AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS ACTIVISM

Social media, influence, and community building

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Introduction

As is acknowledged throughout the handbook, autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 1) The tradition is an exercise in reflection, culture, and communal analysis. The experience of self-reflection and deep critical work centering self demonstrates awareness, vulnerability, a commitment to situating personal knowledge, often in the service of activism and connectedness (Adams et al., 2017). The techniques center identity and invite the community to interrogate and engage with their own experiences (Adams et al., 2017; Are, 2021; Boylorn, 2018). Autoethnographic roots are foundationally narrative traditions that across the world had existed long before rules of rigor placed expectations on cultural and social phenomena and cannot be contained in a traditional sense (Bhattacharya & Kim, 2018; Griffin, 2012). Research on social media and autoethnography is emergent but is rapidly increasing (Atay, 2020; Atherton, 2020; Brown, 2019; Dunn and Myers, 2020) for several reasons. First, technology is embedded in everyday life. Second, digital natives see social media as a natural extension of their lived experiences and become more prevalent in autoethnography (Atay, 2020, Atherton, 2020). Third, the impacts of social movements often felt on college campuses, and in my role as an assistant professor of higher education leadership, I bear witness to the power of activism using social media and hear the stories from various stakeholders. National media outlets regularly look to social media to craft a story based on the curated posts of activists and storytellers who seek to shed light on social issues, and the global reach of the internet only amplifies this opportunity.

Often, silos, resource limitations, and context cloud shared understanding. Compelled by personal stories, captured using visual, audio, and text elements, groups, are spurred to collective action (Lantz et al., 2016). There are incredible scholars making sense of this work. I find myself needing new ways to make sense of the role social media data plays in the stories we tell about ourselves, the ways we position ourselves digitally and face to face, and how these are represented in understanding how online communities and social media function as narrative, is a promising step in meaning making. I am inspired by scholars of digital autoethnography...
As a Black, cisgender woman in the United States whose multiplicity of identity shows up in visually identifiable and culturally invisible ways, I walk in the discomfort of racially fraught spaces despite privilege. The stories and studies that reinvigorated social movements were painful, redemptive, and curious. In particular, the murder of George Floyd, the racially disproportionate survival outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the racialised and economised inequities experienced in a rapidly automated and technological environment have shaken my core. Academics often accept norms to participate in the exercise of academia and its perceived rights and privileges. I am no different. The options for someone in my position are few: be outspoken in exemplifying truth to power, work within systems in an attempt to change systems, or passively acquiesce, enjoying the privileges that come with being seen as nonthreatening, either in stature, voice, or study. Despite the clear, liberating voices of brave and resolute autoethnography (Griffin, 2012), I have admittedly used every choice. Boylorn (2013) describes the dichotomy best in her autoethnography, including her life and work as a blogger and activist as

being pulled in two directions, one insisting that I keep my mouth shut when other people were around, and the other requiring that I live my life with my mouth open.

My audience further shifted from family members to an academic audience.

This came to a climax when I took on dissertation mentorship and worked with students who felt confined by traditional requirements of demonstrating rigor, objectivity, and analysis. I wanted better for them.

For marginalised communities, this challenge abounds. Bhattacharya and Kim (2018) articulate a related struggle as they challenge the qualitative discipline to become culturally expansive enough to consider how knowledge derives from cultural traditions that disrupt standard Westernised expectations of rigor and process. The work aligns with my articulation of the courage necessary for authenticity in qualitative research. There is power in the representation and possibilities of cultural ways of knowing. Using his own story through an analysis of six months of Twitter posts and related engagement methods, Atherton (2020) sees his study, and digital autoethnography, as emancipatory for teachers who many seek to express themselves as they navigate a global pandemic and surge of technological change. The resulting empowerment impacts activism and expands understanding. Mai and Laine’s (2016) autoethnographic study on blogging activism and micropolitics for women in Tunisia and Vietnam is one such example, as they “consider the dynamics of oppression and resistance in the context of daily concerns, intergenerational encounters and conflicts, and the shaping of a global identity” (p. 895) using constructed meaning making of Facebook posts, Facebook groups, and Tumblr posts. Given the flexibility and nuance of autoethnographic strategies, engaging in these studies requires the courage and trust of researchers to create possibility models inclusive of culture and community. The hope is that the resulting experience is a story of survival, change, and joy in the academy. Pillay’s (2020) essay highlights the growing chasm between social media’s
reach and open expression in activism while acknowledging the gaps in understanding between the academic community and a growing population of scholars committed to diversifying knowledge production.

