



*Interdisciplinary Research in Gender*

# **IDENTITIES AND INTIMACIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

**TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

Edited by  
Tonny Krijnen, Paul G. Nixon,  
Michelle D. Ravenscroft and  
Cosimo Marco Scarcelli



# Identities and Intimacies on Social Media

This edited collection illuminates the scope with which identities and intimacies interact on a wide range of social media platforms.

A varied range of international scholars examine the contexts of very different social media spaces, with topics ranging from whitewashing and memes, parental discourses in online activities, Spotify as an intimate social media platform, neoliberalisation of feminist discourses, digital sex work, social media wars in trans debates and 'BimboTok'. The focus is on their acceleration and impact due to the specificities of social media in relation to identities, intimacies within the broad 'political' sphere. The geographic range of case study material reflects the global impact of social media, and includes data from Belgium, Canada, China, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the USA.

This enlightening and rigorous collection will be of key interest to scholars in media studies and gender studies, and to scholars and professionals of social media.

**Tonny Krijnen**, PhD, is Associate Professor Media Studies in the Department of Media and Communication at the Erasmus University, Rotterdam. Her research interest lies in popular culture, morality, gender, television and qualitative research methods. She has published extensively on these topics, most notably in a co-authored volume (with Sofie Van Bauwel), *Gender and Media: Representing, Producing, Consuming* (2022, Routledge). Currently, she is the chair of the Popular Culture Working Group of the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and an active member of the Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication and Culture (ERMeCC).

**Paul G. Nixon** has contributed chapters to many edited collections and has co-edited eleven previous collections, including *Talking Bodies III: Transformations, Movements and Expression* (with Michelle D. Ravenscroft, Bee Hughes and Charlotte Dann, 2021), *Reshaping International Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (with V. P. Dennen and R. Rawal, 2021), *Sex in the Digital Age* (with I. K. Dusterhoft, 2018), *Digital Media Use across*

*the Lifecourse* (with Rajash Rawal and Andreas Funk, 2016) and *Gender and Sexuality in the Contemporary Media Landscape*, a special edition of the *Information Communication and Society* journal (edited with Cosimo Marco Scarcelli and Tonny Krijnen), which was published online in 2021.

**Michelle D. Ravenscroft** is currently undertaking doctoral study at Manchester Metropolitan University, researching the Portico Library's collection and archives and nineteenth-century Manchester literature and identity. Michelle is a graduate of the University of Chester, where she studied English literature, education, and nineteenth-century literature and culture. Michelle is an educational consultant working on projects relating to personal and social education and development in the primary and secondary education sectors. She also delivers enrichment sessions in a North Wales primary school, and has recently co-edited *Talking Bodies III: Transformations, Movements and Expression* (with Bee Hughes, Charlotte Dann and Paul G. Nixon, University of Chester Press, 2021).

**Cosimo Marco Scarcelli**, PhD, is Tenure Track Assistant Professor of Sociology of Culture and Communication at the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padova (Italy). His research deals with digital media in relation to sexuality, gender, intimacy and young people. He was chair of the Gender, Sexuality and Communication Section of ECREA until 2021 and he is an editor of the *Journal of Gender Studies* and *Media Education*. He edited the book *Gender and Sexuality in the European Media* (Routledge, 2021, with Chronaki, De Vuyst and Baselga), and he was associate editor for *The International Encyclopaedia of Gender, Media and Communication* (Wiley, 2021; editor Karen Ross).

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**From Paul G. Nixon  
Thanks to Ingrid**

**From Michelle D. Ravenscroft  
For Sophie Lauren**



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# Contributors

**Victoria Andelsman** is a PhD candidate at the University of Copenhagen, where she is part of the ERC-funded project Datafied Living (2021–2025). Her work centres on digital parenting, its infrastructural underpinnings and implications for care. She holds a Research Master's degree in new media and digital culture from the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Victoria received her BA in communication from Universidad de San Andrés in Argentina, her home country.

**Sofie Van Bauwel** is Associate Professor at the Department of Communication Studies at Ghent University, where she teaches on cultural media studies, gender, and media and television studies. She is a member of the Centre for Cinema and Media Studies (CIMS) and her main field of interest is gender, media, and film and television. She is involved in several projects with a focus on the media as signifying articulations in visual popular culture. She was vice-chair of the Gender and Communication section of the European Research and Communication Association (ECREA, 2006–2012) and is on the editorial board of the *Journal of Media Theory*. She is also co-editor of the Working Papers Film and Television Studies and publishes internationally and nationally on popular media culture, feminist theory and film.

**Sofia P. Caldeira** is a MSCA postdoctoral fellow at CICANT, Lusófona University. She holds a communication sciences PhD from Ghent University, Belgium (2020), funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). Her research focuses primarily on feminist media studies, social media, self-representation practices, politics of gender representation and everyday aesthetics. She currently serves as vice-chair of ECREA's Digital Culture and Communication section.

**Daniel Cardoso** holds a PhD in communication sciences from the NOVA University, and is an Associate Professor at the Lusófona University and Guest Assistant Professor at the Nova University, in Portugal. Their main areas of research are consensual non-monogamies, BDSM, gender and



sexualities, young and new media, and cybercultures. Their work and activism can be found at [www.danielscardoso.net](http://www.danielscardoso.net).

**Despina Chronaki** is an adjunct lecturer at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (School of Journalism and Mass Communications), the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and the Hellenic Open University (MA in Journalism Studies). Her research focuses on audiences of popular culture, children's experiences with media, citizenship, ethics and porn studies. Alongside publishing on related topics she has been actively engaged with relevant research in European (mostly EU-funded), national (Greek) and international projects since 2007 (<https://chronakidespina.wordpress.com/> for a detailed record).

**Frederik Dhaenens** is Associate Professor at Ghent University, where he teaches courses that deal with media, (popular) culture and diversity. His research is situated within the field of critical media studies and cultural studies, while focusing on queer theory, LGBTQ representation, sex and sexuality, and masculinities in relation to popular culture, with a particular interest in television studies, popular music studies and fan studies. Further, Frederik is vice-chair of the Popular Culture Working Group at IAMCR. He also co-organises the LGBTQ forum – a Flemish network of researchers, civil society actors and policymakers working on sexual and gender diversity.

**Manolo Farci** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies of the University of Urbino Carlo Bo (Italy). His main research interests are in the field of media and internet studies. In recent years he has been studying the impact of digital communication in the processes of social construction of gender identity, with reference to the experience of networked masculinities. His latest publications: *Italian Men's Rights Activism and Online Backlash against Feminism* (Bologna, 2019); 'Remember Who Your Real Friends Are'. *Suburra: Blood on Rome and the Performative Nature of Young Italian Masculinity* (Cambridge, 2019).

**Qian Huang** is a lecturer in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Groningen. Her current research considers digital vigilantism on the Chinese internet. She has published articles in peer-reviewed journals and co-edited the book *Introducing Vigilant Audiences*.

**Burcu Korkmazer** is a guest professor at the Communication Department of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Her research and teaching interests include youth and social media, visual culture, digital culture, and gender and diversity.

**Tonny Krijnen**, PhD, is Associate Professor Media Studies in the department of Media and Communication at the Erasmus University, Rotterdam. Her research interest lies in popular culture, morality,

gender, television and qualitative research methods. She has published extensively on these topics, most notably in a co-authored volume (with Sofie Van Bauwel), *Gender and Media: Representing, Producing, Consuming* (2022, Routledge). Currently, she is the chair of the Popular Culture Working Group of the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and an active member of the Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication and Culture (ERMeCC).

**R. Lucas Platero** serves as Associate Professor in Social Psychology at the King Juan Carlos University, and as the Director of University Publications at Bellaterra Publishing House. He was recently awarded the Emma Goldman Prize supporting new feminist knowledge in Europe. Currently, his research focuses on the experience of Spanish LGBTQ+ individuals with Covid-19 and, more specifically, in vulnerable LGBTQ+ children.

**Ana Flora Machado** is a PhD student in culture studies at the Catholic University of Portugal. She is currently completing her research on the female gaze, through the analysis of photographic self-representations and selfies, articulated with visual culture, media studies and feminist critical theory. She holds an MSc in Marketing and Business Management from Aston University, where she completed her thesis on male representation in advertisements. Currently, she is involved in several research projects, while managing a wine company in the Douro region.

**Arianna Mainardi** is currently Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the Milano-Bicocca University. Vice-chair of the Women's Network at ECREA (European Communication Research and Education Association); board member of ATGENDER (The European Association for Gender Research, Education and Documentation). She has been Visiting Fellow at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, and Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Scuola Normale Superiore. She has published on issues concerning digital media and gender relations, youth cultures and social movements.

**AP Pierce** (ampierce@ucsb.edu) is a PhD candidate in the Department of Feminist Studies at the University of California Santa Barbara. Their research involves digital media, labour and affect, with specific attention to the ways different digital publics use art and media to resist regimes of racial, gendered and capitalist violences. Their dissertation theorises a resistant aesthetics of unproductivity within the contemporary context of constant crisis and neoliberal racial capitalism. Forthcoming co-written research on care, pleasure and the queer figure of the witch in the neo-liberal era can be found in *The Witch Studies Reader* (Duke University Press, 2023).

**Sander De Ridder** is Assistant Professor of Media Studies at the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Antwerp. His research engages with the role of digital and data-driven media in culture and society.

**Cosimo Marco Scarcelli**, PhD, is Tenure Track Assistant Professor of Sociology of Culture and Communication at the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padova (Italy). His research deals with digital media in relation to sexuality, gender, intimacy and young people. He was the chair of the Gender, Sexuality and Communication Section of ECREA until 2021 and he is a member of the editorial boards of the *Journal of Gender Studies* and *Media Education*. He edited the book *Gender and Sexuality in the European Media* (Routledge, 2021, with Chronaki, De Vuyst and Baselga), and he was associate editor for *The International Encyclopaedia of Gender, Media and Communication* (Wiley, 2021; editor Karen Ross).

**Pernilla Jonsson Severson** holds a PhD in media and communication studies from Uppsala University (2004). She is Associate Professor (Docent) in Media and Communication Studies at the Department of Media and Journalism, Linnaeus University in Sweden. Her research focuses on media development (media innovations), participatory practices and democratic values, media professions and digital methods. Within the field of critical digital method development and applications, she has published: *Exploring the Meaning Problem of Big and Small Data through Digital Method Triangulation* (with S. Leckner, 2019); *How Critical Digital Method Development can Strengthen Studies of Media and Terrorism* (2019) and *Applying Critical Digital Method: Ethics, Sampling Strategies and Analysis Methods* (2020).

**Ben De Smet** is a PhD researcher at the Department of Communication Sciences of Ghent University and a member of CIMS, the Centre for Cinema and Media Studies. He is conducting a study within the BOF-funded project 'Streams of music, identity and diversity: A qualitative study of identity-related practices on music streaming services', under the supervision of Prof. Dr Frederik Dhaenens and Prof. Dr Sofie Van Bauwel. His fields of interest include pop culture, popular music, gender and diversity, and digital media.

**Iolanda Tortajada** is Senior Lecturer of Communication Studies at the Rovira i Virgili University (Tarragona, Spain) and member of Asterisc Communication Research Group. She has long experience in leading and collaborating in competitive research projects dealing mainly with the changing depiction of different types of femininity, as well as with gender and sexual identity mediatisation, the relationship between the media and gender violence, alternative masculinities and media appropriation. She recently coordinated a four-year research project on sexual identities

and social networking sites, funded by Spain's Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness. She is also on the Executive Board of the Spanish Association for Communication Research and vice-chair of the Commission for Audiovisual Diversity of the Catalan Audiovisual Council.

**Anna Wald**, PhD, received her doctorate in Feminist Studies from the University of California Santa Barbara in the Department of Feminist Studies. Her research focuses on race, gender and technology, with a specialisation in digital culture studies, online discourse analysis and racialised media.

**Cilia M. Willem** is Associate Professor of Media and Communication at the Rovira i Virgili University (ES), where she is Head of Studies of the Journalism, Audiovisual Communication and Public Relations Programmes. As a researcher and member of the Asterisc Research Group she leads a research tier on gender, technology and media appropriation in popular culture. Her current research focuses on expressions of feminism and sexual identity on social media. She has published several book chapters and peer-reviewed articles in academic journals on topics of media and gender. Willem was the main editor of the *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies* until 2020, and has been guest editor for several periodicals, among them *Feminist Media Studies*.

**Zhen Ye** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University, Rotterdam. Her research project studies the cultural production of China's live-streaming industry, with particular focuses on gender, labour and platformisation.

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# Introduction

## Social Media and Society

*Cosimo Marco Scarcelli, Paul G. Nixon,  
Tonny Krijnen and Michelle D. Ravenscroft*

Social networks allow many of us to experience the world, to test our identity and to be with others in new ways compared to the past. The complex media and communication environment in which we live has become ubiquitous. Various works in this field have made it possible to recognise how much this environment, particularly social media, conditions our participation in the everyday life in modern society (Livingstone, 2011). Social networks, then, represent a privileged point of observation for understanding social change and the changing relational dynamics that do not end within platforms.

Building onto Martin's notion of the evidence of a wired society emerging and characterised by the use of mass communication networks (1978), 'the network' is the most widely used metaphor in recent years to describe these changes and the paradigms that result from them (Rossiter, 2006). Jan van Dijk (1991) introduced the term 'network society' – which would be taken up and made more famous by another author, Manuel Castells (1996) – which currently represents a useful concept to describe a social system that presents important features of discontinuity with respect to classical modernity (Castells, 1996). Talking about a networked society means observing the most recent changes with a keen eye on technological changes, without being technologically determinist. As Castells himself would say, it means looking at the new social morphology, intertwining cultures, and a more flexible and horizontal organisation of society capable of adapting to changing environmental conditions. There have been technological, economic and social/cultural processes which generated a new social structure, the information society; a new economy, the informational economy; and a new culture, that of real virtuality. As a result, the economy, work, state, culture, cities and so on are increasingly informational (Castells, 2001) and sociality itself is becoming reticular.

Shifting our gaze to dimensions closer to the everyday experiences of individuals, we can identify further changes that have reconfigured our way of being together in an increasingly connected world. The use of resources that digital media provide creates spaces for self-expression and allows users to make sense of their daily lives and forms of social action (Scarcelli &

Mainardi, 2019). Physical and digital spaces, therefore, become part of a continuum (boyd, 2007) in which the distinctions between real and virtual, and between online and offline, lose their most rigid meanings. Users move easily from one dimension to another, mixing different forms of communication, whether mediated or face to face (Ling & Haddon, 2008).

This fluidity is connected to three central considerations. Firstly, online interactions are part of the meaning horizons of a unitary experience in which the online is an essential part of the offline and vice versa. Secondly, we cannot forget that what happens online is shaped by variables such as gender, age, and social and cultural capital, and that the online experience is an essential part of the offline experience. Thirdly, we must consider the fact that digital platforms and spaces have their own peculiarities, mechanisms, and rules. We are not, in other words, talking about neutral environments.

The pervasiveness of mediated communication in everyday life and the effects that interaction through social media can have on personal relationships and identity also prompt us to reflect on changes from a more 'micro' point of view. In this regard one of the most flourishing readings is that given by the so-called networked individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). In his oeuvre, Barry Wellman suggests focusing on the relationships that develop within digital environments without contrasting them with face-to-face ones. Social relations develop as a consequence of interactions utilising digital media, through the intersection of different networks, and the influences between their nodes (e.g. Wellman, Quan-Haase & Harper, 2020; Wellman, 2018, 2015).

With the concept of networked individualism, Wellman explicates a new way of organising social relations. These relations are based on a networked structure of which the centre is the individual. Each person can be part of different networks, independently choosing which networks to belong to, according to his or her own interests and entering and leaving them with relative ease. As argued earlier, in this interpretation the online and offline dimensions are deeply intertwined, creating a whole new experiential web. Therefore, the network replaces the group, and the individual takes on greater power, freeing oneself both from the constraints of physical space and from those that linked one to one's ascribed status. Social networks, the pivot around which our reasoning in this book revolves, represent one of the examples of the network built around the individual (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002).

This approach brings with it an important theme: the expansion of the individual's possibilities of choice – a typically modern trait that has found a sudden acceleration in the network society. In the network society, practices of reflexivity also change. While in modernity practices of reflexivity were viewed as individual actions, in the network society – in tandem with the development of platforms that become experiential contexts – these practices become connected. Social network sites bring the individual's inner conversation, their inner reflexivity, into a context in which the social relations – to which this reflexivity is oriented – are recognised and become visible and

explicit. Content posting on any social network often implies that the individual incorporates reflective (connected) work in which the individual's experience finds meaning in the relationship with others and in which each person also looks at themselves in relation to other users' gaze.

Moreover, in social media there are expectations of reciprocity. We create content so that there are reactions from other users, a comment, a like, a share, a reaction. Publishing something becomes a performative act that concerns the self, the way this self is represented online and the strategic management of different audiences. To help understand digital practices of representation and interaction, Erving Goffman's (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life* has been used for some time. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor is still valid, though it needs to be refreshed in view of the changes that have taken place since its appearance. We are no longer talking about an audience that is co-present with the performance, but about networked publics (boyd, 2010). Compared to the publics described by Goffman (1959), networked publics are first and foremost audiences that are often, at the very least partially, invisible. We cannot know who is currently viewing our Instagram or Facebook profile, and when preparing our posts, we do not actually know who will be viewing that content. Additionally, the audience for our posts is selecting itself which posts to view and which ones to potentially engage with. Lastly, this networked audience is somewhat amorphous and asynchronous in its interactions and responses. This causes different contexts to collapse: our audiences are part of different social contexts, which can easily overlap. Finally, the separation between the limelight and the backstage loses its strength and, consequently, some private dimensions become public.

Following the definitions we have just outlined, it is easy to project an image in which connected reflexivity, reticular individualism and connected publics compose a picture in which each user is potentially constantly watched by the other individuals who make up the networks in which they may be embedded, be they friends, parents or peers in general or unknown individuals who have different roles.

Surveillance in this context is not only that of institutions or platforms (Van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018), but also that which refers to decentralised power and is found within interpersonal relationships. What Marwick (2013) called social surveillance, which Rainie and Wellman (2012) termed 'coveillance', thus consists of surveillance carried out by relatives, friends or other users in general. This surveillance does not so much aim to control the person observed, but aims to get to know better the social context referred to for relational purposes. This control is not only operable in one way, and all users potentially have the same tools to surveil or 'control' others. Each person then finds oneself showing one's self, coming to terms with one's own performance – looking at others in a process in which different practices conflict with strategies useful for preserving their own image and representations.



There are several strategies to manage one's online presence. Lange (2007), for example, distinguishes between 'publicly private' and 'privately public' communication. In the first case, individuals use social networks as private spaces in which to communicate with their friends, and thus share information about themselves, making communication accessible only to a restricted group of users. In the second case, however, social networks are seen as a platform on which to stage a performance that is not directly linked to the identity – understood as the name and surname – of the person who created the content, but to nicknames or fictitious identities. Hence, a sense of potential anonymity of the performer is created and/or an additional persona/identity by which the performer is identified in this context and, perhaps, subsequently recognised by the audience.

What we have described so far is a new culture of connectivity (Van Dijk, 1991), which has been grafted onto our lives and around which new ways of being together revolve. At the centre of this discourse, we find social network platforms. Hinton and Hjorth (2013) point out to us that many social networks incorporate similar features, such as profiles with name, picture and biography – more or less short contact list, comments and private messaging. Connecting has become, according to Van Dijk (1991), a human necessity in a society where everyone's life is embedded and, to some extent, validated in technology-mediated communication. This has led to social platforms having a great deal of power and making it more complicated to give up social media use than refusing to engage with other media such as television (Langlois, 2013). In fact, social media allow people to come together, build networks and mediate emotions (Fuchs, 2014).

As Baym (2010) points out, social media are not an entirely new phenomenon. We can already find traces of these media in cave paintings or in the telegraph, according to Standage (2013). This is because social media, in their essence, represent useful interfaces that facilitate connection and promote interpersonal contacts (Miguel, 2018). However, if we refer to contemporary social media, boyd and Ellison (2007) trace the origins of these platforms to 1995, the year in which Classmates was created, and 1996, the year in which SixDegrees took off. The latter allowed its users to create a list of friends and, from 1998 onwards, to browse this list (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The first successful social networks were Friends Reunited (2000) and Friendster (2002), which allowed users to share photographs with each other. In 2004 Facebook appeared, initially a network dedicated to university students, which in September 2006 opened to a wider audience. Thus, we can assume that the evolution of social networks has led these networks to transform from platforms that allowed communication between users, in a horizontal way, to much more complex tools that are grafted onto the social reality, and connect individuals, institutions and companies.

## Digital Media, Gender and Sexuality

To better understand the relationship between social media, gender and sexuality we can start from considering sex, sexuality and gender as socially constructed (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Consequently, we can assume that they are (re)produced by media and popular culture (Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Gauntlett, 2008; Van Zoonen, 1994) including social media.

Digital media represent an important arena for shaping, articulating, representing and performing gender, sexuality, and intimacies (Attwood, 2018; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2022; Scarcelli, Krijnen & Nixon, 2021). Despite the fact that traditional views still prevail in certain contexts, meaning that questions connected to sexual identity and gender are constantly under attack in both a political and cultural way, these topics are much more open for discussion when compared to the past, and, as a rule, we are more aware of the issues that gender and sexuality bring into our lives.

In recent years online and mobile digital media spaces have increasingly become sites where sexual cultures and gender expressions are made visible. Digital technologies play an important role in such interpretation and remediation, adding new challenges around discourse and a point of observation for the study of the intertwining of media, gender and sexuality. Websites, apps, social networks and so on become ambivalent spaces where we can find support, activism, information and identity expressions, but also abuse, harassment and other negative aspects. Studying digital media today has become a central facet in the analysis of society, allowing an amplification of focus on privileges, power, differences, stereotypes, scripts and so on.

Research on digital culture produced many studies with a focus on the intersections between gender, sexuality and the digital media (Van Doorn & Van Zoonen, 2008). Initially the work in this field optimistically stressed the possibility for gender fluidity, underlining, at the same time, the risks of reinforcement of a deterministic conception of gender roles connected to technology (Wajcman, 1991). Indeed, starting in the 1990s many internet scholars, using Butler's (1990) work as a starting point, tried to understand online identity, helping to create the so-called 'disembodiment hypothesis' that held that – liberated from the constraints of the body – the users could choose their own gender or sexuality, creating alternative identities. This process is conceived as an active choice that permits people to adopt, experiment with and play with different identities, disrupting binary conceptions of gender and sexuality and encouraging fluidity (see for example Turkle, 1995). When writing about positive cyber-theory it would be remiss of us to exclude Haraway's cyborg (1991), a concept that described a new way of thinking and being, beyond the dichotomy of nature-technology. This concept was widely adopted by scholars in the 1990s, including by advocates of cyberfeminism who consider technoscience as liberating for

women and technology as intrinsically connected to women's ways of being (Plant, 1998).

More recently, media, gender and sexuality researchers, among others, started to ask new questions related to gender and sexuality in these spaces (Albury, 2018). Such questions focus on how technologies and affordances shape the user's experiences of gender and sexuality; how users interpret the codes and conventions of different platforms; how digital spaces could help or discourage non-normative expressions or sexual subcultures; how datafication and platformisation are affecting gender and sexuality; the entanglement of gender and sexuality with the sociotechnical and political aspects of platforms, and so on (for some examples see the special issue of *Social Media + Society* edited by Jean Burgess, Elija Cassidy, Stefanie Duguay & Ben Light, 2016).

Following Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2022), we can identify at least three important levels of connections between digital technologies, gender, and sexuality. The first one relates to infrastructures: "digital media are built and conceptualised in a way that influences the way we use them and they contribute to our idea of gender [and sexuality]" (p. 124). It is important to question who built the algorithms that we use every day and how the values of their creators are encoded within the algorithms, and thus impact and condition society's use of social media. The second level is related to the platforms. The focus here lies with the question on how digital media incorporate barriers that discriminate against certain groups of users. As De Ridder (2015) explains, gender and sexuality are mediated by the software's architecture of the platform. The third level is connected to the affordances of social media platforms that, on the one hand, allow for a more varied performance and fluid conception of gender and sexuality, while on the other hand they reproduce and reinforce more traditionally conventional gender logic.

Ultimately platforms and their affordance, the access to mobile media, the different use of the apps, and so on show us the ambivalence of digital media that represent new structures of surveillance and reproduction of power but, at the same time, permit the visibility of specific content and bring a political potential.

We attempt to showcase these more contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality and their relation to mediated content in this special edited collection. In Chapter 1, 'Whitewashing and the Meme-ability of Scarlett Johansson: Online controversy surrounding *The Ghost in the Shell* remake', Anna Wald examines the 2016–2017 controversy surrounding the 'whitewashing' of the role played by white American actress Scarlett Johansson in the live-action remake of the original Japanese anime film *Ghost in the Shell* (1995). Examining the relationship between international media, racial representation, online discourse and science fictional imaginings of technological futures, this chapter illustrates the nuanced and complicated nature of this memetic event. Exploring the specifics of this moment of racial

controversy by examining the arguably ‘ambiguous’ racial categorisation of the media discussed, and fan activists arguing for diversified casting. Delving into the history of yellowface and Hollywood whitewashing discussions of racialised animation and social media campaigns to bring attention to the whitewashing of Asian characters, the author opens up the larger and more contentious issue of Hollywood casting choices.

The following chapter, by Arianna Mainardi and Tonny Krijnen, is “‘My Parents Check My Profile’: How Italian girls negotiate parental discourses in online activities’. In this chapter we can see how girls’ online activities are a topic within often heated debates on sexualisation, debates in which girls’ own voices are rarely heard. The authors elucidate on two aspects of these debates. First, there seem to be opposing perspectives on the position of girls as either ‘girl-at-risk’ or as ‘empowered girl’. Mainardi and Krijnen adopt a poststructuralist approach and attempt to empirically contribute to a dialogic understanding of agency and structure. Second, the sexualisation debate is embedded in a specific neoliberal climate that is locally nuanced. The Italian context magnifies the double standards at play and emphasises the importance of the family, constructing a complex power system which girls need to navigate in order to ‘be’. In this chapter, the research highlights how girls negotiate their online identities (on social network sites such as Facebook) in tandem with potentially conflicting parental discourses. Interviews with a total of 32 girls between the ages of 15 and 18 years of age were used to show that parental discourses often take different shapes but always intervene with girls’ online activities. Simultaneously, girls find direct and indirect strategies to attempt to circumvent these structures. This shows not only girls’ ability and capabilities to handle the ‘risky’ online environment and the multiple shapes of agency within a specific power configuration, but also that local spaces intersect in interesting ways.

Chapter 3 sees us shift continents to explore the world of online advice and influencers in China. In ‘Counselling Marriage and Love through Live-streaming in China: Douyin, relationship counsellor and the affective public’, Zhen Ye and Qian Huang demonstrate how, throughout modern Chinese history, media have been affording spaces which have been used in the production and shaping of relationship-related values and practices. Intimate relationship and marriage counselling has become a popular topic in various media formats, evolving with the development of media technologies. Emotional counsellors, or what we might term influencers, appear on social media platforms to produce monetised content aimed at women who seek success in romantic relationships in a time of change in economic and gender norms in China. Examining a self-proclaimed relationship counsellor, Xianjing, whose practices are afforded by the social media platform Douyin, this research reveals how Xianjing builds affective connection with her followers, and discursively rebrands their subordinate position in marriages as a natural result of traditional virtues, enabling Xianjing to monetise her followers’ intimate feelings and affective attachments.

Ben De Smet and Frederik Dhaenens examine the notion that “‘Music Makes the People Come Together’”: Spotify as an intimate social media platform’ in Chapter 4, taking the example of music-streaming platform Spotify not only as a platform for music consumption, but one which also affords (algorithm-driven) playlist and public-profile features via which users can engage in curation, social interaction and self-presentation, akin to ‘traditional’ social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. This chapter examines Spotify’s relations to intimacies and identities via a social media lens. While popular music and social media have both been lauded as spaces for tolerance and democracy, the relations between Spotify, which operates at the intersection of both, and notions of identities have been more complex and less unilaterally positive. As exemplified in the chapter, Spotify, via its use of algorithms, interferes with the music discoveries and practices of users. Spotify mediates intimacies when users curate and engage with music to make sense of the self or to navigate moods, emotions and everyday life. Users also negotiate what ought to be shared and what should be kept private with context collapses potentially leading to unintended disclosure of intimate aspects of one’s music taste, personal situation or social-political identities. The authors show how in attempting to understand the relations between social media and people’s everyday lives, emotional worlds, intimacies and identities, the role of Spotify should not be overlooked.

Chapter 5 by Burcu Korkmazer, Sander De Ridder and Sofie Van Bauwel gives us an insight into how young people define and curate notions of sexual reputation through their social media activities. Entitled ‘Sexual Reputation, Intersectional Intimacies and Visual Social Media: Exploring young people’s mores on “good” versus “bad” online sexual reputations’, the chapter seeks to address the urgent need to problematise the current emphasis on digital reputation, specifically related to sexual and intimate practices on social media. The authors attempt to understand how a focus on digital reputations potentially produces reputational harm to those young people who do not conform to the particular sexual norms of their peer groups, social and family ties, and wider culture and society.

Victoria Andelsman examines the production of knowledge and authority in sex and relationship vlogs in Chapter 6, “‘You Live and You Learn’”: Sex and relationship vlogging and the production of knowledge’. Using YouTuber Hannah Witton’s #TheHormoneDiaries series as a case study, the chapter demonstrates how the knowledge production process transcends the YouTuber’s body in sex and relationship vlogs, and how knowledge and authority are produced through bodily experience. Andelsman posits an analysis of vlogs as technological and affectively networked material including the YouTube comment section. The chapter shows how when users relate to Hannah’s sensuous experiences, particularly her pain, and share their personal realities in the comment section, the boundaries of individual experiences is exceeded by the collective body of knowledge which is created. This chapter then draws on the findings from the case study and

reflects on the propagative qualities of sex and relationship vlogs and how they may both produce and afford spaces for intimate publics.

Chapter 7 is 'Webisodes as Different Subversive Forms of Representation of Gender and Sexuality' by Pernilla Jonsson Severson. It is a study of webisodes as subversive forms of representation of gender and sexuality often under the realm of fan activism. The webisodes are, for the fans, going beyond both 'for the youth' and the local contexts. Social media and comment sections are often aligned to the webisode as a validation choir, furthering the notion of 'for the fans'. These short videos, often targeted at niche audiences as a community, invite interactivity, comment and reinterpretation. Webisodes democratise access, usage and production, unwrapping subversive aspects, forms and potentials of representation of gender and sexuality. Within the chapter a content analysis is made of four webisode contexts which are beneficial to understand varieties of subversive forms of representation: the Swedish youth series 'Eagles' on youth and sexuality; the American and Canadian LGBT and queer webisodes like 'Platonic'; gender-bending fan-edits like the German 'Crolli' vlog from *Verboten Liebe*; Islamic comedy on the French website 'A part ça tout va bien' constructing gender and sexuality on Islamic culture from a French perspective. The analysis focuses on local constructions, and resistance to representations of gender and sexuality. Findings show variations of destabilisations and legitimisations of gender and sexuality constructions. These identity constructions are adapted, functioning as reference points for resistance, forging new normative gendered identities related to sexual identity communities.

The next chapter is an examination of men's rights groups by Manolo Farci. 'No Country for Men: Negotiating men's rights activism in digital spaces' shows us how the numerous discussions about men's behaviours, which have been widely recognised as being a key issue in terms of the drive towards gender equality, can lead to some form of positive transformation. Examining the so-called 'manosphere', which is most widely recognised and researched in anglophone societies, Farci seeks to broaden this research by taking as the focus of his study the emergent anti-feminist and men's rights groups in Italy. This chapter showcases how men's rights activism within the Italian digital environment is constructed and detects three key interpretative repertoires employed by Facebook users in discourse, while questioning men's issues within these groups: the nice guy discourse, the liberationist rhetoric and the hybrid style of activism. Farci then shows how members within this manosphere can use diverse, and sometimes conflicting, interpretative repertoires to conceptualise and justify their participation in anti-sexist, anti-feminist and pro-male groups. The author posits that one can differentiate those activists who are positively concerned with campaigning on issues related to men's rights from those activists who may be better categorised as holding views which can be considered to be expressive of a more negative, anti-feminist stance.

Chapter 9 is “Hello My Lovelies!” Conflicted feminisms and the neoliberalisation of Portuguese activist influencer practices’ in which Sofia P. Caldeira and Ana Flora Machado put forward the complexities and tensions that mark Instagram as a site for contemporary feminist practices and discourses. The chapter addresses the growing popularity of feminist discourses on Portuguese social media, critically exploring the Instagram presence of Portuguese psychologist, sexologist and self-identified feminist Tânia Graça, who has been gaining popularity by advocating for women’s sexual empowerment, pleasure and women’s rights more broadly within the context of a still largely conservative Portuguese society. Her Instagram presence is an example of activist influencer practices – marred by tensions between its essentially feminist aims and Instagram’s dominant logics of popularity, visibility and commercial success. Its embodiment of feminist politics – focused on issues of bodily experiences and pleasurable sexual experimentation, and visually expressed through practices of self-representation – also chafes with Instagram’s platform politics, which often deplatform ‘objectionable’ content. In addition, this chapter posits how popular feminist expressions can rely on gendered conventions of communication, privileging a personal and intimate tone to build a sense of perceived interconnectedness with followers. This aligns with notions of popular and spectacular feminism that tend to privilege ‘cute’ expressions of feminism and centre individual issues, in line with expressions of neoliberal feminism.

Our tenth chapter examines the rapidly developing notion of the monetisation of citizen-produced digital sexual content. In ‘Digital Sex Work? Creating and selling explicit content in OnlyFans’, Daniel Cardoso, Despina Chronaki and Cosimo Marco Scarcelli illustrate how research on/with young adults and sexual(ised) media is often framed in terms of empowerment or victimisation, while media use is often reduced to media effects (assumed to be either positive or negative). Equally, work on porn production and online sex workers is still limited, and there is a dearth of research connecting the two and addressing young adult content producers. Thus, this chapter takes as its theme OnlyFans, a platform where content is monetised for the producer and is most famous for its sexual content. Focusing on women who sell their own sexual(ised) content on OnlyFans, the authors analyse how the women make sense of their online activity, and how they (dis)identify with the category of ‘sex worker’. The chapter interweaves discourses around sex work and media/digital media studies, to attempt to understand how digital environments’ affordances and constraints impact on how the meaning of sex work and content creation are negotiated and internalised. It takes note of the concept of immaterial labour and the many ways in which digital work on social media involves a constant stream of affective labour within a neoliberal system. Furthermore, the chapter shows perceptions of how ‘work’ is defined, and how digital content creation interacts with



long-standing cultural narratives about ‘art versus pornography’ and ‘artistic creativity versus money-generating content’.

Debates over the positioning of trans people and gender rights is the subject of Chapter 11, ‘Trans-Exclusionary Discourses on Social Media in Spain’. Here Cilia Willem, R. Lucas Platero and Iolanda Tortajada explain how since best-selling author J. K. Rowling outed herself as a ‘TERF’ (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) in 2019, the term has been used both as a slur by those who advocate trans inclusion in feminist/female spaces and acclaimed by those who push for the exclusion of trans individuals, specifically trans women, from female-only spaces. In Spain, a cultural war has been taking place since 2018 mainly on social media between ‘TERFs’ and ‘Transfeminists’ – trans activists and trans-inclusive feminist collectives. This chapter sheds light on the specific affordances of social media for discourses on gender and sexual identity, including misinformation and hate speech, regarding the new Trans Law to be adopted by the Spanish Parliament. This law aims at depathologising transness and securing the right to gender self-determination of trans individuals, following the path set by laws passed already in seventeen Spanish regions. The proposal has become controversial, not only among the conservative and extreme right, but also among certain sectors of traditional centre and progressive parties. This explores how the narratives of opinion makers and influencers on transgender rights are crucial aspects in determining public opinion on feminist, queer and trans theory.

Bringing the collection to a close, in Chapter 12 ‘The Rise of Bimbo TikTok: Digital Sociality, Postfeminism, and Disidentificatory Subjects’, AP Pierce brings us a vivid examination of how one set of social media adherents are using TikTok to redefine the previously pejorative notion of a ‘bimbo’. This chapter explores the community of ‘BimboTok’ and its feminist and political potential (and the limits thereof), showing how these activists are leaving behind previous models of feminism concerned with ‘girlboss’ capitalism, the notion of having to conform to patriarchal ideas of success and ‘how one should be’, and reclaiming the concept of the bimbo – not only reclaiming it but transforming what was once viewed as an extremely negative portrayal of femininity into a positive one by creating an online community re-envisioning and politicising the figure of the bimbo as an empowered expression of modern-day femininity through their own performances. As the author explains in their analysis, the BimboTok subcommunity sits neatly on a fence between normative and resistant in its hyperfeminine aesthetic and embodied performance. The author ultimately rejects understanding BimboTok through an oversimplified empowerment/subjugation dichotomy in favour of examining the complex queer disidentifications being performed when these users take to TikTok to revel in displaying themselves as the antithesis of the ‘girlboss’ and other more widely accepted notions of feminist portrayal.



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Part I

# Old Matter in New Spaces



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# 1 Whitewashing and the Meme-ability of Scarlett Johansson

## Online Controversy Surrounding the *Ghost in the Shell* Remake

*Anna Wald*

### Introduction

This chapter explores the controversy surrounding the casting of Scarlett Johansson in the remake of *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) as a case study in theorising how conversations around race and gender online are determined by interlocking factors such as type of media being discussed (anime to live-action reboot) and fan cultures associated with source material genre. The plot of the remake further complicates the role of race in the film, and leads to questions about separation of actors from their celebrity, and what happens when the actor becomes the focal point of the controversies they bring to their films. Examining the relationship between international media, racial representation, online discourse and science fictional imaginings of technological futures, this chapter points out the many nuances and complications of this memetic event. Since 2017 a number of notable high-budget films, including *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and Marvel's *Shang-Chi and the Ten Rings* (2021), have partially addressed the gap in Asian representation as lead characters in Western box office blockbusters. I position the memetic event of the racial scandal of the *Ghost in the Shell* remake as a case study to examine the impact of fan cultures in online communities, and the ways online discourses complicate and conflate source material with representational 'correctness'.

The term 'whitewashing' frames whiteness not as a static or singular category, but a cohesive racial categorisation created through the constant re-establishment of whiteness as a natural and essential classification. Whitewashing establishes white subjects as the norm, and non-white races as 'Others'. Through this process of framing and naturalising whiteness as superior, while systematically erasing non-white others, whitewashing makes whiteness appear as the unmarked and unnamed position. Performance of whiteness is seldom discussed, as the neutrality of a white actor performing a white character presents to the audience as self-evident (Gabriel, 1998). It is when the issue of racial performance is seen to be transgressing the correlation between the actor's racial identity and the character's racialisation that controversy arises.

Scholars have taken up the task of asking how the specifics of the format in which people talk about race in digital spaces impacts both the conversations being had and the conclusions being drawn (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013; Brock, 2009). Online discussions of ‘whitewashing’ and cultural appropriation often centre on a film or television show. Film discourse, in particular online avenues, relates to fandoms, critics and general buzz surrounding a trailer release, or a sneak peek. *Ghost in the Shell* was published originally as a manga comic created by Japanese artist Masamune Shirow in 1989. It first gained international notoriety as a feature-length anime film by Japanese director Mamoro Oshii in 1995. In 2016 controversy arose surrounding the announcement of the live-action remake of the film, at the helm of Hollywood director Rupert Sanders. Those opposing this remake claimed that the film’s casting choice of A-list Hollywood actress Scarlett Johansson whitewashed the film’s main character, Motoko Kusanagic.

Lauren Berlant (2008) suggests the “problem of writing the history of the present” (p. 845) is a problem of affect. In considering the 2016–2017 controversy surrounding the ‘whitewashing’ of the live-action remake of *Ghost in the Shell* starring Scarlett Johansson, there are multiple levels from which to focus analysis upon the cultural backlash as an ‘affective event’. Scarlett Johansson was the highest paid actress in the US in 2018 and 2019. This was due largely to her role as ‘Black Widow’, part of the Marvel superhero film franchise (the first female Avenger). Johansson does not actively use social media for self-promotion or personalised content. However, through her celebrity and the proliferation of internet memes that use her image, “Johansson is highly visible across social media nevertheless, where she is subject to the waxing and waning of public approval and the controversies that inevitably beset anyone working in the public eye” (Palmer & Warren, 2019, p. 128). By looking to the whitewashing controversy as a memetic event, I argue that a collection of interrelated affective memetic responses can arise in reaction to a conceptual transgression based in racial performance.

Internet memes rose in popularity in the early 2000s as digital files usually in the form of an image macro: a digital media featuring a picture or artwork combined with text that conveyed a concept or phrase. As digital files are easily copied and shared, the widespread increase in usage of this medium, which was both an aesthetic style (often featuring a top text and bottom text) and a format for entertainment, information or political message, co-evolved with the increase of personal computer ownership and the emergence of smartphones. While internet memes have been a topic of media scholarship in the past decade (see Shifman, 2013; Phillips, 2015; Milner, 2018), for the purposes of this chapter I define a memetic event as an event that manifests as viral exchange that duplicates and problematises affective response to the original subject. Berlant (2008) asks how the historical present can be recorded in the ‘affective event’: “How does a particular affective

response come to be exemplary of a shared historical time, and in what terms?” (p. 845). I adopt this question of affective response surrounding a shared controversy in categorising the reaction to the remake as meme event.

## Fandom and Online Fan-Activists

Assuming that those with a strong opinion on the casting of the 2017 remake of *Ghost in the Shell* would have been fans of the original anime, a presumption of male viewership is in line with the model of ‘otaku’ fandom. Annalee Newitz (1995) articulates that ‘anime otaku’, roughly translating to ‘anime fanboy’ is a reclaiming of a derogatory Japanese term to one of pride:

This form of self-identification among (largely American) fans of Japanese animation tells us something about what it means to consume anime outside Japan: in order to affiliate themselves with anime fan culture, American fans are calling themselves by a name the Japanese use as an insult.

(Newitz, 1995, p. 1)

The cultural panic surrounding otaku fandom in the US (noted by Newitz, 1995; Kinsella, 1998; Tobin, 2004) revolves around fear of the isolated, withdrawn young male being sexually excited by sexualised female forms within anime comics. Matt Hills (2002) complicates the generalisations of anime otaku fandom. Hills elaborates on why terms like ‘appropriation’ and ‘globalisation’ are insufficient to describe transcultural anime fandom by suggesting that the recognition of “subcultural homologues (the way subcultures use certain texts to articulate their group identity)” can become “transcultural homologues (subcultures can use representations of other national subcultures to articulate a shared identity or devaluation)” (p. 13). Anime fandom functions within a transnational and intercultural context of media consumption, which complicates the racial politics of a live-action remake of an anime property.

Film remakes must often contend with the expectations held by fans of the original property. For producers, prediction and management of the expectations of those viewers may impact the filmmaking process. Thomas Leitch (1990) remarks that remakes aim to please the audience that has never heard of the original film, the audience that doubts the original can be improved and the audience who enjoyed the original enough to want the remake to be successful: “For some of these audiences the existence of the original film will not even be an issue; for others it will provide a benchmark against which to measure every scene in the remake” (p. 140). Racial controversy surrounding the casting of characters in a remake engages in assumptions of what a remake is or should be. Networks of fan cultures are one case study to examine how online arguments tend to reduce and simplify nuanced concepts. When a controversy arises surrounding the casting



of a remake, online arguments demonstrate some of the ways that fans understand race and racialisation.

An examination of the comments sections of various media journalism reports on the release of 2017's *Ghost in the Shell* reveals multiple lines of argument surrounding the choice of casting, and further debate over the racial identity of the original animated character in question. Commenters claim that anime, as a genre, is known to portray a variety of races in its characters, including 'the Westerner'. One fan states: "The ethnicity of Scarlett Johansson's character is not mentioned, but the character was drawn in the original Manga as a white westerner (big blue eyes is manga code for white westerner)" (David5309, 2018). The colour and shape of Motoko's eyes leads the commenter to claim that by 'manga code' the original character is signalled as a white Westerner. Samit Basu (2017) claimed Motoko in the original was "white" or a Westerner: "Yes, Motoko's shell model is Caucasian with a different colour option. It is a mass produced model like a car." Another commenter stated: "Like most Japanese anime, I would argue the animators typically draw the main characters as White or Caucasian" (Marcus Taylor, 2016).

A prominent argument within this online controversy discourse is that anime is illustrated with stylistic ambiguity, rather than illustrative of live human racial features. For example, daniel.hill12139 (2017) comments:

Major wasn't whitewashed. Nowhere have the creators of the anime, or the fiction itself, ever said that she (she being the cyborg, not the human she was before) was white or Japanese. Just as the people who adapted didn't understand the fiction, the people who are bemoaning the casting don't either.

This argument assumes that accurate knowledge of the source material would predicate understanding the protagonist as an ambiguously raced subject within the confines of anime characterisation. This line of thinking also bases its assertions on the presumed authority of the original, claiming neither "the anime, [nor] the fiction itself" explicitly mentioned Motoko's race, so both the producers of the remake and those alleging whitewashing misunderstand the source material.

Justification to support the casting decisions of the remake was also sometimes linked to the 'authority' of the director of the 1995 anime *Ghost in the Shell*, Mamoru Oshii. Oshii responded when questioned about his reaction to the casting of Scarlett Johansson:

What issue could there possibly be with casting her? The Major is a cyborg and her physical form is an entirely assumed one. The name 'Motoko Kusanagi' and her current body are not her original name and body, so there is no basis for saying that an Asian actress must portray her.

(Diaz, 2017)

Some commenters took Oshii's approval of the casting as evidence of what should be deemed acceptable in ways similar to citations of 'the original' anime or manga.

The perceived race of anime characters may be largely dependent on the location, position and opinion of the viewer. Amy Shirong Lu argues that the position of the viewer when looking at anime characters can lead to "own race perception" (Lu, 2009, p. 173). Characters that are 'abstract' or 'ambiguous' in style may not be easily identified as one race or another. In fact, she argues, they may not have been drawn to portray any 'real' race (p. 174). Anime characters may be drawn as abstract or fantasy versions of non-real races or ethnicities. As Susan Napier (2001) contends: "Anime offers an array of diverse identities and ethnicities to choose from that are not bound by the strictures of the 'real' world" (p. 17). In this way 'abstracted' or 'ambiguous' racialisations may be distinct from real world racial categories. However, abstraction or ambiguity does not mean that a character not easily racially categorised should be assumed to be white, as seems to have been done by some commenters. To do so would be to conflate neutral imagery or 'lack of race' with whiteness (Ruh, 2014, p. 167). Brian Ruh claims that representation of the body is dependent on the creator, the narrative and the genre tropes, without presuming to universalise all anime genre tropes and styles by reference to 'manga logic'. As Ruh (2014) and Terry Kawashima (2002) contend, assigning race to an abstracted character is almost always contingent on the viewer's positionality and location.

Digital fan communities within online spaces have been working to bring awareness to the specific issues of whitewashing Asian character roles in live-action remakes of anime films. Fans who wanted to voice their disagreement with the casting recreated images, filmed skits mirroring the original film, and published on science fiction forums in order to draw attention and ask for a boycott of the film. The twitter campaign #notmymajor gathered fans of the original to post their distaste for the Johansson casting, and many shared their stories of disappointment and allegiance to the original. Fan videos such as 'Ghost in the Shell PSA' show through re-enactment the lived affects of children not seeing themselves represented in the media they admire, and were circulated to draw attention to the remake's casting (May & Tom, 2017).

Live-action remakes of anime properties offer a comparison of the frequency and ubiquity of the tendency within Western media to race anime characters as white, as was the claim against 2017's *Ghost in the Shell*. *Speed Racer* (2008), directed by the Wachowskis, is a pertinent case study. This film in recent years has been deemed a 'cult classic', though it faced a negative critical reception upon release. *Speed Racer* was also criticised at the time of its theatrical release for whitewashing when Emile Hirsh was cast as the titular character, though the main character in the original cartoon can be read as an unmarked racial subject. Other anime-to-live-action films that received criticism for whitewashing include *Dragonball Evolution* (2009)

and *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2010). These films, like *Speed Racer*, were reboots of beloved television cartoons that did poorly at the box office.

Lori Kido Lopez (2012) examines issues regarding digital fan communities, whitewashing and opinions regarding the remake of properties within already existing fan cultures. Lopez conducted ethnographic research with the operators of *racebending.com*, through which she is able to speak to the make-up and motivation of fans who disagree with casting choices that they feel do not reflect the intent of the original. Lopez frames the group she studies as consumer-citizens who aim to impact the film industry through the collective power of their boycott, and also utilises Henry Jenkins's (2006) "convergence cultures" (p. 438) to expand their imagined space of impact: "It is clear that participatory cultures like those around fan communities offer a potential space and set of tools for shifting conversations from fictional texts to the realities that they impact and rely upon" (Lopez, 2012, p. 443). Because conversations surrounding whitewashing move the analysis of the argument from media content to the production side of content and its lived experiential impact on fans, looking to fan activists can offer a material subject for examining "spreadable media" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 194).

The population that Lopez defines as "fan activists" (2012, p. 432), such as those who brought attention to the *Ghost in the Shell* casting with hashtags like #notmymajor, function to impact media and how it is both disseminated and received. Media spreadability concerns the way media is mobilised. Jenkins et al. (2013) argue that spreadability assumes that media environments are shaped by circulation: "It comes also from a belief that, if we can better understand the social and institutional factors that shape the nature of circulation, we may become more effective at putting alternative messages into circulation [...]" (p. 194). By this definition, Jenkins et al. (2013) assert that media is shaped by its audiences; it circulates rather than being handed down from one party to another. Their approach theorises that media is reciprocally influenced by consumer-citizenship that propels the conversation about fan cultures and whitewashing to move from a top-down consumption model to one that allows multiple influences to challenge what sort of content will be created. In other words, the idea that Hollywood will cast according to its own model of what will be a lucrative property, and the concept that audiences are just consumers of that material without any reciprocal impact, is no longer taken for granted.

