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Richard S. L. Blissett and Dominique J. Baker

Seeing is MORE THAN Believing

Visual Media, Social Media, and Anti-Racism on College Campuses

While the fight for social justice has never been dormant for certain activists and scholars, recent events suggest that we are now in the midst of a revival. On January 21, 2017, millions of people around the globe marched as part of what has become known as the “Women’s March” in order to protest the newly elected Republican administration in the United States which, many feared, was poised to affect reproductive and civil rights (Przybyla and Schouten 2017). While this protest has been deemed one of the largest collective actions in American history, it was preceded by a near-half decade of increased attention to protest and civil rights. Of particular note is the Black Lives Matter movement, which organized continuous responses to what seemed like increased exposure of patterns of police brutality that disproportionately targeted black people (Somashekhar 2015).

These movements not only existed on the streets, but also within the walls of colleges and universities around the nation and around the world. In addition, this wave of action was one of the first big spikes in citizen action to occur since calls for American institutions to divest from South Africa during apartheid (Rhoads 1998). The world has changed since then, especially with regard to the resources available for individuals to communicate with each other. Technology has opened many doors, and we contend in this work that social media facilitated more recent collective action within higher education. Particularly in concert with the ability to share visual media through social media, we provide an argument that these modern tools were important in the actions of recent collective actions. In discussing “social media,” we are referring to those internet-based tools, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, which have emerged to enable users to participate in online social networking. This is distinct from collective action, which is defined by the joint action of a group of people towards a common goal (Olson 1971). In this essay, we first provide an overview

of issues of inclusion on college campuses, followed by a brief history of one of the more famous recent movements—the I, Too, Am Harvard-related campaigns. Drawing on the history of the movements as well as evidence we gathered from participants in the movements, we then highlight the importance of the use of visual and social media to the dynamics and success of these organizations. Lastly, we offer concluding thoughts.

Problems of Inclusion on Campus

A significant body of literature provides evidence that increased racial/ethnic diversity within higher education leads to better learning, critical thinking, and more empathetic individuals with reduced discriminatory behaviors (Chang 2011; Gurin et al. 2002; Milem, Chang, and Antonio 2005). However, it can be difficult to facilitate these opportunities for growth and engagement of students when structural and psychological challenges create obstacles to interacting among students. This is exacerbated by the fact that most students in higher education come from segregated communities; they experience racial diversity for the first time when they enter higher education (Gurin et al. 2002).

Structurally, institutions, if they do focus on diversity, have focused primarily on increasing the enrollment of students from certain underrepresented demographic groups within higher education (Garces and Jayakumar 2014). This can be detrimental to student success for several reasons. Numerous scholars have found that faculty and administrators from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds can be and often are underrepresented within higher education (e.g., Jayakumar et al. 2009). In addition, regardless of the diversity of students, faculty, or staff, the pedagogy within the classroom or spaces around campus also have a critical, largely unnoticed, role in the campus climate and the success of students (Bennett and Benton 2001; Strange and Banning 2001; Tatum 1992). For these reasons, scholars have advocated for a more expansive version of collegiate diversity (Chesler, Lewis, and Crowfoot 2005; Garces and Jayakumar 2014). Whether focusing on creating a multicultural university—which focuses on the ability of university community members to interact with each other in a climate of inclusion (Chesler, Lewis,

and Crowfoot 2005)—or dynamic diversity—which focuses on “interactions among students within a particular context and under appropriate environmental conditions needed to realize the educational benefits of diversity” (Garces and Jayakumar 2014, 116)—there is evidence that simply focusing on the number of students enrolled from certain backgrounds does not automatically lead to an inclusive campus.

In addition to structural challenges within colleges and universities, scholars have noted the negative impact of microaggressions on students' experiences within college and on persisting and graduating. Microaggressions are subtle, often unconscious, insults (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). For example, Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso recorded one white student remarking, “You [an African American] are not like the rest of them. *You're different*” (2000, 61). This is an example of racial microaggressions that the white student most likely did not realize could be considered offensive. Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso's (2000) work elucidates the culture of racial microaggressions; the research highlights its existence within classrooms, faculty-student interactions, and social interactions with other students.

