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# Filtering feminisms: Emergent feminist visibilities on Instagram

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## Abstract

Based on interviews with feminist Instagram users, this article studies emergent feminist visibilities on Instagram through the concept of filtering. Filtering entails both enhancement and subtraction: some feminist sensibilities align with Instagram's interaction order, while others become subdued and remain at the margins of visibility. Taken together, users' filtering practices contribute to the confident and happy image, individualistic streak, and accommodationist cast of popular feminism, while also amplifying feminist politics that affirm the pleasures of visibility and desire. Instagram proves a more challenging environment for feminists seeking to criticize competitive individualism and aesthetic norms. The notion of filtering enriches existing research on how online environments reconfigure feminist politics and problematizes the avowal of feminism in media culture.

## Keywords

Digital feminism, Instagram, personal branding, self, social media

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About a year ago I was having a conversation with another model, and she was like, “It’s really important to show on your Instagram who you are as a person. If you want to get booked to bigger jobs, they also want you because you are a certain person, because you love a certain thing.” That was when I decided that feminism is a big part of me, so it should also be a big part of my social media. It has been successful so far. My bookers like the image I put on my Instagram. . . . Some of the things I find very important I haven’t posted much about. Apparently, feminism-related stuff can also scare people away. So, I have to do it kind of moderately. — Sara

After finishing her business degree, Sara moved from the Netherlands to New York to pursue a career in plus-size modeling. In her quest to make it in the fashion world, developing a presence on the visual social network Instagram was central. To set herself apart from the competition, Sara incorporated feminism into her self-brand, garnishing her posts with hashtags such as #Bold, #NoWrongWayToBeAWoman, and #EffYourBeautyStandards. She wanted to portray herself as “young,” “free,” “cool,” and “politically involved.” Sara’s self-presentation strategy bore fruit: she gained followers and booked jobs she was content with. But within, she struggles. In order to cultivate an agreeable self-brand, she has had to stay silent about feminist issues close to her heart that might offend onlookers or “scare off” clients. Her feminism is a competitive advantage—but only if she leaves out many of its elements and packages what remains in the correct form.

For a while it seemed that media culture was conclusively postfeminist; recognizing and incorporating market-friendly feminist themes while telling women that they no longer need feminism as a collective movement (Gill, 2007). However, we are currently witnessing a reinvigorated insistence on the continued relevance of feminism, especially on social media (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Social media affordances and practices have been adopted for diverse kinds of feminist expression and activism (Keller, 2015; Myles, 2019; Pruchniewska, 2019; Rentschler and Thrift, 2015). As the history of feminism is often written as a succession of different stages characterized by different repertoires of contention and emancipatory foci, the advent of digital media has ignited discussions about a potential fourth wave of feminism, distinguished by Internet use and an outspoken commitment to intersectionality (Pruchniewska, 2019; Retallack et al., 2016). Since social media affect the “rules and conditions of social interaction” (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013: 3), understanding digital feminist visibilities requires detailed attention to how users perceive the affordances and vernaculars of different online platforms in relation to feminist identities and engagements (see also Keller, 2019). In this article, we analyze feminist users’ reflections on their practices of Instagram use *alongside* their Instagram posts in order to understand the strategic decisions and difficult trade-offs that go into curating a feminist profile on the platform. We demonstrate how *certain* feminist sensibilities emerge as widely accepted and highly appealing on and through Instagram—indeed, they can even be employed as competitive strategies for self-advancement—while others are suppressed and remain at the margins of visibility.

A focus on feminist media visibilities matters, because they “redirect and reimagine what ‘empowerment’ means for girls and women” (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 17) and “make

[things] available and foreclose [them] in terms of politics” (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 5). Instagram is only one among many sites where feminisms are being mobilized and enacted. However, the platform is undeniably part of the current cultural moment, reflecting and shaping its aesthetics and sociality. It has over one billion monthly active users, and its Stories feature alone, which allows sharing short clips or animations, is used by 500 million users daily (Statista, 2018). With high levels of use among younger age groups and a popularity among women (cf. Statista, 2020), the platform is important for the apparent transformation of feminism from a “repudiated identity among young women” into “a desirable, stylish and decidedly fashionable one” (Gill, 2016: 611). Sara’s story illustrates this transformation but also suggests that prevalent uses of the platform and audience expectations simultaneously complicate feminist expression.

How do feminist Instagram users reflect on the prospects and perils of online visual self-presentation? What strategies do they employ in attempting to reconcile their feminist identity with their investment in visual social media? What kinds of feminist images and imaginaries do they produce in their characteristic blending of activism with conformity and aspiration? To answer these questions and understand how feminist sensibilities transfer to and circulate in social media like Instagram, we propose the concept of *filtering* that emerged from our aforementioned empirical analysis. In its general use, filtering means to “remove unwanted material” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). In image editing, filters either *transform image data or generate new data to achieve a visual effect* (Manovich, 2013). Emergent feminist visibilities are filtered in this dual sense. Their digital mediation not only leaves elements out; it refashions. While some feminist viewpoints are more effortlessly reconcilable with Instagram’s interaction order—such as individual empowerment—more often than not, filtered self-presentations disguise ideological rifts and tensions.

In what follows, we first develop our concept of filtering, tracing the value of dramaturgical perspectives for the study of digital feminism. The concept enriches current research on how online environments shape, limit, and erase digital feminist cultures (Fotopoulou, 2016; Jurasz and Barker, 2019 ; Keller, 2019; Olszanowski, 2014; Pruchniewska, 2019; Shaw, 2014) by illustrating how users’ structurally and technically conditioned judgments regarding what to display, augment, and conceal—together with algorithms that likewise value and rank content—produce and circulate a certain kind of feminist imagery and imaginary. Moreover, the concept of filtering contributes to problematizations of the seeming espousal of feminism in media culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser et al., 2019; Gill, 2016) by empirically detailing how social media dynamics favor and reinforce some feminist sensibilities over others, disguising productive tensions and even contradictions between them. We then lay out how we collected and analyzed our data before discussing how our interviewees engage in filtering practices. Taken together, these filtering practices contribute to the confident and happy image, individualistic streak, and accommodationist cast of “popular feminism” (Banet-Weiser, 2018), while also amplifying feminist politics that affirm the pleasures of visibility and desire. Instagram proves a challenging environment for feminists seeking to criticize competitive individualism and aesthetic norms.