Activism in autoethnography aligns social justice and transformational qualitative pedagogy, feminist paradigms, and critical theories. Social media platforms as data offer a technological solution to gains and shifts in knowledge over time, both as a record of behavior or a suggestive tool. Digital communities offer solace and respite (Mai & Laine, 2016; Orth et al., 2020; Tanksley, 2019) to many marginalised communities, in many cases fortifying them with spaces for joy and release that are at times unavailable. Tanksley’s (2019) dissertation study of the impact of social media and activism found that amid such movements, including #sayhername, #BlackLivesMatter, and Black women, college students use social media and the resulting online communities as places of social support, empowerment, and visibility. Online community involvement has grown exponentially as well as the protests for divestment, improved living conditions, academic programs, racial and gender discrimination, and financial support. Social media companies are aware of the power of these communities, and the most popular of these embed community language in guidelines and descriptions of the platforms.

The power of community in activism

There is a broader personal history to my collective awareness. Personal testimony has long been instrumental in my life. Praise reports were a tradition growing up in a charismatic Christian household. These are best described as individual stories of resilience against all odds, offering hope that faith would provide no matter the circumstance. These stories were told with a flourish. Wearing their Sunday best, my elders would wait patiently for their opportunity to share. Even as a child I could recall the storytelling cadence. The beginning struggle or difficult circumstance, followed by the crossroad or moment all hope was lost, a glimmer of hope, the choice to seek God, and concludes with the blessing that eventually flowed forth. Whether supporting struggling families, protesting racial injustices, or offering familial capital to those lacking, these stories were a foundation for progress. The resultant victories offered hope to keep going even through insurmountable odds in these churches. The message was clear. No matter what, faith and perseverance lead to freedom and victory. Call and response fervently urged the congregation to engage:

Call: God is good
Response: All the time
Call: And all the time
Response: God is good

I remember the excitement of these stories as a child, yet also feeling nervous, as if someone would ask me to stand and share God’s goodness at any moment. The support within the room was beautiful but also asked a vulnerability of me that I could not provide. However, it was easy to find my way; the outline came in the form of a song I hear as loudly now as I could then:

When I look back over my life
And I think things over
I can truly say that I’ve been blessed
I’ve got a testimony
Sometimes I couldn’t see my way through
But the Lord He brought me out
Right now I’m free
I’ve got the victory
I’ve got a testimony
I have a testimony

—Clay Evans “I Got a testimony”

My formative years consisted of this tradition at least once a week. I have mixed emotions about its utility. I found myself questioning my loyalty to my faith traditions regularly because of my life’s circumstances, my inability to be vulnerable, to demonstrate the unflappable strength and martyrdom often performed by Black women, and ultimately, to submit my fear and struggles to prayer. Yet, despite my inability to give back, the prayers and stories from those memories are currency in my life, providing encouragement and trust in me no matter the circumstance. This fortification did not require an academic term yet remains as meaningful a lesson as I have ever known. As a community member, I’ve inherited these stories, and I am indebted, recognizing a personal responsibility to show up for the community. The value of storytelling and community stories that elicit loyalty, create change, and inspire hope will never leave my subconscious.

These stories often occur face to face, yet parallels exist in the comfort of oral tradition and digital narrative (I now use social media to make sense of honor I bestow on church elders while unpacking the racialised and gendered complexities of these faith traditions). Today, I can connect with former members of my “church homes,” supporting community causes, laughing at memes that depict the culture of our shared upbringing. Facebook pictures of church trips are a source of comfort and feel like a breach of privacy. Social media shifts in ways that include online communities and digital diaries. The resultant data, evidence of revisiting memories and documenting experiences depict these complexities.

