

Article

## “It’s Not Just Instagram Models”: Exploring the Gendered Political Potential of Young Women’s Instagram Use

Sofia P. Caldeira

Department of Communication Sciences, Ghent University, 9000 Ghent, Belgium;  
E-Mail: [anasofia.pereiracaldeira@ugent.be](mailto:anasofia.pereiracaldeira@ugent.be)

Submitted: 7 October 2020 | Accepted: 27 November 2020 | Published: 23 March 2021

### Abstract

With over one billion monthly users worldwide (Constine, 2018) and being embedded in the everyday lives of many young people, Instagram has become a common topic of discussion both in popular media and scholarly debates. As young women are amongst the predominant active users of Instagram (WeAreSocial, 2019) and the demographic stereotypically associated with online self-representation (Burns, 2015), Instagram carries an underlying gendered political potential. This is manifested through online political practices such as hashtag activism (Highfield, 2016), as well as through Instagram’s use of user-generated content to challenge existing politics of representation, broadening the scope of who is considered photographable (Tiidenberg, 2018). This article explores how this gendered political potential is understood by young women using Instagram. This research is based on 13 in-depth interviews with a theoretical sample of female ‘ordinary’ Instagram users (i.e., not celebrities or Insta-famous), aged 18–35. Our findings illustrate how the perception of political potential is grounded in the participants’ understanding of Instagram as an aesthetically-oriented platform (Manovich, 2017). Most participants recognised the potential for engaging in visibility politics (Whittier, 2017), representing a wider diversity of femininities often absent from popular media. However, this was seen as tempered by the co-existence of idealised beauty conventions and the politics of popularity within social media (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Furthermore, this political potential is accompanied by the possibility of receiving backlash or being dismissed as a slacktivist (Glenn, 2015). As Instagram becomes a central part of contemporary visual cultures, this article seeks to critically explore the nuanced ways in which young women’s everyday experiences of Instagram intersect with broader cultural and political questions of gender representation.

### Keywords

everyday politics; gender; Instagram; social media; young women

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Gender and Media: Recent Trends in Theory, Methodology and Research Subjects” edited by Sofie Van Bauwel (Ghent University, Belgium) and Tonny Krijnen (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands).

© 2021 by the author; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

Instagram is currently one of the most popular and widely used social media platforms worldwide, amassing over 1 billion monthly active users (Constine, 2018). Initially conceived as an aesthetically-oriented platform dedicated to photo and video-sharing, making simple editing tools and filters easily accessible (Manovich, 2017, p. 73), Instagram has helped shape our collective visual culture imaginaries, popularising new photographic conventions

and aesthetic values. The platform is becoming deeply embedded in the everyday lives of many people and its conventions permeate the wider media panorama (e.g., Caldeira, 2020).

Although self-representations (i.e., images that include the users’ themselves) tend not to be amongst the most shared images on Instagram (Tifentale & Manovich, 2014, pp. 2–5), this idea—and particularly the selfie phenomenon—occupies a prominent place in both the popular cultural imaginary surrounding

Instagram and academic discussions about the platform (Tiidenberg, 2018). Our understanding of self-representation, however, should not be limited to a narrow association with the selfie. Rather, in the context of this research, self-representation is understood as encompassing not only the technical production of a symbolic media text (Rettberg, 2017), but also the exercise of curatorial agency—seeing the users' choices of how to represent themselves, what to share, and what to exclude as productive acts (Rettberg, 2014, p. 40).

In this way, we can understand self-representation as embodying the ethos of social media: allowing 'ordinary' people to "speak for themselves," claiming agency over media production and the strategies of representation they employ (Thumim, 2012, p. 136). As such, self-representation can have an underlying political character (Highfield, 2016). This broader understanding of 'the political' acknowledges how political themes and concerns can be framed around everyday personal experiences, choices, and preferences (Highfield, 2016, pp. 3–4). Issues such as self-representation, appearances, or lifestyles can be read as political, shaping society 'from below,' rather than through decrees or laws (Mouffe, 2005, pp. 38–40). In this light, we can, on a first instance, recognise the political potential of self-representation on Instagram when it is accompanied by deliberately political statements or when it is linked to overt efforts of fourth-wave feminism (Chamberlain, 2017). Although the idea of fourth-wave is still a topic of academic debate, many scholars and young feminists have adopted the term to refer to a contemporary resurgence of feminist ideas and discourses (Chamberlain, 2017, p. 1). The fourth-wave is largely defined by its adoption of digital and social media for activist organizing, engagement, and dissemination of information, taking advantage of user-generated content and self-representation to grant widespread visibility to a variety of previously marginalized groups (Chamberlain, 2017, p. 4). In addition, we can also recognize that political potential is often manifested in more tangential ways, for example, in self-representations that might have been constructed without any deliberate political aim in mind.

The idea of the photographable (Bourdieu, 1965) itself, imbues self-representational practices with this tangential everyday political potential. The photographable refers to the range of people, objects, and moments that are deemed worthy of being photographed in any given specific socio-cultural context. As such, it carries the cultural, social, ethical, and aesthetic values and conventions of a particular epoch and culture, valuing and privileging certain types of motifs and images, while disregarding others. The photographable is thus a cultural site where structured notions of visibility and inclusivity, but also inequalities and exclusions, are constantly being negotiated.

