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# Misogyny, solidarity and postfeminism on social media: The work of being Diana Shurygina, survivor-celebrity

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## Abstract

In a disclosure on Russian talk television in January 2017, 16-year-old Diana Shurygina shared with a national audience the traumatic details of her rape by Sergei Semenov. Using Shurygina's performances on television and her subsequent participation on social media as a case study, this article analyses the emergence of empathic publics and the construction of celebrity at the intersection of digital media, popular misogyny and postfeminism in Russia. By setting up a vlog, support groups, fan and personal pages on VKontakte (a popular Russian social networking site), Shurygina is able to counter vicious pillorizing by creating a network of empathy and support. The celebrity that Shurygina sculpts in these spaces, however, is postfeminist in its emphasis on individual choice and self-esteem as strategies to overcome all societal ills, in its celebration of hyperfemininity and in its eschewal of radical politics. This article thus considers how digital platforms shape voice, public affect and solidarity on digital platforms *but also* how complicit that emergent voice is in the neoliberal 'retraditionalisation' of gender roles in post-Soviet Russia.

## Keywords

Affective solidarity, celebrity, postfeminism, Russia, therapeutic media

## Introduction

This article analyses the mobilisation of empathic publics and the production of post-feminist celebrity at the intersection of digital technology, neoliberalism and popular

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misogyny in Russia. It does this by examining the media performances of Diana Shurygina, a rape survivor, on television and social media. In a disclosure on Russian talk TV in January 2017, 16-year-old Diana Shurygina shared with a studio audience and the nation the traumatic details of her rape by Sergei Semenov. Semenov was sentenced to 8 years in prison and was released in January 2018 after a year.

Initial responses to Shurygina's story on reality TV involved attacks on her credibility and sympathy for the convicted rapist. But Shurygina's own participation on suitable platforms helps her steer public discourse to her own benefit and transform pillorizing into empathy. Her work of engendering bonds of understanding takes effect through three modes of social media engagement, each shaped in turn by the particularities of the media platforms on which they unfold. Shurygina has remained hypervisible and her experience ever-present in the public eye through the creation of (1) a vlog, (2) closed groups for trauma survivors and support groups and (3) a fan page on VKontakte.<sup>1</sup>

What emerges in these spaces is an affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012) with Shurygina, underpinned by the emotional practices of responding with empathy, sharing anger and frustration at misogyny and admiration for her resilience and recovery. This article also considers the flip side of this process, where the 'self-brand' (Banet-Weiser, 2012) that Shurygina cultivates is a postfeminist one that pivots on girlie femininity as a strategy for self-empowerment. Her hypervisibility, self-grooming and social sharing, all of which constitute the unpaid creative labour of the entrepreneurial subject, underpin market-driven society and therefore undermine the radical, politically transformative potential of Shurygina's mobilisation of an empathic public.

## **Critical concepts**

At the outset, this article offers a discussion of the theoretical concepts of therapeutic media culture, misogynist vigilantism, postfeminism, self-branding/celebrity and online participation as not only democratic and inclusive but also as unpaid and exploitative labour in an age of neoliberalism.

### *Therapeutic sensibility of pop culture*

Shurygina's sharing of her trauma occurs in the context of the 'therapeutic sensibility' of pop culture, given fillip in an age of reality television and social media where the threshold of participation is low. In Russia, a spate of television shows offers a platform for such public disclosures of trauma, hardship and dysfunctionality to find expression but then also attain redress through the mediation of experts and audiences (Lerner and Zbenovich, 2013: 838).

As a society, we are deeply uncomfortable with unresolved, indeterminate experience and therefore work quickly to construct codified stories that place pain in the past, position individuals as emotionally hardy survivors, and reinforce the social bonds tested during trying times. There is a powerful force, a narrative imperative, urging us to frame life experience in terms steeped in the culturally pervasive therapeutic ethos. (Woodstock, 2014: 780)

This media culture of intimate self-disclosures is characterised not only by the sharing of personal experiences but also the public dispensation of judgement and support. This sharing of stories and the culture of advising, empathy or shaming that occurs constitutes a circuit of affect; a network where emotions permeate communication but may be amplified but also managed and transformed by the simultaneous emergence of a variety of groups that seek to mould public affect by taking charge of the production of content on social media. This quest to be healed in the public eye is heightened in a neoliberal age where the discourse of the market also endorses the responsibility of the individual to manage, succeed and overcome systemic obstacles as though they were merely personal mind blocks. Tomas Matza writes about the psychotherapy market in Russia that ‘self-esteem, self-realization, self-knowledge, self-management, independence, personal potential, and responsibility have articulated with consumer desire, capitalist self-fashioning and careerism’. Working on one’s self is key to succeeding in a market-driven society (Matza, 2009: 492).

### *Misogyny and shaming on social media*

Not all public responses to revelations of trauma and struggle are conducive to a therapeutic resolution. Research has increasingly demonstrated that new media have become spaces for the conservative disciplining of ‘errant’ social behaviour. In Russia, such social conservatism is situated in a context of neo-masculinism and the retraditionalisation of gender norms (Johnson and Saarinen, 2013). Johnson and Saarinen (2013) refer to this as a ‘gender regime change’, where neomasculinism governs the social order and pushes back any emergent feminisms of the early post-Soviet decade (p.550). ‘In Russia, the backlash against the Soviet-style faux emancipation, widespread resistance to any kind of public engagement or “ism,” and the power of global neoliberalism overwhelmed most feminisms’ (Johnson and Saarinen, 2013: 544). Conservative nationalism has legitimised a discourse of masculinity that was previously ‘locker-room talk’ – praising men’s sexual prowess and calling women protesters ‘whores’ (Johnson and Saarinen, 2013: 548) are now part of normative political discourse. What this leads to is a popular misogyny that objectifies female sexuality but denies women sexual agency; if they do appear to exercise that agency, these transgressions are publicly shamed on the Internet. In this quality, Russian Internet spaces correspond to Internet cultures in other parts of the world, where scholars have repeatedly shown that the Internet (along with television) has played an active role in reinforcing ‘rape culture’, so that moral repugnance is directed at a victim rather than at a perpetrator (Rentschler, 2014: 66).

Furthermore, rape culture is bolstered by new mediations (Phipps et al., 2017) as these new platforms become a space where a survivor’s narrative of events is constantly dissected for credibility, her social network is subjected to scrutiny and all efforts to undermine her are unleashed. In this misogynist environment, where male aggressiveness towards women is normalised, new media have engendered a culture of pillory and shaming. This has been referred to as the ‘embodied surveillance’ of digital media, which takes upon itself the power to ‘alert the world to acts of immoral/illegal behaviour’ (Hess and Waller, 2014: 102). When women take to media platforms to speak against sexual violence, they are subjected to vicious trolling and abusive behaviour from men and

women who place responsibility and blame squarely on the shoulders of the women who bravely address these issues in public. This pervasive phenomenon of ‘gendertrolling’ ‘systematically targets women to prevent them from fully occupying public spaces’ (Mantilla, 2013: 569). The strong element of courtroom trials and public tribunals on Russian reality television creates a fertile media space for the pillory of young women who dare to talk about sexual violence and sexual agency; this policing carries over into public discourse on social media.

