Thinking in hashtags: exploring teenagers’ new literacies practices on twitter

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Keywords
Social media, Twitter, new literacies, narrative, adolescence

Disciplines
Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Higher Education | Instructional Media Design | Online and Distance Education | Secondary Education

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Thinking in hashtags: exploring teenagers’ new literacies practices on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates how three high school students in the USA developed new literacies practices through their participation in teenage Twitter. Data was collected from two sources, including archival data from participants’ Twitter over a two-year span, and semi-structured interviews. Results found that teenagers developed a number of practices that facilitated orientation to cultural conventions of teenage Twitter, helped them mobilize followers for participatory events, and led to reflective awareness of how to tell stories on Twitter. This study suggests that teenagers used the affordances of Twitter in order to craft multimodal narratives that are co-constructed, participatory, nonlinear, and emergent. Thinking in hashtags, for participants, is a kind of action that serves to develop affinities of relation (to friends, to pop culture, and to new knowledge) through mediatized ‘vital life stuff.’

Introduction

I’m starting to think in hashtags. Lucy

Now twenty-one years old and a senior in college, Lucy started using Twitter in 2009 as an eighth grader; her first tweet simply announced ‘doing homework.’ Her early tweets chronicled her life, with one reading, ‘no power. awesome’ while another wondered, ‘really? why does the world hate me so?’ For the next three years, Lucy gradually became more engaged with Twitter. As an eighth grader, she tweeted once per day; four years later, as a high school senior, Lucy was tweeting ten times per day. Simultaneously, her Twitter practices were changing as well; introspective, journal-like tweets became more participatory, as she contributed information on important topics, and offered opinions through hashtags. In May 2013, following a period of frequent posting, Lucy, then a junior in high school, tweeted, ‘I’m starting to think in hashtags.’

On the other hand, Ryan, now a junior in college, recalled his early decision to not use Twitter at a time when all of his friends participated on the site: ‘I don’t really like Twitter, the hashtag seems stupid.’ Though Ryan eventually became a prolific and creative participant user, his non-engagement with the hashtag, a key feature of the social media space, encourages literacy researchers, teachers, parents, young people, and others to think critically about what it means to think in hashtags. Thinking in hashtags might be shorthand for how young people develop, adopt, and adapt new literacies on Twitter.

How does the use of Twitter help young people practice literacy? How do young people learn how to story themselves on teenage Twitter through the use of a seemingly simple tool – the hashtag? This study is part of a growing research interest in exploring how social media offers new possibilities for...
literacy practices (e.g., new ways to story ourselves, our world, and others) (Page 2013; Gleason and von Gillern 2018).

This two-year-long case study of three adolescents’ participation on Twitter investigates the following research question: What (new) literacies practices do teenagers participate in on Twitter? It explores the way that ‘thinking in hashtags’ may suggest new ways of thinking, being, and feeling for teenagers on Twitter. This study contributes to a line of research that explores whether Twitter might be considered a new literacy practice (Greenhow and Gleason 2012; Gleason 2016), and considers how teenagers’ participation on Twitter blurs traditional boundaries (i.e., authorship/readership; traditional/emergent literacies; thinking/feeling/being; private/public). Ultimately, this study brings to light a range of practices on Twitter undertaken by young people that may suggest new directions in research, theory, and pedagogical practice.

Context matters: what is ‘literacy’ on Twitter?

Twitter is a popular social media space for young people. According to recent survey data, 33% of young people aged 13–17 use Twitter (Lenhart 2015), though among 16–17 year olds, roughly 50% of this group use Twitter (Zickuhr and Rainie 2014). Twitter is a microblog/social network site in which users create their own content, tag, and share it. For example, Lori tweeted, ‘When I don’t straighten my hair or wear makeup I look like a boy with long hair. #oh #yolo’ Lori included the hashtag #yolo as a way of participating in teen culture through her use of the phrase yolo (You Only Live Once). Through brief messages called tweets (formerly restricted to 140, now 280 characters), users can publish a variety of multimodal texts, including print, images (e.g., jpegs or gifs) and short videos. Users participate by replying to a tweet, liking (or favoriting) it, or bringing another user into the conversation with a mention. Additionally, people use a range of multimodal texts to communicate on Twitter (i.e., images, videos, and graphic systems like emoji and emoticons). Twitter users share content related to a particular interest, often through the use of a hashtag (Gleason 2013). Twitter is a hybrid cultural space, in which designed functions of Twitter (e.g., the tweet) co-exist with user-designed social practices, such as the hashtag, invented by Twitter user Chris Messina and is currently one of the most prominent elements of the space (Greenhow and Gleason 2012). Through the hashtag, Twitter makes visible users’ textual practices, allowing literacy researchers, teachers, students, parents, and others to trace literate practices over time.

Following Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič (2000), I conceptualize literacy practices as what people do with language and literacy. On Twitter, practices are influenced by the affordances of the platform, individualistic expression, and cultural norms shaped by people’s attitudes and beliefs. Practices can be thought of as ‘existing in the relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals’ (2000, 8). To describe what people do with language, and the values and beliefs they place on these activities, it is necessary to observe and explore the interactions between people.