Lopez in her study of the whitewashing controversy surrounding the live-action remake of *The Last Airbender* notes that fans' preoccupation with the original often disables thoughtful conversation surrounding race: "We see that a fannish preoccupation with authenticity can be limiting if it becomes affixed to a relationship between racialised or otherwise marked bodies and the stories they can tell" (2012, p. 443). As Lopez shows, claiming that the original is the authority on how to compose a remake becomes complicated when racial identity is left unexamined, and affixing race to

fictional character often limits productive dialogue on racial inequalities within media.

### Whitewashing and Yellowface

Distinct from the traditions of minstrelsy and blackface, yellowface refers to historically situated relations between figures of Asian descent within American media. Locating the discourse around whitewashing within a historical context, the significance of yellowface performances in media contributes to the memetic response as anger against whitewashing. By conceptualising whitewashing within the historical matrix of Western media's uses of blackface and yellowface, online controversy engages in a tradition of protest against harmful representations. Notable examples of yellowface in film include iterations of the Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan characters, and Mickey Rooney as Mr Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Phruksachart, 2017). Examples of stereotypical and damaging depictions of Asian characters by Asian actors would comprise another list, including Gedde Watanabe as Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles*. Jill Lane (2008) problematises how performances of black-, red- and yellowface function historically as a technology of national representation within the Americas. Lane places racial impersonation within historical contexts that were foundational to identifying a national character: "Somehow, racial impersonation is the key to a persuasive sense of authentic national performance" (p. 1730). Following Lane's concept of the matrix of racial performances in media as tied within historical and cultural understandings of identity and 'citizenship', yellowface falls within visual regimes of racialisation and media.

In theorising visual regimes of racialisation online, I follow Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's (2013) definition of 'race as technology'. The concepts in this chapter encapsulate these ideas moving from movie screen, to understandings of race within online discourse, and out to theorising stardom and celebrity in the case of Johansson. Racial identity defined as biologically and/or culturally located becomes a technology through inter-personal identificatory processes of classification, enabled in part through visual regimes of knowledge. Debate surrounding racial 'essence', 'authenticity' or 'truth' is embroiled in person-to-person perceptive modes of identification (Johnson, 2003). Observing a person's phenotype, skin tone, style of dress and speech can be conceived of as a two-dimensional equation. When a third dimension such as film, television or digital image presents a person, the categories of racial identification are further distanced from the living self-defined identity of the person whose image has been captured. Chun (2013) argues that conceiving of race through 'epidermal logic' links the visible (what is on the outside and perceivable) to what is invisible (a person's identity). These racialising logics are further essentialised through media technologies, as a real person (as themselves or performing as a character) is

represented visually and removed from the reality of that person's quotidian life. Processes of racial signification are entrenched in visual indicators of race and the associational matrix of understanding what race *is* through which a web of meaning is projected onto the body of the racialised subject. Understanding how visual regimes of racialisation are structured and facilitated through media, first with TV and film, and then with images on internet platforms, expands a reading of race as a technology.

To historicise yellowface and look specifically at the displacement or invisibility of actors of Asian descent in the recent past, Jane Chi Hyun Park (2010) describes the roles of Asian characters as based in “conditional visibility” (p. viii). The terms of this conditional visibility demand that Asian characters in Hollywood films are often relegated to peripheral roles, fetishised or underdeveloped, or visible as signifiers rather than full characters. Following the historical precedence of the yellow peril narrative in the nineteenth century, Park (2010) asserts that by the 1980s the ‘oriental other’ of Japan was posed as more of an economic than military threat (p. 8). As narratives of globalisation and transnational economies replaced those of internment camps and post-WWII xenophobic discourses, Asia, and particularly Japan, became synonymous with concepts of technology and innovation (p. 29). As Park (2010) states, narratives of Japan began to shift in the late 20th century:

at the time news and popular media began to depict Tokyo as the quintessential postmodern metropolis while reactivating World War II stereotypes of the Japanese as less human and more machinelike. Linked with new technologies, Japan ... grew to represent the notion of futurity in the national imaginary.

(p. 8)

Stereotypes of the Japanese as machine-like and sub-human during WWII are linked with and have evolved into their association with technology and futurity as another form of dehumanisation. Park (2010) also explores how the tropes of yellow peril, alongside the stereotype of the Asian American population as model minority, are two sides of the same coin, measuring personhood and citizenship based on economic efficiency (p. 42). Identifying groups or races as in proximity to machine and being machine-like, and therefore less human, is a tool of dehumanisation. Park differentiates between older forms of Orientalist media such as *Madame Butterfly* (Degabriele, 1996) and ‘Oriental Style’ in contemporary film, what has also been described as ‘techno-Orientalism’ (Park, 2010, p. 6).

### **Techno-Orientalism and Racialised Animation**

‘Techno-Orientalism’ is a phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asian peoples in “hypo- or hypertechnological terms” (Roh et al., 2015, p. 2) within cultural

and political discourse. Roh et al. (2015) extend and draw on Edward Said's *Orientalism*. As Said (1978) asserts, in the construction of the Orient the West constructs itself; therefore techno-Orientalism "produces and reproduces an oppositional 'East' in order to cement Western hegemony" (Roh et al., 2015, p. 8). The discursive production of an East that is oppositional to the West operates in multiple and multi-directional dimensions, including equating Orientalised subjects with advanced technological resources and ability.

The concept of techno-Orientalism has been used to critique contemporary science fiction, especially within the cyberpunk genre (Park, 2010, p. 9). Cyberpunk narratives, including *Ghost in the Shell*, often position Asian cities and identities as markers of an (often-dystopian) future. The 'techno-Orient', whether produced within Japanese animation or in Western science fiction, becomes a consumable signifier of technological futurity. Park (2010) defines what she designates as 'oriental style': "the representation of Asiatic tropes through the discourses of technological advancement and racial progressivism" (p. 29). While the practice of donning blackface or yellowface in film is understood as no longer culturally acceptable, the history of white actors playing characters of minority races informs how we discuss whitewashing in casting decisions today (Lee, 1999). These discussions, ranging from journalism and film theory, to online discourse by fans or observers, come from many perspectives, not all of which have the historical groundwork to contextualise the multifaceted politics of race-based casting choices.

A comparison could be made between the anime-to-live-action *Ghost in the Shell* and the comic-to-live-action superhero blockbuster by Marvel, *Doctor Strange* (2016), which came under scrutiny for its casting of Tilda Swinton in what had been a role of a Tibetan male, 'The Ancient One' in the comic. The justification by the studio for this casting was twofold: first, that the original character was a stereotypical depiction (along the lines of Fu Manchu) and it was the politically correct move to alter it, and second, that substituting a female character would be celebrated by fans as a sign of gendered progress. As Leilani Nishime (2017) has argued, it is both troublesome and "disturbing" that a studio can promote itself "as an agent for social change by transforming an Asian stereotype into an empowered white woman to move the audience past racist representations and by acknowledging the power of Asian audiences" (p. 30). The move that Nishime (2017) explains points to a number of harmful notions, the first being that there is no way to cast an Asian character in a role that was previously too "stereotypically Asian".

Following this logic, if a white female actress is to fill the role, the problem will solve itself and the audience will be grateful to have a strong (unraced, meaning white) female character in place of a stereotypical Asian character. Racial ambiguity is a trait of anime characters, but this does not eliminate the issue of white actors being cast in these remake roles (Lu, 2009, p. 174). Rather, the attachment that audiences have to anime in all

of its ‘cult’ appeal and the outrage that follows these remakes cannot be separated from the way we interpret and speak to fan cultures at our present moment (Silvio, 1999). It could be argued that if the film had cast a Japanese actress, a techno-Orientalist depiction of Japanese womanhood and non-human lack of emotions of the cyborg character could have itself created a harmful representation. The story itself is not a particular celebration or ‘good’ representation of Japanese womanhood and autonomy in a near-future dystopian storyline. Whitewashing is within and often an extension of yellowface, which positions white actors as the natural and neutral casting choice, regardless of story, origin or character. While whitewashing Asian characters covers a larger Western context from stage to screen, looking particularly to science fiction illuminates a specific trope of Orientalised difference.

Scholars such as Nishime (2017) situate whitewashing of Asian characters in science fiction as relational and interconnected with other issues of racism and representation that take place within a globalised situating of ‘Asianness’. Examining recent Western science fiction films such as *Cloud Atlas* (2012) and *Ex Machina* (2014) that position Asian women as not only stereotypically robotic, but performing as robots, Nishime (2017) argues: “The films reconcile the contradictions between technology’s promise of high-status, disembodied labor and the perpetuation of low-status, embodied, ‘unskilled’ labor under globalization by racializing, gendering, and therefore naturalizing labor stratification” (p. 31). The connection between Western fear of the power of the Asian labour market and technological progress as ‘mechanising’ workers serves to dissociate and distance Western capitalism’s own mechanisation of workers in order to maintain a sense of cultural and racial superiority. Techno-Orientalist science fiction demonstrates one avenue for hypothesising dystopian futures through narratives of technology gone too far.

The 2017 remake of *Ghost in the Shell* draws on science fiction representation of the figure of a female cyborg in ways that resonate with Donna Haraway’s (1994) conception. The cyborg calls into question the many theoretical contradictions that a science fiction cyborg might present: she is both superhuman and at the mercy of her creators; she is both posthuman and rethinking what constitutes ‘human’; she exists outside of biological sex but still presents a gendered embodiment; and she is both artificially created and born to human parentage. The 2017 remake works to pose questions about hybridity, superhumanism, dehumanisation and the militarisation of the cyborg that are also considered in the work of Haraway and contemporary scholars regarding the potential of the concept of the cyborg for critical race and feminist theories.

Johansson’s character, Mira, is constructed as a weapon in the service of her manufacturers. This reflects cyborg scholarship that engages with how human workers approximate mechanical functions under capitalism. Jennifer González (1995) notes in her work on cyborgs and racialisation



that with the rise of industrial capitalism some populations were expected to become mechanised/mechanical: “the distinction between the machine and the human became a question of gender and class” (p. 60). While some arguments such as Haraway’s extol the cyborg as a figure of revolutionary potential, González argues the cyborg will not necessarily exist free of social constraints, “constraints which apply to humans and machines already” (p. 61). The distinction between the mechanical and those who are “mechanized” (Devereux & Kosman, 2016, p. 13) becomes blurred within constructs of productivity, racialisation and exploitation. When the distinction is made between cyborgs and humans, often cyborg science fiction employs a symbolic narrative of racialisation. As Isiah Lavender III (2011) argues:

Envisioning exactly how the cyborg occupies a new race position becomes possible when thinking about future projections of human racial history. In the same way, posthumanism changes how we think about our physical being by raising new questions of what is innately or naturally human.

(p. 26)

Relating the cyborg as a ‘new race’ to conceptual posthumanism opens up the possibilities of applying a racial analysis to theories of ‘what comes next?’ for humankind within contemporary science fiction. In that sense, Johansson as Mira occupies a space of a new ‘type’ of being, one that as a cyborg is distinct from humans in status, and may be exempt from racial identification by nature of this same artificial parentage.

The plot of the 2017 remake, which detours from the original anime film, operates to justify the casting of Johansson by exposition that informs the audience that the robot ‘shell’ (played by Johansson) contains the memories and identity (‘ghost’) of the Japanese woman Motoko. Janice Loreck (2018) argues that when the character Mira discovers the mother of her human brain, who is Japanese, the opportunity is opened for “the film’s exploration of race in a posthuman future” (p. 38). Part of my argument as to the controversy rests on the backlash to the film prior to viewing the full movie. While the ending of the 2017 film suggests that the cyborg protagonist may occupy a complicated racial categorisation, Loreck (2018) contends that this thought-experiment is a failure due to the magnitude of Johansson’s fame to begin with, and her notability as a white American actress. Claiming that Johansson as an actress cannot be distanced from her critical reception and previous roles that connect her to all the white characters she has portrayed on screen, Loreck (2018) argues casting Johansson in the role “not only tethers the cyborg character to Johansson’s lived existence as a white woman, it also connects her intertextually to the constellation of white characters that she has previously portrayed” (p. 39).



Central to the “constellation of white characters” portrayed by Johansson are various non-human or posthuman characters who may complicate a certain embodiment of ‘humanness’. As the subject of a science fictional experiment testing the potential of ‘cerebral capacity’ in *Lucy* (2014), as the disembodied yet eerily present voice of Joaquin Phoenix’s artificially intelligent operating system/girlfriend in *Her* (2013) or as an alien seductress who preys on men in *Under the Skin* (2013), Johansson’s roles as “a posthuman ‘pin-up girl’” (Matthews, 2018, p. 5) have come to define her celebrity to some audiences. Johansson being typecast as robotic, other-than-human, and placed in multiple science fiction films may signal a trend that would lead her to be cast in *Ghost in the Shell*. Zara Dinnen and Sam McBean (2018) make an argument as to Johansson’s face on screen as a technology of gendering and racialisation. They argue that within popular culture the norms and privileges of whiteness and femininity are figured through the face on screen as technological formation (2018, p. 136). While a few media outlets commented on the potentially trans-racial twist within the remake, the majority of online memes and mockery surrounding Johansson focus on her public statements and further casting controversies.

## Conclusion

Johansson’s perceived racial transgression continues to position her as a meme-able celebrity persona. These issues of who a white cis-female should be able to play as an actress extended when Johansson received criticism for her consideration of the protagonist role in the film biography titled *Rub & Tug*, a profile of Pittsburgh transgender male gangster Dante ‘Tex’ Gill. Johansson turned down the role, and the film, which would have been made by 2017’s *Ghost in the Shell* director Rupert Sanders, halted production. As this controversy arose, a sharp increase in Johansson-based memes proliferated online that conflated the *Ghost in the Shell* whitewashing controversy with the disapproval of her considering taking the role of portraying a trans male character. Speaking to memes of Johansson falling taken from *Under the Skin* as well as the “I am Major” digital marketing campaign, Palmer and Warren (2019) contend: “Memes are exemplary tools that reveal how, in contemporary sharing economies, audiences can directly influence and help construct celebrity personas, both through fandom and through cultural critique” (p. 141). In 2019 there was an explosion of memes which photo-shopped Johansson’s face onto trees, after her comment to *As If* magazine. Johansson stated: “You know, as an actor I should be allowed to play any person, or any tree, or any animal because that is my job and the requirements of my job” (Dawson, 2019). Internet memes connecting the *Ghost in the Shell* controversy to this statement employed an ironic ridicule of the actress’s seemingly clueless, or possibly dismissive, attitude toward representation politics in Hollywood.

Given the continued success of Johansson's career following two Academy Award nominations in 2020 and the successful release of the *Black Widow* Marvel film, it is fair to say that while the controversy continues to haunt Johansson's meme-able celebrity, the repercussions of this memetic event have had little impact on her career or ability to remain an A-list actress in Hollywood. Online controversies such as the *Ghost in the Shell* whitewashing discourse may impact film productions and take into consideration the appeals from fan activists and advocates for more diverse racial representations in film. The connection and continuation of a meme-able Johansson illuminates a particular instance of collective memory within online cultures to remember transgressions, as it has been argued: "the internet doesn't forget" (García-Gavilanes et al., 2017). Johansson's career faced no serious impact from this controversy, yet her continued meme-ability within certain online communities that centre the actor's opinions on the roles she accepts is worth considering in further online discourse studies that seek to define online communities through ironic mockery and humour.

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## 2 “My Parents Check My Profile”

### How Italian Girls Negotiate Parental Discourses in Online Activities

*Arianna Mainardi and Tonny Krijnen*

#### Introduction

Then I started seeing FB more as a part of my world and so my parents could see everything I was doing and I said okay ... withdraw them from my friends! [embarrassed laugh]. Because I wanted it to be my own little world outside the family.

Giulia is a 16-year-old girl. Like many of her peers in Italy, her everyday life is situated in both online and offline contexts. Connected with her smart-phone at school and at home, Giulia keeps in touch with family and friends, sharing photos, videos and texts through social network sites (SNSs). Giulia employs different online resources to construct her own views on the world. Moreover, it is in these online spaces that girls build and articulate themselves showing photos, videos and private texts. For Giulia and her peers, SNSs are an existential space in and through which they build, discuss and express their identities.

In both society and academia, girls' online activities are a topic of heated debates. Public debates usually centre on the worries and anxieties of adults about girls' activities, which are often portrayed as risky business. Falling victim to hypersexualisation, cyberbullying, or being easy game for internet predators are commonly voiced concerns. Girls, it is argued, should be protected against these corrupting influences. These protectionist/moralist discourses, as Dobson (2014) calls them, are not only prevalent in public debates but sustained and reinforced by publicly available research reports such as the *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* by the American Psychological Association (2010). Other researchers contribute to these discourses by showing how digital media cause body dissatisfaction among adolescent girls, or force them to self-sexualise by posting selfies and other sexualised self-images on social media (see Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2022). Furthermore, in order to ensure safety for young women and to restore and/or maintain more reassuring traditional social norms and roles, their activities should be controlled (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2022). This paternalistic protectionist/moralist

discourse is embedded in a conception of ‘I know what is right for you, and you don’t’.

The Italian journalistic debate around girls and SNSs illustrates this: online girls are continuously portrayed as victims. For example, SNSs are presented as generating the ‘objectified woman’ or the focus lies on how selfies, posted on SNSs, are sufficient reasons to fall victim to violence. Hence, Italian newspapers maintain patriarchal discourses by presenting technology as inappropriate for girls and by regulating girls’ presence in the public sphere (Mainardi, 2015). Parents are encouraged to protect their children, and especially their daughters, from this risky online environment. Guidelines on how to protect them are usually formulated in terms of media literacy and active parental involvement. However, other scholars note that by posing girls as subjects at risk, girls’ own standpoints and views on their activities are at best weakened, if not obscured (Duits & Van Romondt Vis, 2009; Duits & Van Zoonen, 2006). The protectionist/moralist discourse is a one-sided perspective obscuring girls’ ideas, opinions and actions. A number of studies contributing to the protectionist discourse are based on content analysis of social media (Gill, 2007, 2008), showing how misogynist discourses dominate young women’s media environment. However, what young women actually do with these discourses is a question left unanswered. Indeed, as Edell et al. (2013) argue, talking to girls complicates these matters tremendously.

We want to highlight two important aspects of the protectionist/moralist discourse articulated in the debate on girls and new media. First, the debate seems to postulate two positions for girls: ‘girls at risk’ versus ‘empowered girls’. These positions are particularly polarised in the sense that they focus exclusively either on power structures or on girls’ agency. This dichotomy has been questioned by many authors before us (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014; Gonick et al., 2009; Harris & Dobson, 2015). We also feel neither position does justice to girls’ online activities; therefore we adopt a poststructural view on Italian girls’ online activities. Girls’ agency, expressed in acts, activities and acting are discursive practices that co-construct the very structures enabling and limiting their agency. As Harris and Dobson (2015) argue, this means to “[...] understand subjectivity and social structure as produced in concert” (p. 145). Through acting on SNSs, girls engage with power systems and (re)produce power systems. Girls are not defined, structured or limited by power but “come into being through an active engagement with systems of power” (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014, p. 469).

Sexualisation and girls’ entanglement with it is located in a neoliberalist climate in tandem with a postfeminist sensibility (Gonick et al., 2009): on the one hand positioning girls as rational individuals capable of making life choices, while on the other hand the sexist structures in which they have to do this deny girls freedom of choice. McRobbie (2009) has identified this violent climate as the postfeminist masquerade. We would like to draw attention to regionality. As Gonick

(2015) argues, neoliberalism has spread on a global scale, but its configuration is locally nuanced. In the Italian context, we argue, the postfeminist masquerade is just as prone as elsewhere, but the role played by parents and family differs from that in North European countries. Families have a crucial position in conveying society's norms and codes for girls. Furthermore, parents play a key role in orienting girls' use of new technologies in the domestic space (Scarcelli, 2010). In other words, Italian girls engage with a different power system to articulate the self than in other European countries. Our aim then is to make a contribution to understanding girls' online activities within specific power configurations.

Attributing attention to a dialogic understanding of agency and structure and to the local specificities of the power configurations in which identities are negotiated, we focus our research on how Italian girls between the ages of 15 and 18 years negotiate parental discourses on sexuality and SNSs. The internet practices and daily experiences of girls in the northern Italian city of Milan are central to our investigation of *How do Italian girls negotiate parental discourses in their online activities?* We use in-depth interviews to answer our research question.

### The Italian Context

Gender and sexuality in Italy are an insidious terrain, both of discriminations and for political struggle. The ambivalent situation in the Italian context produces a gender system that encourages girls' and women's self-achievement in a culture that reproduces many forms of sexism and misogyny (see Zambelli et al., 2018). Public debate carries a gendered moral panic on girls' sexuality, constantly seeking to augment the already strict separation between good, respectable women and bad, disreputable women (Gribaldo, 2018). This separation between 'good' and 'bad' is known as the double standard: different standards used to judge sexual acts committed by men or women. As in other parts of the world, Italian women are expected to be respectable and not to show interest in sexuality or to engage in sexual behaviour outside heterosexual marriage (Bertone & Ferrero Camoletto, 2011; Crawford & Popp, 2003; Zambelli et al., 2018). Simultaneously, men's interest in sexuality in and outside marriage is accepted and sometimes even rewarded. "Women were faced with a Madonna-whore dichotomy: They were either pure and virginal or promiscuous and easy" (Crawford & Popp, 2003, p. 13).

Combined with the neoliberal idea of girls as empowered subjects, this creates an interesting context in which Italian girls negotiate their identities. While female Italian teenagers are considered as free and independent as their male peers regarding employment and education, the girls are restricted by rigid norms of respectability with regard to sexuality. Discourses on girls' sexuality are built on the basis of the double standards that characterised sexual morality in Italy between 1950 and 1960 (Leccardi, 2011).



Additionally, cultural practices concerning family relations also contribute to Italy's specific context for young girls. In Italy the familial welfare model delegates care services to the family sphere. Italian social and labour policies are based on the notion of family support and thus sustain the cohabitation of youth and the family until adulthood. Autonomy is reached at a later age than in other European countries. Furthermore, though the patriarchal family model, based on the male breadwinner and the female housewife, has been challenged by new gender and family models (Schizzerotto et al., 2011), men's participation in domestic work and care activities remains very limited (Bertone & Ferrero Camoletto, 2011). This configuration of the double standard in a context that emphasises heterosexual marriage and a strong division of domestic labour results in a very specific context for young girls to negotiated their sexual identities. As Pasquali (2012) argues, Italy witnesses a paradoxical situation in which sex and sexuality are both pervasive and hypervisualised, while also being removed from society. This makes sex a taboo subject, “right there where it is most exhibited”, therefore “making the relationship among generations and between public and private more problematic than in other European contexts” (Pasquali, 2012, p. 207).

### **Framing Girls and SNSs**

The protectionist/moralist discourses on girls' online activities are not entirely new. With the rise of every new medium, concerns about the impact of that medium on girls' well-being arise. From dance halls in the early 1900s to today's SNSs, debates on the new medium's effects have always concentrated on the mental and physical health of the vulnerable (Thiel-Stern, 2014). The vulnerable are often embodied by girls, as they fall into all of the categories under fire: young age and assumed lesser mental and cognitive capacities (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2022). Within the current neoliberal discourse prevalent in societies of the Global North, the image of vulnerable girls is countered by a seemingly opposing image of the empowered girl.

This configuration should not be equated with a dichotomous conceptualisation of agency vs structure. As argued earlier, we follow a poststructural approach, understanding agency and structure in a dialogic fashion. Agency should therefore not be equated with resistance as this obscures the reproduction of unequal power structures by girls themselves (cf. Harris & Dobson, 2015). Moreover, positioning agency as opposed to structure forces one to either focus on ‘the girl at risk’, a victim of structures, or on ‘the empowered girl’ as an overt agent.

With the rise of digital media, the protectionist/moralist discourses took a slightly different shape. Online environments, it was argued, offered the opportunity to play with identities and assigned social roles, granting media access to everyone, including girls. Gender play and the accompanying dislocation of sex and gender increase the potential to disrupt the heterosexual



matrix (Butler, 1990). However, SNSs also significantly reduce the distance between online and offline life and produce important consequences for identity constructions as SNSs sustain an embodied presence in online interaction (Turkle, 1995).

The ways that SNSs differ significantly from other media are located in four distinct properties: persistence, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences (boyd, 2007). These properties are particularly relevant with regard to debates on the risks of SNSs and one's online behaviour and feed the protectionist/moralist discourse. SNSs never forget what one posts, all material is easily found and can be distributed further without one's consent, and no one knows exactly who is viewing what pages. These four features are prominent elements of the aforementioned protectionist/moralist discourses, and used as arguments in the sexualisation debate: the consequences of online actions might have repercussions in offline life and young girls are unable to oversee or foresee these consequences. Therefore, SNSs provide a context in which the relationship between girls' agency and constraints is in flux. Online space may operate as a place of sexual freedom and gender play, but within these very spaces of opportunity harsh norms of gender identity and sexual regulation are articulated. Moreover, this context is positioned within a power configuration that emphasises parental and familial discourses. How do girls navigate these discourses and how does their direct environment intersect?

## Method

To focus on girls' identity negotiations we investigated the ways girls appropriate the resources available in order to understand how they create and negotiate the meaning of these resources in everyday life. This chapter intends to contribute to the debate with an empirical study, answering the question: *How do Italian girls negotiate parental discourses in their online activities?*

A total of 32 girls between 15 and 18 years of age were interviewed. The qualitative interview was particularly useful for our purposes as it focuses attention on everyday life and provides room for the interviewees to express themselves and their experiences in their own words. By use of a topic list (containing topics such as time spent during the day using internet with friends, relatives and boyfriends; use of a smartphone; unpleasant experiences online; self-representations on social media), the interviewer guided the interviewees with the construction of the narrative. Hence, the interviewer co-constructs the narrative (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). Here, we want to acknowledge the existence of a power relation between researcher and interviewee during the interviews. We reflexively considered both the interviewer position (researcher, woman, young adult, white) and the context in which the interviews took place. To create a friendly and less hierarchical atmosphere, the interviewer asked the girls to address her with

the informal pronoun ‘you’ and by using the first name (the Italian social rules ask youth to address adults using the formal version of the pronoun ‘you’ that corresponds to the third person ‘lei’; there is no English parallel to this pronoun). Some interviews were conducted inside the schools. In these cases we created a safe space, ensuring privacy. Other interviews took place in public spaces, such as parks or coffee shops. All interviews were transcribed *ad verbum*.

The girls came from different socio-economic contexts. Interviewees attended different schools (high school, vocational school or technical institute) and their parents differed in educational level and in country of origin. These girls lived at the intersection of several social categories. Their everyday experiences were situated and embodied at the intersection of these different dimensions of power: economic resources, educational level, ethnic background and religious context. In order to understand the process of negotiating parental discourses we have to consider how girls are immersed within these dimensions.

The SNS most used by the girls at the time of the interviews was Facebook (FB). Therefore, in the results we will focus on FB instead of SNSs in general. Interviews were interpreted following a discourse analysis approach. As ‘discourse’ we considered the relation between knowledge and power that structures the different subject positions that girls can adopt (Foucault, 1970). Discourses do not exist independently of their reproduction through social practice and meaning of the subject; discourses change over time and new ones emerge. Discourse analysis is therefore a suitable way to understand negotiating parental discourses and the specific power configurations for girls online. First, we identified parental discourses and how they contribute to a normative gender definition in girls’ lives. Second, we focused on the way in which girls negotiated these discourses in their everyday life and in the context of SNSs.

## Parents’ Normative Gender Discourses

As is common for youths in contemporary societies in the Global North, for the girls interviewed there was an existential continuity between online and offline in everyday life. For instance, people with whom they kept in touch the most were the same people they interacted with offline. The interviewees were not that excited about FB. As they used FB every day it was integrated in their daily practices. FB was often evaluated by the girls as a boring place rather than a novelty. Part of the boredom was caused by the presence of parents on FB. At the time of the interviews – the study was concluded in 2015 – Facebook had started to be a place for ‘adults’. While the girls were already active on Facebook, parents had just started to discover it. By entering into this online space, parents started modifying its socio-technological culture. Given that most of the girls involved in the research had had a Facebook account since middle school, the entry of parents into

this space changed the ways in which it was perceived and inhabited, and the meanings associated with its use. Thus, this research shows the emergence of a normative dimension within Facebook spaces that contributed to girls' exploration of other SNSs in recent years (such as Instagram or TikTok). Although FB started out as a space in which girls interacted with their peers, the presence of the parents now changed the way the girls used, felt about and had fun on FB. In saying they were bored with FB, we suggest, the interviewed girls were also responding to a system of (parental) checks and pressures in a complex space in between the public and private sphere (boyd, 2007).

All of the girls reported parental role and parents' protectionist/moralist discourses as significant to their activities on FB. Sometimes, parental presence manifested itself as a direct intervention in girls' activities, such as forcing the girls to unfriend people or to delete posts. Other times, parental presence became apparent indirectly, such as monitoring their online interactions. In general, parental interventions can be read as suggesting and encouraging traditional forms of femininity. This normative discourse on how to be a 'good girl' was not only exercised by parents, but sometimes maintained by other family members such as brothers.

According to the girls interviewed, parents' and other family members' direct and indirect interventions were instigated by protectionist/moralist discourses. For example, Geneva explains how her mother allowed her to open a FB account only if she used her mother's email to set it up. Furthermore, Geneva had to utilise the setting that makes FB send email notifications of all activities on FB to her mother. Hence, Geneva's mother is aware of all of her activities. According to Geneva, this is because her mother tries to protect her from harm:

They [her parents] check my profile. In the sense that my mother, when I joined FB said: 'or you sign up with my email or you can't!'. So I enrolled with her email and she receives all my notifications. She receives my messages [...]. Because she does not want me dating the wrong people ... That they may lure me online and then maybe even hurt me.

(Geneva, 16-year-old, high school)

Geneva's account is reflected in the interviews with the other girls, though not all parents performed a continuous monitoring of their daughters' online activities. Some activities, such as viewing pages, were intervened in only when the occasion arose. For example, Fatima explains:

Once I was in the car with my dad and he saw a picture of two naked people on the beach. He said 'What is that thing on FB?' And I say, 'It is a page.' and he says 'Remove it!' [stern voice] 'take away the like from the page.' and I said 'Okay.' [laughs].

(Fatima, 15-year-old, vocational school)

The intervention of the father in this case is occasional: he happens to catch a glimpse of what his daughter is viewing online and exercises his authority immediately. The girls perceived that dealing with protectionist/moralist discourses embodied by their parents’ presence and interventions was part of the power system that they found themselves in.

The girls were aware of the opportunities and risks posed by online environments. For example, Geneva explains how there is a threshold of friends in common before you accept a friendship request:

Once I had accepted a friendship of a person ... I didn’t know him but he was a friend of a friend, I said ‘he is a friend of a friend, I accept him’ and she [the mother] was very angry ... I said ‘damn Mom! He is a person who I know exists because he is a friend of another person, it is not that bad.’

(Geneva, 16-year-old, high school)

By making sure the person accepted is known to several good friends, Geneva tries to ensure her own safety. Other examples that show the girls’ knowledge and awareness include expressions such as: “not that you could see anything” (Antonella), or “I choose the best picture of me, but I don’t want to show too much. If I have a dress which shows a bit of breast I choose the picture that doesn’t show it” (Miriam). This awareness shows the girls’ knowledge of sexualisation, as Duits and Van Zoonen (2011) argued, and how to navigate this in their everyday practices. Parental interventions, or demands in this regard, were only accepted because the punishments for not doing so were severe. As Geneva explains, when her mother demands her to unfriend a newly accepted person:

At first I said, ‘come on, Mom, he’s a person that I know he exists because he is a friend of another person, he is not bad’. But she said: ‘No, I’ve told you, you can use FB if you follow my rules.’ Then I said: ‘all right, all right.’ Precisely because it was the first time, it was my first experience on FB and I did not want me to be taken off, so I said yes.

(Geneva, 16-year-old, high school)

Geneva only avoids exploring the boy’s friendship in exchange for being able to continue to use FB. One of the side effects of this perceived parental fear of daughters’ online activities is an enforcement of the paradoxical coexistence of both pervasiveness and removal of sexuality in Italian girls’ lives. A restrictive attitude towards girls’ use of social media turns sexuality into a taboo. Hence, parents exclude the possibility that girls could discuss sexuality within the family (Pasquali, 2012). Additionally, these interventions, restrictions and censorship restore the figure of girls as potential ‘victims’ on the internet. This discourse weakens their position and sustains a patriarchal

order which regulates girls' presence in public contexts, suggesting that technologies are inappropriate for them (Thiel-Stern, 2014). Thus, girls' social subject positions are undermined. Nevertheless, all the girls developed one or multiple strategies to negotiate parental interventions. These strategies ranged from direct blocking of (non-parental) family members on their pages to adopting parents' discourses.

### **Girls' Navigation Strategies**

From the interviews we could distinguish five strategies girls employ when negotiating parents' discourses: hiding out, writing codes, seeking confrontation, succumbing and resistance. Each of these strategies can be seen as agentic as they are used by the girls to articulate themselves and their identities. The first strategy resembles hiding out. Girls have invented creative ways to circumvent parental interventions. For example, most girls are active on other social media such as Twitter, ASKfm or Tumblr, where they are free from parental presence. But girls also show savviness with regard to what they do and do not post. During the interviews, the girls reported that they do not share on FB photos of themselves in transgressive moments – for example, while smoking a cigarette or being cosy with their boyfriend. This prevents parents and other family members from finding out too much of the girl's lives.

I remember that there are things that I said: 'I cannot [put them on FB], because my parents are there and I respect them, they created their daughter with a brain, I do not put these things on [FB]'. Perhaps the photos ... I took some pictures, always with my best friend. At the time I had short hair and it was not yet the time when a lot of celebrities cut it short and they took pictures ... I was interested in fashion and photography and my friend had to learn about the lighting in photography. So, she used me as model and I was topless and without a bra. But these things have never gone on the internet; at least I do not think so [laughs].

(Marta, 18-year-old, vocational school)

Girls, imagining their audience, speak and act in accordance with the rules generally perceived acceptable by the public; often girls feel under control by the 'invisible' audience of FB. Hence, FB becomes a technology that imposes a form of self-monitoring and self-control. What prevails is the idea of a more 'moderate' femininity, taking care to express behaviour that is not too sexually explicit, but more compatible with the presence of parents. This self-regulatory practice helps to sustain and reinforce existing discourse on how to be a 'good girl' in the Italian context and the reproduction of the heterosexual matrix (Foucault, 1976; Butler, 1990).

A second way to evade parental discourse is by writing code, making sure their posts do not address anyone in particular. Claudia’s parents, for example, do not approve of her boyfriend. Both her parents and her boyfriend are befriended on FB. Hence, Claudia posts messages to him that could be for anyone:

I only write stupid things, for example: ‘goodnight love’, ‘I miss you’ and stuff like that. I don’t want my parents to understand that I’m writing to him, because my family doesn’t accept this situation. They are in my FB contacts now and I don’t want to create problems. I have thousands of people in my FB contacts ... because you do not know directly all the people on FB, almost, but not all. So I don’t want people to say stupid things ... so I prefer to avoid that and keep my things anonymous. I know they are for him and that’s it.

(Claudia, 17-year-old, vocational school)

By keeping the posts anonymous, Claudia not only prevents her parents knowing about her boyfriend, but also prevents other people betraying her secrets.

Not all attempts on deluding parents are successful. For example, Geneva explains how she tried to join a FB page for the One Direction concert she would attend. As she was aware her mother would not approve, she deleted the notifications that would be sent to her mother’s email account:

On June 28 I will go to the One Direction concert. Someone has created this official group composed of girls who are going. I told myself: ‘Okay, I join the group, there are some innocent girls...’. However, I removed all notifications and I made sure that my mother didn’t know about this ...

(Geneva, 16-year-old, high school)

When Geneva’s mother found out, Geneva was forced to leave the FB group. These two strategies designed to navigate parental interventions are, in a way, an indirect response to parental norms and intervention. The attempts of parents to protect their daughters from harm result in the daughters adopting unethical behaviour: hiding out from their parents and keeping secrets. Combined with the taboos created around sexuality, we argue that parental discourses partially heighten the risks to girls.

However, other strategies employed by girls to navigate parental discourses are less ‘risky’. The third strategy is confrontational. An interesting example is made by Fatima, who puts a conflicting aspect of her relationship with her family to the foreground on her FB page. Fatima’s FB cover image carries the words ‘follow your dreams’. Fatima explains how her parents do not understand her huge passion for singing and how she would like to become

a professional singer by participating in auditions for music broadcasts on television. Her parents oppose these activities:

My parents are Egyptians ‘terrioni’ [laughs] ... still have a mentality of Egypt and do not want to understand that what I do now will be my future ... They want me to be more focused on spirituality rather than the real world, but I have a very different opinion. So: ‘follow your dream’ and that’s it ... [laughs].

(Fatima, 16-year-old, technical school)

In the process of constructing her identity, Fatima struggles between the values of the religious community (Italian Coptic Orthodox) she belongs to and the cultural resources available to her in daily life in Milan (‘terrioni’ is a derogatory term used by northern Italians to describe southern Italians). Fatima’s foregrounding of a familial conflict is a way not only to navigate parental intervention but also to navigate her everyday activities within a church she feels differently about than her parents. FB hence enables Fatima to discuss this aspect with her parents instead of disabling her (which is the case with regard to sexuality, as noted before).

A fourth strategy employed is to succumb to parental discourse. Girls take parents’ arguments into deep consideration and sometimes incorporate them. One of the interviewees, Carlotta, took some pictures with her friend during the school’s summer break. Some of these photos portray her without a bra and with her hands crossed over her chest to cover her breasts. One of these photos is edited by Carlotta on her computer and she adds a group of swallows taking flight into the sky from her chest. The photo is then reproduced in three consecutive sequences. Very satisfied with the result, Carlotta spontaneously feels the desire to share it online through her FB profile. So, at first Carlotta is happy with her creative work and she feels she has protected herself by making sure her breasts were not exposed. However, when her parents find out they are angry:

Just you could not see anything, however, only the idea that there was no bra, but my parents when they found it, they were truly ... They were angry [...] I had to figure it out by myself that it was not good to post it, but I was so happy [laughs]. I do not know if I can say that ...

(Carlotta, 16-year-old, high school)

During the interview, Carlotta starts a reflexive process that highlights a transformation from her initial position after her mother’s intervention. At first, pride and satisfaction prevail with regard to creating an image that she likes so much and, above all, where she feels beautiful. This latter aspect is important if we consider the abundant research results that often show the difficulties girls have in building a peaceful relationship with their body, and

the complex negotiations that take place before deciding which picture can be published on FB (Dobson, 2015).

Later, Carlotta seems to embrace her parents’ views, and becomes very critical of herself:

Well, if I had thought only one more day I would have never done it. Because my mother told me ... It is also a question of personal modesty, to show my body ... no ... you have to keep it to yourself. Anyway ... even for [my] current reputation, then maybe everyone thinks I’m a slut. [Long pause] I shouldn’t say it [slut]?

(Carlotta, 16-year-old, high school)

Materially, Carlotta’s parents forced her to immediately remove the photos from FB and then forbade her to use her personal FB account for a month. During this episode, Carlotta discussed with her mother a more legitimate gender model that makes intelligible the way Carlotta performs her body online. In the discussion with the mother, ‘modesty’ was the key term, which became a value capable of defining a particular idea of femininity in which the body is something ‘to keep in private’ and ‘not to exhibit’ (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Carlotta imagined her audience as her own peer group when she shared these images on her personal profile, for whom the photograph had a meaning different from the one in the adult world.

Yes, [now] I always think about what people may think ... I don’t think about my friends, because there are contexts where ... [...] But I try to think about other people. Because for example my parents have reacted in a different way.

(Carlotta, 16-year-old, high school)

After discussing the issues with her mother, the same image took a different meaning: “Then they think I’m a slut,” said Carlotta. Her fears of the stigma (slut) show how the sexual conduct of girls in the Italian context is still the subject of a moral discourse that condemns certain young women’s behaviour (cf. Mainardi, 2018).

The fifth and last strategy to negotiate one’s identity with the complex power configuration the girls find themselves in is that of resistance. Resistance manifests itself in blocking family members from their FB or straightforward disobedience. This type of resistance only manifests when girls do not accept, or are unconvinced by, the parental discourse. One example is the dispute between Antonella and her brother over some pictures of her with a friend while sitting on the steps of Milan Cathedral. Antonella’s older brother intervened as he felt she was exposing too much of her body:

I’m sitting outside the cathedral and dressed in short shorts but not that you can see everything. But my brother got angry because I put it on



FB ... and he began to say to my mother: 'look at your daughter and what she looks like, do you let her go out this way, ... [on FB] there are perverts [...] You are not good, you're licentious, putting photos on FB ...'

(Antonella, 16-year-old, vocational school)

The intervention of her brother first of all highlights an organisation of family relationships based on a patriarchal family model (actually Antonella's father no longer lived with the family; she told us that from the moment her father left, her brother started playing the role of head of the household). Her brother's opinion reinforces the idea that Antonella cannot be responsible for what she publishes on FB but that he is. Therefore, he feels that it is legitimate to exercise this kind of authority. However, Antonella directly resists her brother's meddling:

... my brother. I blocked him because everything that I put on FB, for him it is not right!

(Antonella, 16-years-old, vocational school)

Antonella controls her online space consciously by defining who she wants to be part of her audience.

Another example of resistance manifests itself in the expressing, playing with and experimenting with sexuality on SNSs (Ringrose & Barajas, 2011). Claudia, for example, does seem to utilise FB much more for these purposes. She resisted her parents' pressure when she posted some pictures of herself in which she kisses a female friend:

... God knows what they thought because I kissed with a friend of mine. And for the pictures with my boyfriends they told me: 'remove them because you're much too young and others could criticise and so on...'

(Claudia, 17-year-old, vocational school)

She then continues to explain how she first gave in to her parents and removed the pictures, but then decided against it and uploaded them again. Not to rebel against her parents, as Claudia clearly states, but because she feels other people's opinions are not that important, especially when you feel you have done nothing wrong.

CLAUDIA: I took them off and then I put them on again. But not to be rebellious, I don't care about what other people say, because they criticise but they are not critical of themselves. [...] I argued with my childhood friend's father. He is a close friend of my parents. My father or my mother might have commented on the picture saying: 'Claudia stop it!'

INTERVIEWER: They were afraid of such criticisms?

CLAUDIA: About the kiss that I was lesbian or about the picture with my boyfriend that I was no good. But I have a clear conscience ...  
(Claudia, 17-year-old, vocational school)

Showing a photo in which they exchange a kiss is in itself not a subversive act for the girls themselves. However, uploading the photos again challenges the ritualised forms of performance and production of gendered social norms that are reinforced by parents. Although Claudia acknowledges these norms, she does not succumb like Carlotta. The difference between the girls' responses to parental interventions on expressions of their sexuality shows exactly the opportunity to exercise agency. While Carlotta is eventually convinced by her mother's discourse, Claudia is not. Both girls have thought deep and hard about their actions and both have made a decision that they seem satisfied with.

## Conclusion

Our results show how the possibility for Italian girls to express themselves in an online context depends on the continuous mediation of the pressures of parents' discourses. Girls' online sexuality marks the intersection in defining youth and adult relationships. Even though postfeminist discourse celebrates girls' independence and autonomy in different aspects of their life, sexuality and gender expressions remain a contested space in the relationships between girls and family.

In this chapter, we have analysed both discourses surrounding parents' direct and indirect interventions in girls' online activities and girls' direct and indirect strategies to negotiate these. The Italian context, with its magnified image of the double standard, is particularly relevant to the girls interviewed. The interventions of parents and brothers strengthen the persistent and pernicious presence of unequal gender discourses internalised by the girls, relevant to the expression of sexuality and corporeality of girls. Studies on girls, SNSs and sexuality should, we would like to argue, take these intersections into account in order to transcend the 'empowered girl' versus 'girl at risk' dichotomy. However, all interviewees show ways of negotiating parental discourses, some direct and some more indirect. FB is formulated as a boring place, indicating that all the really exciting stuff (and we assume that sexuality is more exciting to them than everyday vicissitudes at school) is taken elsewhere. This shows not only awareness of FB's affordances, but also knowledge about and the ability to use other technical structures to redefine boundaries of what is possible and what is not. How these technical structures interact with the construction of sexual identities in specific contexts should be further investigated.

Harris and Dobson (2015) suggest understanding girls' agency in a "post-girl-power cultural landscape" (p. 154) does not mean considering girls as subjects inevitably powerful, but instead, as we did, recognising

(im)material boundaries that structure girls' positions of speaking and trying to unpack how they make sense of their experiences in such circumstances. The results of our research enrich the academic debate on girls' agency, offering empirical material – girls' points of view – crucial to understanding the material resources available to the girls to organise their presence in the world.

Although the study involved girls coming from different socio-cultural contexts and with different geographical and religious backgrounds, we should consider that all the subjects attended a secondary school and lived in a big city in the north of Italy, Milan. It should be noted that Italy is extraordinarily differentiated, based on geographic characteristics. Firstly, with regard to different organisations of the family and different connections with European youth culture, the north and south differ. Secondly, big cities and small villages offer different cultural opportunities and variances in broadband access. Our results therefore show how young, Italian, urban, educated girls negotiate new spaces of expression through SNSs articulating their agency in the arena of possibilities offered by the context they live in. Research into girls who live in different geographical situations could reveal different kinds of individual strategies and negotiation.

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# 3 Counselling Marriage and Love through Live-streaming in China

## Douyin, Relationship Counsellor and the Affective Public

*Zhen Ye and Qian Huang*

### Introduction

If you have any frustration or question regarding marriage and emotions, please come into my live-streaming chatroom and call in to talk with me. I will be a keen listener and a helper. Thank you for your trust and support!

This is the profile of a self-proclaimed relationship, marriage and family counsellor on Douyin (the Chinese market version of TikTok) with over 4 million followers. According to her Douyin profile, Xianjing (pseudonyms used throughout) is a 37-year-old woman located in Shanghai. Xianjing formed a community of older people – a definition for the middle-aged people who identify themselves as neither young nor old (Miller et al., 2021) – surrounding her multiple accounts on Douyin. In live-streaming sessions, Xianjing provides advice on people's personal lives, reads relationship-related articles and shares her opinions in a so-called “reading club”, as well as promoting beauty or household products. Xianjing represents a certain type of social media influencer – a relationship-themed influencer – in China. Intimate relationship and marriage counselling has been taken up as a popular topic in various media formats, evolving alongside the development of media technologies in China. Such content has always played an important role in presenting, maintaining and shaping how people understand gender and intimacy (Gill, 2007; Sun & Lei, 2017).

Launched in September 2016, Douyin has become one of the most popular social media platforms in China, with over 600 million daily active users in 2021 (Kang, 2021). Not only is it a short video platform where content is created and shared, but it has also become an important site of local community-building (Wang & Wu, 2021). The platform's live-streaming function affords real-time interactions between content creators and viewers, and therefore aggregates large and loyal fan communities (Cunningham et al., 2019). Relationship-themed content flourishes on Douyin, and relationship

counsellors like Xianjing have established communities facilitating key sites where gender and intimacy norms are (re)produced.

By examining the history of mediated relationship counselling in China, this research articulates how mass media function as social institutions that affect norms of intimacy and how social media transform the ways women's personal life and intimate issues are discussed. Taking Xianjing's relationship counselling as a case study, this research explores how live-streaming influences and complicates relationship counselling practices on social media. Specifically, we aim to illustrate *how* and *why* influencers adopt the functionality of live-streaming on social media platforms like Douyin to construct an affective public.

### **Mass Media, Mediated Personal Lives and Intimate Publics**

Throughout modern Chinese history, mass media have played an active role in producing and shaping relationship-related values and practices. During the economic reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s, a proliferation of commercial media and increased content related to entertainment, lifestyle and business (Zhao, 1998) transformed Chinese public discourses on gender relationships, marriage and romantic love. In the post-reform era, women's magazines have taken up issues of women's private lives and their intimate feelings, and present them as important topics for public discussion. In contrast, radio and television functioned as social institutions that directly affect people's notions about intimacy and relationship-related practices.

The prominence of these mass media products demonstrates the trend of repositioning topics that used to belong to private spheres – such as relationships and intimate feelings – into public matters. Lauren Berlant (2008) identifies a similar mass media phenomenon as 'women's culture' in 20th-century America, the core belief of which is that women essentially have something in common and "are in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief even when it is mediated by commodities" (p. ix). This presumption enables an intimate public to take shape. Berlant (2008) sees an intimate public as consumers who are brought together by mass-marketed media texts that claim to express the consumers' particular core interest and desire. This concept helps us understand how marriages and romantic relationships have become a constant topic for mass media to cover and discuss. Building on the premise of women's culture, mass media induce commonly shared sentiments and experiences among women living in post-reform China and bring forward intimate publics.

