From Sony's Walkman to RuPaul's Drag Race: A Landscape of Contemporary Popular Culture

Editors

Tonny Krijnen, Frederik Dhaenens and Niall Brennan

COGITATIO

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Editorial

An Uneasy Return to the Role of Popular Culture

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Abstract

The editorial for the thematic issue of *Media and Communication*, "From Sony's Walkman to *RuPaul's Drag Race*: A Landscape of Contemporary Popular Culture," looks at the prevailing themes of earlier studies of popular culture, from Raymond Williams' organic culture to the postmodern embrace of commodity culture, in relation to the current cultural moment of disruption and unease. The editorial then synthesizes the articles contained in the issue against where the study of popular culture has been and where we may anticipate it going.

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue "From Sony's Walkman to RuPaul's Drag Race: A Landscape of Contemporary Popular Culture" edited by Tonny Krijnen (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands), Frederik Dhaenens (Ghent University, Belgium) and Niall Brennan (Fairfield University, USA).

The last year and a half, and going forward, have been and will continue to be uneasy periods for human existence. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought uncertainty, disruption, and trauma to all aspects of life we previously took for granted. Perhaps one area of pre-pandemic life that has gone unscathed, and arguably even flourished despite a global virus, is consumption of popular culture, even if the latter constitutes being alone while collectively consuming mass-produced culture (Coates, 2020), or producing one's *own* culture to share in the contingent, ever-changing public sphere (MacDonald, 2020). As heads of the Popular Culture working group of IAMCR, and as guest editors of this thematic issue of *Media and Communication*, we never imagined present circumstances when we conceived of revisiting the role of popular culture in contemporary life, and by no means is the issue dedicated to implications of the pandemic for contemporary popular culture. Nonetheless, we see this as an opportune moment to consider perspectives on where popular culture has been, and where it is going,

in relation to the present-day climate which only seems to suggest continuity to unsettled social conditions.

Looking back, Raymond Williams (1974) crucially distinguished different kinds of popular culture. One kind is produced *by* the people to express their meanings and values, and another is produced *for* the people in which is engrained processes ranging from repressive imposition to commercial saturation by both internal and external forces. For Williams, as now, no clear-cut distinction exists between the former "organic" and latter "mechanistic" cultures (Shashidhar, 1997), although arguably it has become even more challenging to differentiate between lived reality and political ideology (Williams, 1983) as they intersect in popular culture, particularly in the contemporary moment, as many contributors to the issue address. What Williams may have resisted but now seems inevitable is that legitimization of the study of popular culture stems from Marxist traditions which recognize the role popular culture plays in mobilizing political action (Mukerji & Schudson, 1986). But if the popular is

political, as these moments of uncertainty and entries in this issue also evidence, so too is it commodified and consumption-driven, mostly although not entirely to the displeasure of cultural scholars (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979; Baudrillard, 1983; Hebdige, 1979; Jameson, 1984; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001).

On the commodification of popular culture, and where Williams would likely shudder, Fiske (1989, p. 15) writes: "There is no 'authentic' folk culture to provide an alternative, and so popular culture is necessarily the art of making do with what is available." Not to suggest its decimation by way of commodification and consumption, however, Fiske (1989, p. 15) adds, "the study of popular culture requires the study not only of the cultural commodities out of which it is made, but also of the ways that people use them" and from which the latter promise "far more creative and varied" processes for exploration than do the former. Making use of, and endlessly reusing, the (exhausted) commodities of popular culture brings us somewhat naturally to the role postmodernism plays in intersecting lived reality and political ideology. Moreover, while intense interest in postmodernism as a framework for interpreting the (amenable) absorption of popular life into late-capitalism seems to have faded, it also seems inevitable to acknowledge that in the present moment commodification and consumption are precisely what continue to make the popular political, a premise the contributions to this issue additionally illustrate.

Apart from embracing commodification and consumerism, postmodernism implicates intertextuality and self-referentiality, simulacra and hyperreality, media convergence and interdependency, and the blank parody of pastiche in making sense of contemporary popular culture to suggest that the "easing out of the real in favour of its most appropriate representation makes it more difficult to talk about the media and society today" (McRobbie, 1986, p. 111). Equally so, it becomes increasingly difficult to assess the means of producing and consuming popular culture against ever-increasing profusion of popular forms themselves. However, despite critique of postmodernism, which would assert that the profusion of popular culture guarantees rights to consumption, not to access, that a "deadening" of reality signals realism devoid of investment, and that "recycling and ransacking of culture" results in an "inward-looking, second-hand aesthetic," postmodern inflections on popular culture also reveal distinct possibilities for articulating political agency (McRobbie, 1986, p. 114). For as much as postmodernism reflects the difficulties of fragmented existence, impermanence, and the futility of meaning when it was first reckoned with by cultural scholars, such conditions not only persist but provide grounds for political mobilization and action through popular culture in contemporary experience. Looking presently and forward, the authors contributing to this issue reflect many previous perspectives on popular culture in assessing where it is now and where it is going.

Hyzen and Van den Bulck (2021) analyse the nexus between conspiracy theories, "ideological entrepreneurs" and digital popular culture. They examine how digital popular culture serves to variously criticise, refute, and reinforce conspiracies as instrumental in pushing the latter *and* their propagators to the mainstream. The authors elaborate on the ideological entrepreneurs who play key roles in disseminating ideas that thrive in times of upheaval and alienation, and feed conspiracism. Digital popular culture works as ideological intermediaries in the relative power of various countercultures. Through discourse analysis of ideological entrepreneurs' digital communication strategies and remix/meme parodic culture, the authors find that (ironic) spectators can oppose or endorse ideological messaging through their own strategies. Cases of ideological entrepreneurship include Alex Jones, and the person(s) representing "Q" of the conspiracy-movement QAnon.

Pitcher's (2021) study takes up centuries-old fascination with the absurd and society's marvelling at those who deviate from physical and mental norms. Such fascinations peaked during nineteenth-century exhibits of those deemed too different for "normal" society. As science and human rights progressed, freak and travelling shows dwindled, yet fascination with freakishness remains. Research argues that freak discourse is intact, especially in some medical disciplines, and film studies literature is replete with analyses of the grotesque. Little work has plotted the role of freak discourse in creating reality television narratives. Pitcher argues that reality television mirrors the discourse used by freak shows to attract audiences and drive narratives, falling back on the same techniques used by sideshows and circuses, and hinging on faux-reality to construct similar narrative formulas. Three case studies from reality television further support how their narratives mirror traditional freak shows, and how human dignity is still belittled for the sake of entertainment.

Vázquez-Rodríguez et al. (2021) examine how queer teenagers use popular culture to seek information about themselves. Television plays a key role in LGBTQ+ youth identity-formation as means of providing information about sexuality, gender roles, and non-normative relationships unavailable in education and home. The authors analyse how protagonists of Netflix's *Sex Education* use popular media to explore their desires, fantasies, and gender expressions in forming queer identities in ways that illustrate the metatextual role audio-visual culture plays for audiences. Case studies include Adam, a bisexual teenager who masturbates to images of a 1980s actor, and Lily, whose role-playing fantasies with alien creatures are influenced by *Tank Girl*, *Alien*, and fantasy fiction. The most revealing case of popular influence on queer youth identity-formation is that of Eric, whose non-conforming gender expression follows the *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* transgender character to mark Eric's birthdays.

Van Bauwel and Krijnen (2021) interrogate the gendered nature of popular media. Gendered audiences, genres, and production have been thoroughly examined, but perspectives on globalization and intersectionality leave room to examine popular media's relationship with gender. The authors investigate the meanings of intersectionality and globalization in the 2020 Super Bowl Halftime Show featuring Shakira and Jennifer Lopez. The performance resulted in hundreds of complaints of it being "too sexy," invoking the #MeToo movement, sex trafficking, and corporate boycotts. Other spectators read the show differently to see representations of child abuse and slavery, suggesting how contradictory responses reveal complexity in relations between gender and popular media. The authors use discourse analysis of the video and articles reviewing the show to argue that intersectionality and globalization contribute to varying appraisals of gender performance. Moreover, the authors argue that age, motherhood, and geography are vital to interpreting the relations between gender and popular media.

While social-cultural change in young people's socialities can proceed slowly, the pervasiveness of social media in young people's lives pertains to changes in certain "qualities" by which sociality is understood. De Ridder (2021) interrogates change in qualities of social relationships, relating them to questions of values and beliefs central to data and surveillance capitalism, namely, how young people articulate values and beliefs of what constitutes "proper" intimacy, reputation, and popularity in social media imagery. Drawing on ethnographic research in which young people produced and reflected on Instagram accounts viewed as proper, inappropriate, or ideal, De Ridder examines the sematic universe in which sociality is understood by focusing on embodiment, data, and quantification logics, and the production and circulation of visuality. De Ridder argues that understanding data/surveillance capitalism is driven by goals of global companies whose data/surveillance strategies create value out of tracking people's activities, yet data/surveillance capitalism is also suffused with values and beliefs about "proper" intimacy, reputation, and popularity.

For Hermes and Teurlings (2021), popular culture is in a contradictory space. Popular culture is thriving in the expanding range of media objects studied under the rubric of "popular." Cultural studies scholars rarely examine these objects *as* popular culture, however. Instead, concerns about immaterial labour, voting behaviour, public opinion, societal polarisation, and populist authoritarianism are dominant frames of the contemporary media environment. The authors trace how such change has come to be, arguing that it reflects the technological media environment *and* cultural studies as an institutionalized project. The authors identify "the moment of popular culture" as cursory but groundbreaking, displaced by theoretical problems that gradually removed popular culture studies from the popular. Displacements include: hollowing out of the popular as signalled by Morris (1988); misuse of "ethnography"; (perceived) moves towards and engagement with interpretative sociology; concern for neoliberalism and governmentality; and affect theory. The authors analyse how these moments mutated understanding of popular culture from hegemony and meaning-making to platforms for cultural citizenship and training grounds for docile subjects, and as commercial entertainment. Throughout the study, the authors link popular culture with political engagement as illustrative elements.

Dumitrica (2021) examines the identity-work performed in the use of transnational cultural resources in protest. The transnational symbolic dimension of the 2017 anti-corruption protests in Romania, evidenced in citizens' cultural references to Marvel superheroes, Charlie Hebdo, and Stalinist politics, was a striking feature of the movement. Dumitrica uses multimodal critical discourse analysis of protest posters to ask how transnational cultural resources are reinvested with local meanings to support the protest message, and how interplay between local and transnational meanings contribute to the construction of a collective protest identity. Dumitrica finds that protesters interchangeably addressed national and international audiences to simultaneously evoke and construct a cosmopolitan political imaginary. This cosmopolitan imaginary, however, remains permeated by hierarchies and decontextualised of (political) meaning.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Conspiracies, Ideological Entrepreneurs, and Digital Popular Culture

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Abstract
This contribution starts from the contemporary surge in conspiracism to develop a theoretical framework to understand how conspiracy theories make it from the margins to the mainstream. To this end, it combines a view of conspiracy theories as ideology and its propagandists as ideological entrepreneurs with insights into how the affordances of digital media and popular culture are instrumental in propagating the conspiracy theories. It further complements sociological and psychological explanations with a fandom perspective to grasp the diversity of conspiracy audiences. Together, it is argued, these factors allow ideological entrepreneurs to push conspiracy theories from the margins to the mainstream. Alex Jones and QAnon are discussed as cases in point.

Issue
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1. Introduction

1.1. Because the Third Eye Ain't Open

Trying to understand the people storming the US Capitol —the physical and symbolic heart of US democracy— on January 6, 2021, early media reports unearthed an interview given to Austrian public broadcaster ORF by Jacob Anthony Angeli Chansley (or Jake Angeli), self-proclaimed shaman of conspiracy phenomenon QAnon and prominent participant in the riots:

> And so, as a Shaman, I am like a multidimensional or hyperdimensional being, ok? I am able to perceive multiple different frequencies of life beyond my five senses and it allows me to see into these other, higher dimensions that these entities, these pedophiles, these rapists, these murderers, really

high up people, that they almost like hide in the shadow. Nobody can see that because the third eye ain't open. (etzimanuel, 2021, 8:50m)

Hilarious nonsense to some, pathological obscurity to others, his statement was crystal clear to QAnon conspiracists. They believe in a secret, Deep State cabal of politicians, billionaires, and celebrities that they consider to be pedophiles and human traffickers that rule the world and extend their lives through the blood of abused children. These beliefs echo longer-standing conspiracies, famously promoted by Alex Jones, (now disgraced) founder of Infowars. Long before the 2017 emergence of QAnon, Jones propagated conspiracies, many based on his worldview: a fantasy-infused, idiosyncratic interpretation of Simulation Theory (Bostrom, 2003). As Jones 'explained' on the *Joe Rogan Experience* (PowerfulJRE, 2017):

There's at least 12 dimensions, and all the top scientists and billionaires are coming out, saying it's a false hologram. It is artificial; the computers are scanning it and finding tension points where it's artificially projected….There is this 'Sub-transmission Zone' below the third dimension which is turned over to the most horrible things….And our species is already way up at the fifth/sixth dimension consciousnally [*sic*]—our best people. But there's this war, trying to basically destroy Humanity, because Humanity has free will. And there's a decision—which level we want to go to. We have free will, so Evil is allowed to come and contend.

The January 6 events served as a powerful reminder of the mainstreaming and mobilizing powers of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories very much predate the current climate of mis/dis/malinformation but recent years have seen a boom in revived and new conspiracy theories and in those rallying around them. These include: Flat-Earthers, who dismiss scientific proof of a round earth as a conspiracy of the Royal Society and NASA; Birthers, refuting that former US president Barack Obama was born in the US, a presidential prerequisite; those convinced that so-called Illuminati secretly control the world, an Alex Jones favorite picked up by QAnon; Anti-Vaxxers, opposing the scientific consensus that vaccines are safe; and, recently, Covid-19 conspiracists. The latter includes debunked notions of Covid-19 as unleashed by Microsoft founder and philanthropist Bill Gates to sell vaccines and/or to plant microchips in every person, and Covid-19 being transmitted by 5G towers.

Academic attention has focused on the particulars of a given conspiracy theory and on psychological and sociological explanations for their attraction. Much less attention has been paid to the forces/processes through which conspiracy theories make it from the margins to the mainstream, and that is the focus of this article. We argue that this requires attention: 1) to the ideological nature of conspiracy theories, 2) to those actively propagating conspiracies, 3) to their use of the affordances of digital media and popular culture and, 4) to conspiracy theory followers as audiences and fans. Crucially, we argue that incorporating concepts and findings from the study of digital popular culture and its audience-fans into existing explanations of conspiracism can help us to understand the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories.

In their overview of work on conspiracy theories, Baden and Sharon (2021) mention research from fields including political communication, philosophy, social psychology, anthropology, history, law, and discourse studies, but there is no mention of a (digital) popular culture perspective. We take inspiration from scholars such as Street (2019) and van Zoonen (2005) who point out the growing convergence between politics and popular culture, politicians and celebrity, news and entertainment, citizenship and consumerism. We see this convergence at the heart of the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories. We develop a framework inspired by the literature on ideology and propaganda, on conspiracism, on digital media and popular culture's affordances as conduits for ideology, and on views on audience and fan engagement with digital content. We start from a conception of conspiracy theories as ideological and from the role of so-called ideological entrepreneurs (North, 1981) in pushing conspiracy theories to generate ideological change. We consider how their efforts to push a conspiracy-propaganda message are affected by characteristics of celebrity and of the evolving media and popular culture that serve as ideological intermediaries. We complement sociological and psychological explanations with insights from digital audience and fan studies to understand how various audiences help distribute, reinforce, or refute conspiracies. This is instrumental in pushing conspiracy theories and their propagators from the margins to the mainstream. To illustrate, we refer to "conspiracy magnate" Alex Jones and the person(s) representing Q of QAnon. The focus is on the US but there are many indications that their impact goes beyond the US borders.

1.2. Meet the Great Conspirators

Alex Jones is a US radio show host, founder of Infowars.com and, in his words, the "most paranoid man in America" (for detailed analysis: Van den Bulck & Hyzen, 2020). Ignoring factual evidence, Jones presents economic predictions, pseudo-science-meets-popular-culture phantasy and conspiracies emphasizing Illuminati, Deep State, and false flags (e.g., 9/11 as a US government job). As his popularity grew, so did his conspiracy spectrum, most notably in his insistence on the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting was a covert government operation, a so-called false flag (Van den Bulck & Hyzen, 2020). In 2016, as part of his attack on Hillary Clinton, Jones sided with then-presidential candidate Donald Trump. He was a prominent propagator of so-called Pizzagate—a (debunked) conspiracy theory regarding involvement of top Democrats in a sex trafficking ring—and of key Democrats being lizard people, later elaborated upon by QAnon. At the height of his popularity (2017–2018), Jones and his claims attracted two million weekly listeners to his syndicated and streamed radio show, up to 1,3 billion views to his YouTube channels, and 20 million monthly visits to Infowars.com—80% from the US. Following growing criticism and a conviction in a Sandy Hook defamation suit, in late 2018, Jones was banned from social media, affecting his ability to reach out and, to him, effectively proving the Deep State. Regardless, Jones remains in the public eye, promoting conspiracies, including President Biden as a shapeshifting lizard, appearing at alt-right rallies, and claiming strong involvement in organizing the January 6th rally and subsequent storming of the US Capitol.

QAnon originated in October 2017 when one or more people started posting under the name Q on

anonymous imageboard 4chan, later extending activities to 8chan/8kun and beyond. Q presented itself as US insider with top military clearance and knowledge of Deep State activities. Through countless "drops" or cryptic posts, followers ("anons") are invited to become "bakers," studying crumbs of evidence to turn into dough/bread that exposes Deep State machinations (Quincy, 2018). Conspiracy topics vary, from Pizzagate to the Covid-19 pandemic as a false flag but emphasize a liberal, affluent elite of child-abusing Satan worshippers. Crucially, President Trump was presented as recruited by the US military to help fight the Deep State, an effort that followers are invited to support. In the fall of 2020, social media increasingly blocked and removed QAnon content for falsehoods and instigation of violence. Q was instrumental in pushing a voter fraud conspiracy theory surrounding the 2020 US presidential elections, resulting in QAnon followers being heavily involved in the storming of the US Capitol. At the time of writing, Q's identity remained unknown, although in December 2020, *Business Insider* published a list of the 200 main QAnon contributors, including "celebrities, politicians, activists, military veterans, men's rights activists, media personalities, and the name of the person who probably is the mysterious 'Q'" (Edwards & Davies, 2020).

2. Conspiracy Theories, Ideology, and Ideological Entrepreneurs

2.1. Conspiracy Theories as Ideology

The starting point is the distinct surge in conspiracism, i.e., the belief in conspiracy theories. The term conspiracy theories refers to a seemingly diverse range of theories revolving around secret activities and subversions of invisible enemies, often relating to covert government operations (so-called False Flags) and cover-ups (by the so-called Deep State). We follow Baden and Sharon (2021) and Cassam (2020), who distinguish between theories about conspiracies that have turned out to be factual—such as the propaganda campaign based on fabricated claims that Saddam Hussein had both weapons of mass destruction and ties with Al-Qaeda, which led the US into the second Iraq war—and Conspiracy Theories (Cassam, 2020) or Conspiracy Theories Proper (Baden & Sharon, 2021) that are unproven, our main focus. Different from e.g., Baden and Sharon (2021, p. 85), we do not consider conspiracy theories as "a distinct, pathological phenomenon" but follow Aupers (2012, p. 22), who sees conspiracism as, "A cultural phenomenon that revolves around epistemological doubts about the validity of scientific knowledge claims, ontological insecurity about rationalized social systems like the state, multinationals and the media; and a relentless 'will to believe' in a disenchanted world."

Following Billig (1989), Byford (2014), and Cassam (2020), we consider conspiracy theories as ideology. Conspiracy operates as an ideological lens and (belief in it) is not so much about a theory's specifics but higher-order beliefs like distrust of authority. As such, conspiracy theories serve as smokescreens for an ideological-political agenda (Byford, 2014; Cassam, 2020). Following Thompson (1991), we consider ideology as a world view and value system, a set of beliefs held by (sections of) a society that serves not just to ensure cohesion but to maintain power relations. In this, ideologies do not so much serve as a unifying force, but legitimate the positions of and relationships between various groups. Engels and Marx (1848/1977) consider a deterministic model where the economic structure, especially the dominant superstructure's interests, bears on ideology within capitalist societies. Gramsci (1971, pp. 376–377) instead distinguishes between "historically organic ideologies… which are necessary to the structure, and ideologies that are arbitrary, rationalistic and 'willed.'" Hall (1985, p. 94) concurs, saying there is "no necessary correspondence" between structure and ideology. Conspiracy theories can fit either (organic or arbitrary) category and so, like ideology, do not have to follow from the superstructure. Various stakeholders of some ideological issue or another can participate in ideological formation and its circulation and can affect some material outcome. Conspiracy theories can be instrumental in this, as:

> Their basic function is to advance a political or ideological objective, be it opposition to gun control, anti-Semitism, hostility to federal government or whatever. Conspiracy Theories advance a political objective in a special way: by advancing seductive explanations of major events that, objectively speaking, are unlikely to be true but are likely to influence public opinion in the preferred direction. (Cassam, 2020, p. 11)

Conspiracy theories and their following do not fit traditional party-political divisions, as is the case of Flat Earthers, Anti-Vaxxers, 9/11, or Covid-19 conspiracists. However, they tend to fall in with extremist political ideologies, be it on the left (anti-capitalist) or the right (distrust of government; Cassam, 2020). In the US, recently, conspiracy theories have become more visibly related to alt-right and populist movements, encompassing "different branches of White nationalism, including 'scientific' racists, sections of the neonazi movement, and adherents of European New Right ideology" (Lyons, 2017, para. 2), themselves increasingly connecting to the so-called manoscape. The latter involves both activist men's movements like the Proud Boys, aiming to change a status quo perceived as dominated by women, and online communities like incels, who believe in a feminist conspiracy to manipulate men and vow to stay away from women (Lin, 2017). Much attention has gone to how US President Trump embraced conspiracism and the alt-right and how the end of his term culminated in a violent convergence of conspiracism and alt-right.

2.2. Selling Conspiracies: The Role of Ideological Entrepreneurs

Conspiracy theories are essentially ideological, aimed at challenging prevailing ideologies, and are generated and spread by ideological entrepreneurs. Ideological entrepreneurs, a concept introduced by North (1981), refer to figures that play a key role in ideological change and thrive in times of upheaval and alienation—a condition that also feeds conspiracism—when people are open to alternative interpretations of how things work. An ideological entrepreneur:

> Would be alert to opportunities to sell a new ideology that better explains the world than existing ideologies. [They] would be a bold innovator who created new conceptions of how the world works or combined and presented existing models of how the world works in new ways (i.e., to promote ideological development). [They] would work to capture the ideological marketplace, competing fiercely against other ideological entrepreneurs as well as against the weight of existing public opinion and conventions. (Storr, 2011, pp. 107–108)

Ideological entrepreneurs can include politicians but more often are non-party actors: media personalities like right-wing radio host Rush Limbaugh, public intellectual and one of the "Four Horsemen of the Non-Apocalypse" Sam Harris; YouTube Professor Jordan Peterson, a Christian traditionalist and critic of political correctness; former Breitbart editor, neo-conservative podcaster Ben Shapiro; and, indeed Alex Jones and QAnon. The ideological entrepreneur's success is based on providing "a convincing image of a relationship between the specific injustices perceived by various groups and the larger system which the ideological entrepreneurs desire altered" (Storr, 2011, p. 108), alongside a guide to action and a clear picture of what a world will look like without these injustices. The latter can be dystopian or utopian and can compete with more scientific/common-sense/meaningful explanations. Taking Martin's (2015) simple but clear conception of ideology as *values + beliefs = opinion* and applying it to conspiracy-ideological entrepreneurs, they advance ideology to displace beliefs. They generate and propagate ideology expressed as alternative histories, science, political views, interpretations, amongst others, to affect public opinion and ensure followers' loyalties. As such, ideological entrepreneurs operate as propagandists. Their end goal is to challenge and displace prevailing ideologies and manipulate/manage public opinion towards conspiracy indoctrination.

As an ideological entrepreneur, Q's push of a 2020 presidential election fraud has the relationship between Deep State and traditional US politics at the heart of its conspiracy—with (President) Trump as the "savior." This has earlier roots in the ideological work of Alex Jones, who forged a relationship between conspiracism,

the alt-right, and Trump politics. Identifying as libertarian and paleo-conservative, Jones made a turn to actual politics in the run-up to the 2016 presidential elections when he and Trump endorsed each other, with Jones telling Trump over the air: "Ninety percent of my listeners are Trump supporters"; and a triumphant president-elect telling Jones, "Listen, Alex, I just talked to the kings and the queens of the world. I want to thank you, your audience" (Van den Bulck & Hyzen, 2020). By the time Jones fell out with Trump (his 2017 order of an attack on Syria upset Jones' isolationism), crying on-air and ranting "Fuck Trump, and fuck these fucking people" (Politi, 2018), much of the ideological work was done.

However, many conspiracies pushed by Jones and Q are not party-political but equally ideological: Sandy Hook, Pizzagate, lizard people, Covid-19, and 5G, the fourth dimension of evil. It can prove challenging to conceptualize such fantastical, irrational theories within any framework of rational thought or traditional ideological framework for political discourse, left/right propaganda campaigns, international conflicts, and religious affiliations. Looking closer, though, these theories serve the same ideological function as, for instance, traditional socialist or neo-liberal doctrine. Take political elites as secretly shape-shifting lizards who eat children or globalist elites as a cabal of international pedophiles. Setting aside irrationality or evidence, pushing such beliefs serves the most traditional political functions: to denigrate opposing parties, damage specific politicians or general left/right values. As such, the conspiracy-ideological entrepreneur's discourse is similar to other political theory or discourse: critiques of prevailing power and institutions, outlets of political grievances, expressions of nationalism, support of favored politicians, and demonization of rivals—all with a deeper, ideological goal.

3. Digital Media and Popular Culture as Ideological Intermediaries

3.1. Getting the Message Out

Ideological entrepreneurs need to sell their conspiracy message through propaganda, here defined as "a sustained campaign of communication to enforce ideological goals, manage opinion and codify loyalties… aimed towards consolidating identity, indoctrination and producing loyalty" (Hyzen, 2021). Our definition effectively confirms earlier notions of propaganda described as "the penetration of an ideology" (Ellul, 1965, p. 65) where "the methods of propaganda" can be deployed so that "specific allegiances and loyalties… will operate to mollify the free will" of subjects (Bernays, 1928/2005, p. 119). So, conspiracy-ideological entrepreneurs create and curate ideology in the form of conspiracy theory and elaborate this position through propaganda campaigns sustained by their own and/or third-party (social) media until the message/theory takes on a life of its own. Jones

and Q, as ideological entrepreneurs, must remain relevant by producing new theories and by curating and critiquing the ever-evolving theories of others. Their modus operandi is influenced by the affordances of contemporary media and popular culture. Just like the early 20th century agitprop efforts to spread the communist message throughout Soviet Russia using popular media or ISIS posting on YouTube violent decapitation videos overlaid with ideological messages in hopes of attracting mainstream media attention worldwide, so do contemporary conspiracy-ideological entrepreneurs employ media at their disposal. Their aim: establish and maintain ideological goals and build an audience for their conspiracies through the "manipulation of significant symbols" (Lasswell, 1927, p. 627). Such symbols are not required to be of a rational nature.

3.2. Playing the Media Game

As the mechanism by which conspiracy theorists elaborate and spread their ideological positions and goals, propaganda has no shortage of outlets in our media-rich environment. For one, like online movements (Lyons, 2017), ideological entrepreneurs build their realm of influence and rally support through alternative-activist media. Alternative media are defined as media that compensate for the shortcomings of mainstream media and strengthen democracy through professional practices and participatory communication (Atton, 2006, p. 574). For some, conspiracist and right-wing media are not considered alternative because they develop community with closure. However, we argue that alternative-activist media refer to media that are outside of the mainstream or counter-hegemonic, can have a left-progressive (e.g., Chapo Trap House) or right/alt-right (e.g., Breitbart) orientation, and can invite participatory communication (e.g., 4chan, Reddit).

Alex Jones built his own alternative media to spread his conspiracy message (Van den Bulck & Hyzen, 2020). In the late 1990s, he built a reputation as a radio host. Fired from broadcast radio for his radical views, in 1999, he started the online Alex Jones show that was quickly syndicated to a hundred stations through the Genesis Communications Network. He combined a daily, three-hour radio show with a television show three days a week, while developing Infowars.com. Embracing the growth of social media, he developed a strong Twitter presence and created 18 YouTube channels. In 2011, he launched Infowars Nightly News TV program to anchor his new subscriber TV network. By 2017, Jones was running a multimedia business, had 2 million weekly radio listeners, and reached up to 1,3 billion views for his YouTube video channels, creating traffic to his websites that accumulated to 20 million monthly visits. As such, digital media greatly helped his visibility and reach with a more mainstream audience.

At the same time, ideological entrepreneurs exploit the web's and social media's opportunities for interactive participation. As Sharbaugh & Nguyen (2014, p. 137) explain:

> The significance of the Internet and social media for political change is to be seen in the way these open, networked tools empower people and organizations to privately and publicly articulate and debate a welter of conflicting views throughout society.

While this has been argued as the democratizing potential of social media, they have also been embraced by conspiracy ideological entrepreneurs. Like sections of the alt-right, conspiracism has "firm links with participatory, often fringe or even dark media networks through websites such as 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit" (Heikkilä, 2017). Claiming to champion free speech, these platforms welcome communicators who may be banned elsewhere. Alex Jones/Infowars was a popular topic on these platforms, with followers/fans dissecting and discussing his every word. QAnon's start and rise are rooted in these platforms, to the extent that, at the time of writing, some suspect the 4chan/8chan/8kun founders to be Q (Francescani, 2020). Participatory communication is at QAnon's core; Q's drops are meant to engage followers, inviting them to trace and collect evidence of conspiracies, similar to immersive games.

Crucially, we argue, the role of interactive participation in conspiracism extends beyond fringe platforms to mainstream (social) media. Paolillo (2018) analyzes YouTube as a space for Flat Earthers to come together, sharing evidence, while Lewis (2018) discusses how Facebook and Instagram influencers amplify fringe ideological messages. De Zeeuw et al. (2020) use the label "normiefication" to explain how online diffusion across culturally distinct web spheres helps counter-cultural/subcultural messages to move from the dark web to the mainstream. Before being banned, Jones played into this by repackaging his streamed radio and television shows to fit web and social media formats, markets and algorithmic sorting and recommendation systems to reach wider audiences. Jones used social media as mainstreaming extensions and amplifiers of his alternative media and message. Similarly, mainstream social media became megaphones for QAnon's ideological messages, as anons post their fabricated proof of conspiracy on mainstream social media where they garner broad attention and following, well beyond US borders. By the time social media started banning profiles related to Alex Jones (from mid-2018) and QAnon (from late-2020), these ideological entrepreneurs had achieved their mainstreaming goal.