New literacies scholars argue for the importance of digital literacy, in addition to traditional (i.e., print-based) literacy (Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Coiro et al. 2014; Greenhow and Gleason 2012; Knobel and Lankshear 2014). New literacies scholars conceive of literacy broadly, from a sociocultural perspective, emphasizing that it is dynamic, multimodal, situationally specific, and socially mediated. Digital technologies influence, and are influenced by, new literacies. An apt definition comes from Steve Apkon: ‘Literacy is the ability to express oneself in an effective way through the text of the moment, the prevailing mode of expression in a particular society’ (2013).

Literacy is also multimodal, existing across multiple modes including print, image, audio, gesture, and others (Kress 2003). Finally, digital technologies are socially mediated; people experiment with them and adapt them for their own use, as in the creation of the hashtag. Davies (2012) has argued that, through social media, young people engage in social acts previously impossible. They are able to co-create narratives through images and text that suggest friendship, identity expressions, and youth culture.
Knobel and Lankshear (2014) argued that new literacies practices (or ways of thinking, acting, doing, and becoming) are ‘participatory, collaborative, distributed,’ drawing attention to how, in social media (as elsewhere), new practices emerge that challenge traditional ways of reading, writing, thinking, and becoming (98). Authorship and audienceship merge, as multiple authors co-construct, curate, and create stories from multimodal texts that use the shared codes of popular culture. As such, literacy scholars have suggested that youth practices are ‘significantly more complex and varied than traditional literacy curricula and externally imposed standardized assessments currently permit’ (Mills 2010, 262).

Methods

I used a case-study method (Yin 2003) to investigate the new literacies practices of a select group of highly active users who used Twitter daily. Three participants, all from a suburban town in the eastern U.S. and acquainted with each other, were enrolled in the study in March 2013. As a result of a pilot study (Gleason 2016), I was familiar with the participants and wanted to continue to investigate their literate practices on Twitter over an extended period of time. Since 2009, I have been a daily participant on Twitter, one who considers Twitter to be a significant social space. As an active Twitter user, I am a participant in professional or scholarly purposes of social media (Author) and an observer of the unique cultural context of teenage Twitter. Twitter represents a powerful influence on popular culture, and the all-purpose hashtag was the star of a comedy skit featuring Justin Timberlake and Jimmy Fallon, in which the duo punctuated their conversation by hashtagging everything. Recently, Twitter has become the rhetorical platform for U.S. President Donald Trump, whose often-provocative statements (and #fakenews hashtags) spread far and wide. Twitter, and the hashtag, are so popular that even those who do not use the platform are aware of it – the hashtag, in short, has arrived.

This study is informed by digital research methods, including the use of ‘virtual’ or ‘cyber’ research methods. In keeping with the ‘digital-first’ nature of internet research, participants were recruited and enrolled via digital methods. For example, I made professional connections via the Association for Internet Research (AoIR), and was introduced to a (small) network of adolescents interested in participating in the study. Participants who expressed interest in the study, and were willing to join a study of a male researcher unknown to them, and to submit their entire Twitter archive, were then enrolled in the study.

For over two years of the study, I communicated with study participants through Twitter, tweeting @ them, retweeting them, and occasionally using the direct-messaging feature. Data from three focal participants included two data sources: their archived Twitter feed (e.g., ‘archive’) and participant interviews. All three participants produced thousands of tweets during the study, with one creating over 20,000 tweets. For this study, I collected Twitter data representing all their Twitter activity (see Table 1). Participants requested their Twitter archive and sent it to me in 2015.

Since I was interested in what it means to ‘think in hashtags,’ I conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the relationship between new literacies practices of teenage Twitter and the social, cultural, and cognitive significance of these practices. Interviews were conducted after an initial round of data analysis was completed at the end of 2015. Topics discussed during the interview included: learning how to use Twitter; the development of new literacies practices; outcomes of particular practices; and public recognition on Twitter. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 min,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Data collection period</th>
<th>Number of tweets collected</th>
<th>Interview date collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>August 2012–August 2014</td>
<td>22,529</td>
<td>January 30, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>March 2009–August 2013</td>
<td>7033</td>
<td>January 19, 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and took place on Zoom, a video conferencing platform. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Looking at the table, it is apparent that the data collection periods are not uniform for participants. Rather, data was collected from when participants began using Twitter, through the period when they started college. This methodological decision is consistent with my theoretical focus on exploring new literacies practices of adolescents (e.g., high-school students).

Data analysis

A constant comparative approach (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corbin 2008) was used in order to develop theory about how young people practice literacy (literacies) in teenage Twitter. Guided by a symbolic interactionist perspective that views data analysis and theory development as constructivist activity, I collected ‘rich, substantial, and relevant’ data from young people’s Twitter archive (Charmaz 2006, 32) and compared it with earlier theorizing on teenagers’ new literacies practices on Twitter (Gleason 2016).

This study is informed by two related perspectives: first, participants’ Twitter activities are envisioned as narrative, guided by a humanistic desire to ‘write themselves into being’ (Boyd 2008). Narrative, as Bruner reminds us, facilitates the construction of reality (1991) through features such as story time, the particular topic of the story, and the overall ‘truthiness’ of the experience (Colbert 2005). Stories describe particular experiences as they simultaneously construct shared social histories, and reference their place in it (1991). Narrative researchers have suggested that people are ‘storying creatures [who] … make sense of the world … by constructing narratives to explain and interpret events both to ourselves and other people’ (Sipes and Gale 2006, in Davies 2015, 3). Bruner thought that ‘we become the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives’ (2003, 694, italics in original). In this perspective, the use of teenage Twitter to describe lived experiences through multimodal composition processes is seen as a way to story themselves through participatory, nonlinear, emerging cultural practices.

