‘A place for everyone who gets it’: Instacartooning as Feminist Activism

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Abstract

This article discusses the political potential of sharing comics and cartoons on Instagram when that practice lies in the intersection of autobiographical art, feminist activism, and for-profit influencer work. Through a case study of cartoonist Mary Catherine Starr, aka @momlife_comics, and the 2022 viral campaign against her work known as ‘Peachgate,’ the article discusses whether Starr’s work participates in a juxtapolitical intimate public or whether it holds the potential to incite more radical transformation of the gender dynamics it criticizes. Investigating Starr’s visual style and aesthetic strategies, as well as the platformed visibility labor she engages in, the article argues that Peachgate can be seen as an indication of the potential for this work to transform from an intimate public to an affective public, although only if allowed to circulate beyond the intentions and preferred interpretations offered by Starr.

KEYWORDS: activism, comics, influencer, Instagram, intimate publics

This article discusses an emergent and contested form of feminist activism: the intersection of instacartooning and 'momfluencing,' exemplified by the Instagram profile @momlife_comics. The profile is the main creative outlet for US cartoonist Mary Catherine Starr, who uses comics and cartoons to raise awareness about the gendered inequality of cisheterosexual marriage. Starr's comics went viral in the summer of 2022 when a number of Twitter[1] users shared her posts with denigrating commentary. Termed 'Peachgate' for the iconography of her most vilified comic, the virality greatly increased Starr's follower count but also subjected her to hate comments and anonymous threats. As a result, Starr modified her content, moving some more personal stories behind a paywall and doubling down on her insistence of being a necessary voice that anti-feminist critics would rather see silenced. Thus, along with the creative, activist labor of producing comics, Starr's engagement in the affective labor of platformed community management increased in intensity, making her a notable example of an increasingly common form of digital feminist consciousness-raising.

In this article, I use the case of Mary Catherine Starr's evolving online presence to investigate the affordances of Instagram activism in comics form. I hypothesize that Starr came under public scrutiny not merely because she details the struggles and frustrations of being a mother and the female partner in a cis-het marriage, but because she does so in the form of comics and cartoons.[2] The affordances of the form chosen by Starr—not just the cartoon but the *instacartoon*—compounds visual 'momfluencer' content typical on Instagram with the memetic viral potential of the cartoon distributed on social media. By analyzing Starr's visual style and the development of her content since gaining a large following, I discuss the aesthetic and political potential of Starr's work. Starr has been accused of indulging in 'domestic heteropessimism' (Brouillette, 2023), suggesting that she participates in the seemingly apolitical 'complaint genre' of feminized intimate publics (Berlant, 2008). I will argue that looking more closely at Starr's aesthetic strategies and the circulation of her comics on and beyond the Instagram platform complicates the assumption that complaint cannot lead to systemic critique and political action. Although commercial in nature, Starr's work has been used in ways that counteract her attempts to control its meaning, thus inviting us to reconsider the activist potential of instacartooning.

Instacartooning and Peachgate

Mary Catherine Starr is a white woman in a heterosexual marriage, mother of two young children, and a resident of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, the traditional and ancestral land of the Wampanoag people. A former yoga instructor, Starr began sharing comics and cartoons on Instagram in 2021 about her experiences as a mother and wife. The experiences depicted by Starr are largely those of white middle-class US American cis women, although Starr addresses her work to 'women' and/or 'default parents' and 'primary caregivers' more broadly. Initially gaining a modest following, Starr first rose to wider prominence in January of 2022, when the *Huffington Post* shared her "Illustrated Guide to the Double Standards of Parenting" (Borresen, 2022). The comic was framed as a canny insight into gender inequality and resulted in a number of online articles and features, which Starr archived on her Instagram profile. This widespread attention resulted in Starr's follower count increasing dramatically, and on July 14, 2022, Starr shared a grateful and optimistic recap of the first full year of running @momlife_comics, having amassed a following of 215,000 people.

Two weeks later, on July 29, 2022, comics creator Rachel Jane Andelman posted several of Starr's comics on Twitter, noting that "I for one promise to never make comics about how much I hate my spouse, should I ever possess one" (2022a). Several scathing Twitter posts followed as other users picked up on the trend, sharing Starr's comics with captions such as "Women will create an Instagram account to complain about their relationship, gain 200k followers that are equally dissatisfied with their life choices and use it to trauma dump before going to couples therapy" (@ChulthuRisen, 2022). This led, in very brief, to comments ranging from contemptuous to threatening, on Twitter and on Starr's Instagram, as well as via Direct Messages and email (Stokel-Walker, 2022). The influx of attention also included new followers who were sympathetic to Starr's work but the majority of the attention, as Starr describes it, was negative and overtly hateful. The controversy came to be termed 'Peachgate,' for the iconography of the post which received the most negative attention, and the criticism was largely directed towards Starr's perceived inability to either 'fix her marriage' or divorce her 'useless' husband.

