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Capstone Prospectus

Introduction

With the rise of social media usage, critical conversations about political issues, campaigns, and policies are frequently had online. Digital movements start as a response to political current events, providing a space to people who strive to be activists by sharing their voice and engaging with others in conversation. While scholarship has been done to understand the communicative patterns and rhetorical uses of the internet for federal political agendas (Grant and Cheek; Ferro-Santos and Sepulveda; Adebomi and Oluwabunmi), far less scholarship has addressed activism groups. Social justice activism groups are incorporating digital platforms to build community and create change-oriented campaigns. When justice organizations do their work with a digital-first method, an important opportunity appears for lush rhetorical and cultural analysis by communication and media scholars. UltraViolet is a nonprofit gender justice organization and self-proclaimed digital-first activism group founded by feminists in 2012 (UltraViolet). The group, with just over 30k followers on Instagram as of September 2026, publishes campaigns, often in the form of digitally made infographics that address political current events as feminist issues.

UltraViolet's Instagram posts use call-to-action language as a technique that invites the user to follow a link in order to join the campaign in any of the following ways: sign a petition, learn more via their website, download and save infographics to reshare, and join others in

expressing opinions among various comment sections. My work aims to understand the ways in which UltraViolet's content interpellates a subject who then is empowered to appropriate the messaging in their own contexts, and the affordances that allow this process. Scholarship has discussed these facets of media interaction separately, but as far as I am aware, my project will bring them into conversation together for the first time. In doing this work, an audience invested in digital-first activism, spreadable media, and media consumption patterns will hopefully discover corresponding interests. I believe my ultimate stake is in the way that media built to move impacts evolving social justice tactics produced by the fourth wave of feminism. Before addressing larger analysis and conclusions, I will first speak to the foundational theories that will serve as my theoretical framework along with my method of analysis.

I will perform a case study examining three sets of media produced by UltraViolet. The first media I will analyze is the subsection of UltraViolet's website that supplies information about Flock surveillance and Ulta Beauty. The second is the first post by UV on Instagram, the graphic itself and the caption. Lastly, I will look at two related TikToks that have spread the media UltraViolet produced about Flock and Ulta.

By performing a case study on their recent and ongoing campaign addressing Flock surveillance and Ulta Beauty, I aim to answer the following research questions: 1) how is the media (Instagram posts and website content) produced by UltraViolet built to be spread and circulated in digital spaces? 2) How does UltraViolet's content move in a life cycle pattern from publication to audience interaction, to user appropriation, to the point the content is no longer spread and what messages are being carried throughout with ideology and affordances in mind? 3) How does UltraViolet's use of communication tactics invite and prioritize community and

agency and how does this apply to broader characterizations of digital-first activism in the fourth wave of feminism?

Literature Review

Interpellation, Ideology, and Affordances

Ideology is everywhere and among everything. In engaging with French philosopher Louis Althusser, scholar Luke Ferretter describes the unconsciousness of ideology as it "comprises the stream of discourses, images and ideas that are all around us all the time, into which we are born, in which we grow up, and in which we live, think and act" (Ferretter 77). Althusser develops the scope of ideology as he describes interpellation or hailing as the operation in which ideology recruits or transforms individuals into subjects (Althusser). Expanding on the concept of hailing, Althusser argues that "hailing is such that they hardly ever miss their man," meaning that the subject recognizes when they are being recruited into a certain ideology (Althusser). Using the organization of UltraViolet then, their method of branding, their style, and the overall voice and tone of their posts present an ideology. When their content is published to an audience, those individuals will either recognize themselves as hailed–the subject–or not.

In an article regarding the advocating of Spanish citizens for universal healthcare, Alvarez incorporates interpellation as it, "allows for a more comprehensive understanding of political and social action in the context of mass protest," and "reveals the ideological positions of the subjects within the demonstration" (Alvarez 5). While Alvarez is not applying interpellation to a digital-first activism campaign, similar principles stand with my research object. When a user engages with and spreads the content of UltraViolet, it 'reveals the ideological positions' of the user. Depending on the context in which the media is spread, it may

reveal that the user is a feminist, believes in taking action, and chooses to share this identity and value with others.

The context in which a user engages with spreadable media can be tied back to theories of affordance and constraint. Scholar Andrew Schrock asserts that "communicative affordances are defined as an interaction between subjective perceptions of utility and objective qualities of the technology that alter communicative practices or habits" (Schrock 1232). On a digital platform like Instagram, "the designer primarily can control only perceived affordances" (Norman 39). A follower of UltraViolet, may then understand they are offered certain abilities to spread the message of the organization such as reposting an image, following a link, or leaving a comment. These are all affordances that adhere to the goals and utility of the content, but they also are allotted through the functions of Instagram as a platform. This is what Hutchby and Barnett identify as how affordances shape, "the conditions of possibility associated with an action: it may be possible to do it one way, but not another" (Hutchby and Barnett 151). UltraViolet encourages their followers to engage in activism that suits the possibilities of the technology. If a user wanted to repost to their followers, that is afforded to them; however, if they choose to reflect on a message by way of face-to-face conversation, this is not afforded to them directly on the platform. Additionally, spreading UV's message face-to-face is not an intended or prioritized possible action of the digital-first activism group's design. I seek to understand how the affordances of the digital platforms that UltraViolet's message circulates within ultimately allows a user to appropriate a message themselves, aligning their ideology with that of UV.