Second, it is informed by new media theories (Kember and Zylinska 2012) that attempt to understand the role of media in daily lives. Kember and Zylinska focus on the process of mediation involved as people become themselves through intra-action with media. In this reading, through mediated interaction (and intra-action) with technologies in our everyday lives, new and different forms of engagement with media spur participation, invention, and artistic creation. Media (i.e., film, art, and even stories) emerge as a momentary stabilization of the continuous media flow – a momentary ‘fix’ amidst a media-saturated world.

Putting these two in conversation insinuates that young people are writing themselves into being on teenage Twitter through, and that this participatory (new) literacy practice is made possible through an engagement with Twitter that has consequences on their ways of thinking, being, and feeling in the world. Young people story themselves on Twitter and are storied as well – that is, how are they changed by the experience of participating on teenage Twitter. Kember and Zylinska (2012) proposed the concept of the ‘cut’ as a creative intervention to understand, uncover, and disrupt the incessant ‘media flow’ – similarly, a central theme of this works seeks to explore how young people’s uses of hashtags may be envisioned as ‘cuts’. Using this heuristic, I aim to uncover how hashtags may serve as device for narrative while also attending to the particular processes involved as young people become themselves through technological mediated acts.

Findings are reported as a two-step process. In the first step, participant Twitter data was collected and analyzed to respond to the research question: What (new) literacies practices do teenagers participate in on Twitter? How might ‘thinking in hashtags’ suggest new ways of thinking, being, and feeling for teenagers on Twitter?

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In this step, I attempted to catalogue a wide range of young people’s new literacies practices on Twitter, from subtweeting (e.g., where a user indirectly references another) to selfies (e.g., a self-portrait, often in picture form). (Coding procedures can be found in the Appendix). For the participants
in this study, there are particular ways of doing things with words on Twitter that are different than in other spaces. On Twitter, and unlike in classroom, it is common for young people to use humor, participate in co-constructed narratives, and share their feelings openly with their audience.

Coding was followed by reading through the entirety of participant Twitter archives, focusing on finding and identifying a range of new literate practices that present possibilities about what teenage Twitter can be for young people.

In order to maintain privacy for participants, all of the following tweets have been modified so as not to be found via internet search.

Participants

Lucy

Lucy is a 20-year-old White woman in her senior year of college, where she studies philosophy and women’s studies. Both intelligent and academically motivated, Lucy uses her introspective personality to process and reflect on events in her life. When I met her in April 2013, Lucy was a high school senior in the middle of deciding what college to attend. Accepted to several prestigious liberal arts colleges, she chose to attend an affordable state school. She recently finished a summer as an Undergraduate Research Fellow at Harvard University, studying philosophy and doing research with a faculty mentor.

Outside the academic sphere, Lucy works hard as well. She has worked at a number of different stores including a discount clothing chain and home furnishings store. Through all the challenges of adolescence and early adulthood, Lucy tries to maintain a sense of humor. For example, when she looked back on her emergent sexual attractions, she tweeted, ‘#thatawkwardmoment when you figure out you’re straight after being bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, and bisexual again …’

Ryan

Ryan is a White college student in his junior year of college on in the Eastern U.S. Now 19 years old, Ryan was 16 when he first began to participate in a research study that explored how teenagers practice literacy on Twitter. Ryan has many friends, many of whom share his primary interests: photography, politics, emo bands like the 1975 and 21 Pilots, and all things Francophile. He has also maintained close relationships with his family, including his younger sister, his parents, and his beloved grandfather, who passed away recently. A prolific social media user, Ryan participates in a number of different social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Ask.fm, and Snapchat. Ryan is majoring in political science, motivated by his passion for politics and public participation.

Recent pictures from college show Ryan to be an integral part of a social group, surrounded by smiling friends. On Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, Ryan demonstrates his obsession with 21 Pilots through sharing concert pictures, lyrics, fan art, and upcoming tour information. Ryan’s profile picture on Twitter shows him holding a ski mask in front of his face, a coded reference to 21 Pilots.

Lori

Lori is a 19-year-old White woman in her junior year of college in a metropolitan area of the U.S. When she began participating in the study in 2013, Lori was a 17 year old high school junior who told me that she checks Twitter up to 30 times per day. At the time, Lori used Twitter to follow musicians like Taylor Swift and We the Kings, express her affinity for her favorite sit-coms (e.g., Friends), and talk with friends and acquaintances. Much of Lori’s daily Twitter activity is directed at her close social network – friends, family members, and even favorite teachers. However, Lori’s Twitter use is
not without complication. Her first tweet expressed the tensions between the ‘publicness’ of social media and user control. Lori wrote, ‘hate having a new privated twitter but i can’t stand people so …’ Lori expressed her frustration that, when her tweets are private, her followers were unable to retweet her. Pointing to herself, she wrote, ‘#imhilarious.’

Now 19, Lori is in her third year after transferring from a university in a large southern state to an art school in the Eastern U.S. At her new university, Lori has developed her interest in radio production, deciding to major in sound engineering. On Twitter, Lori occasionally tweets about topics such as feminism, politics, and gender and sexual identities.

