CYBERACTIVISM AND LGBT COLLEGE STUDENTS: UTILIZING THE INTERNET TO ENGAGE IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

A doctoral research study presented
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Abstract

Student activism as a concept has proven to be heavily influenced by not only the students who participate, but also the political, social, and technological variables that are at play. Throughout history, collective action among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) college students did not under any circumstances follow the same trends as activism in general, due in part to fear of being identified and an overall sense of repression by other social and political activists. However, the digital age has ushered in a new era of activism, and the way in which LGBT college students utilize the Internet to engage in cyberactivism is an understudied topic. This study sought to explore how LGBT college students utilize the Internet for cyberactivism.

Results of this study indicate that students place a large emphasis on communities of support. In addition, the concept of cyberactivism proved to have subjective components relating to how participants defined the phenomenon. Lastly, the results explored the ways in which students navigate the Internet for purposes of their activism. Implications for practice are discussed and offer insights into how student cyberactivists can be best supported.

*Keywords:* collective action, cyberactivism, LGBT
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Chapter One: Introduction and Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to investigate how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) college students utilize social media and the Internet to engage in collective activism. Understanding how LGBT students engage with online communities that center on social action will not only allow for a deeper understanding of the modern LGBT college student as an activist, but will also capture important insight into the cyber resources the subjects utilize in their pursuit for social change. This study will utilize the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) technique to explore the phenomenon being studied.

This chapter begins with an overview of the context and background of the problem of practice. Following the context will be a discussion of the rationale of this study and a brief definition of frequently used terminology. This chapter will then explore the problem statement, the statement of purpose, and the research question. This chapter concludes with a discussion of social movement concepts and resource mobilization theory (RMT), which provide the lens through which this study is explored.

Context and Background

Van Laer (2010) has published extensively on online activism and posits that every population uses technology differently when it comes to collective action online. He believes it is imperative for future researchers to explore the profiles of these various groups. Like the many populations Van Laer (2010) references, the LGBT population is one that is considerably understudied with regard to how they mobilize online. This study will explore the various motivators and outlets for online collective action in an attempt to understand how the Internet has shaped LGBT student activism. To do so effectively, this section will present important historical information pertaining to student activism, as well as contemporary research
that will explore the intersections between activism and cyberactivism.

A review of the literature shows that student activism has roots in the early days of the American university, but it was not until the 1960s that student activism became a polarizing topic in this country, ignited by social movements such as Civil Rights (Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Altbach & Peterson, 1971). Occasionally spiraling into violence, the protests during this critical point in higher education were brought about by an overwhelming belief by young Americans that collective action would result in significant social change (Flacks, 1967). By the end of the decade, American polls revealed that a major concern in our country at the time was campus unrest (Altbach & Cohen, 1990).

Aside from the violence associated with these campus movements during this time, the 1960s also served as the period in history when students’ rights took center stage in the courts and where seminal cases such as *Tinker v. Des Moines School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969) affirmed a student’s ability to express themselves verbally or symbolically while on school grounds. By affirming the rights of students to engage in reasonable protests, *Tinker* effectively protected and encouraged the anti-war protests of the 1970s and has preserved that right even in modern times.

Kerpelman (1969) and Levine and Wilson (1979) were among the first researchers to point out the transformational trends that were present in the decades prior to the 1980s. Each researcher pointed to a distinct shift in student activism that was tied to major social movements of the time. Furthermore, Kerpelman (1969) considered apathy as a cause of decline in student activism at the end of the 1960s, but Levine and Wilson (1979) posited that activism was taking on new and more sophisticated forms and was evolving from the seminal protests that took place in the early years of activism to more organized approaches that included forming special interest
groups and lobbying the government for change.

The 1980s and 1990s were relatively quiet, apathetic years in comparison to the earlier decades and did not produce the same significant unrest that had been seen previously. That is not to say that the college students during this time were not active on campuses—many of them created movements around issues such as gay rights, affirmative action, and student aid (Altbach & Cohen, 1990). It was not until the onset of the Internet in the late 1990s and into the 2000s that activism began to offer students new mechanisms for collective action. Activism was once again placed in the forefront.

Modern, digital forms of activism—often referred to as slacktivism or clicktivism by researchers who have explored the topic—have begun to change the way various populations and social advocates mobilize with regard to various social issues (McCafferty, 2011). The traditional forms of activism such as rallies or protests have been modernized with the introduction of the Internet and now offer activists new tools such as Twitter backchannels, virtual petitions hosted on sites such as Change.org, or video testimonials on YouTube to engage broad audiences. In these cases, marginalized populations were able to unify resources, communicate effectively, and collaborate in the interest of social change using the Internet.

Online activism has enabled marginalized individuals to unite together with impressive numbers that have not previously been possible. Significant online movements, such as the 2011 Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the fight to repeal the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), stand as testaments to the power, complexity, and capabilities of social actors who turn to the Internet for solidarity. Research has shown that as a marginalized population, LGBT college students are more likely to participate in collective action than their heterosexual peers (Longerbeam, 2007).
This new era of student activism remains understudied in comparison to earlier generations. Van Laer (201) wrote, “Many questions remain unanswered about how different kinds of activists, mobilized around different types of issues and distinct types of social movements, employ new communication technologies as a means to be informed on and be mobilized for collective action” (p. 406). Therefore, it is important to explore how the LGBT community utilizes Internet resources to create or participate in activism.

**Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for this study lies at the intersection of the researcher’s interest in LGBT college student activism and cyberactivism as mutually exclusive topics. Through the course of student affairs work, there comes a time when student activism (namely protests or online petitions) demand our attention and understanding. With the onset of the Internet, college students are beginning to unite with one another across the country in solidarity for various causes, and college administrators are required to both understand the phenomenon and support student involvement in said activities. Without a clear understanding of how certain underrepresented groups are utilizing these accessible resources, colleges and universities are failing in the attempt to educate our future global leaders on methods of responsible and civil participation.

The data from this study will support faculty and staff at colleges and universities as they educate and support the social justice movements that manifest themselves on their various campuses. It will be of specific interest to those who work with LGBT student populations or those who support social justice activities on college campuses.

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

*Activism.* Activism refers to a group of individuals who collaborate and advocate for
social, political, cultural, or other forms of change. Activism can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including leafleting, in-person protests, or demonstrations or online petitions (Klar & Kasser, 2009). This term may be used interchangeably with collective action or social action.

**Actors.** Actor(s) refers to an individual or group of individuals who are participating in various forms of activism. The term is not exclusive to one particular form of activism, but rather refers to someone participating in all forms. This may be used interchangeably with terms such as participant or activist.

**Cyberactivism.** Cyberactivism is the term used to define social action that occurs using web-based Internet technologies such as social networking sites and short messaging services. Cyberactivism maintains many of the same processes as historical forms of activism, but is the result of the influence of the digital age (Illia, 2002).

**LGBT.** LGBT is an acronym used to describe individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. The terms lesbian, gay, and bisexual specifically refer to sexual orientation, while transgender relates to gender identity (Renn, 2007).

**Problem Statement**

The Internet has been a major disruptor (both positively and negatively) in virtually all facets of our life, including the way in which LGBT college students engage in forms of activism. Since this medium continues to evolve and produce new challenges, it is important to adequately understand how LGBT college students utilize the Internet to engage in forms of cyberactivism.

**Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study with LGBT-identified college students is to explore the concept of cyberactivism in their lives. To investigate this problem, the following research question will
be addressed: How do LGBT college students utilize the Internet to engage in forms of activism?

Organization Statement

This dissertation is organized and designed to present background information on the concept of activism as it is manifested on college campuses. Historical perspectives are also provided to outline the unique trajectory that LGBT activism has taken over the past few decades and presents information on how LGBT activism is creating a sense of collective identity among LGBT students in an online forum.

To explore this phenomenon, this thesis is organized to provide a thorough overview of the topic. The first section of this dissertation provides an introduction into the concept of this project. The following section of this chapter will include a description and discussion of RMT, which will serve as the theoretical lens for this study.

Chapter 2 will report on the state of activism through an in-depth literature review that examines the historical perspective on college student activism, specific landmarks in LGBT activism, and trends in modern day cyberactivism. Chapter 3 will provide the research design, including a discussion of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and a thorough explanation of data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter 4 of this thesis presents the findings of this study. This dissertation concludes with a discussion of the implications for practice and avenues for future research in Chapter 5.

Theoretical Framework

Resource mobilization theory (RMT) was born from the multitude of studies during the 1970s and 1980s that sought to explain the heightened number of social movements that emerged in America during the 1960s and 1970s. The basis of the theory states that the success of activism hinges on the ability for the organizers to harness important resources such as money,
leadership skills, and ripe opportunities to capture popular attention. Just as important as the availability of these resources is the ability for the actors to utilize these resources effectively (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011).

Up until the introduction of RMT, scholars focused on psychological studies to explain involvement in social movements, which looked primarily at internal factors (e.g., personal motivation) that determine the success of movements (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). With the introduction of RMT, theorists began to explore the importance of outside factors that are key to movement success. The early days of activism relied heavily on pamphlets and word of mouth to advance a cause (Altbach & Peterson, 1971), and as the concept of activism evolved, so did the players, the resources available to them, and the public space in which these conversations could take place. Thus, the field is primed for a greater understanding of how populations (specifically underrepresented ones) are utilizing the resources available to them to enact social change.

Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) argue that the onset of the digital age of activism should spawn a new interest in RMT as the digital world is now providing more people with the resources needed to be successful at social movements. In this study, RMT will be used to explore how the LGBT community utilizes the Internet to participate in and organize social movements. To understand the trajectory of this theory, this section will explore the overarching concept of social movements, the most widely accepted dimensions of these movements, and the history and renewed interest of RMT.

**Social Movements and Collective Action**

The theory that has been developed to study social movements has proven to be evolutionary, much like the phenomenon it seeks to explore. From the early exploration of social movements and activism during the critical 1960s (Altbach & Cohen, 1990) to more
contemporary forms of activism that utilize new media (Ayers & McCaughey, 2003; Bimber & Flanagan, 2005), social movement and related theories have attempted to explore the complexity of human behavior as it relates to creating social change in our society.

Despite the different manifestations of social movements throughout history, the fundamental components remain consistent and salient. The very definition of collective action can be multifaceted and there is no firm consensus on the definition itself (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Yet, for the purposes of this study, the definition accepted by Marwell and Oliver (1993) shall be utilized; they defined collective action simply as an action taken “by two or more people in pursuit of the same collective good” (as cited by Bimber & Flanagan, 2005, p. 367). The outcome of such collective action must have an intended result that is positive for one community while not marginalizing another (Bimber & Flanagan, 2005).

Equally as important as the social movement is the countermovement, which McCarthy and Zald (1977) define as “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population opposed to a social movement” (p. 1,218). The researchers offer the example of the Civil Rights Movement as a solid example of a countermovement where social movement organizations (SMOs) manifested to oppose those seeking equal rights for all Americans.

A commonality between a movement and a countermovement is that both are primed to become a formal SMO if significant resources are identified and centralized, and if a common goal and strategy is identified (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Oberschall, 1973). In the context of the current LGBT rights movement in the United States, the Human Rights Council (HRC) and Freedom to Marry are a few examples of centralized movement strategies aimed at advocating for the rights of LGBT persons.

Regardless of the focus of individual actors or formalized SMOs, social movements are
of great importance to studies of sociology because they illustrate that “movements are an important constituent element in the world that we seek to investigate and explain” (Crossley, 2002, p. 8). Furthermore, Crossley (2002) states that each movement illustrates a natural exercise in power and that “their existence, successes, failures and more generally their dynamics allow us to gauge the workings of the broader political structures of our society” (p. 9). It is because of this reasoning that all movements, regardless of status and formalization, are critical components of our society that warrant in-depth investigation and understanding.

**The Dimensions of Social Movements**

Social movements can embody a variety of characteristics, depending primarily on how the collective energy is focused. Melucci (1980) determined that collective action as a concept can occur on a spectrum, with increasing levels of intensity and complexity as one moves along that spectrum. At a micro level, he posits that organizational movements (collective action that occurs within a particular organization) constitutes an action directed at the power structure of the particular organization in an effort to challenge the norms or governance of said organization, or to rectify inequitable division of resources (Melucci, 1980). Despite these movements being internal to organizations, they may also incorporate reflections and emotions aimed at pressures outside of the organization.

When these emotions begin to move beyond the boundaries of a specific organization, Melucci (1980) refers to them as political movements. These movements “tend to enlarge political participation, and [seek] to improve the relative position of the actor in the society’s decision processes” (Melucci, 1980, p. 203). These political movements are more large-scale and involve participants who are from a variety of networks and organizations.

Melucci’s (1980) final dimension of collective action is referred to as class political
movements. This complex form of action is defined by Melucci (1980) as “collective actions which not only aim at enlarging political participation, but which also directly challenge the hegemony of the dominant political forces and their link within class interests” (p. 204). This stage of collective action is almost always focused on identity-based issues and how the dominant class might affect the division of resources to a minority class.

The simplicity of the collective action definition provided by researchers does not adequately represent the robust research landscape that is available to explore the topic itself. Since the early 1960s, researchers have explored this phenomenon through a multitude of subjects, such as law, anthropology, sociology and psychology, among others (Poletta & Jasper, 2001). For the purposes of this study, theories positioned in the field of sociology will be explored.

Despite the diversity of thought on this topic, threads of commonality can be found. Many agree, regardless of discipline, that groups engaged in collective action have the ability to enact significant influence on organizations, political dichotomies, and social structures (Buechler, 1995). The mechanisms responsible for this success surround the motivation for participation, the resources available to the actors, and the ability for the actors to enact political change.

A major pillar of contemporary research on this topic rests on the work of Mancur Olson in 1965. In his seminal work, The Logic of Collective Action, he effectively argued that activists do not engage unless there is an opportunity for some political, cultural, or economic gain for themselves or the greater community. Perhaps more importantly, his body of work effectively negated previous beliefs that those who engage in activism are directionless and irrational (Polletta & Jasper, 2001).
Olson’s (1965) explorations as to why people are motivated to engage in collective action also focused on the incentives (real or perceived) that motivate groups to engage in collective behavior. These incentives can come in the form of economic benefits, such as higher salaries or lower taxes. They can also manifest themselves as social incentives, such as equal rights or the development of laws that provide equality under the law (Olson, 1965).

Fireman and Gamson (1977) support the argument that participation in social movements produces some risk for those involved—either individually or collectively—and that this risk results is something lost and something gained for the participants. These researchers support the notion that actors who elect to join collective action have to some extent weighed the cost of what would be gained and what would be lost prior to participation. For example, the decision to participate in social movements could be made after an exploration of the time it would require, the resources it may cost, and the commitment it would entail.

A popular school of thought on who gets involved in collective action was developed by Olson (1965) and was dubbed the free-rider problem. “The rational individual,” Olson (1965) states, “does not curtail his spending to prevent inflation because he knows, first, that his own efforts would not have a noticeable effect, and second, that he would get the benefits of any price stability that other achieved in any case” (p. 166). Olson’s argument indicates that free-riders are problematic in collective action, and that the primary challenge facing organizers is how to deal effectively with those who choose inaction over action.

While Olson (1965) drew attention to the motivation and intentions behind collective action, other researchers delved into how these movements were successful. Social movement theorists, such as Polletta and Jasper (2001), Melucci (1989), and Fireman and Gamson (1979), posit that shared interests are not enough to sustain movements, but rather the identity of the
collective can be seen as a strong predictor of success. When the identity of the group serves as the basis for solidarity, actors are more likely to contribute regardless of how noticeable their individual contribution is (Fireman & Gamson, 1979).

Aside from the identities of the participants, a large body of research targeting how and why movements are successful focus on the resources that are available to the actors involved and how those resources are utilized. According to Buechler (2000), social movements are not born from having mere grievances with society, but rather they are born when the organizers utilize technology, revenue sources, or other means in the mobilization of their cause. This has become widely known as resource mobilization theory, or RMT.

**Resource Mobilization Theory**

Jenkins (1983) posits that despite the diversity of thought surrounding the study of social movements, prominent researchers such as Oberschall (1973), McCarthy and Zald (1973), Gamson (1975), and Tilly (1978) share common beliefs on the importance and complexity of collective action. Among these areas of agreement are that: (a) activism is a rational response that is adaptive to costs and rewards, (b) the goals are often born from conflicts of interests among power relations, (c) the ability to mobilize is based on resources available and the ability for the group to organize, (d) structured movements are more effective at utilizing resources, and (e) the ability for movements to be successful depends largely on the strategies employed by the organizers and the political structure that they are tangled with (Jenkins, 1983).

In the summary points provided by Jenkins (1983), it becomes clear that the ability to utilize available resources is a large factor in determining the success of sociopolitical movements. Resource mobilization theory, born in the 1970s, has become a major foundation for the study of movements in this country. Jenkins (1983) defines mobilization as “the process by
which a group secures collective control over the resources needed for collective action. The
major issues, therefore, are the resources controlled by the group prior to the mobilization
efforts, the processes by which the group pools resources and directs these toward social change,
and the extent to which outsiders increase the pool of resources” (p. 533).

Resources available to social movements can vary in type, frequency, intensity, and
availability. Edwards and Gillham (2013) sought to define the various resources considered as
part of this theory (*moral resources, cultural resources, human resources, material resources,*
*socio-organizational resources*) and the means for accessing resources (*self-production,*
*aggregation, co-optation/appropriation, patronage*).

Moral resources have been determined by Edwards and Gillham (2013) as including
“legitimacy, integrity, solidarity support, sympathetic support and celebrity” (p. 3). The pair
argues that the extent to which a movement resonates with a large audience can often provide the
actors with the public interest necessary to advance a cause or petition. Not surprisingly, the
backing from a celebrity or other such high-profile person can raise the importance of the issue
quickly and can propel an issue to the forefront. An important characteristic of a moral resource
is that they are predominately external from the collective organization and are not long-term
reliable resources given the volume of interests that are demanding public attention (Edwards &
Gillham, 2013).

Other important resources to the activist are cultural resources, which are defined as
“artifacts and cultural products such as conceptual tools and specialized knowledge that have
become widely known” (Edwards & Gillham, 2013, p. 3). Cultural resources can refer to skills
and strategies that are developed from within organizations that seek to raise awareness such as
organizing demonstrations, producing multimedia outputs, employing social media strategies, or
organizing events. The ability for a movement to utilize cultural resources depends solely on the availability of the resource to a particular group, which is not universally consistent with all movements. Organizations that do not have access or the ability to create online content will not cultivate a wide audience as some of their counterparts will.

The most identifiable resource within movements are human resources, or the ability to engage people with a variety of leadership skills, experience, knowledge, and time (Edwards & Gillham, 2013). As with cultural resources, not all movements include the lawyers, designers, webmasters, articulate speakers, or investors needed for movement success. Therefore, the identification and recruitment of participants with an assortment of skills becomes even more essential for movement success.

Material resources are equally as important and refer to “financial and political capital including monetary resources, property, office space, equipment and supplies” (Edwards & Gillham, 2013, p. 4). With the exception of perhaps grassroots movements taking place solely online, the importance of these resources should not be understated. The most important material resource is perhaps financial, as possessing significant fiscal resources can result in the expansion of other material resources (Edwards & Gillham, 2004).

Social-organizational resources refer to “infrastructures, social networks, and organizations, each varying in their degree of organizational formality” (Edwards & Gillham, 2013, p. 4). These resources include public goods that contribute to the convenience of everyday life (post office, Internet, highways, etc). Some of these resources, such as roads and postal services, are available to all, while others (e.g., social networks) are available to some and not others, leading to more inequity among social actors.

Much like the variety of resources available, there are a multitude of avenues to procure
these resources. The first method, defined as self-production, is considered the most fundamental. In self-production, the organizations are creating these resources for themselves by training others in the ways of the movement (human resources) or developing marketing campaigns and events (cultural resources). Aggregation refers to the method by which actors procure resources from other sources, such as by soliciting monetary donations from others (material resources) or by engaging prominent citizens to gain endorsements (moral resources) (Edwards & Gillham, 2013).

The final two ways in which movements procure these resources are by co-optation/appropriation and patronage. In appropriation, actors procure resources by partnering with organizations external to them in an effort to share resources (Edwards & Gillham, 2013). For example, a gay rights organization may partner with the Unitarian Universalist church in an effort to engage with their members, utilize their space, and to share in other material or moral resources. By contrast, patronage refers to the procurement of resources by seeking grants or donations that in turn would foster growth in the movement but would provide donors with significant influence over operations (Edwards & Gillham, 2013).

The work produced Edwards and Gillham (2013) provides us with a solid framework for how to define a resource, and perhaps more importantly, how individual actors and SMOs procure these resources. However, in the ever-changing digital world, RMT must take on new forms and rely on other disciplines (e.g., communication studies) to make sense of the current structure of activism.

Resource Mobilization Theory and Cyberactivism

Initially, early studies of RMT were limited to only material and human resources (Edwards & Gillham, 2013). However, developments in technology and social sciences have
broadened our understanding of resource mobilization theory and how it can manifest itself in collective movements (Edwards & Gillham, 2013).

Social media and the Internet play a significant role in the lives of those who have these services available to them. In developed countries such as the United States, the Internet and social media outlets are accessible on a multitude of devices and provide us with unprecedented access to information. It is for this reason that communication technologies have become a natural source for the launch and sustainability of collective action (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011).