### *(Post)feminist mobilisation*

The intrinsic participatory nature of new media can complicate this landscape of misogyny by engendering spaces of push back and activism. The emergence of digital communicative spaces allows for new forms of political activism that are primarily discursive challenges and networks of solidarity. Young girls and women use social media to actively claim their rights and speak up against pervasive gender violence and sexual harassment in widespread, multiplatform movements like Hollaback, Take Back the Night and others. While many such initiatives challenge systemic misogyny, social media have simultaneously become sites for a feminist mobilisation that is differently structured. It is a post-feminist identity, where freedom lies in the ‘liberating promise of beauty’ and the removal of constraints to ‘femininity’ (‘embodied’ and ‘attitudinal’) (Lazar, 2011: 40). ‘Third Wave feminists and postfeminists encourage “girls” to immerse themselves in the pleasures of femaleness, to find self-fulfillment and carnality, rather than to dismantle, critique, expose, or challenge systematic discrimination and violence’ (Nguyen, 2013: 158). Normative femininity, ‘embracing the pink things of stereotypical girlhood’ (Nguyen, 2013), becomes the mode of engagement and performance for many young girls blogging on social media today. Pertinently, postfeminism is situated in a context of neoliberal capitalism, where a regime of enhanced femininity is encouraged and best realised through constant self-fashioning and participation in commodity culture. For this reason, it is often perceived as politically conservative, because it shifts the burden of responsibility from the state and its institutions to the individual, and fetishises commodity culture. Shelly Budgeon (2015) makes a lucid case for why postfeminism implies a disengagement from the political and a complicit role in the neoliberal environment:

neoliberal feminism does not offer a comparable immanent critique of neoliberal governance. Instead at its centre is a highly individuated female subject who, because she understands that inequalities between men and women exist, is interpreted as a feminist, but her response to the knowledge that inequalities remain is to take full responsibility for pursuing her own ambitions and creating a meaningful life through personal self-transformation. (p.313)

The shift of emphasis from collective good to the individual and her self-care effectively strips this display of ‘emancipation’ of its political capacity to engage and challenge structural impediments in women’s lives.

In post-Soviet Russia, postfeminism is additionally a reaction against western ideas of feminism that are seen as foreign and discomfitingly close to Soviet ideas of gender

equality, which they believe subsumed femininity. In the retraditionalisation of gender roles and expectations that was discussed in the previous section, many Russian women reject western feminism as aggressive and unfeminine, and instead embrace a kind of girlie feminism which allows them to valorise 'being feminine' as an exercise of their right over their bodies. The labour of looking like a woman or looking feminine is claimed to be fun and 'something that is essentially in women's nature' (Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015: 98). In Shurygina's transformation into celebrity, it is this neoliberal labour of self-grooming as key to empowerment that is publicly performed and read as a reclaiming of her life after a traumatic incident.

### *Celebrity in an age of communicative capitalism*

Shurygina's celebrity is produced in an age of reality television and digital media when 'ordinary people' (read working class, usually) achieve fame because of what they have experienced or endured. In digital media, they have ample opportunities to perform their public selves and build 'parasocial' ties with supportive publics (Marshall, 2010: 45). Shurygina's celebrity is what Marshall would call the transgressive-intimate self who wittingly or unwittingly shares that which earlier might have been suitable only for an intimate circle of friends and family, revealing a vulnerable or fragile side to their seemingly robust celebrity personalities (Marshall, 2010). This confessional celebrity that selectively shares an intimate self takes shape in the age of a therapeutic media sensibility (Woodstock, 2014), where media platforms are witness to the sharing of traumatic and emotionally destabilising experiences and ostensibly provide spaces of 'healing'. This culture of confession and sharing has made 'ordinary celebrity' possible, but such seemingly democratic participation is essentially labour without compensation. This phenomenon compels Jodi Dean (2010) to refer to the intersection of networked media and capitalism as communicative capitalism:

I take the position that contemporary communications media capture their users in intensive and extensive networks of enjoyment, production, and surveillance. ... Just as industrial capitalism relied on the exploitation of labor, so does communicative capitalism rely on the exploitation of communication. (pp.3-5)

More specifically, the cultural labour involved here is 'immaterial, service-oriented, and tied to the management of one's own and others' emotions through communication and managing one's bodily appearance' (Baym, 2015: 15).

Thus, while Shurygina's participation appears to be an indication of the democratic potential of reality television and new media, it is creative labour as Shurygina and a host of others on reality television and its social media corollaries offer access to their lives for media content. By submitting so fully to the surveillance of media apparatuses, reality television participants make themselves 'governable' (Lorey, 2015) and also provide a wealth of information towards which industries can tailor products and services. Those who stand to gain from this labour are the industries that host platforms and provide appropriate services depending on our every disclosure. As Mark Andrejevic (2003) writes, the practice that we believe to be empowering by virtue of the low threshold of participation appears instead to be an exploitative one (p.7).

## Methodology

Bringing together these strands of scholarship on therapeutic media, online vigilantism, postfeminism, communicative capitalism and neoliberal media celebrity culture, I analyse episodes of the reality show 'Let them Speak' on Channel 1 and the subsequent social media outrage aimed at Shurygina. This is followed by an analysis of specific social media platforms and their role in affording Shurygina space for changing the course of the narrative and steering public emotion towards support and empathy for herself. This is a discussion not only of the networked nature of affect but also the form and substance of postfeminist survivor-celebrity.

This analysis of Shurygina's celebrity as a case study involves a close, discursive and ideological reading of the initial television episode on 'Let Them Speak' and subsequent social media posts about the episode and Shurygina. Examining her celebrity as multi-platform work, this article draws on a purposive selection of YouTube vlogs shaming Shurygina. The analysis of Shurygina's own media narratives, or those produced by her fans in official groups, entails a broad exploration of online genres (vlogs, selfies and social media messages) posted by her and her fans on YouTube and VKontakte. Selected posts are examples of self-representation, where Shurygina is, variously, a friend in pain who draws comfort from her growing circle of supporters, but also the epitome of resilience and feminine beauty worthy of emulation. Together, these performative posts constitute the intensive labour involved in the production of celebrity. All posts considered in this article appeared on the above-mentioned Internet sites between January 2017 and June 2018.

## The rape disclosures of Diana Shurygina on talk television: 'let them speak'

In March 2016, 16-year-old Diana was raped by a friend with whom she went to a party. The young man in question, Sergei Semenov, was found guilty and sentenced to 8 years RI, subsequently truncated to 3 years in a regular prison, and since then released even sooner in January 2018. In January 2017, when Sergei had only just been convicted, Diana appeared on the most popular talk show 'Let them Speak' to present her story, setting in motion her ongoing encounter with media celebrity (episode 31 January 2017) (Figure 1). The rapist's mother and sister were also present and projected as the victimised. This is evident in their body language: they sit perched as though in discomfort, use a few words and never raise their voices. This projection of them as victims also develops through audience interaction with the guests on stage. The episode set the stage for the public's response by starting the conversation with Sergei's mother; Andrei Malakhov, the show's popular host, requests Semenov's mother to share with the audience what Sergei's dreams for his life had been. Everything that follows, including the narrative of what happened, is set up as a betrayal of his dreams and the onset of his disillusionment. The audience oohs and aahs showing their sympathy for him. The mother is asked if Sergei drank, and she says, 'a couple of beers' and the audience does not react.