Findings

In the data sets analyzed for this study, Lucy, Ryan, and Lori used a variety of new literacies practices on Twitter. Across almost 50,000 tweets over more than two years, participants interacted with friends, acquaintances, and audiences known and unknown; they composed and shared multimodal tweets, and documented, expressed, and circulated a range of feelings and emotions in moments of everyday activity and in moments of conflict, tension, or during compelling activities (e.g., to document milestones such as high-school graduation, beginning college, celebrating holidays and other special events).

While data analysis and interpretation revealed a number of new literacies activities, including subtweeting, taking selfies, and everyday tweets, I developed three concepts that helped me think about how young people story themselves in teenage Twitter: (1) orientating practices; (2) mobilizing practices; and (3) reflective emergence. Each finding is developed as a case of the larger practice.

Orientating practices provide observation and documentation of normative practices (e.g., conventions, cultures, and customs in teenage Twitter). For example, Ryan created the hashtag #AmIDoingThisRight to call attention to his process of learning to use Twitter, and to his novice status. Orientating practices are important because they facilitate participation in a given discourse by offering users an opportunity to figure out where they stand.

Mobilizing practices allow users to marshal their Twitter connections as participants and as resources in their engaged activity. For example, (i.e., that which produces the affective intensities that motivate, inspire, and cajole one to action, such as 21 Pilots, SpongeBob Square Pants, Hunger Games and Jennifer Lawrence, Teegan and Sara, and anything relevant in teenage Twitter. Mobilizing practices facilitate interaction, construction, and circulation of literacy on Twitter through serious engagement with vital life stuff).

Through orientating and mobilizing practices, young people’s ways of thinking and being are transformed through a process of reflective emergence. A state of emergent literate activity facilitates a process of reflection by which Twitter users gain an understanding of common cultural practices, as well as a deeper understanding about the consequences and possibilities suggested by Twitter participation (Figure 1).

#AmIDoingThisRight? Ryan’s case of orientating practices

The process by which young people come to understand teenage Twitter can be thought of as an orientation into the specific, cultural practices of that space – such as participating in specific types of memes (i.e., #EmbarrassYourBestFriend with unflattering photos) that emphasize social connection and relationship; subtweeting; the common practice of sharing selfies – all adds up to the process by which people figure out their own place in this space, enabling young people to observe and document the cultural practices.

In Figures 2 and 3, we see two similar images – first, Ryan sitting with his back to the window of a school bus, phone in hand, ready to shoot; next is his friend Jane, in a similar pose. The text is copied in both as well, further cementing alignment between images, friends, and discourse.
In another example, we see Ryan’s friend writing in all caps, the online equivalent of yelling. Tweeting excitedly, the friend wrote, ‘OMG RY HAI’ using youth vernacular (e.g., OMG for ‘oh my god,’ ‘HAI’ for hi in ‘internet speak,’ and ‘RY’ for Ryan). In response, Ryan wrote, ‘I DON’T KNOW HOW TO WORK THIS,’ copying the stylistic features of his friend’s tweet by using the relatively rare ALL CAPS. By making light of his unwieldy hashtag use (e.g., #amidoingthisrightyet?), Ryan pointed out the potential to develop competence through participation. Discussing his early attempts at Twitter, Ryan said, ‘It was two-fold; either me copying my friends and seeing the ways they used Twitter, and also noticing the general trends of Twitter, what are people hashtagging [and] how are they using it.’

Ryan leveraged his personal interests (e.g., 21 Pilots) as a cultural mediator, allowing him to create artwork reflecting the cultural practices of youth Twitter. Through visual and discursive mirroring, Ryan suggested affinity with 21 Pilots, which facilitated two related outcomes: his creativity (i.e., creating digital fan art about 21 Pilots), and his relationships with friends (e.g., their love of 21 Pilots deepened their relationship). Below, Figure 4 is the cover of a 21 Pilots album cover; Figure 5 is Ryan’s multimodal composition that remixes it.

Orientating practice encourages people to document and participate in relevant cultural practices on Twitter with others (i.e., LOL fish, fan art, pictures of friends), and to create digital compositions that center popular culture. People document and use the social, linguistic, and cultural conventions of social networks (e.g., Ryan mimicking heteronormative, cisgendered insults with his ‘are you gay’). When I interviewed Ryan, he proposed interpreting his tweets ironically, saying, ‘I was making fun of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hashtag Practice</th>
<th>Common Features</th>
<th>Literacy skills</th>
<th>Significance of (new) literacy practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orientating</td>
<td>Documents dominant cultural practices, often with pop cultural references (e.g., 21 Pilots)</td>
<td>1. Recognizing particular cultural practices of teenage Twitter, 2. Playful acculturation to discourse, 3. Multimodal remixing as youth cultural currency</td>
<td>Multimodal remixes document cultural practices (e.g., selfies as participatory art) and present possibility for critique of social norms (i.e., pejorative use of ‘gay’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilizing</td>
<td>Leverages social relationships (and technological tools) to facilitate participatory literacy practices</td>
<td>1. Maintaining interpersonal relationships, 2. Marshalling relationships during emerging event, 3. Developing and advocating use of hashtag</td>
<td>Marshalling social resources to participate in emergent activities (#LorTakesFlorida) invites peers to co-author narrative through multimodal storytelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Emergence</td>
<td>Metacognitive reflection of purposes, possibilities, and power of teenage Twitter</td>
<td>1. Developing public literacy practices, 2. Contributing information to public network, 3. Metacognitive awareness of literacy practices</td>
<td>Merging personal narrative with public advocacy offers ways to use Twitter as space linking lived experience with histories of oppression</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. New literacies practices of teenage Twitter.
people at my school who actually tweeted like that … I just enjoyed mimicking them, as if my Twitter were completely indistinguishable from someone that ignorant.’