Langman (2005) postulates that the Internet has provided actors with an opportunity to synthesize collective efforts in a new virtual public sphere. She argues that “electronic communication media have unique capacities to create democratic, participatory realms in cyberspace devoted to information and debates” (p. 44). This new sphere provides actors with access to blogs, short messaging services (SMS), and social networking sites (SNS) to stage a variety of collective actions, from corporate boycotts to organizing public gatherings in solidarity for a cause. It is for this reason that Langman (2005) and Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) determined the Internet to be an understudied resource for actors and SMOs.

Della Porta and Mosca (2005) argue that the Internet can now provide actors with access to an unprecedented array of resources previously unavailable to them. These “resource-poor actors” as the authors refer to them, now have the opportunity to connect with mass numbers of people who share similar interests at an extremely low cost to the individual or the organization.

Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) determined Della Porta and Mosca (2005) to be accurate in this assumption by exploring the role of social media in the 18-day Egyptian revolution that took place in 2011. Their study determined that by using the Internet as a resource, organizers of the revolution utilized blogs to communicate facts surrounding the corrupt government and used
SNS to communicate the locations and the intensity of protests in the capitol.

In their reflection of the revolution, they observed that “social media introduced speed and interactivity that were lacking in traditional mobilization techniques, which generally include the use of leaflets, posters and faxes” (p. 1,213). Arguably the most important resource needed to make this revolution successful was to have a handful of people with access and expertise in SNS to coordinate these efforts.

Research conducted by Stein (2009) also provides an explanation for how the Internet can be used to procure important resources. She posits that online media can provide important resources to actors with regard to: (a) information dissemination on views and objectives, (b) opportunities for in-person action and collaboration, (c) creation of a space for cyber-dialogue on issues, (d) providing a space for networks to grow and create partnerships, (e) offering an outlet for creative expression, and (e) the space to procure important resources needed for movement success. As RMT dictates, the success of a social movement is dependent upon the organizers’ ability to obtain essential resources. As Della Porta and Mosca (2005), Eltantawy and Wiest (2011), Langman (2005), and Stein (2009) have demonstrated, the Internet provides new opportunities for RMT to be utilized to understand modern day activism.

Critiques of the Theory

During the early years of RMT development, lead researchers, such as McCarthy and Zald (1973, 1977), posited that many of the successful movements originated within majority populations that enjoyed a certain level of affluence. Reflecting upon the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the authors argued that many of the successful organizations created to support the fight for equal rights were created by a majority population and unfairly cast minority populations as incapable of mobilizing due to a lack of resource accessibility.
Pichardo (1988) and Piven and Cloward (1991) criticized McCarthy and Zald and other RMT theorists for postulating that minority communities were incapable of organizing without the intervention and support of majority populations. Researchers such as McAdam (1982) determined that while resources for minorities during the time of the 1960s were certainly less available, they were not incapable of organizing and supporting larger organizations. Pichardo (1988) argued that oppressed communities are just as capable as privileged groups when it comes to accumulating resources and assembling actors.

Another early critic of RMT was Steven Buechler (1993) who proclaimed that RMT placed too high of an emphasis on the procurement of resources as a measure of success and in turn downplayed other important components, such as the strength of grievances and the quality of those who are engaged in the movement itself. It is important to note than many critiques of RMT emerged prior to the onset of the Internet as a major tool for movement actors. Eltantawy and Wiest (2005) maintain that RMT might be easily considered an immaterial theory due to the shortage of studies dedicated to how RMT could be applicable to our understanding of the Internet as fuel for modern-day protest movements. However, they also urge scholars to continue to explore how the Internet is part of the ethos of collective action in the 21st century.

**Rationale**

Considering the frequent evolution and availability of the Internet, researchers are presented with a prime opportunity to explore RMT through this lens to determine how underprivileged groups (such as the LGBT community) utilize this resource to mobilize, and in effect, attempt to challenge the previously held notion that resource-poor actors are not considered as part of this theory. Exploring the LGBT college student activist through the RMT lens provides significant insight into how diverse populations engage in activism, and to what
extent the Internet and its networks support the success of movements at the local and national level.

**Applying the Theory**

As the next chapter will explore, activism has changed significantly since it first took center stage in this country during the 1960s. In an effort to explain the phenomenon when it first emerged, RMT theorists began to look at how actors gathered the resources and motivation necessary for a triumphant outcome. This study will apply historical aspects of the theory in a modern-day context by focusing explicitly on how the Internet alone provides the resources necessary for LGBT college students to lead and participate in successful movements.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

A historical view of college student activism illustrates how the concept evolved from minor protests of university policy into national movements focused on widespread social and political change. However, when held parallel to the activism occurring in the majority population, LGBT activism did not share the same intensity and triumphs, nor were the same resources available to them for mobilization despite legal protections that extended to college students (Beemyn, 2003). The onset of the digital age has ushered in a new dimension of activism—one that provides unprecedented access to complex networks and social movements (McCafferty, 2011; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003). Just as past researchers have sought to explore activism during the early tumultuous years, modern researchers must explore how various college communities utilize these new tools to participate in collective action.

This literature review is organized to support the study of modern day student activism by providing the reader with historical and contemporary profiles of activism and demonstrating the motivations and methods of activism during salient times in the history of higher education. The following sections are presented: Overview of Student Activism, Student Activism From 1800-1959, Activism During the Critical 1960s, Trends in Student Activism From 1970-2000, The Modern Form of Digital Activism, and Summary of the Findings. Throughout each section, LGBT activism is explored in context as are legal landmarks that helped shaped the decade being explored.

Overview of Student Activism

As a laboratory for learning, colleges and universities encourage discourse in the pursuit of education and are often home to polarizing views. As microcosms of our greater society, colleges throughout the decades have enrolled students who are keenly aware of societal
injustices and seek to correct these injustices on behalf of those who are unable (or unwilling) to mobilize (Sampson, 1967). These activists often adopt the approach that “any man’s loss of freedom and dignity threatens [their] own freedom and dignity” (Sampson, 1967, p. 3).

What is known about the complexity of students who attend college is that motives collide in the academic space: Some students have chosen to attend college to engage in self-discovery, others attend to learn more about the world in which we live and have ambitions to change the world. Fewer attend for more classical reasons such as living a scholarly life. The result is a convergence of ideas and beliefs that are prone to conflict on campus (Sampson, 1967).

Student activists have often stood up to advocate for self-serving issues at the micro-level, such as a university policy they deem to be undemocratic. Incidents such as the Berkeley or Columbia riots in the 1960s can be seen as policy-related, self-serving activism that is equally as important as other forms of activism that are present (Sorey & Gregory, 2010).

The benefits and disadvantages of being an activist on campus are open to much debate. In the current global community, experiential learning is a concept that is gaining significant momentum. The ability to understand privilege and to use one’s privilege for the benefit of others is of significant importance in today’s society. Previously, the concept of shared governance was reserved for faculty at colleges and universities but today students are taking a more active role in university matters, especially as a consumerist attitude is permeating the academe (Selingo, 2013). Therefore, it can be argued that students who are more apt to participate in advocacy will gain significant experience that can attribute to their success post-college (Sampson, 1967).

Sampson (1967) utilized an analogy that best encapsulates the power and purpose of
student activism during the most critical decade:

Participation appears to provide an excellent training ground for the study of politics of power and student protestors... serve the positive function of rocking the boat, conceivably at a time and in a world which some boats have slow leaks and require frequent rocking. (p. 33)

Sampson (1967) also argued that “although active dissent and protest are useful and have their place, too much, and particularly by those who really have little competence to speak out in protest, only serves to disrupt and tear down, not create and build up anew” (p. 33).

**Student Activism From 1800 to 1959**

While these early years of student activism are not often cited as having a significant impact on social change and university life, they do contain important benchmarks in the evolution of campus activism across the United States. The preceding subsections provide an overview of this period by exploring the salient trends of the 1800s, the evolving characteristics of the first half of the 20th century, the emergence of LGBT activism during this time, and significant legal interventions that impacted the birth of activism on college campuses.

**Trends of the 1800s.** Primarily, this period in the history of activism can be defined as a largely apolitical period, with students focusing their efforts on institutional-specific issues such as the quality of food, housing, and the rigidity of the rules that governed student behavior. The scuffles that did occur on campuses had no large-scale impact on social change for the greater population (Altbach & Peterson, 1971; Sorey & Gregory, 2010).

Between 1800 and 1875, student rebellion was recorded at roughly 13 colleges across the country (Sorey & Gregory, 2010). The rebellion during this era was primarily in response to issues pertaining to the college experience and did very little to enhance social change. For
example, a rebellion at the University of Virginia in 1836 erupted after administrators demanded students forfeit their firearms while on campus. The result was a riot in which students fired their weapons at faculty residences. In other instances of the time, apolitical riots ensued at Oakland College that resulted in the fatal stabbing of the college president and at the University of Georgia where administrators were stoned with rocks (Sorey & Gregory, 2010).

**Student-institution relationship.** During this early stage of campus activism, institutional administration prescribed to *in loco parentis*, a term meaning “in place of the parents,” which effectively allowed both secondary and postsecondary institutions to construct policies and procedures that restricted student rights in an effort to “command obedience, control stubbornness, to quicken diligence and to reform bad habits” (Sarabyn, 2008, p. 49). In effect, *in loco parentis* placed college students in the same category as children in need of discipline and strict boundaries and faculty responsible for student evaluation were the authoritarians during this time. As a result, the practice of *in loco parentis* stifled many student voices and renders this period in time a fairly inactive and uneventful activist era.

**Characteristics of activism: 1900-1959.** The student activists of the early 20th century were given their first major avenue to the national stage when the Intercollegiate Sociality Society (ISS) was established at colleges and universities. This radical organization shifted the focus on student activism from self-serving, campus-based lobbying to larger societal issues plaguing the country, such as the creation of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) and other matters such as immigration, free speech infringements, and foreign policy (Sorey & Gregory, 2010).

The 1930s brought about a shift in student activism on American college campuses. The rise of the Nazi party in Germany sparked anti-war sentiments across the country that ultimately
spawned the American Student Union—a group of 20,000 students—who coordinated peace
crises and formed a strong network of socially-minded young citizens who were uniting
together on a global issue for the first time. Even with this new momentum, activism trended
toward metropolitan areas and a majority of campuses were left unaffected by the movement
(Altbach & Peterson, 1971).

The activists that entered college in the late 1940s and 1950s were most often veterans
with “little time for social involvement on college campuses. Their primary goal was to obtain a
degree and gain employment” (Sorey & Gregory, 2010, p. 187). While anti-war sentiments ran
high and students continued to seek ways to show support for the allied forces, the draft of 1941
effectively drained a considerable amount of the progressive activists from college campuses.
Organizations such as the Student Defenders of Democracy were among the most active on
campus, but the lack of active members rendered the groups ineffective.

As the 1940s drew to a close, the post-war activists shifted their focus toward
communism—either for or against. According to Altbach and Peterson (1971), groups such as
American Youth for Democracy (AYD) sprouted in support of communism (though it was
largely ineffective) and students rose up against communism by forming organizations such as
Students for Democratic Action, which did receive substantial support on college campuses. The
communist vs. anti-communist organizations on campus provided a new host of rallies either for
or against the issue.

The 1948 presidential election was a key turning point at the end of the decade, with the
defeat of Henry Wallace for President. Wallace, a member of the Progressive Party, carried
intense communist support during his bid for the presidency, which only fueled the controversy
on college campuses. When Wallace lost the election, it effectively killed the issue among
student activists and welcomed in an era of relative apathy (Altbach & Peterson, 1971).

The 1950s proved to be an era of students who were “born in war, bred in war, participants in war, seeking only security in income, home and career” (Sampson, 1967, p. 1). As members of the “silent generation” they refrained from participating in large forms of activism. As Sorey and Gregory (2010) reflected, the college students of the 1950s “feared any challenge to the status quo and believed that the government and college administrators possessed unlimited power” (p. 187).

The oppression brought on by Senator Joseph McCarthy deeply affected the activism on college campuses during the 1950s. Right-wing activists began to gain footing during this time and liberal-minded students began to suffer under the repression of political beliefs. Professors and administrators were forced from their positions due to their political affiliations and senate investigations at the national level inspired many student activists to suppress their beliefs during this time, which led to severe apathy (Altbach & Peterson, 1971). It is perhaps for this reason that many students did not mobilize on issues pertaining to the Korean War, which was an almost non-existent discussion topic among campus groups.

**LGBT activism.** Activism within the LGBT population during this time did not share the same intensity as the more mainstream activist behaviors. The 1950s, as demonstrated previously, were not recognized as a particularly influential era in student activist history. Apathy was rampant and conservative values stifled what liberal voices dared to speak (Beemyn, 2003). That is not to say, however, that liberal social movements were not taking shape during this time. Contrary to popular belief, the LGBT liberation movement did not begin overnight after the famed Stonewall Riots in New York City on June 28, 1969, but rather took shape quietly during the otherwise apathetic years of the early 20th century (Beemyn, 2003).
The Mattachine Society, often considered the earliest gay rights organization, was conceived in 1948 and later established as a formal organization in 1950 by Harry Hay, an activist and member of the Progressive Party (Beemyn, 2003). Originally conceived as “Bachelor’s Anonymous,” the organization was designed as a gathering of homosexual men to discuss gay liberation in a method similar to the famed secret societies of Harvard (Meeker, 2001). The society focused primarily on connecting gay men who were otherwise isolated and on providing education that would result in a more socially conscious man and also to provide support and resources to victimized gays (Meeker, 2001).

**Legal developments.** While secondary institutions to some extent still prescribe to *in loco parentis* (and courts have often affirmed their right to do so), colleges and universities pushed aside the doctrine during the mid-20th century as the function of the American university shifted from teaching students the values of society to one where the acquisition of knowledge and research was central to the college experience (Sarabyn, 2008). This mindset, combined with the debate that culminated in the passing of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, converged to mark the end of *in loco parentis* at the collegiate level.

The departure from *in loco parentis* to one where students are seen as adults changed the way universities function. The institutions themselves changed the relationship they had with their students by moving away from *in loco parentis*. In essence, by embracing the students as adults, administrators also had to bestow upon them the same constitutional rights that adults in this country are entitled to, within reason (Sarabyn, 2008). This point was only further solidified with the passing of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, which changed the legal age of interdependence to age 18 from 21. The passing of that amendment created legal ground for the elimination of *in loco parentis* on college campuses and primed the way for the critical decade of
student activism that brought collective action to the forefront.

**Conclusion.** The early years of activism, while not significant in comparison to more contemporary decades, provided solid evidence of how evolutionary the concept of activism could be on college campuses. During the 1800s, activism was isolated and restricted due to laws and practices that governed younger Americans. As the early 20th century marched on, we began to see more connections between social movements, national politics, and student activism on campuses—a relationship that continues in modern times as well.

**Activism During the Critical 1960s**

The 1960s quickly erased the apathy experienced during the 1950s. The 1960s were, as Altbach and Cohen (1990) described, “the flowering of American student political activism. The American university was in turmoil, and students, for the first time since the 1930s, played on a national political stage” (p. 32). Sampson (1967) cited the youth of the 1960s as being “fed from a stream which flowed out of the Civil Rights Movement, and they gave impetus, direction and a base of identification for the new and growing force of the under-thirty youth” (p. 1).

Students on college campuses began to focus on domestic issues that struck at the heart of American values and sentiments, such as “relations between the sexes, reproductive rights, music, and social norms” (Altbach & Cohen, 1990, p. 32). By the close of the decade, American polls indicated that the primary concern in the country at that time was campus unrest (Altbach & Cohen, 1990).

To explore this critical decade, the next section provides an overview of the foundation of activism during this time, the significance of UC Berkeley, the parallels of LGBT activism, and the legal implications that changed the way American institutions regulated activist activities.

**Characteristics of the 1960s.** The activists of the 1960s were able to prosper and gain
significant national attention due to several defining factors of the decade. America during this time enjoyed relative success economically and many college students held the belief that the pursuit of wealth was their right as an American (Altbach & Cohen, 1990). With the election of John F. Kennedy as President, the 1960s represented a time of blossoming for the young liberal movement, and students of the time felt empowered to join movements to enact social change. Arguably, students approached activism with the belief that social change would result from acts of coordinated activism, and this high level of confidence resulted in students mobilizing over issues such as the Vietnam War, civil rights, and women’s rights (Altbach & Cohen, 1990).

The explosion of student participation across the nation was fueled by the onset of technological advancements such as television, which was a fixture in over 90% of homes during this time (Isserman & Kazin, 2000). Television coverage of the unrest on college campuses quickly spread to traditional print media and effectively captured the attention of the nation. Lucas (1994) stated that the media “highly sensationalized accounts of each new incident… further fanning the flames of discontent” (p. 259).

The important themes of activism during this time, as identified by Flacks (1967) were: (a) romanticism (the quest for a “free life”); (b) anti-authoritarianism (“a strong antipathy toward administrative rule”); (c) egalitarianism/populism (“a belief that all men are capable of political participation,” and that the “locus of value in society lies with the people and not elites”); (d) anti-dogmatism (repelling “formulated models of social order”); (e) moral purity (the assertion that society is hypocritical); (f) community (emphasis and desire for interpersonal connectedness); and (g) anti-institutionalism (belief that being involved will avoid institutional careers and instead pursue a life of political organizing (p. 56).

Flacks’ (1967) themes coupled with Altbach and Cohen’s (1990) reflections on the
activists of the 1960s illustrated a highly active and motivated generation that is focused on making significant changes during a time of free thinking and liberal mindedness. It is this overwhelming belief that political organizing would result in social change that led into the more violent protests of the late 1960s when change did not occur. When the same romantic student activists were confronted with the fact that their liberal and passive organizing was not resulting in the sweeping social reforms they had hoped, more radical activists shifted to violent movements that they hoped would be more effective on campus (Altbach & Cohen, 1990).

The trend toward violent movements captured national attention. During the early 1960s, the small number of violent protests was related to civil rights. Between February 1960 and September 1961, roughly 3,600 students were arrested for participating in civil rights-related rallies (Oppenheimer, 1984). Violent protests that resulted in arrests often also included students being “arrested, placed in a stockade, and sprayed with water during freezing temperatures” (p. 50). Perhaps even more noteworthy, a survey conducted by The Scranton Commission uncovered that some Americans “openly applauded police violence against students, arguing that they had only themselves to blame if they were killed by police during disruptive or violent protests” (Sorey & Gregory, 2010, p. 188).

**Significance of the University of California at Berkeley.** The Berkeley revolt represented a major turning point in American history and illustrated to the public that college students had the opportunity and enthusiasm to defend the rights and privileges of others (Sorey & Gregory, 2010). In doing so, the students at Berkeley created First Amendment protections for future generations of college students on campus property.

The typical Berkeley student of the 1960s was politically minded and often met on a section of land at the entrance to campus that was long believed to be property of the City of
Berkeley (Sorey & Gregory, 2010). It was on this land that the students handed out leaflets, gathered to discuss their political views, and solicited funds to fuel further demonstrations. Amidst the media coverage across the country, the administrators at Berkeley re-issued a dormant policy that forbade political activity from occurring on campus property—which they claimed applied to the land at the entrance to campus (Sorey & Gregory, 2010). Often the site of pamphlet distribution and other forms of political expression, this strip of land would usher in a battleground for student freedom of expression and speech.

Shortly after re-instituting the policy, eight students were suspended after utilizing the property for political expression. This action by the university administration ignited a semester-long dispute over student rights and freedoms that featured 600-person sit-ins and governmental and law enforcement interventions. These interventions fueled the passions of students and supporters and made the riots and protests more intense and severe. After a semester of tumultuous relations between students and administration, the university relaxed its policies on demonstrations and delivered a message to student activists around the country: participation in solidarity movements can have positive and measureable effects on institutions and bureaucratic structures (Sorey & Gregory, 2010).

The occurrences at Berkeley had a paramount effect on youth across the nation. As DuBose (1967) reflected, “Student activists across the nation were shown that they could organize, protest, rally, sit-in and strike—and get actual results… they had won faculty support, and were thus transformed from marginal disruptors… into legitimate spokesmen for the entire community” (p. 2). The media focused intently on the circumstances at Berkeley and shifted public attention to the issue of campus activism. The coverage ignited the passions of other students around the country, and more college campuses began to experience unrest focused on a
variety of institutional and national issues, much to the chagrin of campus leadership (Sorey & Gregory, 2010).

Berkeley illuminated an issue on college campuses across the nation that inspired other students to create movements to enact change. Many students experienced the Berkeley situation via popular media and made the determination that campus administrators were inherently anti-student and thus deserved very little respect from students on campus. In the wake of Berkeley, many anti-administrative revolts began to manifest on college campuses in the country, and students began to assert their demands to improve the campus culture for all students (Sorey & Gregory, 2010).

**LGBT activism.** It is important to understand that while the 1960s were an active time on most campuses with regard to the war and civil rights, LGBT activists were unable to enjoy similar forms of social action due to the cloak of anonymity that covered most gay organizations (Beemyn, 2003). With the Mattachine Society gaining ground in major cities across the United States, its members began to enter colleges and universities and sought to continue their involvement at the campus level. Stephen Donaldson was one of those students, and he matriculated into Columbia University in 1965 (Beemyn, 2003).

As an openly bisexual man and an active member of the Mattachine Society of New York City, Donaldson was forced by administrators to move out of his on-campus residence after his roommates complained of his sexuality. This occurrence spawned his desire to unite other gay men on campus, and he ultimately sought to establish a Mattachine-esque organization on campus called the Student Homophile League (SHL; Beemyn, 2003).