The 'Peach' comic, as it became known, is a two-panel juxtaposition of Starr's avatar and that of her husband, posted to Instagram on July 23, 2021 (Starr, 2021b). A single panel border bisects the square frame, meaning that the entire comic fits into a single image on Instagram. This memetic style makes it easy to read at a glance and thus heightens the shareable nature of the comic, unlike Starr's longer comic strips. The image is easy to visually decode; the two characters are posed identically, in similarly casual outfits, rendered in simple line work with block colors. The thought balloons highlight the contrast between Starr and her husband: upon finding a ripe peach in their kitchen, Starr chooses to save it for her children rather than eating it herself, whereas her husband decides to use it in a smoothie for himself. Their difference in behavior and attitude is thus heightened, visually underscored by reducing them to their generic and binary gendered difference. Above the image, a caption reads "One of the [many] differences between me & my husband," and at the bottom of the image, smaller captions with arrows mark the characters as 'me' and 'him' (Starr, 2021a). In the caption, Starr refers to herself as an "unintentional martyr" (2021b), asking her followers whether they also fall into this trap.

The 'Peach' comic thus encapsulates the tone, themes, and mode of address favored by Starr and shared by many other digital creators with profiles similar to Starr's. Although Starr's notoriety and explicit activist agenda make her notable for the purposes of this article, she should not be taken as an exception to a norm but rather as one of many artists situated at the intersection of creative work and digital celebrity. As demonstrated by Emily Hund, the 2010s witnessed a transformation of online female-oriented community from the early-2000s blogosphere to platformed social media, resulting in the rise of the 'influencer' (2023). The self-promotional and commercialized practices of influencers, Hund argues, have come to shape social media presences even for people who do not work or identify as such—a trend described by Sophie Bishop as 'influencer creep' (2023). This is the context in which we have witnessed online communities surrounding motherhood transform from 'mommy bloggers' (Morrison, 2011; Taylor, 2016; Yonker, 2012) to 'momfluencers' (Jorge et al., 2022; Lewis, 2023) on platforms such as Instagram. Sharing personal experiences and reaching out to a community of strangers is now a practice shaped by the affordances of these platforms.

The practice of 'instacartooning,' I argue, is one such practice: an artistic, often autobiographical, endeavor affected by influencer creep. I adapt the term from Camilla Holm Soelseth's concept of the 'instapoet'; designating a poet whose primary publication platform is Instagram and whose work consists in (large) part of posting, community-building, and self-promotion: "when they take on the platform-specific tasks of a social media creator, which is more than just producing content" (2022, p. 97). This is a sliding scale, as Soelseth argues, meaning that poets can undertake varying degrees of platformed labor (2022, p. 98). Thus, while anyone who posts comics and cartoons to Instagram could be designated an 'instacartoonist,' the term most accurately describes cartoonists who adapt their comics and cartoons to suit the affordances of Instagram and whose presence on the platform also includes building a community around their work, in part through sharing details about themselves, their lives, and their work. Instagram is ideally suited for comics and cartoons that are short, usually single-panel or consisting of a few panels that fit into a square slide, enabling readers to take them in at a glance. They are often simply rendered, graphically eye-catching, and easy to read on a small screen. Many of the most successful instacartoonists draw on their own lived experience and make their lives part of their public persona, cultivating community as well as an artistic practice. For those instacartoonists who attempt to make a living from their digital comics, platformed labor is as much part of their work as the work of creating comics and cartoons. Thus, while their comics are interesting aesthetic and cultural artifacts in themselves, designating them 'instacartoons' can more accurately capture their political valence.

Instacartooning is a wildly heterogenous category, as diverse as its practitioners. A significant subset of instacartoonists, however, are mothers whose cartoons detail their lives as caregivers and artists. Their work takes place at the intersection of instacartooning and momfluencing, drawing on the aesthetic and social practices of both. As this hybrid form gains visibility and cultural impact, it prompts questions of political potential. The aesthetic and artistic experiments in the comics form and platformed art happen in conversation with the self-promotional ethos of influencing. Posting comics to Instagram does not guarantee an income, so artists wishing to sustain a living from their practice need to find alternative ways of making money. One such way, which presents itself to those artists whose following reaches a certain size, is to lean into the platformed work of influencing, selling merchandise and accepting corporate sponsorship. When artists such as Starr choose to brand and sell their content, which also claims an activist force, the lines between authentic sharing, activist community-building, and commodification inevitably blur. It is within this context that Starr rose to notoriety.

What went under-discussed in Peachgate and Starr's subsequent community moderation work, was the affordances of *drawing* feminist critiques of patriarchal motherhood culture. In the original Twitter thread, Andelman highlights cartoonists Anna Denise Floor and Cassandra Berger, both of whom share comics about parenting and motherhood on Instagram. Andelman's preference for Floor and Berger has to do, by her own account, with aesthetics and successful use of the comics form: "After making fun of those other comics, I started to wonder if there were mom comics I'd appreciate, or if the whole genre wasn't for me. After some searching on Insta, I really like these ones by Anna Denise Floor. They've got strong punchlines and the art is quite appealing!" (Andelman, 2022c), she states, sharing examples of Floor's work, and following up with Berger's: "I love these Cassandra Berger comics, the art style is so so striking" (Andelman, 2022d). Commenting on Starr's work, Andelman shares a comic and its caption side by side, noting that "Her comics would be 5000% more interesting if she just incorporated the caption into the body of the comic. Maybe make it multi-paneled. But that would undercut the seething tone" (2022b). The concrete suggestions—to create multi-panel comics and to incorporate the message of the caption in the comic itself—are strategies that Starr frequently employs, since many of her posts are multi-slide posts containing all or mostly text, overtly stating her aims. Andelman infers that Starr chooses the more obviously 'memeable' style to convey a less nuanced message, not wanting to "undercut the seething tone." Andelman's initial critique of the messaging and strategy of the comics was picked up by the media and in Starr's responses, whereas the aesthetic and formal judgement did not make their way into the reporting on Peachgate or Starr's response. There is an argument to be made—and, indeed, Starr seems to make it—that the critique has to do with the messages and Starr's gender, rather than with her merits as a visual communicator. I contend, however, that the visual style and aesthetic choices made by Starr propelled her to the heightened visibility from which she both profits and is made vulnerable to critique.