These practices allow him to reflect the social norms and conventions of teenagers in his network, such as using ‘gay’ pejoratively, while facilitating an opportunity for him to evaluate these norms.
Ryan intimated that using language ironically to reflect the deeply offensive social conventions of his community presents an opportunity for self-expression, commentary, and implicit critique. He is confident that his followers would ‘definitely know’ he was being sarcastic, and that more explicit critique is unnecessary.

Orientating practices provide an ephemeral station in the shifting tectonics of social media; from this station they illuminate emerging interests, connections, and burgeoning networks, encouraging people to investigate norms and practices. Orientating practices encourage users to engage with Twitter through awareness of how the space functions and how their own literate practices ‘fit’ (or not) with common practices. And yet, by themselves, orientating practices are not sufficient
enough to facilitate the complex, generative, co-constructed literacies. Why not? Isn’t it possible these orientating practices could pull others into a co-constructed narrative. To analyze the significance of these practices, a new concept was developed: mobilizing practices.

#Lortakesflorida: Lori’s case of mobilizing practices

As young people participate in teenage Twitter, documenting their enculturation through hashtags and (im)material artifacts, they often enlist others to participate in their emerging activity. Mobilizing practices facilitate joint activity on Twitter, reminding us of the social nature of the media space. On Twitter, there are many ways to be social, and one of the ways in which people tweet an event, activity, or performance, as it is happening, that pertains directly to their life. Conceptually, livetweeting is related to lifestreaming, in that users chronicle their lives online and share them with networked audiences, ‘facilitating connections to others, deepening relationships, and creating a source of real-time information,’ (Marwick and Boyd 2011, 371).

Here, high school junior Lori livetweeted a flight from the East Coast to Florida, creating the hashtag #LorTakesFlorida to organize the activity. This hashtag suggests action (‘taking’ Florida), references pop culture (‘taking Florida’ alludes to ‘taking Manhattan’) and a personal connection (i.e., the use of Lori’s nickname Lor). As soon as Lori tweeted that she ‘finally’ finished packing, two delays occurred, putting Lori’s flight ‘on hold’ and causing her to melodramatically blurt, ‘kill me pls’ (‘pls’ for ‘please’). Throughout this event, Lori, Brianna, and Hannah tweeted about Lori’s flight with the kind of topical humor valued on Twitter. After Lori expressed her frustration (‘kill me, please’), Hannah clarified, ‘Lori will have to take Florida a little later than expected’ and shared a picture of a smiling Lori.

In another example of mobilizing practices, Lori and friends invited others to collectively tell their story of their senior trip to an amusement park (i.e., Lori retweeted six different people before the bus even left the parking lot). Through attention to narrative cues both explicit (i.e., #setrip14) and implicit (e.g., ‘riding the roller coasters’), Lori weaves her story from the contributions of multiple perspectives. On the senior trip, Lori produced and circulated visual images that reinforced relational connections with her good friends; sharing pictures of Lori and her friends created a story within a story.

Mobilizing practices are those aimed at social participation through joint activity in a particular area. Lori and her friends encouraged others to ‘jump on in’ and ‘don’t be shy live tweet [Lori’s] adventure.’ Mobilizing practices involve related concepts of relationality and possibility through intense engagement with a range of personal interests (i.e., 21 Pilots, health and well-being, networked sociality). That is, young people are able to encourage their friends and followers to participate in their literate practice (recall Lori and her friends encouraging others to ‘join us’ in livetweeting #LorTakesFlorida). Mobilized by interests that are engaging, personal, and relevant to others, people participate in memes, creative composition, information sharing, and emergent activity.

Mobilizing practices suggest a way of engaging with the world that facilitates creative, emergent, interactive, co-construction of multimodal narratives. These stories are often deeply personal, reflecting intense emotional moments and strong interpersonal relationships.

#Recovery (something larger than me): Lucy’s case of reflective emergence

Lucy’s Twitter centered on #recovery from emotional trauma and sexual abuse, for which she was hospitalized during her sophomore and junior years of high school. Envisioned as conversation comprised of multiple elements – including a journal; images (i.e., selfies); curated content; and meme participation – reflective emergence is a practice that can help people ‘write themselves into being’ (Boyd 2008) through committed (i.e., daily) practice in which they reflect on critical events, activities, and processes in their life.
For roughly three years, Lucy used Twitter to document her recovery process. As a way of coping with her emotional trauma, Lucy engaged in self-harming behaviors, including disordered eating. Lucy said, ‘When I was very sick, Twitter was an outlet for me. Much of the suffering of mental illness is very private, and I wanted to make it tangible.’ On Twitter, Lucy recorded her recovery, reporting a wide range of emotions, experiences, and memories associated with her journey. After returning from a six-month stay in the hospital, she would regularly post ‘angsty tweets’ like this: ‘feels like she is going fucking insane and is really stressed out’ or this one: ‘frustration overwhelms me, nothing left but this empty feeling, rejection from the very thing that gave me definition.’ Around the same time, Lucy began using hashtags to punctuate her tweets and provide an evaluative dimension to her utterances (c.f. Gleason 2016). For example, from this time period, she tweeted, ‘new therapist walks by without saying hello. good first impression, man. #asshole.’ Another time, she wrote, ‘I think some of the four pounds I lost was in my face :) #fuckyeah.’ Lucy seemed to be quite cognizant that she was using Twitter as a tool in her #recovery process – one tweet read: ‘Just kill me now. fuck everything. #angstytweetwhatelseisnew.’