Finally, these conspiracy-ideological entrepreneurs embrace interaction provided by digital popular culture, just like alt-right groups. The latter deploy bashing and trolling tactics as well as online memes to spread their extremist message, remixing and repurposing popular cultural references like Pepe the frog and using irony to hide their message in plain sight (Lyons, 2017). This makes it difficult to criticize and allows for

inter-ideological mingling (Graham, 2015), spreading the message beyond primary target groups and fans to mainstream audiences, ironic spectators, and even anti-fans. Indeed, while Byford (2014, p. 10) maintains that "[t]he threat of ridicule… makes anticipating and reacting to potential or actual charges of irrationality, paranoia or prejudice, an essential feature of the conspiracy theorist's endeavour," such ridicule is not necessarily detrimental to the ideological entrepreneur's aim to catch mainstream attention. This is similar to the PR adagio: There is no such thing as bad publicity. Byford (2014, p. 14) concurs that "to cajole the mainstream into a 'debate' with the conspiracy theorist… invariably enhances the latter's status and esteem." Jones exploited his on-air antics' meme-able qualities and re-edited his media material to ignite a viral storm or hashtag war, in favor of or against his claims. Discussing the fall-out following his role in spreading the Sandy Hook conspiracy theory, he stated: "I'm under attack. And I summon the meme war, I summon it all against the enemy" (Tilove, 2019). QAnon consistently encourages followers to collect and publish proof of the Deep State conspiracies by all means possible.

3.3. Ideological Entrepreneurs and Celebrity

The entrepreneurs' success hinges on their ability to gain visibility and attention, often enabled by a level of celebrity within and beyond the community of core believers. Celebrity is based in mediated communication (Driessens, 2014; Turner, 2004; Van den Bulck, 2018), so it is not surprising that their primary media of communication shapes the ideological entrepreneur's visibility and renown. Alex Jones' celebrity has its basis in the radio personality: a cross-over between right-wing talk radio hosts like Glenn Beck (Jutel, 2018) and shock jocks like Howard Stern and Don Imus (Hayes & Zechowski, 2014). His celebrity is vested, in part, in a distinct political persona as a "deep-digging" populist-conspiracist that results from the apparent merger of his public and private persona (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021) and, in part, in affective performativity, his melodramatic and exaggerated style. Together, they create a sense of authenticity: Jones IS his message. This helps attract the attention and following of conspiracy theory believers who take his message seriously and wider audiences that enjoyed and even ridicule his antics. Jones' embrace of new media and online viral culture helped him to gain further visibility and recognition beyond his primary target audience, even among those opposing his message.

While Jones' celebrity is based on the personal, Q's celebrity status results from the elusive as basic celebrity appeal. Indeed, the celebrity appeal and power of anonymity and of the (physical or symbolic) mask has a long history (Merck, 2015). Turning a feature of its media platform of choice into a tool, Q's celebrity is based on the anonymous nature of imageboards like 4chan that obscure contributors' identities while allowing for a consistent, if anonymous, identity across posts. Even though they are ideological opponents, Q's celebrity is closest to celebrity hackers collective Anonymous as well as to recent whistle-blowers whose celebrity preceded their unmasking (Coleman, 2014). It is based on being unknown but knowledgeable, necessitating anonymity while holding the melodrama of potential unmasking. As such, Q illustrates the political efficacy of anonymity (Merck, 2015). In the context of Deep State conspiracies, Q's anonymity adds to the mystery. It makes Q newsworthy and interesting, also for mainstream media and audiences.

4. Duped, Empowered, or Immersed?

4.1. Psychological and Sociological Approaches to Conspiracism

How to explain the attraction of conspiracy theories to what appears to be an ever-larger following? Conspiracism has caught the attention of (social) psychology, an academic domain that considers it a pathology and focuses on the brain, especially the occurrence of types (intentionality, confirmation, proportionality) of cognitive bias and on conspiracy believers' personality. By means of a Conspiracy Mentality Scale, people are identified as having a conspiracy mentality or as being conspiracy-minded. Critics (Billig, 1989; Byford, 2014; Cassam, 2020) question the methodologies (surveys/experiments as tools, make up of samples, etc.) and normative position of researchers in this field that assume "people are at fault for believing [conspiracy theories]" (Cassam, 2020, pp. 38–39) or that conspiracies are "neutral" (Byford, 2014, p. 12; see also, Billig, 1989). The approach ignores the role of ideology in people's adherence to conspiracy theories, while, for Cassam (2020, p. 45), a conspiracy mindset is not a personality trait but an ideology: "Fundamental to conspiracism is the belief that people in authority are hiding things from the rest of us as part of a conspiracy to achieve their own sinister goals." From this perspective, still according to Cassam (2020, p. 48): "The ideology of conspiracism is attractive to some because it fits their broader ideological or political commitments," which can be right or left leaning but tend to be extremist.

Taking a "sociological perspective," Byford (2014, pp. 10–11) urges us to consider conspiracism in the context of "how historically situated ideologies, worldviews and cultural traditions produce and sustain particular patterns of thinking and behaviour." In this light, Cassam (2020, p. 53) points to how earlier social developments can affect current beliefs. For instance, for members of communities that have been the victim of proven conspiracies, that context makes them more susceptible to unproven conspiracy theories. An example is the relationship between the popularity of anti-vax conspiracies in US black communities and the disturbing history of drug trial abuse, most notably the

Tuskegee study (Billauer, 2020). In this context, you do not have to be an extremist to engage with the conspiracy. Others (e.g., Freeman & Bentall, 2017) focus on how people's belief in conspiracy theories relates to feelings of marginalization and lack of agency/control. Hofstadter (2012) connects this to Durkheim's (1897/1951) notion of anomie: In a world where (you are told that) familiar norms are eroding, individuals experience powerlessness. Conspiracy theories fill the hole left by the demise of traditional political doctrine and ethnoscience, help people make sense of the world and restore a sense of control and predictability through simple, externalized explanations and the identification of an opponent.

Accounts about Jones' and QAnon's followers suggest a considerable part fits the conception of conspiracists as disenfranchised, feeling marginalized and lacking control, with the conspiracy-ideological entrepreneurs offering an alternative. Two groups can be identified. First, there is a dedicated if eclectic following of individual and loosely networked alt-right folks, libertarians, the manoscape, and doomsday preppers. Confirming the relationship between conspiracy and anomie, Socolow (2018, para. 30) says about Jones/Infowars: "They speak to—and claim to speak for—not simply the downtrodden and downwardly-mobile; they also speak to those feeling wronged and forgotten." QAnon appeals to similar alt-right and manoscape groups such as Proud Boys, while Trump's explicit identification as part of the solution ensured success with Make America Great Again followers.

A second related audience is not alt-right but likewise feels abandoned by government and society. Interviewing Jones fans, Belluz (2017, para. 7) found:

> The Infowarriors I spoke to didn't fit the stereotypes. Most said they believed in climate change and the benefits of vaccines. Some were former NPR listeners who felt the mainstream media had let them down. Others were looking for interesting and alternative opinions online. Still others championed science.

What brings them to Alex Jones is that they "felt let down by government, medicine and the media" (Belluz, 2017, para. 33). Reflecting on the diverse group of intruders on the US Capitol, Heath and Lynch (2021, para. 2) found that, next to alt-right: "Court documents paint a picture of a diverse mob that included both citizens with mainstream careers—police officers, a flower shop owner, a state lawmaker, military veterans, even an Olympic medalist—as well as Americans on the fringe."

Calling it a "Pottery Barn Insurrection," Bunch (2021, para. 3) suggests that, rather than the economic downtrodden, the January 6 rioters:

> Came from lush-green suburbs all across this land, flying business class on Delta or United and staying in four-star hotels with three-martini lobby bars—the better to keep warm after a long day of taking selfies

with friendly cops or pummeling the unfriendly ones, chanting "Hang Mike Pence!"

Other authors (e.g., Zuckerman & McQuade, 2019) suggest that a considerable part of the audience does not fit either group of conspiracists.

4.2. The Conspiracist-Fan

Expanding the theoretical lens to digital audience studies and fan studies reflects the highly mediated nature of how followers come into contact, engage, and interact with conspiracy theories and their entrepreneurs, building on an historical interplay of audienceship and political participation (Sandvoss, 2013). Furthermore, it draws attention to a more diverse set of motivations to follow conspiracy-ideological entrepreneurs and to the dynamic nature of the involvement. With regards to the latter, social media, blogs, podcasts, and the chat boards, frequented by conspiracy theories believers, such as the QAnon' and Jones' followers, are lively places of discussion and debate, creating communities and, we could argue, fans.

Sandvoss (2005, p. 8) defines fandom as the "regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given narrative or text." On the one hand, thinking about conspiracists as fans can help appreciate the active and affective involvement of conspiracy theory believers. Work by Jenkins (2006) and Sandvoss (2013), amongst others, has shown parallels between participation in political discourse and political activism and fandom in popular culture. In both cases, such engagement becomes an important identity resource. The ideological nature of conspiracy theories informs a parallel with Sandvoss' (2013, p. 252) conceptualization of political enthusiasm "as a form of media fandom, in which [media activity] constitute forms of enunciative and textual productivity." As such, the relationship between conspiracy theories and followers is similar to an affective bond between fan objects and fans. Jones' followers demonstrate fan-like behavior in their detailed dissecting of Jones' every word in endless—now removed—threads. QAnon's basic principle is active participation and decentralized storytelling, with followers creating social media content explaining their interpretations, which Zuckerman and McQuade (2019) dubs a form of fan fiction.

On the other hand, a fan perspective can provide insight into conspiracy followers that do not fit the profile of the politically disenfranchised nor of the deeply involved conspiracy believer. Chang's (2018, para. 10) analysis of QAnon enthusiasts on Reddit found that "most participants are relatively casual conspiracy theorists....Their interests coalesce around things like video games, cryptocurrency, men's rights, and martial arts." They come for the fun of the immersive game and the community, more than the conspiracy or the sense of regaining control. In the case of Jones, many fans are attracted not so much to his message as to his persona

as exuberant performer. Looking at Jones' followers as audiences and fans also allows for an understanding of various ways in which his message is decoded, with their involvement being ironic and even oppositional while still embracing the experience and community. Indeed, part of his fame comes from parodies, meme culture, and remixes such as those from video creator Vic Berger who adds music and special effects to Jones' broadcasts and posts the edits on social media to popular response. These ironic spectators do not necessarily believe nor oppose Jones' ideas but enjoy his rants as entertainment and enjoy making fun of his man's man performances. This group includes members of the general public and public figures like stand-up comedian, commentator, and podcast host Joe Rogan. This type of audience is both instrumental in and part of the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories.

5. Discussion: All Fired Up but Nowhere to Go?

This contribution has presented a cross-disciplinary framework allowing for a contextualized understanding of contemporary conspiracism as ideological work occurring at the crossroads of politics and digital popular culture. It has pointed to the crucial role of ideological entrepreneurs that work with the affordances of digital media and popular culture to propagate their message and push it from the margins to the mainstream.

Certain conspiracies may not fit our conceptualization. For instance, conspiracy theories regarding the death of Elvis (still alive) or Princess Diana (not an accident) can be explained starting from a perspective of fandom, i.e., fans dealing with the loss of their idolized object of fandom to a random, "banal" event such as a heart attack or a car accident, rather than from a deeper ideological base. While not dismissing these cases, we argue that these examples do not undermine the notion that a majority of conspiracy theories primarily serve ideological goals. Similarly, the ideological entrepreneur's role may not always be as clearly identifiable or dominant as in the case of Jones and QAnon. We aimed to show how these entrepreneurs are instrumental in pushing conspiracies from the fringe to the mainstream. This is not a one-size-fits-all explanation but a general conceptualization that allows for different particulars of specific conspiracy theories. In a digitized environment, people move easily between individuals, groups, and institutions, merging the political and the popular, civic values and commodity. This is the context in which contemporary conspiracism flourishes. Through mediated communication and aided by the force of celebrity and popular culture, ideological entrepreneurs like Alex Jones and QAnon push their conspiracies, gathering a diverse mix of followers. These include people deeply involved in the ideological message and its promise of an empowering alternative world view, casual fans enjoying the antics (Jones) and immersive experience (QAnon) and community as much as the ideological message, as well as ironic spectators. Together, they push the conspiracy message from the fringe to the mainstream. Much more work is needed to understand these dynamics better. This will require the full conceptual and methodological toolbox available to scholars of popular culture as much as of politics and political communication.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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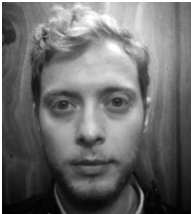
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Article

Here Come My 600-Pound Quintuplets: A Discussion of Reality Television as a Freak Discourse

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Abstract
History is littered with tales of the absurd, odd, and unusual. From Gorgons and mermaids to bearded ladies and elephant men, people have, for centuries, been fascinated by those who deviate from physical and mental social norms. Such fascinations seemed to peak during the 19th century when showmen, like PT Barnum, bought and exhibited those deemed too different and macabre for "normal" society. However, as science and medicine progressed, and the protection of human rights became more important, freak shows and travelling sideshows dwindled (Nicholas & Chambers, 2016). Society's fascination with the unusual though, did not. Despite increased political correctness and calls to end "fat shaming," bullying and the like, reality television appears to encourage "a dehumanising process that actually lessens our regard for other people" (Sardar, 2000). While some writers have considered how reality television exploits stereotypes and links social norms to hegemonic whiteness (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Rennels, 2015), few have commented on the similarities between such programming and the stylings of the 19th century freak show. Utilising Thomson's (1996) concept of freak discourse, and Bogdan's (1996) assessment of freak narrative, this article examines how reality television programming as a genre, despite its varied plots, uses a narrative formula that can be likened to 19th century freak shows to enhance its storylines and "produce a human spectacle" (Thomson, 1996, p. 7).

Keywords
freak discourse; popular culture; reality television; television studies

1. Introduction

In its tagline, the cult classic *Freaks* (Browning, 1932) asked, "[can] a full grown woman truly love a midget?" Critics were horrified, the public fascinated. MGM Studios withdrew the film (despite decent box office earnings) after a number of complainants cited that the film concentrated too heavily on "the most unsavoury aspects of the freak show" (Hawkins, 1996, p. 265). One of the reasons for such outrage lent on advances in medicine and science during the first half of the twentieth century. As these professions developed, so too did society's sensibilities toward those who appeared in sideshows and circuses. "People with disabilities started to be viewed as… having various genetic and endocrine disorders" (Bogdan, 1996, p. 33) to be treated, rather than deformities to be ogled. And those who were termed "exotic" only a few decades prior, were no longer that unusual as more people began to travel, and diasporic communities flourished in big cities. Consequently, the few side shows that remain today, tend to be seen as exploitive and "seedy vestiges" of a time gone by (Bogdan, 1996, p. 23). Yet despite such changes to society, and the rights movements they encouraged, freak discourse remains intact, and embedded in more contemporary disciplines such as genetics, zoology, embryology, taxidermy, and celebrity culture (Thomson, 1996).

As Thomson (1996, pp. 1–2) points out, humans have a "seemingly insatiable desire to gawk" and a "profound disquiet [stirs] in the human soul by bodies that stray from what is typical and predictable." While academic work in literature (including film studies) are littered with analysis of the "other" and grotesque, few appear to have plotted the role that freak discourse plays in creating narrative. Other contemporary work has hinted at how television in the form of talk shows (see Dennett, 1996) and medical documentaries (see Clark & Myser, 1996) contain aspects of freak discourse, but none have gone so far as to directly link their studies to how these discourses have revitalised the conventional 19th century freak show into 21st century reality television. I argue in this article that reality television mirrors the same discourses used by freak shows in the late 19th century to attract audiences and drive their narratives, falling back on many of the techniques, described by historians and academics, which were used by sideshows and circuses. Like freak shows, reality television is "about spectacle: it is a place where human deviance is enhanced, dressed, coiffed, and propped up for the entertainment of paying audiences" (Bogdan, 1996, p. 325).

Therefore, this article opens with a short history about reality television and the complexity in its definition. From there, a comparison is made between reality television and freak shows of the 19th century. The discussion then moves on to apply Thomson's (1996) work to selected examples, highlighting that it is not merely those programmes which deal with the so-called grotesque, but that most shows hinged on faux-reality follow the formula of freak discourse. Finally, the article ends with a discussion of themes contained in various examples, highlighting how these mirror Bogdan's (1987, 1988, 1996) assessment of conventional freak shows, concluding that Western society is no more "civilised" than it has ever been. Notably, this article deals broadly with the genre of reality television in light of freak discourse. Consequently, the research achieves a methodological framework which can be utilised in future case study analyses.

2. Reality TV or Freak Show: Is There a Difference?

Reality television is a somewhat complicated genre, without much consensus as to how to classify it. Part of the problem is that it is a postmodern hybrid that borrows elements from many other genres like documentary, talk shows, game shows, and even home movies. Some trace the genre back to the 1960s and the introduction of *Candid Camera* (Clissold, 2004), but the genre only really began to gain traction in the early 1990s (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004). Originally, the genre was confined to "factual programs containing 'on-scene' footage" (Hill, 2005, p. 468), such as the Rodney King assault in 1991, but this became too restrictive as newer "fly-on-the-wall" documentaries proliferated 1990s primetime slots (Hill, 2005). Programmes like *Rescue 911*, *Cops*, and *America's*

Most Wanted, re-presented real events in dramatised formats, inviting audiences to experience life as an emergency worker, while other extreme talk shows, like *Jerry Springer*, exploited salacious scandals that were usually kept out of the public eye. The commonality with these programmes, as outlined by Hill (2005, p. 451), was that they were "a combination of observational documentary and character-driven drama" that were obviously scripted and edited.

However, when shows like *Big Brother* and *Survivor* catapulted into viewers' homes in the early 2000s, many writers thought that the genre had shifted into one which offered unmediated insight into the private lives of ordinary people (Biressi & Nunn, 2005; Oulette & Murray, 2004). Even medical docu-soaps, which focussed on abnormal bodies within the privacy of a surgery, were no longer seen as "real" because they were often dramatised, and only tended to allow viewers in via invitation through the perspective of "the benevolent work of heroic physicians" (Clark & Myser, 1996, p. 338), rather than alongside the "lived" experience of a patient. Nevertheless, the "realness" of reality television was quickly brought into question. Despite shows like *Big Brother*, which appeared unedited and unmediated, it became widely understood that these types of programmes were carefully constructed and manipulated by producers. In essence, the only useful description that could be used when trying to classify generic cues in reality television are the ways in which programmes "invite viewers to voyeuristically observe" (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 116) the ways of living, which are typically off-limits in other genres. O'Donnell (2017, p. 125) concurs, highlighting that reality television, and the myriad of sub-genres it has spawned, encourages "audience voyeurism" which provides audiences "a sense of contact with what is real rather than what is fiction." Additionally, researchers continue to raise two common themes in relation to reality television which aid in its definition.

Firstly, reality programmes provide viewers an opportunity to deal with social identity (as does most television). However, Biressi and Nunn (2005) argue that reality television, unlike conventional television, provides "real" stories about "real" people with whom audiences are able to relate, and thus provide a sense of social legitimisation. In other words, reality programming allows audiences to say to themselves, "I'm not alone, others are dealing with the same traumas as me." Biressi and Nunn (2005) lament that audiences appear to be using what they see on reality television as a way to authenticate their existence. Briggs (2009, p. 48) agrees and describes television as a "modern confessional" that provides viewers significant interaction around intimate topics that would otherwise be kept hidden. In doing so, audiences are presented with various social options in terms of how to behave and react when "faced with challenging situations" (Briggs, 2009, p. 51).

However, this idea is not new. Franzino (2015, p. 189) pointed out that that during the late 19th century "what

audience members saw on the sideshow stage shaped their ideas about identity, normality, and communal and national belonging." Thomson (1996, p. 11) argued a similar point, stating that "freak shows became ritual sites where the uncertain polity could anxiously contemplate the new parameters of embodiment that cultural transformations had wrought." And while Thomson (1996) was referring to the uncertainty that industrialisation and mechanised factories posed for the "normal'' body in the early 20th century, there are obvious similarities today as artificial intelligence and robotics become more advanced. Therefore, reality programmes, like freak shows, are "filled by voices proclaiming and celebrating their own 'freakishness'" (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 107) to help articulate viewers' personal insecurities and anxieties in ways that would otherwise not be possible in the normalcy of day-to-day living. Consequently, Hill (2007, p. 108) concludes that viewers use reality television as a way to "explore the troubling or negative aspects of their self-experience."

Secondly, reality television reinforces hegemonic norms by using those who deviate from these (whether physically, or psychologically) as examples of how not to behave. Jones (2018, p. 28) argues that "reality television shows seek out the worst of humanity [in order] to reflect it back at [audiences]" as it flirts with moral and immoral behaviour, creating a dichotomy between us (moral) and them (immoral). When viewers sense those boundary lines have been pushed too far, they recognise the dangers of deviating too far outside the norm of proper social interaction and draw back with indignation. In the words of Hill (2007, p. 108), such interactions "appear like a 'mad dream'" which viewers are only able to escape if they return to the sanity of hegemonic normalcy. Consequently, reality television deals with such anxieties by appealing to a "mythic past where gender norms [are] absolute [and] the nuclear family," as well as the average white middle-class, are considered the "ultimate normalising rite" (Stephens, 2004, p. 193). The spectacle of placing alternatives to such norms is used as a display to "warn others of the dangers of defying society's *modus operandi*" (Rennels, 2015, p. 274).

Again, one finds similarities between such descriptions and those which described freak shows. Thomson's (1996, p. 4) work highlights how the unusual body, relationship or mentality were considered as an "especially vicious normative violation, demanding genetic reconstruction, surgical normalisation, therapeutic elimination, or relegation to pathological specimen." The extreme freakishness of performers in side-shows and circuses allowed the common petite bourgeois audience to be "rendered comfortably common and safely standard by exchange" (Thomson, 1996, p. 5). In other words, audiences knew that by maintaining normalcy and non-deviant behaviour they were morally sound and aligned with successful modern living, unlike the freaks of the sideshow. However, the true parallels between freak shows and reality television can be drawn from an ana-

lysis of freak discourse itself, as many reality shows (even those which appear to encourage positivity) use the same structures to advertise and drive freak show performance.

3. Freak Discourse

Thomson (1996) argued that the conventional 19th century sideshow was underpinned by four interwoven narrative forms which helped to produce freak discourse. The primary stage comprised of the oral spiel, or "lecture,'' which was touted outside the main side show tent. The showman, most commonly referred to as a "doctor," "lecturer," or "professor," would deliver a speech, often with a relatively tame-looking freak beside him, to help whet the intrigue of passers-by and potential customers. He would advertise amazing dwarves, intriguing giantesses, sword swallowing marvels from the East, human torsos without arms or legs who could light and smoke cigarettes, or even animal-people who were half man and half beast. Today, such proclamations may seem offensive, yet simultaneously somewhat familiar; especially when flipping through reality television channels. Viewers are offered a choice of programming which offer insight into the escapades of "the largest known family of little people in the world" (*7 Little Johnstons*), "America's fattest teenager" (*The 685lb Teenager*), or a man with an implied harem of 25 women (*The Bachelor*).

Additionally, as freak shows peddled "doctors" and "professors" to legitimate the scientific and educational merit of such human oddities, so too do reality television shows. One can use literal examples like *Dr Miami*, *Dr Pimple Popper*, and *Dr Christian*, which use real doctors to help participants overcome some type of medical or psychological malady. But, it must be remembered, that like credible doctors who were used by freak shows to lend credence to the scientific and educational merit of certain exhibits, those who feature on medical reality programmes, are driven by "a for profit activity, and within the climate of the amusement world" (Bogdan, 1996, p. 25). However, the role performed by freak show orators is probably best represented by reality television narrators and hosts who direct audiences to take heed of participants strange conditions and outrageous behaviour. In South Africa's *Date My Family*, for example, the narrator, never seen by the audience, introduces the potential bachelor or bachelorette, and provides information and details about their wants, desires, and often salacious expectations. Such narration is similar in other shows, like *Come Dine With Me* or *Dinner Date*, in which the narrator often responds to bizarre or strange behaviour displayed by contestants with sarcastic quips (not heard by the participant). Consequently, the narrator guides audiences through these types of shows highlighting that specific types of behaviour should be met with audience derision, and essentially pinpoints what type of behaviour is deemed socially acceptable or not. *Date My Family* is an excellent example of such direction. Despite sharing the same general format as

other dating reality shows, its primary audience are middle-class Black South Africans. One might assume that this would spark a narrative which deviated from the "whiteness" of other international shows. However, what emerges is not only a narrator who quips about contestants' strange wants and desires in a partner, but also makes light of their cultural belief systems. Often, male contestants when meeting the family of a potential female partner, tend to describe their perfect relationship as one which adheres to culturally traditional gender roles: Women are expected to be the homemaker, respectful to the wants of their man, and provide sex when her partner demands. Nevertheless, what one often hears thereafter from the narrator is that many of these cultural expectations are archaic and not desirable for those who wish to be part of modern-day South Africa. Overall, the narrator seems to advocate for the same social norms as found in other contemporary dating shows imported from the West.

The second narrative form, as outlined by Thomson (1996), revolves around texts which were published—in the form of pamphlets, advertisements, and newspapers—that provided detailed biographies about each freak. Importantly, as explained by Bogdan (1996, p. 25), advertisers of freak shows were careful to construct "a public identity for the person that was being exhibited… designed to market the exhibit [and] produce a more appealing freak." Again, one can see the same technique used in reality programming as advertisers and producers provide biographical backgrounds for participants, promotional videos, and appearances on various talk shows. As can be noted in the extract below, taken from MSN Entertainment about the reality programme *Outdaughtered: Life with the Quints*, audiences are primed to consider participants as abnormal:

> In April 2015, [a] Texas couple became parents to the first-ever all-female quintuplets born in the U.S. The new additions—Ava, Olivia, Hazel, Riley and Parker—join 4-year-old Blayke, turning a family of three into a bustling household of eight overnight. "Outdaughtered" profiles the Busbys' journey, focusing on the babies' delivery and the massive adjustment period that follows. Lending much-needed help are Danielle's older twin sisters, Ashley and Crystal, and her zany mom, Michelle. (MSN Entertainment, 2016)

Based on this extract, the couple are seen as odd as they are forced to make adjustments to accommodate their unconventional family. Additionally, by including their extended family, who are considered "zany," audiences are asked to judge the non-conventional family dynamic as strange, bordering on crazy. Evidently, the show acts as a cautionary tale, as many freak show acts did, of what to expect if one deviates too far outside Western familial norms of the traditional nuclear family. This is only one of many programmes which

deals with alternative family living. In programmes like *Welcome to Plathville* and *19 Kids and Counting*, audiences are invited to visit the websites set up by each family to see more about their ultra-conservative Christian lifestyles. Together with advertisements and gossip magazine space about family scandals (such as molestation charges; see Swift, 2015), audiences are left questioning if this type of lifestyle is not "cult-like," and one that should be avoided—just as would have happened when reading about the lifestyle of African "savages" found in 19th century sideshow pamphlets.

Thomson's (1996, p. 7) third aspect of freak discourse concentrates on "staging which include[s] costuming, choreography, [and] performance." Such description draws obvious parallels to the staging of all media, but is especially important in relation to reality television. As already discussed, the reality in reality television is a trope as programmes are constructed, scripted and edited. Even *Big Brother*, which was meant to be an unmediated broadcast that "shattered the fourth wall and invited viewers behind the scenes" (Andrejevich, 2004, p. 120), was manipulated by producers who chose participants based on psychometric tests, and often influenced them, and thus their interactions, during sessions in the diary room (Knox, 2016). This mirrors many of the techniques used by freak show exhibitions whereby showmen would create fabricated personal histories for their performers, carefully constructed stories about how they ended up as part of the freak circuit, and what their current personal circumstances were like (Bogdan, 1996). Apart from the Wild Men of Borneo (discussed later), one of the most carefully constructed characters was General Tom Thumb. Born Charles Sherwood Sutton in 1838, General Tom Thumb became one of PT Barnum's most well-known oddities. Touted as an eleven-year old, Sutton was only four when he began working for Barnum. He was renamed Tom Thumb, after the English fairy-tale character, and promoted to General to help bolster his status as a remarkable adult oddity; all of which was reinforced by his characteristic army uniform and performances satirising Napoleon Bonaparte (Bogdan, 1996). He was even married off by Barnum to another small person to maintain his celebrity. More recently, Rennels (2015) has highlighted that similar audience manipulation occurs in reality television and uses the programme *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* as a case study for her argument.

In this show, audiences are introduced to child pageant star Alana (Honey Boo Boo) Thompson, and her "redneck" American family. The programme, which centres on the family's life, is intentionally edited to show off the family's worst behaviours and teach Americans "what not to do and who not to be in the United States" (Rennels, 2015, p. 275). The family were displayed as uneducated, uncouth (often farting on-camera), and immensely unhealthy. To enforce the concept that the Thompsons were not the family any respectable white American would want to emulate, directors even took to

editing in shots of a train that was allegedly meant to pass by the family's home, highlighting that they were indeed from the "wrong side of the tracks." Not once during the series was the family shown as having bettered their social position or improved their lifestyles as a result of their earnings from the show (despite earning an estimated $50,000 per episode). Therefore, just like the narratives around the characters found in freak shows, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, like all reality television, is knitted together to produce a carefully crafted narrative which appears to naturalise performance, and manipulate audiences into believing that they mimic the "true" reality of performers.