As user-generated content, self-representations on Instagram are created by the platform's extensive and inevitably diverse user-base. They place images made by

'ordinary' people in the public online sphere where they can potentially reach a massive audience (Tiidenberg, 2018, pp. 135–136). These self-representations rely on the assertion, perhaps unconscious, that this person and these moments of their lives are photographable—worthy of being aesthetically admired and shared online (Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 81). They have the potential to afford visibility to often-marginalised groups of people, who are underrepresented or absent in popular mainstream media (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 7). These self-representations can thus challenge hegemonic visibility regimes and help to broaden the scope of who and what can be deemed as photographable (Tiidenberg, 2018).

Furthermore, there is also a gendered aspect underlying the political potential of Instagram. Young women are still amongst the predominant active users of Instagram (WeAreSocial, 2019), and the demographic stereotypically associated with Instagram and online self-representational practices (Burns, 2015). This gendered character is extended to the cultural imaginary that surrounds Instagram, which has become linked with genres of content stereotypically associated with women—including fashion, beauty, fitness, and lifestyle accounts. These genres are popularized by some of Instagram's most popular accounts, many belonging to women, including accounts of popular musicians, celebrities, and influencers (WeAreSocial, 2020, p. 133). These cultural imaginaries connect Instagram to the notion of 'women's genres' (Hermes, 2008) which is commonly defined as media primarily created for, or mainly enjoyed by, female audiences, for example, soap operas, romance novels, or women's magazines. Online self-representation is also frequently dismissed in popular media as a gendered practice, derided as trivial and associated with feminine vanity (Burns, 2015, p. 1718). Such discourse echoes and perpetuates the historically established tendency to dismiss women's genres as uninteresting, superficial, and overall 'low genres' (Gill, 2007, p. 13).

Yet, social media platforms, such as Instagram, also offer young women a simplified and democratised access to tools of media production and distribution (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012, p. 373), thus disrupting the historical associations between young women and the consumption of media (Kanai & Dobson, 2016, p. 1). This carries the potential to displace culturally established male-oriented narratives, which have historically portrayed women as a source of visual pleasure, framed by a male gaze, and relegated to the role of thing-to-be-observed (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975). This adds an additional gendered layer to the political potential of self-representation and Instagram use. Although all users, regardless of gender, engage (to varying degrees) in practices of self-branding and in the construction of an edited self (Marwick, 2013), the judgement afforded to these online self-representational practices is uneven. As women's identities are still stereotypically associated with a logic of spectacular femininity (McRobbie,

2007)—conceived as appearance-centric and consumer-oriented—women are often more harshly judged by, and valued for, their physical appearance (Wagner, Aguirre, & Sumner, 2016). In addition, as will be explored further in this article, women also tend to disproportionately be the target of online hate when engaging with political content (Harvey, 2020, p. 140).

However, this political potential is experienced in individual and deeply affective manners, in the course of everyday life and within mundane social media practices (Papacharissi, 2015). As such, this article aims to complexify the scholarly discussions of the political potential of Instagram by grounding them on the personal sense-making of the young women who engage with Instagram. This article takes a feminist media studies perspective (Van Zoonen, 1994), questioning how this gendered political potential is experienced and understood in the context of everyday media practices, and exploring the tensions and nuances in these discourses.

This research is grounded on a series of 13 in-depth conversational interviews (Van Zoonen, 1994, pp. 135–139) with ‘ordinary’ Instagram users (i.e., not celebrities or Insta-famous users). As our theoretical focus concerns the exploration of socio-cultural issues of gender in the context of Instagram, and particularly femininities, all the selected participants were women aged between 18 and 35 years old. This age range is associated with young adulthood and roughly overlaps, at the time of study, that of the millennial generation (Frey, 2018) commonly associated with the use of social media platforms. As seen before, this is a core demographic amongst active Instagram users, as well as the demographic stereotypically associated with online self-representational practices (Burns, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2018).

The selection of interviewees arose from a sample of 77 randomly selected Instagram users who participated in a prior qualitative textual analysis of self-representations on Instagram (Caldeira, De Ridder, & Van Bauwel, 2020). This initial roster of 77 users was established using a random snowballing strategy (Willem, Araña, Crescenzi, & Tortajada, 2010) initiated from four randomly selected users from the researcher’s own following list on Instagram. These four initial users were not included in the final sample. From these initial users, we randomly selected another four users that they followed, and so on, until the final number of 77 users was reached. After these textual analyses, the 13 interviewees were purposefully selected (Patton, 2002), focusing on information-rich cases which offered compelling insights into diverse self-representational practices on Instagram.

Although not a criterion for the selection of the studied sample, all the participants were all established users of Instagram, having joined the platform three to seven years prior to the interviews. The interviewees were from eight different countries across Europe, North America, and Asia, and were from distinct (self-identified) eth-

nic backgrounds: Nine of the participants identifying as White, two as Multiracial, two as Asian, and one as Black (see Table 1 for an overview). It must be acknowledged, however, that these interviews addressed a relatively small sample of Instagram users, being limited in scope. As such, this sample does not intend to be representative nor generalizable, rather, the sample is overtly illustrative.