During the 1966-1967 academic year, Donaldson fought the administration to recognize this group despite the university requirement that all membership rosters be disclosed to the
university. While the gay students were not willing to have their names shared, other prominent non-gay students stood up in support and declared themselves members so that the SHL would be eligible for charter. On April 19, 1967, Columbia University became the first institution of higher education to charter a gay rights group on campus (Beemyn, 2003).

Despite the intense level of activism taking place at other universities with regard to other social issues, LGBT activists remained mostly concealed from the public eye. At Cornell, a chapter of SHL was established during the late 60s that primarily participated in demonstrations coordinated by other organizations seeking to improve campus treatment of African American students (Beemyn, 2003). It was not until the Stonewall Riots of 1969 that the Cornell chapter of SHL entered the political activism stage full force in conjunction with more experienced protestors that were part of the Students for Democratic Society (SDS), a tremendously influential group of student activists with strong networks and a national reputation (Beemyn, 2003).

The Stonewall Riots (commonly referred to as simply Stonewall) was a turning point for the gay liberation movement in the country. New York City Mayor John Lindsay ordered police intervention at gay bars across the city and authorities raided the Stonewall Inn in the city’s Greenwich Village neighborhood (Baker, 2007). While police raids at gay clubs were not an unusual occurrence, on this particular night, the hunger for equal rights and distaste for ill treatment by authorities coalesced and resulted in riots and protests that lasted three days (Baker, 2007). Stonewall serves as a pinnacle moment in gay American history and remains a strong motivator for those who still lobby for gay rights.

**Legal developments in support of activism.** The seminal case before the high court at this time was *Tinker v. Des Moines School District* (1969). While dealing specifically with a
secondary school’s decision to regulate a group of students’ passive protest, it paved the way for
the Supreme Court to consider such cases during this age of activism. In *Tinker*, several high
school students had chosen to wear black armbands to show solidarity for the anti-Vietnam
movement and were subsequently suspended (Ramey, 2000). Despite *Tinker* dealing specifically
with secondary institutions, it is often referenced in conjunction with college court
considerations as well.

The Court, in considering the case through the First Amendment lens decided that the
protest was a “non-disruptive exercise of free speech and could not be punished by suspension
from school” (Kaplin & Lee, 1997, p. 360). Furthermore, the Court held that “First Amendment
rights, applied in light of special circumstances of the school environment, are available to
teachers and students,” with students possessing “fundamental rights which the state must
respect, just as they themselves respect their obligation to the state” (Kaplin & Lee, 1997, p.
360).

The significance of the *Tinker* case is that it not only reinforced students’ right to express
themselves verbally, but it also extended that protection to symbolic acts that convey specific
viewpoints. In the majority opinion, the Justices made it clear that “it can hardly be argued that
either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom or expression at the
schoolhouse gate” (*Tinker et al v. Des Moines Independent Community School District et al*, 393
U.S. 503). Furthermore, the majority Justices maintained that First Amendment rights must
always be applied “in light of the special characteristics of the environment” (*Tinker et al v. Des
Moyines Independent Community School District et al*, 393 U.S. 503), and that state organizations
have “the need for affirming the comprehensive authority of the states and of school officials,
consistent with fundamental constitutional safeguards, to prescribe and control conduct” (*Tinker*
Tinker further stated that, while safeguards should be put into place to protect the freedom to protest, it should not at the same time constitute a freedom to disrupt (Kaplin & Lee, 1997). In part, the Court stated, “Conduct by the student, in class or out of it, which for any reason—whether it stems from time, place or type of behavior—materially disrupts classwork or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others is not immunized by the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech” (Tinker et al v. Des Moines Independent Community School District et al, 393 U.S. 503).

This clarification is an important one as it protects the students’ rights to protest and assemble, but in the same vein, it provides key protections to those who wish to not participate. In short, a protest occurring on campus should not interfere with the rights of other students to study, read, or conduct normal business on the campus. While Tinker remained focused on high school cases, subsequent court cases addressed the same components in relation to post-secondary institutions.

While the Tinker case was progressing through the court system, the Supreme Court was hearing United States v. O’Brien (1968). While not a case dealing directly with institutions of education, its roots were born at the University of California when a protest broke out to show solidarity against the United States involvement in the Dominican Republic (Alfange, 1968). At this particular rally held in the spring of 1965, several students burned their draft cards in effigy to support the movement.

While this symbolic form of protest did not attract wide attention, it did spawn a series of similar rallies across the nation. After a particular protest in New York City in summer of 1965, Congress passed a motion to make the intentional burning of draft cards a felony. By October of
that same year, H.R. 10306 was passed (393 to 1) and enacted into law by President Johnson (Alfange, 1968). Shortly thereafter, O’Brien, a 22-year-old member of a anti-war group, burned his draft card at a rally in the presence of the FBI and Secret Service. After this particular event, O’Brien was arrested and subsequently sentenced to jail time (Alfange, 1968).

When O’Brien reached the Supreme Court for the 1967 session, the Supreme Court almost entirely avoided the First Amendment issue and affirmed the constitutionality of the act of Congress. However the Court did determine that “speech that takes the form of conduct… may be suppressed if the legislation prohibiting the conduct meetings a four-part test” (Alfange, 1968, p. 18). The test includes the following components:

If the governmental interest is real, apparently unrelated to the suppression of speech, and related to a proper subject of legislative concern, all applications of a statute that protects this interest are constitutional if the statute itself is sufficiently narrowly drawn so that the ‘incidental restriction on alleged First Amendment freedom is no greater than is essential to the furtherance of that interest. (Alfange, 1968, p. 18)

Because the court determined that the government interest in the draft and military operations superseded O’Brien’s right to express himself, and that his expression could have been made in other methods, his claim was ultimately dismissed.

**Conclusion.** The 1960s successfully provided students with a strong network by which they could collaborate on issues across a variety of campuses. United for change, the youth during this decade became keenly aware that they had a voice that could be used to enact positive social change both on campus and across the country. It was the most significant decade in the history of student activism and served as proof that society would take notice of college student positions on issues. With the courts affirming students’ rights to freedom of speech, this
decade served as a major turning point in the evolution of student activism.

**Trends in Student Activism From 1970-2000**

The three decades that followed the volatile 1960s were arguably much more apathetic. Altbach (1979) reported that while political sentiments still veered to the liberal side on college campuses, the disruptions that were seen in the previous decade were far less obtrusive. While around 18% of students indicated that they were involved in some form of political activism in the 1970s, the trend in activism during this time was more toward religious freedoms and rights to organize (Altbach, 1979). To illustrate the trajectory of activism during this time, the following sections will explore activism during the presidency of Richard Nixon, the apathetic decades that closed the 20th century, the parallels of LGBT activism during this era, and how the courts continued to provide protections for students exercising their rights on college campuses.

**The Nixon years.** Richard Nixon, running on the platform to end the Vietnam War, was elected President in 1968. Sensing that the war would come to an end, campus activism declined slightly in the later years of the decade. By April of 1970, President Nixon declared that the nation would invade Cambodia—a major departure from his presidential campaign message. This announcement ushered in a wave of protests and violence on campuses across the country that “propelled the most violent wave of disorders in the history of the nation’s campuses” (Semas, 1970, p. 31).

Among the most noteworthy cases of violence in the wake of the nation’s invasion of Cambodia occurred on the campus of Kent State University located in Kent, Ohio. In May of 1970, as the academic year was winding to a close, anti-war rallies raged on the campus of Kent State. Students turned out in droves to peacefully assemble on the campus and were met with violence at the hands of the National Guard that resulted in the death of four students (Sorey &
Moreover, Kent State ushered in a new era that called into question the constitutional rights of students and what protections they are entitled to receive while in college (Sorey & Gregory, 2010).

**Student activism: 1980-1999.** Student activism in the 1980s, as Altbach and Cohen (1990) discussed, was primarily a transitional period that served as the gateway to the more modern forms of activism that are prevalent today. The Regan Administration created a conservative stronghold on the country and those on the left were once again (as seen in the 50s) on the sidelines and relatively quiet. While issues such as apartheid ignited social movements on campuses once again, the 80s were relatively insignificant in the activism landscape.

The 90s brought about a freedom from the conservative years that defined the 80s, and students began to once again gain confidence with regard to participating in liberal social movements. Issues such as “federal student aid, peace, affirmative action, women’s, gay and disabled rights” began to take center stage and gain momentum among the country’s youth (Altbach & Cohen, 1990). In the final years of the 1990s, while activism remained a fixture of college life, the Internet was in its infancy and remained a developing technology at that time.

**LGBT activism.** Organizations such as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) have roots in the months and years post-Stonewall, and this increased visibility allowed for LGBT student activists on college campuses to revisit their anonymity clauses (Kissack, 1995). This momentum trickled back down into Cornell, where members of the SHL were still partnering with SDS to spread their message.

With the power of Stonewall behind them, the student leaders within SHL began to take more outward approaches to spreading their message. Shedding the traditional masks of the past, SHL members took to campus to publically share their identities and experiences in an effort to
increase campus awareness and to lobby for political change (Beemyn, 2003). Sit-ins were also not uncommon for SHL and their modes of participation began to reflect the national trends mentioned earlier. It was a pinnacle moment in gay liberation history when gay students repelled anonymity and spoke out in an effort to educate the American public about gay rights.

**Legal developments.** While *Tinker* developed safeguards for protection at the secondary level, the Supreme Court held in *Healy v. James* (1972) that the same First Amendment protections extend to college students as well. In *Healy*, the Court considered a petition filed by a group of students who attempted to begin a chapter of SDS at Central Connecticut State College (now University) that would afford them the ability to host meetings, organize rallies and protests, and use the school newspaper for advertising among other benefits.

In the application for formal recognition, the students declared that they would remain completely independent of the national organization, which had a history of creating disruption and violence at a national level. After an approval by the Student Affairs Committee, the college president rejected the students’ application for recognition, stating that the group mission was antithetical to the college’s mission and values. The students filed suit and eventually the Supreme Court granted a writ of certiorari.

The *Healy* majority argued that colleges are a “marketplace of ideas” and relied on the previous decision in *Shelton v. Tucker* (1960) and upheld that “the vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools” (sec. 1). The fact that the college president disagreed with the organizations philosophy and national reputation was not held as a significant enough reason to deny First Amendment rights to the students.

While not specifically related to protest or activism, *Widmar v. Vincent* (1981) played an
important role in defining the difference between activism in public spaces and activism taking place on college campuses. In *Widmar*, University of Missouri at Kansas City students who were a part of a religious organization were denied the ability to meet in campus buildings due to a university regulation stating that use of campus facilities could not be used “for purposes of religious worship or religious teaching” (sec. 1).

Where *Widmar* has a lasting impact is that it designated a university as a special entity where the mission is education and the decision of the court up until that time had never denied a university’s authority to impose reasonable regulations compatible with that mission upon the use of its campus and facilities (Kaplin & Lee, 1997). That being said, the court recognized that denying the group access to space based on the content of speech was in direct violation of the First Amendment.

In the years since *Tinker*, other significant court cases have reached the Supreme Court and have ended with a finding in favor of the schools. In *Bethel School District No. 403 v. Fraser* (1986), a student delivering a nomination speech for a peer who was running for student government peppered his speech with sexual references. The school responded by suspending the student (Chemerinsky, 1999). In the court majority opinion, Justice Burger distinguished the *Bethel* case from *Tinker* in that Bethel did not focus on political speech. In his opinion he stated, “It is a highly appropriate function of public education to prohibit the use of vulgar and offensive terms in public discourse… a high school assembly or classroom is no place for explicit monologue” (Chemerinsky, 1999). In doing so, the Supreme Court effectively determined that the authorities in public schools have the flexibility to determine what is appropriate and what is not given the circumstances and can effectively regulate non-curricular activities that may disrupt the operation of the schools (Chemerinsky, 1999).
Conclusion. From 1970 through 2000, the activism by and for LGBT persons began to enter the mainstream, and for the first time in history, it emerged from the shadows and took center stage. Simultaneously, the 1970s Nixon-era politics ignited the passions of college students around the nation and the courts began to extend protections to actors who wish to lobby for social change while in college. The 1980s were marked by a significant court decision in *Widmar* (1981), which upheld an institution of higher education’s ability to make decisions based on the educational mission, yet still ruled that public universities must uphold the tenets of the constitution. The 1980s made way for the more boisterous and liberal 90s, and while not particularly significant in the legal or social realm, technological advancements slowly began to develop that would eventually be the catalyst for a new form of activism.

The Modern Form of Digital Activism

While the protests, rallies, and sit-ins of the previous decades defined student participation on college campuses, nothing could have prepared us for the disruption caused by the onset of the Internet and social media that were introduced in the late 1990s. The Internet disruption has created an entirely new platform for student organizing and demands more critical understanding. The following sections will highlight the characteristics of online activism and will begin to discuss contemporary legal issues and cases that have begun to regulate this new form of participation.

Online activism. Online activism can take on many forms and encompasses a wide variety of digital media platforms. Websites such as change.org have taken over the traditional letter writing or petition process that had been previously relied on to illustrate support for an issue. Protest.net has been created to allow activists to track local demonstrations or protests and has become a vehicle that makes hanging up fliers obsolete. The digital revolution not only
changes how global citizens communicate with each other, but it also changes how they join and define communities (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002).

During then-Senator Barack Obama’s first bid for the White House, the United States saw for the first time a major political campaign taking place in this country on the digital sphere. Obama, appealing to the younger, more hopeful generation of Americans, took platforms such as Twitter and Facebook by storm, organizing online meet-ups of supporters and simply uniting massive amounts of citizens together who otherwise would not have connected (McCafferty, 2011). To say that Obama masterfully capitalized on digital technology would be a massive understatement. In essence, the campaign stretched the legs of social media and exposed millions of young Americans to the power of digital mobilization.

Perhaps an obvious assumption is that those most likely to participate in virtual social action are those with consistent and reliable access to the Internet. Those who have achieved a college education are also most likely to be socially active in the digital era, making college students most likely to utilize digital media to participate in collective action (Broido, 2000). According to Van Laer (2010), Internet mobilization is significant for a few reasons. Primarily, it supports and strengthens pre-existing networks of activists, and secondly, there is a greater chance of expanding those networks by use of virtual communities, hashtags, and keywords (Van Laer, 2010).

There are dangerous aspects to online organizing, and while not often the case in the United States, it is important to recognize that other countries do not enjoy the same uncensored access to Internet as those who reside in the Western world (Budish, 2012). Therefore it should not be assumed that research that focuses on an American-based sample set should be representative of international views, as countries such as Egypt, Kazakhstan, and Zimbabwe
still struggle over the right to organize and protest governmental matters (Etling, Faris, & Palfrey, 2010).

Motivations for digital social action are vast and vary greatly depending on the social group being considered. However, threads of consistent themes can be found as researchers such as Van Laer (2010) have discovered. These researchers, among others, have established “instrumentality, collective identity, and ideology” (Van Laer, 2010, p. 409) as the themes that have been imbedded across a multitude of activist networks. In short, instrumentality refers to the participation in digital activism with the strong belief that said participation will result in change. Participation in one’s collective group becomes a goal in and of itself and ideology emerges as a trend for the purpose of expressing one’s own views on the situation to satisfy an emotional motive (Van Laer, 2010).

Like the former versions of activism that have been discussed within this study, online activism has enabled marginalized populations to unite together with impressive numbers that had not previously been possible. In 2009, over 1,000 Chinese citizens rioted in response to the tragic death of two factory workers—a number that Budish (2012) indicated would have been all but impossible to obtain a few years earlier due to censorship laws. In Egypt, more than half of the protests that took place in a 7-year period between 2004 and 2011 were organized completely online.

Critics of online mobilization have pinpointed several major concerns with this new concept: first, researchers have claimed that slacktivism (or arm-chair activism) is resulting in significant numbers, but ultimately those numbers are not indicative of true interest in the topic. Budish (2012) discussed that of all those who indicated they were members of the Occupy Wall Street movement on Facebook, 74.3% of people merely posted about the issue and did not
participate in other forms of activism. Second, there is a claim that clicktivism presents major security concerns for those participating since user names and those seeking to disrupt any activity can gather other identifiable information.

Another significant concern presented is that complex geopolitical issues are reduced to slogans, memes, and bumper stickers, thus stripping them of their significance (Budish, 2012). Furthermore, researchers (e.g., Bennett, 2003, 2008) posit that as online communities become more a part of a young person’s life, the less they will be capable or able to form similar communities in real-life, which could reduce the effectiveness of more traditional forms of activism. Regardless of the dangers and concerns that may be possible in this new online era, students continue to flock to virtual networks to connect with their communities.

**LGBT online activism.** Van Laer (2010) and Harris, Wyn, and Younes (2010) are researchers who studied trends in digital mobilization and pointed out that significant research exists with regard to how information technologies changed mobilization around social issues, but that very little research exists that explores specific protest participants who are not linked to formal organizations to see how digital media influenced their involvement in social action. “Many questions remain unanswered,” Van Laer (2010) wrote, “about how different kinds of activists, mobilized around different types of issues and distinct types of social movements, employ new communication technologies as a means to be informed on and be mobilized for collective action” (p. 406). Considering this view in relation to what is known about LGBT activism at the macro-level, it is imperative for us to understand not only how digital media has affected LGBT activism, but also how student populations mobilized by LGBT issues utilize digital communications to enhance their social activism.

In short, some pertinent questions remain unanswered with regard to LGBT activists in
the digital world: what does the current landscape of LGBT activism look like; how empowered are LGBT activists with regard to online collective action; and to what extent does clicktivism actually make significant, long-lasting impact? It is very difficult to measure the extent to which social media has inspired people to take part in online social action (McCafferty, 2011), but researchers can and should explore specific populations to determine how the digital revolution has impacted their social activism.

What is known is that collective organizing in an online setting creates opportunities and barriers for LGBT students just as it does all other types of students. The literature also explains that during the four critical years of college, students are exploring the complexity of their identities, and therefore, communities (both online and in person) play an integral role in that healthy exploration.

“Belonging to the LGBT community,” Meyer (2009) writes, “provides a sense of perceptual empowerment for individuals because they see that there are ‘others like me’” (p. 508). This concept is a source of empowerment for LGBT students as they build an affinity toward a larger community and begin to organize socially around various issues and concerns pertaining to their community (Fraser, 2008).

Considering the historical and social variables presented in this paper, it can be posited that LGBT activism has not enjoyed the public attention that other social groups have for a variety of reasons. For the first time in history, given the positive changes to social policy and the onset of the Internet, LGBT activists may begin to enjoy a significant amount of success in the digital realm. What is known about LGBT organizations on college campuses is that they foster a sense of community and support for a marginalized community and they positively contribute to a healthy development of identity (Meyer, 2009). In the same vein, these
organizations tend to be very visible on campus and that visibility may serve as a source of anxiety for students at specific stages of development, thus making online organizing a more comfortable and natural choice for some.

McAdam conducted a study that determined that online activists are more likely to participate within a network that is closely linked to one’s own self-identity (as cited in Budish, 2012). This is complimented by studies (e.g., Longerbeam, 2007) that indicated LGBT college students were more likely to participate in social justice activism than their heterosexual peers. With this information in mind, researchers can safely posit that LGBT students are mobilizing online to lobby for social change, yet little understanding is available for what the characteristics are of the LGBT online protestor, or how they define social justice within this realm.

**The legal landscape of digital activism.** There are a multitude of complications brought on by our digital age and many cyberspace issues are primed for court intervention, as seen in *City of Los Angeles v. Preferred Communications* (1986). Justice Blackmun stated that the First Amendment needed to be kept up to date with new technologies. With the introduction of each new social media platform, the First Amendment must undergo further scrutiny to determine the type of protection that should be applied (Jacques, 1996).

Online student activism and online speech protections are only a sliver of what the courts might be asked to decide in the coming decades. Among other concerns is student censorship on university computer networks, electronic privacy concerns, and online intellectual privacy rights. However, Beeman (1996) argued that legal complacency toward any of these issues might be the largest threat to cyberspace civil liberty.

The Internet has presented a new challenge for the courts in the consideration of First Amendment rights. Ambiguity exists with regard to where the speech originates, if the schools
capital played any role in the speech, and to what extent the speech took place on campus versus off campus. What precedent has illustrated is that speech that is antithetical to the educational mission of the school is subject to regulation by school officials (Harpaz, 2000). Therefore, it is important for us to consider online activism in the broader context of First Amendment protections, as both of these areas are still developing with regard to online activities.

The court system has yet to take up major cases that pertain to college students and their online activism. As with Tinker, the courts are just beginning to explore the limits of freedom of speech as it pertains to online activities with secondary schools. These decisions will serve as important precedents as the courts consider similar instances at the collegiate level. Examples of both student speech protections being upheld (Beussink v. Woodland R-IV School District, 1998; Mahaffey v. Aldrich, 2002); and examples of school regulation of cyber speech being upheld (J.S. v. Bethlehem Area School District, 2002) are only beginning to carve out criteria for protected speech (Hanks, 2010).

Applying the Tinker test (determining if speech took place on school grounds or off and if said speech was disruptive) has long provided clarity for the traditional form of demonstrations, but the Tinker test continues to be problematic in our online era. “Tinker’s simple armband,” the Pennsylvania Supreme Court noted, “has been replaced by a complex multimedia website, accessible to fellow students, teachers and the world” (Fryman, 2008, p. 560). Since the Internet and social media play such a major role in our society today, the question of Tinker in an online world stands in need of clarification.