The final aspect of freak discourse which Thomson (1996, p. 7) discusses deals with how sideshows were tied together by images which pitted "staged freakishness" against the "proper" "Victorian parlor and family album." Obviously we are not judged against the social decorum of Victorian sensibilities today, but comparison between "proper" and "improper" behaviour on reality television is a basic tenet of the genre. Between reality programming that draws attention to unusual maladies or relationships, and poor social status, one also finds another type of show: one which tends to highlight lifestyles on the opposite end of the spectrum. In programmes like *Say Yes to the Dress* and *House Hunters International*, viewers are given the opportunity to experience the benefits that one can achieve when adhering to Western hegemonic social norms. In retrospect, shows like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Swamp People*, demonstrate that to be white and relatively unattractive, of low intelligence, and poor is the equivalent of being an undesirable social freak. Other programmes which highlight the attractiveness of white middle-class living, and above average education, provide participants opportunities for fairy-tale happy endings. However, those who deviate too far into the realm of the extremely wealthy, or from hegemonic middle-class whiteness, are also represented as undesirable. For example, in programming like *Jersey Shore*, *The Real Housewives Series*, and *Bling Empire*, viewers are asked to judge the lifestyles of participants who are often shown as crude, overly sexualised, spoiled, and thus abhorrent to conventional white Western, middle-class social etiquette. In other words, these shows tend to highlight the classlessness of overt wealth, especially if it is in the possession of non-white actors and spent in ways that are considered flamboyant. In doing so, these narratives help maintain the idea that it is better to aspire to be part of the typical white upper-middle class, thus re-affirming the privilege of this group, than deviate too far on either side of the spectrum. Such conclusions are further reinforced when exploring the work of Bogdan (1996).

4. Freakish Constructions on Reality Television

Like reality television, the aim of conventional freak shows was to turn a profit. The ways in which acts were constructed and marketed helped increase earnings. The more outrageous the spectacle attached to a specific act, the greater the amount circuses and sideshows could charge. As with reality television, there were a variety of freak shows that were available to audiences. These tended to be differentiated between those freaks who were "born," "made," or provided some form of "novel" act. In other words, there were performers who were born with some type of malady or deformity such as Prince Randian, more commonly known as the Human Torso, who was born without limbs; other performers who made themselves into freaks, such as Captain George Costentenus, who was covered in tattoos; and novelty acts, in which exhibitions performed strange and exotic routines, such as sword swallowing or eating glass.

One doesn't have to search too hard to find the same "types" of performers on modern reality television. Those who are born different often appear in programmes like *7 Little Johnsons* (a show about a family of seven small people)*, Outdaughtered* (a programme which documents the day-to-day life of a husband and wife with six daughters) and, to mirror the example above, *TLC's Born Without Limbs*; a show which follows the day-to-day life and challenges of Nick Vujicic, a man who was born without arms and legs. Other shows, like *Black Ink Crew*, *Tattoo Girls*, and *Botched* follow the lives of those who have made themselves into something different, whether it be through tattooing or plastic surgery. Interestingly, *Botched* deals with individuals who have undergone plastic surgery and are either looking to correct botched surgeries, or undo a poor surgery decision (such as over-enlarged breast implants). Consequently, the overall message of the show teeters back toward the idea that one should adhere to typical social norms regarding appearance, or face the horrible prospect of corrective surgery and/or ridicule from society. Not only does *Botched* detail the surgery needed to fix a patient, but also the agony of recovery, thus providing even more traumatic material to further discourage audiences from unnecessary cosmetic deviations. Additionally, today's novelty acts, while not usually as extreme or dangerous as sword swallowing, can be linked to programming like *Fear Factor*, *American Idol*, *Britain's Got Talent*, and *Survivor*. However, even in these shows, producers tend to focus attention on contestants who are different in some way, such as Susan Boyle, a frumpy Scottish woman, who shocked both audience and judges on *Britain's Got Talent* with her rendition of *I Dreamed a Dream*. Boyle did not "fit" with the conventional image of a pop singer, and was laughed at by both studio audience and judges when she first took to the stage. However, she stunned everyone into silence when she began to sing and was proffered an apology from judge Simon Cowell at the end of her performance for judging her on her appearance.

Based on the above criteria, Bogdan (1996) argued further that freak show performers generally fell into one of two modes of performance, based on how a sideshow

was constructed: the exotic mode and/or the aggrandised mode. I argue that modern reality television also follows the same formula.

In relation to the exotic mode, Bogdan (1996, p. 27) considered sideshow acts which "appealed to people's interest in the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, [and] the exotic." In other words, any act which suggested that performers were from an exotic land, or displayed characteristics similar to animals fitted into this category of freak. Some of the most famous acts to which he refers were the Wild Men of Borneo, the Elephant Man, and Prince Randian. However, most of these acts relied on audiences' limited worldliness, and showmen's aptitude and orchestration of manipulation. The Wild Men of Borneo, for example, were touted as two savages who had been captured after an intense physical struggle with sailors visiting the distant island of Borneo in the Pacific. In reality, they were two mentally disabled (but very strong) brothers from New Jersey who were acquired by PT Barnum (Bogdan, 1988). And despite what one might assume, these performers, like many other headlining acts in Barnum's shows, died incredibly wealthy. Others were not so lucky. Annie Jones, more commonly known in Barnum's circus as the Bearded Lady or Monkey Girl, was essentially sold into his employ by her parents as a baby, and Joice Heth, a blind and almost paralysed slave, advertised as the oldest woman on Earth at 161, was rented from her owners by Barnum for $1,000 a year. Consequently, many exotic acts were underpinned by racist ideologies and determined by ethnology in which exoticism was likened to those deemed "primitive" in light of Western society's assumed civility (Cassuto, 1996; Rothfels, 1996).

Freak shows generally sourced exotic acts (or at least pretended to in some cases) from outside the Western world. Audiences were told that exhibits "came from a mysterious part of the world—darkest Africa, the wilds of Borneo, a Turkish harem, [or] an ancient Aztec kingdom" (Bogdan, 1996, p. 28). Those on display were scripted to behave in a stereotyped and primitive manner (like grunting and knuckle-walking) to validate orators' "lectures" about their origins and narratives as audiences made their way through the exhibit. Therefore, the exotic mode tended to make people freaks because of the "racist presentation of them and their culture by promoters" (Bogdan, 1996, p. 29), and their opposition to how one was meant to behave in civilised modern Western society. While reality television producers may not be quite as obviously racist in their construction of the exotic today, there is still plenty of evidence to suggest that such categorisation is used, whether consciously or not. However, what is interesting to note, is that when one begins to look for examples, especially from programmes that are syndicated out of the US for global broadcast, the exaggerated "other" tends to focus on either "uncivilised" rednecks, or immigrants in the US. Two examples to be noted are *Swamp People* and *Cake Boss* respectively.

In *Swamp People*, a History Channel production, participants are represented as partaking in a way of life that is foreign, and somewhat strange in relation to standard expectations of modern American living. Despite filming around different swamps throughout the southern US, the show's official webpage cites that the show provides insight into the "proud descendants of French Canadian refugees who settled in the swamp region of Louisiana in the 18th century" and now hunt alligators in the Louisiana delta, just as their ancestors did, to help preserve their traditions (History Channel, 2021). When the programme first began, it often relied on subtitles, due to actors' thick regional accents, and audiences were propelled into the backwaters of the American continent with men who appeared bestial. Not only did they hunt and wrestle alligators to sell for meat and skin, they were large, bearded, and seemingly unwashed. Overall, they appeared as the epitome of the Ape Men from HG Wells' *The Lost World*. Such representations point directly back to Bogdan's (1996) work on exotic freak shows, whereby some individuals who spoke a primitive language and/or partook in eating animals that would repel typical Western sensibilities, helped display and reinforce their "savagery." It could also be argued that in 21st century society, and the continual rise of animal rights, that the sale of alligator skin, as well as its meat, is akin to the same "barbarous" behaviour, and in direct contrast to the morals and values of contemporary Western society.

However, it is not only programmes which highlight extreme social behaviour or difference which follow the path of exotic freak discourse. Programmes like *Cake Boss* use scripting and stereotypes to embolden their narratives to reinforce exoticness. Documenting the day-to-day life of a successful New Jersey baker, and first generation Italian-American, Buddy Valastro, one could assume that *Cake Boss* is an example of aggrandised freakishness (to be discussed below). Instead, it can be examined as part of the exotic thanks to producers' use of stereotypes related to Italian-American immigrants. *Cake Boss* often focusses on Buddy's Italian heritage and large conventional Catholic family, introducing each show with Valastro stating: "This is the crew, mia famiglia. We're going to take this bakery to the top. They call me Buddy, I'm the boss" (Feeley et al., 2009–present). By using phrases like "the crew," "mia famiglia" (my family, in Italian), and "the boss," one is reminded of the same type of discourse used in American gangster movies, and how Italian-American families were often linked in the media to organised crime and the Mafia. Throughout the series, Buddy is portrayed as a "Don"-like figure who oversees his entire bakery operation and family, much like a crime boss in old gangster films. Audiences also see him and his family partake in important Catholic rituals, such as christenings and weddings, which help focus audience attention to their familial bonds. Such displays help to further links between the *Cake Boss* and stereotypes from movies such as

The Godfather, as many important business decisions are made during these meetings. Additionally, *Cake Boss* is a rags-to-riches story of a first-generation immigrant who is living the American dream (another common theme in the gangster genre), thanks to his cake empire. Interestingly, the show often shows Buddy and his family flaunting their riches, either on expensive holidays, or on seemingly frivolous household luxuries, such as a home bowling alley. Consequently, the show couches itself in stereotypes that "other" Italian-Americans as immigrant-exotics who do not quite "fit" into the norms of conventional middle-class America, and should be looked at with caution, even while the programme reinforces the success that one can enjoy by partaking legally in the United States' capitalist economy.

Additionally, remnants of racist stereotyping, as first witnessed in freak shows, is still evident in modern reality television. Notably, the representation of non-white participants in US reality shows are either positioned as wealthy socialites in programmes like the *Hip-Hop Wives* series, or *Basketball Wives*, or as criminals in shows like *Cops* or *Border Security: America's Front Line*. There appears to be no middle-ground in terms of how non-white Americans are portrayed on reality television, and thus implies that they do not (or cannot) "fit" into the ideals of white American life. Such othering is portrayed in other countries, but manifest in different ways. In South Africa, for example, most reality shows feature black participants, and the concept of the exotic manifests in relation to tribal differences. One such example was witnessed in *The Real Housewives of Durban* in 2021 when Ayanda Ncwane, a Zulu participant, inferred that another participant, Nonkanyiso Conco, who is Tswana, was not human because she is not Zulu. Interestingly, despite the furore this altercation caused on social media, the incident seemed to be swept under the carpet by producers (possibly pointing to the privilege Zulus hold as the dominant population group in the country). However, despite portraying smaller tribes as exotic, the overall discourse of these shows in South Africa mimic the same ideology of American reality television—success is measured by how well one meets the ideals of a white Western middle-class.

In addition to the exotic mode of freak discourse, Bogdan (1996) argues, much like Thomson (1996), that freak shows also cast actors in an aggrandised manner, rather than exotic and othered. As was mentioned previously, conventional freak shows often paraded less offensive freaks in a manner which elevated them in way to lay "claim to the superiority of the freak" (Bogdan, 1996, p. 29) and draw audiences in. This article has already mentioned the unexpected talents of Susan Boyle and Nick Vujicic, thus hinting that basic aggrandisement occurs when a person shows a talent that "normal" society would believe to be unexpected from an exhibit. However, the most common type of aggrandisement is merely standard show business and was linked, when referring to sideshows, to those individuals who "were

carefully groomed and trained for exhibit" (Bogdan, 1996, p. 30). In modern reality programming, this can be linked to almost any reality show in which participants are coached (*The Voice*, *America's Got Talent*, *Pop Idol*), mentored (*Project Runway*, *America's Next Top Model*, *Next Great Baker)*, or just carefully narrated in their day-to-day lifestyles (*Keeping Up With The Kardashians*, *Girls of the Playboy Mansion*, *Real Housewives*).

In fact, much of today's celebratory culture is rooted in the aggrandisement of reality stars. Talent competitions like *American Idol* or *Chopped*, are obvious sources from which producers are able to discover singers, chefs, actors, models, and designers. However, reality television is also responsible for celebrity production or, as termed by Thompson et al. (2015), the creation of "celetoids," such as *The Kardashians*. Such celebrities are created thanks to "close collaboration between the cast and the production team" (Thompson et al., 2015, p. 482) and the seemingly unfettered access audiences are given into their "real" everyday lives. Celetoids do not have any talent per say, except being wealthy (usually). However, the spectacle of their opulent lifestyle, and by allowing audiences to voyeuristically observe their day-to-day lives, the Kardashians, like most celetoids, have been carefully crafted for audience consumption, thus making them household names. Thanks to the success of the show, each member of the Kardashian family has been able to profit off their celebrity, and launch different products such as perfumes, clothing lines, and cosmetics. Most have also landed lucrative endorsement deals with major brands such as Pepsi, SugarBear Hair Vitamins, and Proactiv. And most of this is a direct result of exaggerating and coiffing their wealthy lifestyle, rather than as a result of any remarkable or unique talent.

However, it is not unusual for acts to cross the boundary between the exotic and othered to an aggrandised act that is trained and exhibited, and back again. Bogdan (1996, p. 32) reflects on two conjoined twins, Millie and Christine, who, rather than just a deformed oddity "became celebrated Victorian singing nightingales" in PT Barnum's circus after Barnum discovered their talent for singing. Again, we can see many examples of the same type of thing among the myriad of reality programming. In the previously mentioned show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, which was cancelled after four seasons, the fame of the family allowed them to create the spin-off series *Mama June: From Not to Hot*. In this new show the audience followed Alana's mother, who was ridiculed for her weight and bad manners during the original show, and watched her train, both physically and behaviourally, into a more attractive and "acceptable" American woman. Over the course of the first season, viewers watched Mama June lose over 120kgs. However, the next three seasons returned to the basic tenets of exotic freakism as the family and Mama June fall back into their stereotyped redneck ways of life (although Mama June does keep her weight down). During this period, Mama June and her boyfriend were arrested for

drug possession which then allowed for another spin-off production: *Mama June: Family Crisis*. This spin-off saw the family attempting to deal with Mama June's drug addiction and arrest, as well as how the family coped during this period. The spin-off ended after Mama June completed a drug rehabilitation programme in 2020, and has now led to a further series, *Mama June: Road to Redemption*, which is currently premiering on *We TV*. Consequently, the family constantly flitters between "other" and aggrandised as producers try to keep their franchise profitable; much like PT Barnum did with many of his exhibits as their acts waned and required revitalisation.

5. Conclusions

Ironically, many authors' work on sideshows and freak discourse conclude that the "concept of 'freak' no longer sustains careers" (Bogdan, 1996, p. 35). However, what has emerged from the discussion above is evidence that this is not the case. The term "freak" may have fallen out of fashion, but freak discourse is alive and thriving as revealed in the many examples above. Bogdan's (1996) modes of freak performance, coupled with Thomson's (1996) narrative forms of freak discourse, highlight that reality producers create characters based on stereotypes, difference, and aggrandisement in ways similar to those of 19th century sideshow owners. Reality television offers the public a voyeuristic glimpse behind the metaphorical curtain into a world that often rocks their sensibilities, just as exhibits did in circuses like PT Barnum's back in the 1800s. Reality programming provides room to engage with moral and immoral aspects of modern society; right from wrong. In fact, reality television is so rife with freak discourse that, as this article has argued, it can be applied to almost any programme which falls into the reality category. However, while it was acknowledged that there are some overlaps which occur between reality television and other genres (like documentary), freak discourse does not manifest as easily within these other genres. Possibly, this is the result of one key difference: documentaries, conventional talk shows, news, and other non-fictional programmes are created under the tenet of informing, educating, *and* entertaining audiences (Bignell, 2004). Reality television is concerned with entertainment and profit first; social education is a fortunate supporting act. Documentaries also "tend to focus on correction" (Clark & Myser, 1996), whereas reality television, which can groom and train individuals, does not aim for permanent correction, as evidenced in the case of Mama June. The aim is to keep shows on the air for as long as possible, and thus keep performers performing for as long as possible, or until they are no longer profitable. Just like freaks of the past, some reality stars leave wealthy, but many are spit out at the end just as destitute as they were when they started. Reality stars are no different from the freaks of the 1840s, and society is no less polarised. Therefore, despite much

social progress, one can also conclude that thanks to certain representations within reality television, the entertainment industry still has a way to go before it can be considered a "civilized" medium.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

The Role of Popular Culture for Queer Teen Identities' Formation in Netflix's *Sex Education*

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Abstract
Queer teenagers are avid readers of popular culture; as numerous audience studies prove, television plays a significant role in identity-formation for LGBTIQ+ youth, providing them with the information about sexuality, gender roles or non-normative relationships usually unavailable in their educational and home environments. In this article we analyze how some of the protagonists of Netflix's TV show *Sex Education* (2019-present) utilize popular culture as a tool to explore their desires, forbidden fantasies, and gender expressions, becoming instrumental in the formation of their queer identities in a way that metatextually reflects the role LGBTIQ+ shows play for their audiences. Such is the case of Adam, a bisexual teenager that masturbates to the image of a fictional actor featured in a 1980s action film poster; Lily, whose sexual fantasies of role playing with alien creatures are strongly influenced by spatial sci-fi; and Ola, whose onyric universe is influenced by David Bowie's genderbending aesthetics. However, the most representative example of how popular culture influences the formation of queer identities is Eric, whose non-conforming gender expression follows the example set by the trans characters in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

1. Introduction

In this article we analyze the role popular culture plays for the exploration of non-normative desires, forbidden fantasies, and non-conforming gender expressions amongst the teen protagonists of Netflix's TV show *Sex Education* (2019–present). Specifically, we focus on the ways in which a wide range of cultural products impact on the intersectional identity-formation (Crenshaw, 1989) and self-acceptance of those characters who could most accurately be defined as queer (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Regarding the meaning of the word queerness, we not only follow Sedgwick's (1990) and Butler's (1991) notions of gender performativ-

ity and fluidity, but also understand the concept as referring to any form of otherness that challenges the hegemonic norm, going a step beyond the simplifying notion that equates queerness with non-cisheterosexuality. This theoretical framework allows us to consider instances and characters that do not necessarily fit the identity labels comprised by the LGBTIQ+ acronym, capturing instead a fluid and shifting understanding of the self that rejects rigid, essentialist, and static structures of identity, and turning our attention to characters that define themselves in opposition to the normal rather than the straight (Warner, 1993). In addition, we believe that the protagonists' identities and the places they occupy in the social hierarchy are not only determined by their gender

expression and/or sexual orientation, but also by other vectors of oppression such as race, class, or disability that, as Crenshaw (1989, p. 139) explains, should not be treated as "mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis," because the dynamics between coexisting identities (e.g., homosexual and black) and connected systems of oppression (e.g., heteropatriarchy and white supremacy) are inherently interconnected.

It is worth noting that the examples of mainstream shows that include sexually diverse characters in their plots have multiplied exponentially in the past decade; as Wendy Peters (2016) reveals, between June 2010 and June 2011, teenage TV fiction included more non-heterosexual characters than in the previous two decades combined. Other examples of this trend are *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix, 2018–present), *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019–present) or *Elite* (Netflix, 2017–present), demonstrating that video-on-demand platforms offer great sources of representation of teen LGBTIQ+ realities. Despite the aforementioned increase in queer characters on widespread teen shows, the field of adolescent studies is still relatively minor within general (queer) media scholarship. There is a wide range of books and academic articles exploring either queer television (see for example Chambers, 2009, or Davis & Needham, 2008) or TV shows for teenagers (e.g., Davis & Dickinson, 2004), but not so much scholarship specifically focused on TV shows targeted at queer teenagers apart from individual chapters included in the aforementioned edited collections. Notable exceptions to this trend are Christopher Pullen's *Queer Youth and Media Cultures* (2014), and—although the focus is not specifically on TV but on general popular culture—Susan Driver's 2008's anthology entitled *Queer Youth Cultures*. Considering not only the increasing visibility of queer teen characters in TV fiction but also the multiplication of non-normative identities, sexual orientations, and gender expressions that go beyond categorial identity markers such as "lesbian" or "gay," the continued lack of focus on adolescent characters and audiences somehow comes as a surprise. In this sense, we agree with Meyer's assertion that "our scholarly attention must focus on representation in adolescent texts as much as those in adult oriented texts" (2003, p. 271).

As Laury Nunn—creator and screenwriter of the series—explains: "Audiences are looking to see themselves reflected in the characters, as well as watch content from different perspectives, so inclusive storytelling is really important to our show" (Phillipson, 2019). Although as several authors point out (e.g., Pullen, 2014), the increasing visibility of LGBTIQ+ people in popular culture (particularly within video-on-demand platforms) may respond to commercial interests (the multiplication of LGBTIQ+ and teen audiences, for instance) rather than reflecting an actual change in the values of the status quo. Nevertheless, the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ representativity as a selling value across all genres and cultural forms also means that queer teenagers will have more opportunities to develop their identities utilizing a wider range of images as role models.

The show follows the adventures of Otis Milburn (Asa Butterfield) in his high school, located in a rural setting in the outskirts of Cardiff (Wales). Having observed his mother, a sex therapist, he establishes a sex counselling service for his peers with the help of his classmate and love interest Maeve (Emma Mackey). Each episode focuses on an issue related to adolescent sexuality, depicting numerous gender identities and sexual orientations. However, some of the clichés related to teen television persist in the series, such as the idea that adolescents are in a period of transition, do not yet have a defined identity, and are particularly vulnerable to peer pressure, all factors that render these characters more easily influenced by popular culture in their identity-formation processes. Indeed, as numerous audience studies prove (e.g., Meyer & Wood, 2013) television plays a significant role in identity-formation for LGBTIQ+ youth, providing them with the information about sexuality, gender roles, or non-normative relationships usually unavailable to them in their (mostly) heteronormative educational and family environments. Given that popular culture constitutes a privileged apparatus for the socialization of gender and sexuality among its young audience, this type of production, along with the various cultural products allow us to observe the reconfigurations of power relations in terms of the diverse expressions of gender and sexual orientations presented by their protagonists.

It is important to note that not all examples of cultural products mobilized by LGBTIQ+ people—and by the show's protagonists—as a source of inspiration for the formation of their gendered identities or sexual orientations have been produced with a queer lens. At a time where there were no possibilities for the development of openly queer popular culture, LGBTIQ+ people proved the unlimited potential of the queer imagination and world-making processes (Muñoz, 1999) by decoding a wide variety of texts against the mainstream, heterosexual grain (Hall, 1973). Since heteronormativity is the hegemonic discourse spread from all cultural industries—specifically television, a medium traditionally associated with family and the domestic—in most cultural products produced before the new millennium, people who did not fit into the binary, heteronormative matrix remained in the blind spot. This meant that we had to develop queer reading practices in order to negotiate our identity needs and build non-normative role models. As Lipton explains, "Queer reading practices articulate queer positions in and about mass culture that reveal popular culture need not exclusively and inevitably express straightness" (2008, p. 104). In other words, cultural products constitute open, unfinished texts whose meaning is woven between the authors and the readers, who decode them by bringing their specific socio-political backgrounds, individual fantasies, and intersectional identities, questioning the various modes

by which desire and identity are produced. Therefore, when queer subjects—particularly teenagers—actively engage with popular culture, the negotiated meanings they make of films, graphic novels, or songs "reveal a great deal about the queer imagination and its relationships to sexual desire and political resistance" (Lipton, 2008, p. 164).

In light of the above, we aim to determine how popular culture shapes the non-normative desires and fantasies of some of the characters featured in *Sex Education*'s first two seasons. Based on previous analyses of the identity, desires, and behaviours of all the show's teen protagonists (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2020), we will take as a case study four of the most clearly queer characters who, at the same time, present remarkable narrative and dramatic relevance: Eric Effiong (Ncuti Gatwa), Adam Groff (Connor Swindell), Ola Nyman (Patricia Allison), and Lily Iglehart (Tanya Reynolds).

2. Methodology

To study the role of popular culture on the identity-formation of the queer characters in *Sex Education* we have employed a qualitative methodology anchored in textual analysis that incorporates a queer theoretical perspective and takes into account iconographic approaches to media texts. Following Evans and Gamman (1995), we believe there is a common cultural imagery that queer subjects put into play on the decoding (Hall, 1973) and reappropriation of popular culture. As such, we follow Muñoz's (1999) conceptualization of "disidentifications" as the survival strategies integrated by queer subjects (particularly queer subjects of color) in order to subsume dominant artistic expressions for the purposes of creating their own unique expression and conforming their identities within a cultural sphere that often elides the existence of those who do not conform to normative citizenship. This cultural imagery, whether openly non-normative or just open to queer readings is undeniably incorporated in the protagonists' articulation of their own sexual and gender identities. Here, we employ the term "queer teens" as a category of analysis to refer to young people whose identities "exceed the boundaries of straight gender and/or sexual categories" (Driver, 2008, p. 2). Far from imposing a new label, the term encompasses those who define themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, pansexual, and/or non-binary, expanding the definition to also include those teenagers whose fantasies defy the norm. Our research builds upon a long-established tradition that frames queerness as a mobile articulation of the desires, identities, and activities of sexual and gender minorities stemming from their interactions with popular culture, subcultural communities, and political movements. Following Rasmussen et al. (2016), we understand queer adolescents as essentially agentic subjects that draw on different references in order to define and imagine themselves, eschewing the prevailing approach

that frames them as infantile victims passively affected by normative ideals they are unable to negotiate.

Evidently, when discussing the sexual identity-formation processes of *Sex Education*, our approach is strongly anchored in a social constructionist, environmentalist paradigm that forecloses essentialist views on LGBTIQ+ subjectivities (Eliason & Schope, 2007). There are several ideas frequently repeated amongst the theoretical models proposed to understand sexual identity-formation for which the role of popular culture—and its articulation in the show object of study—is particularly clear. Eliason and Schope (2007, p. 13) signal the feeling of differentness as crucial for the development of non-normative sexual identities, expressed through the differential cultural preferences of the characters.

Adopting a cultural studies' perspective which considers popular culture a site that both embraces and resists hegemonic culture, we have selected those scenes in seasons 1 and 2 of the show featuring significant instances that provide insightful examples of the way popular culture is mobilized as a tool for non-normative identity-formation processes. Hence, we will use as analytical categories the role diegetic music, films, fashion, graphic novels, and the internet play in the development of repressed desires and/or non-conforming gender expressions for those queer characters that incorporate particular references from popular culture in their daily life, tastes, or fantasies, and whose narrative and dramatic relevance merits a more thorough examination. Therefore, some of the cultural references we will be analyzing throughout the article are not only pivotal for the development of individual desires and alternative gender expressions, but also constitute essential signifiers of the changes occurring in the relationships among queer characters.

As such, the themes we have chosen to analyze in this article can be summarized in the following statements: 1) key popular texts, whether openly queer or not are integrated in the development of the non-normative fantasies and desires deployed by the character's object of study; 2) popular culture references are narratively and aesthetically incorporated by some of the show's protagonists in order to build their non-conforming gender expressions; 3) cultural texts have a significant role for the development of queer relationships amongst the characters analyzed.

3. Popular Culture's Key Role for *Sex Education*'s Queer Protagonists

3.1. Eric Effiong

Eric constitutes one of the queerest characters included in the show whose identity is determined by diverse intersecting vectors of oppression that simultaneously reproduce particular places of oppression and exclusion. He is religious, presents a non-normative gender expression, is black and coming from a working-class family,

and, despite being Otis' best friend, in no moment is he relegated to the superficial role of "gay best friend." His self-consciously exaggerated clothing and makeup seamlessly fit within the camp aesthetic paradigm defined by Sontag (1964), which Dyer (2002) later identified as a form of queer resistance. Following Luu (2018), we identify campness as a form of theatrical self-expression that subverts the gender binaries that fail to contain Eric's identity, something particularly visible in the drag he and Otis do every year for his birthday, dressing up as Hedwig (see Figure 1), from queer cult musical film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (Mitchell, 2001).

The choice of Hedwig as a role model for the development of Eric's non-conforming gender identity is a particularly interesting example of the ways popular culture is integrated and re-interpreted by *Sex Education*'s queer protagonists. Although the show does not provide a label for Eric's gender identity—he does, however, repeatedly describe himself as gay—his character can be most accurately described as gender-y, in the sense outlined by Sedgwick (1990). "Gendery"—or non-binary—refers to the quantity rather than the quality of gender signifiers, permitting the coexistence of multiple gender axes—such as butch-femme, masculine-feminine—and breaking down the conventional gender dichotomy between masculinity and femininity. Although he enjoys some of the aspects related to the performance of femininity (Butler, 1991), such as putting makeup on, dressing up in drag, or wearing African women's headpieces, Eric also integrates in his identity several behavioral and visual signifiers that mark him as "a man" (on E6S1, for example, he punches Anwar in the face, displaying a form of aggression generally associated with hege-

monic masculinity). Much like Hedwig, who alternates between more femme and more masculine appearance, Eric switches from one to the other with ease, particularly in his outfits. However, his return to a more conventionally masculine performance after the trans homophobic aggression he suffers (E5S1) is narratively read as a form of surrender to socially acceptable gender norms to grant him physical safety rather than interpreted as a sign of gender play. The morning after being physically abused for dressing up as Hedwig he puts on bland, beige clothes designed to mask himself as conventionally masculine. In this episode, he is effectively dressing up as a cisheterosexual man, doing straight drag in a manner that renders his male performance more unnatural than his female drag ever was.

In this sense, since Eric is not a trans character, his most recognizable role model could not be a conventional trans person either. Refusing the widespread approach to transsexuality that frames sex change as the only way to create a sexed body coherent with the protagonist's gender identity, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* tells a story of an individual that utilizes sex change to escape East Berlin rather than due to her own desire to transition. Indeed, her sex change operation goes wrong, leaving her with the angry inch that lends its name to the film instead of endowing her with the genitals that would render her physically readable as a "woman." Both Hedwig's and Eric's refusal or inability to define their gender identity in essentialist/absolute terms constitute an undeniably queer gesture. John Cameron Mitchell did not conceive his film as a way to advance transgender politics just as Laurie Nunn did not intend for Eric to become a teenage trans symbol, constructing in turn

Figure 1. Eric dressed up as Hedwig (E7S1).

characters that can be utilized to challenge the reification and naturalization of normative binaries. Much like Gatwa's character is, for his queer fans, a flamboyant celebration of sexual freedom especially signified by his iconic camp outfits, Hedwig's has become his own inspiration, while traces of David Bowie can be found in the latter's gender expression. Hedwig also wears a Farrah Fawcett wig (also worn by Eric on his birthday) and emulates Tina Turner on her music performances (Hsu, 2007, p. 108); specific female celebrities (Madonna, Cher, Dolly Parton, etc.) have always been prominent role models for the gay/drag/trans community. Significantly, the first time we see Eric applying make-up and therefore performing his queer/drag identity he is listening to Tina Turner's cover of Anne Peebbles' classic *I Can't Stand the Rain* in what could be understood as an intergenerational form of cultural reappropriation; here, a song performed by a white, heterosexual woman is being utilized as a means for the (gender) self-expression of a queer character of color, who not only listens to her but also utilizes the female icon's fashion style as a source of inspiration. Therefore, his animal print garments (which could be accurately defined as camp) emulate Tina Turner's typical leopard skin outfits (she was known as "the panther"), such as the one she wears for the videoclip of *Love Thing*.