## Social media, the self, and femininity

What accounts for the specific articulations—the enhancements and amplifications on the one hand and the avoidances and trivializations on the other—of feminist politics on Instagram? Expression on social media, political or otherwise, cannot be divorced from the performance of self that social media platforms afford (Milan, 2018). For both rank-and-file users and “instafamous” (micro-) celebrities, personal profiles act as “‘front stages’ where actors strive to *optimize* [emphasis added] the (re)presentation of the self” (Marwick, 2013; Milan, 2018: 510). To talk of a front stage already implies certain strategic exclusions and improvements to tailor one’s impression suitable for the context. While selves projected onto social media are edited, they must simultaneously come across as “authentic” and legitimate, a balancing act requiring both technical and emotional labor (Marwick, 2013). Because even “very minor mishaps” (Goffman, 1956: 56) risk violating the interaction order—that is, the ceremonial ground rules of interaction “upon which the maintenance of ‘self’ depends” (Rawls, 1987: 140)—impression management must be rehearsed reflexively, with caution and foresight.

Elaborating Goffmanian themes to the study of social media, Uski and Lampinen (2016) argue that users engaged in “profile work” indeed continuously seek a balance between personal self-presentation goals and the assumed expectations of one’s “imagined audiences” (Litt, 2012; see also Keller, 2019). Social media self-presentation is closely related to affordances: features of socio-technical systems that enable and constrain interactive behaviors (Bucher and Helmond, 2017). Affordances are not merely technical but shaped by imaginations, attitudes, and beliefs regarding the “proper” and potential uses of technology (Nagy and Neff, 2015). This expanded notion of affordances brings in the mutual expectations and norms that are central to the interaction order as conceptualized by Goffman. We understand interaction orders on social media as encouraged by platform affordances and in turn shaping how those affordances are imagined. For instance, because users’ presence on Instagram is primarily a grid of images taken from their own smartphones and laid out for others to appreciate, users self-present by assuming a consistent style that makes the image grid look neat. As a result, they begin to think of Instagram as a means of building a visual, audience-oriented portfolio of what one does, has, and is—assessed according to platform-specific aesthetic and affective ideals and norms. Thus, the distinct interaction orders observable on different online platforms emerge in dynamic interplay between technical features and user activity.

We pursue these insights by means of the notion of *filtering*. As a relational concept, filtering comprises sensitivity to observable practices of strategic self-performance (Goffman, 1956; Uski and Lampinen, 2016)—the realm of conformity and self-enhancement—but also a concern for the subjective, emotive, and embodied repercussions of social media self-presentation: the novel, energizing desires, the straining personal problems, and the concealment of “embarrassing” behaviors and feelings in accordance with reigning etiquette (Elias, 2000). Users must, then, both strategically and emotionally navigate the cross-pressures associated with social media like Instagram—such as balancing personal self-representation goals with the potential shame of “stepping out of line” in the eyes of one’s imagined audience or the desire to

enhance one's job prospects by self-branding (cf. Marwick, 2013). Through filtering practices—empirical examples of which follow—users strive to work out tensions and reconcile dissonant aims associated with using the platform.

All social media users filter their expressions, hiding and augmenting aspects of themselves in accordance with contextual standards. However, studying how users of different feminist persuasions curate their digital selves is especially interesting given the particularly gendered cast of online self-presentation qua self-branding (Abidin, 2016; Duffy and Hund, 2019; Petersson-McIntyre, 2020). The self-presentational scripts of influencer and selfie culture are informed by cultural ideals of beauty, prosperity, and social distinction (Marwick, 2015), and seem to promote an objectifying relationship vis-à-vis one's body (see Abidin, 2016: 12). Failures at projecting relatable femininity online—itsself a precarious balance of coming off as relatable and personable while embracing normative beauty and consumption practices—are punished, while successes are rewarded with attention, followers, and commercial deals (Petersson-McIntyre, 2020; see also Duffy and Hund, 2019). To be sure, the relationship between femininity and feminism need not be antagonistic. On the contrary, many have pointed out how signs of femininity can be used subversively or, more commonly, experienced as empowering (cf. Baumgardner and Richards, 2010). However, we should not forget the critical question of “how chosen desires are constructed” and recognize “how an aggregation of individual choices can have a negative impact on gender relations at large” (Snyder, 2008: 189). Users and commentators alike frame social media self-presentation as a matter of personal choice and pleasure, which obfuscates its culturally determined boundaries (Thorpe et al., 2017: 371). Social media self-branding is not only quintessentially gendered, but also an individualistic endeavor, which may further complicate the practice for users invested in collective feminist politics (Pruchniewska, 2018).

How, then, do feminists negotiate the often gendered norms that prevail on Instagram, while pursuing the desires and social rewards posited by the platform? Banet-Weiser (2018) proposes that we approach contemporary feminist visibilities through the concept of “popular feminism,” where “popular” is seen as a site of struggle over recognition and meaning. On the one hand, capitalist infrastructures of circulation privilege neoliberal feminism, which incorporates a grammar of empowerment and meritocratic advancement in order to bolster rather than challenge prevailing economic, racial, and gender hierarchies (Banet-Weiser 2018; Fraser, 2013; Prügl, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014; Thorpe et al., 2017). On the other, social media are also employed by feminist users whose political loyalties run counter to neoliberal feminism. Moreover, while social media technologies, neoliberal policies, and the enterprising self frequently go hand in hand (Mirowski, 2014: 112), neoliberal dispositions are reflexively adopted, negotiated, or resisted, not deterministically personified (Scharff, 2016, see also Pruchniewska, 2018). Studying such moments of alignment and friction is key for understanding both Instagram feminists' varying positions of compliance and resistance vis-à-vis the digital capitalist status quo and its gendered dimensions. Filtering brings to the fore how different feminist sensibilities interact with the interaction order and affordances of Instagram, and what kind of feminist imagery and imaginary is produced at the user-platform-audience interface as a result.