At the time of initial contact, all research participants had public profiles. Having been contacted via Instagram Direct Message and informed about the research and its aims, they gave their informed consent to participate. In order to respect their privacy, the participants were given the choice of being identified by a self-chosen pseudonym. Those who did not wish to be anonymous chose to be identified by their first names. After the interviews were finalised, a member-check was conducted, offering the participants an edited version of their interview transcripts and an overview of the preliminary results of the analysis.

The interviews were conducted between December 2018 and February 2019, using an array of online video-chat platforms (e.g., Google Hangouts, Facebook Messenger, Skype, WhatsApp), and lasted between 25 and 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Following a close reading and preliminary analysis, the interviews were thematically coded (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003) in NVivo. Emerging themes and topics were identified within the data, establishing relationships between these, in an iterative process. This interpretative analysis was grounded in the participants’ own experiences and ways of interpreting and defining reality (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 131), in an effort to bring their reflexivity, agency, and nuanced understandings of Instagram into the academic discussion.

## 2. Understanding the Convergence between Political Potential and Instagrammable Aesthetics

Instagram was recognised by the interviewed participants as allowing for many different practices and Instagram ‘cultures,’ characterised by different attitudes and intentions (Alexandra, Filipa, Ndiza). This multiplicity was also reflected in their distinct understandings of the political potential of Instagram. For some, like Kori or Cris Topolino, Instagram felt like a central tool to share political information and bring about societal change in the contemporary world. As Instagram became one of the social media platforms most used by these young women, something they engage with regularly in their daily lives and a major source of their media consumption, it also became a central platform for reading up on and engaging with political and social issues (Megan). Many of the interviewed participants followed accounts that engaged in political discussions on topics such as feminism (Filipa, Kori, Mariana, a miserável, Megan), body activism (Alexandra, Ndiza), race issues (Ndiza, Tyrah), ecological issues (Cris Topolino, Filipa, Frances), or inter-

**Table 1.** Overview of the interviewees.

Name*	Age	Ethnicity**	Nationality	Place of residency	Occupation	Social media platforms used	Instagram user since...	Frequency of Instagram use
Patricia	28	White/ Caucasian	Portuguese	Portugal	Multimedia specialist	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Mixer	2012	Daily
Çağla	31	White/ Caucasian	Turkish	Sweden	Doctoral student	Instagram, Twitter, Facebook	2013	Daily
Ndiza	24	Black (of African descent)	British	UK	Medical student	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Whatsapp	2013	Daily
Mariana, a miserável	31	White/ Caucasian	Portuguese	Portugal	Illustrator	Instagram, Facebook	2015	Daily
Danielle	28	Multiracial	British	UK	Creative: make-up artist, designer; Part-time nanny	Instagram, Facebook	2012	Daily
Kori	30	White/ Caucasian	American	USA	Creative Director	Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest	2011	Daily
Jac	32	Asian (Chinese)	Canadian	Canada	Business service manager	Instagram, Facebook	2014	Multiple times a day
Filipa	31	White/ Caucasian	Portuguese	Portugal	Medical Pathologist	Instagram, Facebook, VSCO	2012	Almost every day
Megan	22	Asian (Chinese)	Singaporean-Malaysian	Singapore	Student	Instagram, YouTube	2013	Multiple times a day
Alexandra	22	White/ Caucasian	Belgian	Belgium	Student	Instagram, Facebook, Messenger, Twitter, Pinterest, Tumblr	2014	Multiple times a day
Tyrah	21	Multiracial	Canadian	Canada	Student; Part-time model	Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter	2013	Multiple times a day
Cris Topolino	28	White/ Caucasian	Spanish	Lithuania	Volunteer kindergarten assistant	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter	2013	Daily
Frances	26	White/ Caucasian	American	USA	Seasonal worker: camp councillor and holistic centre	Instagram, WordPress	2013	Daily

Notes: \* = Interviewees first name or, if they chose to remain anonymous, their self-chosen pseudonyms; \*\* = as self-identified by the participants.

national politics (Danielle, Megan, Tyrah). Although some participants occasionally sought and engaged with this content quite intensely, diving into long searches about particular topics (Danielle), for many this engagement was more informal and fleeting, for example, checking Instagram on their commutes (Megan), or even by getting Instagram advertisements that reflected their political concerns (Frances).

Some of these participants also acknowledged the possibility of deliberately using their personal accounts and self-representations to engage in political discussions and reach more people (Filipa). Filipa, for example, combined picturesque photographs of her recent holiday to the Azores with posts calling attention to the problem of plastic pollution she encountered on the island's beaches. By doing so, she felt she was doing her part in educating people on this pressing ecological issue, seeing it as an alternative to the mass media communication that often felt insufficient.

In addition to creating their own posts, these young women also engaged with these topics by re-posting politically-concerned posts they saw elsewhere to their own Instagram Stories (Filipa, Megan, Tyrah). Through these Stories, these women engaged with other Instagram users, asking their opinions and, at times, starting constructive conversations (Tyrah). The personal relationships underlying many of their Instagram interactions were seen by the participants as facilitating the platform's political potential: "You can make people think. Because they know you, so they are going to care, maybe, a little bit about what you're saying" (Cris Topolino).