Talk shows act as a morality tribunal; people appear on screen to talk of their personal crises and traumas, and their issues are seen as manifestations of dysfunctionality. Reality



**Figure 1.** Stills from the episode of *Let Them Speak*, 31 January 2017 (YouTube).

television also enables exploitation via the promotion and display of suffering, which is not only a necessary prelude to the spectacle of self-improvement that reality television is all about but also provides the ideal occasion for the ritual of articulating public morality (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 210). Like all talk shows part of this therapeutic media culture, ‘Let them Speak’s ‘big reveal’ (Palmer, 2008) comprises a succession of points throughout the narrative when the person disclosing their story is subjected to judgement and evaluation by others; these usually become prime shaming moments. In addition, there is the middle-class scrutiny that disciplines the dysfunctional ways of the working-class (embodied by values and tastes). Shurygina’s father was a long haul truck driver and her mother an employee in a hypermarket; he, allegedly, quit his job in the face of public hostility after Shurygina’s case become well-known. During the show, middle-class, accomplished professionals (a psychologist, model and DJ) discipline not only Shurygina’s behaviour but have chastising words for her family’s presumed failure in raising their daughter to observe restraint and self-control.

This lineup of professionals attempts to enlighten Shurygina about proper female decorum; they chuckle, raise their eyebrows and shake their heads in consternation through Shurygina’s testimony, doubting her credibility. The celebrity guests’ dogged questioning of Shurygina, aided by the audience’s vocalised outrage at her behaviour, constitutes an act of vigilantism as well as gentrification on national television. When Shurygina declares, after repeated interrogation about how much she drank that evening, that she had a few glasses of vodka (‘na donyshke’/a wee bit), the audience gasps in outrage. The phrase ‘a wee bit’, now part of the lore around Shurygina, indicates to her detractors both a flippant attitude towards alcohol consumption and an inability to assess the ‘boundaries’ of normative female decorum. Either way, she falls short in the public eye.

The studio audience repeatedly calls attention to Shurygina’s other alleged failings too. Her manner of dress, her relationships with men and her behaviour after the rape are held up for particular scrutiny. A video begins to play in the background; it is a selfie video made a month after she was raped, and it shows her striking seductive poses and pouting provocatively into the camera. A celebrity guest points to the screen and suggests that this behaviour shows Shurygina to be out to trap men. The audience largely concurs and Malakhov wraps up, saying: ‘The point is not whether the rape happened. But your



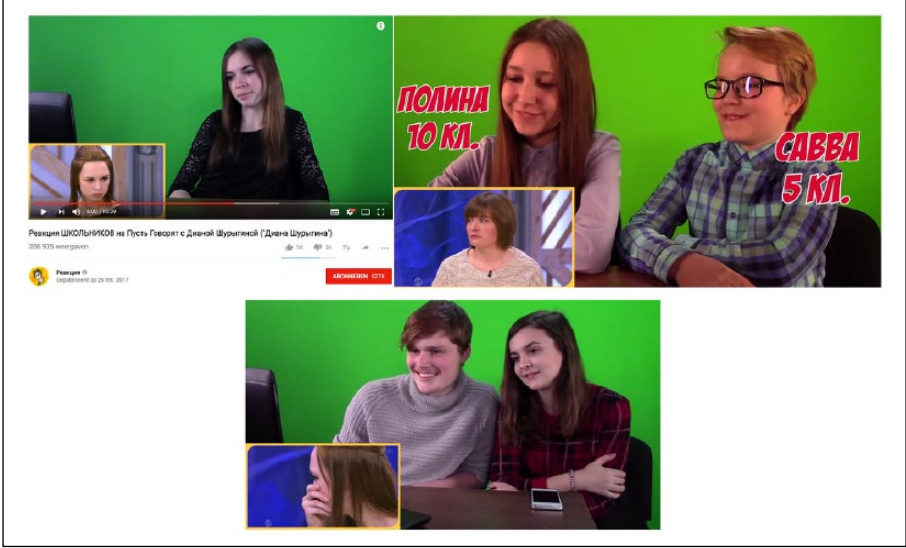
behaviour and utterances after that'. The audience claps resoundingly. The affective engagement of the audience with the person being shamed is a requisite in this loop between reality show and audience. Referring to how shame underpins interactions between audience and those who engage in self-disclosures on television, Ferguson (2010) calls this the 'sociality of shame', where shame and shaming are a socially binding and divisive force (pp.95–96). The shame must be felt by the survivor not only for having made herself vulnerable to rape or misrepresenting facts but also for not showing trauma in a manner considered appropriate by those watching.

## **Social media: silencing Diana**

On social media platforms, audiences/viewing publics continue debating television episodes, characters and narratives online and continue to judge participants of reality television, beyond what the in-show judges and audiences might do in their roles. New media have, like reality TV, become a site of everyday surveillance of 'deviant behaviour' by ordinary people with the simple access to their mobile phones (Hess and Waller, 2014: 106). Additionally, as we discussed above, feminist scholarship has shown us repeatedly that the Internet is a deeply misogynist space. Contrary to expectations that it would redress social inequalities by giving everyone equal access, access has hardly led to a progressive transformation of social values. Women are more likely to be disciplined and silenced on the Internet, punished for speaking up and for simply being present and vocal. Shurygina's vocality about her experience has led to widespread online shaming and mocking, with people dissecting her story for alleged inconsistencies and generally casting aspersions on her credibility. Online detractors point to Shurygina's own sexualised selfies and videos to suggest that 'girls like her' trap men and that men are the victims of 'wily' female sexuality. Videos have appeared on YouTube where various members of the media audience are recorded reacting to the 'Let Them Speak' episode.

One of countless examples is a video titled 'Reactions of school students to the "Let Them Speak" with Diana Shurygina' (Figure 2), in which young people watch the video of the episode (in the inset) and then respond to Shurygina's appearance and utterances for the camera.

The school students laugh, mock and look generally exasperated at almost everything Shurygina says on TV and comments run the gamut of negative emotions from disbelief to ridicule. One observer says 'poor girl' in a sarcastic tone, and another boy adds: 'She was raped on April 1 and the (selfie- ed.) video was made on July 1': the implication is clear. For these young people, Shurygina did not 'appear' traumatised after her rape and her perceived flippancy shrouds her rape claim in doubt (3:54) [3:54 indicates the time/moment in the video that this occurs]. They murmur in agreement when the guest in the episode says that Shurygina seems more upset about people blogging about her, than she appears to be about the rape. Even something as personal as trauma is subjected to moral policing by the public that will settle for nothing less than the survivor's withdrawal from public life and repentant self-flagellation for what occurred as authentic signs of trauma and grief. Any indication of resilient survivorhood, enjoyment and pleasure is seen to cast doubt on the veracity of the survivor's story.



