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Review of Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller, Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture

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Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller, **Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture**, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019, 216 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover), \$27.95 (paperback).

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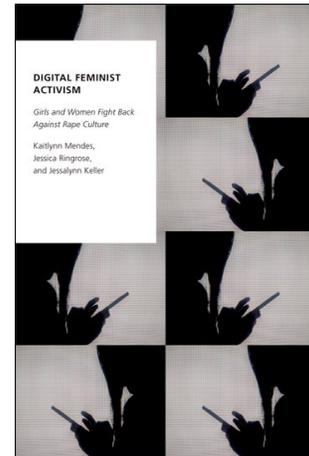
Women are sexually harassed at work. They are cat-called and wolf-whistled at when walking down the street. Rape survivors are accused of lying when they report their rapes. Girls are told crop tops are distracting and inappropriate for school.

These are a few examples of misogyny that Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller discuss in their book, **Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture**. Mendes is an associate professor in media and communication at the University of Leicester, Ringrose is a professor of the sociology of gender and education at the University College of London, and Keller is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication, Media and Film at the University of Calgary.

Whereas women previously took to the streets to protest patriarchy, they are now taking their activism online. Feminism is not dead, the authors argue; on the contrary, it has since the beginning of this century become increasingly visible through digital technologies. A variety of feminist communities exists today, and they are both “reimagined and expanded” through the use of new media (p. 1). The authors ask how girls and women are using digital technologies to document their experiences of sexism.

Mendes and associates analyze six cases studies: the Hollaback! website, the Everyday Sexism website, the Who Needs Feminism? Tumblr site, the #BeenRapedNeverReported Twitter hashtag, discussions with self-identified Twitter feminists, and information from a feminist group at a London school. The geographic focus is in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In their 21-month study, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK, the authors used a variety of social scientific research methods, including qualitative content analysis, thematic analysis, in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, surveys, and observations of online communities. To get an idea of the scope of the study, the authors report interviewing 78 girls and women and four men, and they analyzed more than 800 pieces of digital content (blog posts, tweets, and selfies).

In the introductory chapter, the authors outline four key arguments, which they revisit in the conclusion: digital feminist activism transforms participants’ lives, digital feminism is more complex and nuanced than one might expect, women and girls create digital strategies despite barriers to inclusion, and there is intense labor involved in this work. Here, Mendes and colleagues define rape culture as a culture that condones and normalizes sexual violence against women. Their work takes place in a time of backlash, especially through



the rise of Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) and what Vickery and Everbach (2018) call "mediated misogyny." Hashtag feminism is one way of resisting this backlash.

In chapter 2, the authors outline their conceptual framework, key theories, and methodological issues. They consider the concepts of affective economy and feminists as affective aliens. Other key concepts used are that of networked publics, networked affect, the political economy of digital culture, and affective platform vernaculars. The authors state explicitly that they are using an intersectional feminist perspective in their research, a theme that runs through the chapters and to which we will return later.

The remaining chapters are organized by research method. Chapter 3 presents an analysis of content from the Hollaback! website, the Everyday Sexism website, the Who Needs Feminism? Tumblr, and the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag on Twitter. In chapter 4, the authors report data from semistructured interviews with 18 feminist organizers of three of these campaigns. Chapter 5 reports survey findings from 46 Twitter users and interviews with 21 of these respondents to consider how Twitter is used as a pedagogical platform that creates digital affective counter publics among feminists across time and space. Chapter 6 consists of a discussion of the #BeenRapedNeverReported hashtag based on a thematic analysis and interviews with eight women. In chapter 7, the authors consider how teen girls use social media against rape culture, lad culture, and toxic masculinity by drawing on individual interview data as well as focus groups and an analysis of media artifacts. A part of this chapter discusses the hashtag #CropTopDay, which was a response to a Toronto girl being told that her crop top was "inappropriate" for school. In the final chapter, chapter 8, the authors provide a summary of their findings and directions for future research.

Within the context of postfeminism and neoliberal feminism, this comprehensive research by Mendes and associates is a welcome and timely contribution, primarily to the field of feminist media studies. The Internet, with all its egalitarian potential, has become the battleground for social and political issues of our time, with Fourth Wave feminists actively organizing but also facing hateful backlash, as can be seen in the rise of MRAs in the so-called manosphere. While parts of this project have been published as individual journal articles, the strength here lies in the combination the case studies form into a coherent whole.

"Digital Feminist Activism" is systematically organized with plenty of empirical evidence that supports the authors' conclusions. The combination of research methods is innovative and appropriate, making this book exemplary. As pointed out by the authors, gaining access to rich, qualitative data from human participants, including schoolgirls, is difficult. In addition to practical challenges, the researchers also faced emotional and psychological challenges in dealing with this book and the topic of rape culture for almost two years.

The book is meticulously documented with relevant and up-to-date references from a variety of academic fields. The list of references by itself is impressive. This is perhaps the result of synergy among the interdisciplinary authors. The nature of the book may attract audiences from not only feminist media studies but also media studies in general, gender studies, education, sociology, criminology, girls' studies, and cultural studies. Another strength of the book is its solid theoretical foundations. The book is chock-full of references to theoretical concepts that are applied to the case studies.

Readers may be more familiar with the MeToo hashtag that emerged in October 2017 than with some of the case studies included, but the authors were already in the final stages of completing their book at that time. Perhaps this makes the case studies even more interesting, as they did not gather the same amount of attention as the #MeToo. Even so, the authors managed to include references to the #MeToo movement. This work is closely related to Mendes's (2015) previous book, "Slutwalk: Feminism, Activism and the Media," in which she explores representations of the global antirape movement. While "Slutwalk" focused on one global movement, the current book is more expansive in dealing with a variety of case studies. Yet, several of Mendes's earlier findings reoccur here.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of "Digital Feminist Activism" is how the authors include discussions of intersectionality throughout the book. In chapter 3, the authors ask whether Hollaback!, Who Needs Feminism?, and Everyday Sexism are platforms for White, middle-class, cis-gendered women. They point out that only 3% of posts in the sample reflected concerns of nonconforming genders and that it was difficult to assess the race or ethnicity of contributors. In chapter 4, readers hear from Arpita Bhagat in Mumbai and Wacu Mureithi in Nairobi. Not surprisingly, both participants express reservations about the label of (Western) "feminism." In chapter 6, the authors include specific references to Black, Indigenous, and trans women in the context of rape. Here it is disturbing, but again not a surprise, that some (White) participants talked about rape in Africa or India, associating sexual violence with "other" geographic locations than their own (p. 140).

Yet, as the authors acknowledge in the conclusion, a lack of underprivileged voices is also a weakness of the book:

As we document throughout this book, an intersectional lens guided our analysis, and we paid particular attention toward the ways in which those with marginalized identities participated in our chosen case studies. Nonetheless, we recognize BAME [Black and Minority Ethnic communities] and LGBTQ+ communities are harnessing the power of digital platforms . . . and that these identity-specific campaigns are not present in this book. We acknowledge that this is both due to our positionality and the lack of media attention and mainstream visibility that digital feminist activism by black, Indigenous, queer, disabled and other marginalized groups receive. (p. 182)

Future research should widen the scope from a focus on White, middle class, cis-gendered women to include (subaltern) voices that are currently left out of digital feminist spaces, including those from the Global South. This is especially urgent in a time that the field of media and communication research confronts itself with its lack of diversity as expressed through hashtags such as #CommunicationSoWhite and #jstudiesowhite.

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