Semiotic openness

Starr's visual style is established by the first post to the @momlife_comics profile from July 14, 2021 (Starr, 2021a). Starr had been sharing comics and illustrations on her personal Instagram profile before this time but created a separate account to, in her own words, "keep creating these illustrations and see where I can take this new passion"

(2021a). This wording is reminiscent of the language of 'side hustles' and 'passion jobs' that are pervasive within feminized blogging practices and influencer culture (Duffy, 2016, 2017). Thus, from the start, readers are invited to see Starr's comics as a personal, passion-driven project that straddles the line between amateur sharing and a professional art practice.

The image shared in the initial post is an anonymized portrait of Starr and her two children. It is drawn in her signature style of blocky digital line art with flat colors, in a generally pastel color scheme with no shading and minimal detail. None of the characters depicted have facial features, and the faces are instead left as blank surfaces. This has remained an instantly recognizable element of Starr's work; a semiotic openness at the heart of her comics. Although the characters are often meant to represent Starr and her family, or specific followers, they are anonymized and explicitly invite a more generalized reading of the situations and dynamics Starr depicts. The identificatory potential of the highly abstracted face is central to comics studies, taking up an idea from Scott McCloud (see e.g. Flowers, 2020; Hatfield, 2005, 2022; Sinervo and Freedman, 2022). Following the idea that the lowest degree of realism invites the highest degree of identification, Starr's decision to leave the faces entirely blank allows a broad range of people to see themselves in her characters.[3] Thus, even though the initial post was framed as a self-portrait, the character it depicts became the generic cis woman who appears throughout the comics. Initially colored as a white woman with light brown hair, this stock character is often re-colored by Starr to feature different skin tones and hair colors, with slightly different styling, although always recognizable as the 'generic woman.' Her counterpart, the generic 'husband,' is similarly featureless, although usually depicted with facial hair. Notably, his first appearance on the profile is in the 'Peach' comic that would eventually go viral.

Starr stresses, in the image itself as well as in the accompanying text caption of the original post, that this is a story specifically about her and her spouse. Any generalized commentary is thus an implied subtext, resulting from the faceless representation, the labelling of the husband as 'him' rather than his actual name, and the rhetorical tone of 'is it just me and my marriage?' in the paratextual caption. As the comic began to circulate, however, the subtextual implications increasingly dominate the meaning of the comic. Starr herself has reshared the comic many times, before and after it was virally circulated, capitalizing on the memetic capacity of the image. Launching the hashtag "#eatthedamnpeach" as a rallying cry for women to prioritize their own satisfaction over that of their families, Starr produced merchandise with the slogan and images of a peach, even having it tattooed and offering the tattoo stencil for use by her followers. Starr thus herself enabled the comic to travel from its specific, anchored meaning of "this is a situation which happened to me and my husband" to a more general experience of self-abnegating wives and mothers.

The circular, atemporal repetition of the post, as it is reshared and reactivated periodically by Starr and her followers, demonstrates that Starr's work is at its most effective when it is repeated. Notably, Starr's children are referenced but not visually present in the Peach comic. Thus, it can be shared at any time, regardless of the time that has elapsed from the initial posting, since there is no trace of its origin in the image itself. I argue that Starr increasingly uses this strategy, telling stories about her marriage which are unanchored from their specific time and place—even if they take place at, say, Christmas, it is a generic, repeatable 'holiday season'—enabling her to share them time and again with little to no changes or updates. This cyclical repetition is characteristic of momfluencer instacartooning more broadly, drawing on the affordances of the platform and the experiences of feminized work, brought together in comics form (see Fabricius, 2024). In Charles Hatfield's parlance, comics is an "art of tensions" (2005), drawing its semiotic force from the multiple, interacting modes of address created by combining words and images, single images and sequences, and—I argue—context-dependent meanings and meanings derived from resharing a comic in a new context.

For Starr, I speculate, the strategy will prove profitable in the long-term, since reposting old comics gets Starr closer to a form of passive income, lessening the rate at which she has to produce new content. She is not hindered, either, by her children growing up, leaving her without content about raising young children. While issues related to mothering and young children still appear in Starr's work, the focus of most of her posts is arguably "wife life" rather than the "momlife" of her Instagram handle.