Additionally, in E3S1, Lily finds out that Eric owns women's clothes, but when she confronts him about it, he responds that he is "not a ladyboy or anything," refusing to identify as other than a man who likes to dress up. Then, they play with makeup, creating a look for Eric that is undoubtedly inspired by the Black trans characters from queer cult film *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1990; see Figure 2). Produced in 1990, this

was a key documentary film for the visibilization of queer people of color, creating recognizable role models for gender non-conforming black teenagers such as Eric himself that were largely absent from popular culture before. Furthermore, Eric goes to the school dance sporting glitter makeup, a Ghanian-inspired headpiece, African-made earrings, vinyl high heel shoes, and a kente suit, in what constitutes an homage to both his African heritage and to Brooklyn's iconic ballroom drag scene, represented in *Paris is Burning*. His Nigerian-influenced glam drag, "explicitly if briefly makes visible the black origins of so much queer music and performance" (Mayer, 2020, p. 37), perhaps constituting the most open reference to objects from black queer culture present in the show.

Therefore, drag plays a significant role for both Hedwig and Eric's identities; in its parodic imitation of femininity, it becomes a way to "implicitly reveal the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" (Butler, 1991, p. 175). Their gender play does not revolve around "imitating" an original or natural form of femininity. Although Hedwig provides her audiences with a much more radical example of queer politics than Eric, both their gender performances nonetheless embody Queer Theory's notions of parody, performativity, and the impossibility of relying upon the sex/gender system as a marker of identity. The show's perhaps self-conscious choice to avoid politicizing Eric's identity and delve less deeply into his gender expression, not providing him with a label may be read as a way to avoid alienating an audience that is conceived as relatively niche, but not as much as *Hedwig*'s. Partly due to their widely diverging channels of distribution, *Sex Education* could not endow Eric with as liminal a status as Hedwig enjoys.

Figure 2. Eric and Lily on drag (E5S1).

Hedwig finds in Glam Rock a space for the development of fluid gender expressions, finding inspiration in queer idols such as David Bowie's gender-bending Ziggy Stardust incarnation, Freddie Mercury, or Prince (Hsu, 2007, p. 104). As John Cameron Mitchell explains "the rock and the drag were all mixed up already," citing androgyny as quintessential for rock (as cited in Eliscu, 2001, p. 29). While Eric does not play in a punk band, he does play the French horn in his school's Swing Bang and displays a love for musical theatre generally associated with queer masculinities. Although his defiance to the heteronormative (and even to the homonormative) is most accurately depicted through his outfits, diegetic music still plays a key role for his self-acceptance as a gay, potentially gender-fluid individual. Disco and funky songs, which constitute a gay-male signifier based on its historical existence as a dance subculture dominated by gay men in US cities (Dyer, 1979) are often playing in the background at key moments where Eric performs his queer identity, privately and in front of others. For example, Eric campily dances and twerks to *We Got the Funk* (Positive Force)—a song that gave name to Oakland's 2010 LGBTIQ+ Pride Festival—when he tries to persuade Otis to go to a party in E3S2. Additionally, when he teaches Ruby how to perform fellatio utilizing a banana in that same party, it is the song *Take on Me* that is playing in the background; although A-ha's song is often categorized as "synth pop," its infectious, simple beats, and high notes trace a musical lineage that goes back to 1970s disco. According to Dyer (1979), disco music built a liberating space in the 1970s for queer men of color because of its "all-body eroticism," repetitive rhythms and "romanticism," allowing gay men to come together in non-homophobic, non-commercial spaces. While some authors consider that nowadays this space has been co-opted, white-washed and heterosexualized, it is nevertheless true that Eric integrates "the queer experience of disco" to negate a monolithic, phallic gay identity that does not fit his gender fluidity (Dyer, 1979, p. 159), constructing a subversive sensibility also inscribed in his fashion choices, that blend together disco aesthetics and African textiles. For Eric, music is used to contest gender and sexual norms, accommodating—particularly when he is dancing—emotional, physical, and sexual expressions perhaps unavailable to him in other aspects of his daily life (Taylor, 2012, p. 45).

In addition, diegetic music places a key role to mark the development of the queer relationships (whether romantic or not) depicted in the show: In S1's finale, Otis and Eric signify their reconciliation by dancing together to *The Origin of Love* (*Hedwig's* main theme) in front of their entire high school. The song's lyrics and animations featured in Mitchell's film refer to the Greek myth of humans divided into halves by the gods, condemned to search for another person to be complete, recounted by Plato in *The Banquet* (385–370 a.C.). Reinterpreting this platonic myth, *Sex Education* subverts the original heteronormative romantic-love narrative presenting

instead two male friends, ultimately rejecting the message that Hedwig also negates: It is not love that will make us whole, but the establishment of (queer) communities. This relational dialectics expressed through music is clear in another instance (E4S2): For their first date, Eric takes Rahim to a fancy restaurant, a distinctly heteronormative place where they seem unable to express their attraction freely, so Eric takes him to an arcade, where they play a dancing videogame to the song *What is Love?* (Haddaway) immediately before kissing for the first time. Interpreted by a Black German singer of Triniadian ascent, the song's videoclip was originally presented as an interracial vampire story that alludes to an implicit connection between vampirism and a form of diseased, yet irresistible sexuality, a message only intelligible for those whose queer sexuality may also be seen as perverse. Musicals are so important for Eric that it is Rahim's dislike for them that ultimately marks their incompatibility (E8S2). Rahim's cultural references are very different from Eric's much more queer tastes; Rahim loves Pablo Neruda while Eric enjoys camp musicals. However, when Eric invites Adam to the school's play it is clear that, despite his more "macho" performance, he can enjoy musicals, asking if the show will be like *Frozen*, a film he watched despite deeming it sad, hinting at a mutual love for corny musicals as a queer sign of affective compatibility.

Although both Otis and Eric dress up as Hedwig, it is only the latter who is narratively punished for this gender transgression in E5S1. After having his belongings robbed and being stood up by Otis, two white men in a car laugh at Eric, to which he responds: "Please, this isn't me this is a costume" before he is immediately hit and spat on by one of them. On the other hand, Otis—being a white, more heteronormative character—is allowed to happily enlighten another white student on queer popular culture when he asks about his costume, which speaks of the intersectional nature of the oppression experienced by Gatwa's character (Crenshaw, 1989). Here, Johnson's (2005) "quare" framework (an African American vernacular of saying queer) can be integrated to explain the racialized, gendered, and class nature of Eric's material reality and the aggression he suffers: The fact that he is physically assaulted when being in drag while Otis is not forces the audience (even queer, white viewers) to be accountable to a raced body, rather than abstraction, disembodiment, and the devaluing of queers of color's fleshed experience (Johnson, 2005). Interestingly, although Eric could have picked a black queer symbol to emulate on his birthday he nevertheless chose Hedgwig, an extremely eurocentric role model from a musical, a genre generally associated with the queer, white upper classes, constituting a further example of Muñoz's disidentificatory performances (1999). This choice emphasizes the hegemony of American/European popular culture texts as opposed to more peripheral cultural references, even when those incorporating them to construct their identities and express them through artistic/creative performances do

not come from a white, Western background. However, it is only after meeting a queer man of color on E6S1 that he goes back to his usual camp outfits, and the African prints he reinvents for his outfits—feminine turbans or kente suits—are a key marker of his queer identity.

3.2. Lily Iglehart and Ola Nyman

If we understand queerness as a rejection of normality in all its forms, *Sex Education*'s most transgressive character would undoubtedly be Lily, an amateur comic book writer who, through her artistic expression has managed to create her own posthuman erotic universe. In her attempt not to be defined as the "weird virgin," Lily obsessively tries to lose her virginity with some of her classmates, disregarding their sex, gender, orientation, or corporality; she is even willing to pretend to be a boy in order to have sex with Eric (E3S1). However, rather than a human being, Lily's ideal sexual object is an alien. In this sense, Lily is presented as an androgynous being with futuristic outfits, galactic makeup, and a hairstyle reminiscent of antennae (see Figure 2); she utilizes prosthetic tentacles and recreates spatial scenarios in her room for her sexual encounters. The first time she has sex, she orchestrates a role playing scene based in her own artistic-literary imaginary universe, making out with a boy nicknamed "Octoboy" with whom she cannot culminate because her vagina contracts involuntarily, something Otis will later diagnose as vaginismus (E8S1).

The rich imaginary from which Lily articulates her identity and her sexual-affective relationships is manifested through her comic writing. Lily has created her own erotic-spatial universe full of sexual fantasies with strange alien creatures in a cyborg and post-human logic (Haraway, 1985) where the border between the animal, the human, and the alien is continuously transgressed. Far from marking the impossibility of coupling between subjects of different species, Lily poses a myriad of disturbing and pleasurable couplings through her literary proposals, her stage productions, and her own sexual performativity. Bestiality and inappropriate beings are initially represented by the giant octopus Kraken, who appears seductively showing his phallic tentacles embodied in "Octoboy" and in the plastic prostheses that Lily uses as a dildo. The Kraken, which in Scandinavian popular culture attacks ships and devours sailors, will be incorporated in contemporary popular culture after its appearance in the novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (Jules Verne, 1870) and featured in films such as *Clash of the Titans* (Desmond Davis, 1981), *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (Verbinski, 2006) and several B horror films. However, it will be in the figure of the alien, which enables new forms of coupling and reproduction, where this affective-sexual twist that renders human heterosexual coupling meaningless culminates.

Lily's erotic universe is even translated to Ola's fantasies; in E5S2, she has a dream in which she kisses the latter, revealing her orientation as pansexual. Full of psychedelic lighting and electronic sounds, it reminds viewers of David Bowie's galactic videoclips, again borrowing aesthetic influences from one of the icons with the most ambiguous gender identities of all times. The song *Early Rain*—by punk rocker Ezra Furman—is playing in the dream; they were also responsible for curating and creating *Sex Education*'s original soundtrack, conjuring "a movable feast where a queerer version of commonality and comfort" (Mayer, 2020, p. 37) allows the characters to come together in physical spaces and headspaces, bringing a level of genderqueerness to the show that is yet to be articulated at the narrative level (aside from Ola occasionally dressing like "a very small man," as her boss points out), thus linking a (transtemporal) musical education to a sexual one (Mayer, 2020, p. 37). Significantly, Furman identifies as bisexual and, inspired by Lou Reed, does not identify as man nor woman, "proud to exist in an ambiguous, undecided state" (Furman, 2015, para. 14). Music constitutes a resource for Ola and Lily's utopian queer world-making (Muñoz, 1999), strategically incorporated in their subconscious to presage new, alternative worlds in which they are not confined to dissatisfying straight relationships. Analyzing the music that *Sex Education*'s queer protagonists listen to provides us with valuable insights into the way the construct their identities, for it is connected to gender, sex, and desire, and it has historically been utilized as a resource in queer identity-formation (Taylor, 2012, p. 142).

In this futuristic and transhuman eroticism not only Haraway's theoretical approach can be traced, but also the spatial fictions of feminist science fiction novels such as Anne McCaffrey's (e.g., *The Ship Who Sang*, 1969) or Joanna Russ' (e.g., *The Female Man*, 1975), as well as other graphic novels and films that explicitly appear in the series that Lily identifies with. For example, her explicit identification with Lieutenant Ripley from *Alien: The Eighth Passenger* (Ridley Scott, 1979) through her sexual cosplaying and her passion for *Tank Girl* (Alan Martin and Jamie Hewlett, 1988), which will lead in turn to her connection with Ola in season 2. In this sense, Lily appears reading the comics several times and wears a badge featuring the iconic green tank, parallel to Ola's rainbow badge.

In truth, nothing about Lily corresponds to the idea we have of a British teenager who is white, well-to-do, cultured, intelligent, and with artistic sensibility. Her whole persona connotes strangeness, further exemplifying queerness' rallying cry against the regimes of the "normal" (Warner, 1993) through her musical adaptation of Shakespeare (which she writes and directs for the end-of-the-year performance). With it, Lily shares with her entire school her way of understanding sexuality by designing a phallic and vaginal staging that recreates her sci-fi fantasy universe in glam key (E8S2). Her adaptation is inspired, on the one hand, by the tradition of cult musicals for the queer community such as *The Rocky Horror*

Picture Show (Jim Sharman, 1975); and, on the other, by recent queer re-readings of Shakespeare's plays, some of them performed at the Globe Theatre in London, such as Emma Rice's 2017 musical adaptation of *Twelfth Night*.

In this sense, Lily's musical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the queerest instances featured in the show, considering that normality, norm, or normativity are social constructs that privilege certain aesthetics, images, and lifestyles over others, and that transgressing them can be both artistically enlightening and sexually liberating. As Taylor explains, "music has been associated with sexual allure, gender inversion and suspect sexuality" in a manner that reflects the way both musicals and diegetic disco music act in the show as "an expressive mechanism of gender and sexual signification, capable of arousing and channelling sexual urges and desires" (2012, p. i).

3.3. Adam Groff

Adam is first introduced as a character while having sex with his high school girlfriend, with whom he cannot reach orgasm; he is presented in a passive, absent attitude. Moments later, Adam is shown as a troll (Zurian, 2013, p. 173), cornering Eric in his locker and stealing his money and food; he is perpetually framed as an outsider, not fully within the educational system despite being the dictatorial headmaster's son. His problematic relationship with his father, who always criticizes and belittles him, obviously inflicts serious harm to Adam's already bruised ego. The fact that he cannot culminate his sexual relations is further problematized by the widespread rumors that he has an "elephant dick," thus rendering his phallus and sexual performance key issues for his identity.

In addition to his deep psychological issues, Adam is never placed in his own personal space. Contrarily, we see other characters in their private rooms (decorated according to their preferences, full of references to the popular culture that inspires them), as well as interacting with each other in public spaces. Adam wanders through space without fully occupying it, seemingly without an identity of his own beyond that of a bad student, a troll, and possessing a huge penis. Adam is full of silences, cold stares, and hatred towards himself and his father. However, we do not know the origin of this hatred until, in E8S1 he is sent to the school's detention room with Eric (whom he bullied for years), an encounter that ends with them kissing and Adam performing fellatio on Eric. Here, the screenwriters offer us a turning point that will begin to show part of the root of Adam's problems.

E5S2 shows Adam in the privacy of his room, at last. We see model airplanes hanging from the ceiling, a couple of nondescript paintings and the *Ultimate Deadlock* film poster (a made-up reference; see Figure 3). Inspired by 1980s B-movie aesthetics, it features a muscular male protagonist (Tommy Tester) on the left and a sexy actress, Ava Speed—whose obvious to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey, 1975) reminds us of iconic figures like Ava Gardner and Sandra Bullock in the film *Speed* (Mark Mancini, 1994)—on the right, with a speeding car located between them. Adam looks lustfully at Tommy, running his gaze through his face and muscles while he masturbates, shaking his head in denial. He tries to look at the girl instead, but this immediately lowers his arousal, prompting him to return to the actor. Drawing

Figure 3. The *Ultimate Deadlock* poster (E5S2).

on gay erotic myths deemed "not suspect" by straight audiences, Tester's appearance and costume are highly reminiscent of famous action actors such as Chuck Norris, Sylvester Stallone, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose powerful physique eternally on display constitutes a source of voyeuristic pleasure for queer male viewers, on a gay reversal of the Male Gaze (Mulvey, 1975) that Adam's commoditization of Tester's body further exemplifies. The position of the actor, utilized to emphasize his muscles, proves to the onlooker that he is an active subject (as opposed to passive, feminine men), "the end product of his own activity of muscle-building" (Dyer, 1982, p. 62), portraying a form of masculinity highly common in popular culture that may not be read as too emasculating to young queer men coming to terms with their identities.

"A match between equals. Only one can survive"; the film's tagline summarizes Adams' conflict throughout his adolescence: the binary choice between homosexuality and heterosexuality, since bisexuality is initially not presented as a possibility. The poster represents a widespread social imagery in which there is no room to "match" both a man or a woman with fluidity, indistinctly; where bisexuality is only understood as a transitory phase, a "tester," or a disguise for unaccepted homosexuality. In this sense, the poster becomes a symbolic space (both visually and verbally) channeling Adam's identitary conflicts and internalized homophobia. Eventually, he will tell Eric, who becomes his love interest throughout S2 that he thinks he is bisexual, thus confirming his previously unacknowledged queer sexual orientation.

4. Conclusions

In the first two seasons of the show, cult films, pop songs, fashion trends, and graphic novels become instrumental in the formation of the main characters' queer identities in a way that metatextually reflects the role LGBTIQ+ audiovisual products play for those members of their audience whose sexual orientations and/or gender identities do not fit within the norm. As we have seen, popular culture becomes a source of inspiration and a site for the development of non-straight desires for Eric, whose non-binary gender expression follows the example set by the trans characters in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*; Adam, a bisexual teenager whose sexual conflict is symbolized in the 1980s movie poster he masturbates to; and Lily, whose sexual fantasies of role playing with alien creatures are strongly influenced by Tank Girl, Lieutenant Ripley, and other spatial sci-fi. Perhaps due to the queer potential of the cultural objects incorporated in their identity-formation process, none of these characters adopt homonormative identities. Eric, Lily, Ola and—to a lesser extent—Adam put into play a queer youth culture with sexual pleasures and cultural tastes that challenge the (hetero)normal; in this sense, they offer role models beyond the normalization of gay youth in popu-

lar culture which, according to Driver "works to desexualize and depoliticize youth once again, creating safe, sanitized images that conform with white middle-class standards of visibility and value" (2008, p. 5).

By invoking famously queer musical and cinematic references crucial for identity-formation and for the establishment of queer genealogies amongst chosen families, *Sex Education* offers LGBTIQ+ teenagers a way to establish peer groups marked by their shared aesthetics, standing as a representational memorial "to an improvisatory, interstitial cultural moment" (Mayer, 2020, p. 38). TV representations of teenagers offer prescriptive identities to their target audiences, telling them how their gender and/or sexual identity should be built by incorporating the different values and references integrated by the protagonists of their favorite shows. This is even more true for teenagers, for whom these prescriptive modes of behavior and markers of taste will determine their belonging to any given group, a value crucial during adolescence (Zurian, 2013, p. 158). Popular culture thus remains one of the means by which queer adolescents both recognize and connect with others that share their experiences, desires, and struggles. By the perpetuation of shared popular culture references (sometimes reappropriated or negotiated by younger generations), "queer breeding provides a way for thinking about queer inheritances and proliferations that are not overdetermined by heteronormative logics of reproduction, hierarchy and binary" (Marshall, 2013, p. 603); for example, tracing a lineage of genderqueer popular culture icons that evolves from Bowie to Hedwig to Eric or even Ola. Therefore, *Sex Education* makes the history of queer popular culture visible, underlining the impact these references from books, films, and music have on the identity-formation and self-acceptance of queer teenagers (and TV characters) across different generations. The intertextual approach selected here is, in this sense, quite unique as it offers multiple insights on the different ways cultural texts are integrated by teen subjects as part of their non-normative identity-formation processes. In other words, as Dhaenens explains, "the ongoing public debate about gay civil rights is not only waged in the political arena but also in popular culture" (2013, p. 304).

As we have proven, the creative queer potential of even cultural objects not positioned as overtly queer in form or content plays a significant role in the construction of the protagonists' queer fantasies and gender expressions, exemplifying the power of queer youth's imaginative re-readings. This is due to the fact that queer youth bring highly specific subcultural experiences and knowledge to the reading of popular texts that, to the general population, may be unknown or seem perfectly straight, such as Lily's highly queer musical interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* or Adam's sexualized gaze upon a Sylvester Stallone fictional lookalike. Hence, all forms of popular culture are relevant for the identity-formation of the characters featured in *Sex Education*, although

more ethnographic work should be conducted on how these representations may influence the development of non cisheteronormative subjectivities on the program's audiences. In a world where access to different media platforms is increasing rapidly, media scholars should devote more attention to exploring how adolescents utilize media and popular culture to form identity.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Let's Get Loud: Intersectionally Studying the Super Bowl's Halftime Show

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Abstract
The study of popular culture has always been closely related to the study of class, gender, race, and sexuality. An increasing number of authors have called for an intersectional approach. However, the contradictory, fluid meanings articulated in popular culture render such an approach difficult, and many ignore the call for intersectional analysis. We will not. We will try to engage with an intersectional analysis of popular culture, using Shakira and Jennifer Lopez's performance at the 2020 Super Bowl Halftime Show as a case to study the intersections of identity markers. We aim to bridge the different meanings attributed to their performance and to understand them as different elements in the intersectional configuration. A discourse analysis of the performance, and of reviews thereof, was performed to unravel five elements highlighted in the discourse: the quality of the show, Shakira and Lopez's empowered performances, the incorporation of Latinidad elements, the performers' sexiness, and perceived political messages. Our aim to understand how the contradictory discourses about these elements arose urges the reader to use listening to grapple with the complexity of intersectional analysis. Truly listening includes putting effort into opening up academic cultures, finding other voices. It is important to recognize global gender inequity, but we need to start investing far more to understand the politics of media representations as a transnational affair that causes multiple conceptions of gender (and other related) concepts to clash, mesh, and integrate.

1. Introduction

The study of popular culture, everyday life culture, has always been closely related to the study of class, gender, race, and sexuality. Popular culture is political and forms the arena in which the meanings of the aforementioned identity markers are established, negotiated, contested, and refuted. Recently, an increasing number of authors have argued that we can understand gender, class, race, age, (dis)ability, and sexuality only in relation to popular culture within a full intersectional configuration (Collins

& Bilge, 2016). In other words, to fully understand the political meaning of popular culture in relation to gender, age, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, and so on, we need to understand that all these factors, including the markers not listed here, mutually inform each other. However, adopting an intersectional approach is often called for but seldom carried out, and hence, the adage is often honoured in the breach, perhaps because of the contradictory, fluid meanings articulated in popular culture. As Hermes and Kopitz (2021) recently argued, as popular culture scholars, we aim to be open to new ideas

and opinions but find it simultaneously challenging to be open to "definitions, intuitions and experiences that are diametrically opposed to [our] own" (p. 3).

Hence, in this contribution, we challenge ourselves by engaging in an intersectional analysis of popular culture. How do we understand gendered genres of popular culture if gender is a dynamic, fluid concept that exists only because it is articulated as such? Our case study of Shakira and Jennifer Lopez's performance at the 2020 Super Bowl Halftime Show investigates the intersections of identity markers in this media representation. Questioning the discourses about this performance, we will focus on the political understanding of Shakira and Lopez's gendered performance from an intersectional perspective. With this case study we want to illustrate how we can understand popular culture in relation to gender.

This case, we feel, illustrates eloquently the contradictory meanings articulated in popular culture. The performance by both artists generated lively debate on different topics: sexuality, gender, race, and political messages that were read into their performance. The Federal Communication Commission received over 1,300 complaints about the performance. These complaints ranged from references to the #MeToo movement and sex trafficking to calls to boycott Pepsi and the Super Bowl for the "overly sexual character" of the performance, which complainants considered unsuitable for the Super Bowl Halftime Show. However, other voices argued for other, deeper meanings in the show that supposedly criticized child trafficking or the captivity of people of colour. These contradictory responses exemplify the current complexity of gender's relations with popular media culture and are embedded in shifting formations of power (Hedge, 2011).

Additionally, the Super Bowl itself, televised globally, is a showcase of popular culture experienced by a large audience. Already in 1975, Michael Real discussed the Super Bowl as a mythic spectacle, claiming it reveals American values and ideology. Real (1975) elaborated on this claim from different angles, including social structures: "If one wanted to create from scratch a sport that reflected the sexual, racial, and organisational priorities of American social structure, it is doubtful that one could improve on football" (p. 38). Thus, the Super Bowl Halftime Show is an inherently American pop culture product that forms the context and arena for the contradictory processes of sensemaking surrounding Shakira and Jennifer Lopez's performance. In our analysis, we aim to bridge the different opinions and meanings attributed to their performance and to understand them as different elements in the intersectional configuration that positions both artists as female, famous, Latina, middle aged, and sexual. Hence, we will not argue for "right" or "wrong," "informed" or "disinformed." Rather, we will return to what we understand as the root of the study of popular culture: Understanding everyday culture and its political meanings.

2. Intersectional Representations in the Popular

Rincón et al. (2020) stated, "Together, Lopez and Shakira underscore the inherently relational, dynamic character of Latinidad" (p. 302), thus drawing attention to the intersectional understanding of both artists' identities as female, Latina, middle aged, sexual beings. Shakira, Rincón et al. (2020) argued, is not to be understood in the same way as Lopez, and neither should their (il)legible political stances during the Halftime Show as they are subject of the debate. Rincón et al. (2020), hence, explicitly argued for an intersectional approach to the performance, or what Collins and Bilge (2016) called intersectionality, as an analytical tool, a way to grapple with complexity.

In her book *The Gender of Latinidad: Uses and Abuses of Hybridity*, Angharad N. Valdivia (2020) argued that Latinidad is a "broad multiplicitous and diverse category of ethnicity that is pan-national, multi-ethnic, intersectional, and transnational" (p. 2). Latinidad is a complex, hybrid, and unstable construct that has become more visible in transnational media content over the last five years. This hybridity is represented through gendered bodies and is, according to Valdivia, often equated with the Latina bodies in mainstream culture, where these bodies are "sexualized or relegated to abnegation narratives such as spitfires and dedicated asexual mothers" (Valdivia, 2020, p. 11), but a nuanced and layered conceptualisation is needed.

In feminist media studies, the need for complexity has been part of the debate for a few decades in two respects. On the one hand, a post-structuralist notion of gender draws attention to essentialist conceptions of sex and gender. On the other hand, complexity is more directly discussed in terms of intersectionality, initially drawing attention to the white gaze that was/is inherent in feminist media studies on popular culture but also focussing on the intersection of gender with sexuality. Feminist media studies of gender representations have moved "beyond the heteronormative and sexist" in their analysis of contemporary sex and gender scripts in popular media (Ross, 2012, p. xxi). The complexity of gender mostly draws on the work of Judith Butler (1990), who criticized the sex/gender dichotomy and the essentialist notions that underlie this dichotomy. As Butler (1990) and others have argued, both gender and sex are fluid notions, dynamic constructs. Hence, gender and sex are subject to change on an individual and social level. Understanding both sex and gender as notions on a continuum, which is also subject to change, over one's life span not only challenges social and societal structures invested in maintaining the status quo but also contributes to complexity in the analysis of gender and sex. Rebecca Kern (2012) pointed out that gender is not static but rooted in gendered processes. It is an act of bodily repetitions where the body becomes a site of discursive practices. These bodily gendered processes relate to the notion of performativity (Butler, 1993). Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2015) explained that:

Performativity does not mean that gender is something you put in the morning and take off when you go to sleep. Rather, gender is assigned to the body through performativity. Our ways of doing gender produce something real, they construct meanings of gender inscribed to the body. (p. 6)

From 2000 onwards, scholarly work on gender and media has been using—and further developing—Butler's work on gender identity performativity to analyse the articulations of gendered intersections in and by media, as in the work of Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanesi (2012), who studied Dutch Moroccan girls and their performance on instant messaging sites. Leurs and Ponzanesi found "intersectional constitution of selves through language in its focus has been on the wider context of power relations" (2012, p. 450). As in the work of Leurs and Ponzanesi (2012), power and power relations are an important element in the case study. Feminist media scholars have built on the work of Teresa De Lauretis (1987), where subject positions become important, and the historical and political contexts in which these subjectivities are constructed are intersectional, multiple, fluid, and contradictory (Dhoest & Simons, 2012). De Lauretis (1987) pointed out that gender is constructed by various technologies of gender (for example media representations), which control and reproduce the social meaning of gender. The contextual aspect of power in the analysis of gendered representations and their intersections is also important; for instance, Cynthia Carter (2012) noted the differences in representational status of different femininities. How, then, do we understand gendered genres of popular culture if gender is a dynamic, fluid concept that only exists because it is articulated as such? Though such complexity poses challenges, Butler's work is vital in understanding contemporary heated debates and activism challenging the power structures invested in maintaining a sex/gender dichotomy. Two examples that illustrate the political meaning of transgressing the sex/gender dichotomy are the #MeToo movement and the transgender movement, whose voice grows louder every day.

Another layer of complexity is added by black feminist scholars, who criticised feminist media studies scholars on the white gaze embedded in their work, a perspective that has been broadened and fleshed out and is currently known as intersectionality. Collins and Bilge (2016) showed the presence of multiple narratives of intersectionality, and how intersectional perspectives are formulated in multiple places at multiple times. For our purposes, while we do not need to trace the history of the concept, it is essential to understand intersectionality's contribution to the complexity of feminist analysis. As Rincón et al. (2020) showed, Lopez, "As a Puerto Rican from the Bronx… and [its] historically established Latina/o/x community" (p. 302), has unquestioned Latinidad status. Shakira, however, who was born in Colombia and is of Lebanese descent, takes a different

position. Thus, even though both artists are women and Latina, they are not treated equally in (American) society. For both artists, the power configurations are specifically situated in their particular positions. Importantly, both Shakira and Lopez are part of popular culture, the arena in which these power configurations are articulated, negotiated, and contested.

As Phoenix and Pattynama explained (2006), intersectionality is used in many different ways, but the power, inequality, structure, and process of othering is always part of the conceptualisation. Intersectionality highlights the different positions of people rooted in sets of complex identities. Introducing the concept, Kimberley Crenshaw (1989) focussed on the oppression of African Americans. Later, intersectionality was used to relate power to a set of experiences based on a complex set of identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and disability. Now, most contemporary work on gender from a feminist perspective engages with intersectionality. According to Bachmann et al. (2018), a major criticism of earlier feminist perspectives was its failure to address the intersectional nature of gender. Gender identities should always be understood in relation to class, age, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. We will use this conceptualisation to use an intersectional approach to examine gender identities and the way they are linked to power configurations. Because the body is an important signifier for identities in popular culture, it is also important to conceptualize the body as inherently intersectional, as the body is always signified and "embodies" in relation to other bodies. However, while most of the bodies on display in popular culture belong to women, this discourse argues that these bodily representations preserve patriarchal and heteronormative hegemony (Wallis, 2011). Bodies have a colour, a dis-ability, are gendered and aged, and are often the first signifier to read into gendered identities. Mediated performances like the Super Bowl Halftime Show are considered as popular culture because they attract very large audiences through transnational media representation. They are also widely discussed on social and traditional media around the globe. What are the dominant tropes around the representation of Shakira and Jennifer Lopez's Super Bowl Halftime Show?