These political concerns can also become intertwined with everyday social media practices, existing alongside and within self-representational content such as selfies, outfits of the day, or photos of artful lattes that are not deliberately created with political aims in mind (Caldeira et al., 2020). As Danielle stated: "Maybe people get a bit confused because one post will be a selfie, then it will be a food post, and then I'll just talk about children dying in Yemen, you know?" Social media and Instagram can thus be understood as a hybrid 'third-space' (Papacharissi, 2015), where socio-cultural practices are intermeshed with personal self-representational practices.

For some participants, this sense of political potential was related to Instagram's ability to showcase a wider array of self-representations of women and lifestyles (Tiidenberg, 2018). Through these self-representations, the participants felt they could engage with content made by people who looked like them and with whom they could relate, by following, for example, accounts made by women of colour sharing natural hair styling tips—content that was largely absent from the mainstream media they followed and, at times, even from their offline everyday environments (Tyrah). This entanglement between Instagram self-representational practices and politically-charged personal identity issues

can thus emerge in tangential ways, becoming deeply embedded in the participants' mundane and everyday lives, as Ndiza explains: "Yes, I'm very obviously black, so I'm probably going to post about it."

However, the participants' understanding of the platform and its underlying political potential was also deeply marked by their perception of Instagram as an aesthetically-oriented and entertainment-driven platform. Echoing Instagram's origins as a photo-sharing platform that made vintage-looking filters widely available (Manovich, 2017), many of the interviewees said that they were initially attracted to the platform due to its visual and artistic character, which allowed them to create, edit, and curate beautiful photographs (Alexandra, Çağla, Cris Topolino, Danielle, Filipa, Frances, Kori, Patricia). The aesthetically-oriented character of Instagram seemed to encourage the development of certain standards of Instagrammable aesthetics that content should satisfy in order to be deemed "good enough" to share (Ndiza). Unlike other social media platforms, Instagram content was seen as requiring a more carefully considerate and curated set of aesthetic conventions: "Well, on Facebook you can share just some shitty photos....But Instagram, for me, is about showing the beauty" (Cris Topolino).

This idea of Instagrammable aesthetics goes beyond the formal and visual characteristics of a photograph posted on Instagram, it also encompasses a careful consideration of lifestyle choices and experiences in terms of their visual and aesthetic characteristics, privileging those who look particularly good on Instagram and attract more likes and engagement (Caldeira, 2020, p. 93). In this way, Instagrammable aesthetics have become a lens through which to appreciate both online and offline everyday experiences (Ndiza). The notion of Instagrammable aesthetics is also interrelated with the platform vernaculars of Instagram: a combination of communicative styles, grammars, and logics that emerge from the relationship between the platform's technological affordances and the practices continuously enacted and negotiated by its users (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015). Platform vernaculars can thus shape the expected uses of a platform, influencing dominant conventions and preferred meanings. As Instagram's platform vernaculars are largely oriented around the creation of visual and aestheticised content, political discourses and practices can also become conflated with, and materialised through, Instagrammable aesthetic practices. For the interviewed participants this seemed at times to limit the perceived scope of political action of Instagram, as well as the range of issues that it could address. As Instagram was seen as a visual platform, political topics that seemed to require more verbal discussion were dismissed as "boring for Instagram" (Çağla) and relegated to other social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, or online news platforms like Bloomberg or Business Weekly (Alexandra, Cris Topolino, Jac). Political topics were seen as in need of being

reframed and presented in ways that were compatible with an Instagrammable aesthetics, combining, as Çağla put it, “Seriousness with art and photography.” As such, for participants like Patricia, creating politically-oriented content for Instagram was limited by the need to adhere to certain conventions and standards, thus requiring particular aesthetic sensibilities and technical skills such as graphic design, composition, colour-correction, and digital editing—skills which not everyone possesses.

### 3. Gendered Political Potential

By showcasing women whose appearances and interests differ from those typically represented in popular mass media, Instagram can help to broaden the scope of who and what is deemed worthy of public visibility, thus challenging hegemonic hierarchies of representation (Caldeira et al., 2020). The interviewed participants emphasized this idea, seeing Instagram as helping to enact social change regarding what they considered “exposure issues,” as exemplified by Tyrah with references to issues of race, or by Alexandra regarding questions of body activism. They felt that making these identities more widely visible would “broaden people’s perspectives...and maybe even make them more tolerant” (Alexandra). This perspective closely echoes the idea of visibility politics (Whittier, 2017), which aims at gradual cultural and societal change—changing subjectivities, beliefs, and feelings—by making visible the individual experiences of potentially marginalised people, thus normalising these identities in everyday life (Whittier, 2017, pp. 376–377).