In the Chinese context, women's culture starts with the proliferation of local and international women's magazines from the 1980s. In comparison to the media coverage in the pre-reform era that predominantly focused on promoting women's social status and women's role in the revolution, new local women's magazines (such as *Zhiyin* and *Woman's Friend*) were devoted to covering intimate matters in personal life, while the Chinese

version of Western women's magazines (such as *Elle*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*) endorsed a consumerist gender ideology and promoted beauty products to modern women (Frith & Feng, 2009). Glasser (1997) identifies that the fiction narratives in magazines have also shifted to portray urban women's personal and emotional gratification in the domestic environment, diminishing narratives of women in workplaces. Similarly, another study shows that Chinese mainstream media's framing of urban women's issues was closely associated with women's private lives, putting "delaying marriage and relationships issues" at the focal point (Sun & Chen, 2015, p. 1098). These media representations and narratives reflect that, on the one hand, the meaning of women's liberation has been shifted from labour force participation towards a consumeristic expression of femininity (Liu, 2014; Sun & Chen, 2015). On the other hand, the emphasis on women's emotional needs promotes an individualistic solution to women's struggles and conceals some structural gender inequalities caused by economic reform (Sun & Chen, 2015; Wu, 2010). In addition, these representations and narratives also solicit a sense of belonging among readers via circulating sentiments and experiences that are commonly shared. Individuals, especially women whose voices were traditionally less heard in the public sphere, can feel that "their emotional lives are already shared and have already been raised to a degree of general significance while remaining true to what's personal" (Berlant, 2008, p. ix) through consuming these magazines. In other words, they develop a feeling of participating in an intimate public through media consumption.

Meanwhile, mass media can also function as a channel for individuals to communicate their personal stories and struggles, which can directly impact and shape people's notions about intimacy-related practices. The emergence of late-night radio programmes and television shows that offer advice and guidance for individuals on intimate matters – often called "the advice media" (Sun & Lei, 2017) – exemplify how mass media directly engage certain groups of people in the process of content production and cultivate specific intimate publics based on their core interests and desires. In the 1990s, late-night talk back radio programmes were popular among marginal social groups, such as migrant workers, who called in to discuss with the hosts their sexual, emotional or moral struggles (Sun & Lei, 2017). The hosts were not accredited psychologists or counsellors, but they attentively and empathetically listened to the callers' personal stories, including stories about extramarital affairs, without judgement. In this way, late-night talk back radio programmes provided "individuals with desperately needed knowledge about sexuality, love, marriage and family, in a decade that saw many people disembedded from traditional/socialist ways of life" (Sun & Lei, 2017, p. 30). But later, in early 2000, television reality shows with a panel of experts – such as psychologists, emotional counsellors, and lawyers offering advice and ethical guidance to individuals or couples – started to appear on various city-level television networks in China (Sun



& Lei, 2017). These shows no longer valued the emotional needs of individuals from marginalised social groups the same way radio programmes did. Unlike radio hosts who constantly showed emotional support to the estranged callers, experts on television counselling shows often commented on marriage- or relationship-related issues with a professional, if not authoritative, attitude. The undertone of these shows gradually catered to the better-educated urban audiences.

The advice media turn people's frustrations and desires into "a sense of collective sociality rooted in revelation of what is personal" (Berlant, 2008, p. 10), despite what is personal being embedded in a distinct process of individualisation in contemporary China. That is to say, not everyone can relate to the content presented in such advice media, especially television reality shows, which predominantly present young people's desires and struggles in an urban setting. However, the development of information and communication technologies and the high penetration rate of mobile internet in China have brought changes to the production and consumption of content of 'the advice media'. Individuals, therefore, increasingly turn to social media platforms for information and advice when it comes to making decisions and choices for their private lives and relationships (Liu, 2014; Peng, 2020).

### **Social Media, Relationship Influencers and Affective Publics**

The ways mediated intimate feelings are solicited in an individual's advice-searching process are altered in the social media era. Social media facilitate intimate practices and offer more possibilities for intimate connections based on personal choice (Benski & Fisher, 2013; Raun, 2018). While Berlant's (2008) notion of intimate publics is particularly useful in explaining the proliferation of mass media products around marriages and romantic relationships, the concept of affective publics can provide a better framework to understand relationship counselling practices on social media platforms. Affective publics are defined as networked publics mobilised and connected (or disconnected) through expressions of sentiment, as these expressions of sentiment materialise discursively through online media (Papacharissi, 2015, 2016). Drawing on works of affect theory, Zizi Papacharissi regards affect "as a form of pre-emptive intensity subjectively experienced and connected to" (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 311) that informs our sense-making process. In her research, Papacharissi (2015) gives significance to the networked structure of social media and how this structure mediates feelings of connection: "the connective affordances of social media help activate the in-between bond publics, and they also enable expression and information sharing that liberate the individual and collective imaginations" (p. 9).

Recent research has noticed a phenomenal rise of self-proclaimed relationship experts in China, who rely on social media platforms to produce general relationship-related advice, mainly targeting urban, educated, single women (Liu, 2019; Peng, 2019, 2020). Addressing them as KOLs (key opinion

leaders), Peng (2019) argues that “WeChat provides a major platform for women-focused Chinese KOL business” (p. 116). WeChat is a multi-purpose social media app in China, also known as a ‘super-sticky app’ (Chen et al., 2018). It affords private messaging and group-chatting, as well as a more public-facing service Official Accounts (gongzhonghao), through which individual users, businesses and organisations can publish blog-like articles. Relationship KOLs, such as Mimeng and Ayawawa, produce marriage- and relationship-related content on their Official Accounts and successfully establish popularity and visibility when their content is widely circulated through the networked structure of WeChat. The discursive strategies of Mimeng and Ayawawa differ. Mimeng adopts a neoliberal feminist discourse that constructs a feminised male ideal to Chinese women and encourages women to manage their expectations of men and family life (Peng, 2020). In contrast, Ayawawa explicitly endorses patriarchal values, and often uses psychology and biology jargon such as ‘mate value’ and ‘paternity uncertainty’ to present ‘scientific’ interpretations and solutions to her readers’ relationship and marriage problems (Wang, 2018). Through emphasising the unequal social structure in which Chinese women live, Ayawawa revives the traditional gender norm of women exchanging emotional value for men’s provider value with rhetoric of “twisted female successology”: the theory that attributes the promise of success to a woman’s self-(re)making ability in the marriage market (Liu, 2019, p. 115).

Mimeng and Ayawawa both successfully mobilise their audience, mostly young women, to act on their affective attachments to the content by circulating it within their personal networks. For instance, Mimeng posted a story of a 24-year-old man who died from cancer in February 2019, which received more than 10,000 ‘reads’ and 4,000 ‘likes’ on WeChat in a couple hours. This sensational post, telling the fate of a young man raised in poverty from a viewpoint of a middle-class woman who used to be his classmate, later faced the allegation of fake news and “manipulating public emotions” from the state newspaper *People’s Daily* (Forrest, 2019, para 3). Rather than indicating a shared collective identity among the followers, Mimeng and Ayawawa always present “affective statement of opinion, fact, or a blend of both” (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 316) in their posts to trigger emotive expressions among users, who then participate in further sharing and sustaining the affective flow. These connective actions demonstrate how affective publics are formed on social media.

As well as video sharing and live-streaming platforms such as Douyin going mainstream, relationship-themed content reanimates itself with new dynamics. One outstanding feature is live-streaming, which enables relationship-themed content producers to have real-time interactions with individuals who came to their live-streaming chatrooms with questions or frustrations. Unlike formal counselling practices that remain completely private between the counsellor and clients, the conversations between relationship influencers and their clients are broadcast to every user who is in the

live-streaming chatrooms. This type of live-streaming is popular on Douyin, especially among older people. As many self-proclaimed relationship experts start to provide relationship counselling services through live-streaming on Douyin, it is worth exploring whether Douyin's live-streaming function transforms the production and consumption of relationship-themed content and changes the ways affective publics are formed.

## Methodology

Existing research on relationship influencers, such as Mimeng and Ayawawa, primarily focuses on revealing the patterns and problematic gendered discourses in their social media posts (Peng, 2019; 2020). However, this approach fails to account for the role of platforms and its connective affordances regarding the production and circulation of romantic relationship-related content and the forming of affective publics. The production and circulation of content on social media are determined not only by content creators/users, but also by platform infrastructure. Van Dijck and Poell (2013) articulate this complexity as the social media logic, characterised by four interconnected elements: programmability, popularity, connectivity and datafication. On social media platforms, both popularity and connectivity are data-driven and grounded in the platforms' algorithmic conditions and socio-economic components (what users and advertisers are interested in). In this regard, the production and consumption of content is a contingent process depending on what types of connective action are afforded and favoured by each social media platform.

This research uses a self-proclaimed relationship counsellor, Xianjing, as a case study to explore how relationship counselling practices on Douyin are mediated by live-streaming. We situate Xianjing's relationship counselling practices within Douyin's socio-technological environment, attending to both her discursive strategies as well as her engagement with followers and Douyin's affordances, to avoid the limitation of analysing texts and discourses out of context. Before her main account got suspended by the platform on 19 April 2021, Xianjing was one of the most-followed relationship influencers on Douyin, which makes her account an important case study. Our digital ethnography took place in two stages: 2 February to 19 April and 27 April to 25 May 2021. In the first stage, before Xianjing's main account (with over 4.5 million followers) was removed, we collected ethnographic data from her seven live-streaming sessions; in the second stage, we turned to her rebranded back-up 'personal life account' (with more than 267,000 followers) for another six live-streaming sessions. Murthy (2011) defines digital ethnography as adding a new array of data gathering methods, such as embedding field notes with video streaming and digital pictures or connecting field notes with blog entries. Among these added methods, platform-specific affordance is a key type of digital ethnographic data required to contextualise the observed digital communication

(Varis, 2015). Informed by methods from both conventional and digital ethnography, we first immersed ourselves by frequently watching Xianjing's live-streaming: we observed and took field notes about her relationship counselling practices and her interactions with her viewers as they unfolded in real-time, including Xianjing's uses of verbal and body language, and both Xianjing and her viewers' interactions with the Douyin platform's features and functions.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was then employed to analyse both the raw ethnographic data and field notes. CDA is an approach that not only focuses on texts, but also critically accounts for "both the social processes and structures which give rise to the production of a text, and of the social structures and processes within which individuals or groups [...] create meanings in their interactions with texts" (Wodak, 2001, p. 3). This approach fits the intention of this research to understand the meaning-making process and social structures formed in the marriage counselling on Douyin as a communicative activity. Specifically, we follow Fairclough's (2013) approach to CDA and primarily focus on the effect of power relations by systematically analysing relations between discourses and other elements of the social process. Guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, we include the following: the linguistic devices; the discursive strategies established in live-streaming; and Xianjing's live-streaming as a socio-cultural and commercial practice. We first focus on analysing Xianjing's relationship counselling activities, then move on to studying the 'reading groups' and e-commerce activities in her live-streaming chatroom.

### **Relationship Counselling through Live-streaming**

Individuals reach out to Xianjing in the live-streaming chat room and ask her for advice or suggestions. Throughout the process, Xianjing's communicative style constantly switches between being a counsellor, who is having intimate conversations with her clients, and being a narrator, who is explaining the situation to other users in her live-streaming chatroom. We noticed that Xianjing mainly employed two linguistic devices in her counselling process, namely repetition and rhetorical questions. These linguistic devices helped Xianjing turn her relationship counselling practices into performative acts, demonstrating her 'expertise' in solving relationship- or marriage-related problems. In the process, Xianjing and her followers constitute an affective public, relying on the connective affordances of Douyin.

We identified repetition as a rhetorical technique consisting of repeating words, phrases or sentences to add emphasis in the context of a conversation. Xianjing employed this technique to direct attention to certain perspectives of personal stories being told by her clients. Meanwhile, rhetorical questions were often used by Xianjing to draw a contrast, persuade her clients, and make her listeners think. These two linguistic devices were often used in combination. For instance, in one counselling session a woman

named Yangyang told Xianjing that she would like to get back with her ex-boyfriend. When Yangyang was still dating him, she didn't think him a suitable life partner; therefore, she went to meet someone introduced by a matchmaker. After the ex discovered this episode, he decided to break up with her. Yangyang sounded very upset and regretful:

YANGYANG: Probably the main reason is that I went to a matchmaker, and I didn't tell him about that dinner ... But this is not a fundamental problem, right?

XIANJING: This is not a fundamental problem? Then, what is fundamental? This clearly is a fundamental problem.

YANGYANG: But I didn't cheat on him (chugui). It's not like I was having an affair ...

XIANJING: Well, what is the difference? You were receiving his care and love, but you still went for matchmaking. Isn't it a fundamental problem? You're making excuses for yourself. (5 February 2021)

By repeating what Yangyang has done wrong in her relationship and framing it as a 'fundamental problem', Xianjing ignored Yangyang's willingness to communicate with her ex-boyfriend. She did not offer any advice to Yangyang. Instead, Xianjing drew a diagnosis of Yangyang's love life and used a series of rhetorical questions to make her point:

It is a problem with your personality. You cannot expect him to forgive you for your big mistake. Why would he? If you meet someone tall, rich, and handsome (gaofushuai) when you're married, won't you elope with him?

(5 February 2021)

Hiding behind Xianjing's questions was a tone of impatience and judgement, rather than sympathy and understanding.

In another counselling session Hu, a man around 50 years old, called to complain about having trouble communicating with his wife. In this session Xianjing pulled out a different definition of what counts as a 'fundamental issue' in marriages:

Xianjing: [...] You're a man. Don't be fussy. Don't be petty. Only women are fussy over minor things. Men should be tolerating! Let me tell you something: as long as it is not a fundamental issue, you should be forgiving.

(3 March 2021)

Later on, Xianjing called Hu's wife. Hu's wife complained about Hu being irresponsible to and careless about the family. Xianjing tried to reconcile the conflicts: "As I said, if there is nothing fundamental, we ought to be

forgiving. Let me ask you: Does he beat you? Is he having an affair? If not, can't you tolerate him?" (3 March 2021). Again, rhetorical questions were used to strengthen her argument and persuade Hu's wife to be forgiving. In this context, Xianjing's words indicated that only domestic violence and extramarital affairs count as fundamental issues in marriages.

These two examples of Xianjing's relationship counselling practices demonstrate how Xianjing discursively associates gender relations in romantic relationships or marriages with patriarchal values and a misogynist connotation. Xianjing reinforces traditional gender norms of men being breadwinners, and of women as homemakers, who should be grateful and not expect men to take on domestic duties. This portrays women as emotional and irrational beings in romantic relationships or marriages. This discursive strategy suggests women change their attitudes and behaviours in romantic relationships or marriages in accordance with traditional female virtues in China. Her discourse revives the Confucian gender ethics prevailing in pre-modern Chinese society that underpin a woman's role as a 'virtuous wife' who follows the lead of her husband (Liu, 2014, p. 19). For example, when Hu's wife continued to argue that Hu didn't fulfil his family duty, Xianjing interrupted her:

Well, you're still talking about the past and not willing to change your attitude!

As a woman, you should take out your natural strength, presenting your tenderness and weakness to men. Only in this way will a man find you adorable! This is the wisdom of women.

(3 March 2021)

Xianjing's words normalise the imbalanced gender power relationships and essentialise the sex differences.

This notion of gender relationship, shaped by the Confucian gender ethics, seems odd in today's Chinese society. From the Maoist period, Chinese women started to have equal rights to participate in social production, and the traditional gender ethics were challenged and overthrown. However, this liberation of women is considered 'unfinished', especially in rural areas, resulting in gender division of labour as well as rural women's lack of freedom and equality in marriage practices and family relations (Jacka, 2014, p. 38). Additionally, marketisation in the post-Mao era brought profound social change regarding culture and morality, mobilising individuals to move to urban areas in search of ways to realise their material, sexual and affective desires (Rofel, 2007; Jacka, 2014). Urban young women living in post-reform China embrace the neoliberal logic for self-actualisation and cultivate their identity as "the autonomous modern female" (Liu, 2014, p. 22). Yet, the marketisation process reinforces an urban/rural divide, resulting in an 'othering' of rural residents and rural migrants as backward and inferior to urbanites (Jacka, 2014, p. 55). Rural women cannot identify themselves

in the popular media discourses of modern women, pursuing independence and commercialised female beauty. They remain on the margins of public life in the countryside, where traditional patrilocal marriage still has a profound influence (Mann, 2011).

From this perspective, it is not hard to understand why Xianjing's reassertion of sexual differences perpetuates patriarchal values as a return to the "truth" (Liu, 2014, p. 20). A return to 'tradition' is equally appealing to the majority of her followers – married women living in rural areas or lower-tier cities. The Chinese city tier system is a hierarchical categorisation of Chinese cities, based on the income level, population size, infrastructure, business opportunities and other factors in the cities. The lower-tier cities normally refer to third-tier cities like Shantou, Weifang, Taizhou. By emphasising women's 'natural strength', Xianjing resolves the self-identity issue of rural women, who often find themselves in an inferior position in their families and in the socio-economic structure of China. Xianjing's discourse associates femininity with being subordinate in gender relationships and justifies this subordinate position as a conscious choice of a wise woman. In this way, she constructs her live-streaming chatroom as an intimate space, where her followers find a sense of belonging and aspirations and form an affective public.

Xianjing relied on the affective public in her live-streaming chatroom to support her argumentation. For instance, before ending the counselling session with Hu's wife, she said:

You know, I could have taken more calls today. My followers are all waiting in my chatroom. They've been hearing your issues for almost an hour ... Check out the comments, they all think of you as too negative.  
(3 March 2021)

In this case, she emphasised her position as a popular relationship counsellor on Douyin and pointed out the existence of her followers in the live-streaming chatroom to persuade Hu's wife to follow her suggestion. Her popularity on Douyin became evidence, as well as enabler, of her authority and trustworthiness. This statement also enabled her followers to feel included in the relationship counselling process.

In order to perform the connectedness with her followers and strengthen the affective relationships with them, Xianjing actively engages with Douyin's connective affordance. Xianjing's relationship counselling practices take place within Douyin's technological environment, where comments, likes and follower numbers are important components of user engagement metrics. The platform monitors the data continuously and distributes Xianjing's content in its networked system. Xianjing always addresses her followers in the live-streaming chatroom, appealing for various forms of engagement. For example, she made quiz questions based on her clients' personal stories: "If you think this wife can change her attitude towards her mother-in-law, comment with '1'; if you do not think so, comment with '2'."



(16 March 2021). Sometimes, Xianjing directly addresses her followers in the live-streaming chatroom and asks for engagement: “Friends! If you like my live-streaming, follow me and double-tap the screen to send a ‘like’.” Inviting followers to conduct connective actions in these forms, which feed into Douyin’s algorithms as data input, is another discursive strategy taken up by Xianjing. Thus, she is able to maintain the popularity and visibility of her content on the platform.

However, although Douyin’s algorithmic system has brought high visibility to Xianjing on the platform, it has also put her in a precarious position. From March 2021 Douyin Safety Center organised campaigns targeting relationship counselling accounts on the platform to monitor sensational content and false advertising, which resulted in suspending the live-streaming function of over 400 accounts and banning 33 accounts (ChinaNews, 2021). There is no way we could verify if Xianjing’s main account was being monitored and removed by Douyin for violating platform regulation; yet, on 19 April 2021, all the content on her main account was removed. In the same week, Xianjing posted three short videos on her back-up account, explaining to her followers that she needed a break. In the comment section of one video, Xianjing wrote: “Don’t worry! I’ll start live-streaming in a couple of days.” Until our observation ended in late May, her main account remained empty. However, from late April, Xianjing started live-streaming again, using her life account.

### **Cashing In on the Affective Public**

This interruption forced Xianjing to change her live-streaming content. She started organising reading sessions and e-commerce activities, through which she discursively constructed herself as a life coach for her followers, suggesting they learn from her and achieve self-improvement, as well as purchase ‘good products’ that she recommended. While the connective affordance of live-streaming enables an affective public to form, the commercial affordance enables Xianjing to convert her followers’ intimate feelings and affective attachments into monetary rewards.

Reference, especially self-reference, is the main linguistic device that Xianjing uses to construct herself as a life coach. In Xianjing’s reading group, she read out sentences or paragraphs from some selected books of hers or online articles. Some recurring themes in her reading sessions include “how to be an elegant woman” and “what charms do women have”, which reinforce an essentialist view on womanhood. In different sessions, she repeated the statement that women are naturally ‘soft and tender’ (*wenrou*) and women should explore how to maximise their tenderness and sustain this feminine quality in order to have a good relationship. According to Xianjing:

When we’re dealing with men, we’ll need certain skills and techniques. ...  
Women need to learn how to use our tenderness to resolve conflicts.



What is tenderness (*wenrou*)? It is a weapon. When a man is angry, do not fight with him. Smile, try to comfort him, have some skinship [Eastern Asian euphemism for physical intimacy] ... If you can use your tenderness to an extent, your men won't be angry at all.

(30 April 2021)

To elaborate on her point of view, Xianjing even invented quotes of famous intellectuals and used these quotes as references. She claimed that Zhu Ziqing, a renowned Chinese poet and essayist, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx have all commented on the tenderness of women and described it as a female virtue. Her mis-reference, which seems ridiculous, remained unchallenged by her followers. The majority of Xianjing's followers are married women around 40 or 50 years old, who are living in rural areas or lower-tier cities. According to a report about Chinese women's education, 70.8% of women in rural areas had no education or primary level of education in 1990 (Attané, 2014). In other words, it is possible that many of Xianjing's followers had limited access to education resources when they were young. Therefore, listing the names of famous intellectuals helps Xianjing to convince her followers that she is a knowledgeable woman, who is selflessly sharing necessary skills and techniques in marriage and love life with them.

On the one hand, Xianjing continuously uses self-help books or similar materials to normalise and consolidate her essentialist understanding of gender relations and gender roles. On the other hand, she also actively employs self-referencing as a linguistic device. For instance, she claimed:

My friends always praise me for my tenderness and elegance. These qualities are part of *our* personality, but also can be nurtured by *our* mentality. When *you* have a good mentality, *you*'ll gradually become someone like *me*.

Of course, it requires *us* to learn and reflect, and to understand. What is the most important thing? *You* need to be humble and eager to learn.

(30 April 2021)

Here, Xianjing not only refers to herself as an ideal woman with wisdom, obtaining the female virtues that she promotes, but also uses the interchangeable first-person and second-person pronouns to address her followers, foregrounding a notion that they can all become like her through learning with her. The interchangeable uses of 'us' and 'you' address and sustain the affective public in her live-streaming chatroom with the feelings of inclusiveness. The discourse of self-improvement and co-learning in reading sessions, therefore, productively keeps her followers continuously watching her live-streaming and engaging with her through commenting and liking. Moreover, self-referencing is employed in contexts when Xianjing describes her live-streaming practices as 'sharing', through which she performs a caring self

for a network of her ‘homosocial friends’ (Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Raun, 2018). The discourse of sharing is most notable when she promotes her reading sessions and conducts e-commerce activities:

Look at me. I am always here organising reading sessions with all of you. I normally first comprehended [the meanings] and then came here to share with you! [...] I am always sharing, right? One sentence, or a paragraph, I’ll spend two hours explaining to you. (20 May 2021)

My friends, you can buy this lipstick. The one I am using today is colour 4. [...] I also recommend this wok to all of you. This wok is really good quality. I’ve been using it for almost a year now. See, I only share things that are cheap and cheerful (wumeijialian) here.

(30 April 2021)

In the first situation, her reading sessions are branded as a form of knowledge-sharing activities. In the second situation, when she promotes household and cosmetic products, she describes it as a way of sharing her personal experiences with these products and recommending ‘cheap and cheerful’ products to her ‘friends’. In other words, her promotional activities on live-streaming foster persona intimacy (Abidin & Thompson, 2012), meaning that her followers maintain emotional attachment, not to the products that she promotes but to the online persona of Xianjing. The phenomenon of the digital environment cultivating persona intimacy is widely researched in influencer studies with a particular focus on the interplay of gender and commerce (see Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Duffy, 2016; Marwick, 2015). Unlike the outcomes of these studies, which find influencers or micro-celebrities endorse beauty standards in line with middle-class or sometimes luxury lifestyles to target young urban women, Xianjing carefully selected the products according to the principle of ‘cheap and cheerful’, attending to the economic situation of her followers.

By affectively describing her promotional activities as knowledge- or experience-sharing, Xianjing downplayed the commercial nature of these activities. Nonetheless, what lies at the core of these live-streaming activities is her attempts to cash in on the affective public. For instance, in her reading sessions, the selected books, such as *How to Talk Like a Woman with High Emotional Intelligence*, were placed inside the live-streaming shopping cart through which her followers can purchase directly. Douyin’s shopping cart is a function designed to afford live-streaming shopping, which refers to a novel form of e-commerce with real-time social interactions (Cai et al., 2018). By tapping on the shopping cart icon displayed on the live-streaming chatroom interface, users can access a list of products selected by streamers and purchase any item through an embedded link. Once these products are sold, Xianjing splits the revenue with Douyin, which requests a 10% commission from each transaction (Douyin E-commerce Information Center, 2021). Guo et al. (2021) argue that the technological features of live-streaming

commerce, namely visualisation and real-time interaction, increase the level of customer trust, yet it is the streamers who play the dominant role in cultivating trust and engagement. Xianjing constructs herself as a knowledgeable and caring life coach for her followers and engages with them to sustain the affective public in her live-streaming chatroom. Meanwhile, she turns the emotional attachment and intimate feelings circulating within a network of her followers into the surplus value of these products (Abidin & Thompson, 2012; Ahmed, 2004), emphasising homosocial friendships and encouraging her followers to materialise their intimate feelings and aspirations towards her through buying these products. In these contexts, we argue, Xianjing's live-streaming articulates an affective economy in Douyin's socio-technical environment.

## Conclusion

As revealed in this research, love and marriage, personal life and intimate feelings are popular topics that have been circulating in the media environment of contemporary China. From the 1980s to early 2000, this type of content produced by mass media actively mediates norms of gender relations, desire and intimacy in the increasingly individualised neoliberal society. But the mass-media-produced women's culture gradually became significantly tailored to a select group of urban, young, well-educated women's interests, whereas social media and their network structure provide an alternative mechanism for producing and consuming relationship-related media content. Recent years have witnessed the rise of some self-proclaimed relationship experts on social media platforms. On the live-streaming and short video platform Douyin, many of these relationship influencers produce content that specifically addresses older women living in rural areas or lower-tier cities, whose emotional needs are often under-recognised in mainstream media coverage.

Xianjing situates her relationship counselling at the nexus between digital platforms, gender norms, and culture market in China. Through Douyin's live-streaming function, she uses her clients' personal stories as intimate materials to construct an affective public with her followers, who are mostly marginalised older women living in rural areas. Xianjing's live-streaming, therefore, provides them with feelings of connectedness to an imaginary community. By rebranding their subordinate position in gender relations as a natural result of traditional female virtues, Xianjing discursively sustains the affective connections with these women. The networked structure of Douyin and the connective affordances enables these women to actively engage in Xianjing's relationship counselling practices and develop intimate feelings of inclusiveness and relatability. Nevertheless, this affective public is contingent and non-communal, facing interconnected challenges from the platform's regulation, its algorithmic system, and the lure of monetisation in an affective economy. In closing, we call for additional insights into the

social impact that might be caused by this kind of uncertificated relationship counselling practice. It is also worth exploring alternative ways for creating a more inclusive media environment, for rural older women, as well as for other minority groups in China, through digital technologies.

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## 4 “Music Makes the People Come Together”

### Spotify as an Intimate Social Media Platform

*Ben De Smet and Frederik Dhaenens*

#### **Introduction**

New music technologies (from gramophones, to file-sharing sites like Napster, to music-streaming platforms like Spotify) always bring with them a (partial) change in music production and consumption, not only in a technical and physical way, but also in regards to the socio-cultural aspects. They affect music’s level of accessibility and democracy, the modes of consumption, the range of possible intimate and social (political) uses, and the very nature of what music or a recording of sounds can mean.

Music-streaming platform Spotify (along with its predecessors and competitors) has taken music into the realm of digital and social media. At first glance, the Swedish world-leading music-streaming service is a platform that merely provides non-‘user-generated content’ (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010): a library to which people turn to enjoy their favourite music. However, behind this front of neutral provider, Spotify’s algorithmic architecture and recommender systems are perhaps the platform’s most appealing qualities, and do much more than passively make this library available. Much like its audiovisual equivalent, Netflix, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter, Spotify engages thorough datafication and selection (Van Dijck et al., 2018), utilising user data to offer personalised recommendations.

More than other music-streaming platforms, Spotify acts as a space for the meeting of previously more distinct realms of private music collection/consumption, such as CD or record collections at home, and public music identity/social interaction, including attending live concerts or discussions with peers. On the one hand, offering access to an immense library of music and affording users to arrange and curate a personal digital music collection enables them to intimately and privately experience music, and construct, curate, and negotiate a personal musical identity. On the other hand, Spotify affords users to explore music publicly and engage in self-presentation and social interaction through practices like constructing a profile and following



friends, reminiscent of Facebook and Instagram. These social features provide an arena for social interaction and even political work, and offer ways to articulate a musical, personal, and social identity.

In this chapter we argue that Spotify acts not merely as a music provider, but also as a social media platform. Rather than engaging in a direct one-on-one relationship with the user, Spotify essentially provides a social *network*, where users are connected to one another, both through friending and following affordances, and through indirect algorithmic mechanisms. We then take theories of intimacies and identities on social media to explore what these imply in the context of Spotify. We demonstrate how Spotify mediates, affords, and constrains music-related intimacies and identity work, in particular concerning gender and sexuality.

We look at intimacy as “the enigma of [a] range of attachments” (Berlant, 1998, p. 283), rather than seeing it solely as explicit sexual and/or romantic expressions. We expand on the traditional romantic-sexual notion of intimacy by incorporating a popular music studies approach to the term, where “intimacy” is used to describe those (affective) music practices that are tied closely to emotions, memories, and negotiations of the self (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 136; Prey, 2018, p. 1087; Hagen & Lüders, 2017, p. xx). We thus respond to Berlant’s call: “What if we saw it [intimacy] emerge from much more mobile processes of attachment?” (1998, p. 284), and take into account the more subtle, but profound, ways in which intimacy, music, and identity meet on Spotify.

Spotify builds on music’s long-standing connections to identities and identity work, the navigation of emotions and moods, and social and political work. Practices like fandom, identity construction, and taste articulation related to traditional media and settings (radio, record and CD technologies, the Walkman, live music, nightlife) live through Spotify, and at the same time get modified.

Our analysis is informed by (theoretical) literature on intimacies, identities and social media, and an app walkthrough (Light et al., 2018) of the platform. First, we elaborate on the ways in which Spotify can be considered a social media platform, applying key definitions and theories of social media onto the streaming service. Second, we examine optimistic, popular discourses surrounding music, gender and sexuality, and the internet as utopian places of freedom and tolerance. Next, we nuance these claims by first turning to the algorithmic recommender architecture of Spotify, and then to its intimate and social affordances to analyse how these mediate intimacies, identities, and identity work.

## Spotify as a Social Media Platform

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) famously defined social media as a “group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological



foundations of the Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (p. 61). On the surface, this definition seems to exclude Spotify, as the content (the music), strictly speaking, is generated by artists and not by ‘regular’ users.

However, Spotify affords users to drastically intervene and interact with the music, by curating and arranging this content to preference, for example by generating playlists and queues. Unless you decide to keep this ‘private’ or ‘secret’, your personal collection of playlists (‘Your Library’), as well as a report of your real-time music listening (‘Friend Activity’), can be found and seen by other Spotify users. People can visit and follow each other’s profiles to get acquainted with their musical taste and keep up with the music trajectory of one another. So even though these contents are not ‘generated’ by the users, when they are selected, arranged, and named in personal ways and put on public display, they come to articulate an individual identity, just like on Twitter or Facebook, where much of the content (links, retweets, pictures by others) is not generated by the users either.

Spotify can thus serve as a place for self-presentation and impression management. Hogan (2010), building upon Goffman (1959), noted that on social media, on top of performances taking place in synchronous situations (e.g., chatting), there are also artefacts, put up for display in asynchronous exhibitions. Two or more people do not have to be present simultaneously to socially interact or engage in self-presentation. Profiles, timelines and other ‘friend or following’ features enable people – virtual curators – to install artefacts in their virtual exhibitions, so that people who come by at any time get a glimpse of their (virtual) identities. Of course, just like in synchronous and analogous situations, curational choices are mediated and shaped by interactional and broader social considerations and deliberations (Hogan, 2010). Applying this theory to Spotify, the real-time report in ‘Friend Activity’ can be considered a synchronous social situation, while profiles can be considered exhibitions with the playlists and music they contain being artefacts. To keep control over these arenas of self-presentation people might engage in considerable impression management, governing the tension between the public and the private.

Furthermore, Spotify employs the same core mechanisms as (other) social media to shape its users’ experiences, trying to keep them on board and monetise their presence. Van Dijck and Poell (2013) state that social media work via social media logic with four central elements: programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication. Spotify programs its content in a personalised and algorithmised way; it measures and communicates popularity (charts, trends, plays, followers); it connects people, not only to each other, but also to “platforms, advertisers, and, more generally, online performative environments” (p. 8); and lastly, Spotify continuously keeps track of data and heavily leans on the data to govern its recommender efforts.

## Music, Sexuality and Gender, and New Media: Spotify as Queer/Feminist Utopia?

Arguably, since its very origins, popular music has served “as a means by which we formulate and express our individual identities” (Hargreaves et al., 2002, p. 1). Moreover, music “is much more than a structural ‘reflection’ of the social. Music is constitutive of the social” (DeNora, 2003, p. 57). While it cannot (entirely) escape the hegemonic power structures under which it operates, music certainly “has provided an arena where marginalized voices can be heard and sexual identities shaped, challenged, and renegotiated” (Lecklider, 2006, p. 117). Performative and creative by definition, “music, and the world of entertainment more generally, have long been hospitable to gender and sexual misfits” (Taylor, 2012, p. 87), and genres like disco (Dyer, 1979) and riot grrrl (Halberstam, 2005) have crafted out places for the negotiation and articulation of gender and sexual identities. Furthermore, musicality, in its very core, has often been associated with femininity (Middleton, 2013) and queerness, insofar that “musicality” served as an insider synonym for “gayness” in pre-Stonewall times (Brett, 1994, p. 11).

Popular music coincides quite naturally with the identity project of the postmodern subject, an identity which has to be reflexively made (Giddens, 1991). Taylor (2012) argues that “both are productive and dynamic systems of constructing meaning, yet neither can be comprehensively articulated discursively or pictorially” (p. 82). Both, *theoretically*, are safe places of unbound self-invention and self-expression, rich with options to select from and to be combined to an infinite array of constellations. Similarly, intimacy too is “supposed to be about optimism, remember?” (Berlant, 1998, p. 288), providing a supposedly harmless and safe arena as well: “a controllable space, a world of potential unconflictedness (even for five minutes a day): a world built for you” (Berlant, 1998, p. 286).

Much like popular music, new technologies and especially social media have been welcomed as postmodern places offering potential for creative, subversive, and safe identity work. Social media are pre-eminent sites for the reflexive construction of postmodern identity (Giddens, 1991) and for “the aestheticization of everyday life” (Featherstone, 2007, p. 65). Through their algorithmic architectures, which are always in motion and alteration, social media themselves can be seen as possessing and enabling postmodern identities with “variable ontologies” (Mackenzie, 2006, p. 96). Especially in their early stages, new media have often been “associated in popular depictions with empowerment and liberation as ‘the people’ apparently reclaim the internet”, thus placed within “a rhetoric of democratization” (Beer, 2009, p. 986). Finally, it is believed by some that people can negotiate their identities independently of the hegemonic structures that exist offline.

If popular music, postmodern identities and intimacies, and new (social) media are elusive sites where identities can be (re)negotiated and hegemonic

structures can be challenged, then Spotify might just be the ultimate queer and feminist utopia. Is Spotify a place ultimately fit for queering practices, for “the doubting of ‘authentic’ gender and sexual identity and a reaction against the ‘legitimate’ categories of female and male, heterosexual and homosexual and the social power afforded to them” (Taylor, 2012, p. 44)? In reality, in spite of all the techno-optimism and faith in the power of art, music and identity practices on Spotify are subject to algorithmic architectures, opaque infrastructures, and governing templates of desirable (musical) identities.

### **Agency and Identity in Algorithmic Environments**

Many scholars (among others, MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013; Van Dijck et al., 2018; Cheney-Lippold, 2011) have been studying how social media, technologies, and algorithm-driven architectures are affecting our individual, social, and political lives. Exactly how strong and coercive these powers are is hard, if not impossible, to measure, especially since these media and their underlying (algorithmic) architectures are ever-evolving, both short term and long term, and remain hidden from the public (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 41). The question as to whether social media, including Spotify, ‘guide’, ‘mediate’, ‘govern’, ‘influence’, or ‘determine’ our social lives remains to a certain extent unanswerable, but the fact is that social media play *a* role in people’s lives and that it has become almost impossible to construct, negotiate, and/or present identities entirely independently of social media.

These social media “are neither neutral nor value-free constructs; they come with specific norms and values inscribed in their architectures” (Van Dijck et al., 2008, p. 3). For the sake of this chapter, we focus on how Spotify’s architecture affects intimacies and identity work. Having originally operated as a more or less impartial library of music, Spotify in 2013 took a “so-called curatorial turn [...] from a search-based interface focused on simply accessing music to its current emphasis on delivering crafted music recommendations” (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 117). To help people navigate through its immense library, several algorithm-driven personalised recommender features (Discover Weekly, Release Radar, personalised Mixes) arose and grew to be among Spotify’s most prominent qualities. Importantly, rather than relying on all kinds of sonic parameters, Spotify’s algorithms make their so-called “inferences” “based on your listening habits (what you like, share, save, skip) and the listening habits of others with similar taste” (Support.spotify.com), an algorithmic technique called “collaborative filtering” (Ricci et al., 2015, p. 2).

To cater to the individual musical profiles of its hundreds of millions of users, Spotify thoroughly engages in datafication, a key characteristic of social media and platforms (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013; Van Dijck et al., 2018). Datafication involves the capturing and circulation of user data,

“[rendering] into data many aspects of the world that have never been quantified before” (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 33). These transcend demographic parameters such as gender and age, and can encompass things like happiness, mood, friendship, ideology, and music taste. The data are no mere accurate reflections of the qualities they try to capture, in fact “raw data is an oxymoron” (Gitelman, 2013), as “data are always already prefigured through a platform’s gathering mechanisms” (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 34). Platforms decide what and how to measure, and what and how to ignore. What’s more, algorithms are self-learning and adjust themselves when they notice some things work better than others.

This datafication is vital in Spotify’s search for revenue, first, by attracting and retaining (paying) users through the appeal of these personalised recommendations, and secondly, by using these data for personalised advertising towards non-paying users. People’s music practices are thus commodified by Spotify, and while the monetisation of music has been taking place for ages through live concerts, records/CDs, etc., now the most personal and intimate engagements with music are captured and translated into data, and later revenue. CDs and CD players had and have to be purchased too, but the very practices they afford – e.g., listening to sad music on the bed on a Tuesday night – remained until recently more or less uncommodified.

By relying on datafication, more specifically on collaborative filtering, Spotify engages in a “cybernetic relationship to identification” that replaces “essential notions of identity” with a “new algorithmic identity” (Cheney-Lippold, 2011, p. 168). Through algorithmic individuation “the individual is not so much revealed as constructed by his or her data” (Prey, 2018, p. 1088), and then constantly reconstructed and re-evaluated. “Online, traditional categories of identity such as ‘gender’, ‘race’, or ‘age’ are not determined at the outset, but rather performed into being through the user’s actions” (Prey, 2018, p. 1088). While this to a certain extent avoids rigid, normative, conservative identity systems, it makes way for new hierarchies and new powers that are much more hidden and beyond the users’ control.

Nevertheless, as is the case with other algorithm-driven social media, we want to “emphasize the mutual shaping of technology, economic models, and users: while platform mechanisms filter and steer social interactions, users also define their outcome” (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 5). Through collaborative filtering, what we listen to informs what is suggested to us, and vice versa, which makes it hard to discern cause from effect. Also, as Van Dijck et al. (2018) state, “it is important to realize that personalization is precisely the reason so many people are attracted to platforms. Customization and personalization also empower users as consumers and citizens” (p. 42), and we cannot and should not think of hundreds of millions of users to be mere helpless victims of the omnipotent evil that is Spotify.

As MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999) have argued, “it is mistaken to think of technology and society as separate spheres influencing each other: technology and society are mutually constitutive” (p. 41). Spotify is not a space

devoid of societal power and identity structures or cultural and music conventions, and “it is quite possible that listeners are merely collecting, listening to and passing on music that reinforces their pre-existing and socially acquired musical tastes” (Prior, 2018, p. 51). Even within the digital sphere, a range of other media (YouTube, radio, TikTok, Twitter, etc.) are complexly connected with the music-streaming platform. Enduring ideas about the gendering of certain genres and artists may persist and remain instructive in people’s online music practices, especially when these are public. For example, Hagen and Lüders (2017) report how an interviewee was worried about his preference for pop ballads not being “typical boy music” (p. 651).

### **The (Re)Creation of Canons**

Spotify features over four billion playlists. Of Spotify’s own playlists, a vast number of personalised playlists and recommendations make use of user-driven algorithmic input – of which the precise workings remain hidden – while other shared playlists, so-called ‘editorial playlists’, are curated by humans to whom artists “can pitch unreleased music to be considered” (artists.spotify.com). Next to these playlists, there is an overwhelming amount of user-curated playlists, although these too are dependent on algorithms, indirectly (through their general discovery of music) or directly (through the help and suggestions in making playlists). Spotify playlists and user playlists feature alongside each other and can only be discerned from each other by those who know they have to look for “the little Spotify logo in the top-left corner of the cover image” (support.spotify.com).

Regardless of their curational origins, through the playlists, “Spotify not only co-constructs individual tastes, but also – given its widespread cultural influence – arguably contributes to the reshaping or invention of musical canons for particular styles and genres” (Dhaenens & Burgess, 2019, p. 1195). When users make use of the Spotify search bar or the many preselected genre and mood categories to get acquainted with new genres (e.g., ‘deep house’, ‘pride’), and listen to the playlists presented, the music included will naturally come to represent and define these genres. The more followers a playlist has, the more prominent a place it gets through the search function and the more cultural legitimacy it is believed to have. This way, Spotify not only co-constructs musical styles and genres but also mediates more social-musical phenomena like music scenes, music communities, and social groups, since genre labels like ‘deep house’ and ‘metal’ feature alongside social-cultural labels like ‘Pride’ or ‘Girl Power’.

On Spotify the expert-based selection of radio stations and music magazines is largely replaced by user-driven and algorithm-driven selection. While this may appear to be more democratic, hegemonic power structures remain instructive (see above) and this “user-driven” selection is “also constituted through often black-boxed techno-commercial strategies” (Van

Dijck et al., 2018, p. 41). Since social media algorithms “measure popularity at the same time and by the same means as [they try] to influence or manipulate these rankings” (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 7), this means that a dominant interpretation might be presented more prominently, and thus become increasingly dominant. With respect to LGBTQ music cultures, Dhaenens and Burgess (2019) found that Spotify is “returning the user inexorably time and again to – and thereby reinforcing – a canon of Western-centric LGBTQ music culture” (p. 1208).

### Spotify as an Intimate Place for Negotiating and Constructing Identities

When studying the relations between social media and identity work, especially when focusing on intimacies, gender, and sexuality, we should not merely focus on the social, interactional practices they afford, but also direct our attention towards the *private* and *intimate* practices people might engage in. On Spotify, ‘private sessions’, ‘secret playlists’, or even the momentarily intimate curation of playlists before making them public are instances where people negotiate their (musical) identities, not in an a-social vacuum, but in relation to social and societal conventions, and inevitably mediated by the affordances of Spotify’s architecture. Spotify then illustrates how intimacy cannot and should not be rigidly interpreted as a supposed straightforward ‘private’ matter, as opposed to a non-intimate ‘public’ matter. Such rigid dichotomies “are considered by many scholars to be archaic formations, legacies of a Victorian fantasy that the world can be divided into a controllable space (the private-affective) and an uncontrollable one (the public-instrumental)” (Berlant, 1998, p. 283). The private and the public – the intimate and the social – inform, mediate, or even contaminate each other.

Through Spotify listeners are provided with a (somewhat) private and (somewhat) controllable space where they can discover artists, negotiate their position towards these artists, and consequently shape their music tastes. Even though the above-mentioned algorithmic architectures might considerably interfere, Spotify users can roam through music in an intimate environment, undisturbed, at their own pace and on their own terms. Before, music consumers were dependent on radio programming, with little space for personal choice, or on record stores and libraries, offering more possibilities for personal choice but less room for casual exploration and eclectic curation. These outlets took music exploration automatically and immediately into the public sphere.

As has been said, “one of the primary social functions of music lies in establishing and developing an individual’s sense of identity” (Hargreaves et al., 2002, p. 5). Music (and other culture) can provide important tools for people to construct and make sense of their identities, even more so for non-normative identities. As Dyer (2002) states, “culture is part of that more conscious process of making sense of the world[,] the social group’s

production of *knowledge* about itself and its situation” (pp. 15–16). Coming into contact with (and producing) a variety of (non-normative) music and through it negotiating one’s own position has been a prominent part of identity work of people with ethnic minority identities (Slobin, 1994; Radano, 2012; Gilroy, 1991) and queer identities (Dyer, 2002; Taylor, 2012). In the age of music streaming, music “remains an important resource for LGBTQ people to find and express comfort, pleasure, belonging, and recognition” (Dhaenens & Burgess, 2019, p. 1206).

A primary way of engaging in identity work on Spotify is by creating and curating playlists. These playlists can be “used as a means of individualization: control over this content, that is, implies control over the self” (Hagen, 2015, p. 642). Because of music’s innate elusiveness and plasticity, and its intricate links to identities, creating, arranging, and rearranging playlists is a way of negotiating and making sense of the self, and performing “mastery over the self” (Hagen, 2015, p. 642). The logics behind these playlists are often based on “personal feelings and experiences”, departing from deeply intimate motivations (Dhaenens & Burgess, 2019, p. 1205).

Two meaningful music practices relating to intimacy and identity are music’s use for the navigation of everyday life and mood management. The role of music in this, famously examined by Tia DeNora (2000), has arguably intensified in the age of smartphones and music streaming. Using music as a soundtrack to everyday life is a means to exert control over the environment, to provide a background for negotiating the tasks of daily life, “to perform professional or personal tasks in desired conditions” (Siles et al., 2019, p. 4). This form of music engagement has been stated to be of special interest for individuals in urban, postmodern contexts. According to Bull (2005), postmodern individuals use portable music devices to “actively ‘warm up’ the city and its perceived monotonous rhythms by aestheticizing it, [while] they also withdraw from it by holding the urban crowd and its contingencies at bay” (Prior, 2018, p. 104). Compared to its predecessors the Walkman and the iPod, “the greater level of choice and convenience” of streaming services affords users “both greater control and integration of music into the everyday routine” (Sinclair & Tinson, 2017, p. 5). Many people turn to streaming playlists in order to “navigate the daily commute and work tasks through the use of carefully constructed playlists” (Sinclair & Tinson, 2017, p. 5).

While the soundtracking of everyday life often leads to ubiquitous music and inattentive listening (Kassabian, 2013), the use of music as a comforting, safe presence is pre-eminently personal and intimate, and even political. For example, in examining LGBTQ playlists, Dhaenens and Burgess (2019) argue: “the music may be chosen as personal background music for a generic activity like walking, or a workout, but the playlists still curate and perform a representation of LGBTQ culture” (p. 1204). The need for a protective shield of music in urban environments is also heavily gendered; Prior (2018) found that many women even “wore their headphones to signal



unavailability while having the device switched off in order to keep their wits about them” (p. 113). On the other hand, people can also use music to navigate daily life through more social practices and intimate engagement with others, like the sharing of earpieces (Prior, 2018, p. 108).

People turn to Spotify not only to *create* a desired setting or mindset, but also “to *respond* to moods and emotions derived from specific experiences and activities” (Siles et al., 2019, p. 4). Importantly, “music is both an instigator and a container of feeling – anger, sorrow and so forth”, and therefore often has a prominent place in people’s mood management (DeNora, 2000, p. 58). Mood-inspired music selection might look for music that fits or even enhances a current mood, whether it be happy or sad, but it might also require music that goes against an undesired mood, hoping to leave it behind. A helpful way to manage one’s mood is by engaging in fandom, “the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text” (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 8), and this “affective engagement” (Duffet, 2014, p. 7) with favourite music can be a source of comfort, empowerment, and strength.

For this purpose, people might turn to their own carefully curated playlists, but Spotify also offers a great deal of successful mood- and context-related playlists, such as ‘Chill Hits’, ‘Dance Party’, and ‘Dinner with Friends’, all amassing more than a million followers. According to a statistical study by Chartmetric, context-based playlists and hybrid context/content playlists are rapidly catching up with strictly music-based content playlists (Joven, 2018). Traditional genre categorisations are gradually making way for ‘affective genres’, constellations of music that are connected through affective bonds rather than musical similarities (Siles et al., 2019).

While pre-streaming practices of record-collecting and connoisseurship were often considered to be a primarily male preoccupation (Straw, 1997), music streaming might afford more ‘feminised’, affective, and intimate engagements with music. Eriksson and colleagues (2019) argue that mood management on Spotify is “portrayed as a female undertaking” (p. 127) and that Spotify’s prominent placing of mood-oriented playlists tend to privilege an “entrepreneurial subjectivity” (p. 125), with women being the “entrepreneurial subjects par excellence” (Scharff, 2016, p. 109). However, the connection between music and mood has more straining consequences too, “as users are encouraged to direct their desire for change inwards and ‘capably manage difficulties and hide injuries’ [Scharff, 2016]” (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 125). Under neoliberalism, entrepreneurial subjects are given not only the opportunity but the very responsibility to manage their problems and be happy, autonomous individuals (Scharff, 2016), and, consequently, “compete with the self, and not just with others” (p. 108). Spotify, as Eriksson et al. (2019) argue, frames music streaming as a “deeply personal and intimate – even happiness-inducing – practice” (p. 136), thereby in a certain way commodifying the emotional struggles of its users.



While people often engage in mood management and the soundtracking of everyday life subconsciously and routinely, for example, simply ‘being in the mood for’ or ‘feeling like’ listening to particular music, these are instances where music is used in the most intimate and delicate ways, relating directly to listeners’ very practices and emotions. This way, music and music streaming are awarded a delicate position of intimate confidant that would not easily be given to humans.