Images are another important compositional element of blogging. While Lucy primarily communicated through printed text, her judicious use of visual imagery (i.e., pictures of Lucy, sometimes with friends) added rhetorical richness and reflected her progress. In Lucy’s case, many images were deleted from her Twitter account as well. A tweet from 2012 reported, ‘How to erase every artifact of what I looked like last year.’

Lucy’s practices changed significantly in the three years that she was actively using Twitter to assist in her recovery from sexual abuse. Lucy’s early practices emphasized her personal struggle, while her later practices positioned her as an expert with valuable information and experience to share. By inserting her voice into the conversation, she situated her own struggle in social and cultural contexts. This complex topic of recovery included connections to other discourses, such as memes focused on emotional health, images documenting Lucy’s progress, and, eventually, circulating information (e.g., curated content) about #recovery.

When Lucy returned home from the hospital, her blog was heavily journalistic. In one tweet, Lucy wondered, ‘why don’t I have any motivation anymore? I just don’t care’ and in another she reported that it was, ‘So frustrating. Hate self.’ Lucy turned the corner as she gained support from her parents, friends, mentors, teachers, and mental health professionals. After a period of ‘dullness’ associated with stabilizing medication, Lucy felt excitement and motivation again. She tweeted, ‘I can’t wait to have obsessions again.’ Regaining her mental acuity after coming off medication, Lucy began to form connections to other literate practices. Lucy told me that her senior English class encouraged her to develop her analytical and rhetorical skills.

This experience helped Lucy to connect her struggle to systemic struggles, as well. She said, ‘Social justice, activism, and feminism was a way for me to feel validated. It was a way to see that my experience as not totally unique, like thousands of women suffer mental illness as a result of sexual abuse.’ Lucy noted how sharing information about the connection between mental illness and sexual abuse gave her a ‘narrative in which to place myself, situating this thing in something larger than me, and that I could be a part of this community.’ Overall, during this period, Lucy’s lifelogging practices shifted from journalistic confessional to advocacy. By contributing information about recovery (e.g., through informative articles), she added her voice to the conversation.

Lucy brings her voice to a multivocal conversation about the importance of health and well-being (e.g., physical, mental, emotional, and social). It is intriguing, however, that Lucy distinguished between advocacy and blogging. It is not her journalistic writings – her daily reporting about the emotional, embodied (and sometimes tortured) experience of living through recovery – that she recognizes as an addition to the conversation, but rather her advocacy work. Lucy’s sense of possibility comes from making connections, building a network of people (e.g., her curated list of people to follow, her gaining followers from retweeting certain things), and weaving her personal and societal stories together. Through blogging, Lucy contributes her recovery process for others to recognize, connect with (or not), and use as a learning experience. As Lucy’s blogging changed
over time, she envisioned it as a transformative agent. As she ‘started getting into social justice stuff,’ she met influential thinkers on Twitter and began to develop a network of her own. She said, ‘I found much more of a community and a sense of belonging because I was tweeting feminism.’

**Discussion**

On Twitter, teenagers used a number of different approaches to ‘mediatize’ (Deuze 2015) their lived experience on social media. Through spontaneous, ‘moment-by-moment unfoldings’ (Leander and Boldt 2013) with their friends and followers, they engage in new literacies practices that allow them to observe their immediate local context, as well as encourage others to participate in these unfoldings. Lucy, Ryan, and Lori traversed the unfamiliar landscape of teenage Twitter through orientating practices that documented popular cultural practices, gradually developing the requisite competence in this social space to mobilize their network to participate along with them.

Literacy practices on Twitter are *reflective*, in that young people displayed sophisticated meta-awareness of their own Twitteracy practices. Lori’s strategy of deliberation, which included her texts being ‘vetted’ by close friends before public posting to Twitter, was different than Ryan’s individual composing process, in which he focused on the ‘economy’ of crafting the perfect tweet. By developing competency in teenage Twitter, and becoming recognized via retweets or likes (formerly Favorites), participants leveraged their insight and social recognition to mark them as creative, authentic, and networked – in short, seen as being ‘relevant’ to peers.

*Reflective emergence* strikes a different chord than mere planned or designed uses of Twitter. Here I am influenced by Leander and Boldt (2013), who argued for literacy research that does not assume participatory practices of forward-thinking by backward-looking investigation; that is, they attempt to introduce indeterminancy and ‘raucous play’ via ‘moment by moment unfoldings’ through embodied activity. It can be playful, embodied, and uncertain. Like them, I am arguing away from an analytical lens focused on purposeful or designed uses of Twitter. Unlike in other settings (e.g., a social movement) where Twitter users use a hashtag such as #OWS to organize, mobilize, and share information about Occupy Wall Street in a planned and purposeful way (Gleason 2013), youth in this study were engaged and mobilized by friends, emerging topics of interest, and a need to speak one’s heart and mind.