## Data and methods

The data consist of semi-structured interviews with feminist Instagram users. We found 12 initial interviewees by querying data gathered via the erstwhile Instagram API on users who had geotagged posts to either Amsterdam or Copenhagen between 1 December 2015 and 30 May 2016 (see Boy and Uitermark 2016, 2017, 2020). The API allowed registered developers to request data from Instagram for purposes laid out in their terms of service. We searched for users who used the word “feminist” or “feminism” either in their user profiles or in the caption of a post. This initial sampling frame thus included everyday users of the platform who affiliated with feminism through the platform’s affordances. As such, they had made an explicit connection between Instagram and feminism, minimally signaling their interest in feminism on the platform, maximally using it as a technology for activism. We then recruited 13 additional interviewees via snowball sampling (i.e. having interviewees recommend additional people to talk to). In this way, we broadened the range of interviewees beyond the initial population of north-western European urbanites, and also included more widely known users whose feminist affiliation is more broadly recognized. The interviews lasted for about an hour. Feminism was invariably a highly important part of our interviewees’ identities and political aims, both online and -off, and their feminist convictions informed their self-presentation practices on Instagram in various ways (that we will return to).

Our 25 interviewees consume Instagram content daily, while active posting ranges from daily to monthly. The interviewees are aged 18–37, represented about a dozen nationalities, and generally had a high education level. Four interviewees identified as LGBTQ, with two of them identifying as non-binary, all others as female. While interviewees were overwhelmingly European, five resided outside of Europe at the time of the interview, and eight had a minority ethnic background. Their follower counts ranged from 300 to over 70,000. Table 1 contains additional background information on the interviewees and their Instagram presence.

The interview questions explored the users’ feminist views. We did not impose our own normative understandings of feminisms. Instead, we let our respondents explain what sorts of practices or ideas they regarded as feminist (see also Keller, 2015: 20–23). Probing for normative speech (“Are there ways in which some (feminist) users self-present on the platform that you find harmful or annoying?”) and reflection on conflicting goals (“Do you reflect upon your self-presentation from a feminist perspective?”) was a powerful way to both probe Instagram’s interaction order (the implicit etiquette that governs Instagram use) and tease out the political as it is present within online self-presentation strategies “without needing to be framed as explicitly political” (Highfield, 2016: 10). We often browsed interviewees’ feeds while speaking to them to get a sense of how they view others’ posts and to understand their own practices. We transcribed interviews and coded them, identifying patterned and recurring contradictions and inner struggles interviewees reported feeling when using Instagram. In this inductive way, we discovered the filtering practices by which users attempt to reconcile their dissonant aims in using the platform. As our analysis shows, taken together, these filtering practices shape the feminist politics, imaginaries, and subjectivities that are cultivated on and communicated through the platform.

Thirteen interviewees gave *repeated, explicit, informed* consent to reproduce their public Instagram posts in the article. We further shared a draft of this article with



**Table 1.** Interviewee details.

Pseudonym	Instagram followers <sup>a</sup>	Age	Gender identity	Occupation <sup>b</sup>	Sample
none <sup>c</sup>	600	24	Female	Student	Convenience
none	1400	27	Female	Writer & journalist	Original
none	900	37	Female	Journalist	Original
none	1000	25	Female	Teacher	Original
Eve	500	27	Female	Student	Original
Jane	1400	25	Female	Writer	Original
Jie	400	18	Female	Student	Original
Josefien	600	22	Female	Student	Original
Lotte	300	23	Female	Salesperson	Original
Nika	600	29	Non-binary	Student	Original
Rebecca	1900	29	Female	Fashion marketing	Original
Sara	6500	26	Female	Fashion model	Original
none	700	25	Female	Content creator	Original
Erika	29,000	26	Female	Writer	Original
Ida	70,000	29	Female	Influencer	Original
none	1000	32	Non-binary	Designer	Snowball
none	3000/ unknown	29	Female	Writer	Snowball
none	1000	27	Female	Brand strategist	Snowball
none	500	24	Female	Student	Snowball
none	40,000	23	Female	Vlogger	Snowball
Annette	6500	23	Female	Writer	Snowball
Anna	1300/1300	29	Female	Student	Snowball
Maya	6000/300	25	Female	Fashion marketing	Snowball
none	1200/700	27	Female	Writer	Snowball
none	3500	30	Female	Journalist	Snowball

<sup>a</sup>Multiple numbers refer to multiple active accounts.

<sup>b</sup>Primary occupation listed. Most respondents have multiple jobs and work as freelancers.

<sup>c</sup>We do not mention interviewees without pseudonyms directly in the article.

interviewees whose images we included in the article in order to confirm that they approved of how we discuss their images and the potential for identifiability they afford (despite pseudonymization). We also provided them with an opportunity to give feedback on the analysis. Users retain the copyright over the original content they post to Instagram. In the case of reposts (uploading an image from someone else's feed to one's own), we acquired the permission of the original content creator in addition to the interviewee to reproduce the post.

## Filtering feminisms

Although our sample of interviewees is not representative, it reflects “the diversity and shifting nature of various feminisms and the fluidity of their boundaries” (Prügl, 2015:



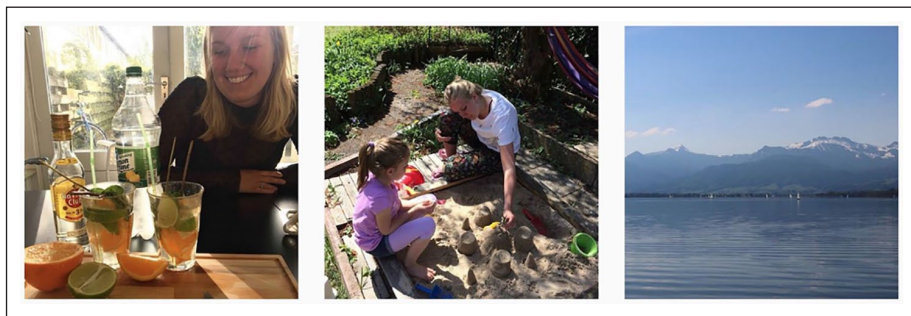
615). Interviewees articulated a blend of previous feminist waves' thematics that is characteristic of digital feminisms: a focus on individual empowerment while withholding judgment of other women's practices associated with the third wave mixed with interest in collective action associated with the second wave (Pruchniewska 2019: 1366). Intersectionality—widely embraced as a corrective to second-wave feminism's overwhelming focus on privileged (White, middle-class, heterosexual) women (e.g. Lorde, 1984)—was likewise a recurring theme in our interviews. Many of our interviewees defined their feminism in opposition to White, neoliberal, commodified, or “gender-critical” feminisms. Some endorsed leftist feminisms, while others' understandings of feminism did not (explicitly) align with political-economic commitments. Most engaged with feminist issues (e.g. rape culture, body positivity, or equal pay). Some women took part in feminist organizing on the ground. For others, their activism consisted mainly of their Instagram performances and the interactions around them. Acknowledging these at times overlapping, at times frictional dimensions, our discussion seeks to do justice to the diverse ways in which feminisms are mobilized and enacted among Instagram feminists.

