Gendered Cultures in Platform Economies: Entertainment, Expertise, and Online Selfhood

Edited by Panos Kompatsiaris, Cláudia Álvares, and Sofie Van Bauwel

cogitatio

Volume 13

2025

Academic Editors

Panos Kompatsiaris (IULM University)
Cláudia Álvares (Iscte—University Institute of Lisbon)
Sofie Van Bauwel (Ghent University)

Table of Contents

cogitatio

EDITORIAL

Editorial: Gendered Cultures in Platform Economies—Entertainment, Expertise, and Online Selfhood

Panos Kompatsiaris [1] , **Cláudia Álvares** [2] , **and Sofie Van Bauwel** [3]

[1] IULM University, Italy
[2] Iscte—University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal
[3] Ghent University, Belgium

Correspondence: Panos Kompatsiaris (panoskompa@gmail.com)

Abstract

This thematic issue examines the gendered dimensions of platform economies, focusing on the construction of gendered online selfhood. Through the affordances of social media platforms, users expand the range of topics and content accessible to the public, simultaneously exposing these subjects to increased visibility and potential debate. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, X, and Telegram enable anyone to create channels and publicize content on virtually any topic, fostering niche communities. In other words, platforms, driven by their pursuit of attention, time, and data, cannot be analyzed solely through a business or organizational lens. The economic dimension is intertwined with cultural formations—beliefs, values, and identity constructions—which carry an anthropological dimension. In this thematic issue, we are particularly interested in the gendered aspects of this intertwining.

Keywords

authenticity; digital platforms; entertainment; expertise; gender; selfhood; social media

---

This thematic issue examines the gendered dimensions of platform economies, focusing on the construction of gendered online selfhood (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). We regard platforms as data infrastructures that capitalize on users' time, labor, and attention (Poell et al., 2022), with vested commercial interests in disciplining users' sense of self-perception. Through the affordances of social media platforms, users expand the range of topics and content accessible to the public, simultaneously exposing these subjects to increased visibility and potential debate. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, X, and Telegram enable anyone to create channels and publicize content on virtually any topic, fostering niche communities. From

influencers and "fitfluencers" to life coaches, wellness gurus, sex therapists, and gastronomic bloggers, content creators cultivate "authentic" (Banet-Weiser, 2012) public personas to secure capital, both symbolic and monetary, in response to platform-driven demands for enhanced visibility. Their followers, in turn, learn from these "successful" content producers, who permeate the neoliberal digital marketplace of personalities, on how to discipline—or undiscipline—their gendered self-perceptions, often in ways that are not entirely emancipatory. In other words, platforms, driven by their pursuit of attention, time, and data, cannot be analyzed solely through a business or organizational lens. The economic dimension is intertwined with cultural formations—beliefs, values, and identity constructions—which, as we later discuss, carry an anthropological dimension. In this thematic issue, we are particularly interested in the gendered aspects of this intertwining.

According to a widespread idea in media studies, social networks can be potential agents of political and civic participation, enabling users to organize, exchange information, and protest against injustice through their interactive and creative affordances (e.g., Breuer, 2016; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). This is significant insofar as networked communication, as mentioned earlier, allows for an ever-increasing range of topics to be publicized—importantly, without a classic top-down mediation of gatekeepers or editors, as was the case with mass media. In this thematic issue, Babette Lagrange's (2025) article, "Emotions on Social Media as Catalysts for Change: Epistemic and Motivational Potentialities for Gender Equality," argues that marginalized people—particularly those with excluded gender identities—can use social media to form collective protests against forms of (epistemic) injustice. For Lagrange, emotions coming from excluded gender identities constitute a form of epistemic counter-knowledge capable of mobilizing justice-oriented demands in public spaces. In addition, beyond political participation, social media can also be mobilized as part of the simple desire to live a better life. Drawing on feminist reception studies, Eujong Kim and Yeran Kim (2025), in their article "'Finally, Me Time!': Korean Middle-Aged Women's Platform Practices," argue for a shift in focus from the typical figure of the tech-savvy youth to a rather underrepresented age group in platform literature, referred to as "later middle-age" women. Using Hartmut Rosa's concept of "resonance" and a mixed-methods analysis, the authors argue that later middle-aged Korean women, who are YouTube users, strive to create a "better life" within the context of wider patriarchal structures in Korea.

Additionally, the rise of gigantic privately owned digital platforms as major sites for controlling the informational and communicational landscape raises questions about the civic or empowering role of social networks. A widely discussed and politicized point of contestation regarding digital platforms is the spread of misinformation and fake news threatening critical thinking and informed social action on a global scale. Beyond misinformation and fake news, however, the platform-driven pursuit of users' attention and time also has a broader anthropological dimension: it is "modifying and commodifying" the behavior of audiences, users, creators, and human beings in general (Zuboff, 2019, p. 85). Driven by an incessant appetite for extracting user data, digital platforms generate a globalizing demand for daily content, often mirroring industrial production. Content producers—especially those seeking to monetize their content economically or symbolically—operate within the framework of what we might call the "content industry," a paradigm characterized by the serialized production of content to maintain algorithmic visibility and connectivity. The most popular content producers on media platforms may create content that validates normative gender ideas (insofar as these appeal to wider audiences) or co-opts progressive gender ideals to craft their personas.

This is argued by many in this thematic issue. In the article "Gender Rhetoric for Sale: Ferragni and the Platformization of the Female Body That Crushes Ideologies," Elisabetta Risi and Maria Angela Polesana (2025) argue that the drive for visibility and audience attention often commodifies feminist ideas, selling them as products. Focusing on the social media activity of Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni—who has nearly 30 million followers on Instagram and 6.5 million on TikTok—the authors argue that the influencer imposes a "simulacrum of perfection" on women, where the narrative of female empowerment aligns with market demands to produce relevant content.

Similarly, in the article "Father Influencers' Short Videos in China: Representations of Hybrid Fatherhood and Commercialisation on Xiaohongshu," Min Xu, Xinchen Liu, and Hao Zhang (2025) explore the commodification of "progressive" gender roles, particularly the commercialization of fatherhood representations in dad vlogs and short videos on the Chinese-language platform Xiaohongshu. Using a netnographic approach, the authors argue that representations of fatherhood in Xiaohongshu contrast with the more common authoritarian father role in China. Instead, they portray a "hybrid masculinity" characterized by humor, playfulness, emotional involvement in children's education, and the frequent sharing of parenting tips and everyday family life experiences. In turn, this caring and hybrid masculinity functions as symbolic capital that fathers can exchange online and potentially monetize on the platform.

The inclusion of animals can also fuel projections of progressive, "feel-good" identity performances while contributing to a broader discourse on well-being. In the article titled "Gendered Zootopia on Instagram: Curation of Pet Accounts and Identity Representation," Natalia Vereshchagina and Irina Dushakova (2025) examine gender representations on Instagram pet accounts, focusing on how human–animal identities are performed within the specific affordances and limitations of the platform. Similarly to other articles in this thematic issue, the authors argue that rather than challenging or bypassing gender stereotypes—as might be expected given that Instagram imposes fewer regulations on animal content than on human content—pet accounts reinforce traditional gender roles and identities primarily because of the commercial nature of the platform.

Influencers, bloggers, and pet-account owners construct personas that embody some form of niche, or expertise, as mentioned earlier, an informed discourse about a subject that they can potentially offer to audiences. The global massification, commodification, and potential celebritization of expert knowledge began with the proliferation of television talent shows—including song, fashion, and cooking contests—that introduced the public to the creative celebrity-expert as an arbiter of good taste. Today, potentially anyone can become a micro-expert in any field by attending seminars, reading how-to guides, watching videos, and participating in forum discussions. This expertise is diffused across various spaces, including influencer profiles and hashtags, which not only represent but fragment expertise into countless, and often conflicting, narratives of authenticity, where authority, credibility, and self-presentation are shaped by cultural expectations. This digital turn in access to expert knowledge reinforces the responsibility of individual users for self-care and well-being.

In the article "Instagram and #Wellness: Uncovering Gender and Body Patterns," Ana Marta M. Flores and Rita Sepúlveda (2025) analyze discourses around so-called "wellness," a hashtag where vast amounts of micro-expert knowledge are performed daily on social media. By examining 300 public Instagram posts tagged with #wellness, Flores and Sepúlveda explore the portrayal of wellness from a gender perspective,

arguing that wellness content largely reinforces traditional gender and body norms. Similarly to the case of Chiara Ferragni discussed earlier, this content often promotes thin or athletic bodies and depicts gender in binary terms. An important point the authors make is that while counter-narratives exist on Instagram, even within the wellness movement, they struggle to gain visibility because algorithms favor content that aligns with dominant societal norms.

Vanessa Brown and Steve Jones (2025) discuss the emergence of similar gender normativities in the article, "360 Degrees of Feminine Competence: Surface Aesthetics, Expertise, and Authority Among Drip Cake Baker-Influencers," focusing on so-called "baker-influencers." The "drip cake," which Brown and Jones examine, is a mainstream online baking trend emphasizing formal "perfection" rather than the pleasures of eating or feeding. It combines exclusive baking expertise with modernist design, symbolizing a performance of cool, post-feminist, and aspiring middle-class perfection. The cake's labor-intensive, controlled surface celebrates rationality, cleanliness, and distinction, reflecting the aesthetic labor demanded of women in a post-feminist, neoliberal society.

While such aspirational (and typically unpaid) labor on digital platforms is often performed by women (Duffy, 2017), platform affordances also popularize specific gender-coded labor practices, including in the sphere of intimacy. In "Mediating the Sugar Baby Imaginary: Popular Narratives About Gender and Sexuality in Sugar Dating," Megan Sawey (2025) explores "sugar dating," a form of relationship typically involving the exchange of intimacy for economic rewards, as a labor practice. Digital platforms and networked communications make it easier to engage in sugar dating, circulating advice and popularizing the "sugar" imaginary through hashtags like #sugarbaby on TikTok or websites like Seeking. Drawing on interviews with 13 women engaging in such relationships, Sawey shows how they push back against mainstream social media narratives vis-à-vis sugar dating, such as the "hot younger woman" and "sex worker," emphasizing a more nuanced perspective on their experiences, involving both labor and leisure.

In turn, Christine Linke and Lisa Brune (2025), in "Intimate Yet Exploitative: Representations of Gender-Based Violence in Platformed True Crime Narratives," show how the demands of platform algorithms not only produce stereotypical representations but can also spectacularize gender-based violence. Through an analysis of Bailey Sarian's Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series on YouTube, they demonstrate how prioritizing engagement metrics leads to content that decontextualizes and sensationalizes violence, particularly violence against women. To maintain visibility on platforms like YouTube, content creators must adhere to strict posting schedules, often resulting in rushed or sensationalist content.

Overall, the articles in this thematic issue grapple with the gendered aspects of platform economies through various case studies that span diverse geographical contexts, ranging from China and Korea to Italy and the US, mobilizing diverse methodological and theoretical approaches. These case studies examine the multiple ways in which gendered selfhood is constructed in online spaces. While some findings are more optimistic regarding the potential for empowerment, all cases consistently highlight the pervasive influence of neoliberalism in shaping online identities and the currency of this particular content. They foreground the gendered cultures surrounding these economies, illustrating how the entertainment-driven nature of online worlds generates new forms of self-presentation that claim authenticity amidst the constant interchangeabilities of empowerment and alienation, labor and leisure, and normativity and protest.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic TM: The politics of ambivalence in a brand culture*. New York University Press.

Breuer, A. (2016). The role of social media in mobilizing political protest: Evidence from the Tunisian revolution. In E. A. Sayre & R. M. Yousef (Eds.), *Young generation awakening: Economics, society, and policy on the eve of the Arab spring* (pp. 110–131). Oxford University Press.

Brown, V., & Jones, S. (2025). 360 Degrees of feminine competence: Surface aesthetics, expertise, and authority among drip cake baker-influencers. *Media and Communication*, *13*, Article 8887. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8887

Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. Yale University Press.

Flores, A. M. M., & Sepúlveda, R. (2025). Instagram and #wellness: Uncovering gender and body patterns. *Media and Communication*, *13*, Article 8776. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8776

Kim, E., & Kim, Y. (2025). "Finally, me time!": Korean middle-aged women's platform practices. *Media and Communication*, *13*, Article 8746. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8746

Lagrange, B. (2025). Emotions on social media as catalysts for change: Epistemic and motivational potentialities for gender equality. *Media and Communication*, *13*, Article 8591. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8591

Linke, C., & Brune, L. (2025). Intimate yet exploitative: Representations of gender-based violence in platformed true crime narratives. *Media and Communication*, *13*, Article 8964. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8964

Poell, T., Nieborg, D. B., & Duffy, B. E. (2022). *Platforms and cultural production*. Polity Press.

Risi, E., & Polesana, M. A. (2025). Gender rhetoric for sale: Ferragni and the platformization of the female body that crushes ideologies. *Media and Communication*, *13*, Article 8783. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8783

Sawey, M. (2025). Mediating the sugar baby imaginary: Popular narratives about gender and sexuality in sugar dating. *Media and Communication*, *13*, Article 8811. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8811

Vaccari, C., & Valeriani, A. (2021). *Outside the bubble: Social media and political participation in western democracies*. Oxford University Press.

van Driel, L., & Dumitrica, D. (2021). Selling brands while staying "authentic": The professionalization of Instagram influencers. *Convergence*, *27*(1), 66–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520902136

Vereshchagina, N., & Dushakova, I. (2025). Gendered zootopia on Instagram: Curation of pet accounts and identity representation. *Media and Communication*, *13*, Article 8784. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8784

Xu, M., Liu, X., & Zhang, H. (2025). Father influencers' short videos in China: Representations of hybrid fatherhood and commercialisation on Xiaohongshu. *Media and Communication*, *13*, Article 8762. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.8762

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.

About the Authors

Panos Kompatsiaris is an associate professor of Media and Culture at HSE University in Moscow and research fellow at IULM, Milan. His latest book is *Curation in the Age of Platform Capitalism* (Routledge, 2024).

Cláudia Álvares is habilitated associate professor in Media Studies at the Sociology Department of ISCTE—Instituto Universitário de Lisboa and integrates the research center CIES (Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology).

Sofie Van Bauwel is a full professor of Media Studies at Ghent University, Department of Communication Studies, where she is a member of the research center CIMS (Centre for Cinema and Media Studies).

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Emotions on Social Media as Catalysts for Change: Epistemic and Motivational Potentialities for Gender Equality

Babette Lagrange [ID]

Ghent University, Belgium

Correspondence: Babette Lagrange (babette.lagrange@ugent.be)

Abstract

To this day, people still face gender discrimination and battle with gender injustices. To change this, we both need accurate knowledge about these injustices and we need to strive for active change. This article provides a theoretical reflection on how social media, by serving as an accessible platform for people to portray their emotions, can be a tool for both of these needs. In terms of the topics it discusses, the article operates at the intersection of the literature on digital activism on the one hand and emotions and social media on the other. However, I approach these topics using a combination of multidisciplinary lenses. I employ the epistemic injustice framework to emphasise the link between gender inequality and the production and distribution of knowledge. In line with the literature on affect theory, I argue both that emotions can generate epistemic novelties and that emotions have collectivising and motivational power. Finally, the article builds on existing research on how social media provide a space for people to portray, distribute, and adopt emotions. The theoretical reflection in this article then combines these insights to demonstrate how social media—by allowing the expression and distribution of emotions—can catalyse both the production of new knowledge and active change. With social media enabling emotions to be heard and seen, this online sphere can contribute to the epistemic empowerment of women and to the fight against gender discrimination and gender injustices.

Keywords

affect; emotions; epistemic injustice; gender; social media; societal change

1. Introduction

With the rise of social media, possibilities to communicate have shifted significantly. Social media enable people to reach each other faster than ever before. Moreover, they allow people to be in contact with others

from all over the world. As such, people can now connect not only with acquaintances, but also with strangers. Among other things, this has impacted knowledge production and distribution. Many people turn to social media when seeking information on various topics, such as health care (Hamid et al., 2016; K. Kim et al., 2014; Morahan-Martin, 2000; Westerman et al., 2013). While social media's accessibility might result in a faster and broader dissemination of information, we can question whether this is always preferable when accurate information is desired. Indeed, several authors have pointed to the danger of filter bubbles and echo chambers on social media. Meaning, the content users see on social media becomes gradually less diverse over time (filter bubble; Leysen et al., 2022; Pariser, 2011) and people generally only see content that reflects or reinforces their own preconceived notions and ideas (echo chamber; Cinelli et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2018). These phenomena may lead to misinformation, confirmation bias, and polarisation, and are thus often perceived as problems when relying on and using social media (Barberá et al., 2015; Díaz Ruiz & Nilsson, 2022; Nguyen, 2018). However, social media can also come with more positive transformative possibilities. Indeed, whereas for example the easy shareability of information can lead to misinformation, it can also result in allowing a wider variety of actors to participate in knowledge production (Jin et al., 2015; Safadi et al., 2021). As such, while social media should be treated with caution, the platforms still hold a more positive transformative potential as well. Social media can be a place where marginalised voices are given a platform and marginalised people form collectives. It is this potential of social media that plays a central role in this article. More precisely, the aim of this article is to provide a theoretical reflection on how social media, by serving as accessible platforms for people to portray their emotions, can contribute to combatting gendered injustices by both providing knowledge on these injustices and by facilitating and amplifying collective efforts for active change. It will do so by building on philosophical insights and frameworks—more precisely from the epistemic injustice literature and affect theory—and applying these to topical issues in media and communication studies.

Thematically speaking, this article mainly ties in with ongoing media and communication studies research on two topics: emotions and social media on the one hand, and digital activism on the other. Firstly, emotions have become an increasingly popular study object in social media studies (Hyvärinen & Beck, 2018). This is reflected in literature on topics such as flaming (Jane, 2015; Moor et al., 2010) and emotional contagion (Ferrara & Yang, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2016; Kramer et al., 2014). One recurring theme in this field is social media's potential to amplify emotional experiences and to enable the social sharing of emotions (e.g., Micalizzi, 2014), while also reflecting and potentially perpetuating social inequalities (Hjorth & Lim, 2012, p. 480). Secondly, social media have created novel opportunities and spaces for activism (Nikunen, 2019). This has sparked scholarly attention for the role of social media in the emergence of new social movements and events such as #MeToo (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020; Freedman, 2020; Gilmore, 2019; Page & Arcy, 2020) and the Arab Spring (Comunello & Anzera, 2012; Gire, 2015; Smidi & Shahin, 2017; Tudoroiu, 2014). To explain social media's role in social change, recent empirical work in this field has mainly focussed on functional mechanisms, such as how social media can serve as platforms for expressing opinions and joining causes (Valenzuela, 2013), their ability to amplify counter-public spheres (Luna et al., 2022; Nikunen, 2019), and the possibilities they offer to raise awareness about the seriousness or the structural nature of issues such as sexual violence (Levy & Mattsson, 2023; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019). Moving on, while some authors have acknowledged that there is a link between digital activism and social media as platforms for emotions (e.g., Gerbaudo, 2016; Shaw, 2014), this link remains underexplored. Indeed, James Jasper argues, "emotions are present in every phase and every aspect of protest" (Jasper, 2011, p. 1). Therefore, approaching social change through the lens of emotions is necessary to reveal the "hidden mechanisms beneath many of the concepts we have taken for

granted for so long" (Jasper, 2011, p. 18). This article responds to that need by focussing on social media's capacity to function as platforms for portraying emotions and how this fosters knowledge about and action against gender injustices. As such, in terms of the topics it discusses, this article operates at the intersection of the literature on digital activism on the one hand and emotions and social media on the other. However, I chose to approach these topics from the perspective of existing philosophical work on epistemic injustices and affect theory. These two bodies of literature can provide an added layer of analytical depth to discussions on social media, emotions, and active change. The main argument of this article is then that social media with their capacity to serve as platforms for emotions to be expressed, shared, and adopted, can be valuable in creating knowledge about inequalities and initiating active change against them.

What remains of this article consists of two parts. In the first part, I discuss the necessary existing literature that forms the basis of my discussion of emotions, social media, and (digital) activism. I start by briefly explaining gender in/equality as the background against which this article is situated (Section 2.1). This is followed by an analysis of the relevant state-of-the-art related to epistemic injustices (2.2), affect theory (2.3), and social media and emotions (2.4). In the second part of the article, the main argument of this article is developed. First, I argue that social media—as platforms for emotions—can provide valuable knowledge that can help overcome epistemic injustices (3.1). Then, in line with emotions' motivational power and current knowledge of online social movements, I also argue for social media's collectivising and transformative potentiality that can catalyse active change (3.2).

2. Discussion and Analysis of Gendered Epistemic Injustices, Affect Theory, and Social Media

2.1. Moving Towards Gender Equality

To this day, gender inequalities prevail in almost all aspects of our lives. Worldwide, women enjoy less education than men, are more prone to gender-based violence, have less access to quality healthcare, receive lower wages, face higher burdens of domestic work, have less social and political power, are more often in a subjugated position in the personal sphere, and so on (Bertocchi & Bozzano, 2020; Dahal et al., 2022; European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.; Gu et al., 2024; Kearns et al., 2020; Milazzo & Goldstein, 2019; Paxton et al., 2021; Perez, 2019; Treas & Tai, 2016; UNICEF, n.d.; World Economic Forum, 2023). While several strategies exist to combat gender inequality (e.g., gender quotas for political positions), scholars point out that true equality cannot be achieved as long as discriminatory beliefs and epistemic injustices prevail (Collins, 2017; Fricker, 2013; Meeussen et al., 2022). To combat such discriminatory beliefs, injustices, and inequalities, two things are necessary: (a) accurate knowledge of what gender discrimination looks like, and (b) taking steps to actively combat this. This article addresses the role social media can play in both of these aspects by focussing on how they serve as platforms for emotions. In other words, I will discuss how social media—because of their link with emotions—can contribute to both knowledge about and action against gender injustices. This article thereby mostly refers to gender injustices faced by women because the vast majority of current research covers only men and women. However, much of what this article discusses may also apply to the situation of other non-cismen. Moreover, while the article mainly discusses gender injustices from the perspective of women in general, it is important to keep in mind that many women face complex forms of injustice due to intersectionally overlapping identities and inequalities.

So, in this article, I will point to social media's intimate link with emotions to explain how social media can contribute to both knowledge about and action against gender injustices. However, this reasoning implies three things: that there is a link between gender injustice and knowledge; that there is a link between knowledge, active change, and emotions; and that there is a link between emotions and social media. Therefore, in the following sections, I will discuss three bodies of literature corresponding to these three implications. First, we turn to the epistemic injustice literature as a framework for understanding the relationship between gender in/equality and knowledge. Next, I focus on current works from affect theory to explain the role emotions can play in creating knowledge about injustices and in active change. Indeed, while the link between emotions and activism has sporadically been touched upon within the communication science literature as well (Gerbaudo, 2016; Shaw, 2014), it is affect theory scholars who have most thoroughly discussed the intrinsic properties of emotions that cause them to have both epistemic and motivational value. Finally, I also discuss some relevant literature explaining social media's potential to be an accessible platform for expressing and sharing emotions.

2.2. Gender Inequality in Knowledge Production and Distribution

As explained, an important part of the fight against any kind of injustice is to have accurate knowledge about this injustice. With that in mind, I now turn to the existing literature on feminist epistemology, which addresses gender inequality in the production and distribution of knowledge. For the scope of this article, I focus on the work of Fricker (1999, 2007, 2013), Pohlhaus (2012), and Dotson (2012, 2014).

In its most general form, epistemic injustices are injustices that hamper someone's capacity to gather knowledge or to be seen as generating valid knowledge. Fricker (2007, 2013) distinguishes two kinds of such epistemic injustices: distributive and discriminatory injustices. Distributive injustice refers to an unjust distribution of epistemic goods, i.e., when people have less access than others to information and knowledge. For example, academic articles are less accessible to a broader public than popular media (e.g., social media platforms). The second form, discriminatory injustice, is again subdivided into testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a person or a group is perceived as less credible due to stereotypes. The experiences they report, e.g., testimonies on sexual violence in official hearings, can then be perceived as not credible. We speak of hermeneutical injustice when someone has an unfair disadvantage in their social situation being understood, either by themselves or by others. This might occur when there is a lack of understanding or of fitting concepts and language for people to interpret or describe certain experiences (Fricker, 2007, 2013). For example, when there is a lack of collective insight into the structural features of societies that contribute to the prevalence of sexual violence, victims of sexual violence can blame themselves, and their experiences might be misunderstood by others. To this list, Dotson (2012) and Pohlhaus (2012) add a fourth type of epistemic injustice: contributory injustice. This occurs if alternative hermeneutical resources are wilfully ignored by epistemic agents. Current prejudiced epistemic resources are then maintained as the norm. For example, when victims of sexual violence attempt to explain their experience in a shifty or emotional way, those listening to them might not believe these testimonies due to them upholding structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that victims are "people who fight back" and—importantly—that true testimonies must be "logical, rational and clear." The epistemic agent listening thwarts a knower's ability (here the victim) to contribute to knowledge by not having done the necessary work to understand that victims of sexual violence may not be able to sound clear and rational after being assaulted (Dotson, 2012).

As such, we can distinguish four forms of epistemic injustice: distributive (when there is an unjust distribution of epistemic goods), testimonial (when people are seen as less credible due to stereotypes), hermeneutical (when someone has an unfair disadvantage in their social situation being understood), and contributory (when certain sources of knowledge are wilfully ignored). Moreover, if one or more people suffer from any of these kinds of epistemic injustices in a systematic way, we can speak of epistemic oppression (Dotson, 2014; Fricker, 1999). While all these concepts surrounding epistemic injustice are ever-evolving and can each be analysed even further, the distinctions explained here suffice for the purpose of this article. Readers interested in further discussions on epistemic injustices can refer to Kidd et al. (2017).

2.3. The Cognitive and Motivational Power of Emotions

As discussed earlier, this article builds on affect theory to explain the relationship between emotions, knowledge, and active change. This will then later be applied to the case of social media as places where emotions are expressed and distributed. In affect theory, different terms are used to address emotions—"emotions," "affects," etc. The terms' usages and meanings vary across the literature. This article consistently uses the term "emotion" because it is more common in everyday language than terms like "affect" and it thus resonates more with laypeople (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014). To understand how emotions can be valuable for societal change, this research builds on the work of three authors who played key roles in the development of affect theory: Nussbaum (2001), Ahmed (2004a, 2004b), and Cvetkovich (2012). I will mainly use the work of the first two authors to argue for the role emotions can play in epistemic in/justices. The latter two will mainly be used to emphasise emotions' role regarding the motivation of active change.

First, Nussbaum's (2001) work reveals how emotions contain cognitive value. She defines emotions as a way of perceiving objects or situations. They can be seen as a lens between the subject and the object, concerned with both the receiving and the processing of information. Therefore, emotions are bearers of knowledge. They contain information on the object that causes the emotions as well as on the subject that experiences them. Moreover, they teach us something about how subjects and objects relate (Nussbaum, 2001). Next, Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) explains phenomenological aspects of emotions by showing how emotions can form people and groups. Her work can be seen as a "sociality" of emotions (Ahmed, 2004b). She explains the relationships between bodies (people, objects, etc.) as defined by emotions sticking to these bodies in two ways. First, emotions can stick more to some bodies than to others. Meaning, different bodies are associated with different emotions, due to e.g., stereotypes. Secondly, emotions can stick bodies together. Meaning that they can form relations between bodies—through e.g., shared histories and experiences—and create collectives. As stereotypes can stick certain emotions to minority groups and as these groups' shared histories can bring them together, emotions have consequences for minority groups (Ahmed, 2004b). This makes emotions a worthwhile study object. Even more so since emotions can also have a motivational power within these formed collectives. Cvetkovich (2012), building on Berlant (2011) and Sedgwick (2003), addresses emotions' motivational power. She counters the idea that emotions are merely individual and argues that experiencing emotions can be something collective and thus part of public life and group identities. Because of this collectivity, emotions carry the potential for us to use our agency in various ways, such as motivating each other to participate in political action. Due to this motivational power, Cvetkovich (2012) considers emotions necessary for political action.

In sum, according to existing research, emotions have cognitive value, define both bodies and social relations, and are political potentialities. They shape individuals, form collectives of them, and can fuel these collectives with motivation for change.

2.4. Social Media as Platforms for Communicating Emotions

In the previous two sections, I have addressed both the relationship between gender injustices and knowledge, and the relationships between knowledge, social change, and emotions. The final topic that needs to be discussed before moving on to the second part of this article is the link between social media and emotions. Therefore, I now briefly explore existing research on five essential characteristics of social media related to emotions.

First, Panahi et al. (2012) have discussed the potential of social media for sharing tacit knowledge, i.e., personal knowledge that exists in the mind of the knower in the form of personal experience, beliefs, know-how...and emotions. However, only existing in the mind of individuals, tacit knowledge is not easily spread. Nonetheless, Panahi et al. (2012) argue that social media have some interesting characteristics that can facilitate this, for example by enabling practices of observation, imitation, and informal networking. Hence, social media can provide valuable opportunities for spreading the knowledge contained in emotions. Moreover, secondly, social media posts allow people to have additional types of control over how they express their emotions in comparison with real-life contexts (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Morahan-Martin, 2000; Panger, 2017). Third, social media provide platforms where people can express their emotions, and this on a larger scale than ever before (Duncombe, 2019; Jalonen, 2014; Lykousas et al., 2019; Tettegah, 2016). As such, emotional messages often reach a wider audience when presented on social media. Therefore, they can draw attention to and emphasise the emotions people experience towards certain events, systems, objects, etc. Fourth, messages on social media are more widely shared when they contain emotions (Chen et al., 2022; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). This further illustrates the potential of social media to serve as platforms for emotional messages to reach and impact many people. Fifth and finally, social media often serve as platforms for emotional contagion (Ferrara & Yang, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2016; Kramer et al., 2014). Meaning, emotions expressed on social media by one person may be taken over by others, even unconsciously. As such, social media facilitate the spreading of emotions.

In sum, social media form spaces where various emotions can be expressed, distributed, and perceived that otherwise would go unexpressed or unheard. Moreover, we saw earlier how emotions have both an epistemic and a motivational value and how knowledge about inequalities is an important precondition for change. Taken together, these insights suggest that social media may be highly suitable places for activism to emerge. The rest of this article will argue that this is indeed the case, and that social media's link with emotions plays an important role in explaining why this is so. More specifically, I will first discuss how emotions and social media can contribute to knowledge about gender inequality, and then how they can help in actively combatting it.

It is important to note that I do not aim to portray social media as utopian means of communication where injustices can be combatted without drawback. Indeed, social media come with their own dangers and imperfections, for example regarding polarisation, misinformation, etc. (Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2020; Aïmeur et al., 2023; Morahan-Martin, 2000). This should not surprise, given that social media are generally

profit-driven and tend to prioritise content based on commercial rather than social justice considerations. Moreover, media platforms often reflect and reproduce (gendered) injustices, among other things due to them usually being designed by the more dominant and privileged groups of society (Hjorth & Lim, 2012). At the same time, however, people at the margins of society regularly reinvent the use and significance of technologies such as social media to suit their own needs and cultures—often in ways that involve a form of resistance. This phenomenon is referred to as "the appropriation of technology" (Eglash, 2004). In line with such practices, this article points to how social media platforms can play a role in social change and how they might be used as tools by ordinary people and activists who—by doing so—in turn shape these digital realms and their significance. In other words, I believe that social media can be employed to capitalise on the epistemic and motivational value of emotions, which can in turn help combat gender injustices. As such, social media can form a useful complement to other means of communication, such as traditional media, face-to-face communication, traditional knowledge distribution, etc.

3. Theoretical Reflection on Emotions' Potentiality for Epistemic Justice and Active Change Through Social Media

3.1. Social Media and Emotions as Tools to Reduce Gendered Epistemic Injustices

As discussed previously, knowledge about gender inequality and oppression is an essential precondition for change (Collins, 2017; Fricker, 2013). In this section, I will explain how social media—as platforms where emotions are widely and easily shared—can contribute to this knowledge. I mainly build on the feminist epistemology literature about epistemic injustices and on affect theory to develop this argument. Furthermore, I refer to examples of digital activism—mainly #MeToo—to further illustrate the role social media can play.

To start, let us consider how women are confronted with all four forms of epistemic injustice described earlier. Indeed, many women have no or less access to knowledge resources and are consequently less able to understand the systemics of the discrimination they face (distributive injustice; Fricker, 2007, 2013). Women are also perceived as less credible and irrational (Bankey, 2001), stereotypes resulting in them being less likely believed or taken as accurate sources of knowledge (testimonial injustice; Fricker, 2007, 2013). The lack of knowledge on various gender issues also results in women's positions being less understood, often leading to hermeneutical injustices (Fricker, 2007, 2013). Moreover, I assert that when women express their knowledge about gender injustices in an emotional manner (rage about the gender pay gap, confusion about whether they consented to the sexual violence they experienced, etc.), this is often misperceived as irrational and unreliable because of entrenched views of knowledge as rational and emotions as unfit for knowledge production (Jaggar, 1989). This is in line with contributory injustice (Dotson, 2012; Pohlhaus, 2012). While women are thus confronted with all four kinds of epistemic injustice, social media can play a role in overcoming these. An important reason for this is the fact that they can function as platforms where emotions can be communicated. Indeed, as I will demonstrate in the rest of this section, considering emotions as knowledgeable and cognitive (in line with affect theory and scholars such as Nussbaum, 2001) can open up potentialities to combat cases of all aforementioned epistemic injustices. These potentialities can then be harnessed using social media.

To explain why that is so, we first establish emotions' epistemic potentiality for gender equality. As Nussbaum (2001) describes, emotions link an emotional subject to an object and mediate how the subject receives and processes information. Therefore, studying emotions can teach us a lot about how something is perceived by a subject, how the subject and object relate, and how the subject processes information. Moreover, as Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) explains, shared emotions have the potential to instigate the formation of collectives. People who experience similar emotions can then find a mutual ground that binds them together. Hence, studying emotions can also be useful for understanding how collectives are formed and what unites them. Ahmed also argues that emotions can stick to certain people due to stereotypes (2004a, 2004b). For example, there can be an intertwined genealogy identified with regards to women being perceived as hysterical and mad (i.e., various emotions), and unknowledgeable and irrational (i.e., various stereotypes). This gives them a shared understanding of how existing patriarchal power relations are maintained in discourses of rationality (Bankey, 2001). As such, emotional stereotypes can also contain valuable knowledge, and bearers of these stereotypes can teach us something we otherwise wouldn't have access to. In sum, emotions can be regarded as a rich epistemic resource that can reveal important insights into gender inequalities.

Moving on, social media are spaces where people portray, distribute, perceive, and adopt emotions (see above). I argue that this attribute of social media results in social media bearing the potential to combat epistemic injustices. I will now illustrate this by discussing all four kinds of epistemic injustices described above. First, we can consider distributive injustice. Distributive epistemic injustices occur when there is an unjust distribution of epistemic goods (Fricker, 2007, 2013). Whereas many forms of knowledge are not always equally accessible to everyone, the accessibility of social media provides a wide reach in terms of knowledge distribution. We can think for example of the #MeToo movement. Although statistics, articles, etc. were already discussing the prevalence and diversity of sexual violence before the start of the #MeToo movement in October 2017, this was not able to reach and impact as many people as the online #MeToo movement did (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020). Moreover, emotions around sexual violence also found their way into public knowledge more through this social media movement than through earlier theoretical works (Gilmore, 2019). As such, social media enabled a wide spreading of information, testimonies, and emotions regarding—in this case—sexual violence. This illustrates how social media—in addition to combatting distributive injustice by disseminating information widely—are especially helpful in reducing distributive injustice with regard to the knowledge contained in emotional messages. Evidently, social media are not accessible to everyone (think for example of older people, people without internet connection, people who live in places where social media are forbidden or content is censored, etc.). Nonetheless, social media and their potential for the distribution and expression of emotions can help us to reach people with knowledge (such as tacit knowledge about gender-related topics) that otherwise would not be reached.

Next, we turn to testimonial injustice, i.e., when people's testimonies are not believed due to e.g., stereotypes (Fricker, 2007, 2013). Looking at gender equality and epistemology, we see that throughout history, women have been seen as less rational and more emotional than men (Bankey, 2001; Jaggar, 1989). This has marginalised women with regard to knowledge production. Their testimonies and opinions are regarded as less credible due to the intertwined genealogy between stereotypes of irrationality and being perceived as emotional (Bankey, 2001; Jaggar, 1989). However, if we follow affect theory scholars in recognising that emotions also contain valuable knowledge, women's testimonies cannot be that easily dismissed anymore for being "irrational." After all, emotional testimonies can then be seen as an epistemically very rich resource instead of being brushed aside as unhelpful or worthless. Importantly, social

media can help distribute this epistemically rich resource (see above). Social media's accessibility and wide reach can result in a far-reaching impact of epistemologically valuable emotional testimonies. This can normalise emotions as knowledgeable in testimonies of people that are usually disregarded as "emotional and thus irrational." This impact of social media is again also visible by looking at the example of the #MeToo movement. The power of this movement (partly) lay in the fact that it was not about a few individual cases, but about large numbers of women sharing their stories and revealing structural injustices prevalent in our societies (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020). This revelation of structural injustices makes subsequent individual depositions, tacit knowledge, and emotional statements harder to dismiss as made up or exaggerated. As such, social media expand the power and potentiality emotions already contain regarding current testimonial injustices.

Moving on, hermeneutical epistemic injustices entail that someone has an unfair disadvantage in their (social) situation being understood (Fricker, 2007, 2013). Gender inequalities can propagate such injustices. After all, dominant groups of people have more power in both producing and distributing knowledge. As such, they influence what people know about diverse social situations. This can then result in a lack of knowledge about diverse (intersectional) experiences and circumstances (Collins, 2017; Fricker, 2007, 2013). Think for example about sexual violence by romantic partners. Today we know that when victims do not fight back, reach for help, or leave the relationship, this might be due to love, fear, or other binding emotions towards their partners. However, when one does not understand the social situation of these victims, one might interpret the fact that the victim didn't fight back or leave their partner as a sign of consent (instead of one of fear/love/etc.). As such, acknowledging emotions as knowledge diminishes hermeneutical injustices by shedding light on aspects necessary to understand people's social experiences. Here as well, social media can elevate this potentiality of emotions because of its large scale, wide impact, users' control, and potential for sharing tacit knowledge (see above). To illustrate this, the #MeToo movement is again telling. The movement provides us with a large database of personal testimonies. When more and more women share their stories of sexual violence, or gender inequality in general, it helps both women to better understand their own situation and other people to understand the systemic oppression women face (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020; Freedman, 2020; Page & Arcy, 2020). People are thus given a new hermeneutical knowledge resource to understand the social situation of women, namely women's lived experiences (tacit knowledge) presented to them through social media. This then results in a reduction of hermeneutical injustice.

Finally, the main epistemic injustice that acknowledging emotions as knowledge would evidently reduce is contributory injustice. This injustice occurs when alternative hermeneutical resources are not recognised by epistemic agents (Dotson, 2012; Pohlhaus, 2012). By listening to emotions as possible sources of knowledge, we are acknowledging them as an alternative hermeneutical resource. Therefore, valuing emotions as knowledgeable is a way of going against the maintenance of only structurally accepted hermeneutical resources and a way of acknowledging an alternative hermeneutical resource. This is also highly relevant for gender injustices since minority people (women, people of colour, etc.) are so often disregarded as irrational due to their attachment to emotions (confused, angry, etc.; Bankey, 2001; Gilman, 1985; Jaggar, 1989; J. Y. Kim, 2016). Together with dominant epistemological paradigms favouring "rational" knowledge, these stereotypes lead to situations where minority people have fewer opportunities to contribute to knowledge production (Jaggar, 1989). Valuing emotions as knowledge gives these people a greater say and influence in knowledge production, thus resolving some aspects of the contributory injustice they currently still face. Social media can also play a role in this by providing platforms for people to share their emotions and thus

contribute to knowledge production. For example, again looking at the #MeToo movement, many people have contributed to the revelation of the mechanisms and scope of structural sexual violence and abuse of power by testifying about it and discussing it on social media (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre, 2020; Page & Arcy, 2020).

In sum, valuing the epistemic potential of emotions can have positive effects on various forms of gendered epistemic injustice. Moreover, social media can serve as accessible platforms for people to portray their emotions and for others to get in contact with and learn about other peoples' emotions. As such, social media can be harnessed to spread the positive effects of acknowledging the epistemic potential of emotions. All in all, while certainly not utopian platforms, social media can thus still be useful tools in overcoming epistemic injustices.

3.2. Social Media and Emotions' Ability to Collectivise and Motivate Active Change

I started this article by positing that two things are needed in the fight against gender inequality: knowledge about this inequality, and active change. In the previous section, the focus was on knowledge and the barriers to spreading this knowledge. Now, we turn to active change and what role social media and online emotions can play in this, bringing us to the domain of digital activism. Most straightforwardly, social media can be a place to call people to action or a space where concrete plans to take action are spread. This was for example the case in the Arab Spring revolutions, where—as several authors have argued—social media played a key role in mobilising, organising, and broadcasting protests and other actions (Comunello & Anzera, 2012; Gire, 2015; Smidi & Shahin, 2017; Tudoroiu, 2014). However, as explained in the introduction, such direct mechanics are not the focus here. Instead, following Jasper (2011) and existing research on emotions in digital activism (e.g., Gerbaudo, 2016; Shaw, 2014), I focus on social media's additional capacity to showcase and distribute emotions, and how this can instigate societal change in/directly.

An interesting starting point is the work of Gerbaudo (2016), who characterises the Egyptian revolution and the Spanish Indignados movement as "moments of digital enthusiasm" that were facilitated by emotional communication on social media. In his analysis of these movements' Facebook pages, he identifies two important driving factors behind this digital enthusiasm: the emotional work of page admins to construct a hopeful narrative, and emotional contagion between Facebook users that resulted in collective solidarity. However, we can ask ourselves what the deeper emotional mechanics behind this are: How do emotions expressed on social media lead to feelings of collectivity, and how can that result in active change? To answer these questions, let us return to the affect theory literature on the collectivising and motivational potential of emotions.

As explained, Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) researched how emotions "stick" people together. People can live through similar emotions by going through similar experiences. We can think for example about the fear women may have of walking alone at night due to their position as women in a world that is often still unsafe for them. When people experience similar emotions, this can glue them together, turning individuals into collectives (Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b). Moreover, these emotions can spark feelings of active togetherness. Meaning, the comparable fear, anger, or joy people feel due to shared histories can encourage them to pursue change for the good of their collective. Indeed, as Cvetkovich (2012) argued, collective emotions can encourage people to take action. As such, emotions can be seen as a necessary ingredient for political and societal change.

Because of their intricate link with emotions, social media can then extend these characteristics of emotions. Indeed, social media allow for the collectivising potential of emotions to impact a large audience. As established in the literature on social media and emotions, social media can serve as accessible platforms for the expression, distribution, contagion, and uptake of emotions and emotional messages (see above). As such, it can be a locus where feelings of togetherness blossom and where communities are formed. Indeed, feminist scholars have argued that knowledge about gender injustices can be spread and taken up through social media, which can result in the emergence of online collectivities (boyd, 2011; Morahan-Martin, 2000). We can observe this in the case of the #MeToo movement. This started with one person using the hashtag, but it evolved into a movement where many people felt connected through their shared experiences and emotions. Indeed, a powerful aspect of the #MeToo movement is that it consolidates feelings of solidarity and collectivity (Page & Arcy, 2020; Suk et al., 2019).

Thus, social media induce the formation of collectives, and emotional messages leave a residue on viewers of social media posts. It is precisely this that can catalyse active change. After all, most large-scale social change does not come from individuals, but from many people who share certain emotions or a sense of urgency and necessity for change. Therefore, the formation of collectives is often a necessary step in achieving social change. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, collective emotions can motivate active change (Cvetkovich, 2012). This can be fuelled by the mechanisms and characteristics of social media. Social media can enable people to share their anger, pain, feelings of injustice, and determination. This can then be converted into calls for change or concrete plans of action. Social media's capability for emotions to be shared widely can then not only create collectives, but also help to motivate active change. Here again, we can look at the #MeToo movement. This movement goes beyond people sharing their tacit knowledge, experiences, and emotions. It also inspired calls for action in relation to gender injustices such as gendered violence. Social media played a key role in this (Mendes et al., 2019). Another example of the collective potentiality of emotions arising from media (content) is the case of the Arab Spring. Here, collective outrage was often spread, voiced, and fuelled through social media. This then created a feeling of collectivity, sparking calls to take action (Comunello & Anzera, 2012; Gire, 2015; Smidi & Shahin, 2017; Tudoroiu, 2014).

To sum up, in accordance with authors such as Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) and Cvetkovich (2012), I argue for emotions' collectivising and motivational power. In line with that, I argue that social media can play a valuable role in forming social movements and collectives, and in creating active change. A key reason for this is that social media act as platforms where emotions can be expressed, shared, and understood, and ultimately lead to the formation of collectives. Subsequently, social media can then—through those collectives and collective emotions—inspire, motivate, and incite activism and social change.

4. Conclusion: Social Media and Emotions Enabling Epistemic Justice and Active Change

With gender injustices persisting to this day, it is important to both have accurate knowledge on what gender discrimination looks like, and to take steps to actively combat this. This article has argued that social media, by serving as accessible platforms for people to portray their emotions, can be tools for both of these needs. It did that by building on philosophical insights and frameworks—more precisely from the epistemic injustice literature and affect theory—and applying these to topical issues in media and communication studies.

Social media allow for people to inform many others on emotional experiences with additional types of control over their messages. Furthermore, social media can enable emotional contagion and allow for tacit knowledge to be shared widely and with a large impact. Because of these characteristics, they are valuable media where emotions on topics and experiences related to gender injustices can be shared and distributed. In this article, I uncovered how this ability of social media to serve as platforms where emotions can be expressed and shared can contribute to knowledge about and action against gender injustices.

I first looked at how social media can help provide knowledge about gender inequality and counter epistemic injustices. This is the case because of their link with emotions. Indeed, valuing emotions as knowledge enables us to understand different aspects of gender injustices that would otherwise remain underexposed. I discussed how epistemic injustices cause certain groups of people to have less access to knowledge production and distribution than others. Moreover, these injustices result in the testimonies of some being valued more than those of others due to stereotypes and insufficient knowledge about different social contexts. They also lead to various knowledge resources being disregarded. However, valuing emotions as knowledge can—at least partly—combat these injustices. Valuing emotions as an alternative hermeneutical resource allows people's emotional testimonies to be believed, others' social contexts to be understood, and it enables people viewed as "emotional and not rational" to take part in knowledge production. Gender plays a prominent role in this as women are often viewed as emotional. Due to this connection to emotions, their testimonies are often not believed. Moreover, their social contexts are repeatedly underrepresented and underexposed. The potential of social media to share emotions and to do so with additional types of control, a wide reach, and substantial impact ensures that social media can be platforms where the effects of valuing emotions as knowledge can come to fruition. In this way, social media can play a valuable role in gaining a better understanding of the variety and diversity of injustices related to gender inequality.

Broadening our knowledge of gender inequality may be the first step to combat it, but it is not the last. Fortunately, as this article demonstrated, social media also allow us to move from knowledge to action. This they do by enabling the formation of collectives, and by empowering people to motivate others for active change. Here as well, emotions can play a crucial role since they define the relationships between bodies (people, objects, etc.). Emotions can both stick more to certain people than to others due to stereotypes, and they can form relations between bodies through e.g., shared histories and experiences. When people learn via online platforms how others face similar experiences and emotions to theirs, this can evoke feelings of togetherness and induce the formation of collectives—we can for example think about the collectivity of the #MeToo movement. Even more so, emotions have a motivational power. Emotions can motivate us to participate in political action, and—in line with their collectivising potential—encourage others to do so as well. Together with social media's broad reach, this can catalyse social movements promoting gender equality and justice.

In conclusion, by enhancing the cognitive, collectivising, and motivational power of emotions, social media can be useful tools in the fight against gender injustices. First, when we open up to the idea of emotions as knowledgeable and valuable, we can better understand gender in/equality and counter epistemic injustices. Valuing emotions as knowledge and understanding the extending role social media can play in their cognitive potential allows for women to participate (more) in knowledge production and distribution. Moreover, emotions' collectivising and motivational power allows people to come together and instigate active change for more gender equality. In sum, social media and online emotions' potential for enabling marginalised

people to participate in knowledge production and distribution, and to bring these people together in collectives that can take action, cannot be underestimated.

Of course, this research is not without limitations. Firstly, I have focussed only on discrimination and injustices faced by women. The ideas developed here may benefit from future research expanding the scope of analysis to the situations of other oppressed groups and to intersectional experiences. Moreover, this study primarily offers a theoretical reflection on the themes discussed. Further empirical work may help validate and deepen the arguments developed here. Thirdly, while I acknowledge that social media also posit potential challenges from a social justice perspective, I have chosen to focus mainly on their more positive transformational potential. In future research, it would be beneficial to analyse if and how these positive potentials of social media can be preserved while minimising their downsides. Withal, this article can be valuable both from an academic and a social justice perspective. The academic contributions of this article lie primarily in how it examines the all too often overlooked intersection of digital activism on the one hand and social media and emotions on the other, and in how it does this from an innovative perspective. Indeed, I approached these topics through the lenses of the epistemic injustice framework and affect theory, which provided this article with additional layers of analytical depth. Importantly, the relevance of this article also goes beyond its academic value. After all, a deeper understanding of the emotional mechanics behind active change on social media can contribute to the epistemic empowerment of women and future fights against gender discrimination and gender injustices.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Ahmed, S. (2004a). Affective economies. *Social Text*, *79*(2), 117–139.

Ahmed, S. (2004b). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.

Ahmed, S., & Madrid-Morales, D. (2020). Is it still a man's world? Social media news use and gender inequality in online political engagement. *Information, Communication & Society*, *24*(3), 381–399. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2020.1851387

Aïmeur, E., Amri, S., & Brassard, G. (2023). Fake news, disinformation and misinformation in social media: A review. *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, *13*(1), Article 30. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-023-01028-5

Bankey, R. (2001). La donna é mobile: Constructing the irrational woman. *Gender, Place and Culture*, *8*(1), 37–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/09663690120026316

Barberá, P., Jost, J. T., Nagler, J., Tucker, J. A., & Bonneau, R. (2015). Tweeting from left to right: Is online political communication more than an echo chamber? *Psychological Science*, *26*(10), 1531–1542. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797615594620

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.

Bertocchi, G., & Bozzano, M. (2020). Gender gaps in education. In K. F. Zimmerman (Ed.), *Handbook of labor, human resources and population economics*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57365-6_26-1

boyd, d. (2011). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *Networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites* (pp. 39–58). Routledge.

Brunner, E., & Partlow-Lefevre, S. (2020). #MeToo as networked collective: Examining consciousness-raising on wild public networks. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *17*(2), 166–182. https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1750043

Chen, J., Yan, Y., & Leach, J. (2022). Are emotion-expressing messages more shared on social media? A meta-analytic review. *Review of Communication Research*, *10*, 59–79. https://www.rcommunicationr.org/index.php/rcr/article/view/9

Cinelli, M., De Francisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocchi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. *PNAS*, *118*(9), Article e2023301118. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118

Collins, P. H. (2017). Intersectionality and epistemic injustice. In I. J. Kidd, J. Medina, & G. Pohlhaus (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of epistemic injustice* (pp. 115–124). Routledge.

Comunello, F., & Anzera, G. (2012). Will the revolution be tweeted? A conceptual framework for understanding the social media and the Arab Spring. *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, *23*(4), 453–470. https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2012.712435

Cvetkovich, A. (2012). *Depression: A public feeling*. Duke University Press.

Dahal, P., Joshi, S. K., & Swahnberg, K. (2022). A qualitative study on gender inequality and gender-based violence in Nepal. *BMC Public Health*, *22*(1), Article 2005. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14389-x

Díaz Ruiz, C., & Nilsson, T. (2022). Disinformation and echo chambers: How disinformation circulates on social media through identity-driven controversies. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *42*(1), 18–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/07439156221103852

Dotson, K. (2012). A cautionary tale: On limiting epistemic oppression. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, *33*(1), 24–47.

Dotson, K. (2014). Conceptualizing epistemic oppression. *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy*, *28*(2), 115–138.

Duncombe, C. (2019). The politics of Twitter: Emotions and the power of social media. *International Political Sociology*, *13*(4), 409–429. https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olz013

Eglash, R. (2004). *Appropriating technology: Vernacular science and social power*. University of Minnesota Press.

European Institute for Gender Equality. (n.d.). *Gender and intersecting inequalities in access to health services*. https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-equality-index-2021-report/gender-and-intersecting-inequalities-access-health?language_content_entity=en

Ferrara, E., & Yang, Z. (2015). Measuring emotional contagion in social media. *PLoS ONE*, *10*(11), Article e0142390. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0142390

Freedman, K. L. (2020). The epistemic significance of #MeToo. *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, *6*(2), Article 2.

Fricker, M. (1999). Epistemic oppression and epistemic privilege. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *25*, 191–210.

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.

Fricker, M. (2013). Epistemic justice as a condition of political freedom? *Synthese*, *190*(7), 1317–1332. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41931810

Gerbaudo, P. (2016). Rousing the Facebook crowd: Digital enthusiasm and emotional contagion in the 2011 protests in Egypt and Spain. *International Journal of Communication*, *10*, 254–273.

Gilman, S. L. (1985). *Difference and pathology: Stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness*. Cornell University Press.