Dating myself as a MySpace user and LiveJournal lurker, I have witnessed the evolution of the online community. Users collect artifacts representing their feelings at the time and context in both examples. Timestamps allow a captive audience to lock into the story, navigating through as quickly as new content is posted. Social media provides a textbook definition of cultivating a story in all of its decadence. Influencers are paid to curate lives of aspiration. Indeed, these are often embellished to seem idyllic but remain effective. Successful storytellers find a niche or position and lean into that content. These feelings seep into everyday lives, the personal and professional, and can impact activism. Naturally, autoethnographic methods and the resultant analysis of naturally occurring events in an organic social, cultural, and political context is well suited to this structure (Atherton, 2020).

More than ever, social media offers connectivity, providing community and space for expression formerly limited by geographic bounds (Tanksley, 2019). For some, these bonds represent the only safe outlet for self-expression. Technology has become so ubiquitous that it has developed unique cultural identities with rules and expectations (Atay, 2020). Technological connectedness has been a balm for many who could not connect based on identity (Tanksley, 2019). Community builds passion and belief that we are greater together than apart and is a foundation of activism.

Faulkener’s (2019) autoethnography uses poetry and vignettes to offer propositions that echo collective response’s influence. The study’s vignette describes activism addressing racist and sexist behavior at a university. The study surmises that (1) Autoethnographic stories can make people feel shame (pathos); (2a) Shame is one way to get those in power to act (ethos);
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(2b) Shame, fear, and rage are closely related; and (3) We can use autoethnography to shame those in power to do the right thing (logos) (p. 555). In this study, public acknowledgment and collective rage resulted in change. Cultural and community support and the amplification of problems in the online setting has created unprecedented opportunity to research the impact of lived experience and behavior mediated in the digital environment.

Across the globe, current events demonstrate the power of social media in activism, advocacy, and research. The power of social media activism has quickly spread to higher education. Autoethnography as influence is primed to transform civility education through social media engagement (Gale & Wyatt, 2019). As with testimony and influence, social media relies on personal connection and storytelling. Activism is, therefore, empowered by the autoethnographic account. The tradition “speaks against or provide alternatives to, dominant, taken-for-granted and harmful cultural scripts, stories or stereotypes” (Adams et al., 2017, p. 3). When this criticality is enmeshed in a methodological opportunity, it is wise to explore its potential as fully as possible.

Young and McKibban (2014) use collective autoethnography to describe the experience of developing a Safe space training at a Midwest university. While a dated example, the study is helpful in organisationally guiding the reader through intentional meaning-making. The authors name the problem of marginalisation and homophobia. This study plainly states intention, an activist call to action, within its purpose. The study oscillates between authors, offering their perspectives, challenges, and relational proximity to developing the training, supporting participants, navigating professional feedback, and collaboration. The authors reiterate this call to action throughout their narratives and analysis using relational dialectic theory. While this example did not use social media, the study demonstrates activism, autoethnographic study, and a call that empowers a community, as activists acknowledged in more recent studies (Are, 2021).

Given the communities of support for coalition builders online, there is much to gain from engaging social media as an effective autoethnographic tool. Are’s (2021) autoethnography of shadowbanning and censoring nudity on Instagram is one such example. She was inspired by activism addressing censorship, particularly in the disproportionality of banning sexuality in social media content disproportionately affecting “women, athletes, educators, artists, sex workers, the LGBTQIA+ community and people of color” (p. 3). Social media outlets targeted restrictions on whose bodies are acceptable to display and in what ways had personal and professional implications for anyone choosing to express themselves. The author’s experiences were depicted in sample posts to her followers via Instagram, where she experienced shadowbanning. The engagement metrics were also captured based on specific post content. In addition, her experience was captured on major news outlets around the world, during which time the #EveryBODYVisible hashtag campaign emerged to challenge the policing of select bodies. Are’s (2021) study demonstrates the risks, consequences of shadowbans, and implications for content creators, offering community and research that further challenges the status quo using her own social media data and experience.

Social media as dataset, culture, and community provide a great opportunity, yet navigating content is often unclear. I use a personal story to highlight some of the tensions that autoethnography may experience in this work.