Despite this potential, Instagram at large, and particularly popular influencers and Insta-famous users, have been criticised for their limited diversity and for reiterating commercial standards of femininity and beauty (Duffy, 2017, pp. 183–184). However, for the users interviewed the platform also allowed them the opportunity to carefully curate the types of content they followed and consumed, tailoring it to their particular interests and needs, and thus it allowed them to create a space of diversity that was not necessarily reflected in their other media consumption nor in their daily lives offline:

My social media spaces, Instagram and Twitter, in particular, are very...curated. I follow things that I like. If someone would borrow my phone and use my social media, the assumption would be that there are a lot of black people everywhere. [laughs] Which isn’t true, not in the UK anyway....[On social media] it’s very easy to make sure that my content is predominantly stuff that’s about people who look like me. (Ndiza)

Ndiza developed strategic practices of content curation, for example doing regular “Instagram cleanses” where she unfollows overly-idealized content, such as influencers, Insta-famous pages, models, or celebrities. These

practices of curation of consumed content were seen by Ndiza as empowering, allowing her not only to focus on relatable content but also to avoid seeing content which made her feel uncomfortable or created pressure.

For many of the young women interviewed, this everyday political potential also often had a particularly gendered aspect, being frequently linked to discussions about restrictive beauty standards. Some participants saw the user-generated and self-representational ethos of social media as rejecting the gate-keeping of traditional media, which could uphold stereotypical beauty and ideals (Alexandra). Instagram was understood as a “more democratic environment” (Alexandra, Çağla, Kori), which was moving away from the narrow ideals—mainly white, thin, young, seemingly heterosexual, and conventionally attractive—that still prevail in western societies (Gill, 2007, p. 12). The research participants thus recognised the potential of Instagram to showcase a wider diversity of femininities, for example, in terms of ethnicities (Ndiza, Tyrah), body-types (Alexandra, Ndiza), or gender presentations (Kori).

However, many of the interviewees were also critically aware of the limitations of Instagram’s political potential, recognising that these diverse representations of femininities do not exist in a cultural vacuum. The overall media consumption of most of the participants interviewed was centred on digital and social media, with Instagram taking a significant role as one of their most frequently used platforms. However, these participants were familiar with the broader pop culture environment and its conventions, occasionally also engaging with traditional mainstream media, such as television or magazines. Furthermore, they followed on their Instagram accounts not only other ‘ordinary’ users, like their friends or families, but also an array of Insta-famous users, influencers, and even pop culture related accounts, including those of mainstream celebrities and models. As such, these participants recognised that both diverse and more conventional and idealised representations of femininities co-existed on Instagram (Kori, Ndiza): “Obviously [Instagram] has been a great tool in the discussion and the popularisation of things like body-positivity....But, at the same time, there are still Victoria Secret models on Instagram....You encounter both. And they kind of stand in tension” (Ndiza).

Instagram thus exists embedded in a complex, bi-directional intertextual relationship (Allen, 2006) with traditional mainstream media formats, drawing influence from their ideals and conventions, while at the same time shaping the discourses of popular culture. Some interviewees, like Mariana, felt this was seeping into some of the self-representations they encountered on Instagram: “There is always that desire to want to be like that person who appears in the movies. That stereotype, that idea of what you want to be is always inspired by someone who’s ‘above you’” (Mariana, a *miserável*).

These participants also acknowledged the existence of a recognisable Instagrammable beauty ideal, seen as

particularly prevalent amongst popular accounts. This look was exemplified by references to not only influencers, fitness bloggers, or Instagram models, but also traditional celebrities and models with strong Instagram presences, such as Kim Kardashian or Victoria's Secret models (Danielle, Jac, Kori, Tyrah). This look—achieved through the careful use of makeup, hair extensions, exercise routines, other body enhancements, and digital photo-editing and filtering tools—was usually understood as overly-glamorised, highly idealised, and “not very natural” (Danielle, Jac). Drawing back on the logic of spectacular femininity (McRobbie, 2007), these observations echo the idea of idealised femininity as needing to be actively constructed and maintained through forms of aesthetic labour (Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017). Instagram and social media can be seen as potentially extending the pressure to perform endless aesthetic labour, previously mainly associated with celebrities, into the realm of everyday life and towards ‘ordinary’ people (Elias et al., 2017, p. 5). This idealisation can be further linked to the notion of self-branding and the crafting of an edited self, which can be adopted, to a larger or smaller extent, by ‘ordinary’ Instagram users, curating their profiles and strategically revealing only certain aspects of their personal lives that fit with their desired ‘brand’ and aesthetic (Marwick, 2013, p. 15). However, these overly idealised representations were often derided as repetitive, unoriginal, and inauthentic (Danielle, Megan, Tyrah), and seen by some of the participants as potentially detrimental to people’s mental health, creating unachievable ideals (Danielle, Tyrah).

These popular Instagram accounts and the aesthetic conventions they promote can thus become part of the broad ‘cultural scripts’ (Abidin, 2016, p. 87) of Instagram use. These cultural scripts can serve as inspiration for ‘ordinary’ users, being consciously or unconsciously adopted and echoed in everyday self-representational practices. Furthermore, this emulation of popular Instagram cultural scripts and aesthetic conventions can be understood in light of the social media logic of popularity (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) which underlies Instagram practices. This logic privileges the ability to be ‘likeable’ and attract attention, equating metrics of popularity (such as numbers of followers or likes) with standards of success (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 6–7). In order to increase their popularity, Instagram users can adopt sets of attention-seeking strategies and practices (Marwick, 2013), which can include careful consideration of what to post, thus merging the presumed ethos of authenticity of social media with practices of self-branding (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Although to a degree, all ‘ordinary’ users engage with popular cultural scripts regardless of their numbers of followers, the participants noted that the desire for online popularity can be linked to the replication of certain strategies of self-representation that have already proven popular, for example, emulating the lifestyle and consumption choices of influencers (Mariana, a miserável; Megan), or

even their appearances (Tyrah): “People always want to match their idols. They’re not so into being an individual, because that doesn’t get the most likes. I feel like it boils down to that.”