Gilmore, L. (2019). #MeToo and the memoir boom: The year in the US. *Biography*, *42*(1), 162–167. https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2019.0024

Gire, S. (2015). The role of social media in the Arab Spring. *Pangaea Journal*, *5*. https://sites.stedwards.edu/pangaea/the-role-of-social-media-in-the-arab-spring

Gu, R., Peng, C., & Zhang, W. (2024). The gender gap in household bargaining power: A revealed-preference approach. *The Review of Financial Studies*, *2024*, Article hhae039. https://doi.org/10.1093/rfs/hhae039

Hamid, S., Bukhari, S., Ravana, S. D., Norman, A. A., & Ijab, M. T. (2016). Role of social media in information-seeking behaviour of international students. *Aslib Journal of Information Management*, *68*(5), 643–666. https://doi.org/10.1108/ajim-03-2016-0031

Hjorth, L., & Lim, S. S. (2012). Mobile intimacy in an age of affective mobile media. *Feminist Media Studies*, *12*(4), 477–484. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.741860

Hyvärinen, H., & Beck, R. (2018). Emotions trump facts: The role of emotions in on social media: A literature review. In T. X. Bui (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 51st Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (pp. 1797–1806). HICSS. https://doi.org/10.24251/HICSS.2018.226

Jaggar, A. M. (1989). Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology. *Inquiry*, *32*(2), 151–176. https://doi.org/10.1080/00201748908602185

Jalonen, H. (2014). Social media—An arena for venting negative emotions. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, *4*(Special), 53–70. https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcmt/5704

Jane, E. A. (2015). Flaming? What flaming? The pitfalls and potentials of researching online hostility. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *17*, 65–87. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-015-9362-0

Jasper, J. M. (2011). Emotions and social movements: Twenty years of theory and research. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *37*, 285–303. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150015

Jin, J., Li, Y., Zhong, X., & Zhai, L. (2015). Why users contribute knowledge to online communities: An empirical study of an online social Q&A community. *Information & Management*, *52*(7), 840–849. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2015.07.005

Kearns, M. C., D'Inverno, A. S., & Reidy, D. E. (2020). The association between gender inequality and sexual violence in the U.S. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *58*(1), 12–20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2019.08.035

Kidd, I. J., Medina, J., & Pohlhaus, G., Jr. (Eds.). (2017). *The Routledge handbook of epistemic injustice*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315212043

Kim, J. Y. (2016). Racial emotions and the feeling of equality. *University of Colorado Law Review*, *87*(2), 437–500.

Kim, K., Sin, S. J., & Tsai, T. (2014). Individual differences in social media use for information seeking. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *40*(2), 171–178. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.03.001

Kramer, A. D. I., Guillory, J. E., & Hancock, J. T. (2014). Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks. *PNAS*, *111*(24), 8788–8790. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1320040111

Levy, R., & Mattsson, M. (2023). *The effects of social movements: Evidence from #MeToo*. SSRN. http://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3496903

Leysen, J., Michiels, L., Smets, A., & Goethals, B. (2022). What are filter bubbles really? A review of the conceptual and empirical work. In A. Bellogin, L. Boratto, O. C. Santos, L. Ardissono, & B. Knijnenburg (Eds.), *UMAP'22 Adjunct: Adjunct Proceedings of the 30th ACM Conference on User Modeling, Adaptation and Personalization* (pp. 274–279). Association for Computing Machinery. https://doi.org/10.1145/3511047.3538028

Luna, J. P., Toro, S., & Valenzuela, S. (2022). Amplifying counter-public spheres on social media: News sharing

of alternative versus traditional media after the 2019 Chilean uprising. *Social Media + Society*, *8*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221077308

Lykousas, N., Patsakis, C., Kaltenbrunner, A., & Gómez, V. (2019). Sharing emotions at scale: The VENT dataset. In J. Pfeffer, C. Budak, Y.-R. Lin, & F. Morstatter (Eds.), *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* (Vol. 13, pp. 611–619). Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence. https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v13i01.3361

McKenna, K. Y. A., & Bargh, J. A. (2000). Plan 9 from cyberspace: The implications of the internet for personality and social psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *4*(1), 57–75. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0401_6

Meeussen, L., Van Rossum, A., Van Laar, C., & Derks, B. (2022). Gender stereotypes: What are they and how do they relate to social inequality? In M. A. Yerkes & M. Bal (Eds.), *Solidarity and social justice in contemporary societies* (pp. 79–86). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93795-9_7

Mendes, K., & Ringrose, J. (2019). Digital feminist activism: #MeToo and the everyday experiences of challenging rape culture. In B. Fileborn & R. Loney-Howes (Eds.), *#MeToo and the politics of social change* (pp. 37–51). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15213-0_3

Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., & Keller, J. (2019). *Digital feminist activism: Girls and women fight back against rape culture*. Oxford University Press.

Micalizzi, A. (2014). Anger, pain, shame, and cyber-voyeurism: Emotions around e-tragic events. In T. Benski & E. Fisher (Eds.), *Internet and emotions* (pp. 193–210). Routledge.

Milazzo, A., & Goldstein, M. (2019). Governance and women's economic and political participation: Power inequalities, formal constraints and norms. *The World Bank Research Observer*, *34*(1), 34–64. https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lky006

Moor, P. J., Heuvelman, A., & Verleur, R. (2010). Flaming on YouTube. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *26*(6), 1536–1546. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2010.05.023

Morahan-Martin, J. (2000). Women and the internet: Promise and perils. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, *3*(5), 683–691.

Nguyen, C. T. (2018). Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. *Episteme*, *17*(2), 141–161. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32

Nikunen, K. (2019). *Media solidarities: Emotions, power and justice in the digital age*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529715019

Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge University Press.

Page, A., & Arcy, J. (2020). #MeToo and the politics of collective healing: Emotional connection as contestation. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, *13*(3), 333–348. https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz032

Panahi, S., Watson, J., & Partridge, H. (2012). Social media and tacit knowledge sharing: Developing a conceptual model. *World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology*, *64*, 1095–1102.

Panger, G. T. (2017). *Emotion in social media* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of California – Berkeley. https://www.proquest.com/openview/6b503e067bafa6b4b62f36194d5f2280/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the internet is hiding from you*. Penguin.

Paxton, P., Hughes, M. M., & Barnes, T. D. (2021). *Women, politics, and power*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Perez, C. C. (2019). *Invisible women: Exposing data bias in a world designed for men*. Penguin Random House Vintage.

Pohlhaus, G. (2012). Relational knowing and epistemic injustice: Toward a theory of willful hermeneutical ignorance. *Hypatia*, *27*(4), 715–735.

Safadi, H., Johnson, S. L., & Faraj, S. (2021). Who contributes knowledge? Core–periphery tension in online innovation communities. *Organization Science*, *32*(3), 752–775. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2020.1364

Schmitz, S., & Ahmed, S. (2014). Affect/emotion: Orientation matters. A conversation between Sigrid Schmitz and Sara Ahmed. *Freiburger Frauenstudien*, *22*(2), 97–108.

Sedgwick, E. K. (2003). *Touching feeling*. Duke University Press.

Shaw, F. (2014). Emotional investments: Australian feminist blogging and affective networks. In T. Benski & E. Fisher (Eds.), *Internet and emotions* (pp. 211–224). Routledge.

Smidi, A., & Shahin, S. (2017). Social media and social mobilisation in the Middle East: A survey of research on the Arab Spring. *India Quarterly*, *73*(2), 196–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928417700798

Stieglitz, S., & Dang-Xuan, L. (2013). Emotions and information diffusion in social media—Sentiment of microblogs and sharing behavior. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, *29*(4), 217–248. https://doi.org/10.2753/mis0742-1222290408

Suk, J., Abhishek, A., Zhang, Y., Ahn, S. Y., Correa, T., Garlough, C., & Shah, D. V. (2019). #MeToo, networked acknowledgment, and connective action: How "empowerment through empathy" launched a social movement. *Social Science Computer Review*, *39*(2), 276–294. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439319864882

Tettegah, S. Y. (Ed.). (2016). *Emotions, technology, and social media*. Elsevier.

Treas, J., & Tai, T. (2016). Gender inequality in housework across 20 European nations: Lessons from gender stratification theories. *Sex Roles*, *74*(11/12), 495–511. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0575-9

Tudoroiu, T. (2014). Social media and revolutionary waves: The case of the Arab Spring. *New Political Science*, *36*(3), 346–365. https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2014.913841

UNICEF. (n.d.). *Gender equality*. https://www.unicef.org/gender-equality

Valenzuela, S. (2013). Unpacking the use of social media for protest behavior: The roles of information, opinion expression, and activism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *57*(7), 920–942. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479375

Westerman, D., Spence, P. R., & Van Der Heide, B. (2013). Social media as information source: Recency of updates and credibility of information. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *19*(2), 171–183. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12041

World Economic Forum. (2023). *Global gender gap report 2023*. https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023

About the Author

Babette Lagrange is a researcher and assistant at Ghent University. She has worked for the Horizon 2020-funded EUMEPLAT project with the Department of Communication Sciences and is currently affiliated with the Philosophy Department as a teaching assistant. She writes and publishes articles on topics related to gender issues. Within these articles she often implements an affect theoretical lens.

ARTICLE

"Finally, Me Time!": Korean Middle-Aged Women's Platform Practices

Eujong Kim [1] and **Yeran Kim** [2]

[1] Content Strategy Team, Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation, Republic of Korea
[2] Kwangwoon University, Republic of Korea

Correspondence: Yeran Kim (yeran@kw.ac.kr)

Abstract

This work builds on the legacy of feminist reception studies by expanding the research focus from mass media to digital platforms, particularly YouTube, and from media use to the practices of consuming and engaging with media in the context of Korean middle-aged women. The research also integrates Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance with the digital media environment: It suggests that while Rosa may reject digital technology in his view of resonance, digital technology, or YouTube in this case, can contribute to enhancing resonance, but only depending on how people practice it. Furthermore, our analysis highlights the importance of middle-aged women, who are not merely viewers, but rather active participants within the burgeoning YouTube scene. Lastly, we expand the current understanding of how audience groups may potentially exert agency, moving beyond the ideological binaries of submission versus resistance in the process of interpreting media texts. Our emphasis lies in the creativity embedded in Korean middle-aged women's platform practices within their daily lives. This process is fuelled by a deep desire and will to find resonance with themselves, others, and the world.

Keywords

digital platforms; feminist reception studies; middle-aged women; resonance; South Korea; YouTube

1. Introduction

Critiquing the relationship between gender and media has a long history. One key theme within this field involves "feminist reception studies," which focus on women's everyday lives and media use (Cavalcante et al., 2017, p. 1). This field has developed in tandem with historical changes in the media landscape, from radio and magazines to film, television, and contemporary digital media (Bird, 2011; Hermes, 2003). These

studies have explored how ordinary women—whose lives often centre around family and home—engage with popular culture through their domestic use of mass media (romance novels, soap operas, talk shows, etc.). From a feminist reception perspective, mass media offer a wide range of desires, fantasies, and pleasures that are often dismissed as "vulgar clichés" (Modleski, 1982). However, these media can provide rich experiences of "quieter, less heroic and less politically charged forms of media use" (Cavalcante et al., 2017, p. 4) through which women audiences reflect on their own lives, family relationships, society, and the world beyond patriarchal constraints.

This work builds on the legacy of feminist reception studies by expanding the research focus from mass media to digital platforms, particularly YouTube, and from media use to the practices of consuming and engaging with media in the context of Korean middle-aged women. As the Korean government defines "middle age" as encompassing the 40–65 age bracket, this research specifically focuses on the 50–65 age group, a period sometimes referred to as "later middle age" in Korea.

The emergence of online platforms has significantly changed the field of audience studies, with the concept of audiences now often referred to as "interactive audiences" (Livingstone, 2003) and "produsers" (Bird, 2011). This shift is also reflected in women's engagement with platforms, with a notable rise in active and digitally savvy female producers in the emerging field of cultural production on platforms (Jeffries, 2011). As van Zoonen suggests, "feminist internet studies" (van Zoonen, 2001) have evolved from "feminist media studies" (van Zoonen, 1994); these studies will continue to transform alongside media development, as seen with the rise of various social media platforms. They aim to uncover the richness of women's culture, cultivated through diverse forms of voluntary engagement with the digitally mediated space of women's "affective" sphere (Ahmed, 2014; Papacharissi, 2014).

A core value of this online and social media space is the shared experience of "communicative intimacy" among women. This intimacy is co-constructed by female producers and audiences through their collective and horizontal "perceived interconnectedness" on these platforms (Abidin, 2015). In a similar vein, van Cleaf (2020) analyses how the "mamasphere" has developed between mothers' blogs and digital communities. This space fosters a "digital maternal gaze" (van Cleaf, 2020), creating a "pleasure of connectiveness" amongst these communities. It is also argued to differ from the male voyeuristic gaze at female bodies, being actualised instead through women's self-presentation online and reception by female audiences. This, in turn, potentially disrupts the male gaze at female bodies. Built on reciprocal connection and care amongst women, van Cleaf (2020) suggests that the mamasphere embodies maternity in a radical form, contributing to the articulation of new relationships among mothers, their bodies, babies, and blogs.

However, a critical gap exists in how women's platform participation is described. Most studies assume that female platform users are culturally sophisticated, digitally savvy, socially aspiring, and young (Duffy, 2016; Duffy et al., 2021). The prioritisation of young women on these platforms risks marginalising middle-aged and older viewers who remain loyal to their lifelong television habits (and not as produsers). In reality, these middle-aged women tend to remain invisible or are only highlighted for their scarcity (Moon & Abidin, 2020). Otherwise, if they are included, it is primarily within the restrictive framework of binaries such as the stereotypical negative image versus the counter-stereotypical image (Oró-Piqueras & Marques, 2017). Such an approach overlooks the rich diversity and dynamic nature inherent in the digital platform practices of older subjects.

Another issue lies in the narrow scope of research on platform use by the middle-aged population. A great deal of research across various disciplines—including medicine, psychology, information studies, and media studies—has explored how YouTube impacts users' physical and mental health improvement. However, Couldry (2004) argues that these functionalist approaches have limitations: They run the risk of overlooking the broader platform experiences of middle-aged women, the very audience upon which this study is based. Thus, instead of employing the term "use," this study adopts Couldry's (2004) notion of "practice" to incorporate a broader social contextuality, marked by "looseness and openness" (Couldry, 2004, p. 119). This broader perspective allows for a decentring approach to media, questioning "what people are *doing* in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts" (emphasis added) beyond the media-centric focus of use (Couldry, 2004, p. 119).

Among various modes of practising media, this study is particularly interested in how middle-aged women, through their YouTube practices, create and develop their relationships with the world—or, as Rosa (2019) terms it, "resonance" with the world, negotiating and perhaps defying the limitations imposed by patriarchal structures. YouTube is a valuable and insightful digital platform for exploring how female audiences practice it through their experiences of resonance. As exemplified by its popular slogan "broadcast yourself," YouTube's unique mode of "homecasting" (van Dijck, 2013) has been highly successful in remediating television as a "cultural form" and its associated audience practices, while simultaneously incorporating the digital potential for connectivity and sharing (van Dijck, 2013). Another advantage of YouTube for middle-aged women is its ease of use and affordability. Engagement with social media by the middle-aged population does not necessarily lead to an increase in their social well-being (encompassing social capital, loneliness, social connectedness, and social provision) in the same way that it does for younger age groups (Quinn, 2021). This discrepancy may potentially be due to a lack of technological proficiency and established online social networks for older individuals. Nevertheless, the role that YouTube plays in the lives of middle-aged women merits investigation, given that YouTube occupies a distinct space, compared to other social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok). Unlike platforms demanding high user interaction, YouTube offers a vast library of professional and user-generated content, bypassing complex technicalities, and with a free basic tier as well as a premium option.

Integrating the rich traditions of feminist reception and media practice studies, this work aims to break new ground by exploring the platform practices of middle-aged women in Korea. Korean society, with its digital advancement and deep-rooted patriarchal culture, offers particular relevance for developing this research. Our research has three key objectives. First, we investigate how middle-aged women integrate platforms into their daily lives and how their platform practice unfolds at the intersection of the dominant digital ecology and their patriarchal-shaped daily lives. Second, we examine how these women's platform practices are associated with their navigation of social connections, including relationships with family, friends, strangers, and, ultimately, themselves. Third, we explore how platform practices contribute to middle-aged women's "resonance" with the world, or "one's relationship to the world," drawing on Rosa's (2019) theorisation. Our study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey analysis (related to the *role* of YouTube practices in middle-aged women's resonant lives) with qualitative focus group interviews (related to the *meaning* of YouTube practices in middle-aged women's resonant lives).

2. Contextualisation of Korean Middle-Aged Women's Practices on YouTube

South Korea is one of the most technologically connected countries in the world. According to the International Telecommunication Union, South Korea has the world's leading coverage of LTE, a wireless technology. Also, mobile phone ownership (98%), percentage of households with internet access (100%), and personal internet usage (98%) are also very high (International Telecommunication Union, 2023). Thus, it can be inferred that internet-based platform use is prevalent not only among younger generations but also among middle-aged and older people. With respect to watching video content, 84% of people watch online services, including YouTube, and 60% watch TV (Hankook Research, 2024). While the amount of time spent watching TV increases with age, there is less of an age difference in YouTube viewing patterns (Hankook Research, 2024). These findings indicate that Korean middle-aged and older adults are highly engaged with online video channels, especially YouTube. The primary motivation for YouTube watching for middle-aged people is to "obtain more information" (Lee et al., 2023) while appreciating a relatively wide range of choices (entertainment, informational programs, and music). Additionally, usage behaviour has expanded beyond consumption to include participation, sharing and expressing emotions and opinions, and, to a very limited extent, production (Korea Information Society Development Institute, 2021).

The reality of middle-aged women's lives, however, is complex and multifaceted, defying simple explanation through YouTube usage alone. Significant research suggests that middle-aged women experience "vulnerabilities" specific to their gender (Gunnarsson, 2002; Monteiro et al., 2024; Park et al., 2017; Schröder-Butterfill & Marianti, 2006). While some variations exist among women, this age group is often positioned within a "vulnerable life course" (Gunnarsson, 2002). This vulnerability arises from a confluence of factors: (a) a perceived decline in their roles and responsibilities within family and social life, potentially linked to physical changes associated with menopause, economic insecurity, or poverty; (b) a diminishing social network and support system; and (c) psychological factors such as anxiety and depression related to the perceived threats of these risks and a perceived lack of "coping capacity" with such risks (Schröder-Butterfill & Marianti, 2006). Of particular relevance to middle-aged female YouTube users in Korea is the country's long history of patriarchal norms, where women in middle-class families traditionally assume the role of housewife. Notably, the gender gap in Korea regarding housework division is significant, with men contributing only 16.5%, compared to the OECD average of 33.6%. Furthermore, only 29.4% of married couples with children under 14 have dual incomes, which falls far short of the OECD average of 58.5% (Shin, 2017). A 2023 report by the Korean Ministry of Gender Equality indicates a worsening situation, with 78.3% of women over their 40s dedicating themselves fully to housework (Choi, 2024). In short, many Korean families, especially those with middle-aged parents, remain entrenched in a patriarchal system where men are breadwinners and women are housewives.

Considering the intersection of YouTube's prevalence and patriarchal structures, the current study investigates how these women actually utilise YouTube to create and develop their relationships with the world. We have no intention of dismissing or patronising middle-aged women by portraying them as weak or frustrated. On the contrary, this study aims to uncover and valorise the unheard stories of middle-aged women's experiences of anxiety and vulnerability in Korea. More importantly, it explores how they seek to forge a different relationship with these feelings, and potentially, overcome them. Significantly, YouTube plays a key mediating role in their journeys. In this exploration, Rosa's notion of resonance offers valuable insights.

3. Resonance Around Digital Platforms?

Hartmut Rosa, a well-known German sociologist, elucidates a mode of one's relation to the world from the perspective of "resonance" (Rosa, 2019). With its Latin etymology of *resonare* (to resound), resonance refers to a mutual and reciprocal relationship. Mutuality and reciprocity in resonance encompass both physical and psychical senses and sensibilities (a←ffect and e→motion), communication (calling and responding), and transformative acts (adjustment and transformation; Rosa, 2019). Rosa stipulates the core elements of resonance as affection (being truly touched or moved), the experience of responsive self-efficacy, transformative disposability and intrinsic moments of unpredictability, and uncontrollability (Rosa, 2019).

For Rosa, resonance differs from harmony or echo. Unlike those terms, which connote differences being fused into one, resonance is balanced with the closedness and openness of each body (Rosa, 2019, pp. 165–174). In resonance, the two bodies retain "their own voice." Resonance "requires" difference, even opposition and contradiction, "in order to enable a real encounter" (Rosa, 2018). The antithesis of resonance is alienation; Rosa argues that resonance and alienation exist in a dialectical relationship. Alienation has been a critical theme in modern thought, referring to the inversion of the relationship between the social subject and the social object. Marx, for example, described it in terms of "capital (social object) controlling workers (social subject)" (Haugaard, 2020, p. 330). However, Rosa's theorisation of alienation is notable for its focus on relationality. Rosa describes it as a "relation of relationlessness," where "our relationships no longer speak to us," and the world becomes mute and frozen. Consequently, in alienation, the subject and the world confront each other with indifference and hostility. Here, the subject and the world appear cold, rigid, repulsive, lifeless, and dead (Rosa, 2019, pp. 178–184).

Rosa's concept of resonance offers a pivotal framework for our research. The first point concerns the motivational potentiality embedded in the experience of resonance. Importantly, Rosa emphasises that resonance is "not an emotional state, but a mode of relation" (Rosa, 2019, p. 168). In other words, resonance is synonymous with the individuals' longing for, seeking, and hoping for improved relations between beings-in-the-world (Susen, 2020).

Furthermore, the experience of resonance is less descriptive and more evaluative, purposive, and performative. This is because the desire for resonance persistently stems from its "unavailability" in one's life, leading to a wilful feeling of "nonetheless," meaning that one cannot but pursue resonance nonetheless, or is due to the lack of resonance in one's life. Thus, we can recall the dialectic of resonance and alienation, which suggests that "people's most liberating forms of creative resonance emerge out of profound experiences of alienation, oppression, and repulsion" (Rosa, 2019, as cited in Susen, 2020, p. 320). In other words, the human search for resonance often springs from the experience of alienation and the desire to escape it.

We can consider the experiences of middle-aged women around platforms such as YouTube within the social structures of gender and generation. Many of these women have likely lived their lives confined to domestic duties and the care of family members. Can their current desire for enjoyment from platform use—seeking access, reach, and interaction—be understood as a form of resonance? This question concerns a critical account of digital platforms in relation to Rosa's view of resonance. Rosa critiques modernity's emphasis on "acceleration," arguing that it leads to the "generalisation and habituation of the subject through the escalating compulsion of dynamic stabilization," thereby perpetuating alienation (Rosa, 2019, p. 423).

He further calls digitalisation a "monster," delivering "unlimited acceleration" or a "new, radical form of uncontrollability" (Rosa, 2020, pp. 112, 115). He argues that in the "uncontrollable dynamism of media and social networks," or digitalisation, we cannot hear, reach, or transform the world at all; rather, we are abandoned in a world of radical aggression, alienation, fear, anger, and despair.

Given this premise, it is worth questioning whether there is a certain path for middle-aged housewives to find some novel opportunity for resonance through platform practices. While Rosa critiques digital technology as a central factor reinforcing alienation in the contemporary era, we propose an alternative interpretation. In Terranova's critical study of the corporate platform complex's control over the online "attention economy," she identifies a potential silver lining (Terranova, 2022). Terranova argues that users' combined cognitive and affective labour can contribute to the construction of a new "technosociality," or "commons" as she terms it, from which alternative forms of subjectivities and social co-operation may emerge. In articulating her argument with the current study, the YouTube platform experience offers a potential avenue toward a new technosocial commons, or resonance as our focus, for those alienated in the contemporary world but who wish to feel connected, to communicate, and to engage with the world in pursuit of a good life.

4. Method

4.1. Sampling

To answer the research question, this study employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. We used online surveys and focus group interviews with a population of women aged 45–64 living in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province who had watched YouTube within the previous month. The sample size for the online survey was 800, drawn from a national Ipsos South Korea panel and allocated by gender, age (45–64), and region. The survey was conducted between 20 and 27 February 2023. As this study examines the relationship between Korean middle-aged women's use of YouTube and their resonant lives, only the responses of women were selected from the total data for analysis ($n = 401$).

Of the 401 total participants, 99 were aged 45–49 (24.7%), 110 were aged 50–54 (27.4%), 95 were aged 55–59 (23.7%), and 97 were aged 60–64 (24.2%). In terms of media platform usage, most participants watched and visited a variety of platforms, but usage varied by platform. Respondents watched an average of more than 2 and a half hours of TV per day ($M = 159.7$ minutes, $SD = 122.8$) and 1 hour and 20 minutes of YouTube per day ($M = 81.9$ minutes, $SD = 122.8$). Over-the-top services such as Netflix were watched an average of 69.3 minutes per day ($SD = 69.8$); the internet was used an average of 23.2 minutes per day ($SD = 21.4$); and social media were visited an average of 23.4 minutes per day ($SD = 31.7$).

For the qualitative research, five focus group interviews were conducted during February 2023. The focus group interview is particularly regarded as a useful methodology for audience reception studies because focus group discussions function as a form of "socially situated communication" (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 79). In such discussions, diverse personal, social, and political experiences, relations, and opinions are explored and intertwined, ultimately shaping the research directions and potentially enhancing their validity (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). The interviewees were recruited through email invitations sent to a panel of Ipsos South Korea members. Each group consisted of eight people, and five focus group interviews were conducted. The selected participants were all frequent YouTube users in their 50s (24 females) and 60s

(16 females). Each group participated in separate focus group interviews. With informed consent, we recorded all interviews, which were then transcribed by professionals. The length of each interview was approximately two hours, and produced an average transcript length of 60 pages.

4.2. Measurement for Quantitative Survey

Drawing on Rosa's concept of resonance, we identified four key variables encompassing the idea of resonance, and one variable related to YouTube practices. In relation to the notion of resonance, life satisfaction, referring to how an individual feels about their life and their relationship with themselves, is one of these. The other three variables capture the relational and communicative trajectory (bonding with others, encountering others online, and encountering others offline), leading to resonance.

Life satisfaction was measured with two statements anchored by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, including "I am satisfied with my overall life" and "I feel satisfied with my daily life and the circumstances surrounding it" (Diener & Suh, 1997; Veenhoven, 2000).

Respondents were asked three statements about bonding with others, answering on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*): "I feel psychologically close to people in this age group," "I am influenced by the lifestyle of this age group," and "I am usually interested in content that this age group likes" ($\alpha = .90$). The items were presented by age group; respondents rated how close they felt to each age group, which we averaged across age groups for analysis.

Two items were used to assess encounters with others online, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*: "I tend to encounter this age group a lot online" and "I encounter and interact with this age group online" ($\alpha = .76$). The concept of encountering others online was also measured by having respondents answer questions for each age group and using the average value.

Encountering others offline was also measured with two statements anchored by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, including "I encounter and interact with this age group in person" and "I have the opportunity to actually observe people in this age group on a daily basis" ($\alpha = .83$). The average of the in-person encounter levels by age group was used in the analysis.

Respondents were asked about their perceptions of the motivations and effects of watching YouTube in their lives. Three statements were used to measure YouTube practice: "I watch YouTube for my future growth," "watching YouTube is important for my personal progress," and "watching YouTube teaches me about the world, people, facts, and information I didn't know." Respondents answered *yes* or *no* to each statement. The sum of the *yes* responses was used for analysis.

5. Result

5.1. The Role of YouTube in One's Trajectory to Resonance

In this analysis, the study employed a partial correlation methodology. Partial correlation analysis aims to isolate the effect of a new variable on the existing correlation between two other variables. For instance,

partial correlation controls for the influence of a third variable C on the correlation between the two variables, A and B. This allows researchers to identify the true association between A and B, independent of C's influence. It means that we can also speculate on the influence of variable C on the correlation of the two variables A and B by controlling for variable C. If the partial correlation coefficient becomes lower than the original coefficient or statistically insignificant, this suggests a significant role played by the variable C on the correlation between A and B. This analytical approach underpins the current study, which examines the influence of YouTube practice on the correlation among the four variables of resonance (life satisfaction, bonding with others, encountering others online, and encountering others offline).

Table 1 presents the zero-order correlation matrix for the variables and partial correlation results indicating the relationships among the key variables, along with the effects of the YouTube practice by middle-aged women in their relation to the world. To begin with, we examine the correlation among the four variables of resonance (zero-order correlations). The correlations among the variables—life satisfaction, bonding with others, encountering others online, and encountering others offline—ranged from .13 to .68, indicating that significant positive relationships exist (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2000).

Next, to explore the influence of YouTube practice on the four variables of resonance (i.e., life satisfaction, bonding with others, encountering others online, encountering others offline), we incorporated this factor into our analysis as part of the partial correlation. As shown in Table 1, a partial correlation analysis was conducted to assess the influence of the third variable (i.e., YouTube practice) on the relationship among the other variables (i.e., life satisfaction, bonding with others, encountering others online, and encountering

Table 1. Partial correlations with YouTube practice held constant ($n = 401$).

		Life satisfaction	Bonding with others	Encountering others online	Encountering others offline	M	SD
Zero-order correlations	Life satisfaction	—				3.34	.86
	Bonding with others	.20**	—			3.03	.62
	Encountering others online	.13**	.59**	—		2.81	.75
	Encountering others offline	.15**	.68**	.60**	—	3.15	.69
Partial correlations: YouTube practice controlled	Life satisfaction	—					
	Bonding with others	.16**	—				
	Encountering others online	.08	.52**	—			
	Encountering others offline	.10*	.63**	.53**	—		

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

others offline). In our study, controlling for YouTube practice resulted in lower or statistically insignificant correlation coefficients than the initial correlation among the four variables of resonance, particularly between life satisfaction (as their relation to their own lives), and the other three variables of bonding with others, encountering others online, and encountering others offline (as their relation to others).

These results empirically demonstrate that, first, for middle-aged women, life satisfaction (their relation to their own lives) is contingent on their relation to others (bonding with others, encountering others online, and encountering others offline). Moreover, it turns out that this interconnectedness would be weakened significantly without consistent YouTube practice. In other words, YouTube seems to actively contribute to the women's resonance with themselves (life satisfaction) and others (bonding with others, encountering others online, and encountering others offline) in balance.

This study further explores how specific aspects of YouTube practice contribute to the perceived connection between life satisfaction (their relation to their own lives) and relational and communicative activities (one's relation to others, including bonding with others, encountering others online, and encountering others offline)—all aspects of resonance—in the daily lives of middle-aged women in Korea.

5.2. The Meaning of YouTube Practice in One's Trajectory of Resonance

On the surface, middle-aged women in Korea seemingly navigate YouTube within a strong patriarchal context, pursuing the creation of prosperous families. They mostly enjoy specific genres of YouTube contents for various reasons such as exploring new recipes or skills to save money, finding pride in existing culinary or financial investment techniques, and even multitasking by listening while cooking for the family. This tendency is reflected in their most popular content choices, with cooking shows and the management of household assets standing out. In contrast to Radway's seminal study on the female romance reading culture (Radway, 1991), where pleasure is experienced as an "escape" from patriarchal constraints, the middle-aged women in our interviews primarily find satisfaction and pride in utilising YouTube content to further develop their housekeeping skills.

Some participants reported expanding their economic knowledge and financial management techniques through YouTube. For example, YH, a woman in her 60s who lives alone due to her husband and son working in other cities, was able to begin investing in stocks after dedicating several hours daily to watching and learning from a YouTube channel specialising in stock market knowledge. MS, another participant interviewed at the same location, echoed YH's experience, expressing her own interest in learning about the stock market. She revealed that she not only followed the recommendations of a specific YouTube channel but also encouraged her daughters to invest in the same stocks. Notably, YH and MS confirmed that they had both purchased stocks based on the advice of the same YouTube content, unanimously agreeing that "YouTube is a valuable teacher for [them], consistently collecting and delivering useful information, and ensuring [their] success" (MS, YH). The statements from this participant group appear to resonate with the findings of Ouellette and Wilson (2011) regarding women's daily engagement with self-help content in multimedia environments. The authors argued that, within the contemporary neoliberal context, women are pressured to achieve a form of "neoliberal citizenship" through the cultivation of an "enterprising-self" capable of "successful self-management and family governance" (Ouellette & Wilson, 2011, pp. 549–550).

Following Ouellette and Wilson's study, this seemingly conventional way of using YouTube could perpetuate patriarchal boundaries by channelling Korean middle-aged women toward domestic roles. Their use of YouTube in their mundane lives may simply contribute to reproducing the neoliberal subject who is complicit with a "second shift of domestic and affective labour," created in the environment of advanced digital platforms, which leads them to "holding families together and makes strategic individualism possible" (Ouellette & Wilson, 2011, pp. 556–559). However, under this surface, might middle-aged women negotiate or challenge their roles as wives and mothers, carving out new subtle directions in their lives toward the experience of resonance through their YouTube practices?

To delve deeper into this question of resonance, the current study analyses the focus group interviews on how middle-aged housewives engage with YouTube in their daily lives. The analysis, consistent with the variables identified in the quantitative analysis, draws on Rosa's theorisation of resonance (Rosa, 2019, 2020) to explore four key areas related to the possibility of middle-aged women creating alternative relational modes of resonance. These areas are: (a) intrinsic moments of embracing YouTube as a desire to encounter others, and as the trajectorial points toward resonance; (b) the experience of self-efficacy gained through YouTube practice; (c) transformative disposability in their relationships with others fostered by YouTube practice; and (d) the (re)creation of selfhood and its relationship to the world.

Regarding the intrinsic moments of embracing YouTube as a desire to encounter others, and as the trajectorial points toward resonance, the daily lives of middle-aged women are explored, focusing on their emotional states and social experiences. A recurring term in the interviews is "climacteric," highlighting the physical and psychological difficulties associated with menopause and ageing. Interviewees reported that they commonly experienced "anxiety, depression, and ennui," often accompanied by a sense of resentment toward their family members. These volatile emotions were intertwined with physical changes, as some women described reaching a "red light" in their health around their 60s (AL). This physical weakness manifested as sleep problems, reduced agility (*bbarit bbarit*, meaning precise and quick in Korean, according to the participant transcript, CT), and emotional instability, described by JH as "puberty in emotion," which she experienced in her 50s concurrently with her own children undergoing "real" puberty. These experiences are, as CT, a woman in her 50s who works in an office, confesses, naturally linked to feelings of loss and emptiness that accompany the thought that "her life is nearing its end."

For these women, YouTube serves as an unexpected refuge from the depression, weakness, and loneliness that overwhelm them at home. YM, in her 60s, for instance, recalled learning about YouTube from a friend who seemed well-informed about cultural trends. As she aged and her children grew up, she felt her role in her family and society had shrunk, and she herself had become less needed. YM had felt a diminishing sense of social connection, missing out on events such as school friend meetings. Upon discovering YouTube, she exclaimed, "Oh, is there such a world existing?" Watching YouTube content quickly became a cherished habit, allowing her to "shut [her] bedroom door from 10:30 p.m. and enjoy YouTube comfortably in [her] bed alone" (YM). Despite the challenges in their lives, YouTube presents the possibility of a new world, fostering a sense of opportunities for "happiness" (HK).

Concerning the second point regarding the experience of self-efficacy, middle-aged women's YouTube habits diverged from the typical expectations for social network services. Social network service platforms are generally understood as being social and collaborative, with users sharing topics, links, and posts at both the

interpersonal and broader societal levels (French & Read, 2013). In contrast, all the middle-aged women interviewed emphasised the pleasure of simply "being themselves" while using YouTube. Regarding the physical condition of watching or listening to YouTube, these women prefer spending time alone watching YouTube to social interactions. It connotes the freedom to choose, decide, and pursue what they want, on their own terms, and from the comfort of their own rooms. They find peace and relaxation (referred to as "*mung*" in Korean) with their headphones on, enjoying their favourite YouTube content. Another advantage of YouTube is that it helps them sleep as a companion during those most personal moments, when sleeping difficulties arise due to their physical age. Specific playlists of music for sleep, such as audiobooks, religious speeches, and even "raining sounds" are popular for this purpose. These users find that YouTube allows them to "listen even while drifting off to sleep," as HJ confesses (in her 60s, housewife).

Furthermore, they prioritise loving their own time over the stress of shallow interactions as an active form of liberation. As EA, an office worker in her 50s, puts it, YouTube (which she jokingly calls an "addiction") infuses her life with fun and useful information. This "addiction" is more accurately described as a sense of liberation *toward* a new world of knowledge and pleasure, unlike the "escape" *from* patriarchal reality that Radway (1991) emphasises. Focusing on the self is thus associated with a sense of vitality and empowerment, emerging as a key takeaway across various disciplines, ranging from music to the humanities and literature. MS, a freelancer in her 50s, had developed a habit of listening to various genres of music and "a taste for knowledge" on YouTube. For her, listening to these "good sounds and words" soothed her feelings of depression. While she found it difficult to concentrate on reading books and had grown to avoid them in her later years as she physically aged, YouTube allowed her to gain new insights that she had not recognised before.

As for the third point of transformative disposability in their relationships with others, fostered by YouTube practice, middle-aged women's desire for autonomy, freedom, and happiness is not necessarily silenced or rendered mute, which Rosa warns can be a symptom of "alienation" (Rosa, 2019). Their experiences suggest that these newfound joys of engaging with YouTube motivate them to connect with others and develop new ways of relating to the world. This ultimately leads to a reshaping of their sense of self, distinct from their previous identities.

For example, HS, in her 60s, after enduring caregiver fatigue, chose to create separate living spaces for her husband (coined "Mr. Second Floor"). However, after listening to the teachings of Buprul Monk on YouTube, her family noticed a significant improvement in her ability to understand others. This newfound empathy fostered improved family relationships. She credited this positive change to the self-assurance and self-awareness she cultivated through reflection on spiritual content such as Buprul's teachings. Interestingly, she did not pinpoint the exact lesson that Buprul delivered, nor did she detail how she had actively applied his words to her life. Instead, it seemed that she had used his teachings as an opportunity to reflect on herself and her relationships with others. Accordingly, the significance lies less in Buprul's teaching itself and more in HS' creative act of using the offered content and propelling her toward a transformative shift in her relationships with herself and others. YouTube has become a catalyst for self-reflection, fostering stronger relationships, and even prompting a renewed sense of purpose in connecting with others—a concept akin to "resonance" (Rosa, 2019).

Regarding the fourth point of the (re)creation of selfhood and its relationship to the world, middle-aged women's YouTube practices are deeply intertwined with their journeys involving the rediscovery of their selves and personal growth. The interviews revealed self-recognition and empowerment emerging in the

process of YouTube practices: "Through YouTube, I've discovered many aspects of myself I never knew existed—a new me, in a way" (DP). YouTube may even spark a sense of adventurous courage, prompting visions of a potential "second life" in their 60s (TK). One interviewee exclaimed, "Oh, there are so many things I could try! I never realised there were so many things I would like to do. I will definitely do at least one of them before I die!" (DJ). This newfound inspiration even included a dream of becoming a YouTube creator herself (PN). At its heart, their enjoyment of YouTube stems from the autonomy, freedom, and happiness it mediates—values that these women have long felt alienated from in their lives. These values are now discovered or created through their active YouTube practices.

Participants in their 60s reported near-unanimous agreement that the most important relationship in their lives currently is the one with themselves. This finding also holds true within the context of their YouTube practices:

> Researcher: What relationship is most important to you these days?

> YH: Making myself strong. After all, it's fundamental to my happiness. When I met my daughter today, I realised I could only chat with her because I'm healthy.

> SM: It's a cliché, but a healthy and peaceful family often relies on a healthy mother. That is why I think my hobbies are important. I enjoy travelling, thanks to the information I find on YouTube. Therefore, the relationship with myself is paramount; I come first.

> YH: Exactly. Let's live for ourselves. Just for ourselves. In the past, I used to think I was doing things to help my family, that my children would appreciate it. But I don't think that way anymore. Now, I only do what I enjoy.

> SM: For me, too. Fulfilling myself is most meaningful.

The kinds of popular YouTube content among middle-aged women appear to be more in a "hegemonic relationship" (Seiter, 1999, as cited in Hermes, 2003, p. 391) within the social patriarchy than a critical or resistant nature. However, as Hermes argues, it is necessary to "delve beneath the surface of interviews or observation material" and across the "mixture of highly conservative and progressive elements" made up of their "shared discourses and cultural resources" (Hermes, 2003, pp. 384–389) to explore how middle-aged women constantly engage with YouTube through "performing and audiencing" in their daily lives (Cavalcante et al., 2017, p. 5). Consequently, the current study prioritises an examination of the diversity, complexity, and dynamics embedded in middle-aged women's YouTube practices. In particular, we focus on middle-aged women's newfound desire, will, and capability to actively create and cultivate resonant experiences through their YouTube practices.

While Rosa describes resonance as an "oasis," it is not a pre-existing haven offered by YouTube. For the middle-aged female interviewees, this oasis was not provided by the YouTube platform itself. Rather, it was actively and arduously created through their unique and personal engagement with YouTube. Their lived experiences, often marked by alienation and suppression, served as the "desert" landscape from which they cultivated this self-made "oasis," a refuge found through their YouTube practices (Rosa, 2019). These practices emerge *despite* the realities of a digitally saturated world and their alienation from the patriarchal

structure. Thus, the power of gendering and un-gendering is not predetermined by YouTube, the dominant platform. Instead, middle-aged women, through their daily YouTube practices, use and turn this platform into an oasis where they can subtly challenge gender and age norms, thereby redefining the self. The YouTube oasis that Korean women create through their YouTube practices is unique. They preserve the patriarchal surface of their daily lives within this space yet venture toward a new resonant world where they discover, transform, and re-tune their relationship with themselves and others.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how middle-aged women's YouTube practices influence their newfound ability to create resonance in pursuit of building a better life based on this resonant relationship with the world.

The findings suggest that, firstly, YouTube practices play a significant mediating role in their resonant relationships in balance with others (bonding and encountering others) and their own lives and themselves (life satisfaction). Secondly, our analysis of the interviews revealed that middle-aged women's YouTube practices (rather than the content itself) are meaningful—partly due to its nature of platformisation (i.e., the interrelational and dynamic structures available through ubiquitous and mobile networks; van Dijck et al., 2019)—as both a temporal-spatial condition and socio-cultural resource for resonance. This allows middle-aged women to discover themselves, develop their self-esteem and efficacy, and transform their relationships with themselves, others, and the world. Challenging the notion of YouTube as a platform for social interaction, our research indicates that middle-aged women prioritise cultivating resonant relationships—*both* with themselves and others—through their YouTube practices, which they view, in alignment with Rosa's perspective, as indispensable for their good lives.

Our analysis suggests that middle-aged women do not entirely resist the content, partly because they actively choose what they need and want on YouTube. This differs from the traditional "active audience" model, in which individuals negotiate or resist messages presented by the mass media (Morley, 1992). However, middle-aged women may be considered active in terms of how they creatively engage with YouTube within their lives. By encountering new and different worlds through YouTube, they generate a desire, will, and capability to create different relationships with others, the world, and themselves. They are less like the traditionally studied "active audiences" in relation to ideological structures, and more like reflexive and creative subjects in relation to resonance, or a good life.

This study contributes to developing the valuable tradition of feminist reception studies in the platform-based media environment, in particular within the context of YouTube practice. The research also integrates Rosa's theory of resonance with the digital media environment: It suggests that while Rosa may reject digital technology in his view of resonance, digital technology (or YouTube in this case) can contribute to enhancing resonance, but only depending on how people *practice* it. Furthermore, our analysis highlights the importance of middle-aged women, who are not merely viewers, but rather active participants within the burgeoning YouTube scene. This middle-aged group's YouTube practices have been unfairly overlooked, as social and academic discussions of YouTube often prioritise creators and influencers, most of whom are young, framing them as the platform's emerging produsers. Lastly, we expand the current understanding of how audience groups may potentially exert agency, moving beyond the ideological binaries of submission versus resistance in the process of interpreting media texts. Our emphasis lies in the creativity embedded in

Korean middle-aged women's platform practices within their daily lives, the creativity through which they generate resonant relationships with themselves, others, and the world. Through this creative trajectory, these women engage in diverse YouTube practices as they continually pursue good lives, finding solace and renewal much like an oasis in a desert.

The current study has limitations. It does not fully explore the diversity of middle-aged women in terms of economic, social, or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), all of which are crucial factors influencing cultural consumption, including YouTube practices. Additionally, this study focused on the immediate experiences of YouTube users and did not sufficiently examine the long-term consequences of such experiences, particularly in relation to the concept of resonance. These questions are certainly worth further investigation, rebuilding the tradition of feminist reception studies in the media environment of platformisation.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Abidin, C. (2015). Communicative intimacies: Influencers and perceived interconnectedness. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, *8*. https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/26365

Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge.

Bird, S. E. (2011). Are we all produsers now? Convergence and media audience practice. *Cultural Studies*, *25*(4/5), 502–516.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Routledge.

Cavalcante, A., Press, A., & Sender, K. (2017). Feminist reception studies in a post-audience age: Returning to audiences and everyday life. *Feminist Media Studies*, *17*(1), 1–13.

Choi, Y. (2024, April 17). 'Anae dogbak gasa' gajung de neulgo, dogbak yukah gyunghyangdo yejun. *Hangyerae News*. https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/women/1136948.html

Couldry, N. (2004). Theorising media as practice. *Social Semiotics*, *14*(2), 115–132.

Diener, E., & Suh, E. (1997). Measuring quality of life: Economic, social, and subjective indicators. *Social Indicators Research*, *40*, 189–216.

Duffy, B. E. (2016). The romance of work: Gender and aspirational labour in the digital culture industries. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *19*(4), 441–457. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877915572186

Duffy, B. E., Pinch, A., Sannon, S., & Sawey, M. (2021). The nested precarities of creative labor on social media. *Social Media + Society*, *7*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211021368

French, A. M., & Read, A. (2013). My mom's on Facebook: An evaluation of information sharing depth in social networking. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, *32*(10), 1049–1059. https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2013.816775

Gunnarsson, E. (2002). The vulnerable life course: Poverty and social assistance among middle-aged and older women. *Ageing and Society*, *22*, 709–728.

Hankook Research. (2024). *Video content usage behavior and perception—Focusing on comparison by generation.* https://hrcopinion.co.kr/archives/29053

Haugaard, M. (2020). What is resonance? What is alienation? How do the two relate? Reflections on Rosa's theory of resonance and alienation. *Journal of Political Power, 13*(3), 324–336.

Hermes, J. (2003). Practicing embodiment: Reality, respect, and issues of gender in media reception. In Valdivia, A. N. (Ed.), *A companion to media studies* (pp. 382–398). Blackwell Publishing.

International Telecommunication Union. (2023). *Digital development dashboard* [Data set]. https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Dashboards/Pages/Digital-Development.aspx

Jeffries, L. (2011). The revolution will be soooo cute: YouTube 'hauls' and the voice of young female consumers. *Studies in Popular Culture, 33*(2), 59–75.

Korea Information Society Development Institute. (2021). *YouTube and Netflix content usage behavior by gender and age group* (KISDI Perspective No. 3).

Lee, J., Gwak, S., Gwon, J., Park, J., Eom, S., Hong, S., Ku, G., Lee, W., & Jung, H. (2023). Exploring the community of older adult viewers on YouTube. *Universal Access in the Information Society, 22*(4), 1393–1404.

Livingstone, S. (2003). The changing nature of audiences: From the mass audience to the interactive media user. In Valdivia, A. N. (Ed.), *A companion to media studies* (pp. 337–359). Blackwell Publishing.

Lunt, P., & Livingstone, S. (1996). Rethinking the focus group in media and communications research. *Journal of Communication, 46*(2), 79–98.

Modleski, T. (1982). *Loving with a vengeance: Mass-produced fantasies for women.* Archon Books.

Monteiro, J. M., Gonçalves, R., Bastos, A., & Barbosa, M. R. (2024). Social engagement and wellbeing in late life: A systematic review. *Ageing & Society.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X24000011

Moon, J., & Abidin, C. (2020). Online *ajumma*: Self-presentations of contemporary elderly women via digital media in Korea. In K. Warfield, C. Abidin, & C. Cambre (Eds.), *Mediated interfaces: The body on social media* (pp. 177–189). Routledge.

Morley, D. (1992). *Television, audiences & cultural studies.* Routledge.

Oró-Piqueras, M., & Marques, S. (2017). Images of old age in YouTube: Destabilizing stereotypes. *Continuum, 31*(2), 257–265.

Ouellette, L., & Wilson, J. (2011). Women's work: Affective labour and convergence culture. *Cultural Studies, 25*(4/5), 548–565.

Papacharissi, Z. (2014). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics.* Oxford University Press.

Park, M., Lee, S., & Park, Y. (2017). Depression experience and suicidal behavior among menopausal middle-aged women in Korea: Mediating effects of health related quality of life and moderating effects of income. *Journal of the Korea Contents Association, 17*(11), 110–122.

Quinn, K. (2021). Social media and social wellbeing in later life. *Ageing & Society, 41*(6), 1349–1370.

Radway, J. (1991). *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature.* The University of North Carolina Press.

Rosa, H. (2018, July 9). The idea of resonance as a sociological concept. *Global Dialogue.* https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/the-idea-of-resonance-as-a-sociological-concept

Rosa, H. (2019). *Resonance: A sociology of our relationship to the world.* Wiley.

Rosa, H. (2020). *The uncontrollability of the world.* Polity.

Schröder-Butterfill, E., & Marianti, R. (2006). A framework for understanding old-age vulnerabilities. *Ageing & Society, 26*(1), 9–35.

Shin, S. (2017, July 3). Matbueli, OECD pyunggyuneui julban…nasung gasabundamrul choijue. *Yunhap News.* https://www.yna.co.kr/view/MYH20170703017400038

Susen, S. (2020). The resonance of resonance: Critical theory as a sociology of world-relations? *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, *33*, 309–344.

Tabachnick, B. G., & Fidell, L. S. (2000). *Using multivariate statistics* (4th ed.). Allyn & Bacon.

Terranova, T. (2022). *After the internet: Digital Networks between capital and the common*. Semiotext(e).

van Cleaf, K. M. (2020). The pleasure of connectivity: Media, motherhood, and the digital maternal gaze. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, *13*(1), 36–53.

van Dijck, J. (2013). YouTube beyond technology and cultural form. In J. Teurlings & M. de Valck (Eds.), *After the break: Television theory today* (pp. 147–160). Amsterdam University Press.

van Dijck, J., Nieborg, D., & Poell, T. (2019). Reframing platform power. *Internet Policy Review*, *8*(2). https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.2.1414

van Zoonen, L. (1994). *Feminist media studies*. Sage.

van Zoonen, L. (2001). Feminist internet studies. *Feminist Media Studies*, *1*(1), 67–72.

Veenhoven, R. (2000). The four qualities of life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *1*(1), 1–39.

About the Authors

Eujong Kim is a senior research fellow at Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation, a Korean broadcasting company in Seoul, South Korea. She has published articles in Korean and English on migrants' media use and social integration, the media industry, and audience studies, and has also written and translated books. Her current research interests cover media usage measurement, content and platform strategies, and media law and policy.

Yeran Kim is a professor at the School of Communications, Kwangwoon University, Seoul, South Korea. She has published a number of articles and books in Korean, English, and Japanese. Her research articles are found in multiple renowned journals in Korean and English, including *Cultural Studies*, *Communication Monographs*, *Digital Journalism*, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *Journal of Gender Studies*. Her current research focuses on the cultural intersection of affect, culture, and society in the contemporary digital media ecology.

ARTICLE

Gender Rhetoric for Sale: Ferragni and the Platformization of the Female Body That Crushes Ideologies

Elisabetta Risi [ID] **and Maria Angela Polesana** [ID]

Department of Communication, Arts and Media, University Institute of Modern Languages (IULM), Italy

Correspondence: Elisabetta Risi (elisabetta.risi@iulm.it)

Abstract

This article aims to make a contribution to the study of liberal feminism, social media, and influencer culture, especially in the Italian context. The feminism of Chiara Ferragni, Italian fashion influencer with over 29 million followers, is an interesting case study that questions the relations, as well as the interaction, between activism, gender, and influencer culture. Ferragni's body simulacrum, exhibited through numerous social media advertising images, was displayed at Sanremo, a renowned Italian song festival, watched by 12 million people in 2023. At Sanremo, that body carried on the feminist battle through the wearing of manifesto luxury designer dresses together with the reading of a letter addressed to herself, a vector of a rhetorically powerful message that was, however, directed to the single woman rather than to women as a collectivity. This neoliberal discourse is emblematic of the instrumental use of gender issues for self-promotion, which often leads to the dilution of feminist meanings and the trivialization of social movements.

Keywords

digital platforms; female bodies; feminism; gender; influencers; rhetoric; social media influencer

1. Introduction

This article discusses the case study of the Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni and in particular her commitment to supporting feminism—through the contradictions it manifests itself with and which we are going to discuss—unmasking the neoliberal ideology that pervades it, and thus emptying it of strength.

The rationale of our study is to explore the implications and potential challenges arising from the instrumental use of gender issues for self-promotion, which often leads to the dilution of feminist meanings and the trivialization of social movements. The superficial treatment of relevant gender equality issues

warrants a critical examination. The analysis aims to investigate the entanglement between body image, platform capitalism, and the various strands of feminism.

In contemporary discourse, feminism exists through various forms (see Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Postfeminism is characterized by its unique sensibility, consisting of a number of interconnected themes that include the notion that femininity is a bodily property, with an emphasis on self-surveillance, individualism, choice, and empowerment within a media-saturated society (Gill, 2007). Neoliberal feminism, on the other hand, intertwines with neoliberal ideals, placing a strong emphasis on professional and economic success while simultaneously upholding traditional familial roles (Rottenberg, 2018). Popular feminism suggests that postfeminist sensibility has facilitated feminism's rise in popularity, linking it to media visibility and an affective embrace by the public (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This form of feminism is characterized by its commodification, especially through digital platforms (van Dijck et al., 2018) and the ways in which feminist ideas are repackaged for mass consumption.

In our society, there is a noticeable conflation between body and identity, particularly among women. As Rosalind Gill (2003) points out, since the 1980s, the process of the re-erotization of female bodies in media content has involved a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, i.e., the representation of women who freely choose to become sexual objects. Alongside the male gaze on objectified and judged women (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975), there is the female gaze of women on men and above all on themselves: In the postfeminist representation, feminism would be supplanted by narcissism, by the pleasure of pleasing oneself (Gill, 2007). Gill notes how words such as choice, empowerment, and body positivity, a trend defined as cooling feminism, are circulating to make girls feel fashionable, cool, and stylish. Thus, there is a psychologization of the feminist discourse, which becomes flat and hollow through its focus on increasing self-esteem and self-confidence: A confidence culture that proposes girls to work on themselves as a solution to gender inequality, distancing them from the political goals of the feminist movement (Gill & Orgad, 2017). Having self-esteem and self-confidence become the new dominant imperatives, thanks to the self-esteem industry, but do not motivate them to become "feminists" by fighting to change power structures in depth. The proliferation of beauty products, practices, and services on social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok further complicates this landscape. The digital makeup tutorial format exemplifies a form of democratized beauty, suggesting that with effort, learned skills, and the right products, individuals can transform their appearance regardless of their "natural beauty." However, this trend simultaneously sets unprecedentedly high expectations for appearance, perpetuating the ideal of a perfect body: a *simulacrum* of perfection.