It is important to note that while the majority of research on microaggressions focuses on students who identify as African American or Latino, students of other historically marginalized populations, such as Asian students and women, also face these struggles (Capodilupo et al. 2010; Teranishi 2007). Researchers have found that racial/ethnic minority students face incidents of bias while in the classroom, both secondary and postsecondary (Boysen et al. 2009). Additionally, this can negatively affect students' social experiences, which is troubling as obstacles to social integration into higher education can lead students to drop out (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). This nonexhaustive review of the barriers to inclusion within higher education reflects the reality of college for a significant portion of students. This context can create a contentious environment for students to navigate.

History of ITA Movements

The current case study in question largely sprung from action at Harvard University, which started during the 2013–2014 academic school year. Originally, *I, Too, Am Harvard* was a play, written and directed by student Kimiko Matsuda-Lawrence and named in reference to Langston Hughes's *I, Too, Am America*. In order to promote the play, students, including photographer Carol Powell, developed the famous photo campaign in which Harvard students presented, on dry-erase boards, “racially insensitive, often humiliating remarks made by their peers, as well as would-be responses to them” (Butler 2014). (See Fig. 1, Harvard University.) These photos were collected and published on Tumblr, a blog-based social media website. Shortly afterwards, BuzzFeed, a social and cultural news and entertainment website, published a review of this work called “63 Black Harvard Students Share Their Experiences in a Powerful Photo Project” (Vingiano 2014). Tying this work to broader discussions about microaggressions and even to earlier blog posts at Columbia University, the *New York Times* published an article in late March on the project, titled “Students See Many Slights as Racial ‘Microaggressions’” (Vega 2014).