However, this underlying logic of popularity can also be understood as tempering the political potential of Instagram, limiting the reach of diverse representations of beauty or political discourses (Alexandra). Popularity on Instagram is defined not only by quantified metrics of popularity, but it also relies on algorithmic components to determine the ranking and visibility of certain users and posts on individual Instagram feeds and Explore lists (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, pp. 6–7). As some participants noticed, the potential reach of a post is thus dependent on the popularity of the user who shared it (Alexandra, Danielle, Jac). This can lead to more influential users being privileged, with more weight assigned to their voices, further reinforcing pre-existing logics of celebrity (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 6):

I think there’s a potential for getting word out through Instagram. I think if you have somebody who’s well-known, like actors, actresses, athletes....If they were behind the cause and they were posting about it, then I believe it could have an impact. But for your everyday person, I don’t think so. (Jac)

Diverse representations thus abide by the same logic of popularity underlying Instagram at large. As Alexandra acknowledged, whilst more diverse-looking models and bloggers can co-exist on Instagram, they are not necessarily afforded the same visibility and popularity as more conventional-looking models. This further emphasises the tensions between the potential of Instagram and social media to disrupt and challenge hegemonic conventions of gendered representation, and simultaneously, its ability to reinforce and reproduce dominant ideals of femininity and beauty (Enli & Thumim, 2012, p. 100).

#### **4. Negotiating Political Engagement on Instagram**

Although most of the participants interviewed enjoyed following Instagram accounts that addressed political or social issues, and although they applauded these efforts and saw their value (Alexandra, Ndiza, Tyrah), many hesitated when it came to creating and sharing such content themselves (Alexandra, Megan, Tyrah). Megan, who had previously struggled with maintaining a popular (now deleted) fitness-oriented account, described her awareness of Instagram as a public platform in which she felt constantly observed and judged by strangers as the main reason for avoiding sharing “serious issues”:

To be able to share my opinion, knowing very well that these are controversial issues that could get me a lot of backlash was a scary concept for me. Because if I talked to my friends about these issues, I feel that they are more understanding, more forgiving....But if

I say it on a public platform....If someone notices a small mistake that I've made they will be rejoicing.

These observations seem to echo the broader recognition that political and feminist discourses online are often met with online hate and misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Furthermore, this backlash tends to be disproportionately targeted at women, people of colour, and other marginalised communities (Harvey, 2020, p. 140). These participants thus felt the need to be constantly aware of the possible consequences of engaging with political topics on Instagram, developing varied strategies to try to minimise negative feedback and online backlash. These ranged from carefully curating their strategies of self-representation, shifting their accounts to private, filtering who they allowed to follow their accounts, blocking those who harass them, taking occasional Instagram breaks, or even deleting their public accounts, as in the case of Megan. Relegating politically-charged content to the ephemeral feature of Instagram Stories, in which shared content disappears after 24 hours by default, also emerged as a strategy to minimise potential backlash. This seemed to be not only due to its impermanence and lack of archive, which helps to limit the exposure to negative comments (Megan), but also because the vernaculars of Stories incentivise more personal, immediate, and less curated content (Çağla, Mariana, a miserável, Ndiza), potentially facilitating an openness to content that is often excluded from Instagram posts.

The political potential of Instagram also gets embedded into larger discourses of authenticity, which frame the 'transparent' sharing of everyday life and 'just being yourself' as key tenets of social media (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 60). The participants often emphasised the ways in which the content they shared on Instagram, including politically-oriented content, emerged naturally in the course of their everyday lives and was grounded in their personal interests and principles (Alexandra Cris Topolino, Danielle, Mariana, a miserável, Megan, Tyrah). Being "genuine" in their political engagements and, by extension, having a "genuine following" of people who shared similar concerns and mindsets was seen as a way to ensure positive feedback and avoid potential backlash (Danielle). Conversely, this alignment with authenticity can also serve as a cause for online backlash. Creating something "just for the sake of Instagram" (Megan) was often derided as dishonest and hypocritical. The participants thus tended to morally distance (De Ridder, 2017, p. 7) themselves from political statements they saw as insincere, for example when adopting a political "flag" just because of its current popularity or commercial viability (Mariana, a miserável).

Furthermore, some interviewees also expressed concerns that their more socially or politically-oriented posts could be dismissed as a form of slacktivism (Glenn, 2015)—commonly understood as a disconnection between the awareness of a political cause through social media and the actual political action taken towards

it (Glenn, 2015, pp. 81–82). Cris Topolino was aware of this general reproach: "I know that some people maybe will laugh, like: Oh, this makes no sense. If you're complaining on social media you need to act!" Yet, she expressed some frustration at other's refusal to recognise that her posts were accompanied by offline activist engagements, such as joining feminist protests in Spain, as well as other people's dismissal of the relevance of these online statements because she saw social media as central to the ways we communicate nowadays.