Perceived influence

Twenty “ish” years ago, I worked as an associate for a video dating service. We sold upscale dating packages. Vintage commercials for their services are used as the punchline for jokes on YouTube. The job was to conduct one on one interviews/sales pitches.
to singles in search of partners. The office was fancy, which might be called moody academia in current aesthetics. From allowable office décor, the sales script, and the way we dressed, every decision was selected to depict an exclusive atmosphere. I was the only Black employee at that branch. I was, by far, the largest woman by stature.

Circumstances had long ago made going home an impossibility, and reentering that community of support felt impossible. A public family tragedy moved me farther and farther from the resilience narrative that was the fortification of my youth. I had no testimony. I needed a job. I equated professionalism with what I saw online … at that time that meant wearing business professional, tamed hair, speaking softly, not making waves. I straighten my hair. A diet of Ephedra pills, one boiled egg, almonds, a salmon filet or chicken à la George Foreman grill, and unlimited spinach kept my weight down. I went to thrift stores and purchased three blazers and three shells. I was ready. Not knowing what I was doing made me commit to looking the part and doing what I had to do to represent success. So I laughed away personal criticisms of differences, now becoming the punchline of jokes that come in these types of environments.

Content creators and researchers who seek audiences (admittedly or not) curate a style, design, and way of being. Lee and Pausė’s 2016 collaborative ethnography illustrates the significance of accepting the stigma of fatness in the healthcare community. Their research identifies the dismissive nature of many healthcare professionals who dismiss healthcare concerns and focus only on size, as defined by a system that ignores differences in diverse populations. The office was designed to make potential clients feel unique and highly selective in the workplace example. The salespeople were expected to represent an ideal I did not possess. It was a sales tool. As with the job, social media often runs the risk of selling personality at the expense of an authentic story. Using digital artifacts, autoethnography balances feeling and representation. Nevertheless, authenticity always rears its head. Hiding cannot last forever; eventually, life and research demand learning into vulnerability.

Vulnerability

A certain nervousness comes from having someone peer over your shoulder. I remember the slight chill that would take over my body when I knew I was being “shopped”, a sales phrase that meant a manager was pretending to be a client, or listening in to my sales pitch. Cool beads of sweat would slowly trickle down my spine before speaking. I’d take a deep breath and say a silent prayer that evidence of my nervousness would not appear as wet marks on the back of my blouse. Supervisors looked for the same things, confidence and exclusivity, enthusiasm, persistence, and above all, adherence to the script. As a Black woman in this space, I had to balance demonstrating an exclusiveness that was not extended to my being. More clearly, what I mean is that we were expected to create a selective and luxurious environment, but I also had to demonstrate that I knew my place and would defer to clients who might demean or outright dismiss me. I was often given potential clients who were unlikely to choose the service, find potential matches, or meet our very loose requirements. The sales shops were evidence that we were performing the job effectively. An intercom was placed in each office so that the sales team could listen in on a client interview at any given time. A manager required me to speak with a potential client who had no intention of purchasing the service and public history of violence towards women. Later, I was told that I could use the practice.
There was a significant vulnerability in demonstrating competence in this example. In research, there is a desire to demonstrate competency and success. Autoethnography as activism in social media forces the author to risk showcasing strengths, challenges, and positions. The method itself is often challenged and dismissed as selfish. At once, autoethnography lay bare the need for introspection and the introspection itself. Incorporating social media catalogs shared identity sometimes chronologically opens researchers up to scrutiny and can blur the lines between personal and professional. Naming this reality may help to liberate analysis and to recognise the sacrifices necessary to use this data, including shame, discomfort, and, in some cases, reputation. In addition, the problem addressed by a researcher activist may become a target, with those seeking to oppose a given position now equipped with enough information to launch personal attacks. Social media adopters often mitigate these risks by leaning on a good representation of themselves to influence or manage outside perceptions.