The image of Chiara Ferragni coincides with her body through which the entire influencer narrative is conveyed on Instagram. A body that also becomes a medium for neoliberal feminism or postfeminism, as we shall see in our analysis. The influencer's success began in 2009 with a blog "The Blonde Salad" (that is metaphorically a salad-like mix of Ferragni's passions and interests): A diary started with her passion for fashion that permeates Ferragni's "mediatized" everyday life. Since 2010, she has been producing a clothing and accessories line branded with her own name. There is therefore a gradual reconfiguration of the blog, which is transformed into a lifestyle magazine (transversally touching on topics such as fashion, trends, celebrity looks, and beauty) and a global retail business. Chiara Ferragni perceives the value of Instagram (introduced in 2010), an image-based social media platform particularly suited to enhancing fashion outfits due to its primarily visual nature.

Social media platforms like Instagram have been domesticated as stages where the physical body becomes a central element of everyday posts. With approximately 26.8 million active users in Italy, representing about 45% of the population (Socialbakers, 2022), Instagram serves as a significant site for the construction and dissemination of body images. Instagram's digital affordances, as features of socio-technical systems that enable and constrain interactive behaviors (Bucher & Helmond, 2017), drive users to post engaging photos and videos by leveraging visual creativity, algorithm-driven visibility, and interactive features like stories and reels. These affordances not only influence user behavior but also extend to third parties such as developers, who enhance the platform's capabilities, and advertisers, who capitalize on user engagement for monetization (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). Instagram favors content that generates high levels of engagement, such as "likes" and comments: Images of bodies tend to receive more interaction, thereby increasing the post's visibility through the platform's algorithm (Leaver et al., 2020).

Capturing the body in countless photos shared on these platforms appears to be a means of preserving and controlling it. This control, however, is not solely individual but is deeply influenced by media narratives that promote ideal and perfect bodies, transforming them into simulacra that reflect the power of capital: Bodies are expected to be beautiful, young, slender, and sensual. The phenomenon of "Instagrammability" underscores this issue, as the value of women is often reduced to their surface appearance in social media images. Gender is thus situated within these communicative circuits, shaped by shared processes of social construction where the body serves as one of the primary "evidence" of gender, understood as the visible and objectified aspect of representation (Poggio, 2018).

The construction and representation of self-identity have long been influenced by cultural products, establishing expressive trends and cultural models. These representations are the result of a sedimentation process of shared images, significantly circulated within social media platforms (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020).

Gender, conceptualized as a dynamic performative practice, is produced and reproduced through a series of acts (Butler, 1988). It is not a static trait but one that is historically constructed and both socially and culturally determined (Butler & Trouble, 1990). From the discovery of photography to the present day, the proliferation of images shared in the media has continually disseminated the ideal of female beauty as a social value, conferring upon it a normative power (Wolf, 2002). These media-driven standards of beauty have profound implications on how femininity is perceived and enacted.

This pervasive media influence can foster processes of sexual objectification and self-objectification among women, reducing their identities to mere sexual objects and ignoring the complexity of their individuality (Fredrickson et al., 2011). As technology evolves and social media platforms become more integrated into daily life through mobile access, the line between "online" and "offline" increasingly fades (Carstensen, 2015).

Our case study is contextualized within the broader Italian patriarchal society, in which the digital influencer Chiara Ferragni operates. The traditional/patriarchal model is deeply rooted in Italian history and culture, with the influence of Catholicism, which has long reinforced traditional gender roles. Men are typically seen as "heads" of households, while women are expected to focus on caregiving and domestic duties (Saraceno, 1994). These roles contribute to significant gender inequalities in the labor market, where women face higher unemployment, lower wages, and limited career opportunities (Righetto, 2023). Nationalist forces are

strategically co-opting gender equality to further their agendas, posing a serious threat to feminist politics and gender justice. This involves the intersection of gender and sexuality with the selective appropriation of feminist ideals by right-wing parties, particularly through *femonationalist* actors who actively contribute to ongoing attacks on women's and LGBTQI+ rights (Peroni & Rapetti, 2023). Furthermore, the alliance between right-wing governments and pro-life groups has intensified a transnational "anti-gender war" and this backlash threatens the progress made in reproductive and sexual rights (Colella, 2021).

2. Methodology

This article focuses on and discusses a case study of the Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni, a mega influencer and digital entrepreneur internationally known, followed by over 28 million followers on Instagram and 6,5 million followers on TikTok. The study aims to uncover how her use of gender rhetoric in media and social media storytelling influences public perceptions of gender and feminism, and the broader implications for social and cultural norms. The research is based on a qualitative analysis of the storytelling online and a critical analysis of a particular speech.

A qualitative analysis of the influencer's storytelling was carried out over time (Polesana, 2017, 2023). In particular, the observation focused on the contents (posts and reels) published in Ferragni's Instagram feed (https://www.instagram.com/chiaraferragni) and not as Instagram stories (given the ephemeral nature of these contents). The specific study timeframe was 2023 and the first three months of 2024 (with the so-called "Pandoro Gate" episode). In this article, we will use the feminist criticism posture as an interpretative key to the content posted by the influencer (images, videos, and captions). Additionally, a critical analysis of Ferragni's speech at the Sanremo Festival 2023, an esteemed Italian song festival held annually in Italy was conducted. This is one of the most significant musical events broadcast on television, with its first edition dating back to 1951. The observation focused in particular on the episode of reading a letter that the influencer wrote to herself, the dress worn, and the words used are considered emblematic of how some feminist instances are selected and treated.

3. Ferragni's Body as Simulacra and Symbol of Popular Feminism

On social media, Chiara Ferragni builds a storytelling that is mostly visual, therefore photos and videos (sometimes accompanied by descriptions or captions). From the analysis of this content, it clearly emerges that the image of Chiara Ferragni coincides with her body through which the entire narrative of the influencer is conveyed, in particular on Instagram. So much so that the logo identifying the brand consists of the so-called "winking eye": a stylized blue eye (just like the influencer's eyes) with long black eyelashes, accompanied by the name Chiara Ferragni. A synecdoche that stands for the whole person of the influencer and conveys her friendly and playful attitude. The logo thus speaks to us of a living brand and is emblematic of how the brand humanizes itself and, vice versa, how individuals brand themselves, making the logics of branding their own in order to impose themselves in the communicative space and in the imagination of contemporary society. However, it is not simply a matter of the individual's self-commodification, but of something deeper, namely how the individual expresses their creativity, sociality, and humanity within brand culture.

In order to strengthen her visual/brand identity, and foster follower engagement, she begins to turn her private life into a sort of reality show. Her marketing strategies underpin narratives that mark "highly emotional" stages of life: from rapper Fedez's declaration and marriage proposal to the birth of their children. The wedding, celebrated in 2018, witnesses both the triumph of a large number of brands sponsoring the event, and marks the birth not only of a couple, namely Fedez and Ferragni, but of a real brand: The Ferragnez. "The Ferragnez" is also the name of a docuseries (2021 and 2023 on Amazon Prime) on the life of her family which, like the many pictures posted on Instagram, shows Chiara Ferragni's ability to be both mother of two children (they enter the screens as newborns and from the start are perfectly integrated into the Ferragnez's consumerist world) and entrepreneur. It's a transmedia narrative permeated by typically neo-liberal gender rhetoric that requires women to reconcile career and family in order to be truly complete (Rottenberg, 2018). To make this point, Chiara Ferragni herself on more than one occasion (even reading the letter addressed to herself at the Sanremo festival) has claimed to feel the pressure of society that expects women to be efficient at work and at the same time good mothers and wives, whereas it is different for men, on whom such expectations don't apply but at the same time she herself, through her words and her body, supports the inequalities she criticizes.

Specifically, Chiara Ferragni's life, her passion for fashion, and her activistic activity take place against the backdrop of the latter and are manifested through a corporeity that is continuously displayed on her Instagram page. Chiara Ferragni is indeed a *showcased* body (Codeluppi, 2021), which reveals the contradictions of the neoliberal ideology that rules it, in which freedom of choice is disguised as emancipation. In other words, female empowerment, which Ferragni represents, coincides with the feminist imagery that has been asserting itself since the 1990s, circulating in popular culture (McRobbie, 2004) that enhances/supports female individualism. In line with the empowerment promoted by the mainstream media and much advertising, it seems to be reduced to the choice of one consumer good rather than another, to a private, individual action, to a complacent narcissism in the name of a kind of marketplace feminism (Zeisler, 2016), i.e., a decontextualized, depoliticized, mediatized feminism, focused on individual experience and personal fulfillment. A feminism emptied of its subversive charge, a commodity feminism or postfeminism: The consumer society has transformed bodies into inexhaustible repertoires of proposals and solicitations (Priulla, 2016).

Chiara Ferragni's body seems to become a compendium of neoliberal and postfeminism issues: She engages herself in constant self-monitoring, in continuous self-surveillance to identify the areas on which to act in order to transform one's appearance. The imperative to transformation meets very high expectations and requires high financial resources and a large investment of time (McRobbie, 2020; Riley et al., 2018). Actually, women, even before the advent of digital screens and the profiling that characterizes them, have always thought of themselves on the basis of a second-order observation. Indeed, as Berger (1972) argues, women have to look at themselves all the time, they are almost constantly accompanied by the image they have of themselves. From a very early age, a woman is taught and persuaded to observe herself continuously. And so, she comes to regard the overseer and the overseen within herself as the two constituent elements of her identity as a woman. For the woman, feeling her own existence is replaced by feeling recognized by the other. In this regard, we can take up Berger's reflection on painting. The scholar, considering a series of paintings from different eras depicting nude women in the act of looking at themselves in the mirror, notes how the mirror was often used as a symbol of female vanity, even though in reality it is a hypocritical form of moralism. In particular, regarding the *Vanity* portrait by the German painter Hans Memling (1435–1494), Berger states:

> You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting Vanity, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight. (Berger, 1972, p. 53)

In photos and videos posted on Instagram, Ferragni's body is an expression of this reduction to "sight," it is a simulacrum body (Polesana, 2017), since despite being part of an identitarian narrative this does not make it earth-human, as this biography is narrated through advertising images. And advertising, by its very nature, is the realm of the happy ending, of happiness, of perfect bodies, especially if female. It is this syntax constructed by capital (Foucault, 1975) and acted out by Ferragni's simulacrum body that guarantees her success even beyond national borders because she expresses her value within a "deterritorialised aesthetic space" (Lull, 2000) affected by consumer culture and the visual logic of communication.

In the many photos shared on social media platforms, this influencer seems to play, like a child, at dressing up. Her laughter, a sort of uncontainable joy, and her exaggerated gestures express a playfulness in line with the celebration of youth and happiness. We can consider this in line with the contemporary discourse on "happycracy," another new narrative that focuses on the development of character traits associated with happiness, such as inner strength, autonomy, self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience, aimed at increasing the likelihood of individuals completing challenging tasks (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). This discourse reflects a shift towards emphasizing psychological attributes as key to personal and professional success, intertwining with neoliberal ideologies of self-optimization

As Baudrillard states, the body has an "ideological function"; it is "the guiding myth of an ethic of consumption" (2016, p. 136) and as such loses any "demystifying" character to become, in its pornography, "advertising," an obsessive show-casing of which the proliferation of digital images is a disturbing and hypertrophic manifestation, a simulacrum, an empty packaging that refers to nothing but itself. It is visible without any "originality" in its reference to a capitalist "model" (Baudrillard, 2016) of body image that is not the result of a "representation," but is a simulacrum invested by pornography that, in the name of the truest of the true, annihilates any claim to uniqueness. The very nudity of the body, which claims to be progressivist and rational, far from finding the "truth of the body"—its "natural" reason beyond clothes, taboos, and fashion—passes by the body used as the universal equivalent of the spectacle of commodities (Galimberti, 2013).

In this regard, we recall the criticism of sexual objectification expressed by an Italian teenager follower, as a comment to a photo on Ferragni's Instagram profile in May 2023: That image portrays the influencer naked in front of the mirror, covered only by her hands that hide her breasts. The young user commented: "What is the message for us girls? That to get noticed we have to get naked? I don't find that a good message to send." Ferragni's counter-response seems to confirm the cannibalization of the feminist message by the neo-liberal culture that turns the structural problem of gender inequality into an individual issue by focusing on the individual empowered woman. In fact, the influencer wrote:

> The message for all of us, young girls or not, from me is very simple: no one can judge us or make us feel wrong. Posting a photo like this should not embarrass anyone and on the contrary, show that everyone is free to be themselves and celebrate themselves when they feel like it. Why should a woman in her

underwear be ashamed of her body? Why should she be afraid of giving the wrong idea instead of feeling good inside her skin? We have been taught that women cannot dare, and this is one of the many ways that I use to take the freedom that we ALL should have.

Actually, it is a strange freedom, a freedom subject to the less visible and more insidious control of money: "Knowing how to sell yourself is the mercantile motto shown as a conquest of modernity. Make an authentic brand of yourself" (Priulla, 2016 p. 245). As Priulla argues:

> It is not nudity itself that is right or wrong, but the meaning we give to that naked body at that moment. If it is a subject of freedom or if it is an object of exchange, if it is erotic or if it is eroticised for commercial purposes. (Priulla, p. 246)

The body, in tune with the post-feminist sensibility (Gill, 2007), becomes also the place of feminine value and identity: in the next paragraphs, the Dior dress worn by Chiara Ferragni at the Sanremo Festival can be an emblematic example. A flesh-colored tulle dress that simulates, in a sort of *trompe l'oeil*, the influencer's nude body, a body that symbolically represents, in her intentions, liberation from the shame that has befallen it since Eve, the first woman in history to feel this sentiment (recalling the words used by Ferragni).

The emphasis on her "perfect" body translates into so many forms of control since "to the extent that she becomes 'free,' a woman becomes increasingly confused with her own sex" (Baudrillard, 2016, p. 160). We are in the presence of that social control that Foucault (1975) denounces as an emanation of power in a kind of anatomo-politics of the human body. The power that Foucault speaks of is now located in capital and consumption, instruments that induce adaptation with respect to precise models of femininity that in fact lead towards homogenization of bodies and their forms, rather than towards their free expression.

4. The Intersections Between Body Image, Platform Capitalism, and Neoliberal Feminist Issues

Ferragni's body expresses itself in all its simulacra nature (Polesana, 2017) and it becomes a symbol of popular feminism, a feminism mediatized as much through broadcast media (television and the press that quote her) as through social media.

The influencer fights "to free the nipple" through images posted on Instagram, in which she wears transparent garments that defy social censorship with respect to the nipple, claiming the need for women to regain possession of their bodies: a liberating gesture, according to her intentions, but which can also be read as an example of sexual subjectification (Gill, 2003). In short, once again feminism becomes an expression of one's individuality, of being what one wants without any attempt to question the structural aspects that undermine its strength in a still patriarchal society. Chiara Ferragni seems to use a precise (social media) marketing strategy to tune in to the feeling of the contemporary consumer who, in her specific case, is a woman. Modern marketing no longer sells a product or service, but it leverages the storytelling of the product, makes it emotionally impactful, and convinces the consumer to buy the product not (only) because of its intrinsic qualities but because the consumer is in line with the values of the brand selling it.

This type of (influ-)activism, however, as Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, does not go beyond the politics of individual visibility: Being the bearer of an instance means being important/relevant/famous in oneself, without having a real objective of social and structural change. This sort of feminism is an expression of an economy of attention in which its accessibility (through shared images, "likes," clicks, followers, retweets, etc.) is a key component of its popularity. This popularity is linked in a kind of perverse spiral to its visibility, which is not static but dynamic: meaning that popular feminism is constantly striving to maintain and increase its visibility. As Rottenberg (2018) argues, the values and assumptions of neoliberalism (ever-expanding markets, entrepreneurship, a focus on the individual) are embraced and not contested/challenged by feminism.

In digital platforms, the popularity is conditioned by algorithmic and economic components and is measured mainly in quantitative terms by rewarding with greater visibility users with more followers, comments, or likes, and content that is able to generate immediate reactions from users. But such visibility circuits are driven by profit, competition, and capitalist logic (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016): Influencers are incorporated within the world of advertising and marketing, and their dependence on the platforms where they carry out their activities shapes their content and their relationship with followers (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021).

Chiara Ferragni embodies the tenets of neoliberal feminism which, unlike traditional feminism that focuses on social justice, equality, emancipation, and liberation, enhances self-esteem, resilience, and the ability to manage both professional and domestic spheres effectively (Rottenberg, 2018). Ferragni's public persona and Instagram storytelling promote a vision of happiness achieved through balancing career and family life, framing this balance as a managerial challenge.

The intersections between body image, platform capitalism, and post- and neoliberal feminist issues manifest prominently across various and increasingly social media platforms. These intersections are set against a historical backdrop where associations between women and beauty concerns have been problematized by feminist discourses as oppressive and objectifying (Riley et al., 2018). In contemporary contexts, such as the discourse propagated by influencer Chiara Ferragni, we observe a convergence of body image with neoliberal feminist activism, where gender terminologies and visual representations of bodies serve the purposes of self-promotion, visibility, and commercial gain. This is evident in the commodification of personal data, content, and beauty products. Ferragni's rhetoric exemplifies what can be termed a "re-traditionalisation" of femininity, where pursuits related to beauty and the domestic sphere, once critiqued by feminists like Rosalind Gill (2007) as tools of oppression, are now rebranded as sites of pleasure and empowerment (Riley et al., 2018). This shift, from viewing these activities as oppressive duties to recognizing them as sources of pleasure and empowerment, illustrates the complex and often contradictory nature of contemporary feminist discourse, particularly within the framework of platform capitalism. This dynamic underscores how neoliberal feminism reinterprets traditional feminine roles, aligning them with modern ideals of personal success and fulfillment, while simultaneously engaging in the commercial exploitation of these identities.

Digital activism and influence culture, increasingly central themes in social sciences within the platformization framework (Poell et al., 2019), have traditionally been treated separately. Recently, however, two processes have blurred this distinction. In our analysis, an influencer like Chiara Ferragni takes explicit stances on controversial issues, as well as an increasing number of creators that focus on public issues to

promote social change in areas such as intersectional feminism and social justice. This phenomenon, termed influ-activism, has sparked a debate on digital activism's ability to promote non-hegemonic narratives while also being influenced by the neoliberal and commodifying logics of social media platforms.

Chiara Ferragni's activity in favor of solidarity campaigns and her frequent social media exposure on civil rights issues were helping to also generate expectations regarding her substantial ability to frame current political issues (Mitchell, 2020). For example, Ferragni and her husband Fedez played a significant role during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic by raising awareness among young audiences about the importance of wearing masks, following a request for help from Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in October 2020. While Ferragni's influence in the world of marketing and commercial branding has been extensively analyzed, it is also crucial to explore how she leverages her substantial social media following to become a socio-political influencer, effectively "selling" political content to her audience (Duffy & Pierce, 2007).

Chiara Ferragni's activism is an expression of the intertwining of neo-liberal feminism and platform affordances that encourage self-branding whose success rests on the emotional involvement of the audience through her own autobiographical narration (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

5. From "Think Yourself Free" to "Think Yourself Liberal": Feministic Rhetoric for Sale

Starting from her social media image, Ferragni participated as co-presenter of the Italian Festival of Sanremo in the 2023 edition, broadcast on RAI1, the main public television channel in Italy (part of the Radiotelevisione Italiana group), which is the public broadcasting service in Italy. This event was viewed by an average of 12 million viewers.

Our case study focused, more specifically, on her speech and clothing. Among the dresses worn by Ferragni at the festival, one notable piece was a long, black, strapless, bustier dress with a white stole manifesto bearing the embroidered inscription "*Pensati Libera*" (think yourself free), designed by the high fashion company Dior. According to Ferragni and Dior, this dress represents an invitation to women to step out of societal roles and feel free. Ferragni explained that "Think Yourself Free is dedicated to all women who want to feel simply themselves without being judged," highlighting the concept of self-management and the empowerment of women as sole architects of their destinies, consistent with neo-liberal ideology.

However, the paradox of the message was caught by the web with a meme replacing "*libera*" (free) with "liberal," thus exposing what some people perceived as the hollowing out of feminism by Ferragni. Her invitation was ironically transformed into "pensati liberal" (think of yourself as liberal). Additionally, Maria Grazia Chiuri, Dior's creative director, claimed on Instagram that she was inspired by a photo taken of this manifesto on a wall in Genoa by the artistic duo Claire Fontaine. However, the phrase had long appeared on the walls of Bologna, attributed to the street artist Cicatrici Nere (Black Scars), who clarified that his intent was not feminist advocacy but rather a critique of the commodification and spectacle that consume all aspects of human life.

During one of the evenings at the festival, Chiara Ferragni delivered a "letter addressed to herself." Her discourse begins with this incipit: "Hello baby girl, I decided to write you a letter." The speech included some reflections such as: "At any stage of my life there was one thought stuck in my head: I didn't feel

enough" and "you will feel guilty for having other dreams than family, because our society has taught us that when you become a mother you are just a mother." She urged herself (as a single woman) to "celebrate your successes, the big ones and the small ones" and to "challenge prejudices" surrounding body image, noting, "If you hide it you're a nun, if you show it you're a slut."

Ferragni's speech effectively engaged the audience's identification mechanisms, presenting a rhetorically powerful message that addressed the individual woman rather than women as a collective:

> I always tried to make you proud. Everything I do, I do it for you, it is for the little girl that I used to be. All those times you haven't felt good enough, pretty enough, smart enough, anything enough…you were. And do you know during how many moments you'll feel like this? So many.

The struggle for women's emancipation is treated in an ambivalent and individualistic manner:

> Yes, you'll become a mother too.…But you will be the same person, with the same doubts and insecurities as always.…Will it be easy to be a parent? Never. It will be the hardest job of them all.…You'll often feel guilty of being far from your kids, even to go to work. Our society has taught us that when you become a mother you are only a mother.…But I'll tell you something: If you'll always do your best for your children, and if they're the main thought of your days, set aside any doubts: probably you are a good mother. Not perfect, but good enough.

In these quotes from Ferragni's speech, it emerges how gender inequalities are considered issues to be solved with individual work on herself as a woman: a common feeling that leads to a collective movement of social change is not solicited. More specifically, we can notice a discrepancy between Chiara Ferragni's words and the pictures portraying her on social media. The images posted by Ferragni represent the images of her own body and of the traditional family: the goal is commercial and stimulates mechanisms of projection ("I would like to be like her") and identification ("I see myself in her"). The words instead tell of a potential empowerment useful to fuel an individualistic feminist rhetoric (with the same purpose, which is to attract followers/consumers).

In this sense, we view Ferragni's speech as an example of rhetoric for sale that fuels the phenomenon of influ-activism (Sobrero, 2024). On one hand, the blend of celebrity and politics has the potential to rejuvenate political culture, encouraging public engagement through alternative forms of participation (Campus, 2020). On the other hand, celebrity activism is often perceived as either a meaningful contribution or a superficial manifestation of a consumer-driven culture. It embodies "heroic individualism" (Wheeler, 2013), promoting the pursuit of economic growth while perpetuating consumerist culture and reinforcing social inequalities. Ferragni's discourse appears to generate not dissent, but rather adherence to an "idolatry of consensus" (Nicolas, 2016).

Influ-activism often struggles to promote non-hegemonic narratives because it is deeply embedded within the neoliberal and commodifying logics of social media platforms. These platforms prioritize visibility, engagement, and marketability, which tends to favor content that aligns with dominant cultural norms and consumer interests. As a result, influencers, even those engaged in activism, reduce complex social issues to individual branding opportunities, where the focus shifts from collective action to personal gain and visibility. This can dilute the radical potential of activism by framing it within a commodified, easily digestible format

that is more about maintaining a positive image and less about challenging the status quo. Consequently, non-hegemonic narratives, which often require deeper, more critical engagement, may be sidelined in favor of content that is more palatable to a wider audience, more easily monetized, and less likely to disrupt the platform's commercial ecosystem.

Ferragni's gender storytelling and feminist rhetoric aim to capture the attention (Lipovetsky, 2017) of consumer-followers. Her commitment, along with that of millions of other bodies displayed on digital platforms, manifests the capitalization of values promoted by advertising narratives into habitus. By exploiting gender rhetoric, the image of women is reduced to their ability to spectacularize their bodies, thus emptying ideologies of substance. According to Immanuel Wallerstein (2007) in *The Rhetoric of Power: Critique of European Universalism*, there is nothing more particularistic than universalist claims. Ferragni's speech separates the collective, hierarchical, and material dimensions of gender relations, individualizing them and relegating them to the private sphere. This is an example of the fragmentation of a *spot-politik* made of slogans and the pulverization of consensus (Capaci & Licheri, 2014), leading to the construction of "fragile public opinions, incapable of independently formulating critical thought" (Banti, 2020, p. 96). The relationship between influencers and followers is based on the emotional involvement of social media audiences, often ignoring the topic of the speech and wherein "the global image we have of the person prevails as a persuasive factor over the details of their words" (Landowski, 2018, p. 5).

Paraphrasing Nancy Fraser (1989), it is evident that a woman like Chiara Ferragni, who attains top positions by conforming to capitalist norms, changes things for herself without subverting the system. This corporate-friendly feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018) equates female empowerment with the mere inclusion of more women in corporate settings. This approach suggests that merely having more women in top positions resolves all issues, overlooking the need to challenge dominant cultural models of sexuality and the underlying ideology.

Chiara Ferragni's presence at the Sanremo Festival 2023, her promotion of a "feminist manifesto" (all dressed in Dior), her promotion of Di.Re. (a network of organizations dedicated to ending violence against women) can be considered a marketing operation. Chiara Ferragni introduces herself to the public, shares an open letter with her baby self, talks about her experience of motherhood, and gets in touch with her audience, which is women. She talks about women, selling products for women with the aim of monetizing by leveraging emotions. It is not necessarily pinkwashing: her fee for Sanremo 2023 amounted to around 100,000 euros and was donated to associations dealing with gender violence. Many of her collaborators are women. These are very practical actions that go from a simple brand purpose to strong brand activism (Sakar & Kotler, 2021).

6. The Capitalist Spectacle of Ferragni's Branded World

Chiara Ferragni's narrative is imbued with neo-liberal arguments that are translated into the narcissistic competition that she sustains with herself, and with respect to her own limits, according to a dictatorship of therapeutic well-being functional to the demands of capitalism: that is, a model of a woman that is engaged in a process of constant, perpetual self-monitoring and self-improvement, to be realized through psychological tools in order to achieve happiness (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). To the point that, as the influencer herself states several times in the documentary *Chiara Ferragni-Unposted* (2019), what inspires her is the "Chiara I would like." In other words: a model of the ideal individual ("I have always been obsessed with

becoming the best version of myself," states Ferragni). And the whole transmedia narrative of the influencer is centered precisely around the commitment to self-improvement, working on unwanted emotions and thoughts in a positive way. Thus, she embodies, through her affective and entrepreneurial life, a sort of therapeutic model for finding happiness.

It is interesting in this regard to consider the particularly troubled period, both professionally and from a personal point of view, that the influencer is going through in the current year (2024). Indeed, we can see how the reaction to the scandal that engulfed her in December 2023 unmasks the ambiguities of popular or postfeminist feminism deeply steeped in neoliberal ideology. Specifically, Chiara Ferragni was fined one million euros in December 2023 by the Competition and Market Authority (the Antitrust Authority) for misleading advertising. Let us briefly recall that the influencer was the protagonist, in 2022, of the promotional campaign "Pandoro Pink Christmas" for a line of pandoro cakes (traditional Italian Christmas sponge cake) produced by Balocco. She received a cachet of one million euros and consumers were led to believe that the sale of each product (which had tripled in price due to the packaging with Chiara Ferragni's brand logos) would contribute to a charity donation to the pediatric oncology ward of the Regina Margherita hospital in Turin. However, it was revealed that the donation, amounting to 50 thousand euros, had previously been made by Balocco alone, regardless of sales. It is clear, therefore, that the amount of this donation was completely unrelated to the number of sales of the Ferragni-branded Pandoro cakes.

As we know, the lives of digital influencers are subject to intense scrutiny and public fascination. When Chiara Ferragni experienced a fallout, whether due to scandal, controversy, or public disagreement, the event reverberated through media channels and societal discourse. The role of social media platforms in managing fandom bashing on her Instagram account can be interpreted in the context of what Guy Debord (1966) defines as a spectacle. To apologize to her followers, Ferragni shared an exculpatory video on social media in which she presented herself in a very sober manner, wearing a grey tracksuit, admitting her mistake (albeit partially, since she claimed and maintains that it was a communication error that led consumers to misunderstand the real nature of the collaboration between her brand and that of Balocco), with her voice broken by tears. In order to remedy this, she pledged to donate an amount equal to the fine imposed by the Antitrust Authority, that is, one million euros, to the hospital. Without delving too deeply into the content of the video and the many communication errors that characterize it, we can't help but note the somewhat too openly contrived character of the video itself through a stereotypical communication/presentation of suffering (dull make-up, resigned outfit, rehearsed facial expression, voice broken by weeping, as already noted, etc.). The spectacle, typically seen as a theory of sign and image dissemination, gains depth when viewed as a comprehensive organization of signs. This perspective helps us understand figures like Ferragni across various levels of the spectacle, including digital platforms and their impact in Italy. It also allows us to move beyond the notion of celebrity agency in self-presentation (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) as a result of the sedimentation of shared images previously circulated (not only) inside social media platforms (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020).

What we would like to draw attention to, however, is the most macroscopic among the errors committed, namely the influencer's belief that she could make amends by buying the betrayed trust of her followers with a large sum of money—as if everything had a price, including values and ethics. This gesture violently brings to light the capitalist nature of Ferragni's branded world, insinuating in those who follow her the doubt that the social commitment she has professed over the years, on several fronts—including the one taken into

consideration here, namely feminist commitment—was not in fact disinterested, but rather aimed at soliciting "likes" and maintaining her visibility on the platforms.

In this sense, we argue that the fallout involving Chiara Ferragni represents a rupture in the structure of the spectacle, disrupting established codes of behavior, morality, and identity. This disruption extends beyond the individual to encompass broader social and cultural dynamics of the spectacle. Social media platforms serve as both channels for the proliferation of the spectacle and platforms where the micro ruptures of fallout are amplified, providing space for negotiation. By analyzing the fallout, it becomes evident that underlying power structures, ideological tensions, and cultural norms are at play within the spectacle, influencing the reception and interpretation of the event. Through a precise rhetorical and content organization strategy (rather than mere dissemination) consisting of images, narratives, and discourses, social media platforms play a pivotal role in constructing and deconstructing the meanings associated with influencers.

7. Some Conclusions

In this article, we discuss the case study of the Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni as an example of gender rhetoric for sale and of platformization of the woman body that crushes gender ideologies. We considered both the visual storytelling on her Instagram channel (during 2023 and the first two months of 2024), and letters addressed to herself as a baby girl, together with the dresses worn at the 2023 edition of the Italian Sanremo Festival.

The analysis conducted revealed a powerful narrative in favor of female empowerment, which actually seems inspired by neoliberal rhetoric. As much on social media as on television, Chiara Ferragni is her body, an advertised body, anything but free. It's a body that expresses the contradictions of postfeminism in which the struggle for women's freedom is reduced to self-management, through the "free" objectification of one's body, and the possibility of making one's own consumer choices independently. Therefore, it does not have a collective dimension but is an expression of an individual act.

Other celebrities, such as Beyoncé and Emma Watson, have become spokespersons for feminist issues. We can consider Ferragni's speech as the contemporary evolution of the "girl power" rhetoric, which gained popularity in North America and Europe, from the Spice Girls to the Women's World Cup, promoting confident, assertive, and intelligent girls. "Girl power" practices and goods quickly became normative, embedding themselves in a postfeminist culture.

The digital landscape has influenced gender representation, offering both opportunities and challenges. As we discussed in the article, the relationship between feminism and (social) media remains open, because, in a complex and mixed way, it concerns aspects such as sexism, empowerment, visibility, resistance, activism, or even the irrelevance of gender.

On one hand, social media and online platforms have democratized content creation, giving marginalized genders a platform to share diverse and authentic narratives that challenge traditional stereotypes. Research shows that these platforms can empower individuals to redefine gender norms and identities in more inclusive ways, even if social media platforms are complex and contradictory spaces for feminism (Locke et al., 2018). Digital platforms can offer the potential for widely disseminating feminist ideas "shaping new

forms of discourse on gender and sexism, connecting with diverse audiences, and fostering creative modes of protest" (Baer, 2016, p. 18).

On the other hand, the context of feminism via social media captures "a distinctive contradictory yet patterned sensibility closely tied to neoliberalism" (Gill, 2016, p. 610), emphasizing "individualism, choice, and agency" (Gill, 2016, p. 613). In this sense, many of the new feminist activities on social media are rooted in postfeminist ideas. Whether we remain in a postfeminist era or are transitioning away from it toward a potential fourth wave of social media-based activism (Turley & Fisher, 2018), remains an open question.

On a more macro level, we cannot fail to consider the connection between (social) media and platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017): Neoliberal and popular feminism depend on and validate the interests of social media platforms and digital corporations, as well as neoliberal capitalism. Contemporary iterations of feminism do not challenge the hegemony of neoliberal or platform capitalism but rather contribute to its normalization and presumption of inevitability. On social media, different feminist practices coexist, embedded in an attention economy shaped by the logic of popularity (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Digital activism initiatives navigate algorithmic logics to attract and sustain visibility for feminist messages, with social movements competing by using the same communication strategies and algorithmic management as social media influencers.

While we critically discuss contemporary feminisms, our critique also represents an attempt to envision alternatives beyond instrumental rhetoric. We explore the ambivalence of Ferragni's speech and reflect on how gender rhetoric can potentially generate movements within post-, neoliberal, and popular feminisms. We consider how this ambivalence might be mobilized to construct a renewed vision of economic and gender justice. The relationship between gender, influencer culture, and digital activism, as well as their interaction, are promising but under-researched areas deserving further exploration.

Funding

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Baer, H. (2016). Redoing feminism: Digital activism, body politics, and neoliberalism. *Feminist Media Studies*, *16*(1), 17–34.

Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic: The politics of ambivalence in a brand culture*. New York University Press.

Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Duke University Press.

Banet-Weiser, S., Gill, R., & Rottenberg, C. (2020). Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation. *Feminist Theory*, *21*(1), 3–24.

Banti, A. M. (2020). *La democrazia dei followers. Neoliberismo e cultura di massa*. Laterza.

Baudrillard, J. (2016). *The consumer society: Myths and structures*. Sage.

Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. Penguin.

Bucher, T., & Helmond, A. (2017). The affordances of social media platforms. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of social media* (pp. 233–253). Sage.

Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theater Journal*, *40*(4), 519–531.

Butler, J., & Trouble, G. (1990). Feminism and the subversion of identity. *Gender Trouble*, *3*(1), 3–17.

Cabanas, E., & Illouz, E. (2019). *Manufacturing happy citizens: How the science and industry of happiness control our lives*. Wiley.

Campus, D. (2020). Celebrity leadership: When political leaders are stars. *Comunicazione Politica*, *2*, 185–203. https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.3270/97903

Capaci, B., & Licheri, P. (2014). *Non sia retorico! Luoghi, argomenti e figure della persuasione*. Pardes.

Carstensen, T. (2015). Gender and social media: Sexism, empowerment, or the irrelevance of gender? In C. Carter, L. Steiner, & L. Mclaughlin (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to media & gender* (pp. 483–492). Routledge.

Codeluppi, V. (2021). *Vetrinizzazione. Individui e società in scena*. Bollati Boringhieri

Colella, D. (2021). Femonationalism and anti-gender backlash: The instrumental use of gender equality in the nationalist discourse of the Fratelli d'Italia party. *Gender & Development*, *29*(2/3), 269–289.

Duffy, B., & Pierce, A. (2007). *Socio-political influencers: Who are they and why they matter*. Ipsos MORI.

Foucault, M. (1975). *Sorvegliare e punire*. Einuadi.

Fraser, N. (1989). *Power, discourse and gender in contemporary social theory*. University of Minnesota Press.

Fredrickson, B. L., Hendler, L. M., Nilsen, S., O'Barr, J. F., & Roberts, T.-A. (2011). Bringing back the body: A retrospective on the development of objectification theory. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *35*(4), 689–696. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684311426690

Galimberti, U. (2013). *Il corpo, Opere V*. Feltrinelli.

Gill, R. (2003). From sexual objectification to sexual subjectifaction: The resexualisation of women's bodies in the media. *Feminist Media Studies*, *3*(1), 100–106.

Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *10*(2), 147–166.

Gill, R. (2016). Post-feminism? New feminist visibilities in postfeminist times. *Feminist Media Studies*, *16*(4), 610–630.

Gill, R., & Orgad, S. (2017). Confidence culture and the remaking of feminism. *New Formations*, *91*, 16–34.

Hearn, A., & Schoenhoff, S. (2016). From celebrity to influencer: Tracing the diffusion of celebrity value across the data stream, in a companion to celebrity. In P. D. Marshall & S. Redmond (Eds.), *A companion to celebrity* (pp. 194–212). Wiley.

Landowski, E. (2018). Populisme et esthésie : Presentation. *Actes Sémiotiques*, *121*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.25965/as.6021

Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. Wiley.

Lipovetsky, G. (2017). The empire of fashion: Introduction. In M. Barnard (Ed.), *Fashion theory* (pp. 25–32). Routledge.

Locke, A., Lawthom, R., & Lyons, A. (2018). Social media platforms as complex and contradictory spaces for feminisms: Visibility, opportunity, power, resistance and activism. *Feminism & Psychology*, *28*(1), 3–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353517753973

Lull, J. (2000). *Media, communication and culture: A global approach*. Polity Press.

Marwick, A., & Boyd, D. (2011). To see and be seen: Celebrity practice on Twitter. *Convergence*, *17*(2), 139–158.

McRobbie, A. (2004). Postfeminism and popular culture. *Feminist Media Studies*, *4*(3), 255–264.

McRobbie, A. (2020). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. Sage.

Mitchell, C. (2020). *Political realities as portrayed by internet personalities, creative truth or social control*. SSRN. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3607969

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, *16*(6), 16–18.

Nicolas, L. (2016). Using speech to disturb consensus: Or, taking rhetoric (and its agonistic roots) seriously. *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio*, *2016*, 184–198. https://doi.org/10.4396/2016BC13

Peroni, M., & Rapetti, E. (2023). Where feminists dare: The challenge to the hetero-patriarchal and neo-conservative backlash in Italy and Poland. *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, *10*(1S), 38S–66S. https://doi.org/10.35295/osls.iisl/0000-0000-0000-1156

Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & van Dijck, J. (2019). Platformisation. *Internet Policy Review*, *8*(4), 1–13.

Poggio, B. (2018). Gender politics in academia in the neoliberal age. In J. W. Messerschmidt, M. A. Messner, R. Connell, & P. Y. Martin (Eds.), *Gender reckonings: New social theory and research* (pp. 173–193). New York University Press.

Polesana, M. A. (2017). Chiara Ferragni: Il corpo simulacro. *Mediascapes Journal*, *9*, 194–210. https://rosa.uniroma1.it/rosa03/mediascapes/article/view/14145/13883

Polesana, M. A. (2023). *Influencer e social media*. FrancoAngeli.

Priulla, G. (2016). *La libertà difficile delle donne: Ragionando di corpi e di poteri*. Settenove.

Righetto, G. (2023). Marriage patterns and the gender gap in labor force participation: Evidence from Italy. *Labor Economics*, *82*, Article 102359. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2023.102359

Riley, S., Evans, A., & Robson, M. (2018). *Postfeminism and health: Critical psychology and media perspectives*. Routledge.

Rottenberg, C. (2018). *The rise of neoliberal feminism*. Oxford University Press.

Sakar, C., & Kotler, P. (2021). *Brand activism: From purpose to action*. Idea bite pess.

Saraceno, C. (1994). The ambivalent familism of the Italian welfare state. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, *1*(1), 60–82.

Sobrero, R. (2024). *Pericolo socialwashing: Comunicare l'impegno sociale tra opportunità e rischi*. EGEA spa.

Socialbakers. (2022). *Social media trends report*.

Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Polity.

Tiggemann, M., & Anderberg, I. (2020). Social media is not real: The effect of 'Instagram vs reality' images on women's social comparison and body image. *New Media & Society*, *22*(12), 2183–2199.

Turley, E., & Fisher, J. (2018). Tweeting back while shouting back: Social media and feminist activism. *Feminism & Psychology*, *28*(1), 128–132.

van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2013). Understanding social media logic. *Media and Communication*, *1*(1), 2–14.

van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford university press.

van Driel, L., & Dumitrica, D. (2021). Selling brands while staying "authentic": The professionalization of Instagram influencers. *Convergence*, *27*(1), 66–84.

Wallerstein, I. (2007). *The rhetoric of power: Critique of European universalism*. New York Press.

Wolf, N. (2002). *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. Harper-Collins.

Wheeler, M. (2013). *Celebrity politics*. Polity Press.

Zeisler, A. (2016). *We were feminist once: From riot grrrl to covergirl, the buying and selling of a political movement*. PublicAffairs.

About the Authors

Elisabetta Risi is senior assistant professor at IULM University (Italy). She carries out research activities at the Giampaolo Fabris Department of Communication, Arts, and Media. Her research interests cover the sociology of media and communication and methods of social research. She participated in and organized conferences and workshops in various universities and is the author of several articles on the relationship between communication practices, platformization and contemporary forms of gender, with particular reference to digital communication.

Maria Angela Polesana is associate professor in media and cultural studies at IULM University in Milan. She carries out research activities at Giampaolo Fabris Department of Communication, Arts, and Media. Her main areas of research concern: consumption, corporate communication, representations of gender in advertisements, and construction of identity in digital space. Her latest book is *Influencer and Social Media* (2023, FrancoAngeli, Milan).

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Father Influencers' Short Videos in China: Representations of Hybrid Fatherhood and Commercialisation on Xiaohongshu

Min Xu [ID], Xinchen Liu, and Hao Zhang

School of Journalism and Communication, Yangzhou University, China

Correspondence: Hao Zhang (zhanghao@yzu.edu.cn)

Abstract

This study investigates the emerging trend of "dad vlogs" and short videos on Xiaohongshu, a popular lifestyle platform in China that incorporates e-commerce. Specifically, it examines how dad vloggers represent fathers' parenting practices and responsibilities in their videos, and how they construct the commercial aspects of their content. Through a netnography approach and the analysis of 285 popular dad vlogs and short videos created by ten father influencers on Xiaohongshu, the study reveals how these dad vloggers showcase the various activities and efforts involved in raising children. They take on the roles of friend, playmate, and mentor, incorporating a type of humour and playfulness that end up characterising their approach. Notably, a hybrid model of fatherhood has emerged that combines new practices—such as encouragement and an "emotionally strategic" approach—with the traditional Chinese father's role as an educator, aiming to cultivate high-achieving children. Based on such representations, the commercialisation of father influencers' content involves different approaches to integrating product endorsements into well-crafted, informative videos with a well-received persona. The findings provide insights into contemporary parenting practices popularised in short videos, where representations of fatherhood attract large audiences, particularly female viewers, while enabling monetisation in the context of Chinese platform economies.

Keywords

Chinese short-video platforms; dad vlogs; father influencers; fatherhood; parenthood; representation; Xiaohongshu

1. Introduction

Vlogs that discuss various aspects of parenting, including family activities, parenting tips, and product reviews, have become increasingly popular on video platforms. While scholars have extensively studied "mommy blogs" and "mommy vlogs" (e.g., Abetz & Moore, 2018; G. He et al., 2022; Lehto, 2020; Lopez, 2009; Morrison, 2011), there is a noticeable lack of research on dad vlogs and short videos in which fathers share their parenting experiences, insights, and advice. A comparative study of mommy blogs and dad blogs reveals gendered nuances in blog framings of parenting, and that intensive parenting culture affects both mothers and fathers in similar but also different ways (Scheibling & Milkie, 2023). Compared to blogs, newer social media platforms such as TikTok may challenge parental norms and gendered messages more radically (Scheibling & Milkie, 2023). It is therefore important to study dad vlogs and short videos on social media to understand how they challenge traditional parenting norms and to identify their characteristics in representing parenting practices.

Dad vlogs and short videos in the Chinese context present an interesting area for research, given the widespread popularity of short videos in China and their potential to challenge traditional stereotypes of fathers as distant or uninvolved. These videos feature fathers actively participating in childcare, documenting their parenting journeys, and sharing parenting advice. It is intriguing to explore how dad vloggers construct fatherhood and whether these representations reinforce patriarchal structures. Moreover, with both mother and father influencers showcasing goods and services in their content, there is growing concern about the ongoing monetisation of parenting media. The question arises as to whether these media primarily serve as informative resources for parents or as marketing tools aimed at parents as consumers (Scheibling & Milkie, 2023). In this context, dad vlogs and short videos in China can also provide valuable insights, as sponsored videos still have the potential to attract thousands of likes and generate lively interactions on Chinese social media platforms.

This study examines representations of fatherhood in dad vlogs and short videos as well as their commercialisation on Xiaohongshu, a platform in China, similar to Instagram and Pinterest, that has evolved into a lifestyle platform with e-commerce integration. Focusing on 285 popular dad vlogs and short videos by ten father influencers on Xiaohongshu, the study poses the following key question: How do dad vlogs and short videos on Xiaohongshu represent the responsibilities and parenting practices of fathers in China today, and how do they incorporate elements of commercialisation?

This study builds on the theory of hybrid fatherhood (Randles, 2018). Based on a netnography approach and thematic analysis, we propose that a hybrid model of fatherhood has emerged that combines new practices (such as encouragement and an "emotionally strategic" approach) with the traditional Chinese father's role as an educator, aiming to cultivate high-achieving children. Hybrid fatherhood thus serves both as the theoretical framework for this study and as a distinct finding in the Chinese context. This study contributes to ongoing discussions about parenting practices in short videos, where representations of fatherhood resonate with large audiences, particularly female viewers, while enabling monetisation in the context of Chinese platform economies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Hybrid Fatherhood

The study of fatherhood has been a significant area of interest for scholars, with a growing amount of research in recent years focusing on fathering and hybrid masculinities (e.g., Carian & Abromaviciute, 2023; Randles, 2018; Wang & Keizer, 2024). Hybrid masculinity describes a phenomenon in which men selectively integrate aspects of marginalised masculinities and femininities into their identities and behaviours (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). It discursively distances men from hegemonic masculinity and signals shifts in styles of hegemonic masculinity. Some men construct a hybrid masculinity by strategically appropriating traits traditionally defined as feminine and describing themselves as caring (Eisen & Yamashita, 2019). Paradoxically, hybrid masculinity reinforces rather than challenges existing gender hierarchies. It reproduces systems of gendered and sexual inequalities while obscuring this process (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

Building on the theory of hybrid masculinities, studies on fatherhood have explored how fathers incorporate elements stereotypically associated with femininity, such as caregiving and emotional expressiveness, alongside more traditional breadwinning aspects. In particular, Randles (2018) theorises hybrid fatherhood as a discourse of paternal engagement that promotes the idea that fathers, especially those from marginalised groups, should engage emotionally with their children, encouraging fathers to be masculine role models that mothers alone cannot provide. This discourse suggests that responsible fathering involves embracing a nurturing, care-focused hybrid paternal identity. However, as Randles (2018) points out, the discourse of hybrid fatherhood is based on patriarchal assumptions. Rather than highlighting the practical and emotional contributions that fathers can make to their children's lives, the discourse suggests that their value is inherent in their gender (Randles, 2018). This discourse sustains gender, race, and class inequalities, failing to address the impact of class and race inequalities on marginalised men's parental involvement and advocate for gender-egalitarian parenting.

Some studies have explored hybrid fatherhood in different cultural contexts (e.g., Cannito, 2019; Randles, 2018; Scheibling, 2019a). For example, a hybrid model of fatherhood has been identified among Italian fathers, challenging the distinction between traditional and new fatherhood (Cannito, 2019). However, as most existing studies have focused on Western societies, it is intriguing to consider how elements of hybrid fatherhood might differ in other contexts, which are shaped by different cultural and parenting traditions, as well as social trends.

2.2. Reconstructing Fatherhood in the Digital Age

The media, particularly digital platforms, play a crucial role in shaping and disseminating evolving fatherhood. Social media has provided a transformative space for fathers to redefine their roles and challenge traditional notions of masculinity and stereotypes about dads (e.g., Scheibling, 2019b, 2020). In a study by Scheibling (2019b), dad bloggers reject stereotypes of being "bad" fathers, while also pushing back against the stereotype of being a "good" or "super" dad, which often refers to stay-at-home dads or celebrity fathers publicly caring for their children. Although many dad bloggers live up to the "super dad" image, they resist being labelled as such. Instead, they seek to reshape prevailing beliefs about fatherhood, advocating for the normalisation of active and nurturing parenting by dads, which Scheibling (2019b, p. 15) describes as "a new ideology of

normalised involved fatherhood." They therefore form the basis of a group culture referred to as "the culture of fatherhood 2.0" (p. 15), which promotes the idea that caregiving fathers should be seen as capable, but not exceptional.

Although the studies have examined the meaningful practices of dad bloggers, further research in the following areas could deepen our understanding of fatherhood in the digital age. First, with the expansion of the platform economy, where commercialised content is ubiquitous, there is a growing need for research into the commercialisation of social media content created by fathers. Existing studies have examined the monetisation of mommy blogs and the commercialisation of parenting experiences through "sharenting" (sharing content about one's child on social media; see, e.g., Archer, 2019; Campana et al., 2020; Hunter, 2016; Jorge et al., 2022). In a study focusing on father influencers on Instagram, scholars suggest that they engage in "sharenting labour," which involves sharing parenting experiences for monetary gain (Campana et al., 2020). They perform relational, connective, and emotional labour while creating commercial imagery of fatherhood for sponsoring brands (Campana et al., 2020). How father influencers construct commercial representations of fatherhood on social media platforms remains an important area of research.

Second, it is crucial to pay more attention to the diversity of contemporary fatherhood on social media. Existing research suggests that the demographic profile of dad bloggers is predominantly made up of individuals who are "white, heterosexual, married, and relatively affluent men" (Scheibling, 2019b, p. 15). The experiences and practices shared by these bloggers may not fully represent the diversity of contemporary fatherhood, given the complexity of fatherhood in different cultural contexts and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as the variety of digital practices observed worldwide. Thus, it is recommended to consider variations in parenting content by race, class, sexuality, and marital status (Scheibling & Milkie, 2023).

Finally, on platforms that use algorithms, the role of visual media, such as dad vlogs and short videos, in articulating fatherhood remains underexplored. Dad vlogs, which capture snapshots of everyday fathering, use visual and auditory elements to communicate emotions and experiences in a more immediate and engaging way. This contrasts with dad bloggers, who offer a more retrospective account of their experiences. Moreover, scholars have noted the rise of traffic media in China, which prioritise maximising and controlling user attention through algorithmic technologies (Zhang et al., 2020). On traffic media such as TikTok and Xiaohongshu, independent content creators often use tactics to "play with" or "please" algorithms in the hope of increasing their traffic (Zhang et al., 2020). With the influences of algorithms and commercialised elements mentioned above, the resulting representation of fatherhood in dad vlogs and short videos can be more intricate. These aspects suggest that studying dad vlogs and short videos on social media platforms in a non-Western context could complicate or enrich current narratives of fatherhood.

2.3. Fatherhood in China and Media Representations

Fatherhood in China has changed dramatically in response to rapid social, economic, and cultural shifts. Traditionally, Confucianism has had a significant influence on Chinese family life, establishing a patriarchal structure that creates dual hierarchical relationships (Li, 2020; Xu, 2016). A key aspect is the hierarchical nature of the parent-child relationship (Wu, 2012). Parental control, referred to as *guan* in Chinese, embodies not only the guidance and supervision of parents for the success of their children but also the understanding and obedience of children to their parents' instructions (Wu, 2012). In this style of Chinese parenting,

authority is a defining characteristic, and expressions of parental love are often subtle (Li & Lamb, 2015). Fathers were responsible for teaching children social etiquette, disciplining misbehaviour, and acting as role models rather than being directly involved in child rearing, which was not considered a masculine activity for fathers (Cao & Lin, 2019). The prevalent "strict father, kind mother" model of parenting reflects the norm that fathers and offspring need to have "a smooth yet distant father–child relationship" to ensure parental authority (Li & Lamb, 2015, p. 277).

Another aspect is the hierarchy between men and women. The old sayings reflect traditional Chinese gender roles, such as "men take care of things outside the family whereas women take care of things inside the family" (*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei*; Shek, 2006). Consequently, Chinese fathers were expected to be the financial providers and to make important family and child-related decisions (Chuang & Su, 2009), while mothers were responsible for caring for the family and taking on daily childcare activities (Shen & Jiao, 2024). The powerful role of the father was defined as "master of the family" (*yi jia zhi zhu*; Chuang & Su, 2009), positioning men as the head of the household.

In the early 1900s, progressive elites embraced and promoted a modern version of fatherhood, characterised by child-centredness and affectionate displays between parents and children, in contrast to the traditional, power-assertive father role; however, authoritarian fatherhood remained the norm in society (Li, 2020). Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, traditional patriarchal fatherhood has undergone dramatic changes. In particular, the state has taken over the educational responsibilities traditionally held by fathers, while also undermining their patriarchal power (Li, 2020). The economic reforms of 1978 in China marked a further shift in fatherhood, emphasising the revival of the traditional male breadwinner role and rearticulating the importance of the paternal role of provider (Cao & Lin, 2019).