*Thinking in hashtags* then is a mode of participating in the mediatized world of Twitter through the aforementioned new literate practices. It is conceptualized as an interactive, co-constructed, social activity that facilitates new literacies by mobilizing engagement with the *vital life stuff* found on Twitter. Through engaged participation, such as co-constructing a narrative about a delayed flight, or demonstrating the cultural affinities of the crowd through multimodal texts, users escape their own silo of individualized writing and become the vital life stuff for other people. Thinking in hashtags is an active process of participation that involves more than mere expression or communication via tweets. As Lucy reported in her interview,

> Thinking was action for me when I was in high school, without a car, without any kind of activist community. That kind of thinking was much more active and intentional than it was [just] thinking. It was a way of engaging in action.

Engaged by the affective forces and intensities of relational connection, and interested in the collective affinities for cultural icons, young people take to Twitter as a way of mobilizing action and activity with close friends. There, they participate in emergent activities through practices that orient themselves to the cultural practices of teenage Twitter; as they become more competent, they learn to mobilize resources as they participate. Eventually, they may even reflect on their practices and take on new ways of thinking, acting, and being as a result of this participation. These practices are predicated on a notion of Twitter literacy as partial, multiple, synthetic, and connective – that is, the three practices introduced in this study do not develop creative and communicative competence in isolation (i.e., as an individual Twitter user), but facilitate
the capacity to join (and get others to join) others in an emergent world driven by interests, relationships, and creative assembly.

Young people’s agentic engagement with peers through shared cultural practices (e.g., livetweeting emergent events, remixing the prom picture, and hashtagging one’s #recovery) exists through co-production of media through technological means. New media theorists and artists Kember and Zylinska (2012) proposed the notion of ‘making good cuts’ as bulwark against the overwhelming medational flow of the digital universe. For Kember and Zylinska, the notion of ‘cuts’ that ‘shape the universe and ourselves in it’ (168) aligns with my research focus on young people’s literate practices of teenage Twitter, specifically focusing on the hashtag as an approach to organizing lived experiences. Envisioning the hashtag as a ‘cut’ encourages researchers to consider how young people’s emergent lives are circulated through the social network via the affordances of Twitter. Through hashtags, young people not only create dynamic, co-constructed, multimodal stories that emphasize social relationships, but are themselves co-created as their stories take shape through the same hashtags. Hashtags stick around, spread easily, can be searched, and are highly visible. Stories told for particular audiences become remediated through new contexts, new audiences, and with new information (Georgakopoulou 2015). In fact, the notion of hashtags as cuts encourages us to see the active, intuitive, emergent process of writing and creating on Twitter as a form of multimodal storytelling (or composition). As young people use hashtags to tell multimodal stories using shared cultural affinities (e.g., 21 Pilots), invite peers to participate in emergent livetweet, and reflect on transformative power of narrative to advocate for self and community change, they are creating stories that aim to engage in the attentional economy. Envisioned as capable of cutting through the information overload (or information glut) of contemporary (social) media ecology, these stories are told through multiple modes (journalistic, imagistic, participatory, reflective).

Conclusions and implications

The participatory practices that support new literacies of teenage Twitter suggest important considerations for literacy research and practice, as well as important connections to informal and formal learning spaces. First, this study suggests the complexity involved in the process of developing Twitteracy, or Twitter literacy (Greenhow and Gleason 2012). Teenagers’ Twitteracy practices (e.g., orientating, mobilizing, and reflective emergence) were co-constructed, non-linear, multiple, creative, social, and action-oriented. Their participation in Twitter ‘allows young people to perform new social acts not previously possible,’ such as collectively composing creative, multimodal, non-linear stories documenting important milestones for teenagers (i.e., the prom, graduation, or school trips) (Greenhow and Gleason 2012, 471). Consider how Lori and her classmates livetweeted her flight – the story was composed through different authors, representing multiple perspectives, and non-linear. Unlike formal academic literacy, with its stable, fossilized products (i.e., the five-paragraph essay or informational essay), teenage Twitteracy can be seen as a space where new literacies practices enable complex, creative, co-constructed composition. Ten years ago, Hull and Katz (2006) warned us that ‘we cannot afford to neglect such new meditational means,’ for they offer ‘personally and socially meaningful’ uses of literacy (72). Teenagers’ participatory practices on Twitter represent an increasingly valuable space for the development of new literacy practices that are relevant in a globalized, networked world. Significantly, these practices encourage literacy researchers and practitioners to take seriously the idea that ‘thinking in hash tags’ presents new ways of being in the world that are worthy of continued and future research.