As cited by Calvert (2009), Boston College professor Mary-Rose Papandrea stated that the Supreme Court to date has “provide[ed] little direct guidance to the lower courts concerning the authority of school officials to punish student speech involving digital media” (Calvert, 2009,
Furthermore, Papandrea noted that the speech that has been regulated by the courts has all occurred on campus and during school activities, which might “render all their cases inapplicable to digital speech” (as cited in Calvert, 2009, p. 90), since much of what takes place online may in fact be done off campus and disconnected from normal campus operations.

This ambiguity has resulted in mixed decisions among lower courts. In fact, many public institutions have relied on claims of qualified immunity to absolve them from any civil litigation that might result in monetary sanctions (Calvert, 2009). Qualified immunity, as defined clearly by the Justices in *Pearson v. Callahan* (2009), “balances two important interests—the need to hold public officials accountable when they exercise power irresponsibly and the need to shield officials from harassment, distraction, and liability when they perform their duties reasonably” (p. 87).

This concept of qualified immunity was able to rescue public officials from civil judgments in *Doninger v. Niehoff* (2009) where a student had sued school officials for disciplining her for negative comments made about staff on a blog she maintained. While the decision in *Doninger* sided with the school in question on the basis of qualified immunity, it opens up further concerns with the unidentified line between speech taking place on campus or off (Calvert, 2009). More importantly, the *Doninger* decision single-handedly applied the *Tinker* test to determine that the student’s online speech was not protected under the First Amendment, and thus, the institution was able to regulate the speech.

Despite the legal gray area surrounding online speech, colleges and universities are implementing policies via student codes of conduct that address when the institution has jurisdiction over what takes place online (Beckstrom, 2008). It is these institution-specific Internet speech restrictions that are important for students to know before they engage in online
Beckstrom (2008) indicated that recent incidents at the University of Central Florida, Valdosta State University, and the University of Illinois signaled that universities are becoming more comfortable with defining what is considered appropriate speech that takes place online and off campus. The case involving the University of Illinois specifically relates to online speech in the context of student activism. In this case, a Facebook page was created to protest the university’s mascot, which was deemed racist by some. In response to the ongoing dialogue that was taking place on the Facebook page, the university sought to take action against a student who posted comments pertaining to one of the most vocal members of the demonstration. In response, the University issued charges against the student per the student code of conduct.

While there has been a lack of federal court debate with regard to student speech online, institutions of higher education will often be deferred to by the courts to adapt their rules and regulations as they see fit. In essence, universities may determine on an individual basis what types of speech “are no longer valuable to the marketplace of ideas” (Beckstrom, 2008, p. 278). However, since it can be argued that the entire Internet is a marketplace of ideas, administrators must tread lightly when deciding to police online behavior.

Lower courts that have chosen to hear online speech cases often rely on Watts v. United States (1969) for a glimpse into how the Supreme Court might determine these types of cases. In Watts, the Court determined that online speech can be legally regulated if that speech poses a true threat. A true threat, according to lower court decisions (e.g., Doe v. Pulaski, 2002 and Lovell v. Poway, 1996) is a threshold designed to protect “individuals from the fear of violence, from the disruption that fear engenders, and from the possibility that the threatened violence will occur” (Beckstrom, 2008, p. 302). These lower court decisions therefore establish a similar
regulation on First Amendment rights as *Tinker*.

There are two standards that must be applied to determine a true threat. The first is the “reasonable recipient” standard and the second is the “reasonable speaker” standard. *Doe*, which established the reasonable recipient clause, employed the test to determine “whether a reasonable person would interpret the purported threat as a serious expression of an intent to cause a present or future harm” (Beckstrom, 2008, p. 302). The court determined that to satisfy the reasonable recipient standard, we must ascertain: (a) the reaction of those who experienced the threat, (b) if the threat was presented with conditions, (c) if the person who initiated the threat spoke directly at the recipient of the threat, (d) if the person issuing the threat has a history of making other threats, and (e) if a history or propensity of violence was present (Beckstrom, 2008). For the reasonable speaker standard, the *Lovell* court pondered whether a reasonable person would interpret the speech as a “serious expression of harm or assault” (Beckstrom, 2008, p. 304). The court also placed significant emphasis on the context of how the speech occurred. This included the setting in which it was said and the story that lead up to the speech being made.

For both the reasonable speaker and the reasonable recipient standards, lower courts have attempted to carve out exceptions to the First Amendment for speech that occurs online. Colleges and universities should pay special attention to these standards when creating their codes of conduct to avoid potential court intervention. It would behoove college administrators to determine if online speech was a true threat and if it caused a significant disruption before pursuing administrative action.

**Conclusion.** The onset of the digital age ushered in a new catalyst for student activism, and provided students with the ability to connect with other actors previously inaccessible to them. LGBT students also began to use this platform to participate in social and political
movements. As new technologies continue to be introduced, and while the courts continue to define what free speech protections exist in the online realm, we are primed for a greater understanding of how the digital world will impact activism on college campuses.

**Summary**

As history and modern exploration have illustrated, activism among college students has been and remains an essential characteristic of the college experience. Each decade ushered in new catalysts for student activism, and our current global, social, and political landscapes continue to fuel student participation. With the onset of the Internet, college students are beginning to unite with one another across the country in solidarity for various causes, and college administrators are required to both understand the phenomenon and support student involvement in said activities. However, to effectively support student participation in these activities, administrators must understand how each minority group approaches online activism and how the digital age can be an effective tool for those students to find solidarity with others. These two important inquiries will serve as a basis for this study.

Recent developments in the landscape of collective action, specifically the Arab Spring, has drawn focus to how minority populations are utilizing the Internet to create and participate in social movements. Literature published by Budish (2012) and Jansen (2010) illustrate the key role technology played in minority uprisings in the Middle East and begin to shed light on the need to understand how other minority groups are utilizing technological platforms. Despite the depth of understanding that is present on how privileged groups have created and sustained social movements, it cannot be assumed that these experiences are the same for minority college students. Significant limitations exist in the literature with regard to LGBT college students and their participation in collective action. This study will seek to explore this concept in an effort to
advance our understanding.

Each generation has proven to have a different approach to activism, and introductions of new communication modules and legal protections have encouraged student participation in a multitude of ways. Our current cyber culture is the latest development in our society that has the ability to change activist behaviors and attitudes for a new generation. With the onset of the Internet and social media, LGBT students are able to connect with individuals around the country and throughout the world to expand gay rights and to tell the story of struggles within the community. To support and encourage involvement in social movements, it is imperative that college and university staff and faculty possess an intimate understanding of how various populations utilize these free and accessible resources in pursuit of social change. The theoretical framework for this study—resource mobilization theory—provides us with a framework for how movements are successful, but it has not been adequately applied to cyberactivism. This study explores the applicability of RMT in this era of digital activism in an attempt to uncover modules commonly used by participants, and the ways in which these resources have contributed to their activist identity and effectiveness.

The limitations present in activism research provide scholars with an opportunity to explore the topic from a multitude of angles to advance our understanding and appreciation for the impact of activism on society. In an effort to increase our understanding of minority student participation in cyberactivism, this study will be guided by one overarching research question: How do LGBT college students utilize the Internet to engage in forms of activism?
Chapter Three: Research Design

A review of the literature shows that student activism has roots in the early days of the American university, but it was not until the 1960s that student activism became a polarizing topic in this country. Between 1960 and today, researchers have studied how student motivations for advocacy have shifted from being at the forefront of college life, to a sense of apathy among college students in the 1980s and 1990s, to what is now being referred to as advocacy in the digital age (Altbach & Peterson, 1971; Illia, 2002).

More recently, Van Laer (2010) has published extensively on the new era of activism in the digital age and posits that every population uses technology differently when it comes to collective action online; it is imperative for future researchers to explore what the profile is of these various groups. Like the many populations Van Laer (2010) references, the LGBT population is one that is considerably understudied with regard to how they mobilize online.

This research study investigated how the Internet is shaping and supporting LGBT student activism. Understanding how LGBT students engage with online communities that center on social action will allow us to obtain a deeper understanding of the modern LGBT college student as an activist. Therefore, the primary research question that was explored in this study was: How do LGBT college students utilize the Internet to engage in forms of activism?

**Qualitative Research Approach**

To explore this research question adequately, this study utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, which is situated in the phenomenological tradition. Phenomenological research strives to be a “rigorous science in the service of humanity” (Cohen, 1987, p. 31). The purpose of this research approach is to explore the complexity of the human experience in a manner that focuses on the particular phenomenon without considering
preexisting theory. To properly capture the essence of the experience, this type of research must take into account observed behaviors of participants, and those experiences are considered truth, regardless of theory (Cohen, 1987).

Qualitative inquiry is designed to not only situate the researcher as an observer within the world, but also to explore how people interpret the world around them and what meanings subjects attach to various phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Primarily, the benefit of using qualitative research for this study is that it empowers a group of people (in this case, LGBT college students) to share their stories on a topic that is of significant importance to those who support LGBT college students in their development (Creswell, 2013).

A review of the literature on this topic illustrates that LGBT college student cyberactivism is primed for more understanding. While quantitative research methods would allow for the researcher to gain a broader understanding of how these two entities intersect, it would not adequately capture the complexity of the lived experience as qualitative inquiry would. Being able to delve deeply into the shared experiences of these students will add to the literature on how various identities participate in online activism; these experiences are best analyzed through qualitative inquiry (Ayers, 2003).

This study is situated within the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivists maintain that reality is constructed within each participant and that multiple realities must be identified and understood if the researcher is able to adequately solve the problem of practice (Ponterotto, 2005). In this paradigm, the researcher must focus on perspective and cannot sufficiently separate themselves from the participants’ views due to the shared perspectives of the researcher/subject (Ponterotto, 2005). Given that the researcher identifies with the LGBT population, this paradigm would permit the researcher to focus on the perspective of the student
participants while being cognizant of how the researcher’s positionality may impact the study.

**Background on Phenomenology and IPA**

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is often considered the father of phenomenology; he observed that “consciousness is always directed at an object” (Creswell, 2013, p. 77) and that the reality of this object is directly related to a person’s perception and experience with said object. Husserl’s view urged researchers to focus on the essence of the participants’ experiences as a route to new knowledge rather than turning to established theory (Cohen, 1987). Husserl argued that anything outside of immediate experience “must be ignored, and in this way the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 4). Thus, Husserl developed the term *phenomenology,* which is often associated with the caption: “Back to the things themselves” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26).

Husserl’s view on phenomenology required participants to step “outside of our everyday experience, our natural attitude, in order to be able to examine that everyday experience” (as cited in Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 12). In doing so, researchers are able to shift the perspective of the participant from the object itself, to the way in which the object is viewed or perceived by the participant. This method became known as bracketing, which serves an important role in IPA inquiry.

Heidegger, a student of Husserl, ushered in a school of thought that is attributed to Husserl, yet contrasts from him in distinct ways. Through the course of his study, Heidegger connected the meaning of phenomenology to hermeneutics—or the theory of interpretation. In doing so, Heidegger provided a foundation for IPA that perceives the subject as placed in a world of “objects, relationships, and language” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 18), and that “being-in-the-world is always perspectival, always temporal, and always in relation to something” (p. 18).
Smith et al. (2009) cited researchers such as Merleau-Ponty and Sartre who both contributed to the belief that living persons are experiencing a complex world filled with meanings, observations, and relationships. Specifically, Merleau-Ponty supported the concept of humans being placed in world, and that people merely view themselves as observers of the world rather than being an active participant in it. Similarly, Sartre introduced the belief that humans are consistently evolving and learning from these experiences; thus, “the self is not a pre-existing unity to be discovered, but rather an ongoing project to be unfurled” (as cited in Smith et al., 2009, p. 19). This school of thought served as a basis for the introduction of IPA by researcher Jonathan Smith in 1996.

IPA, in keeping with phenomenological tradition, is a form of inquiry focused on examining lived experience, what significance those lived experiences have on individuals, and how those individuals understand, perceive, and make sense of their experiences (Smith, 2011). To effectively identify patterns within the complexity of each individual experience, IPA channels idiographic traditions that require a comprehensive analysis of each individual experience as a means for uncovering patterns across small sample sizes (Smith, 2011).

In addition to relying on phenomenological and idiographic ideologies, IPA also has underpinnings in hermeneutics, described earlier as the science of interpretation. Schleiermacher (1998) contributed to the hermeneutic landscape by arguing that interpretation does not prescribe to fixed rules or outcomes, and that by employing detailed methods and exploration of analysis, the researcher can “end up with an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself” (as cited in Smith et al., 2009, p. 22).

IPA researchers are committed to generating specific, detailed, and rich data that can be used to interpret how individuals respond to major life events or activities. To do so, the method
for choosing participants, framing interview questions, and interpreting data must strictly adhere
to the standards for IPA.

To achieve the best results, a purposeful sample of participants was chosen who all
closely identify with the phenomenon under study. The questions for these participants were
“open and expansive” and permitted the participants to talk freely and at length about their
experiences, beliefs, and relationships (Smith et al., 2009, p. 59). The interview schedule for this
project can be found in Appendix A. Data analysis was also heavily influenced by IPA standards.
In accordance with IPA research, a thorough reading and re-reading occurred, followed by the
notation of transcripts that included extensive comments on articles of interest, consistency
among the participants, and the initial themes that emerged.

The use of IPA in this study was the appropriate method for the exploration of this topic.
The concept of LGBT activism in the digital age is an emerging phenomenon that requires in-
depth study in an effort to understand how LGBT college students utilize the Internet to engage
in activist behaviors. By asking participants to explore their relationship with the phenomenon,
the researcher uncovered beliefs, behaviors, and patterns that have previously been unreported.

**Participants**

To effectively ascertain the experiences and impressions of LGBT cyberactivists, this
research utilized a homogenous sampling strategy, which is in line with IPA techniques.
Homogenous sampling allowed for the researcher to purposefully choose candidates who have
directly experienced cyberactivism while also identifying as a member of the LGBT community.
Smith et al. (2009) indicate that participants in IPA investigations are chosen on the basis that
“they can grant us access to a particular perspective on the phenomena under study” (p. 49).

In consideration of this project, the participants of focus were undergraduates who
identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, or along that spectrum) and who had engaged in forms of cyberactivism. The participants identified with any or no specific gender identity, and other demographic characteristics such as religion, ethnicity, and social class had no bearing on the ability to participate in this study.

The selected participants were asked to participate in a series of in-depth interviews (to be explored in the proceeding section). Given the geographic location of the participants, each of them determined that either telephone or Skype was their most comfortable and convenient way to engage in this study. See Table 1 for additional information on the chosen participants.

Procedures

Northeastern Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received for this study as required by policy, and it was renewed once prior to expiration (see Appendix B). To effectively capture a sample that maximized the effect of this study, six participants were recruited in accordance with IPA recommendations. This small sample size was sought from traditional 4-year public or private institutions of higher education. To recruit a diverse sample size, the researcher connected with college and university LGBT student organizations and formally established LGBT centers in an effort to capture a wide audience. Recipients of this email were encouraged to pass along the call for participants to their students, or to make recommendations to the researcher for those who might be interested or valuable to the project. Consistent with sampling strategies for IPA, a researcher can obtain participants in a variety of ways, such as referrals, direct contact, or snowballing (Smith et al., 2009).

A link was provided to the sign-up/eligibility form where the interested participants formally signed up. This form required them to provide basic contact information that the researcher used to make initial contact. In some cases, participants referred friends to the project
Table 1

Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Institution Region</th>
<th>LGBT Identity Disclosed</th>
<th>Preferred Pronouns</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>She/her/hers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>She/her/hers or they/them/their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Polysexual/nonbinary trans masculine</td>
<td>They/them/their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Lesbian/gender fluid</td>
<td>They/them/their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tessa</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>She/her/hers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kat</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Bisexual/asexual spectrum</td>
<td>She/her/hers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

as well. In addition to partnering with student affairs professionals who work in these areas, information on the recruitment of participants was posted to the Consortium of LGBT Resource Center Professionals and to Facebook. Once participants were selected, they were contacted by the researcher to discuss the scope of this study and to answer any questions the participants had before the study commenced. During the initial call, the three interview dates and times were scheduled and the study was described in depth.

Data collection. Once participants were identified, they were asked to participate in a three-part, in-depth, semi-structured interview process that allowed for the experience to be thoroughly explored and placed into a context (Seidman, 2006; Smith, 2011). The first was of shorter duration (15 to 30 minutes) where basic information was collected on the participants’ background and experiences in college. Within three weeks, a secondary interview was conducted (60 to 90 minutes via telephone or Skype) where the topic of cyberactivism was the main focus and was explored in depth. A third and final interview was conducted to ask clarifying and reflective questions.

Given the potentially sensitive nature of the conversations and interviews, the researcher
permitted the data to be collected in a setting chosen by the participants (Drew, Hardman, & Hosp, 2008). Allowing the participants to choose a method most comfortable for them was key in creating a “safe” environment for them to share their stories openly. A majority of the interviews were conducted via electronic means, but one participant elected to meet in person for the first interview only.

There was only one researcher collecting data pertaining to this thesis. To accurately capture the data, multiple methods of recording were used. In addition to a handheld recorder, the researcher’s iPhone and iPad were setup to capture responses in the event one recording was of poor quality. The researcher used AudioNote as the only recording platform. It was purchased from the Apple iTunes store.

Data Analysis

Smith et al. (2009) provide a multi-step approach to analysis within the IPA tradition that was adhered to in this study at the various stages. The steps and procedures for the data analysis portion of this study are discussed in this section.

Reading and re-reading the transcription. Rev.com, a third party, professional transcriber was enlisted to accurately capture the verbal responses of the participants. Rev.com has strict confidentiality expectations for its own contract employees. Once the transcripts were returned, the researcher conducted a “close, line-by-line analysis of the experiential claims, concerns and understandings of each participant” (p. 79).

At this stage, the transcribed data was explored in depth, as were the original recordings, in an effort to break the responses into meaningful segments while the researcher suspended understanding of the theory and research on this topic. In doing so, preconceived notions that the researcher may have on the topic were suspended, and the participants’ statements were used to
construct a new reality.

This initial step of reading and re-reading provided the researcher with an appreciation for how trust can be built with the individual participant and aided in identifying contradictions and inconsistencies that can be clarified in future interviews (Smith et al., 2009). Hycner (1985) suggested the use of a journal at this stage to capture initial thoughts or elements of interest that require follow-up. A similar structure was suggested by Smith et al. (2009) and is defined as a “free textual analysis” (p. 83) with no strict criteria on what is commented on, the aim of which was to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments about the transcripts.

Initial noting. While noting took place organically during the previous stage, Smith et al. (2009) advise that this step requires the analyst to focus on semantic themes, language use, and the notation of any response that is of interest or that requires follow-up. These exploratory comments are intended to be descriptive, and they noted significant events or objects in the participants’ lives that were of importance to how they perceived the phenomenon. Smith et al. (2009) also emphasize the importance of making linguistic notations on the transcripts. This stage pays close attention to word use, pauses, stammers, laughter, tone, and frequent word use and use of metaphors in an effort to understand how the content of the discussion and the meaning behind it is presented to the analyst. Recognizing these various queues resulted in creating new outlets for discussion and follow-up on conceptual meanings behind the participants’ linguistic delivery.

The final component of this annotation phase entailed the researcher performing a conceptual notation of the transcripts. This allowed the researcher to explore the data at a more thematic level, moving away from the nuances of the responses and instead focusing on overarching themes that emerged when exploring the transcript as a whole. At this stage, the
researcher used personal perceptions and experiences to help make sense of the participants’ responses and to situate them within the context of the topic. Smith et al. (2009) also recommend deconstructing the narrative, if appropriate, to aide in illustrating the interrelationships between various experiences. An audit chart is provided (see Appendix C) to illustrate how this process unfolded for this study.

**Developing emergent themes.** Once this initial round of coding was completed, the researcher began to identify emerging patterns, consistencies, and variances within individual transcripts and across multiple transcripts (Smith et al., 2009). This step allowed for a reduction in the amount of detail and volume gleaned from the interviews and for initial notations to add more salient points and themes. Hycner (1985) supported this method and stated that the role of the researcher is to examine all the clusters of meaning to determine what central themes emerge in the narrative. Once the themes were identified and condensed, a chronological structure emerged that showed the relationship between the various themes. The relationship between these themes was identified using the abstraction method, which resulted in the creation of overarching themes; these overarching themes were made up of more specific subordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009).

**Creating connection across themes.** Making the connections between themes is an essential part of the analysis process and is Smith et al.’s (2009) fourth step of analysis. In completing this stage, the researcher employed the abstraction method to identify patterns that emerged. This method required the analyst to develop a list of the abstract themes identified thus far and to group them with similar themes, leading to the establishment of a superordinate theme.

**Presentation of themes for analysis.** As Smith et al. (2009) suggest, the researcher compiled the structure of themes into a graphic that includes the subordinate themes, as well as
participant phrases and comments that served as the catalyst for the creation of the themes. In doing so, this preserved the analytic process and demonstrated how participant responses resonated in the creation of the applicable themes.