This case study illustrates how we can understand popular culture in relation to gender. Transnational media environments—including media content and representations—can be seen as pathways to understand the constructions of gender across the globe (Hedge, 2011). Representations of bodies are often strong tropes of gender identity. The body, in this respect, could be seen as a site on which culture plays itself out (Barker, 2000; Weiss, 1999), and the increasing representations of the body as spectacle in popular culture contribute to the importance of the study of gender representations and performances in popular culture. For example, Valdivia (2010) studied Jenifer Lopez back in 2010 as an example of the spectacular

Latina in the way she was overexposed in contrast to the Latino. These kinds of gender spectacles are not new to popular culture in general nor to the Super Bowl Halftime Shows. Controversy around the performances during the Super Bowl halftime has become a tradition, and these performances are always gendered and disruptive. From the 1990s onwards, the Halftime Show began to present pop music acts and created several controversies around these performances. For example, during the performance of Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake in the Super Bowl XXXVIII Halftime Show in 2004—now referred to as Nipplegate—Justin Timberlake exposed one of Janet Jackson's breasts for approximately half a second. In the Super Bowl XLVII Halftime Show in 2013, the performance of Beyoncé was also criticized, including the lace-and-leather bodysuit, which critics described as black-leather dominatrix wear. These two examples exemplify the controversy, critique, and the comments female performers are subject to, similar to those aimed at the performance of Lopez and Shakira.

3. Method

Our analysis engaged with multiple materials. First, we examined the Super Bowl LIV Halftime Show in 2020, which lasts approximately 15 minutes. The show was directed by Hamish Hamilton and featured Jennifer Lopez and Shakira as the main performers. Bad Bunny, J Balvin, and Emme Muñiz are listed as special guests. We viewed the show four times on YouTube (Trapeton 2020, 2020) and read blogposts and commenting sections in popular magazines and news outlets addressing this Halftime Show. This selection is not exhaustive as it is impossible to identify every opinion voiced on the web about this show. Rather, we looked for explicit opinions and interpretations of Shakira and Lopez's performance, as we aim to understand contradictions, not to show the complete range of opinions. We analysed a range of texts about the show: five blogposts (Stace.com, Feminist Current, Pop Sugar, Refinery29, and BuzzFeed); four popular magazines (*Mr Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, *Deadline Hollywood*, and *Entertainment Weekly*); and five news outlets (*USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Morning Call*). We worked on the basis that grounded theory and data are conceptualised as a site of ideological negotiations, and once we saw the same discourses, arguments, strategies, and arguments reoccurring, we stopped looking for more public discourses.

These two types of data were subjected to a Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault, 1976) in order to answer three specific questions: 1) What is the political understanding of Shakira's and Lopez's gender from an intersectional perspective?; 2) Which strategies are employed to maintain the boundaries of these understandings?; and 3) Which subject positions can we distinguish within this discourse?

Instead of relying on fixed procedures, many contemporary scholars who use Foucauldian discourse ana-

lysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) share a common analytic language that is shaped by insights from hermeneutics, semiotics, deconstruction, and film analysis. A Foucauldian discourse analysis looks for latent meanings of a text and relates them to the social construction of reality (Larsen, 2002). We started with a semiotic analysis of the media text (i.e., the performance itself) by inductively and thematically coding the text complemented by a discourse analysis of the public discourses, which was also thematically coded. These codes were identified by re-reading the data (media text of the performance and discourse on the performance); the codes exist both at the surface (what is physically present in a text) and at a deeper level of meaning-making (the connotative meanings). First, we looked at the general descriptive elements, and second, we analysed the denotative meanings and the presence of the different elements and topics, using the following codes: gender, ethnicity, colour, sexuality, age, and empowerment.

We believe that, as researchers and feminist media scholars, we are both qualified to conduct such analysis. We were (academically) born and raised in the decades in which the study of popular culture was no longer obscure and in which it had become commonplace for a woman to acquire an academic education. We are in the same age range as Lopez and Shakira and have both followed their careers from their outsets. Our initial response to the uproar that their performance caused was lukewarm, and we viewed it as ageism, sexism, and racism. As with Janet Jackson's Nipplegate in the 2004 Halftime Show, we were wary. Moreover, we are also continuously astounded by the increasing visibility of this sexism, racism, and ageism. Hence, we felt it was time to honour the adage of complex analysis. How do these understandings arise? How do they relate to everyday culture? Has society really changed that much over the decades with regard to these power configurations? While we may not be able to answer all these questions, we might be able to fulfil our expectations and bridge subject positions instead of denying or rejecting them (cf. Hermes & Kopitz, 2021). Next, we will discuss the analysis of the discourses, including the representation of the show: Both the representation and the public discourses on the show are connected, and analysing them together will deepen our understanding of the gendered representation, the strategies used to discuss the performance, and how they are linked to the subject positions within the text.

4. Female Spectacle and the Polarised Debate

The Super Bowl Halftime Show opened with Shakira performing in a red two-piece suit; she later changed to a gold outfit. Accompanied by female and male dancers, and later by rapper Bad Bunny, Shakira performed some of her songs and her trademark belly dancing, mapalé and champeta (Afro-Colombian dance styles), and the traditional Arabic zaghrouta (high-pitched vocal sound).

Hence, Shakira integrated various elements related to her Lebanese-Colombian background. After Shakira, Jennifer Lopez entered the stage in a black leather body-suit, reminiscent of BDSM, which was later replaced by a sparkly silver outfit. Notably, during one of her songs, she wore a feather cape depicting the Puerto Rican and American flags. Lopez was accompanied by female dancers, the performer J Balvin, and a children's choir (including her own daughter) who were sitting in stylized "cages." During the show, she performed some of her songs and pole danced (Exposito, 2020). The so-called sexual spectacle of the performance became controversial due to the specific interaction with the camera of both J. Lo and Shakira, who were shaking their behinds while bending down. This intimate interaction between body and camera could be seen as the spectacle at work. This becomes significant because the audiences are constructed out of watching this particular television content broadcasted or streamed and not by live attending the Super Bowl.

In general, the responses to both performances were positive, highlighting five elements: the quality of the show; Shakira's and Lopez's empowered performances; the incorporation of Latinidad elements; their sexiness (though usually in combination with mentioning their age and fitness); and, finally, perceived political messages incorporated in the performances of both artists. However, discourses on each on each of these elements were contradictory. We discuss the five elements to achieve an intersectional analysis of the show.

First, the overall quality of the show was mostly lauded. Reviews on popular sites such as *Rolling Stone* (Exposito, 2020), CNN (Respers France, 2020), and Shape.com raved about the show. However, others described their performance as mediocre. For example, a commenter in *The Washington Post* site wrote, "Let's go on continuing to celebrate mediocrity in every aspect of life possible" (Rivera-Rideau, 2020). Interestingly, the discussion of quality is loaded with comments on "arts" in an intersection with both political value and class. Quality, therefore, is articulated in relation to taste and popular culture, and this performance is seen as either in good or bad taste. On the one hand, Shakira and Lopez's performance is framed as wholly artistic but only when the political value of their show is emphasised. For example, Alex Suskind (2020) remarks in his review of the Halftime Show on Entertainment Weekly: "The result? A punchy, political, and flat-out electric 14-minute performance that doubled as a salute to Latin culture and celebration of both stars' careers." On the other hand, the quality is deemed mediocre at best in intersection with lower-class features. Pole dancing, the folk-dance styles, and the dress style of both performers are regarded as lower class and, hence, not worthy. Though these comments speak directly about Shakira and Lopez, what is at stake is the "good-old" battle for cultural distinction and who and what belongs to it and what does not. We will later see that this notion of quality intersects deeply with

the debate on the political values embedded in Shakira and Lopez's performance, and taste and taste culture appear to be used as leverage to articulate a political standpoint in relation to the performance.

The class aspect of the show's quality also intersects with the second element apparent in all discussions: the two artists' empowering performance. While neither Lopez nor Shakira positions herself as clearly "feminist," both women are generally viewed as strong, talented, and professional artists. Over the last five years, performances by female pop artists have been regarded as feminist or as empowered by large audiences (Allmark, 2021), even though these artists are not always explicit about their positions in relation to gender equality. The uniqueness of being a successful female performer in the mainstream music industry as such is "enough" to label an artist as feminist or to understand the performance as empowering in relation to gender. This is especially the case for U.S.-based female pop music artists and their performances. This is also true for the performance of Shakira and Lopez during the Super Bowl Halftime Show. Many reviews discussed the Halftime Show in terms of empowerment: Two strong Latinas delivering a dazzling show. In particular, the artists' sexuality in tandem with their age (Shakira was 43 and Lopez, 50), their level of fitness, and Latinx descent was perceived as empowering for women. Contradicting this opinion, some argued that displaying the female body according to the rules of the male gaze is not empowering but contributes to objectification. The closeness of the camera and the sexual movements of their posteriors were seen as sexual objectification. Laura McNally on *Feminist Current* explored Lopez's pole dancing from that perspective. By listing the facts of sexual harassment/violence in the pole dancing industry, she established a convincing argument for objectification. McNally (2020) argued that women (and men) who defend pole dancing as empowering are misled:

> The problem is that, instead of defending women's right to understand and express our actual sexualities, women are defending the *commoditization* of our sexuality—a 'sexuality' that has little to do with female pleasure, and everything to do with performing for the male gaze.

Nevertheless, other voices drew attention to the power configurations inherent in the concept of objectification and the male gaze. For instance, Hannah Yasharoff in *USA Today* argued, "In the debate over whether something is empowering or objectifying, it's important to check who holds the power. Lopez and Shakira did nothing Sunday night if not command power." This part of the discourse on Shakira and Lopez's performances focuses on sexualisation, and it should be understood from the larger debates on the commodification of sexuality, post-feminist sensibilities, and hypersexualisation. These concerns in relation to sexualisation are often more explicit

when referring to girls or women of age. Ageing women are not supposed to express any female sexual agency or empowerment (Van Bauwel, 2018), including the idea that ageing bodies, and especially feminine bodies, are not supposed to be visible. However, a fit body that expresses health and agelessness is also admired, as we see in the comments on the show of Shakira and Lopez. For example, a comment on the *BuzzFeed News* website states, "Well, it's my duty as a journalist to bring you this breaking news: JENNIFER LOPEZ IS 50 YEARS OLD" (Mack, 2020). Nevertheless, bearing in mind that Lopez and Shakira are not the first artists to deliver a sexually explicit Halftime Show, we feel we need to examine more deeply to understand these opposing readings of their performance. Moreover, Shakira and Lopez were not the first female artists to embrace a controversial dress style for a performance during a Halftime Show. Janet Jackson, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga each sported similar outfits.

One element of the show that may or may not be empowering is the Latin roots of both artists. As mentioned, while Lopez was born in New York, the Bronx, her roots are in Puerto Rico. Shakira, who was born in Colombia, has a Lebanese father and a Colombian mother. It is widely held that such diverse origins emphasise the variety of what it means to be Latina/o/x. As one commenter on Twitter remarked, "The Latino community was represented proudly tonight by two queens and we love that" (Nuñez, 2020). Others said the performance symbolized girl power and played its part in bringing women of colour together. In addition, the cultural element of both performances further emphasised cultural diversity. However, some of these elements need a specific cultural capital to be interpreted as such. For example, Shakira's display of zaghrouta is easily interpreted as an attempt at sexiness (Rincón et al., 2020). In addition to the cultural capital necessary to be able to read the cultural aspects in the Halftime Show, many also felt the artists did not represent the Latina/o/x community as both Lopez and Shakira are light-skinned. Critics have even accused the artists of whitewashing the Latina/o/x. All the performers, including J Balvin and Bad Bunny, were Latina/o/x, but they were relatively white. According to some critics, this contributes to the further marginalization of Afro-Latinos (Rivera-Rideau, 2020). While these arguments relate to the idea of whitewashing Latina/o/x identity, they simultaneously steer the meaning towards ethnicization when elements of the Latina/o/x identity are dominant, openly articulated in the performance (which could lead to identification). The strong polarization surrounding the intersection of gender and ethnicity could be read as either a de-ethnicization or a re-ethnicization (Grosswirth Kachtan, 2017) of the Latinidad identity in popular culture. In the context of re-ethnicization of the Latinidad, audiences read the performances of Shakira and Lopez as outspoken cultural performances and as ethno-gendered performances against the hegemonic culture.

Finally, some viewed Shakira and Lopez's performance as re-emphasising the stereotype of the Latina women as hypersexual. This stereotype is very dominant and deals with the "Madonna/Whore" dichotomy and the way Latina sexuality is represented (Arrizón, 2008; Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004). The artists' roots intersect deeply with aspects of class and age. Not only were middle-aged women showing their sexuality, but middle-aged Latina women were displaying a sexuality deemed to be from lower-class environments (such as the strip-dancing industry). Together, these three elements are thought to have caused most of the consternation about the sexual explicitness of the show. As Ashley Jordan in *Ms. Magazine* argued, many scantily clad female performers, including Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, and Janet Jackson, preceded Shakira and Lopez in earlier Halftime Shows. Only within the intersection of age, class, and race can we understand the multiple interpretations attributed to their performance. Hence, our results emphasise the presence of ambivalence and distinction when reading the Latinidad representations pointed out earlier by Viviana Rojas (2004). Rojas (2004) demonstrated how the criticism of the sexualisation of women in television shows is often used to distinguish from stereotypical representations of Latina identity.

A last point where intersectional configurations are vital to understand the discourse on Lopez and Shakira's performance is the more overt political messages that were particularly visible in Lopez's performance. Lopez performed part of her song "Let's get loud" and Springsteen's "Born in the USA" while accompanied by her daughter and a children's choir. The children in the choir were each positioned in a cage, and the cages resembled a constellation, which is readily interpreted as a critique of the mistreatment of immigrant children (and adults) by the U.S. government. Lopez's play with a cape that depicted the Puerto Rican and the American flag added to this message. Including the Puerto Rican flag in J. Lo's cape is controversial and political because: first, it recognizes and includes Latinidad in North America identity; second, it acknowledges the difficult relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico; and third, it uses a symbol that does not represent the whole of the diversity of Latinidad.

Again, while some were positively affected by such a strong message, others felt that politics have no place in entertainment or in American football. Many commenters explicitly stated that the Super Bowl is supposed to be entertaining, and politics are not part of the entertainment. Of course, claiming the Super Bowl to be non-political might be an illustration of white privilege, as we would argue that popular culture, including the Super Bowl, is always political.

On the one hand, the performance was seen as a "no-nonsense affirmation of Latin pride and cultural diversity in a political climate where immigrants and American Latinos have been widely demonized" (Pareles, 2020). On the other hand, it was seen as not political.

Jon Pareles (2020) also stated in *The New York Times* that "A halftime show with a bunch of Latinx artists is not Latinx excellence." He tweeted, "True Latinx excellence at the Super Bowl would have been showing solidarity with the POCs protesting the NFL and declining the offer to perform" (Pareles, 2020). These different interpretations of the performance's politics need to be understood in the contemporary context of the U.S. and the presence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and at that time, the almost four years of a Trump government, with its specific policies on migration (e.g., building of the wall on the border with Mexico) and gender. The fact that a large number of Latinos supported Trump in the 2016 election adds to the gendered complexity. Moreover, while ethnicity appears to be at the core of the arguments on the political character of the performances, on social media, the political was discussed in relation to the fact that two middle-aged women performed, which was deemed empowering or a feminist articulation in mainstream entertainment. The age of the two performers could also be seen as political from a feminist perspective as older women are often absent in the entertainment industry. Certainly, this political aspect intersects with Latina identities and the way they are presented in this Super Bowl performance, a huge and popular media performance showcasing non-hegemonic identities in the context of North American popular entertainment media. In her work on the "Latinidad feminista," Jillian Báez (2007) examined the duality and multiplicity of Latinidad representations in popular cinema and, as we did, found that representations of Latinidad in popular culture are diverse and complex and demonstrate the layered and dynamic intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, and age. The bodies and performances of Latina pop artists become sites of social struggle (see also Beltran, 2002). The political understanding of the gender performance from an intersectional perspective put forward a political articulation of nationhood, feminism, age, Latinidad diaspora, female empowerment, and ageing femininities in a popular media representation and the discourses surrounding this particular media text. The political in this case also entails being present and being represented in a popular mainstream media text. The strategies used to articulate these identities are mostly linked, and the subject positions are mostly linked to ethnicity and femininity articulated by Latina identity and femininity.

5. Conclusion

Once more, this article suggests that the relationship between gender and popular culture is incredibly complex. Multiple aspects construct a field of power configurations in which and through which this relationship is articulated. For approximately half a century, gender and media have been the focus of scholarly attention—sometimes with a clear feminist motivation, sometimes without one. While the former theorized how gender takes shape and represents a discursive praxis, the lat-

ter has been invaluable in showing inequalities between genders. Digitalization and globalization have posed new challenges to scholars in the field. On the one hand, they facilitate a space for diverging viewpoints that enrich the study of gender and media. On the other hand, both developments also emphasize the limitations of theoretical viewpoints. It is time to ask about the elephant in the room: How to proceed? What possibilities lie ahead for future researchers? Are any tools available to transcend these limitations and to address these challenges? The answer sounds rather undeveloped, as dialogic approaches seem to be the most important factor. However, a dialogue does not only contain speech, but—most importantly—also listening.

A dialogic approach would be useful to address challenges posed by developments in the study of gender and popular culture: We must not only ensure that different voices can speak but must also listen. The backlash caused by feminist scholars in the 1980s led to self-criticism, which resulted in discrediting gender studies (or pausing them, as Van Zoonen suggested), also resulted in the emergence of important concepts: intersectionality and queer studies. While intersectionality is rooted in standpoint feminism (Krijnen, 2017), and hence advocates a form of essentialism, queer studies advocates a fluid identity that is constructed continuously by interacting with one's environment. De Ridder et al. (2011) suggested a pragmatic approach, proposing a synthesis between essentialist and post-structural views in order to obviate the rather polemic debate between them. In a more pragmatic sense, this means insights formulated by either perspective are given equal weight.

Inspired by these insights, we would like to suggest a different research strategy than that commonly adopted in studies on gender and popular cultures, a strategy that takes essentialist and post-structural viewpoints into account. Traditionally, empirical studies on the relationship between gender and popular culture, be it in the production, content, or consumption thereof, start by explaining which view—essentialist or post-structuralist—is adopted. Next, a traditional empirical study demonstrates how genders manifest in the text, production context, or in audiences. Mostly, this leads to a rather repetitive exercise that shows how patriarchal constructions still hold strong and how social change is incredibly slow. Instead, we would argue, it is useful to change the starting point of investigation to something other than gender. For example, a study of the meaning of gender in the Super Bowl Halftime Shows could discuss gender roles and then identify them in the Halftime Shows. Undoubtedly, if we investigate more Halftime Shows, we could isolate stereotypical gender roles, and we could conclude that the series misrepresents women and men. Lopez's performance, for example, can, as we have shown, be interpreted as a stereotypical display of the hypersexualized Latina. However, this route does not enable us to understand the discord in interpretations. Instead, our analysis started by determining the

key points in the debate on the show thus identifying what is at stake. By peeling away the layers of interpretation and paying attention to the different viewpoints, we attempted to reveal the intersectional power configurations that enable us to understand the relation of this arguably small case in popular culture to everyday politics. The results of this approach are, in our opinion, more interesting than the obvious stereotypes that can be identified. An intersectional analysis enables all characters to contribute to discourses on gender articulated by popular culture, which is more complex than the stereotypes presently in it. This also allows us to connect the text more readily to audience appreciation of it (cf. Fenton, 2000).

However, if we seriously want to understand current developments, such as #MeToo or the Super Bowl Halftime Show by Shakira and Lopez, we do need to do more than state that "Yes, intersectionality, indeed, is very important, but for now we focus on gender," or "Yes, of course, other regions in the world might be different, but for now we focus on this locality." Truly listening includes putting effort into opening up academic cultures, finding other voices that further challenge canonical theories, and referencing these when needed. We need not only to recognize global gender inequality but to understand the politics of media representations as a transnational affair that causes multiple conceptions of gender (and other related) concepts to clash, mesh, and integrate. So, let's not only get loud, but also start listening.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

The Banality of Digital Reputation: A Visual Ethnography of Young People, Reputation, and Social Media

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Abstract
This article relies on a visual ethnography with young people between 13 and 20 years old. Young people were asked to make visual collages of fictional social media accounts, which are used in this article to analyse the signification of "good" and "bad" reputation in digital youth culture. It explores how reputation is performed visually and aesthetically in digital youth culture. The aim is to contribute to the critical study of digital reputation, it formulates an ethical critique on how the signification of digital reputation has formed alongside values and beliefs that support the growth of platform capitalism, rather than assigning a reputational value and rank responsibly. I conclude how the signification of digital reputation is not only conformist and essentialist but also meaningless. The banality of reputation argues that, in the context of popular social media, there is no real or substantial information made available to distinguish between a "good" or a "bad" reputation, except for stylized banality, a stylistic focus on lifestyle and commodities. The point is that reputation should not be banal and meaningless. Many important political and institutional decisions in a democracy rely on the evaluation of reputation and critical assessment of the information upon which such evaluations are made. Although platform capitalism has made digital reputation meaningless, it is in fact an essential skill to critically orient oneself in digital societies.

Issue
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1. Introduction

Reputation is a high-stakes issue in the public sphere and popular culture. The so-called "cancel culture," the "withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic" (Ng, 2020, p. 623), has been the downfall for a significant number of celebrities in the past few years. High-level cases of reputation loss have illustrated that, despite outstanding reputation management for decades, a sudden and shocking fall from grace could happen to any star.

Yet concerns regarding the potential that one may experience a downfall caused by a rapid and unpre-

dictable drop in reputation status resonate beyond the world of stars. Reputation capital, one's accumulated status and rank, is an asset that especially in the context of digital media is a concern for young people and their parents too, with Pew Research Center surveys showing that teens are active reputation managers. A majority of parents are also "very concerned" about digital reputation (Madden et al., 2013). Safeguarding children and young people's future reputation capital when living a digital life is not easy. "Bad" decisions, for example, a nude picture circulating without consent, might forever circulate—"trending" algorithms are unforgiving technologies.

Digital reputation and how it is experienced (through shame, guilt, popularity, and influence) causes harm in

digital life. While reputation might encourage people to improve themselves, "good" digital reputation is, as I will argue, also conformist and essentialist. Indeed, digital reputation is a kind of violence; it may produce or reinforce pre-existing social inequalities and hamper people's ability to live alongside those in society who are different. While reputation is symbolic, constructed, and performed in nature, it has enormous psychological and social-material value; "to exist means to be assigned a value in a *ranking*, in a system that makes comparisons possible. To be is to be comparable" (Origgi, 2019, p. 158, original emphasis). In this article, I will explore value and rank in the context of social media and young people's digital cultures by asking: What does digital reputation signify in digital youth cultures?

Digital reputation has mainly been the domain of management studies, exploring how brands, organizations, and individuals can monitor reputation as well as how online techniques and methods can be used to make something more attractive (Schultz et al., 2000). Further, media literacy pundits have argued that online reputation management should be an essential skill, emphasizing the importance of privacy settings and the risks of oversharing things online. More critical explorations of digital reputation remain understudied, however. Recently, Gandini (2016) argued that the commercial measurements of someone's individual digital reputation has become a determinant factor for career success (e.g., measurements of "social influence" based on numbers of followers on social media). Further, Rosamond (2019) has argued that the 2016 presidential Trump campaign, which mobilized trolls to capitalize on the volatility and loss of reputation, introduced "reputation warfare" as a dominant digital reputation paradigm. Rosamond argues that reputation *volatility* is the new norm, instead of secured reputation measurement and capital.

My aim is to contribute to the critical study of digital reputation by focusing on how conformist and essentialist interpretations of digital reputation have been formed alongside values and beliefs supporting the growth of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2016). My objective is to ethically critique the moral economy of digital reputation in the context of social media and digital youth cultures (Hesmondhalgh, 2017; Sayer, 2007), and to assess how significations of "good" and "bad" reputations reference "proper activities" that support the platforms' business. To do so, I will use a visual ethnography (Pink, 2013) to analyse how digital reputation is symbolically made sense of by young people between 15 and 20 years old, focusing on aesthetics and visual self-representations of "good" or "bad" digital reputations.

I consider the critical study of reputation in digital youth cultures important because while "digital reputation management" is taken for granted as a digital media literacy strategy, it may reinforce social exclusion. It benefits platform capitalism more than it benefits young people and society. I will conclude by making an argument that digital reputation has become banal; "good" repu-

tation signifies meaningless self-representations, tropes and clichés, commodities and instagrammable lifestyles. "Bad" reputations signify the spectacle of reputation volatility, the loss of digital reputation and the practice of shaming as entertainment. The banality of reputation is, however, not a good thing for democracy or society (Origgi, 2019). While reputation is constructed and performed, the assessment of rank and value cannot be left to radical relativism or instagrammable tropes. Assessing reputation in a contextualized, fair, ethical, critical, and compassionate way is an important, certainly not banal, skill.

2. The Formation of Digital Reputation

Reputation is often seen as a "mark of modernity" but Origgi (2019) argues this is a mistake. Rather, reputation is central to human psychology: "Anxiety about how we see ourselves seen exists in all cultures and manifests itself at a very early stage of child development" (Origgi, 2019, p. 24). Despite it not being modern, reputation has, since the early 2000s, become a central feature of people's digital lives and taken on particular significance in Western societies and culture—it is this particular significance that I will explore in this first part.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the formation of digital reputation might be seen as a language containing no essence but formed in "shifting relations of difference" and as such establishing itself "with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field" (Hall, 1997); while the essence of the distinctions between "good" and "bad" reputations might be mysterious, their meanings are fixed in particular socio-cultural formations at a particular time. For example, in digital youth cultures, reputation establishes itself with culturally specific normative believes about gender when girls are shamed disproportionally more than boys for "harming" their online reputation by taking too sexy selfies (Korkmazer et al., 2020). The socio-cultural work of digital reputation organizes people into different social groups and acts as a means of "social human classification" (Hall, 1997).

I want to argue, however, that the significance of digital reputation in digital lives has been formed alongside specific technocultural transformations such as the transition to a user-generated web in the early 2000s. Built around online participation, self-representation, and the data-driven business models of platforms such as Facebook, this technocultural formation meant the end of the pre-commercial internet (Lovink, 2012). Popularity on the internet became seen as the foundation for a career, a gateway to digital entrepreneurship for the aspiring young (McGuigan, 2014). Methods and techniques to systematically manage digital reputations became something that could be employed not only by corporate brands (Schultz et al., 2000) but also by ordinary people. The shifting boundaries between public and private life brought a new kind of "information war" (Thompson, 2011), giving power and

"creditworthiness'' (Rosamond, 2019) to those with good reputations. Around 2006, high-level stories of cyber-bullying and revenge porn started to circulate and made way for Reputation.com, the first online reputation management agency providing services to those who need help with public shaming on the internet (Ronson, 2015).

The power of digital reputation, but also how meanings of digital reputation shift and are re-appropriated, have made digital life vulnerable and exhausting. A moment of clouded judgement may lead to a loss of reputation. A poorly formulated tweet, a drunken picture, or sexting gone wild reduces someone to a single "bad" decision (Phillips & Milner, 2017). The searchability and durability of online content, but also how gossiping, shaming, and rumours are characteristic of digital sociality are ongoing threats to digital reputations. In the technocultural formations of contemporary digital life, reputation is seen as capital turning "reputation" into a financialized asset. Reputation capital, as defined by Rosamond (2019), is a form of what Bourdieu (1994) refers to as "symbolic capital": "The aggregated value of signs indicating the perceived esteem, honour, respect, likeability, importance and/or trustworthiness attributed to a given person or entity, understood as the person or entity's intangible asset" (Rosamond, 2019, p. 4). Digital tools for monitoring financialized reputation are assumed to "rationally" and "objectively" measure reputation capital across social media platforms. Yet, while reputation capital is assumed to be steadily built over time, it is the volatility and the potential loss of reputation that characterizes reputation's financialization.

For ordinary youths, the financialization and volatility of digital reputation produce expectations and requirements to maintain "good" reputations so as to not jeopardize their social value and (future) reputation capital. In everyday life, despite being symbolic in nature, digital reputation is interpreted as the essence of the digital self that, once damaged, is difficult to fix. An example in digital youth cultures is the stigmatization of "those who send sexts": Young people are harshly judged and excluded from their peer groups when sexting because they have failed to maintain "good" reputations (De Ridder, 2019), they have failed to protect their future reputation capital. Digital reputation is an individual responsibility that needs to be defended relentlessly, for a loss of digital reputation may be weaponized against you (Rosamond, 2019) as some may find pleasure in seeing your digital reputation destroyed. Reputation is an important part of the affective experience of daily digital life (e.g., anxiety, exhaustion, shame, and humiliation) as its undoing means a rupture of one's digital self (Origgi, 2019, p. 21).

3. Platform Capitalism, Social Media, and the Moral Economy of Reputation

So far, I have argued that the financialization of digital reputation refers to reputation as a calculable asset of people's social value and to the idea that a "good" digital reputation is necessary to build a career in today's knowledge economy: When maintaining "good" digital reputations there is the expectation of an economic return (Gandini, 2016, p. 27). Moreover, I have argued that concerns about digital reputation are central to the affective experience of digital life. In this part, I will further explore how digital reputation is a "product" of the commercial internet and platform capitalism, and how the significance of digital reputation is formed alongside the norms, values, and beliefs that support the growth of platform capitalism.

I refer to the moral economy of digital reputation to explore the values and beliefs of what constitutes the social human classifications of a "good" reputation in the context of social media (Sayer, 2007). Platform capitalism, like any other economy, is "suffused with values and beliefs about what constitutes proper activity, regarding rights and responsibilities of individuals and institutions and qualities of goods, service and environment" (Hesmondhalgh, 2017, p. 206). A moral economic approach to digital reputation asks critical questions about platform capitalism's validity to make distinctions between "good" and "bad" reputations. A moral economy approach to digital reputation is an ethical critique of platform capitalism, yet it also invests in politics and power; the distinctions between "good" and "bad" reputation might (re)produce particular kinds of violence that need to be addressed, it may reinforce already existing inequalities and eventually hamper people's ability to live alongside those who are different.