Second, this study pushes us to consider the way that young people can access and mobilize resources (material, cognitive, and social) as they navigate spaces of emergent literacy activities. This focus on orientating and mobilizing practices pushes teachers, parents, young people, and researchers to consider social media participation as networked, sociocultural activity. Participation on Twitter requires young people to orient themselves, and then marshal resources to complete the activity. Consider the vast range of resources used across multiple times and spaces of
composing – including social resources (e.g., friends, classmates), cultural resources (i.e., 21 Pilots, Parks and Recreation, Taylor Swift), discursive resources (e.g., teenage Twitter practices such as subtweeting, selfies, and lurking), rhetorical resources (i.e., knowledge of audience(s) and the like), personal resources (e.g., performed identity) and countless others. Innovative educators and youth workers may find value in attempting to map the range of resources involved in new literate practice. Similar to the way that teachers imagine student writing as participation in formal discourse communities, educators may want to trace the process by which young people mobilize resources from a wide range of networks and communities in order to participate. Envisioning the act of mobilizing resources as a kind of knowledge helps educators to see participation on Twitter as a space for new literate possibilities.

Finally, while it may be possible for innovative educators and literacy researchers to connect young people’s new literacies practices on Twitter to formal literacy practices, I am not suggesting an uncritical (i.e., ‘out of the box’) application of teenager’s Twitter practices. As literacy scholars have argued (Hull and Nelson 2005; Greenhow, Robelia, and Hughes 2009; Paris 2010; Gleason 2016), young people’s unsanctioned literacy practices in youth spaces are worthy of study because they suggest creativity, aesthetic pleasure, and communicative prowess. As we explore young people’s use of hashtags, we do well to see them, as Lucy suggested, as evidence of action. Thinking in hashtags is an agentic process by which young people leverage teenage Twitter to story themselves into being by making good ‘cuts’ that develop affinities of relation (friendship, cultural affinities, and toward knowledge building via information-sharing).

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor
Benjamin Gleason is an assistant professor in Curriculum & Instructional Technology who studies how digital media (e.g., social media) mediate language and (new) literate practices, can facilitate teaching and learning, and may support humanizing pedagogy.

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References


### Appendix

### Table A1. Coding design.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Sample Codes</th>
<th>Coding Definitions</th>
<th>Participant Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What kind of literate practices do young adult Twitter users participate in?</td>
<td>Emotion, affect</td>
<td>Feeling or emotion suggested, expressed or communicated by tweet</td>
<td>‘I apologize for all the teenage angst tweets right now. #sorrynotsorry.’ (Lori, 9/8/12) ‘feels like she is going fucking insane and is really stressed out 3’ (Lucy, 1/8/10) ‘I’m thankful for my incredible friends. Couldn’t have gone this far without them. Thank you’ (Ryan, 11/22/12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday tweets</td>
<td>Record of ‘everyday’ experience that aims to suggest relevance to youth audience(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘My toenail just fell in my keyboard’ (Lucy, 7/28/11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to use Twitter</td>
<td>Suggests progress of learning how to use Twitter</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘hate having a new privated twitter but I can’t stand people so …’ (Lori, 6/22/12) ‘@mal I DON’T KNOW HOW TO WORK THIS.’ (Ryan, 8/24/12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifeblogging</td>
<td>The process by which Twitter is used as a journal (to record one’s daily moments)</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘why don’t I have any motivation anymore? I just don’t care’ (Lucy, 5/11/10)</td>
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(Continued)
Table A1. Continued.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question:</th>
<th>Sample Codes</th>
<th>Coding Definitions</th>
<th>Participant Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifetweeting</td>
<td>Tweeting as an event is happening, often through the use of a hashtag to organize the experience</td>
<td>‘finally about to start boarding #LoriTakesFlorida’ (Lori, 8/7/13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-awareness of Twitter use</td>
<td>Beyond mere knowledge of how to tweet, this code expresses user awareness of how audiences may react to tweets, suggesting deep knowledge of Twitter conventions and competencies.</td>
<td>‘[Insert tweet here about scrubbing, hating school and getting up this early, and wanting your bed.]’ (Ryan, 11/19/12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meme participation</td>
<td>Using knowledge of popular culture (including youth culture) to participate in trending topics, signified by the hashtag.</td>
<td>‘#LyricsThatSavedMe. It was only a kiss how did it end up like this’ (Ryan, 3/7/13) ‘Jude the mainstream #LessInterestingBooks @thywebz’ (Lucy, 11/23/12)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Multimodality</td>
<td>In this category, visual-based texts are shared as users circulate images of themselves, their friends, and favored popular culture icons (e.g., SpongeBob SquarePants, Friends, Sara &amp; Teegan)</td>
<td>(Lori, 9/9/12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationality on Twitter</td>
<td>Tweets add another way to build connection between users, as young people retweet their friends to establish relationality.</td>
<td>‘When I don’t want to talk to Lori, I retweet her’ (Lori’s friend, 9/17/13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selfies</td>
<td>These images often represent youth, alone or with others, typically friends, family members, or interesting spaces</td>
<td>(Lucy, 12/17/12)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Subtweet</td>
<td>This kind of tweet does not use direct address (e.g., lacks the @username convention) to mention a specific user. Rather, it relies on the expectation that the tweet suggests a particular user.</td>
<td>‘One of my best friends. You’ll go far. You’re original, funny, brilliant more than you give yourself credit for. You’ll go far kid; je le sais sans doute’ (Ryan, 10/23/13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveillance aka ‘creeping’</td>
<td>This code emphasizes that tweeting is a public act; as users tweet, they are subject to surveillance by their followers.</td>
<td>‘I really love creeping on nico’ (Lori, 9/24/13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>