China's one-child policy has led to the majority of urban Chinese youth born after 1979 lacking siblings, prompting intense parental focus on their only child as the family's hope (Fong, 2004; Xu & Yeung, 2013). With the significant investment of their parents, many people who are an only child can enjoy high living standards and educational opportunities (Fong, 2004; Xu & Yeung, 2013). In contemporary Chinese families, fathers are increasingly involved in their children's daily lives and education, shifting from aloof disciplinarians to more involved and affectionate dads (Li & Jankowiak, 2016). In a study by Xu and O'Brien (2014), for example, fathers are described as close and supportive, in contrast to the stereotype of the strict father. Chinese fathers are changing their parenting style from the traditional strict, distant figure to a warmer, more affectionate role. An increasing number of fathers are proud to be called "nurturing fathers" (*nai ba*), a term that describes their active participation in the daily care and upbringing of their children (S. He, 2020). The term *nai ba* challenges traditional gender stereotypes by shifting the father's role from being primarily the family breadwinner to a more involved and nurturing father figure, in line with modern societal expectations of fatherhood and family responsibilities (S. He, 2020).

Scholars have examined different representations of fatherhood. For example, "dadvertising" portrays fathers with ideal masculinity, focusing on involved parenting and emotional vulnerability (Leader, 2019). On social media and at conferences, dad bloggers challenge traditional notions of masculinity and create "caring masculinities" through representations and interactions (Scheibling, 2020). In the Chinese context, existing research on media representations of fatherhood has largely focused on traditional media, particularly television programmes (e.g., Jiang, 2018; Song, 2019). The reality TV series *Where Are We Going,*

Dad? has been recognised as a representation of changing parenting practices and serves as a cultural site to encourage a re-examination of traditional parenting practices and the role of fathers in China (Jiang, 2018). While discussions about motherhood and parenting on social media platforms have increased in recent years (e.g., Han & Kuipers, 2021; Shen & Jiao, 2024), Chinese fatherhood in the digital realm remains understudied. Given the increasing popularity of short videos in China and their integration into everyday life, it is crucial to examine how fathering practices are represented in these videos.

3. Methods

Given the exploratory nature of the research, this study employs a qualitative approach to examine the phenomenon of dad vlogs and short videos. It specifically focuses on the popular videos produced by dad vloggers on Xiaohongshu. The platform boasts three million active users. Of these, approximately 70% are female, 50% reside in first- and second-tier cities in China, and 77% are aged between 18 and 34 (Qian Gua, 2024). Notably, about 22.06% of these users are mothers. This makes Xiaohongshu a highly frequented platform for sharing motherhood and parenting content in China (Qian Gua, 2024). Xiaohongshu encourages users to share various aspects of their lives, from daily routines to product experiences, inspiring people to explore and connect with different lifestyles (Xiaohongshu, 2021). Its promotional culture is closely linked to the rise of user-generated product reviews. Compared to other platforms, Xiaohongshu combines "personal life experiences" and "genuine, friendly" content with commerce, making it a popular resource for lifestyle choices (Xiaohongshu, 2023). This aspect of Xiaohongshu's culture ensures that dad vlogs and short videos are filled with representations of everyday parenting practices, even when commercial elements are included.

To identify influential dad vloggers on Xiaohongshu, a search was conducted on the Xinhong data platform. The keywords "nurturing father" (*nai ba*) and "dad" (*ba ba*) were used, targeting either account names or user descriptions. This search revealed a group of dad vloggers who primarily produce parenting content. A total of ten father influencers were selected based on their popularity and the relevance and sufficiency of their content to our research, with followers ranging from 206,962 to 921,499 on Xiaohongshu (see Table 1). We also made sure to include dad vloggers with different personas, professional backgrounds, and content styles. More than half of the father influencers in this study are affiliated with multi-channel network agencies. This affiliation suggests that these vloggers receive training in persona development, style, photography, editing, and copywriting, leading to more organised and planned content production (Yu & Li, 2022). A certain level of popularity among dad vloggers not only provides a foundation for their commercialisation but also increases both the views of their content and the level of interaction with their audience.

We conducted a netnography of the accounts of the ten father influencers (Kozinets, 2019). In the first phase, we immersed ourselves in these accounts on Xiaohongshu, observing their self-introductions, posted videos, hashtags, comments, and interactions between the influencers and commenters. We also observed content from other dad vloggers and mommy vloggers to gain a broader understanding of typical content trends and to identify the unique characteristics that set these ten father influencers apart. Many mommy vloggers started earlier and have more followers than daddy vloggers. However, when comparing dad and mommy vloggers with similar numbers of followers who post similar parenting content, their metrics such as likes, saves, and comments show little difference. Dad vloggers tend to have more collaborations with sponsoring brands than

Table 1. Information about the selected dad vloggers and short videos on Xiaohongshu (data collected in April 2024).

Dad vlogger	Location	Followers	Wording in the introduction (in Chinese)	Children	The number of likes on his most popular short video	Number of sampled short videos with over 1,000 likes
@dad 1	Beijing, China	483912	ba ba (nai ba is used in some videos)	one daughter and one son	39156	30
@dad 2	Hebei, China	305708	nai ba	one daughter and one son	54507	30
@dad 3	Beijing, China	631259	ba ba	one daughter and one son	103037	30
@dad 4	Guangdong, China	334670	nai ba	one daughter	7707	30
@dad 5	Guangdong, China	274864	nai ba	two daughters	6126	21
@dad 6	Beijing, China	921499	ba ba	one daughter	41189	30
@dad 7	Guangdong, China	588162	ba ba (nai ba is used in some videos)	one son	92066	30
@dad 8	Zhejiang, China	415361	ba ba (nai ba is used in some videos)	one daughter and one son	12147	24
@dad 9	Shanxi, China	507091	ba ba (nai ba is used in some videos)	one daughter	49120	30
@dad 10	Hebei, China	206962	ba ba	one son	25588	30

mommy vloggers, although it is unclear whether this is due to their greater interest in commercialisation or the preferences of the brands.

Based on the general information about the followers of these accounts available on Xinhong, the audience for father influencers' videos is predominantly female. In addition, our observations suggest that the majority of commenters on dad vlogs and short videos are also female. The predominantly female audience aligns with the primary consumers of the Chinese maternal and infant market. Mothers tend to make most of the purchasing decisions for childcare products, which has led to the rise of social media influencers who use their expertise to offer specialised advice and recommendations (Zhao, 2023). With a large proportion of female followers, dad vlogs and short videos can spark discussions about children and parenting among female viewers, and sometimes discussions about fatherhood and gender.

In the second phase, we collected popular dad vlogs and short videos from the ten father influencers, which involved several steps. Initially, Xinhong was used to collect all vlogs and short videos with more than 1,000 likes created by the ten influencers from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. Subsequently, these videos were organised based on the number of "likes" they received. Videos with more than 1,000 likes from each vlogger were chosen to capture content with high engagement and strong audience interest. The top 30 most popular

videos for each vlogger were selected to ensure a comprehensive representation of their content. In cases where fewer than 30 videos received 1,000 likes for a particular dad vlogger, all available videos were included. In total, 285 dad vlogs and short videos were collected, none of which had durations longer than a few minutes.

A thematic analysis of these collected videos on Xiaohongshu was conducted, which provided insights into the recurring themes and narratives they presented (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We first familiarised ourselves with the data by repeatedly watching the short videos and reading the transcripts. Initial codes were generated and the relevant coded data extracts were then collated into potential themes. Particular attention was paid to representations of fathering practices and responsibilities, comparisons with traditional Chinese fathering, and aspects of commercialisation. Finally, the themes were reviewed in relation to the coded extracts and the overall dataset. They were refined as follows: humour and playfulness in representations of fatherhood; an emotionally strategic approach to educating children; and commodification of parenting experiences and everyday family life.

4. Discussions

4.1. Humour and Playfulness in Representations of Fatherhood

Many dad vlogs and short videos are tagged with #DadWithKids (*baba daiwa*) or similar hashtags. For some dad vloggers, a frequently used hashtag related to fatherhood is #DadHasWaysToRaiseKids (*baba daiwa you banfa*), with the videos showcasing the resourceful role of young fathers. In these videos, fathers have their own unique and interesting ways of raising children. In some cases, the dad vloggers' narratives show a sense of humour, highlighting the joy of parenting and turning difficulties of parenting into special memories. For example, @dad 9 humorously shows his care for his daughter, as well as his personal thoughts and feelings about raising her. In one of his short videos, entitled *An Annual Performance Report of a Married Man*, he comments on his experiences of caring for his daughter over the past year:

> Our little friend still loves to cry and probably cried over 200 times during the year. With 365 days a year and three meals a day, 1095 meals in total, almost none of them were eaten with full attention. The most memorable moment was when she got sick and I took her to the hospital twice. I suddenly realised that the hundreds of times she cried and did not eat with full attention throughout the year were insignificant compared to her health. (12044 likes, 280 saves, 262 comments)

This father influencer starts by describing the video as an "annual family performance report" to assess whether he is a qualified husband and father, joking about his role in the family. He takes a humorous approach to the challenges of parenting, sharing clips of his daughter crying and eating inattentively. The video lightens the mood while highlighting the prevalence of parenting difficulties and the father's emotional investment in his child. It evokes emotion through sharenting (Campana et al., 2020), in this case combining humour with a father's sensitivity. It is worth noting that unlike the self-mocking humour of Chinese mothers on TikTok, who ironically portray themselves as "desperate" or "hopeless" (Han & Kuipers, 2021), this father influencer emphasises his progress and skills rather than mocking himself. He humorously addresses the challenges of caring for his daughter, including her crying and inattentive eating habits. Like other dad vlogs and short videos tagged with #DadHasWaysToRaiseKid, this short video portrays the father influencer as resourceful and demonstrates his ability to handle difficult parenting situations.

In dad vlogs and short videos, father influencers are portrayed as actively engaging in various daily activities with their children, taking on the roles of friends, playmates, and mentors, rather than adhering to the strict, authoritarian father figure commonly seen in traditional Chinese families (Chuang & Su, 2009; Wang & Keizer, 2024). In the past, Chinese fathers were often not very involved in their children's daily lives, focusing instead on providing financial support. However, the emergence of dad vloggers signals a shift, as these fathers are deeply committed to being actively present in their children's lives, participating in every stage and special moment of their growth. They promote and demonstrate a collaborative approach to parenting. Their vlogs and short videos show not only the quality time they spend with their children but also the everyday tasks involved in caring for them. These activities include playing with their children, preparing meals, teaching them new skills such as cycling and swimming, bathing them, reading to them at bedtime, picking them up from school, going on trips, and capturing special moments through photography, among others. The representations of various fathering practices are consistent with a recent study showing that fathers embrace the idea of *pei* (companionship) and spend time with their children (Wang & Keizer, 2024). Their representations challenge the public discourse on widow-style parenting, which criticises and mocks "the prevailing parenting norm in which fathers have minimal involvement in childcare and education, leaving the mother with the majority of the responsibility, similar to that of a widow" (Shen & Jiao, 2024, p. 1).

Like the short video discussed above, the progressive parenting styles shown in dad vlogs and short videos are often well-received by commenters. They frequently praise the children and sometimes wish there were more fathers like the influencers they see. In a rare instance, a male commentator mentions that work can make it challenging to spend quality time with kids. Other commentators point out that mothers also work, suggesting that hard work should not excuse men from sharing parenting responsibilities. This type of dialogue among commentators partly explains why representations of caring fatherhood appeal to viewers, especially women who desire more recognition for mothers' contributions and increased involvement of fathers in parenting.

In addition to the humour discussed above, another key feature of their representations of fatherhood is playfulness. In dad vlogs and short videos, father influencers try to bring creativity to their companionship. These representations often include playful interactions, such as fathers playing with their kids or children playing pranks on their fathers. For instance, @dad 1 shares several videos of his children playing pranks on him, such as splashing him in the swimming pool or playfully throwing wet paper at him as if in a snowball fight. While dad vloggers increasingly portray childcare in videos similar to mommy vloggers, their playful interactions stand out and are less commonly seen in representations of mommy vloggers. Through playful activities, these father influencers create environments where children can express themselves freely in their daily interactions. They redefine behaviours once considered rebellious into acceptable jokes. These representations illustrate moments of bonding and playfulness, challenging the traditional strict father figure and contrasting with audiences' stereotypes of fathers.

4.2. An Emotionally Strategic Approach to Educating Children

Scenes of encouragement and emotional support are common in the dad vlogs and short videos sampled, suggesting a shift from the traditional notion of "a father's love as silent as the mountain" (*fuai rushan*) to a more expressive and emotional approach to fatherhood. However, this shift subtly fulfils the traditional Chinese father's role as an educator and serves the purpose of cultivating children (*jiao*; Cao & Lin, 2019),

resulting in a hybrid model of fatherhood that combines new practices with traditional roles. Such hybrid fatherhood is reflected in dad vlogs and short videos in two main ways. First, dad vloggers incorporate practices of encouragement into their daily interactions with their children. The encouragement of father influencers is consistent with research showing that fathers consider encouraging words to be an important daily fathering practice, as well as showing positive emotions to their children (Wang & Keizer, 2024). The encouragement styles of some dad vloggers in this study appear to be more expressive, presumably because of their vlogging scenarios and as a way to enhance the entertaining elements of their short videos. The occasions for encouragement can be as big as the children's participation in competitions, or as small as the children finishing their meals. Other dad vloggers tend to be more thoughtful or deliberate in their encouragement practices, as exemplified by the suggestions by @dad 10:

> To encourage a sense of responsibility in children, tell them that the family really can't function without them; this empowers them and makes them feel like an indispensable member of the family. To build self-confidence in children, tell them that next month they'll be able to do it, and next year it won't be difficult at all. This instils a growth mindset in children, letting them know that all difficulties can be overcome with effort. (1439 likes, 1004 saves, 6 comments)

This dad vlogger uses positive affirmations to empower children, focusing on fostering a sense of responsibility and self-confidence. His parenting strategies illustrate how contemporary Chinese parents consciously use the opportunity of everyday interactions with their children to develop them into "high-achieving [*youxiu*], emotionally well-adjusted, and considerate individuals" (Li & Jankowiak, 2016, p. 189). In contemporary China, fathers are expected not only to provide sufficient financial resources for their offspring (raise/feed, or *yang* in Chinese), but also to raise confident, competitive, independent, and happy children with a promising future (educate/cultivate, or *jiao* in Chinese; Cao & Lin, 2019). The encouraging approach to cultivating children, while different from the distant fathering role, is closely aligned with the strong emphasis on *jiao* in traditional Chinese fathering practices (Cao & Lin, 2019).

Second, some dad vloggers not only provide positive affirmations to their children, but also respond skilfully to difficult interactions, fulfilling the purpose of *Jiao*. For instance, @dad 8 discusses parent-child communication extensively in his videos. In one video, he talks about empathetic ways to respond to disappointed children:

> One mistake parents make when expressing empathy is the tendency to follow empathic language with a "but," which is not really comforting to someone in need. To avoid this, I have two tips. The first tip is to replace the "but" with an expression of your own feelings....The second tip is to replace "but" with a question. Instead of closing the door on the child with a "but," asking a question invites the child to work together to find a solution. (4958 likes, 4021 saves, 293 comments)

This video draws attention to children's emotional wellbeing, pointing to an emotionally strategic approach advocated by some dad vloggers. To effectively engage in this emotional work and foster a deeper connection with their children, parents need to learn techniques such as acknowledging and validating their children's emotions and avoiding language that undermines their empathic intentions, such as the use of "but." Fathers are thus encouraged to adopt traditionally feminine traits such as caring and emotional expressiveness. Indeed, emotional involvement in Chinese fathering practices is increasingly recognised and is becoming an important aspect of contemporary Chinese masculinity (Wang & Keizer, 2024; Xu & O'Brien,

2014). Notably, this study suggests that efforts to support children's emotional well-being extend beyond simply offering positive affirmations, and also involve adeptly navigating challenging interactions with specific intentions. With the intention of "inviting the child to work together to find a solution," this video can be seen as a clear example of *jiao*, in line with traditional Chinese fathering practices. The aim is to promote the development of psychologically healthy children, reflecting the prevailing "psychologized" discourse on child development in contemporary Chinese society (Li & Jankowiak, 2016, p. 189).

In discussing hybrid fatherhood, which combines new practices such as positive affirmations and an emotionally strategic approach to father-child interactions with the traditional Chinese paternal role of educating children, it is worth noting that dad vlogs and short videos also demonstrate unconditional love and support for their children. A representative example is the fathers' support for their children's hobbies. For example, in the short video entitled *Why Are Her Eye Sockets So Dark? It's Because of Her Deep Love for Latin Dance!*, @dad 3 reflects on how his daughter persists in learning and practising dance, despite her clumsiness as a beginner:

> When it comes to the child's hobby, we as parents should not have ulterior motives, hoping that she will achieve this or that. Her hobby is her hobby and it's not a transaction where our time must necessarily produce a result. Her optimism and positivity can melt away all the negative emotions that any difficulties bring. Parents simply need to keep providing her with a nurturing environment of joy and happiness. (103037 likes, 6113 saves, 916 comments)

This quote shows that @dad 3 supports his daughter in pursuing her own passions, while respecting her individuality. More importantly, the father rejects the idea that a parent's time and effort should be seen as an investment that must produce a specific result, suggesting a philosophy of unconditional love with no expectation of return. Fathers' involvement in their children's education is often associated with high expectations for children's success (Xu & Yeung, 2013). However, this dad vlogger suggests a more nuanced perspective, indicating a growing complexity in Chinese parenting practices. While many parents aim to raise high-achieving individuals, as seen in the videos discussed earlier in this section, they also respect their children's individuality and adjust expectations as necessary.

4.3. Commodification of Parenting Experiences and Everyday Family Life

The realm of dad vlogs and short videos has seen a significant increase in commercialisation as vloggers integrate product endorsements into their content. Although dad vloggers may present fatherhood in similar ways, the commercial opportunities depend on several factors, including the classification of the vlogger. Influencers on Xiaohongshu are classified based on their follower counts, content statistics such as likes and interactions, and rates for product endorsements. While it is difficult to determine the social class of the ten father influencers in real life, identities such as former national athlete or PhD likely help them attract attention more quickly than average individuals on Xiaohongshu. Organised, high-quality content and a well-received persona also help these influencers attain higher statuses on Xiaohongshu, leading to greater visibility, more attention, and more endorsement opportunities. There are two main types of content creators on Xiaohongshu: spontaneous users who post out of personal interest, and strategic content providers who adhere to community rules and commercial goals (Yu & Li, 2022). Based on our observations, less popular dad vloggers on Xiaohongshu often have irregular posting schedules, inconsistent content

styles, and overly commercialised material. In contrast, the ten father influencers in this study produce well-crafted, informative, and subtly commercialised videos.

The father influencers draw inspiration from their lives and vlogging experiences, as well as from trending topics on the platform and interactions with their audience, such as questions from followers. They have a deep understanding of the platform's algorithmic recommendations and actively address their followers' parenting concerns. Among the ten father influencers in this study, there are three main types based on their positioning and content development. The first type has a clear focus from the start. For example, @dad 5 consistently shares parenting tips, while @dad 6 emphasises understanding from a child's perspective. The second type starts as a personal diary with a somewhat vague positioning, but gains popularity. Based on what attracts attention, these vloggers then focus on parenting practices and sharing their children's daily lives, such as @dad 1, @dad 3, and @dad 9. The third type consists of dad vloggers who initially focus on other topics, but later shift to parenting content after getting married and becoming fathers. For example, @dad 2 started vlogging about pregnancy nutrition, mother and baby care product recommendations, and parenting advice after his wife became pregnant.

Integrating product endorsements into discussions about parenting experiences and product recommendations, or incorporating them into storytelling about everyday family life, are the two main approaches these father influencers use in their sponsored videos. In the first approach, a key feature of these short videos is their informative nature, often with a dad vlogger speaking directly into the camera, sharing his ideas and recommendations, drawing on his knowledge and personal experience. These informative videos showcase two distinct styles of endorsement, aligning with the typical approach of dad vloggers. The first style is more personal, where the dad vlogger shares his child's experiences as a consumer while providing detailed information about a product. A typical example of this is infant formula. In the short video, entitled *From Tiny Baby to Chubby Cheeks, I'm So Proud as a* Nai Ba (7512 likes, 1610 saves, 282 comments), @dad 4 reflects on his child's healthy growth with the help of a particular brand of formula. The video features heartwarming clips of the dad cradling the baby, the baby eating, smiling, and enjoying various indoor and outdoor activities. Before highlighting the brand of formula, the dad vlogger acknowledges that the choice of formula is a personal one and may vary depending on the specific needs of each baby. He also emphasises that he is very selective about which brands he endorses, only recommending those that his own child has used and had positive experiences with.

The second style of endorsement, seen in these informative videos, takes a more educational approach, targeting new parents with specific advice and information on parenting. These videos typically serve as how-to guides, focusing on specific topics related to child-rearing, including practices that promote children's well-being and physical and intellectual development, as well as discussing behaviours and habits that may hinder their overall growth, and addressing nutrition and skin care concerns. The integration of sponsored products is often woven into the content, rather than being the central focus of the video. For example, in a series of short videos by @dad 2, he features a particular brand of infant formula in videos entitled *6 Foolish Behaviours That Harm a Child's Intelligence—Don't Do Them*, *6 Things That Seem Good for Children But Actually Damage Intelligence*, and *7 Foods That Smart Babies All Eat*. Throughout these videos, he provides nutritional science to support his product recommendations. This style of informative sponsored videos requires the expertise of the vlogger, positioning the vlogger as a trusted advisor and increasing the credibility of product recommendations. The PhD identity of this dad vlogger validates his persona with

scientific expertise. To enhance the visual appeal, he combines his own commentary with images of scientific reports and clips of his child, creating a visually engaging and informative experience for viewers. In addition, he frequently highlights children's intelligence while endorsing products to attract the attention of new parents, presumably targeting those hoping to raise high-achieving and competitive children.

The second approach to sponsored videos often involves creating a narrative, with dad vloggers chatting or participating in activities with their children, such as playing games, while integrating product recommendations into the storyline. By blending storytelling and product information, they not only showcase products but also ensure that they align with the rest of their everyday life videos. This approach also encompasses a range of styles, from light-hearted to heart-warming content. For example, a short video from @dad 1 titled *What? The Dad Lets Kids Do Homework in the Car!* (16140 likes, 4401 saves, 84 comments) is a portrayal of a family's morning routine in which the children are scrambling to finish their homework before heading off to school. The father influencer pleasantly surprises them with a new car that offers ample space and advanced technology, enabling the children to make the most of their commute by studying. The title of the short video plays on the stereotype that dads often do awkward things while spending time with their children. However, the video depicts his thoughtful solution to a problem faced by the children. While the video shows his caring nature, the car endorsement is in line with traditional masculine qualities and reflects the traditional Chinese fatherly role of provider. Hybrid fatherhood is therefore evident in commercialised videos like this. Incorporating product promotion into family interactions subtly minimises the commercial aspects of the videos, even though they are scripted.

5. Conclusion

By analysing popular dad vlogs and short videos on Xiaohongshu, this study reveals key characteristics of how dad vloggers represent fatherhood and engage in commercial activities within the Chinese platform economy. Firstly, dad vloggers show the various activities and efforts involved in raising children, taking on the role of friend, playmate, and mentor, in contrast to the strict, authoritarian father figure found in traditional Chinese families. Dad vloggers who showcase nurturing roles are more likely to attract female viewers' attention, as their content resonates with mothers' desire for greater recognition of their contributions and increased involvement from fathers in childcare. Second, a hybrid model of fatherhood has emerged that combines new practices such as encouragement and an emotionally strategic approach with the traditional Chinese father's role as an educator whose goal is to cultivate children. While this model of fatherhood reflects a transnational shift towards a more caring role (e.g., Cannito, 2019; Randles, 2018; Scheibling, 2019a, 2020), the representations in this study also promote the traditional Chinese father's responsibility to cultivate high-achieving children (Li & Jankowiak, 2016). Finally, the commercialisation of father influencers' content involves various approaches to integrating product endorsements into well-crafted, informative videos with a well-received persona. These videos not only showcase fathers' caring moments but also highlight their proven expertise and capabilities as providers in traditional Chinese fatherhood. However, the platform designates different classes of influencers, making it difficult for most dad vloggers to achieve the same level of popularity and financial benefits as the sampled father influencers. As a result, the platform to some extent reinforces class inequality among content creators.

The findings have two main implications for the current discussions on hybrid fatherhood. Firstly, in the study of Randles (2018), the discourse of hybrid fatherhood does not call for men to share household and

childcare responsibilities equally. Instead, it reinforces patriarchal power by framing men as "helpers" and emphasising how to maintain masculine identities. In contrast, the representations of fatherhood on Xiaohongshu emphasise the multiple responsibilities and considerable efforts of fatherhood. Fathers are actively involved in various daily activities with their children and present themselves as resourceful, caring, and encouraging. As a result, the differences in content between mommy vloggers and daddy vloggers are diminishing. However, certain representations of parenting practices, such as humour and playfulness, are presented by these fathers as unique to their approach. Secondly, while Randles (2018) suggests that the value of fathers in the discourse of hybrid fatherhood is inherent in their gender, the representations of hybrid fatherhood by father influencers in this study are less tied to gender and more connected to the traditional Chinese father's role. Although these representations include caring and emotionally expressive practices rarely seen in the distant fathering roles of the past, the underlying emphasis on the father as both provider and educator still, to some extent, reinforces patriarchal structures.

There are a few limitations to this research. First, while father influencers provide brief self-introductions on their Xiaohongshu pages, their personal information—such as their occupations (if they have jobs apart from being influencers) and social class—remains unknown. Gathering more information through interviews would be beneficial for determining whether social class influences their popularity and representation of fatherhood. Second, because our focus was on representations of fatherhood by popular father influencers, it is difficult to make claims about actual parenting practices. Future research could explore how wider audiences, particularly male viewers, interpret these representations to assess their authenticity and influence on male viewers.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Abetz, J., & Moore, J. (2018). "Welcome to the mommy wars, ladies": Making sense of the ideology of combative mothering in mommy blogs. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, *11*(2), 265–281.

Archer, C. (2019). How influencer 'mumpreneur' bloggers and 'everyday' mums frame presenting their children online. *Media International Australia*, *170*(1), 47–56.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Bridges, T., & Pascoe, C. J. (2014). Hybrid masculinities: New directions in the sociology of men and masculinities. *Sociology Compass*, *8*(3), 246–258.

Campana, M., Van den Bossche, A., & Miller, B. (2020). #dadtribe: Performing sharenting labour to commercialise involved fatherhood. *Journal of Macromarketing*, *40*(4), 475–491.

Cannito, M. (2019). Beyond "traditional" and "new": An attempt of redefinition of contemporary fatherhoods through discursive practices and practices of care. *Men and Masculinities*, *23*(3/4), 661–679.

Cao, S., & Lin, X. (2019). Masculinizing fatherhood: Negotiation of *Yang* and *Jiao* among young fathers in China. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *28*(8), 937–947.

Carian, E. K., & Abromaviciute, J. (2023). "It's certainly fair for me": Hybrid masculinities and the gendered division of labor during Covid-19. *Men and Masculinities*, *26*(4), 544–565.

Chuang, S. S., & Su, Y. (2009). Do we see eye to eye? Chinese mothers' and fathers' parenting beliefs and values for toddlers in Canada and China. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *23*(3), 331–341.

Eisen, D. B., & Yamashita, L. (2019). Borrowing from femininity: The caring man, hybrid masculinities, and maintaining male dominance. *Men and Masculinities*, *22*(5), 801–820.

Fong, V. L. (2004). *Only hope: Coming of age under China's one-child policy*. Stanford University Press.

Han, X., & Kuipers, G. (2021). Humour and TikTok memes during the 2020 pandemic lockdown: Tensions of gender and care faced by Chinese mothers working from home. *China Information*, *35*(3), 393–419.

He, S. (2020). Holding up the "half of the sky" for childcare: A sociological examination of fatherhood practices. *China Youth Study*, *2*, 85–91.

He, G., Leurs, K., & Li, Y. (2022). Researching motherhood in the age of short videos: Stay-at-home mothers in China performing labor on Douyin. *Media and Communication*, *10*(3), 273–289.

Hunter, A. (2016). Monetizing the mommy: Mommy blogs and the audience commodity. *Information, Communication & Society*, *19*(9), 1306–1320.

Jiang, X. (2018). Parenting practices and gender roles in the modern Chinese family: Interculturalism in *Where Are We Going, Dad*? *Television & New Media*, *20*(5), 460–475.

Jorge, A., Marôpo, L., Coelho, A. M., & Novello, L. (2022). Mummy influencers and professional sharenting. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *25*(1), 166–182.

Kozinets, R. (2019). *Netnography: The essential guide to qualitative social media research*. Sage.

Leader, C. F. (2019). Dadvertising: Representations of fatherhood in Procter & Gamble's Tide commercials. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, *12*(1), 72–89.

Lehto, M. (2020). Bad is the new good: Negotiating bad motherhood in Finnish mommy blogs. *Feminist Media Studies*, *20*(5), 657–671.

Li, X. (2020). Fathers' involvement in Chinese societies: Increasing presence, uneven progress. *Child Development Perspectives*, *14*(3), 150–156.

Li, X., & Jankowiak, W. (2016). The Chinese father: Masculinity, conjugal love, and parental involvement. In K. Louie (Ed.), *Changing Chinese masculinities: From imperial pillars of state to global real men* (pp. 186–203). Hong Kong University Press.

Li, X., & Lamb, M. E. (2015). Fathering in Chinese culture: Traditions and transitions. In J. L. Roopnarine (Ed.), *Fathers across cultures: The importance, roles, and diverse practices of dads* (pp. 273–306). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Lopez, L. K. (2009). The radical act of 'mommy blogging': Redefining motherhood through the blogosphere. *New Media & Society*, *11*(5), 729–747.

Morrison, A. (2011). "Suffused by feeling and affect": The intimate public of personal mommy blogging. *Biography*, *34*(1), 37–55.

Qian Gua. (2024). *2024 Active user research report—The Xiaohongshu platform*. https://www.163.com/dy/article/J0RVF2O00511B3FV.html

Randles, J. (2018). "Manning up" to be a good father: Hybrid fatherhood, masculinity, and U.S. responsible fatherhood policy. *Gender & Society*, *32*(4), 516–539.

Scheibling, C. (2019a). The culture of fatherhood 2.0: Exploring the "tiny public" of dad bloggers in North America. *Feminist Media Studies*, *20*(6), 813–830.

Scheibling, C. (2019b). Doing fatherhood online: Men's parental identities, experiences, and ideologies on social media. *Symbolic Interaction*, *43*(3), 472–492.

Scheibling, C. (2020). "Real heroes care": How dad bloggers are reconstructing fatherhood and masculinities. *Men and Masculinities*, *23*(1), 3–19.

Scheibling, C., & Milkie, M. A. (2023). Shifting toward intensive parenting culture? A comparative analysis of top mommy blogs and dad blogs. *Family Relations*, *72*(2), 495–514.

Shek, D. T. (2006). Chinese family research: Puzzles, progress, paradigms, and policy implications. *Journal of Family Issues*, *27*(3), 275–284.

Shen, Y., & Jiao, L. (2024). "Widow-style parenting": The discursive formation of gendered parenting roles and popular feminism on social media in China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2024.2329063

Song, L. (2019). Idealizing masculinity through representation of fatherhood: Negotiating transcultural masculinities in *Dad, Where Are We Going*? In D. Hird & G. Song (Eds.), *The cosmopolitan dream: Transnational Chinese masculinities in a global age* (pp. 161–179). Hong Kong University Press.

Wang, L., & Keizer, R. (2024). 'I am a traditional but caring father': Narratives of paternal masculinity in urban Chinese families. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *33*(6), 851–866.

Wu, M. Y. (2012). The concept of guan in the Chinese parent-child relationship. In C. C. Yi (Ed.), *The psychological well-being of East Asian youth* (Vol. 2, pp. 29–49). Springer.

Xiaohongshu. (2021). *About*. https://www.xiaohongshu.com/en#culture

Xiaohongshu. (2023). *Community guidelines*. https://www.xiaohongshu.com/crown/community/agreement

Xu, Q. (2016). *Fatherhood, adolescence and gender in Chinese families*. Springer.

Xu, Q., & O'Brien, M. (2014). Fathers and teenage daughters in Shanghai: Intimacy, gender and care. *Journal of Family Studies*, *20*(3), 311–322.

Xu, Q., & Yeung, W. J. J. (2013). Hoping for a phoenix: Shanghai fathers and their daughters. *Journal of Family Issues*, *34*(2), 182–207.

Yu, C. S., & Li, Z. W. (2022). Operational logic and digital labour in online communities: The case of Xiaohongshu APP. *View on Publishing*, *8*, 77–80.

Zhang, W., Chen, Z., & Xi, Y. (2020). Traffic media: How algorithmic imaginations and practices change content production. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, *14*(1), 58–74.

Zhao, Y. X. (2023). Digital motherhood practices: The intrinsic logic, action strategies and group identity of online sharing parenting information. *Contemporary Youth Research*, *3*, 37–47.

About the Authors

Min Xu is an assistant professor at the School of Journalism and Communication at Yangzhou University, China. Her research interests revolve around the intersections of media, gender, and everyday life. She has published in journals such as *Media, Culture & Society*, the *Chinese Journal of Communication*, *Celebrity Studies*, and *Feminist Media Studies*.

Xinchen Liu is a postgraduate student at the School of Journalism and Communication at Yangzhou University, China. His research interests include the production and reception of short videos in China. He has published two research papers on these topics.

Hao Zhang is a professor and dean of the School of Journalism and Communication at Yangzhou University, China. He has led several national and provincial research projects at the intersection of education, technology, and media. His research focuses on innovative educational practices, media literacy, and media culture.

cogitatio

Gendered Zootopia on Instagram: Curation of Pet Accounts and Identity Representation

Natalia Vereshchagina 🟢 and **Irina Dushakova** 🟢

Institute of Media, HSE University, Russia

Correspondence: Natalia Vereshchagina (nvereshchagina@hse.ru)

Abstract

The social media landscape is replete with images of animals that users share, repost, and like. The various nonhuman species that have become a part of the social media ecosystem are no longer merely models for different content formats but have their own accounts and become influencers almost like humans. Instagram's gender-related politics do not regulate images of animals; one can hypothesize that pet accounts could serve as spaces, tools, and sources of creative content for gender representations free from stereotypes or undermining gender norms. This article aims to answer two main research questions: In what sets of actions is gendered human–animal identity performed in pet accounts? What curating strategies and platform tools are selected by owners to perform gender in pet accounts, within the limits of the platform affordances? To answer these questions, the article addresses three theoretical fields: (a) human–animal relationships, (b) the representation and performing of identity, and (c) the politics and affordances of digital platforms. Based on previous research in these fields, the authors suggest an analytical approach comprising account architecture (content of the header, saved/pinned stories, and relationships with other pet accounts) and account content (format in which content is created and presented). The empirical part is based on the analysis of six regularly updated accounts run on behalf of pets that were active at least three months prior to the beginning of the research.

Keywords

platform affordances; gender; human–animal relationships; identity; Instagram; pet accounts; representation; social media

1. Introduction

The social media landscape is replete with images of animals (Lupton, 2023; Maddox, 2021) that users share, repost, and like. Various nonhuman species have become part of the social media ecosystem (van Dijck, 2013),

ranging from cute kittens and puppies to exotic dragon lizards. Some of these animals have their own accounts, which are run by human owners on behalf of their pets. Jessica Maddox notes that the use of animal "voices" is not a new cultural practice (Maddox, 2021) since, for instance, writing social letters in an animal's voice was already known in the nineteenth century. Katherine Grier, in her book *Pets in America: A History*, provides numerous excerpts from letters written by adults and children on behalf of dogs, cats, and birds (Grier, 2006, p. 73). By the 1870s, animal "autobiography" became a popular literary device in literature, inviting readers to hear the voice of an animal in the first person, "to assume the identity of the suffering animal through the 'I' in the story" (Grier, 2006, p. 175). For example, Anna Sewell's (1993) famous novel *Black Beauty* invites readers to immerse themselves in the autobiographical memoir of a horse.

Today, social media pet accounts that use animal voices are more than just a narrative or dramaturgical technique. Such accounts are not only created on behalf of pets; they also follow each other, like and comment on each other's posts, share photos and videos, share experiences, and represent expertise. Some of these accounts have attained the status of "petfluencers," which is comparable to that of human influencers in a certain sense. They are classified as "celebrity pets," and their fame is not directly associated with human celebrities, as it used to be a decade ago (Giles, 2013, p. 119). The American Influencer Awards, which honors top social media influencers, has added the Pet Influencer of the Year nomination to its Lifestyle category. This category also includes parenting, LGBTQIA+, and couple-influencers, who impact people's lives through their experiences and expertise (https://www.aiaawards.com).

This research focuses on Instagram pet accounts maintained by humans on behalf of animals. Human users can create more than one Instagram account, for themselves and for their pet separately, which is allowed by the platform's policy (Instagram Help Center, n.d.). According to Instagram's mission, it aims "to bring you closer to the people and things that you love" (Instagram Help Center, n.d.). Yet, pets are unable to create their own accounts to connect with the people and animals they love, which indicates that pet accounts continue, in some sense, the above-mentioned cultural practice of using animals' voices.

Pets and other non-human animals are highly prevalent on the photo-sharing platform Instagram, where they are incorporated into a wide variety of visual images and communication practices. Digital culture researchers note that pet accounts emerged as an integral part of Instagram's animalistic system (Leaver et al., 2020; Maddox, 2022) and became embedded in the creation and sharing of aesthetic visual content, which is the core purpose of this social media platform (Manovich, 2017). Since Instagram allows users "to curate" (Kompatsiaris, 2024) their accounts, utilizing not only visual content tools but also the option to choose the type of account, then pet accounts could serve as the stage for hybrid human–animal representations. At the same time, pet accounts can be analyzed as creative content products, digital communication spaces, and tools for representing oneself, one's pet, and the relationship between them within the Instagram ecosystem.

As a part of social media, Instagram pet accounts are shaped by the policies, economics, and affordances of the digital platform (van Dijck, 2013). At the same time, the anthropocentric orientation of the platform and its algorithms (Poell et al., 2019, p. 3; van Dijck, 2021) is oriented toward human rather than animal creativity. With this in mind, one might suggest that hybrid human–animal representations in pet accounts form a gray area within platform politics and possess the potential to create a space free from stereotypes (including stereotypical identity representations), possibly enabling a "*zootopia*," a space where anything is

possible. The concept of the internet as a space for the "plurality of life worlds" (Giddens, 1991, p. 83) has previously been applied to Instagram, "where multiple identities are negotiated" (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 151), and can be extended to pet accounts.

Multiple studies indicate that Instagram's gender-related politics is unbalanced and biased, often favoring heteronormative femininity and masculinity over more diverse forms (Caldeira et al., 2018, p. 24). As Caldeira et al. (2018, p. 28) put it:

> Instagram's Terms of Use, for instance, directly regulate what can be shared on the platform and what is liable to be deleted. They impose direct constraints over the self-representations shared on Instagram, prohibiting the sharing of images with full or partial nudity, of sexually explicit or pornographic photographs, as well as of violent, discriminatory or illegal content.

Instagram thus allows for less divergence in assigned gender roles, thereby reinforcing stereotypes (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2024; Fernández & González, 2017), complicating feminist practices for young women (Santos & Figueras, 2020). The construct of gender on Instagram also involves repeated body stylizations within regulatory cultural frameworks that do not expand but rather replicate existing gender norms (Caldeira et al., 2018). Moreover, stereotyped gender roles represented in social media are not only affected by gender norms and other regulatory cultural frames but also affect them (Caldeira et al., 2018), thus making identity performance even more complicated.

Instagram's gender-related politics do not regulate images of animals (Instagram Help Center, n.d.); one can hypothesize that pet accounts could serve as spaces, tools, and sources of creative content for gender representations free from stereotypes or undermining gender norms. Our analysis of pet accounts on the platform focuses on performing gender (Butler, 1990) and representing identity, acknowledging that gender is not a fixed identity but rather a dynamic set of acts or performances: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990, p. 33). Multiple aspects of identity frequently interact and co-occur with gender, including social roles and biological sex. Gender performances allow individuals to uphold or challenge traditional norms. To analyze the representation and performance of gendered identities in pet accounts, six accounts were selected representing different social roles and biological sexes. An analysis of these accounts will allow us to examine how an animal account is built, used, and functions at the intersection of gender-related politics on Instagram, its affordances, and "*zootopian creativity*."

This article proposes an analysis of Instagram pet accounts as products of creative curatorial work based on the performance of a hybrid identity, particularly around gender, and the affordances of the digital platform. The research is built on three overlapping fields: (a) human–animal relationships, (b) the representation and performing of identity, and (c) the politics and affordances of digital platforms. In the subsequent sections of the article, we will first discuss each of these fields, shaping a framework for analysis, and then perform an empirical analysis of pet accounts. This article addresses two research questions regarding the performance of gender within the platform ecosystem, including its politics and affordances:

> RQ1: In what sets of actions are gendered human–animal identities performed in pet accounts (what aspects of identity co-occur with gender and which gender norms are being undermined or reproduced)?

RQ2: What curating strategies and platform tools are selected by owners to perform gender in pet accounts, within the limits of the platform affordances?

2. Representation of Human–Animal Relationships in Pet Accounts: Performing Identity in Media

The cultural forms of human–animal relations in different periods influence the way that animal images function in the media (Grier, 2006; Ritvo, 1989). Therefore, an analysis of pet accounts should be preceded by contextualizing contemporary human–animal relations. Katherine Grier explored human–animal relationships in the late nineteenth century, highlighting key aspects of how these ties were formed at that time. She noted that the metaphor of companionship implies an active, peer-like relationship and a broader community formed through mutual recognition among species. Although pets can be deeply loved like human friends, their transient nature may create emotional distance, complicating the definition of "friend," especially when applied to "four-footed" companions (Grier, 2006, p. 176). This dynamic can be reflected in media culture in various ways. Therefore, in the history of complicated and dramatic human–animal relations, attention is focused on two approaches.

First, in the functional approach, humans see animals as objects and utilize them as pre-industrial machines, sources of materials and energy within a logistics system, and tangible products. This means that "men depended upon animals for food, work, transport, and clothing" (Berger, 2009, p. 2). Braidotti employs the term "zooproletariat" (Braidotti, 2009, p. 528) to describe this form. This term defines the subordinate position of animals only to some extent because there is an ultimate alienation; the objectified bodies of animals are not only sold, bought, and exchanged but also consumed (literally eaten).

Second, in the metaphorical approach, animals are perceived by humans not as part of their own reality but are rather used as a signification system for Others or "to symbolize human identity and human values" (Baker, 1993, p. 34). Animal images as metaphors serve as a coding system for the "moral and cognitive bestiary" (Braidotti, 2009, p. 527). Baker (1993) analyzes the forms and types of images of non-human animals "as a 'natural' resource for saying-things-about-humans" (Baker, 1993, p. x), while Shukin (2009) interprets animal images in a fetishistic manner from both Marxian and psychoanalytic perspectives.

Researchers note a reconfiguration of human–animal relations under capitalism (Berger, 2009; Braidotti, 2009). Non-human animals are replaced by machines for industrial purposes but remain confined within an exploitation system rooted in classical metaphysics constructing a hierarchy of species (Braidotti, 2009). Consequently, non-human animals become associated with Otherness, positioned beyond inherently "anthropocentric, gendered, and racialized" normality (Braidotti, 2009, p. 526). In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Adams (2015) highlights parallels between the objectification of animals and women in a patriarchal system, while Creed and Reesink (2015) argue that media representations of animals imply those of marginalized groups. Thus, animals exist within the circle of Others, with both functional and metaphorical relations performed during this period.

The posthuman turn in culture and the humanities suggests reconsidering human–animal relationships by dismantling the hierarchy of classical metaphysics, including speciesism, proposing forms of interspecies kinship, "cross-species sociality" (Haraway, 2003, p. 4), and a "radical breakdown of the human/animal

distinction" (Calarco, 2015, p. 6). While this performative suggestion could reassemble human–animal relations symbolically, animals are still exploited in practice. Their bodies are part of the consumer basket as "meat," and their images are used for cartoons, children's books, memes, etc. Animals are part of the capitalist system of "cute economy" (Maddox, 2021), in which "cuteness" generates income following the platform economy (Lukács, 2020). Thus, animals in the digital cute economy function as tools of media labor used to produce "cuteness" that is then traded.

Human–animal studies (Belk, 1996; Greenebaum, 2004; Veevers, 1985) register a reconfiguration of relationships, primarily applying to pets. Veevers (1985) lists some of the social functions of pets: the sociability function, the surrogate function, and the projective function. First, pets serve as social catalysts, forming the base for various types of pet lovers' communities. Second, "pets may supplement human-to-human interaction or serve as a substitute for it" (Veevers, 1985, p. 11), functioning as friends, partners, family members, or as "fur babies" (Belk, 1996; Greenebaum, 2004). As a result, human–pet relationships are performed as a "symbolic extension" of the human self (Veevers, 1985, p. 11). Animals, along with objects, are extensions of human identity, "clothing, automobiles, homes and home decor, the places we frequent, the people we know, and the books we read are also partly constitutive of our selves" (Belk, 2016, p. 50). Whether or not a human–animal interaction is intentional, pets become integrated into a person's self-image and represent the human "extended self" as part of an assemblage with other individuals, places, and objects (Belk, 2016).

Simultaneously, digital platforms and social media have their own tools, rules, and policies for use, offered to users to curate their extended self-image and perform their identity. Digital platforms are increasingly integrated into human–animal relationships, "configuring animal-human-digital assemblages" (Lupton, 2023, p. 17). At the same time, all three actors (human, animal, digital platform) influence the configuration, which remains fluid. We will discuss these curatorial tools and the limitations of platforms in the next part of the article.

Instagram pet accounts run by human owners on behalf of their pets are organized through what we call, following Lupton, animal-human-digital assemblages (2023, p. 17). This indicates that these accounts represent the nature of human–animal relationships, identity performing, and media communication trends, including the politics and affordances of digital platforms. The approach (whether functional or metaphorical) and type of human–animal relationships (social roles) should be interpreted through performing "cross-species" identities (Haraway, 2003). Simultaneously, the identity performance requires agency from a combination of actors involved in the creation of an Instagram pet account: the human curator, the pet itself, and Instagram as a platform with its policies and affordances. This constellation of actors can be analyzed using Latour's (1992) approach to understanding the functions of non-humans. To do this, one needs to imagine what humans or non-humans would need to do without the presence of non-humans. This imaginary substitution helps reveal the role or function of that object (Latour, 1992, p. 230).

To answer the question of how gendered human–animal identity is performed in pet accounts—that is, what curating tools and techniques are employed for this—we will analyze published photos and videos in selected accounts. Since pet accounts are analyzed within the context of contemporary human–animal relations and the user agreements and policies of digital platforms, we will perceive them as extended human self-representation. To reconstruct the acting of gender identity within the account, we will highlight the

functions and roles of both human and non-human characters presented, describe how their relationships are visually and implicitly represented, and analyze the platform tools used for performing gender identity.

3. Platform Policy and Affordances: Choosing Curatorial Tools

The third aspect we address in this research is the politics of digital platforms with a set of tools to curate one's identity by creatively using the possibilities that platforms offer their users. Simultaneously, platforms play their roles in the assemblages described by Lupton by presenting a set of tools, but also by promoting more variable interactions with these technologies.

The platforms, mostly created to be transparent in the technical functionality they provide, suggest that over time users associate a platform with specific expectations regarding what and how will be communicated through it (Hepp, 2019, p. 8). Such expectations, in turn, stabilize communication patterns (Hepp, 2019, p. 8), thus narrowing down the full spectrum of creative curation of representations. This process of stabilization of a narrower range of usage tactics is also supported by seeing commonly exercised forms as "natural" ones because the platforms are perceived "as coded like this" (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, pp. 51–52). Thus, the curation of a pet's account can also take standardized forms that seem natural for depicting either human–animal relations or human social roles through animals' accounts.

Some platform functions might not be used to their full extent, which reduces the range of curatorial strategies available. Here, we should take into consideration that the decision not to use a platform in a certain way may be caused by so-called "cultural constraints," or limitations that forbid certain actions while promoting others due to social and cultural values and norms (Norman, 1999). As an option, it can be connected to a lack of platform literacy, when the curator simply doesn't know about existing technical possibilities or variations in the usage of a function.

Platform usage, in turn, does not depend on the curator only as the platform itself has limited options of what and how can be done by a user. Moreover, not all the tools and functions are explicitly shown on the platform, which leads us to the theoretical concept of affordances—the intersection of subjective perception of technology with its designed qualities. Some functions and tools can be explicit, which means they make *perceptible affordances*, "in which there is perceptual information available for an existing affordance" (Gaver, 1991, p. 80). The knowledge about the function, though, does not necessarily mean that a user will use this function, that is why we are talking about assemblages of platforms that offer some technical possibilities, curators that choose among them, and animals that also have their own limitations and agency in creating content. Thus, it's up to the curators whether they want to familiarize themselves with all the existing technical tools of Instagram or not. At the same time, the information on some existing functions might be missing, thus the users face *hidden affordances* (Gaver, 1991, p. 80). In case "information suggests a nonexistent affordance, a *false affordance* exists upon which people may mistakenly try to act" (Gaver, 1991, p. 80). This variety of user interactions with hidden and false platform affordances is particularly interesting to us, as it introduces flexibility in the interpretation of a platform.

Thus, a theoretical analysis of the reasons to (not) use the platform in specific ways is usually seen through the idea of affordances as a sensitizing tool for a researcher to reflect on the "interaction between technologies and the people who will use them," paying attention to the characteristics of both the subject (human–animal

assemblage) and the object (the platform) (Gaver, 1991, p. 79). This concept also allows the researchers to have regard to social affordances (Falahatpisheh & Khajeheian, 2020, p. 2) as the connection between social structures, which in our case are seen through depicted gender stereotypes, and technical ones, which in our case can not only be analyzed through the description of existing Instagram tools, but also appear to be tightly connected to the body of the animal and what visual content it allows to create, the curator's level of proficiency in using the platform, and the chosen types of visual representations.

In our research, we will address cultural affordances as well as cultural constraints from two perspectives: (a) by analyzing gendered human–animal relationships acting in the selected pet accounts; (b) by seeing Instagram's "Terms of Use" (Instagram Help Center, n.d.) as a document representing cultural and social constraints as an additional set of boundaries.

4. Instagram Pet Accounts: Representation of Human–Animal Identity and Gender Performance

Our data collection was built on the following account selection criteria: (a) the account should be run on behalf of a pet, which is stated in the profile (in its header and/or account name); (b) the account should be active and regularly updated with new posts during the whole period of research—to ensure the selection of active accounts and to avoid accounts of a deceased animal, we decided to choose accounts that we had been following for several months prior to the beginning of the research; (c) consequently, accounts should not be completely new and have been active at least three months, providing enough content for analysis. Since our focus was on qualitative features of pet accounts and curatorial practices, we did not take into account such quantitative indicators as the number of followers and their activity or involvement, which are relevant for studying influencers/celebrities. Because of that, accounts with both several hundred and several million followers appear in the sample.

We aimed to capture various aspects of the hybrid human–animal identities within the selected accounts. As we stated before, we see Instagram accounts dedicated to pets as reflections of human–animal relationships. These accounts represent an extended form of human self-representation that includes both animal and human characters, their social interactions, and the exploration of their "cross-species" identities. Thus, to analyze the representation and performance of gendered human–animal identities in pet accounts and study the curatorial strategies, we selected six accounts. These accounts were grouped into pairs, which allowed us to identify and compare differences and common features in gender representation and performance regarding characters (both human and animal) and role performance.

The first pair of accounts demonstrate different levels of anthropomorphism: Zoey (@zoey_fatcat)—a cat that acts as a character herself, performing a cat-animal character; Noodle (@noodlesthepooch)—a dog that acts as a businesswoman, performing a human office worker. The second pair consists of Lenny the lizard's (@whosagoodlizard) and Honeybelle (or Honey) the cat's accounts (@princesshoneybelle): they belong to different species, but they play human characters associated with the service sector—a cook and a café customer, respectively. The last pair of accounts consists of Teddy (@aguyandagoldenn) and Tucker (@tuckerbudzyn): unlike the previous pair, they are of the same species (even the same breed—golden retriever), but their social roles (characters) and gender dynamics are represented in different ways. One of them has a male owner, and the other has a female owner, which determines the nature of the character performed in the account.

In each one of the selected accounts, 40 posts were analyzed, starting from the top as of May 27, 2024. The dates for the selected posts were random, but, as the analysis of the posts shows, the date does not affect the results of the research. The number of analyzed posts was determined after examining the average frequency of publications in the accounts. Usually, new content is posted every two or three days; thus, the selected number of publications allows us to analyze content published within three months. The analysis of the content published during this period provides data for capturing changing media trends recurring across different accounts, such as the use of the same sound effects (sound memes), music tracks, video memes, or challenges. At the same time, it allows us to identify repeated features in the accounts and reconstruct consistently performed identity.

Selected posts (published photos and videos) from six pet accounts were analyzed to answer the question of how gendered human–animal identity is performed in these accounts—that is, which tools and techniques are used for this by curators (pet owners) within the limits of the platform affordances. By combining the fields described above, namely (a) human–animal relationships, (b) the representation and performing of identity, and (c) politics and affordances of digital platforms, we propose the following framework for analyzing pet accounts, their content, and social media account architecture as a whole:

4.1. Social Media Account Architecture

Firstly, the content of the account header is an affordance of Instagram that allows the curator to position the pet in terms of gender or other attributes and to either employ multiplatform representation logic by including links to external platforms or create an additional account (there are cases when the link in the header leads to another account that has a paywall). In terms of the suggested typology of affordances, it might be seen as a perceptible affordance to show all the actors creating and curating the account but can also work as a false affordance in case it represents a reduced set of such actors.

Secondly, we focus on the presence/absence of saved (pinned) stories in the header above the posts: This is the affordance of Instagram to emphasize certain content. This could be a welcoming post with information about the account and the pet character, or the tool to draw the users' attention to some posts that are preferred by the account curator. If such pinned stories exist, we analyze their content as well. When used, it can function as a perceptible affordance, in case nothing is pinned it could also mean that this affordance might have gone hidden depending on the level of "Instagram literacy" of the curator.