Julianne Adams argues that internet meme culture, particularly in feminized genres, "results in a de-personalization of content that allows readers to interpret content contingent on their subjectivity" (2022, p. 1722). While the examples considered by Adams are distributed by creators whose online personas are more highly fictionalized or anonymized, I argue that the same potential is present in work such as Starr's. The memetic qualities of the content and how it is platformed invite readers to see their own experiences and frustrations in the 'de-personalized' depictions. This repeated and repeatable memetic quality to Starr's work is also, however, a main source of criticism. If Starr is to sustain the repetition of comics about her frustrations with her marriage, she must necessarily remain in an unsatisfactory state. Starr attempts to 'have it both ways' in the personal appeal and ethos of her posts. She capitalizes on the 'relatability' of sharing personal, lived experiences, as stated in her post addressing Peachgate:

> *For the majority of the time I have had this account […] I have been speaking to a very specific audience of millennial or millennial-adjacent mothers. In this context, my body of work has been taken as a whole and I have felt confident that the majority of you, my audience, understands where I'm coming from. Many of us have had similar experiences when it come to the challenging aspects of motherhood and household equality. (Starr, 2022a)*

After the controversy, however, Starr increasingly felt the need to disclaim that her posts were fictionalized accounts, in captions such as "Most of you know this but in case you don't: this comic isn't about my husband. It's about being the preferred/default parent […]" (2022b). She also began illustrating stories from followers, the first posted on November 14, 2022, with the disclaimer "This is not a personal comic; a follower sent me this story. I receive lots of messages like this one but this is the first time I've illustrated someone else's conversation with her husband. I took some creative liberties with the last slide" (Starr, 2022c). This disclaimer, similar to when Starr draws on her own experiences, places the story somewhere between the authentically personal and the generically relatable, taking creative liberty while remaining rooted in 'real life.' Starr's style of drawing backs up this balance, visually gesturing towards the general through the faceless, anonymous characters that are given some specificity through the design and coloring, as well as their specific story.

The 'shareability' of Starr's instacartoons works both for and against her intentions of finding community through sharing personal experiences. Starr can harness the potential virality to some extent by encouraging engagement with her work, as well as through her aesthetic choices. Her more text-heavy posts, with handwriting on pastel-toned backgrounds, mimic an increasingly popular aesthetic associated with social justice activism on Instagram known colloquially as the 'Canva text slide' (Hund, 2023, pp. 140–41; Nguyen, 2020). Gesturing towards social activism through aesthetics and towards a generalizable message through her anonymized characters, Starr transforms her personal frustrations into a broadly shared, and sharable, representation of motherhood and 'women's work.' These qualities, which make Starr's work appealing to a broad audience, also expose her to audiences which do not feel seen or represented by her point of view. Although often accompanied by lengthy captions, Starr's posts can be taken out of context and shared as-is, leading them to be easily found by readers who are not necessarily sympathetic to

Starr or her messaging. Even with the original context, readers are not guaranteed to be swayed by Starr's politics, humor, or visual choices.

The choice to communicate through comics and cartoons is key to the diverse responses to Starr's work. Unlike photography, which claims a much higher degree of verisimilitude, Starr's illustrated real-life scenarios are clearly artistic interpretations. While Starr still enters an autobiographical contract with her audience, the terms differ from those of momfluencers who use photography and video. Although these forms are also framed and manipulated to tell a particular story and audiences are increasingly aware of this (Hund, 2023, p. 169), I argue that Starr's drawing style communicates that she is synthesizing and stylizing events to make a point. Her use of first-person singular pronouns and references to details from her own life retains an illusion of facticity, but the comics form makes evident that this is an artistic interpretation. For some audiences, this means expanded space for imagining themselves in Starr's shoes, sharing her experience and finding community in that recognition. These readers interpret Starr's work as commentary on a generalizable struggle, rooted in personal experience.

For others, Starr's combination of the personal and the generalized invites responses aimed at the systemic and the private, all at once. During Peachgate, Starr was taken to task both for the perceived failure of her own marriage and for the inability of heterosexually partnered cis women to take responsibility for their own happiness and refuse compliance with normative divisions of gendered labor. Starr's illustrated frustrations about motherhood, housework, and emotional labor were thus interpreted not as a space for solidarity with but as a symptom of regressive gender politics. While Starr herself attempts to remain rooted in personal experience and gesture towards a 'universal' experience of 'womanhood,' some readers see her as failing at both. The semiotic openness of Starr's visual style invites a range of responses, many of which fall outside the preferred reading offered by Starr.

Visibility work

Peachgate brought an overwhelming amount of visibility and attention to Starr and her work, most of it initially negative, and the viral attention caused her to double down on the platformed labor that undergirds her creative practice. She openly discussed the instacartooning work of managing comments and personal messages, of choosing what to share and what to keep private, and the need for explanatory disclaimers on her posts. The feminized labor represented by Starr in her posts was increasingly accompanied by the platformed labor of community management. Her posts, especially those in direct response to Peachgate, began including variations of the phrase "for those who get it," as she carefully delineated who her content was for (2022a). Although Starr mentions protecting her husband and how he was perceived by readers (2022a), she also centers herself, her creative decisions, and how she, as a woman speaking publicly, was perceived and sanctioned.