Filter: The Tissue

I recall a conversation where a district manager visited the office and coached – the district manager sitting across from one of my colleagues at a small, round table. Following a short sample sales pitch we all watched, he immediately started launching rapid-fire insults about her performance and experience. I was surprised to see this publicly and admittedly a bit nervous. I watched as she attempted to defend herself, and then she began to shrink in the chair. Her eyes welled up with tears. I remember watching her reach for a box of tissues at a small, round table separating her and the manager. It seemed like a split second; the manager grabbed the box of tissues, pushed his chair back, and stood up with them. Without comforting my colleague, he explained that when you force a client to consider the worst in themselves, and they demonstrate weakness (meaning feelings of inadequacy, frustration, or sadness) – the vulnerability becomes an opportunity to sell. He explained that it is in our nature to reach for tissues as my colleague had. To wipe away the evidence of our vulnerability. If the tissues are not there, vulnerabilities remain. From that day on, I knew two things, I could no longer keep tissues in the office, and I could not continue to work for the company shortly after lawsuits uncovered the realities of the business based on misrepresentation, exorbitant costs, and the potential risks for participants.

Social media is often representative of an ideal image. Profile pictures and bios are a digital representation of putting your best face forward. During this time, my Friendster and AOL messenger account profiles were idyllic. The rare emotional expression usually came by changing my bio to vaguely melancholy song lyrics. Social media represented hope and promise, and, at first, the vulnerability was unnecessary. The most difficult times in my life were captured through a filter suggesting everything was fine until I could find meaningful community. It was not until national news captured the realities of my former workplace that I began engaging with online communities of former employees with similar experiences. The tissue represents techniques creators use to soften, filter, or strengthen emotion. As ugly as the analogy is, revisiting stories for analysis through a filtered lens runs the risk of edited memories, even intraditionally accepted settings. Atherton (2020) describes the role of the online persona, stating “the self can be virtual but complementary to the physical self” (p. 51). While it is human nature to revise personal stories, social media data offer a glimpse into feelings or interactions at a given point and time. In autoethnography, researchers must reflect on these in honest ways, which cause as little harm to the individuals who represent characters in the story.
Ethics

Social media content demands essential ethical considerations for autoethnographic work (Ellis, 2007; Taylor & Pagliari, 2018). Sharing participants’ reactions or content data without consent is an increasing ethical challenge (Lee, 2018). The nature of both social media and social justice activism represent personal decisions that supporting characters may not be comfortable sharing in the academic publication may be an unwelcome disclosure (Orth et al., 2020). Individuals who feel safe in a social group may speak with candor, may disclose information that they usually would not. Although their contributions are a part of an autoethnography collective story, the right to share those stories, voices, and images in the name of research is more complex (Ellis, 2007). In addition, the unveiling of a study rooted in activism and disclosing challenges may change the nature of the group itself, a consequence that has disproportionate consequences for marginalised groups. Finally, specific considerations go beyond traditional notions of protecting human subjects (Ellis & Calafell, 2020). The following are 10 concerns that are especially useful when working with the data of online communities.

1. Under what pretenses will the researcher engage the group? (Ellis & Calafell, 2020)
2. Do I have the permission of an individual or group to include them in a research study? (Ellis, 2007)
3. How will social media data be used in the context of the project? (Pearce et al., 2020)
4. What is considered public vs. private? (Taylor & Pagliari, 2018)
5. How does the research define the differences between personal content and collaborative content? (Boylorn, 2018; Ellis, 2007)
6. How is the representation of group data essential for data collection? (Ellis & Calafell, 2020)
7. What steps are taken to inform individuals of their inclusion and related impacts in the study? If none, why not? (Townsend & Wallace, 2016)
8. What steps have I taken to keep unwitting participants safe? (Ellis, 2007)
9. How, if at all, will online community participation be impacted by the researcher’s data gathering and analysis? (Pearce et al., 2020)
10. How do I distinguish analysis of textual, aural, and visual data and the relationships within and between each? (Pearce et al., 2020).