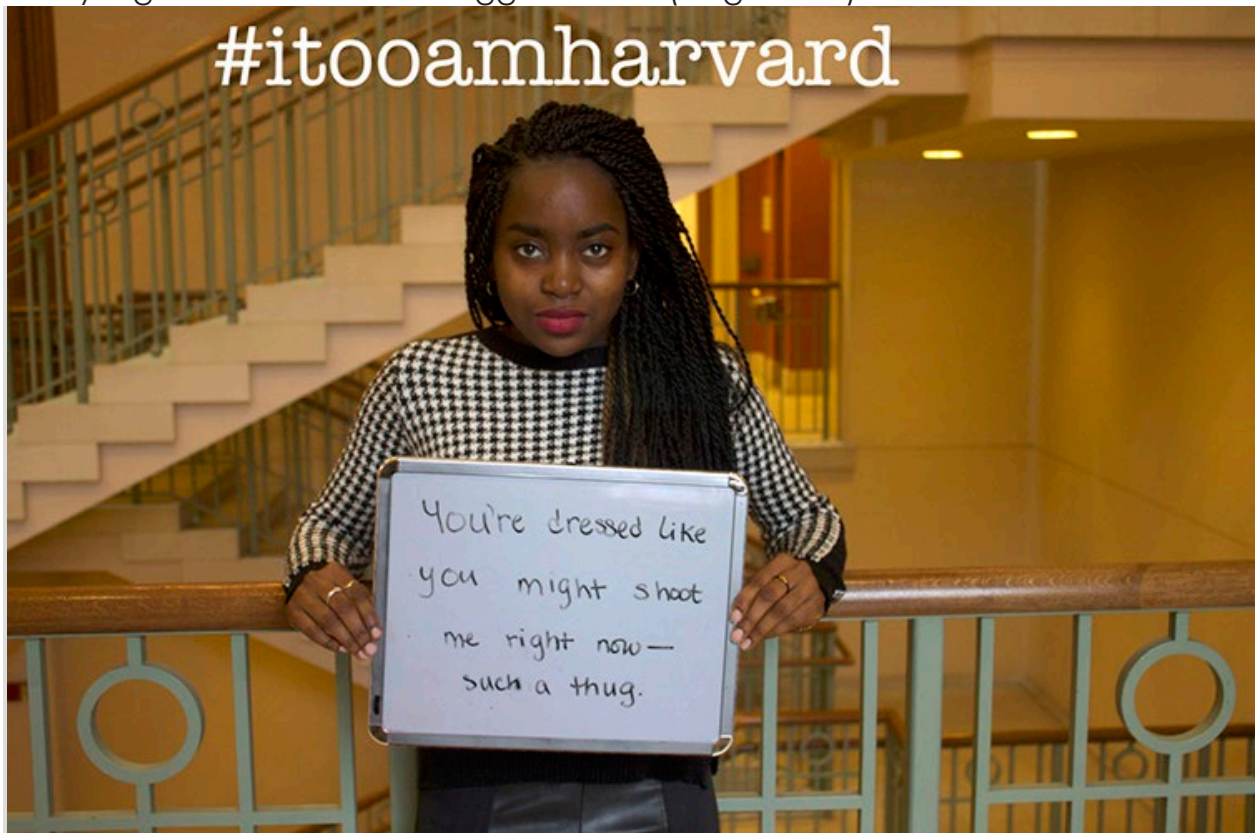


Figure 1: *I, Too, Am Harvard* example.

I, Too, Am Harvard, available at <http://itooamharvard.tumblr.com/>

After its debut at Harvard and its subsequent exposure on social and news media, I, Too, Am Harvard-like campaigns (ITA) spread rapidly across the United States and, in some instances, across the globe. Within the United States, as of November 2016, the movement had reached at least 40 institutions ranging from private Ivy League institutions like Princeton University to public colleges such as the University of Northern Iowa (Baker and Blissett, forthcoming). While most followed the Harvard model, some added small tweaks, such that the campaigns presented a variety of perspectives. Still, all of the ITA campaigns focused on diversity and inclusion issues on college campuses. People came forth with stories and moments from racist encounters outside of black/white racism (see Fig. 2, Davidson College). Issues from other historically marginalized populations, including women (see Fig. 3, Cornell University), people identifying as queer (see Fig. 4, Lehigh University), and individuals with disabilities were incorporated into the projects as well. Lastly, as noted above, the movement did not remain confined to the United States, and it spread abroad to institutions such as the University of Auckland in New Zealand and Oxford University in the United Kingdom.



Figure 2: Beyond Black/White Racism, Davidson College.

I, Too, Am Davidson, available at <http://itooamdavidson.tumblr.com/>



Figure 3: Sexism, Cornell University.