**Analyzing subsequent narratives.** In the fifth step, the researcher repeated the review process for the additional transcripts and took great care to bracket his beliefs and assumptions based on the initial transcript analysis to create an open-minded approach when analyzing the additional narratives. Per Smith et al. (2009), this bracketing allows for the researcher to remain connected to the IPA commitment to new scientific discovery.

**Drawing connections and conclusions.** Once all the cases were analyzed and grouped into themes independently, the final step in IPA analysis was to look for themes that resonated across all of the narratives. As IPA requires, this process allowed for the distinct experiences of each participant to be preserved, while also connecting commonalities in each of their experiences. Once completed, a master graphic was created to illustrate the connections between the narratives.

**Ethical Considerations**

Conducting and analyzing data pertaining to this topic will offer significant benefit to those working on college campuses. As the research has shown thus far, participating in activism has positive effects on student development in its traditional form, but little is known about how specific identity groups engage in cyberactivism (Ayers, 2003; Rosas, 2010). Therefore, participants in this study contributed significantly to a new understanding of this phenomenon.

While the outcome of research can be powerful, that motivation should never come at the expense of those participating in the study. Subscribing to ethical principles in the field of social science research provided a framework by which the researcher protected those who elected to
participate in the study. Not only does abiding by these ethics protect the participants, but it also preserves the dignity and reputation of Northeastern University (Drew et al., 2008). It is also incumbent upon the researcher to focus the protection of subjects on three primary areas: “obtain consent, protect from harm and ensure privacy” (Drew et al., 2008, p. 57). See Appendix D for the informed consent form used in this study. To certify compliance in these areas, this research was conducted only with approval from the Northeastern IRB (see Appendix B) and the National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research (see Appendix E).

No participants from the researcher’s institution of employment participated in this study. Therefore, concerns pertaining to coercion within an administrator-student relationship were alleviated. However, coercion remained an important consideration with regard to the participants that did participate. Given the researchers administrative position at a university, it is possible the participants could view the researcher as an authority figure and therefore might feel undue pressure to participate in the study once the study has begun (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), which would be a form of unintended coercion. To alleviate these concerns, the researcher clarified the role of the researcher in this study and reminded participants that, at any time, they could remove themselves from the study or elect to not answer questions without repercussions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To assist in alleviating concerns of coercion, as well as others, all participants were asked to verbally agree to an unsigned informed consent statement that was read aloud to them during the first interview. The recording captured the students’ verbal consent prior to being asked any questions on the interview schedule.

In addition, the researcher clearly articulated to all participants how the information would be collected and how that information would be used after collection (Drew et al., 2008). Since this study dealt with sensitive information (personal narratives, negative/positive online
experiences, etc.), participants were informed of the minimal risk that they might encounter by participating in this study. This chapter will also outline another important component of protection—confidentiality and privacy.

Confidentiality and privacy are vital considerations for this project. To design a study that captures participants’ experiences while maintaining their anonymity, the researcher went to great lengths to protect their names, stories, and identities. When reporting and transcribing the information, the researcher employed the use of pseudonyms to refer to participants in an effort to protect their identity from being revealed.

Given the sensitive nature of the conversations and interviews, choosing the appropriate research setting was critical to maintaining confidentiality (Drew et al., 2008). The participants were able to choose a method most comfortable for them, which was key in creating a “safe” environment for them to share their stories openly. Predominately, the interviews were conducted over the phone or via Skype, but in one instance, a participant chose to meet in person for the first interview.

**Data storage.** The methods of protecting the data and recordings are important to the process of achieving high ethical standards in this study. Notes from the interviews and information linking student identities to responses were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home office, where they will be kept for a period of one year after successful defense. All audio recordings were erased immediately after transcription to further protect the anonymity of the subjects. No video recordings from any electronic interview were ever made.

**Trustworthiness**

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher utilized three methods: clarifying researcher bias, conducting member checks, and providing rich descriptions (Creswell,
2013). By employing these methods, readers were able to: (a) duplicate the study without difficulty, (b) understand the researchers background and potential biases, and (c) recognize the participants’ role in verifying trustworthiness.

**Clarifying researcher bias.** The researcher in this study is employed at a large urban university that has a history of activism on its campus, particularly related to cultural, political, and social issues. Furthermore, the researcher oversaw the development and operation of the LGBT Resource Center on campus and developed programs and services to support LGBT student leaders. This experience provided the researcher with a solid experiential foundation and awareness of these issues that should be disclosed to create transparency and to avoid researcher bias. To alleviate the potential interference of these biases, the researcher must identify these biases, disclose them to the audience, and isolate these experiences from the data analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Biases pertaining to this study will be explored in depth later in this chapter.

**Member checking.** Thomas (2006) discussed the value of utilizing member checks as a method for increasing the trustworthiness of the findings. In the member checking process, the participants had the opportunity to make remarks on various components of the coding process to ensure the accuracy of data. In this study, the researcher provided participants with transcripts from their interviews after each session to verify the validity of the data. In addition, participants had the opportunity to provide feedback after the coding process was complete to ensure their thoughts and themes were preserved (Creswell, 2013). During this process, the researcher remained cognizant of any historical maturation that may have manifested in the time between data collection and member checking which could possibly influenced changes to the participants’ responses.
**IPA validity measures.** To further enhance the validity of this study while maintaining a commitment to IPA inquiry, the researcher adopted four principles during the research process that will contribute to reliable and accurate data. Smith et al. (2009) pointed to the following four criteria developed by Yardley (2000): (a) sensitivity to context, (b) commitment and rigor, (c) transparency and coherence, and (d) impact and importance (p. 182).

First and foremost, the researcher adopted sensitivity to context during all stages of inquiry in an effort to strengthen relationships with participants and the organizations that will be asked to support the recruitment of these individuals. By showing empathy, solidarity, and sensitivity during the interview process, the participants were comfortable sharing true and honest accounts of their experiences. Furthermore, utilizing verbatim responses in the analysis gleaned data that is true to the participants and that can be verified at a later date (Smith et al., 2009).

Secondly, demonstrating commitment and rigor during the investigative process also contributed to the validity of the study. To adequately demonstrate commitment to the study, the researcher presented a “degree of attentiveness to the participant during data collection” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 181) and a “care with which the analysis of each case is carried out” (p. 181). Interviews were conducted in accordance with the participants’ comfort level. Exercising a commitment to rigor was demonstrated by the purposeful selection of participants who provided insight into the research question for this study and by the thoughtful, explorative questions that each participant was asked during the interviews (Smith et al., 2009).

The third tenet—transparency and coherence—was attained in this study by using rich, thick descriptions. The researcher has gone into detail to describe the design of the study (selection of participants, description of research site, methodology, coding process, and data
analysis) in an effort to increase the validity of the findings. Through the rich descriptions of these processes, the reader will be able to affirm the commitment to IPA inquiry, while seeing the value in replicating this study in other situations and scenarios (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). The final criteria—impact and importance—was achieved by providing a comprehensive discussion of the findings and implications this study will have on the field of higher education and student affairs.

**Potential Researcher Bias**

Exploring this topic required that the researcher have a solid understanding of their background, identities, and biases. Machi and McEvoy (2012) provided a rubric that aids in the discovery of biases. That rubric served as the basis for this statement.

**Higher education exposure.** The researcher attended a small state university in Western New York that was predominately White and made up of middle-class students pursuing an education in teaching or the arts. Many of the students there hailed from within 100 miles of campus and were not the first in their family to have pursued an education there. The researcher’s undergraduate campus was not one that was deeply concerned with social issues, nor were its students often exposed to frequent protests or demonstrations. The LGBT population was large but was not entirely active or present in campus life.

After graduating, the researcher moved on to work and obtain a graduate degree at a small Jesuit Catholic university where LGBT life on campus was not openly supported or visible. There was a small group of students who were informally considered an LGBT organization, but they could not obtain formal recognition from the college. Again, the researcher came in contact with an LGBT population that was unmotivated, disjointed, and considerably ineffective at building community. As was the case with the researcher’s
undergraduate alma mater, protests and demonstrations were simply not a priority, though “service to others” was a concept of Jesuit education that stirred discussion on how to make changes in our world.

It was not until the researcher began working professionally that it became evident that communities can be empowered and that dedicated students can unite together to make significant large-scale contributions to society. The researcher witnessed activism play out in person but also online. Working with over 400 student organizations at what could be considered an activist campus, each academic year featured students who wanted to lobby for change or protest injustices.

In 2009, the researcher established the first LGBT Resource Center on campus, where providing an inclusive space for all LGBT identities was the primary focus. In developing this center, the university was able to provide a place where LGBT students and advocates could come together to discuss issues, have healthy discourse surrounding those issues, and develop plans for making positive changes on campus and throughout the world. It has become clear since opening this center that the LGBT population is highly active online, yet are perceived to be apathetic because they are not as visible as other marginalized populations.

**Personal and professional bias.** As someone who identifies as a member of the LGBT community, the researcher’s personal experiences played a part in the research conducted for this thesis. Jupp and Slattery (2010) openly stated that researchers should not completely disregard personal identities and biases, as they directly influence positionality. In addition, Maxwell (2005) indicated that researching a topic that closely relates to a researcher’s identity or experience could provide significant insights related to that study. As a member of the LGBT community, the researcher possesses a responsibility to educate others on topics pertaining to
LGBT life, while also advocating for positive social change. The researcher is devoted to making sure the LGBT identity is accurately portrayed, even if the data presented as part of this study is not as positive as initially hypothesized.

In the researcher’s current role, the negative aspects of online activism are beginning to manifest. Researchers are just now beginning to define what digital activism means on campus and how practitioners can appropriately give advice to students related to this trend, which is proving to be a difficult task. While the researcher’s experiences with this topic have not always been the most positive, they served as motivation to explore this topic to gain a broader understanding of what this new transformation of LGBT activism looks like in our digital age.

**Researcher bias.** Fennell and Arnot (2008) argued that to be a successful researcher, one must not look at the group being represented as an “other,” but must strive to appreciate, understand, and compare the experiences of other to their own. Using this mindset, it was necessary for the researcher to adopt the view of a student who is considered an activist in the digital age. The researcher was placed in situations throughout this research where it was essential to explore experiences through the lens of someone who identified elsewhere on the LGBT spectrum. Since it was not possible for the researcher to identify with each of the participants, it was important to suspend any biases so the researcher could be immersed in the data that was presented.

Briscoe (2005) also discussed the issue of privilege as it pertains to representing the other. She indicated that a researcher must be careful not to marginalize subjects or misrepresent their interests, which is a concern when a member of a privileged group is representing others. In the case of this research project, it can be argued that as a gay man, the researcher’s understanding of the identity development of someone who is transgender is limited. However,
the researcher needed to be mindful not to write in such a way that might marginalize specific intersections within the LGBT population, or indicates that the research is for the benefit of only those who identify as lesbian or gay. Therefore, it was imperative that the researcher take the time to identify trends in online activism among a generous cross-section of individuals within the LGBT community and to draw information from areas that are underrepresented in other research (such as a lack of information on transgender issues, etc.).

Milner (2007) argued for educational researchers to utilize a framework that does not distance the researcher’s own cultural positionality in the process of collecting data. While Milner (2007) argued that it would be irresponsible for researchers to detach themselves from their own identities, it is incumbent upon the researcher to consider dangers “seen, unseen and unforeseen” (p. 388) while conducting research. The researcher has established how to control bias for “seen” dangers, but by being prepared to experience unseen dangers that may have arisen during my research, the researcher will remain flexible and able to conduct ethical and accurate research.

Limitations

This study, while designed to promote a greater understanding and respect for the art of online activism, does present a few limitations important for discussion. Primarily, the design for the study, while in accordance with IPA standards, presents difficulties particularly on the ability for the data to be applied in a larger context. The smaller sample size, while appropriate for in-depth inquiry, may not be easily transferrable to other contexts. While transparency remains an important tool for demonstrating validity, critics have identified this drawback in the literature as a valid critique for the applicability of IPA studies to the greater landscape (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011).
Other limitations exist with regard to the theoretical framework for this study (i.e., resource mobilization theory or RMT). As discussed in Chapter 1, this theory emerged during the 1960s and 1970s and dealt primarily with the non-digital resources available at the time of inception. Only recently has a renewed interest in RMT taken shape, and thus, the applicability of RMT in the digital sphere is only in its infancy until researchers are able to draw specific and significant parallels.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

Themes

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to investigate how LGBT college students utilize social media and the Internet to engage in collective activism. Analysis of the data resulted in the identification of three superordinate themes and a total of eight subordinate themes. This chapter presents an analysis of the super and subthemes that emerged (see Table 2 for the themes that emerged among the participants). The themes will be presented in the following order:

1. Climate of Support (1.1 Positive Relationships, 1.2 Inclusive Environments);
2. Subjective Concepts (2.1 Defining the Phenomenon, 2.2 Measuring the Impact on Movements and Self); and
3. Navigating the Internet (3.1 Experiences as Newcomers, 3.2 Concept of Anonymity, 3.3 Platforms and Methods).

Climate of Support

College provides an opportunity for students to explore new experiences and concepts, create long-lasting relationships, and prepare for life outside of the academe where each will enter a complex and ever-changing society. For the LGBT students who participated in this study, supportive, nurturing, and inclusive family, peers, and environments are important factors in their quest to understand their identity and to feel supported in their work as cyberactivists. This first superordinate theme—Climate of Support—reflects the people and places these students are surrounded by in their everyday lives. For a majority of the participants, the acceptance of their identity by family and friends was a positive indicator of involvement in cyberactivism. Furthermore, their choice of institution was overwhelmingly influenced by how
accepting and inclusive the climate was to LGBT-identified students. Therefore it can be ascertained that supportive people and inclusive environments can be key indicators of involvement in cyberactivism. To illustrate the importance of this supportive and nurturing environment, the two subordinate themes that emerged from the data were Positive Relationships and Inclusive Institutions.

**Positive Relationships.** Each of the participants were asked to reflect on their “coming out process,” or the way in which they made their identity known publically. For many LGBT students, the immediate response by those with whom they are closest can have a very strong impact on their development and self-acceptance as a member of the LGBT community. In all instances, the participants indicated having supportive and encouraging people in their lives who accepted—or are in the process of accepting—their LGBT identity.

That is not to say that the process of coming out was easy or without issue, but in every
instance the students could point to several people in their lives who supported them through their journey of self-discovery and disclosure. Drew stated, “It was a bit hard, especially with my gender identity, because I had to tell people that I was trans and then nobody really listened. Everyone in my community was truly okay with gay people, but they didn’t know much about trans people.” Drew went on to explain that despite a lack of familiarity with transgender identities within his family and social structure, they could not recall an example of a relationship in their life that had been lost due to their gender identity.

Tessa, who identifies as a pansexual female, also pointed to a more complex coming out process due to the intricacy of her identity. She indicated that her parents, who were older than the parents of some of her peers, viewed being queer as either gay or straight, rather than a spectrum of identities that includes pansexual persons. Tessa explained that her parents had difficulty making sense of her identity because it was something fluid: “I told them that I was dating my girlfriend [and said], ‘This is a thing I am doing, not necessarily a thing that I am.’” That statement sent the message to her parents that much like being a shy child, this was a behavior and not a label that would trap her. The fluidity of her identity resulted in a harder time for her parents to progress toward full acceptance, but members of Tessa’s extended family came to terms more rapidly.

Tessa’s story also touched upon a dimension of the coming out process that is important to note. She openly discussed the process of coming out on social media as being tangential and of equal importance to telling people in close circles: “I didn’t have a ‘Hi, I’m out’ kind of thing. It was more the little things, like I had a relationship status on Facebook… then I gradually got ‘I don’t care’ and just sort of made it very known on the Internet, so a lot of my family members found out that way.” Becoming open online about her identity, Tessa was able to receive positive
and supportive messages from family and friends and reduced the need to tell people on an individual level.

While not expressed by the other participants, Tessa’s sense-making related to the online coming out process is an important point; doing so illustrates the emphasis that she places on the Internet in her modern life. Recognizing the online community she is a part of as separate but equal to her in-person relationships serves as an important prologue to the way in which she perceives her cyberactivist community.

Rachel also reported a positive coming out process. Identifying as a lesbian, Rachel came out at 16 and was embraced by family and friends. “It was a nerve wracking process,” she stated, “but it was positive and I never had any bad experiences—if there was any bullying in school, it was minimal… then I came out to my parents and it was totally positive. They were very accepting.” She continued by expressing her belief that she knew her sexuality perhaps much earlier and had “suppressed it” for a while, but being true to her identity had brought on a sense of relief and happiness. Out of the six participants in this study, Rachel’s coming out process was mostly positive.

Given that each of the participants indicated a fairly positive to mostly/extremely positive coming out process, it can be said that there may be a positive correlation between support given during their identity discovery process and their likelihood of making the foray into cyberactivism. However, those positive in-person relationships may not be enough to support their engagement in online social movements.

The participants were asked to reflect on the relationships they have with others in these online activist communities. All six participants indicated that they feel a part of a larger likeminded and supportive community in the online realm to some extent. Tessa made sense of
this topic by comparing it to in-person communities: “I definitely think it’s different… at the same time, I’ve gotten a lot of validation that there are people who have similar interests.” Tessa went on to explain that she feels a larger community connection with those on campus with whom she organizes, but did feel a sense of connectedness to people in the cyberactivist world despite the experiences that are the “opposite of community,” such as attacks in the comment section of posts. Tessa feels positive connections to people when they reach out to her to comment on her posts or when they engage with her by asking questions or seeking clarification of her points or views. These interactions serve as an important factor in the measurement of her effectiveness in the cyber world. While it may be easy for Tessa to question her effectiveness in her activism, she pointed to two messages she received from people that have fueled her continued participation.

Drew—who emerged as the most engaged of all the participants—represented someone who has drawn upon the support of his fellow cyberactivists to fuel continued participation. “Without cyberactivism,” they stated, “I don’t think I would have ever found that community.” They continued:

I think [the positive sense of community] is really important. Sometimes it can even be lifesaving for people. For me, it only gives me hope… had we not had [the Internet], I think activism would be a lot different and we wouldn’t be able to accomplish things as quickly as we are able too.

Many of the positive relationships that Drew has forged with fellow cyberactivists have manifested themselves into vital in-person connections as well. Citing examples such as rallies, Drew reflected on how online communities can enact change on the ground to show support or dissent for topics important to their causes. This ability to unify actors in an online community
and mobilize them in person reflects the level of professionalism and sophistication with which Drew approaches activism.

Rachel also has a strong online community of which she feels a part. Focusing much of her activism on the intersection of the Black Lives Matter movement and other gender/sexuality causes, Rachel feels indelibly linked to others within these movements and shared that the Internet can provide a space for people to build positive connections with others if one does not exist in real life. During her coming out period, Rachel indicated that she did not know other queer people, “so [she] only had the Internet to go to.” It was there that she encountered queer people of whom she could ask questions during this formidable time in her life. It was within these online communities where she was able to ask questions about her identity and ultimately find the courage to speak to her friends and family openly about her queer identity:

I found these people to talk to and I really learned about what it means to be gay, and I was able to think about what it means in terms of who I am and then take what I learned there into my physical world and be able to tell my parents—because I really didn’t understand myself.

Chris also touched upon the importance of having positive connections in these online communities, but was reluctant to measure these connections as being equal to or more substantial than relationships with family or friends in real life. The online community tends to be “more distant” for Chris than in-person relationships, but the breadth of discussions may not be as rich in real life. In Chris’ experience, the Internet is where they go to engage with people intellectually on topics of interest, because those in their immediate circle may not share the same level of understanding or awareness. Chris takes what is learned online and then engages people in person as a way to educate and create awareness. So, while they might not be able to
point to a specific community of people who have provided encouragement, it can be argued that
the knowledge gained online has fueled their interest in continued engagement. Kat summarized
the concept of positive online relationships concisely:

I think what the Internet has done is its given people the ability to find people wherever
they are… you are going to find people there who you might not find in your personal
daily life who share the same view as you… that’s really what’s been helpful.

While the participants reflected on positive and negative experiences with relationships in
both their personal and online realms, the positive experiences provided the students with the
support and encouragement they needed to discover their queer identity and assimilate into a
community of online activists.

**Inclusive Institutions.** While the interpersonal relationships of these activists emerged as
a major theme, so did the backdrop of the institutions they attend. For college students, the
process of selecting an institution of higher education can be an overwhelming one. Many may
prioritize location, academic program offerings, and financial considerations as reasons for
choosing their institution, but for these LGBT cyberactivists, the overwhelming majority (five
out of six) cited the primary factor as the inclusion of and support for the LGBT community in
deciding on their institution of higher education.

For each of the participants, inclusion was measured in a variety of ways including: the
recognition of student organizations inclusive of all LGBT+ identities, visibility of the LGBT
community, availability of gender-inclusive housing, the level of commitment faculty and staff
have toward using preferred pronouns, and the presence of an LGBT center with full-time staff.

For Drew, the choice boiled down to the ability for them to live in gender-neutral
housing, which provides students with the opportunity to reside in housing that is not driven by
gender. Drew shared, “[My institution] is notorious for having a really great LGBTQ environment.” As a trans student, the ability to live in inclusive housing was a major influence in the choice of university. Similarly, Meg (who identifies as a bisexual female) admits that her major was the primary incentive in her choice of university, but she also “looked for diversity” as another deciding factor.