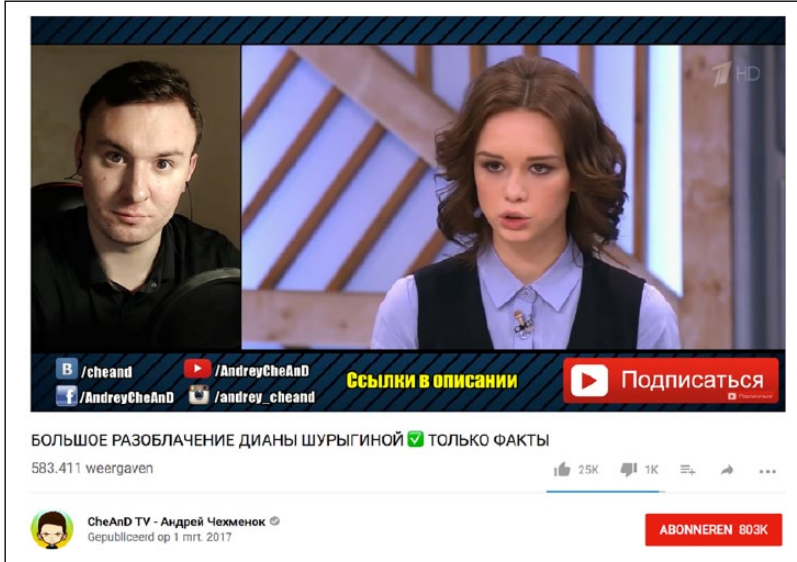
**Figure 2.** Stills from the YouTube video ‘Reactions of school students to the Let Them Speak episode with Diana Shurygina’.

In another vlog commentary about the Shurygina episode, video blogger Andrei Chekhmenokde constructs Diana’s narrative by claiming to show the implausibility of many of her contentions (Figure 3). Splicing the video so you can see his expressions as he responds to her alleged omission of facts, he visibly shows his incredulity: when exactly did she scream for help and how come the rooms were all at once so empty, he asks disbelievingly.

There is a ‘new vigor’ on the Internet to ‘maintain the cultural suppression of female sexuality’ or the shaming of women who are (perceived to be) sexually active (Webb, 2015). The aggravated nature of shaming on the Internet can have the effect of silencing those shamed, because it reinforces their exclusion and may lead to them limiting their self-expression; after all shaming is not meant to reintegrate or rehabilitate, but to exclude and ostracise. However, in an age of new media, these attempts to silence women may be said to be undercut by the participatory nature of new media and the agency of those shamed to use the Internet in equally vocal ways. It is to this participatory work that the article turns in the next section.

### **From survivor to resilient celebrity: managing affect on social media**

Moments of perceived discrepancy between word and behaviour give audiences a sense that they are witnessing the authentic individual on television, which opens that individual to ridicule and pillory. The social media responses we noted above continue this quest to disclose moments of ‘authenticity’ which are purported to demonstrate



**Figure 3.** 'The Grand Deception of Diana Shurygina. Only Facts', posted by user CheAnD TV, 1 March 2017.

Shurygina's real persona behind the alleged artifice. Simultaneously, Shurygina's own performances on social media are meant to constitute authentic self-representations, stripped of others' mediation and judgement. In the face of moral vigilantism and attempts to silence her, Shurygina frames and performs her own narratives on platforms of her choice; she does the work of transforming public affect by managing her own media content. Making the most of the confessional function of media culture, Shurygina resorts to 'constant revealing' (Keller, 2014: 160) to reclaim the public narrative of her rape and build emotional ties with her fans. She does this in three ways: through personal address in vlogs, by creating groups for similarly traumatised women and for likeminded supporters, and by maintaining a fan page which sustains her visibility as a survivor-celebrity with a personality and image her fans can emulate. Shurygina is not represented by activists, but remains visible, vocal and agentic in the creation and perpetuation of a networked solidarity that claims to challenge rape culture.

### *Vlogs: intimate connections with empathic publics*

Shurygina posted four vlogs in 2017 before she shifted her attention to her VKontakte pages. Her vlogs frame her experience in a narrative of healing and recovery, feeding into the therapeutic sensibility that pervades popular culture. Considered authentic and unmediated, vlogging is a tool for individuals to create intimate communities; people become subscribers to the vlogger's feed, eager to listen and commiserate about the individual's personal revelations. Shurygina's supporters visit her vlog to hear of her phases of recovery and applaud her resilience, creating a space of understanding and empathy in

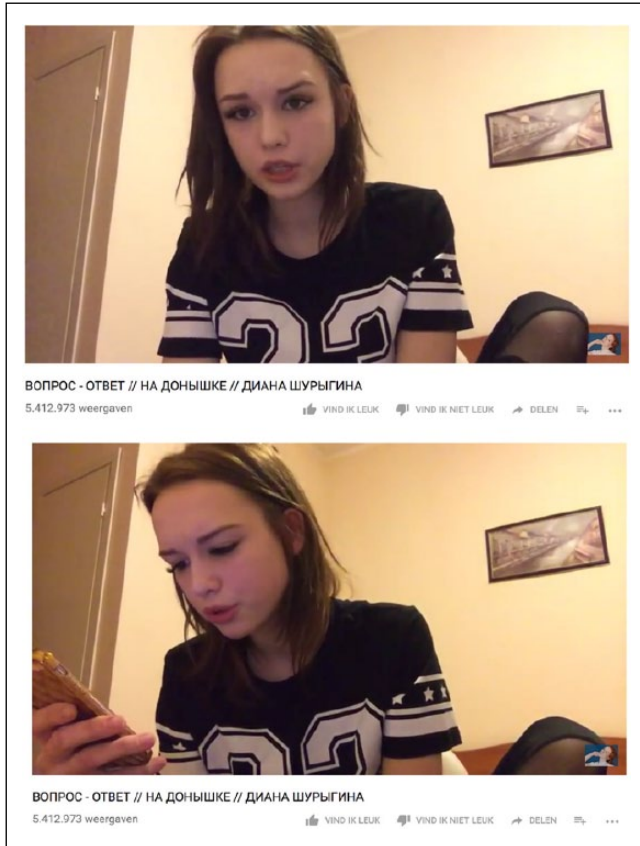
this social network. The narrative style in the vlog is intimate and performative; it is personal in the way that the speaker speaks only to the camera. In his research on transgender vlogging on YouTube, Tobias Raun (2015) describes vlogging as a ‘transformative medium for working on, producing and exploring the self’ (p.366). The vlog can be both ‘an individual act of self-validation and . . . a social act of recognition and encouragement’ due to audience feedback and interaction (Raun, 2015: 368). Intimacy is vital to this affective labour and does not work without a receptive community with whom it resonates. Raun (2018) has elsewhere argued that, in fact, intimacy as exemplified by vlog performances is a genre, as well as a form of capital that accrues to your celebrity status.