Brown (2019) uses a computational digital autoethnographic methodology to mitigate additional risks inherent in revisiting digital presence, analyzing her own social media posts over eleven years. She urges autoethnography considering using social media to make rigorous and demonstrated efforts, including a computation to place appropriate values on audio, video, and textual data. Dunn and Myers (2020) contend that digital autoethnography by design requires the analysis of navigating digital identity. For example, their study navigated the impact of co-authoring a romantic relationship on a social media platform. The study is a reminder that co-autoethnography in the digital space has its own set of challenging parameters of data use, explicitly using the communication to highlight impact, change, or design. Other researchers’ focus on data usage in ways that mitigate representation issues, such as using metrics and social media data chronologically (Are, 2021). The ability to do this is dependent on the social media in use. For example, while tools like Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, and TikTok build in chronological mechanisms for achievable, buildable storytelling (Orth et al., 2020; Walker Rettberg, 2014), communities such as Clubhouse and Snapchat are more temporary locations for content, with derived data more often represented as observation data.
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Still, other researchers choose to outline the challenges of autoethnography in the digital world clearly. Boylorn (2013) provides an early accessible example of authentically understanding the overlap I describe.

Auto/ethnography as a method allows me to write (about/for) my life and to make sense of it. Blogging allows me to do that in a more open space, which jeopardizes my anonymity but creates a larger public space for the kinds of conversations auto/ethnography should instigate.

(p. 2013)

In her work, she describes the expansion of her community, and the personal responsibility she feels to “take house business to the streets” (p. 80). The span of Boylorn’s reach and accessibility as a blogger and activist is significant. In her work, she named the duality or content she creates, recognizes the risks inherent in coupling both and actively chooses to do so in the name of activism. As an academic, author of the Crunk feminist collective blogger and online community, and a Black Feminist, she uses a cultural lens to make meaning out of her experiences and identities in a larger cultural context.

Pearce’s (2020) autoethnographic study sheds light on the unique experiences marginalized groups face while surviving and researching traumatic, yet all too common occurrences within the community. Her case study provides a reflection addressing the secondary trauma as a researcher of trans peoples’ experiences in healthcare. Her own provides a care-centered framework that implores education to develop mechanisms for increased support as researchers navigate cultures, bodies, and circumstances subjected to trauma. Her work is a reminder of the labor inherent in these studies and offers suggestions such as advocating for additional supervisory community space collaborative and social systems to be responsive to the trauma that disproportionality impacts marginalized students (Pearce et al., 2020). When considering activists’ work, a duty of protection for self and the communities impacted in disclosure and amplification of contributions must be handled with care.

Conclusion

Autoethnography will increasingly include reflections on and artifacts from social media. Higher education can benefit from these practices from multiple viewpoints. Leadership, in conception, development, and sustenance, requires intentional reflection. Social media provides a mirror to aid in understanding the varied viewpoints that converge to change over time. As in the examples of activism understanding social justice in the college, context must include these expressions using data gathered from social media content.

Similarly, understanding the student experience through narrative data captured in social media expression is essential in harnessing the fiery passion and action that often leads to social change. Social media also provides connection and autoethnography aids in understanding the role of connection in organising and liberating thoughts around identity and social position. The democratising opportunities to share individual stories in online communities are captured and memorialised as evidence of perspective-shifting, understanding differences, and demanding change. The studies highlighted in the chapter offer evidence of these developments, enhancing commitment to social justice. Community reflections in autoethnography allow researchers the opportunity to add depth, spurred by the aided recall of data captured and affirmed in the online environment.
Using my own experiences, I have attempted to demonstrate how autoethnography is malleable using personal lived experience and experiences to connect my cultural reality and societal frameworks. The connections I navigate, expectations I straddled, and communities I honor are represented using social media memories I can easily recall. As a research tool, the medium allows the First to connect with the naming of individual stories with the nuance and context they deserve. Next, these data allow the researcher to reconnect with communities of shared experience, related literature, and theoretical frameworks where applicable. The data also represent authenticity in commitment to social justice, freedom, and authentic joy. Issues impacting marginalised populations are often unsafe positions to hold publicly, and there is a sense of responsibility to make safe choices. Autoethnography by design is a method of emancipation. Personal data analysis aids in studying cultural norms, traditions, pedagogy, and social action even when it may not be safe to do so. For example, social media data give a descriptive record of actions that support and strengthen groups in activist contexts to understand the response to recent educational events. Reflection using social media can be tremendously effective, especially those willing to share their own experiences to inform change. A willingness to engage in a rigorous, ethical, and identity-centered process significantly benefits higher education and those seeking to support social justice initiatives.

References