For Tessa, her institution’s ethos was magnetic. The students appeared “to have their passions, but they were all really engaged and willing to speak with [her] about anything, whether they know about [the topic].” Furthermore, support for the LGBT community on campus was good; the new campus center opened with two gender-neutral restrooms and it was easy to start student organizations if what a student desired was not represented. However, Tessa was one of the few participants who admitted that more could be done to make the community more inclusive. Professors, in some instances, refused to use preferred pronouns and many liberal-minded students take on the viewpoint that they “are so aware and have done their part,” that they may ignore areas where growth and education may be necessary.

The campus environment that Tessa described is not often detected prior to matriculation. Prospective students are not able to tell how perceptive faculty are to using gender inclusive language, nor are they able to sense how inclusive student organizations are to all those on the queer spectrum. Overall, very few of the participants admitted that more effort needed to be made to make the university more inclusive; they accepted the institution for what they perceived it to be when making their choice and did not often challenge their initial impressions after matriculation.

A specific institution’s duty to support and include LGBT students is undisputable. However, the concept of an institution’s role in supporting cyberactivism is an interesting one to
explore. Some of the more experienced activists were clear that their universities could do more to support engagement in online social communities. Tessa spoke freely about resources she believes her university could provide as a way to show a commitment to online activism. Hosting a forum to discuss sexual assault cases and Title IX, she states, was one way her institution demonstrated a commitment to providing education and a space for discussing concerns: “It prompted open discussions, where the school would send people from the Title IX office to answer questions, explain things, because it is a really confusing thing that is new and changing constantly.”

The concept of forums is not a novel one—indeed colleges and universities have been conducting them for generations—but in Tessa’s case, her institution provides integral design and marketing support to students who are involved in social action. There are staff members there to support student initiatives and they offer a wide array of design support from websites to the creation of advertisements. Kat also spoke to the commitment of full-time staff to the support of student activism: “We have a multicultural center [on campus] and they will do activism stuff—be it gender, sexuality, race, or privilege. A lot of people are involved with the multicultural center and are somewhere on the LGBT spectrum.”

Representing the other extreme, Drew indicated that their “institution doesn’t do much to encourage cyberactivism in general.” However, they do posit that the institution could do more to support activism by empowering and supporting students by “taking existing campaigns and putting them in a digital format.” Given that many institutions might not wish to place human resources against this request, Drew predicts that, “maybe in the next 10 years,” cyberactivism will become a major player in student involvement and more resources will be put toward supporting it on campus. Chris also reported a lack of support at the university-level for their
activism efforts. “It’s not like they are discouraging me,” they stated, but much of the support provided is to encourage and facilitate traditional activism.

**Conclusion.** Without an environment that supports their holistic development, the lives of these students might have been critically different. A lack of personal support during the coming out process might have led to a series of side effects that many in the LGBT community face because of rejection (homelessness and depression to name two of the more prominent outcomes). Had it not been for these participants finding online and in-person communities, they might not have been as engaged in online activism as they are.

The presence of a climate of support served as the impetus for these students to make the commitment to engage in cyberactivism; they were more confident to engage with strangers online on points of agreement and dissention, and these unknown allies in turn served as support structures for one participant in particular as she was seeking to learn more about herself.

As the data indicates, a university’s approach to supporting the LGBT community is paramount in an individual’s choice to attend a specific institution. However, once students enter their halls, it becomes evident that colleges and universities do not provide significant (or substantial) support for students who define themselves as activists. While some institutions do have multicultural or pride centers, they do not necessarily include support for student’s activism efforts either in person or online. However, it is clear that these students are able to navigate cyberactivism without these collegiate resources in place.

**Subjective Concepts**

Many of the concepts surrounding cyberactivism—such as how participants define the concept, how they assess their impact on causes, and what skills they have obtained as a result of their participation—emerged as highly subjective. In essence, each participant is able to establish
their own criteria for how they interpret their experiences and results with the phenomenon. This is most likely attributed to the fact that cyberactivism as a topic is extremely broad and not relatively understood as a concept.

Throughout the various interviews, the participants overwhelmingly demonstrated a varied response to the following concepts: how they define the phenomenon of cyberactivism, how they measure their own impact on cyberactivist movements, and in turn, what developmental outcomes they achieved as a result of their participation. These concepts are illustrated throughout this superordinate theme analysis.

**Defining the phenomenon.** The participants were asked to define the concept of cyberactivism and to reflect upon the ways in which they classified themselves as such. Perhaps not surprisingly, the participants painted a broad spectrum of the definition with some participants anointing themselves as cyberactivists for posting or “liking” articles on Facebook, whereas some of the more involved participants required a higher standard of involvement to be considered cyberactivists.

Drew, one of the more experienced cyberactivists who participated in this study, established a broad definition of the term that effectively created room for everyone to be classified as a cyberactivist. “I don’t think people understand that everything is advocacy,” they stated. For Drew, anything that makes a statement and “generates conversation” on major social media platforms can be defined as cyberactivism “right down to re-blogging posts” or sharing an article that provides information on a topic. Using this extremely broad definition, Drew is giving validation to what some critics of cyberactivism refer to as “slacktivism,” which draws comparisons between sophisticated activists and those who engage on the peripheral. To perhaps refute that statement, Drew explained that “people who are allies” are those who might be merely
liking posts online, “and that is really important to me,” they stated, “because I am able to tell who my supporters are and where I can go to have a safe space.”

When asked how they themselves meet the criteria for being a cyberactivist, Drew painted a more sophisticated picture by citing articles they have written for major online publications and videos they produced to help raise awareness on various issues. This, in fact, is a higher standard than they themselves have set for what the basic cyberactivist is and, in effect, it begins to paint the picture of the broad spectrum that exists. Of all the participants, Drew could be classified as the most active and connected, but they self-defined as a “lower end of the spectrum” activist:

I think [being at the low end of the spectrum] is just as important as the other end of the spectrum. Because every good movement needs support and there are all different types of personalities and I think that some people are better being supporters… and some people are better being leaders and that is just the way it is. So I feel like the movement itself cannot function any other way; without that balance.

Activists like Tessa and Rachel agreed with Drew and established the baseline for being considered a cyberactivist as someone who shares articles or posts about social issues on their social media accounts. Rachel even pointed to merely liking someone else’s post as a criterion for being an activist—which, similar to Drew’s baseline, creates a stir among critics of cyberactivism. Tessa created room in her definition of cyberactivism by including people who are open about their identities on social media, which essentially could open up anyone registered on social media platforms to being defined as a cyberactivist. She went on by saying:

For me, it’s sort of like there are different levels. The way I started was by just sharing things… and not necessarily affiliating myself with [a specific movement]…. It’s much
easier, I think, to be a cyberactivist than a real world activist in part because of the time and money.

Tessa’s comparison between real-world activism and activism conducted solely online boils down to a matter of resources. The very existence of the Internet, per Tessa, has in fact created a vehicle for people with limited means to engage meaningfully in efforts to educate the public and advocate for social change. Perhaps it is for this reason that cyberactivism as a concept should be accessible to all, regardless of how engaged one may be.

Validating Drew’s definition of the baseline cyberactivist is Meg, who engages with others online by sharing articles and taking the time to educate the misinformed on Facebook. While Meg did mention sharing articles as a defining factor of cyberactivism, she took it one step further by saying that engagement is also a key pillar in the concept. Taking the time to “kindly” educate misinformed people on “terminology,” or to “gently inform” someone of preferred pronouns, is one way in which the cyberactivist can be defined, according to Meg.

Chris defined cyberactivism as a “spectrum” from the outset and admitted to engaging at various levels of that spectrum:

I know there are people who use the Internet as a real-world platform… they use it to get people together for Pride parades and rallies, petitions, and stuff like that. There are people who use it to spread information… to talk about definitions… how you should handle situations… and here are your rights in these states. I’m more of the “spread information” side of that.

Chris’ definition, much like Drew’s, illustrates how cyberactivism creates a space for everyone, but they themselves engage at a higher level than merely sharing articles.

Kat also adopted a broad definition of the concept. She would “define it as somebody
who actively and purposefully uses the Internet as a means of raising awareness,” but stops short of saying that someone who “changes their profile picture to a rainbow” or “liking a thing on Facebook” is enough to get the title of cyberactivist. Similar to the other participants, Kat places a strong emphasis on “engagement” and “raising awareness” as the baseline for being considered a cyberactivist.

While this study did not seek to define cyberactivism as a concept, it is important to note how subjective the very definition of it can be. Stringing together these narratives, the conclusion can be drawn that while space will be made for those who merely “like” or “share” articles on social media, those who truly engage in conversation and raising awareness in their online circles make up the first meaningful level of engagement in online activism. Taking the time to educate others, correct misinformation, and provide resources to others was the common thread that all of the participants had in common.

**Measuring impact on movements and self.** Another subjective concept that emerged from the data analysis is the way in which the participants measured the impact of their cyberactivism on communities or specific movements. The participants were asked to think critically about their role in activist causes and to measure how impactful their participation had been in these movements. The responses were often humble and potentially downplayed.

Drew—the more experienced activist of all the participants—was rather ambivalent about their direct impact on social movements. Since many of their efforts were made with a team of activists (collaborating together to write articles and create videos and/or other storytelling mechanisms to spread awareness), Drew attributed much of their own impact to the team effort:

I don’t think [my impact] is obvious. I just think it looks like something that is part of the rest of the team in a cohesive thought… I don’t know if I’ve ever specifically seen
something that I’ve done directly manifest itself within a project or a campaign, but I would like to think that if I wasn’t involved, it would have been a lot different. I think I see that my voice counts.

Interestingly, Drew represents a well-connected and high performing activist in comparison with the other participants. Therefore, it was rather unexpected to hear that Drew was unable to clearly state that they have had an impact on larger movements. It draws into question what one needs to do to truly feel as though their participation is significant.

While Drew’s activism vitae may be more sophisticated than the other participants, they all share the same ambivalence related to their cyberactivism impact. For example, Chris seemed unsure of their impact on movements, but conceded that involvement in cyberactivism could position oneself to be effective in everyday life:

I’m not sure I’ve had such an impact in the movement itself… I’m there sharing things, I’m spreading information, I’m talking with people, but as a whole, [much] of what I do is [to] share other larger voices that might appear more informed… on the other hand, I think more of the work that I do, the actual impact that I make… is when I am sitting talking with my friends… and I bring up things like feminist movements.

The concept of ambivalence related to the impact of their participation was a reoccurring one. While many of the participants were pleased to talk about their experience and involvement in cyberactivism, they were unable to state unequivocally that their involvement has had a major impact on the movement itself. In Tessa’s case, she conceded that measuring one’s significance on a larger movement could be plotted on a spectrum. It is “hard to measure,” she posited, but perhaps the most significant impact she has had was with regard to the number of people she reaches and with whom she engages. “Tons of people have responded to me by messaging me,”
she describes, “it’s very easy to just like it and move on.”

Tessa established what can be considered an acceptable (albeit low) standard for measuring impact, but one that creates opportunities for all participants to consider themselves successful in their cyberactivist participation. Without truly understanding how many people were transformed or educated as a result of her participation, she effectively established criteria that can be deemed acceptable.

Kat validated Tessa’s position, but conceded that she may often be “preaching to the choir,” where much of her audience may typically agree with her positions regardless. Even with her audience typically agreeing with her and supporting her views, she self-assessed the significance of her involvement at a “5 out of 10.” This presented an interesting contrast to someone like Drew who questioned how impactful their efforts were, when they were unarguably more numerous than Kat’s experiences.

While practitioners are left without a clear understanding of how they can measure the impact these students have on social movements, there is little ambivalence over what skills they have directly gained from participating. Overwhelmingly, the participants indicated that their communication skills have increased exponentially after engaging with cyberactivism. “Communication” should be defined in the broadest sense, with many of the participants indicating their ability to reason and structure solid arguments has improved, in addition to their ability to express dissent.

Tessa reflected that she herself feels “more informed” when discussing pertinent topics and indicated that involvement in cyberactivist movements have provided her with knowledge that she would not have gained in the classroom. In turn, she is more assertive with her positions and feels more confident engaging with others. Rachel relayed how she is “more vocal” in the
classroom and more prepared to defend her positions with peers and authority figures. In turn, she is a “better advocate” for others. Drew pointed to an improvement in writing and expression skills and indicated that involvement in cyberactivism was a catalyst for them to find solidarity with causes and movements that are taking place in the online sphere. Meg echoed Tessa’s statement on gaining the confidence to defend positions:

[Cyberactivism] definitely has gotten me to be more comfortable talking to people even in person and online and just overall. Mostly, it is helping me with my confidence talking to people. My ability to communicate and to get my point across online definitely seems to have gotten better since I started cyberactivism… I tend to now speak up more in class that I used to.

While Chris spoke to some of the same skills as mentioned above, they reflected more broadly on how involvement in cyberactivism has supported personal growth and development. As an activist, Chris engages online by sharing articles and providing education to others on topics about which they are passionate. However, involvement in activism has also brought to light that “gaps” in Chris’ own knowledge illuminate the need for continued, self-directed learning. “I do feel like I am more informed, but I also have more learning to do,” they stated, “and there is so much to learn that it’s really not possible to know everything [about it].” Placing this responsibility on themselves to continue to engage as a responsibility of being a lifelong learner demonstrates the appreciation that activists have for gaining additional knowledge and continuing to engage for the benefit of self and others.

In many of the final interviews conducted with each member, they reflected on how their participation in this study shed light on the need for them to be more active and have a larger impact on movements in the future, as if to say what they had done so far was still not enough.
While this might inspire them to engage more intensely, it does illuminate the finding that the effect one has on larger movements is measured subjectively.

On an individual level, the students have all pointed to receiving tangible benefits because of their involvement, which validates these experiences as effective and rewarding. The fact that the students can point to specific experiences online that have improved their personal development solidifies it as an experience that contributes positively to student development in college. However, successful outcomes do not come without growing pains and difficulties orienting to the new world of cyberactivism.

**Conclusion.** This study demonstrated that much of cyberactivism may be ambiguous and never completely understood given that the definition of cyberactivism, the effectiveness one has online, and the impact that involvement has on self and others is difficult to ascertain. The apparent subjectivity that accompanies cyberactivism can present both positive and negative aspects.

On the positive side, allowing for participants to define cyberactivism in the broadest sense can create space for anyone to engage in what can be considered cyberactivism. In effect, the participants consider those who create and sustain the movements just as vital as those who merely share the content and engage their friends in conversation. It is therefore not unreasonable to posit that every student has the potential to be considered a cyberactivist.

The subjectivity of many of these key concepts can present difficulties when attempting to understand cyberactivism. It is difficult for the participants to determine how and to what extent their involvement has impacted the movement, which can present some yield issues for movement organizers. Additionally, while there are tangible benefits from participating in cyberactivism, it remains an ambiguous concept that might never be consistent for all who
participate.

Despite the ambiguity and subjectivity that is present, the participants seemed content with the impact they have had and remained motivated to continue involvement in cyberactivist causes, even if it means they are educating and engaging with people in their immediate networks. If the students see that they have impacted even a few people, they are more likely to continue with their online activism.

**Navigating the Internet**

The Internet is a vast space bursting with opportunities and hazards that these cyberactivists are not immune from experiencing. As both novices and experienced activists, they have engaged with likeminded individuals and those who have reacted harshly to their positions or missteps. They have tangled with the question of anonymity on the Internet and have dabbled in a variety of platforms that are primed for activist movements. These experiences are important for practitioners to understand, and they coalesce into how navigating the Internet is an important consideration for this study. This section will be divided into three salient segments: Experiences as Newcomers, Concept of Anonymity, and finally, Platforms and Methods (for cyberactivism).

**Experiences as Newcomers.** If college and university professionals are to adequately support and encourage students while they engage in cyberactivism, they must understand and appreciate the experiences that our students will encounter while they immerse themselves in this phenomenon. As cyberactivist novices, they are at their most vulnerable; this time period can often serve as the dénouement if they are not adequately supported and able to persevere.

In the early stages of their involvement, Chris “found when people make mistakes in some kind of discussion… especially if they are new, they are immediately attacked.” These
“attacks” come in the form of harsh comments that can have the result of pushing novices out of the fold and away from engaging in cyberactivism:

I was lucky, I stayed on the sidelines a lot when I first started learning about [a specific activist topic]. I did a lot of passive reading, I didn’t engage in these discussions as much when I was new, because I knew that I didn’t know a lot, and there are people out there who don’t know [all the facts]. So, they go and they try to engage in these discussions and it’s like a whole new world to them and then sometimes it’s a learning experience, and then other times it’s them getting chased off the Internet by people who are way too passionate and yell at 15-year-olds about this.

As a novice cyberactivist, Chris admitted to making mistakes by engaging without adequate (or accurate) information but cited the supportive subset of cyberactivists they encountered as being transformational. They “reached out to the people [online]” and were gently educated on why what they said was radical or unpopular. This mentorship and guidance proved to be vital in Chris’ development as a cyberactivist. Now, Chris is more prepared with sources to support their claims, is not afraid to make mistakes, and is able to engage with a higher degree of confidence.

Chris’ reflections on being a novice serve as a warning signal to those who dabble in cyberactivism for the first time. As a newcomer to any cyberactivist movement, it may behoove the participant to stay “on the sidelines” and observe the dialogue before engaging without an understanding of the etiquette and the perquisite knowledge that may be needed to engage. In Chris’ experience, using incorrect or outdated terminology could be enough to launch attacks against any newcomer.

Rachel also reflected on her experience as a novice and noted how engaging slowly
allowed her to become comfortable with increasing her involvement:

I just started liking things and then it just snowballed from there. I picked an issue that I felt strongly about… then I would read posts about it, maybe I would share the post… that’s how I got started. I feel like I would just give somebody that same advice. Just pick an issue you’re passionate about and just start reading about it and see what kind of connection you can make from other people in the comments.

This concept of experiencing the phenomenon from the sidelines—at least initially—resulted in the activists achieving a higher level of accomplishment as they became more experienced.

Tessa believed this sideline approach for newcomers also provides valuable lessons for more experienced activists. She posits that new activists need to become more comfortable expressing their views on social media and should enjoy the ability to sit back and process their thoughts and positions before responding to comments that may be triggering or extreme. Exercising this restraint in the beginning (and throughout) allows for a more respectful and responsible exchange of ideas.

Approaching cyberactivism with compassion, according to Kat, will allow for others to have a more positive experience in cyberactivism. “There is a person behind the screen,” she stated, so it is important for “controversy with civility,” where people can have discussions that do not devolve into trying to tear each other down: “Ask them why they feel this way. Try to get their perspective and talk about it. And then keep it safe. Don’t do anything that could hurt you.”

This concept of safety related to online engagement is an important one for newcomers to keep in mind. Knowing who can support you in real life is key during what might be precarious times in cyberactivism.

The lessons of novices provide a critical insight into how institutions of higher education
can foster involvement in cyberactivism and improve the self-efficacy of students who participate in these activities. Per the participants, there are countless people in the cyberactivism world who possess the ability to sideline voices that could evolve into important figures in movements. Therefore, it is imperative that newcomers to cyberactivism develop communities of support within the movements themselves and on their college campuses.

**Concept of Anonymity.** There is no disputing that the Internet provides a haven for people who wish to not be identified. Countless discussion boards feature anonymous posts that offer both productive and non-productive purposes, and these anonymous voices are also present in cyberactivist movements. Not surprisingly, the participants highlighted themes related to anonymity that are worthy of discussions.

Tessa approached the concept of anonymity primarily from the negative and positive stance, indicating that in her experience, “[anonymity] is a scary thing,” due to her experience with applications such as Yik Yak that encourages anonymous postings about people or communities on college campuses. Anonymity can allow participants to “say hurtful things and not really think about what the repercussions are.” As illustrated in the previous section, trolling comments can also carry the power of ostracizing others from staying engaged in cyberactivist communities in the long term.

Chris also offered thoughts on this concept of anonymity. “There are people who abuse it” and take the approach that this anonymity provides them immunity to say harmful and vile things to people. Chris added that they have noticed “death and rape threats” being directed at people from anonymous trolls. These anonymous participants have the ability to inflict tangible harm on others.

However, Tessa highlighted another important consideration related to anonymity: safety
and security. It may be obvious to some, but there are personal reasons for participants to elect to have an anonymous presence in online social movements. “It may be a whistleblower situation,” she begins, “or there will be some group retaliation, or they don’t want to be associated with this movement.” Members of the LGBT community may elect to remain anonymous as a way to keep themselves safe, or so that hostile people are unable to identify them personally. Chris provided some insight on this theme as well:

   Anonymity allows people to go out and do what they need to be able to find the resources that they need; they engage in these discussions to talk about their own experiences without having people find them and having to face any severe consequences for it.

For people who are unable to disclose their identities to family or friends, an anonymous persona online can be lifesaving, or in its most simplistic form, validating.

   For cyberactivism, the context of the anonymity is an important consideration. While some choose to adopt anonymous personas for the purpose of being hostile without fear of repercussion, it can also allow for people to connect with a broader community as a way to cope. For that reason, anonymity is often seen as an important commodity in cyberactivism.

**Platforms and Methods.** If institutions of higher education are to support students and their cyberactivism, they must understand how these students use the Internet as a resource. Despite the seemingly endless options the activists have for participating in movements, the participants in this study have identified only a few. In addition to the platforms the actors choose, the way in which they utilize these platforms is both interesting and unique.