However, more often, some of the participants felt that their 'serious' or political posts simply tended to be ignored and not receive much engagement (Cris Topolino, Danielle, Filipa). Being too strongly political and "shoving it into their faces" was seen as causing people to "turn away" from such posts and messages (Danielle). These remarks echo the idea of the 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2010). Addressing political or feminist issues is often seen as essentially disruptive, disturbing the 'peace' of the status quo and confronting others with unpleasant realities, and, as such, these issues can often be dismissed or are negatively received by others. However, while Ahmed sees the figure of the feminist killjoy as being someone who is willing to cause trouble, the concerns of these participants regarding engaging in politics on their Instagram seems to point to a certain reluctance to be ascribed to the category of killjoy and to have to engage with the backlash that often accompanies it. Moreover, linking back to the perception of Instagram as essentially an entertainment-driven platform, as described earlier, for Filipa and Danielle, there was also this vague sense of disillusion, as they saw people privileging "silly" or "shallow" content over more politically poignant posts:

I get the feeling that when I do a more serious post people don't interact as much. It seems like they are ashamed, or guilty, or that they don't care, or don't want to think about it....I don't know, [if I post] some photo of me doing something silly, they are likely to interact much more than with something that is a bit more serious. I think this is a tendency that people have, to put their heads in the ground and to pretend they don't see it. (Filipa)

## 5. Conclusion

By centring the individual and affective manners in which young women engage with and negotiate social media practices (Papacharissi, 2015), this article aimed to complexify the discourses surrounding Instagram's gendered political potential, bringing forward the participants' nuanced, and at times contradictory, understandings.

Given the popularity and reach of Instagram (Constine, 2018), some of the participants saw it as an essential tool for engaging with political opinions in the contemporary media ecosystem. They either used it in informal and quotidian ways to consume politically-



minded content, or more deliberately, to directly address a wide array of political issues by creating and posting self-representations, or by re-sharing particularly interesting posts into their Stories.

However, these understandings of the gendered political potential of Instagram were also grounded by the participants' perception of Instagram as an aesthetically-oriented and entertainment-driven platform. Recognising the existence of particular standards of Instagrammable aesthetics, the participants understood that political discourses could also end up being reframed through this visual lens and materialised through aesthetic practices. This was seen as potentially limiting the political scope of Instagram to those topics that can be suitably addressed in a visual format, thus requiring particular aesthetic sensibilities and technical skills.

The interviewees also linked this political potential to the possibility of engaging with diverse and relatable content. Instagram allows these participants to carefully curate the content they consume, empowering them to create a space of diversity that was not necessarily reflected in the traditional media they consume or in their offline everyday lives. This perspective echoed the ideas of visibility politics (Whittier, 2017) which sees increased visibility of diverse self-representations as a way to broaden perspectives and increase tolerance.

The participants recognised the gendered aspect of Instagram's political potential, often linking these discussions to questions of representation of women and restrictive beauty ideals (Gill, 2007). They critically acknowledged that diverse Instagram representations necessarily co-existed with the more normative and conventional-looking representations which typically rely on aesthetic labour (Elias et al., 2017) and strategies of curation and self-branding (Marwick, 2013). The participants identified the existence of particular Instagrammable beauty ideals, such as those popularised by Insta-famous or celebrity accounts, seeing these representations as promoting a highly glamorised, idealised, and generally unachievable beauty standard. Following a social media logic of popularity (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), these popular ideals can become 'cultural scripts' (Abidin, 2016), inspiring, sometimes unconsciously, the content produced by 'ordinary' users. In addition, the participants saw this emphasis on popularity as limiting the potential reach of diverse self-representations and political discourses, because more diverse representations are not necessarily afforded the same visibility as already popular conventionally-attractive users and content.

Finally, although most interviewees enjoyed following and engaging with politically-oriented content on Instagram, many did not feel personally comfortable in creating such content themselves. Aware of the possibility of public scrutiny, of receiving online backlash, or being accused of slacktivism (Glenn, 2015), these interviewees thus negotiated their political engagements

on Instagram, developing several strategies to avoid attracting backlash. This hesitation to create content and self-representations that overtly engage with political and structural issues can be seen as significant in itself, reflecting larger structural and social forces, as the fear of backlash can serve as a form of discipline which may discourage feminist and political discourse (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

The discourses explored in this work recognise Instagram as a complex and diverse platform, where the political potential to showcase diversity and broaden the scope of who can be considered beautiful and Insta-worthy always co-exists with its potential to reproduce hegemonic ideals and politics of representation. As Instagram remains a central presence in the contemporary media environment and essential to the lives of so many people worldwide, we should strive to critically explore the complexities of everyday social media use, where politics of gender representation can become enmeshed with aesthetic practices, often dismissed as trivial yet rooted in broader cultural logics that both shape them and are shaped by them.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Academic Editors and anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful insights and feedback on this manuscript. This research was supported by funding from the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia [SFRH/BD/116452/2016].