In her first video blog ‘Question-Answer//a wee bit//’ that Shurygina published on 24 February 2017, she chats with her audience by reading out their questions from her mobile phone. Leaning into the camera, as though sharing a confidence, Shurygina answers questions about how she has remained strong, how she deals with criticism and how she spends her free time (Figure 4).

Her voice is muted, while she appears to be casually dressed and in her own room. Her posture is casual, her lines appear unscripted and there are no distractions. The vlog has a raw finish that serves to lend her appearance credibility and authenticity. Questions she handles are mainly about how she copes with the post-rape trauma and whether her daily life has been affected by the incessant trolling. She concludes by reading people’s best wishes and their compassionate and empathic messages. These letters, she claims, help her and her family through this ordeal. She addresses questions about the shaming but also about her life choices as an individual: ‘What do you want to do in future?’ ‘What are your plans?’ her supporters want to know, and Shurygina obliges by sharing her dreams and aspirations with them. The vlog as a technosocial space thus cements the bond between Diana and her audience, whose commiserating messages and displays of support become co-opted in Shurygina’s own performance of her self on the vlog. The audience’s participation is vital to her quest for validation through the vlog.

In a subsequent vlog, ‘I am tired’ posted on 10 March 2017, her form of address and her tone are different from the first, but the aura of closeness that binds the speaker to the audience remains, by virtue of the platform (Figure 5). Her expression and words at the beginning immediately convey her agony and set the tone for what is to follow (as does the title of the vlog, naturally). Interestingly, she begins by claiming she is going to be herself, as though her previous attempts to put on a brave face and appear stoic are wearing her down. ‘I am just going to be myself. Last year I saw a lot of unpleasantness; I was insulted. I am tired. I can’t go on like this’. In this vlog, Diana’s tone goes from distressed to strident; the setting is more impersonal, akin to a studio. The intimacy of her home is missing. Yet, the address to the camera, directly to the viewer, and the absence of any other individual in the frame and the space, suggests the sharing of confidences, seals her connection with her audience and buttresses her claim to credibility and authenticity. She thanks her subscribers for their support and then leaning forward to the camera as if to urge those in doubt, she adds: ‘Do not be silent about encounters you have had with violence. The police will help you’.

The video then is no longer about her personal trauma alone, but about mobilising against misogyny in general. Shurygina takes recourse to the ‘virtual confessional’ (Keller,

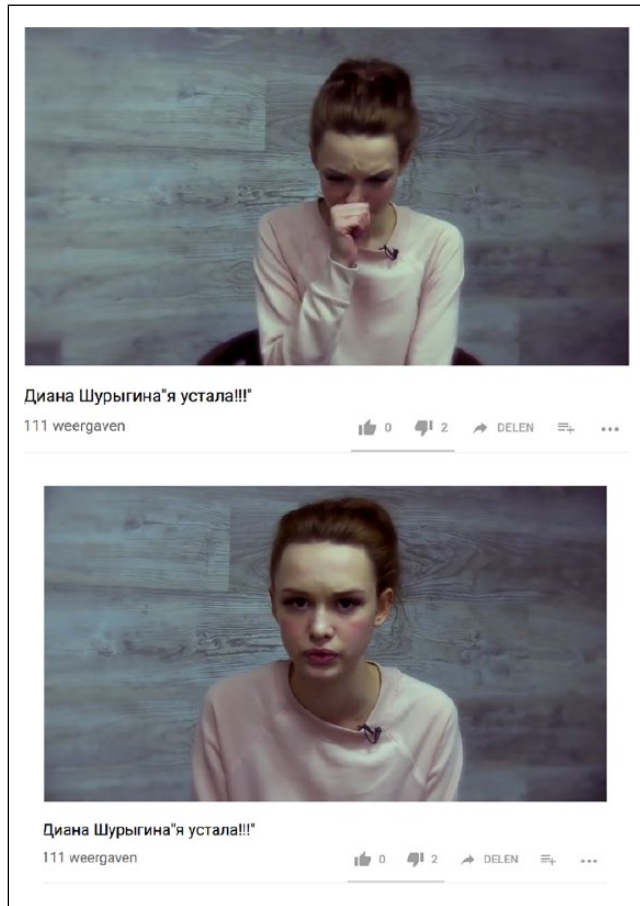


**Figure 4.** Still from Shurygina's first vlog, 'Question-Answer//a wee bit//' (<https://youtu.be/VpMPyNJqaNM?t=69>).

2014: 160) mode of new media culture to construct, out of her traumatic experience, a celebrity persona who must appear to be authentic, resilient, emotionally accessible and a strong voice against everyday virulent sexism. In this quest for solidarity among women, one sees the potential for political mobilisation that may reinforce the optimism about participatory media's emancipatory potential that was characteristic of the early years of new media research.

### *Social networks: private disclosures and popular mobilisation*

This connect that Diana forges with the collective and the solidarity with other women that it implies is sustained in social networking communities of two kinds that emerge around her experiences: one kind of grouping is closed VKontakte groups that allow access only to those who have suffered trauma and would like to share their stories in a

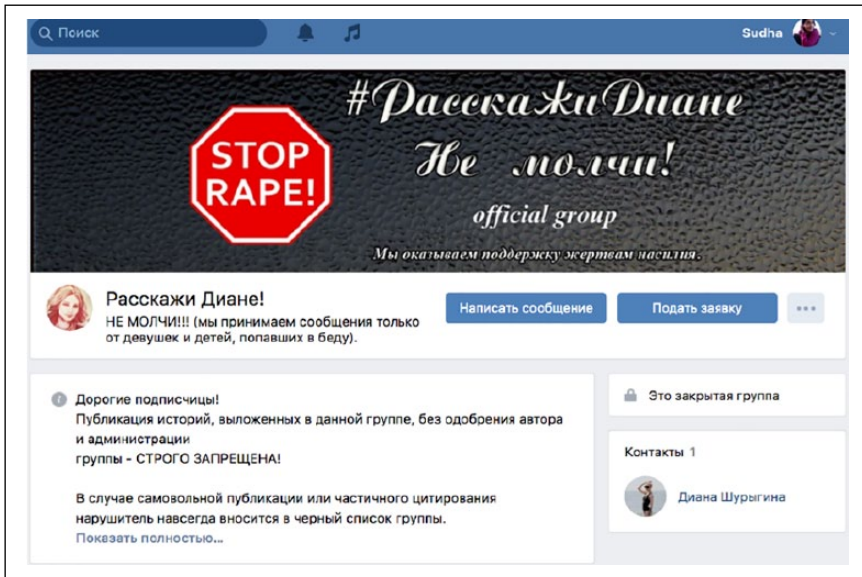


**Figure 5.** Still from the vlog 'I am tired'.

private safe enclave, and the second is social networking groups on VKontakte that are maintained by supporters and become a space for discursive mobilisation against rape culture. These sites act as spaces for the pursuit of informal justice; here, Shurygina seeks and gets public support that legitimises and reinforces the court verdict.