   Overwhelmingly, Tumblr and Facebook have emerged as the top two applications these participants are more likely to use, with Twitter, YouTube, and Change.org cited by a minority of the participants. It became clear that Facebook was the most popular among the participants,
and according to them, it is the platform primed for the most successful forms of cyberactivism. Facebook allows for activists to connect personally with people in their networks using a variety of methods, including but not limited to videos, written vignettes, photos, etc. The ability to share articles from various news sites and other blogs is seamless, with many of them offering a shortcut for sharing the content to your networks via Facebook. Given the broad definition of a cyberactivist that was provided by the participants, Facebook is an easy medium for sharing content and generating dialogue broadly.

Drew points to Facebook (and YouTube) as being prime territory for cyberactivists because it hosts what they believe is the most influential type of activism: storytelling.

When you use media and storytelling together, that’s the most powerful thing. It’s sharing your story, because once somebody sees that they’re experiencing the same thing that somebody else out there is experiencing, then you don’t feel alone… because that is so public, but it’s so intimate that somebody could be watching your video and feel like you are talking to them.

Storytelling has been a major part of Drew’s cyberactivism role. As an active member of the Trevor Project, Drew was approached to assist in the creation of a photo campaign that involved individuals holding up signs that identified a person’s gender identity and pronouns as a way of raising awareness of the different identity groups. Creating campaigns that relied on videos and photos presented endless possibilities for Drew. “I put them on Facebook and Twitter,” which could then be used on other popular sites such as YouTube or Tumblr. Structuring these campaigns in a versatile way allows for the content to reach more people since not everyone uses all available platforms.

What Drew is referring to is known as cross-posting, where content creators create
versatile campaigns that can be used across multiple platforms in an effort to engage more people. Drew reflects on one such experience: “It generated a lot of popularity on Tumblr. It generated a lot of popularity on Facebook. I think somebody shared my photo three or four times. Just really cool.”

Since Facebook is designed for people to connect with those they know, Drew believes that using Facebook as a platform connects people they know with the issues about which they are passionate. In effect, it is a “face-to-face spin” on cyberactivism and unites people who may know each other in real life with the communities that they are a part of online. This could result in more enriched interactions with between activists and those they have personal relationships with in real life.

Meg also cited Facebook as being the primary way in which she engages with cyberactivism, but also pointed to Tumblr as a key player in online activism. According to Meg, Tumblr, which is a microblogging service that allows for the sharing of content to various communities, features “a lot of judgment” from people (mainly because of its emphasis on anonymity), as it allows for people to make comments. Kat cited Tumblr as the main platform she uses online and indicated that the anonymity of the site provides for more storytelling opportunities. Chris also points to Tumblr as their main cyberactivist vehicle, but did indicate that the anonymity does invite harmful and uncensored comments from people that can be discouraging.

Just because certain social media platforms exist does not mean that all cyberactivist movements are successful on them. As with many social media trends, activism movements can fizzle with time if not administered correctly or if they lack the resources necessary to sustain themselves. When the participants were asked about cyberactivist movements that were done
exceptionally well, they responded with various examples, but the common thread among them were movements that incorporated a variety of approaches (in-person and online, for example).

The Bernie Sanders campaign was specifically cited by two of the participants who could point to a strong online movement that was also connected to a coordinated effort on the ground. Tessa provided some insight into what made this campaign so successful in her view:

“Something about his platform translates better to being online. There is something very relatable about him and he communicates messages more on the Internet… in a way that Hillary Clinton just hasn’t been able to do.” Tessa’s statement about the Bernie Sanders 2016 Presidential Campaign shed some light onto how valuable the Internet can be as a platform for storytelling and for rallying interest around a specific cause or candidate.

The participants were unable to reach a consensus about what methods and platforms are more likely to create successful movements. Both Chris and Tessa suggested that the failure of a movement might not be at the hands of the platforms themselves. These participants both discussed examples of movements that were organized and done well, and a common theme emerged: intersectionality. Intersectionality is the interconnectedness (and perhaps purposeful partnership) between movements that enhance the message and create a space for collaboration. Chris explains: “I’ve been gay all my life but let’s talk about the specific wage gaps between the LGBTQ community and what that means for people, or how trans people are often denied housing in affordable areas.”

Activist movements exist for both LGBTQ people and also for fair wage advocates, and the marrying of these two issues can strengthen each mutually exclusive movement. Chris has also been involved in online conversations on gender issues and the Black Lives Matter movement, thus dabbling at the intersection of two movements that are not often seen as the
The participants saw the Internet as a vital resource for social justice movements and they gave credit to the Internet for the reason many movements are visible and easily accessible. Chris explained how the introduction of the Internet has fundamentally changed what were more traditional forms of activism:

When you think about it, a lot of times these movements—back before there was the Internet—it would be very easy to push these movements aside. As long as the news stations didn’t come to cover you and the press didn’t want to show up or talk about you, there were thousands of people who just wouldn’t hear about you.

The Internet serves as a vehicle for these students connecting with likeminded people across the world who share in their views or who are seeking more education on topics about which they are passionate. While many around the world may not have access to the Internet in the same fashion as these students, there is little dispute that the Internet is a major resource for modern day activists.

The participants demonstrated that while many of the more popular social media platforms are primed to host successful movements, the formula for success is more detailed and sophisticated. As demonstrated previously, movements that are adaptable to more than one social media platform have a greater chance of being noticed by a broader audience. To sustain that audience, the participants suggested that movement organizers capitalize on opportunities to partner with other organizations to address the myriad of issues that may be present within each overarching movement.

**Conclusion.** The students in this study are technological natives, so navigating the complex and crowded cyberspace may come naturally to them. Each of the participants navigated the Internet with some confidence (and cautiously when the circumstances call for it),
and they are exploring many different options when it comes to participating in movements that span platforms and populations. There is a complexity and thoughtfulness involved in their work in social action communities, and they are intentional with how to engage, who to engage, and when to engage.

The participants approached cyberactivism as if it were a profession in many cases. They think critically about how to reach a broader audience, they develop content that shares an important narrative, they take heed not to alienate newcomers, and they take notice of when certain movements do well and when others fade into oblivion. As if leading major companies, some of these participants even think critically about how to translate their message over multiple mediums in a way that preserves the story and yet engages people more broadly. This sophistication indicates an investment of pride and time, but also a sense of familiarity and comfort with using the Internet as a resource for activist movements.

**Summation**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to investigate how LGBT college students utilize social media and the Internet to engage in collective activism. This research introduced us to students who not only engage in cyberactivism, but immerse themselves into the phenomenon. While some of the concepts and outcomes may be subjective and difficult to articulate, the participants draw much of their meaning from those with whom they come into contact—some of whom they will never meet in person.

Serving as the backdrop for their involvement in cyberactivism has been a supportive and encouraging environment. Each of the participants indicated that they have people in their lives who have accepted their identities, and thus, the participants are given a sense of confidence to explore themselves more freely and openly. Similarly, inclusive and welcoming campuses that
offer support for social justice advocates and/or the LGBT community have had positive impacts on their lives. The presence of these relationships and communities at formidable points in their development might signal that these students are more apt to participate in cyberactivism due to these support structures.

While we have established that many of the concepts pertaining to cyberactivism are ambiguous or subjective, this does not serve as a deterrent for the students to engage in social action communities that are present online. In fact, the ambiguity that surrounds cyberactivism may allow for more students to find their own place in cyberactivism given its broad definition and myriad of opportunities.

What is clear from the findings is that each participant could point to specific skills that have been enhanced due to their participation, even if they were ambivalent about the impact they have had on the overall movements. While this may attribute to them being humble about the overall effect they had on these movements, it does illuminate the fact that personal satisfaction and having a sense of accomplishment is not a motivating factor for becoming involved in cyberactivism. Instead, the reward is spreading knowledge to others and promoting a more sensitive and inclusive society.

The participants are very skilled at navigating the Internet as their vehicle for cyberactivism. Despite having experiences as newcomers that may prove intimidating for some, the participants gave insight into how movements can be effective (or ineffective) and how identifying points of intersection between movements can result in richer conversation and greater participation. For most of the participants, they gravitated toward the same few social media platforms, but agreed that the most successful movements are those that are adaptable to multiple platforms. There is no doubt that the participants in this study are keenly aware of how
the Internet can support their activist efforts.

The very existence of the Internet as a resource for activists provides any student with an opportunity to engage with critical topics and social issues that may otherwise not be available to them on their campuses. Now that it has been established that genuine learning and development takes place on the Internet and that students are often seeking these opportunities on their own, it is important for higher education administrators to analyze the ways in which they can support and encourage all students to engage in cyberactivism.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate how LGBT college students utilize social media and the Internet to engage in collective activism. The theoretical framework for this study was resource mobilization theory (RMT). According to Eltantawy and Wiest (2011), RMT maintains that the success of activism hinges on the ability of organizers or participants to acquire essential resources necessary for movement success. In the context for this study, RMT was used in an effort to establish the Internet as a resource in modern-day activism and to explore how the participants utilize the Internet to engage in activism. Using IPA as the methodological framework for this study allowed the researcher to use in-depth, semi-structured interviews as a means for collecting data on the lived experiences of LGBT college students who use the Internet to engage in activism.

Overview of the Findings

After a thorough analysis of the data, three superordinate themes emerged from the various interviews. The three themes are: Climate of Support, Subjective Concepts, and Navigating the Internet. This chapter will be organized in a manner that provides an in-depth discussion of these findings with regard to the existing literature. It will also include a discussion of the implications these findings have for higher education as a field and will conclude with a discussion on opportunities for additional research pertaining to this topic.

Climate of Support

For the LGBT college students who participated in this study, the immediate community where they are situated had a positive impact on their lives and serves as the buttress for their cyberactivist efforts. Each of the participants pointed to having positive figures in their lives (e.g., family, friends) who accepted their identity and provided support for them during the
critical coming out process. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of the students indicated that their choice of institution was made primarily due to how inclusive the campus was to the LGBT population. They looked specifically for colleges and universities that had visible LGBT organizations and/or offered services or support that was unique to the LGBT student population.

Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, and Robinson-Keilig (2004) established that campus climate for LGBT students can feature harassment, discrimination, or violence directed at them, merely because of how they identify. In many instances, LGBT students rate the campus climate as being lower than their heterosexual peers (Rankin, 2005). Astin’s (1993) research also illustrated the importance of a positive community of peers. According to this body of literature, a student’s success in college hinges on the ability for students to find accepting and nurturing communities on campus. Therefore, it is not surprising that these participants took great care in choosing institutions that are supportive of the LGBT community.

The literature also illustrates the importance of supportive networks in the lives of queer activists. According to Beemyn (2003), the Mattachine Society played a significant role in the lives of LGBT people since being founded in 1948. This society focused primarily on providing resources and support for gay men who were otherwise isolated from other queer persons. Other communities of support, such as the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance, sprouted in the years post-Stonewall and served as an important unifier for a community that was beginning its fight for civil rights. In fact, the participants pointed to active and visible LGBT organizations on campus as one of the primary factors they considered in deciding to attend their respective institutions.

The need for supportive communities did not end with the introduction of the Internet. Budish (2010) affirmed what the participants in this study indicated: activists are more likely to
engage with an (online) network that is closely linked to one’s own self-identity. When the participants in this study reflected on the types of activism in which they engaged, the examples they cited were either exclusively connected to their identity or had logical parallels with their identity. The participants also admitted to primarily engaging with “likeminded people” and confessed to often “preaching to the choir,” or to those who were already familiar with the topics passionate to them.

Meyer (2009) and Fraser (2008) presented research that supported the concept that many LGBT people will engage in topics that are closely related to their identities. They argued that being members of the LGBT community provides a sense of empowerment for people once they begin engaging with others who also identify as such. As is the case with several of the participants, the discovery of their community of support online was critical to their development. These online communities played an important role during the coming out process, and they were a source for connectivity when they may have felt isolated prior to making their identities known.

The results of this study indicate that aside from personal relationships and inclusive campus communities, the connectedness these cyberactivists feel to the online community is also important. All of the participants in this study confided that they do feel a sense of connectedness to those they encounter while they are participating in these movements. While one participant concluded that they would interpret the term “connection” differently when measuring online versus in-person relationships, it emerged as an important part of their participation.

The participants spoke directly to the idea of collective identity being present in the cyberactivist world. As Polletta and Jasper (2001) claim, collective identity is synonymous with being willing to protest with them or on behalf of them. It is from this sense of loyalty and
connection that the researchers claim actors are motivated to continue their involvement. While the participants in this study did not cite a sense of loyalty to those who participate in the movements with them, they did signal that a sense of community is an important component of their cyberactivism. However, the identities of the participants contributed to the types of online cyberactivism in which they engaged. According to the research conducted by Polletta and Jasper (2001), the sense of connection these participants feel with their cyberactivist community might be due to the cognitive, moral, and emotional relationship the participants have with the values of the group. Given that each of the participants identify as being a member of the queer community, it can be ascertained that their focus on LGBT cyberactivist movements is due in part to their identity.

**Subjective Concepts**

Given that cyberactivism has not been as widely studied as the more traditional in-person forms of activism, it remains a relatively understudied phenomenon. Due to the absence of in-depth studies in the literature, much of cyberactivism is left for participants to interpret on their own. The literature available on the topic of social movements, dating back to the 1960s and earlier, confirms that it is a subjective study matter where no consensus exists on how to define it (Melucci, 1980). This study affirms that cyberactivism, like its older sibling, contains similar ambiguity and leaves much of the interpretation up to the individual participants themselves.

Defining what is cyberactivism versus what is not cyberactivism remains a debated topic in existing literature and within this study. As discussed previously, the participants in this study created a wide definition of the cyberactivist by creating room on the spectrum for people who merely “like” or share articles on social media. This creates a dichotomy with existing literature on slacktivism or arm-chair activism. Budish (2012) posited that slacktivists may be large in
number, but their impact on or dedication to the topic of interest wanes and may not be significant.

Standing in direct opposition to that argument are the participants in this study. While some of them were unable to take a position on slacktivists as cyberactivists, an overwhelming majority of them indicated that they do serve a critical purpose in spreading knowledge about a topic about which they are passionate. The activists in this study placed an emphasis on sharing information with peers with the goal of generating conversation or a broader understanding of LGBT topics within their social circles and beyond. If the participants identified sharing resources as being a valid form of activism, then it calls into question the accuracy of the slacktivist moniker.

Critics of cyberactivism have also claimed that the more a young person involves themselves with cyber communities, the less emphasis they will place on real-life communities. While that concept was not explored in depth within this study, the participants spoke openly about how their involvement in online communities has enriched their in-person interactions. They pointed to having more confidence to speak in class about their views and passions, and were better prepared to reason and argue using well thought out and researched positions.

Furthermore, the participants indicated that participation in cyberactivism has made them feel a sense of connectedness to large movements and shared that these online social communities do result in in-person action at times. Research conducted by Valenzuela (2013) indicated that the Internet provides a point of entry for those who otherwise would not have joined a movement and that this involvement increased the likelihood that people would learn about in-person opportunities to engage and would in fact encourage them to do so.

Budish’s (2012) inquiry also indicated that young people might be less likely to find
similar activist communities in real life. Similar studies (e.g., Amin, 2009) also warned that as activists increasingly go to the Internet for mobilization, it may make these movements less recognizable to a majority of people, due in part to the different ways in which people receive information about current events. However, this study indicated the opposite. In several cases, the students believed that online activism increased the likelihood that they would utilize the network to engage with in-person rallies or protest movements. It is quite possible that the confidence and skills they are gaining by engaging in cyberactivism might actually be increasing the likelihood of their participation in person.

Additionally, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2014) presented a four-stage model where the final stage describes how social media-based cyberactivism can spill over into the physical world. According to their inquiry, social media is able to circumnavigate the mainstream media and inform people almost instantaneously that a movement or physical response is taking place. By comparison, the participants in this study were more aligned with the research done by Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia than the research done by Budish (2012), but due to the contemporary nature of these studies, it is important they are both recognized.

The literature also discusses the motivations for participating in cyberactivism, which was a consideration within the context of this study. Van Laer (2010) illustrated the vast and variable motivations for participation in cyberactivism. He posited that people are likely to participate in digital activism when there is a held belief that that participation will result in change. Furthermore, he discussed how engaging with one’s social group becomes a goal in itself. Therefore, interacting with others can satisfy an emotional need for participants.

The participants in this study offered a wide array of responses when they were asked if
they believe they have had an impact on the movements in which they participate. It was clear that the participants were ambivalent about their impact; some indicated that engaging/educating one person was rewarding and could be indicative of impact, whereas others measured impact more conservatively. If the motivation for participating in cyberactivist movements does indeed come from a sense of connection with a greater community, then these participants have validated that fact.

What cannot be disputed is that the participants in this study demonstrated an indelible commitment to the causes and communities with which they associate online. Hunt and Benford (2004) indicated that commitment is also a subjective term that can be interpreted a variety of ways between and within movements, but what can be culled from the results in this study is that regardless of the extent or intensity of their participation in these movements, they are fueled by a commitment to their own values and passions.

**Navigating the Internet**

The participants rely heavily on established social media platforms to participate in online cyberactivism. Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube all emerged as essential tools that the participants utilized to connect with others. In addition, they described a world where linkages between these platforms have enhanced a movement by expanding the audience. In turn, the participants affirmed that without the Internet as a major resource to activists, many of the movements that have spread as widely as they have would not have enjoyed the same success. Research on anonymity online is present in the literature, and though it does not directly focus on anonymous cyberactivism, there are parallels that apply to this context.

As discussed previously, Stein’s (2009) research began to lay out the opportunities the Internet provides to social movements. In addition to being a space that fosters connectivity
across the globe, it can also be a space for dialogue on important topics, as well as a place for artistic expression by means of filmmaking, graphic design, or writing. While discussing the concept of the Internet as a resource with the participants, they affirmed Stein’s (2010) work and described specifically how the Internet has been able to host successful movements.

The participants cited Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Tumblr as their primary platforms for engaging in social media. Surprisingly, the participants did not indicate involvement beyond those platforms—or at least not to the extent where the use would stand out. Modern literature on the topic of cyberactivism includes many other platforms as well, such as e-mail, fundraising sites, and instant messaging modules. Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2014) indicate that countless tools available to activists on the Internet provide cyberactivists with the resources needed to launch or participate in movements.

Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2014) consider cyberactivism using popular social media platforms as being a new era in cyberactivism that is replacing seminal tools such as e-mail and websites. Often referred to as web 2.0, social media has now become more prevalent and allows user-centered applications such as Facebook and YouTube to be at the center of creating connectedness between people who would otherwise not engage directly with one another (Wilson, Lin, Longstreet, & Sarker, 2011). This form of online “activism 2.0” (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014, p.365) is distinguishable by the integrated use of social media platforms in a way that can easily create global awareness of issues and can theoretically encourage millions to coalesce around a single cause. Examples of this were the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as Wikileaks and Anonymous information dumps (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014).

All of the participants indicated using the Internet as a means to connect with these new
movements, all of which featured an integrated use of social media platforms to engage millions of participants. A broad examination of the results showed that the participants primarily engaged in social justice-related topics and were focused on creating political and/or social change via their activities, which compliments studies conducted by researchers such as Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2014) and Ayers and McCaughey (2003).

Studying the intersections between various movements is an emerging field and one that deserves to be mentioned in the context of this study. As one participant mentioned, involvement in cyberactivism does not necessarily occur within one distinct movement. Rather, it can exist at the intersection of various movements that utilize the Internet to mobilize participants.

Considering movements within the intersections of sexuality, Gamson and Moon (2004) indicated that before queer theory began to formally explore the intricacies of identity, feminists were already exploring the intersections of class and sexual orientation. The existence of intersectional movements began long before a term was developed to define it. Gamson and Moon (2004) further posited that intersectional social movements in the LGBT community have the power to deconstruct intergroup categories and in turn create smaller, more sustainable movements.

The available literature on activism offers a multitude of research on the idea of intersectional movements. Valocci (2001) theorized that when major societal changes (i.e., political, social) occur, the repertoire used by the organizers becomes adaptable for many different movements. While research has not looked extensively at these intersectional movements, at least one participant appeared to specifically seek out these converging discussions to explore a larger topic of interest. The participants who reflected on intersectional movements indicated that these movements might often share resources but have the potential of
unifying a countless number of people who otherwise may not have been mobilized together.

The Internet offers many intriguing features for cyberactivists, and as these participants indicated, the concept of anonymity in cyberactivism is a concept that is important to understand. As several of the activists noted, anonymity can be both a vehicle for those who seek to harm and bully others, or it can be the only conduit for those who need it as a cloak of security for whatever reason. The literature on this topic is vast, and several studies provide insight that is important for this study.

Christopherson (2007) indicated that there are two types of anonymity in cyberspace—the first being technical anonymity and the second being social anonymity. Technical anonymity refers to when an individual removes their name from online communications that may reveal who they are to the public. Social anonymity is more of a perception that someone is anonymous online. For the socially anonymous, they may post to social media or discussion boards by using unidentifiable screen names or handles, but they may not be completely anonymous to those with the ability and technical expertise to locate more information about them. This social anonymity is what the participants in this study were referring to directly.

Marx (2004) indicated that anonymity on the Internet can serve several important purposes, including but not limited to protecting oneself from unwanted intrusions, avoiding persecution, maintaining traditional expectations, preserving reputations, and perhaps most relevant to this study, needing to protect personhood. This research supports the notion that anonymity is a necessary component of cyberactivism, so it allows people to connect with their community without fear of being personally identified.