I, Too, Am Cornell, available at <https://twitter.com/itooamcornell>

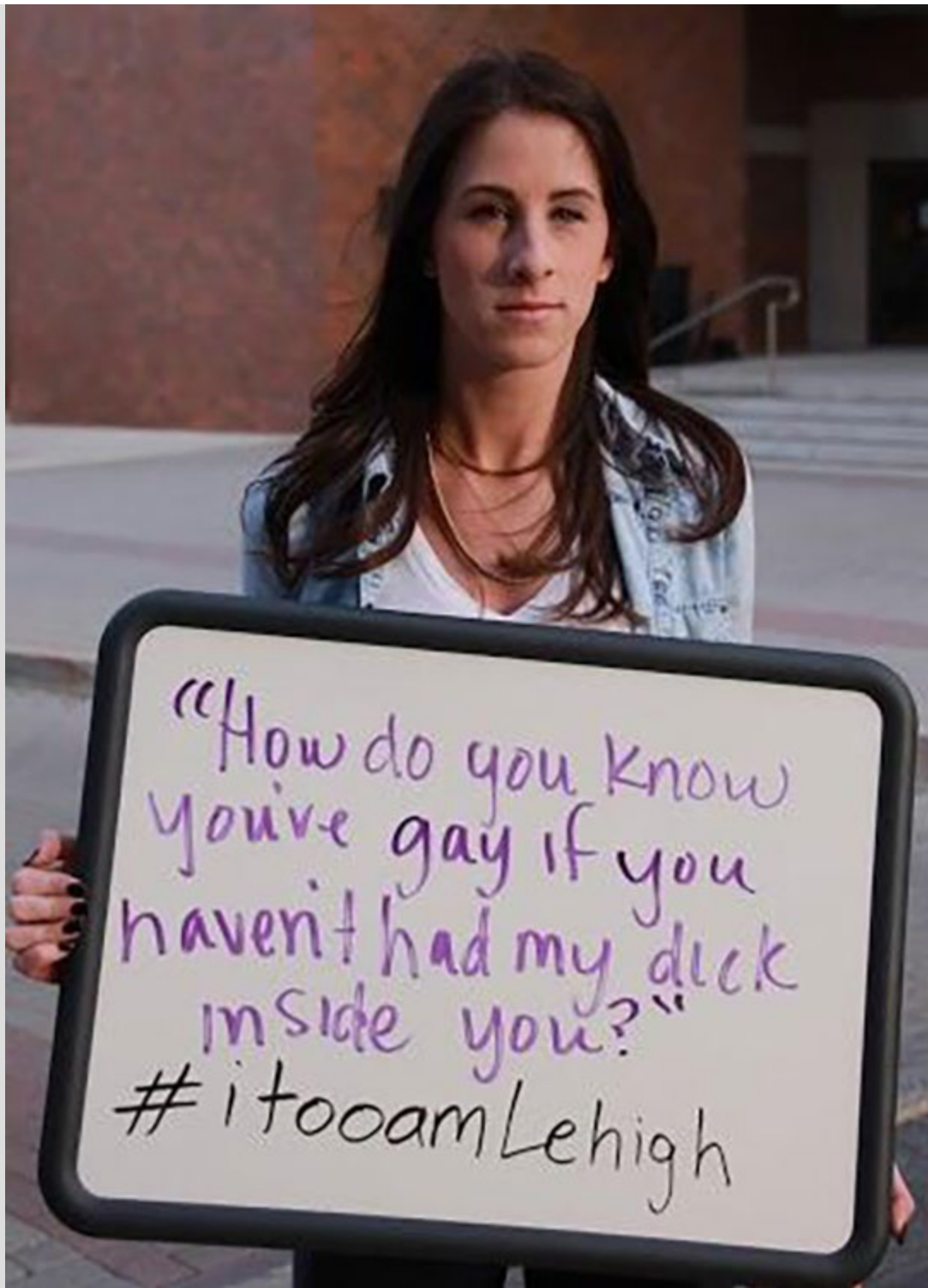


Figure 4: Sexism, Lehigh University.

I, Too, Am Lehigh, available at <https://twitter.com/itooamlehigh>

The ITA movement, importantly, occurred concurrent to several other prominent campus-based protests. In fall of 2014, Colgate University students staged a series of sit-ins to protest the mistreatment of minority students (New 2014). Hundreds of students protested the violent arrest of a black student at the University of Virginia in spring of 2015 (Associated Press 2015). A student activist group called ConcernedStudent1950 arose at the University of Missouri in fall of 2015 after a series of racial incidents on campus (Barnhardt 2014). These were just a few examples of the way in which the nation was responding to, at the least, increased visibility of issues of racism and other forms of discrimination. Additional, high-profile examples included the We're a Culture, Not a Costume campaign at the University of Ohio (in reference to offensive "ethnic" Halloween costumes) (Grinberg 2011), the viral spread of a video of a racist chant by Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity members at the University of Oklahoma (Svrluga 2015), and, last, the spread of the Black Lives Matter movement to college campuses nationwide (Somashekhar 2015). Formally, students at over 70 institutions proposed sets of demands to their campus administrations, calling for changes ranging from reviews of bias protocols to public acknowledgements of racist histories (Chessman and Wayt 2016).