In the first kind of group where private confidences about traumatic experiences are shared, membership is restricted and the anonymity provided engenders an intimate space for sharing. This network-based, media-enabled documentation of misogyny is a critically important response to the normalisation of rape culture on mainstream media. One prominent example of such an initiative is the group on VKontakte, 'Tell Diana! DO NOT REMAIN SILENT!!!' (their subheading says: We only accept messages from girls who have been traumatised). Currently it has 7220 members (Figure 6).

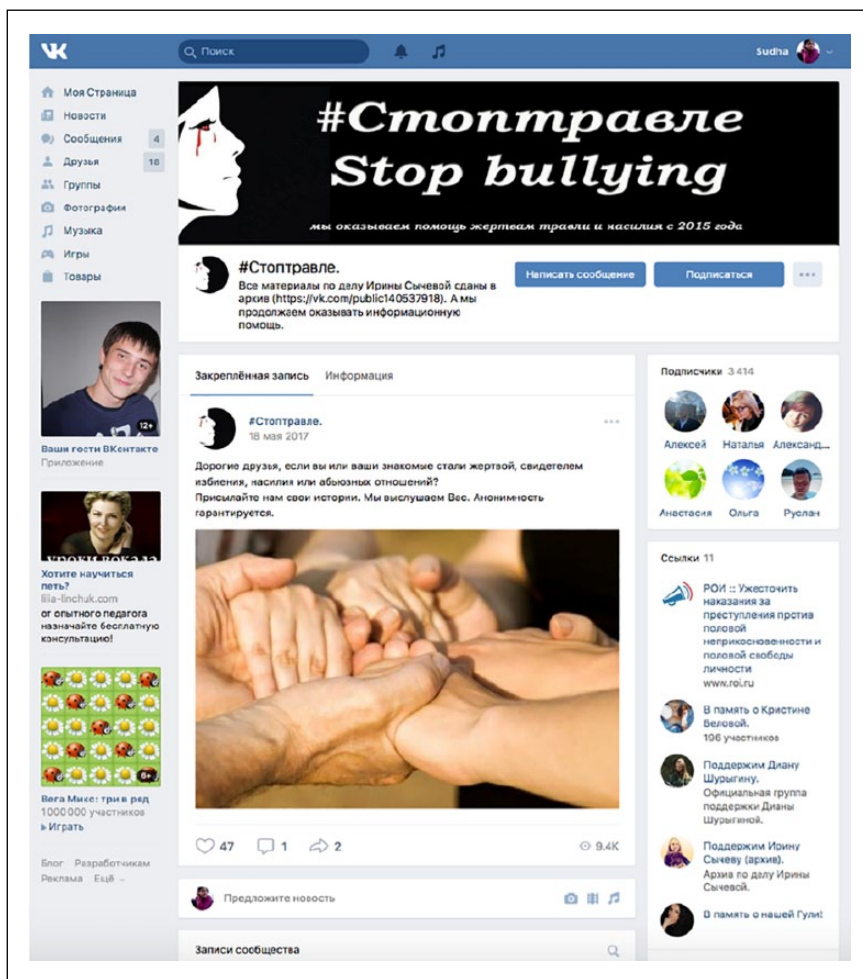
It is noteworthy that women are invited to this group to 'tell Diana' all; her emergent celebrity pivots on the example she has set by speaking up and having her rapist



**Figure 6.** Screenshot from the VKontakte page 'Tell Diana! DO NOT REMAIN SILENT!!!'.

incarcerated. This invests her with authority based on her experience in taking on the world of misogyny and puts her in a position to receive other people's confidences. This group is for those who have suffered sexual assault and are looking for a support group that will help them work through their grief. VKontakte being a platform like Facebook links groups that display similar aims, goals and interests. Algorithms help fuel solidarity, forming a network of affinity across social networking sites. So, while browsing through the index of groups supporting Diana, one is prompted to consider the following group in support of another rape survivor Irina Sycheva, called '#Stoptrolling. We support those who have suffered from trolling and violence since 2015'. This group was set up in support of 18-year-old Irina Sycheva who was raped in a bathroom stall in 2015. The rapists were imprisoned, but Sycheva suffered brutal online trolling which pushed her to attempt suicide. On the right side you see links (below the profile pictures of the members) to groups offering similar support platforms for other rape survivors, including Shurygina (Figure 7).

Membership in these private support groups is out of bounds for the researcher, but it is clear from their self description that theirs is a space not only for self-disclosures but also advice giving. For women who do participate in these groups – the connections formed, conversations had and advice shared in these communities tell them they are not alone in a society that is hostile to women's narratives of sexual violence. This act of speaking through social media, this witnessing that is shared, indicates 'a politics of care' and 'a culture of support and response that enhances' ... 'capacities for responding, and for reporting sexual assaults' (Rentschler, 2014, 76).



**Figure 7.** Screenshot from VKontakte group page '#Stoptrolling. We support those who have suffered from trolling and violence since 2015' (<https://vk.com/stoptravle>).

Groups on VKontakte are also sites for expressions of solidarity with Diana: here I am referring to the formation, on social networking sites, of communities that have as their common purpose offering explicit support for Shurygina's fight against Semenov and his trolling supporters online and offline. Affective solidarity emerges in the constant 'likes', the 'we're with you' refrain and the 'shares' which act as a reaffirmation of whatever she says publicly. An important group in this regard is the VKontakte group 'Third Front: we support Diana Shurygina', with 34,702 members, where the administrator has the following stirring words of solidarity for Shurygina:



I support Diana Shurygina because I don't want a victim to be blamed for her behaviour. I support Diana Shurygina, because a short skirt is not a justification for rape. I support Diana Shurygina because I am repelled by our society that trolls a traumatised girl. I didn't believe a single word the rapist says; it is very evident that he is lying. Diana, we are with you! You are not alone! (posted on 9 June 20, 2017)

Subsequent posts have become a steady flow of documentation of incidences of rape across the country, with links to news reports. This perpetual bulletin board of sexual violence is a vital tool for disseminating information daily and compelling visitors to acknowledge the pervasiveness and routine nature of crimes against women. In this aspect of engendering ties of solidarity, her online labour can be said to enable a form of networked activism. If focusing on this dimension of her presence, it would seem that online media do fulfill their much-touted promise of democratisation, inclusivity and political participation. An analysis of the media content that Shurygina produces or the substance of her celebrity, however, suggests that the political and radical potential of her participation remains unrealised.