Kennedy (2006) also pointed to the importance of anonymity on the Internet. She argues that the assumption of anonymity can be an empowering concept for Internet users because it
protects oneself from being judged and identified, but it also has a more powerful benefit.
Kennedy posits that the ability to cloak your identity online can be empowering in part because it can allow for people to explore their identity in a space that is comfortable, especially if that identity is difficult to possess in real life. Kennedy (2006) posited, “Anonymous online settings are empowering because they facilitate identity exploration or occupying identity positions which may be difficult to occupy in real life” (p. 864). This statement directly supports what the participants pointed to as being the most important attribute for anonymity online.

Maczewski (2002) conducted research on young adults and found that they have used the Internet anonymously to explore their sexuality. She uncovered that for many of her participants, anonymity on the Internet allowed them to explore their identity freely and left them able to speak more freely about their identity than if they were in a face-to-face situation. The research conducted in this study also supports the theory that anonymity online can be extremely beneficial to certain cyberactivists.

As the participants also indicated, often times anonymous cyberactivists can seek to harass, demean, or threaten others due to their identity. This aggressive behavior can have negative effects on others (Kennedy, 2006). As stated previously, several of the participants could recall situations where anonymous posters were seeking to harm others by lashing out at their positions or by attacking their identity. In one instance, a participant in this study indicated that if she were unable to overlook these aggressive posters, it might have resulted in her terminating her cyberactivist activities.

Conclusion

This research explored how LGBT college students utilize the Internet and make meaning of their experiences in cyberactivism. Based on the information garnered from this study, the
participants shed light on the concept of cyberactivism and placed an emphasis on common
themes that help us better understand the phenomenon. The data collected here illustrates that the
participants have several common lenses through which they interpret their experiences with
cyberactivism.

Primarily, each of the participants pointed to having communities in place (both online
and face-to-face) that have supported their activism online. Additionally, the participants
struggled with some of the more subjective concepts of the phenomenon, which is also reflected
in the literature that is available. Finally, the results of this study indicated that the ways in which
the participants utilized the Internet and experienced anonymity were consistent with the
literature available on the topic.

Cyberactivism is still a developing area of study, and there is even less available
literature on LGBT cyberactivism. However, key tenets of LGBT cyberactivism can be garnered
from investigating literature on closely-related topics. The absence of closely-related literature
validated the need to investigate the topic from this angle and underscored the need for student
affairs practitioners to understand how the results of this study impact their profession.

**Implications for Practice**

Given that cyberactivism remains a relatively understudied topic—and even less research
exists on the cyberactivist habits of LGBT students—this study provides tremendous insight into
what may be a significant piece of the student experience. The subsequent section highlights the
researcher’s recommendations for how the results of this study can be applied in practice. In
addition to sharing the results herewith, the researcher will also make the results available to
professionals who are affiliated with professional organizations such as the Consortium of
Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals in an effort to inform their work with social
justice advocates. Opportunities to share this research via conferences or other professional development modules will be explored as well.

Create spaces that cultivate and develop cyberactivists within marginalized communities. Students with access to comprehensive programs that promote and encourage responsible cyberactivism will be given the tools necessary to engage in what this study deems an important form of experiential learning. Oftentimes resource poor institutions may justify a lack of resources as a reason for not providing key services. This may be accurate in certain circumstances, but unlike other focus areas, cyberactivism can be supported by weaving it into many existing structures already in place on campuses across the country. While some organizations may feature a social justice-focused department in student affairs units, this work can also be done in established units such as multicultural/LGBT centers, residence life, student activities, or within academic units where these conversations can happen organically. Given that students are already engaged within these units, they could benefit by having these conversations in spaces toward which they already have an affinity.

Regardless of where the conversation is housed, providing a space for LGBT cyberactivists to come together and discuss their methods would benefit the students in a multitude of ways. Primarily, it will provide opportunities for the many identities within the LGBT spectrum to come together surrounding a topic that is of mutual interest. As this study demonstrated, a positive and affirming community is important for LGBT students, and providing the opportunity for students to come together and discuss this topic would allow for them to tap into that supportive community that is essential to their retention and development. Additionally, creating a space on campus for LGBT cyberactivists to come together will demonstrate the university commitment to social justice and activism.
As this study illustrated, there are a multitude of definitions for how a cyberactivist is defined. Regardless of how the institution or its staff and faculty define the phenomenon, it is important for these spaces to be inclusive of all those who engage in cyberactivism at any level. Doing so would allow for those who are novices to gain exposure to their more experienced peers. This peer-to-peer interaction will ultimately result in mentorship opportunities that will contribute to the intellectual and emotional development of both newcomers and thespians. However, merely creating spaces for these conversations to take place will not be sufficient. Students also need opportunities to access important resources and services that support their cyberactivism.

**Develop meaningful and holistic resources for cyberactivists.** The Internet serves as the underpinning for cyberactivism. As this study has demonstrated, the mere existence of social media platforms is not enough to host a sustainable and far-reaching movement. Cyberactivists must possess skills and proficiencies that can be applied to online mobilization. These skills include: maximizing the use of visuals (e.g., graphics, charts, infographics, videos); using language that seeks to educate and mobilize others; and possessing the ability to critically assess online sources of information for trustworthiness. Colleges and universities are, in many cases, already providing students with opportunities to become more proficient in these (and other) related areas and need only to make the connection between the cyberactivists and these services.

While training for students would add significant value to their experience, students also need to be made aware of legal and ethical considerations with regard to activism online. As the literature shows, the courts are only just beginning to apply the law to the Internet, and as the decades progress, there may be additional guidance from the courts that would be important for students to be aware of. The following are examples of emerging legal concerns on which
students should be advised: how the First Amendment is or is not applicable to their activities, how copyright and trademark laws are applied to the use of graphics, how privacy laws affect the perception of anonymity, and how cyberbullying is enforced so it can serve as a reminder of appropriate conduct online.

In an effort to create inclusive resources for cyberactivists, it is important for students to have access to resources that cater to cyberactivists who fall at many points on the spectrum. If students only have access to trainings that speak to experienced cyberactivists, it can exclude those who are not as active or even those who did not have access to Internet in their pre-college years. Many international countries ban the use of the Internet in an attempt to prevent social movements from disrupting the government’s political agenda. In addition, many international LGBT students will come to American colleges and universities seeking asylum from countries that are hostile to LGBT people. Therefore, it is important to keep these considerations in mind and to design resources that address cyberactivists at all stages of development and experience.

Conflicting research exists on the likelihood that cyberactivists will engage in real life activism after engaging online. To refute this claim that online engagement is for those who wish to receive a free ride on the coattails of those who mobilize in person, students need to be encouraged to mobilize online with the goal of engaging in person. This could come in the form of college-specific issues or social justice issues that affect larger communities. Whatever the central topic is, activists who engage in person and online will be able to lead movements that are more sustainable and visible to all.

Furthermore, students also need access to discussions that focus on responsible ways to engage in cyberactivism. This would entail trainings and discussions on how to share information in a responsible way (checking for trustworthiness and accuracy), how to conduct
yourself in online communities in an effort to engage and not alienate others, how to utilize limited resources to create movements that have wide-reaching capabilities, how to engage cross-culturally, or which ethical considerations should be taken into account before making the decision to engage. Preparing students to engage in a meaningful and responsible way becomes an important foundation for the future of online activism. Equally as important is the ability for students to experience the value of online communities in other areas of their college experience.

**Emphasize the importance of online communities.** College students are entering a society where online communities are a part of life. Sites such as Facebook and Twitter provide endless opportunities to connect with friends, family, and strangers on a multitude of topics. While the participants in this study have found their way to cyberactivist communities on their own, others on campus may not possess the same comfort level and may not engage as readily.

To aid in the creation of more cyberactivists, students need access to robust academic and social communities that can exist in the online sphere. Platforms such as SalesForce, Blackboard, and OrgSync are available and provide students with the ability to form online communities that can be easily translated into real life. As research shows, the ability for cyberactivists to turn online engagement into real world action is distinctly possible. Therefore, the more comfortable students are engaging in online communities, the more apt they may be to engage in cyberactivism.

Participants in this study indicated that they primarily share information within close social circles made up of people who often share their same views and opinions. Therefore, it would be important to encourage online community engagement that allows for students to interact with people not in their immediate network. This way, students will be able to practice communication skills and will become more adept and structuring arguments geared toward
unknown audiences. Online communities—whether sponsored by the university or not—require the students to exercise care and caution while they engage.

**Promoting self-efficacy, safety, and security online.** There are endless threats to us on the Internet, and individuals with clandestine intentions are out to create havoc and threaten our safety and security. While many institutions are prepared to discuss ways to protect your personal information from hackers, conversations on how to explore your identity in a (perceived) safe manner may not occur as regularly.

Cyberactivism requires a great deal of courage for newcomers, and it is important that students have positive experiences when they first wade into the waters of online collective action. According to the participants in this study, some of the experiences they encounter as new activists could be perceived as threatening. Therefore, it is important for novice cyberactivists to have an understanding of how to exercise self-care in the event they experience negative outcomes. Without attaining self-efficacy related to participating in cyberactivism, the likelihood that students continue to participate after having a negative experience will decrease.

Institutions can encourage students to attain a high level of confidence in their cyberactivist abilities by providing opportunities for them to engage with one another, share positive experiences, and share learning experiences that were not as positive. Learning from peers who are more experienced in cyberactivism will allow for others to develop coping skills and strategies that have proven to be successful.

Safety and security is another important implication for practice as well. While some students come to college having had years of experience on the Internet, some may approach cyberactivism with a sense of false confidence that can lead to unintentional harm to themselves or others. As demonstrated in the literature, anonymity can be a false sense of coverage for
Students who need to protect their identities, and it is essential for them to be engaged in conversations that empower them to protect themselves while engaging online.

Students must be given a clear understanding of true anonymity versus perceived anonymity so they are able to participate in cyberactivism cautiously and carefully. As the literature has demonstrated, many young people retreat to the Internet during the formative years of their development to understand their identity and to connect with similar people. However, if students feel the need to use the cloak of anonymity to engage, they should be educated on what real anonymity is versus what is perceived anonymity. The ability to do so results in the difference between being unmasked or remaining secret.

**Recognizing the various outcomes of participation.** Cyberactivism should be seen as an experiential opportunity that positively impacts students’ learning, growth, and development while in college. According to the participants in this study, they all were able to single out skills and traits that have been improved due in part to their participation in cyberactivism. In an effort to illustrate the value of these experiences to students, there must be opportunities for students to explore the connections between cyberactivism, the skills gained as a result of participating, and how those skills and experiences can contribute to their career choice or areas of future engagement. Leadership programs that are facilitated by colleges can be primed for these discussions as well, as many of them are built on a social change model.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Cyberactivism remains an emerging course of study, and LGBT-specific cyberactivism is less examined than its parent topic. In an effort to create a stronger body of literature on this topic, there are countless opportunities for researchers to contribute to our understanding of this amorphous area of study. In this final section, a selection of the possibilities for future
examination are presented and discussed.

This study explored the experiences of actors who were not leaders within cyberactivist movements. They engaged on the peripheral by sharing articles and engaging in conversation. To obtain a better understanding of how the Internet offers resources to social movements, it would be interesting to speak to those who created movements themselves or who play a lead role in crafting the direction of these movements. In particular, this would help us understand how the leaders of these movements view those who share articles and engage in conversation but do not play a lead role in coordinating efforts.

Overwhelmingly, the participants in this study indicated that their institutions do not provide specific education or resources that help in their cyberactivist practices. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate colleges and universities that do offer resources for activists on campus to determine how those resources have impacted the students who utilized them. Do students who have access to educational resources engage differently with cyberactivism than those who do not have access to the same services? Understanding this would assist colleges and universities as they think through what type of support would be helpful for their community.

Higher education could also benefit from understanding how novice cyberactivists experience the phenomenon for the first time. While this study uncovered some of those experiences, the field could benefit from an in-depth understanding of why students first become involved in cyber mobilization, what varied experiences they had during those first few attempts, which communities were the most/least welcoming, and how those initial experiences impacted their future involvement in cyberactivism. Exploring the role and experiences of the newcomer will help inform movement leaders about ways to create meaningful pathways to leadership within these communities.
Our understanding of LGBT cyberactivism could expand from the introduction of studies that increase our understanding of how the specific identities within that spectrum experience cyberactivism. For the purposes of this study, LGBT identities were explored broadly as a way to add value to our understanding of the topic, but as research on identity development informs us, each unique identity within that spectrum may approach cyberactivism differently. Therefore, continued efforts should be made to understand how cyberactivism manifests itself within each unique identity group.

Very little research exists that delves deeply into cyberactivist learning outcomes. While the participants in this study reached consensus, higher education professionals could benefit from a broader understanding of the skills and abilities that become more pronounced as a result of participating in online activism. It would be particularly interesting to know how those skills vary depending on the level of involvement each participant had in online social action communities.

Finally, there is no consensus in the literature on the definition of cyberactivism. While some view it as slacktivism, others—especially the participants in this study—hold the belief that cyberactivists do play an important role in spreading knowledge and awareness. The conflicting literature on the value and definition of cyberactivism continues to fuel debate. Future research should focus on establishing a spectrum of cyberactivism that creates an understanding of the value that all cyberactivists have on the movement as a whole.
Appendix A

Interview Schedule

First Interview
1. Please state your age.
2. Where is your hometown?
3. Which describes your current institution:
   a. Urban public
   b. Rural public
   c. Urban private
   d. Urban public
   e. Suburban public
   f. Suburban private
4. What geographic region is your institution located in?
5. What is your current class standing?
6. Please talk about what made you choose your current institution.
7. Talk about your coming out process. How would you describe it?
8. Describe the LGBT culture on your campus.
9. Please describe how you would define the term “cyberactivist.”

Second Interview
1. Please describe how you engage in cyberactivism.
2. Which platforms do you use and why?
3. Talk about the specific social action communities you engage with online.
4. Explain how you first became involved with cyberactivism. What was that experience like?
5. Describe the groups and people you interact with during these activities.
6. Do you feel a sense of connectedness to a larger community? Describe your answer.
7. Talk about how cyberactivism has impacted you personally.
8. In your opinion, what significance does your involvement have on the larger movement?
9. How would you/do you measure your impact?
10. What qualities do effective cyberactivist movements have?
11. What qualities do ineffective cyberactivist movements have?

Third Interview
1. Does your institution illustrate a commitment to activism? How?
2. How could your institution support your cyberactivism?
3. What advice would you provide to other college students who might want to start engaging in cyberactivism?
4. In your opinion, what might the future of cyberactivism look like?
5. Are there up and coming social media platforms that might be primed to host cyberactivist movements?
6. What has the experience of participating in this study been like for you?
Appendix B

Northeastern IRB Approval

Northeastern

Notification of IRB Action

Date: August 11, 2015  IRB #: CPS15-07-05
Principal Investigator(s): Joseph McNabb
Jason Campbell-Foster
Department: Doctor of Education
            College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
         Northeastern University
Title of Project: LGBT College Student Cyberactivism: Making Meaning of
                Participation in Online Social Action Communities
Participating Sites: N/A
Informed Consent: One (1) unsigned consent

As per CFR 45.46.117(c)(2) signed consent is being waived as the research presents no more
than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally
required.

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

Approval Expiration Date: AUGUST 10, 2016

Investigator's Responsibilities:
1. Informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants
   into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
   information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be
   reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the
   expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other
   university approvals that may be necessary.

[Signatures]

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Man C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Call for Participants (sent to student LGBT organizations)

Are you a college student who identifies as LGBT? Do you participate in online communities that center on social action? Are you a cyberactivist?

Consider taking part in this study!

A study is being conducted to by Jason Campbell-Foster, Assistant Dean of Student Involvement and EdD student at Northeastern University in order to gain insight into the experiences of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) college students who have participated in online activism in some form or fashion.

In order to participate, individuals must be between the ages of 18-24, proficient in English, enrolled in a 4-year college or university within the United States, and identify as LGBT. All qualified individuals are encouraged to apply, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, religion, disability or national origin.

The commitment for this study will be for three separate interviews. The first being a 20-30 minute introduction; the second a 60-90 minute exploration into the student experience and a final interview (up to 30 minutes) for clarification and reflection purposes. These interviews may take place via Skype or in person if geographically convenient for both the participant and the student investigator.

If you or someone you know is interested in sharing their experiences as an LGBT cyberactivist, please complete the following form (INSERT LINK). If you meet the initial criteria you will be contacted to discuss your participation in more detail.

Your information will be kept confidential and your names will never be shared with others or used in published results. Participation is entirely voluntary.

I invite you to participate in this study and to aid in our understanding of this very important component of student life on college campuses. Please do not hesitate to contact me for any questions regarding this study. If you are interested in applying for this opportunity, please utilize the link provided above.

Sincerely,

Jason Campbell-Foster
Student Investigator and EdD candidate in the College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Call for Participants (sent to student LGBT organizations)

Are you a college student who identifies as LGBT? Do you participate in online communities that center on social action? Are you a cyberactivist?

Consider taking part in this study!

A study is being conducted by Jason Campbell-Foster, Assistant Dean of Student Involvement and EdD student at Northeastern University in order to gain insight into the experiences of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) college students who have participated in online activism in some form or fashion.

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Sincerely,

Jason Campbell-Foster
Student Investigator and EdD candidate in the College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION
RENEWAL APPROVAL

Date: August 8, 2016  IRB #: C0815-07-05
Principal Investigator(s): Joseph McNabbi
                                      Jason Campbell-Foster
Department: Doctor of Education
                      College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
                 Northeastern University
Title of Project: LGBT College Student Cyberactivism: Making Meaning of Participation in Online Social Action Communities
Approval Status: Closed to Enrollment – Ongoing Analysis Only
Participating Sites: N/A
Original Protocol Approved: August 11, 2015
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: N/A
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: AUGUST 7, 2017

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Jason Campbell-Foster <foster.jas@husky.neu.edu> 1/21/16

to Kate, Jason, Joseph

Hello Kate,

I have a question regarding the IRB approval. If I decided to offer participants a $25 Amazon gift card for participating in the study, how will I go about amending the approved IRB?

Also, I have one person currently in the process of being interviewed - I assume they would be eligible for it even though they came in under the previously approved IRB?

Thanks for the guidance,

Jason


Skophammer, Kate <k.skophammer@neu.edu> 1/21/16

to me, Jason, Joseph

Hi Jason,

I think that is okay. Yes the one currently being interviewed can get the gift card. I would offer a choice just in case they don’t shop at Amazon. Offer them a couple choices (Amazon, Target, etc.) and let them choose.

Best,
Kate
Appendix C

Sample Audit Trail

Drew: Without cyberactivism I don’t think I would have ever found that community. Nor would I have found people from that community in my real life…

Meaningful communities exist online and may not if social media were not available

Importance of supportive communities

Chris: I’ve sort of been all over the spectrum myself. Like, I know people who use the internet as a real world platform where they get people together for rallies. There are people who use it to spread information. I’m more of the spread information side of that.

Cyberactivism is a spectrum. Involvement can be as small as sharing articles to as large as coordinating in person action within online communities

Definition of ‘cyberactivist’ and ‘cyberactivism’ is subjective/varies by participant

Rachel: I think I’ve made an impact, whether it’s being able to help people that reach out, or learning new things. I’m typically a quiet person… but being active online has made me be more vocal in my personal life.

Participant does believe she’s made an impact on the lives of others. In turn, participation online has increased confidence to engage with people in person.

Measuring impact of participation on self and others
Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

**Name of Investigators:** Dr. Joseph McNabb (principal); Jason Campbell-Foster (student researcher)

**Title:** Cyberactivism and LGBT College Students: Utilizing the Internet to Engage in Collective Action

**Request to Participate in Research**

We would like to invite you to participate in a research project. The purpose of this research is to gather information on how LGBT college students perceive and make meaning of their involvement in online communities that center on social action. You must be at least 18 years old in order to participate.

This study will take place at _____________ and will last approximately ____________. If you decide to participate in this study, we will ask you to take part in three interviews (conducted by Jason Campbell-Foster) to discuss your experiences in college, and most specifically with regard to your experience as a self-identified cyberactivist.

**There are no foreseeable risks associated with your participation in this study.**

**You will be offered a $25 gift card to Amazon or Target upon completion of this study.** In addition, your participation will allow us to learn more about how certain LGBT students are utilizing the Internet to enact social change.

**Your part in this study will be anonymous.** Only the researchers will know that you have participated in this study. Any reporting based on this research will use pseudonyms to protect your identity.

**The decision to participate in this study is up to you.** You do not have to participate in this study and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at anytime.

**If you have any questions about this study,** please feel free to contact Jason Campbell-Foster (tel. 617-650-6283; email: foster.jas@husky.neu.edu), the person mainly responsible for this research. You can also contact Dr. Joseph McNabb (Northeastern University, email: j.mcnabb@neu.edu), the principal investigator.

**If you have any questions about your rights in this research,** you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director of Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.
Appendix E

Human Subjects Protection Certificate

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Jason Campbell-Foster successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”.

Date of completion: 11/12/2013
Certification Number: 1325386
References


*Bethel School District No. 403 v. Fraser 478 U.S. 675 (1986)*


*City of Los Angeles v. Preferred Communications*, 476 U.S. 488, 496 (1986)


*Doe v. Pulaski*, 306 F. 3d 616, 622 (8th Cir. 2002)


*Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169 (1972)


*Lovell v. Poway*, 90 F. 3d 367 (9th Cir. 1996)