The platform, as argued by Srnicek (2016), is a firm built around the handling of data for profit. The platform business affects every sector of the economy, but my focus here is primarily on social media and the technology that they use for facilitating online participation and self-representation. The economic operations of social media platforms are more than a shift in the business models of the internet, they are "an ideal that can legitimate contemporary capitalism more broadly" (Srnicek, 2016, p. 12). Platform capitalism is a hegemonic model that can be applied to different businesses and sectors (e.g., Srnicek provides the example of how cities are expected to become "smart") and social media applied that model to facilitating and organizing sociality, communication, and connection by extracting data from its users. I argue that there are two key values and beliefs to how platform capitalism's hegemonic model assesses reputation in the context of social media. The first is an expectation that one's digital self and identity needs to be managed, the second is that one is able to master popularity and as such gain influence.

First, the efficient management of digital reputation relies on authentic self-promotion, which means promoting the self in a "natural" way, staying true to so-called "innate qualities" of the self (Grazian, 2018). Ideally, a digital identity with a "good" reputation avoids anonymity, is transparent, coherent, and stable across

platforms. This is something that platform capitalism has a "vested interest in pushing as the need for a uniform online identity attained maximum transparency, not only because they want to know who their users are, but also because advertisers want users 'truthful' data" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 200). Such a belief of what constitutes a "proper" online identity was initially pushed by Facebook (Kirkpatrick, 2010) but broadly pushed a "hegemony of a single identity" in digital culture (van Zoonen, 2013). Today, popular mobile applications such as Snapchat and Instagram allow more playful engagements with the self and identity—Instagram supports multiple accounts for users to engage with different groups of followers (Leaver et al., 2020)—yet the demand for coherent identity management is unlikely to change, precisely because it is at the core of platform capitalism's hegemonic model of sociality.

Second, digital reputation is a matter of mastering popularity and influence, primarily supported by technology that allows social media users to manipulate algorithms in order to make particular people, issues or topics trend by "liking" and "sharing." Social media algorithms are in fact reputational technologies: They continuously measure social value and reputation capital ambiguously. Algorithms are opaque, which contributes to the volatility of digital reputations. Algorithms' lack of transparency also makes them exciting (Gillespie, 2018). Reputational technologies play an important role in how reputation's volatility is capitalized upon: "Tactical interventions" (e.g., large numbers of people "liking" or "sharing" at the same time) may quickly make or break a reputation, making digital reputation a powerful (political) weapon in culture and society (Rosamond, 2019). The logic of popularity is a battleground for the digital reputation to be made and unmade. The attractiveness of the unfolding spectacle of a broken reputation supports platform capitalism, as it generates more traffic and time spent on social media.

4. A Visual Ethnography of Reputation in Digital Youth Cultures

This article relies on a visual ethnography to explore the signification of digital reputation. Digital reputation is primarily negotiated visually in contemporary youth culture: Popular social media platforms and apps such as Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram have produced an intense influencer culture that focuses on visuality. Instagram in particular has heralded "a new class of content creators who strive for authenticity on a platform best known for selfies and self-representation" (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 26). In contemporary digital youth cultures, reputation is often aesthetically negotiated by means of beautiful images: Such images have gained significant social and economic influence in contemporary culture (Manovich, 2020). Because digital reputation's signification is primarily negotiated visually, a visual ethnography is well suited to providing insight into

digital reputation in youth culture. As Pink (2013, p. 16) notes, the visual is often interwoven with "our personal identities, narratives, lifestyles, cultures, and societies." Visual ethnography is a means to produce situated knowledge through images about (digital) everyday life.

To research the signification of digital reputation in digital youth culture, visual research materials that young people produced during ethnographic research were collected. The analysis of these visual research materials allowed me to explore how digital reputation is constructed and performed. These analyzed visual research materials are not realist representations of digital reputation but symbolical explorations of reputational signifiers such as "esteem, honour, respect, likeability, importance and/or trustworthiness" (Rosamond, 2019, p. 4). During the ethnographic research activities, participants were divided into groups and asked to visually design fictional social media accounts with a good or bad reputation by drawing and/or using magazines to produce visual representations of imagined social media profiles. During these research activities, conversations with the research participants about the representations that they produced were recorded and transcribed, these conversations also formed part of the research data. I chose "analogue" visual research materials instead of digitally available visual material (e.g., pictures circulating on Instagram) to consider the "digital intangible" (Pink et al., 2015, p. 72). Such a non-digital-centric approach is a powerful method to explore how the digital has become part of the every day and the social worlds that people inhabit. Such an approach does not focus on the digital, but on the complex relationship between people's digital and social worlds.

I analyzed the visual research materials by categorizing them as presenting a "good" or "bad" reputation, allowing me to explore the significance of this distinction. I explored (1) how reputation was constructed and performed visually and aesthetically through symbolic motives. Then, drawing on a moral economy approach I explored (2) how distinctions between "good" and "bad" were validated by hegemonic ideas that relate to platform capitalism. I took a reflexive approach to analyzing these materials, which means it was a collaborative effort between my own interpretations of the visual research material and the interpretations of the young people involved in the study.

My approach to the visual data is not rooted in a semiotic approach to those images as "texts," I did not read those images in isolation. Rather, a visual ethnographic approach (Pink, 2013) recognizes how these visual images are interwoven and connected to people's identities, as well as how they are part of the wider environments in which people live, such as people's social life-worlds and the technologies that are part of everyday life. As I have previously argued, the signification of digital reputation may produce classificatory systems through language; however, it is only when these classificatory systems become a factor in everyday

life through their interwovenness with practices, affective experiences, and technologies that digital reputation may become powerful by regulating people's conduct and experiences which may therefore potentially produce or reinforce inequalities.

4.1. Introducing the Participants

The visual ethnography presented in this article is part of a four-year research project (2017–2021). The project explores how digital reputation relates to everyday power struggles of young people based on gendered, sexual, ethnic, and religious identity intersections. The goal of this project is to find alternative strategies to improve young people's online well-being which go beyond a highly individualized focus on "online reputation management" and take into account the dynamics of exclusion and subordination, related to multiple identity experiences. This study supports this need as this research has been conducted with a diverse group of young people who were actively engaged in the research process (Sue et al., 2009).

The research presented in this article is empirically driven, yet it is anti-positivist. Such an approach demands that the presented discussions are "radically contextualized" (Ang, 1995), which means considering spatial and temporal settings, as well as bearing in mind the particular social categories and formations of the participants. The participants, all of whom live in an urban region of Dutch-speaking Belgium were recruited from two different secondary schools and one youth organisation. The first school offers a general education (preparing students for higher education), having a mostly white, middle-class student population. The second school offers a vocational education, having an ethnically diverse, and mostly lower-middle-class student population. Finally, the youth organisation focuses on empowering urban youth who are experiencing difficulties, helping them to navigate life, offering guidance with finding a job and/or leisure activities, with mostly lower-middle-class youths being involved in this organisation. In total, 29 (23 female and 6 male) youths between 15 and 20 years old participated in the production of the visual research materials presented.

5. Symbolizing "Good" Digital Reputation

The visual research materials are, as shown in Figure 1, creative collages that made use of sketches to get across what they wanted to communicate about digital reputation. Other than sketches, participants used a broad selection of magazines that were provided by the researchers, allowing participants to look for fitting visual material. In total, 10 collages that signify "good" digital reputations were included in the analysis, referring to typically banal tropes and clichés. First, participants used the "tropes and clichés" of what is Instagrammable (Leaver et al., 2020). Instagrammability

signifies an "ideal" genre of visual self-representation that has become the norm across platforms and not just on Instagram. Second, visually communicating virtues such as having a positive attitude, volunteering, and supporting left-liberal activism were found to signify a "good" digital reputation. Representing such virtues through circulating beautiful images and attractive lifestyles supports digital reputation's banality. Often, there is no interest in structural solidarity (Moran, 2014, p. 153), yet there is the expectation of an economic return when symbolizing solidarity and optimism on popular social media.

5.1. The Instagrammability of Reputation Capital

The visual aesthetics of a good reputation are built around showing off one's importance and likeability. The collages show a visual economy of repetition around the themes of being athletic and fit, eating healthy instagrammable foods, being popular among friends, travelling, showing luxury consumables such as watches and sunglasses, having a relationship (#couplegoals), and being artsy and bohemian. A use of aesthetically pleasing compositions, poses, filters, or having a consistent style in your profile (such as all black and white pictures) are markers of one's digital reputation. All of the collages showed how the metrification of one's popularity is important, having a significant following base indicates influence—more than 1,000 followers seemed to be the norm, but some collages made references to 1,3 million followers. Also, accounts that do not follow as many profiles as they have followers themselves are granted reputation capital.

The visual collage of the fictional Instagram account of Jean-Paul, an account having 1,3 million followers, is an example of how the commodification of reputation (Kurzman et al., 2007) is at the core of being an internet celebrity. Jean-Paul, as argued by the participants, made a lucrative career from vlogging on YouTube, which he shows off on Instagram:

> We have a handsome guy, he has pictures of healthy eating, from luxury clothes such as Balenciaga and other expensive brands. You can see he has lots of money, he shows his nice cars, shoes, and travels….He is a Dutch YouTuber, and he is also gay. (Describing the collage of Jean Paul)

Yet, on the other hand, the unpretentious authenticity of the fictional Instagram account of Sarah Snow with 2,035 followers, shows that one's reputational capital is not related to being an internet celebrity per se. Presenting as middle class, likeable, and a socially attractive personality is also an example of a "good" digital reputation:

> We have a very normal girl. She has pictures from her most beautiful moments. The pictures on her profile show she has a new dog, bought a new outfit, that
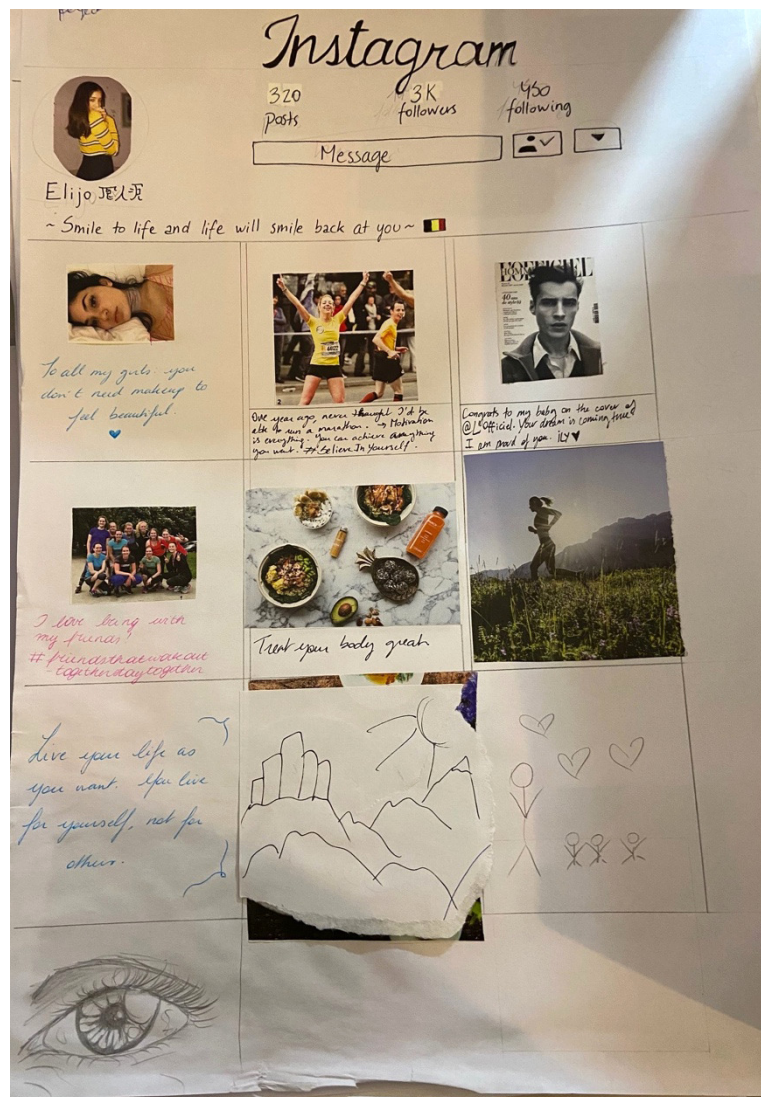
Figure 1. Fictional Instagram of Elijo symbolizing "good" reputation.

she went to a nice bar, and that she celebrates having been together with her boyfriend for over a year. (Describing the collage of Sarah Snow)

Good reputations were symbolized in different ways, ranging from being the handsome internet celebrity or the "ordinary" Instagram girl next door. Yet both the collages of Jean Paul and Sarah Snow agree that one's visual identity should be well-defined and personal, displayed through a distinctive choice of commodities and clothes, lifestyle, and image (Moran, 2014, p. 153).

Instagrammable reputation capital drives consumer capitalism, and thus platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2016). The focus on instagrammable reputation capital is yet another way to extend capitalist production and the creation of new markets (Moran, 2014). These new markets, which produce new consumables that are used to signify one's reputation capital, are lucrative business for social media platforms. They profit from time and traffic spent on the platform when people do the work to shape one's "personal identity" and they profit again from tar-

geted advertising, selling consumables that people need to shape a well-defined identity.

5.2. The Communication of Virtues as Reputation Capital

The fictional Instagram account Ilijo signifies good reputation by posting optimistic inspirational quotes such as "smile at life and life will smile back at you," the account of Poyraz Aktas shows pictures symbolizing helping children in poverty, and finally the fictional Instagram account Troye Sivan shows pictures symbolizing LGBT activism and joining protest marches. The attention to visualizing virtues such as optimism, fairness, inclusivity, and diversity on social media was seen as crucial to building reputation capital, but the participants recognized the irony of performing such a social conscience—there is a performative aspect to signalling such virtues on visual social media. For example, when describing the fictional Instagram account of Sofie Demeers, virtues such as "doing charity work" and "getting to know different cultures" were recognized as clichés of visual

self-representation: "She has 1,099 followers. She has pictures from doing charity work when she went on holiday to learn a new language, to get to know different cultures, and all that 'blablaba'" (describing the collage of Sofie Demeers).

Rather pessimistically, Cremin (2012) refers to performing such a left-liberal social conscience as "guilt fetishism"; it shows compassion but ignores the structural foundations of inequalities, often there is a resistance towards a more fundamental engagement with inequalities. While this is a pessimistic take, there is something to say about this in the context of digital reputation. As I have previously argued, the moral economy of reputation is built around the expectations of economic return when maintaining a "good" digital reputation; creating a self-brand based on positivity and compassion works well for influencers as it opposes shame and scandal (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 220). Further, visualizing virtues allows you to distinguish your personal identity. This is something that participants recognized that might help you to "find a job":

> Interviewer: Why does this profile focus on doing charity work and being involved in activism?
>
> Participants: It's just….People like it. It's good to volunteer! It makes it easy to find a job in the future. (Describing the collage of Poyraz Aktas)

Identity management focuses on distinguishing yourself as respectable and likeable, for which the communication of positive virtues is a powerful strategy. The hegemonic model of platform capitalism has helped to introduce this "wish to do good." Digital entrepreneurs typically celebrate left-liberal values and a "neo-hippy manner'' way of doing business (McGuigan, 2014). Building reputation capital means showing yourself as being part of such a "wish to do good." However, such a moral economic principle deserves ethical criticism, as it might also work against the "emancipatory, solidaristic potential of the social notion of identity" (Moran, 2014, p. 153).

6. Symbolizing "Bad" Digital Reputation

In total, four collages that signify "bad" digital reputation were included in the analysis. Three of these accounts were "anonymous," signifying not identifying with your real name as a marker of a bad reputation. There are two ways in which "bad" digital reputations were symbolized. First, there was an agreement that sexual content harms reputation capital. Second, it was seen as bad to engage in online trolling and shaming. These are practices to which I will refer to as "reputation warfare."

6.1. Sexual Content Harms Reputation Capital

Figure 2 is the fictional Instagram account of Chanel, showing a collage of female nudity that symbolizes sexual content by showing practices such as sexting (sharing [semi-]nude pictures online), glorifying being a "stripper," teen pregnancy, having a sugar daddy, and
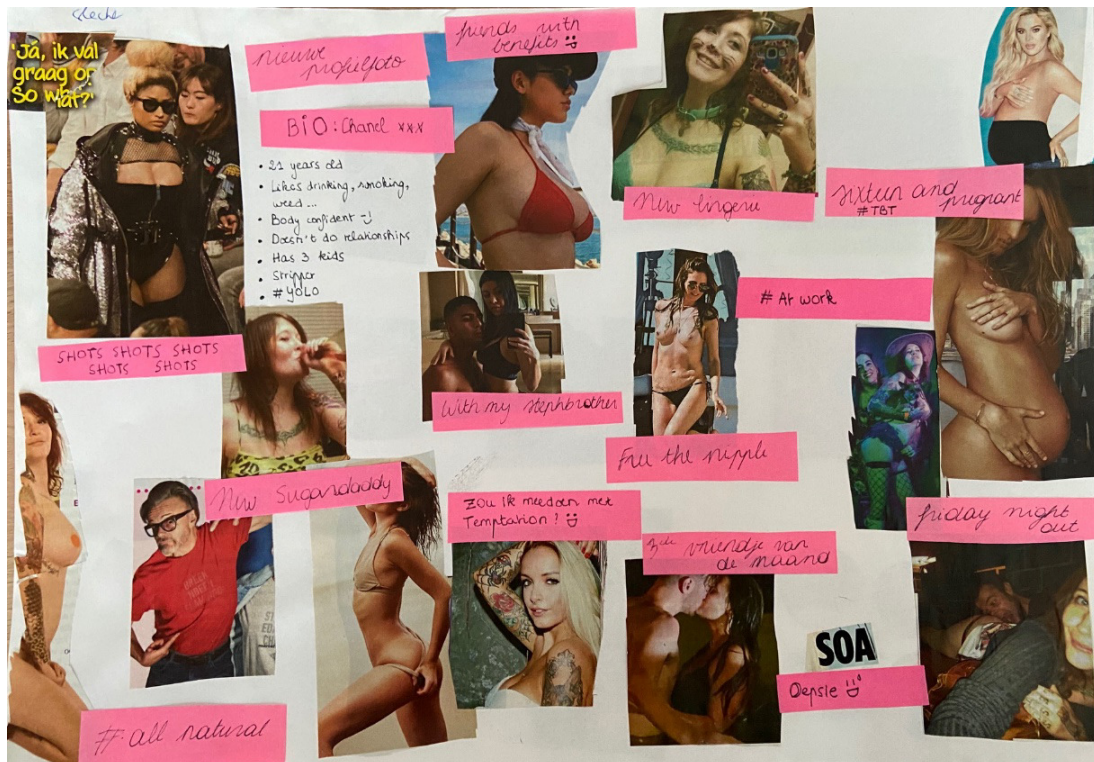

Figure 2. Fictional Instagram of Chanel symbolizing "bad" reputation.

participating in reality-TV shows such as *Temptation Island*. The meanings assigned to those self-representations were paradoxical. On the one hand, participants described those visual self-representations of nude female bodies as "beautiful." On the other hand, they agreed that nudity can cause conflict and harm an individual's future reputation capital, certainly among females and/or those who are "ordinary" as opposed to (internet) celebrities. Digital reputation is gendered (Salter, 2016) and reputation capital is lost, gained, or maintained in different ways for different social groups: "A guy is allowed to show more nudity than a woman. When a guy poses in his swimsuit no one cares, but when a woman is posing in a swimsuit, most people are immediately offended" (describing the collage of Chanel).

Maintaining a "good" reputation avoids not having pictures circulating that can be weaponized against you and that may destroy your digital reputation. Notoriously, sexual content has posed content moderation challenges for popular social media platforms (Gillespie, 2018). In many ways, digital reputation is a regulatory regime for sexual self-expression; high-level stories of public humiliation and revenge porn (Ronson, 2015) teach people how posting sexual content is a bad idea. Platforms are institutional agents that make choices of what nudity is "acceptable" and they have an interest in pushing the idea that online nudity is wrong. Popular platforms allow users to share only limited experiences of bodily pleasure in order to remain attractive to a mainstream pool of users and advertisers (Gillespie, 2018).

6.2. Reputation Warfare and the Volatility of Reputation Capital

The distinction between "good" and "bad" reputation was not always clear. Accounts that symbolized "good" reputation were also discussed as sometimes having "bad" features. Particularly those accounts of internet celebrities were found to be both "inspiring and depressing." When influencers show off too much they eventually risk losing their authenticity and "naturalness":

> I do not trust such types. From where do they have the money to show off? Probably because they are getting the money from posting that stuff I guess, but I think it is misleading. Most of the time you would think "oh so perfect," but in the end... their life is just as boring as yours. (Discussing the collage of Jean Paul)

Discussions about "bad" reputation revealed the volatility of digital reputation, or how popular social media are a battleground for the making and unmaking of digital reputation. Reputation warfare, what Rosamond (2019, p. 14) defines as "capitalizing on reputation volatility," provides excitement and the pleasure of judging other's reputations and seeing them fall. An unidentified fictional Instagram account (its anonymity reveals its status

as not being "truthful") engaged in posting "not pictures of himself but pictures that shame others." While this is, as the participants stated "bad" it is nevertheless "fun to follow."

Finally, the fictional Facebook account of Gerard Zuurpruim symbolizes a middle-aged white man who is an internet troll and "sees nothing positive in life and who is friends with Donald Trump on Facebook." Moreover, "he ridicules everyone and everything." Gerard Zuurpruim symbolizes what Rosamond (2019) sees as a "paradigmatic shift" in how reputation is made sense of in culture and society since the 2016 Trump presidential campaign, in which destroying reputation became a "pleasurable spectacle" from which platform capitalism has benefitted. The aim of Gerard Zuurpruim is to strategically "[produce] reputational volatility" (Rosamond, 2019, p. 3). It shows that, given the high stakes of defending one's reputation capital, the signification of digital reputation as "war" has become a meaningful aspect of ordinary digital life, making digital reputation particularly vulnerable and exhausting, not only in the arena of politics but also in digital youth culture.

7. Conclusions: The Banality of Reputation

So why then, despite the signification of digital reputation, do I claim that digital reputation is "banal"?

I refer to digital reputation as "banal" (Shinkle, 2004) to argue there is a particular attitude towards "reputation"—how people assign value and rank—that is formed alongside values and beliefs that are in the best interests of platform capitalism. I have observed how the attitude towards digital reputation signifies the use of a particular aesthetic that focuses on trivial pleasures, commodities, marketable lifestyles, and performative left-liberal virtues. Moreover, that "banal" attitude assesses information that distinguishes between "good" and "bad" reputation not based on someone's qualities, but rather on their belonging to a social group; reputational distinctions are driven by classificatory systems based on essentialist, gendered, middle-class values, beliefs, and activities.

Such a moral economy of reputation based on the suppression of difference and diversity deserves to be fiercely criticized. "Good" reputations were primarily discussed as gendered by participants, maintaining and reinforcing gendered double standards. Moreover, class was also discussed as a significant marker of reputation in visual social media. Showing wealth combined with messages of doing good and giving back are markers of reputation capital and distinction in the context of visual social media. Finally, race was less explicitly visualized and discussed as a marker of digital reputation but it deserves further exploration, particularly given the significance of reputation warfare for politics following Trump.

My point is that digital reputation is "banal" because platform capitalism made it meaningless. While a "good" digital reputation has a clearly identifiable style and

aesthetic in digital youth culture, it operates in a void that is filled with commodities, opaque algorithms, and reputational warfare. The banality of digital reputation means that the assigning of value or rank is made without any agent taking epistemic responsibility for doing so (Origgi, 2019, p. 160); no real or substantial information is made available to distinguish the "good" from the "bad" reputations in popular social media, except for stylized banality, filled with materiality and commodities.

The point is that reputation should not be "banal" and made meaningless. Many important political and institutional decisions in a democracy rely on the evaluation of reputation and critical assessment of the information upon which such evaluations are made. Yet, the assigning of value and rank should be carried out responsibly, precisely to protect social groups from exclusion and democracy from manipulation. As Origgi (2019, p. 162) states, the responsible assigning of reputation is a significant socio-cultural and technological challenge: "We still lack appropriate and effective methods for navigating among epistemic hierarchies and guarding against an obtuse and potentially authoritarian manipulation of ranking methods that affect and can sometimes unfairly solidify reputations."

In digital societies, there is agreement that children and young people should be taught the "digital skills" to uphold a "good" digital reputation across platforms to safeguard their future reputation capital. These digital skills are aimed at making young people aware of the searchability and durability of online content by, for example, focusing on the importance of privacy settings and the dangers of sharing (semi-)nudes. While this is done with the best intentions, focusing on techniques for online reputation management is missing the point. It maintains the banality of digital reputation and often relies on social-cultural dynamics of human classification to distinguish between "good" and "bad" reputations. Rather, focusing on contextualized, fair, ethical, critical, and compassionate assessments of information for making decisions about reputations are skills that will be much more beneficial to digital societies in the long term.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that my own assessment of the signification of reputation in digital youth cultures as "banal" is no judgement of young people's social media practices, but an ethical critique on platform capitalism. In digital life, there may be many reasons for which banality may in fact not be meaningless. For one, in a cultural climate where reputation volatility is capitalized upon, banality works as a shield for reputational warfare tactics such as shaming, bullying and humiliation. Stylized banality—"smile at life and life will smile back at you"—eases the affective burden that comes with maintaining one's digital reputation.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author

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Article

The Loss of the Popular: Reconstructing Fifty Years of Studying Popular Culture

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Abstract
This article starts from the observation that popular culture resides in a contradictory space. On the one hand it seems to be thriving, in that the range of media objects that were previously studied under the rubric of popular culture has certainly expanded. Yet, cultural studies scholars rarely study these media objects *as* popular culture. Instead, concerns about immaterial labor, about the manipulation of voting behavior and public opinion, about filter bubbles and societal polarization, and about populist authoritarianism, determine the dominant frames with which the contemporary media environment is approached. This article aims to trace how this change has come to pass over the last 50 years. It argues that changes in the media environment are important, but also that cultural studies as an institutionalizing interdisciplinary project has changed. It identifies "the moment of popular culture" as a relatively short-lived but epoch-defining moment in cultural studies. This moment was subsequently displaced by a set of related yet different theoretical problematics that gradually moved the study of popular culture away from the popular. These displacements are: the hollowing out of the notion of the popular, as signaled early on by Meaghan Morris' article "The Banality of Cultural Studies" in 1988; the institutionalization of cultural studies; the rise of the governmentality approach and a growing engagement with affect theory.

Issue
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1. Introduction

"People griping about nonwhite actors in Bridgerton but not fussing about the Duke wearing riding boots to a ball?! Riding boots!" (Fredericks, 2020). The above is a tweet about the Netflix series *Bridgerton*. It makes light-hearted fun of others taking a popular television series way too seriously. Or perhaps of mistaking popular culture for always being about something else: Anti-racist activism and historical accuracy are suggested to be equally important issues. In jest, the tweet says that we might want to return to popular culture as popular cul-

ture. That is exactly our starting point in this joint article. We participated in an online roundtable on "The Power of the Popular," organized by IAMCR's Popular Culture Working Group. The theme of the discussion was the status of popular culture in the 2020s. Even though we approached the question from different angles, we found ourselves in agreement that it seemed popular culture is no longer studied as *popular culture*. By this we meant that studies of the popular no longer invoke the notion of popular culture, even when they use the term. To be sure, media and cultural studies scholars continue to study phenomena that would have been considered

popular culture in the 1980s. On the surface, it would therefore seem that we never really left the terrain of the popular. When analyzing, say, the way Twitter controversies shape public discourse, it is clear a 1980s scholar, magically transported to 2021, would have no trouble approaching Twitter as a cultural forum (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983) where different views and parts of society meet and interact. That same 1980s scholar would also approach Twitter as neither entirely top-down nor entirely bottom-up, operating instead somewhere in between the abstract forces of the cultural industries while generating and requiring activity and enthusiasm "from below." Twitter comments are neither high culture nor the kind of authentic folk culture associated with premodernity. All of this to say that yes, Twitter can be considered—*is*, actually—popular culture.

However, we do not study Twitter as *popular culture*. Instead, we look at it and other social media platforms as a place where the free labor of users is exploited (Fuchs, 2010; Terranova, 2000), or as a powerful advertisement platform that manipulates voting behavior through targeted advertising (Tufekci, 2014). We look at it as a network that can manipulate public opinion through the creation of botnets (Bastos & Mercea, 2019), a place where filter bubbles reinforce existing opinions (Pariser, 2011), or as a platform that allows populist leaders to bypass the traditional media of old (Enli, 2017). It seems popular culture is studied as a means to study something we are tempted to designate a bit sarcastically as "more important." An example is the recent *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change*, edited by Jenkins et al. (2020). Notably and commendably, Jenkins also spends his time on The Civic Imagination Project, "to explore ways to inspire creative collaborations within communities as they work together to identify shared values and visions for the future," taking a step away from being a popular culture scholar to being a community worker and activist (Jenkins, 2021).

What we see in recent work like this is that, even though the words "popular culture" figure prominently, the entire conceptual framework that came with "popular culture" and "the popular" has been relegated to the background: the topological distinctions between elite, mass, folk, and popular culture; the culturalist insight that popular culture is actively produced; the Gramscian idea that popular culture is the place where common sense is produced and formed. Notwithstanding exceptions, what remains is a "fun" object ("popular culture") without the conceptual framework that tied everyday practices of meaning making to engaged research of power structures. Or a zone of exploitation, subjection or exclusion, of course.

This article is an attempt to trace how that change occurred. In answering that question, we focus on subsequent transformations of the cultural studies project, arguably the interdisciplinary domain that introduced and disseminated the term. Our point of reference here is what came to be known as cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s and originated in Britain (focused on class and ideology), Australia (work on policy, governmentality, and the creative industries), and the US (fans, genres, and affect). While less easily identified, it originated elsewhere too, for instance as studies of youth culture and music in Scandinavia. We are less interested in work that approaches popular culture as folk culture (as in ethnologist approaches, e.g., at German universities) or uses literary methods. The cultural studies of the 1980s and 1990s, published in *Cultural Studies* and, by the end of the decade, in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, and the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, understood popular culture as a linking pin. It connected what Williams called a structure of feeling with concrete and identifiable cultural texts. Popular culture thus gave access to the hearts and minds of "ordinary people," to what connected those who did not have automatic access to the public space of politics and information. In entertainment, politics and the popular were understood to merge.

Cultural studies' modes of political engagement changed, as did the popular culture objects that were (and are) studied: from soap opera to reality TV, to games, and social media today. This article traces a genealogy of the *debate* on popular culture, in the precise Foucauldian sense of the word, namely as "a history of the present," one that explains how the present moment came into being (Foucault, 1977, p. 31). From a vibrant, engaged form of scholarship emerged something completely different, in which recognition of the merits of popular culture—understood as texts-in-action, the text/style/object-related practices that are energized by the shared use of music, TV series, clothes—have been drastically altered and perhaps even been lost. Even though the focus of this article is on changes in scholarship, and especially on the way scholars have conceptually approached popular culture objects, it is worth pointing out that as a field of objects that energize and connect, popular culture itself has also changed, for various technological, economic, and political reasons.