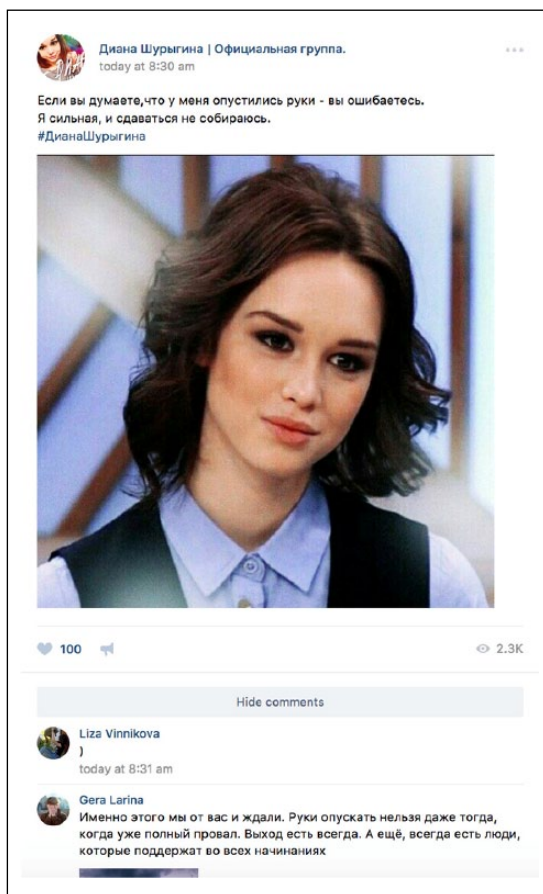
### *Self-fashioning on VKontakte: postfeminist celebrity*

Each media platform's architecture shapes the nature of Shurygina's participation. On VKontakte, with its accommodation of personal and group pages, Shurygina's celebrity is one that derives only partly from her political activism, instead leaning more heavily on her resolve to 'self-brand' (Banet-Weiser, 2012) as a young woman whose capacity to survive and move on is presumably manifested in the care she takes of herself, with respect to her self-presentation and lifestyle choices (such as matrimony).

In the earlier posts, when Semenov was still incarcerated, Shurygina wrote more often about her state of mind and resolve to win against the haters. In one of the earliest posts here, Shurygina prefaced her photo with this: 'if you think they have bound my arms, then you are wrong. I am strong, and do not intend to succumb' (Figure 8). When Semenov was released from prison in January, Diana posted the following selfie with a message decrying social norms that prescribe how women must behave after rape. In a post with 681,000 likes, she writes that life is beautiful and she plans to enjoy it. 'Is it humane to expect victims of rape to languish at home or cut their veins?' (Figure 9).

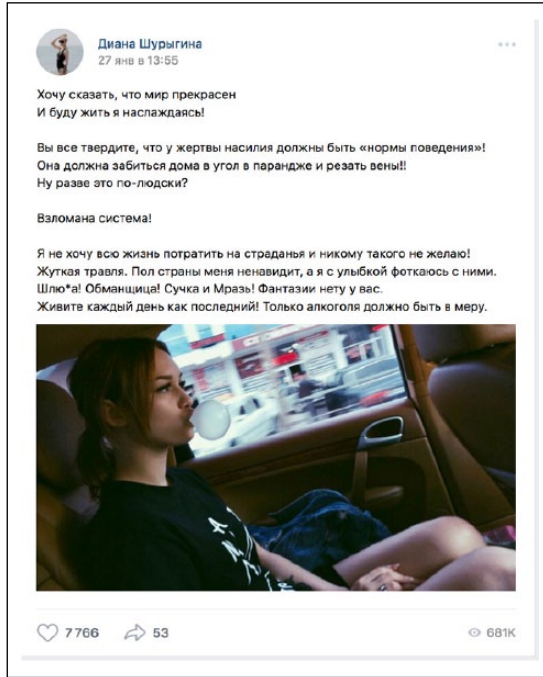
While many fans' posts on this page speak of her strength and desire to carry on the fight, subsequently most move beyond the violent incident to write effusive messages praising Diana for her gumption, her sassy demeanour, her soundbites about romance and love, and even her choice of wardrobe.

The bulk of her own posts work towards maintaining a girlie feminine image, buttressed by more than her fair share of cute emojis. News about Diana on this official fan page is about everything from her romance to her first job and first car – this sharing brings her closer to her viewers, letting her supporters have daily glimpses into her private life and creating affective ties necessary for her celebrity to seem authentic. Functioning in a society where a woman's value pivots on her physical appearance, scholars find it 'unsurprising that young women are willing to collude with neoliberal media agendas, using them as a launching pad to become famous and/or, at the very least, (precariously) employed' (Kokoli and Winter, 2015: 162).



**Figure 8.** Screenshot from Shurygina’s personal page on VK, posted on 27 January 2018.

In these spaces, Shurygina’s narrative of self is based mostly on simply ‘being Diana’ – someone whose story is no longer only about surviving a horrific act of violence, but about her individual pursuit of ‘the happy and successful life’ despite that experience. Her official fan page with 54,446 members, ‘Diana Shurygina | Official group’, is one of the main sites where she does the emotional work of self-fashioning and social sharing. Having recently married Andrei Shlyanin, her fan page has been renewed to carry a wedding photo in the banner (Figure 10), aiding in her story of recovery and healing by validating her re-entry into the traditional fold. In her fan page, Shurygina is a person healing with few visible fissures in her identity and with only subtle references to the violence she has survived. Instead, the emphasis is on her re-emergence as a young woman who has done the creative and aesthetic labour of making herself whole again, through an impressive display of confidence and self-esteem, with little or no disruption to the bourgeois social order.



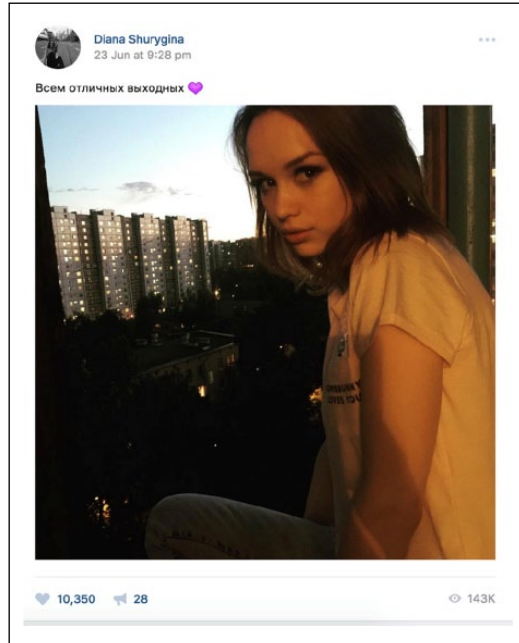
**Figure 9.** Screenshot from the official group/fan page on VKontakte, 6 March 2017 (now removed).



**Figure 10.** Screenshot from the official group/fan page on VKontakte, 23 June 2017 (now removed).

In the images below (Figures 11 and 12), she greets her fans in visuals replete with emojis, hearts and the soft glow of a pink lens that casts her in a romantic hue and makes her look feminine and fragile.