Appropriation

Theories of appropriation will be crucial to understanding the actions that UltraViolet invites their audience to partake in. I speak about appropriation in terms of audience content usage and the process by which a user spreads the message of the original content publisher but resituates it in their own individualized context. In a piece regarding media globalization, Wincharles Coker addresses John Thompson's theories of media globalization claiming, "the central tenant of Thompson's theory of media globalization is that media globalization is made possible when a media product is consumed by a local culture through the process of appropriation" (Coker 3). Coker summarizes that there are essentially "globalized diffusions and localized appropriations" (Coker 4). I believe my analysis will show that this is the case on a smaller scale for UltraViolet's content. They produce a 'globalized' message, and users appropriate it among their own localized profiles. To understand the mechanics of this, Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding is helpful. Hall provides a model that outlines the 'encoding' that produces a message, which is then programmed as meaningful discourse before it is decoded by an audience (Hall 165). It is the decoded meaning that has an "ideological and consequential effect" in which people may be 'persuaded' (Hall 165). When an audience has decoded meaning, I believe that is where there is an invitation to appropriate the message. Not only has the producer encoded the persuasive opportunity to appropriate, but the hailed audience receives that message and it is taken-up. In the case of UltraViolet, I believe their content is specifically made with this appropriation in mind, as a characteristic of their digital-first identity.

UltraViolet chooses to use call-to-action language in order to invite the user to appropriate the content via reposting, sharing, or downloading. Their profile corresponds with the idea that "successful creators understand the strategic and technical aspects they need in order to create content more likely to spread, and they think about what motivates participants to

share information and to build relationships with the communities shaping its circulation" (Jenkins et al. 196). While I do not intend to analyze UltraViolet for its success as an online activism organization, I do believe it is important to understand that they make spreadable content with the goal that it will be algorithmically successful. Their concern with the spread of the message is what allows or affords the appropriation of their message, as I aim to prove this in my forthcoming analysis. The way that the content is spread and the meanings that it takes throughout that life cycle is what I am ultimately invested in, especially as it influences trends in fourth wave feminism.

Activism and Fourth Wave Feminism

After demonstrating the key elements of my theoretical framework–interpellation, ideology, affordances, and appropriation–I hope to show how this framework has the potential to respond to and make up larger themes in activism and fourth wave feminism. Bart Cammaerts asserts that, "activism is a relatively new term, introduced in the mid-70s and referring to the ability to act and make or change history" (Cammaerts 217). Feminism, then, is a kind of activism with a "belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes in every stage of the society" (Mohajan, 2). There have been 3 complete 'waves' or time periods of focused feminist efforts that sought to bring about social change.

Starting in 2012, also the founding year of UltraViolet, the fourth wave of feminism began and is frequently noted as a new type of feminism "that depends on social media" (Mohajan 2). In these efforts, social media and the internet more broadly have become a "means of recruitment and fundraising" (Lewis et al. 1). However relevant the internet is to current activism efforts, scholar Van Laer proclaimed "that fast growing support and diffusion of protest

enabled via the Internet is followed by an even faster decline in commitment" and that "because of its low entry costs, Internet allows citizens to easily opt in and opt out of different protest issues and causes following their individual preferences and current priorities" (Van Laer 406). This idea was similarly supported by Lewis et al. in their study on the mobilization of an activism campaign on Facebook in 2014. When approaching my analysis, I will be concerned with the portion of this discussion that Van Laer described as an 'easy opt in and opt out.' This idea inherently lends itself to theories of interpellation, allowing a hailed audience to then appropriate the message in a resituated context. Additionally, it could be the affordances, the very design, of a social media platform that led to the 'fast decline in commitment' to a specific protest. These possibilities are exactly what I aim to explore in my analysis.

Methodology

I am performing a case study that will analyze three sets of media produced by UltraViolet and/or spread by their audience. First, I will outline the life cycle of UltraViolet's first Instagram post about Ulta Beauty's use of Flock surveillance. From production and publishing, reception and growth, response, and finally to resolution, tracking the graphic in this way will support the media as a communicative object produced in order to circulate. I anticipate my analysis will reveal that the media does so in a way that adheres to the affordances and constraints of various relevant platforms, while initially hailing an audience that can then appropriate the graphic themselves. I will also analyze the subpage of UltraViolet's website that is dedicated to their Drop Flock campaign. The subpage offers the observer the opportunity to read through FAQs which reinforce the issue as a specifically feminist one. Additionally, a user is invited on this subsection of the website to "take action," by sharing PNGs to their own social

media accounts, joining the "comment storm," and signing a petition (UltraViolet). The call-to-action language encourages the audience to appropriate or take-up the messaging. The last piece of content that makes up my object of analysis is the cross-platform posting of UV's Ulta graphics on TikTok. Two TikTok creators, "@rachel_mle" and "@essencicle," posted short videos regarding Ulta Beauty's relationship with Flock surveillance. The creators embed the messaging of UltraViolet while adjusting it to fit their personal agendas and branding. Analyzing these videos and their comment sections will reveal further stages in the life cycle of UV content and what about the content encourages it as a 'made-to-move' format.

A study by Sayeed and collaborators within a linguistic, philosophical, and political communication discipline analyzed political dogwhistles "where the utility of the message, from when it is born to its (potential) death, is accounted for in terms of its overall life cycle" (Sayeed et. al. 215). While their work focuses more broadly on patterns of linguistic circulation and understanding, my study will perform with similar investments in terms of tracking UltraViolet's message from its initial publication to a resting point. Another scholar performed a slightly similar methodology, yet on a larger scale. Anàlisi, using transmedia journalism, selected certain media materials and analyzed its design and content with field work, analysis sheets, and samples serving as their methodological tools. Instead of these tools, I will be analyzing selected content through the life cycle. Additionally, this study uses an archive of material, and I, in contrast, will be using three main sites of analysis. My goal is that my forthcoming analysis will bring theories of interpellation and ideology, affordances, appropriation, and fourth wave feminism into fruitful conversation together.

Honor Code: I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not. /s/ Lillian Metzler

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