Studies of platformed visibility demonstrate that algorithmically structured platforms reproduce, even heighten, existing inequality and structures of power (Duffy, Poell, and Nieborg, 2019; Muldoon and Raekstad, 2022; Nieborg and Poell, 2018). The overlap between platformed labor and algorithmically driven social media, in particular, is an area in which visibility is highly contingent on gender (Bishop, 2018; Duffy, 2016; Duffy and Hund, 2019; Duffy and Meisner, 2022; Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017). Since Instagram influencers tend to be women, and since platformed labor depends on gaining visibility (Cotter, 2019; Duffy and Hund, 2019; Duffy and Meisner, 2022), instacartooning and similar practices must be investigated within a framework attuned to the specificities of becoming-visible as a woman in these digital public spheres. As Duffy and Pruchniewska observe, "The much-vaunted imperative to 'put oneself out there' is fraught with risk for female entrepreneurs in digital spaces. Acts of compulsory visibility open content producers up to more insidious forms of public scrutiny, including hate speech, trolling, and other acts of online misogyny" (2017, p. 855).

Feminist critics have long been concerned with the terms of visibility for women and others who do not fit the norms of white masculinity. Liz Conor, tracing these issues to the early twentieth century and the emergence of spectacularized images of women in visual media, argues that "images of women are always producing meanings of women's visibility" (2004, p. xv). According to Conor, the changing presence of women in the visual cultures of early twentieth century modernity marked a paradigm shift in women's ability to choose, if within limits, the terms of their visibility. Appearing in a mediated public sphere became an arena within which women could enact agency, all the while that they were still policed along gendered, as well as classed and racialized, lines. This has remained the case throughout the changing media landscape of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Choosing the terms of one's appearance and appearing in the public sphere is a fraught negotiation of gender and power, undergirded by strict norms of presentability. It is no great stretch to argue that this is increasingly the case in our moment of pervasive self-representation on social and other digital media.

Like the anxieties surrounding feminine visibility, concerns regarding the semiotic openness of images and the need to anchor preferred meanings through texts stem from the changing media landscapes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Brian Maidment demonstrates that satirical and comic images published in the Victorian period were accompanied by text that explained, and often simplified, their meaning. The explanatory texts were "an inhibiting force on their original graphic statements, making them something less, although perhaps something safer, than they were once were" (Maidment, 2016, p. 64). According to Maidment, this attempt to 'tame' the potential disruption of a politically controversial image which "remained dangerously open to alternative, and possibly transgressive, readings," was often successful, as the semiotic openness "could be neutralized by the intervention of the explicatory text" (2016, p. 64). Starr's attempts to 'anchor' the meaning of her images can similarly be understood as attempts to undercut the potential disruption that the cartoons and comics might cause. While Starr included such caveats and explanations in her posts before Peachgate, they become more explicit and deliberate after the influx of attention.

This does not mean, however, that all readers will follow Starr's suggested interpretation. Attempts to reduce the semiotic openness of an image cannot be entirely successful without altering the image itself. Readers can ignore or go against the preferred interpretation of a caption. While this can often lead to the kinds of responses Starr attempts to avoid—readers misinterpreting her work—it also facilitates more nuance in what Starr is able to communicate and how. Because she communicates in hybrid visual/verbal forms, Starr gives her readers the option of interpreting her work in a variety of ways. The explanatory captions should thus not be read only as attempts to 'lock down' a preferred interpretation but *also* as a way of allowing more nuanced, complicated, or even controversial messages without alienating parts of her audience.

Thus, when discussing the "visibility game" (Cotter, 2019) of Instagram, we should attend not only to the "threat of invisibility" (Cotter, 2019) but also to the threats inherent in visibility itself and how they are negotiated. Visibility is desirable because it can lead to popularity, community, and an income, but it is also a state of heightened scrutiny, the effects of which are unequally distributed along gendered, classed, and racialized lines. Starr's virality granted her the much-desired exposure but with significant personal cost, if her public statements are to be believed. Her subsequent choices to carefully frame her public posts and paywall some of her content should be understood, I argue, as effects partially of her gender and the other power structures with which it intersects. Starr did not need to disappear entirely from the public eye but instead attempts to guide and control how her work is received.

Starr's efforts in community management and the affective labor of managing her own responses, as well as modelling appropriate responses to her followers and encourage them to form community in line with her values, is central to mitigating the ambivalent visibility her posts invite. The feminized work of managing emotional responses and building community thus seems inextricably linked to the creative and entrepreneurial labor necessary to building a platformed audience. As demonstrated by Julie A. Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim, this type of 'mamapreneurial' digital labor, while holding the promise of, in Brooke Erin Duffy's terms, "getting paid to do what you love" (2017), works entirely within the boundaries of the patriarchal capitalist system that necessitated women making a living from their kitchen counters while their children nap (Wilson and Yochim, 2015, pp. 677–78). Although the circumstances differ—as a whole, the women studied by Wilson and Yochim are not creative workers but rather engaged in multilevel marketing schemes and other similarly exploitative 'side hustles'—and class privilege provides an important distinction, we should be mindful of this caveat. While this kind of work serves some women, it is far from a radical overthrow of oppressive, gendered labor conditions.