The selfies with her greeting her supporters every morning, either from the intimacy of her home or outdoors in her favourite hang outs, appear every day. When she does not

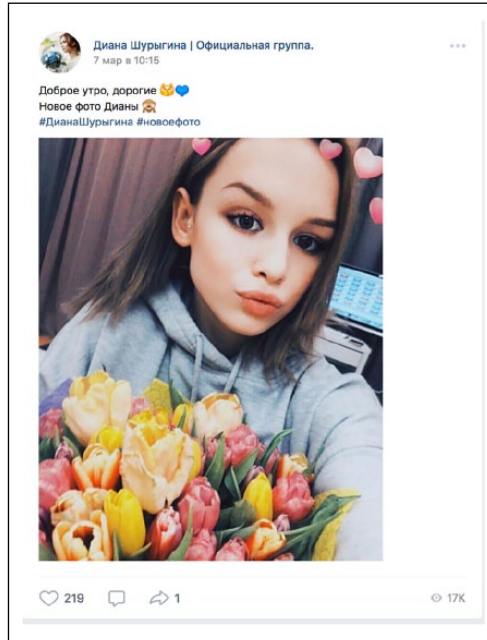


**Figure 11.** Post greeting fans on 23 June 2017. Source: Fan page on VKontakte.

post for a few days, she reappears with an apology for having being incommunicado for a while. Her celebrity hinges on communicating with her fans daily, even if real interaction is absent. Her hypervisibility, while functioning as a strategy to counter the silencing, is vital to the symbolic capital of social media ‘likes’ and also her cultural capital as a media brand.

Furthermore, Shurygina’s brand of celebrity mirrors ‘gendered neoliberalism’ when it suggests that women could be anything they wanted and fight injustice if only they had the confidence to do so (Gill and Orgad, 2017). In Russia too, this confidence must stem from doing the labour of self-fashioning, ‘that is essentially in women’s nature’ (Salmenniemi and Adamson, 2015: 98). Shurygina has her private VKontakte page where she has close to 51,000 subscribers who are witness to Diana’s pursuit of self-improvement. In May 2018, she posted a short video of herself exercising; ‘I am too thin and need to look good for the summer’. Are you getting ready for the summer? she asks (Figure 13). ‘Work on yourself’, this constant urging to engage in the labour of looking good, is met with approval by her fans, as evident in the number of votes and approving comments the posts receive.

Often unaccompanied by text, images of herself at home, on a walk, out partying (among other examples) fill her feed and meet with many ‘likes.’ Her publicly accessible selfies and other photographs are a way to claim speakability, and they function to an extent as ‘embodied resistance’ in the face of silencing and stigmatisation (Ferreday, 2017: 127).



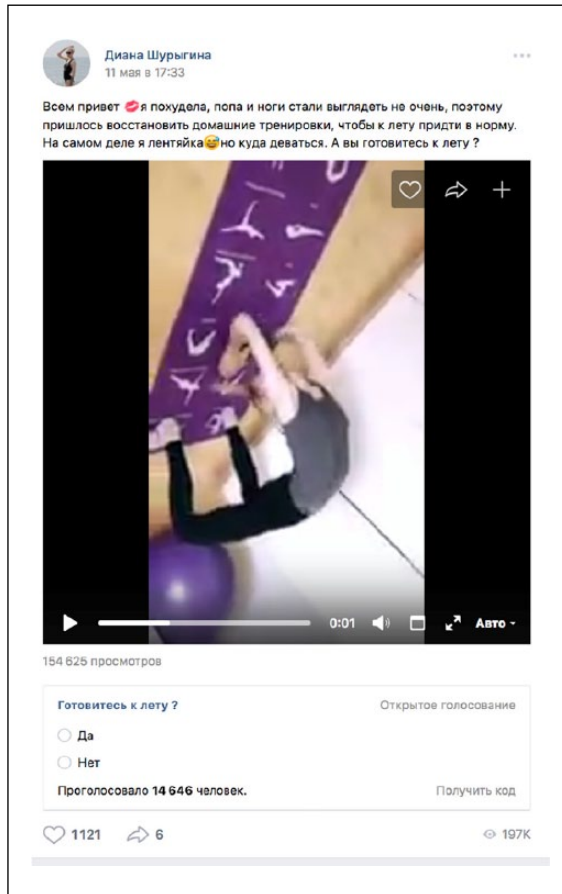
**Figure 12.** Screenshot from the official group/fan page on VKontakte, 23 June 2017 (now removed).

Shurygina's articulations and those of her fans are postfeminist both in the glaring absence of references to political feminism, as in the assertion of individualism, self-improvement and girly femininity as a measure of a woman's worth. Public affect is transformed through her creative labour from shaming to a confident celebrity, but this celebrity is one that relies on the reproduction of traditional gender roles and feminine ideals in the symbolic economy of media celebrity. Ultimately Shurygina's trauma is resolved because she has found herself a husband; from the time of her wedding, her posts are about herself and the intimate comfort of matrimony (Figure 14). Her persona is complete, her trauma healed and her reputation 'mended,' as she enters the institutional fold of married life.

## Conclusion

In January 2018, Sergei Semenov was released early from prison. Diana responded with a post on her VKontakte page that reiterated her resolve to put the pain behind her and move on to live her life to the fullest. She and Semenov have since appeared on new episodes of 'Let Them Speak', each to tell their respective stories.

In the wake of Shurygina's disclosures, the initial shaming and silencing on social media lead to an 'affective solidarity' (Hemmings, 2012: 148) that emerges in safe enclaves where Shurygina is hypervisible, and where articulations of support fuel both



**Figure 13.** An exercise video clip as Shurygina gets ready for the summer.

her celebrity and discursive mobilisation against misogyny. Yet, this mobilisation is a momentary one, creating a community whose participation is immediately commodified and capitalised. In its hypervisibility, her celebrity is at once defiant, but also a form of unpaid media labour that feeds the neoliberal environment through routine self-disclosures and self-mediation, providing personal information as grist to the capitalist mill.

Although Shurygina's visibility and speakability are admirable in the face of detractors who would rather she stay silent, she steers clear of radical feminist goals and her celebrity is steeped in postfeminist constructions of feminine subjectivity. While the act of performing in public is an initial instance of political behaviour, ultimately it is potential that is unrealised. Instead it becomes a function of creative, affective and aesthetic labour at the service of consumer capitalism. Despite the occasional call to social justice for all and for girls to shun silence and speak up, this is not celebrity that emerges in the pursuit of democratic mobilisation against systemic misogyny. Instead it speaks of



**Figure 14.** 'Sweet dreams, everyone \*heart emoji\*'.

self-mediation's 'hybrid potential for democratisation and control' (Chouliaraki, 2010: 227), as Shurygina pushes back against the rapist (and sexual violence in its physical manifestation, in general), but then proceeds to become the poster child for a cultural regime that promotes individualism, mediated self-sharing and emphasised femininity vital to maintaining, rather than disrupting, a neoliberal, bourgeois, masculinist social order.

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### Note

1. Russian social media platform that mirrors Facebook and is one of the top social networking sites in Russia.

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### Biographical note

Sudha Rajagopalan, a Soviet cultural historian and new media scholar, is senior lecturer in European Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Her work on Russian digital media engages with debates on new public spheres, citizenship, celebrity, identity work and memory and can be seen in publications such as *Celebrity Studies*, *Transformative Works and Culture*, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* and *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*.