Music streaming’s relations to personal and emotional lives get more explicitly intimate when we take into account the many romantic, sexual, and date settings where music is present in the background, evoking or guiding a certain mood. With the use of Spotify in these contexts to “get in the mood” or “get going” (DeNora, 2000, p. 55), music becomes “a device of sexual-political negotiation or, put less combatively, a device for configuring the intimate environment” (p. 116). Through Spotify’s playlist and queue affordances (whether curated by users or by Spotify), opportunities to select, curate, and arrange music that ‘fits’ the occasion have risen considerably when compared to pre-streaming times.

Lastly, we would like to point out Spotify’s collaborations with dating apps such as Tinder and Bumble, where music streaming interferes quite directly with people’s intimate lives. It is significant how applications that have the search for intimacy as their core business give Spotify a prominent place in its user profiles, next to obvious personality and identity features like pictures, age, and occupation. Apparently, music taste is an important and revealing personality marker, to the extent that it considerably informs romantic or sexual attraction. Interestingly, Spotify generates a few artists to choose from for dating app users, based on their listening habits, but users have the possibility to navigate these and display only the ones they think will help them find a match. In a way, Spotify lends its supposed ‘neutrality’ and ‘authority’ to the presented music – ‘this is actually my music taste’ – while in reality people still very much govern this self-presentation.

### **Spotify as a Social Place for Self-presentation**

If, as Hesmondhalgh (2008) argues, music in general “represents a remarkable meeting point of the private and public realms, providing encounters of self-identity (this is who I am; this is who I am not) with collective identity (this is who we are; this is who we’re not)” (p. 329), then the same can be said about Spotify. Much like ‘traditional’ social media like Facebook and Instagram, Spotify affords social interaction and self-presentation through constructing a profile, following friends, sharing artefacts with these friends, and keeping up with them.

In 2002 Hargreaves et al. argued that “music can be used increasingly as a means by which we formulate and express our individual identities. We use it not only to regulate our own everyday moods and behaviours,

but also to present ourselves to others in the way we prefer” (p. 1). While other (previous) identity markers such as a vinyl collection or artists’ merchandise are more tangible and perhaps more straightforward markers of taste, people’s music-streaming profiles and featured playlists are important presentations of identities too. Analysing the iTunes environment in 2005, Volda et al. stated that individuals carefully negotiated “what identity to portray through [their] own music library” (p. 194). According to research from Belk (2013), “digital, sharing and access modes of consumption can provide valuable resources for constructing identity if not greater opportunities in which identity can be controlled and communicated to a greater number of people” (Sinclair & Tinson, 2017, p. 2).

When music taste and consumption is believed to be closely tied to identities, and “you are what you share” (Leadbeater, 2008, p. 1), then the presentation of this music taste and consumption is subject to impression management. Following Hogan’s (2010) exhibitional approach to social media, playlists are artefacts that feature in the exhibition that is a Spotify profile, where an audience can come by at any time. Goffman’s (1959) original dramaturgical approach remains important, as Spotify also affords real-time self-presentation through the ‘Friend Activity’ feature, where one can see what friends are listening to in real time. When streaming music without enabling the ‘private session’ function or when curating a public playlist, users are in essence operating in front of a (possible) audience, which brings about a series of ideas, discourses, and connotations to reckon with, even if these are ultimately ignored or rejected. To negotiate the “perceived shareability” of their playlists, people employ highly personal but socially inspired requirements and parameters (Hagen & Lüders, 2017, p. 648). Many people can thus be considered selective sharers, and Hagen and Lüders (2017) further discern ‘share-all users’, who are willing to share their entire music consumption, and ‘non-sharers’, for whom “music listening was deemed too personal and intimate an activity to be shared at all” (p. 651).

The settings for managing what to keep private and what to make public are not always as transparent or easy to find: it is hardly indicated to users which features are private by default and which are public. There are some key differences between the smartphone and desktop version (e.g., ‘Friend Activity’), and users are not notified when people start following their profiles or playlists. This means that Spotify users are susceptible to context collapses, where “the lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries makes it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts” (boyd, 2011, p. 49). Spotify contexts (e.g., the private vs. the public) can collapse when artefacts meant to be private or only accessible for playlist collaborators are inadvertently, and often unknowingly, made public. This unintended disclosure of intimate matters might concern music taste (‘guilty pleasures’), but also more intimate issues (‘sad’ playlists or ‘sex’ playlists) or socio-political identity issues (‘Pride’ playlists that lead to unintended coming out), etc.

Spotify's social features might also have more collective social and political implications. The creation of canons, and the proximity of and interaction with peers with similar backgrounds, can install networks that can be considered communities or scenes. These are strongly tied to social networks in the offline world, and at the same time inform and mediate them. For example, existing offline ideas of what queer music cultures are are transduced (Mackenzie, 2002) to Spotify and then get reworked and reshaped through its algorithmic architecture and the combined and intertwined user practices. In this respect, "playlists on streaming services [...] do cultural work" (Dhaenens & Burgess, 2019, p. 1193).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we took a social media lens to examine Spotify's relations to intimacies and identities. We argue that music-streaming service Spotify can be considered a social media platform, since it employs many of the characteristics found in traditional social media like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. First, Spotify affords users to engage and interfere with the music by rearranging and curating music into playlists and queues, so that the resulting curated assemblages can be read as "user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Secondly, through the public presentation and exchange of these assemblages, Spotify can serve as a place for Goffmanian self-presentation and impression management. Following Hogan's (2010) Goffmanian approach to social media, we argue that Spotify profiles are virtual exhibitions, where artefacts (playlists containing songs) are put on display for an audience that can come by at any time. Thus, users might carefully deliberate and monitor how they want to present their musical identities. Thirdly, Spotify attracts users and advertisers, and shapes user experiences through the key social-media actions of programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

While both popular music and social media have been hailed as possible utopias of tolerance and democracy, the relations between identities and Spotify, which operates at the intersection of both, have been more complex and less unilaterally positive. Firstly, through its algorithmic architecture and reliance on datafication, Spotify interferes in hidden but meaningful ways with the music discoveries and practices of users. User practices and algorithms are mutually constitutive, rendering music identities always provisional and to a certain degree uncontrollable. Furthermore, through its algorithm-driven playlists and recommendations, Spotify contributes to the (re)shaping and (re)invention of canons, not only of strictly musical genres, but also of social, cultural, and political phenomena. Social identities are thus mediated by Spotify, not in a clear-cut top-down power hierarchy, but according to the dynamics of a "post-hegemonic age" (Lash, 2007), where power works through the real and through everyday practices, and "has become ontological, intensive, factual and communicational" (p. 74).

Secondly, Spotify affords users to engage with music in private and intimate ways, to carefully and personally select music as a soundtrack for everyday life. Responding to the call in Berlant’s seminal 1998 essay, we see intimacy not only as directly associated with love and sexuality, but rather see it as taking place through a “range of attachments” (Berlant, 1998, p. 283). Taking into account the popular music studies use of the term ‘intimacy’ as designating all affective, deeply personal, private practices, we see Spotify as one of “so many institutions not usually associated with feeling [that] can be read as institutions of intimacy” (p. 283). Next to more obvious links to intimacies, such as the use of certain playlists for dates or sexual occasions or the embedding of Spotify into dating apps, Spotify also mediates intimacies when users turn to music to make sense of the self or to navigate their moods, emotions, and everyday life.

Thirdly and lastly, Spotify affords users to socially interact and present (musical) identities to one another. Amidst Spotify’s rather blurry and opaque private-public affordances, users negotiate what ought to be shared and what ought to be kept private. Context collapses might lead to unintended disclosure of (aspects of) one’s music taste, personal situation, or social-political identity.

Through our analysis of Spotify as a social-media platform, we were able to transcend its obvious relations to music consumption, and instead explore its notable relations to intimacies and identities. When we aim to understand the relations between social media and people’s everyday life, emotional worlds, intimacies, and identities, the role of Spotify is not to be ignored.

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Part II

# Contextualising Identities and Social Media





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# 5 Sexual Reputation, Intersectional Intimacies and Visual Social Media

## Exploring Young People's Mores on 'Good' versus 'Bad' Online Sexual Reputations

*Burcu Korkmazer, Sander De Ridder and Sofie Van Bauwel*

### Introduction

In deeply digitalised societies, 'sexual reputations' are more vulnerable. Digital technologies such as smartphone cameras and social media platforms can capture and distribute moments that damage sexual reputations and statuses. Many examples can be found in the literature: from the unwanted sharing of people's (semi-)nude erotic pictures (e.g., sexting), to the distribution of so-called "revenge porn" (De Ridder, 2021, p. 220). The importance of "reputation" in digital contexts relates to the emergence of the commercial internet, where power and "creditworthiness" (Rosamond, 2019) is given to those with "good reputations". The systematic management of reputation, used for corporate brands and identities, also became important for ordinary people when navigating online worlds.

For young people, a group that uses digital media intensively, reputation management is an everyday consideration. Media literacy experts and organisations that argue the need for 'reputation management' advise users to stay safe online. Usually, such reputational protection is linked to young people's online sexual and intimate practices, such as being advised not to date people you do not know, or not to take 'sexy' pictures or (semi-)nudes. Maintaining a 'good' online reputation could be understood as a specific form of labour; it is a form of emotional labour for young people to carefully manage online personas towards dominant sexual norms.

In this chapter we explore how young people's mediated sexual intimacies are increasingly visible, mainly because of the emergence of popular visual social media (e.g., Instagram and Snapchat). Young people's everyday intimate lives have become not only increasingly exposed due to these visual cultures, but also more accessible as everyday social media practices are happening in semi-public online contexts. We are particularly concerned

with how increased visibility to unanticipated audiences has made young people more aware of the importance of a good digital reputation and has initiated more careful negotiations of sexual morality to protect their digital reputations. Managing a reputation is an intensive moral negotiation that is defined by various cultural discourses (e.g., gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality). We argue that it is important to look at these moral negotiations from an intersectional angle, particularly as young people's self-positionings simultaneously build on several identity discourses to orientate their everyday life online and to strategically present and disclose the self in more public and visible spaces.

Throughout this chapter we rely on visual research materials that young people between 13 and 20 years old produced during ethnographic research. The analysis of these visual research materials allowed us to explore how digital reputation is constructed, discussed and performed. During the ethnographic research activities, participants were divided into groups and they were asked to design fictional social media accounts with a good or bad reputation, drawing and/or using lifestyle magazines to produce visual representations of imagined social media profiles. During these research activities, conversations with the research participants about their produced visual research materials were recorded and transcribed; these conversations also form part of the research data.

This chapter will start with discussing how this age group's understanding of mediated sexual intimacy is shaped by powerful cultural and moral discourses on sexual intimacy, which in turn initiate strategic processes of online reputation management. Since young people manage their reputation according to the various cultural and moral discourses related to their diverse gendered, ethnic and sexual identifications, the second part of this chapter will elaborate on the value of an intersectional perspective and provide examples of young people's negotiations of 'good' versus 'bad' digital reputations. We conclude that problematisation of the current emphasis on digital reputation, specifically related to sexual and intimate practices on visual social media, is urgently needed. We seek to understand how a focus on digital reputation produces opposition to those young people that are not conforming to the sexual norms of their peer groups, social and family ties, and wider culture and society.

### **Mediated Sexuality: Youth, Sexual Intimacy and Morality**

In recent years the relationship between the digital and the sexual has become more and more interconnected due to the increase in digital technologies and platforms that are mediating our sexual lives (Adams-Santos, 2020). Social media have reshaped our understanding and experience of modern sexuality, intimacy and privacy profoundly, as they make it possible to both challenge and reinforce the sexual status quo (Miguel, 2016; Adams-Santos, 2020). Consequently, social media have become key platforms for

young people to explore and experiment with identity, sexuality, intimacy and belonging (boyd, 2014; Leurs, 2015). Due to digital affordances (e.g., tagging) that promote dialogue and interaction, connections are created in which the negotiation of sexual intimacy online becomes possible (Wang, 2020). While young people have always experimented with the construction of sexual identities (Ringrose, 2011), practices differ from the negotiations of contemporary youth, as the visual culture of social media is nowadays central to how young people's sexual subjectivities are formed within semi-public contexts of the everyday.

According to Miguel (2016), the extensive use of visual content in self-presentations has altered how we construct and practise mediated (sexual) intimacies. Presenting everyday visual narratives of the self on social media does indeed include the presentation, representation and embodiment of one's identity, but it also entails a certain level of vulnerability as one's intimate experiences can become public and visible for diverse audiences (Miguel, 2016; Amundsen, 2022). Nevertheless, social media are important in the social and cultural organisation of youth's everyday sexualities and intimacies (De Ridder, 2014); they take up an active role in the construction of intimacies and relationships of young people and their broader sexual cultures online (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017). Moreover, as social media are platforms for identity performance, young people's negotiations of identity traits such as gender, sexuality and intimacy are being voiced and performed through intimate self-presentations. These self-presentations are discursive media practices that have symbolic powers, as they can establish "how intimacy becomes meaningful, but also regulate intimate practices in social life" (De Ridder, 2014, p. 51). They can be adopted to make sense of discursive understandings on gender, sexuality and relationships while developing intimate and sexual identities, and therefore need to be understood as audience activities that co-construct the sense-making, understanding and experience of intimacy (De Ridder, 2014; Storey & McDonald, 2014; Dobson, 2015). Even though intimate media practices are still defined by discourses of hetero- and gender-normativity in contemporary digital cultures, in this chapter we build on the understanding of youth as reflexive agents who are trying to navigate their intimate selves within hegemonic social media cultures.

Intimate topics that are generally considered to be risky and/or harmful to share through social media are related to sexuality and emotionality/relationships (Miguel, 2016). As these topics are usually interpreted as private, and social media are known to have a more public nature, sharing intimate/sexual self-presentations is often seen as a possibly harmful practice (Dobson, 2015). Self-presentations are therefore frequently distinguished as either being too private to share for all, particularly when portraying gendered, sexual and intimate aspects of the self, or as appropriate enough to be publicly visible (Albury, 2015; Hand, 2017). By reflexively curating and controlling which aspects of the self can be made visible to which audiences,

young people try to minimise their vulnerability by performing identities in relation to various understandings of privacy (Hodkinson, 2016). However, this discursive focus on risk, harm and vulnerability goes together with increased moral and media panics on youth, sexual intimacy and social media, in which discourses of youth sexualisation and victimisation are dominant in both the public and academic debate (Döring, 2014, 2020; Walrave et al., 2015; Korkmazer et al., 2020; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Since these discussions mainly reflect adult anxieties rather than the lived experiences of young people, they often tend to use moralising and policing discourses (Naezer, 2018; Korkmazer et al., 2019; 2020). These moralistic discourses are denying young people their sexual agency by representing limited roles for youth as sexual agents (Dobson, 2015). Moreover, sexuality is often interpreted in homogenising terms of the ‘sexualisation of youth’, in which ‘youth’ often refers to white, middle-class girls who need to be protected (Gill, 2012). This gendered, radicalised, and classed discourse of sexualisation tends to neglect the differences (gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, bodily ability, etc.) between young people and obscure the given that different young people are sexualised in various manners that carry diverse meanings (Gill, 2012; Korkmazer et al., 2019, 2020). However, sexuality is “a complex, multifaceted and multilayered notion that includes personalized sexual feelings and desires, social ideologies and practices of kinship, gender relations and reproduction, power relations, symbolic meanings of gender and moral discourses” (Spronk, 2012, p. 7, as cited in Naezer, 2018, p. 20). It is the product of social and cultural discourses, which are often reproduced online, and is discussed in terms of regulation, policy and morality (Richardson et al., 2013; Wang, 2020).

Drawing on Foucault’s (1990) history of sexuality, cultural discourses determine how we understand and shape our sexual desires, sexual practices and thus our sexual identity. An individual’s sexual identity is therefore only understandable within a specific cultural context, as these cultural discourses label, classify and establish certain sexual acts as ‘normal’, ‘healthy’ and ‘good’ sexualities. This classification changed the social significance of sexual practices within societies; it became dependent as to where the sexual practices were performed and with whom. Even more, these classifications were not neutral but rather othering discourses based on strict norms of gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality (Ringrose & Barajas, 2011; Naezer, 2018). Although there is a growing diversity within contemporary societies, this powerful discourse of classifying and ranking diverse sexualities according to moral standards is still manifesting and even being reproduced online. This is particularly apparent as social media platforms require their users to engage in deliberate and visible performances of the intimate and sexual self, making users fall back on existing cultural moralities (Gabriel, 2014; Miguel, 2016). In this sense, digital mediation can create new possibilities for the experience of intimacy while at the same time strengthening the existing inequalities of (hetero)sexual intimacy (Amundsen, 2022). Intimate

self-presentations therefore often reveal the dominant morality on gender and sexuality within digital youth cultures (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Naezer & Van Oosterhout, 2021). For example, one of the important conclusions we draw from the ethnographic research on visual social media with young people is how the online presentation and performance of sexual subjectivities, such as pictures portraying acts like kissing, hugging or other intimate poses, are *still* very much negotiated in terms of where these were performed (online vs offline/ bedroom vs other room) and with whom (love interest vs random peers/ heterosexual partner vs homosexual partner).

While the sharing of pictures depicting intimacy and love interests is not necessarily interpreted as problematic, intimate pictures must adhere to specific standards to preserve one's good digital reputation. Visual intimacy is only considered appropriate if it is performed according to common understandings of (sexual) morality and privacy. Even though many of the 'good' Instagram accounts included pictures of couples and love interests, a clear example of which type of visual intimacy is allowed or believed to be appropriate enough to be visible online was the photograph of a couple sitting outside and enjoying drinks together while celebrating their first anniversary (as clarified in the caption). However, this picture is a deliberate example as both the 'where' and the 'with whom' aspects of visual intimacy are carefully performed. It was taken outside in a public space, rather than in the private sphere, and is not depicting intimate acts of hugging or kissing, despite the clear look of love and desire in the eyes of the couple and the fact that they have been together for a year. Thus this picture implies an authentic intimacy between the couple rather than a sexual one, as it is avoiding any signs of what could be interpreted as sexual or too private to share, which is believed to be strengthening the good digital reputation of the profile owner. During the visual ethnographic group discussions of this study, self-presentations that did not take these moral standards into account were often interpreted and talked about as marginalised and immoral (Korkmazer et al., 2021). Accordingly, dominant cultural discourses make it difficult to determine and create the self as a sexual subject without being interpreted as bad, dirty and immoral. Despite the increasing emphasis on the attractiveness, beauty and aesthetic of bodies in online visual cultures, sexual subjectivity remains a crucial aspect of the visual self that needs to be monitored constantly, particularly because it can be understood as a behavioural error, damaging one's reputation. Although this might be gender related and in some senses such 'errors' might bolster the sexual reputation of a male, while damaging that of a female, the differences are lessening somewhat. Girls are especially affected by these dichotomous gendered and sexual norms in contradictory ways. To gain recognition among peers, they must present a visual self where they embody neoliberal values of youthfulness, success and independence, which they often try to establish by sharing pictures of their solo travels, sporting accomplishments, and numerous friends and followers. Although this is in line with the postfeminist context in which digital youth cultures

nowadays operate (Dobson, 2015; Pruchniewska, 2018), sexual agency and pleasure for women is not considered to be a part of it. It seems that for women willing to perform a sexual subjectivity online, the available subject positions and cultural moralities are very limited (Korkmazer, et al., 2022).

Moral discourses and binary opinions about ‘good’ vs ‘bad’ self-presentations must be understood as disciplinary powers that are regulating the social and sexed bodies of young people. As “morals become transported into stable, durable dispositions through ongoing, everyday practice” (Winchester, 2008, p. 1773), most people build and negotiate their identities and reputations based on how they should act in relation to others. This state of interdependency within social interaction makes it possible to understand moral negotiations as the outcome of dialogue among peers (Gergen, 1991; Hill, 1996). Moreover, this disciplinary power is associated with processes of social surveillance and operates best in a state of “conscious and permanent visibility” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201), in which young people are constantly careful of the visibility and morality of their self-presentations and thus become responsible for the disciplining of their own sexed bodies (Richardson, et al., 2013). Visibility of self-presentations refers to the searchability, shareability and durability of this online content, and is interpreted as potentially harmful for digital reputations as it can initiate discourses of shame, gossip and ridicule (De Ridder, 2021). As social media are normative and visual spaces, merging ‘making visible’ with ‘making public’ (Ibrahim, 2012), youth self-presentations are being placed under the moral gaze of their peers. The intensive peer control over intimate self-presentations is leading to an increase in the fear of imagined audiences on social media, but it is also initiating complex value systems based on moral negotiations upon which young people rely when constructing their online identities (Thomson & Holland, 2002; Turkle, 2011; Korkmazer et al., 2022).

Negotiation indicates a form of decision making that occurs when people are in interdependent relations with morality at its core (Brett & Gelfand, 2005; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013). Hagen and Jorge (2015) state that young people position themselves and manage their digital reputation based on the dominant discourses of their peers and parents in relation to everyday contexts such as school and social media. In this manner, they construct a personal sense of morality that serves as a guide for what is socially appropriate behaviour online. As young people constantly negotiate dominant cultural and moral norms, their everyday discourses incorporate a dialogic relationship with the (normative) discourses of others (Soep, 2006; Hoehsmann & Poyntz, 2012). Elizabeth Soep (2006) explains in her study on youth’s media production that this dialogic relationship means that young people speak in a “double-voiced discourse” during the production of their own media content (p. 202). Her analysis builds on the earlier work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), in which he clarified that this double-voiced discourse refers to how an individual’s own voice is formed through the

inclusion of the voices of others (e.g., peers, family, community members). Young people's discursive understandings are thus intertwined with the cultural and moral discourses of others, which initiates a reflexive negotiation process when producing media content to different audiences (Soep, 2006). Hagen and Jorge (2015) argue that young people therefore need to be understood as both products of discourse and as (re)producers of discourse. While questioning whether their (social) media practices are worth the risks they might encounter online (i.e., loss of reputation), young people depend on the dominant moral discourses of their peers and parents to strategically position themselves on social media. Also, they often have dual presence, e.g., 'pages' they can show to parents and another perhaps more risqué one they share with their peers. This positioning depends on negotiations of the relationship between an individual's own perceptions and the perspective of others regarding moral and social norms. This interactive relationship is affecting the self-presentational negotiations of young people and is enabling processes of online reputation management. In the following paragraphs, the concept and importance of online reputation management in the everyday life of young people will be further discussed.

### **Digital Reputation Management**

Anderson and Shirako (2007) define reputation as "the set of perceptions a community forms about the personal qualities of one of its members" (p. 5). Yang et al. (2017) have expanded this understanding to the definition of a digital reputation and explain that digital reputations also consist of a set of perceptions, beliefs and evaluations, while including social media practices that are consciously performed to enhance, maintain and build a good reputation online. This is considered to be important, as having a good reputation is seen as a means to gain access to social resources and solidarity (Tufekci, 2008; Leurs, 2015). De Ridder (2021) argues that digital reputation has become an important part of the digital lives of young people since the early 2000s, particularly due to techno-cultural transformations like user-generated data, self-presentation and algorithmic cultures. These transformations introduced reputational technologies that measure social value and reputation capital in a vague manner, such as the social media algorithms that define which content is popular in terms of likes and shares. This algorithmic culture contributed to the volatility of digital reputation because of its lack of transparency, which has initiated a moral economy in which digital reputation management is seen as a granted digital media literacy strategy (De Ridder, 2021).

Moreover, digital reputation management has become an individual responsibility in the affective experience of everyday life online, as digital reputation is seen as essential to one's digital identity (Rosamond, 2019; Origgi, 2019; De Ridder, 2021). The loss of a good digital reputation is understood as harmful to one's social value and future reputation capital,



which is why reputation management requires strategic actions to present the self in the best way possible (De Ridder, 2021; Korkmazer et al., 2022). Young people in particular feel obliged to present more idealised versions of the online self (Yang et al., 2017; Choi & Sung, 2018). Since everyday self-presentations are socially mediated processes that offer social interaction, self-expression and visibility, young people constantly negotiate their intimate self-presentations in terms of what can be made visible for whom and on which platform (Loh & Lim, 2019; Duffy et al., 2017; Choi & Sung, 2018; Korkmazer et al., 2021, 2022). As a result, these online visual selves are carefully curated presentations that are performed to conform to the dominant cultural norms and values, while also being in line with the platform-specific expectations on visuality (Yang et al., 2017).

Duffy et al. (2017) conceptualise this as the logic of “platform-specific self-branding”, which is based on the interaction between the platform’s specific affordances, the assumptions users have about the audiences and the user/producer’s own self-concept (p. 1). Aroldi and Vittadini (2014) have called this negotiation process the “double-sided negotiation”, as young people must balance platform-specific expectations, individual agency and group affiliations while presenting a visual digital self online (p. 210). As young people engage with several social media, each with specific user experiences, they construct and distribute visual content across different platforms. However, this visual content is not the same on all social media. The hegemonic capitalist models of digital platforms determine these differentiated reputation management strategies as they install the expectation that one needs to manage one’s digital identity and that, by doing so, it is possible to gain popularity and influence on social media (De Ridder, 2021). Young people therefore make discrete elements of their intimate selves visible in different ways and on different platforms. For example, Instagram is used for the presentation of a more aesthetically appealing self, whereas Snapchat is more a means of daily connection and conversation, and therefore considered to be a more authentic presentation of the self. While these differentiated self-presentations can be empowering for young people’s self-expressions, a critical awareness is needed of how this socio-digital emphasis on digital reputation management benefits platform capitalism, as it generates more traffic on several social media platforms (De Ridder, 2021).

One of the main reasons young people feel the need to manage their reputation is related to their understanding of cultural and moral discourses (Walrave & Van Ouytsel, 2014), especially regarding gender, sexuality and intimacy. However, the discursive understanding of (sexual) morality can vary across different cultures. All social media content is subject to multiple interpretations depending on the different subject positions of the audience members. It is thus important to take these various subject positions, through which young audiences understand culture, into account when studying how young people, as social media audiences, interpret and negotiate media

culture. This is worth remembering when considering how the interaction between these diverse cultural discourses has implications for the digital reputations of young people as they navigate between different cultural contexts with different significances. To fully grasp the complex negotiation processes of young people regarding mediated sexual intimacies and digital reputation, it is crucial to recognise the cultural diversity within digital youth cultures. Indeed, youth's social identities are organised and regulated by the intersection of multiple structures of positioning like gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity and class (Crenshaw, 1989). These are affecting the moral discursive understandings and experiences of young people both online and offline (Hagen & Jorge, 2015). It is within these discursive positionings that young individuals negotiate, challenge and define their social identities/positionings, and co-construct forms of belonging and otherness (Anthias, 2005; Levine-Rasky, 2011). Hence, we need to look at the moral dimensions of their everyday discourses when creating, performing, and making sense of visual self-presentations on social media, particularly as visual content is not a transparent window on the world, but rather a way to interpret, represent and make sense of one's diverse social and cultural life worlds (Rose, 2016; Hand, 2017). The importance of an intersectional perspective when studying youth's diverse everyday life online will therefore be elaborated in the following paragraphs.

### **Reputation and Intersectionality**

Intersectionality highlights the social identities that are typically defined and treated as marginal/invisible by hegemonic discourses (Harris & Leonardo, 2018). It provides a critical theoretical framework that underlines the overlapping oppressions of individuals with multiple minoritised identities, while making it possible to look at how these different intersections can lead to different inequalities in the social identities and experiences of minoritised individuals (Duran & Jones, 2019), as these people are the ones facing vulnerabilities on the intersections of racism, class oppression, sexism, ageism, ableism, transphobia and more (Crenshaw, 2015).

In particular, gender dynamics need to be understood in relation to other social positionings like race, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation, as the relationship with these dimensions of social structure play an influential role in how gender is operated, interpreted, and negotiated (Shields, 2008). Even though the meanings attached to a social category can vary across time and culture, gender is one of the most visible and pervasive social positionings. As contemporary youth cultures are increasingly diverse in the social identities they inhabit, both online and offline, it is valuable to recognise and understand this diversity in their lived experiences and media practices online.

The presentation of different aspects of the self is not a randomly articulated media practice, but rather one of strategic identity construction (Furlong, 2015; Choi & Sung, 2018). It involves considerate agentic

processes of negotiation and adjustment to the diverse cultural environments of social belonging (Choi & Sung, 2018). According to Wyn and White (2015), who build on Yuval-Davis's (2006) earlier work, the concept of belonging is important in understanding young people's everyday life as it emphasises how subjective and structural dimensions of life are intertwined. Young people feel connected to various places, communities, people, cultures and institutions, both materially/subjectively and offline/online. For that reason, belonging needs to be understood as the social connection between institutions, identities and actions (Wyn & White, 2015). The growing diversity in the cultural discourses that are being circulated in digital youth cultures is therefore initiating processes of awareness, as young people become conscious of their own positioning while learning how to navigate multiple perspectives in socially approved manners (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012).

As social media allow for the visual expression and performance of the self, digital artefacts that are user-generated, like profile pictures, stories and selfies, often function as ways to see and shape our digital visual identities (Rettberg, 2014; Leurs, 2015). These digital identities are, just like offline identities, dynamic and hybrid understandings of the interactive relationship between young individuals and their socio-cultural life worlds (De Leeuw & Rydin, 2007). Young people's peer cultures in particular co-construct the heterogeneous and diverse digital identities of youth. According to Loh and Lim (2019), young people become more self-conscious during interactions with peers, as their identities are being questioned by both them themselves and their peers. Peer cultures offer standards for socially acceptable behaviour and act as socialisation agents that can validate one's gendered, ethnic and sexual identity. In the same way, they can also exclude actions and identities that are inconsistent with the peer norms through social mechanisms like gossip and ridicule (Loh & Lim, 2019). These peer culture dynamics are reproduced on social media where young people create distinctive norms, practices and shared identities that re-enact their specific peer culture online (Lim, 2013; Loh & Lim, 2019). To belong to these peer cultures, young people now have to create, present and perform a visual self that is in line with the peer group's moral understanding of socialisation (Yang et al., 2017). In this sense, self-presentations are performances that aim for recognition, validation and an improvement of one's digital reputation (Leurs, 2015). However, these peer cultures are not a homogeneous given, but rather reflect the diverse cultural discourses and subjectivities of the various communities that young people feel belonged to. As young people's identities are "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (Hall, 1996, p. 6, as cited in Raby, 2007), they are constituted through shared and intersecting subject positions (e.g., gender, ethnicity, sexuality) with which they identify themselves. Their moral understandings are therefore affected by the negotiation of several ethnic, gendered, cultural and religious discourses they feel belonged to. Even though

all subject positions are assumed to be fluid and temporary, like the identification with age, there are subject positions that are experienced as being far more permanent, like gender and ethnicity (Hall, 1996; Raby, 2007).

In relation to gender, earlier studies have already shown that social media are heavily peer-controlled spaces with gender normative expectations (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Leurs, 2015). Even though young people go through self-regulatory negotiation processes to present their digital identity according to the appropriate standard, these standards are generally made up of dichotomous gender ideals. Young people and especially young women are expected to present the self in ways that are defined by heteronormative, heterosex and patriarchal ideals (Donnelly, 2011; Leurs, 2015; Attwood, 2011; Miguel, 2016; Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Naezer, 2018). While we can see this being the dominant expectation, there are those who might positively present themselves as having non-heteronormative performances of self. In this sense, young people adopt stereotypical displays of femininity and masculinity to feel accepted, confident and popular among peers. Self-presentations therefore often contain reflections of girls' attempts to meet the socio-cultural gender and sexual standards by emphasising overt, yet acceptable, signs of female sexuality, such as smiling, wearing clothes that are fashionable and highlighting the body (Leurs, 2015). However, there is a visible shift towards the presentation of more neoliberal subjectivities on social media, which includes the display of traits like adventurousness, confidence, youthfulness, independence and empowerment. Adventurousness and youthfulness are often embodied in visual self-presentations portraying sports, outdoor activities and a healthy lifestyle, while confidence and empowerment are mainly expressed in terms of self-love, but also in more textual forms such as a high number of followers as this indicates success and independence. Scholars like Gill (2012) have argued that these neoliberal traits also need to be seen as presentations of a sexual culture in modern postfeminist Western societies. By emphasising the choice, freedom, success and sexual empowerment of young women, these postfeminist and neoliberal discourses are creating a new, yet limiting, understanding of female sexual attractiveness. To gain recognition among peers and to meet the socio-cultural expectations on femininity, young women feel the need to present a neoliberal visual self where they embody gendered and sexual ideals of youthfulness, success and empowerment. When they perform femininities other than these prescribed cultural discourses, they are often met with intimidating practices online, like gossip, exclusion and sexist comments (De Vuyst, 2020).

Moreover, this visual aesthetic culture of Instagram is also affecting the self-presentations of young men. While they too are subjected to the aesthetic gaze of their peers, young men have to perform their gendered identity by portraying slightly different, but still stereotypical and even heterosexist, self-presentations. Masculinity is thus mainly understood in terms of wealth, success and confidence, embodied through the sharing of pictures of expensive

cars, designer clothing and accessories, and exclusive travel destinations. However, at the same time this understanding of masculinity also includes the portrayal of a digital self that is visually aesthetic and appealing. The visual culture of Instagram has created new expectations making males, in the same way as females, present a visual self that is youthful, attractive and fashionable. More specifically, the digital reputation of young men too can be affected, based on whether they do or do not embody the visual aesthetic and neoliberal culture of both social media and the broader society in the expected manner, making them carefully negotiate how to perform their visual intimate and gendered selves. The performance of gender therefore includes a two-fold dynamic: it is the agency to carry out one's gender identity through specific acts, while at the same time being affected by prescribed gender norms. These norms are part of powerful cultural discourses through which young people aspire to belong to peer communities, both online and offline (Leurs, 2015). Still, youth need to be understood as active and self-reflexive social agents who can negotiate these powerful cultural discourses and shift between the multiple subject positions they offer, particularly as the construction of their gendered identities takes place in the production, negotiation, and consumption of (self-)representations because identities are "constituted not outside but within representation" (Hall, 1994, p. 236).

However, gendered identities are always positioned and shaped through a dialectical relation to other identity axes like age, ethnicity, sexuality and religion. The intersection of gender with ethnicity is particularly interesting as it can affect the intimate self-presentations and digital reputations of young people in significant ways. Since ethnic identities are made sense of through the interaction between ethnicity and other multiple discourses of local, cultural, gendered and religious belongings (Smets, 2018), ethnicity needs to be understood as the performance of individuals and groups engaging in ethnic presentations of the self. Moreover, ethnicity is also performative, as ethnic boundaries are constituted by daily confirmations of differences with other ethnic groups. Ethnic boundaries are drawn around discourses of gender, sexuality and class and therefore often make up sexual boundaries too (Nagel, 2000). These boundaries are constantly being articulated and (re)constructed in the context of the everyday through repetitive performances and narrative storytelling (Bozdağ, 2014). Both the performances and the narratives have become increasingly mediated in recent years due to the growing popularity of social media in everyday social relationships and interactions. This mediation has enabled more interactive negotiations of ethnic identities and their related values of culture, religion and gender (Bozdağ, 2017; Smets, 2013), as it is through the interaction with digital technologies like social media that gendered and ethnic identities are experienced, experimented with and (de)constructed (Mainsah, 2011; Leurs, 2015; Smets, 2018).

In this sense, specific ethnic-cultural understandings can impact whether the digital reputation of a young individual is interpreted as good or bad.

During our visual ethnography, one of the created social media accounts making the intersection of gender with ethnic-cultural background especially visible through various performative aspects was the portrayal of a Facebook account of a young man named Alper. While this may seem ordinary information, it is telling that the creator of this profile, a young Turkish-Belgian boy himself, chose to use a common and popular Turkish name for his fictive character. When looking further at the contact information about Alper, it becomes clear that he likes to play soccer and that he lives in Ghent (Belgium), but also in Afyon Karahisar (Turkey). During the group discussion, the fact that this profile is proud and open about its Turkish roots was seen as a trustworthy and respectable aspect, therefore adding to the assumed good digital reputation of Alper. This was even more strengthened by his cover photo being the flag and symbol of the popular and well-known Turkish soccer team Galatasaray. While this profile depicts only limited (visual) information about the profile owner, Alper was believed to be a good young man with a good digital reputation, particularly by the young boys with an ethnic Turkish background in our group, as he made authentic and relatable aspects visible of both his gendered (e.g., his preference for soccer, often interpreted as a more masculine sport) and ethnic identity (his proud support of Turkish soccer).

While these diverse cultural discourses are powerful in the regulation of contemporary youth's gendered and sexual self-presentations and digital reputations, it is important to recognise young people's cultural identities not as essential givens, but rather as vocal and situational positionings in their everyday life within diverse digital cultures (Hall, 1994).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has illustrated how intimate/sexual self-presentations on visual social media are the product of deliberate processes of moral negotiation and digital reputation management. Young people have to negotiate and balance between contradicting discursive structures, visual cultures and diverse socio-cultural expectations in order to ensure their good reputation online in authentic, visible and non-disputable ways. However, this increased visibility often seems to be intertwined with vulnerability, as it can result in the online visibility of young people's mediated sexual intimacies to unwanted or unanticipated audiences. As young people's gendered, sexual and intimate selves lie at the core of their subjectivities, negotiations and positionings among peers, it can be a stressful burden to navigate everyday life online in terms of digital reputation management. In addition, digital reputation can also produce reputational harm for those young people that are not conforming to dominant visual cultures of platforms and the socio-cultural expectations of peers and society.

This tandem of visibility and vulnerability is highly intersectional as young people's intimate and sexual self-presentations need to be understood

as complex performances of their intersectional identities. Young people are characterised by diverse social attachments, cultural discourses and media practices which are manifesting in their everyday life online. Therefore, by looking only at certain identity axes like gender, without taking other axes of meaning like ethnicity into consideration, reification might be overlooking the complex and heterogeneous identities of youth within these diverse digital cultures. The self-presentational negotiations about sexual morality and digital reputation are often formed on the intersections of gender with ethnicity and religiosity, making clear that young people sharing the same gendered identity do not necessarily share the same negotiation process. Minoritised young people (e.g., gendered, ethnic, religious, sexual, disabled, ...) need to be especially conceptualised as valuable articulations within broader youth cultures and not as singularities that need to be explained as opposite to the assumed homogeneous dominant youth culture. These differences should not be seen from an essentialist point of view on diversity; even though there are unequal power relations embedded in their negotiation processes, the moral understandings of young people on mediated sexual intimacy are often quite similar within the visual cultures of social media.

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## 6 “You Live and You Learn”

### Sex and Relationship Vlogging and the Production of Knowledge

*Victoria Andelsman*

#### Introduction

Her hair in a mess and wearing pyjamas, Hannah Witton looks straight into the camera and greets us. She seems to be barely able to sit up on the unmade bed while she confides: “it has been the worst I’ve ever experienced”. The light is dim, coming mostly from a small bedside table lamp. The camera shakes as Hannah explains: “I felt weak, I felt nauseous, I can’t even hold my camera because it hurts” (Witton, 2017d). It is the night of her IUS (intrauterine system) insertion and, regardless of her visible pain, Hannah is recording for her thousands of YouTube followers how the procedure went. The video belongs to Hannah’s #TheHormoneDiaries, a series she created to document the process of coming off the (birth control) pill. As the description of the homonymous book inspired by the series explains, “The Hormone Diaries is your essential companion on the hormone rollercoaster” (Witton, 2019). And Hannah is there to guide us.

What Hannah refers to as her ‘journey’ is chronicled for her YouTube channel, where the self-proclaimed ‘sex nerd’ has been posting content about sex and relationships since 2011 (Witton, 2017c). Following the literature on sex education and social media, this chapter analyses #TheHormoneDiaries as an alternative pedagogic site for sex education (McKee et al., 2018). It explores the ways in which knowledge and authority are produced through sex and relationship vlogging and the type of knowledge generated in this content. Additionally, drawing on new materialist approaches to education, this research gives a central role to the bodies of the educator and its followers, looking at what they can and cannot do within their relational assemblage and how this shapes the pedagogical experience (Alldred & Fox, 2017).

Sense-making about sexual and reproductive health through vlogging, this chapter argues, privileges bodily knowing. The analysis of Hannah’s vlogs reveals a productive tension between knowing and not knowing where the initially inexperienced vlogger becomes an expert through her ‘skin knowledge’, that is, an understanding that can only be acquired through bodily experiences. Experience thus legitimates the vlogger as a knowledgeable interlocutor, and the perceptible ways in which her body

is affected – predominantly conveyed through the key device of the face – possess a persuasive potential when recorded in video. However, the production of embodied knowledge is not restricted to Hannah’s body. When users relate to Hannah’s sensuous experiences, particularly her pain, and share their personal realities in the comment section, the collective body of knowledge created exceeds the boundaries of individual bodily experiences. This chapter draws on these findings to reflect on the generative nature of sex and relationship vlogs and how they may produce an intimate public that inspires emotional solidarities and discussions on how to navigate everyday sexual health.

## **Social Media and Sexual Health**

Literature on sex education and social media has either focused on the risks posed by young people’s exposure to sex and sexuality content online or opposed this approach (Albury, 2013; Albury & Byron, 2018; Bleakley et al., 2008; Byron, 2015; McKee et al., 2018; Wright & Rubin, 2017). However, within sexual health research a discourse of both online and health risk is prominent. This literature highlights the dangers of young people’s social media use rather than explore social media’s affordances and possibilities for sex education (Byron, 2015). Studies critiquing this risk-focus expose how adult stakeholders involved in sexual health promotion tend to encourage formal expertise at the expense of young people’s knowledge (Albury & Byron, 2018; Byron, 2015). The formal sexual knowledge promoted is disciplinary in nature, seeking to counter potential ‘negative’ outcomes of sexual behaviour and equating sexual education solely to information about disease, personal hygiene and reproductive biology (Aggleton & Campbell, 2000; Albury & Byron, 2018; Allen, 2005, 2008). This information tends to be framed from a clinical perspective that emphasises pathological and physiological explanations to the detriment of knowledge related to sensual corporeality (Allen, 2005). Thus, traditional approaches to sex and sexual health education – while emphasising biology – have often ignored corporeality and the embodied aspects of young people’s sexuality and sexual health. Young people’s know-how and experiences are overlooked here in two different but interrelated ways. First, what young people know about sexuality and sexual health, and the ways in which these issues affect their lives, is often sidelined. Second, by shunning new media environments as an effective context within which discussions about sex, sexuality, and sexual health can or should take place, these formal approaches fail to consider young people’s digital media practices and literacies (Byron, 2015; Byron & Hunt, 2017).

Rejecting risk-based narratives does not mean being a-critical. Naturally, content shared through social media may imitate limited understandings of sex education or present controversial views of sex and sexuality within formal education. However, existing formal sexuality education does not

meet the needs of young people (Aggleton & Campbell, 2000; Allen, 2008). What is needed, then, is an understanding of media practice which recognises young people’s rights to access technologies as forms of digital and sexual citizenship, exploring what people do on the internet and the type of content available (Albury & Byron, 2018). Researchers, this literature suggests, should “take off the risk goggles” and attend to “different media genres and formats and their relation to sexual advice and education and more broadly to the construction of sexual knowledge” (Attwood et al., 2015, p. 532).

## Sex and Relationship Vlogging

McKee and colleagues have called our attention to vlogging as a “source of alternative sex education” where gender and sexuality stories are shared by young people going through their own process of learning and discovery (McKee et al., 2018, p. 4578). These personal videos on YouTube are confessional and intimate, characterised by a pervasive visual focus on the creators’ face and their rhetorical I-you address (Berryman & Kavka, 2018). Sex and relationship vlogs, in particular, are a form of mediated intimacy, enabling platform-mediated connections while shaping people’s knowledge, desires, practices and expectations about sexuality (Andreassen et al., 2017; Attwood et al., 2017; Barker et al., 2018).

Research on sex and relationship vlogging has focused on video creators’ values, identities and stardom (Johnston, 2017; Raun, 2018). Johnston (2017), for example, has looked at how the producer’s stardom allows them to create a brand of sex education salient to audiences by relying “on the illusion of face-to-face interaction, the development of an authoritative yet approachable identity and the cultivation of a virtual community” (p. 76). This approach focuses on the relationship between sex-education content and YouTube’s “star system”, looking at how an edutainer must “balance both the educational content and the entertainment dimensions of her advice videos so that her followers feel informed, captivated and invested enough to return” (Johnston, 2017, p. 77). Here the issue of authority and legitimacy comes to the fore. In her case study of Laci Green’s YouTube presence, for instance, Johnston (2017) argues that Green’s authority emerges “from her perceived status as an Internet celebrity who many other viewers seem to trust” (p. 85). What is missing from this literature, however, is an analysis of how – and what – knowledge is produced, as well as the ways in which the producer’s body is implicated in the enactment of knowledge, community and authority.

To understand how the body is implicated in the production of knowledge, authority, and community we therefore need to look at studies of other vlog genres. Berryman and Kavka’s (2018) study of ‘crying vlogs’ by beauty vloggers, for instance, points to how the vlog’s dynamic visibility enables a community to coalesce around the affective labour of a particular body. Similarly, studies of patient-initiated vlogs by people with chronic

illnesses and self-injury videos on YouTube identify the creator's body as both a form of 'evidence', and therefore knowledge, as well as a place of collective identification (Gardner et al., 2019; Johansson, 2013).

In all of these cases, the negative affective labour that goes into creating this type of content is productive because it creates an intimate public (Berlant, 2008; Berryman & Kavka, 2018). Intimate publics refer to the type of collectivity that operates when a market opens up to a previously disenfranchised group of consumers, for instance women, "claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires" and promising to provide a better experience of social belonging (Berlant, 2008, p. 5). Significantly, for the purpose of this chapter, intimate publics express "the sensational, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world" (Berlant, 2008, p. viii). By looking at the relations between the comment section and the videos, this chapter is able to explore vlogs as key sites for the formation of this type of public and the ways in which community building through interpersonal connection affects the production of knowledge.

In spite of sex-education professionals' expectations, young people look increasingly to digital media for information about sex (Albury, 2013; Barker et al., 2018; Byron, 2015; Simon & Daneback, 2013). This chapter seeks to contribute to literature on social media and sex education by exploring the ways in which sex and relationship vlogging produces knowledge, community and authority. However, before we turn to these efforts, it is important to briefly discuss how our theoretical framework informs our analysis.

## **New Materialism and Body Knowledge**

For the purpose of this study, new materialism can be understood as both a conceptual toolbox and a methodology. Put briefly, neo-materialists provide us with the theoretical tools to analyse the world by looking at the assemblages formed by multiple agents and the affective forces they generate (Bennett, 2010). New materialism hopes to reposition humans among non-human actants as "vital players in the world" (Bennett, 2010, p. 4). It enables us to perceive our own constitution as vital materiality and calls for a "robust account of the materialization of all bodies – human and non-human – and the material discursive practices by which their differential constitutions are marked" (Barad, 2003, p. 811). From this perspective, human bodies extend and connect to others in ways that challenge the Cartesian mind–body dualism (Blackman, 2008). This reconceptualisation points to the fact that the body "as bodily, corporeal, material is irreversibly linked to the materiality of the world – it is not only located in the world, but it is of the world" (Rogowska-Stangret, 2017).

To elucidate these entanglements of different bodies, Barad introduced the concept of "intra-actions" which describes the co-constitution of agencies (Barad, 2007). Agency is described here as referring to the relational process



by which matter and things are defined, distributed and organised. This notion stems from Barad’s conceptualisation of the world as a constant material-discursive differentiation process where the enactment of boundaries and exclusions gives every *thing* – be it a human, a discourse or an object – a particular position within that process (Barad, 2007; Schadler, 2016). Each part is connected to all the other entities, “linked with each other (intra-acting) because they are part of the same process” (Schadler, 2016, p. 507).

Looking at education from the standpoint of new materialism indicates a shift away from individualised acts of cognition. It urges us to think of learning and knowledge production in terms of change, flows, assemblages, materialities and processes (Allen, 2018). Approaches to education inspired in new materialism invite us to “take seriously our own messy, implicated, connected, embodied involvement in knowledge production” (Taylor & Ivinson, 2013, p. 666). Moreover, new materialism’s disruption of the Cartesian dualism is evidenced in the way learning and ‘intelligent thinking’ is understood as being partly felt (Blackman, 2008). This implies a shift away from knowledge transmission models and an awareness of how bodies are implicated in both teaching and learning.

### Reading Networked Images Horizontally

In this chapter I follow the method of reading images horizontally, devised by Warfield and Demone (2018). This approach to images is non-anthropocentric and non-representationalist, avoiding focusing on the human elements of images or understanding that which is represented as “independent of all practices of representing” (Barad, 2007, p. 46). Instead, this relational method construes images – in this case videos – as networked, not just technologically, “but affectively, discursively, and materially” (Warfield & Demone, 2018, p. 118). Inspired by Hultman and Lenz Taguchi’s analysis of educational data, this ‘reading’ of images sees the human body, as captured by the camera, as emergent in a relational field where non-human forces are equally at play (Warfield & Demone, 2018).

As previously discussed, a more-than-human approach requires abandoning the notion of a distinct border between entities and understanding them, instead viewing them as transversally connected. A horizontal reading of images pays attention to the relationship between different bodies and how they come into play with each other. Video is particularly interesting as a unit of analysis here, since cameras capture the material positioning and relations between objects and bodies (Allen, 2018, p. 38). Moreover, the analysis of networked images demands attention to the way in which the image creator intra-acts and is affected by the technology used to record the image, the platform where the image will be shared and the discursive regulatory mechanisms that may intervene. Reading Hannah’s vlogs horizontally attends not only to what happens in the video, but also to the



technology used to take the image and YouTube's affordances – such as enabling users' comments. Additionally, this approach emphasises the ways in which these material forces are entangled with discursive forces – such as gender, race, class, sexuality, (dis)ability – and how the image creator intracts with, while being affected by, all of these objects/discourses (Warfield & Demone, 2018).