Maintaining an Instagram presence requires a great deal of reflexivity and self-regulation, but depending on their positionality, feminist sensibilities and self-projects, our respondents developed a variety of strategies. The users we spoke to calibrated many, often contradictory, personal desires: displaying status versus “candid” sharing, fighting structural inequality versus self-branding, getting recognition versus not wanting to come off as attention-seekers. As suggested, filtering practices often result from the need to resolve these sorts of contradictions. Sometimes filtering works in a “subtractive” manner: it requires users to hold back and downplay what otherwise would be an active part of their self-projects. However, some interviewees' feminist sensibilities seemingly dovetailed with Instagram's imagined affordances and emergent interaction order. They experienced filtering as pleasurable and even endorsed practices of filtering. Rather than filtering something *out*, filtering here works to augment and even enhance feminist self-projects. We discuss examples of subtractive and enhancing filtering before addressing the balancing acts that most interviewees engage in.

## Subtractive filtering

The selves cultivated on Instagram by most of our interviewees are notably agreeable and consensual (Figure 1), crafted to avoid causing negative reactions in audience members. The strong constraint exercised by perceived audience expectations came to light as several respondents reported holding back political views they thought were not sufficiently popular. Users in smaller and more conservative cities were aware of their local followers' suspicion toward feminism and left-wing politics, and found it nearly impossible to express their political views on social media. The social cost of being known as a “killjoy” was simply too high:

This is quite a small town, and I've been a bit in trouble, because I've been quite an extreme leftist. . . . Now that I'm living here I don't feel comfortable showing my feminism on social media. I don't post as many political things as I would like to. When I was living in Amsterdam, it was different, I felt more encouraged. (Lotte)



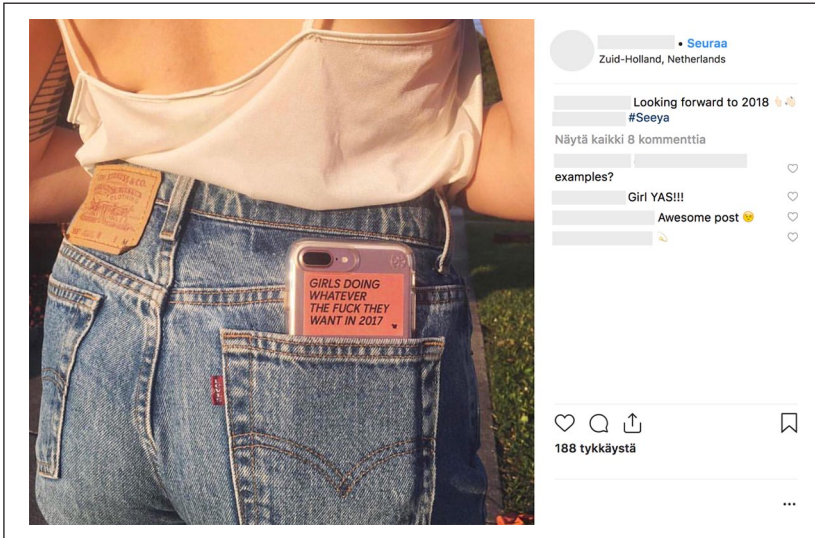
**Figure 1.** The consensual self: A picture of Lotte's Instagram profile.

Most interviewees were at a stage in their lives where their social circles and most of their Instagram followers were pro-feminist, which makes it easier to wear one's politics on one's sleeve. However, even then, expressing dissenting opinions resulted in social sanctions—as experienced first-hand by Ajda. She had lost feminist friends after starting a meme page that satirized White Instagram feminists for what she perceived as a lack of understanding of their positionality and a failure to articulate real political-economic goals. She dropped the project in less than a week. Indeed, almost all interviewees adopted a “you do you” attitude toward other women's online self-presentation and claims to feminism—even if they found them harmful or hollow. Fearing reputational damage and loss of face in front of their audiences, our interviewees—often reluctantly—suppressed expressions that could cause audience members discomfort. Instagram's interaction order offered no possibilities to bring these diverse views and enactments of feminism into dialogue.

Instagram's self-presentation incentives and pressures taught users to treat their profiles as a form of social or aesthetic capital to be protected from expressions that may be seen as unpopular or strange. This push was even greater for those who were uncertain about their professional prospects. As labor arrangements become increasingly precarious, social media self-presentation is used—and is indeed increasingly required—to boost one's professional chances. The young women we spoke to reported often feeling friction between their personal self-presentation goals and what the pursuit of employment opportunities demands of them. Self-branding granted Sara freedom to define her professional self, but she had to carefully attune her feminist messages to the fashion industry's value system. The spectrum of political opinions she was able to share with her audience was restricted. This became difficult to resolve:

I wouldn't really want to work with people who are anti-abortion. But even if the decision-maker is like that, the rest of the team necessarily isn't [sic]. So, it's important not to exclude yourself. . . . My modeling agent has advised me to not to post anything that men could find aggressive or wouldn't like. So that's hard sometimes.

Erika, a professional feminist activist, also relied on Instagram to promote her work. While her occupation granted her more leeway in expressing political opinions than



**Figure 2.** “Girls doing whatever the fuck they want”: Sara’s Instagram post.

Sara’s, Erika felt that the functionalities of Instagram and conventions regarding their use restricted her aspirations to express more “verbal activism” and “a feminism that has a more structural and economic critique.” She, too, faced difficult trade-offs and an ongoing struggle:

Instagram is so visual, you have to show yourself all the time. And it makes for a feminism, or an activism, that is so centered on your own body, and not your thoughts, always. . . . I do think it’s difficult . . . because I find that what I want to say really fits badly with the platform.

