommendations

We offer three practical recommendations for teachers who wish to utilize service-learning *vis a vis* activism in their classrooms. These recommendations are specifically tailored to teachers who would like to bridge the gap between online activism endeavors and their in-class opportunities. We feel that these recommendations bridge not only the way that students view activism and activists, but also address the way in which students can sense make a version of their role within activism:

1. Teachers can introduce positive examples of activism to students in a way that maximizes feelings of safety by focusing on a variety of modes of participation. Students who engage in information seeking without guidance can push up against various causes and outlets that focus on negative depictions of activism. Teachers can open dialogue and show students a variety of movements and causes that have historically led to positive change.
2. Teachers can include honest dialogue addressing the negative aspects of activism as a teaching tool highlighting ways in which students can learn from previous mistakes within campaigns. Teaching through case study can provide students with examples that they can then transfer to their own endeavors when they feel comfortable taking on a more participatory role.
3. Teachers can introduce new concepts of activism as a means of reframing negative connotations of "activist." Teachers who recognize that students come to the classroom with preconceived notions of activism based on life-long sensemaking can understand that increased exposure to different kinds of activism can make the established CBAs more permeable and open to reinterpretation—which could result in a positive association and willingness on the part of the student to engage in service-learning.

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

This study, like all studies, had limitations. One limitation, which stemmed from the use of convenience sampling, was a disproportionate ratio of females and campus democrats. Because of location of data collection, a group of campus democrats were registering voters and were mixing among the crowd resulting in disproportionately large number of participation from this campus group. Another limitation is inconsistency the duration of the interviews due to the spontaneous nature of data collection. Some students had no involvement or awareness of any particular causes whereas others were highly involved and thoughtful about their experiences.

Numerous opportunities exist for future studies taking a communication-focused approach. For example, learning about how students present narratives about their involvement in social issues may yield insight into the least threatening means of engaging them. Moreover, investigating activist uses and gratifications of individual social media platforms could offer insight into the effect on mobilization. Many participants reported reluctance towards sharing their political views on Facebook. Future studies can investigate techniques for dealing with trolls on social media sites. Tailored messaging on social media should also be explored to analyze the relationship between communication and behavior. Student engagement with social media remains a powerful social force. A more focused understanding of how these media are used by students would help in promoting their interest in and involvement with current social issues.

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