Marxist critic Sophie Lewis, in a commentary on momfluencers, notes the simultaneous matrophobic critiques of an industry built by women doing unpaid work in their homes and the misogyny of "the multibillion-dollar industry in question, where wifely financial dependency is positively aestheticized" (2023, n.p.). This view keeps in tension the pieceworker-esque working conditions of most momfluencers and the highly lucrative industry they have built. Starr's work exists on this spectrum, and thus its political valence cannot easily be pinned down. In the case of Starr, it seems clear that doing the work of creating comics and Instagram posts and fostering online community brings Starr personal fulfilment, along with the worries associated with microcelebrity. Her followers also express sentiments of feeling seen, aided, and empowered by Starr's work. Starr's critics, on the other hand, doubt that Starr's work has the potential to actually dismantle the structures being criticized. The popularity and notoriety Starr's work should prompt us to ask whom these comics and cartoons serve. The effects of Starr's posts are anything but monolithic, due to Starr's visual style and the capacious space for interpretation it affords.

Radical complaint?

Peachgate and the ongoing critique of Starr demonstrates that not all readers were convinced by Starr's version of the narrative. While the influx of negative attention was initially the result of Starr's work circulating beyond its intended audience, the virality was also due to Starr's audience having already grown beyond a small in-group. This tension, which I have argued is shaped by ambivalent feminized visibility, troubles Starr's claim that her work is activist and consciousness-raising. Aimée Morrison argues that 'personal mommy blogging' holds radical potential beyond the notion of an intimate public so long as it remains networked at a small scale and is characterized by reciprocity (2011, p. 37). While this may have been the case at the early stages of Starr's career on Instagram, by the time of Peachgate, and certainly in its wake, the size of her following had moved her from 'networked' to 'broadcast' status, in Morrison's parlance. The asymmetry of this relationship thus diminished the radical potential that Morrison locates in the "direct reciprocity of attention and affect" of personal blogging (2011, p. 51).[4] Peachgate also took place in a digital landscape shaped by 'virality 2.0,' wherein media producers and platforms alike seek out viral sharing beyond an expected audience (Payne, 2013). While the affordances of the instacartoon include the memetic potential to reach a wide and diverse audience, the algorithmic logics of the platform make it near-impossible for creators such as Starr to only speak to "those who get it." Peachgate was, read in this vein, an example of context collapse (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Starr's strategies of managing the affordances and microcelebrity specific to Instagram, speaking to her imagined audience (Marwick and boyd, 2011, p. 116), did not translate onto another platform as her images, divorced from their captions, did.

As mentioned, Starr attempted to insulate herself from criticism by scaling back on personal anecdotes, writing disclaimers, and illustrating stories shared with her by her followers, gesturing towards broader, systemic issues. She dismissed backlash in the vein of "get a divorce" or "just do things differently" as personalized solutions to a systemic problem. This disavowal of individual solutions, however, was rarely backed up by suggestions for actual systemic change beyond the nebulous "raising awareness" and "building solidarity." Thus, Starr seemingly sits between an individualized and a systemic approach to solving gendered inequality in the home, insisting that sharing her personal stories will matter to strangers but refraining from suggesting or enacting radical changes to married life.

This lack of systemic critique was one of the tenets of Peachgate and echoes into the academic reception of Starr's comics. Sarah Brouillette characterizes Starr's work as 'domestic heteropessimism' (2023), a mode of feeling that recognizes the gendered inequalities inherent in the heterosexual nuclear family unit but cannot imagine life beyond that structure. Starr may criticize the gender dynamics of her marriage and domestic arrangement but her attachment to being married and a primary caregiver is never questioned. Thus, Brouillette argues, while Starr recognizes and calls out a structural problem beyond her own situation, "gratitude and attachment are presented as the ultimate antidotes to her bad feelings about what work within the home requires of her" (2023, n.p.). Brouillette sees Starr's work as proof of the ideological force of the family under late capitalism, which has duped Starr and her followers. Starr's comics are imagined by Brouillette to be a mere cash grab: "as we know, the comics are designed ultimately to elicit online engagement, grow a monetizable following, and sell products" (2023, n.p.). While I do not disagree with this assessment of Starr's presumable aims, it does belie Starr's frequently stated desire to provide community and solidarity, in addition to being a source of exposure and income for her. In Brouillette's reading, neither Starr nor her followers are imagined to be reaching beyond the patriarchal systems they rile against. The pessimism turns fatalistic, foreclosing any chance of change and instead "offering the consolation of complaint" (Brouillette, 2023, n.p.).

The "consolation of complaint" echoes the notion of the 'female complaint' described by Lauren Berlant in their extensive study of popular feminized fiction. Complaint genres, according to Berlant, "foreground a view of power that blames flawed men and bad ideologies for women's intimate suffering, all the while maintaining some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such disappointment in the first place" (2008, p. 2). The logic of complaint encourages women to remain allegiant to the structures of oppression which they identify as the source of their suffering. Starr has repeatedly stated her lack of interest in divorcing her husband or otherwise radically changing the tenets of her situation. The affective stance she offers her readers is one of frustration at circumstances which, while at times seem unbearable, are imagined to be better than the alternative. This dynamic is what leads Brouillette to characterize Starr's work as domestic heteropessimism.