The merging of popular texts and politics that is characteristic of cultural studies work, is prefigured in Hall and Whannell's collection *The Popular Arts* (1964) and Fiske and Hartley's *Reading Television* (1978). Both books depend significantly on semiotics, where later work merged semiotics and Marxism with an ethnographic approach. They need to be credited with making well-read "low cultural" texts worthy of serious academic attention. Popular television as in police series, westerns, Ian Fleming's James Bond novels, jazz, and advertising are all discussed. "Popular culture" itself, as a label, is put to new use to undo the ideological force of the high-low culture distinction and expands the much more restrictive use of the term by historians such as Burke (1978/2009). The key element that changed is that the commercial nature of these widely used and appreciated texts no longer counted against taking them seriously.

Early work on popular culture in cultural studies, in its enthusiasm to defend the relevance and importance of this new domain of critical work, developed a penchant to cast different kinds of everyday, often media-related practices as transgressive and resisting dominant culture. These claims may not always have been entirely convincing. A certain level of "optimism of the will" was required by researchers and readers, but it was not an impossible task. There were enough links to progressive ideas in the popular culture of the 1970s–1990s to at least warrant the option of reading popular cultural practices as progressive (via oppositional or aberrant decoding). In today's context that feels more problematic. Gamers out to bully women journalists (Seymour, 2016), conspiracy theories, the deep commercialization of making your own online influencer video: All of these examples either do not read as a political agenda, or when they do, do so as a deeply exclusionary and right-wing one. The occasional hopeful reading of e.g., *RuPaul's Drag Race*, as an emancipatory moment that queers gender conventions and offers a highly diverse range of ethnicities in competitors on this television show, also points to host RuPaul's deeply neoliberal convictions. Fans and viewers combine their love of the show with the criticism that it discriminates against darker-skinned queens and trans women as contenders (Hermes & Kardolus, 2019). All of these changes within popular culture and in its users as well go a long way in explaining "the loss of the popular." However, at least equally important are a series of paradigm shifts that gradually shifted the object of cultural studies.

Before proceeding to an overview of these paradigm shifts, a word of clarification. The expression "loss of the popular" might be interpreted as a story of betrayal—a once vibrant approach was betrayed by subsequent scholarship—and a call to return to the origins. This is emphatically *not* the intention behind our argument. Each of the changes we identify below responded to earlier problems and offered valuable ways forward. It was, in other words, not a question of betrayal but of scholarly work responding to paradigmatic deficiencies and societal changes (and in some instances, changing political priorities). But the net effect of this work of advancement has been a gradual redefinition and reorientation of the field, and it is the latter that we are trying to capture with the expression "loss of the popular."

2. "This Has Gone Too Far"

The first movement *away* from studying popular culture through the lens of the popular did not take place as a result of a paradigm shift, but rather as the result of unease with the direction the study of popular culture had taken. It is easy to forget how soon this sense of unease emerged. Already in 1988—merely one year after Fiske published *Television Culture* (Fiske, 1987)—Meaghan Morris published her *Banality in Cultural Studies* essay, which became the programmatic text in the anti-celebratory approach to popular culture:

> I get the feeling that somewhere in some English publisher's vault there is a master-disk from which thousands of versions of the same article about pleasure, resistance, and the politics of consumption are being run off under different names with minor variations. (Morris, 1988, p. 15)

Morris' critique entailed more than the complaint that the celebratory takes on popular culture were repetitive and decontextualized. She also argued that the use of interview material amounted to little more than a "vox pop" technique, in which the interviewer becomes the spokesperson (and thus privileged interpreter) for what the interviewee actually means: "The people is a voice, or a *figure of* a voice, cited in a discourse of exegesis" (1988, p. 16, emphasis in the original). Or, in one of the harsher judgements in the essay, "the people are… the textually delegated, allegorical emblem of the critics' own activity" (p. 17). Thus, instead of giving a voice to "the people," the scholars of popular culture were depicted as having become narcissistic ventriloquists, who make ordinary people utter the words they want them to speak. The result was a left populism that was mechanically transposed on any given situation and lost its critical bite.

The loss of critical purchase was also at the center of McGuigan's book-length critique *Cultural Populism* (1992). In a recent interview he recounts the context in which he intervened:

> In the 1980s, interpretation of the culture of "ordinary people" in cultural and media studies had become peculiarly reverential and even celebratory….I had myself gone along with the rather more positive estimation of contemporary popular culture until the point—probably when reading John Fiske—when I thought, come on, this has gone too far! Critical judgement had been abandoned too easily. (Moran & McGuigan, 2020, pp. 1005–1006)

McGuigan did not challenge the importance of studying popular culture: He remained attached to the idea that "the cultures of ordinary people are of paramount importance" (Moran & McGuigan, 2020, p. 1007). He considered the knee-jerk celebration of popular culture, however, an undesirable evolution of an otherwise correct idea that popular culture was a terrain not to be neglected by politically engaged intellectuals. In this sense, these early criticisms of the cultural studies project on popular culture represents a corrective moment, more interested in a return to the source than in abandoning it: not a loss of the popular but a reappraisal of it.

It needs to be mentioned that the corrective moment came with its own set of limitations. The work of John Fiske conveniently served as a shorthand for all of

cultural studies, which does not do justice to the wide variety of nuanced empirical work that was dismissed as celebratory and populist. Neither did his critics give John Fiske any credit for the wave of scholarly enthusiasm and inspiration that his work undeniably generated, or the complexity of his reasoning.

3. Institutionalization: From Popular Culture to Audience Research

Looking back, the earliest engagement with popular culture from a cultural studies perspective we became acquainted with, would be work at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham. There is the famous *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall & Jefferson, 1975) collection on youth culture and how its rebellion against established class culture is afforded by making wayward use of consumer culture. The attraction of the CCCS books and earlier stenciled papers lies at least in part in the surprising tolerance for consumption and what could easily be demeaned as trivial pastimes and interests, given the keen interest in Marxist philosophy at the CCCS.

At the CCCS, the importance of everyday meaning making and of popular culture was never a given, nor was their significance ever underestimated. Rather, both were felt to be in need of theoretical understanding. With regard to conceptualizing popular culture, Gramsci's writing (1971) on civil society, common sense, and organic intellectuals was important, as was Althusser's work (1971). Althusser offered ideology and recognition as concepts, while Gramsci solved Althusser's problematic distinction between science and ideology, as well as the associated notion of false consciousness. He also insisted on common sense as fragmented, disjointed, and contradictory (and thus open to change). In an essay originally written in 1977, Hall et al. explicitly bring both arguments together: "Because Gramsci does not work with a true/false consciousness or science/ideology model his thinking is directed towards the contradictory possibilities within spontaneous, non-systematised forms of thinking and action" (2007, p. 284). Allowing for contradiction might well be the single most important contribution to critical thinking that made studying popular culture at all possible.

It allows us to understand how exceptional a collection *Resistance Through Rituals* is in combining a Marxist perspective, extensive ethnographic description, and a somewhat romantic rendering of the spirit of independence amongst young people. Together with Hebdige's slightly later *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), *Resistance* established the political significance of youth culture. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* in turn established the "reading" of culture as a valid method of cultural research that Meaghan Morris would be so very critical of ten years later. Its implied method is ethnographic, even if Hebdige does not offer a methodological account. Like Marxism, feminism is an important source

of inspiration for the CCCS researchers. It allows for a different type of argumentation, as becomes clear from the work of the CCCS Women's Studies Group in *Women Take Issue* (1978). It is far less celebratory of popular culture and resistance against dominant culture than the work of the men is.

The famous example of Angela McRobbie's chapter in *Women Take Issue*, in which she wrote about talking with girls about their bedrooms, provides a link to popular music but also to acquiescence with patriarchal rules. Both returned, popular music and women's popular culture, in work undertaken in the US. American media and cultural studies scholar Larry Grossberg wrote about popular music and resistance. He would also introduce the notion of "affect," which was to provide a new direction for cultural analysis (defined broadly) by the end of the 1990s. Secondly, unaware of the work in Birmingham, UK, Janice Radway studied romance reading in the US, following a remarkably similar logic to the CCCS Women's group (Radway, 1984). She, too, understood women's reading of romances as only a temporary bid for freedom that at the same time rewrites dominant ideology. Romance reading rebuilds masculinity as both caring and spectacular, as part of the fantasy shared by novels and readers.

In the early 1980s, studying popular culture was a political act in itself. Authors engaged with social power relations and subordinate groups by doing research among different groups of popular culture users. Taking the perspective of its users (rather than that of popular culture's critics) was commonly referred to as "ethnographically inspired." Whether it was Ang's work on *Dallas* (1985), the prime time soap series, Radway's work on romances (1984), or Morley's on television viewing (1980, 1986). Their seminal texts all start from the experiences of actual viewers and readers, who talk about cultural texts that are not deemed very worthy. Their work countered established notions about the utter lack of quality in popular entertainment that John Hartley dates back to the 19th-century tenets of class culture. It also countered how these tenets were upheld by what he calls the knowledge class: schoolmasters in the 19th century, intellectuals of the "fear" school in the late 20th century (Hartley, 1999, pp. 124, 133–134). While Morley, Ang, and Radway offered a combination of ethnographic method and engagement with texts, the method part of their work was not what attracted others to this new field of study. They were read as alternatives to the dismissive and pessimist "mass culture" paradigm (Jensen, 1990) and fed a gleeful sense that consumer culture might not be all bad.

Notably, the double political agenda their work served was a feminist one rather than the Marxist one in the earlier work at the CCCS. Ang (1985) suggested that melodrama's tragic structure of feeling allows for emotional realism, a new term with which to approach how media texts become meaningful. Rather than reduce reactions to the soap series as sentimental drivel, and

a typical example of women's culture, Ang offered an account of the fantasy work involved in engaging with media texts. Morley (1986) focused on both class and gender in his work, carefully noting how masculinity in the home is a mode of power. While attacked for interpreting romance reading as a form of proto-feminism, Radway (1984) showed popular culture to be a space of negotiation that temporarily rewrote patriarchal rule and ideology, i.e., that it is women's task to care for others emotionally, and not men's.

While Ang, Morley, and Radway are seen as media and cultural studies scholars, it is earlier work at the CCCS that established academics studying popular culture as "organic intellectuals" (Fernández Castro, 2017). "The popular" and "common sense" had come to be considered valuable categories. Morris correctly identified the sleight of hand taking place, from the voice of the people to the academic as a mouthpiece. She was too irritated, however, to see how ethnographic insight had simultaneously come to be valued in cultural studies, stemming from academics' personal engagement with specific popular cultural texts as well as with a strong wish for non-patronizing forms of research. As Hoggart said when talking about literacy in 1998:

> You see you're always torn if you come from my kind of background….Perhaps excessively, you don't want to appear to patronize. You want to understand better. So I wanted to avoid two things in *The Uses of Literacy*. One was the dismissal of working-class culture as though it was nothing, was worthless or crude. And the other was sentimental acceptance, which is just as bad. (Gibson & Hartley, 1998, p. 14)

The early "organic intellectuals" cared about specific texts and their users. As the focus on media use grew stronger, there was a move away from "the popular" as such while criticism of the new popular culture research intensified. Curran criticized what he called "the new revisionism" in mass communication research for its lack of historical awareness of earlier pluralist communication research that held similar tenets regarding audiences' appreciation of media texts (1990, p. 158). When Winlow and Hall (2007) reviewed the second edition of *Resistance Through Rituals* a decade and a half later, they reiterated a sense of disappointment that has come to haunt cultural studies:

> We did expect Hall and Jefferson to deal directly with the main flaw of the CCCS's work, which for many of its critics is the assumption that youth subcultures have the irrepressible ability to avoid the compulsions and seductions of the consumer culture they inhabit, always nimbly moving beyond its chain of signification and processes of identification to fashion their own meanings and identities as methods of resisting the dominant order. (p. 395)

While early popular culture research presented a happy and irreverent mix of disciplinary backgrounds, ranging from the literary to criminology, sociology, political economy, and psychoanalysis, the 1990s proved a period of attrition and disciplining of an unruly field. For Curran (1990), the fact that researchers did not understand their compliance with consumer culture, pointed to how the new cultural studies work was really just a new chapter in the tradition of mass communication research. Winlow and Hall (2007) spoke of post-war sociology and a similar failure not to take mass cultural and consumerist manipulation into account. Others felt that the link made to ethnography is erroneous. Although the new audience researchers might well have been inspired by how critical anthropologists took Geertz's "thick description" further to question the power relation between researcher and researched (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1973), they were not actually doing fieldwork. Often, the power of popular culture was such that researchers felt deeply familiar with what they studied and used personal experience rather than long interviews or participant observation in a more formal sense. This is not incommensurable with ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1998), but it differed greatly from the lengthy fieldwork that, exceptionally, Gillespie (1995) and Thornton (1995) did conduct.

Over two decades, work that started from engagement with forms of culture that were presumed to be worthless, brought about the revaluation of "the popular" and popular culture, and then again lost the claim of transcendent value in popular culture as a phenomenon in and of itself. Neither Ang nor Radway understood romances or melodrama as in themselves empowering, but they did appreciate how these particular texts allowed audiences to use their agency and imagination to make them empowering. Ten years later, neither Gray (1992), or Gillespie (1995), nor Hermes (1995) understood the video recorder, television, or women's magazines as "prime movers." In the first instance, their interest was in the audiences they studied. How specific (sub)cultural forms inspire audience members was to be culled from how informants talk about their lives and media preferences rather than from the media texts or practices themselves. Media texts and technologies were credited with providing instances of resistance. Gray, for instance, noted how her informants explained their complicated cookers to her when talking about household technologies, but claimed they could not program the family VCR. A case of calculated ignorance, she argued: Not knowing how to do this meant one chore less on their plates. However telling, this was a minor countermove compared to the much grander claim made by Fiske for popular cultural texts. The shift away from the "power of the popular" was mirrored in a much stronger emphasis on method: Cultural studies was no longer a free space in academia that attracted radical thought. While all of these newer authors related their work to everyday practices of meaning making and the power

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relations that shape these practices, they were more accurately labelled as politically engaged than as radicals or organic intellectuals.

In another decade, "aca-fans" will reclaim free space and, much to the amazement of outsiders, such subjects as "Buffy studies" become part of the academic curriculum (Hills, 2002). Here a different logic returns us to popular culture as text where unexpected discoveries can be made. Here, too, the operative suggestion is that the gap between literature and pulp is not as wide as is believed. In this case, it leads to the emancipation of exceptional texts and not their users, and while it broadens what may count as "high culture," it leaves the distinction between high and low culture intact. Otherwise, popular culture studies will mostly turn into audience studies.

4. The Governmental Turn

The influence of governmentality studies presents a second decisive shift away from popular culture (even though, as we will see, it did not abandon the notion entirely, but instead reinterprets it by linking it to its strategic use in the wider field of culture). The influence of governmentality studies came rather late, considering the long-standing influence of Foucault on cultural studies. The focus initially was very much on Foucault's earlier work on discourse (Foucault, 1970, 1972). When his later work on power/knowledge, governmentality, and practices of the self was used, it was interpreted in such a way that it always led back to discourse. Hall's (1997) chapter in the Open University textbook *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* is a good example of this tendency to "discursify" Foucault. This changed around the 2000s, when the exhaustion of the Gramscian influence on cultural studies opened up a space for reinterpreting Foucault's work. The concept that generated the most scholarly enthusiasm was governmentality. This brought a radically different approach to culture, a paradigm shift that was less interested in conceiving culture as the site of the creation of common sense, than as a field crisscrossed by strategic power relations.

A cursory glance through the table of contents of the 2003 collection *Foucault, Cultural Studies, and Governmentality*, a fairly typical selection of the work being conducted under the rubric of governmentality at the time, illustrates this new orientation of culture towards strategy. There is an article on how new communication technologies have been strategically deployed in order to reconfigure the home along neoliberal lines (Hay, 2003). Coffey (2003) offers an analysis of the role of museums in the reconfiguration of Mexican society towards neoliberalism. King (2003) analyzes the rhetoric of cancer survivorship as embodied in initiatives like "Race for the Cure" and examines how such consciousness *cum* fundraising events redefine citizenship away from the State and towards individual ethical notions. As diverse as these analyses might be, they all approach cultural phenomena as strategically deployed in pursuit of some higher good, usually involving some large-scale but low-intensity transformation of society. In this sense, the governmentality approach to culture represented a return to earlier strands of sociological analysis that stressed the instrumentalist character of cultural goods (e.g., Packard's *Hidden Persuaders*, 1957; but also to some of the work of Bourdieu that stresses the role of symbolic goods in establishing and maintaining different social positions, e.g., Bourdieu, 1980).

Two observations are worth making here. First, almost unnoticed, the governmentality approach to culture eliminated the adjective popular from its conceptual apparatus. (It is worth noting, in this context, that Tony Bennett's (2003) contribution to the above collection is simply called "Culture and Governmentality"). Read positively, this meant that cultural studies widened its scope to also include phenomena that were previously considered to be "high culture." Yet, more often than not, this also had the consequence that the entire notion of the popular was evacuated from the discipline. To be sure, governmentality scholars still scrutinized popular culture objects, ranging from computer games like Civilization (Miklaucic, 2003) to reality TV shows like *Judge Judy* (Ouellette, 2004), but they did so without invoking the popular.

The evolution of Tony Bennett's work is a good example of this switch away from the popular towards the wider field of culture. His earlier work was heavily invested in the notion of the popular, e.g., in his writing about James Bond as a popular hero (Bennett, 1982, 1986). But by the early 1990s he had made the switch away from the popular to study one of those classic loci of high culture: The museum, which he analyzed from a governmental point-of-view (Bennett, 1995). The series of essays gathered in *Culture: A Reformer's Science* (Bennett, 1998) are the culmination and further theorization of how the governmental turn impacted cultural studies' understanding of culture.

This does not mean that the notion of popular culture was abandoned in its entirety within governmentality studies, even though it was given a much diminished and certainly much less prominent place. True to form, governmentality studies at times invoked the opposition between high and low culture, but only to the extent that the difference was strategically deployed by those wanting to intervene in a social field. In Bennett's words:

> Rather… than speaking of a contest of high culture versus low culture, the logic of culture, viewed governmentally, organises a means for high culture to reach into low culture in order to provide a route from one set of norms for conduct to another. (1998, p. 79)

Consequently, if—and this is a big if because occasions were scarce—governmentality scholars used the term popular culture, it was always from the viewpoint of how the notion was strategically deployed.

5. Affect Theory

The move towards affect theory constitutes the final and definitive turn away from earlier efforts to understand popular culture for its own sake. While not named as such, affect was always part of studying popular culture as a political moment. Ang (1985) traced an intricate relationship between the melodramatic text (and its tragic structure of feeling that defines happiness as always transient and short-lived) and the emotional realism it affords. This ultimately revolved around the kind of energy soap opera offers its viewer: It seems to be a kind of warmth, a feeling of recognition and being recognized. That feeling, however, was couched not in terms of affect but in terms of ideology—an Althusserian rendering of the power of television as ideological state apparatus. Likewise, when Walkerdine (1986) wrote about watching *Rocky II* (the movie) with the Cole family, she pointed to how the film offers a fantasy of transformation, drawing together the text, psychoanalytical insight, and theorization of identity and subjectivity. The actual popular text is crucial to the unfolding psychic processes. Psychoanalysis, however, is not an approach that is much favored in cultural studies. As a theoretical apparatus it goes against the radical contextualization and Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity that is enthusiastically taken up by the field. Psychoanalysis' association with textualist approaches in film studies has not helped. Nevertheless, in analyses like Ang's and Walkerdine's, there is an untheorized (or at the very least differently theorized) notion of affect at work.

Discussion of affect as such emerged in cultural studies in the mid-1990s to fill a void. When Grossberg spoke of affective sensibility in relation to music fandom (1992), he used it to critically intervene in a discussion of identity and representation that felt too mechanical to him. According to Grossberg, affect is subjective feeling, which "gives 'color,' 'tone' or 'texture' to our experiences" (1992, p. 57). He used the concept of affective sensibility to think identity outside of modernist and essentialist parameters, as historically and culturally constructed, as fluid and fed by (popular) culture. As a term, affect locates the "doing of popular culture" (rather than popular culture as text) between subjects by following in Spinoza's footsteps; it aims to recognize energy and change in "being affected." While "emotion" is used to refer to the social performance of feelings and sensations, affect refers to the power of moments of connection, whether positively or negatively (Wetherell, 2012). While arguably this could tie in with engaging with the popular to understand its power, this is not what happened.

A 1999 article by Ahmed illustrates this perfectly. Just before Ahmed's work turned to affect, she wrote about "becoming" by focusing on how texts interpellate readers and construct them in doing so—which as a reader we may also resist. Her mode of analysis was to read popular texts against philosophical "master texts":

It is my position that a close and critical reading of master-texts such as *A Thousand Plateaus* is of fundamental importance to Cultural Studies. This is not because I think we should keep a canonical narrative in place of the production of (high) theory. Rather, we need to attend closely to texts which have been read as originary and as charting a field. In the case of *A Thousand Plateaus*, the critical appropriation of models of becoming, bodies without organs, bodies as machines and desire as positivity, all mark its powerful dissemination in cultural theory. (Ahmed, 1999, p. 49)

The crucial text here is the philosophical one. The retelling of the narrative of *Dances With Wolves*, the 1990s movie, was used as ammunition against it. Ahmed was not interested in its appeal as popular culture, she was interested in the homology between the two (very different) texts that allowed her to develop what reading "skeptically, critically, and closely" as a feminist (1999, p. 49) might mean in relation to engagement and the power of phantasy, and against essentialized notions of identity. Much can be recognized here, but not in any known configuration of what was previously known as "doing cultural studies." Partly it is Ahmed's unique approach. Equally, it was a sign of the times that we had moved far away from the exhilaration and pleasure early cultural studies found in subcultures and youth culture and in popular entertainment.

6. Conclusion

While cultural studies stopped studying popular culture in order to understand "the popular" and started using it, among other things, as a means to confront high theory, neoliberal politics was consolidating. Initiated in the Western world by politicians such as Thatcher, Reagan, and Kohl, in the 1990s neoliberalism became part of British Labour's creative industries policy (Hewison, 2014). Culture, regardless of its provenance, was felt to be an "expedient" for all sorts of policy initiatives and governmentality in general (Yudice, 2004). The broad field of media and cultural studies keenly felt that it needed to turn away from what was now deemed to be too naive an approach to mediated culture. It did not help that the new reality genres that offered a public presence to non-professionals, or "ordinary people," and then the new digital platforms that allowed for amateur production, after a brief moment of anarchist hope in the late 1990s, could be seen to close down rather than open multiple identity formation (Lovink, 2002, 2012; Ytreberg, 2004). To understand the politics of the new media culture as allowing for broad fantasies of new selves and different worlds, felt like a small part of a troubling and much larger whole. There were exceptions, of course, that recognized the political power in media as information and in the pleasure of cosplay (Andeweg, 2017; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Gn, 2011) but the moment of "the popular" was past.

Today, when popular culture is referenced in the hybrid field that includes cultural studies but also sociology, popular culture and the popular have become part of a research tradition, as in John Storey's work, or props for quite different arguments. When Wood and Skeggs write about reality TV, they discuss class and gender (Skeggs et al., 2008; Storey, 2018; Wood, 2017). When Littler makes her case against meritocracy and unveils it as neoliberalism at work, she references the ultra-rich as they populate TV programs and popular figures such as the "mumpreneur" (Littler, 2018). When Gloria Wekker deconstructs the politics of race in the Netherlands, the yearly Sinterklaas festivities and its caricatural Petes in blackface serve as an example of popular culture as a deeply conservative and exclusionary force (Wekker, 2016).

It is well possible that, had Stallybrass and White (1986) come across Sinterklaas when writing their *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, they would have interpreted the Petes in blackface in terms of carnival and exhilaration. Referencing medieval examples, they would have cautioned that these were raucous and uncouth times that did not particularly score well on inclusion or emancipation. In as far as the popular has carnivalesque traits, Stallybrass and White might well have argued that these have to do with temporarily stepping out of line, of suspending the normal order and turning power relations upside down. That contemporary scholars approach such popular energies with distrust has very sound political reasons in times when QAnon believers storm the US Capitol. In the current conjuncture, it seems that the Right is simply better at reading and using Gramsci. Cultural studies, on the contrary, seems to have lost its sense of how texts might energize and produce collectivity and utopian connections. Of course, cultural studies has also gained critical awareness through its understanding of governmentality, and through its theorization of affect and how the senses are involved in processes of meaning making.

What this overview has tried to show is that the "moment of popular culture" was a relatively short-lived but highly influential, foundational moment in the history of cultural studies. This popular moment was subsequently displaced by a set of related yet different theoretical problematics, that gradually moved the study of popular culture away from the popular, in some instances even getting rid of the adjective in its entirety. Each of these mutations was caused by the interlocking of changing mediatic and political environments, changing political engagements, and changing scholarly views. Consolidation of the move to audience studies was as much a response to changing media technologies as it was an attempt to attenuate and empirically ground some of the more grandiose claims made in the 1980s. The governmental approach argued that an exclusive focus on popular culture blinded one to the strategic deployment of culture in the wider sense. In addition, it was inspired by the belief that cultural studies scholars should engage in policy debates. Affect theory was both an attempt to take the discipline away from an exclusive focus on discourse, meaning, and ideology, and the result of the belief that popular texts are in need of analysis but do not require any defense against their detractors. And the recent, more critical work with which we ended the previous section, no longer sees a utopian impulse in the pleasures and enthusiasm generated by popular culture, focusing instead on its reactionary energies, its increasing commodification and racist lineages.

What we have gained is a shared understanding that popular culture is a key site for the production and reproduction of hegemony (Storey, 2018, p. 3). Nowadays we know that popular culture provides us with easy means to reflect on what binds and what divides us, whether such forms of cultural citizenship take progressive or conservative forms (Eeken & Hermes, 2021; Hermes, 2005). That it affords wholehearted immersion and excitement over issues that are deeply political, but quite possibly more properly belong in other realms. The opening line of this article, one of the many tweets about the Shondaland series *Bridgerton* for Netflix, proves this point: *Bridgerton* is based on a series of romance novels, one of the ultimate "pulp" genres. As a Netflix offering it has become "drama." In the hands of producer Shonda Rhimes, it also became a political vehicle to suggest that racial diversity requires only the smallest leap of the imagination. On Twitter, however, the series becomes a cause célèbre to vent outrage over historical inaccuracy: not just about whether or not the English nobility might have been a more diverse group of people than is assumed, but about its costumes and musical scores as well. An astounding wish for authoritative, historically correct storytelling seems to motivate the twitterers. The point seems lost that *Bridgerton* might simply be an instance of "the popular," of that which gives us energy and hope and a sense that everything might be better (and to h*** with historical accuracy and other norms, codes, and prescriptions). A pity really, that without the popular, we are all dancing in our riding boots (which, for the uninitiated, is truly extremely uncomfortable).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

"Chuck Norris, Please Help!" Transnational Cultural Flows in the 2017 Anti-Corruption Protests in Romania

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Abstract

This study examines the meaning-making work of transnational cultural references in protest. Whether using the image of the superhero or re-mixing a famous painting, the presence of such references in home-made protest placards was a striking feature of the 2017 anti-corruption protests in Romania. By means of a qualitative analysis of 58 such signs, this study identifies five types of transnational cultural resources co-opted in the local protest: politics, high and popular culture, brand names, computer culture, and other motivational slogans and protest symbols. Such references are appropriated in local protest for their recognizability potential, their generic interpretive frames, or their usefulness in generating surprising re-iterations of the political cause. Yet, the use of such references remains interwoven with the symbolic and political capital of professional, middle-class elites. In the Romanian case, the use of these transnational cultural references also constructs the protesters as cosmopolitan and aligned with Western cultural consumption and political practices. In turn, this frames political opponents as backwards, parochial, and unfit for democratic politics.

Issue

This article is part of the issue "From Sony's Walkman to RuPaul's Drag Race: A Landscape of Contemporary Popular Culture" edited by Tonny Krijnen (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands), Frederik Dhaenens (Ghent University, Belgium) and Niall Brennan (Fairfield University, USA).

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the meaning-making work of transnational cultural references in protest. Using data from the 2017 anti-corruption protests in Romania, the study asks how symbolic resources from other geopolitical and cultural contexts become re-used in national protests and how this glocalized meaning-making work contributes to the mobilization and amplification of protests.

Transnational references such as HBO series, Italian Renaissance paintings, English novels, or North Korean politics, for instance, are reused in homemade protest visuals such as banners, protests placards, or art installations. Protest visuals condense everyday political talk (Graham & Hajru, 2011), participate in collective iden-

tity building, and provide photographic opportunities for media coverage and social media circulation and archiving (Faulkner, 2013; Juris, 2008; Mattoni & Teune, 2014). Where the transnational diffusion of collective identity and action frames has been studied in relation to social movements (della Porta & Kriesi, 1999; della Porta & Mattoni, 2014), there is less attention to how seemingly global cultural references are mobilized in national protest to generate novel expressions of civic dissent. Furthermore, the role of visuals in protest communication remains understudied (Mattoni & Teune, 2014; Philipps, 2012; Rovisco & Veneti, 2017). This study draws attention to an underexamined form of the glocalization of protest, and adds to existing examinations of visuals in protests. As such, the study addresses the following empirical questions: Which transnational

cultural references are mobilized in national protest; and how do these references contribute to local political meaning-making?

2. The 2017 Anti-Corruption Protests in Romania

The 2017 #rezist/OUG13 anti-corruption protests in Romania represent a case of sustained protests against an ongoing political issue endemic to post-communist political systems: the corruption of the political elites (Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017). Recent activism in Romania has been nationally-oriented, defined by an overarching concern with the effects of communism in the democratic and economic development of the country, and reflective of the pro-European, middle-class ethos (Gubernat & Rammelt, 2021). A cause of ongoing protest, corruption has been framed by local activists and political commentators as a consequence of communism's "unresolved issues of the past" (Abăseacă, 2018, p. 681), eventually growing into a "quasi-hegemonic metanarrative and identity marker of the urban middle class in Romania" (Kiss & Székely, 2021, p. 11).

