Special Forum: Undergraduate Perspectives on Feminism

Sabrinna Fogarty
sfogarty@uri.edu

Jeannette E. Riley
jen_riley@uri.edu

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Sabrinna Fogarty, *JFS* Intern, University of Rhode Island[1]

Jeannette E. Riley, *JFS* Co-Executive Editor, University of Rhode Island

The Call

In our call for this inaugural special undergraduate section for the *Journal of Feminist Scholarship,* we sought to illuminate the ways by which current undergraduate students have come to encounter and experience feminism in their own generational realities. Numerous undergraduates today carry the collective experience of an upbringing in the information age. The social and political lives of Generation Z and the Millennial generation have predominately been structured around an increasing participation in, and dependence upon, the internet throughout their lifetime. Specifically, the continuous opportunity to interact with various social media platforms has largely defined their outlooks and involvement on global and domestic concerns. Those digital platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok, among others, have provided a venue to observe history materialize. More specifically, in the last decade current undergraduates have witnessed how smaller instances of documentation on social media can compile to generate entire movements for a social or political cause.

For example, the growth of smartphone videos posted online documenting individual instances of police brutality uncover firsthand the macrocosm that is the everydayness of systemic racism, which has helped to build the Black Lives Matter movement as we know it today. Furthermore, social media has provided an outlet for storytelling in which the #MeToo movement flourished, encouraging the empowerment of individual truths in order to provoke a national conversation around the realities of sexual violence. The #MeToo movement's occupation of social media further contributed to the turmoil surrounding the confirmation of Justice Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court as the dismissal of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testimony spoke to the evidently massive number of women who have faced similar violence.

These movements and others like them that grew from individual storytelling through media have impacted the experience of students currently studying as undergraduates. The substantial exposure to and engagement with various media outlets places them in a unique role as both spectators and informants in an evolving history of social progress. Therefore, current undergraduates have subsequently adopted a magnified scope of both the everydayness of feminist manifestations and the headlining moments that will define future histories of our time. They bear witness to the evolution of feminism and its ability to evolve with us in a more daily and explicit fashion than those before them were able to access. The digital age has provided a distinct moment to gain awareness of feminist advocacy and to also inform that very same culture on a much broader and more interactive scale.

The Issue

JFS asked undergraduate contributors to reflect upon and incorporate those actualities of growing up in the digital age when examining their perspective on feminism and its current state. We are pleased to share

this collective that features eight student authors in undergraduate programs across the world sharing their concerns, accomplishments, and encounters with feminism in the digital age. The common themes in their arguments include, but are not limited to, representation of gender diversity on and off screen, the emergence of a gendered digital labor force, and difficulties launching feminist theory into action both within and outside of digital spaces. It is important to note that these authors speak not only from a research standpoint, but from a personal perspective as well granted they are collectively a part of a generation raised by technology and within digital spaces.

In "Miss Lebanon: The Digital Age's Way of Maintaining the Gender Gap," Ali Badereddine unveils the invisibility of the gendered labor force that constitutes the Miss Lebanon annual pageant. The televised sensation is dependent on the physical and emotional performance of female contestants, who share little of the revenue generated not only from the main production, but also the advertising generated over social media platforms through users' mockery of pageant contestants. User engagement with pageant contestants over social media, even if negative, is a form of marketing for the production by exploiting the labor of the contestants who gain little profit in turn relative to producers. Baddereddine further argues that the mockery of the pageant in online spaces is rooted in the commodification of beauty for women and the notion that beauty and intelligence must be mutually exclusive qualities in a woman.

Sarah Bardhan confronts the self-determination online platforms allow for with respect to gender identity in her paper "Gender Unfreedom: Gender Diverse Perspectives from Digital India." Bardhan argues that the internet has offered bodily transcendence, which largely contributed to the development of the "they/them" pronoun we encounter in "real" spaces. In other words, Bardhan's article recognizes that who we are online affects who we are offline, and we desire cohesion between the two with respect to real cultural and legal structures recognizing a diverse range of identities. Bardhan employs real world examples from India to illustrate gender identity cohesiveness where pushback on gender freedom on and off digital platforms has been met with digital activism.