While Instagram’s affordances technically allow posting text-based interventions, shared imaginations about the platform as predominantly photographic, person-centered, and aspirational constrained our interviewees’ feminist expressions. Instagram’s interaction order and imagined affordances not only mitigate against particular types of political statements, but also against showing certain types of emotions. Our interviewees believed that Instagram was not the platform to express anger, vulnerability, or frustration. For most, this is simply a rule to live by (i.e. stay away from Instagram if you feel bad about yourself), but for some, the emotional dictates associated with the platform align with their understanding of feminism (see also Banet-Weiser, 2018):

Because feminism is all about paying attention to women, if you position yourself like, ‘I’m not good enough,’ you can’t really show that to other people. (Jie)

While the sensibilities and audiences are varied, subtractive filtering invariably involves respecting the interaction order and, hence, the power relations it incorporates. While our interviewees pay heed to expectations, their posts often appear to suggest

otherwise (Figure 2). Although asserting that girls should do “whatever the fuck they want,” in practice, they censor images or views that might be disruptive. Subtractive filtering also applies to emotions. Of the gamut of emotions that motivate social movements—from outrage or frustration to hope and desire—only some find their way onto the platform. In light of feminist literature emphasizing the need for articulating critiques that are disturbing or uncomfortable (Ahmed, 2017) and our interviewees’ insistence that it should be okay to show one’s “true self,” it is remarkable that negative emotions and vulnerable states are filtered out almost completely.

## Filtering as enhancement

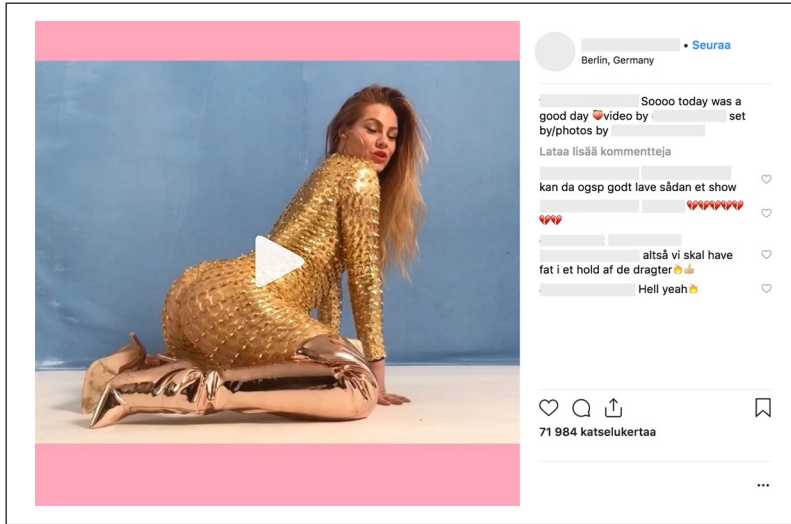
While Instagram’s interaction order is inhospitable to some feminist practices and sensibilities, it amplifies others. The ethos of social media self-production turns out to be highly compatible with a branded, hyper-confident, and corporeal mode of activism. Ida is a case in point. Her feminist awakening took place as she noticed that some people discount her academic expertise because she is into twerking, a dance characterized by thrusting one’s hips while squatting. She became passionate about breaking norms and double standards related to gender and sexuality. Using social media, she carved out a new professional category for herself as a feminist twerk dancer-slash-activist. Ida is a proponent of weaponized femininity: she understands markers of normative femininity as resources to be mobilized in the fight against patriarchy. Reflecting on the power of female sexuality, she tells us,

Think if we’d just tap into that resource, and use it—that could be a way to equalize us with men. . . . Instead of shying away [from femininity], I reclaimed it. . . . I always say—it’s kind of a joke—“I lure them in with my butt, grab them, and put feminism in their head.”

Ida regards comments that condemn her sexual assertiveness as an indication that she’s breaking down boundaries. She makes the most out of Instagram’s affordances and uses them for her own ends, trying out what kinds of images and videos provoke the strongest reaction in her audience in terms of comments and the number of likes, and modifying her self-presentation accordingly. Through such continuous iteration, Ida not only gained algorithmic visibility and followers, but her online persona morphed into a lavish caricature (Figure 3). Ida’s weaponized femininity bore fruit. She recounts calling out a popular dating site that asked its users for their skin color:

The website actually responded like, ‘We’re so sorry, we’re going to change it.’ And I was like, it was a little bit of power there.

Ida’s self-presentation strategies exploit rather than resist the visibility dynamics and metrics of social media: she filters her feminism in a feedback loop. Annette had a similar trajectory. She started posting YouTube videos as a young teenager and experienced that her sex-positive message resonated strongly with her followers. Now in her 20s, she has become a micro-celebrity. By posting about her experiences as a bisexual woman and giving practical advice on such topics as oral sex, she hopes to educate

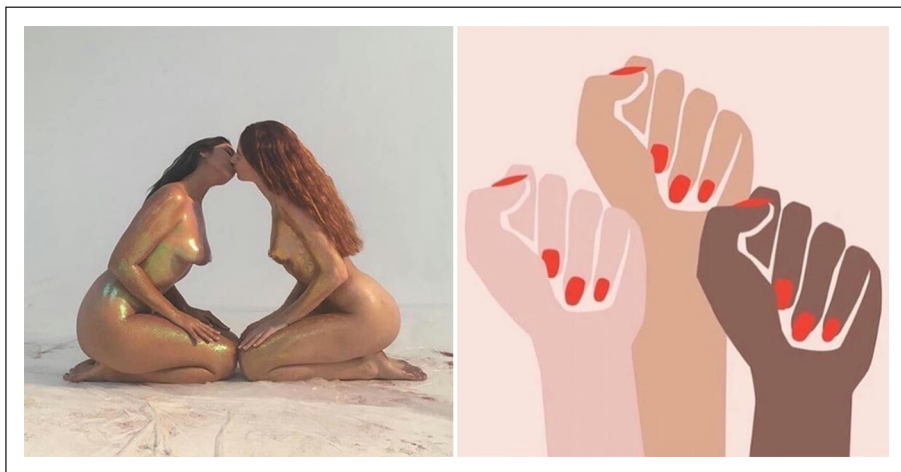


**Figure 3.** Weaponized femininity: Ida's Instagram post.

girls and young women with less sexual experience. Social media gives her a platform to advocate against “slut shaming” and to insist that women are entitled to sexual freedom and pleasure.