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### References

- Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labour: Engaging with Influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia*, 161(1), 86–100.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Allen, G. (2006). *Intertextuality*. London: Routledge.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic TM: The politics of ambivalence in a brand culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. London: Penguin Books.
- Bourdieu, P. (1965). *Photography, a middle-brown art*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Burns, A. (2015). Self(ie)-discipline: Social regulation as enacted through the discussion of photographic practice. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1716–1733.
- Caldeira, S. P. (2020). "Shop it. Wear it. 'Gram it.": A quali-

- tative textual analysis of women's fashion glossy magazines and their intertextual relationship with Instagram. *Feminist Media Studies*, 20(1), 86–103.
- Caldeira, S. P., De Ridder, S., & Van Bauwel, S. (2020). Between the mundane and the political: Women's self-representations on Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 1–14.
- Chamberlain, P. (2017). *The feminist fourth wave: Affective temporality*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Constine, J. (2018, June 20). Instagram hits 1 billion monthly users, up from 800M in September. *Tech Crunch*. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2018/06/20/instagram-1-billion-users>
- De Ridder, S. (2017). Social media and young people's sexualities: Values, norms, and battlegrounds. *Social Media + Society*, 3(4), 1–11.
- Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) Getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Elias, A. S., Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2017). Aesthetic labour: Beauty politics in neoliberalism. In A. S. Elias, R. Gill, & C. Scharff (Eds.), *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism* (pp. 3–49). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Enli, G. S., & Thumim, N. (2012). Socializing and self-representation online: Exploring Facebook. *Observatorio (OBS\*) Journal*, 6(1), 87–105.
- Frey, W. H. (2018). *The millennial generation: A demographic bridge to America's diverse future*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. Retrieved from [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2018-jan\\_brookings-metro\\_millennials-a-demographic-bridge-to-americas-diverse-future.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2018-jan_brookings-metro_millennials-a-demographic-bridge-to-americas-diverse-future.pdf)
- Gibbs, M., Meese, J., Arnold, M., Nansen, B., & Carter, M. (2015). #Funeral and Instagram: Death, social media, and platform vernacular. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(3), 255–268.
- Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Glenn, C. (2015). Activism or “slacktivism?": Digital media and organizing for social change. *Communication Teacher*, 29(2), 81–85.
- Harvey, A. (2020). *Feminist media studies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hermes, J. (2008). Women's media genres. In W. Donsbach (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of communication*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405186407.wbiecw008>
- Highfield, T. (2016). *Social media and everyday politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kanai, A., & Dobson, A. (2016). Digital media and gender. In N. Naples (Ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell encyclopedia of gender and sexuality studies* (pp. 1–4). Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.
- Legard, R., Keegan, J., & Ward, K. (2003). In-depth Interviews. In J. Ritchie & J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (pp. 139–168). London: SAGE Publications.
- Manovich, L. (2017). Instagram and contemporary image. *Manovich*. Retrieved from <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image>
- Marwick, A. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, & branding in the social media age*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- McRobbie, A. (2007). Top girls? Young women and the post-feminist sexual contract. *Cultural Studies*, 21(4), 718–737.
- Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political: Thinking in action*. London: Routledge.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Rettberg, J. W. (2014). *Seeing ourselves through technology: How we use selfies, blogs and wearable devices to see and shape ourselves*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rettberg, J. W. (2017). Self-representation in social media. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell (Eds.), *SAGE handbook of social media* (pp. 429–443). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Thumim, N. (2012). *Self-representation and digital culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tifentale, A., & Manovich, L. (2014). Selfiecity: Exploring photography and self-fashioning in social media. *Manovich*. Retrieved from <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/selfiecity-exploring>
- Tiidenberg, K. (2018). *Selfies: Why we love (and hate) them*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2013). Understanding social media logic. *Media and Communication*, 1(1), 2–14.
- Van Zoonen, L. (1994). *Feminist media studies*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Vivienne, S., & Burgess, J. (2012). The digital storyteller's stage: Queer everyday activists negotiating privacy and publicness. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(3), 362–377.
- Wagner, C., Aguirre, E., & Sumner, E. (2016). The relationship between Instagram selfies and body image in young adult women. *First Monday*, 21(9). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v21i9.6390>
- WeAreSocial. (2019). Global digital report 2019. *WeAreSocial*. Retrieved from <https://wearesocial.com/global-digital-report-2019>
- WeAreSocial. (2020). Digital 2020: Global digital overview. *WeAreSocial*. Retrieved from [https://p.widencdn.net/1zybur/Digital2020Global\\_Report\\_en](https://p.widencdn.net/1zybur/Digital2020Global_Report_en)
- Whittier, N. (2017). Identity politics, consciousness-raising, and visibility politics. In H. J. McCammon, V. Taylor, J. Reger, & R. L. Einwohner (Eds.), *The*

*Oxford handbook of U.S. women's social movement activism* (pp. 376–397). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Willem, C., Araña, N., Crescenzi, L., & Tortajada, I.

(2010). Girls on Fotolog: Reproduction of gender stereotypes or identity play? *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, 2(3), 225–242.

#### About the Author



**Sofia P. Caldeira** has a PhD in Communication Sciences from Ghent University. She is a Member of the Centre for Cinema and Media Studies (CIMS) at Ghent University, Belgium. Her research focuses on social media, everyday aesthetics, the politics of gender representation, and feminist media studies.