Complaint genres, Berlant argues, ultimately lead to intimate publics: affective communities which sustain the lives of those who participate but refrain from manifesting political transformation (2008, p. 19). To Berlant, the intimate public of 'women's culture' is entangled with capitalism and circulation: "the cohabitation of critique, conventionality, and the commodity produces more movement within a space than toward being or wanting to be beyond it" (2008, p. 12). Although critique is present—as indeed we see in Starr's work—its circular logic fails to gain an outward trajectory, instead remaining within the ideological confines of the framework it claims to criticize: "The circularity of the feminine project will not escape you, therefore: it is a perfect form, a sphere infused with activities of ongoing circuits of attachment that can at the same time look like and feel like a zero" (Berlant, 2008, p. 20). As demonstrated by Fabricius & Hogg, the form of circularity is built into the structure and lived experiences of feminized labor and its representation in art, including instacartoons (2023, p. 13; see also Fabricius, 2024). Starr's work draws on circularity at multiple levels, from the directly pictorial to the repetitive rhythms of reposting old comics and creating variations of the same basic structures and ideas.

In Berlant's view, the experience of recognition, of seeing oneself addressed by an intimate public, is created by the circulation of cultural artefacts, such as Starr's comics. In a platformed context such as Instagram, the notion of "a world of strangers […] emotionally literate in each other's experience of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent" (Berlant, 2008, p. 5), and that this community existed prior to being marketed to, seems entirely suited to the affordances of the communities created by influencers such as Starr. Indeed, as argued by Dobson, Carah, and Robards, "feminist critique of the immaterial, emotional, and affective labour of social reproduction" that shapes digital intimate publics allows us to see "how the intimate labour of care and of producing and maintaining shared feelings, affects, and intimate and social relations becomes *more* productive under conditions of digital capitalism" (2018, p. 16), evoking an idea similar to Kylie Jarret's notion of the digital worker as an evolution of the housewife (2016). Further, Dobson et al. argue, "In being made productive, practices of digital intimacy lose important aspects of their *publicness*. The labour of intimacy sustains the business model of social media platforms" (2018, p. 16), leading to commodification of the affects and care that creators invest in their platformed work (2018, p. 17). While Brouillette locates the failings of Starr's activism in the content and ideology of her work, Dobson et al. would point to the platform as the limit to the political potential. Ultimately, they conclude, digital intimate publics are "not public enough" (Dobson, Carah, and Robards, 2018, p. 21), as the affective labor that could raise consciousness and affect lasting change is subsumed by corporate interest and made to feed an algorithm.

The circular, recursive logic of the intimate public is also part of why Berlant claims intimate publics as *juxtapolitical*, that is, not quite politically effective: while intimate publics generate meaningful connection, sense of community, and affective potential, they are ineffective in the realm of systemic political change. Intimate publics create, as well as respond to, a shared feeling, "flourish[ing] by circulating as an already felt need" (2008, p. 5), and that feeling is sustained, rather than transformed, in the circulation and consumption of it. Taking part in the intimate public of female complaint culture, such as Starr's following, offers a sense of belonging and a way of keeping on in a hostile system. It does not, however, provide the impetus for undoing or overthrowing said system.[5] Buying merchandise with the "Eat the damn peach" slogan is posited by Starr as a way of standing up for oneself and claiming a place—and, of course, supporting her 'woman-owned small business' in the process. Capitalism is posited as, at once, the source of and solution to the societal ills—in this case, patriarchal marriage and the double shift burden placed on mothers—its products attempt to describe.

This analysis, however, does not account for Peachgate. I hesitate in characterizing Starr unequivocally in the terms suggested by Brouillette and Berlant because of her status as a single individual claiming to share her own lived experience. While Starr is an entrepreneur and runs her Instagram account as a business, I find it difficult to equate her in simple terms with a large corporate entity or as simply expressive of 'market forces.' Certainly, she is complicit in such systems, as evidenced by the fact that her Instagram is a business, and she has taken steps to ensure its continued profitability. This does not, however, predetermine how her work will be taken up by readers. In this case, we should consider Zizi Papacharissi's concept of *affective publics*: social movements, effecting lasting political change, which originated on social media. Affective publics are defined as "networked publics that are sustained by online media but also by modalities of affective intensity" (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 118). Papacharissi notes that digital platforms are not content, they are structures (2014, p. 121), and thus the effects and affects of the structure of feeling depend less on the platform and more on what each person/activist puts on that platform for others to engage with. Starr cannot control the public that forms around the circulation of her work, whether their affective responses to it reproduce the intimacy of shared complaint or take a more activist, transformative direction. Starr did not initiate an affective public, but her comics were circulated by a range of people who came to constitute, at least for a moment, such a public.

One could argue that the community mobilized by Starr can never become an affective public at the scale described by Papacharissi, because it is too controlled by one person with a vested interest in turning a profit, in addition to facilitating a public. Intimacy crowds out mobilizing, in this reading. I contend, however, that although Starr's followers have not yet mobilized beyond their screens, and perhaps never will, the momentum was and is present in the affects being circulated through and around Starr's comics. As Starr moves her work in two distinct directions—a smaller community requiring paid access and a broader inclusion of stories beyond her own in her free content—it remains to be seen whether her consciousness-raising brings about lasting change in the lives of the people who follow her. Starr's work invites readers—particularly women living similar lives—to recognize themselves in the images and stories. What they do with that sense of recognition, whether it prompts reassurance or a lingering sense that one does not want this life if nothing will ever change, cannot be predicted in advance. The tensions inherent in the comics form and the strategic semiotic openness of Starr's aesthetic create a mirror for hundreds of thousands of people to gaze at. What they see upon looking is neither given nor static.