Whether one would consider the ITA movement as successful depends on the definition of success. In our larger study, we have interviewed several leaders of the campus campaigns and analyzed their responses using interpretative phenomenological analysis. In terms of producing change in their fellow students, the leaders generally felt that they had succeeded. Through their campaigns, they had created spaces of solidarity through which people of all backgrounds were able to come together and talk about the issues facing them on campus. As suggested by work from Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001), there was a positive emotional component for people's participation. In addition, several students cited evidence of widespread participation and learning on behalf of other students. While we also find that the specific universities were somewhat unresponsive and uninvolved during the earlier stages of the campaigns, students did make note of some policy changes that were being made later.

Social Media, Visual Media, and Social Change

Before presenting evidence on the role of social and visual media in the ITA movements, it is important to historicize the use of these types of media in social change. Regarding social media, the most prominent discussion in the academic literature has been attached to the Arab Spring and, specifically, social movements that led to the resignation of then-President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in February of 2011. Based on a survey of protesters who participated in demonstrations at Egypt's Tahrir Square, Tufekci and Wilson (2012) found that social media played an important role in bringing people out to protest. More than a quarter of surveyed protesters first heard about the protests via Facebook, and a similar portion disseminated videos and pictures of the events via Facebook. Twitter was also used to disseminate information. According to both Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) and Lim (2012), social media served three important purposes during the Egyptian revolution. First, it aided the formation of connections between previously disconnected activist groups. Second, it spread awareness of grievances beyond the small community of activist leaders. Lastly, it globalized the cause by spreading the appeal of the domestic movement beyond the nation's borders. Similar analysis of a Guatemalan justice movement in 2009 revealed that the use of Facebook in the movement extended beyond just discussion of justice, but was also focused on calls to action (Harlow 2011).

Importantly, evidence of the use of social media can also be seen in movements in the United States. Analyzing the use of the #BlackLivesMatter and #TCOT (Top Conservatives on Twitter) hashtags on Twitter after the death of Michael Brown at the hands of police officer Darren Wilson, researchers Ray, Brown, Fraistat, and Summers (2017) found that these hashtags operated to develop polarizing identities among activists by establishing narratives. Tweets associated with #BlackLivesMatter, on one hand, discussed themes focusing on police brutality, solidarity, and activism. On the other hand, the #TCOT tweets tended to focus on validating justifiable homicides, white victims of black criminality, and #BlackLivesMatter protesters as radical terrorists. In a similar vein, authors Brown, Ray, Summers, and Fraistat (2017) analyzed the use of the #SayHerName hashtag on Twitter, which was generally used to draw attention to violence against black women. This use of social media, according to the

authors, provided a critical space for intersectionality in activism given historical divides between mainstream feminism that focused on white women and mainstream anti-racism that focused on black men.

A common critique of optimism about the role that social media can play in collective action is that social media may encourage a form of participation that is limited to simple, relatively effortless endorsements of social causes that have little to no real impact and do not lead to direct action (Shirky 2011). This kind of participation has been popularly referred to as “slacktivism.” In addition, it is important to note that there is an inherent danger in the reliance on social media, as there can sometimes be opportunities for authoritarian institutions to co-opt these resources and quell activism and communication. A prominent example has been the limits placed by the Chinese government on its citizens’ internet access, minimizing access to information (Shirky 2011). Further, there is concern that social media may allow individuals to target and harass individuals who identify with or support marginalized groups without proper regulation (DeLisaColeman 2016; Fuchs 2017). However, as noted by Kidd and McIntosh (2016), this pessimism about the role of social media may be too quick to discount the possibilities of social media. Indeed, the authors highlight the need for more empirical evidence on the role of social media, a gap to which our own research contributes (Kidd and McIntosh 2016).