Lastly, addressing networking and community development, we check (a) whether the account in focus *follows* other pet accounts and (b) whether they are *followed* by other pet accounts. This works as a perceptible affordance, since Instagram is aimed at creating communities, as stated in its policy. However, this might be seen as a false affordance, misrepresenting the agency involved in creating and curating an account. Such accounts can also serve as hidden markers of income, as not everyone who owns a pet can afford to maintain them. Moreover, these communities are not maintained by the pets themselves but by their curators, who manage interactions, support, and mutual following. On the contrary, this affordance is part of platform policy that leads to specific activities that would increase the visibility of an account, thus promoting it and having other pets contribute to the income.

4.2. Social Media Account Content

Regarding the format for presenting content, Instagram as a platform has this perceptible affordance to upload visual content, obviously used by all relevant accounts. At the same time, we see video and photos as very different types of content in terms of how the human needs to be present within the published content, so the pet can be depicted in specific situations or playing a specific role. In other words, different species of animals are able to perform certain movements or posture in certain ways while others are not. Thus, the physical characteristics of pets influence the selection of curatorial tools, which in turn affects gendered images in a pet account. Animals might seem to exist independently in their accounts without the visible presence of the human. Moreover, the use of the video format is a curatorial choice opening up editing possibilities and allowing the creation of more complex characters through the use of voiceovers, titles, and other elements. Thus, we will analyze the text present in the posts, although it is not the visual content that plays the primary role for Instagram.

As for creating content, the content illustrates the range of themes presented in the posts by depicting an animal in unique circumstances or during its daily routine. The imagery is crafted in a manner similar to that used in human Instagram accounts, featuring expressive clothing, automobiles, homes, home decor, as well as locations, people, and other elements. This curatorial strategy, on the one hand, highlights the nature of a pet's account as an extension of human self-representation in digital space. On the other hand, this is connected with the anthropocentricity of the platform itself. Moreover, if we focus on gendered identity, these Instagram accounts:

> Not only exhibit the pre-existing gender expressions of the photographed individual—through their clothing, styling and mannerisms—but also create gender expressions in the process of taking the photographs, conveyed by the choice of what to photograph, how to pose, what facial expressions to present, etc. (Caldeira et al., 2018, p. 27)

As we emphasize above, poses, and expressions are limited by the pet's species, so they may be unable to express certain ideas, but that encourages the curator to choose other tools to show (hybrid) identity. This choice is, though, limited by the above-mentioned cultural constraints or so-called filters, "the social norms and expectations, rules and conventions that shape our photographic creations. They teach us, often unintentionally, to mimic societally approved images in our own photographic practices" (Caldeira et al., 2018, p. 28). Thus, the curators are limited in their choice by the physical characteristics of the pets and their species, but also by their own stereotypes of how to create visual content that also has to be successful from the perspective of the platform so as to raise its visibility. As we read the content of Instagram pet accounts from the "animal-human-digital assemblages" perspective, we see animals and humans emerging as characters who play roles and possess their own functions. And these human and animal characters and their relationships can be analyzed as enacting identity.

4.3. Analysis of Instagram Pet Accounts: Architecture and Content

Thus, based on the described framework, we will highlight the functions and roles of both human and non-human characters presented, describe how their relationships are visually and implicitly represented, reconstruct the performing gendered human–animal identity within the account, and analyze the platforms' curating tools used for performing gender.

As for the social media account architecture, we see it as a space for performing identity and a set of possibilities for the primary positioning of the pet, particularly in terms of gender. The most obvious indication of gender we can see in the account of Teddy the golden retriever is that the name contains the indicative word "guy" pointing to the gender of the pet. However, contrary to our expectations, the header space is mostly used for promotional representation and is not focused on gender. Thus, all the accounts have some information in the header, but not all of them are complete, some of them are only partially filled. The type of account varies from a public person and digital content creator to a pet. The account header may also indicate gender and gendered social roles; however, it is not often utilized for this purpose.

In the account of Zoey the cat as well as Noodles the dog, gender is marked through the pronouns "she/her." The indicator of gender can be also traced in the short description in the header, where Noodles is called a "queen," whereas in the account header of Tucker the golden retriever, gender is conveyed through the role of "dad," as he is stated to be a dad of another dog (@toddbudzyn) who also has an account.

It's also important that the header space can be used to represent the gender role of the owner and serve as one of the first indicators of the animal-human relationships to be shown in the account. Thus, the relationship between Teddy and his curator is marked as family, with the dominance of a human as "father." The relationship between Tucker and his curator is represented using professional media production language—through the verb "feature." Moreover, Tucker's curator calls herself "momager" in the header of her account, combining both the economic relationship with her pet and the parental role (also expressed in many posts where she describes Tucker's actions as if he tells her something, addressing her as "mom"), which we also see in Teddy's case.

Thus, regarding the actors involved in the performance of pet identities, this set of tools seems to be neutral from the perspective of what the platform offers, as humans are made visible in some cases and invisible in other cases—for example, through indicating "parents" or, vice versa, referring to the pet's independence. A thing that remains invisible in all cases is the platform itself, although its logic of creating attractive, inclusive, participatory content affects the representations.

Despite these gender indicators, the header space is most actively used to promote links to other accounts (some of them promote specific platforms, for example, Zoey promotes her TikTok account), while others use Linktree—an external (in relation to Instagram affordances) tool that helps collect all personal links in one place. All six accounts that we analyze insert as many links in the header as possible. Such an unbalanced usage of headers to represent gender identity versus promotional info shows us that the curators try to strengthen the affordances allowing them to promote their pets on multiple platforms or promote multiple accounts and, since the headers are sometimes only partially filled in, they seem to ignore the affordances already available on the platform. Thus, for this part of Instagram accounts, the promotional function prevails essentially. This is supported by the fact that the header is largely used to promote collaborations (some of the accounts, like the account of Chef Lenny the lizard, communicate the starting year for collaborations—"Product collabs since '19,'"—while others list the products they are promoting, like Tucker—"Tucker's Products") and the channels that should be used if someone wants to collaborate.

Most of the pinned stories and/or posts are used in the same way: they represent collaborations, contacts with the press, mentions by other accounts, or also ads. The number of pinned themes for stories also varies

from zero to 22 within our sample. We found zero pinned stories in the account of Zoey, which does not use many other affordances of Instagram either, while a maximum of 22 pinned stories is found in the account of Tucker the golden retriever and Honey the cat. Despite the variations in number of pinned stories, their content is still mostly promotional, whether the account has only one pinned story—like the account of Chef Lenny the lizard, published under the label "cool stuff" but in fact recommending things to buy—or there being many of them. Still, having 22 pinned stories makes the content more diverse. For example, Tucker's account has 22 categories, some of which sell products, while others just depict Tucker's character—for example, how sensitive he is to his curator's physical state while working as a therapy dog for her. This account also uses two pinned posts to advertise Dyson and to describe Tucker's spa routine. As such, the strategy of combining ads with something that describes Tucker is consistently used in this account but cannot be traced in other ones.

One more strategy that we could trace and that could be seen as a more professional usage of this technical affordance is having seven pinned collections of stories, like in the account of Noodles, as this number ideally fits the desktop screen and the follower can see all of them while looking at the page from the desktop, or four stories like in the account of Teddy, ideally fitting the screen of a smartphone. It's worth noting that Teddy's account uses this affordance in a very selective way, emphasizing only charity work related to the account and links to other Teddy's accounts (Facebook and YouTube). Given these slight variations, if we generalize, this means that, despite these tools serving as instruments for identity performance, they are predominantly used to generate income for the curator. It's interesting that sometimes this issue is raised in the content of accounts, as in the typed comment over the short video feeds in the pinned stories of Chef Lenny the lizard that states: "Full disclosure, I do receive a small commission on all of my recommendations, but I only recommend what I love." The networking tools (i.e., follow other representatives of the community and be followed by them) are used by all the accounts. Let's take a look at more details in several accounts.

Zoey's header is partially filled, providing minimal gender positioning by including only the pronouns she/her and the main idea of the narrative ("I'm a rescue who loves to rock my bowl!"—and many posts actually describe the way the cat interacts with her bowl). It serves primarily as a promotional space, featuring links to other accounts associated with the same pet. We can see the link to her TikTok account in the description and a link to Linktree, right on the next line. This tool is also used by Chef Lenny the lizard. There are no pinned posts in the account of Zoey, but the account follows and is followed by other pets. The type of account states that it is a pet account. This is an example of the use of affordances directly aimed at promotion through link-building. Zoey's account, which doesn't use many tools, can be seen as less commercial and, according to the header, not so much focused on gender.

As for the two golden retrievers, both accounts actively use the header for positioning the pet itself, either through a concise description of activities—"Dog | Comedy | Travel | Charity"—or through such public achievements as being twice the "Pet Influencer Award Winner." The header is also used to add external links either selling specific products or leading to other platforms, thus incorporating the pet into the economic approach to using animals, making them sell products relevant to the account. At the same time, in cases of both retrievers, the curators are explicitly represented despite our expectations that they might be hidden, although the roles of the curators are represented differently, an aspect which we will cover in the next paragraph. Both accounts follow and are followed by other pet accounts, thus reproducing one of the strategies to raise account visibility and exploit the hidden affordances of the platform.

Moving towards content analysis, we will first provide a preliminary comparative description of the selected pairs of accounts. We will start with characterizing the format (photo and/or video) and examine the dramaturgy (some visual, textual, auditory, and musical elements). Then, we will reconstruct the non-human and human characters performing gender roles and describe some of the curatorial techniques used to create characters.

Looking at the first pair of accounts, we find different strategies of content curation for gendered animal performance in the media. Both accounts belong to female animals (as stated in the account header) and are run by their female owners. But in the first case, a cat named Zoey acts as a pet (a non-human animal), and in the second case, a dog named Noodles plays a whole spectrum of female human roles (businessperson, beauty guru, gal pal, etc.), as if she were living an everyday human life in a TV show. The dramaturgy and narratives of the posts and videos from Zoey's account are quite simple: in the foreground, Zoey rocks her bowl; in the background, the owner sits and is in no hurry to serve Zoey. The owner's presence is not concealed; on the contrary, the pet–owner relationship is performed right in front of the camera. At the same time, the cat's image looks quite stereotypical, showing her as an arrogant pet who is the main one in human–animal relations and needs to be served. The gender aspect in Zoey's image is not articulated through the narrative as it could be absolutely the same even if either the owner or the animal's gender were different. In addition to the central character, Zoey, and her owner, the account features a golden retriever with whom Zoey competes for the owner's attention. The conflicts depicted in the account's narrative are not based on gender contradictions, but rather on interspecies stereotypes about demanding and arrogant cats and silly retrievers. The relationship between Zoey and her owner is represented in the account as a parent–child dynamic. However, this relationship is not a key plot element, except when Zoey is unwell or when she celebrates something (for example, a birthday). The techniques selected for the account curation are quite simple, as already noted, with few details such as special clothing or decor, and the posing is monotonous, contributing to a comic effect. Ultimately, Zoey performs the cat character with some anthropomorphic traits.

Noodles' account demonstrates different tendencies. It is a selling account, so the header is filled, the content is structured and styled, and the narrative is in the form of sketches. The pet performs the function of an actor, playing female human roles. The owner's presence is hidden; the pet plays human roles by herself, so human presence is redundant. A variety of decorative details (such as a desktop, a lounge chair, and a soft blanket), clothing items (including hats, costumes, and dresses), and accessories (like glasses and a scrunchie), as well as different locations, contribute to the expression of gender identity in the pet's account. The character performed by Noodle the dog is portrayed as anthropomorphic and feminine, curated by its owner. This is achieved through the use of pre-existing gender expressions in the media (including photography, cinema, television, etc.), such as posing on a sun lounger with a drink or in an image of an everyday beauty routine. The animal performer's body cannot represent all human movements, so the dramaturgy is based on short montages, using in-frame text and sounds.

In the second pair of analyzed accounts, those of Princess Honeybelle and Chef Lenny the lizard, human curators chose strategies of anthropomorphic identity representations. The pets belong to two different species, but they perform similar characters in terms of social roles. The first one is Princess Honeybelle's account, representing a "cat chef, fashionista, and world-famous catfluencer." Other cat characters, Mocha and Kody, as well as their owner, are also shown in the account, but Princess Honeybelle (or Honey) is the

main character. The account is fragmented by format, including the role of cats (chef or barista) and content showing behind-the-scenes routine (or life with cats). In the first case, the owner's presence is hidden through montage and detail shots; in the second one, the owner is visible and audible. The chef's format is carefully curated in terms of color and atmosphere, representing stereotypes: animal (a cat loving the "dolce vita"), cultural (the atmosphere of a French café), and gender (pink for girls).

The other account, Chef Lenny the lizard, belongs to three lizards (Lenny, Betty, and Samson) and their female owner; they also cook, but in their small kitchen for lizards, and their food is not always actually edible. The strategies are very similar to those used for Honey's account, but due to species differences, the cooking process is performed differently. Another perspective is opened up by comparing two accounts that are created for the same species, but performing different gendered roles. As with Noodles' account, the anthropomorphization of the pet character often conceals the owner's presence. Similar to Zoey, the owner only appears in the role of "pet parent" in rare instances. Thus, the representation of the pet–owner relationship, including the gender aspect, is confined to a parent–child dynamic. And regardless of the animal species, the curation of gendered images is influenced by gendered affordances. Thus, a pearl necklace will adorn a woman's neck (or that of a female lizard), while a bow tie will embellish a man's neck (or that of a male lizard or cat).

The last pair of accounts that we analyzed belong to two golden retrievers, Teddy and Tucker. Although both dogs are male, Teddy's curator is a young man while Tucker's is a young woman. One might assume that the characters portrayed would be diverse and differ significantly; however, this is not the case. In general, the accounts reflect the aforementioned strategies of representing and performing gender identity. Both accounts primarily use short vertical videos extensively edited and with complex montages, and they are remarkably anthropomorphized. For example, in both accounts, one can see videos in which golden retrievers seem to write something on paper, thus delivering the viewer some form of message. In these videos, the dogs' forepaws imitate the movements of a human arm typically used for writing. As for the content, it mostly reproduces communicative situations that can be seen as deeply stereotypical. The gender aspect is not the primary factor in shaping the conflicts within the characters' relationships. The plot of the sketch can be based on a pet's "selective hearing"—i.e., he or she is interested mostly in food (and this actually represents a pet as a pet), or a situation when a flatmate brings home his girlfriend (in this case, a pet is more included in human types of relationship and is anthropomorphic).

The curatorial strategy in both accounts is mixed and uses different social roles to represent the pet. Unlike the cat or lizard accounts, these accounts use fewer small details (such as accessories, new interiors, and clothes) in the images, which may be due to the size of the pets and their activities. The performance of gender identity is embedded in videos representing social and cultural practices, and this is the most interesting aspect of the accounts. Therefore, the representation of gender identity is expressed in one case through the pursuit of opportunities to earn extra money, while in the other one, it is demonstrated through beauty routine and massage. The owner/curator is guided by their own preferences and roles.

Summarizing the analysis of the accounts based on the suggested perspective, we can conclude that the social media account architecture provides means for performing gender identity in different ways: through account names, header contents, pinned stories, and posts. However, these are mostly used as promotional tools. Moreover, the most perceptible affordance for that purpose is seen as inserting links wherever

possible and even using an additional digital tool (Linktree) to strengthen this focus and add even more links. At the same time, it's worth noting that in some cases this space is used in a more creative way and shows the features of a pet's character (like sensitivity) or routine (which could be advertising at the same time). By curating content for pet accounts, owners create characters, plots, and conflicts, choose the format (photos or videos, sketch comedies or cute pictures, etc.), and make creative decisions about what should be displayed and how. The pets are "invited" into this process as lead actors or main characters; therefore, an animal character in an account largely depends on the size, activity level, mobility, and distinctive appearance based on the species of the pet. Dramaturgical techniques, such as curation, depend on the degree of anthropomorphism attributed to the pet. The higher the level of anthropomorphism of the animal, the less prominent the human presence; this is emphasized through short montages, cropping, and other techniques. Moreover, more conventional and stereotypical elements are employed to create these anthropomorphic pet images. Human–animal relationships and the associated identity (such as the role of a pet parent) typically do not become central themes in such accounts, showing up only occasionally.

5. Conclusion

Despite the long history of using animal voices in the mediated space as extensions of human identity, be it letters, early photographs, or anything else, this interaction fundamentally changes when a social media platform gets involved. Together with global changes in human–animal relations, the integration of platforms leads to configuring "animal-human-digital assemblages" that not only represent animals or, to be more precise, pets, but also perform identities. Simultaneously, digital platforms, namely Instagram, have their own tools, rules, and policies that create space—sometimes perceptible, sometimes hidden, or even false—for such representations. With technical limitations on the one hand and types of human–animal relationships, as well as social roles on the other hand, curators perform hybrid human–animal identities, including gendered ones, despite not creating an ideal "zootopia" of "cross-species sociality." The pets' Instagram accounts become not merely a space where a human's "expanded identity" is represented or performed, but also a digital stage where human–animal (commodified) narratives unfold, with the pet in the lead role and the owner serving as the curator.

Based on research in the fields of human–animal relationships, cultural representation, identity performance, and digital platform politics, we proposed an analytical perspective comprising two parts: account architecture (content of the header, saved/pinned stories, and relationships with other pet accounts) and account content (format for presenting and creating content). We analyzed six active Instagram pet accounts that had had regular updates for at least three months prior to the beginning of the research.

Taking into account the hybrid nature and transformation of human–animal relationships in the media, the first research question focused on acts of performing gendered human–animal identity in pet accounts. The analysis of Instagram account architecture reveals that not all platform affordances are utilized for performing gendered identity; some are primarily used for promotional purposes. Headers, pinned stories, and pinned posts mostly contain links to related accounts or advertisements. Rarely, an account name may reference gender (e.g., "a guy") or indicate gender through pronouns ("she/her" next to the pet's name). The descriptions published in the header are usually more representative of professional roles (e.g., "chef," "beauty guru") rather than gendered ones. Thus, "gendered zootopia" appears as a hidden affordance, while the more perceptible ones assist in promotion.

From the perspective of content, pet accounts are consciously curated; they rarely feature random posts. Pet characters are designed with specific functions and memorable traits, meaning that the performance of gender identity is not incidental but is carefully planned by the owner/curator and enacted by the pet character (e.g., a female cat in pink baking pies or a female poodle lounging by the pool).

The design of a gendered character mostly relies on the animal's sex and the anthropomorphism of the pet's image. Regardless of species, the curation of gendered images is shaped by culturally gendered affordances and gendered filters. Thus, a pearl necklace adorns a woman's neck (or that of a female lizard), while a bow tie embellishes a man's neck (or that of a male cat).

RQ2 addresses the curating strategies and platform tools that are selected by owners for performing gender in pet accounts within the limits of platform affordances. Examining analyzed accounts' architecture reveals that platform limitations do not directly affect curatorial strategies, as Instagram is well-suited for producing visual content. Two characteristics of the platform can be seen as important in this regard: (a) rapid consumption of content by the audience, which makes the curators make the content short and standardized to be more easily accessible; (b) monetization of the account that emphasizes all the tools that help the curator promote products.

The influence of the platform can be also traced through cultural restraints and gendered stereotypes that affect the limits within which the curators create content. The imagery in pet accounts is curated similarly to that in human Instagram accounts, showcasing expressive clothing, cars, homes, decor, and various locations and people. This is in line with both Instagram's mission and the representation of an "extended identity."

One important aspect of curating a pet account is selecting objects, locations, decorations, clothing, and accessories that convey the gendered character's traits and habits in a recognizable way. Partly for this reason, stereotypical techniques are used in enacting gender (e.g., pink for girls and dark glasses for rugged men), because the images of speechless characters (videos and photos) must be interpreted unambiguously.

Since the primary element ("lead actor") of the account is a pet, the selection of curatorial strategies and tools largely depends on its size, activity level, mobility, and distinctive appearance based on species. Dramatic curation techniques are influenced by the degree of anthropomorphism attributed to the pet. A higher level of anthropomorphism minimizes human presence, which is emphasized through techniques such as montage, voice-over, text overlay, close-up shots, and music tracks, among others.

Ultimately, the analyzed pet accounts reveal a tendency to reproduce traditional, stereotypical gender performances that are often meticulously curated and thoughtfully composed in detail by their human owners. Although gender-related politics on Instagram does not cover images of animals, pet accounts are not used as spaces for creative gender content or gender activism, and "zootopia"—a space where anything is possible—remains only a potentiality.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Adams, C. J. (2015). *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory*. The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Aran-Ramspott, S., Korres-Alonso, O., Elexpuru-Albizuri, I., Moro-Inchaurtieta, Á., & Bergillos-García, I. (2024). Young users of social media: An analysis from a gender perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *15*, Article 1375983. https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1375983/full

Baker, S. (1993). *Picturing the beast: Animals, identity, and representation*. Manchester University Press.

Belk, R. (2016). Extended self and the digital world. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *10*, 50–54.

Belk, R. W. (1996). Metaphoric relationships with pets. *Society & Animals*, *4*(2), 121–145.

Berger, J. (2009). *Why look at animals*? Penguin Books.

Braidotti, R. (2009). Animals, anomalies, and inorganic others. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, *124*(2), 526–532.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Calarco, M. (2015). *Thinking through animals: Identity, difference, indistinction*. Stanford University Press.

Caldeira, S. P., de Ridder, S., & van Bauwel, S. (2018). Exploring the politics of gender representation on Instagram: Self-representations of femininity. *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, *5*(1), 23–42.

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2016). *The mediated construction of reality*. Wiley.

Creed, B., & Reesink, M. (2015). Animals, images, anthropocentrism. *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, *4*(1), 95–105.

Falahatpisheh, Z., & Khajeheian, D. (2020). Affordances and IT design: A typology for social media and platform affordances. In I. Williams (Ed.), *2020 13th CMI conference on cybersecurity and privacy (CMI): Digital transformation—Potentials and challenges* (pp. 1–7). IEEE.

Fernández, B. F., & González, A. G. (2017). Analysis of children consumption of TV, videogames and the internet: Differences based on gender in their selection of audiovisual content. *Fonseca, Journal of Communication*, *15*, 95–108.

Gaver, W. W. (1991). Technology affordances. In S. P. Robertson, G. M. Olson, & J. S. Olson (Eds.), *CHI '91: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 79–84). ACM.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Polity Press.

Giles, D. C. (2013). Animal celebrities. *Celebrity Studies*, *4*(2), 115–128.

Greenebaum, J. (2004). It's a dog's life: Elevating status from pet to "fur baby" at yappy hour. *Society & Animals*, *12*(2), 117–135.

Grier, K. (2006). *Pets in America: A history*. Harvest Books.

Haraway, D. J. (2003). *The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness*. Prickly Paradigm Press.

Hepp, A. (2019). *Deep mediatization*. Routledge.

Instagram Help Center. (n.d.). *Terms of use*. https://help.instagram.com/581066165581870/?helpref=hc_fnav&cms_id=581066165581870

Kompatsiaris, P. (2024). *Curation in the age of platform capitalism: The value of selection, narration, and expertise in new media cultures*. Taylor & Francis.

Latour, B. (1992). Where are the missing masses? The sociology of a few mundane artifacts. *Shaping technology/building society: Studies in sociotechnical change*, *1*, 225–258.

Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. Wiley.

Lukács, G. (2020). *Invisibility by design: Women and labor in Japan's digital economy*. Duke University Press.

Lupton, D. (2023). *The internet of animals: Human-animal relationships in the digital age*. Wiley.

Maddox, J. (2021). The secret life of pet Instagram accounts: Joy, resistance, and commodification in the internet's cute economy. *New Media & Society*, *23*(11), 3332–3348.

Maddox, J. (2022). *The internet is for cats: How animal images shape our digital lives*. Rutgers University Press.

Manovich, L. (2017). *Instagram and contemporary image*. Unpublished manuscript. http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image

Norman, D. A. (1999). Affordance, conventions, and design. *Interactions*, *6*(3), 38–43.

Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & van Dijck, J. (2019). Concepts of the digital society: Platformisation. *Internet Policy Review*, *8*(4). https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1425

Ritvo, H. (1989). *The animal estate: The english and other creatures in victorian England*. Harvard University Press.

Santos, A., & Figueras, M. (2020). Instagram and gender inequalities: The discourse of young women regarding social networks. In F. J. García-Peñalvo & A. García-Holgado (Eds.), *Eighth international conference on technological ecosystems for enhancing multiculturality* (pp. 577–581). Association for Computing Machinery.

Serafinelli, E. (2018). *Digital life on Instagram: New social communication of photography*. Emerald Publishing.

Sewell, A. (1993). *Black beauty: The autobiography of a horse*. Everyman.

Shukin, N. (2009). *Animal capital: Rendering life in biopolitical times*. University of Minnesota Press.

van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press.

van Dijck, J. (2021). Seeing the forest for the trees: Visualizing platformization and its governance. *New Media & Society*, *23*(9), 2801–2819.

Veevers, J. (1985). The social meaning of pets: Alternative roles for companion animals. *Marriage and Family Review*, *8*(3/4), 11–30.

About the Authors

Natalia Vereshchagina is a senior lecturer in the Institute of Media at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Russia). She works at the intersection of cultural studies, media theory, and film studies, with a focus on narrative analysis. Her research interests include posthumanism, othering and media representations, philosophical anthropology and media, and film theory. She has participated in projects related to posthumanism and media, outer space, and media.

Irina Dushakova (PhD in journalism) is an assistant professor in the Institute of Media at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Russia). Her research interests include the social construction of technology, including generative AI and social media platforms, mediatization of social life with a focus on identity, memory, and religion. She is the author of more than 30 articles and principal investigator in the project supported by Russian Science Foundation on the mediatization of religion.

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Instagram and #Wellness: Uncovering Gender and Body Patterns

Ana Marta M. Flores [1] and **Rita Sepúlveda** [2]

NOVA Institute of Communication (ICNOVA), NOVA University of Lisbon, Portugal

Correspondence: Ana Marta M. Flores (amflores@fsch.unl.pt)

Abstract

The concept of "wellness" and its associated representations have become key aspects of modern culture, with social media platforms like Instagram playing a significant role. Not only do these platforms serve as spaces for the public expression of wellness-related topics, but they also influence public perceptions. This becomes particularly meaningful when these expressions are linked to gender. Our research explores how wellness and gender are depicted in popular Instagram posts. By analysing 300 public Instagram posts tagged with #wellness from 2023, we investigate whether traditional notions of gender and bodies are challenged or reinforced. Wellness is a multifaceted process, but our findings show that users often adhere to a narrow concept. To understand these representations, we focused on posts tagged with #wellness, particularly those in the physical category. The study employed a digital methods approach (Rogers, 2013) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), uncovering three primary themes: Practices & Workout, Body & Expressions, and Clothing & Adornment. Predominantly, all themes in the context of wellness depict gender in a binary form and bodies as thin or athletic. These traditional gender and body norms are perpetuated on Instagram, reinforcing societal standards of beauty and body image. Instagram's engagement logic preferentially promotes content conforming to dominant societal norms, strengthening these patterns. Alternative or counter-narratives, while they exist, often face challenges in gaining visibility due to both algorithmic biases and cultural predispositions. Although Instagram has the potential to offer a platform for such counter-narratives, our findings indicate that normative content continues to dominate in terms of visibility and engagement.

Keywords

app studies; gender norms; gender representations; hashtags; Instagram; social platforms; wellness

1. Introduction

The term "wellness" has become a prevalent part of everyday discourse, with wellness-related posts on Instagram serving as a means of self-expression and shaping perceptions of well-being (Chinn et al., 2023). Wellness culture encourages individuals to take responsibility for their health, promoting a holistic approach that connects lifestyle choices with well-being (Baker, 2022). Contemporarily, Instagram plays a crucial role in disseminating these ideas, not only as a source of information but also by shaping societal notions of wellness (Ahrens et al., 2022; Pelletier et al., 2020). Prior research has explored the relationship between wellness and gender on Instagram, revealing how digital platforms can both empower users and perpetuate traditional stereotypes (Conor, 2021; Tiusanen, 2022). These studies have concentrated on specific hashtags, user accounts, or particular dimensions of wellness. The findings highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of how wellness is constructed and experienced in digital spaces. This is especially relevant to the ongoing negotiation of gender identities. A critical next step involves examining broader forms of expression, enabling a deeper analysis of users' wellness expressions.

This article addresses this gap, aiming to explore and characterise wellness-associated representations on Instagram, particularly with gender and body narratives. The article builds on a multidisciplinary understanding of wellness as a process encompassing several dimensions, with the physical one being the most prevalent in social media portrayals. It focuses particularly on how the platform serves as a space for the performance and visualisation of wellness practices on Instagram. Our primary research question is: What narratives about gender and inclusivity emerge in users' portrayal of wellness in Instagram posts? By analysing popular posts tagged with #wellness, we investigate how visual and textual narratives reinforce or challenge gender norms, especially within the context of neoliberal feminism and gender performativity. The article is structured as follows: First, we present the theoretical foundations, situating the study within wellness, social media, and gender research. Next, we detail our methods, including data collection and analysis procedures. Section 3 presents our findings, discussing key themes identified through thematic analysis and positioning them to existing literature. Section 4 restates the main points, emphasising the gendered dimensions of wellness portrayals. Finally, we address study limitations and propose directions for future research.

1.1. Approaching Contemporary Wellness

Wellness, as the pursuit of personal fulfilment and an idealised self-involving physical health practices, mental and emotional balance, and healthy choices (Baker, 2022), is an indicator that can be measured by individuals' perceptions of what benefits them (Adams et al., 1997). Defined as "an active process through which people become aware of, and make choices toward, a more successful existence" (Stoewen, 2015, p. 983), wellness involves a set of multidisciplinary practices among several dimensions of life. As a multidimensional concept (e.g., Adams et al., 1997; Dolan et al., 2008; National Wellness Institute, n.d.), wellness encompasses physical aspects, emotional and psychological elements, social dimensions, intellectual components, spiritual details, environmental considerations, economic factors, and vocational concerns, among other widely agreed components. Such dimensions are interconnected, with one influencing the others (Stoewen, 2017). They play a crucial role in shaping an individual's overall wellness, and their balance is essential for achieving holistic health. Although often used as a synonym for well-being, wellness is conceptualised with a focus on the processes or pathways the individual takes to achieve optimal

health goals and not on the outcomes themselves, as is the case with the concept of well-being (Rachele et al., 2013). Among the several dimensions of wellness, the physical one is particularly prominent among authors' contributions and is objectively conceptualised (e.g., Bak & Priniski, 2020; Chinn et al., 2023; Moreno et al., 2023). It relates to caring for a healthy body through nutrition, revealing an awareness about food choices, nourishing the body through diet and engaging with physical practices which are often the most visible and accessible aspects of wellness in society. The widespread nature of physical wellness practices makes them a significant area of study. While "fitness culture" and "physical wellness" are often used interchangeably, they represent distinct concepts. Fitness culture is driven by societal standards of beauty and performance and focuses on aesthetic goals like body shape and muscularity, which can lead to a limited view of health in which appearance is seen as the main indicator of wellness (Grogan, 2021). In contrast, physical wellness aims to promote a more inclusive approach and recognises diverse body shapes, fitness levels, and health practices, supporting the idea that wellness is personalised to an individual's needs and preferences (Myers et al., 2000). In contemporary society, wellness is increasingly viewed as a choice and a cultural phenomenon, which is integral to a modern identity. This shift views wellness not only as a health objective but as a lifestyle choice, where people adopt wellness-oriented behaviours and practices to enhance their lives. Wellness can also be seen as a rhetorical tool for personal improvement and disease prevention, which places responsibility on individuals for their health outcomes (Derkatch, 2022). Consequently, there has been a surge in investment in wellness-related products and services, from programmes and retreats to apps and supplements, transforming wellness into a trillion-dollar industry (Callaghan et al., 2021). Focus on physical wellness content has gained prominence on Instagram (e.g., Ahrens et al., 2022; Chaudhary & Dhillon, 2021; Chinn et al., 2023), one of the most used social media platforms worldwide (Chinn et al., 2023). Such can be attributed to several interrelated factors that reflect broader cultural and technological shifts and their interactive and communal aspects, contributing to its dissemination and promotion while being a source of wellness-related information (Sidorova, 2019). On Instagram, users can share, like, and comment on visual content and interact with other users, be they ordinary people, influencers, professionals in specific fields, experts, brands, companies, or institutions. Through the main affordances of the visual-based platform, users share photos and videos, report personal experiences or thoughts, use hashtags, and associate them with products or services, reflecting possibilities in engaging with wellness posts (Moreno et al., 2023). Previous studies on Instagram have highlighted the influence of fitspiration on women's communities (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021), body and gender discourses in sports (Krieger et al., 2022), and user participation in fitness culture (Schöps et al., 2024). Research also explores how masculinities are negotiated through hegemonic male bodies (Marshall et al., 2020), gender display (Baker & Walsh, 2018), and gender stereotypes (Plasencia & León, 2021). Research focusing on fitness-related hashtags, communities, and influencers reveals strategies such as fitness challenges, sharing milestones, and peer feedback (Goodyear et al., 2021; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018) to engage audiences (Lupton, 2021) and have access to how credibility is implemented to relationships flourish and grow wellness businesses (Wellman, 2024). This content cycle ensures that physical wellness remains prominent on social media.

1.2. Wellness, Social Platforms, and Gender

The intersection of wellness discourse and gender representation on social media platforms has garnered increasing attention from scholars and practitioners alike (Lee et al., 2015), reflecting a broader societal shift towards online spaces as influential sources of information, inspiration, and identity formation.

Instagram's visual and interactive features promote wellness practices that frequently embody neoliberal feminist ideals, emphasising individual responsibility and self-optimisation. These representations often align with Butler's (2006) concept of gender performativity, where users engage in repeated acts that visually assert their gender identities through posts tagged with wellness-related hashtags. Such gendered performances reflect and perpetuate broader cultural norms on the platform. According to Butler (2006), gender is not an innate trait but a socially constructed and performative act. This idea suggests that gender identities are formed through repeated performances that conform to societal expectations. On Instagram, these performances are visually articulated through curated wellness portrayals, reinforcing conventional gender norms. Women are more likely to engage online with wellness content due to a combination of social, psychological, and content-related factors (Chinn et al., 2023). However, this engagement is often passive, with women typically scrolling rather than posting, reflecting their consumption habits and motivations for seeking inspiration (Mayoh & Jones, 2020). This involvement is shaped by their interests, motivations, and the nature of the content itself. Younger and more liberal women, in particular, actively seek wellness content on platforms like Instagram, which reflects a broader cultural trend towards health and wellness (Chinn et al., 2023). Posts that resonate emotionally and offer relatable experiences tend to garner higher engagement, particularly among women who seek validation and community (Chou, 2021). The nature of the content, such as personal stories or real-life images, strongly affects engagement, with women often identifying more with authentic wellness portrayals (Kim, 2023). Gender depictions usually emphasise slenderness and flexibility for women and muscularity for men (Rose et al., 2012), and this reinforces traditional gender roles in wellness discourse. These representations are shaped by dominant ideologies in digital media (Popa & Gavriliu, 2015), with Instagram playing a pivotal role in promoting wellness practices (Moreno et al., 2023; Nadobnik, 2019). Social media significantly influences perceptions of a "healthy" and "desirable" lifestyle, perpetuating idealised standards that shape gender norms and expectations (Rounsefell et al., 2020). As users navigate the curated landscapes of social media, they may strategically present aspects of their identities in alignment with dominant norms or resist and subvert traditional gender roles. Understanding these dynamics through the lens of neoliberal feminism and Butler's (2006) concept of performativity offers a deeper insight into the complex interplay between wellness, gender, and identity on Instagram. This approach allows us to explore how wellness, particularly in the physical dimension, perpetuates or disrupts gender norms and expectations. The literature on gender portrayals on social platforms reveals a range of theories and findings that highlight the persistence of gender stereotypes and their implications for users (e.g., Caldeira et al., 2018; Li, 2023). Digital platforms, including social media, search engines, and other online spaces, have been shown to reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes, particularly in portraying occupations (Singh et al., 2020).

Instagram content can perpetuate gender stereotyping (Pramaskara, 2022) through large audiences, allowing for lasting consequences for such content. The literature collectively indicates it through various mechanisms, including stereotypical representations (Bailey et al., 2013), algorithmic biases (Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2021), and user-generated content (Jain & Kaur, 2023; Rose et al., 2012). For instance, in 2015, Instagram blocked the hashtag #curvy, sparking backlash from users and body positivity advocates. Instagram claimed the hashtag violated community guidelines on nudity and pornography. Critics argued that the move unfairly targeted users promoting body positivity and diversity. The incident raised concerns about algorithmic bias and content moderation's impact on marginalised communities. Instagram later reinstated the hashtag, acknowledging community concerns and emphasising its commitment to allowing users to express themselves while maintaining a safe environment (Webb et al.,

2019). This case exemplifies social media platforms' challenges in balancing content moderation with inclusivity and free expression.

In this sense, any digital platform has the potential to be an online arena for the creation of alternative communities and a space for countering oppression and promoting well-being (Perera et al., 2021). These platforms offer a social environment where traditional barriers to visibility and representation can be challenged. Scholars such as Nancy Fraser (1990) have argued that digital spaces enable the formation of what she terms "subaltern counter publics"—arenas for alternative discourses where groups with less social power can organise, articulate their interests, and gain visibility. Similarly, boyd (2014) argues that social media platforms facilitate the reorganisation of social ties and amplify voices often excluded from mainstream media. Through these digital networks, minority groups can build communities that not only foster solidarity but also create new forms of visibility and influence within the broader public sphere, challenging dominant cultural narratives and promoting inclusivity. In the context of wellness, particularly concerning the physical dimension, and considering previous studies' contributions, we question: What narratives about gender and inclusivity emerge in users' portrayal of Wellness in Instagram posts? We aim to identify and characterise wellness-associated representations. We sought to identify how the human body manifests in the content users share, paying particular attention to gender and narratives. Previous studies have primarily focused on specific hashtags, influencers, or particular communities, shaping their field of observation and consequently guiding their findings. However, they have not examined gender narratives linked to more general hashtags such as #wellness. This study seeks to address this perspective. Drawing on the insights from prior research, this study proposes to analyse and describe gender narratives associated with a broad form of expression, which encompasses multiple dimensions and may lead to diverse manifestations. This approach can contribute to the discussion on gender construction and representation on social platforms from a wellness-specific perspective. The literature reveals several pivotal dimensions of social media, particularly Instagram, and how it shapes perceptions of mental health, wellness, and identity (Utter et al., 2020). LGBTQ+ youth benefit from social media platforms like Instagram, which offer crucial spaces for connection, the construction of identity, and social support. However, these benefits can be undermined by the discrimination and victimisation these youth may face online (Berger et al., 2022). Instagram's visual focus has been linked to increased comparisons of appearance and lower body satisfaction, particularly among young women, driven by idealised body images that can harm mental health (Engeln et al., 2020; Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). Gender differences also emerge in the perception of food-related content, with males more likely than females to consider unhealthy foods healthy. In contrast, females' food choices are strongly influenced by their perceptions of food healthfulness, reflecting societal gender norms in health behaviours (Nelson & Fleming, 2019). Within wellness culture, the #womenswellness community on Instagram encourages women to express emotions such as honesty, gratitude, and empowerment, which aligns with feminist principles of self-love and vulnerability. This represents a shift from traditional post-feminist discourse towards a more collective, emotionally supportive narrative (Tiusanen, 2022). Studies show that the wellness industry is heavily dominated by women entrepreneurs, professionals, and consumers (O'Neill, 2023). As such, wellness culture can be understood within the framework of neoliberal feminism, which emphasises individual empowerment and self-optimisation within a market-driven society (Rottenberg, 2014). Wellness is often portrayed as a way to self-improvement, aligned with neoliberal ideals that prioritise individual success and bodily control over collective or systemic change (Tiusanen, 2021). The feminised aspects of wellness culture are also evident in how wellness is marketed to fashionable young women, who shape wellness trends and narratives

intertwined with societal expectations of femininity (O'Neill, 2020). Concepts of femininity and masculinity, socially constructed and shaped by cultural, social, and political forces, vary across cultures and history. These gender roles are complex, context-dependent, and enacted through social practices rather than being fixed (Butler, 2006; Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2009). Instagram has also proven effective in promoting sexual health education, especially among black male adolescents and young adults. However, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube are more popular sources for this information, which highlights the range of media preferences (Burns et al., 2020). Moreover, for Western women of South Asian heritage, Instagram serves as a platform to express and share gendered ethnic identities, enabling them to resist oppression and enhance well-being through intragroup dialogue and alliance-building (Perera et al., 2021).

By applying the theoretical approaches of neoliberal feminism and Butler's performativity, this study brings the "physical wellness" dimension to the discussion. This approach offers new insights into how Instagram posts reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms. The justification for doing so lies in the fact that wellness has established itself as a relevant topic in the context of health, currently representing a multimillion-dollar industry, and in which social networks have played a significant role by providing a stage for communication and promotion. The focus on the physical dimension is explained by individuals' perception of wellness as physical health, as discussed by Stoewen (2017).

2. Methods and Research Design

2.1. Data Collection and Sample Selection

The study employed a digital methods approach, exploring digital media for research, focusing on born-digital content and repurposing web-native techniques to study cultural phenomena—such as gender within wellness-related Instagram posts. This methodology emphasises the unique data generated by digital platforms while also acknowledging the challenges posed by the medium itself (Rogers, 2013). Using PhantomBuster, a tool that collects public data through Instagram API, we extracted publicly available Instagram posts identified with #wellness during March, April, and May 2023. The choice of the hashtag is justified by its popularity at the time of data collection (more than 50 million posts associated with #wellness), by the fact that it is a more general expression when compared to hashtags used in other studies (e.g., #fitsinspo, #instasad, #mentalhealth) and helped us to obtain a broader sample. Collecting data at three different points in time enabled us to meet the goal of obtaining such a heterogeneous sample.

Each month, the 500 posts with higher engagement (considering it as the sum of likes and comments) were collected, composing an initial dataset of 1,500 posts. Instagram uses a complex algorithm to determine the order of posts in users' feeds. The algorithm is designed to maximise user engagement by showing content that is likely to interest them. Likes and comments are key indicators of such interest. When a post receives a high number of likes and comments shortly after being published, it is more likely to appear higher in users' feeds, increasing its visibility (Leaver et al., 2020).

Our proposal acknowledges the contextual nature of social media platforms, allowing us to analyse metrics (e.g., likes, shares, comments) and native digital objects (e.g., hashtags). Hashtags can be used for content labelling, categorising, organising discourse, and adding context to posts (Zappavigna, 2015) while having a collective framing potential (Meraz, 2017). The engagement metrics offer valuable insights into the complex

interaction of algorithmic design, social validation, visual appeal, influencer culture, and cultural norms. While Instagram's algorithm is constantly evolving and not fully transparent, it still influences user behaviour by favouring content that meets specific engagement metrics, even though it does not solely dictate them (Cotter, 2019; Register et al., 2023).

The full dataset ($N = 1,500$) was first classified through eight wellness dimensions (Adams et al., 1997; Stoewen, 2015, 2017): Physical, Intellectual, Emotional, Social, Spiritual, Vocational, Financial, and Environmental. The Physical dimension was the most common, representing 73% of posts in the initial sample. We isolated the Physical category and selected the most popular 300 posts from the 90 days. The Physical category emphasises the corporeal dimensions of wellness, such as exercise, weight management, and body image. These elements are inherently linked to culturally constructed gender norms, as the expectations that dictate how individuals of different genders should behave are perpetuated through social institutions and cultural practices (Kimmel & Aronson, 2017). These norms can be observed in how they are portrayed and discussed in social media posts that employ the hashtag wellness. By narrowing the focus to the physical dimension, this research can look in detail at the exploration of one key aspect to address a dominant impression of the current wellness discourse. This focus not only reflects the priorities of contemporary wellness practices but also provides a critical lens through which to examine the cultural and societal implications of this emphasis on physical health and gender. This facet will allow a comprehensive analysis of how gender representations are either reinforced or challenged through visual content related to the physical component of wellness posts. The final dataset that unified 300 public Instagram posts published in 2023 tagged with #wellness from the Physical category was analysed through interpretive thematic analysis to qualitatively explore it for identifying recurrent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It should be noted that the unit of analysis was the published post, i.e., both images and captions were included to conduct the study. Figure 1 summarises the process.
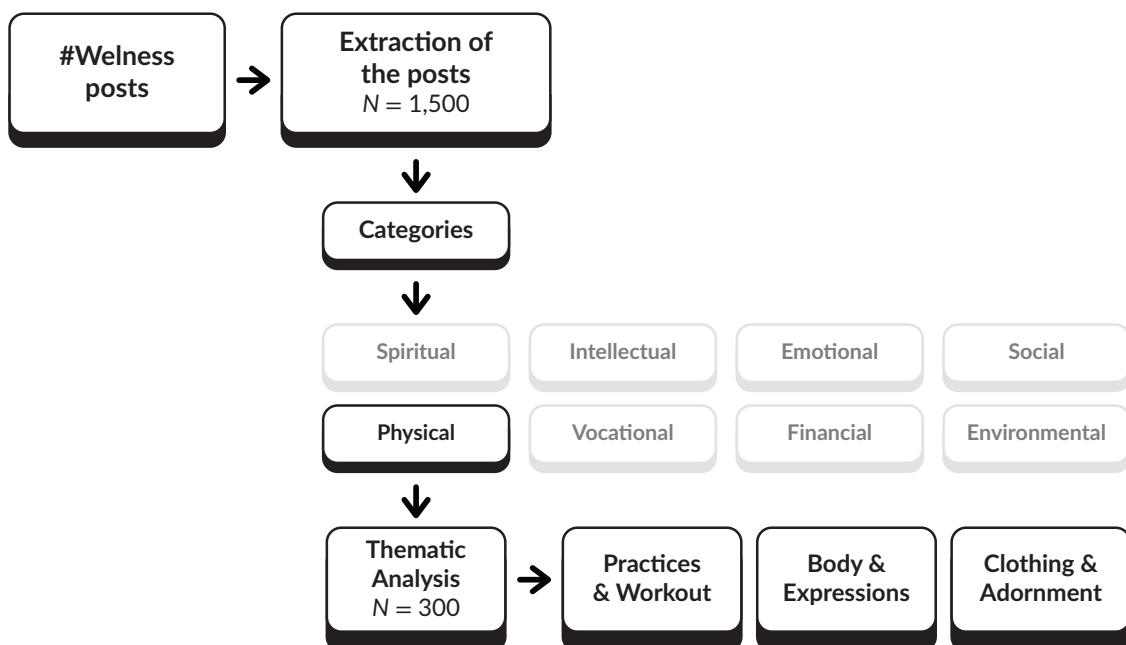

Figure 1. Research design protocol.

2.2. Data Analysis

To examine #wellness posts, we employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) alongside an inductive coding approach, whereby codes were developed during the dataset analysis. While the primary focus was on the visual components of the posts, the captions were also analysed to gain a deeper understanding of the content and context. This dual approach provided a comprehensive examination of the visual and textual elements. Comments on the posts were excluded from the analysis as our focus remained solely on the posts. The thematic analysis process consisted of the following steps. First, the dataset was organised into a spreadsheet file, allowing coders to familiarise themselves with #wellness posts individually, observing the images and reading the captions to discern meaning and narrative, within the context of Instagram's platform and the #wellness hashtag. Initial contact with the data was accompanied by qualitative notes, which served to identify potential codes. We began by noting aspects of gender performance, including body language, posture, facial expressions, clothing, and exercise routines. Second, building on this initial step, we proceeded with the first round of coding, which involved combining raw data with interpretative insights. At this stage, we aimed to refine the posts' semantics and meanings using keywords or key expressions.

A second coding round was conducted to consolidate the codes by merging those with significant overlap and removing those lacking coherence (Saldaña, 2015). The codes were not mutually exclusive; therefore, multiple codes could be applied to a single post, reflecting the complexity of the study subject (i.e., images and text). For instance, a post depicting a person at the gym could simultaneously convey information about the type of exercise performed and body display. Third, the review and consolidation of the codes led to the development of the codebook. Each code was labelled and its definition was conceptualised. Additionally, guidelines for the appropriate application of each code were provided, along with examples of posts. The purpose of the codebook was not to measure data accuracy objectively but rather to encourage reflection on coding decisions and assess the accuracy of labels, definitions, and examples (Braun & Clarke, 2021), thereby enhancing clarity during the analysis. Throughout this process, the two coders involved collaborated to resolve ambiguities and refine the coding framework. And finally, following this process, the codes were grouped into themes that theoretically explained the physical dimension of #wellness. This involved examining the relationships between codes and how they collectively contributed to a narrative about the posts, thus forming a cohesive theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.3. Ethical Considerations

The data collected for this study originates from Instagram public accounts and was collected through the Instagram API, respecting the platform's terms of service. Following recommendations that help researchers decide whether the information available on the internet is public or private (Franzke et al., 2020), we decided that if the data was available for collection, it was included in the analysis corpus. Images were described to illustrate findings without including personal information to prevent content from being traced back.

3. Findings and Discussion

The dataset analysis revealed three key themes: Practices & Workout, Body & Expressions and Clothing & Adornment. Our results uncover a landscape entrenched in traditional gender and body stereotypes.

3.1. Practices & Workout: Gendered Performances

This theme captures the diverse ways that users display how they physically work their bodies. Posts generally describe body care and images of physical exercise as an "everyday" practice. Through post captions, users reinforce to their audiences that training is part of their daily routines. Workout-related posts with training methods are popular Instagram content that users share and engage with (Nadobnik, 2019). Three types of sports were identified when focusing on practices: yoga, running, and functional training, which are readily linked to physical activities in the understanding of Instagram users for pursuing wellness. As the following analysis presents, most typologies were binary-gendered on many levels.

Yoga was predominantly associated with women through posts portraying several popular yoga postures (asanas). It is often depicted in domestic indoor settings such as bedrooms or living rooms with clean, neutral decor, rugs, and plants or candles. Previous research has identified that the practice of yoga has undergone a process of feminisation, Americanisation, and commercialisation, transforming it into a Western exercise regimen that is progressively influenced by neoliberal ideology (Markula, 2014). At the same time, outdoor representations typically show women practising in gardens with clear skies and green grass. These depictions most often show individual practice rather than group activities. Analysis of captions on these posts revealed efforts to dispel the notion that yoga is exclusively for women, with some highlighting the benefits of yoga for muscle strengthening, directing their posts to a male audience. Despite the potential benefits for anyone, social perceptions and pressures related to gender remain barriers for men in practising yoga (Cagas et al., 2020).

The running posts consistently depicted individuals engaged in outdoor activities, whether in organised running events or during their daily training. The analysis of the posts did not reveal any significant differences based on gender. Both male and female figures were portrayed visually, focusing on running. The textual descriptions also mentioned the benefits of running and offered techniques for improving performance without any gender-specific language. The captions underscored the importance of motivation and discipline in reaching fitness goals, conveying a sense of triumph over challenges. These aspects underscore the holistic nature of the concept, showing how specific dimensions, such as the emotional aspect, can impact overall wellness (Stoewen, 2015, 2017). Notably, none of these approaches emphasised gender distinctions.

Posts featuring functional training, which focuses on improving athletic performance and increasing muscular strength, were the sample's most common type of physical practice. These posts often showed individuals participating in exercises such as squatting, pushing or pulling objects, or jumping. The training occurred in a gym, using equipment like kettlebells, dumbbells, and ropes. It was presented as an individual practice in open gym spaces rather than studio classes.

Considering the whole dataset, the analysis revealed that both men ($n = 80$) and women ($n = 220$) were depicted, and there were differences in the exercises based on gender. Among the creators and users studied, the images predominantly reflected gender presentations that corresponded to the gender assigned to the creators at birth. Women were often shown focusing on lower-body workouts, such as squats, lunges, and leg lifts, while men emphasised upper-body training. It is worth noting that this evidence has been associated with fitness practices on Instagram (Carrotte et al., 2017) but not necessarily within the realm of wellness.

Additionally, some posts showed support from personal trainers, with a pattern emerging that men's coaches were typically men, while women's coaches could be both men and women. The observation raises essential questions about male individuals' preferences when seeking training advice from a female personal trainer. These perspectives may impact those who engage with such content and, consequently, what they understand and reproduce as wellness, perpetuating gender stereotyping (Pramaskara, 2022).

3.2. Body & Expressions: Binary Insta-Bodies

The analysis of photos and videos associated with #wellness revealed a common theme: The body displays the impact and result of training. Through various poses, users not only showed themselves practising exercises as a means of achieving wellness but also showed their body physiognomy. The images reveal the frequency of the thin and/or athletic body associated with the practice, praising body flexibility. Posts also confirmed yoga as a common practice, mostly among young white women. Presenting the whole body suggests reinforcing yoga as a holistic outlook, favouring bodily and emotional wellness. Functional training posts portray bodies as central characters by posing in front of a mirror at the gym. In this type of post, we could find images of the user's entire body, half the body, or specific parts portraying physical exercise as a fraction of the wellness process. Users highlight the ongoing results through physical shape achievement. In the full-body photos, the emphasis was, in women's case, on the slim and athletic shape and, in men's case, on the muscular shape. We discovered that men frequently exposed the upper part of their bodies, standing in different positions, in which they tensed their muscles and bent their arms to make them appear muscular. In addition, photographs were taken to highlight the abdominal muscles, showcasing this well-defined part of the body. Women created wellness and body-related content, showcasing different lower-body poses in their images. They accomplished this by strategically flexing their legs to display their muscle mass and definition, accentuating their glutes by shifting their hips back or in a specific direction. These were not casual or everyday poses but carefully choreographed positions designed to showcase their muscles.