Certainly, what Peachgate demonstrated was that people did take her comics and used them as tools for denouncing domestic heteropessimism. Notably, this mainly took place on Twitter, the platform singled out by Papacharissi as the dominant vehicle for affective publics. Despite her efforts, Starr could not control how people used her comics, and although she attempted to do so within the confines of the Instagram community she leads, her work was shared and used elsewhere in ways she had not predicted nor endorsed. I do not wish to overstate the impact of Peachgate, which seemed mainly to contribute increased profitability, as well as increased anxiety over cyberbullying, for Starr. Perhaps the people sharing Starr's work to widespread ridicule were not caught up in domestic heteropessimism to begin with. Nevertheless, Peachgate did demonstrate that the semiotic openness of Starr's comics worked beyond her intentions, allowing people to use it in ways *not* characteristic of an intimate public.

Conclusion

Similarly to how Berlant treats female complaint novels and film, my aim with this article has been to open a space of curiosity about a form of comics that are, at once, wildly successful and deeply off-putting, depending on the recipient. Most people presumably land somewhere between those two positions. The 'problem' with Starr's comics may well be what they were, if crudely, criticized for on Twitter: that they create an intimate public stagnated in its own oppression, with no systemic change in sight and no one to benefit but Starr herself (and the advertisers and shareholders of Instagram). This view, however, somewhat flattens the impact the comics have on Starr's followers and critics alike, who circulate and repurpose her comics in a variety of ways. Because Starr's comics are semiotically capacious enough, despite their seemingly monolithic aesthetic messaging, to warrant multiple interpretations and uses, they retain virtual meanings beyond face value. Indeed, because there are no actual faces, the affective ambiguity serves purposes beyond reifying the conditions that are so frustrating to their creator. Although sometimes cruel in tone, the initial Twitter posts mocking Starr's work were decidedly not roped into Starr's (assumed) politics, although aiding in their circulation.

While I agree with Brouillette's description of Starr's work as engaging in domestic heteropessimism, I am less satisfied with the suggestion that Starr is simply reproducing the conditions of her own oppression and conditioning others to do the same. Brouillette concedes that "One can identify with aspects of heteropessimism and still be engaged in looking toward the revolutionary horizon, of course" (2023, n.p.). The next sentence, however, begins with the word "Yet," lamenting that "so many of its expressions do the opposite" (Brouillette, 2023, n.p.). Criticizing the politics of influential creators is a worthwhile endeavor but should not uncritically assume that their audiences will give over wholesale to those politics. The kinds of creative expression, shaped by activist sensibilities if not examples of actual activism, that are shared by Starr and her peers present so new a phenomenon that we have only begun to map its effects. On the one hand, Starr seems to be exploiting the private financial gain made possible by her following. Her creation of the subscriber-only feed, remaining on the Instagram platform, and her prioritization of 'wifelife' over 'momlife' in many of her posts suggests a longer-term strategy for remaining in the conditions that cause her distress but also create an income. Domestic heteropessimism, indeed—and cruelly optimistic, following Berlant's parlance.

On the other hand, however, we do not yet know what Starr or her many followers will do with the community and consciousness-raising done within it. If the abolition of heterosexual marriage is not the only route to systemic change in gender relations, incremental change may yet come from having one's domestic oppression literally drawn out in bright appealing colors, inviting reflection and extending community. Perhaps some of the people advocating for Starr's divorce in the comments will themselves leave marriages or at least set out a set of demands. As the dynamics of social media continue to develop and work by artists like Starr continues to be shared, we should remain attentive to the publics and critiques that arise from their circulation, within and beyond the intent of the instacartoonist.

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Notes

1 While this platform has since been rebranded as 'X,' I refer to it as Twitter throughout, since this was the name at the time of the controversy and the term used throughout the sources I draw on.

2 For the purposes of this article, I do not dwell on the distinctions between comics (understood as an artform also known as 'sequential art') and cartoons (which can, in this context, be understood as 'single-panel comics'). Starr, as well as many of her 'mom Insta-cartoonist' colleagues, share a mixture of cartoons and comics, and thus my characterization of their work is similarly agnostic regarding the finer distinctions.

3 Following Flowers, I note that this identification is always shaped by norms of whiteness, cisgender, and other 'default' identities, most of which Starr herself embodies. Not everyone is able to see themselves represented by Starr, even if she has significantly expanded the representational space of her avatar.

4 It is worth noting that Morrison is writing on the cusp of the transformation of blogging into increasingly platformed influencer work (see Hund, 2023), and that later work on 'mommy bloggers' is less optimistic about their radical potential in a post-Recession platformed economy (see e.g. Taylor, 2016).

5 Berlant's subsequent work posited the notion of 'cruel optimism' as the ultimate outcome of the intimate publics that form around popular culture, in particular.