Maeve Conway contemplates grounding feminist theory outside of academia in "Decentralizing Feminist Theory From Academia: Bringing Transfeminism and Disability Justice Home with Sarah Ahmed." Conway recounts a personal immersive experience with feminism through culminating an online gallery during the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought challenges in finding ways to bring feminist activism to digital spaces. Conway saw the necessity in making digital activist spaces accessible on the basis of inclusiveness, pandemic safety, and the importance of virtual mediums to transfeminist and queer engagement for a sense of safety and anonymity. Conway cites inspiration for her disability justice methodology from feminist writer Sarah Ahmed as she encouraged Conway to continue asking herself how one can live better in and unjust and unequal world. In her answer, she found that with the dependence upon digital engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, Conway saw it crucial that online activism ensure accessibility needs.

"A Gamer Girl's Account on Interacting with Feminism in Video Games" by Nicole Dowell considers the experiences of women in male dominated spaces through the microcosm of video game play. Dowell notes that video games as a gendered hobby, particularly those with online play, subject women to sexualization and verbal abuse by male members of the community. The author notes that despite making up nearly half of the video gaming community, women are not treated as equally entitled to those spaces and thereby pushed to the peripheral. Dowell argues for a departure from the "boys will be boys" narrative as it expects women to tolerate sexist behaviors that communicate to them that they are less deserving of participating in virtual game spaces. Furthermore, it socializes men and boys into misogyny from a young age as the use of such technology is popular at impressionable ages. Dowell's paper calls for reformation of video game culture in both the ways community members engage with it as well as the hypersexual depictions of female characters by video game designers.

In "The Digital Age: Giving Sex Work a New Meaning," Allison Garvey argues for the positive impacts the digital age has had on the sex work industry. Garvey tells us that through digital platforms such as OnlyFans and Snapchat, women have been able to earn a living as sex workers in a much safer and more flexible way than they could off-screen. Not only is this kind of labor more accessible to a wider range of women granted they can work from home, but their ability to work without the requirement of physical interaction has reduced the risk of STD transmission, physical and sexual violence, as well as being able to maintain anonymity. Garvey's article views the digitalization of sex work as something now increasingly mainstream, thereby a step toward destigmatizing and decriminalizing the industry.

Elizabeth Jankowski's "Queerbaiting in the Marvel Cinematic Universe" shares a personal account as a bisexual woman searching for representation and validation in digital media. Jankowski focuses on her favorite film franchise, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and their use of "queerbaiting" in their movies, which refers to the use of small hints to queer relationships on screen to bait queer audiences, yet never confirm them to maintain their conservative viewership. Jankowski argues for the importance of queer visibility on screen and calls for Marvel to step up and show audiences the power and pride in LGBTQ+ identities and relationships.

In "Female Representation in the Natural and Digital Worlds: A Feminist Millennial Perspective," Lauren-Marie Kennedy explores gender inequality in educational venues such as traditional museum formats as well as online image search results. Kennedy argues that depictions of animal species in museums and in virtual image galleries mislead learners with gender stereotypes rather than lead with biological facts and underrepresent female species members altogether. Museum depictions and online images heavily favor male displays, and when female representations are exhibited, they largely reinforce deceitful lessons of beauty, maternity, and submission. The problem, Kennedy argues, is that educational settings are influenced by gendered ideas told by the dominant group in power, men, which has been particularly problematic with the dependence upon online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kennedy concludes with a call to the millennial generation to change the course of educational storytelling in real and virtual spaces.

The special issue concludes with Amanda Nguyen's article, "The Digital Age: Our Feminist Echo Chamber." Nguyen addresses the plight of social media algorithms, such as those for TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, for feminist progression as they can trap users within their niche, thereby creating an echo chamber effect. Algorithms, argues Nguyen, can stagnate the progress of a message or movement as they can limit users from being exposed to feminist perspectives altogether or limit exposure to exclude intersectional voices. Nguyen acknowledges that being brought up in the digital age, especially with algorithms, has facilitated a personal passion for feminism and stimulated her own growth. However, the algorithm has to understand that the user desires to learn and it must be free of biases itself, which is why, Nguyen argues, a special ethics in algorithm development must be ensured.

Notes

1. Sabrinna Fogarty is a Gender and Women's Studies and Political Science double major at the University of Rhode Island graduating in May 2022. This special issue is an internship project she completed with Co-Executive Editor Jeannette E. Riley from 2021-2022.