Nonetheless, one counter-narrative challenging established gender norms emerged, particularly in posts where women engage in activities traditionally associated with masculinity, such as bodybuilding contests. Fitness studies on Instagram have discussed the effects of the athletic body, observing a shift from the thin ideal towards the athletic ideal of a healthier body, revealing and reinforcing pressure to achieve and maintain an athletic figure (Bacon, 2010; Thompson et al., 2004). The representation of non-athletic or overweight bodies was showcased in before and after posts, specifically in the "before" pictures, reinforcing the pressure to change and conform to a certain body type. It can be inferred from these results that wellness is a process and that its most prominent and evident manifestation is through the body and its transformation. It is as if users realise that it is not enough to seek wellness but to perform wellness through a supposedly standard-beauty body. The analysis also revealed differences regarding body and expressions in constructing gender representations. The gender-related aspect is evident in posts showing specific body parts, especially in posts related to weight management. These posts commonly feature body transformations through collages or Instagram carousels—a type of post that allows users to upload and share up to 20 photos or videos in a single post—documenting weight loss progress and showcasing physical changes. Posts of men who had undergone such a process show them without shirts, focusing on the muscular definition achieved. However, in the case of women, the body was shown as a whole, and weight loss was praised with a focus on thinness. The impact that Instagram posts related to body image and appearance have on shaping ideals of body image and appearance has been identified (Tiggemann et al.,

2020). Our study highlights how this is also reflected in gender norms on wellness content. Evidence from our research demonstrates that the collective narrative of #wellness on Instagram contradicts the definition of wellness itself. As for the variety of body types, these appear predominantly in "before and after" posts, referring to the "before." That is, in some instances, a derogatory interpretation of the overweight body that needs to be improved to achieve wellness.

Regarding facial expressions, men were typically portrayed with serious expressions of dominance and control. This visual language aligns with traditional notions of masculinity. It is important to note that in many selfies, women intentionally cover their faces with a smartphone. This strategy aims to direct the audience's attention towards the body rather than the face. When the women's faces show, their expression tends to be friendlier, smiling and displaying lighter energy. This reinforces the stereotype of femininity associated with approachability and submissiveness. Previous studies have already identified that images often perpetuate gender stereotypes on social media, portraying men as active and dominant while females are depicted as attractive and dependent (Rose et al., 2012). This observation aligns with broader academic discussions about the limitations of a binary framework for understanding gender. Traditional gender binaries, which categorise individuals strictly as male or female, exclude the complexity of gender identities and expressions beyond these categories (Butler, 2006; Liesen, 2001). The posts analysed and the gender performances do not always represent an individual's gender identity. However, for the creators and users studied, the images they shared generally reflected gender presentations consistent with their sex assigned at birth. Notably, the sample exclusively features individuals identifying as male or female, overlooking representation from non-binary, transgender, or agender individuals. This gap underscores the need for broader inclusivity and representation in discussions about gender and wellness online.

3.3. Clothing & Adornment: A Visual Reinforcement of Stereotypes

Most of the clothing featured in the posts was sportswear. In posts where women were the primary focus, the clothing showed some diversity by featuring women of various body shapes and sizes. Form-fitting workout clothing is preferred over loose attire in posts depicting women. This type of clothing accentuates the body, focusing attention on a more fitted silhouette and highlighting curves and muscular shapes. The variety included leggings, tight shorts, crop tops, and sports bras. Athletes' use of high-waisted designs provided additional support and coverage. However, the variety of clothing choices in Instagram posts does not genuinely reflect inclusivity, as it is still gender specific.

In posts where men were the central focus, t-shirts, compression tops, sleeveless shirts, and lightweight shorts were showcased. Unlike women, men did not wear leggings or prefer tight clothing. In contrast, the focus was on men's clothing choices, prioritising functionality and performance, reflecting societal expectations of athleticism and physical prowess. This positions men's preference for clothes as a more relaxed fit, providing roomier cuts through the torso and shoulders. The adoption of sports attire can be seen as a lifestyle choice. It was a recurring representation associated with pre- or post-workout activities, embodying the athleisure concept. Athleisure combines athletic and leisure in a fashion trend defined by sporty clothing that is not only comfortable but also visually appealing, signifying that activewear has moved beyond the confines of the gym. However, although this concept refers to comfort, tight leggings were typical among women. Top clothing revealed hoodies and sweatshirts, a common element between different users. The results also indicate a lack of gender-neutral or unisex activewear, one of the trends in the fitness industry. Designed to be inclusive

and accessible to individuals of all genders, it challenges traditional binary distinctions in clothing and aims for a diverse range of body types and preferences. The study highlights how men typically wear clothing that accentuates their upper body musculature, emphasising the physical traits associated with the dominant masculine ideal (Lefkowich et al., 2017). In contrast, women were more likely to be seen in leggings and tight tops, with more significant variation observed. However, this variation often remains within the confines of conventionally feminine attire.

In terms of clothing colour, black was the predominant choice across different garments (e.g., tops, t-shirts, shorts) and was consistent across genders. However, women more frequently wore clothing in a variety of other colours. Neutral tones, such as light green and white, were preferred in yoga practice, though not exclusively, while more vibrant colours (e.g., red, pink) were favoured in other activities. Among both female and male bodybuilders, especially when displaying their physiques, there was a tendency to wear skimpy bikinis in bright and vibrant shades.

4. Conclusion

Our research focuses on understanding how wellness and gender are represented in popular posts. The collective narrative indirectly built through hashtags on Instagram (Amaral & Flores, 2023; Meraz, 2017; Zappavigna, 2015) can demonstrate if and how the traditional notions of gender and bodies are challenged or reinforced. Considering wellness as processual and multidimensional, our results reveal that users may respond to a limited idea of the concept. To pinpoint and further explore how people are depicted concerning #wellness, we isolated the posts classified in the physical category. While one may expect that results were necessarily connected to physical activities, the scrutinised posts underscore the predominance of fitness-related content in three themes. Practices & Workout, Body & Expressions, and Clothing & Adornment emerged from analysing the 300 most popular posts tagging #wellness. Our study results show that popular content is not only associated with hashtags or accounts related to fitness culture and communities, as observed previously (Mayoh & Jones, 2020; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021), but also with a holistic topic such as wellness.

Practices & Workouts refer to the representations of routines associated with physical exercise. For women, the focus is predominantly on yoga and lower-body workouts. Despite the visibility and resonance of the counter-narrative of women bodybuilders, our findings suggest that the discourse surrounding gender and physical wellness on Instagram remains predominantly aligned with normative expectations. Ideas about body image and appearance are influenced by gender norms (Mahon & Hevey, 2021), which are particularly important in the context of wellness. Such can also impact health-related behaviours, dictating societal expectations regarding how individuals should look and behave based on gender. These gendered expectations can influence individuals' attitudes towards physical activity, with some feeling motivated to exercise to meet societal standards. In opposition to this, others may feel discouraged or intimidated by unrealistic ideals or social judgement. For instance, societal pressures such as Yoga being perceived as feminine may keep men from practising it (Cagas et al., 2020).

Connecting the notion of wellness represented on Instagram in the dataset, especially on women, we may associate it with neoliberal feminism, a form of feminism that aligns with neoliberal ideologies and values, emphasising individual empowerment, self-improvement, and personal responsibility within a market-driven

society (Rottenberg, 2014). Unlike traditional liberal feminism, which critiques systemic inequalities and advocates for structural change, neoliberal feminism focuses on individual success, self-optimization, and achieving equality through market mechanisms. Neoliberal feminism often promotes ideas of "leaning in" to corporate structures, entrepreneurship, and self-branding as pathways to gender equality while downplaying the need for broader social and economic reforms. Additionally, such representations may create barriers to participation in physical activity for individuals who do not fit traditional gender norms.

Body & Expressions addresses the portrayal of bodies in shape, size, and photo or video framing. Female bodies are often depicted as thin and white, with facial expressions that are either hidden or smiling. Male bodies, as opposed, are typically muscular, with facial expressions that convey seriousness, dominance, and control. Literature has illustrated how conventional gender norms have linked physical strength and athleticism more closely with masculinity than femininity (e.g., Best & Williams, 2019; Connell, 2005). This association comes from traditional gender roles where men undertook physically demanding tasks while women were assigned domestic chores (Thébaud, 2010). The perpetuation of these traditional gender norms can be observed among Instagram users through their wellness-related posts.

The study's findings underscore the pervasive reinforcement of binary gender norms. This observation aligns with broader academic discussions about the limitations of a binary framework for understanding gender. Traditional gender binaries, which categorise individuals strictly as male or female, exclude the complexity of gender identities and expressions beyond these categories (Butler, 2006; Liesen, 2001). While the platform can be a space for challenging and subverting traditional gender norms, it can also play a role in sustaining prevailing social norms related to gender and beauty (Caldeira et al., 2018). Our study's findings further support this conclusion, which examined a generic hashtag that was not initially expected to be gendered. Gender norms influence societal body image and appearance standards, impacting individuals' attitudes towards physical activity, particularly in wellness contexts. Societal expectations of femininity may prioritise slimness and body shape, leading some women to concentrate on activities that aid in weight loss or toning rather than strength training. In this context, encouragement through positive and motivational messages that promote "confidence culture" places the burden of success on individuals and highlights that while seemingly positive, they fail to tackle structural oppression (Orgad & Gill, 2021). Conversely, traditional ideals of masculinity may prioritise muscularity and athleticism, influencing men's preferences for specific forms of physical activity.

Clothing & Adornment examines the representations of clothing and equipment choices in exercise contexts. Women are generally shown wearing body-hugging activewear, accentuating physical attributes and adhering to societal standards of femininity. Men are depicted in relaxed-fit sportswear, prioritising practicality and efficiency. Our discoveries highlight the enduring conventional binary divisions in attire, indicating a missed chance for all-encompassing representation. Clothing choices in wellness posts further reinforce these stereotypes, limiting the representation of diverse gender expressions.

These findings underscore the existence of gendered norms and stereotypes perpetuated within the context of wellness on Instagram. Considering that the sample is focused on the most popular public posts, it is essential to mention that the engagement structure on Instagram privileges content that aligns with prevailing aesthetic and societal norms (Caldeira et al., 2018). The interplay of algorithmic design, social validation, visual appeal, influencer culture, and cultural standards is a reinforced cycle where content that

fits these norms is more likely to receive high engagement and become more visible and influential (Cotter, 2019). As a result, alternative or diverse narratives that challenge these norms may need help gaining visibility and support, as they receive a different level of algorithmic and social backing. This raises the question of whether the platform's logic influences or favours the type of content that gains visibility and engagement. When given the chance to create parallel or alternative narratives, users either do not do so, or their content does not become part of the collective narrative. Moreover, the rise of intersectional feminism and LGBTQ+ activism within digital spaces has contributed to the proliferation of counter-narratives that intersect with issues of gender and wellness on Instagram. Counter-narratives on social media may offer alternative viewpoints that challenge mainstream discourses, empower marginalised communities, redefine identity, promote inclusivity, and highlight underrepresented experiences (e.g., Stryker, 2008; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Although the visibility and resonance of these counter-narratives underscore a shifting paradigm within the discourse, our results show the dominance of content related to normative patterns regarding gender and bodies. Although Instagram may catalyse dialogue, advocacy, and social change, it is necessary to recognise its usage limitations in the transformative potential regarding gender norms and fostering a more inclusive and affirming landscape.

This research engages with existing literature on the concept of wellness, particularly its physical dimension, even though previous studies have often focused on fitness rather than wellness per se. Specifically, this research concentrates on the physical aspect of wellness due to its prominence and visibility in Instagram users' expressions of wellness. The study aligns with research that views Instagram as a platform for observing wellness-related expressions and analysing content published by users who employ specific hashtags, engage with fitness communities, or are identified as fitness influencers. However, unlike studies that explore content creators' perspectives, strategies, or goals, this research examines the presentation of wellness content from the viewpoint of Instagram users, specifically exploring how visual narratives are formed through posts rather than user interactions such as comments. It does so by analysing wellness performances and expressions, particularly those that garner significant engagement, to understand their implications for users seeking content through wellness-related hashtags. This study goes beyond merely examining specific workouts, body performance, or gender representation by integrating these themes with other factors, such as the locations chosen for exercise, the types of clothing worn, and the overall presentation of wellness. It employs a qualitative approach to capture nuances, details and underlying meanings that quantitative methods might overlook. The themes identified contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of wellness and offer insights into the other dimensions of wellness beyond the physical. This research is positioned within the broader field of wellness studies, particularly those focusing on Instagram and the physical dimension of wellness. It adds value by highlighting that, despite wellness being defined as a multidimensional concept, it is predominantly represented through physical expressions on Instagram. This suggests that other dimensions of wellness are mainly invisible on this platform.

Furthermore, wellness on Instagram tends to be portrayed in a "one-size-fits-all" manner and disregards individual differences and experiences. It illustrates how wellness is represented within dominant media cultures, with the hashtag manifesting this phenomenon. For example, the content often reflects gender representations that align with the creators' gender assigned at birth. This homogenised representation is further characterised by a binary view of gender, with little room for expressions that transcend traditional masculine and feminine norms among the most engaging posts in the sample.

5. Limitations and Future Research

The corpus consists solely of public Instagram posts, thereby excluding private expressions and potentially omitting a significant portion of wellness-related discourse. Given that Instagram users do not constitute a representative sample of the broader population, the findings are not generalisable to the general population or other social media platforms. Furthermore, data collection was confined to a specific time frame, which may not adequately reflect the evolving nature of wellness discourse over time. Only posts from the physical category were analysed, which limited our findings' generalisability. The study does not specify who posted the content and so does not provide a breakdown of how many of those 300 posts are by individual or brand. Despite these constraints, the method is valid for this study's objectives. Further exploration is needed to understand the impact of other post elements, such as comments. A comprehensive understanding of gender in #wellness requires a study of different dimensions. Instagram reinforces traditional gender stereotypes in wellness culture, but a movement is challenging these norms, especially regarding female representation. This raises critical questions about how gendered representations on Instagram affect self-perception and behaviour, particularly body image and wellness practices. Addressing these questions will help determine if the platform can empower a broader range of experiences in wellness culture.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability
Due to the sensitive nature of the data, the access is restricted to researchers under request to the correspondence author.

References
Adams, T., Bezner, J., & Steinhardt, M. (1997). The conceptualization and measurement of perceived wellness: Integrating balance across and within dimensions. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, *11*(3), 208–218. https://doi.org/10.4278/0890-1171-11.3.208

Ahrens, J., Brennan, F., Eaglesham, S., Buelo, A., Laird, Y., Manner, J., Newman, E., & Sharpe, H. (2022). A longitudinal and comparative content analysis of Instagram fitness posts. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(11), Article 6845. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19116845

Amaral, I., & Flores, A. M. (2023). Challenging gendered and ageing normative stereotypes on Instagram.

In A. Rosales, M. Fernández-Ardèvol, & J. Svensson (Eds.), *Ageism and digital technologies* (pp. 152–171). Routledge.

Bacon, L. (2010). *Health at every size: The surprising truth about your weight*. BenBella Books.

Bailey, J., Steeves, V., Burkell, J., & Regan, P. (2013). Negotiating with gender stereotypes on social networking sites: From "bicycle face" to Facebook. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *37*(2), 91–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859912473777

Bak, C., & Priniski, J. H. (2020). *Representations of health and wellness on Instagram: An analysis of 285,000 posts*. PsyArXiv. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/6nxvu

Baker, S. A. (2022). *Wellness culture*. Emerald. https://doi.org/10.1108/9781802624656

Baker, S. A., & Walsh, M. J. (2018). "Good Morning Fitfam": Top posts, hashtags and gender display on Instagram. *New Media and Society*, *20*(12), 4553–4570. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818777514

Berger, M., Taba, M., Marino, J., Lim, M., & Skinner, S. (2022). Social media use and health and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth: A systematic review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, *24*(9), Article e38449. https://doi.org/10.2196/38449

Best, D. L., & Williams, J. E. (2019). Gender and culture. In D. Matsumoto (Ed.), *The handbook of culture and psychology* (pp. 195–219). Oxford University Press.

boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238

Burns, J., Johnstone, K., Chavanduka, T., Jamison, C., Pena, V., Stephenson, R., & Darbes, L. (2020). Evaluation of the sexual health behaviors of Black male adolescents and young adults through social media platforms: Web-based survey study. *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance*, *6*(3), Article e19219. https://doi.org/10.2196/19219

Butler, J. (2006). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Cagas, J., Biddle, S., & Vergeer, I. (2020). Yoga not a (physical) culture for men? Understanding the barriers for yoga participation among men. *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, *42*, Article 101262. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2020.101262

Caldeira, S. P., De Ridder, S., & Van Bauwel, S. (2018). Exploring the politics of gender representation on Instagram: Self-representations of femininity. *DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, *5*(1), 23–42. https://doi.org/10.11116/digest.5.1.2

Callaghan, S., Lösch, M., Pione, A., & Teichner, W. (2021). *Feeling good: The future of the $1.5 trillion wellness market*. Mckinsey & Company. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/feeling-good-the-future-of-the-1-5-trillion-wellness-market

Carrotte, E., Prichard, I., & Lim, M. (2017). "Fitspiration" on social media: A content analysis of gendered images. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, *19*(3), Article e95. https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.6368

Chaudhary, K., & Dhillon, M. (2021). "#FITNESS": Impact of Instagram on exercise adherence and self-efficacy. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *20*(2), 337–355. https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2020.1869804

Chinn, S., Hasell, A., & Hiaeshutter-Rice, D. (2023). Mapping digital wellness content: Implications for health, science, and political communication research. *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media*, *3*, 1–56. https://doi.org/10.51685/jqd.2023.009

Chou, W.-Y. S. (2021). Using content analysis to inform health communication efforts on social media: Is popularity the goal? *Mhealth*, *7*, Article 40. https://doi.org/10.21037/mhealth-2020-1

Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities*. University of California Press.

Conor, B. (2021). "How goopy are you?" Women, goop and cosmic wellness. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *24*(6), 1261–1281. https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211055735

Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society*, *21*(4), 895–913. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684

Derkatch, C. (2022). *Why wellness sells: Natural health in a pharmaceutical culture*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Dolan, P., Peasgood, T., & White, M. (2008). Do we really know what makes us happy? A review of the economic literature on the factors associated with subjective wellbeing. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, *29*(1), 94–122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2007.09.001

Engeln, R., Loach, R., Imundo, M. N., & Zola, A. (2020). Compared to Facebook, Instagram use causes more appearance comparison and lower body satisfaction in college women. *Body Image*, *34*, 38–45. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.04.007

Fosch-Villaronga, E., Poulsen, A., Søraa, R., & Custers, B. (2021). Gendering algorithms in social media. *ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter*, *23*(1), 24–31. https://doi.org/10.1145/3468507.3468512

Franzke, A. S., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C., & Association of Internet Researchers. (2020). *Internet research: Ethical guidelines 3.0*. Association of Internet Researchers. https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, *25/26*, 56–80. https://doi.org/10.2307/466240

Goodyear, V. A., Boardley, I., Chiou, S.-Y., Fenton, S. A. M., Makopoulou, K., Stathi, A., Wallis, G. A., van Zanten, J. V., & Thompson, J. L. (2021). Social media use informing behaviours related to physical activity, diet and quality of life during COVID-19: a mixed methods study. *BMC Public Health*, *21*, Article 1333. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11398-0

Grogan, S. (2021). *Body image: Understanding body dissatisfaction in men, women and children* (4th ed.). Routledge.

Jain, S., & Kaur, K. (2023). Exploring gender stereotyping in Indian social media content: A NVivo-based content analysis. *2023 14th International Conference on Computing Communication and Networking Technologies (ICCCNT)* (pp. 1–6). IEEE. https://doi.org/10.1109/ICCCNT56998.2023.10306799

Kim, J. (2023). Marital satisfaction, gender, and active social engagement in older adults: Longitudinal evidence from South Korea. *The Journals of* Gerontology, *78*(12), 2090–2101. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbad145

Kimmel, M. (2009). *Masculinity studies: An introduction*. In J. M. Armengol & À. Carabí (Eds.), *Debating masculinity* (pp. 16–30). Men's Studies Press.

Kimmel, M., & Aronson, A. (2017). *The gendered society reader*. Oxford University Press.

Krieger, M. A., Santarossa, S., Bours, S., & Woodruff, S. J. (2022). Men's comments on elite women athletes: Cultural narratives around gender and sport on Instagram. *Feminist Media Studies*, *23*(4), 1627–1642. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2041696

Liesen, L. T. (2001). Sexing the body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality [Review of the book *Sexing the body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality*, by A. Fausto-Sterling]. *Politics and the Life Sciences*, *20*(1), 95–96. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0730938400005232

Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. Polity Press.

Lee, E., Lee, J., Moon, J., & Sung, Y. (2015). Pictures speak louder than words: Motivations for using Instagram. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, *18*(9), 552–556. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2015.0157

Lefkowich, M., Oliffe, J. L., Hurd Clarke, L., & Hannan-Leith, M. (2017). Male body practices: Pitches, purchases, and performativities. *American Journal of Men's Health*, *11*(2), 454–463. https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988316669042

Li, J. (2023). The influential factors on gender inequality in social-media. *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*, *3*(1), 495–504. https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/3/2022570

Lupton, D. (2021). Young people's use of digital health technologies in the global North: Narrative review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, *23*(1), Article e18286. https://doi.org/10.2196/18286

Mahon, C., & Hevey, D. (2021). Processing body image on social media: Gender differences in adolescent boys' and girls' agency and active coping. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, Article 626763. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.626763

Markula, P. (2014). Reading Yoga: Changing discourses of postural yoga on the yoga journal covers. *Communication & Sport*, *2*(2), 143–171. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479513490673

Marshall, K., Chamberlain, K., & Hodgetts, D. (2020). Male bodybuilders on Instagram: Negotiating inclusive masculinities through hegemonic masculine bodies. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *29*(5), 570-589. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2020.1722620

Mayoh, J., & Jones, I. (2020). Young people's experiences of engaging with fitspiration on Instagram: Gendered perspective. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, *23*(10), Article e17811. https://doi.org/10.2196/17811

Meraz, S. (2017). Hashtag wars and networked framing. In A. S. Tellería (Ed.), *Between the public and private in mobile communication* (pp. 303–323). Routledge.

Moreno, D. R., Quintana, J. G., & Riaño, E. R. (2023). Impact and engagement of sport & fitness influencers: A challenge for health education media literacy. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, *13*(3), Article e202334. https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcmt/13309

Myers, J. E., Sweeney, T. J., & Witmer, J. M. (2000). The wheel of wellness counseling for wellness: A holistic model for treatment planning. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *78*(3), 251–266. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2000.tb01906.x

Nadobnik, J. (2019). The use of selected social media: Instagram to promote physical activity and a pro-health lifestyle. *Studies in Sport Humanities*, *24*, 33–38. https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0013.7563

National Wellness Institute. (n.d.). NWI'S six dimensions of wellness. https://nationalwellness.org/resources/six-dimensions-of-wellness

Nelson, A. M., & Fleming, R. (2019). Gender differences in diet and social media: An explorative study. *Appetite*, *142*, Article 104383. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2019.104383

O'Neill, R. (2020). Pursuing "wellness": Considerations for media studies. *Television & New Media*, *21*(6), 628–634. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420919703

O'Neill, R. (2023). By, for, with women? On the politics and potentialities of wellness entrepreneurship. *The Sociological Review*, *72*(1), 3–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261221142461

Orgad, S., & Gill, R. (2021). *Confidence culture*. Duke University Press.

Pedalino, F., & Camerini, A.-L. (2022). Instagram use and body dissatisfaction: The mediating role of upward social comparison with peers and influencers among young females. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(3), Article 1543. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19031543

Pelletier, M. J., Krallman, A., Adams, F. G., & Hancock, T. (2020). One size doesn't fit all: A uses and gratifications analysis of social media platforms. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, *14*(2), 269–284. https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIM-10-2019-0159

Perera, B., Chaudhury, S., Albinsson, P., & Nafees, L. (2021). This is who i am: Instagram as counterspace for shared gendered ethnic identity expressions. *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, *6*(2), 274–285. https://doi.org/10.1086/713288

Plasencia, F. M. P., & León, V. O. V. (2021). Gender stereotypes about women in the fitness world on Instagram. In D. L. Nuñez (Ed.), *2021 IEEE Sciences and Humanities International Research Conference (SHIRCON)* (pp. 1–4). IEEE. https://doi.org/10.1109/SHIRCON53068.2021.9652330

Popa, D., & Gavriliu, D. (2015). Gender representations and digital media. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *180*, 1199-1206. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.02.244

Pramaskara, T. (2022). Social media affordances: Instagram content as a means to perpetuate gender stereotification. *PERSPEKTIF*, *11*(3), 866–877. https://doi.org/10.31289/perspektif.v11i3.6455

Rachele, J. N., Washington, T., Cockshaw, W. D., & Brymer, E. (2013). Towards an operational understanding of wellness. *Journal of Spirituality, Leadership and Management*, *7*(1), 3–12. https://doi.org/10.15183/slm2013.07.1112

Register, Y., Qin, L., Baughan, A., & Spiro, E. S. (2023). Attached to "the algorithm": Making sense of algorithmic precarity on Instagram. In A. Schmidt, K. Väänänen, T. Goyal, P. Ola Kristensson, A. Peters, S. Mueller, J. R. Williamson, & M. L. Wilson (Eds.), *CHI '23: Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (Article 563). ACM. https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3581257

Rogers, R. (2013). *Digital methods*. MIT Press.

Rose, J., Mackey-Kallis, S., Shyles, L., Barry, K., Biagini, D., Hart, C., & Jack, L. (2012). Face it: The impact of gender on social media images. *Communication Quarterly*, *60*(5), 588–607. https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2012.725005

Rottenberg, C. (2014). The rise of neoliberal feminism. *Cultural Studies*, *28*(3), 418-437. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.857361

Rounsefell, K., Gibson, S., McLean, S., Blair, M., Molenaar, A., Brennan, L., Truby, H., & McCaffrey, T. A. (2020). Social media, body image and food choices in healthy young adults: A mixed methods systematic review. *Nutrition & Dietetics*, *77*(1), 19–40. https://doi.org/10.1111/1747-0080.12581

Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.

Schöps, J. D., Schwarz, S., & Rojkowski, V. (2024). Memetic logics of participation: Fitness body culture on Instagram. *Marketing Theory*, *24*(1), 65–89. https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931231201779

Sidorova, I. G. (2019). Wellness brand in personal internet-blogs and social networks. *SHS Web of Conferences*, *69*, Article 00107. https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20196900107

Singh, V., Chayko, M., Inamdar, R., & Floegel, D. (2020). Female librarians and male computer programmers? Gender bias in occupational images on digital media platforms. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, *71*(11), 1281–1294. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24335

Stoewen, D. L. (2015). Health and wellness. *The Canadian Veterinary Journal*, *56*(9), 983–984.

Stoewen, D. L. (2017). Dimensions of wellness: Change your habits, change your life. *The Canadian Veterinary Journal*, *58*(8), 861–862.

Stryker, S. (2008). *Transgender history*. Seal Press.

Thébaud, S. (2010). Masculinity, bargaining, and breadwinning: Understanding men's housework in the cultural context of paid work. *Gender & Society*, *24*(3), 330–354. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243210369105

Thompson, J. K., van den Berg, P., Roehrig, M., Guarda, A. S., & Heinberg, L. J. (2004). The sociocultural attitudes towards appearance scale-3 (SATAQ-3): development and validation. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, *35*(3), 293–304. https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.10257

Tiggemann, M., Anderberg, I., & Brown, Z. (2020). #Loveyourbody: The effect of body positive Instagram captions on women's body image. *Body Image*, *33*, 129–136. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.02.015

Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2014). NetGirls: The internet, Facebook, and body image concerns in adolescent girls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, *46*(6), 630–633. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23712456

Tiggemann, M., & Zaccardo, M. (2018). "Strong is the new skinny": A content analysis of #Fitspiration images on Instagram. *Journal of Health Psychology*, *21*(8), 1788–1799. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105316639436

Tiusanen, K. (2021). Fulfilling the self through food in wellness blogs: Governing the healthy subject. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *24*(6), 1382–1400. https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211055734

Tiusanen, K. (2022). Feeling grateful, kind, and empowered: Rules of feeling in Instagram's #womenswellness digital intimate public. *Feminist Media Studies*, *23*(8), 3687–3704. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2135122

Toffoletti, K., & Thorpe, H. (2021). Bodies, gender, and digital affect in fitspiration media. *Feminist Media Studies*, *21*(5), 822–839. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1713841

Utter, K., Waineo, E., Bell, C., Quaal, H., & Levine, D. (2020). Instagram as a window to societal perspective on mental health, gender, and race: Observational pilot study. *JMIR Mental Health*, *7*(10), Article e19171. https://doi.org/10.2196/19171

Webb, J. B., Thomas, E. V., Rogers, C. B., Clark, V. N., Hartsell, E. N., & Putz, D. Y. (2019). Fitspo at every size? A comparative content analysis of #curvyfit versus #curvyyoga Instagram images. *Fat Studies*, *8*(2), 154–172. https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2019.1548860

Wellman, M. L. (2024). "A friend who knows what they're talking about": Extending source credibility theory to analyze the wellness influencer industry on Instagram. *New Media & Society*, *26*(12), 7020–7036. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231162064

Zappavigna, M. (2015). Searchable talk: the linguistic functions of hashtags. *Social Semiotics*, *25*(3), 274–291. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2014.996948

About the Authors

Ana Marta M. Flores is a visiting assistant professor at NOVA University Lisbon and the University of Coimbra, Portugal. She holds a PhD in journalism and is an integrated member at NOVA Institute of Communication (ICNOVA), where she collaborates with the Trends and Culture Management Lab and Obi.Media. Flores is the vice president of communication for the Digital Culture and Communication section of ECREA.

Rita Sepúlveda (PhD, Communication Sciences) is a researcher at ICNOVA, Instituto de Comunicação da Nova, Nova University of Lisbon, and an invited professor at Iscte-Iul. Her research focuses on collective and dynamic expressions in digital environments regarding the transformation of intimacy in the context of digital platforms' appropriation.

ARTICLE

360 Degrees of Feminine Competence: Surface Aesthetics, Expertise, and Authority Among Drip Cake Baker-Influencers

Vanessa Brown [1] and Steve Jones [2]

[1] Nottingham School of Art and Design, Nottingham Trent University, UK
[2] School of Arts and Humanities, Nottingham Trent University, UK

Correspondence: Steve Jones (steve.jones@ntu.ac.uk)

Abstract

This article explores the gendered expertise of neoliberal female influencers associated with a novel baking form, the "drip cake." It engages in a close historically and theoretically informed analysis of a selection of popular online bakers' content, majoring on their skill-sharing tutorials. Online images of drip cakes are distinctive and spectacular, and their creation is demanding. Yet they have become a mainstream standard of fashionable baking. First, the research shows how exclusive knowledge drawn from patisserie and modernist design has been co-opted by this mix of amateur and professional bakers and transformed and capitalised on through their non-boundaried community of practice into something they announce as definitively theirs. Second, digital cake and baking have been considered previously as part of a post-feminist retreat, reframing and aestheticizing traditional white, cis-gendered, female domesticity. However, in the case of the drip cake, a remarkable lack of reference to family or domestic life in the sample demands further analysis. Drip cake images exemplify aspects of post-feminist digital "food porn," but again elements of this are extended and defied by this phenomenon. Alternatively, cake images have been interpreted as expressions of mastery and competence. We build on these perspectives to explore the drip cake as a form of fashionable capital that stands for an ideal skin, body, and subjectivity in a striking performance of multiple aspects of cool, post-feminist perfection. We focus especially on the laboured and contradictory surface of the drip cake, finding little pleasure in eating or feeding, but instead, a celebration of rationality, cleanliness, and control; distinction produced through the creation of something formally perfect and fashionably current from the most unruly of substances.

Keywords

baking; modernism; neoliberalism; patisserie; post-feminism; surface

---

1. Introduction

Jaunty ukulele music sets the mood for happy crafting as we tilt down a sumptuous celebration cake. In medium shot, a conventionally attractive white woman, Courtney, from Cake by Courtney, explains she is finally going to demonstrate "how to create a drip on your cake." She looks heavenward in ecstatic anticipatory joy: "Let me show you how it's done, because it is *really easy*" (Rich, 2017).

Next, a close-up of a blank, iced cake and Courtney's manicured hands gesture repeatedly to the top and sides of a cream-coloured cylinder. Talking and smiling, she shows how best to angle and squeeze the drip bottle right at the circumference to ensure precise lines of ganache run down the cake's frozen surface, while her other hand deftly rotates the turntable supporting it. Careful, studied movement gives way to a quicker, seemingly effortless (but equally perfect) distribution of the dripped chocolate, and the video speeds up. Courtney smooths chocolate over the uncannily flat top surface before adding tall whirls of frosting and blocks of churros, finally squirting further chocolate over this profusion. The music concludes contentedly, and we return to the completed cake. Hours of expert labour have been condensed into little over two minutes of very satisfying video. Thousands of similar drip cake tutorials are available online.

In this article, we bring together perspectives from food-cultural studies and critical fashion studies to examine the relationship between new forms of expertise (embodied and online) and largely white, largely middle-class forms of femininity. As Sobande and others have argued, aestheticized online baking is a raced, classed, and gendered activity (Sobande, 2024). We contend that the drip cake and its digital manifestations demonstrate a particularly concentrated range of desirable yet elusive feminine qualities (skill/effortlessness; fashionability/individual expression; cleanliness and efficiency/hedonism). Where studies of baking media typically foreground domesticity, motherhood, and home-making, the drip cake mobilises other ideals, overlapping with various forms of "coolness," such as fashionability, techno-rationality, and passionate work (Brown, 2021). At the same time, these ideals resonate strongly with wider debates about women's online performances of "perfect" subjectivity under conditions of post-feminist neoliberalism and "having it all" (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gill, 2021; Lewis, 2011; McRobbie, 2015; Wilkes, 2015).

The drip cake phenomenon brings together and mediates a complex set of materials, practices, and forms of knowledge that demand a multi-disciplinary approach to interpret effectively. An understanding of baking materials and processes points to the labour involved, and the criticality of surface, while historical precedent in patisserie (French, masculine) expertise and modern design more broadly informs our understanding of the new aesthetic standards innovated by these women and the ways in which they "own" them. The body is also critical—these cakes may be digital objects, but they are made through embodied skill, shown alongside their makers, and may also be seen as a surrogate body, worked upon as a form of cultural capital that may yield profits in distinction.

The drip cake (see Figure 1) came to our attention during the initial stages of an investigation about aesthetics in professional patisserie, a field largely neglected across food-cultural, design-historical, and fashion studies. It is significant that when we went looking for classical patisserie, Google offered us drip cakes and their youthful, white, female bakers. Geometrically perfect, yes, but a form of baking and display that did not simply originate in professional patisserie. The drip cake is always sharply cylindrical, covered with a "playful" glaze, and frequently surmounted by an explosion of additional confectionery. Though the name is unfamiliar outside

Figure 1. Drip cakes by a follower of Cupcake Jemma (R. Winfield, personal communication, 2024).

baking communities, in the first episode of the popular amateur TV baking competition *Great British Bake-Off* in 2023 (UK, Channel 4), every one of the diverse cohort chose to make one—the drip cake is a new "classic."

The drip cake aesthetic has originated in online performances of highly skilled labour and expertise from younger female *baker-influencers*—a mixture of largely self-taught "digital foodscape originalists" (Goodman & Jaworska, 2020, p. 187) and professional women bakers who have migrated to digital platforms. These two groups do not exist in a hierarchical relationship to one another, but have co-created this aesthetic, drawing on a number of craft, design, and culinary traditions. We question the nature of the expertise being adopted, transformed, and shared, and the feminine subjectivities bound up in these digital cake trends.

The drip cake exemplifies the impact of digital culture on food. Taylor and Keating (2018) describe a "normalisation of exaggerated styling" (p. 307) and a tendency towards "visualising unattainable ideals" (p. 310). Feldman (2021) observes the "desocialisation" of digital food images, which focus on food as object, rather than the social interactions around it, including its eating. Feldman also describes an "Instagram gaze." Like the stacked burger, the drip cake's appearance has developed through small-screen viewing via digital platforms—before Instagram, print media food stylists and home bakers were happy with significantly less height, but at least three layers of cake, frosting, and topping now fill the screen. Feminist critique has complicated what food porn might be, or mean, in the post-feminist cultural landscape (Dejmanee, 2016; Negra, 2009). Dejmanee (2016) emphasises the "pornographic" characteristics of digital food: "vivid imagery," "close-ups," and the "invitation to gaze" and "vicariously consume" (p. 439). Our analysis of drip cake imagery reveals further dimensions to its workings.

Critically, the consumption of drip cakes is not simply vicarious, indeed it is not necessarily implied at all. Despite the suggestion of a social feast essential to the scale and cost of a celebration cake, in our study visual and textual references to sharing or eating them were strikingly absent. It may not be overstatement to suggest that their purpose is presented as largely aesthetic.

Our conviction that studying a cake is a worthy way to explore contemporary forms of feminine expertise and embodiment follows W. J. T. Mitchell's contention that cultural artefacts reveal "new forms of value...in the collective, political unconscious" (Mitchell, 2005, as cited in Moxey, 2008, p. 142). Our work also engages the recent "turn to surface" in cultural and design studies, which questions assumptions about the ontologies of

surface and emphasises the profound cultural relations tied up in producing and maintaining surface effects (Coleman & Oakley-Brown, 2017, p. 6). In terms of method, we began by searching for images using cake and drip cake-related hashtags. This led us to the online tutorials which underpin our understanding of women's investment in this phenomenon. From these, we identified several popular baker-influencers, analysing their biographical narratives and selected posts. Our digital sample was contextualised through drip cake imagery in conventional food media, particularly cookbooks and food shows. One of us also bakes and engages with these materials, processes, and aesthetics, which necessarily informs our analysis. Our interpretation is supported by studies of digital food and food porn (Dejmanee, 2016; Feldman, 2021; Lupton, 2020; Taylor & Keating, 2018) and critical studies of post-femininity (Casey & Littler, 2022; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gill, 2021; Holmes & Negra, 2011; Nathanson, 2015). Unlike other analyses of cake imagery, we situate the aesthetics and expertise in trans-national historical traditions of baking and, given the formal similarity with modernist material culture, architecture and design. In particular, we engage with Cheng's critique of the modern surface as "second skin" in architecture (2011), and Kelley's insights into the cultural politics of perfected, laboured surfaces (2013). We extend our analysis of skin, surface, and status through broader cultural theorisations of the body.

In what follows, we introduce our baker-influencers in terms of their backgrounds, status, and the varied femininities they perform, before briefly situating the development of the drip cake as a fashion trend. We then analyse the drip cake itself in more detail: examining how it is made, the significance of its surfaces, and its existence as a digital cultural artefact. The next section questions the relationship between these practices and the historical traditions (both culinary and in the broader design field) available to our baker-influencers; to what extent is this a form of democratised patisserie, and how might this relate to their co-option of modernist design aesthetics? In the succeeding section we go further, examining the qualities and connotations of the iced surface, the drip, and the topping in more detail.

Finally, we argue for the cake as a surrogate skin and body that is classed, gendered, raced, and historically-located. We also argue for the drip cake as a counter-intuitive example of the drive towards cleanliness and control within neoliberal times. We further interpret it in terms of status. Deploying Goffman's notion of "composure," we show how the skills demanded by the drip cake and the ways in which it is presented by our baker-influencers afford them a form of prestige analogous to certain conceptions of "cool" (Brown, 2021).

2. The Cake and the Bakers

The baker-influencers selected for focus are all from the Anglosphere: self-taught American baker Courtney Rich (Cake by Courtney), Australian ex-teacher Katherine Sabbath, and two Britons, art-school-trained amateur-turned-professional-baker Jemma Wilson (aka Cupcake Jemma, founder of Crumbs and Doilies in London) and trained (but not practising) chef-turned-blogger Jane Dunn (Jane's Patisserie). All have authored monographs, Katherine Sabbath's being available as a premium pop-up book. Their digital ecology is variegated, with Instagram focusing on finished bakes, YouTube on tutorials, blogging on recipes, and TikTok on micro tips, directions to YouTube videos, and seasonal bakes.

During our research, Katherine Sabbath, Cupcake Jemma, and Cake by Courtney each had around 500k Instagram followers, with Jane's Patisserie more popular with over 900k followers. On YouTube, Cupcake Jemma was most popular with 2.45 million subscribers compared to Jane's Patisserie's 62k, and Cake by

Courtney's 35.8k. Katherine Sabbath has a much smaller presence on YouTube, but a growing presence on TikTok.

Each baker-influencer represents a slightly different (largely white) femininity entangled with the drip cake aesthetic. All emphasise their role as demonstrators and teachers. When seen, these women are presented variously as fun entrepreneurs (Katherine and Jane), style mavens (Katherine, and to some extent Jemma), artisans (Jemma), and competent ordinary domestic bakers (Courtney). Courtney, and others like her, are blonde, cleanly presented in a white domestic kitchen confirming the drip cake as an achievable aspiration for an "ordinary" baker.

Jane's image emphasises her entrepreneurial success, excitedly clutching her latest book or product range, or celebrating a business anniversary with balloons and champagne. She radiates youthful relatability and accessibility, whereas Jemma connotes the hipster artisan, with a functional apron, short black fringe, tattooed arms, and steel bench. The natural lighting of her focused professionalism suggests authenticity. Her noticeably longer instruction videos are serious.

Katherine Sabbath's website borrows the postmodern building-block aesthetic of Memphis design, while her dazzling, graphic outfits and sharp, black fringe mark her as a fashionable creative leader; fans have tattoos of her iconic designs. Unlike our other baker-influencers, Australian Sabbath is of mixed heritage, her mother being Vietnamese and her father German. She describes this multicultural background as the source of her "curious appetite" (Sabbath, 2018). Both she and Cupcake Jemma have been described as "badass"; a problematic term, originally describing powerful black female coolness that "re-signifies qualities typically associated with masculinity" (Johnson, 2014). For women more broadly, the term has been used to suggest success through uncompromising tactics—in this case, aesthetics. Entrepreneurial success which departs from traditional forms of femininity associated with baking has conferred "coolness" on both Katherine Sabbath and Cupcake Jemma, as well as, potentially, on baking more generally.

2.1. Drip Cake as Fashion Trend

Sabbath is credited with originating the drip cake around 2015, indeed it kickstarted her career. Until 2023, her homepage showed her holding this now iconic cake design—the resolutely machinic cake-plinth, with an upturned ice-cream cone apparently melting down its sides. Having circulated online, it peaked around 2017, achieving cross-modal dominance and having been adapted from the original ice cream design to express varied femininities: vaguely subcultural, sophisticated, populist. In 2020, Martha Stewart's *Baking Perfection* cover image was a monolithic drip cake and a year later Reddit commentators agreed that although they were "over it", the trend persisted (Glitterysparkleshine, 2021). By then, the drip cake was appearing in a much wider range of food influencers' content, breaking out from its largely white, sweet-focused community of early adopters.

By 2024, "drip cake" had fallen from online cake trend lists. But it has endured for several reasons. First, given the difficulty of achieving its core aesthetics, it has become a marker of influencers' expertise, and a standard for many aspiring home bakers. Influencers must post frequently, working with already popular hashtags to ensure they are found and followed. Novel, visually arresting content retains engagement, necessitating a proliferation of drip cake reinterpretations: naked, marble, upside-down, splat, biophilic, "cartoon." This follows

the same trajectory as many fast fashion trends, whose lives must be extended as economically as possible. On Sabbath's website, a subordinate drip cake image still claims her as originator, but she is now shown piping a "maximalist" "Lambeth cake," confirming her timely aesthetic departure.

Domestic baking has been experimental, status-building, and aspirational since the 1960s (Casey, 2019, p. 586). The drip cake goes beyond this, becoming a fashionable motif (or even accessory), and our baker-influencers' content a form of fashion leadership and advice. Sabbath is branded as cake-trend innovator, while the others are intermediaries who select and adapt ideas for their followers. This is also apparent in their address to followers—a 2019 drip cake blog post from our contextual research by Milk and Honey concluded thus: "And he said unto them: 'As for you, go forth and make beautiful, on-trend cakes'" (Abaffy, 2019). Like other influencers operating in the non-boundaried space of the fashion blogosphere (Suh, 2020), they claim the authority of the taste maven within the logics of the platform.

2.2. The Cake: Thing, Image, and Surface

Despite the drip cake's currency as a fashionable image, it is, as we have noted, a particularly labour- and skill-intensive, stubbornly and capriciously material thing formed by technical, visceral engagement with volatile substances, and an assembly of surfaces. Competence in baking exemplifies a shift from a post-feminist "empowerment of consumption" to "empowerment through production" (Dejmanee, 2016, p. 443). To grasp just how much is at stake, some detail is beneficial. Drip cake ingredients are accessible enough, but a successful cake demands exact vertical height, complete flatness, and symmetry through 360 degrees. Achieving these effects involves repetitive, time-consuming work, costly ingredients, and specialist tools. First, high volumes of material are required to get height—which is expensive and difficult to manage in a domestic kitchen. Second, ensuring each layer is a perfect circle of uniform depth and width is achieved by freezing and trimming the sponges, including a cake board on the very top. Third, to further ensure a perfected clean surface and edges, a "dirty" icing coat is applied, smoothed using special tools, and refrozen (crumbs, Courtney dictates, must be "locked in"), before the outer layer is crafted (the icing may itself also require refrigeration or re-beating). Finally, the drip can be applied, which also critically demands the correct temperature and consistency. Our baker-influencers both encourage and discourage domestic bakers by demonstrating the precise method "every step" (of the many steps) "of the way." The consequences of home bakers failing to prepare the right surface accompanied the trend; on Reddit, for example, where wonky, lumpy, inconsistent drip cakes were judged "hilariously bad."

Adamson and Kelley's *Surface Tensions* (2013) addresses the social relations of class, gender, and race at play in the creation and maintenance of such surface effects, themselves entangled with light, space, bodies, and media. Kelley notes the inevitable degradation of wood, textile, and paper surfaces, and the "strenuous efforts" made to "stave off such changes" (Adamson & Kelley, 2013, p. 13). The materials chosen to make a cake are particularly challenging viewed through this lens: Soft sponge rises unevenly and unpredictably, and buttercream frosting, which never sets, is vulnerable to the slightest impression. The ontologies of surface in Western thought are fraught with contradictions and ambivalences, and the drip cake surface dramatizes such polarised and precarious contrasts: Something vulnerable and ephemeral, feminine and festive is crafted to look rock solid, impermeable. As a digital photograph, degradation is permanently postponed for these cakes, a memento mori credentialing baker-influencers along with thousands of amateur bakers proud of their improbable achievements.

3. Authority and Expertise

In this section, we situate baker-influencers and their digital expertise within patisserie, a sub-field of the broader culinary field. For Bourdieu (1993), all cultural fields are arenas within which individuals, groups, and institutions compete for the same stakes. A creative field is a "*field of forces*" but also "a *field of struggles* [which] transforms or conserves this field of forces" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 30, emphasis in the original). Here we explore drip-cake baker-influencers' relationship to long- and more recently-established forms of artisanal authority. We conclude that they exert a parallel authority and status within the field, albeit one subject to accelerating requirements to stay on-trend.

Authority in sweet foodstuffs is centred on France, where patisserie was established within early modern gastronomy. Access to colonial resources and markets accelerated this dominance, guaranteeing supplies of sugar, cocoa, and vanilla. The French Revolution dispersed this aristocratic culinary knowledge around Europe before reassembling, codifying, and partially democratising it in post-revolutionary France (Krondl, 2016; Parkhurst Ferguson, 2004). The most prominent exponent of this reconfigured foodscape, the recognised father of spectacular patisserie, was Marie-Antoine Carême, who became known for the creation and recording of elaborate architectural centrepieces. Carême intellectualised these decorative confections and the practice of patisserie (and cuisine), promoting them as art. Tebben (2015, p. 18) writes that in the 19th century, patisserie became "emancipated and free, with equal rights and equally legitimate claims" to the high status of standard French cooking. This expertise and innovativeness have continued to shape the field nationally and globally.

The streamlined, geometric, and precise aesthetic associated with modem patisserie originated in the innovations of Gaston Lenôtre in France after the Second World War. Lenôtre introduced technical and formal advances in industrial patisserie production and was a leading educator and promoter of globalising French baking standards. One apprentice, Sébastien Canonne, set up the first French Pastry School in the USA in 1995, while another, Pierre Hermé, pushed his craft towards the artistic terrain established by Carême. Dubbed the "Picasso of pastry" by *Vogue*, his themed seasonal collections have made him the "Karl Lagerfeld of macarons" (Greenspan, 2004, p. 94). Hermé has further extended the reach of French patisserie, with boutiques in Tokyo and the Middle East.

French authority in patisserie continues to be credentialed through competition and reward. These are visible in popular representations, for example, *Kings of Pastry* (2010, dir. Chris Hegedus & D. A. Pennebaker), which documents the Meilleur Ouvrier de France, a quadrennial competition. In it, fellow Lenôtre apprentice Jacquy Pfeiffer is mentored by Canonne. Pfeiffer and Canonne (representing the USA) were runners-up in the 1997 Coupe du Monde de la Pâtisserie, a biennial event held in Lyon and dominated by French chefs (though with increasing Asian success). This mythology has been further popularised via a series of predominantly USA TV cookery shows featuring a French pastry chef as judge, upholding artisanal authority. Examples include Florian Bellenger (*Cupcake Wars*, Food Network, 2009–2018) and Jacques Torres (*Next Great Baker*, TLC, 2014; *Nailed It!*, Netflix, 2018–present). Meanwhile, French patissiers, including Hermé, have moved into online instruction with ventures like pastryclass.com. As in classical tradition, all these figures are professional male chefs. While there have been elite women, most prominently Cherish Finden, the Singapore-born leader of a team of pastry chefs that won the IKA Culinary Olympics in 2000, and Nina Métayer, the first female winner of the 2016 World Pastry Chef award, patisserie largely corresponds to,

and reproduces, the widely-discussed division between a feminine domestic culinary sphere and a masculine public culinary sphere (Black, 2021; Hollows, 2022, pp. 28–29).

The field, then, was shaped by French masculine culinary-cultural hegemony. Yet even at its 19th-century zenith, other traditions and sources of authority influenced relevant patisserie aesthetics. Queen Victoria's huge 1840 wedding cake was a single tier of rich fruitcake, with a surface (afterwards called "royal icing") made from a thick layer of almond paste "encrusted with white sugar icing so stiff that brides were equipped with a special saw" (Allen, 2003, p. 459). These royal cakes grew more architecturally elaborate and multi-tiered, making the late-Victorian wedding cake "a largely commercial product" (Allen, 2003, p. 481). Two features of the drip cake, therefore—spectacular height and a hard-to-achieve machinic surface—were, to some extent, established in Victorian Britain.

The drip cake does not use royal icing, despite similarities in the surface ideal, indeed buttercream is at odds with the authority of "classical" techniques. French patisserie had experimented with buttercream surfaces, but as Krondl notes, the "buttercream-filled layer cake never really took off in France" (2016, p. 230). More significant was the USA where small buttercream cakes were popular by the early 19th century, and ubiquitous in ordinary mid-century American bakeries, cylindrical and pastel-coloured.

At the turn of the millennium, retro cupcakes became heavily mediatised objects of desire, most famously in the depiction of New York's Magnolia Bakery in *Sex and the City* (HBO, 2000), prompting an international craze and numerous new businesses. Here, too, is a source of offline authority and inspiration for bakers, where stylised cakes encountered fashionable female entrepreneurialism (Nathanson, 2015, p. 250).

In this way, traditionally domestic forms of baking have been elevated into professional craft with correspondingly higher (in some cases luxury) status. Concurrently, buttercream was transformed from a (usually piped) decorative topping or filling associated with homeliness to a smooth, encasing surface. The film *Marie Antoinette* (2006, dir. Sofia Coppola) depicted a decadent scene of pastel-coloured buttercream cakes, which influenced fashion editorial photography, crystallising a post-feminist "radical frivolity" (Willson, 2015, p. 62); a shame*less* indulgence in feminine hedonism. This coincided with the appearance of London-based, Cordon-Bleu-trained Peggy Porschen's tall, minimalist, cylindrical pastel buttercream celebration cakes, whose success has been attributed to their "Insta" qualities. Significantly, in 2018, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's multi-tiered wedding cake (made by American baker Clare Ptak, owner of London's Violet café), was the first royal cake to use buttercream. Her cookbook, *Love Is a Pink Cake* notes, laconically, that the Lemon and Elderflower Wedding Cake is "not for the beginner" (Coke, 2023).

Charting the gourmet foodscape, Johnston and Baumann (2014) note a long period of "de-sacralization" in post-war American cuisine in which French culinary hegemony was gradually decentred and devalued through a growing emphasis on localness, exoticness, and organicism. In high-end patisserie, we demonstrate a similar process: new objects, techniques, and (overwhelmingly women) creators have entered the patisserie field, problematising assumptions about how capitals of various kinds can be accumulated within and beyond the field. Yet baker-influencers, drawing on a mix of domestic and professional traditions, have not thereby devalued the authority of French patisserie—as we have shown, it continues to be a source of legitimate or pure taste and reward. Striking, however, is that our baker-influencers' content makes almost no acknowledgement of the authority of pastry chefs (despite—for the moment—their continuing leading

position within baking TV). Instead, they present themselves as their own forms of authority and instigators of innovation.

4. Surfaces and Depths

Having established the trend for the drip cake, the practitioners, and their labour, the historical precedents of the buttercream celebration cake, and the gendered and classed dynamics of authority at play, we move on to examine the specifics of the drip cake, doing so through a variety of historical and theoretical lenses. We have already argued that this aesthetic relates to the affordances and demands of the platform. Taylor and Keating (2018), as well as Dejmanee (2016), make further salient interpretations of mediatised cake, though neither engages with modernist aesthetic ideals. Doing so produces a broader understanding of the subjectivities expressed in the drip cake, as well as enabling us to consider how creators of drip cakes are reconfiguring the modernist surface, which has previously been understood as a problematic masculine ideal (Cheng, 2013; Sparke, 2010).

It is impossible to separate the surface from the depth of the cake, because the outer appearance relies heavily on the integrity of each interior layer, as does the effect when cut. We will nevertheless address three elements: the iced surface, the drip, and the topping.

4.1. The Iced Surface

The "perfect" surface frequently has a "smooth and tight integrity" and this is common across many materials, objects, and historical periods (Kelley, 2013, p. 19). But the modernist surface is distinguished from previous elegant surfaces by being uncompromisingly smooth, pristine, and pure, or "bare" (Kelley, 2013, p. 19), in line with the Bauhaus tenet "less is more." Since the 1920s, these ideas, afforded by new materials and processes coterminous with industrial manufacture, have informed design. Expanses of glass, and concrete walls smoothed and finished with white Ripolin were perceived as both functional and hygienic. As Le Corbusier said in 1925, "Trash is always abundantly decorated; the luxury object is well-made, neat and clean, pure and healthy, and its bareness reveals the quality of its manufacture" (Le Corbusier, 1987, pp. 87–88). Since Lenôtre, French patisserie echoes these ideas. Seemingly untouched by human hand, edges are exacting; layers are distinct, both inside and out.