It is also important to note that the use of visual media has also been important to social movements in the past. Raiford's (2011) work on the role of photography in several critical moments of the struggle for freedom during the civil rights movement by black people¹ highlights the importance of visual media. In particular, the author emphasizes several instances in which the freedom movement was able to directly use the images of their struggle—including photos of lynching, civil rights movements, and black power—to direct a more empowered and connected narrative for freedom. The use and distribution of visual imagery was powerful for sending messages to the public and coalescing support. Similarly, Torres (2003) investigated the role of television media during various stages of the fight for black civil rights in the United States. Here, the author identified ways in which television media (and the television industry) implicitly supported the movement from 1955–1965 by creating identifiable heroes within the movement and villains among oppressors (and the

white police). Later, during the 1990s, this media framing diminished, with the primary characterization of black bodies being associated with crime.

How does the joint presence of these two forms of media change social movement perspectives in the current age? The research highlighted above illustrates several different ways in which the availability of social media and visual media, separately, may have been important to the ITA movements we discuss. However, we think it is important to note that modern social media resources have possibly lowered barriers to entry when it comes to the use of visual media. Combined with increased access to photographic technology, websites like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram are major, widely accessible ways for people to share images. Indeed, from our research, we find that a majority of the ITA movements in the United States used Tumblr, a free blogging platform, to distribute their images. In this way, modern forms of social media may have increased the role of visual media in social communication and, possibly, social movements.

The Importance of Social and Visual Media to ITA Movements

Scholars have noted new tactics emerging in mobilization and collective action movements (Broadhurst 2014). The ITA movement also exhibited this new reliance on technology to spread its message. As outlined previously, the first movement at Harvard University used Tumblr and YouTube to release pictures and videos about the issues of inclusion on Harvard's campus. These are two free social media platforms, which allowed the students to broadcast to the public their concerns about and experiences with racial microaggressions.

After the BuzzFeed article highlighting this project (Vingiano 2014), the public and higher education stakeholders in particular began giving the movement more attention. Students across the country shared the images from the Harvard ITA movement, primarily through social media. The student leaders we interviewed in our larger study about the beginning of this campus movement highlighted that Facebook, and to a lesser extent Twitter, allowed the students

to share the unrest at Harvard with students struggling at their own institutions. Facebook provided students the opportunity to post about Harvard's ITA movement in relevant group discussions, e.g., a Black Student Union page, and to share news about the movement quickly with other students who would be interested in voicing objections to the current campus climate. One student leader that we interviewed shared that

I think it's silly to disregard the importance and impact that social media can have, and you see it all the time, especially on...Twitter, where social media brings a message to the forefront, it starts a conversation, and it starts change. So using the power of social media, we were able to do the exact same thing, mostly through how we connected with our peers.

The increased attention given to student concerns about institutional inclusivity allowed students attending institutions other than Harvard to learn about this new method of expressing their apprehensions about the inclusivity of their institutions. Social media was a critical facilitator of this movement. The ability to easily take pictures and share them, for free, with the public increased the speed with which the movement spread to different institutions from varying regions of the United States. This forced institutional administrators to contend with the public's, in addition to the students', objection to the campus environment. This also gave students allies at different institutions and validated their feelings of concern about inclusivity at their campuses.

This all occurred within a constantly evolving national understanding of racism and other forms of discrimination facilitated by social media. While issues of inclusivity both within higher education institutions and broader society were not novel to everyone, social media increased the public's awareness of discrimination—particularly racially motivated acts in the years leading up to the first ITA movement.

It is important to note that social media also facilitated reprisals to ITA movements or their leadership as well. These reprisals were not a fully organized countermovement. However, the mobilization of individuals against campus ITA movements was facilitated by the internet, a new dimension in social movement dynamics (Peckham 1998). At some institutions, anonymous Facebook accounts responded to the ITA movement by leaving racial- or gender-based slurs in the official public spaces of the institutional movement. At

other institutions, Yik Yak posts were the primary vehicle for dissent. Yik Yak is a location-based social media platform, which allows users in a certain locale to anonymously post. Due to its anonymous nature, racially charged messages could be shared, targeting an institution's ITA movement with little recourse.² Whether using Facebook or Yik Yak, there is no evidence that only students participated in the negative commentary. There is evidence that community members participated in "policing" the actions of university students. Similar events have occurred with other movements, such as a community member creating a Valentine's Day card celebrating Adolf Hitler that was then unintentionally distributed by Central Michigan University's College Republicans (Associated Press 2017). Therefore, it would be inappropriate to label the resistance to ITA movements as solely led by peer students. In this way, social media facilitated students' ability to share concerns and find support across the nation while also facilitating negative responses. Though, even with the negative backlash, all the students interviewed felt that the ITA movement was worthwhile and valuable for the advancement of their specific institution, and higher education more broadly.

The use of permanent, personal, shareable media was important to the work of the movements. Generally, the pictures that defined the campaigns included the faces of students as they shared, in writing, their stories. In contrast to forms of protest that involve perhaps fleeting action, ITA collective action was able to immortalize their voices into a form that was meaningful and could be continually referenced. In this way, ITA movements publicly documented for the world evidence of the social problems against which they were advocating. As noted by one student that we interviewed:

My biggest thing about it was it's harder to ignore something written down than something you hear in passing, and you hear these stories of people being discriminated against, or you hear your friends say, oh, this person said this to me in my class, or at a party, or in the dining hall, but to actually see it on a whiteboard or written down and to read it yourself...I think hit home a lot more, because a lot of people are like holy—excuse my language—shit, that was really said to you, like, are you serious?

Not only did they make a significant use of visual media, but the narratives they shared also served a purpose. These were often fairly provocative statements, serving as both the truth of the participants' experiences, and also a clarion call

for consumers of the statements, whether they were students, faculty, or administrators. In their study of animal rights movements, Jasper and Poulsen (1995) found that moral shocks played an important role in the recruitment of strangers to a moral cause. The reflections of the students in our study suggest the same political forces were at work here, where the provocativeness of the statements themselves, combined with the faces of the participants, was important.

Conclusion

We have outlined how an innovative, replicable visual media tactic spread rapidly across the globe via social media and we posit that the combination of these two factors, innovation and replicability, contributed to the spread and success of these campaigns. The tactic itself personalized the calls for more equitable and inclusive campus environments, while the use of social media contributed to the spread and political power of the movements. In concert, visual and social media created a network of campaigns that could leverage their shared visions and tactics to impress upon their audiences the severity of the issues they were facing. Together, these forms of media seem to have contributed to a national (and global) environment where the addressing of these issues was not only important, but politically opportunistic. This view, in many ways, aligns with the ideas of political process theory within social movement literature, in which social movement mobilization can be spurred by changes in political opportunity (McAdam 1996).

The importance of social media to the spread and success of these campaigns does, however, raise questions about the equity of activism moving forward. As is also suggested by Baker and Blissett (forthcoming), personal and economic resources of students may influence the likelihood of those students participating in activism. As such, it will be important for scholars and activists to remain vigilant of oppressive environments even in places where there is little or no collective action. Still, we posit that without social media's ability to create a global network of antimarginalization activists, the movements may not have been as successful. This is important because it suggests that the creation of

community via social media can be a powerful tool not only in the traditional sense, where social media enables greater global engagement, but also in a practical sense, where social media is an active medium through which voices can come together in a unified voice to say, "We, too, are America."

Notes

- 1 It is important to note that the authors cited in this essay used various terms to refer to people, including "black" and "African American." We respect the authors' choices, but we use the term "black" in our own syntheses to maintain consistency.
- 2 The Yik Yak application has since been retired. While the circumstances of its closure are not completely clear, at least part of it may have been because of complaints about sexism and racism (Safronova 2017).

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