### **#TheHormoneDiaries**

Vlogs offer an interesting entry point to the study of alternative pedagogic materials because of their conversational form which invites critique, debate and discussion, challenging traditional notions of expertise (Burgess & Green, 2018). #TheHormoneDiaries, as a playlist, was selected because of Hannah's popularity and the series' clear vlog format (Broster, 2019; Saner, 2018). Although I have watched all of the videos in the series, the following analysis and vignettes will focus on the topmost commented vlogs, as they are the ones that have presumably garnered the most conversation (Table 6.1). Moreover, the playlist's focus changed after November 2017, decreasing the vlog format after Hannah had to be hospitalised for an unrelated health issue (Witton, 2018).

### **Skin Knowledge**

In episode nine of #TheHormoneDiaries, "Trying a Menstrual Cup for the First Time!" (Witton, 2017a), we see Hannah in her bathroom, trying to insert her menstrual cup. She is recorded from the shoulders up while sitting on the toilet. She is unable to let her audience see her naked, even if she wanted to, because of YouTube's policy on nudity. She makes up for that by showing us her face, her eyes, which convey what she cannot show on camera: the 'intricacy' of the female body, the discomfort of inserting the cup and the motions needed to do so. Here the face operates as a key device through which affect is transmitted, "as a site of attachment, intimacy and affective encounter" (Kavka, 2013, p. 472). Hannah's face works here as an 'interface' through which we come to know her bodily experience – and learn from it (Angel & Gibbs, 2006).

The face functions as a site of attachment throughout the series, benefiting from Hannah's expressiveness even in the more speech-focused videos. This role is particularly evident in the video "I got the Coil!" described at the beginning of this chapter. In this video, we follow Hannah before and after her appointment for the coil insertion. We see Hannah nervously preparing for the procedure. As customary in her videos, we predominantly see her face while she fretfully communicates that she has "not been able to concentrate on anything" before popping a paracetamol and leaving the house. After a screen that says "later" we see Hannah in her pyjamas. Her face has transformed; she looks drained, fatigued, and has dark circles under her

Table 6.1 Video Corpus (last updated 19 July 2021)

<i>Episode</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Views</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Date</i>
1	Why I'm Coming Off the Pill   The Hormone Diaries Ep. 1   Hannah Witton	296088	1376	09/Aug/16
2	Should I get the Coil?	194639	938	06/Sep/16
3	FIRST PERIOD IN 7 YEARS	329329	927	20/Sep/16
4	Chatting Birth Control with My Mum!	179129	682	25/Oct/16
5	My First Smear Test!	184822	667	15/Nov/16
6	Why You Should Have Period Sex	981925	1562	13/Dec/16
7	The Morning After Pill (ad)	188894	460	06/Jan/17
8	I want a baby!	252899	857	07/Feb/17
9	Trying a Menstrual Cup for the First Time!	643901	1746	07/Mar/17
10	Tracking My Fertility! (ad)	123354	333	09/May/17
11	I Hate My Menstrual Cycle!	140606	1188	19/Jun/17
12	Back on The Pill?!	155485	788	22/Aug/17
13	What is PCOS? with Leena Norms	104547	358	10/Oct/17
14	Being Trans and Testosterone	110202	405	14/Nov/17
15	I got the Coil!	223228	872	28/Nov/17
16	The Coil Update & #EndPeriodPoverty! (ad)	113707	439	27/Mar/18
17	Reasons Why You Might Miss Your Period	81933	541	22/May/18
18	The Future of The Hormone Diaries	85262	355	18/Sep/18
19	Being Blind and Having Periods with Lucy Edwards	115280	364	06/Nov/18
20	Things You Should Learn About Periods in School (ad)	46944	348	22/Mar/19
21	Copper Vs Hormonal Coil	60363	485	02/Apr/19

eyes. Importantly, this section of the video does not deliver much practical information. It focuses, instead, on how Hannah feels (and looks). There will be time to discuss the procedure later in the video. This section of the vlog has the purpose of evoking the pain Hannah is in, and making the viewer a witness of such pain, which is transmitted visually through the device of the face since the feeling is impossible to translate into descriptive language.

Referring back to the “Trying a Menstrual Cup for the First Time!” vlog (Witton, 2017a), after Hannah’s first try, the video continues with a shot of Hannah’s friends recording themselves with a shaky camera. Out of the frame Hannah giggles trying once again to insert the cup behind the closed bathroom door, this time with the verbal support of her friends. Regarding the educational purpose of Hannah’s channel, this snippet evidences a productive tension between knowing and not knowing; Hannah, as the ‘edutainer’, is supposed to teach us, but instead we see her learning in the intimate space of her house and in the company of her friends. Viewers are

invited to identify with Hannah's friends, who have used the cup before and are therefore allowed to advise Hannah – and also by extension any inexperienced viewers. Thus, even if Hannah is the educator who should know how the female anatomy works, only experience is construed as a reliable source of knowledge. It is therefore not her 'cognitive' knowledge but her embodied knowledge – what I have termed in the introduction 'skin knowledge' – that legitimates her as a valid interlocutor and expert. As Hannah's friend puts it, "you live and you learn".

At the end of the video, Hannah herself explains the power of bodily experience when learning about sexual and reproductive health, telling viewers that she likes using the cup because it "confronts me with my body" (Witton, 2017a). Here, learning is about being open to connection and fashioned as a practice of exploration, in this case of one's body. "In putting it in and taking it out you have to really get up there", Hannah explains, "move it around and kinda get to know that area in a way I never got to know" (Witton, 2017a). Hannah's coming together with the menstrual cup – and an array of objects and people throughout the series – is therefore construed as a process that connects her with her own materiality: "that is really exciting", she concludes: "it's just learning to know my body even more" (Witton, 2017a).

### **The Assembled Body**

When looking at the process of knowledge production in #TheHormoneDiaries, the vlogger's body stands out as a crucial element in the assemblage, to the point that what drives the series is the suspense created by the unpredictability of Hannah's body. Viewers congregate on #TheHormoneDiaries to see how Hannah – and particularly her body – goes through physical and psychological changes. This is evidenced by user comments, saying things like "I remember watching the first of the hormone diaries... You've come so far Hannah!;)" (Witton, 2017b). However, in order to reveal this knowledge production process, our understanding of the body needs to go beyond seeing it as fixed and self-enclosed. Hannah's body, from this perspective, is an open and relational system with a disposition to affecting and being affected. This "encounter-prone body" is constituted by her past experiences, her expectations, the ways her body feels and her intra-actions with other entities (Bennett, 2010, p. 21).

A non-anthropocentric analysis of visual data reveals how the materiality of periods and of the human and non-human actants involved in menstrual management is present from the series' first chapter. Episode 1, in effect, starts with Hannah "popping" her last pill, followed by the introduction screen, which depicts multiple products and objects related to periods and contraception. Likewise, throughout the series, Hannah interacts with different people and institutions, such as the National Health Service in the United Kingdom (NHS). Thus, reading the videos

horizontally allows us to see how “talk of the body extends to talk of body assemblages” (Blackman, 2008, p. 133). It is through the coming together with other bodies that the ability to act, feel, learn and educate emerges. What it means to learn, to gain ‘expertise’, is a process that exceeds cognitive skills; it expresses the ability of bodies to increase their connections. Throughout the series, through her intra-actions with objects, information, people and practices, Hannah *becomes* an authority figure, at least temporarily (Witton, n.d.).

What is missing from this exploration of Hannah’s vlog is her viewer’s place in the assemblage. As my analysis of episode 9 already illustrates, #TheHormoneDiaries constantly invites viewers to be part of Hannah’s closest relationships. We get to hear her talk to her mum about contraception in episode 4 and inform her visibly uncomfortable male friend that she is having her first period in seven years in episode 3. Crucially, the social register of the videos is also produced by patterns of direct address to viewers. Looking at the videos as technologically and affectively networked material, the following section explores the role of other YouTube users in Hannah’s relational assemblage.

### The Sociality of Pain

Many of Hannah’s videos in #TheHormoneDiaries can be understood as negative affect vlogs. These vlogs, as Berryman and Kavka (2018) explain, “operate as a primary site of the digital intimate public by exhibiting a potential for community-building through (interpersonal) connection and for self-reflection through (affective) self-disclosure” (p. 95). In this section I will particularly focus on the videos titled “I Hate My Menstrual Cycle!” and “I got the Coil!”, both in the top ten most commented videos of the series. I will look at both the videos and the comments to explore the productive character of negative affect and reflect on how the intimate publics built around #TheHormoneDiaries participate in the process of knowledge production.

“I Hate My Menstrual Cycle!” is in many respects exemplary of the vlog format: during the entire video, the camera is fixed and focuses on Hannah’s upper body. We are made to focus on Hannah’s corporeality and her story, which, Hannah primes us, is going to be a “literal hormone diary”, “an update but also a kind of like, what the F\*\*\* is my body doing?” Hannah looks frustrated while telling us that she hates her period because she is in constant pain, even weeks in advance. As Hannah anticipated, the video works as a diary where Hannah both evokes the pain she has been in and provides us with an analysis of her embodied sensations and how they come to matter for her sexual health and wellbeing. Her body’s materiality is made present to her consciousness as a result of the pain and ailments she experiences during these months. More importantly, Hannah reads her pain as ‘signs’ of her body, linked to one another and trying to communicate

something to her. Thus, her videos try to apprehend Hannah's embodied feelings – in this case pain – as knowledge.

In her vlogs, Hannah evokes her suffering both through descriptive language and by recording herself during these periods of pain. This pain, as previously explored, is mostly communicated through a focus on what it *does* to the body that experiences it (Ahmed, 2013). This is accompanied by direct addresses that recognise the emotional nature of the content, hoping to start conversations around them. In the end of the “I Hate My Menstrual Cycle!” video, for example, Hannah asks her viewers to share their experiences with her. Positioning herself not as an expert but as someone seeking information, Hannah explains that she knows many of her viewers have been “inspired” by her journey to “try no hormones for a bit” and asks them: “I just really wanna know where you're at with it and what is going on. Is anyone in the same position as me? Like, I am at breaking point” (Witton, 2017b).

As a response, the comment sections of these vlogs are filled with personal accounts of how people with periods manage their menstrual cycles and contraception, many of them relating their own embodied experiences to Hannah's account. Users explain they had similar experiences and encourage Hannah in her journey. In a popular message, Lisa (pseudonyms are used throughout) compares her situation to Hannah's. She exposes her doubts on whether or not to start taking the pill to reduce cramps, since she worries that the contraceptives might affect her body negatively. Users flock to reassure her that she should give different types of hormonal contraception a try, drawing on their personal experiences. Patricia, for instance, responds by saying that she had similar issues before starting the pill, and that taking it has improved her life, while Amanda argues that she takes the pill to help with her cramps and irregular cycles and that “it isn't bad really” (Witton, 2017b). By sharing these experiences, #TheHormoneDiaries is turned into an intimate public, an “affective scene of identification among strangers” that provides comfort, support and discussions about how to live as a person with periods (Berlant, 2008, p. viii). These responses, and many other comments on the video, point to both the affective relationship that people have with their bodies and periods and ways in which emotional contact is made in an intimate public sphere.

Indeed, the relational connections between Hannah's corporeality and that of her viewers are shaped by affective experiences. This is all the more evident in the “I got the Coil!” comment section, which is even more emotionally charged, with users discussing their (physical) experience with the procedure. Some comment on the pain they felt when getting the coil, with comments on how the insertion “hurt like HELL” or saying that, regardless of the painkillers, they could feel “E V E R Y T H I N G 😊”. Remarkably, users in comments are restricted by the affordances of the platform, which only allows them to write. Yet, they are able to produce affectively charged messages by creatively using the tools they have at hand: capitalising, spacing and using emojis to emphasise the physical strain of managing periods

and contraception. Thus, embodied sensations are evoked, creating a shared ‘vocabulary’ to inhabit their suffering.

As these examinations begin to expose, this intimate public sphere affirms a sensually embodied communal knowledge and enables a critical assessment of what it means to have a period and how to manage it. Embodied knowledge is therefore not restricted to one person (or one body), as was evident from the participation of Hannah’s knowledgeable friends in the analysis of the menstrual cup video. It is extended through, and arises within, the assemblage, where Hannah’s body is only one – admittedly key – focal point.

Indeed, many of the comments evidence that the users’ motivation to share their experiences is to highlight the diversity of possible experiences for others to learn from. Jennifer, for instance, claims that she “just wanted to put a comment up to show another side to the coil” because for her the procedure was “completely fine” (Witton, 2017d). With a similar motivation in mind, Nancy shares her story “for those looking to read more experiences” explaining that for her “insertion was EXTREMELY painful” (Witton, 2017d). She then provides a detailed explanation of how her body has changed since the procedure, concluding that, while it was painful at the beginning, it was worth it.

Pain, as Ahmed (2013) suggests, “‘surfaces’ in relationship to others, who bear witness to pain, and authenticate its existence” (p. 31). In Hannah’s vlogs, though, this ‘legitimation’ process seems to stem not only from the witnessing of her pain, but also from the fact that other people have had similar (even when not identical) experiences. Thus, while we cannot feel other people’s pain, these accounts demonstrate how intimate publics can form around discussions of physical distress (Ahmed, 2013). The sociality of pain – “the ‘contingent attachment’ of being with others” – goes beyond users merely being aware of other people’s pain (Ahmed, 2013, p. 31). In the case of Hannah’s vlog, it implies being open to the possibility of being affected by that which one cannot feel, while relating to her *capacity* to feel pain.

Indeed, user comments connect to what Hannah is communicating in her videos by referring to the materiality of their own bodies and drawing on their own bodily experiences. Reading this from a new materialist perspective evidences a process of differentiation within the assemblage, where (fluctuating) boundaries are formed between Hannah’s body and the bodies of her followers. As part of this process, these bodies are positioned within the assemblage, their embodied sensations of pain delimiting their contours. In this context, knowledge can be said to arise not only from Hannah’s embodied feelings, but also from the relational connection of her body with other (menstruating) bodies which are not visible and are, instead, only attainable through users’ written testimonies. The knowledge produced in the assemblage when including the comment section is still based on bodily knowledge, on sensations, but goes beyond the individual body. In this sense, the vlogger’s body behaves as a condensation point of physical,

physiological, social and cultural forces around which knowledge is being produced, but from which it is not isolated.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Through my case study of #TheHormoneDiaries I have found that in sex and relationship vlogging, knowledge and authority are produced through lived experience, which is recorded and narrated for the world to witness. Bodily knowledge is privileged, and the sense-making process involves not so much cognitive skills, but rather the ability to establish relationships with multiple bodies and practices. The videos in the corpus focus on Hannah's experience of corporeality where the visible (and audible) ways in which her body is impacted by her coming together with human and non-human objects work as evidence of the acquisition of knowledge.

Looking at vlogs as technologically and affectively networked material that includes the YouTube comment section points to the ways in which the knowledge production process exceeds Hannah's body. By paying attention to the relations between the comment section and the videos, this chapter finds that the intimate publics built around Hannah's vlogs produce an embodied knowledge that is not restricted to one person or body. When users share their testimonies the knowledge production process is extended through and arises within the assemblage, where Hannah's body is only one, certainly crucial, node. Taken together, these findings reveal the generative nature of sex and relationship vlogs, in that they enable a collective embodied knowledge and produce an intimate public that inspires emotional solidarities and discussions on how to navigate everyday sexual health.

This chapter examined #TheHormoneDiaries as an alternative pedagogic site for sexual health education. It aimed to complement current research on social media and sex education by providing an understanding of a specific media practice, vlogging, and the type of knowledge it produces. It suggests the importance of research engaging with the participatory aspects of social media and hints to the possible complementarity of knowledge generated in formal and informal pedagogical settings. Sexual health campaigns can combine the formal 'expertise' of traditional settings with vlogging's attention to sensual corporeality. Moreover, health promotion strategies more attuned to young people's needs must start by recognising them as knowledgeable and legitimate sexual (and digital) subjects (Allen, 2018). In effect, users on the comment section of Hannah's vlogs were as young as 14 years old, but owned and confidently shared their knowledge with other participants, demonstrating an interest in joining in the conversation.

Limited research has been conducted to date specifically on sex and relationship vlogging. Existing literature argues that YouTube stardom aids the creation of a type of sex education where authority arises from the vlogger's perceived status as a micro-celebrity (Johnston, 2017). This chapter contributes to this line of research by exposing how the vlogger's



‘skin knowledge’ legitimates her as a valid interlocutor and expert (Classen, 2005). Moreover, by looking at vlogging as an assemblage, it emphasises the role of non-human entities, followers and other users as co-producers of knowledge. Thus, these findings expand on studies focusing on other types of content – such as patient-initiated vlogs or self-harm content – which find that YouTube videos configure visible human bodies as sites of identification and persuasion (Gardner et al., 2019; Johansson, 2013).

It does not seem incidental that the area of research that has previously explored the role of the (human) body on YouTube investigates painful experiences such as illness and self-injury. As Berryman and Kavka (2018) expose, content expressing negative affect allows a community to coalesce around the affective labour of a vulnerable body. My own findings suggest that the sharing of first-person grievances in vlogs about sexual health gives rise to intimate publics where discussions of how to take care of sexual health relies not on cognitive or expert knowledge, but on the lived experiences of its ordinary subjects. The contingent attachments created within this assemblage go beyond witnessing someone’s suffering to grant their pain the status of an ‘event’ (Ahmed, 2013). The legitimisation process through which Hannah’s experiences are authenticated, I argue, stems from users relating to her capacity to feel pain, where user comments connect to what Hannah experiences by referring to their own materiality and drawing on their own bodily experiences.

Moreover, Hannah’s body and those of her followers are delimited and positioned within the assemblage by their sensations of pain. This evidences how “emotions work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies” (Ahmed, 2013, p. 1). Hannah’s body is differentiated from those of other users because they are not able to feel her pain. However, they are all part of this intimate public because of the shared capacity to feel (a certain type) of pain derived from their roughly common experience of embodiment.

While the results presented in this chapter resonate with existing scholarship, this study is not without limitations. Chiefly, as a case study focusing on one YouTuber and one series, this chapter’s findings may not hold when looking at all of YouTube’s sex-education content. However, the interpretation of the results is in line with previous research which finds that affective displays in social media may be negative and yet productive. Moreover, emphasis on a series about periods and contraception reveals that even content focusing on reproductive functions does not necessitate a biological approach and can incorporate the sensuous, affective and fleshy body in the process of knowledge production.

A new materialist approach evidences the value of inspecting how human and non-human bodies co-produce each other and the affective potentials of their coming together. To ask how authority and knowledge are produced in the context of sex and relationship vlogging is to recognise that they could be enacted differently within different practices and body assemblages.



Examining what type of knowledge is produced – and who participates in its production – in popular sources of information, then, seems crucial in understanding the type of content available to young people and how it is embedded in their media practices. Certainly, vlogs become an interesting source of alternative sex education because they bypass professional approaches to sexual health communication which remind “young people of the limitations of their knowledge and their persistent need for formal expertise” (Byron, 2015, p. 329). In contrast, vlogs’ knowledge production recognises that it is our being in the world that allows us to have knowledge in the first place.

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# 7 Webisodes as Different Subversive Forms of Representation of Gender and Sexuality

*Pernilla Jonsson Severson*

## Introduction

This chapter considers gender, sex, and social media and how social media and identities interact. Various webisodes are compared using previous research and theories on identity and subversion on how social media platforms are made part of these webisodes in multiple ways.

Webisodes are “short, scripted episodic and experimental videos for the Internet” (Peirce, 2011, p. 317). A web series is a series of webisodes (episodes) distributed online (via the world wide web) made available to users through various platforms and services, and watched through various devices with an internet connection (smartphones, computers, etc.). Webisodes are a particular form of popular media culture that by their distribution, as well as content, target niche audiences as a community. Historically, webisodes feature on internet-connected digital platforms (sites) that offer some sort of interactivity. Webisodes can democratise access, usage, and production, for example, as ‘fan activism’ (Scardaville, 2005) unwrapping subversive aspects, forms, and potentials of representation of gender and sexuality (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2012). Webisodes are of interest because they combine more or less industrially produced television series and variations of fan activism. This provides a spectrum to explore subversive forms of representation of gender and sexuality. Thus, the chapter’s interest is in considering how webisodes and social media interact, particularly considering differing forms of audience engagement in social media.

Social media, or social networking sites, in this study vary from being just a platform for distribution (spreading, sharing material) to making, sharing, commenting on, and remaking content (for an overview of social media studies, see Burgess et al., 2018). Social media and webisodes can be linked, as in the case of YouTube, to become both a distribution channel for the webisodes and a platform for viewers/users to comment on the mediated content and even to reinterpret and remake content in new and different ways.

In this chapter, social media and webisodes interaction is explored, in particular potential subversive forms of representation of gender and sexuality. Subversion generally refers to a process of a group of people making

efforts to destroy or overthrow an idea or an authority of some sort. When linked to gender and sexuality, subversive forms of representation of gender and sexuality can mean subversive sexualities, implying revolutionising gendered identities. An example is Chancy's (2008) study on the silence of women's sexuality in the Caribbean, particularly taboos concerning lesbianism, suggesting "that sexuality may be a crucial avenue for social and political transformation" (p. 51). Hence, making a statement that gay identity per se is a realm of subversive forms of representation of gender and sexuality.

The purpose of this chapter is to understand and explain a variety of subversive forms of representation of gender and sexuality via the study of the interaction of categories of webisodes and social media. Research questions guiding the analysis are: How are representations of gender and sexuality constructed, adapted, and resisted? Are new normative gendered identities forged, and if so, in what ways? What is the interplay between the webisodes and the use of social media? Do commentary sections offer resistance or compliance, and if so, in what ways and to what extent?

Therefore, an empirical analysis of four webisode categories is undertaken. These categories can be argued to be analytically beneficial to understand varieties of subversive forms of representation of gender and sexuality. The webisodes examined are a Swedish youth series on youth and sexuality; three different American and Canadian LGBT and queer webisodes; gender-bending fan-edits of a soap opera; a French webisode on gender and sexuality concerning Islamic culture. Hence, the analysis focuses on local constructions and variations of resistance to representations of gender and sexuality.

## **Social Media, Gender, and Sexuality in Global Contexts**

Previous research on social media, gender, and sexuality describes reference points, knowledge gaps, and issues on social media and gender and sexuality in global contexts. The presented research in this section adds to understandings of social media and gender and sexuality in global contexts by giving nuance to subversive aspects linked to anonymity. Notably, the research seems to comment mostly on Facebook, as can be seen below.

Dhoest and Szulc (2016) use the notion of social media dynamics of collapsed contexts, derived from boyd (2002), to argue for "challenges for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people, at least those who find it crucial to maintain distinct contexts in which they disclose or conceal their gender and/or sexual selves" (p. 1). Dhoest and Szulc's (2016) interviews with gay men with a migration background included questions on how these men were using social media as way of navigating in and between different cultural contexts. Findings suggest that Facebook is highlighted as a social media platform that needs to be used discreetly to avoid context collapse because of family and friends mixing.

Jenzen (2017) studies the digital cultural strategies that trans and gender-questioning youth adopt as social media users and producers to cope and thrive. From ethnographic data, their findings provide insight into the nuances of online diversification. Again, as mentioned in the study by Dhoest and Szulc (2016), Facebook, according to Jenzen (2017), was found helpful in connecting locally but needed navigation because one's family was also there. Tumblr was seen as the better tool for connecting with a broader community and being a counter-public to Facebook in being more fragmented and less tied to linear narratives.

DeVito et al. (2018) conducted a study on LGBTQ+ people's self-presentation decisions on many platforms. The findings concluded that participants employed personal social media ecosystems to express and conceal their LGBTQ+ identity strategically. An example is a strategy to only interact vaguely on pro-LGBTQ+ content, such as a 'like' on Facebook. High visibility control is essential, as one-to-one focus, creating a strictly bounded space. Facebook, again, is low visibility control, with one's family there.

Cassidy (2018) studied platforms such as Gaydar, Facebook, Grindr, and Instagram. The focus of the work was how identity and privacy management issues generate a culture of participatory reluctance within gay men's digital environment. Facebook's use of the polysemic phrase 'Interested in' is critiqued, and the Facebook model of people using their real names creates social context collapses with privacy and safety issues.

Talbot et al.'s (2020) study shows how social media influence is vital for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other non-heterosexual and gender-diverse (LGBTQ+) people facing stigma and discrimination. Students may feel exposed when identifying as LGBTQ+, particularly while transitioning to university life. From interviews, findings are that LGBTQ+ students' online identities are multiple, situated, and bound to specific platforms. Alternatives to Facebook seem essential to offer a more comfortable and safe space for expressing one's identities. Hence, the platform-specificness of online identities is multiple, situated, and bound. The case of using Facebook or not is a particular issue for LGBTQ+ people.

There are also important studies on social media linked to fandom and intersectional relation to ethnicity. Day (2018) studied the webisodes *The Peculiar Kind* (Casson & Layne, 2012) on how queer women of colour think about their gender performativity, including an analysis of the YouTube comments for the series *Between Women* (Daniel, 2011). Findings show critical commentators questioning black lesbian women, as this illustrative comment highlights: "Why are these lesbians acting like men? Ridiculous!" (Day, 2018, p. 9). Hence, the queerness of a webisode content can draw commenter critique from the perspective of binary gender identities.

Bradley (2015) studied the intersections of digital media and black women's identities using the concept of 'black girl awkwardness', a notion made famous by writer and comedienne Issa Rae who, at the time of writing, has a show *Insecure* on HBO. The study is of Rae's web series,

*The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* (Rae & Oliver, 2011–2013). Bradley’s findings indicated that social media such as YouTube created spaces for addressing black women’s marginalised narratives and experiences (Bradley, 2015). There is no analysis of the commentary section in Bradley’s (2015) study. However, when I sift through all of the YouTube comments relating to the first episode, posted 3 February 2011, the appreciation for the show and Rae is overwhelming. The 2076 comments, as of 8 December 2021, are along the line of: “This is hilarious”, “Issa Rae is so fine!”, “Im so glad she is getting her moment” (HOORAE Media, 2021). People say it is so relatable; it describes them and so on, all written under a pseudonym. So, when studying the distribution of more media representation of sexual identities as webisodes, the subversive aspect is to offer alternatives that the normative media industry does not provide.

## **Identities and Social Media**

This study focuses on representation and representation of self-representation in social media linked to webisodes where identities are seen as social-historically situated. Building on the perspective of Marwick (2013) on online identities, the fundamentals of identity are threefold: subjectivity (how we think of ourselves); representation (how different facets of identity are depicted in culture and media); or self-presentation (how we present ourselves to others).

Social media has been seen as the principal possibility of self-representation by posts on social network sites and blogs (Marwick, 2013). However, online identities are more than these posts. Identity is also dynamic as people present themselves differently based on context (where they are) and audience (who they are with). Hence, people are more than characteristics such as race, class, and gender. The concept of multiple selves (Marwick, 2013) explains why people vary identity performance based on context. Marwick also mentions Butler (1990) to argue that popular understandings of gender and sexuality are constructed entirely through discourse and social processes; that gender is performative. Hence, how people vary their self-presentation appropriately is a skill and something performative and ideological.

Identity as being performative and ideological is discussed by Marwick (2013) through the links between identity expressions, authenticity, and business models, with Facebook, for example, asking users for their real name. This design decision prevents deception and assures safety, but it also benefits their business model. Hence, technological affordances constrain and enable different types of self-presentation. Second, there are a set of norms around the use of technology: idioms of practice. Third, different social contexts are invoked, like anonymity and playfulness in virtual worlds, compared to for example LinkedIn (Marwick, 2013). Finally, identity expression is influenced by the perception of the audience (Marwick, 2013).



Furthermore, social media has a duality in that it can help people express solidarity, talk to like-minded people, engage in activism, and at the same time further oppression and also the resistance to that oppression. An example is what seems to be a context unmarked by race is strongly marked as heteronormative (straight) and normatively white. But if a user indicates that they do not fit this profile, they may be criticised for bringing race or sexuality into a conversation (Marwick, 2013).

Maintaining a verifiable online identity brings with it a new set of problems and concerns. One of these is the aforementioned ‘context collapse’, how social media challenges possibilities to vary self-presentation based on environment or audience. The challenges are when various groups are gathered in one social media context, and group norms differ or even conflict with each other (Marwick, 2013). Therefore, theories on social media and identity include subjectivity, representation, and self-presentation. In this, online identities are dynamic multiple selves where gender and sexuality are performative and ideological, including people’s skills to vary their self-presentation. This self-representation is constrained and enabled by technology, by the norms and social contexts around the use of technology, and by the audience’s perception. Context collapses of online identities can happen if group norms in social media contexts conflict.

## **Subversion and Gender Identity**

As mentioned in the introduction, democratisation of access, usage, and production, such as ‘fan activism’ (Scardaville, 2005), is unwrapping subversive aspects, forms, and potentials of representation of gender and sexuality (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2012). What then are possible subversive aspects, conditions, and possibilities of representation of gender and sexuality, if taking on a more theoretical approach?

Theoretically, Marxist scholars have discussed subversion as a subversive form of representation of gender and sexuality from feminist scholars. In this study, I start from Butler’s (1990) key text *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, and the notion of how subversive is what is rejected by the discourse. A central thought is to discover the contingency of the gender order and, in this way, to subvert it. Hence, a discourse presents what lifestyles are possible and presents what alternative lifestyles should not be possible. However, this power of discourse can be broken, as each discourse is based on dismissing other possibilities. If one can successfully retrieve the dismissed, this means the subversion of the dominant discourse and the destruction of its definitional power. Weinbach (1997) includes how subversion also can “occur within the discourse, as when the nodal point is not referred back to as the equivalence point, as it was before. Instead, the rejected that constitutes it, takes its place” (p 149). The nodal point determines the elements of the discourse to itself.



Against this background, what then is gender identity? Gender identity is something that is created as a discourse or a system; gender identity is performed taking into account regulatory regimes one encounters in the world, the “materialism of the body” (Butler, 1990; 1993). This means that in relation to the nodal point, various elements are given a feminine or masculine ‘character’, which makes them replaceable or exchangeable in a certain sense. Heterosexuality is then defined through the negation of being gay or lesbian. A man is defined through the negation of the feminine, a female by negating the male. The main interest in this study is what happens when a man is not defined through the negation of the feminine, but rather, everything, according to Butler (1990), is possible. This is made clear through, for example, trans dressing and clarifies the arbitrary character of the symbolic order of gender. The exhibition of this contingency through the signifier’s wrong usage is understood as the subversive repetition of the symbolic order.

Repetition as a subversive act means that, in general, each discourse, like each system, has to be newly constituted from moment to moment. This does not mean, however, that it has to be created each time from scratch. Instead, it uses existing elements and embodies them anew by connecting them to a previous operation. Therefore, subversion and identity as theory highlight the contingency of the gender order presenting what lifestyles are possible or not, as well as alternative lifestyles. What is dismissed or not is important in analysis. The nodal point is an analytical concept helping to determine what makes what is replaceable or exchangeable and how existing elements are used and embodied anew by connecting them to a previous operation.

## The Study and Its Method

Empirically a content analysis was made of four webisode categories argued to be analytically beneficial to understand varieties of subversive forms of representation of gender and sexuality:

- The Swedish public service broadcasting youth series *Eagles* (Lindén et al., 2019), according to model the Norwegian series *Skam*, with themes on youth and sexuality.
- American and Canadian LGBTQ+ and queer webisodes that are predominately lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, like *Platonic* (Buckley, 2020), *The T* (Cordelia & Kyri, 2018), and *A Gay Victorian Affair* (Watson & Lamb, 2018).
- Gender-bending fan-edits of soap operas, the German *Chrolli* vlog (Weil & Schölermann, 2009–2010) from *Verbotene Liebe* (Forbidden Love; Wemcken & Reinhardt, 1995–).
- Islamic comedy on the French website *À part ça tout va bien* constructing gender and sexuality to Islamic culture with a French culture perspective (*À part ça tout va bien*, 2009–2011).

Hence, I have selected webisode variations regarding geographic location as well as variations on sexuality and age. These selections have been made through an interplay of reading research on webisodes and sexuality, search as research through the search engine DuckDuckGo, and searches on various social media platforms. I have snowballed further information and material through the exploration and analysis of webisodes and their interaction with social media platforms. This ethnographic approach to webisodes was structured concerning appropriate methodological rigour. This means that I have been using field notes, documenting all sources digitally, and structuring them analytically according to study purpose and themes. This resulted in separate documents for each webisode, covering:

- Dedicated webisode website.
- Communicated social media platforms on that website.
- Online searches to see what other social media and video-sharing platforms the webisode existed on.
- General online searches for webisode fan groups and communities, and specific ones on social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr.
- General overview of comments: where and how many.
- Specific selections of comments sections on each social media platform, focusing on first and final episode on YouTube and, when possible, other social media platforms linked to this.

The detailed content analysis was made by studying the comments sections for each webisode. Notes were made on whether seemingly real names were used or nicknames. All names consisting of one word that were not personal names (like “Maria”) and with “@” in front of a single non-name word (like “lion”) were considered to be nicknames. Of course, more work is needed to really fact-check all comment posters’ names. However, for this study, this simple categorisation works as an initial sense of seemingly real names in relation to nicknames. Furthermore, notes were made on whether individuals made multiple comments. These comments from the first and final episode were cut and pasted into the documents, where all names and nicknames were deleted and replaced with xx and a number.

Questions guiding the analysis are: How are representations of gender and sexuality constructed, adapted, and resisted? Are new normative gendered identities forged, and if so, in what ways? What is the interplay between the webisodes and the use of social networking sites? Do commentary sections offer resistance or compliance and if so, in what ways? The analysis focuses on local constructions and resistance to representations of gender and sexuality. What variations of destabilisations and legitimisations of gender and sexuality constructions exist? How do these identity constructions relate to resistance? How do local contexts shape the relationship between social

media and identities? In what way can social media and comment sections be understood as revealing this?

## Findings

Findings show variations of destabilisations and legitimisations of gender and sexuality constructions. These identity constructions are adapted, functioning as reference points for resistance, forging new normative gendered identities related to sexual identity communities. For the fans, the webisodes go beyond both ‘for the youth’ and the local contexts. Social media and comment sections are aligned to the webisode as a validation choir, furthering the notion of ‘for the fans’. The findings are presented first as short vignettes on each webisode category. This is followed by summarising comments on findings.

### Swedish Youth Series *Eagles* on Youth and Sexuality

*Eagles* (Lindén et al., 2019) is a Swedish web-based youth drama series aimed at young people aged 16–19 years old. It is a series about five young people in the Swedish city of Oskarshamn, which resembles the Norwegian series *Skam*, with themes on youth and sexuality, “where love, rivalry, and friendship are interspersed with a rock-hard hockey bet and dreams of a different future” ([www.svtplay.se/eagles](http://www.svtplay.se/eagles), author’s translation). New Stories produce the series for the Swedish public service broadcaster SVT. The first season was broadcast in 2019 and the second in 2020; the third premiered on 4 June 2021 and a final season four is planned.

The series is foremost distributed on the play service “SVT Play” ([www.svtplay.se/eagles](http://www.svtplay.se/eagles)). Bloopers, trailers, and so on are available on YouTube, where fan-edits of love stories, a genre that is popular on YouTube, are also available. One example is Felicia and Ludvig, their love story ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooJy-rX59DU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooJy-rX59DU)). This video has had many views, around 87,000, and 11 comments, mainly on how cute it is and asking where the series can be found. There is also a copyright comment, “Hey how did you upload it with music regarding copyright? I tried to upload a *Skam* fan video, and it got immediately removed bc of copyright.” According to SVT, the series is also popular abroad; in addition to Nordic fans, it has also attracted viewers in Italy, Russia, and Indonesia ([www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/smaland/eagles-far-en-tredje-sasong](http://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/smaland/eagles-far-en-tredje-sasong)).

The producers believe that this is due to *Eagles* being similar to an American high school series, which is easy to absorb because it is recognisable, yet at the same time it is set in entirely different environments. The producers believe the success of *Eagles* can be credited to it being much more authentic than many American series ([www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/smaland/eagles-far-en-tredje-sasong](http://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/smaland/eagles-far-en-tredje-sasong)).

For audience engagement, viewers are mainly invited to Instagram (see [www.instagram.com/eagles\\_svt/?hl=en](http://www.instagram.com/eagles_svt/?hl=en)). There is also a particular Facebook page from SVT, SVTZ, for young audiences to interact on SVT's youth series (see [www.facebook.com/svtprojektz](http://www.facebook.com/svtprojektz)). Fans engage on both Instagram and Facebook, saying how much they liked certain things, asking for more and longer episodes. On Instagram, there are English comments also. There are also fans translating the series. This Tumblr blog also provides more information on the episodes and recommendations for other series (<https://eagles-translated.tumblr.com>). The blog has a Twitter account attached to it (see [https://twitter.com/eagles\\_transltd](https://twitter.com/eagles_transltd)).

### *American and Canadian LGBTQ+ and Queer Webisodes*

This category of webisodes, American and Canadian LGBTQ+ and queer webisodes, is predominately lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, like *Platonic* (Buckley, 2020), *The T* (Cordelia & Kyri, 2018), and *A Gay Victorian Affair* (Watson & Lamb, 2018). All three mentioned webisodes are from more recent, alternative, indie media producers than from the mainstream industry or amateurs. Furthermore, the content of *Platonic* and *The T* are both inspired by and making use of the producers' personal lives. In *The T*, the producers are both producing and acting. This content is about how to live an everyday life where being gender and sexual-identity fluid is an ever-present theme. *A Gay Victorian Affair* is a comedy about "what it takes to survive as a queer person in Victorian England", created from the dissatisfaction of the *Downton Abbey* (ITV) series depiction of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

The three webisodes are all distributed through websites as embedded Vimeo videos, and are also available on the Vimeo website and YouTube. However, they differ concerning social media use. *Platonic* and *The T* refer to YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and use them for marketing, with no comments allowed (YouTube) or with almost no presence of comments, with those present being mainly from the crew ("I love this shot"). *A Gay Victorian Affair* differs significantly. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are also used for marketing, but with some fun extras. YouTube hosts the comments, where viewers often rave about how funny the show is and what mainly made them laugh: "Oh my gosh this is simultaneously the cutest and most vulgar thing I've ever seen, I love it." No comments address or say anything about sexual identities relating to themselves.

### *Gender-bending Fan-edits*

This webisode category of gender-bending fan-edits focuses on soap operas, where gender-bending takes place in the men that fall in love with others. I refer to one example for this category: the German *Chrolli* vlog (Weil

& Schölermann, 2009–2010) from *Verbotene Liebe*. This example shows how webisodes further fan communities in a spin-off like a vlog. *Verbotene Liebe* was a German television soap opera (1995–2015) that received international attention in 2008 with the love story of Christian Mann and Oliver Sabel. The relationship between Oliver and Christian unfolds as a love story of two people who happen to be gay. The producers started the *Chrolli* vlog to keep the fans engaged with the famous love couple. The video entries are designed to be a realistic portrayal of what couples do. The YouTube commentaries say how much they love the couple, what they love about them, and ask whether they are a couple for real because it is so realistic.

### *Gender and Sexuality in Islamic Culture from a French Perspective*

*À part ça tout va bien* (2009–2011) is described by producers as an audio-visual project that aims to produce and broadcast humorous videos on the theme of Islam. This webisode example was made available in 2010. It constructs gender and sexuality in Islamic culture with a French cultural perspective. It aims to encourage people to think about the practice of religion and the prejudices it can give rise to, through humour. The tension between diversity and identity is at the heart of the project: what is it to be French? Can we be French with differences? Islam seems to be the subject that drives the most tension because it would reveal these differences and a specific limit to the acceptance of the other. The project website, <http://apartcatoutvabien.com>, makes several videos available. The webisodes on the theme of Islam are not as prevalent on the website. Several episodes are present on YouTube and Dailymotion. The Islam webisode project is no longer a part of the producers' social media presence. The comments on YouTube are in French or Arabic, and they differ accordingly. One example is an episode, *La leçon* (the lesson), with these two comments which illustrate the dissonance: "I'm a Muslim, and this video makes me laugh ... bravo guys" and "The girl is taking lessons with men, it is against Islam. But the video is quite funny."

### **Summarising Comments**

In the sections above, each webisode category displays certain specificities of forms of audience engagement on social media. A simple initial expanded analysis on the comparison of different social media platforms and comments shows that comments can be anonymous or not. YouTube is a social media platform where users post more anonymous comments than on Facebook. As presented in previous research, Facebook is a place of context collapses. Commenting on certain webisodes on gender and identity means possibly displaying ones likes and dislikes to friends, family, and work colleagues. The particularities of the online video-sharing platform YouTube, and the likely nickname comments used, move beyond anonymity to community.

This highlights how the sense of community identity building around a certain taste in webisodes transgresses mere functions of individual expressions. Interacting with other YouTube users posting comments on particular webisodes constitutes a fan community; an engagement to belong. Also, in the webisode analysis above, Instagram appears to foster engagement in comments from anonymous posters.

The webisode producers' 'own' webisode web pages are with or without comments. And more importantly, they are more or less trying to invite and involve personal issues rather than only marketing. It does not matter if the webisode is produced by the media industry, or by indie media producers less involved in the business to engage people. It seems as if being interested in the dominant discourse of a genre, like soap opera and comedy, makes sexual identity nodes to be less necessary, or even silences them. The soap opera is a genre that involves and is supposed to be engaging in personal issues. Comedy is the same. However, these genres seem to make various sexual identities the natural presence or even necessary presence for the series to be good.

When it comes to gay love-oriented webisodes, *Chrolli* seemed to be a safe genre to comment on, in line with "same for me", and "relatable". Queer issues-oriented webisodes studied in this chapter do not attract comments. Instead, social media becomes a place where for example Queerguru ([www.queerguru.com/category/rwd-reports1/](http://www.queerguru.com/category/rwd-reports1/)) can assist in what series to watch on queerness. Concerning the intersections of gender and ethnicity, the webisode from *À part tout ça va bien* plays with Muslim and French identity linked to masculinity in being a man. Women are scarce. Sex as taboo is present to be made fun of. However, there is no gay or lesbian presence in the characters. And in the comments, sexual identity is not made an issue, only gender, what women should or should not do.

Self-presentation strategies could explain the visible comments on the communities that production companies link to Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram. The interaction of webisodes and social media hence could be seen as confirming previous research. In this, Facebook becomes a mainstream social media platform heavily linked to one's private name, and with that platform also a context where family and work friends can also participate. Comments on webisodes on Facebook are scarce, apart from the more mainstream soap operas and youth series, where love stories are presented and same-sex relationships are more or less present. The trans and queer webisodes lack Facebook comments, and it is the same on Instagram. Twitter is mainly used for guiding and reviewing, not as a platform or an account for fans of a particular show or episode. There are some comments on YouTube where nicknames as profiles are used. On YouTube, there are comments in various languages. The international webisode audience is present for all webisodes on YouTube, a situation made possible by YouTube's recommendation system according to the comments. In general, all comments are a validation choir, confirming that one likes the show: like

a round of applause. Romance and comedy mainly cover this validation choir. The case of *À part tout ça va bien* is very different, not specifically about gender and sexuality but about joking about religion, ethnicity, and nationalism. The comments on YouTube include critique towards the fun that is made of faith.

When it comes to ‘youth’, it is essentially a social and historical construct rather than a universal state of being (Lesko, 1996). The studied webisodes are about the relationship between youth and social media, visible particularly in the way *Eagles* represents youth as their target audience. Even if older people (or younger) watch the series, they are (seemingly) not visibly commenting on social media. Besides Facebook, social media is more or less something that younger rather than older people use. In addition to gender and sexuality, age is an essential aspect of social media. The media representations of gender and sexual identities in the webisodes are all of young people.

From the foci in this study on norms around identities as social-historically situated, including how they can impact the relationship between youth and social media, the particular themes that can be derived are:

- How articulations and non-articulations in social media on webisodes focus on love stories, queer life issues, comedy, ethnicity, and masculinity.
- How articulations and non-articulations in social media on webisodes differ depending on the platform (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube) and the platform anonymity and webisode content that is more or less explicitly oriented towards an LGBTQ+ community.
- How the social-historically situatedness matters: webisodes show a production timeline and how that relates to YouTube comments still being posted even if the production is 11 years old. These comments present specific gender and sexuality discourse changes.
- How the global aspects matter: (1) how the YouTube platform, through the recommendations provided, creates global audiences in various ways; (2) how making fun of Muslims in France attracts more than a ‘validation choir’ on social media.

## Conclusions on Subversion

What then are the conclusions on subversion? It can be argued that gay identity is per se a realm of subversive forms of representation of gender and sexuality. Fan-edits compiling kisses between two men are a subversive act. These articulations, which make visible certain activities, like kisses, are part of remaking soap operas which is more critical than making their viewers/users visible. In the *Chrolli* vlog, the interaction between the two gay characters is in focus; hence it does not need to be cut out and compiled. The spin-off continued the fans’ interest in a real, authentic love story, suggesting that contextualisation matters. A kiss in a soap opera is something else than



a kiss in a webisode, as the *Chrolli* vlog shows. Social media, in this case, was critical in providing spaces for expressing joy and affection towards this love story and vent what it meant for people to take part in this love story. It is interesting to see how webisodes that originate from the web spark other articulated interests. The webisodes *The T* and *Platonic* deal with more existential issues on being human and queer rather than depicting love stories. These webisodes do not invite audience engagement or provide articulations of that engagement in the same way as other webisodes such as *Chrolli*. However, it seems the makers and producers are not following up on providing spaces to vent, even, in some cases, turning comments off. The comedy webisode *A Gay Victorian Affair*, however, engages many people. Why? Being open with what you find funny is less sensitive – less subversive – than outing your views on queer issues in society.

What does this mean about possible subversive aspects, forms, and potentials of representation of gender and sexuality from the interaction of webisodes and social media? The powerful discourse of Facebook commentaries on webisodes is the presentation of possible lifestyles: love stories between two people that are easily understood to be heterosexual or gay or lesbian. The dismissive comments are directed towards more fluid gender and sexual identities, sometimes clearly found in the webisode, offering subversion of the dominant discourse and the destruction of its definitional power. In social media, comments on the dismissed between viewers take place on a platform of its own. It is seemingly disconnecting itself even from the webisode, being more a trans or queer community. This is not adhering to only being a ‘fan’ of media content but to assemblages of content, of identity explorations. The previously rejected nodal point of love stories as romantic love stories between two same-sex people seems to be taking a more prominent place for the industry to teach youth. Hence, the nodal point, or the primary form of the system, still guarantees that men are men and women are women, and their love is between two people.

Subversive aspects of webisodes then are about what industry distributes to a mass audience that otherwise is rejected. Subversive acts can also be within a discourse, like *Chrolli*, showing a gay love story with kissing. And this can be more or less linked to social and cultural context. The German *Chrolli* webisode was not questioned; however, in other soap operas, like the American *As the World Turns* (CBS), the love and kissing between gay characters Luke and Noah was critiqued. Either this was coming from how the love story was being treated differently than the heterosexual couples on the show, or the critique came from critiquing the actual love story and the frequent display of love as kissing between Luke and Noah. The scenes of Luke and Noah kissing were excluded from the show for a while, but after a ‘kiss campaign’, kissing was included in the show again.

Social media has acted to provide platforms for accessing certain content and coordinating statements to pressure the media industry to do things like exclude and include kissing between two men. Social media can serve



subversive aspects of webisodes in making it possible to express and share the likes and dislikes of the content. However, the interaction of webisodes and social media regarding gender and sexual identities moves way beyond any webisode's content. This is also a subversive act of its own, not pinning down the webisode as a symbolic order of the political signifier or as the thing that is considered contemptuous. The webisodes and social media results concerning gender and sexuality are that the webisodes offer gender prototypes that deviate from the traditional, opening space for new usages of the materialism of the body. Social media is more a 'validation choir' of the content and these gender prototypes. The question as to whether or not this provides subversive power in a political sense can only be answered through further study.

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# 8 No Country for Men

## Negotiating Men's Rights Activism in Digital Spaces

*Manolo Farci*

### Introduction

Recently there have been intense debates in masculinity studies about transformations in men's behaviour and their impact on gender relations. A significant part of these debates is dedicated to trying to understand how white heterosexual masculinities are produced and buttressed in internet settings, as demonstrated by the increasing amount of knowledge about the heterogeneous nature of the so-called manosphere, a loose confederacy of online communities, focusing on issues concerning men and masculinity (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016; Nagle, 2017; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Sugiura, 2021). Moreover, most of the research on this phenomenon focuses on the US context, and in rare cases on other anglophone realities (such as Australia and Canada), while in Italy this field of studies is only starting to emerge and is limited to a few works, like Farci and Righetti (2019), Vingelli (2019), Cannito and Mercuri (2021), and Dordoni and Magaraggia (2021).

This chapter attempts to investigate Italian men's rights activists (MRAs) on the internet and their connection with the recent emergence of the manosphere. To do so, the research analyses the content of two of the most prominent Facebook pages dedicated to men's rights issues, *Diritti Maschili – Equità e Umanità* (Men's Rights – Equity and Humanity) and *Antisessismo* (Antisexism). These groups were chosen for several reasons. First, even though their participants often perpetuate the same antifeminism rhetoric adopted by more conservative men's rights activism (MRA) movements, their anti-sexist discourses seem to differ from the 'heteropaternalism' of fathers' rights groups and from the anti-woman rhetoric and explicit misogyny of groups like Incels (Involuntary Celibates) or 'Red Pillers' (taking its name from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, the Red Pill refers to men awakening to the reality of male subjugation by women under feminism). Second, as much as they appear thematically connected, there are differences of opinion and beliefs within the groups themselves and some debates cannot be so simply reduced to traditional men's rights issues. Third, although it is not possible to prove that they are representative of the entire MRA population, these pages seem to indicate the emergence of a new strand of moderate men's rights' activists, as demonstrated by *Ti prego Karen sono anche i miei*

*ruoli di genere* (Please Karen they are also my gender roles) ([www.facebook.com/groups/595884441325918](https://www.facebook.com/groups/595884441325918)), which will be discussed in the conclusion.

Employing the principles of a critical discursive psychological approach (Edley, 2001; Wetherell & Edley, 1999), the chapter investigates the discursive constructions of MRA in the digital environment and identifies a range of linguistic resources, called *interpretative repertoires*, that members can utilise in the course of their everyday interactions on these pages. When people talk (or think) about things, their conversations are usually made up of a patchwork of quotations, in terms of particular images, metaphors, or figures of speech, that produce some highly regular patterns of talk. So, interpretative repertoires turn out to be “part and parcel of any community’s common sense, providing a basis for shared social understanding” (Edley, 2001, p. 198). Three key interpretative repertoires employed by Facebook users are used to discuss and question men’s issues within these groups: the nice guy discourse, the liberationist rhetoric, and the softening of masculinity. As the data demonstrates, these interpretative repertoires are not always mutually exclusive nor belong to a specific page because many participants can use multiple strategies in a single post or comment.

It is vital not to underestimate how social media platforms are instrumental in the rise of close-knit MRA communities that polarise around topics of shared concern (Bruns, 2019). According to Massanari (2015), the technological affordances of online platforms have facilitated the connections between different groups, based on similar interests, content, and shared users. Even if they give the appearance of being distinct, these groups authorise and validate one another, conferring on certain movements an outsized presence, which is often unreflective of or disproportionate to the real size of the community in question. However, this chapter tries to look at this phenomenon from a different perspective. Exploring how members can use different, and often conflicting, interpretative repertoires to make sense of their investment in anti-sexist, antifeminist, and ‘pro male’ groups, this work aims at demonstrating how difficult it is to define the contemporary MRA movement in terms of a clearly outlined worldview. Although the MRA is now considered an identity category in popular debates, it is possible to distinguish activists who are squarely antifeminist from those who are really worried about men’s issues. Focusing on such heterogeneity could be a crucial first step in bridging the divide between the men’s rights movement and feminism, which are still seen as opposing sides in the fight for gender equality.

### The Nice Guy Discourse

In recent years, an increasing proportion of research has provided important insights into how the architecture of online platforms has allowed the emergence of a new form of antifeminism called *masculinism* (Nicholas & Agius, 2017; Ging, 2017). Masculinism asserts that since men are in crisis and

suffering because of women in general and feminists in particular, the solution to their problems involves curbing the influence of feminism and revalorising masculinity (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012). Rather than acknowledging the neoliberal economic roots of their changing circumstances, the dominant response of these men has been to construct a masculinity-in-crisis narrative cast in specifically gendered terms of white male disenfranchisement (Kimmel, 2017). Even though the popular discourse of the crisis of masculinity can be considered a cliché, a *catch-all* container affecting contemporary representations of men in Western popular culture since the 1980s (Beynon, 2001), recently it has become notably attractive to new generations of young men. As Gotell and Dutton's (2016) analysis suggests, the emergence of sexual violence as a new focus of MRA can be viewed as part of a deliberate strategy to mobilise young men and exploit their "anxieties about shifting consent standards and changing sexual and gender norms" (p. 76). If activists in more traditional men's rights were "typically in their forties and fifties, often divorced or separated, and nearly always heterosexual" (Flood, 2004, p. 263), now it is young men who are being depicted as being feminism's principal victims.

The appeal to young men's concerns is further complicated because many of those who engage in men's online communities express considerable ambivalence towards predominant standards of masculinity. Let's for example consider the Facebook page *Diritti Maschili – Equità ed umanità* (Men's Rights – Equity and Humanity). *Diritti Maschili* advocates for "gender equality" and "human relationships based on empathy and compassion", and says no to "racism, sexism, violence and gender discrimination in the legal system" ([www.facebook.com/dirittimaschili/](http://www.facebook.com/dirittimaschili/)). It is worth noting that many of the arguments and themes that run as a common thread through this page appeal to a so-called *nice guy* rhetoric. Nice guys are those young people who consider themselves marginalised, left out of the standard dynamics of heterosexual conquest, not tough enough to be one of the *macho* men that, according to them, girls should be more attracted to. An analysis of the comments reveals that Facebook members employ *nice guy* as an interpretative repertoire to position themselves in relation to conventional notions of the masculine. On the one hand, *nice guy* discourse is used to articulate the problematic masculinities of other men, portraying them as embodying negative stereotypes associated with excessive sexual prowess. On the other hand, it allows them to blend the refusal of perceived expectations regarding hegemonic masculinity with a more hegemonically congruent discomfort with women themselves (Kendall, 2002).

*Nice guys* often express their displacement away from the inexplicable realities of heterosexual relations, creating the image of a weak, oppressed, and self-destructive man. Narratives concerning this wounded masculinity support Savran's theory (1998) of the centrality of masochism in contemporary American white masculinity. Savran refers to the masochist as

a man who takes narcissistic delight in playing the role of victim, taking up a feminised position and celebrating the stereotypes of social marginalisation. Victimisation thus becomes a ruse by which men “remasculinize themselves in the wake of their feminizing decentering” (Robinson, 2000, p. 197). This process of remasculinisation is particularly evident in the Incel obsession with the figure of Chad, a caricaturised version of popular representations of the (Westernised) alpha male, alongside the denigration of women, presented as agentless in their desire to have sex with Chad, and other subordinated or marginalised masculinities (simp, soy-boy, cuck, etc.). Incel ideology stresses an exclusive heteronormative environment, whereby sexual relationships with women are exalted as the primary marker of an idealised masculinity. So, although Incels position themselves as beta-males against hegemonic masculine norms, they end up reasserting their sense of aggrieved entitlement to conventional markers of male success (which they are unable to access).

In addition to operating within the rhetoric of masculinity in crisis, the recent *nice guy* discourse can be considered a variation of the undersexed *net geek* trope that has existed for decades since the 1980s. Most of the research on nerds and geeks has emphasised how the connection with technology helps to bolster the ‘emasculatation’ idea. Nerds and geeks are usually coded as physically weak, unattractive, poorly dressed boys who are not man enough to get a flesh and blood relationship, so they turn to machines to fulfil their needs. In their view, the internet represents a safe space where they can have control, where they are successful, and where they can retreat when the off-line world rejects them. For example, Kendall’s study (2002) demonstrates how these spaces are both created and maintained through the use of intellectualism, aggressive displays of technical self-confidence, and an adversarial orientation towards their interlocutors that tends to discourage them from participating (Herring, 2000). Just as significantly, members of online MRA communities tend to embrace a confrontational model of interaction, reminiscent of hypermasculine expressions often found in subcultural trolling behaviours. In certain cases, discursive practices adopted by participants in the online discussions seem driven by the need to mock a particular style of social media sentimentality that has become so central to contemporary liberal identity politics (Nagle, 2017). Indeed, a lot of the content circulating within online MRA communities is aimed at deriding the feminists or insulting the so-called social justice warriors. This is especially so when such content takes the form of easy to disseminate images, clips, screenshots, or internet memes used by these groups to cultivate their personal resistance to feminism (Farci & Righetti, 2019). Considering the substantive knowledge gap about what feminism is/was among MRA groups, it is easy for activists to extract excerpts from broader discourse, take them out of their context, present them as the whole ideology of feminism, and label them as nothing less than misandry. Every statement is immediately turned into a grotesque exaggeration and real people are reduced to fictionalised objects.

The ‘memeification of feminism’ reveals the mask of a troll residing behind the *nice guy* discourse (Phillips, 2016).

Not only does the *nice guy* discourse appear imbricated in the same nihilistic cynicism, detached humour, and public humiliation that constitute trolling behaviours, it also, and simultaneously, mimics what Banet-Weiser (2018) calls the ‘sentimental earnestness’ of popular feminism. Sentimental earnestness is a specific mode of address exploited in many recent feminist campaigns that present girls and women as being ‘in crisis’ – a crisis due to insecurity or a lack of self-confidence, among other things. MRAs mirror the same logic but in a way that distorts and transforms the target of empowerment so that it is men who are discriminated against and in need of recuperation and reparation. For example, the MRA initiative *SheForHe* responds to the success of *HeForShe*, a global campaign launched in September 2014 by UN Women’s solidarity movement for gender equality with the aim to engage men and boys in removing the social and cultural barriers that prevent women and girls from achieving their potential, and thus in positively reshaping society together. *SheForHe* includes a number of counterclaims that invite women “to abandon the models, borrowed directly or indirectly from old stereotypes and new ideologies, that degrade and penalise men, especially those who do not reach certain artificial and toxic standards (social, economic, physical, etc.)” ([www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1379635742154498&type=3](http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.1379635742154498&type=3)). Apparently, the *nice guy* discourse supports many of the same things that feminists want, including acceptance of alternative masculinities, and rejects all the poisonous practices associated with the term ‘toxic masculinity’. However, whereas feminists refuse these roles because they serve to maintain a system of power that benefits men, men’s rights activists deny them because they give women power over them (Clatterbaugh, 1997). Similar to Incels, many young MRAs have unrealistic perceptions of women’s real status. They believe that women have all the power in the romantic sphere, especially the privilege to compare and choose (Kimmel, 2008) and usually find *bad boys* – men who possess confidence and hard-headedness and are inclined to take risks – more appealing. So, even though they are told they can be gentle, vulnerable, less successful, men feel pressured to be strong, aggressive, and bold because of women. It is women who are responsible for keeping the male subject in those traditional gender roles (as providers, protectors, and competitors) that are lethal to him. Ultimately, the *nice guy* discourse circulating on pages like *Diritti Maschili* works as a defensive posture against perceived female power. Such a posture is particularly appealing to mostly younger men who feel disempowered by the shift in gender roles during recent decades.

### The Liberationist Rhetoric

Representations of the *nice guy* who seeks to live up to male gender expectations abound in the MRA groups. However, if many members of the



men's rights movement employ such interpretative repertoires to denounce the reality of their allegedly powerlessness, others use the *nice guy* discourse to adopt a more progressive liberationist rhetoric. Such liberationist rhetoric is intertwined with the 'socialisation argument' that formed the basis of the 1970s male liberation movement. Men's liberation movements were driven by a basic principle: that men are as hurt by gender roles as women and, although they may have more institutional power, they are still imprisoned by their aggression or emotional constraint, or both (Pleck & Sawyer, 1974). So, men's liberation called for men to free themselves of all the negative constraints that limited their ability to be human. Of course, the idea that gender is a social role sounds progressive, because it offers a break from any biological essentialism which assumes men to be naturally rough, tough, and sexually aggressive, and women to be passive, caring, and good. However, it can also be regressive. First, as Whitehead (2002) states, considering men as a passive recipient of socialisation processes, it fails to "develop a theory of masculinity as identity work, beyond, that is, the notion of men learning gender roles scripts appropriate to our culture" (pp. 22–23). So, although it apparently refutes the idea of a universal masculine essence, it reifies the concept of men as a category defined by a cross-cultural and transhistorical experience (Petersen, 1998). Second, by assuming the existence of a consistent and uniform set of social expectations that are reciprocal to men and women, men's liberation discourse underplays social inequality and power (Connell, 1995). The socialisation argument not only depoliticised sexism, but it ignored the power imbalance between men and women (Segal, 1990).

An example of the ambivalence of the liberationist rhetoric that usually underpins MRA discourses is found in *Antisessismo*, a prominent MRA page with over 45,000 followers. *Antisessismo* "adheres to the idea that patriarchy never existed, and that societies [...] came into being as 'bisexist', i.e. they oppressed men and women" ([www.facebook.com/Antisessismo](http://www.facebook.com/Antisessismo)). Most of the public posts shared on pages like *Antisessismo* address news stories and research findings regarding male problems linked to many of the issues coming out of men's liberation: from men's higher suicide and mortality rate to greater involvement in crime, alcohol, and drugs, from boys' crisis in education and mental health issues to frustrations and concerns with fatherhood and loss of status within families (Ashe, 2011). Many MRA groups denounce the areas of public policy in which male subjects can be disadvantaged as men (Coston & Kimmel, 2012). Most of these complaints are a sort of recitation, supported by a few anecdotes, and an occasional series of empirical inversions (Kimmel, 2017). They claim that there is 'gender symmetry' in domestic violence, or that men are more discriminated against in their efforts to balance work and family life, or that women enjoy a greater range of choice regarding the conduct of their sexual life. However, in other cases, their arguments are guided by truly egalitarian goals of fairness, and not everything they discuss lacks merit, like men's higher suicide rates, job-related casualties, or gender disparities in sentencing. Men's



rights activists argue that the oppression of men cannot be reduced to the disciplinary idea of men's emotional incapacity – summarised in statements like 'boys don't cry' or 'don't be a sissy', because it also involves material effects of men's institutional positioning through the division of labour in employment, in the family, and as citizens (New, 2001). Therefore, if men benefit from the gender order, there are aspects in which the current gender order does not meet their human needs and constitutes a form of systematic mistreatment. So, "the fact that men are told they are superior and deserving of privilege does not cancel out the effect of this mistreatment, which we only fail to see as oppressive because of the lack of an obvious agent or beneficiary" (New, 2001, p. 744).

Nevertheless, although MRAs recognise how men's oppression is produced by gender order, for them oppression results in a purely rhetorical category that, in Messner's view (1998), led to a falsely symmetrical call for women's and men's liberation from oppressive sex roles which ignored the structure of gender relations. Consequently, according to them, men are equally oppressed compared to women because, as Farrell (1993) argues, each sex has always been the other's slave in different ways. Situating their belief system in a social vacuum that fails to consider intersecting social dynamics, MRAs construct an over-simplified cultural model of the world that avoids any analysis of structural inequalities in favour of simplistic notions of equality that reinforce the liberal language of individual 'choice' and ignores the material and social constraints of race, class, and gender hierarchies that shape personal choices. As Nicholas and Agius (2017) explain, many MRAs seem to be resistant "to the idea that individuals are shaped by anything bigger than themselves" (p. 46), and that social structures interact dynamically in constituting privileged social groups and conditioning people's life chances. As a result, while MRAs acknowledge that gender inequality operates at the individual level, they often ignore how it is also a result of power relations that structure how societies are organised, laws are set, economies function, and ideologies are shaped. They consider power as a resource possessed by certain individuals that is primarily expressed in individual and intentional acts of domination over others. Such voluntarist understanding of power limits their ability to realise how privilege is reproduced through structurally conditioned actions and interactions, which may be conscious as well as unconscious and not always require deliberately misogynistic intention.

This positioning demonstrates why men's rights discourse that operates on a self-proclaimed platform of egalitarianism can be problematic. Even though it tends to appropriate and reconstruct the language typically associated with feminism that is designed to be non-discriminatory, it comes to discredit any feminist analysis of structural and political inequalities between sexes as unnecessary and unreasonable. Indeed, while on the surface MRA discourses advocate for gender equality, further inspection reveals that they encourage divisive gender relations and derision of feminist

perspectives (Menzies, 2008). MRA groups believe that when gender-specific perspectives are aired, in public opinion they become a zero-sum game, so that any attention paid to female issues diminishes male-specific problems. Therefore, most of what constitutes men's rights activism is trotting out a series of counteraccusations that serve "to pit men against women in arguments of which gender suffers more oppression" (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016, p. 11) and question any feminist efforts to address issues that are experienced by women in distinctive and unique ways. For example, every time antifeminist men's and father's groups call for gender-blind approaches to violence, they essentially demand that "we become blind to women's particular experience of violence" (Dragiewicz, 2011, p. 22).

This perspective is further complicated by the fact that many of these groups neither are explicitly hostile to feminism nor deny the existence of specific discriminations against women; however, they strongly reject feminism as a label and political project. According to Jordan (2016), this stance can be seen as a consequence of the complexification of backlash caused by the prominence of postfeminist ideas. Postfeminism narratives create a context conducive to a gentler, moderate men's rights strategy that tends to selectively incorporate those elements of feminist narrative that confirm the 'liberal equalism' that characterises their liberationistic rhetoric, while disparaging other feminist argument as irrelevant relics of the past (Messner, 2016). In fact, many activists tend to distinguish between a 'reasonable' feminism of equality and an extreme feminism that 'has gone too far'. As Edley and Wetherell (2001) explain, this dual construction of feminism allows MRAs to position themselves as modern-day men who are supportive of women 'simply' wanting equality but who, at the same time, look with fierce disdain at the 'illogical' claims of the unfeminine feminists and extreme political activists. This moving backwards and forwards across these two positions allows these men to be both pro and anti, in favour and against feminist principles. It is here that the rhetorical strength of the liberationist repertoire becomes apparent. The notion that men and women are equal underneath or prior to their gender socialisation "comes to be understood as women taking their place alongside men in an economic, social and political battle of each against all" (Edley & Wetherell, 2001, p. 454). In such individualistic scenarios, programmes of affirmative actions for women get resisted and rejected as unfair or discriminatory against men. If this scenario is historically linked with right-wing conservatism, what is less obvious is the way that is assumed by men's groups claiming to be progressive.

### **The Softening of Masculinity**

Another recurrent interpretative repertoire circulating within MRA communities can be called the 'softening of masculinity', and it refers to the appropriation of apparently contradictory elements of identities typically associated with various marginalised and subordinated masculinities.

Deviating from positions once associated with hegemonic standards of male behaviour, young straight men now exhibit more *sensitive* forms of masculinity that reject sexism, stoicism, and compulsory heterosexuality implicit in orthodox masculinities (Anderson, 2011). This is indeed what happens in online MRA communities, where men have no problems displaying supposedly ‘unmasculine’ emotions such as pain, weakness, vulnerability, and exhaustion without fear of being homosexualised by their peers. The decreasing of homophobia helps to explain why groups like *Antisessismo* are populated by hetero, gay, or bisexual men who claim to be anticonservative, against any sexual prejudice, and supportive of the rights of the LGBTQ+ community but, at the same time, fiercely antifeminist. As Ging’s research (2017) confirms, the circulation of queer discourses within the manosphere serves as a stark demonstration of “how reduced homophobia can happily coexist with extreme expressions of misogyny and racism” (p. 15). Changes in the expression of masculinity characterised by a visible softening do not axiomatically entail a genuine engagement in the erosion of inequalities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). This process may be better explained as a consequence of what John Mercer describes as ‘saturated masculinity’ (2017), in which there are such a multitude of differing and sometimes contradictory or competing representations of masculinities that the meaning of masculinity becomes ever more elastic and fluid. In this contemporary setting, the appropriation of some traditionally feminine appearance-related practices and characteristics that are often also stereotypically associated with gay men is likely to be a repackaging of forms of domination (Ingram & Waller, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), a masquerade behind which men not only maintain their sexual and cultural dominance but also obscure this process as it is happening (Demetriou, 2001).

The opportunity to display behaviours that were once stigmatised as gay or feminine is enhanced by the turn towards a cultural politics of emotion that has recently emerged in conjunction with digital culture and social media. The spread of fake news, clickbait, trolls and bots, polarisation, post-truth, echo chambers, and right-wing extremism has forced scholars, policymakers, and journalists to consider how forms of social media are first and foremost emotional media (Tettegah, 2016); they rely on intense statements of personal feelings, and they thrive on the circulation of affect. As Dean notes (2010), the ‘weaponization of affect’ is central to communicative capitalism in social media. The architecture of the information economy is based on emotional appeal. It relies on the marking, adding, forwarding, and circulating of messages, not because doing so *means* something but simply to capture, exploit, and catalyse users’ feelings. In this vein, the content is less important; what matters is its mobility and capacity to circulate and produce affective encounters with each other, with each other’s writing, with things, places, and events brought to our attention through the broader media ecosystem. As both a precognitive force and a contingent sense of connection and relation, affective encounters shape our networked

exchanges and become ‘registered in bodies’ as they pass from one state to another. Following this line of thinking, the same object – be it a smart device, an app, an animated GIF, a hardcore porn clip, or a social media update – can result in virtually any kind of an affective encounter (Paasonen, 2021). Ahmed (2004) considers such affective encounters as a crucial part of our identity production. Although everyday language of emotion is based on the presumption of interiority, in her reading, emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, emotions are intentional in the sense that they are *about* something: “we do not love and hate because objects are good or bad, but rather because they seem ‘beneficial’ or ‘harmful’” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 5). Consequently, they involve a direction or orientation towards objects: “the attribution of feeling to an object (I feel afraid because you are fearsome) is an effect of the encounter, which moves the subject away from the object” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 8). Emotions do not positively inhabit anybody or anything, meaning that they are an effect of the circulation between objects and signs. Their circulation shapes the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies: “collectives get constructed as *being* through *feeling*” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 97). In other words, emotions produce a differentiation between *us* and *them*, whereby they *are* constituted as the cause of *our* feelings. Emotions glue communities together, but at the same time, they position the ‘other’ on the outside.

The circulation of affect in digital media is crucial to understanding the shift in men’s rights activism towards a new politics of emotion and individualism. Salter (2016), in his study of Australian antifeminism, describes how traditional discourses of rights has become replaced by a less contestable and more supplicatory language of needs that serves to promote a sympathetic response to complainants in the absence of an assessment of the merit of their claims. As Allan (2016) confirms, such language is less about the realness of their claims and more about feelings of pain and anger that motivate these claims. In fact, many assumptions of the men’s rights movement are indisputable precisely because they do not need to prove “their affectively charged discourses” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 7) to be true: emotions cannot be denied; one can only experience them. Discourses around subjective feelings are constantly reproduced in many MRA groups (De Boise, 2017). It is common, indeed, even on moderate pages that embrace a more egalitarian stance, to find comments of users invoking and justifying their rage, anger, frustration, anxiety, and fear against feminists. “The process is not ‘irrational’ in the sense that people act impulsively ‘without thinking’. Rather, specific viewpoints, based on a certain pre-understanding of a society in which men’s privilege is being seemingly eroded, are collectively reinforced through the circulation of affect” (De Boise, 2017, p. 8).

In other cases, the mobilisation of the affect seems to be driven by an opposite intent, specifically that of offering an emotional and pleasurable engagement with factual claims. This is clearly evidenced in the emerging trend of ‘fact signalling’: the strategic and performative invocation of

epistemic and moral authority which may then be weaponised against the enemy. Such an approach usually revolves around charismatic influencers and specific pages claiming their place as standard-bearers of facts and reason, logic and empiricism, against the perceived irrationality of social justice warriors and the sentimentality and absurd priorities of Western liberal politics (Nagle, 2017). Yet, as Hong (2020) highlights, this valorisation of ‘facts over feelings’ is delivered not through a substantive engagement with factual claims using any kind of rigorous methodology, but as a confident and aggressive stance the repetition of which breeds a feeling of being on the right side. So, the affective appeal to ‘facts’ provides a relentless daily flow of para-social experiences through which a particular kind of adversarial, self-confident, and morally and intellectually superior masculinised subjectivity may be cultivated. Such agonistic contestations designed to ‘destroy’ the opposing side is particularly evident in the huge use of *Gish galloping*, a debating/rhetorical technique of burying your opponent under a mountain of different half-truths, weak arguments, logical fallacies or outright lies: the opponent is forced to either laboriously unpack their flaws one by one or forego contesting the house of cards upon which bolder claims are now being made.

In a lot of ways, the affective politics of digital media challenges the idea of men as emotionally inarticulate. The issue, then, is not whether men feel emotions, but whether or not they display or act on some emotions and not others, and with what consequences. In this sense, we could say that MRA communities provide a space of ‘disciplinary homosocial intimacy’ (Kanai, 2019), where men can pick, choose, and customise ideas that promise a desirable sameness – a relatability – with other men who share a similar socio-cultural, gendered, and classed position (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019). Following Hochschild (1983), this space offers a set of feeling rules that guide emotional work between men by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that regulates their affective exchange. These feeling rules provide techniques of ‘gender policing’ through which men may govern themselves and articulate a collective affective attachment to specific standards of masculinity.

## Conclusions

While MRA movements are often thought to be a coherent object with a cohesive set of beliefs, there are contradictory ideas about what contemporary men’s rights activism is or should be. The broad assumptions about MRA misogyny and violence do not fully encapsulate differences of opinion within the movement. First, even within the contemporary MRA movement there appear to be some divisions, or at least degrees of extremism, and some pages are more moderated than others. The policy of *Antisessismo*, for example, “prohibits homophobic, misandric, misogynistic, racist, ableist, slutshaming or virginshaming comments [...] Furthermore, it is not allowed

to attack an entire gender and is therefore forbidden to criticise men or women” ([www.facebook.com/Antisessismo/about](http://www.facebook.com/Antisessismo/about)). *Ti prego Karen sono anche i miei ruoli di genere* (Please Karen they are also my gender roles), a small but very dynamic MRA group founded in June 2020, specify that they are not a Red Pill group: “We do not pick on women here, nor do we pick on the feminine” ([www.facebook.com/groups/595884441325918/about](http://www.facebook.com/groups/595884441325918/about)). Obviously, none of these groups are pro-feminist. On the contrary, most of their members are responsible for the spread of misinformation about feminism and downplay the existence of men’s institutionalised power. Moreover, there are members of the men’s rights movement who fundamentally distrust and dislike women, and believe that feminism is an ideology of hate akin to Nazism, or that false rape accusations against men have reached epidemic proportions. That said, it is inaccurate to ignore how a good proportion of MRA arguments revolve around the rejection of patriarchal notions of gender essentialism. When MRAs criticise the assumption that male rape victims are not seen as real victims because it is unlikely that a teenage boy would not want sex with an older, more experienced woman, what they are really doing is fighting against the gender-essentialist notion of male hypersexuality. Liberationist discourses reject traditional gender ideology, which assumes men to be naturally rough, tough, and sexually aggressive, and women to be passive, caring, and good. These are the attitudes that result from gender essentialism, and these are exactly the attitudes that feminists have been battling against for decades. It goes without saying that any liberationist discourse also has its ugly side. As highlighted, focusing their attention on how men are disadvantaged by gender role stereotypes, MRA groups may provide fuel for male backlash against feminism under the guise of male suffering. That said, it is vital to acknowledge that “any discrimination against men may ultimately result in harm to women” (Levit, 2008, p. 1052). For example, the disparate treatment of the sexes in the case of parental leave harms both men and women. By employers giving women more generous parenting leave, men are precluded from and women are locked into parenting roles. Both genders are damaged because the underlying stereotypes limit their choices. It is unquestionable that women, on the whole, are disadvantaged much more seriously and persistently than men. At the same time, “focusing on comparing the disadvantages of men and women reinforces on a theoretical level what society says on a social level: suck it up. Be tough. You are male” (Levit, 2008, p. 1080). As Segal (1990) points out, it is playing masculinity’s own game to suggest that men do not experience fear, trauma, and bodily shattering, much like women. Men enjoy social power and many forms of privilege by virtue of being male: “But the way we have set up that world of power causes them pain, isolation, and alienation” (Kaufman, 1994, p. 142).

In this context, the continuous appeals to male suffering, as exemplified within MRA groups, may be considered something different than a mere change in styles of masculinity (Messner, 1993). If ‘feeling at ease’

is the quintessential aspect of a masculine stance, men who are nervous and express their emotional discomfort represent a potential break from standard patriarchal gender ideology (Reeser & Gottzén, 2018). Following Butler's suggestion that masculinity is a performance in the theatrical sense (1990), in the MRA communities we can find performances that highlight and call attention to the construction of masculinity rather than concealing it. In many cases such online groups attract members who have witnessed or experienced some kind of discomfort resulting from the pressures exerted on them by hegemonic masculinity – the pressure to not appear weak or effeminate, the pressure to be strong, to be a leader. Unbeknownst to them, they have likely spent more time pondering gender theory than have most other men.

In that sense, considering the *nice guy* discourse as nothing less than a strategic call for victimhood may be counterproductive. As Gotell and Dutton (2016) point out, it is important to adopt a gender-inclusive view of victimisation to prevent moderate men's rights activists from being co-opted by conservative groups that would misuse their arguments in order to maintain the status quo. This approach necessitates viewing victimisation as less of a political or epistemological stance and more of an evidential one: even though men are in general more privileged than women, there are some arenas in which they are disadvantaged by stereotypic notions of maleness and suffer as a result of it. As hooks (1984) argues, "While it in no way diminishes the seriousness of male abuse and oppression of women, or negates male responsibility for exploitative actions, the pain men experience can serve as a catalyst calling attention to the need for change" (p. 73). Moderate men's rights activists, because of their personal involvement with painful consequences of sexism in their lives, can offer a useful framework to understand how men are harmed by gender stereotypes. If they were to replace their misguided anger at women with a more constructive analytical framework through which to address these issues and start to advocate for their rights without being dependent on bashing feminism, they could become useful feminist allies (Allain, 2015).

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Part III

# Negotiating Politics and Identities



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## 9 “Hello My Lovelies!”

### Conflicted Feminisms and the Neoliberalisation of Portuguese Activist Influencer Practices

*Sofia P. Caldeira and Ana Flora Machado*

#### Introduction

Social media platforms, such as Instagram, have revitalised contemporary feminist politics, bringing new opportunities for civic and political engagement, and enabling wide public visibility for feminism (Mahoney, 2020). In Portugal, after years of slow uptake of popular feminism, there seems to be a new wave of social media savvy feminist and social justice minded people quickly gaining a steady footing on online platforms, amongst them the feminist psychologist and sexologist Tânia Graça.

Portugal is a generally conservative society. Until recently, online feminist movements and hashtag campaigns that generated important societal conversations internationally, such as #MeToo, have had little public expression nationally (Garraio et al., 2020). This lack of permeation of feminism in wider societal discourses can, in part, be understood in light of the history of feminism in Portugal. The long fascist dictatorship of the Estado Novo in Portugal and its conservative Catholic foundations cemented extremely narrow views of the role of women in society, and feminist activists in Portugal only regained significant expression after the fall of the dictatorship on 25 April 1974 (Tavares, 2008). After the revolution Portugal saw a surge in activism that continued into the 2000s, striving for issues such as legal abortion, sexual liberation, and protection against domestic violence, and expanding to incorporate intersectional concerns and LGBTQ+ rights. While Portugal secured the rights to abortion or same-sex marriage in the late 2000s and early 2010s (Marôpo et al., 2017, p. 281), cultural change did not necessarily accompany these legal frames – feminist issues are still received with significant resistance and scepticism (Simões & Silveirinha, 2019, p. 2).

This conservative mindset is particularly noticeable on issues related to sex and female sexuality. While sex has become a popular topic within certain media genres, such as women’s magazines and popular morning television shows, societal discussions about sexual freedom or harassment still attract significant backlash. Discussions about sex are often guided by

existing sex panic scripts (Irvine, 2006), generating emotional responses of disgust or anger that reflect and reinforce existing societal, cultural, and political values and a conservative sexual morality.

Yet, in recent years online and social media feminism has slowly become more visible in Portuguese society. As Marôpo et al. (2017) noted, there are a significant number of pages promoting women's rights and gender equality on Facebook in Portugal, although these generally have low metrics of engagement. International online movements, such as #MeToo, that originally failed to rise to the level of a consequential national debate (Garraio et al., 2020) were, in 2021, experiencing a national resurgence. This is due to the emergence of accusations of gendered sexual harassment (Ropio et al., 2021), which garnered wider public attention.

With over 149,000 followers (at the time of writing), the Instagram account @taniagraca – owned by Tânia Graça, a Portuguese psychologist, sexologist, and self-identified feminist – seems to reflect this growing popularity of feminist discourses on Portuguese social media. As her Instagram bio states, this account is dedicated to promoting sexual empowerment that leads to women's empowerment. While the account dates back to March 2013, for the first years her content was mostly personal, showing typical Instagram photographs with her friends and family, with occasional feminist posts punctuating her profile. A post from April 2019, titled “SOMOS TODAS MACHISTAS” (roughly translated as we [women] are all male chauvinists), marks a turning point towards the more deliberately educative and feminist content that now comprises most of her posts. The popularity of Tânia's feminist sex education on Instagram has since led to invitations to participate in popular podcasts and mainstream TV Portuguese shows, like *O Programa da Cristina* or the late-night comedy show *5 para a Meia-Noite*. Tânia's social media practices thus became a broader national media ecosystem and celebrity culture, in an expression of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

We can situate Tânia's Instagram practices in the context of fourth-wave feminism (e.g. Chamberlain, 2017; Munro, 2013), mirroring its use of social media and digital tools for feminist communication, mobilisation, and community building. Social media platforms, like Instagram, can increase the general accessibility of engagement with feminism to wide and diverse audiences that might not wittingly look for political content. Much like fourth-wave feminism is understood in continuity with prior feminist practices (Pruchniewska, 2016, p. 738), Tânia's Instagram feminism is reminiscent of earlier sex-positive third-wave feminist debates (e.g. Glick, 2000; Snyder-Hall, 2010), mirroring its discourses of sexual education, exploration, and liberation. Yet, the general third-wave emphasis on individual choice, rather than on the systemic causes of inequality that underlie sexual choices, complicates the possibilities for collective social movement (Snyder-Hall, 2010, p. 260) – a tension that is also noticeable in Tânia's online practices.

## Methodology

This chapter aims to explore the complexities and tensions of contemporary feminist practices on social media, using the account of @taniagraca as a case study. This case study is grounded on a direct unstructured observation (Given, 2008, pp. 907–908) of @taniagraca’s account – including her profile bio, shared images, IGTV videos, live videos, and accompanying captions and comments. In addition, we also analysed her Stories Highlights (i.e. Instagram Stories that are fixed on a user’s profile, lasting more than the default 24 hours), as well as ephemeral Instagram Stories shared during the period of analysis. The account was observed from October until December 2020, but the analysis extended diachronically, reaching the account’s first post dating from March 2013. As the account continues to exponentially grow and release new content, following the principles of digital ethnography to avoid data and information overload (Kozinets, 2010, pp. 104–105), we decided to end the period of in-depth observation on 7 December 2020, the date on which the account celebrated 60,000 followers. After this, we maintained a perfunctory observation of the account to catch any significant developments. The analysis started from an attentive scrolling through @taniagraca’s posts, in order to get an overview of the dominant kinds of topics of concern, discourses, representations, and engagement strategies. This was accompanied by the extensive taking of field notes. This approach was also attentive to Tânia Graça’s mainstream media appearances, allowing us to make sense of the broader reception of the account (we attempted to invite Tânia Graça for an interview to get further insights, but she declined due to lack of availability).

## @taniagraca and Popular Feminism Online

A significant portion of Tânia Graça’s Instagram content openly engages with feminist politics. With humorous titles and captions such as “FEMINISMO, O BICHO PAPÃO” [Feminism, the Bogeyman], Tânia’s posts seek to demystify feminism for a wider audience and counter established negative prejudices, such as the conflation of feminism with extremism or with female ‘hysteria’. Tânia’s posts address a range of feminist issues: abusive relationships and gender-based violence; online and offline sexual harassment; female solidarity (or lack thereof), amongst others. The vast majority of her content, however, is dedicated to reframing feminist ideals around issues of sexuality and relationships, presenting sex education and the exploration of personal sexual pleasure as a “tool for female liberation” (taniagraca, n.d.). While many of these posts fall into an advice and tips and tricks format, others contextualise issues of sexual education, such as the use of condoms, in light of the dominant gender norms. By using long-form video formats or accompanying her photographs with long captions, Tânia is able to share complex information, develop her conversational and friendly



tone, and incorporate personal experiences into her feminist content. This use expands on the visual-centric technological affordances of Instagram, as long captions help to direct the audience readings and understandings of the images, aligning them with her feminist message (Mahoney, 2020, p. 12).

Through the use of feminist hashtags – such as #feminismo, #igualdadadedegénero, #empoderamentofeminino (i.e. #feminism, #genderequality, #feminineempowerment), or hashtags appealing to transnational audiences, like #womenempowerment – Tânia’s account is also situated as belonging within a wider feminist conversation (Papacharissi, 2015). Tânia’s content and hashtag choices also enable more visibility and discoverability within the platform. Tânia has become one of the first and very few Portuguese influencers dedicated to openly discussing these types of issues. However, as her account and audience grew, this particular use of hashtags declined, becoming limited to posts seeking to engage with specific movements, such as the Portuguese #movimentonaoenormal (i.e. #itsnotnormalmovement), or to the use of hashtags like #pub to signal commercial partnerships. Likewise, by tagging other Portuguese feminist and activist accounts in her posts and Stories, Tânia builds small networks of popular feminists that engage with and amplify each other. These aspects also point to how global social media discourses on sex and feminism might have influenced Tânia’s Instagram content creation. As Tânia’s account grew, her choice of hashtags displayed an adaptation to a local Portuguese audience, as well as to a national network of activist influencers. In this way, global feminist discourses pervade local content producers who follow Instagram’s trends closely, reflecting how global and local social media cultures are closely connected and mutually influencing each other, yet allowing space for unique local dynamics.

Despite their feminist framing, Tânia’s posts can at times risk falling into heteronormative discourses that reinforce gender binaries. Although disclaimers suggest that she employs generalisations to enhance simplicity, Tânia’s relationship advice can occasionally reproduce essentialist understandings of gender, such as the idea that women are “naturally more unsatisfied” within their (presumably heterosexual) relationships and men are more pragmatic, making references not only to socialisation but also to different cerebral and hormonal constitutions between genders to ground these assumptions (taniigraca, n.d.). The heteronormative tone was also noted by some followers, who commented on the lack of references and suggestions to non-heterosexual bonds in her posts about sex and relationships. This inferred, often in a seemingly deliberately friendly tone, that Tânia could also share advice for non-heterosexual couples, presenting this as ‘just another excuse for getting great videos’, as one commenter put it. Tânia responded to these comments by reiterating her support for the LGBTQ+ community, yet emphasising her focus on heterosexual relationships and cisgender women as a professional choice, thus almost overtly reflecting a self-branding decision. In her view, limiting the

scope of her content allows her to create more ‘high quality’ content. As an indirect response to these criticisms, Tânia made a series of Stories directing followers to other Instagrammers working on the topic of sexuality and relationships from a more inclusive and LGBTQ+ friendly perspective. In this way, while these generalisations can help her simplify issues and engage with a wider audience, we should be critical of a lack of attempts to deconstruct generalisations or to represent alternatives to normative models of relationships.

### Instagram Self-representation and Embodied Feminism

A noticeable aspect of Tânia’s content on Instagram is its consistent emphasis on the notion of female (and feminist) embodiment. Tânia’s openness to discuss issues of female sexuality aims to break the conservative taboo in Portugal that frames sex as a topic that should only be discussed (if at all) in private, within the confines of intimate relationships. Focusing on female sexual pleasure, her content also seeks to displace the religious, social, and cultural conventions that continue to promote a narrow notion of female respectability.

In this vein, this account has several posts on the topic of female masturbation. In a mix of scientific language, sex tips, and friend-talk, these posts offer suggestions for more satisfactory masturbatory experiences: ranging from the psychological ‘rid yourself from feelings of guilt’ self-acceptance mantras, or the use of certain sex toys. More than a fun activity, these posts present masturbation as a tool for empowerment. Echoing earlier sex-positive discourses, these posts hint at the political potential of sexual exploration, yet most videos frame its advantages in individual terms of personal liberation, better personal relationships, more self-confidence, and self-love.

This emphasis on the female body as a site of empowerment risks uncritically reproducing normative conventions of sexiness. One of Tânia’s videos promotes the use of lingerie as a way to “feel sexier, hotter, more powerful” (taniigraca, n.d.), echoing popular postfeminist advice that presents lingerie as a tool for increasing sexual self-confidence and gendered consumerism as a route for empowered female sexuality (Barker et al., 2018, p. 13). These recommendations can reproduce the same *heterosexy* aesthetics prevalent in traditional media and in the dominant visual economy of the male gaze (Dobson, 2011). In addition, despite her calls for self-acceptance, in the same video Tânia reassures her viewers that no cellulite will be on display even while wearing lingerie, thus failing to interrogate the dominant standards of what is deemed attractive and sexy. These paradoxical discourses complicate the distinctions between sexualisation, objectification, and expressions of liberation and pleasure (Barker et al., 2018, p. 55).

The second way in which Tânia’s account emphasises the role of feminist embodiment is through her consistent use of self-representation: that is, of

images and videos in which she is physically visible. Scrolling through her profile, we can observe that nearly every single post contains self-representations, either in posts that combine a picture of Tânia with a feminist caption, or in vlog-style videos. This emphasis on self-representation seems to merge feminist practices with the dominant platform vernaculars of Instagram (Keller, 2019). As Instagram's cultural imaginary is dominated by the visual, the photographic, and an association with self-representation, this can lead to feminist practices that centre corporeal expressions of activism and the representation of an embodied feminist identity (Savolainen et al., 2020). Tânia herself seems to recognise the strategic role of self-representation, as she playfully states in one of her posts that she decided to accompany a post about feminism with a “cutesy photograph” of herself “just to see if more people would read this” (taniigraca, n.d.). Using self-representations can thus become a strategy to attract attention, to sustain readership, and also to present feminist ideas in a more ‘approachable’ way.

Unlike her home videos, Tânia's photographs are most often framed in highly aestheticised ways, often taken by professional photographers, and in some cases even counting on the help of stylists or make-up artists – all duly tagged either in the photographs or in the captions. These images often show Tânia (who is a conventionally attractive, young, white woman) smiling at the camera, but they also include artistic semi-nude photographs. Like much of her content, these semi-nude photographs are also framed in terms of personal empowerment. Through this use of self-representation, feminist discourse becomes centred around Tânia and her personality, as she arises as an embodied example of the values she tries to communicate to her audience.

However, this focus on embodiment can also increase the visibility of feminist bodies and subject them to more monitoring, surveillance, and discipline, as well as being used by others in an attempt to control her discourse or compromise her feminist agenda. This risk can be illustrated by some of the comments made on Tânia's account. Many of these, even when made by other women, focus on her appearance, complementing how beautiful she looks in a supportive girl-power tone, often disregarding the written content of the post and the subject being discussed. Several men display the same focus, posting (relatively rare) objectifying comments and turning compliments about her appearance into semi-humorous romantic banter, exemplified by comments asking her on dates to ‘get to know her better’ or inviting her to dinner, or even, as the following section shows, into sexual propositions that verged on sexual harassment.

### **Instagram Platform Politics: Limiting Sexual Self-expression**

While Instagram's platform vernaculars encourage embodied expressions of feminism, its platform politics and Terms of Use can, on the other hand, shape its configurations and limit its scope. Platforms like Instagram are

not mere hosts created by individual users; rather they carry specific platform politics (Gillespie, 2010). These politics are made explicit through Instagram’s Community Guidelines (2021) and Terms of Use (2020), which state what content can be shared and what is liable to be removed. Instagram thus restricts most representations of nudity and sexual activity, and also limits sexually explicit language and the use of vaguely defined “sexually suggestive elements”. These restrictions have a clear gendered character, as evidenced by the decision to restrict “uncovered female nipples”, while male nipples can be unproblematically shared (Facebook, 2021).

These policies promote a deplatformisation of sex on social media, through a combination of platform rules and content moderation (Tiidenberg & Van der Nagel, 2020), and while the Facebook Community Standards (2021) offer an exception to sexual imagery shared in educational contexts or to raise awareness of a cause, the narrowness of these restrictions risks erroneously limiting the work of sex educators like Tânia Graça. While we encountered no evidence that her content was ever deleted or shadow-banned (see Tiidenberg & Van der Nagel, 2020, p. 53) from Instagram due to its sexually explicit content, this is something that is on Tânia’s mind, as she offhandedly comments in one of her videos: “I can’t share pictures of vulvas here or else they might censor my video” (taniagraca, n.d.). Although without interviewing Tânia we cannot ascertain her reasons for choosing a platform that limits the expressions of sexual freedom that are central to her feminist position, these limitations bring to the foreground tensions between, on the one hand, restrictive platform politics and, on the other, the widespread audience-reach that popular platforms like Instagram enable.

Opposition to sex talk can come not only from the platform, but also from users themselves. Tânia’s audience is overwhelmingly supportive, and her work is often celebrated as valuable information and a ‘public service’. However, some of Tânia’s content hints at the existence of negative, and even harassing, comments and private messages. For example, her video on unsolicited dick pics emerged as a reaction to having personally received such content in her Instagram Direct Messages, and we could also observe some overtly negative comments in her posts. Online hate is pervasive on social media platforms (Jane, 2014), and anti-feminist comments are frequent in other Portuguese online environments (e.g. Simões & Silveirinha, 2019). Tânia’s fleeting references therefore point to the possibility that there might be more backlash and harassment than is publicly visible on her account – either being sent via private message, or being managed through practices and tools of comment moderation (e.g. Lunden, 2021).

### **Feminised Empowerment-speak**

Alongside their focus on sex education or feminist topics, Tânia’s posts, and particularly her videos, are easily recognisable for their personal, intimate, yet playful tone. In the manner prevalent amongst influencers, Tânia

addresses her followers as if talking to an audience of friends: starting each video with “Hello my lovelies” and frequently using terms of endearment, talking candidly about sex, and using common Portuguese slang to exemplify the relationship dynamics she addresses in her content. This way of communicating helps to bridge her educational content with entertainment, thus appealing to a wider audience, and to distance sex and feminism from its societal taboos (Sundén & Paasonen, 2020).

There is also a gendered tone underlying Tânia’s communication, as her affect-driven style and focus on engaging with her followers’ questions about sex and relationships parallel prior women’s genres, particularly advice columns in women’s magazines (Phillips, 2008). This is especially noticeable in her weekly feature “Consultório do Amor” [Love Clinic], live sessions in which she answers questions submitted by followers. Even though we have no insights into the demographics of @taniagraca’s followers, her content seems to presuppose a predominantly female audience, often addressing directly her female followers and espousing scenarios that teach women to navigate heterosexual relations.

At the same time, Tânia’s intimate and humorous tone also functions as a form of self-branding (Marwick, 2013). The intro of all her videos, welcoming her lovely followers while excitedly clapping at the camera, became almost a catch-phrase, recognised and praised in the comments. The consistency of this intro was a deliberate choice, as Tânia herself notes on her second IGTV video: “You guys liked the clapping so much that I kept it.” (taniagraca, n.d.).

Both Tânia’s content and her tone align with the notion of *spectacular feminism* that tends to dominate the contemporary popular media landscape (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Tânia’s content and representational strategies seem to point to an effort to distance herself from the dreaded stereotype of the *feminist killjoy* (Ahmed, 2010). Her content is rarely confrontational or overtly seeking to address systemic inequalities or propose collective action. Instead, aligned with the conventions and vernaculars of Instagram that tend to privilege positive content even within feminist action (Savolainen et al., 2020), Tânia’s account is often defined as ‘cute’ psychology and feminism by her followers, thus echoing the mandates of popular ‘happy’ feminism, which focuses on uplifting women (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 9).

While these emotions and intimate discourses are often used as a way to dismiss the legitimacy of feminist complaints (Ahmed, 2014, p. 170), in Tânia’s account this affective tone seems to be linked to its popularity. This can also be understood as related to the feminised relational labour that is expected from social media (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). Tânia’s tone and social media practices come together to create a sense of *perceived interconnectedness* with her followers (Abidin, 2015). This is cultivated through labour-intensive practices: Tânia often likes followers’ comments or briefly replies to many of them with smiley faces and heart-shaped emojis, she asks followers for suggestions for future posts, or she answers their questions

through Stories and Instagram Live sessions. This sense of perceived interconnectedness creates an environment where followers feel comfortable sharing personal experiences related to the posts’ topics via direct messages and public comments – from joyful (and at times embarrassing) stories of masturbation, experiences of sexual harassment, to emotional testimonies of past relationships trauma and abuse.

Yet, a more critical analysis can also perceive this relational work as a way to generate social media engagement and to ‘feed the algorithm’ (Abidin, 2015). As Abidin (2015) notes, for influencers the desire to foster a sense of closeness with followers can also be motivated by commercial interests. An audience emotionally invested in their relationship with an influencer can be more receptive and dedicated. The performance of interconnectedness online necessarily includes the use of affordances such as likes or comments. In this way, invitations to engage with the posts, even if not motivated by cynical considerations, are always contributing to popularity (Pruchniewska & Duffy, 2016, p. 3).

### **Influencer Culture, Commercial Logics, and Activist Influencer Practices**

Despite its focus on women’s empowerment, we can understand Tânia Graça’s social media practices as linked to influencer cultures. Broadly defined, influencers are content creators who accumulate (and maintain) a relatively large following on their social media platforms (Abidin & Cover, 2019, p. 217). Influencer practices are thus shaped by the dominant social media logic of popularity, with platform metrics, such as numbers of followers or likes, becoming quantifiable markers of success (Marwick, 2013, pp. 187–188).

Tânia employs several strategies to incentivise the audience’s engagement with her content. Her posts and videos call on followers to “give that cute like” (taniigraca, n.d.), comment, save the post, and share with other friends who might also enjoy her content. These requests mirror common scripts of engagement seeking both on Instagram and on other platforms, such as YouTube. But these forms of Instagram engagement are also framed by Tânia as a source of encouragement and love, and an incentive to continue to create more content, thus combining commercial and emotional benefits (Abidin, 2015).

Much like traditional influencers, Tânia’s account also includes commercial partnerships and sponsored content. She playfully acknowledged this commerciality in one of her posts from January 2020, in which she announced “the first publicity moment of this Instagram”, remarking in a tongue-in-cheek aside “oh my god, I’m feeling like such an influencer” (taniigraca, n.d.). Since then, Tânia has established several commercial partnerships, promoting products from sex shops, contraceptive brands, intimate hygiene products, and reusable menstrual products. Her commercial partnerships

are closely aligned with her sex education and female empowerment content, mirroring the notion of commodity activism, where feminist ideals become a selling point for particular products (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 19).

Alongside her educational content, Tânia also publicised a life-coaching and female empowerment workshop which she facilitated, aimed at promoting self-knowledge, self-esteem, and healthy sexuality and relationships. Both this workshop and her content at large echo an extremely individualistic vision of *neoliberal feminism* (Rottenberg, 2014) – one that is able to work within the dominant capitalistic system, privileging individual self-improvement and entrepreneurial ‘solutions’ to promote gender equality, while ignoring the structural socio-cultural and economic sources of gender inequality. Within this context, popular and media-friendly expressions of feminism that align more easily with neoliberal commercial interests can achieve more widespread visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In a social media context, we can also see that feminist expressions that fit better with Instagram’s dominant culture of positivity and self-representation are likely to attract more engagement on Instagram (Savolainen et al., 2020). In this way, the individualistic, confidence-based, feel-good notions of female empowerment that dominate Tânia’s content can be critically read as more easily saleable and shareable.

Thus while Tânia’s account frequently acknowledges that there are broader issues of socialisation and education that contribute to the social and sexual oppression of women in Portugal, her suggestions of how to engage with these issues are quickly reframed in individualised terms: it’s about getting what *you* deserve, be it respect, love, or orgasms. Aligning with the dominant confidence culture (Gill & Orgad, 2015) that encourages women to love themselves while still placing the brunt of the emotional labour of self-optimisation within the realm of personal responsibility, Tânia’s upbeat empowerment speech emphasises positive thinking and the importance of having the right mindset. Addressing more ‘serious’ feminism issues, such as rape or gendered violence, can lead to noticeable tonal shifts, often aesthetically marked by a shift to black and white portraits with more serious facial expressions, by the use of graphic white text compositions over solid black backgrounds, or by addressing these topics in the ephemeral format of the Stories, either through text, more informal videos sharing her opinions, or re-sharing other people’s posts on the topic.

Tânia’s rise in online popularity was accompanied by increased invitations to appear in several popular media outlets: from podcasts and multiple TV shows, to interviews for large national newspapers. Online popularity became a springboard for her visibility in mainstream media industries with a significant viewership in Portugal. This led to a new influx of followers and a solidification of her role as influencer, in a mutually reinforcing feedback loop that illustrates how the quantified logic of social media is complemented and enhanced by traditional logics of mass media celebrity (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 7). This media attention can also be seen as



generating visibility to certain political or social issues (Tufekci, 2013), in this case towards ideas of female sexual empowerment. Yet, the selective welcoming of ideas and actors who fit better with the pre-established mass media conventions can lead to the reification of white, heteronormative, and middle-class hegemonic ideals, addressing only the concerns of those who fit the same profile (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 17). Tânia with her joyful and individualised feminism seems to fit rather well within the current popular media landscape in Portugal.

Given this, we understand Tânia’s social media account as an illustration of *activist influencer* practices. While Tânia employs many of the strategies associated with traditional influencers, her account started to gain popularity with a message that sought to be explicitly oriented towards women’s empowerment, rather than those societal concerns emerging as a trendy afterthought. With the rise of recent highly networked activist efforts, such as 2020’s global Black Lives Matter protests, the notion of activist influencers has been widely discussed in popular online media, and there is a growing need for academic research to accompany these discussions (see Abidin & Cover, 2019; Glatt & Banet-Weiser, 2021; or Tufekci, 2013 for examples).

The case study of Tânia Graça’s Instagram offers insights into a use of social media and its affordances that is politically motivated, commercially savvy, aligned with national popular culture appeal, and replicating, perhaps inadvertently, pernicious neoliberal feminist discourses. As an example of *networked microcelebrity activism* (Tufekci, 2013), it shows the emergence of extremely visible actors that are not quite institutionalised political actors, nor celebrities or ‘ordinary’ social media users.

Similarly to celebrity feminists (Hobson, 2017), feminist Instagrammers like Tânia have the potential to widen the visibility and acceptability of social and feminist issues, potentially opening the space for a dialogue with more ‘conventional’ forms of feminism. At the same time, these creators often seek to financially benefit from popular neoliberal feminism, thus potentially reinforcing a narrow genre of commercially safe and easily likeable and shareable social media feminism (e.g. Glatt & Banet-Weiser, 2021; Savolainen et al., 2020). We can see the solidification of this genre in countless websites and online guides that share tips and tricks for the successful activist influencer (e.g. Martinez, 2020; Reid & Sehl, 2020; Riley, 2021), touting advice that frequently mimics generic influencer tips – such as be genuine yet consistent, don’t be performative and hop on trends, and interact with your followers. Yet, some guides also offer advice that points towards the possibility of more collective action grounded in traditional activism – such as providing verifiable information and resources, tagging other activists, or partnering with existing organisations.

Despite its potentialities, activist influencer practices must be critically engaged with, recognising the criticisms that such practices risk commercialising and watering down feminist politics, reducing it to likeable posts. We must strive to question how activist influencer practices on



Instagram can become actionable, or conversely when they can become self-serving popularity acts.

## Conclusion

The case study of Tânia Graça's Instagram account allowed us to explore how online feminism is aligning with a trend towards popular feminism expressions, contextualising these dynamics in the context of a still largely conservative Portuguese society. Using her Instagram account to engage with a range of feminist issues, Tânia has managed to create engaging feminist content that quickly rose to popularity, both online and offline, largely due to its playful and accessible tone.

As this chapter explored, Tânia's feminist content fits particularly well into Instagrammable conventions and aesthetics, centring the embodiment of feminist politics, not only through its focus on issues of bodily experiences and pleasurable sexual experimentation, but also due to its emphatic use of self-representation. Yet, Instagram's platform politics (Gillespie, 2010) can limit such embodied expressions of feminism, as they carry a gendered bias against representations of female bodies that are linked to efforts of deplatforming sex (Tiidenberg & Van der Nagel, 2020). Awareness of this potential deplatforming can thus lead to a necessity to monitor and, at times, restrict the types of feminist content shared. In addition, by centring self-representation, Tânia's content seems to attract comments concerning her physical appearance, both positive compliments but also comments that verge on harassment and objectification.

Tânia's content also relies on a conversational, personal, and intimate tone. This creates a sense of community and perceived interconnectedness (Abidin, 2015) with her followers that can be seen in both feminist terms of community building and consciousness raising, as well as, more cynically, social media strategies to increase engagement. The accessible tone of her content also allows for an expansion of political conversations to otherwise reticent audiences. At the same time, this tone also draws on gendered conventions reminiscent of women's magazine advice columns (Phillips, 2008), further linking Tânia's social media content to notions of popular and spectacular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018) that tend to privilege 'cute' expressions of feminism, centred on individual issues, while avoiding potentially more controversial topics of structural gender inequality.

We explored Tânia Graça's social media presence and recognised examples of activist influencer practices. We saw that traditional influencer strategies can be employed in the service of an essentially feminist aim, while still allowing for a commercialisation and popularisation of feminist discourses.

Given the growing popularity of activist influencer practices in Portugal, not only with Tânia Graça, but with other popular Instagrammers such as Clara Não or Diogo Faro, we must critically question the political potential of this popular feminist digital turn. As this paper indicates, we can see

some clear assets to an accessible and ‘soft’ approach to feminist issues, such as the one exemplified by Tânia Graça. Activist influencer practices can be effectively employed to strategically attract attention to social justice issues, increasing the visibility of feminist ideals and opening up spaces for dialogues that were, for a long time, absent from Portuguese society at large. There is hope that these popular Instagram accounts can be, for many people, a starting point for further feminist mobilisation towards social change.

At the same time, we should not fall into overly utopian readings of such popular expressions of feminism. Low-effort modes of political participation, such as being informed via entertaining social media accounts, can lead to a sense of feminist engagement and of having already enacted political action. For some, online engagement with feminist accounts risks becoming the full extent of their political action. We should question how these engagements might be complemented with more collective and time-consuming (and often less entertaining) political efforts, such as engaging in offline protests, joining organisations, signing petitions, raising funds, etc.

There are inevitable tensions between feminist ideals that seek to address intersectional and systemic gender inequalities, and feminist practices that are constrained by logics of popularity, visibility, and commercial success. While, in the context of social media, attention and visibility are essential to enable the political visibility of feminism, strategies to increase the reach of feminist discourses can become subsumed to the dominant conventions of Instagram and popular culture, potentially limiting the type of feminist content that can attract widespread popularity to easily acceptable actors (most often white, young, thin, and pretty) and expressions of feminism (such as individualised feminist expressions centred on self-improvement and commercial consumption).

However, it is crucial to recognise that online popular feminisms are not static and can shift in reaction to emergent societal events. In the specific case of Tânia Graça, changes in the Portuguese social and political reality – with the rising representation of far-right parties – have created space to disrupt (albeit temporarily) her usually ‘cute’ and commercially friendly feminist tone. Since the time of our observations, Tânia has created videos in response to the 2021 presidential elections, protesting against the far-right candidate and incentivising her followers to vote. This more overtly politicised position received some backlash, leading her to openly recognise in her Stories the misogyny, violence, and online hate she received. As the feminist landscape in Portugal continues to change, with an increase in public debates on sexual harassment triggered by a resurgence of the #MeToo movement in Portugal (Ropio et al., 2021), it is worth remaining attentive to see whether this cultural moment prompts activist influencers towards more collective organising – such as through collaborations like the one Tânia Graça established with the politician Cristina Rodrigues to enact legislative changes on issues such as rape and the criminalisation of non-consensual re-sharing of intimate content – or whether these concerns

can themselves be absorbed into a neoliberal feminist individualist mindset that continues to centre self-improvement as the main route to liberation.

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# 10 Digital Sex Work?

## Creating and Selling Explicit Content in OnlyFans

*Daniel Cardoso, Despina Chronaki and  
Cosimo Marco Scarcelli*

### Introduction

Despite a long and complex media studies tradition of analyses of media uses, those media uses have often been reduced to media effects (assumed to be either positive or negative) (Attwood et al., 2018)<sup>1</sup>. Into this framework, when we focus on young people or emerging adults, media effects are frequently connected to sex and sexuality, and sexual(ised) media are often framed in terms of empowerment or victimisation. Moreover, research and social action focuses on protection from a risk averse culture which assumes that users are proactive but still somehow lacking in their competence. The situation that we have just painted has been made more complex by the COVID-19 pandemic that also affected the performance of the sexual self in offline and online environments. Focusing on platforms, it is interesting to consider that the Match Group (owner of platforms like Tinder) stock value rose rapidly from March to September 2020 and has kept relatively high prices ever since. Even once relatively unknown platforms, like OnlyFans, have risen to popularity among users and consumers. This seems to be especially so in the case of young adults who were affected by a sudden disappearance of entry-level jobs in hospitality, retail and associated functions, or diminished university experiences compared to expectations, due to the COVID-19 crisis. Although there is an increasing amount written on young people, sexuality and the media, research on both young adults and their experiences with sexuality online and online sex workers is scarce (e.g. Berg, 2017; McKee, 2016; Tsaliki & Chronaki, 2016; Jones, 2020). The same applies to OnlyFans, and despite increasing popularity among users (Ryan, 2019) sexual content platforms are also under-researched.

Finally, it is important to consider COVID-19's impact on online/offline intimacies. Indeed, changes need to be observed with new lenses that permit us to explore social and cultural specificities of sexual cultures across the

globe. This is even more relevant if we consider that many published works continue to reflect concerns about the replacement of romantic, ‘real-life’ intimacy with casual online forms of sexual performance (e.g. Lopes et al., 2020). Focusing on younger women, this chapter illustrates their challenges within patriarchal societies and the way in which sex work is heavily gendered. Our analysis focuses on the self-definition of our participants as sex workers. Our research examines how the OnlyFans creators articulate their professional self through the production of contents, marketing practices and customer relations to understand if it is possible to speak about deplatformed sex.

Our analysis in this chapter focuses on the ways and the extent to which our participants define themselves as sex workers; in fact, how the professional self is articulated through discourses of production, marketing and consumption. We highlight the elements through which digital sex work is articulated and becomes a form of labour, also encapsulating its different aspects: immaterial labour, intimate/affective or emotional labour and, not least, aesthetic labour. We argue that the different aspects of digital labour already established in academic discourse (e.g. Sanders et al., 2018; Brents & Jackson, 2013; Elias et al., 2017; Hardy, 2013) appear interchangeably in our participants’ constructions of how sex work on OnlyFans is a job and their negotiations of how content creation is understood on the margins of artistic work and/or as a profession or not.

## **Platformed Labour**

In this section, we analyse how transformations in the way labour is economically, politically and socially organised have contributed to renewed difficulties in how certain forms of work are seen – or not – as labour. We draw on the gendered dynamics that underpin the division between visible and invisible labour as a division between labour that is coded as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, ‘public’ and ‘private’ (Haraway, 2007). We consider also that transformations in the way the means of production are appropriated and deployed in a gendered way (Engels, 2010) are continually altered through the way capitalism has adapted and been itself transformed with and by new media and digital technologies.

These transformations are usually captured under the concept of ‘network societies’ (Castells, 2010; Van Dijk, 2010), a term that brings together not only the social – e.g. interpersonal – dimension of digital media, but also its decentralised infrastructure. Such decentralisation can be read both metaphorically and physically – and in both perspectives it can be connected to a decentralising of human experience: both one’s everyday life and, specifically, one’s productive role within modern society. The topic of individualisation as a central characteristic of modernity is outside the scope of this paper, but it is nevertheless a fundamental background issue to take into consideration – especially in how it pertains to this decentralisation, and the



loss of control and directedness from traditional social structures (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Individualisation both fuels and is fuelled by specific transformations in the sociopolitical landscape of labour, often organised under the term ‘neoliberalism’. In this context, neoliberalism pertains to the loss of relevance of the Welfare State, its rhetorical re-articulation as a privilege, rather than a right, alongside fiscal austerity; a diminution of the reach and robustness of workers’ rights and their organisations; and a liberalisation of international trade agreements and relationships that make workers’ positions more volatile and mobile (Hermann, 2007; Van Doorn, 2017). At the intersection of neoliberalism and the network society, these authors argue, we can see the transformation of temporary work agencies into platforms that connect service providers with clients, in a new ‘gig economy’ – they serve as “*platform labor intermediaries* that [...] operate as new players in a dynamic temporary staffing industry [...], augmented by a more austere and zero-liability peer-to-peer model that leverages software to optimize labor’s flexibility, scalability, tractability, and its fragmentation” [italics in the original] (Van Doorn, 2017, p. 901). Workers become contractors, and contracts are replaced by Terms of Service; the profit is mainly accrued by the platforms rather than the workers-qua-contractors, but the former are still framed – culturally and legally – as entrepreneurs, as individuals working from and within their own initiative and means.

## Sexuality and Sex Work

The issue around workers-qua-entrepreneurs working with their own means is that it directly appeals to the negotiated and complex ways in which ‘labour’ is defined. Much of the debate is founded on Marxist and post-Marxist approaches to labour-power (rather than labour), and how it directly connects to embodied existence and deployment of physical, psychological and emotional resources. In this sense, or so the debate goes, sex work (often rendered as ‘prostitution’) is often seen as a way of selling the body directly rather than the results from the workers’ deployment of their own labour-power.

Another, differing, argument is that when sex work is performed without any sort of intermediaries that pay wages to the workers, then these become part of the *petite bourgeoisie* and thus often fall in an intermediary and reactionary class. Counterpoints to these more negative arguments often focus on the autonomy and empowerment that certain configurations of sex work allow (namely those where the worker has the ability to determine what they do and do not do, how and when they do it, and whom do they do it with). However, Van Der Veen (2001) notes that there is not just one form of sex work, but rather differing forms of it relating to the presence or absence of class differences between the sex worker and the person who contracts their services. This means that class differences, and non-class differences,



can impinge on the level of autonomy and self-determination that a sex worker can bring into a relationship with a client, even if that sex worker is self-employed. Personal issues (e.g. the perceived lack of other work and possibilities of work or economic vulnerability) or macro-social issues (e.g. the stigma attached to sex work, or its criminalisation) can all contribute to create an environment where sex workers offer more services or accept worse conditions than they would ideally prefer. Further, this analysis brings to the fore how, in an informational capitalist society, a complex system of surplus value extraction can be set up even without any direct interference between that system and the negotiations around what the sex worker will and will not do. That is to say, platforms like OnlyFans, and the payment systems they interact with (e.g. Visa) do not directly pay sex workers, nor do they directly mediate the interactions between sex workers and those who purchase a service. Yet, they still extract money out of the transaction by seeming to supply extra services to the workers or by facilitating their working conditions. We can then see how sex work is moralised in specific ways that muddy the analysis of the class and surplus value extraction processes, and that the gig economy mentioned above needs to be further specified in relation to the role sexuality plays in our society, as the purported ultimate truth-sayer about personal and social identity (Foucault, 1994).

### **OnlyFans – at the Intersection of Sexuality and Aesthetics**

Sexuality is not the sole specification that helps us frame OnlyFans sex work. We draw here on literature around aesthetic labour as a fundamental part of our analysis. Before being able to sell their work, content producers on OnlyFans have to, most of the time, produce the content (in the full extent of the meaning of the word), but also advertise it and curate it. In this sense, ‘content producers’ is a flawed terminology to address the selling of sexual content through OnlyFans, inasmuch as it obfuscates the rest of the labour processes involved in monetising that content in a way that allows the worker to obtain a liveable income. However, the curation and especially the advertising of content is done not in a mechanical, detached way, but in a way that is directly connected to notions of authenticity and artistry. This is patent in the platform’s name itself – its focus on ‘Fans’ demonstrates a clear conceptual connection to artists who are surrounded by their fans, with the attending parasocial relationships such a word carries (Hair, 2021).

The worker is a creator, and has fans – and to draw on artistic studies is to take seriously the arguments around how artists construct their public personae. Thus, marketing sexual content – especially in an age where ‘amateur’ porn is paradigmatic (Paasonen, 2010) – means projecting an image of authenticity. This authenticity is of the content, of the sharing of the content, and of the creation of an aura of intimacy around the content that its sexual dimension does not, by itself, guarantee. It is not only content that is created, then, but first and foremost a sense of connection and intimacy that falls

under the notion of emotional labour (Laurin, 2019) and of aesthetic labour (Elias et al., 2017). This, coupled with the precarious nature of platformed labour, and with the specific stigma of sex-related work, configures a situation where any and every moment of a content creator on OnlyFans can potentially be mobilised to bolster online platform engagement, marketing, retweets, likes and so on. Each moment, then, forces the choice – conscious or not – of letting the idea of work pervade everyday life, and to not only produce and mediate a seemingly immediate intimacy, but also to take up that parasocial intimacy as authentic. Here, we mean authentic not only in the sense of perceived-as-authentic, but also in the sense of experienced-as-authentic by the content producer themselves. In this sense, “[artists] also exemplify the individualised risks, responsibilities and precariousness of contemporary work” (Baym, 2018), wherein OnlyFans content producers can be seen (albeit only partially) as artists themselves, subjected to very similar criteria when publicising and selling their work (i.e. authenticity, authorship, originality, improvisational skills, relatability and so on). Just like artists, they are structurally pushed into presenting their work as effortless, as labourless – as non-work – since this bolsters the appearance of authenticity and intimacy.

In summary, then, we resorted to the platformed, sexualised and aestheticised labour of OnlyFans content producers – and their attending structural pressures – to try and set up an area of inquiry: how do content producers on OnlyFans conceptualise what they do vis-à-vis the notions of work/labour, and of sex work specifically? Do they see themselves as sex workers or not, and why and how? Do they see what they do as a form of labour or not, and through which notions and discourses do they express their positioning? What elements – of production, creation, dissemination and advertisement – do they consider to be work, if any, and how?

## **Methodology**

This section is grounded on a qualitative analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with Italian OnlyFans sexual(ised) content producers. The interviews took place between December 2020 and February 2021. We proceeded through a snowball method, starting with exploring Instagram and Twitter accounts. Our research does not seek to be representative of all OnlyFans producers, or even all Italian OnlyFans producers. However, by deploying a social constructionist approach, informed by previously noted Foucauldian frameworks around technologies of the self, we advance knowledge about how online sex work is a multi-layered phenomenon.

Twenty participants, between 19 and 29 years old, were interviewed, all self-identifying as cisgender women. They all live in Italy and Italian is their mother tongue. The interviews were conducted in Italian via online communication platforms, due to COVID-19 restrictions in Italy. The interviewees were given pseudonyms and the interviews transcribed verbatim and then translated into English through automated software (so as to not expose

sensitive data to any third parties) and the translation was checked by the authors of this chapter. To analyse the interviews, we adopted Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews' transcriptions were read over several times to ascertain their main topics and salient concepts. The main themes were identified and then organised into topics and sub-topics (where appropriate).

### **Articulating the Professional Self**

A particularly useful concept in our discussion is Pezzutto's (2019) 'pornpreneur', a concept denoting how porn performers are increasingly internet entrepreneurs and in the process are expected to develop a range of skills and extend their work to a diverse range of business activities to increase revenue and legitimately monetise their work. Although our participants define themselves mostly as sex workers and content creators and less as porn performers, it seems that the concept of the pornpreneur also contributes effectively to the following analytical discussion, which unfolds through two thematic sections: (1) *Producing and marketing practices and customer relations* and (2) *Deplatforming sex, the ethical framing of the sexual body and the demonetisation of digital sex work*. At the same time this thematic framing also draws upon Cardoso and Scarcelli's (2021) recent work on OnlyFans performers' articulations of the platformed body, whereby they recount how corporeal, technical and self-transformational discursive practices shape and provide sustainability to the sexual body as a site of entrepreneurship.

Of the 20 participants, half perform on OnlyFans on a full-time basis (or do not have any other job) and the rest have an additional occupation (as student or an employee). Three participants are between 19 and 20 years old, fifteen are between 21 and 26 years old, and two are between 28 and 29 years old. Although this chapter does not address the interconnectedness between age and the construction of the professional self, this element coincides with the argument that sex work, more specifically digital sex work, is often defined by age (Sanders et al., 2018). Therefore, challenges to do with the precarious position of the work, concerns about the body or the socio-cultural construction of the sex worker as an illegitimate career need to be further investigated empirically. When the question of how they define themselves emerges, the majority of participants define themselves as sex workers, while of the five participants who define what they do as 'artistic nude', most also feel comfortable positioning as sex workers.

I don't consider it a job, but I consider myself a sex worker because I'm offering paid content.

(Samuela, 26)

Although, as Samuela mentions, in several cases participants do not discuss content creation and their performance as a job, our argument is that the

conditions of payment, aesthetic and affective labour, self-branding, new business and promotion practices inevitably shape their activity as work, even in cases where participants explicitly deny the definition of what they do as a job, like Eleonora:

I don't need it: I already have two salaries. Right now I see OnlyFans as a sexual pleasure. [...] at that time I think about masturbating. It has become my sexual pleasure.

(Eleonora, 22)

Her comments about which practices increase her income (“the real gain of OnlyFans is not the subscription, it is not the private videos or photos sold, but the tips”), the evaluation of the platform’s technical characteristics and interface, or the aesthetic labour invested in content production (“a set where I had my hair pulled up in two pigtails in which I behaved like a child with a dildo; photos in which I become a mistress: in one set I was wearing a full leather harness and red lipstick”) inevitably shape what she does as labour, and are considerations that do not wholly fit her narrative of it becoming her “sexual pleasure”. Therefore, we focus on practices through which performers articulate the immaterial, aesthetic, relational and affective labour of the digital sex worker more broadly – all aspects of the broader concept of platformed labour – through discourses about aesthetics, self-branding, economics, rights or policies that emerge during the discussions, even in the cases where participants do not directly identify as sex workers (Rand, 2019).

### **Producing and Marketing Practices and Customer Relations**

The very fact that our participants articulate themselves as entrepreneurs derives from their sophisticated use of (digital) marketing and sex market terms: ‘customer’, ‘sponsor’, ‘sales’, ‘camgirls’ etc., even in the cases where they do not define themselves as sex workers. The equally sophisticated ways in which they position themselves as sex workers draw on the range of entrepreneurial activities which they are expected to perform, from the creation of the content (the product) and its sustainability (self-branding across platforms) to the relational labour of customer relations.

I answer 24 hours a day to all the people who write to me, even ten times a day, I'm ultra active and I also take whole afternoons to dedicate myself only to OnlyFans content.

(Rebecca, 21)

Once a week I create content and for the rest of the days I do the editing, I spam my profile, I find new buyers. I'm not too far from a camgirl: even if there is no direct contact with the client, I still create adult content.

(Camilla, 28)

As neoliberal subjects of sexual entrepreneurship (Harvey & Gill, 2011) or pornpreneurs in the broader sense, our participants are expected to provide a full range of products (their portfolio) and services, involving but not limited to producing and editing content; expanding their portfolio, including the production of custom content; continuously working on self-branding practices; growing their fan base and adapting to changing platform policies and payment terms; engaging in diverse parasocial relational work with customers.

The key element through which OnlyFans performers define what they do as a job is the production of paid content that takes a certain amount of time to be produced and edited before being published. This is often connected to livelihood, in the sense that it is this labour they perform that allows them to have a living income, even if we cannot talk about wages in a technical sense.

I know girls who work as content creators who, unlike me, apply and spend several hours a day there.

(Giacoma, 26)

Yes, I consider it a job because I pay the rent and the bills there: I live there.

(Elda, 25)

Adding to this, performers are expected to provide a cost-estimation of what they offer (decide the amount of their subscription, whether they will have a tip or sales), which they usually do in relation to the type of content they offer, the frequency of producing new content and the requests of custom content.

It really depends on who I have in front of me, on how much the customer can spend. [...] More than the value of the content, it is a question of knowing how to manage one's income, understand people's tastes, understand how far they can go and how much money they have to spend.

(Nerina, 21)

Applying an entrepreneurial philosophy of the gig economy, OnlyFans workers are providing repertoires of how they decide the cost of their content and services. That, however, does not come without consequences and struggles, given that many performers are expected to explain and rationalise why their subscriptions are low or high. In the process they offer critical feminist accounts about women's sexual labour in pornography, expressing concerns about the devaluation of sex work, not only in terms of standard employment relations (O'Connell Davidson, 2014) but also in terms of the challenges of the more recent professionalisation of women's sexual labour brought by the platformed condition.

Many of us keep the cost low, so that people are more enticed to buy. In reality, in this way they lose their value and are commercialising

themselves, giving themselves the object woman, and that's what we wanted to avoid. For this reason many are angry with OnlyFans and the continuous low-cost pornographic sale, we are struggling to make the nude be done, but not to make the times go back as before.

(Selvaggia, 23)

An interesting discourse appearing in their discussions of how they choose the economic value of their services – also emerging in the quote above – is how the peer-to-peer education and support works, having broader implications about sex workers' rights and the issue of the legitimatisation of sex work and digital sex work more specifically.

I started alone, in case of doubts I contacted girls who had already had it for some time.

(Susanna, 23)

Everything I know I have learned from other girls I know who have given me advice.

(Loretto, 19)

Hand in hand with attributing economic value to their content, OnlyFans performers are also explaining how they are coping with the managerial and marketing requirements of platformed labour. Some of them have searched for information online or read all OnlyFans policy documentation thoroughly, while others know about marketing themselves 'intuitively', have learned from their boyfriends (who in many cases manage their accounts) or have joined support groups or asked colleagues for advice.

I asked some colleagues for advice recently, because I didn't know which platform to spam my profile (other than Instagram).

(Dorotea, 21)

I would like to inquire about marketing to improve my business.

(Camilla, 28)

In the course of the interviews, participants acknowledge the precariousness of their work and the many ways in which it is culturally and economically devalued. Nevertheless, they are taking the matter of improving their businesses, or learning how to run them effectively, seriously, projecting ways in which they embrace their entrepreneurial subjectivity more fully (Gill, 2014).

Apart from the logistics of creating content (varying from a few hours during the weekend to a few hours during the day) and sustaining relationships with their customers, time is also interpreted as how time-consuming aesthetic labour may be; each performer works on a certain body, hair or make-up routine in order to be consistent to the concept offered in their services.

I am a fitness fan: I train every day and obviously I want this thing to be seen in the videos and photos I take, I like to have a certain physical prowess.  
(Sibilla, 26)

Performers work through technologies of sexiness (Evans et al., 2010) to construct, embody and perform a certain sexual self, whether this might be ‘natural’ and ‘born with this body’ or a more sophisticated care of the sexual body. This is a cornerstone of the aesthetic labour invested in work and perceived as such in the overall understanding of work. Apart from the body, hair and make-up routine which inevitably means a cost for the performer and therefore is considered part of the job, potential or existing collaborations with brands as well as collaborations with professional photographers are also included in the overall budget needed to sustain the business of being an OnlyFans worker.

When a professional photographer contacts me and asks me to do a nude set, my budget is 100€. If I have to change cities to do a shooting, I also ask for a refund for transport. With non-professional photographers, who shoot for passion, there is no money exchange: I sign the release and everyone with those photos can do whatever they want.  
(Rebecca, 22)

Considering in this context issues of rights, content use and copyright, some performers mention that a collaboration with a professional photographer means that payment is also included. Many performers mention that, in cases where they collaborate with photographers, payment is waived when the agreement includes a shared and fair use of the content from both sides. This discourse about any sort of contracting and terms of agreement implies an entrepreneurial understanding of the work, even if it comes for ‘free’, as it might end up profitable for either of the parts or the platform labour intermediaries (Van Doorn, 2017), such as OnlyFans.

The aesthetic labour invested in production, as well as the conceptualisation of one’s products and services in order for a coherent and niche portfolio to be created, are practices contributing to self-branding, a component of indirect internet-enabled sex work (Sanders et al., 2018) and of platformed labour more broadly. As Cardoso and Scarcelli (2021) argue, authenticity and self-branding contribute to the assemblage work of bodies on OnlyFans. Self-branding, the strategic construction and representation of the online self (Marwick, 2013) become part of understanding and embodying the entrepreneurial self, given that it contributes to the cost of the business and overall revenue. Customer relations are also part of self-branding, as cross-platform promotion and marketing of their work, making self-branding a key discourse through which our participants articulate the notion of the sex worker.

Customer relationships and the parasocial relational labour are a part of the job which our participants discuss. Scholars have illustrated the element of authenticity and realness in amateur porn, gonzo and cam sex, deriving from the ways in which the reality and ordinariness of the performer is

mediated and to which consumers relate (Hardy, 2008; Patterson, 2004). This is an inherent feature of OnlyFans, and performers' work within it, where real-time interaction is a significant feature given the nature of the platform (Cardoso & Scarcelli, 2021), as in following the everyday intimate routine of the performer, customers both consume the product produced (videos, photos), but also interact with them in real life through chatting.

Others tell me the story of their life or their days: for example, the other day a client of mine said to me 'I'm very sorry, I would like to give you more money but they just fired me and I don't know what to do.'

(Gaetana, 29)

In this sense, as Hardy (2008) observes, there is a much more significant relational process taking place in which the consumer is actually interacting with the performer whose content they are consuming "as opposed to simply looking at images of an inaccessible performer giving an overplayed performance" (p. 62). This part of the job is not necessarily unproblematic for our participants, who often raise the burden of having to do it all (from production to customer service), while such parasocial relational labour is not often considered as part of their sexual labour (Hair, 2021; Rouse & Salter, 2021).

I try to hear from my customers every day: this takes me a lot of time, but I know that it helps to make the customer become attached and to renew the subscription the following month.

(Elda, 25)

Thus, performers are mostly working towards their services' sustainability, creating customer loyalty through continuous communication with their clientele and so pushing back against the precarious nature of platformed labour. Such affective sexual labour often wears performers out, given that it requires ample time to invest in communication, and is rarely documented or taken into account as part of the monetisation of sex work.

### **Deplatforming Sex, the Ethical Framing of the Sexual Body and the Demonetisation of Digital Sex Work**

Apart from discussing how they produce and promote their work, as well as how copyright and rights and economic policy issues emerge in this process, our participants discussed the issue of sex being increasingly deplatformed from popular, mainstream platforms like Instagram, Facebook or even PayPal, both as a result of the enforcement of stricter policies (e.g. Blunt & Wolf, 2020; Blunt et al., 2021) but also as a result of popular platforms aiming for more 'appropriate' – thus more censored – forms of content (Swords et al., 2021).

Customers come mainly from Telegram, also because Instagram will no longer allow you to publish certain content from December 20 onwards, the day on which I will lose my entire portfolio.

(Annachiara, 22)



Right now on Instagram you have to be very careful, due to the new policy. You have to work hard to find ways to advertise your Onlyfans link (it is not even possible to write the name of the site).

(Rebecca, 22)

References to deplatforming sex emerged in the context of accounting for how immaterial labour increases, from participants having to work across platforms to increase sponsorship, grow their fan base or promote themselves. Alongside this is the need for them to become savvier in using platforms and digital tools, which means becoming even more platform literate to adapt to continuously changing websites and policies. Participants also mention how deplatforming not only occurs when a platform restricts access to the workers' content or 'shadowbans' (the practice of seamlessly diminishing the visibility of content posted by certain accounts) them (Are, 2021), but also when they fall victims to slut-shaming or harassment.

On Instagram I say it (but not all my acquaintances know that I have an Instagram profile) and on Facebook I have never even posted set photos, because I don't think it should be of interest.

I know some nude models (they do nude art) who have had problems with Instagram and haven't posted for years because too many people have been bothering them.

(Gaetana, 29)

Apparently, then, shadowbanning or platforms' direct censorship of content is only one aspect of the multifaceted problem of deplatforming for digital sex workers, with the cultural and societal impacts being more significant and possibly more harmful. As already documented in academic fora and research, deplatforming of any sort means not just immediate banning of access to payments and shortage of current and potential work sites/environments (Blunt et al., 2021), but also an increasing demonetisation of digital sex work (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020). Further, the demonetisation of sex work online appears to be taking place in the context of how sex work is perceived in different cultural contexts, a condition related to how much sex work is established, popular or embedded in certain cultures.

Most Italians see it as a waste of money: some even ask me to give them free photos!

(Loretto, 19)

I've noticed that foreigners complain less: you can ask them for more or less any amount and, in the worst case, they don't buy the content. The Italian always has something to say about prices!

(Azzura, 19)

Our participants compare and contrast Italian with (mostly) American or other foreign customers, commenting upon the reluctance of Italians to pay

for services or their complaints about the services' pricing. Such concerns about how certain cultures devalue (and in effect demonetise) sex work are also associated with the ways in which sexual labour is socially constructed as illegitimate in certain cultural contexts and its often uncertain or paralegal socio-legal status (Rand, 2019). Challenges relating to how sex workers are thought of and how customers behave are potentially linked to such cultural conceptualisations of sexual labour. To this extent, demonetisation also takes more covert forms, such as harassment or psychological and verbal violence, burdening workers with having to cope with behaviours reflecting the stigmatisation of their work (and the related social concerns about it thereof) (Sanders et al., 2018; Rand, 2019).

## Conclusions

This chapter explored the ways in which OnlyFans workers define themselves, or not, as sex workers. In fact, we aimed at understanding how OnlyFans workers articulate the professional self in the context of the gig economy of platformed labour. Taking into account ongoing theoretical and academic research that prioritises the need to understand and problematise the insecurity of platformed and online sex work and its diverse and complex nature, we have thematically mapped the key issues shaping OnlyFans' workers' agenda when it comes to how labour is defined in their particular case. Our work has been informed by theoretical and empirical approaches to aesthetic and affective labour, the class-defined nature of work, and the ways in which authenticity and empowerment become technologies through which OnlyFans workers are defining and shaping their professional selves; not least, we were interested in positioning towards how such practices are also taking the form of struggles for autonomy and professional and social well-being in the challenging neoliberal entrepreneurial context of the gig economy.

Our participants' definitions of themselves invariably played around the tension between sex worker and content creator, while acknowledging the socially loaded nature of the former. Their agenda unfolds in two themes, one related to production, marketing practices and customer relations, and the second to do with deplatforming sex, the ethical framing of the sexual body and the demonetisation of digital sex work. These thematic sections envelop the key discursive elements through which OnlyFans workers articulate what their job is, what they need to do and what is at stake in the process of 'keeping the business running'. By deploying the range of entrepreneurial activities, OnlyFans workers are defining the multifaceted nature of their work at the same time that they are positioning themselves as pornpreneurs, unpacking the specificities of the job to do with sexuality and sexual content as a commodity.

An interesting aspect of their accounts is the feminist and post-feminist ways in which they approach the community of sex workers, peer-to-peer education, workers' rights in the sex industry and the challenges of the professionalisation of women's sexual labour brought by their platformed condition. Alongside such concerns come nuanced thoughts about issues of

copyright and collaborations, whether these are among sex workers, sex workers and other types of adjacent content creators (e.g. photographers), or workers and brands. In this sense, there is a full entrepreneurial rationale which our participants unpack when talking about the challenges and expectations of the job – aspects that have been seriously under-researched until now. Moreover, although there is well-established work on the parasocial relational labour of platformed work, our findings show that more nuanced empirical work needs to take place. Customer relations are inherently part of one's self-branding, they take place across platforms and through various marketing practices, and they constitute a significant part of the articulation of the professional self. If we consider how culturally and socially loaded the concept of sex work is and the burden of social stigma it frequently carries, then a more in-depth examination of how relational labour is lived and perceived seems paramount.

Finally, there is a key concern among workers, one which sits at the intersection of economic decisions by private companies and the sphere of the political, and which has been growing in the debate about policing sex work and sexual content. Issues around the increasing and systematic deplatforming of sex, and therefore sex workers, are discussed through its consequences on workers' daily life, professional choices and the evolving demonetisation of their work. Deplatforming policies and actions seem to expand, instead of limiting, the already significant proportion of immaterial labour sex workers provide. If all their labour is platform labour, then deplatforming means losing access to basic means of subsistence. Having summed up key issues that emerge from our participants' accounts of the entrepreneurial self, we need to acknowledge that to grasp the diversity of platformed sex work in terms of production, representation and consumption is a much more complex research endeavour, in terms of both theory and methodology.

## Note

- 1 This study was part of the research project *Digital Intimacies and Emerging Adults in Southern Europe*, funded by the Independent Social Research Foundation – London ([www.isrf.org](http://www.isrf.org)).

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# 11 Trans-exclusionary Discourses on Social Media in Spain

*Cilia Willem, R. Lucas Platero and  
Iolanda Tortajada*

## Introduction

In this chapter we intend to disentangle the complexity of the different and overlapping issues that are circulating online with regards to transgender rights in Spain, the main actors involved, their implicit interests, and their online communicative strategies. At the end we will argue that only by uniting, not fighting, can the feminist movement and its allies overcome these divisions and succeed in its struggle against patriarchal oppression.

Biological sex as a fixed category of gender identity has been questioned by nonbinary feminists and trans activists globally during recent years. Judith Butler has commented on the need to reassess the ‘category of woman’ with regards to sex and gender (Gleeson, 2021). Sex, according to trans-inclusive feminists, should not be the only and most important category of gender identification. Some of the most outspoken opponents of this growing dismissal of biological sex are women themselves, ranging from pro-life advocates to radical feminists and prominent figures like author J. K. Rowling: “If sex isn’t real, the lived reality of women globally is erased” (Rowling, 2020). The term TERF was first used by Australian blogger TigTog in 2008 (Smythe, 2018), as a neutral term describing feminists, such as Sheila Jeffreys, who divided feminism among those who include trans women and those who do not (Stryker, 2017). Since it was first coined, the use of the term TERF has changed and nowadays is imbued with strong emotions, leading to some of those who identify with TERF values to reject the label (Hines, 2019). Due to its emotional associations, and for the sake of scholarly rigour, we will not use the term TERF for the profiles we analysed in this chapter, but the word *radfem*, although we acknowledge that many radical feminists were – and still are – trans-inclusive (Srinivasan, 2021).

In Spain, this global cultural war between TERFs and transfeminists – “a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond” (Koyama, 2003, p. 244) – has been going on at least since 2018, with controversial reactions (Platero, 2020a). At the Podemos Fall School, transfeminist Sam Fernández (2018) called for the expansion of the political subject of

feminism, stating “we need to risk the political subject of feminism [...] not to carry on securing women’s bodies as a biological entity”. A short video clip from Fernández’s talk went viral, with 15,000 views and thousands of tweets discussing the feminist political subject, but more importantly, it opened up visible debates and backlash on the inclusion of trans women in the feminist movement.

In fact, the Podemos Fall School marked a rupture with a tradition of inclusion of trans women within Spanish feminism (Platero, 2020b; Romero, 2020). Trans women have visibly participated in the Feminist State Conferences since 1993, introducing debates on what it means to be a woman, their experiences with prostitution, and feminist alliances, among other topics (Platero & Ortega, 2016). In the 2000 Feminist State Conference, the term transfeminism was used for the first time (Solá, 2013, p. 19), where it was argued that trans women were feminists as well, in tune with other transfeminist debates worldwide (Heyes, 2015). Trans issues then went from being a peripheral topic to a central one, with 3,500 participants at the 2009 Granada Conference claiming a ‘transfeminist turn’, discussing intersectionality and going beyond binaries. After the conference, a manifesto for the transfeminist uprising was released, supporting trans de-pathologisation, the need for a shared agenda between trans and feminists, and the reaffirmation of transfeminism against traditional binary feminism (Fernández & Araneta, 2014, p. 52). The discussion was now no longer focused on a few trans activists participating in these feminist conferences, but rather it intended to be a change of paradigm that acknowledged queer theory, anti-racism, de-colonial feminism, and other forms of critical activism (Solá, 2013).

Despite the relevance of the Granada Conference for Spanish feminism, other activists did not acknowledge its developments. The grassroots feminist debates on transfeminism were ignored in part by feminism groups, such as the Feminist Party. Led by Lidia Falcón, these groups were responsible for a backlash on trans women, with aggressive media articles (2019) and two manifestos against trans self-determination (2019). Falcón’s statements sparked a hate crime accusation by Plataforma Trans, which was later dismissed by the Prosecutor’s Office in 2021. At the 16th Rosario Acuña Feminist School, in July 2019, several second wave feminist academics, politicians, and activists, such as Alicia Miyares, Amelia Valcárcel, or Anna Prats, made a mockery of a feminist debate on trans rights, with cruel remarks on trans women.

On social media, the resistance to these messages was soon translated into the hashtag *#hastaalcoñodetransfobia* – ‘we’re fed up with transphobia’. After these actions, the Leftist Party expelled the Feminist Party from their coalition. The remarks used are sadly very much in tune with the discourses by the Spanish far-right party Vox and other ultra-conservative organisations, such as Hazte Oír or Foro de la Familia (Beltrán, 2019), thus making TERFs and far-right organisations strange bedfellows.



The response of the Rosario Acuña organisers, after many protests in various media, was to keep on blaming queer theory and its influence on the new LGBTQ+ law, which in their view put women's rights at risk; as Ángeles Álvarez put it in the video "Freedom of speech against insults and manipulation" (Álvarez, 2019):

The true concern of the feminist movement about the risks of legislating under the parameters of queer theory appeared after the parliamentary initiative of the so-called 'Law of LGBT equality' [...] some sectors are now introducing elements that distort and may put at risk some of the rights acquired by all women.

(Minute 5:01; authors' translation)

In June 2020, feminists of the socialist party, led by former Deputy Prime Minister Carmen Calvo, released a manifesto arguing the new Trans Law "would negatively impact women's rights and safety, putting at risk the identity criteria of 47 million people" (Guede, 2021). The manifesto 'Arguments against the theories that ignore women's reality' (PSOE, 2021) found some support, resulting in small but visible demonstrations in various cities and the spread of transphobic materials online. In Calvo's view, a possible new Trans (or LGBTQ+) Law granting gender self-determination would jeopardise the current legislation on gender violence, since "any man [committing a sex offence] could claim he is a woman" and supposedly get away with it (Guede, 2021). Another transphobic manifesto was released by Confluencia Movimiento Feminista (2020), "in favour of the feminist agenda, against trans laws", replicating the arguments coined at the socialist manifesto.

Many articles and hashtags have warned about the 'erasure of women' should the law on transgender rights be approved (for example, Álvarez, 2019, 2020; Miyares, 2020; Posada, 2020), while other voices have defended the need for a transfeminist struggle (for example, Bambú, 2019; Mayor et al., 2020; Robles, 2021, among others). The debate is increasingly polarised, coinciding with the social and political debates on the new Trans (and LGBTQ+) Laws currently under discussion in Parliament. Most of these debates are taking place online, and thus this chapter will shed light on the specific affordances of social media for political action and engagement of the transfeminist movement in Spain. This cultural war on trans women is linked to the sex wars on pornography of the 1970s, more visible since 2018 on Twitter (as well as on Instagram), with trans-exclusionary influencers such as our sample, @laurardondo, @paulafraga, @barbijaputa, and @LaEtxebarria, among others.

Meanwhile, the strength of both feminism and trans activism has also been increasing in Spain, with relevant voices supporting trans women and feminist values as part of the feminist movement. The 2018 and 2019 feminist strikes were extremely successful, along with protests in the streets against gang rape and gender violence (Romero, 2020). Despite the vehemence



of some trans-exclusionary feminists, the majority of the Spanish feminist movement have shown their support for trans rights and the new Trans Law and released a manifesto in 2021 called ‘Feminists for trans people’s rights’, supported by over 11,000 groups and individuals (VVAA, 2021).

### **TERF and Radfem on Spanish Social Media: What Are the Issues?**

Despite being a minority, the economic, social, and cultural capital of trans-exclusionary feminists is usually significant, as is their ability to create narratives that oppose feminism and trans activism while proposing a problematic and exclusive gender division. This anti-trans sentiment is especially blatant in social networks, which play a fundamental role in mainstream media outlets and broader political debates (Hines, 2019). In the same way, the (visual) narratives created by transfeminist influencers are also crucial for public opinion on issues of feminist, queer, and trans theory (Bettcher, 2017; Halberstam, 2018; Platero & Rosón, 2019). For example, transfeminist YouTuber Elsa Ruiz Cómica holds firm and critical transfeminist standpoints (Halberstam, 2018) with regards to gender equality, male privilege, feminine gender attributions, beauty standards, and the male gaze, among others (Tortajada et al., 2019, 2020; Araüna et al., 2021). Elsa’s YouTube channel is a humorous, and at the same time critical, space for a transfeminist stance: politically committed to transformation, while combining personal fulfilment and ‘active empathy’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

The issues are complex but eventually all come down to the following question: is granting trans people the right to gender self-determination really limiting women’s rights? Does the trans activist fight for the de-pathologisation of legal transition, the non-discrimination of trans people, the protection against gender violence, and equality of rights really imply a dismissal of biological sex, the denial of discrimination on the basis of sex, or ultimately the ‘erasure of womanhood’? What are the interests of agents who want public opinion to believe that rights for trans people imply a significant recoil in women’s rights, who feed the polarisation online with populist arguments and fake news? Why and how do these agents deliberately misinterpret events or facts, and make the public confused about issues of gender, feminism, and trans rights?

### **Methodology**

Using a qualitative, feminist, and queer approach (Van Zoonen, 1994; De Lauretis, 2015), we analysed the discourse of anti-trans or trans-exclusionary feminists on social media. We explored the Twitter accounts of four trans-exclusionary feminists with a large number of followers, with the aim of determining the main elements in their discourse, how they put their opinions into circulation, and what the implications are for both online

and offline debate. This sample of digital content allowed us to broaden our understanding (Gerlitz & Rieder, 2013) about how anti-trans action is organised and legitimised online.

We selected the following trans-exclusionary feminists who were most active on both Twitter and Instagram during the week prior to the pre-approval of the Trans Law on 29 June 2021 (week from 23 to 30 June 2021):

**Laura Redondo**

Twitter (TLR): <https://twitter.com/LauraRdondo>; 421k followers

Instagram (ILR): [www.instagram.com/laurardondo/](http://www.instagram.com/laurardondo/); 19k followers

**Paula Fraga**

Twitter (TPF): [https://twitter.com/Paulafraga\\_](https://twitter.com/Paulafraga_); 265k followers

Instagram (IPF): [www.instagram.com/paulafraga\\_](http://www.instagram.com/paulafraga_); 19k followers

**Barbijaputa (B)**

Twitter (TB): <https://twitter.com/Barbijaputa>; 290k followers

Instagram (IB): [www.instagram.com/barbijaputaaa/](http://www.instagram.com/barbijaputaaa/); 63k followers

**Lucía Etxebarria (LE)**

Twitter (TLE): <https://twitter.com/LaEtxebarria>; 931k followers

Instagram (ILE): [www.instagram.com/lucia\\_etxebarria\\_](http://www.instagram.com/lucia_etxebarria_); 53k followers

Our analysis points to roughly four axes around which online trans-exclusionary narratives evolve: (1) the ‘silencing of (true) feminism’; (2) the ‘erasure of women’ and arguments for gender abolition; (3) ‘the bill hasn’t been passed yet’; and (4) accusations of hate speech. These discourses are presented as an exercise in rationality versus the allegedly anti-scientific claims of trans groups and lobbies.

By analysing anti-trans narratives online we see that its authors are mainly angry and use attacks, misinformation, and self-defence as a communication strategy, rather than debate or dialogue. Feminists who define themselves as materialists and socialists consider postmodern queer theory to be wrong and pernicious, implying that trans rights are a key element of queer theory or that all trans people are in tune with queer theory ideals. Also, anti-trans narratives argue that the dismissal of sex as a biological category is a common and widespread practice that endangers women who are the oppressed sex by definition, and who are being unjustly attacked.

On Twitter, most of the main anti-trans advocates in Spain are privileged white women, often linked to the socialist party PSOE. Their (digital) cultural capital allows them to create and circulate narratives of confrontation between feminism and transfeminism on the basis of ‘erasure of women’ and women’s rights. Although they argue that they are being displaced and invisible, they play a fundamental role in online and offline academic, media, and political debates (Bettcher, 2017; Hines, 2019).

### **Silencing of ‘True Feminism’**

We have found many tweets of anti-trans feminists and radfems claiming that they are victims of ‘queers’ harassing them and accusing them of being ‘white supremacists’ (a concept used ironically by TLR). In addition, they argue that the ‘government is silencing historical feminists and feminist experts’ (TB) while the ‘media gives a voice to those who openly threaten them’ (TLE).

Some of these messages contain arguments or disqualifications, and often consider the attacks suffered by ‘those who try to be critical of gender’ as ‘misogyny’ and ‘sexist violence’. Furthermore, the complicity and inaction of those who should stop them is considered ‘incredible’ (TLR). The deputies who are supporting the Trans Law do not denounce and fight the ‘sexist attacks’ received by ‘true feminists’ who are critical of the notion of gender (TLE). These kinds of discourse accuse Twitter Spain and the media of hypocrisy; of applying patriarchal censorship policies; of defamation; of coercion; and of expelling them from media spaces to ‘silence the feminist debate’ (TLR, TPF). In addition, they state that this persecution also happens on the streets and in bars and restaurants, from which the ‘gender lobby’ wants to expel those who are marked as being TERF (TLE). Mirroring events in the 1980s in the US, currently Spain has an environment in which it is difficult to express any kind of gender variance, since the emphasis on being ‘a woman’ and the accusation of trans infiltration in feminist safe spaces impedes any dialogue about possible alliances or complicities (Halberstam, 2018).

Radfems (rightly) claim that feminism is severely under attack, in the political area, in public opinion, and on (social) media. However, instead of pointing at patriarchal backlash and conservative and right-wing political movements organising hate speech towards feminists globally, they accuse the trans collective: the new bill could be used to infiltrate feminism and destroy it from within. To illustrate its impact, and how the entire feminist universe of women’s rights will be in danger’, radfems present gender self-determination as an open door to the ‘legalisation of prostitution and surrogacy’ (TLR, ILR). By establishing a (false) causal relationship between the dismissal of old feminist demands and the trans collective, they present the latter as a return to a sexist, misogynist, and anti-feminist ideology. According to them, trans rights would be the vehicle to undo the achievements of the feminist movement so far and allow men to enter these spaces, thus silencing the ‘true’ feminists.

### **‘Erasing Women’ and Gender Abolition**

The key argument of anti-trans feminists criticising the proposed law is that granting trans people the right to self-determination will entail the ‘erasure of women’. This idea started spreading online in Spain as *#BorradoDeMujeres* – in reference to the global *#ErasingWomen* hashtag which increased during

early 2021 with Biden's executive order on combating gender-based discrimination in the US. Spanish TERFs' online discourse suggests that it is therefore necessary to 'abolish gender' as a category, and re-establish the concept of biological sex, which is an unquestionable 'material reality' in their view. As an example of this, during the summer and autumn of 2021, some of the radfems started using the Taliban take-over in Afghanistan to highlight that the discrimination and backlash against Afghan women is exclusively based on the notion of sex and, so they argue, 'what must be abolished is gender, not biological sex' (TLR, ILR). These arguments are accompanied by new complaints of silencing and 'erasing women'. In reference to the use of the veil and the 'cultural defence of Islamism', they denounce the names and surnames of some women in politics, such as Najat Driouech, Nora Baños, or Ada Colau – all from leftist parties in Spain – labelling them hypocrites and populists. They accuse them of being hypocrites as they are against violence, but their actions and messages 'embracing difference' have 'reinforced everything that made those differences possible' (TLR, TPF).

In the following quote this argument is expanded to a more serious accusation: 'The current climate belongs to those who embraced postmodernism and relativism instead of fighting for rights. Today, they are necessary accomplices' (TLR). Another quote is also relevant, on the Ministry of Equality's support for the victims of Afghanistan: 'Your tears for Afghanistan are nothing more than an opportunistic position. Feminism is exercised' (TLR); radfems eventually align themselves with post-colonial and paternalistic positions, defending the women of Afghanistan who 'must be saved from macho Muslims'. For these radfems the violence suffered by Afghan women is part of the oppressive practices of Islam based on sex, although, according to them, this cannot be said out loud 'without being attacked and disqualified' (TLR, TLE, TPF). Being labelled as racist or Islamophobic is another example of the attacks they receive, in which they are accused of multiple phobias, while trying to 'combat fundamentalisms, be it Islamists or queer' (TPF).

Radfems also argue that the inclusive language strategy proposed by transfeminists to replace the term 'woman' (as well as 'man') with 'person' is misogynist and homophobic, since it erases women and makes sexual preference or orientation irrelevant. They add that it makes no sense to talk about lesbians, for example, 'because they are just women' (TLE). They also suggest that women are now expected to accept being erased, in order not to offend what they call 'queer genderism'. In addition to commenting on specific examples – true or fake – of the 'erasure of women', they defend a rigorous use of language, naming women and men, contrasting the sex-gender system with what they conceive as individualistic identitarianism.

One of the main consequences of radfems' fear of women being 'erased' is that they deny the very existence of gender or sexual identity. According to them, materialist or structuralist approaches are incompatible with premises of agency, constructivism, or identity politics. The vindication of 'identity'

in their view automatically leads to the erasure of women, as identity is defined outside the scope of ‘material reality’ and ‘rights’ and is therefore totally expendable (TLE). This notion, which is presented by radfems as ‘scientifically established’, and which does not contradict common sense, has been widely contested by various disciplines and theoretical currents: constructivist theory, reflexive modernisation approaches, and Cultural Studies among others.

In addition, in the same way that conservative and (far) right-wing groups have attacked laws favouring equality or defending the prevention of sexist violence, the concept of gender self-determination is ridiculed and simplified (‘there is no such thing as gender identity’). Thus, gender self-determination is reduced to a joke, an absurd act that is not only frivolous, but also plays in favour of patriarchy: it allows men to invade women’s spaces. This is an idea expressed by TLE when she poses the example of Mexican women who tried to escape sexual slavery by declaring they were men: they didn’t get away with it because they were women – implying that men would have got away with claims on womanhood in similar circumstances.

Gender self-determination is thus presented as a ‘death trap for feminism’ that will make public policies that protect and benefit women disappear. The new law is allegedly based on ‘tricks’ to replace the notion of structural inequality suffered by women with that of freedom of choice or, in other words, the possibility of choosing biological sex, which becomes a kind of mandate. For this reason, radfems present themselves as feminists who support trans rights (but not the law) just as they support the previous trans law. This previous law, approved in 2007, requires people who want to change their name and sex on their identity card to be Spanish, to be over 18 years of age, and to demonstrate that they have a psychiatric diagnosis of gender dysphoria and have undergone two years of medical hormonal treatment. Radfems argue that the free choice of sex is not a right but, *de facto*, a dissolution of the biological, legal, and political category of sex, essential to combat inequalities.

Faced with these alleged ‘tricks’, radfems make it clear that being a woman is not and should never be ‘feeling like a woman’, and that sex change is based on and perpetuates sexist stereotypes. In addition, sexual reassignment is a business that is based on a non-existent (or rare) need, as ‘many people overcome dysphoria thanks to psychological treatment or they change their minds during puberty’ (ILE). Here they not only follow the theories of the dismissal of transgenderism led by Kenneth Zucker, but also reinforce the idea of psychological treatment as a form of behaviour modification (Zucker et al., 2012), a practice currently rejected by professional associations and prohibited by Spanish law. This neoliberal logic of free choice, where ‘everyone is what they want to be’ (TB), falsely promotes the assignment of sex as a real possibility of choice.

In line with Anglo-American trans-exclusionary feminists, according to radfems the feminist agenda must thus seek gender abolition. Radfems

point at the trans movement and their claims on gender identity as ‘part of the problem’, accusing it of being misogynistic (TLE). Ironically, trans-exclusionary feminists often ridicule trans women who fail to ‘pass’ as cis women, thus policing women’s bodies in terms of what they should look like according to gender norms. Such feminists tend to be dismissive of nonbinary people, who, in their refusal of gender distinction, actually have “a good claim to being the truest vanguard of gender abolition” (Srinivasan, 2021). The problem is that TERF discourses advocating gender abolition undermine transfeminists’ struggle to be recognised within the feminist movement, and produce an artificial division between transsexuality (materiality) and being trans (misogyny), following the pathologising medical logic that ‘true transsexuals’ – those who modify their bodies and go through a medical and legal process of recognition of their desired sex – must be distinguished from those who call themselves trans but do not meet these requirements. The problem with this meritocratic logic is that it actually restricts the access of transsexuals to some rights (Spade, 2011; Stryker, 2017), such as the changing of name and sex on legal documents in Spain.

### **Not a Law (Just Yet)**

In the material we analysed, we found an ever-present element: an attack on the Ministry of Equality, led by Irene Montero from Unidas Podemos (UP). During the formation of the current coalition government of the socialist party PSOE and UP in early 2020, the Ministry of Equality went from being led by socialist women to being led by Unidas Podemos. In this sense, several voices point out the relevance of some women in the socialist party in giving visibility to trans-exclusionary discourses during the time that PSOE led the Ministry, when it was associated with access to rights for women and LGBTQ+, such as gender equality laws or same-sex marriage (Romero, 2020; Platero, 2020b). These critical voices consider that PSOE has given in to ‘gender radicals’ and is now on the slippery slope of identity politics promoted by UP, thus betraying itself – namely its feminist legacy and its progress with laws favouring women – as well as betraying feminism and all women in general, a betrayal that the radfems consider ‘unforgivable’ (TLR, IPF). They consider that the current government is ‘silencing dissident voices’, in this case their own (ILE, TLE).

In addition, radfems point out that the government is manipulating public opinion by claiming that this is the ‘first trans law ever’ or suggesting that it is approved already, when it is currently – as of autumn 2021 – still pending to pass in Parliament (ILE, TLE). In contrast with the institutional messages that define 29 June 2021 as a historic day for LGBTI+ rights, 29 June 2021 is reformulated by radfems as an infamous day, an absurdity, a moment of ‘legal setback’ and loss of everything feminism has fought for. They insist on the idea that the to-be-approved law is being under debate but is not passed just yet, and that the struggle will continue until the people who ‘violate

the rights of women and children' with their policies are expelled from the institutions (IPF, ILE, TLE). A predominant definition of the current situation is that of conflict, struggle, and the impossibility of understanding each other: 'They wanted to confront us, so here we are. And let them keep underestimating our strength; one day they will understand what an organised and pissed-off movement is capable of. Under no circumstances will we give up' (IPF). As part of the construction of the conflict, the analysed profiles regularly post images of aggressions against them by (supposedly) pro-trans-rights activists, who are 'encouraged by the government itself' and the institutions, and who boycott radfems' demonstrations and actions. Trans-exclusionary feminists present themselves as 'brave women' who will 'not give up until they achieve their goals' (IPF).

As the former government spokesperson Carmen Calvo – who considers herself a radical feminist – has said, the draft law on transgender rights 'does not offer legal guarantees to Spanish society', because, according to her, various factions, both conservative and progressive, reject it (Guede, 2021). The fact that conservative and right-wing parties, including the extreme right, currently share the anti-trans discourse is a delicate issue in some sectors of PSOE. However, radfems do not explicitly reject or distance themselves from far-right discourses on this issue. Likewise, they do now eschew fake news, such as if this bill is approved 'men will be allowed to participate in feminine competitions at the Olympics' (TLR), 'anyone will be able to falsify their sex on their ID card in a question of hours' (TLR), or 'anyone who wears feminist symbols on T-shirts or necklaces is at risk of being fined' (ILE). This kind of content is eagerly shared – sometimes with 'real' examples – in the same way that far-right populist groups use misinformation and fake news online on issues such as immigration.

Radfems refer to the new law as the 'Montero Bill' (in reference to the Minister of Equality) or ironically as the 'dyke Bill' (ILE). They associate the bill with the idea of legislation by and for minorities (it is even branded as being a whim, a defence of 'no one's freedoms') to 'eliminate' the majority (in this case all women). In addition, while questioning the government's promotion of the law, they argue that comparing this bill with any other feminist law is not legitimate, because it is 'far from being feminist' (TLE). Therefore, 'Montero has betrayed the feminist cause' (TLE). Radfems also lament the lack of dialogue with feminist groups who are critical of the bill and 'who have not been heard' (TB). It is also suggested that 'members of the Government incited counter-demonstrations throughout Spain against people protesting to stop the law from being passed' (ILE).

As a consequence, radfems suggest that, far from being approved already, the law will face many legal appeals by conservative parties and associations, in addition to those by feminists, and that the bill may not pass the vote in Congress. They predict that it will be a difficult process, partly due to a rupture within the PSOE itself along the fault line of gender self-determination.



They add that the current coalition government will lose the next elections, and PSOE will lose the support of its feminist members and voters (ILE).

## Hate Speech

As argued, due to the polarisation of mainstream media and online, the term TERF is interpreted by trans-exclusionary feminists as an insult, and very alien to their genuine feminist practice. Using the term TERF is offensive and, in their own words, generates violence and hate speech against those women who denounce ‘the misogyny implicit in trans self-determination’ (TB). Radfems present themselves as brave and fierce, and see standing up against the loss of rights as the last bastion of women’s – including transsexual women’s – defence: they state that hatred against trans women is not their thing because they ‘have read a lot and are well-informed’ (ILE, TLE).

They defend themselves by claiming that their demands are not transphobic, whether it is about girls’ rights to stop being stigmatised for menstruating or when they demand that there be no legislation based on ‘self-perceptions’ or that transsexual women and men not be deprived of medical and psychological care (TB). For them, the bodily materiality or the essentiality of sex and the body are an unquestionable starting premise.

Trans-exclusionary feminists accuse their critics of ‘wanting to silence them’, because, according to them, all their Twitter content ‘will be a crime when the law is approved’ (TB). This law is ‘not a trans law, it is a gag law’ (TLE), and ‘you can hit your children, but you cannot call them by the name they got at birth, if that offends them’ (TLE). All this, according to the profiles we analysed, leads to hate speech. They claim that their names are part of a list circulating on social media in which people are encouraged to stop following them, ‘because they are TERFs’ and because the ‘content they generate is harmful’, while they actually receive thousands of likes and retweets. They consider their claims to be scientifically founded, and that TERF is a form of disqualification similar to *feminazi*. Some re-appropriate the term TERF, humorously resignifying the acronym as “Tells Everyone Real Facts”, sharing memes of agent Scully from *The X-Files*.

As part of their presentation as victims of hate speech – whether or not this is a legitimate complaint – radfems also suggest the idea that ‘men are infiltrating the demonstrations’ they organise and are attacking feminists. This reinforces the notion of masculinity as the ‘Other’, and transness as men who are taking advantage of the to-be-passed law to self-define as women, occupying feminine spaces, and criminal offenders serving sentences in women’s prisons after a sex change (ILE, TB, TLE). At the cry of ‘it’s already happening’, generalisations are established from particular cases that are decontextualised or are outright fake. The law is ridiculed and reduced to some absurd examples, with it being pointed out that the ‘self-perception of gender does not have a material reality’, and the law presented as a tool for destroying opportunities for women’s equality. Moreover, transactivism is



presented as ‘a movement created by men in order to erase women’s rights’ (TLR, TB, ILR).

In contrast with their own claims as victims of online hate speech, radfems attack and dismiss trans and transfeminist advocates with disqualifying attributions such as unscientific, ignorant, or violent. The ‘queer lobby’ is seen as a threat to democracy, women, and children at a global level, so according to trans-exclusionary feminists it is necessary to combat the ‘damage caused by the philosopher Judith Butler’ and ‘expose the dangers of the erasure of sex with rigorous scientific work, even if by doing so we pay a high price on social media’ (TRL). Hate speech, then, becomes a justified means to a noble end.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Although the impact of TERF discourses in Spain has often been minimised (Platero & Ortega, 2016), these voices are currently gaining momentum and are present in sites of power. For all four influencers we analysed we found common narratives regarding the alleged threat new trans rights pose for women’s rights. These narratives include the ‘erasure of women’ and the silencing of ‘true’ feminism, arguments for the abolition of gender as an identity marker, the lack of scientific support for trans rights such as gender self-determination or transition of children and youth, and accusations of hate speech from trans collectives. To convince their followers of these narratives, trans-exclusionary feminists utilise misinformation strategies such as sharing false data or fake news, using faulty argumentation, and adopting divisive language or dehumanising metaphors, some of which constitute strategies of online hate speech (Noriega & Iribarren, 2009). These deliberate misinterpretations, deceptions, and instrumentalisations of transfeminist claims include the idea that ‘self-declared’ women are taking over feminine categories in sports, or trans men can be imprisoned in female prisons as sex offenders. Trans-exclusionary feminists question the very notion of gender, blaming the ‘queer lobby’ for the erasure of women, considering them some sort of inquisition (*‘inqueerquisición’*). In fact, their readings of thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir to justify partisan positions are a misreading of these authors’ historic contributions.

TERF interpretations of rigorous scientific work are not always convincing: the profiles we analysed generally juxtapose structuralism versus individualism and reduce constructivism to a postmodernist stance of diversity and free choice. This odd mixture of theories, defended as a scientific paradigm, implies a rejection of the theoretical achievements of feminism and causes confusion, since from these postulates many theoretical concepts and feminist analysis are revisited and their original meaning changed. The vindication of sex as a category, for example, starts from a reductionist analysis of the contributions of original radical feminism that, from its earliest theory, has always included trans people (Srinivasan, 2021). Issues such as

the sexual division of labour (Lerner, 1986) and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) have always been considered as forms of oppression by feminism, and both gender and sex can be analysed as social constructs resulting from patriarchal power relations (Rubin, 1975).

As feminists, we know that science is not neutral and that it is loaded with values, but it would be better for the debate to transcend both transphobic prejudices and partisan interests and engage in serious theoretical work on which policies can be based. We should ask ourselves: are these transphobic and trans-exclusionary theoretical (mis)interpretations well founded or deliberately misleading? What interests do these ‘weird and outlandish theories about the self’ (Halberstam, 2018) serve and what are their consequences?

Not only are TERF discourses gaining the support of the extreme right in their claims against trans people, but they are also increasingly aligned with the strategies of white supremacist movements that are anti-feminist, racist, and against sexual and reproductive rights, among others. In this sense, it could be argued that trans-exclusionary feminists are mainly ‘angry white women’, privileged women who instead of following an emancipatory reading of feminism are telling other women what to do, and how they should think about trans rights. These discourses are also found in other TERFs at the international level, which accounts for a more global action movement, at least in Europe and North America, currently facing a paradigm shift regarding the rights of trans people, who are obtaining greater visibility and recognition in many places on the planet.

Finally, we argue with Srinivasan (2021) that fissures in the feminist movement along the fault lines of gender “should not be buried as signs of failure but worked through as opportunities for insight”. At the same time, we should be critical as to whether the current fissures are part of a natural evolution of feminist thought or instigated from the outside with the obscure goal of undermining feminism from the inside. The conflict and division between trans-inclusive and trans-exclusionary feminism is partly informed by an artificial debate and intentional divide between those who defend a minority collective’s rights and those who claim these rights will limit their own, which is further amplified by social media echo chambers. We need to ask ourselves where this divide originates, and who is sitting in front of their screens right now watching ‘feminism versus feminism’. The deliberate misinformation about specific issues related to trans rights has led many women in Spain to genuinely think their rights are in danger under this new bill. The current polarisation and hate discourses on Twitter and Instagram in Spain, as in the rest of the world, are not contributing to the real debate on trans rights, but instead only divide the feminist movement, disqualifying it in the face of public opinion. We believe that only by uniting, and sticking to an honest and constructive dialogue, can the feminist movement and its allies overcome these fissures and succeed in the struggle against patriarchal oppression.

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# 12 The Rise of Bimbo TikTok

## Digital Sociality, Postfeminism and Disidentificatory Subjects

*AP Pierce*

### Introduction

The ten “cum-mandments” of the New Age Bimbo “Bible” (Bible), shown in large pink font on a laptop draped in pink light, include items like “girls are pretty”, “birth control”, and “bark at straight people” (Chlapecka, 2020). What has been named “New Age Bimbohood” (Cortés, 2020) on TikTok might be conceptualised as a community, trend, movement, or mindset, one which toes a line between normative and resistant in its hyperfeminine aesthetic and unabashed outward sexuality. The disavowal by many young people of oppressive and elitist forms of feminism and the rise of the algorithmically dominated social media platform of TikTok made conditions just right for a generational reclamation of the gendered insult. This chapter examines the community of ‘Bimbo TikTok’ (or ‘BimboTok’) specifically regarding its feminist and political potential and limits. It explores the ways in which the bimbo has been updated and reimagined, and what the implications of an entire digital public based on ‘bimbohood’ are for feminist and queer politics of gender, race, and sexuality.

This research is an interdisciplinary meeting between studies of gender, sexuality, media, and digital cultures. Following Lauren Berlant’s “aesthetic rendition of affective experience [to provide] evidence of historical processes” (Berlant, 2011, pp. 11, 16), I contend that the affective publics created on and through the platform of TikTok can reveal queer engagements with, or reactions to, contemporary formations of social and political life. Methods used involved an analysis of videos by BimboTok creators or those which used specific popular hashtags (a function which is heavily used on TikTok: see Hautea et al., 2021) largely with medium-to-high levels of engagement from other users (views, likes, and comments). I will be examining BimboTok’s position in a (post-)postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2016) and, ultimately, arguing for the resistive potential of New Age bimbohood as a disidentificatory engagement with norms of gender and affect. Disidentification is a hermeneutic, often used in fields of queer theory and gender studies, that refers to processes of “recycling and rethinking encoded meaning” in which a minoritised subject, in a strategy of survival and subversion, “tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against

a cultural form” (Muñoz, 1999, pp. 31, 12). Disidentificatory subjects take on norms of dominant culture, “sign[s] to which [they do] not belong”, in ways that resignify those norms and uncover their “universalizing and exclusionary machinations” in the service of empowering marginalised communities (Butler, 2011, p. 219; Muñoz, 1999, p. 31). Both Butler (2011) and Muñoz (1999) identify the ways that practices of disidentification can reshape discourse and envision new worlds for queer and gender nonnormative people, especially those of colour.

### **TikTok and the Resurgence of the Bimbo**

The app Douyin was launched in China in 2016, and later renamed TikTok, merging with US lip-syncing app Musical.ly (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Its popularity boomed, making TikTok the seventh most-used platform of the 2010s with one billion monthly active users as of September 2021 (Bursztynsky, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2020). TikTok is a video-sharing application on which users can create videos up to three minutes long and utilise the app’s built-in audio options, filters, and video editing capabilities. Creators can select a specific audio from the app or record their own, and they can film a video lip-syncing, dancing, participating in a meme, or offering cultural commentary – for starters. Then, creators can use the app’s video editor for effects, cuts, speed changes, and more, before adding a caption and publishing their creation.

Scholars of media studies have noted the ways that TikTok’s infrastructure prioritises certain forms of networked sociality (Hautea et al., 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Mizuko Ito (2008) defines “networked publics” as “a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media” (p. 2). Others explore and expand upon networked publics in theorisations of affective publics and digital community formation (Hillis et al., 2015; Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010, 2015). An app’s design and specific ‘affordances’ affect the creation of such networked publics and the social interaction that occurs in that digital space (Van Dijck, 2013; Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Diana Zulli and David James Zulli (2020) argue that while other platforms create networks based on “interpersonal connections, expressions of sentiment, or lived experiences”, the basis of social connection on TikTok is through “processes of imitation and replication” that are encouraged through the app’s design, norms of use, and algorithmic rewards (p. 2). On TikTok, the algorithm is king: while users can follow others as customary on social media, that content feed is separate from the site’s primary feed, the ‘For You Page’ (FYP). Videos on each user’s FYP are curated through TikTok’s algorithm based on the user’s history of viewing and engagement, what device the user has, where the user is located, and the captions and hashtags attached to the video. The FYP’s endless stream of content is the first thing a user sees when making an account and whenever they



subsequently open the app, and thus is the app's primary site of engagement. The FYP as the foundation of the app drives "inherently affective" publics through engagement with and mimesis of content rather than existing interpersonal ties (Hautea et al., 2021, p. 3).

Users commonly discuss in their videos the ways that the TikTok algorithm creates specific subcommunities on the app based on the content they typically see on their FYP. "Welcome! You've reached cottagecore (or rugmaking, or board game) TikTok," a user might add in their audio or caption of a video. Users on 'alt TikTok' (called the "arty side of the cafeteria") may not only have completely distinct FYP content than those on 'Straight TikTok' (mainstream, influencer-laden content), but also completely separate memes, audios, or popular creators (Wylde, 2020). There are countless subcommunities of TikTok, from queer TikTok, to a user commenting how glad they are to have been algorithmically added to follow a saga regarding an incorrect USB cord – 'cordgate' TikTok (Khietnha, 2021).

This chapter focuses specifically on the community of Bimbo TikTok (also called BimboTok, both of which will be used interchangeably). BimboTok is a community of users who are invested in bimbofication and bimbohood. The community is centred on the transformation of one's aesthetic and affect (and potentially political investments) to match that of a reclaimed version of the 'bimbo'. BimboTok is largely made of users engaging in and affirming this process for a community of feminine leftists. The term and trend of 'bimbofication' originates with a specific fetish related to this transformation, thanks to a piece of fetish-art-turned-meme (Dickson, 2020). The bimbofication meme refers to a fetish artist's commissioned illustration of reverse bimbofication, depicting a tanned, blonde, large-breasted woman in revealing pink clothing picking up and reading a book, becoming a pale, modestly dressed brunette. The image was critiqued as sexist, and later, other artists made new illustrations depicting the two women as girlfriends.

Before delving into BimboTok, I will look briefly at the circulations of 'bimbo' over time. The insult of 'bimbo' holds etymological roots in the Italian 'bambino', meaning 'child' (Lipman, 1987; Medina, 2021). It was used in the 19th century as an insult referring to 'foolish men' and began being used to refer to women at the beginning of the 20th century (Medina, 2021). *The Wall Street Journal* named 1987 the 'Year of the Bimbo', referencing prominent names like Jessica Hahn and Brigitte Nielsen (Lipman, 1987). Twenty years later, an impudent *New York Post* article named 2007 the *new* 'Year of the Bimbo', due to the year's news about celebrities like Anna Nicole Smith, Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, and Lindsay Lohan – who made 2007 a "slutty", "young, ditzzy, and out of control" year (Stadtmiller, 2007, para. 2, 8). The bimbo label was applied to (typically white) women who were 'all looks and no brains', whose outward sexuality, raunchy behaviour, or deviant bodies separated them from acceptable femininity despite their sexual capital (the social power afforded as a result of cultural conceptions of sexual appeal) (Cortés, 2020; Dickson, 2020; Dimit, 2021; Hakim, 2011;



Lipman, 1987). The early to mid 2010s brought about a ‘cultural pivot’, undermining the unsavoury bimbo through other models of femininity; the most poignant of these may be the ‘girlboss’, who lauded vague notions of women’s ‘empowerment’ alongside building careers and corporate empires (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2021; Cortés, 2020). The rise of the reclaimed bimbo is attributed by some to the deterioration of ‘girlboss’ feminism: the new generation rejected this ideology of ‘leaning in’ to corporate success to close gaps of inequality for middle-class white women, refusing to distance itself from femininity, paying increasing attention to intersecting structures of oppression. In 2018 ‘professional bimbo’ Alicia Amira began her ‘Be A Bimbo Movement’ as a way for women to own their sexuality and femininity (Taylor, 2019). Amira would belie a larger trend in the coming years in which the resurgence of Y2K fashion and the prominence of TikTok prompted the rise of the New Age Bimbo.

### **BimboTok, Explained**

“Hi, welcome to Bimbo TikTok. I’m so glad you could finally make it! You’re probably wondering how you got here. Are you a leftist who likes to have your tits out?” asks Chrissy Chlapecka in a TikTok video with over two million views (@chrissychlapecka). Chrissy Chlapecka, “one of TikTok’s most famous self-proclaimed bimbos”, is far from the only one (Dimit, 2021, para. 13). As she talks with God on a corded phone plugged into her cleavage, she looks towards the camera with an eye-rolling apology: “Sorry – new intern.” Chlapecka speaks in a breathy, almost confused tone as she welcomes users to her community. Like much of BimboTok, Chlapecka dons stylish, revealing clothing, often in pink. Her long, typically blonde hair frames her elaborate eye makeup and false lashes. The videos using the hashtag #bimbotiktok boast a total of 129.9 million views (as of December 2021) with dozens of different popular creators.

TikTok can be thought of as a (networked) aesthetic, affective, and political community, with the circulation of these different investments mobilised and connected via the infrastructure of TikTok. The self-conception of the bimbo community is not completely static. Users continuously ask questions and theorise the position, politics, and performance of the New Age Bimbo; creators’ expression of political views vary; and subcommunities based on different types of bimbo aesthetics emerge. However, in popular media accounts of the TikTok bimbo and in my own analysis, BimboTok seems to be based on a few major tenets: self-confidence and ‘feeling hot’, self-determination in terms of identity and sexuality, inclusivity and kindness, and a left-leaning political ideology.

Reclaimed bimbohood is a “mentality, an aesthetic, a way of life”; not only an embodied expression, but a way of being in the world that adheres to the tenets of bimbohood (Lanigan, 2021, para. 5). One of the most prominent and ubiquitously cited of these is aspects of self-confidence and

self-assuredness. The bimbo abandons insecurity (or seems to not know to have it in the first place) and embraces ‘hotness’. What ‘hotness’ looks like is somewhat vague, understood as simply an “ideology of being hot” and feeling attractive, though primarily involving a hyperfeminine aesthetic expression (Chlapecka, n.d.; Lanigan, 2021, para. 9). Chlapecka recites bimbo advice in one video: “Be hot, wear whatever you want, castration should be legal for some kinds of people – like predators and abusers” (Chlapecka, n.d.). Less about a particular look and more of a state of mind, the TikTok bimbo’s self-assuredness is accompanied by her embracement of her sexuality – potentially involving a more outwardly sexualised aesthetic (Aranal, 2021; Brooks, n.d.; Dickson, 2020). She/her pronouns are used when referring to the figure of the TikTok bimbo, as this is how the figure is often referred to in Bimbo TikTok content as a way to recognise the figure’s hyperfemininity and the community’s predominant makeup of feminine genders. Another integral aspect of TikTok Bimbohood is the value placed on self-determination, whether that would mean wearing revealing clothing, getting lip fillers, or pursuing gender-affirming care. The TikTok bimbo refuses to judge others’ sexual, aesthetic, and identity choices and pursues an ethic of kindness to all (except misogynists, racists, and queer/transphobes).

This ethic belies the construction of the bimbo as a political figure – as Chlapecka says, the bimbo is “actually a radical leftist” (n.d.) who supports (or is part of) communities of sex workers and people who identify as LGBTQ+, and she is invested in anti-racist, anticapitalist feminist politics. TikTok bimbos affirm that the community is inclusive of “any race, gender, sexual orientation, body type, or style aesthetic” (Suzuki, 2021, as quoted in Lanigan, 2021, para. 9). Users and media outlets describe the community as inclusive of, or in solidarity with, marginalised groups – people of colour, women, queer and trans people, sex workers – and as working to reclaim (hyper)feminine gender expression, body modification with a self-aware, ignorant bliss (Bunny, n.d.; Chlapecka, n.d.; Cortés, 2020; Dimit, 2021). Rather than reproduce the logic of the ‘girlboss’, the New Age Bimbo subverts the devaluation of femininity and denaturalises norms of intelligence and success steeped in racial, class, and gender norms. She exclaims “ew!” and mimics stomping on her phone in response to sexist or homophobic comments, and she is always there for the “girls, gays, and theys” (Chlapecka, n.d., 2020). Referring to a community of women, LGBTQ+ people, and nonbinary people, this is meant to be a more gender-inclusive update of the phrase ‘girls and gays’, and signal a commitment to those disempowered by heteropatriarchal structures (Sommer, 2021). “If you’re homophobic”, the prototypical bimbo says to the camera while putting on lip gloss, “I’ll castrate you!” (Chlapecka, 2020).

The TikTok bimbo’s potential as a resistive political community is contested in TikTok user discourse. User Baubo (@whoreceress) created a series of videos theorising the feminist and radical potential and limits of

the bimbo. With her TikTok name referencing the “obscene” and “sexual[ly] jesting” Greek goddess (Kulish & Holtzman, 2002, pp. 109, 112), user Baubo describes the ways that bimboism may be better understood as a survivalist tactic, rather than an empowering one. She and other users point to the inherently exclusionary norms of white femininity upon which bimbohood is based, and how claims of inclusion can be difficult to back up when the “algorithmic attention economy” (Baubo, n.d.) continues to reward white Eurocentric norms of femininity and bodies (Baubo, n.d.; Khalid, 2021; Medina, 2021; Potts, 2021). In short, ‘feeling hot’ and claiming bimbohood for everyone does not erase the ways in which different communities receive different rewards and punishments for engaging in these aesthetics and modes of affect. The TikTok bimbo movement is also problematised for potential class barriers to hyperfemininity – nail appointments, fillers, makeup, and clothes are expensive – as well as participation in consumerism despite claims of anticapitalist politics. Participation in consumerism is not only coerced but compulsory in contemporary society and some BimboTok creators have shared ways of achieving a bimbo aesthetic for lower costs. Failure to consume and appear in dictated normative frameworks would likely cost some views, due to the “algorithmic attention economy[s]” embeddedness in systems of gender normativity (Baubo, n.d.).

As a digital aesthetic, affective, and political community, Bimbo TikTok occupies an interesting space in terms of feminism and feminine subjectivity – the community is informed by histories of sex-positivity, media criticism, growing anticapitalist sentiment, and the failures of neoliberal feminism. The community and many outlets reporting on it define this reclaimed bimbohood in terms of agency and inclusion, with an overarching norm of hyperfeminine aesthetics. BimboTok holds these somewhat contradictory characteristics together, born out of the complexities of navigating gender and sexuality in a heavily mediated and capitalist society – a navigation which continues to unfold on the affective and aesthetic circuits of TikTok’s infrastructure.

### **(Post-?)Postfeminism and the New Age Bimbo**

Thus far Bimbo TikTok has been discussed primarily in terms of resisting the devaluation of femininity and circulating inclusive, feminist, and anticapitalist ideology among (predominantly) TikTok’s Gen Z users. To add to the problematisation of bimbohood by TikTok’s users, here BimboTok is explored through a postfeminist perspective: specifically, how does bimbohood adhere to or diverge from the characteristics of a postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2007)? Rosalind Gill (2007) introduces the “distinctive sensibility” of postfeminist media cultures as characterised by certain themes, including femininity as a bodily property, prevalence of self-surveillance and self-disciplining, a shift from objectification to subjectification, and a neoliberal focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment (p. 147). This postfeminist

sensibility takes feminist ideas and histories for granted and disavows their relevance in favour of a hyper-individualised, neoliberal understanding of women as unaffected by social and political structures. In a later article, Gill (2016) points to the enduring relevance of postfeminism into more recent years as feminism became no longer repudiated but instead adapted as a depoliticised and stylish identity for young women.

How does this postfeminist sensibility inform reclaimed bimbohood? First, to say that femininity is a bodily property is to say that “possession of a ‘sexy body’ is presented as women’s key (if not sole) source of identity”, requiring nonstop disciplining and consumption to achieve (Gill, 2007, p. 149). The media is saturated with examples of societal surveillance of women (female celebrities, often, but social media has magnified everyday surveillance). Further, the neoliberal rebranding of such surveillance and disciplining actions positions them as empowering, even feminist, choices. One does not do this disciplining work for a man (or due to internalised misogyny, women know better than that) but, rather, this work is the “freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects” (Gill, 2007, p. 153). On Bimbo TikTok, this “collective performance of hyperfemininity” (Dickson, 2020, para. 2) is one in which femininity is displayed and communicated on the body. Performances of feminised and sexualised aesthetics (especially on bodies understood as doing so normatively) may be read simply as the virtual public display of one’s success at this surveilling/disciplining project – as one’s individual choices free from any patriarchal gaze. Such a performance is rewarded for normativity by more followers and likes, and open to commenters’ scrutiny – though of course not swayed by it, as a modern, defiant feminine subject.

Has BimboTok continued this work of the postfeminist internalisation of body and appearance regulation through the politics of compulsory social media display? As feminist ideas transformed through the 2010s from undesirable, potentially outdated to stylish and youthful, it became characterised in the mainstream by a “you go, girls” attitude, a performance of assertiveness and defiance, and as borrowing from a lexicon of activist feminism but applied in ways that do little to challenge patriarchal systems (Gill, 2016, p. 623). Such a sentiment may have adapted to the 2020s to be a more gender-inclusive “you go, girls, gays, and theys!” Bimbo TikTok is cited by some as rejecting neoliberal ‘choice’ (girlboss) feminism and critiqued by others as being its contemporary iteration in posing choices as feminist simply because marginalised genders are making them (Khalid, 2021; Lanigan, 2021).

Thus, posing questions or readings that problematise Bimbo TikTok’s position in contemporary culture is part of this legacy of a depoliticising, individualising postfeminist sensibility rather than simply a form of empowerment. Such a context is necessary in this analysis to capture the full complexity of BimboTok’s investments and cultural impacts. However, an analysis of BimboTok as only a modern form of postfeminism is

an incomplete one. I want to pose a different space the new bimbo may occupy: one which understands her engagement with normative digital affect and normative femininity as part of a performance which – purposefully or not – denaturalises gender and draws attention to the absurdity of life within contemporary social, political, and environmental crisis.

### **Ironic Gender, Digital Psychopolitics, and Bimbo Performance**

User @llanimay has her hair wrapped in a pink silk scarf and dons pink sunglasses, long lashes, and a Y2K style cropped zip-up jacket covered in pink hearts. “I have yet to meet a person that’s tried to bring me down ... that wasn’t literally ugly,” she says matter-of-factly, posing in the sunlight (llanimay, 2021). Another user, Amber (@tofurat), has her blonde hair tied up in a pink pom-pom hair tie, pastel blue and pink eye makeup with long lashes, and iridescent glossy lips. “The government’s running out of money? Ha. That must suck. I have a proposal,” she says, gripping a *Bratz* doll, hard. “We *need* to make more of these” (Amber @tofurat, 2021). User ‘lean girl’ (@69lean666) has hot pink hair that matches her lips and dress as she stands in front of a tweet that compares an illustration of Karl Marx writing *Capital* to an illustration of an archetypal bimbo in front of a computer, reading it (lean girl, 2021). She lip-syncs along to *Deepthroat* by CupcakKe – a raunchy, explicit, and sexual song – and captions her video “I AM THIS MEME”. These three snapshots into Bimbo TikTok display the ways in which bimbo aesthetics and affects have been adopted in the digital age and are engaged with in a playful, political way by TikTok users.

BimboTok is not simply a space of reclaimed femininity, leftist politics, and sex-positivity in the service of empowering women and queer people; nor is it solely the self-objectification of feminine subjects online under the guise of individual choice. Both perspectives risk oversimplifying the aesthetic, affective, and political work being done by BimboTok creators. Rather, TikTok bimbohood is an engagement in a disidentificatory performance and ironic cultural critique in a time of constant crisis. I contend that TikTok bimbos’ performance of aesthetic and affective disidentification is powerful in its collectivity, facilitated through TikTok’s specific sociality: the “scrambling” of normativity (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31) becomes clear and especially powerful due to its enactment by an entire community, an entire networked public. This is not to say that disidentification is not happening in individual TikTok videos, but rather that the aesthetic, affective, and political *circulations* on the platform are more than the sum of their parts.

With what, exactly, is BimboTok disidentifying? First, BimboTok can be positioned as a deconstruction of gender and dominant femininities through an over-performance of femininity (that is sometimes done by those understood as incongruent with femininity). TikTok bimbos draw upon normative embodied and discursive neoliberal femininity and perform it in ways that reveal its instability and create alternative meanings. Successful neoliberal

femininity involves normative gender, (postfeminist) self-sexualisation, a self-surveilled and -disciplined body, and a nonthreatening assertiveness and confidence – all of which must seem to be carefree or even invisible labours of an autonomous, entrepreneurial subject. Broadly, TikTok bimbos engage in many of these characteristics: disciplining one's body toward hyperfemininity, a pleasant, confident affect, a 'freely' chosen sexualised aesthetic. However, TikTok bimbohood engages in these trappings of normative femininity to an extent that calls into question the 'naturalness' and stability of these norms of femininity and gender.

To start, bimbo hyperfemininity is a practice for all bodies and categories on BimboTok – while many #bimbotiktok videos are made by white women, there are also a significant number of those for whom such an aesthetic and performance would not be considered so normative. BimboTok creator Bunny (@bunnythebimbo) theorises, along with her viewers and commenters, that "bimbohood is the satirisation of femininity", specifying the "reconstruction of gender" that occurs particularly through the taking on of hyperfeminine bimbo characteristics by marginalised groups (here, Bunny talks specifically about queer and fat bimbohood) (Bunny, n.d.). This collective satirisation pushes femininity through normativity and out the other side: it becomes excessive, ironic, campy. Bimbos are feminine, but *too* feminine, so much so that they seem to be parodying it rather than succeeding at it; so much so that they reveal the labour involved in doing gender that is supposed to be effortless or invisible. Such excessive femininity harkens back to bimbo as a gendered insult – unintelligent, too sexual, lacking 'class' – in opposition to desirable womanhood. The bimbo's incorrect femininity makes her always on the verge of threatening: she may use men for money, may rise 'above her status', may become a negative influence on other women (Brown, 2005). Mainstream culture may treat her as entertaining, as harmless, until she needs to be used as an example. Thus, the reclamation of this always almost threatening figure by those already considered threats to normative society (fat people, sex workers, queer women, people of colour) engages in disidentification through creators' 'incorrect' engagements with normative femininity. In lauding the low-brow, the cosmetically or surgically modified, and the overtly sexual, TikTok bimbos are doing this campy queer work which pushes boundaries of femininity in ways that question the culture which devalues those things in the first place.

Femininity has been, and continues to be, violently upheld as a category only available to white women, especially those that are thin, able-bodied, cisgender, and middle to upper class – a gender always out of reach but compulsorily reached for (Gilman, 1985; Lugones, 2010; Spillers, 1987). After all, bimbohood has been historically available as a category (or insult) for white women, as their bodies and sexuality were not and are not understood to hold the same meanings, the same dangers to society, as those of women of colour (Gilman, 1985; Hill Collins, 2009). In practices of bimbo femininity, women of colour adorn themselves in a hyperfeminine manner that

claims femininity as much as critiques it – landing somewhere that rejects a politics of respectability and gender success. Many of those excluded from normative femininity are doing the same: fat women, trans women, nonbinary people, and queer people on TikTok are doing the bodily project of femininity *wrong*, on purpose. These disidentificatory subjects circulate the instability of femininity, denaturalising gender categories and the norms attached to them that position it as a property of only some specific kinds of women.

In addition to an aesthetic disidentification, Bimbo TikTok also deals in an affective register of disidentificatory practice: TikTok bimbos express normative ‘happy’ affects, but in ways that perform the work of refusal and reveal the conditions which make optimism so cruel (to reference Berlant, 2011). Neoliberal society demands a dutiful performance of happiness, or a striving for happiness, including in the digital space on platforms like TikTok (Ahmed, 2010; Dobson & Kanai, 2019). This “happiness duty” as outlined by Sara Ahmed requires adherence to certain racial, gendered, and sexual norms (Ahmed, 2010, p. 7). The happiness duty and relation of optimism in the neoliberal era direct and regulate subjects’ attachments in ways that maintain social hierarchies and the power of capital and the state (Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011). Due to neoliberal principles of “free choice”, individual responsibility, and entrepreneurship, to display ‘ugly feelings’ (Ngai, 2004) betrays a personal and moral failure. Further, what Byung-Chul Han (2017) calls an age of “digital psychopolitics” demands active participation in digital subjectivising regimes of “total communication and total surveillance” (p. 83). Like the productive (rather than repressive) power of Foucault’s biopolitics, psychopolitical regimes do not inhibit people from expression in digital space – rather, doing so becomes compulsory as part of the project of disciplining subjects’ bodies and minds. In short, contemporary society compels subjects’ participation in digital communication and surveillance in addition to requiring a display of the correct emotional investments in doing so. The queer disidentificatory performance that TikTok bimbos are doing – similar to their aesthetic hyperfemininity – is performing the normative action *too much* in ways that prove unbeneficial to the structures that demand it: capitalism, patriarchy, and so on.

Bimbo affect is characteristically happy and ditsy; part of the bimbo’s allure is her bubbly personality. Creators on BimboTok display happy affects to an extent that transforms a bubbly, dreamy demeanour into a kind of weaponised incompetence (though weaponised against normative society). Also called ‘strategic incompetence’, this refers to a person feigning ignorance of how to do a task so that others will do it for them, or not ask them to do it in the future (Sandberg, 2007; Strayed & Almond, 2018; Zhou, 2021). An example is one of Chrissy Chlapecka’s first viral TikToks: after a video in which she stated she didn’t understand “why we can’t just print more money?”, a commenter in all-caps responded, “SIMPLE ECONOMICS....DEFLATION. SUPPLY AND DEMAND. LOOK IT UP”



(Chlapecka, 2020). Chlapecka, with a confused expression, says, “Stop talkin’ to me about smart things ... All I know is that our problems would be solved if we just print more money! ... Capitalism is made up, this place I’m living in is made up! We didn’t have to do this to ourselves” (2020). Another video of Chlapecka’s shows her standing still, with pink hair and a leopard print skirt, wearing a blank smiling expression as her voiceover advertises what it is like to have a ‘bimbo girlfriend’: “inability to do math ... will most likely make fun of men a lot ... believes that two plus two equals capitalism is the root of all evil ... and is very, very hot” (n.d.). Another video tagged #bimbo is from user Mersi (@mersidmond) who is responding to a transphobic comment posted on another of her videos stating that she is “not a woman” (2021). She answers with a selfie video of her in pink eye makeup with long, black hair and a pouty expression with the text, “why do I get period symptoms then?” BimboTok users in these examples (and beyond) take these normative codes of happy, thoughtless femininity and ‘dumb blondes’ (Bartyzel, 2000; Inness, 2007) to such an extreme that it exposes the social constructedness of capitalist modes of production and pokes fun at ideas about ‘real’ women and biological essentialism. Chlapecka, Mersi, and others take on these gendered, ableist ideas about knowledge and ‘weaponise’ them to refuse intellectual labour (of educating internet trolls, for instance), circulate anticapitalist ideology, and reject some of the norms of neoliberal psychopolitics – and maybe walk into a couple of doors along the way.

As his version of the figure who opposes psychopolitics, Byung-Chul Han introduces the “idiot” (2017, p. 82). Han’s idiot is a modern-day heretic who ignores or rejects universal truths and embraces the absurd: “What a relief to have nothing to say,” because then what one says might be worth saying, Han writes (2017, p. 84). The idiot refuses communication technologies, instead becoming “unallied, un-networked, and uninformed” (2017, p. 83). So as not to reproduce this language rooted in ableism, I want to understand the bimbo of Bimbo TikTok as a kind of ‘fool’ – as part of a (largely generational) trend of absurdist humour in a context of political, economic, and environmental catastrophe. Liam Creaser (2021) characterises Generation Z’s ironic and absurd humour as a coping mechanism in a context of ‘imminent world catastrophe’ and social alienation, as well as a middle ground between absolute nihilism and the sincerity of the liberal establishment. Creaser (2021) argues for the political power of post-irony – a response to society that combines irony (to critique hegemonic liberalism) and sincerity (to maintain a commitment to care and liberation).

I want to position the ‘fool’ of the TikTok bimbo as a mechanism to deal with psychopolitical regimes and a post-ironic response to “crisis ordinari-ness” – which can be defined as a social state of never-ending and quotidian precarity and trauma (Berlant, 2011, p. 10). Taking psychopolitics, post-irony, and disidentification together, BimboTok reveals itself to be a community that toes this line between sincerity and irony, not *outside* of



the psychopolitical regime but rather by operating within it. The TikTok bimbo responds to ordinary crisis with a “smooth-brained” disidentification in which she continues to add content to the digital space, but does so in such a foolish way that it is less of a compulsory “confession” (Han, 2017, p. 38) and more of a playful refusal of these regimes of affect. Bimbo disidentification is post-ironic in that her sincerity is not that of hegemonic liberalism, but rather tucked within an ironic, campy performance of gender and affect. Normative femininity (and feminism) dictates a happy female subject and a mollified, optimistic feminism (Ahmed, 2017; Gill, 2016); but BimboTok engages with cheerfulness through performing a foolishness that points to the absurdity of optimism in the contemporary sociopolitical moment. As a collective performance of disidentification, the TikTok bimbos draw upon normative modes of feminine aesthetic and gendered affect and muddle them in their image: doing too much, knowing too little, and covered in pink.

## Conclusion

Hyperfeminine, blissfully ignorant, and always inclusive, Bimbo TikTok has formed as a networked public of specific aesthetic, affective, and political investments that makes visible a collective reckoning with contemporary gender and sexual politics in the digital space. The politics of BimboTok reveal the complexities of digitally mediated communities’ identity formation and political posturing – and uncover larger cultural understandings of what is useful about gender, sexuality, and feminism. TikTok’s “inherently affective” infrastructure (Hautea et al., 2021, p. 3) facilitates a specifically *collective* process of disidentification – one in which a particular subcommunity can produce a cultural critique through the digital circulation of specific aesthetic and affective conventions.

Coming off the heels of a depoliticised and individualistic (post-)post-feminist media culture, BimboTok borrows from the norms of hegemonic neoliberal feminism and recodes them. Often this seems to be in an effort to repoliticise the aspects of them that have not proven to materially improve the conditions of marginalised people. Instead, as a tactic of survival in a society in which masculine or capitalistic attempts at resistance have proved only more harmful, the bimbos of TikTok embellish themselves in “everything men want visually” – but too much of it – and thus become “everything they hate” (Muir, 2020).

Media cultures will inevitably shift and new platforms and technologies will fill the space left by TikTok – but will the New Age Bimbo remain? Will she adapt? And what, then, will she signify? The necessity of interdisciplinary engagement with digital community formation will be revealed as these processes hold complex insights into ever-changing modes of political life and sociality. Importantly, we as media scholars and cultural critics must resist the inclination to conceive of feminised digital communities in a

binaristic manner, as either empowering or oppressive – after all, the *bimbos* are doing something much more interesting than that.

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