The drip cake is unswervingly committed to this engineered appearance. Traditionally, rough cake edges are masked with decorative piping, as in the classic Victorian wedding cake and post-war domestic sugar craft. However, the drip cake's "bareness reveals the quality of its manufacture" (Le Corbusier, 1987, pp. 87–88). Taylor and Keating's (2018) definition of food porn extends beyond the erotic, to include a pornography of mastery exemplified by images of layer cake perfection: "clean, balanced and geometric...absolute accuracy...demands our attention," and "delight stems from giving over to the expert and conceding that perfection is unattainable" (p. 317). They note the absolute absence of crumbs in such images, which elsewhere connote rustic authenticity. Our baker-influencers' photographs are "monumental"; and the cake plinth approaches a universal standard continuous with the modernist dream.

4.2. The Drip

If the cake expresses absolute control, the liquid drip presents decorative disorder and "letting go," analogous to Cairns and Johnston's (2015) notion of culinary "calibration," wherein middle-class women must "actively manage their relationships to the extremes of self-control" (p. 154). Sabbath's original drip was an insult, a splat, an act of comic-book disrespect. In an interview, she cites a dripping comic "horror" font as inspiration (Gardner, 2015). Most interpretations, however, present a neatly decorative and controlled expression. Courtney ensures the drips are regular, resulting in something between the look of upholstery fringing and classical columns. A reclaimed rustic "drizzle" appeared previously, but the drip-cake plinth refuses such haphazard cosiness, ensuring the drip is a straight, even line.

Nevertheless, they must suggest a single, fluid gesture—too much effort results in a "messy," laboured finish. However expressed, *all* these drips call attention to the quality of the surface below. Minor imperfections become glaring errors.

4.3. The Topping

Some drip cakes remain cylindrical and flat, in line with Peggy Porschen's high-end aesthetic. But lofty piles of home-made or shop-bought sweets provide baker-influencers with easy opportunities to capitalise on their expertise by attracting engagement through visually arresting novelty, simultaneously communicating non-visual qualities of flavour or occasion. The cake *is* now a plinth, a negligible support. The online audience is hailed by super-democratic cake decorations—already loved and often branded treats, like a ring of Oreos, or chunks of chocolate bar. The topping visualises the calorific excess hidden within those bare sugar walls; the abandon offered by cake: the waste, the excess, the carnival of feminine indulgence.

5. Body, Cleanliness, and Control

5.1. Cake as Body

We have noted the near absence of bodies from drip cake imagery, though tutorials contain medium shots and close-ups of working hands. The baker-influencers' bodies are typically white, young, long-haired, compact, and neat. Can these cakes be considered as expressions of an ideal female body? This might seem unlikely given the discord between the ideal post-feminist body and the enthusiastic *consumption* of cake, though as Cairns and Johnston observe, "exemplary [female] citizens are expected *both* to consume *and* to constrain themselves" (2015, p. 156, emphasis added). In a post-feminist context, then, the pleasures of cake might be reclaimed, though this involves a complex set of negotiations.

Dejmanee (2016) suggests that cake stands in for a female body on social media, although she initially explores a metaphorical relationship between a broader range of digital food images and female bodies/sexuality. For her, as for McDonnell (2016), "creamy frosting and sauces dripping down multi-layer cakes" (Dejmanee, 2016, p. 436) signify the libidinous, liquid depths of feminine comfort and desire. Whether our fashionable drip cakes are these things is questionable, especially since Dejmanee contrasts her sensual come-ons with Martha Stewart's cold minimalism which dominated early 2000s American baking imagery. The drips cannot be understood simply as the libidinous feminine. They promise ooze, but they deliver control. They are not dripp*ing*—they are set.

With a slice removed, cakes offer a more literal welcome to gaze inside. Dejmanee (2016) likens the increasingly "intricate, excessive layers" (p. 440) required in cake imagery to the increasing penetration of intimate self-surveillance in post-feminist subjectivity (p. 441). The cut-cake image is homologous to a vagina "simplify[ed] and sweet[ened]" by Brazilian waxing or labiaplasty (p. 441). Dejmanee's work underlines the reproduction of punitive ideals of perfection, sanitisation, and restraint in both cakes and bodies. A cake can be an ambivalent invitation or exhibition, it seems, depending on fine distinctions in surface quality and finish.

But thinking of this super-controlled cake as a modernist surface opens new directions for critical enquiry. Design history has long acknowledged a relationship between the surfaces and forms of products and human bodily ideals (Maffei, 2009). Cheng (2013) explores the modernist fetishisation of the smooth, bare, and flat, in which "purity, cleanliness, simplicity, anonymity, masculinity, civilisation, technology, intellectual abstractism" are contrasted with notions of "excessive adornment, inarticulate sensuality, femininity, backwardness" (p. 4). What Cheng terms the "undistracted" surface is coded as right and masculine, versus the regressive femininity of the decorative. This set of oppositions bears an almost uncanny resemblance to the relationship between the cake plinth and its drip and topping.

The minimalist modern has become a dominant style in aspirational interiors and international hotels and exemplified by the smartphones through which these digital cultures are experienced—Cheng contends the modernist surface dream persists in ideas of good taste which emphasise the "sleek, the understated" (2013, p. 4). These kinds of "rational" surfaces are routinely described as cool, resonating with Liu and others' conceptions of cool aesthetics as expressive of the ideologies of techno-rationality (Brown, 2021).

The meanings of the modern surface have been contested, a particular tension between the idea of the bare surface being clad and it being naked. In contemporary baking, a "naked" cake has no lateral frosting, yet has been similarly shaped and scraped on a turntable to create the perfect cylinder. But a super-flat plain buttercream surface with no decor is also naked. Skin or clothing, it gives the impression of tautness and adhesion, newness, impermeability. Cheng (2013) describes the ideal modern man as "hermetically sealed in a flawless skin" (p.10). Self-possessed, he is "luckily impervious to all atmospheres" (p. 10). There is therefore a distinct and contradictory *lack* of vulnerability and intimacy about these particular naked bodies.

Thinking about the impermeability of cake-as-body also invokes class politics. Barnaby (2013) and Kelley (2013) have related the cost and difficulty of creating and maintaining surface to the signalling of class distinctions. Allen (2003, p. 483) notes that the super-hard-surfaced Victorian wedding cake, sometimes replaced by a fake, was both an analogous perfection of the bride (and her body) and a distancing from potentially troubling working-class bodies. Similarly, the drip cake surface suggests Bakhtin's distinction between the grotesque body with its leakiness, porosity, and absence of boundaries, and the classical body which is laminated, clean, closed, defined, symmetrical, and orderly (Cohen Shabot, 2007, p. 59). Applying these ideas explicitly to women's (sexualised) bodies, and including height (in contrast to the scorned body of the "low-other"), Kipnis (1992, p. 374) writes that the body—for us, the cake-as-body—is "a refined, orifice-less, laminated surface—homologous to the forms of official high culture that legitimate their authority by references to the values—the highness—inherent in this classical body." The surface of the cake only *appears* to be laminated (being necessarily pliable, malleable, and prone to subsidence). Like the entrepreneurial middle-class femininity of which it is an expression, it must be constantly worked

on and renewed, the drip signalling the impossibility and excess that compromises any vision of corporeal completion.

5.2. Clean Food, Clean Cake

Assessing influencers within the digital foodscape, Goodman and Jaworska (2020) note the prominence of notions of "clean" eating and/or "clean" lifestyles to grammars of good food. Clean has a loosely defined meaning: some variation on a meat-free diet, eschewing various other foods such as fats and sugars. Yet theirs is a broader account of cleanness within which physical activity and mental wellbeing help constitute the clean discourse: Food is "part of a larger regime that includes work on and optimization of the body and the mind" (Goodman & Jaworska, 2020, p. 189). Clean food thereby becomes equated with "aspirational politics of 'perfection' " (Goodman & Jaworska, 2020, p. 191), further signified by the influencers' spotless kitchens.

The drip cake may seem an unlikely object through which to think about clean food. Good to eat, and sustaining of family through its role in celebrations, it is however nutritionally "dirty food" since it transgresses official advice about the effects of a high-fat, high-sugar diet. There are attempts to make it "cleaner," for example, gluten-free and vegan drip cakes, but the digital image cannot be eaten (and baker-influencers do not eat their own creations). Our focus on the *form* of the drip cake and the *manner* of expertise demonstrated reveals that the controlled relationship of the baker-influencer to the sponge layers, the pure buttercream surface, and even the drip represents a demonstration of self-management and clean living. Patisserie is the messiest culinary discipline, yet these baker-influencers make it a hygienic and controllable process. Courtney, for example, barely touches the cake, and her perfect pink nails remain unviolated by the sticky, defrosting surface.

In seeking to make sense of these antinomies of celebration/control, purity/edibility, and cleanliness/dirt, we find striking parallels in Casey and Littler's (2022) study of British Instagram "cleanfluencer" Mrs. Hinch. Her performance of organizing and scouring another modernist surface—the interior of the modern home—represents a response to the instabilities generated by neoliberalism. The clean surface is a therapeutic project of the self, created through hard "digital identity" labour which can yield profits across a range of capitals. Making a drip cake involves the seemingly endless repetition of certain actions. Such repetition could be seen as torturous and oppressive, but both Mrs. Hinch and our baker-influencers represent it as calming and creative. The clean surface represents the distant possibility of "predictability, sanctuary and safety" (Casey & Littler, 2022, p. 499) in an uncertain and unsafe world, and is increasingly defined as a "tactic for soothing the soul" (Casey & Littler, 2022, p. 502). Yet the drip and toppings also signal the difficulties of such projects and the problematic denials involved. Ouellette (2019, p. 548), discussing decluttering expert Marie Kondo, reflects on her own largely unsuccessful attempts at cleaning, concluding that untidiness is not a personal choice but a "manifestation of late capitalism" and that obsessive concern with order under neoliberal conditions threatens to "kill joy" as much as empower its female practitioners. Our baker-influencers' management of the surface, the drip, and the topping dramatizes these tensions.

5.3. Embodied Skill, Competence, and Cool

Dejmanee claims that in food blogging "the material labour of the female body is erased" (2016, p. 444), as digital technologies effect a compression of time and space (Harvey, 1989). The "cake frosts itself" (Dejmanee,

2016, p. 444). This is true of mega-compilations of novel cake ideas produced by YouTube channels like Yum-Up!, but not entirely true of our baker-influencers. As with Ocejo's (2017) "masters of craft"—male and masculine hipster artisans—there is "cool" cultural capital in the demonstration of fashionable skills and "passionate work" (Brown, 2021), since our baker-influencers' skill and process-sharing also represents the performance of mastery and capital that authenticates their brand and legitimises their authority.

Mediatised forms of instruction do however "make it look easy" partly by editing, though the fluent gestures involved require skill gained only through practice, constituting yet more hidden labour. This allows a further, different expression of "modern cool" (Brown, 2015) which draws on Erving Goffman's notion of "composure." Originally observing dealers in 1960s Las Vegas casinos, he noted the special status accorded to people who demonstrate bodily control in what he called fateful situations. He states that this bodily smoothness of movement is particularly expressed through fine motor control of the hands, and is perceived as especially impressive among those in "easily discredited roles" (Goffman, 2005, p. 226). The precarity of influencer life, successful femininity, and neoliberal life more generally, are poetically expressed and symbolically resolved in these performances of skill in managing risk.

6. Conclusion

The unique aesthetic of the drip cake developed within a community of practice comprising professional, semi-professional, amateur, and faux-amateur baking-influencers. It has been informed by the traditions of American retro baking, and from French patisserie and European modernism, co-opting capitals from which women were previously excluded. This marks a departure from the comforting forms of rustic home baking and the feminine, prissy traditions of 20th-century sugar craft, making cake-decorating "cool." The drip cake's online career has followed the trajectory of a fashion trend, baker-influencers actively engaging with creating, promoting, sustaining, and *owning* new aesthetics. They require no endorsement from traditional sources of authority. They move on, but their drip cake has become a new classic.

However, the drip cake poignantly exemplifies the ever-increasing aesthetic labours women are obliged to engage with in post-feminist neoliberal modernity. Women experience a *compromised* agency by making and posting these cakes. Baker-influencers are compelled to compete in the attention economy, raising technical standards and extending the reach and speed of fashion within domestic baking. As with other online lifestyle coaching, their tutorials define the problem they claim to solve: Your cake can—and must—be perfect, through 360 degrees.

But what kind of perfection? Our close analysis of the labour-intensive surfaces of the drip cake reveals that it articulates wider concerns and contradictions of embodied neoliberal, post-feminist femininity. For a dirty, excessive food, these cakes are remarkably clean. For a fun, messy material experience, antithetical to the quotidian work of the spreadsheet, they are remarkably disciplined and bounded. The countless instructions available democratise professional skills, emphasising the accessibility of high-end pleasures, just so long as you can DIY. The effort required is glossed over, the aesthetic relying on an effort*less*ness that only comes with practice. Post-feminist perfection here merges with ideals of coolness, competence, and composure.

Finally, posting images of fashionable cake sidesteps the issue of the unruly body. Yet they are legitimised by images of women who conform to core bodily ideals; ideals upheld by the cake. The delicate surface could

be viewed as smooth and blemish-free, like perfect skin. But stretched over this flawless cylinder, it is also resolute enough to be a barricade, perhaps symbolising the toughness required to survive, succeed, and become "badass."

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Abaffy, H. (2019, September 25). The great white hope, 5 steps to the perfect drip cake. *Milk + Honey*. https://milkandhoneythebakery.com/the-great-white-hope-5-steps-to-the-perfect-drip-cake

Adamson, G., & Kelley, V. (Eds.). (2013). *Surface tensions*. Manchester University Press.

Allen, E. (2003). Culinary exhibition: Victorian wedding cakes and royal spectacle. *Victorian Studies*, *43*(3), 457–484.

Barnaby, A. (2013). Surface recognition: Light and reflection in mid nineteenth-century drawing rooms. In G. Adamson & V. Kelley (Eds.), *Surface tensions* (pp. 166–180). Manchester University Press.

Black, R. (2021). *Cheffes de cuisine*. University of Illinois Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production*. Polity.

Brown, V. (2015). *Cool shades: The history and culture of sunglasses*. Bloomsbury.

Brown, V. (2021). Is coolness still cool? *Journal for Cultural Research*, *25*(4), 429–445.

Cairns, K., & Johnston, J. (2015). *Food and femininity*. Bloomsbury.

Casey, E. (2019). From *Cookery in Colour* to *The Great British Bake Off*: Shifting gendered accounts of home-baking and domesticity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *22*(5/6), 579–594.

Casey, E., & Littler, J. (2022). Mrs Hinch, the rise of the cleanfluencer and the neoliberal refashioning of housework: Scouring away the crisis? *Sociological Review*, *70*(3), 489–505.

Cheng, A. A. (2013). *Second skin*. Oxford University Press.

Cohen Shabot, S. (2007). The grotesque body: Fleshing out the subject. In S. Horstkotte & E. Peeren (Eds.), *The shock of the other: situating alterities* (pp. 57–67). Editions Rodopi B.V.

Coke, A. (2023, April 17). Harry and Meghan's wedding cake baker Claire Ptak on working with royalty. *Tatler*. https://www.tatler.com/article/claire-ptak-violet-bakery-love-is-a-pink-cake-cookbook-interview-recipe

Coleman, R., & Oakley-Brown, L. (2017). Visualizing surfaces, surfacing vision. *Theory, Culture and Society*, *34*(7/8), 5–27.

Dejmanee, T. (2016). "Food porn" as postfeminist play: Digital femininity and the female body on food blogs. *Television & New Media*, *17*(5), 429–448.

Duffy, B. E., & Hund, E. (2015). "Having it all" on social media: Entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion bloggers. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115604337

Feldman, Z. (2021). 'Good food' in an Instagram age: Rethinking hierarchies of culture, criticism and taste. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *24*(6), 1340–1359.

Gardner, E. (2015, August 14). Interview—Katherine Sabbath. *Erin Bakes*. http://erinbakes.com/katherine-sabbath

Gill, R. (2021). Being watched and feeling judged on social media. *Feminist Media Studies*, *21*(8), 1387–1392.

Glitterysparkleshine. (2021). Am I the only one that really dislikes the drip look on cakes?? [Online forum post]. Reddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/cakedecorating/comments/xzktox/am_i_the_only_one_that_really_dislikes_the_drip

Goffman, E. (2005). *Interaction ritual*. Transaction Publishers.

Goodman, M., & Jaworska, S. (2020). Mapping digital foodscapes: Digital food influencers and the grammars of good food. *Geoforum*, *117*, 183–193.

Greenspan, D. (2004). Pierre Hermé: Creating a collection. *Gastronomica*, *4*(1), 90–94.

Harvey, D. (1989). *The condition of postmodernity*. Wiley.

Hollows, J. (2022). *Celebrity chefs, food media and the politics of eating*. Bloomsbury.

Holmes, S., & Negra, D. (Eds.). (2011). *In the limelight and under the microscope: Forms and functions of female celebrity*. Bloomsbury.

Johnson, I. K. (2014). From blues women to b-girls: Performing badass femininity. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, *24*(1), 15–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2014.902649

Johnston, J., & Baumann, S. (2014). *Foodies*. Routledge.

Kelley, V. (2013). A superficial guide to the deeper meanings of surface. In G. Adamson & V. Kelley (Eds.), *Surface tensions* (pp. 13–25). Manchester University Press.

Kipnis, L. (1992). (Male) desire and (female) disgust: Reading *Hustler*. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural studies* (pp. 363–382). Routledge.

Krondl, M. (2016). *Sweet invention*. Chicago Review Press.

Le Corbusier. (1987). *The decorative art of today*. MIT Press. (Original work published 1925)

Lewis, C. Y. (2011). Cool postfeminism: The stardom of Sofia Coppola. In S. Holmes & D. Negra (Eds.), *In the limelight and under the microscope: Forms and functions of female celebrity* (pp. 174–198). Bloomsbury Academic.

Lupton, D. (2020). *Digital food cultures*. Routledge.

Maffei, N. (2009). Both natural and mechanical: The streamlined designs of Norman Bel Geddes. *The Journal of Transport History*, *30*(2), 141–167.

McDonnell, E. M. (2016). Food porn: The conspicuous consumption of food in the age of digital reproduction. In P. Bradley (Ed.), *Food, media and contemporary culture* (pp. 239–265). Palgrave Macmillan.

McRobbie, A. (2015). Notes on the perfect: Competitive femininity in neoliberal times. *Australian Feminist Studies*, *30*(83), 3–20.

Moxey, K. (2008). Visual studies and the iconic turn. *Journal of Visual Culture*, *7*(2), 131–146.

Nathanson, E. (2015). Sweet sisterhood: Cupcakes as sites of feminized consumption and production. In E. Levine (Ed.), *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and ladyporn* (pp. 249–267). University of Illinois Press.

Negra, D. (2009). *What a girl wants?* Routledge.

Ocejo, R. (2017). *Masters of craft: Old jobs in the new urban economy*. Princeton University Press.

Ouellette, L. (2019). Spark joy? Compulsory happiness and the feminist politics of decluttering. *Culture Unbound*, *11*(3/4), 534–550.

Parkhurst Ferguson, P. (2004). *Accounting for taste*. University of Chicago Press.

Rich, C. (2017, May 8). *How to create a drip on your cake* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRwyrwyCCYA

Sabbath, K. (2018, February 27). Katherine Sabbath. *A Taste of Harmony*. https://www.tasteofharmony.org.au/katherine-sabbath

Sobande, F. (2024). White and gendered aesthetics and attitudes of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *27*(3), 389–407. https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231222855

Sparke, P. (2010). *As long as it's pink* (2nd ed.). Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design.

Suh, S. (2020). Non-boundaries of style represented in fashion Instagram: A social media platform as a digital space–time. *Journal of Fashion and Textiles*, *7*, Article 33.

Taylor, N., & Keating, M. (2018). Contemporary food imagery: Food porn and other visual trends. *Communication Research and Practice*, *4*(3), 307–323.

Tebben, M. (2015). Seeing and tasting: The evolution of dessert in French gastronomy. *Gastronomica*, *15*(2), 10–25.

Wilkes, K. (2015). Colluding with neo-liberalism: Post-feminist subjectivities, whiteness and expressions of entitlement. *Feminist Review*, *110*, 18–33.

Willson, J. (2015). *Being gorgeous*. I. B. Tauris.

About the Authors

Vanessa Brown is a senior lecturer and researcher in the Department of Fashion, Textiles and Knit at the Nottingham School of Art and Design, Nottingham Trent University, UK, with a background in design and cultural studies. She writes about coolness, fashionability, and taste in visual and material cultures, but has been a maker of visually interesting celebration cakes since her time at art school.

Steve Jones is a principal lecturer in media and cultural studies in the Department of Journalism and Media, Nottingham Trent University, UK. Steve has written about food writing, media, and culture. He bakes nothing more ambitious than scones.

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Mediating the Sugar Baby Imaginary: Popular Narratives About Gender and Sexuality in Sugar Dating

Megan Sawey

Department of Communication, Cornell University, USA

Correspondence: Megan Sawey (mes476@cornell.edu)

Abstract

The internet is rife with opportunities to participate in dating practices, discourses about gender, romance, and sexuality, and, increasingly, efforts to restrict sexual expression. Therefore, it is important to square popular discourse with the perspectives and thought processes that color women's participation in romantic and sexual phenomena. This article explores how media narratives about women who pursue relationships at the intersection of intimacy, social class, and labor map onto the realities of their lived experiences. Specifically, I compare an analysis of popular press articles about sugar dating—a mutually beneficial relationship practice wherein people engage in frank negotiations of companionship, intimacy, and material benefits—with interviews with 13 women who have participated in sugar dating. I sought to understand how these women defined sugar dating, what motivated them to sugar date, and where their sugar relationships felt most rewarding or difficult. I argue that, for women, sugar dating can be a site of both labor and leisure. These interviews complicate how contemporary press coverage tends to frame sugar dating, revealing important insights about how women may conform to but also challenge popular narratives about their identities, labor, sexual desires, and agency. My findings, therefore, constitute a narrative about sugar dating that captures the nuances of women's thinking and operating logics. This is a crucial step forward in elevating the voices of those who participate in sugar dating and other romantic and sexual practices.

Keywords

gender; identity; intimacy; labor; media; platforms; popular culture; sexuality; sugar dating

1. Introduction

Across the internet, women engaging in relationship practices at the intersection of gender, intimacy, and social class are, to quote *The Wall Street Journal* columnist Satran (2023), "having a moment." Indeed,

discourses about the "stay-at-home girlfriends" on TikTok and Instagram to which Satran was referring and women who participate in "high-value dating" and "hypergamy" (Bansinath, 2024; Simmons, 2024) abound. These discourses range from sweeping endorsements of class-conscious courtship—such as YouTube creator Shera Seven's (2024) "sprinkle sprinkle" movement, which encourages women to lead "soft lives" by only dating financially successful men—to critiques leveled at women who are thought to be jeopardizing their own financial security by relying on their partners' earnings (Smith, 2024). Regardless of their stance, all point to how media, platforms, and popular culture imagine the relationship between women's finances and their intimate lives.

One practice that has—as evidenced by headlines like "Inside the Sugar Baby School of TikTok" (Meley, 2022)—garnered significant media attention is sugar dating. While scholars vary somewhat in how they describe sugar dating (Gunnarsson, 2024; Scull, 2020; Upadhyay, 2021), based on their existing definitions, I take the phenomenon to mean a relationship practice wherein two people engage in frank negotiations of companionship, intimacy, and material goods and services. The premise is that these relationships—also sometimes referred to as arrangements—are mutually beneficial, and that their duration depends on each person's fulfillment of their agreed-upon contributions to the relationship. Although "high-value dating," "hypergamy," and even traditional dating also involve gifting and other activities at the intersection of intimacy and economic exchange, what most differentiates sugar dating from these phenomena is that sugar relationships are forged through the agreement by both partners to build a relationship based explicitly on exchange. However, given the fluidity of these boundaries, it is possible that a sugar dating relationship might take on a structure more akin to a traditional romantic relationship.

Although online and mobile dating services and social media platforms play a key role in mediating sugar dating, as people use the internet to find potential partners (Nayar, 2017) and circulate advice about best practices (Ellis et al., 2023), the phenomenon well predates them and is an upshot of women's introduction to the commercialized intimate sphere. At the turn of the 20th century, heterosexual courtship customs shifted such that women no longer needed to receive male callers in their homes. Indeed, women were increasingly meeting potential partners in department stores, theaters, and other public spaces. Many became "charity girls" who participated in "treating," a practice through which they offered men companionship—broadly construed—in exchange for dinner, theater tickets, and invitations to participate in other heterosocial leisure activities (Clement, 2006; Peiss, 1986). Charity girls used coded terms like *gift* and *favor* to convey their interest in treating while also mitigating suspicions that they were participating in illegal sex work. Treating, thus, is thought to have occupied a space like that which sugar dating now occupies—one that scholars have characterized as "its own thing" (Scull, 2020) and a "gray area" (Motyl, 2013) continuum between traditional dating and sex work.

To better understand how media, platforms, and popular culture are making sense of sugar dating, I compare narratives about women who sugar date with the realities of women's lived experiences. This study builds on previous scholarship on media representations of femininity and intimacy by exploring a thematic analysis of popular press articles about sugar dating. Alongside this analysis, I interviewed 13 women who have participated in sugar dating. I sought to understand how these women defined sugar dating, what motivated them to participate, and where their sugar relationships felt most rewarding or difficult. Based on my interview data, I argue that, for women, sugar dating can be a site of both labor and leisure. These interviews complicate the relationship of women who sugar date to their mediated cultural representation, revealing important insights about how women may conform to but also, crucially, challenge discourses

about their identities, personal appearances, labor, sexual desires, and agency. My findings, therefore, constitute a narrative about sugar dating that captures the nuances of women's motivations and operating logics—which could lead to transformations in how contemporary platform economies take up sugar dating and other class-conscious romantic and sexual phenomena.

2. Feminist Media Scholarship on Femininity and Intimacy

Media make people and their experiences visible, while at the same time creating, circulating, and reaffirming certain narratives. As late 20th-century mass media and advertising produced narratives about femininity and intimacy, media scholars sought to understand how the culture industries define and depict the relationship between women and sex. Across many feminist critiques of gender and sexual representation, objectification—denials of women's sexual agency, autonomy, and subjectivity—became a key concern (Attwood, 2004, 2011; Nussbaum, 2007). In her analysis of gender representation and cinema, Mulvey (1988) contends that women in films of this era were objects of display, presented as bodies available to male characters as they explored their own sexual desires and fantasies. Objectification also figured prominently in critical analyses of the production and consumption of pornography, as researchers (Cowan & Dunn, 1994; MacKinnon, 1989) and radical feminist writers and activists (Dworkin, 1981) positioned pornographic media as sites of women's patterned degradation and victimization. Broadly, the media objectification framework urged us to pay attention to how women appeared devoid of their own desire—instead existing as sexually passive and at risk of succumbing to men's violent domination.

As media texts began to engage more thoroughly with sexuality, scholarship shifted from women's objectification to a burgeoning focus on their sexual subjectivity (Gill, 2003). Radner (1995) observed a transition in late-20th-century romance novels away from female characters who were considered "virtuous" to those who conveyed sexual desire and potential through their embodied heterosexuality. Later, Gill (2008) noted that depictions of women in advertising as active, sexually powerful, desiring, and "always up for it" were outpacing those in which women looked passive and disengaged from their desires. Importantly, though, Gill and other scholars raise these points to critique how media have subverted the potential of women's sexual subjectivity. They call attention to where representations claiming to foreground women's sexual agency might, instead, advance postfeminist sensibilities grounded in a neoliberal media culture that contorts and commodifies feminist messaging and practices. Gill (2003), McRobbie (2009), and Attwood (2011) connect these postfeminist sensibilities to discourses about gender and empowerment, wherein women are thought to have achieved equality and, therefore, may choose their practices freely. Gill (2009) refers to these sensibilities as "pernicious" in that they pressure women to self-surveil their appearances and sexual behaviors. This reading of women's subjectivity resembles critical analyses of media genres like the "makeover show," which endeavor to improve women's self-esteem through mechanisms of discipline and control that promise "to make women look better while also making them feel worse" (Tincknell, 2011, p. 83). Harvey and Gill (2010) detect a similar pattern in *The Sex Inspectors*, as the reality television show's host attempts to persuade a woman that having sex with her husband will, in turn, improve their marriage. Here, the authors argue, women's sexual desire does get acknowledged—though the show situates it as a performance women should enact to please their male partners. Situated desire and agency are also salient in Pitcher's (2006) analysis of *Girls Gone Wild*. Pitcher contends that the adult entertainment franchise films women's consent to appear nude on camera to "stage" agentic choices that are, ultimately, indicative of the franchise's exploitation of women's bodily autonomy. Thus, while contemporary media representations may

afford women more desire and sexual agency than their predecessors, they simultaneously perpetuate mainstream beauty standards and traditional gender norms. In doing so, they reinforce the neoliberal notion that women's sexual expression should be controlled, choreographed, and commercialized.

3. Sugar Dating

Women's sexual expression and agency figure into a growing body of academic research about sugar dating, a mutually beneficial relationship practice. Sugar dating does, in some ways, parallel more mainstream heterosexual courtship customs. For instance, it draws on social mobility discourses rooted in the notion that romantic relationships allow women to transcend class boundaries—what Ouellette (1999) describes as the "pursuit of an upwardly mobile self via carefully strategized romance" (p. 365). However, sugar dating differs from these discourses in its overt and intentional foregrounding of intimacy and economic exchange. The overarching logic is that partners should be explicit about how they will exchange companionship, sex, money, gifts, and other goods or services. Even so, according to Gunnarsson and Strid (2023¸p. 1045), one "important characteristic of sugar dating is its contested meaning." Scull (2020) raises a similar point, drawing on interviews with women who sugar date to develop a seven-part sugar relationship typology. She describes sugar dating as a "unique relational package" that involves "its own subcultural relationship script" (Scull, 2020, p. 142). These findings suggest that the broad "mutually beneficial" premise on which sugar dating is built could be construed to mean many different things.

Against the backdrop of this interpretive flexibility, scholars across fields have focused on teasing out and contextualizing women's motivations for forming heterosexual sugar relationships. In her later work, Scull (2022) argues that women sugar date for myriad reasons, including, among others, access to financial and material resources, travel and other experiential benefits, mentorship, and fun. Metcalfe et al. (2023) draw a similar link between sugar dating and women's desire for monetary gain, while also noting that women might sugar date because they are attracted to older men and believe this practice facilitates cross-generational connections. Upadhyay (2021) adds that sugar dating allows women to pursue casual, "no-strings-attached" relationships discreetly. These relationships afford women the opportunity to manage their intimate interactions, as the bounded nature of sugar dating means they may be able to circumvent the uncertainties of traditional romantic and sexual relationships (Gunnarsson, 2024). Other scholars (Mixon, 2019; Recio, 2022b) tie women's involvement in sugar dating to higher education, finding that women may sugar date to fund their college tuition. Online and mobile dating companies have contributed directly to this motivation. Perhaps the most telling example of this is Seeking, a luxury dating service referenced in several scholarly works on sugar dating (Di Cicco & Vandevenne, 2023; Nayar, 2017; Scull, 2020). Founded in 2006 as SeekingArrangement, the company garnered ample media attention for encouraging its members to participate in sugar dating. While Seeking has since removed direct references to sugar dating from its branding (Seeking, 2024), the company has, historically, offered free premium memberships to students who attach .edu email addresses to their accounts and once ran a marketing campaign called "Sugar Baby University" (Loudenback, 2017). Recio (2022b), who interviewed female university students in the United Kingdom, contends that these women exercised agency when they decided to sugar date—but that "it is necessary to recalibrate this agency in the face of the financial pressures that they were experiencing" (p. 556). One reason for this recalibration, Recio (2022a) argues, is that sugar dating blurs the boundaries of sexual consent. Regardless of their own sexual desires, women may feel compelled to participate in sex acts because they believe that is what their partners expect of them. Taken together, these accounts

demonstrate that women enter sugar dating with a variety of goals and desired material, romantic, or sexual outcomes—and they make agentic choices within the broader neoliberal contexts of financial instability and hegemonic heterosexuality.

4. Sugar Dating, Media, and Popular Culture

Sugar dating offers a productive lens for understanding the ways that media, platforms, and popular culture make sense of intersections of gender, romance, sexuality, and social class. To that end, existing sugar dating research does consider how digital platforms pertain to sugar dating practices and discourses. Nayar's (2017) analysis of sugar relationship dynamics draws on user content submitted to a sugar dating blog. Ellis et al. (2023) also studied blog posts about sugar dating, with a specific focus on the types of information and advice that people who post about sugar dating on Tumblr circulate. Both Recio (2022a) and Di Cicco and Vandevenne (2023) take a top-down approach to understanding the platformization of sugar dating, arguing that Seeking's website design and affordances reinforce normative expectations about femininity and women's roles in romantic and sexual relationships. These projects, therefore, demonstrate that platforms figure prominently in how contemporary sugar daters discover, discuss, and structure their participation in sugar dating.

To build our understanding of sugar dating in contemporary offline and platform-based contexts, this study foregrounds the relationship between sugar dating and media representation. Discourses at the intersection of intimacy and economic exchange have long been considered "slippery" (Johnson, 2007). Sociologists like Viviana Zelizer (2005) and Eva Illouz (2007) have spent decades grappling with how financial processes map onto people's private lives and personal relationships, and vice-versa. Sugar dating offers a compelling context for this research because it could surface important insights pertaining to how shifts in platform branding, regulation, and governance may, in turn, lead to shifts in the ways people's platformized relationship practices are enabled or constrained.

With this, I analyze sugar dating in situ. I ask how women's lived experiences in their bodies and with sexual desire and agency in sugar dating map onto media narratives about relationships at the intersection of intimacy and economic exchange. In what ways do these press narratives position sugar dating, and how might this mirror or challenge reality? This research extends existing knowledge on the motivations women have for participating in sugar dating, the platforms that structure their participation, the composition of their sugar relationships, and configurations of power and agency in these relationships by squaring identities and relational dynamics with popular media, which continue to take an interest in sugar dating.

5. Methods

To better understand how popular narratives about women who participate in sugar dating compare with women's lived experiences, this research draws on two data sources. The first is a corpus of 60 popular press articles that were published between 2010 and 2024. To locate these articles, I entered "sugar dating," "sugar relationships," and "women sugar dating" as search terms in my institution's library website database. Given that romantic and sexual practices—as well as perceptions of the relationship between gender, romance, and sexuality—vary globally (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993), I narrowed my search results to articles published by companies based in the United States and the United Kingdom. While this does create a

limitation, I contend that geographically specific sugar dating scholarship is an important building block for future study and cross-cultural comparisons. From this search, I drew a random selection of articles. I then completed a thematic analysis of these articles, taking note of the most common ways they characterized women who sugar date and the conditions of women's involvement in sugar dating. The second is a collection of in-depth interviews with 13 women who had either sugar dated in the past or who were actively participating in sugar dating. Interviews took place between 2023 and 2024. I recruited women who had self-identified as sugar daters in press articles or blog posts, as well as those who had expressed their affiliation with this phenomenon on social media platforms—namely Reddit, YouTube, and Instagram. All participants resided in the United States. Participants ranged in age, with some in their early 20s and others in their 30s or mid-to-late 40s. Their career experiences also varied, as a few participants were undergraduate or graduate students, while others worked in education, owned their own businesses, or held executive-level positions at companies.

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, and all were conducted one-on-one with the author. I asked participants about how they first discovered sugar dating, how they defined it, why they felt motivated to participate, where they sugar dated, and what they considered to be the benefits and challenges of pursuing mutually beneficial relationships. Specific comments about participants' identities emerged during interviews, as participants discussed gender, age, and race in relation to what they understood to be popular narratives about sugar dating. Importantly, they described where these narratives captured or, at times, contrasted their personal experiences.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted between 30 minutes and 2.5 hours. To protect participants' privacy, interviews were limited to Zoom's audio and chat features. I encouraged participants to replace their Zoom names with pseudonyms. I then replaced those names with pseudonyms to create an additional layer of privacy. To thank participants for their time, each was offered a gift card. With participants' permission, I recorded the interviews. I uploaded audio files to my secure Otter.ai account and transcribed the interviews. Following Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded, inductive approach to qualitative research, I coded and analyzed interview data simultaneously. From these codes emerged the broader themes that structured my framework for grounding mediated sugar dating discourse in women's embodied realities. In my findings section, I highlight two popular narratives and detail the ways these narratives structured how participants made sense of sugar dating. I contend that emphasizing participants' perspectives in this way is important for understanding where media and popular culture may or may not adequately capture people's lived experiences.

6. Findings and Discussion

6.1. Popular Sugar Dating Narratives: Consistencies and Contradictions

The narrativization of sugar dating in contemporary media production and reporting has codified a robust popular framing of women who participate in this relationship practice. Perhaps one of the most salient elements of this framing is that women who sugar date adopt certain labels and language unquestioningly— namely, that all women are sugar babies and refer to themselves as such. Hashtags like #sugarbaby—which, as of writing, surfaces nearly 246 thousand TikTok posts—demonstrate the popularity of the "sugar baby" label in platformized sugar dating discourse, thus reinforcing its resonance. Language use is, however, far

from universal, as several participants held negative opinions about sugar dating terminology. Lydia, who was in her 40s, said "I'm not a sugar baby. I'm a freaking woman with a house and kids." Lydia felt detached from "sugar baby" because she found the label infantilizing. It did little to capture her identity, her nuanced perspective on sugar dating, or her motivations for participating. In fact, more broadly, all the women I interviewed teased out the relationship between their lived experiences and two key popular narratives about sugar dating that emerged from the press articles. These narratives are structured around women and their personal appearances, as well as their labor, sexual desires, and agency. Thus, the following sections interweave findings from my press article analysis and interviews to demonstrate instances where the popular narratives are consistent with or contradictory to participants' perspectives. Importantly, this study neither endorses a paradigm of complete freedom and choice in sugar dating nor situates women who sugar date as inherently coerced or exploited. Rather, as evidenced by my participants' observations and reflections, agency, pleasure, oppression, and exploitation may coexist.

6.2. The "Hot Younger Woman" Narrative

The sheer frequency with which press accounts of sugar dating feature textual or visual references to Julia Roberts's character Vivian Ward—a Los Angeles sex worker—in the 1990 film *Pretty Woman* (Berman, 2018; McKay, 2011; Witt, 2023) as cultural touchstones is a fascinating manifestation of how popular media envision women who sugar date. Of course, while there are several ways to complicate the advancement of Vivian as a canonical figure in sugar dating, as well as the characterization of sugar dating as an embodied "Pretty Woman lifestyle" (McKay, 2011), I will start with pointing out that Roberts is often hailed for her beauty (Coates, 2024). Furthermore, across the sampled press articles, feminine beauty was a consistent throughline. A *San Francisco* magazine columnist (Smiley, 2017) profiled a man who sugar dates, describing two of his former sugar partners as a "leggy brunette in hot-pink stilettos" and a "busty artist." In a *Newsweek* article, Jones (2014) argued that men who sugar date often seek "companionship with a hot young thing." Jones's comment encapsulates the first key framing of women who sugar date: the "hot younger woman" narrative. This narrative consists of two distinct, yet interwoven threads related to women's physical appearances and ages.

The "hot younger woman" narrative fueled women's expectations—and anxieties—about their personal appearances, including the extent to which they considered themselves attractive. Autumn, a graduate student who was in her first sugar relationship, felt the narrative was a valid account of how most men expect the women they sugar date to look. She said that, before she started sugar dating, she had "never envisioned" herself doing it because she believed she "wasn't really hot enough to be a sugar baby. That's for really gorgeous people." Yvette also described her understanding of men's aesthetic expectations, noting that men typically seem to seek "cis[gender] white women" who "have the 'girl next door' type of look…fit, on the thinner side, curvy in the right areas." Helen, too, believed that the "girl next door" comparison was apt. She said that, as a "heavier woman," she believed she was "different than the traditional sugar baby." While these thinness and beauty ideals are not unique to sugar dating (see Sharp & Keyton, 2016), Helen, Yvette, and other participants noted that men who sugar date sometimes seem especially attached to them. They attributed this attachment to the mutually beneficial dynamic of sugar dating, which, they felt, might empower men to go for only the most conventionally attractive women.

Several participants did feel pressured by the notion of attractiveness. Rochelle, who used to sugar date but has since redirected her focus to finding a long-term partner, attributed this to what she considered "the

beauty standard in America." She said that "when we say attractive, people have these celebrities...these models in mind." She went on to describe herself as "beautiful, but not necessarily the beauty standard beautiful." The beauty standard to which she was referring mirrored Yvette's and Helen's comments about the "girl next door" look. Several participants said they felt especially pressured by this beauty standard in their online and mobile dating experiences. For instance, they observed that many men on Seeking kept their own profiles hidden but seemed to expect women to upload a variety of cropped and full-body photos. This fed their concerns about how their body types, facial features, and skin tones might hinder their sugar dating efforts. However, despite Rochelle's characterization of herself as an "average looking" woman, she felt the "hot" aspect of the "hot younger woman" narrative was not universally prescriptive of women's ability to form successful sugar relationships. Rochelle argued that "there's somebody for everybody," which, for her, meant that any woman interested in sugar dating could find a partner because "everybody's going to like different aspects." Ulyssa raised a similar point, saying that "people don't all want the same things." Rochelle's and Ulyssa's comments, thus, offer an interesting counter to other participants' takes on this narrative. Both women believed that—much like with traditional dating practices—time, patience, and confidence were the keys to finding a great sugar partner.

Returning to Jones's (2014) "hot young thing" comment, another crucial aspect of the "hot younger woman" narrative about women who sugar date is age. Participants and press coverage alike remarked on a presumed preference among men for youthfulness. In a CNBC article, Wells (2013) defined sugar dating as "older guys looking for younger women." Oppenheim (2018), writing for *The Independent*, referred to sugar dating as a practice "in which younger women are paid to go on dates with men who are often far older than them." A few recent empirical projects (Di Cicco & Vandevenne, 2023; Recio, 2022a) have even asserted that a sugar relationship is, by definition, an arrangement made between a younger woman and a comparatively older man. Yvette, who was in her late 20s, believed she might already be aging out of sugar dating because the men she encountered were interested in women "on the younger side." She said: "Once you get rid of that young fantasy, for some men, they don't like that." Yvette had even considered lying about her age to maintain the "young fantasy" she described. Autumn was around Yvette's age but in a steady sugar relationship. Even so, she felt that "the trope of the wealthy older man and the hot younger woman is there for a reason." In validating the existence of this trope, Autumn made the case that the feminine youthfulness associated with sugar dating was at least somewhat accurate.

A few participants countered the narrative by arguing that women benefit from sugar dating while they age. Erica started sugar dating in her 40s, after decades of traditional dating and a marriage. Because of this, she believed she was keenly aware of what she wanted out of a sugar relationship and how she wanted the men she dated to treat her. Erica felt she had finetuned her ability "to really strongly articulate my boundaries," and her sense was that she could stand up for herself better at this point in her life than if she had first discovered sugar dating at an earlier age. Like Erica, Helen mentioned the importance of boundary setting. She was in her late 30s but had first started sugar dating on Seeking more than a decade ago. Because Helen had "done a lot of inner work" since her earliest sugar dating experiences, she contended that the aging process had helped her and could help other women sugar date more confidently:

> I think a lot of women feel a lot better in our 30s than in our 20s. Our lives are better, we're more confident with who we are, we know what we want. And that comes from being physical with a person and being more comfortable in your own body and your own desires to also be firmer about knowing

what you want. I've also been surprised from the man's perspective. I would have thought they would really prefer somebody younger. There's a lot of guys who might have 45 as their lower cutoff for age in their profiles.

Media accounts are not devoid of the age-related counterexamples Helen and Erica described. In 2023, 49-year-old writer Emme Witt wrote a Business Insider article about her decision to begin sugar dating as a "42-year-old divorced mother of two" (Witt, 2023, para. 3). Witt did nod to how her age defies the popular narrative—she argued that the "typical" definition of a sugar baby is "a younger woman who dates wealthy, older men"—but, even so, she believed the men with whom she formed relationships appreciated her "worldliness" and "maturity."

While Erica and Helen demonstrated that sugar dating need not be rigidly bound by age, they did acknowledge how the "hot younger woman" narrative—a longstanding construct across advertising, film, television, and other visual media known for valuing youth and conventional beauty—instills pressure to combat physical manifestations of aging. For instance, Helen tempered her comments with the caveat that having more life experience could be advantageous "as long as you still look good." Erica talked about how she:

> Had to start getting Botox, which costs money. It costs money to get your nails done. And it costs money to do all those things. So maybe at the end of the day, it's all moot because I'm maybe spending $2,000 a month.

Erica's reflections on her expenditures demonstrated how conforming to the "hot younger woman" narrative is, ultimately, risky in that doing so both upholds the narrative and reduces women's opportunities to achieve the financial security that may have inspired them to start sugar dating in the first place.

6.3. The "Withholding Sex Worker" Narrative

A key benefit of sugar dating is that people clearly articulate their exact desires and expectations. The resultant tension is that these conversations draw clear connections between intimacy and economic exchange. Therefore, another popular narrative characterizes women's participation in sugar dating as sex work. The *Pretty Woman* motif reaffirms this, and it is also evident in both the content and placement of other media texts. Baragona (2018), writing about women who sugar date for Business Insider, uses the terms "profession," "career," and "work." An article for *The Independent* features a headline about "sugar baby work" (Oppenheim, 2018). Another headline, this time for BuzzFeed (Dobrogosz, 2021) offers a "glimpse into the world of transactional dating." A Refinery29 article, categorized as part of the website's "Work & Money" vertical, appears to conceptualize the phenomenon as one that generates income for women (Chou, 2017). Scholars (Di Cicco & Vandevenne, 2023) have even assumed this labor framing, referring to sugar dating as an occupation, Seeking as a sexual gig work platform (Rand & Stegeman, 2023), and women's participation as a work role. Together, these examples discursively position sugar dating as sex work.

While some participants supported the worker framing, others complicated it. For Cam, who was seeing sugar partners while also in a long-term, non-sugar dating romantic relationship, categorizing sugar dating as work was both a relational decision and a necessary boundary because "my partner needs to see it as sex work." Yvette found the worker framing appropriate, though her reasoning differed from what Cam

described in that she focused on what occurred within the context of her sugar relationships. She argued: "Anything that falls under the category of getting any type of financial assistance in exchange for either your body or your emotions is some type of sex-esque labor." Yvette was also a dominatrix. Therefore, depending on the relationship, she said sugar dating sometimes felt like an extension of that erotic labor dynamic. Bridget also named exchange as a reason to define sugar dating as a "mild" form of sex work. However, she felt the boundaries were blurry:

> In the sense that I am dating these people, I am hearing about their lives, and I am spending time with them and getting to know them or like them. It's like non-monogamous dating. I just have several boyfriends. I don't have clients

Autumn, similarly, said:

> I think sugar dating is really what you make it. Yeah, there are some people who treat it more like light escorting on both sides. But I think there are also relationships where it just feels like you're dating or like boyfriend/girlfriend, but they happen to provide more financial support. And I think if you just described the situation to people, but you didn't use those terms, they would be a lot more receptive to it. So yeah, it's just that actual exchanging of cash that I think people find disconcerting.

Others distinguished between labor and employment, arguing that, although sugar dating is not a job, it does call women to perform aesthetic and emotional labor. While Nadine said, "I don't think it's really appropriate for someone to say oh, this is what I do for a living," she described sugar dating as "kind of a hustle" and said that there are "so many different directions that this gig can go towards." Rochelle concurred, explaining that she did not "see it [sugar dating] as a job. I see it as a side hustle, like an additional source of income." Even where participants did not explicitly declare whether they thought of sugar dating as work, implicit references to labor were evident in their descriptions of how they felt about the energy demands of sugar dating. Reese said she found sugar dating enjoyable but tiring: "There's a lot of time I have to dedicate to the men that I see, especially when I'm emotionally invested, of course, because that's what relationships are." She wanted a break from the men she dated so that she could "hang out with my girls and have girl time, maybe knit together or something….Literally nothing crazy. No drinking. No drugs. Just chill." Finally, although Erica said she considered sugar dating a relief from the typical day-to-day stress of her personal and professional obligations, she noted this feeling came only after realizing that a single, "consistent" partner would be more ideal for her than the "exhaustion" that came with seeing multiple men simultaneously.

Despite the tendency among several participants to support or offer a somewhat amended take on the worker narrative, a few women drew on notions of authenticity to refute this framing. Helen said that her participation in sugar dating was "not transactional" because "you really have a genuine relationship with the person on the other end." Similarly, for Lydia, sugar dating was "literally comparable to regular dating." She participated because she did not "have the emotional bandwidth to commit to a serious relationship in terms of expectations." As such, Lydia considered sugar dating "a friends with benefits with extra benefits." Her use of "friends with benefits," a label commonly attached to casual sexual relationships, links the sex worker narrative with how popular press articles frame women's sexual desire and agency in sugar dating. Often, these articles present desire and pleasure as feelings that are divorced from or even risky for women who sugar date. Meley (2022) clarifies that her informant's sugar relationships "never involves sex."

Rosman's (2018) conversation with Brandon Wade for *The New York Times* conflates women's sexual agency with power. Wade, the founder and CEO of Seeking, argued that "the moment you give sex, you have lost all your power." These examples underscore a belief that women who sugar date have sexual agency only to the extent that they exude sexual desire but do not actually act on it, as having sex with their sugar dating partners would signal forfeiture of both safety and power.

While other research (Metcalfe et al., 2023) has concurred with this characterization of sex in sugar dating as something that men expect and women might concede to performing, my participants complicated this understanding of women's sexual desire. A few were, indeed, sugar dating primarily for material benefits—and they did not always want to have sex with their sugar partners. Conversely, several participants attributed their involvement to their desire for intimacy and sex. Erica described how she derived immense sexual pleasure from sugar dating: "I feel like I came at sugar dating as way more of an empowered thing in that I want the sex. I want the orgasms, but I know specifically what type of sex I want." Ivy said she enjoyed having sex with sugar partners and even felt that sugar dating structured her broader epistemological understandings of romance and sexuality, such that she saw little distinction between her sugar dating and traditional dating practices. The fluidity with which Lydia approached dating paralleled Ivy's perspective. She believed women's sexuality was deeply compatible with sugar dating, as the mutually beneficial premise could empower women to be very agentic in articulating and seeking fulfillment of their exact sexual desires. Yvette, who said she was searching for a man who was "a little more open sexually, like experimental, interested in trying with other people," also felt that sugar dating afforded her sexual confidence and freedom.

To be sure, participants agreed with the press articles' assertions that women who sugar date must worry about their physical safety. Several recommended that women who use platforms to sugar date should consider uploading photos that are not already available online, as nefarious actors could use artificial intelligence or reverse-image search tools to locate their personal information. Cam also spoke about the need to "protect yourself" during the initial stages of meeting a sugar partner and continue to uphold firm boundaries even as a relationship matures. Cam then added that women in precarious financial situations might seek sugar relationships despite having limited prior knowledge and experience because they feel they have "no other options." Therefore, stressing the potential risks of sugar dating is important. In fact, several participants agreed with Cam's comment that anyone who "sugar dated while desperate" could sacrifice her sexual agency and subject herself to exploitation. However, they also noted that all dating practices present safety concerns that women must navigate when they pursue romantic or sexual relationships. Provided women are careful about why, where, and with whom they sugar date, as my participants' accounts make clear, sugar relationships could prove to be sexually liberating and rewarding.

7. Conclusion

Media and popular culture help us make sense of sugar dating and other complex social phenomena. However, the narratives they produce risk flattening people's nuanced experiences and perspectives. As evidenced by my analysis of popular press articles and my interview data, the "hot younger woman" and "withholding sex worker" narratives analyzed in this article are not without merit. For some, these narratives resonated with how they understood their identities, sexualities, and sexual agency in relation to sugar dating. For others, though, the narratives failed to capture the ways sugar dating had fulfilled their sexual desires and given them confidence in their appearances. In characterizing women's participation in sugar dating as a youthful,

entrepreneurial endeavor, the popular media narratives miss opportunities to tease out how sugar dating both transgresses and reifies patriarchal structures by offering women ways to simultaneously seek pleasure and transcend the boundaries of social class. Thus, situating sugar dating in feminist scholarship on gender, media, and sexuality is important in that it allows us to engage deeply with how identity and sexuality figure into women's embodied realities. This is a crucial step forward in elevating the voices of those who participate in sugar dating and other romantic and sexual practices.

The media and popular culture spotlight on sugar dating comes amidst a growing movement among tech policymakers since the 2018 enactment of the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act—two laws meant to limit use of online platforms for illegal sex trafficking—to deplatform sex work (Blunt & Wolf, 2020), sexual activity, and sexual content more broadly (Are, 2021; Bronstein, 2021; Garwood-Cross et al., 2024). While the internet affords visibility to women who sugar date, this heightened attention also invites scrutiny—such as Google Play Store's decision to ban sugar dating apps (Porter, 2021) and Meta's recent replacement of search results for #sugarbaby on Instagram and Facebook with a warning label titled "child sexual abuse is illegal." Thus, given these tensions, it is important to square narrativizations of identity and sexuality in sugar dating with the perspectives and thought processes that color women's participation.