Such national activism also has transnational dimensions. Successive waves of citizen mobilizations since the early 2010s had echoed the mobilizational practices and organizational values of the wider anti-austerity movements. "[D]ecisions made by consensus, the lack of leaders, horizontality, the occupation of public square" (Abăseacă, 2018, p. 681) have also infused the 2017 anti-corruption protests, yet they were appropriated "without including a criticism of neoliberalism and of liberal democracy or showing a sensitivity toward social issues that were important aspects for the post-2011 anti-austerity mobilizations" (Abăseacă, 2018, p. 681). Furthermore, these protests have also been widely supported by expat communities which relied on social media (under the hashtag #rezist) to create transnational resonance for the national protests (Mercea, 2020). These communities held protests in other countries, drawing international media attention to the situation in Romania while also livecasting the events and sharing protest visuals on the social media accounts of the organizers in Romania.

The 2017 #rezist protests were fueled by ongoing discontent, largely among the urban young and the middle-class, with the corruption of the political elites represented by the ruling Social Democrat Party (PSD; Gubernat & Rammelt, 2021; Kiss & Székely, 2021). The party's president, Liviu Dragnea, had a previous fraud conviction and was under criminal investigation for another act of corruption at the time of the protests. The latter erupted when PSD attempted to pass a legislative package that would have decriminalized acts of corruption under approx. 40,000 euro. This would have effectively exonerated Dragnea in the ongoing investigation against him. In spite of warnings from the Romanian president and other public bodies that such a legislative package would be a step back in the fight against cor-

ruption; and, in spite of a demonstration against this package that had just taken place, the government still pushed through with the legal changes by means of an emergency ordinance (also known as OUG13) passed late-night on January 31, 2017.

The press conference that night became a major political blunder. The Justice Minister refused to take any questions about the passing of the emergency ordinance, provoking widespread anger among both journalists and citizens watching from home. Within hours, thousands of people had gathered throughout the entire country (Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017). In early February, a mass protest brought together over 500,000 people across the country (Mercea, 2020). And, although the emergency ordinance was nullified and the Justice Minister resigned, mass demonstrations continued with some estimates putting them at 150,000 to 200,000 protesters daily (Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017). Throughout 2017 and 2018, citizens continued to take the streets intermittently in response to the government's renewed attempts to curb the anti-corruption legal and institutional framework.

3. Transnational Cultural References in Protest Visuals

This section engages with two dimensions of protest placards: the specifics and functions of visual meaning-making in protest; and their transnational dimension. These dimensions provide a theoretical framework for the understanding the meaning-making work performed by the transnational cultural references used in the protest signs analyzed here.

3.1. Visual Objects and Meaning-Making

Whether taking the form of a text, a photograph, a drawing, an installation, a costume, or combinations thereof, protest signs are objects displayed to be seen by others. This visual dimension complexifies their meaning-making work. In cases where photographs, drawings, illustrations, or even costumes are used, signification is affected by the "perception of likeness or resemblance or analogous form" (Mitchell, 2015, as cited in Gori, 2016, p. 41). The analysis of such signification work has to consider the process of sensorial recognition and ensuing emotional reactions entailed in visual meaning-making, as the latter combines "aesthetic familiarity" and "generic meanings" to convey "collectively shared but often inchoate and diffuse sentiments and understandings" (Bartmanski, 2015, p. 17).

Analytically, three layers of meaning-making can be distinguished in visual objects (Panofsky, 1970, as cited in van Leeuwen, 2011). The representational layer elicits an understanding spurred by familiarity with the conventions of the genre, such as the recognition of the overall communicative purposes and of the general traditions of home-made protest signs. Iconographical symbolism resembles the connotative level of signs, drawing attention to the cultural baggage and semantic associations

of the people or places in an image. Finally, iconological symbolism speaks to the wider ideological message that the visual as a whole seeks to convey. Panofsky explains this layer of analysis as an effort to "ascertain those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion" (Panofsky, 1970, as cited in van Leeuwen, 2011, p. 11).

Some visuals also become iconic, meaning they achieve "wholly exceptional levels of widespread recognizability" (Kemp, 2012, as cited in Hubbert, 2014, p. 115). Iconic visuals emerge as a "dominant symbolic representation of the events" gaining seemingly universal normative undertones such as good/bad (Hubbert, 2014, p. 115). In such cases, emotional grip, recognizability, and the naturalization of meaning intersect in conveying a message. Iconic visuals in/of protest "reflect social knowledge and dominant ideologies; they shape understanding of specific events and periods; they influence political action by modelling relationships between civic actors; and they provide figural resources for subsequent communicative action" (Hariman & Lucaites, 2002, p. 366). Furthermore, iconic visuals can potentially be "diffused more easily over cultural, linguistic, ideological and political borders and can have a unifying effect on a public sphere by focusing debates on issues of shared relevance" (Mortensen & Trenz, 2016, p. 258).

While this makes them powerful means of communicating, amplifying the political values underpinning protests (Olesen, 2014; Rovisco, 2017; Wetzstein, 2017), visuals have also been criticized for their "dumbing-down'' potential and propensity towards playing upon the spectacular which may presumably downplay critical thinking and rational engagement with politics (Parry, 2015).

3.2. Visuals in/of Protest

Visuals fulfill multiple functions in protest: convey information, document injustice, participate in identity-building and mobilization, attract media attention to amplify the cause, and generate debate (Casas & Williams, 2019; Faulkner, 2013; Mattoni & Teune, 2014; Milner, 2013; Mortensen & Trenz, 2016). Prominently displayed by individuals during protest, placards are a form of public voice and a performance of citizenship. Their political message links the individual to the collective by simultaneously conveying the individual's political stance and articulating it with the wider protest cause. In the process of being seen by others, protest signs participate in the generation of collective identities and solidarity among protesters (Vanni, 2007).

Placards also constitute opportunities for protest image generation. In a political world where images proliferate, images in/of protest often struggle to achieve visibility in the public sphere (Rovisco & Veneti, 2017). Striking protest signs make for great photographic opportunities, while their concise and slogan-like nature pro-

vides testimonials for the news reporting of the actual events (Mattoni & Teune, 2014). In decentralized and digitally mediated protests where individual organizers or leaders can be difficult to identify, this can prove to be particularly useful. Yet, as shown by the protest paradigm literature, media coverage has often foregrounded the spectacular side at the expense of the political demands of protests (McCurdy, 2012).

In today's panmediated political world (De Luca et al., 2012, p. 500), social media offer protesters new means of circulating and archiving protest visuals that co-exist alongside traditional media (Mattoni & Teune, 2014; Poell, 2014). Even more so than a journalistic photograph of a protest, images captured by participating citizens convey a sense of spontaneity and authenticity (Wetzstein, 2017, p. 31). Growing online circulation can both attract media's attention to the cause and expand the face-to-face protest by creating a space for social and political discussion (Milner, 2013). Social media chatter and virality can thus boost protest communication, influencing the public agenda without having to rely (exclusively) on the amplification and legitimation brought about by news media coverage, while also extending the lifecycle of a protest beyond the presence of bodies on the streets. Yet, while they may bring in distant, potentially global publics (Mattoni & Teune, 2014), the "instant news icons" generated through social media chatter and virality can also remain transient (that is, they easily disappear from collective memory) and recognizable only to fragmented publics (Mortensen, 2016).

Finally, handmade protest signs are also tokens of vernacular creativity. Ingenious and playful crafting of political meaning-making often plays upon collective semantic reservoirs and "complex sets of inter-visual relations" (Faulkner, 2013, p. 14). In so doing, they can simultaneously reproduce and transform these semiotic resources. As forms of "vernacular creativity" (Burgess, 2006), protest visuals merge political agency and resistance with belonging, playfulness, and aesthetic innovation. "Vernacular creativity" is thus a "process by which available cultural resources… are recombined in novel ways, so that they are both recognizable because of their familiar elements, and create affective impact through the innovative process of this recombination" (Burgess, 2006, p. 206). By remixing cultural resources to generate new texts and chains of signification, protest placards also enhance the virality of cultural references. Protest visuals can thus simultaneously fulfill several social and communicational functions, working at once as an act of participation and voice, a means of amplification via news coverage and social media virality, a ludic yet political gestures, and a form of cultural production and circulation.

3.3. The Transnational Circulation of Cultural References

Protest causes, identities, and repertoires of action travel across national borders (della Porta & Mattoni, 2014,

p. 9). Even nationally-oriented protests, such as the case examined here, entail various forms of mobilities across national borders. Protesters often draw inspiration from protests elsewhere, re-appropriating their symbols and their tactics (Chabot & Duyvendak, 2002). While protest visuals can travel fast, spurring transnational mobilization or becoming seemingly global icons (Chabot & Duyvendak, 2002; Mattoni & Teune, 2014; Mortensen, 2017; Mortensen & Trenz, 2016), less attention has been devoted to their adaptation to local contexts (for an exception, see Olesen, 2014). In particular, questions still remain on which transnational cultural references are taken up in national protest, how they become implicated in the local production of contention, and what the ideological implications of their use are.

The transnational circulation of cultural references is conceptualized here with the help of broader discussions of hybridity, glocalization, flows, and de/reterritorialization. From a sociological perspective, the merger of cultural resources anchored in different local contexts can be understood as a form of glocalization (Robertson, 2012). The blending of the local and the global (or glocalization) draws attention to how seemingly global ideas or expressions are localized, leading to the creation of new cultural resources (Roudometof, 2016). Glocalization is a dialectical process, signaling the increased interconnectedness of localities. Yet, glocalization may also unwittingly universalize and standardize an essentialist understanding of locality as synonymous with nationally bounded cultures (Robertson, 2012). Furthermore, the term "global" hides more than it explains. The circulation of cultural resources often follows from historical (e.g., colonialism) and recent hierarchies (e.g., transnational corporations), suggesting the "global" is partial and contextual, better understood as a "locally instigated wave [that] spreads throughout the globe or close to it" that is refracted at the local level, resulting in a plethora of glocalized cultural products (Roudometof, 2016, p. 388).

Similarly, hybridity refers to the "fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles, or identities, cross-cultural contact, which often occurs across national borders as well as across cultural boundaries" (Kraidy, 2005, p. 5). Drawing from the traditions of international and intercultural communication, hybridity destabilizes the very notions local/global by challenging the view of culture as static and territorially bounded. Instead, the historical circulation of signs and meanings is brought to the fore, suggesting contemporary mixing processes are different today only in accelerating the normalization of hybridity as a sociocultural phenomenon (Kraidy, 2005). Neither progressive nor subversive in itself, hybridity can stimulate critical thinking, particularly in relation to nationalism and ethnic exclusivism—although it does not necessarily unsettle them (Anthias, 1999; Thomas, 1998). Like glocalization, hybridity can also bear the traces of historical and contemporary hierarchies. Thus, hybrid texts may reflect colonial histories (Piot, 2001) or privilege

some national cultural resources over others (Anthias, 1999). Furthermore, hybridity favors social actors "with the means to translate and name the world, while weakening the agency of other participants….The means and ability to communicate are therefore an important determinant of agency in intercultural relations that form the crucible of hybridity" (Kraidy, 2005, p. 152). Local social actors engaged in the production of hybridized texts often draw on their own external networks, which may reflect specific forms of cultural capital; as such, they are consequential to which external cultural resources are brought in and which local cultural resources are selected for the mixing process. In that sense, "the local is at once a site of empowerment and marginalization" (Kraidy, 2005, p. 155).

The normalization of hybridity remains an uneven process, simultaneously celebrated and resisted as it inevitably unsettles moral and material universes. The various mobilities (flows) characterizing contemporary societies (goods, money, people, technologies, media, images, and ideas) compound this unevenness, as each circulates in irregular ways that often remain tributary to the "historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33). Under the impetus of pervasive mediatization, these mobilities also generate "non-places" (Augé, 1993, as cited in Tomlinson, 1999, pp. 108–113) and "culturally odourless" resources (Iwabuchi, 2002) that do not bear—at least in an immediate way—clear connections to nationally-defined cultures. This can enhance their circulation, spurring new forms of "cultural proximity" (Iwabuchi, 2002), but it can also enable new forms of agency and ownership rooted in a search for the "authenticity" of the local.

The ability to tap into transnational cultural repertoires has been celebrated as an expression of cosmopolitanism—that is, an outlook on the world rooted in openness towards different cultures and in a sense of global interconnectedness and moral responsibility. It can also be read as a struggle between structural dominance and individual agency (Kraidy, 2005), a strategic choice (Skey, 2012), or an expression of (transcultural) class affinities (Pieterse, 2015). The 2017 anti-corruption protests in Romania provide an opportunity to further capture the multifaceted struggle over visibility, legitimacy, and power entailed in the re-appropriation of transnational cultural repertoires in contemporary protest cultures.

4. Analyzing Protest Signs

This study has analyzed a set of 58 photographs of different protest signs used during the first wave of protests (January 31–February 15, 2017). This set was constructed by collecting photographs of protests from online archives assembled by local bloggers and news media (e.g., https://www.lozinici.ro, http://www.ziare.com, and http://www.artofprotest.ro)

and from Instagram, by harvesting images posted with one of the popular hashtags during these events (e.g., #altaintrebare, #coruptiaucide, #neamsaturat, #romaniatrezeste, #romaniainstrada). While these sources do not capture the totality of protest signs (something that would be, in fact, impossible), they constitute a reasonable record of protest visuals, including diverse protest times, locations, and vantagepoints from where photographs were taken. Photos displaying legible protest signs containing a transnational cultural reference were retrieved and analyzed. Duplicates or minor format/message variations were excluded.

This study is part of a bigger project that has included my participation as an observer in a protest organized by the Romanian diaspora in the Netherlands, followed by fieldwork in summer 2018 in Romania. Having cultural and linguistic competencies was central to recognizing cultural references that, at the time of the protest, counted as "transnational". Such competencies are crucial, as "foreign" cultural references or the hybrids they may lose their "foreignness" with time (Pieterse, 2015, p. 95). I have also interviewed 30 individuals actively engaged in protest mobilization across the country and had several informal discussions with civil society representatives and faculty members. While this fieldwork is not reported here, its insights inevitably informed the analysis and interpretation process. Where possible, I signal this in the reporting of the findings or discussion.

Given the lack of research on home-made protest signs and the specific interest in the meaning-making role of transcultural cultural references, I took an exploratory approach tailoring the analysis process to the two research questions. I started by identifying the context of origin and the domain of reference used (e.g., politics, popular culture texts, etc.). Drawing from multimodal discourse analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012), I paid attention to the use of transnational cultural references to craft a political message, guided by questions such as:

- Which aspects of the original context of the reference were retained in the process? For instance, one protest sign re-used the title of the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* to play a pun upon the Romanian translation of the word "the catcher", while another invoked *The Animal Farm*'s storyline to compare the government to the authoritarian regime described in the book.
- What type of knowledge was needed to recognize the reference?
- Was there a possible and plausible connection between the choice of reference and the broader Romanian political imaginary?
- How was the reference used to make a statement about local politics (people or events)?
- Which aesthetics and stylistic aspects of the protest signs (e.g., figures of speech, rhyme, format of text or illustration) were used?

5. The Meaning-Making Work of Transnational Cultural References in Protest Signs

Five categories of transnational cultural references were used across the protest signs analyzed here.

First, political references included past and present leaders, slogans, and events. Unsurprisingly given the cause, placards evoked well-known authoritarian leaders such as Stalin, Hitler, or Mao Zedong. Other iconic political references were tied to either American (Barack Obama's electoral red/blue poster and Donald Trump's [in]famous quotes) or French politics (Louis XIV's quote "L'etat c'est moi" [I am the state], the slogan of the French revolution, and the slogan of the public response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks, "Je suis Charlie").

Second, even though computer culture has become an everyday practice in Romania (although digital divides remain important), the references discussed here have not been produced in Romania. Popular games (Pokémon and Pacman), websites (PornHub), and technology companies (Google) provided material to create localized political messages, alongside references to computer and internet symbols such as right-click, hashtags, emojis, meme templates, and terms of use.

Third, high and popular culture were a preferred reservoir of transnational references for framing the identity and cause of the protests (Milner, 2013; Rovisco, 2017). Posters drew from classical paintings (Da Vinci's *Last Supper* and Matsys' *The Ugly Duchess*) and books (Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*), song lyrics (Muse's *Uprising* and The Police's *Every Breath You Take*), and films/TV series (*Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Game of Thrones*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Captain America*, *Batman*, *Robin Hood*, *Pinocchio*, *No Country for Old Men*, *Spiderman*, *Orange is the New Black*). US actor Chuck Norris, a classical Hitchcockian image of scared female eyes, and the "Wanted" poster aesthetic popularized by Western films were also used. A few placards were created out of meme templates based on superhero films—Batman slapping Robin and Dr. Octopus, while some protesters cosplayed science fiction or superhero film characters.

Fourth, culture jams of brands played upon the slogans or logos of multi-national corporations such as Coca-Cola, Nokia, Nike, and Victoria's Secret, along with Philip Morris' cigarette brand Marlboro. They were less common across the data set. While culture jamming's subversive ethos can fulfill an anti-capitalist critique in protest (Romanos, 2013), in this case it had a primarily humorous function.

The final category included iconic symbols (slogans, objects, and gestures) such as the feminist "We Can Do It!" poster or the motivational "Keep Calm and Carry On" poster, the Guy Fawkes (Anonymous) mask, and the raised clenched fist.

These references illustrate the Romanian middle-class' desired "cultural proximity" (Iwabuchi, 2002) with the West (Gubernat & Rammlet, 2021; Kiss & Székely,

2021). The classical Western canon (e.g., Da Vinci or Shakespeare), but also popular films, songs, culture jams, or computer culture speak not just of the mobility of texts, but also of their usefulness for legitimizing the local as Western. While such references remain recognizable across different socioeconomic classes, they are normalized primarily among the professional, white-collar groups that have been instrumental to the (digital) mobilization in the 2017 anti-corruption protests. This reading was strengthened during my fieldwork, as interviewees explained their vision of political governance as informed by the allegedly objective organizational efficiency of the multi-national corporation. Most of them were young professionals or local entrepreneurs, who had often travelled extensively or had established transnational business ties. Their grassroots digital leadership (Bakardjieva et al., 2018) was enabled by their ability to strategically and professionally deploy information and communication technologies in protest (e.g., one citizen collective proudly called itself "Geeks for Democracy").

The use of such cultural references can then be reasonably read as strategic in the sense of participating in the struggle between empowerment and marginalization unfolding at the local and regional levels (Kraidy, 2005). Historically, Romanian elites have looked towards "foreign role models" to clear the country's reputation of the often negative "Balkan" or "Eastern" labels circulated in the West (Gallagher, 1997). Within the regional dichotomy East/West, the grassroots use of the Western cultural pool performs protesters as "true" Westerners. Such cultural references, then, help protesters cast their political claims as a fight between the "civilized", pro-Western people and the "backward" strata lacking "all the attitudinal and cultural requisites of a 'normal' (meaning modern, developed, and Western-like) society" (Kiss & Székely, 2021, p. 8; see also Abăseacă, 2018; Gubernat & Rammelt, 2021).

5.1. The Semantic Usefulness of Recognizability

One use of the transnational cultural references in the production of glocal protest communication relies on their iconicity to draw attention to the protest cause (Bartmanski, 2015). Where their original moral and political meanings are silenced, their recognizability is strategically re-appropriated as an attention-grabber. This was the case of several references to then-newly elected US president Donald Trump. One placard, for instance, replaced America in Trump's electoral slogan "Make America great again" with the names of Romanian prisons such as Jilava (the prison for political dissenters during communism) and Rahova (a maximum-security prison for men). The resulting message targeted the political opponent: The idea of making prisons "great again" directly engaged with the protesters' requests to repeal the extraordinary ordinance OUG13 and to punish corruption. By putting corrupt politicians in jail, prisons would be "great again." Like many other signs—whether

using transnational cultural references or not—this one was written in English. While this preserved the integrity of the original reference and its iconic appeal, it also signaled an allegedly mundane integration of English into the Romanian protest landscape.

Another placard used the mobilization slogan against the Charlie Hebdo attacks, "Je suis Charlie." In its original context, the slogan conveyed a moral and political position: "Either you are in favour of free speech and the right to offend or you are against" (Klug, 2016, p. 223). In the 2017 anti-corruption protests, this moral and political meaning was erased, preserving only its formulation in French (which presumably enhanced its recognizability as an iconic slogan). One poster collaged printed photographs of politicians seen by protesters as corrupt. Under each photograph, the author had written: "Je suis plagiator. Je suis jefuitor. Je suis praduitor. Je suis informator. Je suis prostul lor. Je suis infractor" [I am someone who commits plagiarism. I am a robber. I am a thief. I am an informant. I am their fool. I am a criminal]. In the middle of the collage, the photograph of the first post-communist president with a photo-edited crown and the caption "Je suis tatal lor" [I am their father]. Understanding this chain of signification requires historical awareness of the political debates in post-communist Romania. Minimal understanding of French may be needed for understanding, although the iconic status of the slogan may ensure its translation has become common knowledge. Furthermore, the placard becomes funny through the rhyme of the chosen Romanian words (all ending in "-or") and through the confessional frame brought along by the French phrase "I am X." While some of these confessions refer to criminal deeds, two stand out and further contribute to the comic effect: one seemingly admits he is not even a criminal but merely the others' fool; the other introduces former Romanian president Ion Iliescu (also a founder and former president of PSD), made to confess "fathering" all these forms of criminality and ultimately corruption. Illustrating what Abăseacă (2018, p. 681) calls the "unresolved issues of the past," this protest sign historicizes corruption as a consequence of communism perpetuated by unfit political elites.

5.2. The Value of Generic Interpretive Frames

Other transnational cultural references, while still widely recognizable, were used primarily for their generic meanings, helping placard authors craft new political messages. Such references provide over-arching yet simplistic interpretive frames adapted to highlight the immorality of the local governing class. This is the case of photo-edited posters cropping the face of the PSD leader Liviu Dragnea onto well-known portraits of Stalin, Kim Jung-un, Mao, or Hitler. In most cases observed across the sample, meaning-making was achieved merely by juxtaposing the Romanian to the transnational political figures. The latter were signified via iconic signs: the

hairdo and black costumes of the North Korean president, the Nazi uniform with the swastika armband, or the propagandistic portrait of Stalin in uniform. Such posters invite a reading of the PSD leader through the generic interpretive frames associated with the other political figures, such as their ruthless and totalitarian rule. Carrying such a poster to protest is also performative, signifying citizen power in drawing politicians accountable. Indeed, one of the most widely circulated slogans during the protests was "We see you": While a reference to the importance of citizen accountability in democracy, the protests themselves publicly embodied this political value.

Film characters and titles constituted a second example of transnational cultural references used for their generic political and moral connotations. With its overarching frame of the battle between good and evil, the *Star Wars* filmic universe has been a transnational staple of protest (Gray, 2012). In the Romanian protests, one poster edited Dragnea's face onto an image of the Emperor clad in a hooded dark robe, readying his arms to use the force against his opponents. The poster also included textual elements: "Emperor Dragnea," "Darth Corrupt," and "PSD Strikes Back"—all in English. In this case, the generic framing of the *Star Wars* character as an evil ruler served to anchor Dragnea's own character. Yet, the connotation of such fictional tyranny is not only political illegitimacy, but also its inevitable failure—as the forces of good eventually prevail. Thus, the poster implicitly announced the powerful politician's impending doom (something magnified by the presence of the poster within a citizen protest against the government). Indeed, the frame of resistance—where individuals succeed, against all odds, defeating a totalitarian and powerful regime—has emerged transnationally in protest (McClelland-Cohen & Endacott, 2020, p. 850). In the Romanian context, the hashtag of the protests (#rezist) bears a striking—yet probably unrelated (according to my participants)—resemblance to the use of #resist or #TheResistance circulated in the anti-Trump and the anti-Brexit movements (Monteverde & McCollum, 2020).

5.3. The Ludic Appeal

The placards' mixing of transnational cultural references with the local protest cause also constituted playful expressions of "vernacular creativity." While this can work in tandem with the other two meaning-making functions above, it can be analytically distinguished as a separate quality of the hybridization process. This quality has to do with the unexpectedly creative and often humorous articulation of meaning. Unexpectedness depends on the viewer's familiarity with protest signs, remaining an interpretive and partial gesture. Yet, to the protest participant seeing dozens or perhaps hundreds of posters a night; or to the researcher perusing thousands of photographs, the "unexpected" emerges inductively from lived experience or the data.

Unexpectedness was generated through the use of transnational cultural references not associated with recent popular cultural texts. If superheroes and science fiction characters spoke to the increasing popularity of these genres over the last decade, Erol Flynn's 1938 depiction of Robin Hood, Chuck Norris' martial arts film characters, or Shakespeare's *Hamlet* belonged to past cultural flows. This was even more surprising given the protests were largely associated with the young and urban middle-class who might not have been familiar with them. For instance, a beloved 1990s actor of then-fashionable martial arts films and series, Chuck Norris' popularity in Romania had been tied to the introduction of the VCR and the diversification of commercial television stations. One poster written in English read: "Chuck Norris, please help!" invoking the (past) cultural significance of the actor. At the time of being photographed, the placard was carried by a child, enhancing its humorous appeal. While the reference to Chuck Norris builds on his connotation as a punisher of evil characters, other types of (super)heroes are more popular today. In this case, knowledge of past transcultural texts that have marked the local context is needed to understand the poster.

Unexpectedness was also generated by the use of transnational cultural references that did not seem to speak about politics. This was the case of a placard comparing Dragnea to *Lord of the Rings*' Gollum. Where the pairs Dragnea/Stalin or Dragnea/the Emperor (*Star Wars* universe) built on the image of evil rulers, his relationship to Gollum was less intuitive at first. The comparison becomes meaningful when Gollum is read as a symbol of the nefarious consequences of lust for power. The poster edited Dragnea's face on a handcuffed Gollum, while the Parliament building was added to the background. The title of the poster read: "Lord of the Scums." Portraying Dragnea as a bold (albeit still donning his iconic moustache), naked, and generally hideous character; handcuffing and labelling him as the "Lord of the Scums" added a humorous layer that both conveyed the shared protest cause and discursively subverted the political leader's power. In another poster, Dragnea's face was pasted onto Erol Flynn's iconic portrayal of Robin Hood, captioned: "Robbing Hood." This association was also not directly intuitive, as Robin Hood's character is a symbol of the poor stealing from the rich—where here it is use the other way around. Written in English, the gerund form of the verb "to rob" was anchored by the visual of Dragnea to signal the idea of politicians stealing from the state. Both cases require more than a basic knowledge of English to appreciate the posters' political message. Yet, English or knowledge of the cultural text was not enough, as understanding the message also required knowledge of the local political context.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the meaning-making work of transnational cultural references in protest using the

case of the 2017 #rezist protests in Romania. The analysis revealed five types of references providing semantic material for the glocalization of protest communication: political leaders and events, computer culture, high and popular culture, culture jams, and other iconic symbols. Three dimensions of transnational cultural references facilitate their localization. First, such resources were used because of their assumed recognizability among protesters. Their concise, slogan-like style was re-appropriated while their original political or moral meaning was silenced. Second, transnational cultural references provided generic interpretive frames to craft local political messages (with the added benefit of potentially generating transnational visibility). Third, their ludic appeal mobilized "vernacular creativity," commanding attention through their unexpectedness and fusing not only the local and the "foreign," but also different genres and texts. While these dimensions often co-exist within the same protest sign, analytically distinguishing them systematizes the analysis of the transnational dimension of protest communication.

It is tempting to read the use of transnational cultural references as an expression of banal cosmopolitanism (Skey, 2012; Szerszynski & Urry, 2002) or as a normalization of hybridity (Kraidy, 2005) in protest communication. In the case examined here, the references used in protest communication originated in the Western world. Their use constructs protesters as aligned with—and thus, part of—Western cultural consumption and political practices. This is not accidental, as it reflects the political ambition of the Romanian middle-class, seeking to separate itself from corruption (and, by extension, from the communist legacy) and to position itself as the voice of Western democratization/modernization. Indeed, recent analyses have shown how the anti-corruption discourse in Romania draws its legitimacy from "the widening rift between the ideology of 'new Romania' and that of 'old Romania', based on the dichotomy between 'Westernizers' and 'autochthonists'" (Gubernat & Rammelt, 2021, p. 260; see also Kiss & Székely, 2021).

The article thus shows that, as with other forms of cultural hybridity, the transnationalization of protest communication remains permeated by and further implicated in the re-construction of (local) hierarchies and claims to power (Kraidy, 2005, p. 156). The use of transnational cultural resources here is thus not merely an expression of the imagined "cultural proximity" between protesters and the original contexts making these resources iconic, but also a political performance making both regional and local claims to power. In addition to their iconicity, generic frames, or creative potential, the selection and use of transnational cultural resources is political, allowing protesters to construct the young, urban, and professional middle-class as the site of progress and democratization. In turn, their use also normalizes the West as the local "global."

The ability to creatively localize "foreign" cultural resources has become a crucial skill in protest com-

munication. Even though many transnational cultural resources are recognizable across social strata, in the Romanian context, the young and urban middle-class are more adept at fusing foreign languages (English and French), computer culture and foreign politics with local politics by virtue of their access to resources, including multiple mobility flows. In that sense, hybridization favors them (Kraidy, 2005). In turn, they are likely to select resources that resonate with them and thus express transnational class affinities (Pieterse, 2015, p. 87). Considerations of the transnational dimension of protest communication need to critically engage with the socioeconomic divisions reproduced in and through hybridization processes. While hybridization can amplify the visibility of local protest and facilitate transnational ties among protesters, it can also alienate other (local) socio-economic groups. Thus, in addition to the meaning-making functions afforded by transnational cultural resources, the local politics of their selection remain important in understanding their inclusionary/exclusionary potential.

Finally, the contribution of some of these transnational cultural references to the blurring of the boundaries between online and offline protest space requires a brief note (De Luca et al., 2012; Milner, 2013). On the one hand, meme templates and the deep-fakes start online. They speak to how the production of these protest signs begins at home, drawing inspiration from the digital space in multiple ways. Some of these protest signs were shared as templates on social media, with followers urged to download and bring them—whether personalized or not—to the protest. Others used protest slogans or objects that circulate from one protest site to another. On the other hand, references to computer culture are brought to the streets to incriminate politicians and their actions. For instance, in the Romanian protests, a citizen brought along a printout of the pile of poo emoji. The poster was carefully constructed: It was wrapped in yellow tape and had a long stick enabling it to be raised above the crowds. Such do-it-yourself projects appeal to both participants and scholars as subversive and empowering tokens of "vernacular creativity." Yet, the blending of computer culture with street protest does not signal only the "panmediated" nature of contemporary protests (De Luca et al., 2012), but also a collective imaginary of activism where digital technologies appear as seemingly universal spaces and tools for grassroots political engagement. The inclusions/exclusions of this imaginary of digital activism deserve further scholarly attention.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

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