Most of our interviewees described looking back at their posts from a few years back and finding their subject matters strange and aesthetics unrefined in light of current standards, which included more attention to image quality and composition. Like Ida and Annette, many had begun using Instagram to share funny moments with a small group of friends, but as their audience grew and diversified, they had started thinking more about the “image” they cultivated. Many felt a desire to “build an audience” or be “discovered” by other Instagram users. This changing dynamic suggests a trajectory from experimental and spontaneous sharing into careful curation and self-promotion. As users notice how people respond to their posts and observe others’ feeds, they become increasingly aware of what works on the platform (e.g. selfies rather than group photos or landscapes). This transformation, as well as changing technology (e.g. improved smartphone cameras), gives rise to new expectations, norms, and aesthetic standards. Instagram’s interaction order is not a predetermined structure, but the changing expressive behavior of others modifies the conditions of one’s self-presentation strategies (Elias, 1984). Feminist expression on Instagram is likewise subject to the affective and aesthetic ideals and norms generated in this manner. Visual and symbolic expressions of feminism on Instagram were indeed often highly aestheticized and polished (Figures 4 and 5).

As users observe, follow, and are followed by others, they adapt self-presentation strategies according to the new inputs they receive. The resulting push toward greater visibility can align with popular feminist understandings of empowerment:



**Figures 4 and 5.** Aestheticized feminism: images reposted by Anna.

Source: Artwork by Carlota Guerrero.

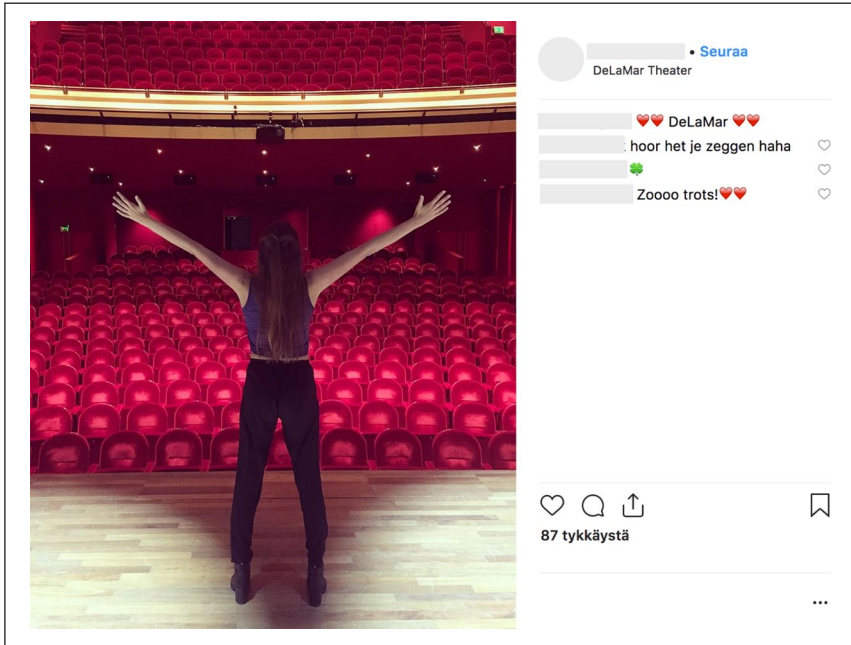
I try that my account will represent me as an individual. I wouldn't say feminism really stopped me from posting things, I actually posted more. Empowerment has a lot to do with it. It's important for me to have the courage to post some things—like more revealing photos—and not be afraid of what people will say. It really feels good to love myself and share it. (Eve)

In these cases, feminism helps to *reduce inhibitions*, but keeps the motivations to perform profile work—attention, acclaim, and distinction—intact. Feminist self-presentation and empowerment become entwined with aspirational and often highly individualistic identity construction practices. For marginalized women, the aspirational interaction order of Instagram may enable gaining professional confidence, expressing ambition and, in Ajda's words, "sharpening one's elbows"—chances for which are not as abundantly on offer elsewhere. "As a woman of color, I've felt the need to take myself seriously and present my accomplishments [on Instagram] in a way that's going to enhance the image of me as successful and good at what I do" (Ajda). While Eve reported expressing her emancipation through what she called "body photos," Rebecca showcases her thriving career in fashion: "I think part of feminism is also taking up the space you deserve, claiming the credits you deserve and show[ing] the stuff that you're proud of." For Josefien, feminist self-presentation equals self-confident nonchalance:

I feel like, as a woman, you can do whatever you want. If I wanna kiss with a girl, or smoke a cigarette, and that's a cool picture, I can put it online.

For these interviewees, taking credit for personal accomplishments (be they aesthetic, social, or professional) becomes an expression of feminist identity and politics, an expression that followers reward with likes and comments (Figure 6). Selfies—which demonstrate commitment to the interaction order of social media by literally presenting the audience with a face to be saved—receive the highest levels of engagement. "Sexy





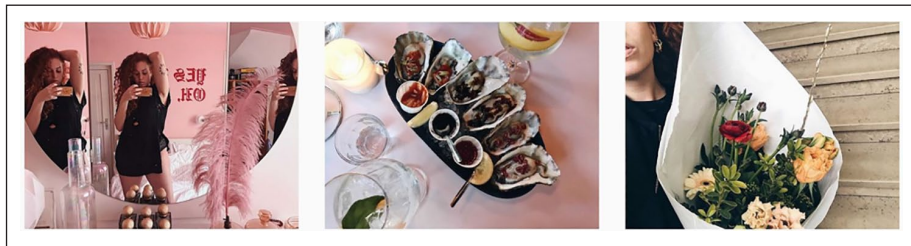
**Figure 6.** Taking credit: Josefien's Instagram post.

selfies” do particularly well, according to our interviewees, once again underlining the gendered dimension of Instagram interactions. “It’s super obvious. . . . Skin works the best,” Maya told us.

The imagery and imaginary of performative, hyper-confident, and heterosexy feminism draws from the postfeminist media culture of the early 2000s (which most of our interviewees had literally grown into, being teenagers at the time) that undid the opposition between heterosexual appeal and sexual agency (Gill, 2007: 151). Postfeminism represents women as playful and knowing: not only targets of a gaze, but actively and confidently gazing back—or, indeed, commanding their audience’s stare. As suggested, many of our interviewees felt that posed photographs can be an expression of a woman’s self, sexuality, and empowerment—even if they confirm beauty standards and do not substantially challenge the male gaze. However, Ajda, having recently left a controlling partner, struggled with the ambiguity of personally empowering images like “sexy selfies” that fall short as feminist texts: “a person who sees this photo doesn’t see the struggle behind it . . . They see a person who . . . Like, my body is white-passing, I’m skinny, I have big breasts, I’m normatively pretty.” She came to notice that the attention such images drew—that rewarded her for her desirability first and foremost—“eventually didn’t feel liberating, but limiting.”

In sum, the interaction order of Instagram not only mitigates against but also enhances some kinds of feminist expression. Filtering boosts feminist (self-)projects that are well-suited for the platform and make use of its concrete and imagined affordances, for example, by optimizing one’s activist self-presentation based on received feedback. In these cases, feminist sensibilities do not complicate or hinder aspirational and aestheticized





**Figure 7.** Careful curation: A picture of Rebecca’s Instagram profile.

self-performances. On the contrary, the inhibitions of putting oneself more visibly on display are reduced, allowing some feminist users to reap the benefits of individualistic, aspirational self-presentation more abundantly, while enabling others to pursue and communicate a feminist politics that affirms the pleasures of desire and visibility.

### Balancing acts and minute deviations

Feminists using Instagram feel incentivized to make use of its material and imagined affordances and play according to the rules of its interaction order, but they also want to challenge patriarchal norms and unrealistic ideals that prevail on and off the platform. Like social media users in general, they balance the related tension between the desire to win recognition from other users in the form of likes and comments (see Marwick, 2013: 93) and the precept to “keep it real” (see Uski and Lampinen, 2016: 457, 461; Pruchniewska, 2018). Self-presentation practices that suggest faking (e.g. photoshopping one’s body or “fishing likes”) are condemned. Signs of unsanctioned status manipulation violate the interaction order, but, at the same time, the interaction order relies on staged displays for its continued reproduction. This clashes with the demand for authenticity, which is strongly felt by our interviewees: we found that feminist sensibilities often manifest as a desire to be radically honest on Instagram. But performed “realness” often becomes yet another marker of social distinction. It authenticates one’s curated profile and increases its *relatability*—a key trope and indeed requirement of successful social media self-branding (cf. Leaver et al., 2020; Petersson-McIntyre, 2020). The aim of “honest” posts, then, is not to disrupt Instagram’s interaction order, but, paradoxically, to validate it. Therefore, vulnerability has to be performed using an aspirational aesthetic register in a way that is consistent with the image cultivated on the platform (Figure 7):

- Rebecca:* Of course, it’s heavily curated still, but that’s Insta.  
*Interviewer:* In what way is it curated?  
*Rebecca:* It’s still pretty pictures. It’s my best angle and lighting, . . . The things that I’m insecure about, I don’t post. I love my body, but would never post my fat belly—I’d post my curvy thighs. . . . The posts must fit the image of myself that I want to put out there. A strong woman who is a powerhouse in work, that is pretty but not fake and that is funny and has a fun life.



**Figure 8.** Minute deviations: Picture of the same occasion on Maya’s “fabulous life” (left) versus “real life” (right) account.

Discrepancy between the presented versus experienced self causes emotional strain (Goffman, 1962). Thus, in order to benefit from the recognition achieved through a socially desirable self-performance, one’s performance has to be rooted in a subjective feeling of authenticity. In Rebecca’s words, a profile ought to be *curated*, not *created*. Most often interviewees authenticate their self-presentation practices with recourse to affects and feelings: their posts represent moments they have truly enjoyed and achievements they are sincerely proud of. Another way to navigate these contradictory longings—from the pleasure of individual self-enhancement to the desire for radically honest sharing as an expression of one’s feminist identity and politics—is to have different accounts for each type of performance. Some users have created “finsta” (fake Instagram) accounts where they are free to display aspects of their lives that do not fit the conventions of Instagram in a supposedly unfiltered and spontaneous way. While such alternative accounts could theoretically be a stage for more contentious and disruptive expressions, in practice, they too are curated. For instance, Maya’s images in Figure 8 are taken on the same occasion and posted to two separate profiles. They differ, but in subtle ways: the image on the left is more posed, poised, and professional-looking. The image pair illustrates the rigidity of the carefully curated digital self. To *marginally* increase her self-presentation bandwidth, Maya has to engage in at least twice the profile work: she has to switch between two accounts, choose, edit, and publish more images, and manage two online personae instead of just one.

Maya’s case illustrates a recurring pattern. Within the aspirational interaction order of Instagram, heaps of profile work is expended on the production of *minute deviations*. Such deviations do not break norms of proper sharing *per se*. Oftentimes they are carried out with such subtlety that identifying them as “deviations” would have been impossible had interviewees not pointed them out as such. Jane remarked that she counteracted posting only picture-perfect images by posting an image that shows cellulite on her right leg. This deviation from conventions is not only minute, but arguably also moot, since the rest of the post *is* picture-perfect. Similarly, Annette posts pictures of herself displaying



**Figure 9.** Challenging and confirming expectations: Image by Maya.

armpit hair, but apart from this, her pictures show a conventionally sexy young woman. Yet another example is Maya’s protest against fat-shaming (Figure 9): the text on her t-shirt articulates a strong critique of beauty standards, but the image confirms those standards. The women are allowed to deviate from the interaction order a little—as long they pay a lot of tribute to it. As Gill and Orgad (2017: 31) write regarding the “feeling rules” of contemporary feminism, “a general atmosphere of assertiveness . . . displaces politics or analysis.”

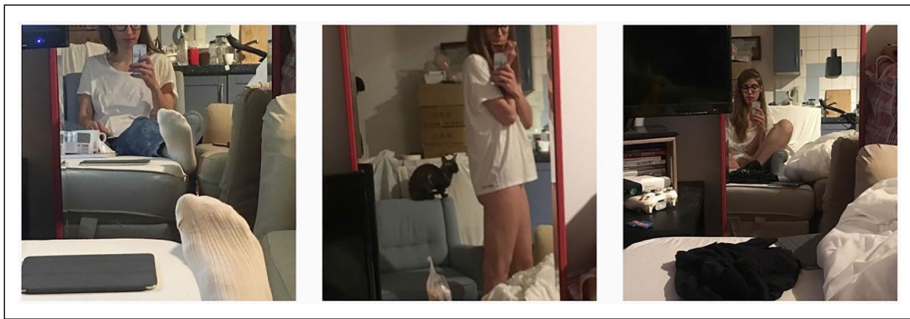
Based on our interviews, reconciling dominant imaginations of Instagram and related audience expectations with feminist sensibilities seems to be challenging for those who subscribe to leftist feminisms. Erika, for example, made vexatious compromises in order to communicate about her activist projects while maintaining her following. She tried to abstain from posting anything that “could make other people jealous, because that is such a big part of [Instagram’s] business model”—but faced continuous difficulties:

People like when you achieve something. I get a prize, or am speaking at a conference. Instagram is very much about individual achievements and competition in a way that is difficult to combine with feminism. I try to counter that, but I also see that it goes against the way the medium is created: I always get the most response and engagement on pictures of myself. But then I also realize that, sometimes, to get a political message across, I have to be in the image myself . . . I struggle with Instagram as a platform a lot. (Erika)

The balancing act of articulating feminist critiques while respecting the valuations mediated by Instagram leads Erika to adopt a strategy of minute deviations: she figures in her posts but attempts to call attention to radical ideas and decenter herself (Figure 10).



**Figure 10.** Struggling to decenter the self.



**Figure 11.** Nika's counter-aesthetics.

Instagram's interaction order thus both pressures and incentivizes users to conform to the gendered and neoliberal dictates of self-branding—ironically steering them to communicate their feminist views by consenting to practices that are against their political convictions.

To better understand the pushes and pulls that condition filtering, it is illustrative to consider the only person we interviewed who wants to pursue alternatives without making compromises. Nika's embrace of a "poor" look—both in terms of the outfits they depicted on Instagram as well as the "bad" quality of the images they (Nika's preferred pronoun) posted—was a rare use of *counter-aesthetics* motivated by their anti-capitalist ideology (Figure 11):

I really hate all this division and stratification. If you want to be cool, you have to dress so and so, add a new iPhone every year. I want to break this idea of what a stylish, fashionable person is. . . . I make an effort to look like a bum. And I think more people should do that. Because then people would respect each other more based on humanity than on looks. (Nika)

Because profile work is always conducted in relation to contextual norms and becomes especially laborious when the user deviates from them, Nika has to "try to be really proud about bad quality photos, or Insta-stories [videos posted to Instagram that disappear after

24 hours], because you always kind of *strive* to this high quality.” As illustrated by Nika’s efforts, resisting the powerful desires produced and alluring social rewards posited by Instagram necessitates an inner battle. A wholesale denial of the norms and ideals ingrained in its interaction order and rejection of dominant scripts for the self-presentation would mean publicly dismantling the aspirational self (see Rawls, 1987: 140). This is perhaps also why many interviewees who felt frustrated with Instagram became more passive in updating their profiles instead of challenging how social reward is typically distributed on the platform on evidence of social, professional, or aesthetic accomplishment. Even if social media users chose such a radical course of action, their performances would likely be recast as a substitute way of seeking recognition. Most feminist users therefore compromise most of the time: their posts conform to Instagram’s interaction order but contain minute deviations that offer a small window into alternative ways of being and seeing.

## Conclusion

Social media is constitutive of popular culture, and popular culture is a terrain where feminisms of varying positions of compliance and resistance vis-à-vis the status quo circulate and struggle over meaning and visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Our proposition is that this tension between compliance and resistance that characterizes feminist social media visibilities plays out not only between but also *within* feminisms of different persuasions, as they strategically adjust, conceal, and amplify aspects of their selves on social media. We argue that these filtering practices aim at resolving contradictions between dissonant self-presentation goals, self-improvement, and protecting the self. Longings for authentically felt connection and expression are constrained by occupational pressures and the fear of losing face. They must also be weighed against other potent desires posited by social media, such as personal advancement and strategic self-enhancement. We found that feminist Instagram users often made compromises for the latter, leading them to adopt the strategy of minute deviations: in order to keep the aspirational self and the social capital of their curated profile intact, they challenged gendered ideals and norms, but only moderately. No wonder, then, that Instagram feminism has not developed a shared critical account of the emotional and aesthetic labor required by self-branding or the competitive ways of relating social media promotes: it tends to downplay the numerous hidden injuries of profile work in order to reap its benefits.

While Instagram’s imagined affordances clashed against some users’ feminist sensibilities, they aligned with and amplified others’. Sexy selfies, posting about one’s accomplishments, and performed “realness” not only work well on the platform, but were understood by many as feminist and empowering practices in their own right. These connotations undoubtedly owe to both postfeminism (Gill, 2007) and neoliberal feminism (cf. Prügl, 2015), which have rendered feminism compatible with heteronormative displays on the one hand and the pursuit of individual success and self-entrepreneurship on the other. Together with Instagram’s affordances, these popular feminist affects and associations produced subjectivities willing to disclose their personal lives to their followers, and digital selves that were both *enhanced* and *relatable*; a combination that works exceptionally well for social media self-branding (Duffy and Hund, 2019; Petersson-McIntyre, 2020). Meanwhile, users who wanted to educate others about



feminism as a collective movement with a structural focus and a commitment to radical political-economic aims observed that despite their compromises, they were left far behind peers who endorsed Instagram's affordances and exploited its person-centered visibility dynamics.

Together with algorithmic feedback loops, users' structurally conditioned filtering practices shape emerging feminist visibilities on Instagram, producing feminist imagery that strategically *evades* feminist issues that sit uneasily with the platform's interaction order—like the need for collective feminist subjectivities, the political value of negative emotions, and internal conflicts within feminisms. At the same time, Instagram also *amplifies* feminist expressions and self-projects, as the constant feedback between feminist users and their audiences boosts feminist thematics that resonate widely, like individual empowerment and sex-positivity. However, even in its amplificatory mode, Instagram feminism remains tightly within the confines of audience acceptance and interest. It is ambiguous to the core: feminist posts make loud claims to transgressiveness and resistance, while in their form and content seek to accommodate the platform's cross-pressures. It should be noted that the reconfiguration of feminist visibilities on Instagram matches only some of its constituents' political sensibilities: as we have illustrated, more often than not, the polished surfaces of feminist Instagram profiles hide ideological rifts and personal struggles. Indeed, we contend that for Instagram feminism to become more than an anticipation of popular feminism's (Banet-Weiser, 2018) changing contours, it should bring to the realm of the political and collective what its constituents now deal with as personal problems in the backstages of their self-performances. These include but are not limited to: the close matching between online self-branding and competitive individualism; how the attention economy of visual social media teaches women to sexualize their bodies in order to gain visibility and acclaim; and what it means for feminism to be rehearsed on and through commercial platforms.

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