Crucially, the results of this study are not meant to critique sex work or create distance between sugar dating and sex work. Rather, they exist to give sugar daters and non-sugar daters alike a more detailed understanding of how women experience this phenomenon—which could shape how platform developers and tech regulators structure their policy decisions. With that in mind, future research should continue exploring how women navigate the complex landscape of digital platforms as they sugar date, and how women worldwide understand their identities, sexualities, and sexual agency in these spaces.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Are, C. (2021). The shadowban cycle: An autoethnography of pole dancing, nudity and censorship on Instagram. *Feminist Media Studies*, *22*(8), 2002–2019. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1928259

Attwood, F. (2004). Pornography and objectification. *Feminist Media Studies*, *4*(1), 7–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770410001674617

Attwood, F. (2011). Through the looking glass? Sexual agency and subjectification online. In R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *New femininities* (pp. 203–214). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bansinath, B. (2024). *The cult of the provider man: Meet the influencers who urge their followers to marry rich*. The Cut. https://www.thecut.com/article/tiktok-dating-influencers-marry-rich.html

Baragona, L. (2018, March 15). *9 things you're probably getting wrong about "sugar babies."* Business Insider. https://www.insider.com/sugar-baby-myths-2018-3

Berman, J. (2018). *'Pretty Woman' with a twist—A 'sugar baby' who dates older men to pay for college.* MarketWatch. https://www.marketwatch.com/story/new-comedy-explores-the-challenges-and-benefits-of-working-as-a-sugar-baby-to-pay-for-college-2018-03-19

Blunt, A., & Wolf, D. (2020). Erased: The impact of FOSTA-SESTA and the removal of backpage on sex workers. *Anti-Trafficking Review*, *14*, 117–121. https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201220148

Bronstein, C. (2021). Deplatforming sexual speech in the age of FOSTA/SESTA. *Porn Studies*, *8*(4), 367–380. https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2021.1993972

Chou, J. (2017). *I'm a sugar baby—& this is how much I get paid to date*. Refinery29. https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/sugar-baby-no-sex-personal-experience

Clement, E. A. (2006). *Love for sale: Courting, treating, and prostitution in New York City, 1900–1945*. University of North Carolina Press.

Coates, H. (2024). *At 56, Julia Roberts continues to serve excellent beauty looks*. Vogue World Paris. https://www.vogue.co.uk/beauty/article/julia-roberts-beauty-looks

Cowan, G., & Dunn, K. F. (1994). What themes in pornography lead to perceptions of the degradation of women? *The Journal of Sex Research*, *31*(1), 11–21.

Di Cicco, M., & Vandevenne, E. (2023). Femininity as a gig? An interface analysis of childcare and sugar dating platforms. *AG AboutGender*, *12*(23), 98–139. https://doi.org/10.15167/2279-5057/AG2023.12.23.2115

Dobrogosz, H. (2021). *21 sugar baby confessions that'll give you a glimpse into the world of transactional dating*. BuzzFeed. https://www.buzzfeed.com/hannahdobro/sugar-baby-confessions-stories-gd

Dworkin, A. (1981). *Pornography: Men possessing women*. Putnam.

Ellis, L. D., Patterson, C. L., & Walters, A. S. (2023). "Becoming a sugar baby will change your life. Let's talk about how": Sugar dating advice on Tumblr. *Sexuality & Culture*, *27*, 484–516. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-022-10024-4

Garwood-Cross, L., Light, B., Cooper-Ryan, A. M., & Vasilica, C. (2024). Sex education against the algorithm: The algorithmically enforced deplatforming of YouTube sex edutainment. *Journal of Gender Studies*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2374752

Gill, R. (2003). From sexual objectification to sexual subjectification: The resexualization of women's bodies in the media. *Feminist Media Studies*, *3*(1), 100–106.

Gill, R. (2008). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *10*(2), 147–166. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898

Gill, R. (2009). Mediated intimacy and postfeminism: A discourse analytic examination of sex and relationships advice in a women's magazine. *Discourse & Communication*, *3*(4), 345–369. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481309343870

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Aldine Transaction.

Gunnarsson, L. (2024). The allure of transactional intimacy in sugar dating. *Sociological Perspectives*, *67*(1/3), 25–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/07311214231191771

Gunnarsson, L., & Strid, S. (2023). Varieties of sugar dating in Sweden: Content, compensation, motivations. *Social Problems*, *70*(4), 1044–1062. https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spab063

Harvey, L., & Gill, R. (2010). "Spicing it up": Sexual entrepreneurship and *The Sex Inspectors*. In R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity* (pp. 52–67). Palgrave Macmillan.

Hatfield, E., & Rapson, R. L. (1993). Historical and cross-cultural perspectives on passionate love and sexual desire. *Annual Review of Sex Research*, *4*(1), 67–97.

Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism.* Polity.

Johnson, E. (2007). *Dreaming of a mail-order husband: Russian-American internet romance.* Duke University Press.

Jones, A. (2014, September 9). 'Daddies Date Babies' asks: Who's your sugar daddy? *Newsweek.* https://www.newsweek.com/daddies-date-babies-asks-whos-your-sugar-daddy-269194

Loudenback, T. (2017). *Millions of college students are so terrified of loans they're turning to 'sugar daddies' for help paying for school.* Yahoo! Finance. https://finance.yahoo.com/news/millions-college-students-terrified-loans-153000311.html

MacKinnon, C. (1989). Sexuality, pornography, and method: Pleasure under patriarchy. *Ethics, 99*(2), 314–346.

McKay, H. (2011, June 23). Is "sugar daddying" prostitution, or just extreme gifting? *Fox News.* https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/is-sugar-daddying-prostitution-or-just-extreme-gifting

McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture, and social change.* Sage.

Meley, C. (2022). *Inside the sugar baby school of TikTok.* Refinery29. https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2021/03/10342855/sugar-baby-tips-tiktok

Metcalfe, K. B., Cormier, L. A., Lacroix, P. J., & O'Sullivan, L. F. (2023). "I was worshipped and in control": Sugar arrangements involving transactional sex from the perspective of both sugar babies and sugar benefactors. *Journal of Sex* Research, *61*(7), 1013–1025. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2023.2293888

Mixon, F. G. (2019). Sugar daddy u: Human capital investment and the university-based supply of 'romantic arrangements.' *Applied Economics, 51*(9), 956–971. https://doi.org/10.1080/00036846.2018.1524129

Motyl, J. (2013). Trading sex for college tuition: How sugar daddy dating sites may be sugar coating prostitution. *Pennsylvania State University Law Review, 117*(3), 927–957.

Mulvey, L. (1988). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. In C. Penley (Ed.), *Feminism and film theory* (pp. 57–68). Routledge.

Nayar, K. I. (2017). Sweetening the deal: Dating for compensation in the digital age. *Journal of Gender Studies, 26*(3), 335–346. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1273101

Nussbaum, M. (2007). Feminism, virtue, and objectification. In R. Halwani (Ed.), *Sex and ethics: Essays on sexuality, virtue, and the good life.* Palgrave MacMillan.

Oppenheim, M. (2018, December 26). Student who did sugar baby work reveals dark side of university life: "He said you look ripe for breeding." *The Independent.* https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/sugar-baby-daddy-student-university-seeking-arrangement-pay-rent-sex-a8667096.html

Ouellette, L. (1999). Inventing the Cosmo Girl: Class identity and girl-style American dreams. *Media, Culture & Society, 21*(3), 359–383. https://doi.org/10.1177/016344399021003004

Peiss, K. (1986). *Cheap amusements: Working women and leisure in turn-of-the-century New York.* Temple University Press.

Pitcher, K. C. (2006). The staging of agency in *Girls Gone Wild. Critical Studies in Media Communication, 23*(3), 200–218. https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180600800759

Porter, J. (2021). *Google is kicking "sugar dating" apps out of the Play Store.* The Verge. https://www.theverge.com/2021/7/29/22599561/google-play-store-sugar-daddy-apps-dormant-developer-accounts-policy-change

Radner, H. (1995). *Shopping around: Feminine culture and the pursuit of pleasure.* Routledge.

Rand, H. M., & Stegeman, H. M. (2023). Navigating and resisting platform affordances: Online sex work as digital labor. *Gender, Work, & Organization, 30*(6), 2102–2118. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13047

Recio, R. P. (2022a). Blurred lines: Technologies of heterosexual coercion in "sugar dating." *Feminism & Psychology, 32*(1), 44–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535211030749

Recio, R. P. (2022b). "I have bills to pay!": Sugar dating in British higher education institutions. *Gender and Education*, *34*(5), 545–560. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1971161

Rosman, K. (2018, October 15). A "sugar date" gone sour. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/style/sugar-dating-seeking-arrangement.html

Satran, R. (2023, December 22). Stay-at-home girlfriends are having a moment. *The Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/style/fashion/stay-at-home-girlfriends-tiktok-instagram-sahg-b7c20c6a

Scull, M. T. (2020). "It's its own thing": A typology of interpersonal sugar relationship scripts. *Sociological Perspectives*, *63*(1), 135–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121419875115

Scull, M. T. (2022). From seeking financialships to satisfying curiosity: Women's motivations for entering sugar relationships. *Sexuality & Culture*, *26*(1), 222–248. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-021-09888-9

Seeking. (2024). *Our story*. https://www.seeking.com/our-story

Seven, S. (2024). *Sprinkle sprinkle: How to date a provider and avoid a dusty*. Amazon Digital Services.

Sharp, E. A., & Keyton, K. (2016). Caught in a bad romance? The negative effect of normative dating and marital ideologies on women's bodies. *Sex Roles*, *75*(1/2), 15–27. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-016-0610-5

Simmons, C. (2024). *"High value" dating and the female pick-up artists exchanging their economic freedom for husbands*. Cosmopolitan. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/love-sex/relationships/a60822013/high-value-dating-female-pick-up-artists

Smiley, L. (2017, April 8). *"I'm rich. You're hot." The cold mathematics of sugar daddy dating*. San Francisco Magazine. https://www.sfgate.com/living/article/I-m-rich-You-re-hot-The-cold-mathematics-of-6133072.php

Smith, E. W. (2024). *What happens to the stay-at-home girlfriend after a breakup?* Cosmopolitan. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a60130675/stay-at-home-girlfriend-tik-tok-trend-breakups

Tincknell, E. (2011). Scourging the abject body: The television make-over show and the reconstruction of femininity under neoliberalism. In R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism, and identity* (pp. 83–95). Palgrave Macmillan.

Upadhyay, S. (2021). Sugaring: Understanding the world of sugar daddies and sugar babies. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *58*(6), 775–784. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2020.1867700

Wells, J. (2013). *What rich men want (and don't want) in a woman*. CNBC. https://www.cnbc.com/2013/11/06/what-do-rich-men-want-in-a-woman-sugardaddyfor-me-survey-gives-answers.html

Witt, E. (2023, August 10). I was a 42-year-old sugar baby who asked for $500 per date. I sought sexual fulfillment after my divorce and I was happy to be spoiled, too. *Business Insider*. https://www.businessinsider.com/sugar-baby-age-42-sexual-fulfillment-wake-divorce-2023-8

Zelizer, V. (2005). *The purchase of intimacy*. Princeton University Press.

About the Authors

Megan Sawey (MS, Cornell University) is a lecturer and PhD candidate in the Department of Communication at Cornell University. Her research interests include the social meaning of money in the platform economy, personal relationships and technology, identity, feminist media, and platform governance. Her research has appeared in peer-reviewed outlets, such as *Social Media + Society*, *Media and Communication*, and the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Open Access Journal

Intimate Yet Exploitative: Representations of Gender-Based Violence in Platformed True Crime Narratives

Christine Linke and **Lisa Brune**

Faculty of Architecture and Design, Wismar University of Applied Sciences, Germany

Correspondence: Christine Linke (christine.linke@hs-wismar.de)

Abstract

True crime is a highly controversial yet successful entertainment genre that is widely available on streaming, video, and podcast platforms. The content often includes visual depictions of victims and survivors of gender-based violence, as well as depictions of the acts of violence themselves, such as surveillance footage, police or court videos, or photographs. Additionally, producers and account holders on social media platforms frequently use stereotypical, clichéd, and even eroticized representations of violence. True crime formats rarely address neither the structural causes and backgrounds which lead to crimes, nor the impact on victims, survivors, and their relatives. To address these issues, we apply audio-visual content analysis, focusing on the YouTube channel of Bailey Sarian and her content combination of narrating true crime stories while doing her makeup. Drawing on communication and media studies, we explore the dual tenor of subversive-empowering versus voyeuristic-exploitative representations in the context of narratives of gender-based violence. Our analysis highlights that the unreflective and voyeuristic tone of commercialized true crime narratives can lead to the unethical exploitation of real events and the people affected. The Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series exemplifies a dual approach, blending affective storytelling, which fosters viewer intimacy, with sensationalistic portrayals that often simplify and stigmatize those involved in criminal cases. Although some empowering and informative voices regarding gender-based violence exist online, they are frequently overshadowed by the sensationalism typical of commercial true crime. The series underscores a tension between intimate engagement and ethical responsibility, shaped by platform-driven pressures that prioritize engagement over quality. Our findings emphasize the need for platforms to actively enable nuanced, balanced portrayals that foster a more informed and empathetic media environment.

Keywords

affective storytelling; audio-visual content analysis; Bailey Sarian; gender-based violence; platform-culture; true crime; YouTube

1. Introduction

The true crime genre has become a commercially successful yet highly controversial area of entertainment, extensively available across various media platforms, including streaming services, video channels, and podcasts. True crime content typically involves detailed depictions of real-life crimes, featuring visual elements such as surveillance footage, police videos, and court recordings. Covering a range of criminal activities, including murder, kidnapping, and fraud, these productions aim to provide comprehensive insights into the circumstances surrounding crimes and the backgrounds of those involved. True crime formats are a hybrid of non-fictional formats, which are based on the reproduction of reality, and fictional formats like re-enacted scenes (Hobbs & Hoffman, 2022; Lemuth, 2017). The non-fictional, informative part—such as the inclusion of crime scenes, people involved, or experts in a specialist field—creates a feeling of authenticity among viewers. A fictional component of true crime often provides an additional entertainment factor.

Despite its popularity, true crime faces significant criticism from both civil society and the academic community. Critics argue that true crime content fosters sensationalism and an unhealthy fascination with violence, often exploiting the suffering of victims and survivors (Cavender et al., 1999). The genre is also criticized for emphasizing dramatic and eroticized representations of violence rather than addressing the structural causes of crime (e.g., Chan, 2020). These portrayals can reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to a culture that trivializes and normalizes violence, particularly gender-based violence.

This study focuses on the hybridization of true crime narratives with other entertainment formats and examines how these combinations affect the representation of gender-based violence. Specifically, it analyzes Bailey Sarian's Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series on YouTube, which uniquely blends true crime storytelling with makeup application. By examining the channel, this study aims to understand whether these representations serve a subversive and empowering purpose or perpetuate voyeuristic narratives. Overall, the primary objectives of this study are to analyze the representation of gender-based violence in Bailey Sarian's series and to explore the ethical implications of commercializing true crime narratives involving gender-based violence.

In pursuit of this objective, we employ an audio-visual content analysis approach as well as narrative analysis. A sample of videos from Bailey Sarian's series over a span of four years is selected to illustrate the evolution of her content and its impact. This methodology allows for a detailed examination of the storytelling techniques, audience engagement strategies, and commercial elements of her videos. The true crime genre, while immensely popular, raises important ethical and societal questions, particularly regarding the portrayal of gender-based violence. By examining Bailey Sarian's Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on the ethical representation of crime in media and its implications for societal attitudes towards violence and justice.

The manuscript is structured as follows: First, we provide an overview of research on the true crime genre and the representation of gender-based violence in media. We then describe the audio-visual analysis approach, including the selection criteria for the sample videos. Section 4 presents the findings of our analysis and focuses on the audio-visual content, narrative techniques, and the ambivalent nature of true crime representations in Bailey Sarian's videos. Following this, we discuss the findings in relation to the hybrid true crime genre, the ethical implications, and the potential for empowering versus exploitative

content. Finally, we summarize the key findings, address implications for media producers, platforms, and audiences, and provide suggestions for future research.

2. True Crime, Affect, and Hybrid Platform Media

2.1. True Crime Genre From a Communication and Media Studies Perspective

True crime is a media genre that focuses on real crimes and criminal cases, presented through various formats such as books, films, documentaries, podcasts, and other media forms (e.g., Hobbs & Hoffman, 2022; Lemuth, 2017). The content covers a wide range of crimes, including murder, kidnapping, fraud, and other offenses. True crime often provides a more detailed account of the circumstances leading to a crime and the backgrounds of the perpetrators than other informational formats. Typically, these productions delve into investigations and court proceedings related to the crime, offering insights into the work of criminal investigators, journalists, and the systematic examination of crimes. The term "true crime" gained popularity following the review of Truman Capote's (1966) non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood*, which meticulously reconstructed the 1959 murders of a farmer's family in Kansas, creating a novel genre that straddles reportage and narrative writing. The book, often seen as the first modern true crime narrative, set a precedent for how random, senseless violence haunts everyday spaces and perceptions (Linnemann, 2015). True crime media, by placing the horrific within familiar settings, can potentially shape public views on violence, fostering suspect identities and amplifying social insecurities.

There is no universal definition of true crime, as the term now encompasses a variety of multi-media forms and modes, including the highly successful podcast formats. True crime has been a popular TV genre for years, blending entertainment and informational aspects, thus functioning as a hybrid genre between traditional programming categories of information and entertainment (Hobbs & Hoffman, 2022). True crime TV formats are documentaries that address crime and criminality, often depicting real events and shedding light on the backgrounds of crimes, evidence, and investigations. Key features of this genre include:

- Many true crime formats use reenacted, sometimes dramatized, scenes to reconstruct crimes, making them more comprehensible for viewers.
- These formats typically feature interviews with individuals connected to the crime, such as victims, relatives, investigators, lawyers, and witnesses.
- True crime shows often emphasize the detective work involved in solving the case, showcasing how investigators resolved the crime.
- Some formats provide insights into criminal psychology, exploring how perpetrators think and act.
- True crime formats can be highly emotional, as they often deal with extreme crimes and their impact on victims and their families.

Overall, true crime shows have gained immense popularity due to their blend of real crimes, investigative work, and human stories. True crime media plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions of crime, often blurring the line between fact and fiction. Studies reveal that while these narratives are based on real events, they portray a narrow, stylized view of homicide, diverging significantly from typical crime data (Durham et al., 1995). Recent research highlights how true crime media often blend sensationalism with commercial motives, shaping narratives to maximize audience engagement. This commercial emphasis is said to prioritize shock

and drama, which can distort public understanding of crime and exemplify broader trends of commodifying crime stories for profitability (Cornett, 2024).

2.2. Criticism and Concerns Regarding the True Crime Genre From Civil Society and Academia

There is criticism of the true crime genre from both civil society and academic perspectives, as some argue that it promotes sensationalism and an unhealthy interest in violence. In terms of youth protection, Linke (2023) has been collecting central aspects for the debate in Germany, which can be considered beyond this scope: True crime formats can display explicit or gruesome images or details about crimes that may be excessively frightening and therefore inappropriate or even harmful to children or adolescents. They also may focus on sensationalism by presenting dramatized portrayals of crime and violence. This can glamorize violence, trivialize the suffering and perspectives of victims and survivors, and reduce empathy for them. When true crime shows depict crimes without the necessary historical or cultural context, this can lead to a distorted perception of events and the real world, and an inappropriate portrayal of crimes and the individuals involved. By repeatedly publicizing stories and images, true crime programs can infringe upon the privacy and emotional well-being of crime victims and survivors, particularly when their stories are shared without their consent or without appropriate sensitivity. Regarding commercialization and unrealistic representation of criminal cases, we have the psychopathic perpetrator with fantasies of omnipotence on the one hand, and the compliant, helpless, and mostly female and white victim on the other. This style is often characterized by a tear-jerking basic tone with reenacted scenes that are primarily aimed at fear, horror, and even voyeurism.

Furthermore, there is evidence for disproportional media attention and unequal representation of intersectional categories, especially regarding race and gender (e.g., the so-called "missing white woman syndrome"; Slakoff & Duran, 2023). Issues such as intimate partner violence, sexual offenses, and gender-based violence are often central to true crime shows, addressing the particularly vulnerable area of personal relationships. One of the few international studies on true crime, conducted in the late 1990s, already highlighted how true crime manifests gender stereotypes (Cavender et al., 1999). This raises questions about long-term effects and cultivation: For instance, can true crime increase fear of crime, especially among girls and women? Can crimes in intimate relationships become normalized and violent crimes sensationalized? To what extent do viewers maintain a sense of reality? These questions have been posed by media researchers and youth protectors for years. However, they remain largely unanswered for true crime. Unfortunately, the state of research is still insufficient.

2.3. Media Representation of Gender-Based Violence and Specifics of the True Crime Genre

Gender-based violence refers to violence committed against an individual based on their gender. This violence can be physical, emotional, or psychological and may take many forms, including domestic violence, sexual violence, stalking, sexual harassment, and discrimination. As defined by the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe, gender-based violence is "violence directed against a person because of their biological or social gender" (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 3), highlighting its structural nature and impact. While gender-based violence predominantly affects women and girls, men, boys, and non-binary individuals can also be victims. Often, gender-based violence exists within a broader culture of oppression and discrimination, which reinforces gendered power imbalances. It is thus recognized as a serious human rights

issue that requires proactive efforts to combat and prevent it, including legal measures, survivor support, and public awareness initiatives to address its causes and impacts.

The media portrayal of gender-based violence is crucial, as it can influence public understanding in both positive and negative ways. Effective media coverage can increase awareness about the scope and consequences of gender-based violence, encourage survivors to share their experiences, and prompt public debate. It can even catalyze political and legislative action to address the issue. However, there is a risk that media portrayals will trivialize or sensationalize gender-based violence. Especially in the depiction of sexual violence, media producers sometimes risk presenting it as entertainment or eroticized content rather than as a serious crime (Linke & Kasdorf, 2023). This can contribute to a societal attitude that normalizes or justifies violence against women and girls, as recent civil society discussions and scientific findings underscore.

True crime formats specifically play a significant role in shaping societal issues within the media. The production, reception, and framing of media content are part of complex processes that can make social contexts visible or invisible (Linke & Prommer, 2021; Prommer & Linke, 2019). Audiovisual media, and true crime in particular, have the capacity to either address or overlook the structural roots of violence and to highlight or obscure categories of structural difference such as gender, ethnicity, race, social origin, disability, sexual orientation, or age (Thiele, 2019; Thomas, 2019). The high degree of realism typical of true crime gives these depictions a unique status. International research emphasizes the importance of this realism and the global relevance of violence, especially in connection to gender relations and structural inequalities (e.g., Kaya, 2019; Nettleton, 2011). Despite the complexity of gender-based violence, the considerable public interest in true crime formats reflects a societal desire to engage with these issues. However, understanding gender-based, domestic, and intimate partner violence requires a nuanced approach that considers the historical and behavioral patterns of violent relationships, challenging heteronormative ideas of masculinity and femininity that often underpin violent relationship dynamics (Degele, 2005).

Recent studies have shown that media portrayals frequently fail to critically engage with these patterns, instead often reinforcing them by depicting individuals through stereotypes (Thiele, 2015) and situating gender-based violence within narrow relationship narratives (Linke & Kasdorf, 2023). Of particular concern is the representation of violence in contexts of systemic inequality and resulting discrimination and oppression. A study of Germany's eight main television channels during prime time in 2020 found that gender-based violence was depicted in one-third of all programs (Linke & Kasdorf, 2023). Moreover, the study examined the degree to which victims' perspectives were included in these depictions, revealing that in 51% of cases ($n = 149$), the victim's perspective was either absent or only minimally included. Only 8% ($n = 22$) of cases offered a nuanced portrayal of gender-based violence from the victim's viewpoint. Conversely, some violent acts were not clearly identified as violence, and thus no victim perspective was provided (12%, $n = 36$). These findings illustrate the need for media to adopt a sensitive approach to representing gender-based violence accurately.

For media producers, the responsible portrayal of gender-based violence is crucial to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes and structural inequalities rooted in societal acceptance of unequal gender roles. True crime formats, when rigorously researched, can raise awareness and destigmatize survivors by offering diverse perspectives. However, many programs fail to meet this standard, often focusing on sensational aspects, such as reenactments or crime scene footage, without sufficient investigative context. This can

result in media exploitation rather than adherence to journalistic principles, trivializing the complex patterns of violence and their broader societal impacts (Caple, 2018).

The term gender-based violence underscores that violence committed due to gender is not only a personal tragedy but also a societal failure. In addressing this violence, the language used in media plays a vital role in shaping public perception and understanding. For example, "femicide" emphasizes the systemic, misogynistic elements of gendered violence, underscoring its societal dimensions (Meltzer, 2021, 2022). Sensitive and accurate language is essential to convey the specific nature and gravity of gender-based violence, distinguishing it from other forms of violence, and ensuring that its structural dimensions are recognized. Traditional audiovisual media often struggle to represent gender-based violence thoughtfully. Sensationalist portrayals that prioritize dramatization over depth can trivialize and normalize such violence, failing to capture the complex realities of victims' experiences and missing opportunities for thoughtful, respectful representation. The voices and perspectives of victims are frequently overshadowed by spectacle, reducing intricate human experiences to mere visuals.

In true crime narratives, attention often focuses more on the perpetrator and the details of their crimes than on the victim's experience. This focus risks marginalizing victims' suffering and perspectives. It is critical for such narratives to center victims' stories, provide them agency, and highlight their experiences to foster a more empathetic and thorough understanding of gender-based violence's impact (Linke & Kasdorf, 2023). True crime formats rarely include references to prevention, support, or advice for those affected by gender-based violence, which represents a substantial shortcoming. The omission of practical resources fails viewers who might be in similar situations or know someone who is. Including prevention and support information could be instrumental in raising awareness and offering real assistance, as argued by Linke and Kasdorf (2023).

The portrayal of intimate partner violence in true crime shows can be an essential means of raising awareness and informing the public about its effects on victims. It is vital, however, that these formats are carefully designed and presented to avoid glorifying or trivializing violence against women. Reviews show that many programs fail to offer a nuanced perspective on violence patterns and their emergence in relationships, focusing instead on the violent act itself and the stereotypical categorization of those involved (Linke & Kasdorf, 2023). Reenactments, crime scene footage, or interviews with witnesses or acquaintances often emphasize the horror of the acts without a thorough investigation, ultimately serving as media exploitation of available material rather than adhering to the documentary and journalistic principle of newsworthiness (Caple, 2018; Cornett, 2024). Thus, it remains crucial for media producers to portray gender-based violence with care and responsibility to reflect its true impact. Sensationalist portrayals that rely on stereotypes or one-dimensional depictions can reinforce the structural causes of gender-based violence embedded in societal acceptance of unequal gender roles. True crime formats that are rigorously researched and offer diverse perspectives can play a pivotal role in increasing public understanding, destigmatizing survivors, and contributing to efforts to combat and prevent gender-based violence (Murley, 2019).

2.4. Self-Representation, Content Creation, and Ethics on Platformed Media

Contemporary research highlights the complex and multifaceted processes through which online creators cultivate intimacy, navigate audience expectations, and engage in various forms of labor to sustain their

visibility and connection with followers. Marwick (2015) notes that the rise of social media allows niche personalities to cultivate large followings, but without the financial security traditionally associated with celebrity. This shift places heightened emotional and relational demands on creators, whose work is frequently undervalued and financially unrewarding. Raun (2018) expands on this by proposing the concept of "subcultural microcelebrity" to explore how creators, through affective labor, perform authenticity, accessibility, and connectedness, all of which are foundational to audience relationships on social media. This performative intimacy serves as a form of social capital, offering creators pathways to monetization, recognition, and advocacy, though often at a personal cost.

Pelttari (2022) provides further insight into the communicative strategies used by Spanish YouTubers to navigate sensitive topics. Through affective narratives characterized by self-disclosure, explicit emotion, and stance-taking, these creators engage audiences by constructing a "stance-continuum," transitioning from self-oriented perspectives to broader, community-centered stances. This progressive positioning allows creators to serve as informal influencers within their digital communities, blending personal narratives with instructive content.

In the true crime fandom, as Gaynor (2023) observes, social media engagement fosters an environment where fans can collectively consume and discuss violent narratives. Rather than critically engaging with the ethical implications of true crime, fans often seek in-group validation and self-promotion within these spaces, gathering around crime content in ways that audiences are drawn to trauma and violence. Expanding on these dynamics, Glatt (2023) examines the "emotional" and "relational labor" required of content creators, highlighting the uneven challenges faced by marginalized creators, who are more susceptible to harassment and forced to navigate what she terms an "intimacy triple bind." These creators must balance visibility with self-protection, employing strategies like disengaging with negative commenters and creating private community spaces to reduce vulnerability.

Together, these studies underscore the ethical and emotional complexities of self-representation in platformed media, where the pursuit of visibility is intertwined with the risks of overexposure and the commodification of personal experiences. Furthermore, they contribute to a turn to affect and emotion in media and communication studies, emphasizing the ways in which media produce, communicate, and shape emotions and affects in audiences (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018). This perspective highlights the role of affect and emotion as driving forces in contemporary media, particularly as they intersect with structures of difference and power.

Given these issues, it is crucial for media producers to responsibly and sensitively portray gender-based violence to convey an accurate picture of its impacts. Superficial, stereotypical, and one-sided portrayals can perpetuate the structural causes of gender-based violence rooted in unequal gender roles and their acceptance. True crime formats that are well-researched and provide diverse perspectives can contribute to raising awareness, destigmatizing victims, and preventing gender-based violence. These studies underscore the nuanced and often challenging landscape of content creation within platformed media, particularly in genres like true crime, where the interplay between audience engagement, platform requirements, and ethical responsibilities is complex. This raises two pivotal questions for this research: How do true crime creators navigate these dynamics? And what strategies do they employ to meet platform demands while weighing against ethical considerations?

3. Method

3.1. Data Collection, Selection, and Sample Overview

In order to find answers to these two questions, we applied a qualitative approach to a media content analysis of true crime content on the most popular video platform, YouTube. The landscape of true crime on YouTube is populated with numerous creators who focus on true crime cases, each employing unique methods to attract and engage their audience. Among these creators, some adopt more spectacular approaches to increase their viewership and subscriber base. For instance, Stephanie Soo combines true crime narratives with mukbang (eating shows), while others incorporate ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) into their true crime content. For this study, we focus on one of the most popular true-crime series on YouTube, hosted by Los Angeles-based Bailey Sarian. Sarian's channel, which has been active since 2015, gained significant traction with her series Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday with over seven million subscribers as of today. The format involves Sarian applying makeup while narrating true crime stories. This unique combination has set her apart, leading to high viewership, with some videos reaching up to 26 million views and most ranging between three and eight million views. Videos are uploaded every few weeks, with the latest one, as noted at the time of this publication, dated October 28th, 2024.

As this analysis aims to understand her format, storytelling techniques, and the development of content creators' strategies over time, we decided to focus on Bailey Sarian exclusively and include a relevant time frame. Since the videos are relatively long (from 25 to 40 minutes) and we needed to include the entire content in order to analyze the narrative strategies in full, we decided to focus on a relatively small sample size: In this study, we analyzed five videos from Bailey Sarian's Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series over a span of four years. These videos were selected to illustrate the development of Sarian's content and provide insights into the true crime genre on YouTube. Their choice was based on their significance in showcasing changes in her presentation style, audience engagement, and the commercial aspects of her channel. For the list and summary of analyzed videos from Bailey Sarian's Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series, see Boxes 1–5.

Box 1. Video #1: "Chris Watts—2000 Page Discovery Murder, Mystery & Makeup | Bailey Sarian."

- Upload Date: January 15, 2019

- Views: 11,691,757 (dated on October 28, 2024)

- Likes: 256k (dated on October 28, 2024)

- Duration: 27 minutes 37 seconds

- Advertisements: 2 ads before the video

This video marked the beginning of Bailey Sarian's significant rise in popularity. It presents the case of Chris Watts, providing a detailed narrative while Sarian applies makeup.

Box 2. Video #2: "Genesee River Monster, Arthur Shawcross. One Of The Worst Killers. Mystery & Makeup GRWM Bailey Sarian."

- Upload Date: February 10, 2020

- Views: 5,197,677 (dated on October 28, 2024)

- Likes: 140k (dated on October 28, 2024)

- Duration: 24 minutes 46 seconds

- Advertisements: 2 ads before the video, affiliate links

This video features the story of Arthur Shawcross, also known as the Genesee River Monster. The format includes ads and affiliate links, indicating the beginning of Sarian's move towards more commercial content.

Box 3. Video #3: "Best Friends For Life ?? What Happened To Sarah Stern ? Mystery & Makeup Bailey Sarian."

- Upload Date: July 5, 2021

- Views: 8,210,672 (dated on October 28, 2024)

- Likes: 260k (dated on October 28, 2024)

- Duration: 39 minutes 36 seconds

- Advertisements: 2 ads before the video, sponsoring ad, affiliate links

This video discusses the case of Sarah Stern, highlighting the friendship dynamics and the crime involved. It includes multiple forms of ads, showing further commercialization of her content.

Box 4. Video #4: "The Suspish Sitter—Helen Patricia Moore | Mystery & Makeup—Bailey Sarian."

- Upload Date: October 24, 2022

- Views: 4,663,137 (dated on October 28, 2024))

- Likes: 137k (dated on October 28, 2024)

- Duration: 34 minutes 49 seconds

- Advertisements: 2 ads before the video, sponsoring ad, affiliate links

In this video, Sarian narrates the story of Helen Patricia Moore, with a focus on her suspicious activities as a babysitter. The structure includes various ads and sponsorships, maintaining her commercial strategy.

Box 5. Video #5: "A Sicko Serial Killer and NEVER CAUGHT ?!? Jack the Ripper pt 1 | Mystery & Makeup | Bailey Sarian."

- Upload Date: July 24, 2023

- Views: 3,008,856 (dated on October 28, 2024)

- Likes: 85k (dated on October 28, 2024)

- Duration: 49 minutes 18 seconds

- Advertisements: 2 ads before the video, sponsoring ad, affiliate links

This video delves into the infamous Jack the Ripper case, presented in a more subjective and engaging manner. It includes comprehensive advertising elements, reflecting the mature stage of Sarian's content development. Unusually, this story is split into two videos, which could lead to a higher re-engagement rate.

3.2. Audio-Visual Content Analysis

To systematically examine the narrative and stylistic elements of Bailey Sarian's Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series, this study employed a structured audio-visual content analysis following Mikos' approach (2023). First, a systematic deductive–inductive coding process was implemented, focusing on capturing a range of dimensions relevant to the true crime genre on YouTube. Specifically, the coding framework included categories for media genre conventions, stylistic devices, elements of representation, and aesthetic choices, as well as narrative structure. These categories allowed us to dissect the unique ways in which Sarian combines storytelling with performative aspects, such as makeup application, which is integral to her narrative style and engagement with audiences.

Two coders conducted the analysis to enhance reliability and reduce individual bias. To ensure methodological rigor and consistency in coding, communication and consensual coding techniques, as proposed by Kuckartz (2018), were utilized. This involved iterative discussions between the two coders to clarify coding categories, reach a consensus on ambiguous segments, and refine the coding framework throughout the analysis process. This collaborative approach to coding strengthened inter-coder reliability, ensuring that both coders maintained consistency in applying codes across the dataset and validating the findings.

The analysis further involved steps of analytic coding, which moved beyond descriptive categorization to develop theoretical insights and explore deeper conceptual connections within the content. Analytic coding allowed the coders to capture the interplay between visual and verbal elements in Sarian's videos, identifying how these aspects converge to construct a cohesive narrative. For instance, her use of pacing, voice modulation, and camera focus contributes to creating an immersive atmosphere, while her verbal cues guide viewers' emotional responses to the content. This dual approach—integrating both deductive and inductive coding phases—ensured a comprehensive analysis, capturing both expected and emergent themes in the data.

In sum, this combination of systematic deductive–inductive coding, collaboration between two coders for reliability, and analytic coding for theoretical depth provided a robust framework to unpack the distinctive

features of Sarian's true crime series. This methodology enabled us to capture the intricacies of her storytelling approach, highlighting how genre conventions, narrative strategies, and aesthetic choices intersect.

4. Findings

4.1. Structure and Storytelling Techniques

The Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series by Bailey Sarian is a hybrid format that blends well-known "get ready with me" elements with true crime storytelling. Each episode follows a consistent structure designed to engage and retain viewer attention:

- Introduction: Sarian opens each episode by introducing herself and the show's concept, immediately creating a familiar atmosphere for returning viewers.
- Theme song: A brief intro song establishes the thematic mood for the episode.
- Small talk: Sarian engages her audience with brief personal anecdotes, which helps establish a relatable, informal tone.
- Advertisement: Recently, a sponsorship segment has been incorporated, lasting about two and a half minutes, reflecting Sarian's strategy of balancing monetization with content delivery.
- Storytelling with makeup application: The primary segment features Sarian narrating a true crime story while applying makeup. This multitasking approach blends the ordinary with the macabre, setting the scene and providing context for each case.
- Conclusion: Sarian wraps up by summarizing the case, sharing personal reflections, and signing off with safety reminders like "be safe out there" and "make good choices," reinforcing a sense of care and community with her audience.

Sarian's storytelling approach combines both expressive non-verbal cues and interactive language, building a rapport with viewers that feels genuine and immersive. Her facial expressions—from a dramatic eye roll to an amused smile—add emotional depth to her narrative, often signaling her own stance on the content (e.g., "sicko serial killer"). Through gestures like leaning forward during climactic moments or expressive arm movements, she emphasizes key points in the story, while casual actions like playing with her hair enhance the sense of intimacy and relatability.

Her narrative style departs from traditional true crime reporting, with a casual tone and conversational language that draws viewers in. Rather than straightforwardly recounting details, she often speaks as if she were present in the story, using first names and informal language to make the characters and situations more accessible. Colloquial expressions, such as "hell fucking no" or "are you kidding me?" punctuate her storytelling, while frequently rhetorical, sometimes even suggestive and ironic questions like "or is it just me?" and "weird, right?," invite viewers to react and engage, fostering a communal experience where viewers feel like they are part of the discussion.

In addition to these verbal techniques, Sarian employs formal production elements to create an immersive experience. Zoom-ins during tense moments highlight dramatic details. The use of disclaimers and trigger warnings seems to show at least some sensitivity to viewers' vulnerability. Her use of cuts maintains the pacing, ensuring that the narrative remains engaging without digression. Occasionally, she adds subdued background

music that enhances the eerie atmosphere without overwhelming the story. These elements combine to create a setting where viewers feel as though they are sharing a personal conversation with Sarian, making the story feel like "the latest gossip" rather than a distant recounting of events. Through this blend of structured storytelling and authentic interaction, the content creator navigates platform demands by maintaining high engagement while fostering intimacy. Her approach to audience interaction, balanced content structuring, and use of relatable language exemplify the strategies creators employ to sustain viewer interest.

4.2. Channel and Content Evolution: From Research to Branding-Driven Narratives

Bailey Sarian's Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series has undergone considerable changes in production quality over time, a shift that aligns with her expanding commercial success on YouTube. Initially, her videos featured simple cuts, basic lighting, and straightforward camera angles. However, as her channel grew, these aspects became increasingly professionalized, with more polished visuals, advanced lighting techniques, and high-definition audio that contribute to a seamless viewing experience. This enhancement in production quality supports a brand-oriented presentation that appeals to a broad audience, elevating the series from amateur content to a commercially viable product.

Branding also plays a key role in Sarian's strategic approach. Her thumbnails have become more standardized and visually cohesive, while her titles have shifted to more attention-seeking phrases, such as "A Sick Serial Killer and NEVER CAUGHT?!?" These changes reflect a deliberate attempt to capitalize on viewer interest, optimizing content presentation for maximum engagement and click-through rates. Such strategies suggest a clear focus on leveraging visual elements as tools of attraction, which are essential in a highly competitive platform environment.

Sarian's storytelling techniques have also evolved, moving away from a straightforward recounting of true crime cases toward a more personalized, opinion- and judgment-driven narrative that deepens viewer engagement. Initially, her content included citations and source-based reporting, emphasizing factual recounting. However, over time, her narrative style has shifted to include more subjective elements, with frequent digressions, personal reflections, and casual remarks (e.g., "I was very invested [in the case]. It was sickening"). This increasingly subjective approach appears designed to cultivate a sense of intimacy and camaraderie with viewers, who are invited to share in her reactions and judgments. Her use of informal language (e.g., "hell fucking no," "or is it just me?") further enhances this effect, creating a conversational tone that blurs the lines between reporting and personal commentary.

Additionally, Sarian's storytelling employs highly expressive gestures and facial cues, often drawing viewers deeper into the story through her use of pauses, dramatic emphasis, and even rhetorical questioning. This shift towards a more performative narrative approach reflects an underlying strategy to maintain audience attention, using emotional and performative tactics that resemble traditional entertainment formats more than objective storytelling. These choices suggest a calculated balance between engaging content and commercial viability, as Sarian leverages her personality as a primary driver of the channel's appeal.

The commercialization of Sarian's channel is particularly evident in the strategic use of sponsorships, advertising, and self-promotion, indicating a significant shift from amateur content creation to a monetized platform presence. Initially, her videos were largely free from direct advertising, but as her popularity and

subscriber base grew, sponsorships and product placements became integral to her content. Recent videos feature sponsorship segments, such as a nearly two-minute ad for Casetify, as well as pre-roll ads and affiliate links in the description. These commercial elements, while profitable, contribute to an increasing fragmentation of content, where viewer attention is divided between the narrative and promotional materials.

Sarian's brand expansion extends beyond YouTube, encompassing self-promotion through social media channels, including Instagram and TikTok, and a personal merchandise line prominently displayed in her videos. This integration of branded content and affiliate links reflects a broader strategy to capitalize on her growing visibility, using multiple revenue streams that transform her personal brand into a business venture. While these strategies serve to strengthen her financial base, they also highlight the potential tension between viewer engagement and the prioritization of monetization, raising questions about the ethical implications of commercializing true crime content.

5. Discussion and Conclusion: Intimate yet Exploitative

The Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series employs affective storytelling and a relational tone that fosters a sense of intimacy between the host and her audience. By sharing personal anecdotes and using expressive body language, Sarian creates an emotionally engaging environment that draws viewers into the narratives. This affective storytelling technique enhances viewer connection, making the audience feel personally involved in the stories. The strategic use of affective storytelling and relational engagement reflects the characteristics of "subcultural microcelebrity" as described by Raun (2018), where creators rely on performative intimacy and emotional labor to foster audience connection. The conversational style and the integration of makeup application serve to humanize the content, making the complex and often distressing subject matter more accessible and relatable.

Despite the engaging nature of Sarian's storytelling, her videos often resort to stereotypical and stigmatizing characterizations of victims and offenders. These portrayals can reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to the stigmatization of individuals involved in criminal cases. As Gaynor (2023) observes, true crime communities can prioritize in-group validation over critical discourse, creating an environment where stigmatizing portrayals of individuals in criminal cases may go unchecked, fostering a culture of "wound consumption." Victims are frequently depicted too superficially to really enable viewers to be empathic, while offenders are often characterized as inherently evil or monstrous. This binary portrayal fails to address the complexities of human behavior and the socio-economic and psychological factors that contribute to criminal activity and the systematic causes of violence, thereby simplifying and sensationalizing the true crime narratives.

A significant ethical concern in Sarian's content is the depiction of gender-based and sexual violence without adequate contextualization, education, or advocacy. These narratives are often presented for their shock value, lacking the necessary background information that would educate viewers on the broader societal issues underlying such violence. Without providing context or advocating for prevention and support measures, these depictions risk normalizing and trivializing serious issues of gender-based violence. This approach can desensitize viewers and perpetuate harmful attitudes towards victims and survivors of such violence, as well as retraumatize affected individuals and their families (Chan, 2020). The practice of personal disclosure in the context of gender-based violence risks the "intimacy triple bind" (Glatt, 2023),

where creators must navigate pressures to remain relatable while balancing ethical constraints and the potential for audience overidentification.

The logic of regular content production, driven by platform algorithms, significantly influences Sarian's content strategy. This dynamic underscores Marwick's (2015) observation that social media creators, operating without the financial security of traditional celebrity, often prioritize engagement metrics over content quality due to the heightened emotional and relational demands placed upon them. To maintain visibility and engagement on platforms like YouTube, creators must adhere to a consistent posting schedule that aligns with algorithmic demands. This necessity can lead to a focus on quantity over quality, with content potentially being rushed or sensationalized to meet the algorithmic criteria for engagement. The pressure to produce regular content can also impact the depth and rigor of the research, as creators might prioritize content that is likely to generate views and interactions over thorough and balanced storytelling.

The findings from this analysis suggest a need for greater ethical considerations in the production of true crime content. Content creators should strive to present balanced and nuanced portrayals of all individuals involved in criminal cases, avoiding sensationalism and stereotyping. Additionally, there is a crucial need for contextualizing narratives of gender-based and sexual violence, including educational elements and advocacy for prevention and support. It is not only individual content creators who are called to account, but especially the platforms themselves, which establish the very conditions under which content is created. Platforms have a societal responsibility to reconsider their algorithmic structures, ensuring they support content that prioritizes quality and ethical storytelling over purely engagement-driven metrics. Given the profound influence and financial success of these platforms, civil society demands that they act responsibly and rethink their priorities. It is imperative that states worldwide enforce these standards, ensuring that platforms uphold ethical obligations alongside their pursuit of profit.

In alignment with recent findings, this study underscores a pressing need for more balanced portrayals within true crime narratives (Marwick, 2015; Raun, 2018). Implementing context-sensitive, informative, and nuanced approaches would not only address the risks of sensationalism but also foster a responsible media environment that more accurately represents the complexities of crime, violence, and justice and the human experiences connected to them. By addressing these issues, true crime content can evolve to provide not only compelling narratives but also responsible and informative discussions about crime and justice. This approach can contribute to a more informed and empathetic audience, ultimately fostering a healthier media environment and more informed societies.

Bailey Sarian's Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series epitomizes the duality of the true crime genre's evolution on digital platforms. On one hand, Sarian has innovatively created a hybrid genre that combines intimate storytelling with expressive facial and makeup artistry, thus personalizing and humanizing the narratives. This approach fosters a unique connection between the creator and her audience, drawing viewers into a shared experience that blends entertainment with a personal touch. On the other hand, the series also exemplifies the voyeuristic and exploitative tendencies inherent in true crime narratives, particularly concerning gender-based violence. The sensationalist portrayal of violent acts and the often stereotypical characterization of victims and offenders can desensitize viewers and perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Moreover, the economic imperatives driven by platform algorithms necessitate a regular production schedule, which can prioritize engagement metrics over the ethical representation of content.

This duality underscores a critical tension in the genre: the potential for innovative, engaging content that fosters viewer intimacy and connection versus the ethical pitfalls of exploiting sensitive subjects for entertainment. Addressing this tension requires a balance between creative expression and responsible storytelling, ensuring that true crime content can inform and engage audiences without compromising ethical standards. Ultimately, creators like Sarian must navigate these complexities to contribute to a more thoughtful and conscientious media landscape. YouTube, at a minimum, seems to have acknowledged this as a problem: In more recent content, automated crisis resource panels and references to telephone counseling are displayed. Additionally, a panel announcing "includes paid promotion" is briefly shown by the platform. Future research should address these developments and examine how beneficial these actions are.

While this study focuses on Bailey Sarian's Murder, Mystery & Makeup Monday series, similar dynamics of affective engagement and ethical concerns are evident across the genre. However, as this research relies on a single case, further studies examining diverse creators and content types are necessary to generalize these findings. Additionally, research into empowering and educational true crime formats—often with less reach than sensationalized content—is essential to support a more responsible media landscape.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References
Caple, H. (2018). News values and newsworthiness. In M. Powers (Ed.), *Oxford research encyclopedia of communication*. https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-850

Capote, T. (1966). *In cold blood: A true account of a multiple murder and its consequences*. Random House.

Cavender, G., Bond-Maupin, L., & Jurik, N. C. (1999). The construction of gender in reality crime TV. *Gender & Society*, *13*(5), 643–663. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124399013005005

Chan, M. (2020, April 24). Real people keep getting re-traumatized. The human cost of binge-watching true crime series. *Time*. https://time.com/5825475/true-crime-victim-families

Cornett, M. R. G. (2024). Capitalizing on crime stories: Unveiling the connection between sensationalism and commercialization in true crime. *Honors Capstone Projects and Theses*, 878. https://louis.uah.edu/honors-capstones/878

Council of Europe. (2011). *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention)*. https://rm.coe.int/168008482e

Degele, N. (2005). Heteronormativität entselbstverständlichen: Zum verunsichernden Potenzial von Queer Studies. *Freiburger FrauenStudien: Zeitschrift für interdisziplinäre Frauenforschung, 11*(17), 15–39. https://doi.org/10.25595/1717

Durham, A. M., Elrod, H. E., & Kinkade, P. T. (1995). Images of crime and justice: Murder and the "true crime" genre. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *23*(2), 143–152. https://doi.org/10.1016/0047-2352(95)00002-8

Gaynor, S. M. (2023). "Bones are life!" true-crime podcasting, self-promotion and the vernaculars of Instagram with Cult Liter. *Popular Communication*, *22*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2023.2281581

Glatt, Z. (2023). The intimacy triple bind: Structural inequalities and relational labour in the influencer industry. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *27*(3), 424–440. https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231194156

Hobbs, S., & Hoffman, M. (2022). 'True crime and…': The hybridisation of true crime narratives on YouTube. *Crime Fiction Studies*, *3*(1), 26–41. https://doi.org/10.3366/cfs.2022.0058

Kaya, Ş. (2019). Gender and violence: Rape as a spectacle on prime-time television. *Social Science Information*, *58*(4), 681–700. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0539018419883831

Kuckartz, U. (2018). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung*. Beltz Juventa.

Lemuth, C. (2017). *True Crime. Kriminalfälle im Fernsehen. Eine Analyse der Programmstruktur*. Hochschule Mittweida.

Linke, C. (2023). Geschlechtsspezifische Aspekte bei der Bewertung von True Crime. *mediendiskurs*, *27*(2), 70–73.

Linke, C., & Kasdorf, R. (2023). Audiovisuelle Repräsentation geschlechtsspezifischer Gewalt. Theoretische Überlegungen und empirische Befunde. In E. Grittmann, K. Müller, C. Peil, & J. Pinseler (Eds.), *Medien und Ungleichheiten. (Trans-)nationale Perspektiven auf Geschlecht, Diversität und Identität* (pp. 1–12). Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik—und Kommunikationswissenschaft e.V. https://doi.org/10.21241/ssoar.86636

Linke, C., & Prommer, E. (2021). From fade-out into spotlight: An audio-visual character analysis (ACIS) on the diversity of media representation and production culture. *Studies in Communication Sciences*, *21*(1), 145–161. https://doi.org/10.24434/j.scoms.2021.01.010

Linnemann, T. (2015). Capote's ghosts: Violence, media and the spectre of suspicion. *The British Journal of Criminology*, *55*(3), 514–533. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azu098

Lünenborg, M., & Maier, T. (2018). The turn to affect and emotion in media studies. *Media and Communication*, *6*(3), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i3.1732

Marwick, A. (2015). You may know me from YouTube: (Micro)-celebrity in social media. In P. D. Marshall, & S. Redmond (Eds.), *A companion to celebrity* (pp. 333–350). Wiley.

Meltzer, C. E. (2021). *Tragische Einzelfälle: Wie Medien über Gewalt gegen Frauen berichten*. Otto Brenner Stiftung. https://www.otto-brenner-stiftung.de/wissenschaftsportal/informationsseiten-zu-studien-2021/tragische-einzelfaelle

Meltzer, C. E. (2022). *Die Darstellung von Gewalt gegen Frauen in den Medien. Die Rolle von Nachrichten für das gesellschaftliche Verständnis von Gewalt gegen Frauen*. Bundezentrale für politische Bildung. https://www.bpb.de/themen/gender-diversitaet/515609/die-darstellung-von-gewalt-gegen-frauen-in-den-medien

Mikos, L. (2023). *Film—und Fernsehanalyse*. UTB.

Murley, J. (2019). Aftermath: The true crime memoir comes of Age. In D. Akrivos & A. K. Antoniou (Eds.), *Crime, deviance and popular culture* (pp. 203–229). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04912-6_9

Nettleton, P. H. (2011). Domestic violence in men's and women's magazines: Women are guilty of choosing the wrong men, men are not guilty of hitting women. *Women's Studies in Communication*, *34*(2), 139–160. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2011.618240

Pelttari, S. (2022). Emotional self-disclosure and stance-taking within affective narratives on YouTube. A qualitative case study of four Spanish YouTubers. *International Journal of Language and Culture*, *9*(2), 292–321. https://doi.org/10.1075/ijolc.22050.pel

Prommer, E., & Linke, C. (2019). *Ausgeblendet. Frauen im deutschen Film und Fernsehen*. Halem Verlag.

Raun, T. (2018). Capitalizing intimacy: New subcultural forms of micro-celebrity strategies and affective labour on YouTube. *Convergence*, *24*(1), 99–113. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736983

Slakoff, D. C., & Duran, D. (2023). A new media frontier, or more of the same? A descriptive analysis of the "missing white woman syndrome" in top true crime podcasts. *Race and Justice*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/21533687231199271

Thiele, M. (2015). *Medien und Stereotype*. transcript.

Thiele, M. (2019). Internationalität und Kommunikationsforschung: Impulse für kritische Medienanalysen. In T. Thomas & U. Wischermann (Eds.), *Feministische Theorie und Kritische Medienkulturanalyse: Ausgangspunkte und Perspektiven* (pp. 163–177). transcript.

Thomas, T. (2019). Kontroversen über Unterdrückungsverhältnisse: Race, Class und Gender in der feministischen Debatte. In T. Thomas & U. Wischermann (Eds.), *Feministische Theorie und Kritische Medienkulturanalyse: Ausgangspunkte und Perspektiven* (pp. 59–74). transcript.

About the Authors

Christine Linke (Dr phil. habil.) is a full professor of Communication Sciences in the study program Communication Design and Media at the Faculty of Architecture and Design at the Wismar University of Applied Sciences.

Lisa Brune (Dipl.-Des. [FH]) holds a degree in Communication Design and Media from the Faculty of Architecture and Design at the Wismar University of Applied Sciences.

Media and Communication is an international, peer-reviewed open access journal dedicated to a wide variety of basic and applied research in communication and its related fields. It aims at providing a research forum on the social and cultural relevance of media and communication processes.

The journal is concerned with the social development and contemporary transformation of media and communication and critically reflects on their interdependence with global, individual, media, digital, economic and visual processes of change and innovation.

cogitatio

www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication