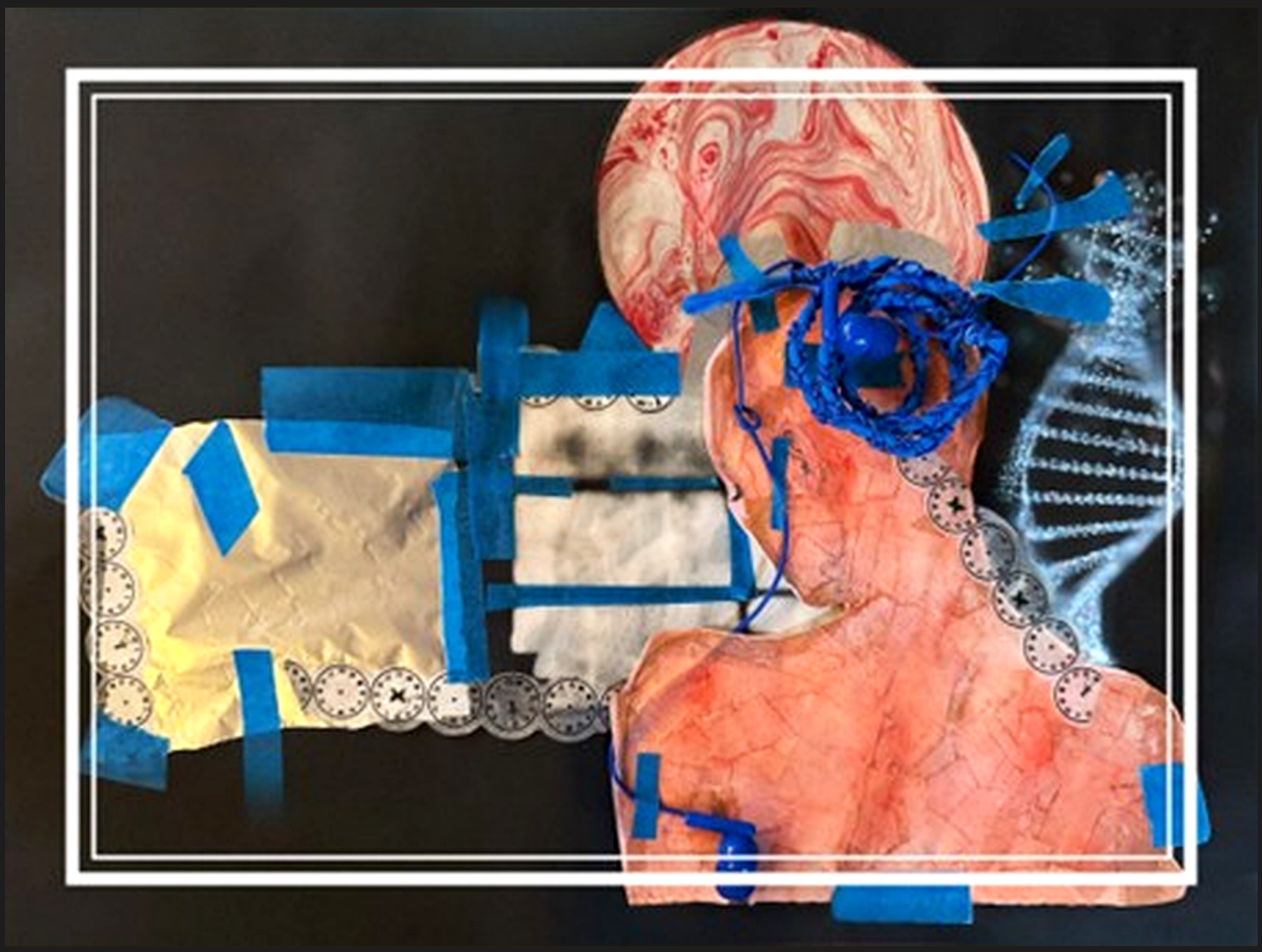
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(EN)GENDERING THE DIGITAL

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ÅRGANG 39, NR. 01. | 2026

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ISSN-online: 2245-6937

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DANMARKS FRIE FORSKNINGSFOND
INDEPENDENT RESEARCH FUND DENMARK

Udgivelsen af Kvinder, Køn & Forskning er støttet af Danmarks Frie Forskningsfond og Hulda Pedersens Legat.

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Redaktionsledelsens forord

Det digitale er blevet en grundlæggende infrastruktur for vores hverdagsliv. Vi arbejder, elsker, organiserer os, søger viden, diskuterer politik, dyrker sex, møder hinanden og fremstiller os selv gennem digitale teknologier og platforme. Samtidig får algoritmiske systemer og de store techvirksomheder, der ejer og driver dem, stadig større indflydelse på, hvad vi ser, hvem der bliver synlige, hvordan mennesker kategoriseres, og hvilken viden der bliver mulig at producere. Med den hastige udbredelse af generativ kunstig intelligens bliver denne indflydelse stadig mere mærkbar i vores sociale og politiske liv, vores intime relationer og den akademiske vidensproduktion.

For kønsforskningen samler det digitale en række af feltets mest grundlæggende spørgsmål om magt, forskel, krop, subjektivitet og vidensproduktion. Digitale teknologier griber ind i eksisterende kønnede, racialiserede og seksualiserede magtforhold (Nirmalarajan, 2025; Sløk-Andersen, 2011), samtidig med at de skaber nye betingelser for identitet, fællesskab, intimitet, arbejde og politisk deltagelse (Myles & Lewis, 2019; Løntoft, 2014; Raun, 2011). Sociale medier kan skabe forbindelser og modoffentligheder (Fabricius, 2024), og de fungerer samtidig som infrastrukturer for misogyni, racisme, homo- og transfobi og andre former for digital vold (Kristensen, 2023; Uldbjerg, 2021). Data kan synliggøre ulighed, mens de kategorier, som data organiseres gennem, selv kan reproducere og forstærke den (Henningsen, Steffensen & Christensen, 2017; Hill, 2017; Sløk-Andersen, 2011). Generativ kunstig intelligens kan udvide adgangen til kommunikation og vidensproduktion og aktualiserer samtidig velkendte feministiske spørgsmål om autoritet, bias, arbejde, krop og epistemisk magt (Birhane & Guest, 2021).

I regi af velfærdsstaten anvendes digitale og algoritmiske systemer i stigende grad til at kategorisere borgere, forudsige risici og understøtte eller automatisere administrative beslutninger om økonomi, sociale ydelser, sikkerhed, familieforhold og adgang til offentlige tilbud. Når historiske data, administrative kategorier og eksisterende sociale uligheder bygges ind i sådanne systemer, kan diskriminerende mønstre reproduceres i stor skala og samtidig blive vanskeligere at gennemskue og anfægte (Nirmalarajan, 2025; Sløk-Andersen, 2011).

Feministisk forskning har en lang tradition for at undersøge medier og teknologier som steder, hvor køn produceres, reguleres, forhandles og udfordres. Tidlige feministiske medieanalyser rettede blandt andet opmærksomheden mod repræsentation: Hvem blev synlig i medierne, hvordan blev kvinder og mænd fremstillet, hvem fik lov til at tale, og hvilke kønnede forestillinger cirkulerede gennem film, tv, reklamer og nyhedsmedier? Gennem årene er disse spørgsmål blevet forbundet med analyser af selve mediernes og teknologiernes arkitekturer og virkemåder. Medier former offentligheder, kroppe og subjektiviteter, og teknologier bærer sociale normer, kategorier og magtrelationer med sig (Løntoft, 2014; Nebeling Petersen, Nielsen & Nørgaard, 2014; Raun, 2011).

Feministisk medieforskning udgør i dag et bredt, tværdisciplinært forskningsfelt, der forbinder spørgsmål om repræsentation, kultur og offentlighed med analyser af teknologi, materialitet, affekt, subjektivering, køn og seksualitet samt politik og økonomi. Medier udgør her både kulturelle udtryk, teknologiske infrastrukturer og sociale betingelser for, hvordan køn og seksualitet kan leves, erfares og gøres.

Som litteraturlisten til dette forord vidner om, går *Kvinder, Køn & Forsknings* engagement i medier tre årtier tilbage. I 1995 udkom temanummeret *Køn og medier*, og allerede tre år senere fulgte *Køn i cyberspace*. På det tidspunkt var internettet endnu et relativt nyt fænomen, og "cyberspace" betegnede et tilsyneladende nyt socialt rum, hvis muligheder endnu var vanskelige at overskue. Artiklerne spurgte blandt andet, hvad cyberspace overhovedet var og kunne betyde for køn (Markussen, 1998). De undersøgte pigers brug af computere og spørgsmålet om en mulig "afmaskulinisering af IT" (Håpnes & Rasmussen, 1998), ligesom de analyserede fænomenet chatgrupper og de nye "kropsløse" og "kønsløse" muligheder, der opstod gennem "computer cross-dressing" (Stuedahl, 1998).

Set fra 2026 er der noget på én gang historisk fremmedartet og bemærkelsesværdigt genkendeligt over artiklernes spørgsmål. Mange af de konkrete teknologier, begreber og digitale praksisser har ændret sig radikalt. Alligevel beskæftigede artiklerne sig allerede i 1990'erne med spørgsmål, som fortsat præger debatten i dag: om adgang til teknologi, digitale muligheder for at forskyde køn og identitet og risikoen for, at eksisterende sociale hierarkier kunne genskabes gennem nye teknologier. Med inspiration fra blandt andre Donna Haraways "cyborgfeminisme" blev det teknologiske og det sociale tænkt sammen (Markussen, 1998; se også Lykke, 1999), samtidig med at nummeret allerede dengang advarede mod den fremskridtsoptimisme og historieløshed, som let kunne ledsage forestillingen om internettet som et nyt og frigørende rum.

Da tidsskriftet i 2014 igen satte forholdet mellem medier og køn på dagsordenen med temanummeret *Medier, offentligheder, køn*, havde både internettet og forskningsspørgsmålene forandret sig. Sociale medier var blevet en del af hverdagen, og interessen rettede sig i højere grad mod medier som sociale og materielle miljøer. Temanummeret beskrev digitale medier som steder, hvor mennesker opholder sig, skaber relationer og danner offentligheder og modoffentligheder (Nebeling Petersen, Nielsen & Nørgaard, 2014). Fokus var på, hvordan medier aktivt medvirker til at producere virkeligheder, kroppe og subjektiviteter. Få år senere flyttede opmærksomheden sig igen. I 2017 udgav tidsskriftet *Quantitative Methods, Big Data and Gender.* Her blev data selv gjort til et feministisk metodologisk og politisk spørgsmål. Hvordan kan feministisk forskning arbejde med kvantitative metoder uden at naturalisere de kategorier, den undersøger? Hvordan får tal og datavisualisering autoritet? Hvilke politiske konsekvenser har de måder, data produceres, kategoriseres og fremstilles på? (Henningsen, Steffensen & Christensen, 2017)

Gennem årene har nye medieteknologier føjet nye problemstillinger til de gamle spørgsmål om repræsentation og adgang er blevet suppleret af spørgsmål om cyberspace og digitale identiteter, medierede offentligheder, dataficering, algoritmer og kunstig intelligens. Flere af de feministiske grundspørgsmål har samtidig vist sig bemærkelsesværdigt vedholdende gennem de sidste tre årtier: Hvem får adgang og autoritet? Hvem og hvad repræsenteres? Hvordan produceres køn og seksualitet gennem medier og teknologier? Hvilke former for liv og fællesskab bliver mulige? Hvilke hierarkier reproduceres? Og hvordan kan feministisk forskning udvikle metoder, der gør disse processer synlige og mulige at kritisere?

Det er denne lange samtale, det aktuelle temanummer *(En)Gendering the Digital* skriver sig ind i. Temaredaktørerne tager i deres indledning blandt andet afsæt i 1990'ernes cyberfeministiske forestillinger om internettet som et potentielt frigørende rum og undersøger, hvad der er sket med dette løfte i en digital kultur, som i stigende grad organiseres gennem globale platforme, kommercielle infrastrukturer, algoritmiske systemer og kunstig intelligens. Nummerets bidrag bevæger sig fra generativ kunstig intelligens, digitale arkiver og feministiske datametoder til trans-sundhedsfællesskaber, digital medieret chemsex, online misogyni, manosfæren og digital militarisme. På tværs af disse forskellige genstandsfelter træder det digitale frem som et konfliktfyldt terræn, hvor kønnede og seksualiserede magtrelationer reproduceres, omformes og udfordres.

Da *Køn i cyberspace* udkom i 1998, var forestillingen om cyberspace som et relativt åbent eksperiment med identitet, kommunikation og sociale relationer stadig ny og genstand for både håb og kritik. I dag ved vi langt mere om, hvordan digitale rum formes af og selv former kroppe, infrastrukturer, økonomier samt politiske og sociale magtforhold. Alligevel står en grundlæggende feministisk problemstilling fortsat åben: Hvilke relationer, vidensformer, offentligheder, identiteter og måder at leve på kan digitale teknologier muliggøre, og under hvilke betingelser? Det nye temanummer fastholder denne spænding og viser, hvorfor feministiske, queer, trans, intersektionelle

og dekoloniale perspektiver er afgørende for at forstå den digitale samtid.

Vi vil gerne rette en stor tak til temaredaktion, Maja Brandt Andreasen, Kai Roland Green, Tara Mehrabi og João Florêncio, for deres omfattende arbejde med at udvikle, samle og redigere dette temanummer. Tak også til alle nummerets forfattere for deres bidrag til et felt, som udvikler sig med næsten samme hast som de teknologier, det undersøger, og for at åbne nye spørgsmål om forholdet mellem køn, seksualitet, magt og digital teknologi.

God læselyst!

På redaktionens vegne,

Michael Nebeling Petersen, Camilla Bruun Eriksen og Mons Bissenbakker

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(En)Gendering the Digital

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INTRODUCTION BY THE SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS

3 X 0 X 1 = THE GENDERED ECONOMY OF THE INTERNET

It has been nearly 30 years since Sadie Plant's *Zeroes + Ones* rang a bell of optimism for women in the emerging digital age. A 'new technoculture' was spreading in the wake of the mass internet, and Plant saw in computing and coding 'the quintessence of the female condition (simulation, connectivity, patchworking)' (Slater, 2009). This was a technology to expose the artificiality of gendered performance. With the incoming internet, many of the so-called cyberfeminists saw a space where 'all physical, bodily cues' could be 'removed from communication' (Wajcman, 2006). Internet-mediated connection beyond bodies was imagined to set-aside the judgements and discriminations afflicting women, queer, non-binary and gender non-conforming people. Multiplicity could spring from zeroes + ones. Plant's evocation through *numbers* drew explicitly on French psychoanalytic feminist Luce Irigaray (1985)—finding in digital code a resonance of Irigaray's account of the female sex as both devalued as zero (less than), but also crucially 'not *one*' (more than)—sexuality as multiple, non-linear, and dispersed.

At the same time, elsewhere in the 1990s techno fug, a then 30 year old law graduate named Peter Thiel was gathering the seed funding for a mass technology empire—one that would go on to produce Paypal, Palentir and Facebook. Thiel began the industrial and intellectual enterprise that would forge his 2014 book, advising on the success that birthed these digital behemoths. His text—evocatively called *Zero to One* (Thiel, 2014)—saw digital culture through the prism of entrepreneurship, frequently now included on undergraduate reading lists for business studies. Subtitled *Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future*, Thiel's book saw in the enigmatic move from 0 to 1 a singular "act of creation", when "something fresh and strange" could spring forth from the mind of the early-stage innovator. Even at the mathematical level, Thiel had reasons to be fascinated by the simple act of addition. As a baby, Peter probably learned to count by starting at One, as most children do. Going up from there to Two, Three, Four or even Five would have been taxing enough for a young brain. Starting at One is pretty fast and efficient but, as the Western Mathematicians of the Middle Ages came to realize, it is far from the whole story.

So, if the doyenne of cyberfeminism and one of digital culture's most controversial entrepreneurs agree on one thing, it appears to be the foundational importance of the number one and the number zero to our technological world. Zero is what Simon Steven called the "true and natural beginning" (Rotman, 1987)—a space out of which counting emerges, introduced into the West by the Hindu numerical system. Realizing that absence could be productive, calculated and even counted-upon was a significant disruption in the intellectual landscape that would form modern Western culture. Today, zero and one—the language of binary code—is felt in every digital interaction of a world increasingly reliant on computing. It resonates, too, in our lived experience as inheritors of modernism: a system of meaning involving binary pairs becoming binary opposition, productive categorizations of "nature/culture, nature/history, natural/human, resource/product" (Haraway, 2001). That enticingly easiest binary of all—man and woman—operates like all others to provide clarity and categorical calm in an unpredictable world, just flexible enough to set the two genders apart or to unite them as common conservations against anything daring to stand outside.

This is the background to the special issue you see before you—more likely on your screen than on a printed page. This special issue began with an open call for papers in 2025 by editors of KKF, aiming to revisit the various (en)genderings of the digital world that we increasingly find ourselves enveloped in. Submissions were received from across the Nordics from a variety of disciplines, with an encouragement for intersectional, feminist, queer/trans, decolonial, and posthuman perspectives. As editors, we felt that representation from junior scholars was of particular importance. In trying to cultivate a wide-scoping, non-hierarchical process arranged around

interweaved themes, we aimed to reflect the hope of early cyberfeminists in the emancipatory possibilities of the early internet. Yet, zeroing-in on the gendered world behind the textual journeys of Plant, Irigaray and Thiel's texts, suggests that such faith in the internet as a genderless space appear massively compromised. Rather, a powerful set of actors in the tech ecosystem benefit from a kind of 'digital patriarchy' (Little and Winch 2021). Plant's complementarity of zero + one becomes Thiel's assertion of progress: the relentless march from zero to one is the search for success at all cost, certainty at all opportunity, and splendid isolation.

In working around these tensions, our issue of nine articles and a book review is arranged in the following themes:

- Gendered Interventions in the Flow of Information
- Counterpublics and Digital Activism
- Mediated Misogyny, and
- Rethinking Methods in the Age of Datafication and Algorithmic Socialities

GENDERED INTERVENTIONS IN THE FLOW OF INFORMATION

As the immersion of the digital into everyday life becomes ever more intense, radical changes in information technology—notably generative Artificial Intelligence—provoke new questions and concerns. Within gender studies, GenAI is considered an epistemic disruption that may be compounding informational injustices – responding with answers "against women, girls and sexual and gender minorities" (Barry & Stephenson, 2025, p. 2). These forms of delegitimisation emerge from an account of AI as "rationalist and masculinist from its inception" (Toupin, 2024, p. 591). AI is just the later chapter here in a story of the proliferation of scientific knowledge as mechanistic and divorced from the body in its worldview. As Frederik Vejlin explores in his book review of Ericka Johnson's edited volume *How That Robot Made Me Feel* (2025), these dimensions even resonate across AI's application to emotional matters—that which (summarizing Jennifer Rhee's chapter) continues to make 'foundational commitments to the theory of basic emotions and the theory of mindblindness [which] reproduce patterns of deauthorisation along lines of race and disability' (Vejlin, this issue). When such a technology manifests not as an executive tool, but as a constantly available, proto-human companion, further questions of gender arise. Feminist labour scholarship identifies the continuity of women's socially accepted roles in the affective labours through which emotion is both produced and managed, with chatbots continuing to "comfort and reassure users, while reinforcing fantasies of inexhaustible and undemanding availability" (Pinzón-Arteaga, 2026, p. 143).

Several texts in this issue refer to contestations of the access to (and regulation of) data in specific gendered forms. For Mariam Khaled and Jakob Kleofas, GenAI technologies are more active than has been recognized in "the production, circulation, and stabilization of gendered meaning", not merely reflecting it but enacting it. This performative reading goes beyond Butler and Haraway to zone in on the enforcement of identity through "probabilistic citation". In exploring how several different chatbots perform gender, the study sketches that which is often less visible to human actors: that recurring and re-performed labour of establishing a gender is "mechanized and hyper-visible" to the readers of AI-generated texts. Their method is an original destabilization of human and AI relationships; the multiple case study sets up a challenge to 'the anthropocentric assumptions of qualitative research' by the interviewing of a 'non-subject'—seven different AI chatbot systems. The result—a Citational Logic of Algorithmic Mimicry (CLAM) – emphasizes cultural scripts as powered by data and set off a structural path of reproduction that should concern all those for whom gendered performance is an act of agency.

The proliferation of AI-related research, commentary and fervour should, however, not lead the information specialist into believing questions of retention, memory and archiving are only answerable in terms of a generative machine. Significant moments in the history of digital archiving are at risk of being elided by AI. Rachel Pierce's text in this issue makes an important intervention in the historiography of digital archiving by tracing women's and gendered archives in Sweden as an example of such tensions of informational retention. Pierce argues that what can be considered and approached as "an archive" has been radically changed due to the networked nature of documentation that digitalization has caused. Pierce finds archives linking their practices to "democracy and inclusivity" whilst also dealing with different interpretations of these terms—particularly for groups whose data may be in a less formalised state or may require more resources to be retained. From an institutional standpoint, whilst it is the 'capture' and 'deployment' of AI technologies by corporations that is currently of concern to many feminist data scholars (Klein & D'Ignazio, 2024), Pierce finds particular challenges in "the lack of preparedness on the part of state institutions"—those who still hold significant archival power. While the author is particularly interested in archival studies, questions about what constitutes data in the onto-digital turn—how such data could be collected, verified and analyzed, by whom–and what sort of knowledge they create is relevant for gender studies at large. By drawing on a 'feminist "information activism" perspective', Pierce's question uncovers from beneath the current AI fervour a more profound question of preservation in the digitalised world: "If our lives now extend into and are influenced by what happens online, what is the future of women's and gender archives?".

COUNTERPUBLICS AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM

As had occurred with earlier developments in communication technologies, the invention of the internet catalysed changes in our understanding of the public sphere and, consequently, in political participation. While having initially been theorised in Kantian political terms by the late Jürgen Habermas (1991) as a space of debate among equals on matters of common concern, the "public sphere" would come to be famously critiqued by feminist theorist Nancy Fraser (1992) on grounds of how its original theorisations universalised a particular class of bourgeois men and contributed to the hegemonisation of their thinking. If, following Habermas (1991), the public sphere could be conceived as the social sphere of "private people come together as a public," to "debate" through "public use of their reason" (27), Fraser highlighted the ways in which access to that public space of political debate was indexed to people's identities.

Yet, according to Michael Warner (1992, 2005), Fraser missed something in her centring of the ways in which social inequalities grounded on, inter alia, one's race, gender, class position or sexuality lead to different levels of access to the public sphere and create different counterhegemonic counterpublics. For Warner, identities and subject positions do not wholly determine the ways in which private individuals relate to a public. Our belonging to a public is not defined by who we are. For Warner, a public is always self-organised not by virtue of the identities of its members but, instead, by means of a mode of address. Publics are nothing but a discursive space that brings strangers together. What unites the members of a public is thus not a shared identity, but their experience of feeling addressed, interpellated by a particular discourse.

Given the centrality of discourse in the formation of publics, it is no surprise that studies of publics and counterpublics have often paid close attention to the media infrastructures that sustain them. From studies of postwar British youth subcultures that have discussed teen TV and pop music (Hall & Jefferson 1975) to later studies of club cultures that have attended to the role of mass-, micro- and niche-media in the production and reproduction of clubbing counterpublics (Thornton 1995), media

and communication infrastructures don't just bring together individuals with pre-existing attributes in common, as Habermas (1991) argued. Instead, they actively constitute that public through their mode of address, shaping the subjectivities of its members and their experience of commonality among strangers (Warner, 2005). In doing so, those technologies perform a mediation of the world, understood not as remediation—translation or recirculation of what already is—but as the bringing-forth of new forms of life, and new human and more-than-human relations (Kember & Zylinska 2012).

If twentieth-century counterpublics were forged and reproduced by peer-to-peer exchanges sustained by subcultural media such as commercial magazines and DIY zines (Hebdige 1979; Hilderbrand 2013; Johnson 2019; Meeker 2006; Thornton 1995), the advent of the internet and, later, Web 2.0 radically altered the shape of those communication networks. Defined through virality, the new digital networks bring forth digital counterpublics sustained by "many-to-many" forms of decentralised communication often conceived, by both progressive and conservative voices alike, as capable of "infecting" or "corrupting" hegemonic discourse and ideas (Florêncio 2024; Galloway & Thacker 2007; Hester 2018; Laboria Cuboniks 2018; Russell 2020). These technological changes have led some researchers to expand on what they perceived to be the limitations of counterpublics as a framework of analysis. Just as "subculture" was critiqued in the wake of a proliferation of composite mosaic-like identities at the turn of the 21st-century (Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003; Ulusoy & Fırat 2018), scholars of social media discourse have noted the ways in which these newer discursive formations, often studied in relation to the online growth of far-right discourse, complicate extant views of counterpublics as counterhegemonic by default (Kaiser & Rauschfleisch 2019; Kavada & Poell 2021).

Feminist hacktivists and digital feminist counterpublics, for instance, have for some time been taking advantage of online platforms for coalition building, advocacy, production of counterhegemonic discourse, and political education and consciousness-raising (Barker-Plummer & Barker-Plummer 2017; Bennett & Segerberg 2012; Berg, König & Koster 2020). While these had led to global movements such as #MeToo, these particular feminist strategies also received criticism (Banet-Weiser & Rottenberg 2020). Some argued that digital activism hypervisibilises individual activists rather than critical masses fighting for structural changes, as well as centring on neoliberal logics of individual action, responsibility and self-governance that reinforce the contemporary atomisation of the social (De Beistegui, 2018). Others, however, have argued that, despite all these challenges, contemporary feminist resistance continues to learn from and work around the limitations of platform activism (Lindqvist 2020, 2023, forthcoming).

Digital communication does not take place in a smooth, attrition-free network of information flows. Contemporary digital communication is structured by corporate platform architectures that shape processes of counterpublic address, counterpublic knowledges, and thus, counterpublic formations. One of the most significant ways in which platform architectures and their governance have impacted digital counterpublics has been through a blanket deplatforming of sexually explicit content, a practice grounded on the view that all sexual content is inherently dangerous, especially to vulnerable groups such as children and teenagers (Molldrem, 2018). Yet, this occurs at the same time as the whole of contemporary media culture is highly sexualised, when sex and sexuality dominate not only social media platforms but everything from fashion advertising, film, art, or indeed sexual education content, making decisions on where to draw a line difficult, arbitrary, or driven by political investments and ideologies (Paasonen et al. 2021, 92; Tiidenberg, 2021). Indeed, as Jenny Sundén, Susanna Paasonen, and Katrin Tiidenberg (2026) argue, this deplatformisation of sex constitutes "a categorical dismissal of the fact that human sociality is inclusive of sexuality, that sexuality is deeply social and builds social ties and attachments" (p. 9). Sexuality has always been central both to the

formation of the public sphere and to the proliferation of counterpublics. If "the personal is political" (Hanisch 1970), that is because intimate life is always "connected to, structured by, or regulated through the public sphere" (Plummer, 2003, p. 70).

Apart from this, the growing deplatformisation of sex has also had repercussions for research on sexual counterpublics, as Kristian Møller's contribution to this issue highlights. In his article, Møller draws from a corpus of 450 viewer comments on 41 DIY chemsex videos uploaded to Pornhub, that is, videos centring sexualised drug use among men who have sex with men. The comments, which Møller gathered in 2019, predated Pornhub's 2021 "purge" of content and search terms that did not meet the new standards the platform put in place to prevent the dissemination of potentially illegal content, including the blocking of "chemsex" as a search term due to the illegal nature of drug use, which in turn made finding chemsex porn more difficult. A consequence of this, the article shows, was the disappearance of a digital forum where chemsex participants were, under the protection of anonymity, able to comment on videos and articulate in narrative form their chemsex imaginaries. Through this, they forged digital counterpublics that mediated anti-drug societal norms with drugged-up sexual pleasures by means of a discursive construction of "chemical companionship" between the human body and the drug consumed.

Digital counterpublics structured by platform architectures are also at the centre of Emma Machado de Souza's study of digital trans health communities on Reddit in this issue. Through analysis of 826 discussion threads from six trans subreddits, Machado de Souza shows how digital trans health communities constitute what the author terms "engaged counterpublics." This refers to counterpublics that emerge not merely by opposition to hegemonic medical discourse on trans health but through a more complex strategic move that involves both appropriation of biomedical knowledge and construction of experiential authority. This, as Machado de Souza argues, offers insight into a contemporary digital counterpublic that can't be reduced to Fraser's theorisation of "subaltern counterpublics" precisely due to the way appropriated medical knowledge is central to the formation of trans health counterpublics.

Similar dynamics of counterpublic formation structured by both affective practices and critical engagement with—and active resignification of—content also emerge in Lena Sotevik's contribution to this issue. Drawing from eight interviews with eighteen Swedish school girls aged 16–17, focusing on their responses to and engagement with food and eating content on social media, Sotevik shows how young girls are not mere passive consumers of what is often content governed by highly gendered norms concerning food and femininity. Being active agents in the affective economy of social media content, these girls took meaningful, critical and often ambivalent stances towards the content they were shown. Importantly, participants described how eating videos can be used as ways of managing the stress or shame associated with particular gendered expectations regarding eating habits and body image. In that way, watching someone eat on social media can provide a sense of companionship between the viewers and the people on screen, especially when the viewers, too, are eating.

MEDIATED MISOGYNY

While misogyny is often defined as the hatred of women because they are women, Kate Manne's influential notion that "[M]isogyny is not about hating women. It is about controlling them" (Manne, 2016) makes way for a broader conceptualisation of misogyny as structural and systemic. Misogyny thus operates within a system of patriarchy where it functions to survey, control, and police individuals and punish those that do not submit to the required, normative gendered behaviours. Loewen-Walker further notes that such a conceptualisation of misogyny allows for intersectional analyses where the logic of misogyny policies not only control women's behaviours but enforces "intersecting systems of white supremacy, heteronormativity and cisnormativity"

(Loewen-Walker, 2024, p. 66).

Networked misogyny, which Banet-Weiser and Maddocks define as "the structural, cultural and technological conditions through which misogyny circulates" (Banet-Weiser & Maddocks, 2023, p. 369) comprise the violent and hateful expressions directed at women on digital platforms. Research evidences how social media platforms facilitates the spread of online misogyny as well as (and often in conjunction with) other harmful ideologies, such as racism, homophobia, and transphobia.

Scholarly attention has thus also been focused on the economy of the platforms. First, is the critical attention to the neoliberal economy of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018) where platform algorithms encourage constant engagement by content creators while pushing misogyny and other forms of harmful content on platform users. Second, is the role of recommender algorithms that push misogynist and anti-feminist content to boys and men.

Significantly, misogyny operates within a patriarchal logic which enforces both women's subordination and male dominance (Manne, 2017). Thus, much research has been focused on how online networks reproduce masculinist, anti-feminist, and misogynist ideologies—i.e. the manosphere. Traditionally characterised as a diverse ecosystem consisting of male-supremacist and anti-feminist groups (Gerrand et al., 2025), the manosphere has been the centre of scholarly attention for a decade while public, media, and political attention significantly increased in 2025 with the release of the TV show *Adolescence*. Based on the fundamental belief that feminist politics equals a misandrist 'war against men', the manosphere ideology frames feminist aims of gender equality as aiming to disadvantage men which in turn justifies misogynist discourse as well as the incitement of violence against women—both physical and sexual (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The early research on the manosphere identified the content as primarily existing on subcultural forums mainly consisting of men's rights activists, pick-up artists, Christian conservatives, male separatists (Men Going Their Own Way), and involuntary celibates (incels). However, recent years have seen a shift in the type and spread of content, as algorithms push the content on mainstream platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, and the content is to large extents now produced by high profile 'manfluencers' (manosphere influencers). Following this also means a shift in the type of content which now includes neo-masculinist paradigms of wellness, stoicism, and 'grindset' (i.e. self-improvement through hard work) as well as the monetarisation of male insecurity whereby manfluencers push pseudoscientific wellness rituals and products, as well as selling 'self-improvement' courses teaching dating strategies as well as financial schemes such as Andrew Tate's "The Real World".

Research is also emerging in the Nordics on online misogyny, particularly in Sweden where research on anti-feminism, misogyny, and digital violence has been particularly prominent (Hansson et al., 2024). Research and reports are starting to document a distinct Nordic manosphere characterised by hypermasculinity, misogyny, homophobia, and anti-gender (Cybernauterne, 2025; Langeland et al., 2022; Mogensen and Rand, 2020; Prøitz et al., 2022; Slaveykov et al., 2025). Furthermore, a Nordic Manosphere Research Network has been established to strengthen manosphere research across the Nordic countries and develop potential avenues for collaboration. Some research is emerging which aims to map and characterise manosphere participation, influence and characteristics of the individual countries. In Sweden much research has been conducted tracing extremist misogynist discourses in far-right digital spaces (Askanius et al., 2024; Francis, 2025), as well as research documenting the role of sexual violence and rape culture in the misogynist discourses (Brock & Askanius, 2026; Hansson et al., 2024). In Finland, some research has emerged on the manosphere (Venäläinen, 2022, 2023) and incels (Lounela, 2026) while the research in Norway has primarily been focused on incels (Langeland et al., 2022; Prøitz et al., 2022). Denmark has only seen very limited research on the manosphere, mostly in the form of reports by

NGOs (Beyer Gregersen et al., 2025; Cybernauterne, 2025; Mogensen & Helding Rand, 2019).

Some researchers focus on constructions of masculinity as a crucial way of understanding the logic and the practices of misogyny. Norocel et al. (2020), for example, explore the construction of white Nordic masculinities in Finish and Swedish far-right populist media and find that idealised Nordic masculinity is contingent on both hegemonic masculinity, heterosexuality, and whiteness. A significant amount of research has focused on the overlap of mediated misogyny with far-right rhetoric and white supremacist discourses. Askanius (2021), for example investigates the intersection of misogyny and racism in Swedish far-right digital cultures while Fangen (2020) demonstrates how a femonationalist (Farris, 2017) logic is employed in Norwegian anti-Muslim Facebook groups to simultaneously frame white Norwegian women as in danger of Muslim men and Muslim women as always oppressed. Finally, an emerging scholarship investigates how anti-gender discourses have spread in online space in the Nordic countries too, promoting misogyny, anti-feminism, anti-queer sentiments, and especially anti-trans discourses (Engebretsen, 2022; Hansen, 2021; Martinsson & Ericson, 2023).

Some of the articles in this issue address issues of misogyny, masculinities, and the manosphere in different ways. The article by Fredrik Langeland investigates misogynist and reactionary discourses of a Norwegian manosphere influencer. The influencer employs strategic ambiguity to his public persona navigating between a position of ideological entrepreneur (Finlayson, 2023) and ideological intermediary (Arnesson, 2023). Utilising humour and irony, he blends the playful with the political thus preserving plausible deniability in relation to some of the more overtly misogynist content.

Online misogyny is also the focal point in the article by Ozan Félix Sousbois and Hande Eslen-Ziya. Here the authors have applied affect theory and creative ethnography—specifically what they coin as "stamping methods"—to explore how young Norwegians reflect upon issues relating to online hate, misogyny, the manosphere, and anti-feminism. The participants engaged with affective orientations, such as anger, fear, ambivalence, and hope, which enabled them to negotiate critique, resilience, empathy for the victims, and engage with questions about the future. The authors then argue that affective engagement with online misogyny is both reactive and productive which demonstrates the value of art-based methods for developing feminist knowledge production.

The article by Marie Naja Lauritzen Dias discusses notions of masculinity and femininity in relation to the way military war efforts and personas are represented. Discussing the phenomenon of *cutified military aesthetics,* the author explores how a feminised, cute mode of militarized imagery reorganises how militarism is perceived, felt and normalised. While the figure of the soldier traditionally has functioned as an emblem of masculinity in visual culture, the visual styles explored by the author demonstrate a turn from a hyper-masculine war-imagery towards a feminised and cutified military aesthetics in contemporary digital platform culture.

The three articles have in common that they warn against potential misogynist and gender reactionary tendencies that are repackaged (in humour, ambiguity, etc), contributing to a potential normalisation of misogyny and hypermasculinity.

RETHINKING METHODS IN THE AGE OF DATAFICATION AND ALGORITHMIC SOCIALITIES

The proliferation of online spheres and digital innovations—combined with big data/thick data economy and AI-fication of bodies, identities, and everyday life—has not only shifted the epistemological planes in research, but also methods and methodologies. As Karen Gregory and colleagues (2015) argue, such digital transformation has created a "new onto-logic of sociality or the social itself" that challenges and

escapes common sociological methods and theories. This "datalogical turn" (ibid.) urges researchers to rethink research methodologies and methods common in sociological studies and humanities, combining and/or reinventing old and new modes of data collection, processing, and analysis. For example, how to expand and reinvent ethnography into "digital ethnography" (Brudvig 2025; Underberg-Goode 2025), qualitative discourse analysis to Soft Data analysis (versus Big Data) (Lindgren & Eriksson Krutrök, 2024), visual analysis in arts and cultural studies to digital visual analysis of for instance memes (MacDonald, 2025), and media studies to social media studies (Caldeira, 2024).

Other methods are provoked by the appearance of newer and more complex technologies, in need of sophisticated analytical tools. Ericka Johnson's recent book *How That Robot Made Me Feel* (2025) is found by Frederik Vejlin (in his review for this issue) to display such a plurality of methods as to be considered a 'feminist intervention, asserting the legitimacy of introspection, design fiction, and ethnographic observation alongside the quantified experimental paradigm that, to an extent, still dominates HRI'. Other authors discuss the possibilities and limits of using AI in methods such as computational text analysis (Lindgren & Eriksson Krutrök, 2024), social network analysis (Knoke & Yang, 2019), platform analysis (Lindqvist, 2023), and algorithmic studies (Buolamwini 2023; D'Ignazio & Klein 2020) to capture "the digital datafication of everyday life" (Leurs, 2017, p. 130). Methods such as "digital mapping" (Fileborn, 2023), "digital iteration and digital mundanes" (Lee, 2025; Leszczynski, 2020), and "scrolling back, walking through, and going along methods" (Moran et al. 2024; Møller & Robards 2019) are now constructing a digital method toolbox in social sciences and humanities.

As algorithmic processing and big data are emerging as a "new regime of power/knowledge" (Leurs, 2017, p. 130) they also beg the question of what counts as data. For instance, doing archival research is not limited anymore to being physically in archives and going through material documents as massive amounts of various forms of data are produced, documented, and circulated on digital networks—a situation Pierce brings out strongly in this special issue. Pierce brings the example of feminist activism and how a great deal of such practices are taking place on networked publics. They further argue how matters of data and data collection become even more complicated as "women's and gender historical material" are fluid and contested. For instance, feminist activism online may not always be in pair with feminist conceptual traditions (such as intersectionality), begging the question of what constitutes data when working with such fluid yet highly regulated digital material (for instance by legal frames such as the GDPR or by business ownership). As such, drawing on information activism and community archives in the Swedish context, the author discusses Swedish institutions' preparedness "for future collection of women's and gender archival materials" as they ask what kind of "gender history will be available to future researchers, based on these materials".

Indeed, there has been a surge of research in gender studies engaging with social media, the online sphere, and platform studies, as these platforms generate new forms of data for understanding sociocultural and political articulations of gender (for example, in this issue, pieces by Møller and Stoevik). Other scholars attend to the affective and generative capacities of these platforms for feminist movements and for assembling networked feminist publics (Coffey & Kanai 2023; Poornimadarshini 2025; Vachhani, 2024), thereby committing to what Asma Mehan terms "digital feminist placemaking" (2024; see also Machado de Souza in this issue). The potential for engagement and resistance to the manosphere using arts-based methods is also explored by Sousbois and Eslen-Ziya in this issue, who discuss the potential for an affective engagement when research participants create art to negotiate their emotional reactions to online misogyny.

While methods attending to social media focus more on the sociocultural aspects of digital and gender

matters, data feminism—or more broadly, feminist engagement with digital data—addresses the politics and processes through which big data is produced, extracted, collected/archived, analyzed, and mobilized into action. For instance, scholars such as Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein (2023; 2024), and Ruha Benjamin (2023) examine how digital data is entangled with power relations related to gender, race, sexuality, and more. They highlight cases in which the absence of data on gendered and racialized groups, as well as biased data (conscious or unconscious, including systematic bias), can harm marginalized groups—particularly in a context where data and datafication are increasingly framed as neutral and objective. In this sense, data feminism critically reflects on practices of data production, distribution, and ownership, as well as on the frames of engagement and politics underpinning Big Data (Michailidou, 2018). Data feminism as a methodology argues for a situated chain of representations in which data is understood as always already embedded and partial (Lee & Johnsson, 2025). Accordingly, data feminism aligns with what Wiens and colleagues describe as "materializing data," that is, moving data out of purely abstract or screen-based forms and into embodied, material, and sensory practices—such as making, handling, dwelling with, or spatially arranging data (2020). This perspective foregrounds questions of data's entanglement with uneven power relations, systematic and institutionalized exclusion, and the unequal effects of datafication in everyday life.

As our earlier description of feminist dimensions in AI research demonstrated, Feminist algorithmic studies is yet another methodological approach that has been influential in gender research. Ranging from human–computer interaction and robotics to synthetic data and algorithmic justice, this field aims to analyse the intersection of intersectional power relations with algorithmic cycles and artificial intelligence—from design to prompting, training, and performance—and how such power relations are reproduced, shifted, and transformed with and by algorithms (In this issue, Khaled and Kleofas; See also Benjamin, 2023; Buolamwini, 2023). It often adopts a posthuman perspective in which AI performativity and AI material infrastructures are understood as agential. The method seeks to understand these complex material–discursive and relational performative infrastructures by addressing which normative values and biases are encoded in AI solutions; how representation and representativeness are imagined and replicated, for example in synthetic data; and how these systems impact marginalized groups for better or worse (Devinney et al., 2025). Using feminist ethical and epistemological tools, the method aims to work toward the creation of more ethical and fair AI systems (Johnson, 2023; Winkle et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

In *Zeros + Ones*, Sadie Plant (1997) wrote that the emergence of the "Net" had been "that of a parasite, rather than an organizing host." (p. 49). The internet had, she claimed, "installed none of the hardware on which it works, simply hitching a largely free ride on existing computers, networks, switching systems, telephone lines" (p. 49). For Plant, the radical potential of the internet's own ontology did not, however, end at its lack of the Phallus—the ultimate organizing host—and the consequent parasitism of its existence in a phallocentric world. The very binary logic of its operations, whereby zeros and ones can code and recode a never-ending unbound stream of the new in all its difference, presented to Plant a pathway for the very liberation of the body and, by extension, of the sex-gender system. "Zeros and ones are utterly indiscriminate, recognizing none of the old boundaries between passages and channels of communication, and spilling out into the emergence of an entirely new sensory environment" (Plant, 1997, p. 185). Zeros and ones did not just extend the body; they informed and reformed it. The zeros and ones sustaining digital culture—or, better, what at the time would be known through the more poetic and utopian term "cyberculture"—had, according to Plant, revealed to us that "every unified body conceals a crowd," that "even the most unified of individuals is intimately bound up with networks which take it past its own borderlines, seething with vast populations of inorganic life whose replications disrupt even the

most perverse anthropocentric notions of what it is to have either a sex or sex itself" (p. 204).

As we approach the thirtieth anniversary of Plant's book it may be arguably hard to maintain such political optimism. The University of Warwick's Cybernetic Culture Research Centre (CCRU), of which Plant was one of the leading members, dissolved at the turn of the 21st century. Mark Fisher, committed leftwing thinker, author of *Capitalist Realism* (2009), and fellow CCRU co-conspirator died almost ten years ago, in 2017, with Nick Land—the other leading name in CCRU's mythology—having turned, moved to Shanghai, and become one of the leading voices of the accelerationist, neo-reactionary right wing. Closing in on thirty years after *Zeros + Ones*, the internet and digital cultures have also become increasingly privatised. Corporate entities govern and administer through surveillance, shadowbanning, and deplatforming; corporate digital infrastructures of our everyday lives turn personal data into profits, acting as avenues for the dissemination of some of the most violent and inhumane ideologies. So much for the liberatory potential of zeros and ones, so much for the internet's parasitic ontology, one could reasonably argue.

Yet, the articles included in this special issue paint a much more nuanced and, therefore, interesting picture of digital culture today. Rather than emerging as either necessarily liberatory or inherently oppressive, digital culture mimics and amplifies the messy, complex nature of our relations and lives. Our exploration of an engendered digital world reveals a place of intense contestation. Once hailed by some as "the world's public square", and through important cosmopolitan values of public speech, the internet's development into platform culture appears increasingly susceptible to state intervention, corporate manipulation and restrictions of content. The internet now appears to have the hallmarks of a "failed state" - a site that Sean Gallagher (IT editor of Ars Technica) describes as closer to 1970s New York: hate speech, low-level crime, and a lack of streetlights to guide those in danger through the darkness (Naughton, 2016). Navigating the digital world is increasingly one of living alongside objects coded by desire and excess–food, porn, drugs, and AI. Trying to stabilize forms of community in a failed state surrounded by these impulses may saturate the will and the engagement of many groups.

In closing, we wish to finally highlight the range of methodological and creative strategies represented across this special issue for engaging with, rather than resolving, the tension between digital fundamentalism/positivism and situated embodiment, intersectionality and cultural sensitivities. For instance, thinking through metaphors and imagination, staying with failure, and engaging in hands-on creative practices—such as "workshopping trouble," algorithmic biographies, and speculative fictions—these scholarships offer ways of (en)gendering and inhabiting the digital otherwise. An example of this is especially strong in the closing paper of this special issue by Schuster and Webster, in which they discuss the increasingly saturated digital landscape shaped by the widespread accessibility of digital technologies. This is a landscape where crisis-driven discourses about data and ubiquitous commentary on algorithms converge with the digitally amplified rise of anti-gender and paternalistic politics that reassert cissexist orders; in its face, they underscore the limited critical attention given to the human vulnerabilities reproduced by the cissexist logics embedded in socio-technical infrastructures. The authors do so by using thought experiments as a queer method, hence offering accessible ways to question relationships with data under techno-capitalism, unsettling dominant academic logics and challenging rigid divides between technical and theoretical approaches, while inviting reflexive, discomforting engagement and reimagining how data—and its governing power—is understood and navigated. Such scholarship contributions are not offering a singular "way out." Instead, they trace possible ways of living with and through digital culture—ways of rethinking, reworking, and, at times, resisting its conditions—while remaining attentive to the uneven, embodied, and deeply contested terrain in which it unfolds.

It is in the midst of such a complex digital culture that scholars such as Haraway, Leurs, D'Ignazio and Klein argue for working with methodologies of multiple/situated partial views—valuing both big data and small data—in order to stake out a nuanced position between uncritical celebration of the datalogical turn and outright dismissal of new methods as "data fundamentalism." As such situated, embodied and creative alternative knowledge production practices such as activism, art, poetry, speculative work not only provide possibilities for making life more liveable but also reimagining potential feminist and ethical futures.

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‘Counter-Plastics’ of Online Misogyny:

Art-based Reflections of Youth on Digital Society, Gender, and Vulnerability in Norway

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ABSTRACT

Based on creative ethnographic methods, this paper explores young people’s emotional archives as they navigate the complexities of digital society, gender and sexuality-based vulnerabilities in the context of “digital patriarchy”. It also discusses the potential of art-based methods, which we coin as stamping poetry, not only as an innovative tool for ethnographic research but also as a means of resilience and a pedagogical strategy. In other terms, how can a future-oriented, “response-able”, ethically and politically engaged methodological approach be mobilized among young people as a self-reflective experience, using objects, spaces, and symbols, to counter anti-democratic circulation paths? Drawing from creative art sessions with university students living in Norway – focusing on their work, presentations, messages, and plastic engagements – this paper aims to understand how youth navigate discussions on digital cultures, misogyny, and the “pros and cons” of new communication technologies. It illustrates how these discussions evoke a spectrum of emotional responses – such as fear, anger, hope, disgust, and empathy – while also showcasing creativity as a powerful medium for fostering critical voices and creating positive echo- and “optic chambers”. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how art-based methods such as stamping poetry can make affective, embodied, and symbolic registers of digital misogyny analyzable, offering both an innovative methodological contribution and new insights into how affective engagements generate resilience, resistance, and alternative digital futures.

KEY WORDS

STAMPING POETRY, ONLINE MISOGYNY, YOUTH, CREATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY, AFFECT THEORY, NORWAY

INTRODUCTION

How can we study digital cultures and society through art and creative thinking? To what extent can a 'plastic approach' — including collages, paintings, sculptures, and object arrangements — improve our understanding and articulation of social phenomena? More importantly, why and how can controversial, anxiety-creating social and political questions, as well as anti-democratic practices, such as gender-based violence, digital attacks, hate speech, wars, and genocide, be debated through visuality and conceptual frameworks? In what ways can this approach spread the idea of resilience and critical perspectives? To address these questions, this paper explores how art-based reflections by young people in Norway can utilize plastic creations as a tool for understanding and expressing their perspectives on online misogyny, gender-based vulnerability, and digital communication technologies. In doing so, we draw on *affect theory* to understand these reflections as embodied and *archives of emotions* that illuminate how misogyny is both experienced and resisted (Brennan, 2004; Ahmed, 2004; Cvetkovich, 2012).

According to Gergen and Gergen (2012), creative methods in social sciences use innovative approaches like visual arts, storytelling, photography, and poetry to expose authentic explanations of human experiences. More conventional methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, or surveys, rely primarily on verbal or written communication. However, not all experiences or engagements with social realities can be fully transmitted by means of words alone (Mason and Davies, 2009). Creative methods help participants share emotions, memories, and experiences that may be hard to express with words (Pink, 2006). Artistic approaches open new dimensions of thought, allowing us to explore experiences that are difficult to express in words or text. Through creations and "happenings" (an event-like artwork where life and art merge, focusing on presence, interaction, and unpredictability) promoted to free association and randomness, participants can express a range of emotions and perspectives (Frankel et al., 2024). In ethnographic research, creative methods help build trust and encourage participation, promoting richer data collection and collective experience (Goopy and Kassan, 2019). As Leavy (2017) notes, these methods can hide the complexities of lived experiences and emotions, offering multiple entry points for the analysis.

Integrating art here enables both researchers and participants to process emotions and engage with the subject matter from multiple perspectives (Salinas, 2024). For instance, participants can delve deeper into the topic, prioritize ideas by organizing them according to their personal viewpoints, and consider the message(s) or emotion(s) they wish to convey. Additionally, they can reflect on how these selections can be expressed through materials, space, or unconventional tools – potentially introducing tension within the pre-established and habitual ways of the storytelling process. As a result, a distinct focus and a new way of thinking emerge at that moment, which can be didactic or more hermeneutic with the help of symbols and metaphors, motivating participants to explore the phenomenon through colors, forms, contrasts of light and dark, different materials (and their resistance), dimensions, and composition.

In this paper, we use creative methods to investigate how knowledge is produced and data is generated, highlighting the role of agency and social interaction in the creative process through a method we will introduce as *stamping poetry*. At its core, this method involves choosing and using an object that leaves an imprint on a surface, much like potato stamping in kindergarten, and then exploring both the symbolic meaning of the object in relation to the chosen topic and the interpretive universe generated by its traces. By adopting this approach, we repositioned ourselves as reflexive, participatory, and responsive researchers, fostering collaboration with participants and integrating multiple perspectives on the research topic (Kindon et al., 2007). Being responsive here to a general attitude that remains open, adaptive, and relational throughout the research process, attuning to participants, materials, and contexts; allowing

emergence and shift; ethically adjusting to unfolding conditions; and co-creating with multiple actors (human, material, affective) (Ringrose et al., 2020). We did this by providing participants with space for self-expression and choice, allowing them to actively shape the research process and articulate their experiences in ways that felt most meaningful to them. This approach not only facilitates deeper engagement but also emphasizes the importance of agency in co-constructing knowledge. At the same time, we remained committed to ensuring the safety of this space, upholding its ethical framework, and maintaining transparency. By presenting data through artistic forms and styles, we aimed to highlight the archive of meanings embedded in cultural and social practices, while also challenging conventional research methods and their limitations. Our approach resonates with recent work that combines feminist, arts-based, and reflexive methodologies to interrogate digital culture (Annabell and Rasmussen, 2024). Like their 'Spotify (Un)wrapped' workshops, our *stamping poetry* sessions position participants as co-analysts of their own mediated experiences, enabling critical reflection on how digital systems shape subjectivity. These experiences invite audiences to engage with alternative understandings of human experiences (Harasym et al., 2024), particularly through visual and kinesthetic research approaches that emphasize cultural practices and social interactions (Goopy and Kassan, 2019). In doing so, our goal was not only to examine the role of non-human and material forces in shaping human responses and the construction of agency but also to study how our participants articulated online misogyny and digital violence in their responsive cosmologies.

Building on recent feminist and arts-based methodological innovations (Annabell and Rasmussen, 2024), our *stamping poetry* workshops invited participants to act as co-analysts of their own mediated experiences, critically reflecting on how digital systems shape subjectivity in a collective *happening*. To interpret the insights generated through this creative process, we turned to affect theory, which foregrounds the embodied, emotional, and relational dynamics of social life (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2011). Affect theory allows us to analyze not only what participants say or create but also how their engagements with online misogyny are charged with feelings of anger, fear, hope, and solidarity. By centering affect, we interpret participants' creative expressions as acts that simultaneously register harm and open possibilities for resilience and resistance. Although posthumanist and new materialist perspectives have illuminated the entanglements of human and non-human actors in digital culture (Gane, 2006), our analysis primarily draws on affect theory, which we find best suited to our data and research aims, particularly for framing *stamping poetry* as a novel and useful ethnographic tool. In doing so, this study contributes to feminist digital scholarship by showing how art-based methods can surface the affective registers of young people's encounters with online misogyny, thereby advancing the theme of *engendering the digital*. More specifically, we show how creative practices like *stamping poetry* invite participants to voice their vulnerabilities while also envisioning alternative digital futures in dialogue with objects and material cultures. Framed through this lens, affect and creativity intertwine to open critical ways of seeing and sensing digital culture, gender, and power.

METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

CREATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

As Coleman highlights (2017), creative work inspired by artistic approaches offers affective, embodied, and sensory dimensions of experience. These qualities are effective when engaging with concepts such as hope, uncertainty, anticipation, and "futurity", where emotional textures are intense and many aspects are intangible. Creative methods then help capture this complexity in ways that conventional research methods often smooth over or disregard (Pink et al., 2018; Hellstrand et al., 2024). They do this by enabling richer, multi-sensory, and multi-modal forms of analysis. As a result, for both the participants' and ethnographers' future possibilities can be felt, imagined, and materialized. These conditions draw attention to non-linear, "in-between," or present-oriented temporalities (Coleman, 2017). In this way, arts-based

inventive methods are not merely experimental; they expand what counts as data, particularly around the concept of agency and meaning-creation. They may also carry political and ethical resonance, making space for marginalized voices and perspectives and opening new ways of thinking about hope, possibility, and collective solutions to "urgent questions" (Andrä, 2022; Alacovska, 2019).

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Following this approach, our creative ethnographic workshop was conducted with twenty-three graduate university students in the social sciences study program, all of whom reside in Norway. The participants, primarily young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 (with a few exceptions over 30), had already been exposed to discussions on incel communities, manospheres, and gender-based violence literature, giving them a foundational understanding of these topics. The group maintained a balanced gender distribution between men and women; however, no participants identified outside of these categories. As this was a pilot study, we aimed for a socio-culturally and economically diverse group and therefore did not impose strict demographic limitations. The study received ethical approval from Sikt, the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (reference number 478612). All participant names have been anonymized using pseudonyms, but we showcase original artwork and titles with the participants' consent for dissemination purposes.

As part of our exploratory ethnographic research, our primary objective was to identify and analyze the key themes that emerged through this method and inquiry. Building on this foundation, our methodological approach is twofold. First, we examine the role of creative ethnographic methods as a means to engage young people in critical reflection on 'difficult' social themes and controversies (Giorgi et al., 2024), with a particular focus on online misogyny and digital violence. Second, we introduce and elaborate on the specific art-based method we designed for this study, which we term *stamping poetry*. By integrating these methodological approaches, we not only outline the rationale behind our data collection process but also demonstrate its significance within the broader field of critical visual ethnography. This creative method we adopted is inspired by visual and plastic arts (specialization of Ozan Félix Sousbois) and involves drawing, painting, collage, sculpture, photography, digital art, and object arrangements, to provide participants with an expressive and interactive space. Our goal was to support them to visually represent their lived or imagined experiences (Leavy, 2017) by offering an innovative way to explore and articulate complex emotions and ideas, whether uncertain, rigid, powerful, emphatic, or ambivalent (Thompson et al., 2011). At the same time, we sought to create an environment where participants could engage in these themes in a way that was both critical and enjoyable, allowing for reflection, experimentation, and creative agency in shaping their narratives.

STAMPING POETRY AS A TOOL AND METHOD

What we call *stamping poetry* is a technique and artistic style in which visual creation revolves around a central object (or multiple objects, e.g., a stone, a vegetable, a hat, fingers, feet, cables…), used as a "painting brush" to leave imprints on a chosen surface, this method is inspired by the artistic philosophy of *Nouveau Réalisme*, as exemplified by artists such as Arman, Yves Klein, and Daniel Spoerri. It draws on their approach to materiality and imprinting, transforming everyday objects into tools for creative expression (Adamson, 2001). To create their works, they employed various techniques such as assemblage, object accumulation, deconstruction and reconstruction of existing materials, and tearing. By recontextualizing these objects and their imprints, the artists infused them with new meaning and significance, fostering reflection on major social transformations and their impact on everyday life (Hamilton, 2006; Cabañas, 2013). In their philosophy, they were rejecting traditional artistic processes in favor of spontaneity, free associations, and action, in response to the changing nature of modern society.

Many artists of this era adopted stamping as a signature technique to explore themes of time, space, movement, national identity, and boundaries. In contrast to collage-based creative methods that construct meaning through the curated juxtaposition and layering of fragments, *stamping poetry* proceeds from the object's own material agency. This emphasis on imprint foregrounds immediacy, non-linearity, and the situated temporality of encounter: *stamping poetry* thus departs from collage's compositional logic, offering a method where testimony arises from material contact and trace, even if the work may transform itself into a collage at the end. Here, we hope the stamps and their repetition highlight the power or the banality of a symbol, depending on how they are used. This technique captures reality while engaging with everyday materials. Leaving an imprint on the surface also serves as a means of communication with the observer -using traces, spaces, and the passage of time to draw attention to transformation. Therefore, *stamping poetry* places the object at the center of creation, allowing it to serve as a 'storytelling device' for exploring social phenomena shaped by political and societal transformations.

Here, we utilized this method to debate online misogyny and digital hate, topics that are often uncomfortable to discuss or engage with. This is done by focusing on the object as a carrier and "career" of (the) meaning; the method allows participants to externalize difficult experiences without the pressure of direct narration, which might be uncomfortable or retraumatizing for different reasons. The resulting imprints function as traces or "testimonies" that hold both immediacy and ambiguity, accommodating the fragmented and non-linear temporality of the difficult topic or lived experience. In this way, stamping poetry creates a safer, more open space, distributing agency between participant, researcher, and object. As a first step, over six weeks, we conceptually explored various topics related to the digital world and its controversies through individual and group discussions. These included themes such as incels, the manosphere, gender-based violence in digital platforms, online misogyny, and digital extremism. The second step involved deconstructing the didactic tone of knowledge transmission by encouraging participants to engage with these phenomena on a more personal and individual level. Here we asked them: *How do we define online hate, misogyny, or violence, and what role does digitalization play in promoting this? What are the potential dangers of this trend - are they simply the result of isolated individuals, or is there a broader societal impact at play? How can we critically analyze and understand the phenomena of inequalities, violence, online misogyny, incels, masculinism, anti-feminism, and digital hate in today's world?* Here, our goal was to promote critical thinking using visual elements. The final step, following the art production, was for them to write reflection texts based on their ethnographic notes, creation process, and personal motivations.

Our primary analysis in this paper involves a cross-examination of the visual categories alongside their textual information (or "reading tips" for their creation), as articulated by the participants themselves. Ultimately, we invited participants to select a specific object to serve as a "painting brush" – one that symbolically connects to digital society, its transformative potential, and the themes of online misogyny and incel communities from their perspective. We also encouraged them to take notes throughout each phase of their creation, much like in traditional ethnographic observation. These notes were not only to reflect on the theme, metaphors, and symbolism they develop, but also to document aspects of composition, including color choices, forms, the interplay of light and dark, and the use of space. However, we gave them complete freedom to move beyond stamping, encouraging the use of mixed media to enrich their visual language and storytelling. This exercise and its outcomes can be considered poetic in that they evoke emotional, symbolic, and conceptual intensity. By sparking the imagination, resonating on an affective level, and conveying meaning through symbols, the process encourages concentrated reflection and interpretation.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze participants' engagement with digital violence and misogyny, we conducted a thematic analysis of their written reflections, complemented by a visual analysis of their creative works. Our dataset consisted of twenty-three written reflections and accompanying photographs of participants' artworks. This dual approach enabled us to trace how meanings were expressed both textually and visually, and to capture the interplay between affect, symbolism, and creative practice.

The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2012) six phases. The first phase began during data collection, as we developed preliminary insights from participants' narratives, artistic processes, and observational notes. Early codes emerged around themes such as *fear*, *anger*, *hope*, *having a voice*, and *resisting misogyny*. In the second and third phases, the transcribed reflections and visual artefacts were coded more systematically. We first applied semantic codes to capture explicit descriptions (e.g., *seeking support*, *digital solidarities*, *feeling monitored*). Then, moving to a more conceptual level, we reorganized initial codes according to their frequency, resonance, and conceptual significance. To structure this step, we distinguished between processes of *exposure and confrontation* and processes of *response and resilience*. The fourth and fifth phases involved reviewing, refining, and clustering codes into broader themes that integrated textual and visual layers of meaning. For example, codes such as *algorithmic bias*, *digital capitalism*, and *platform neglect* were consolidated under the theme *Structural Critics*. In contrast, codes such as personal testimonies of harm and embodied vulnerability informed the theme of *Lived Experience Responders*. Each theme was tested for internal coherence, conceptual distinctiveness, and relevance to our research questions. Finally, in the sixth phase, we knitted these themes into a narrative account that structured our findings. This process led to the development of five typologies of engagement, which will be explained in detail in the following section. To ensure reliability, both authors collaborated on the analytical framework before coding independently. After completing initial coding rounds, we compared results, discussed inconsistencies, and reached consensus through iterative refinement. NVivo software was used to manage and organize codes, while visual analysis was conducted manually through repeated rounds of interpretation. This collaborative approach strengthened the depth and trustworthiness of the analysis, ensuring that multiple perspectives informed the final themes.

FINDINGS: A TYPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ARTISTIC RESPONSES AND PROGRESSIVE INTERVENTIONS

The analysis of our participants' artistic and written reflections has revealed five distinct categories, each representing a different way of engaging with, resisting, or making sense of online hate cultures, gendered digital spaces, and the broader power dynamics embedded within technological infrastructures. Our categories capture different relationships and modes of engagement with the creative process, encompassing content, material use, techniques, and artistic choices, together forming a construction site. The findings are organized around the interaction between the literal space (*espace littéral*) – the actual, physical space occupied by the artwork, such as the canvas, paper, plywood, or any other surface on which techniques are applied, and the suggested space (*espace suggéré*) – the imagined or narrative space evoked by the work, where a storytelling begins through representation, symbolism, and the layering of ideas and concepts (Lumineau, nd). In our ethnographic research context, thinking in terms of *literal space* and *suggested space* enables us to categorize creative works not only by their material properties but also by the universe of meaning they open.

These typologies then reflect not only diverse perspectives and emotional responses but also varying levels of critical engagement with the systemic, personal, and political dimensions of digital misogyny. The five categories that emerged from the analysis are: (1) *The structural critics*: Systemic and

institutional investigators, here the participants focus on macro-level critiques of digital misogyny, examining the role of algorithms, digital capitalism, and online platform structures in reinforcing hate; (2) *The lived experience responders:* Personal and emotional testimonies, here the focus is on personal narratives of victimization, survival, and emotional resilience, centering on the psychological and embodied consequences of online misogyny; (3) *The conceptual experimenters:* Symbolic Interpreters of Imageries, here our participants engage in experimental, metaphor-driven, and symbolically charged representations, utilizing fragmented imagery and dynamic color schemes to evoke complex interpretations of digital violence; (4) *The narrative builders:* Storytellers of digital resistance and victimization, here we observe construction of clear narrative arcs in their creative works, juxtaposing victimization with digital resistance to emphasize the personal and collective dimensions of online hate; (5) *The cyber-advancers*: Progress-oriented and solution-driven responders, here the focus is on participants who are explicitly activist in nature, using stamping poetry to advocate for awareness, justice, and platform accountability in the fight against online misogyny.

In this section, we show how each category sheds light on the ways digital spaces intersect with gendered violence. While some participants deeply examine the structural forces that sustain digital misogyny, others focus on lived experiences, personal traumas, and observations related to harm and survival, or create less didactical, representation-based expressions of online hate and its societal consequences. We will argue that the creative approaches observed in the stamping poetry exercise highlight different features of digital misogyny and illustrate how young people interpret and respond to online violence in ways shaped by their own experiences, positionalities, and conceptual orientations.

The table below provides an at-a-glance overview of the five typologies developed through our thematic analysis.

Typology	Key Focus	Illustrative Codes/Phrases
Structural Critics	Critiques of digital platforms, capitalism, and algorithmic bias	Algorithmic bias, platform neglect
Lived Experience Responders	Sharing embodied experiences of harm and vulnerability	Personal testimonies, re-victimization
Conceptual Experimenters	Testing new framings, categories, or imaginaries	New metaphors, speculative ideas
Narrative Builders	Crafting stories of resilience and justice	Digital solidarities, helping out others
Cyber-Advancers	Forward-looking, future-oriented engagements	Visioning alternative digital futures

1. THE STRUCTURAL CRITICS: SYSTEMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL INVESTIGATORS

The Structural Critics category encompasses participants whose stamped poems reflect a macro-level critique of digital misogyny, hate, and violence, situating these issues within broader institutional, technological, and politico-ideological structures. Rather than focusing on individual experiences of harm, these participants interrogate the systemic mechanisms that sustain and amplify online misogyny, including algorithmic bias, digital capitalism, surveillance infrastructures, and the manosphere's embeddedness in networked communication systems. Their work demonstrates an awareness of how digital platforms function as ideological spaces, shaping both the production and circulation of gendered violence. Through their choice of objects, colors, and compositional structures, these participants' emphasis is on how power operates invisibly within digital spaces, reinforcing gendered hierarchies, exclusionary knowledge economies, and the amplification of misogynistic discourses and normalization of online hate.

A defining feature of this category is the use of networked imagery, such as cords, digital traces, and cables as symbolic imprints, underscoring the entanglement of misogyny within technological infrastructures. Participants frequently employed USB memory pens, charging cords, and data storage devices as their stamping tools, illustrating how platform design and algorithmic curation sustain misogynistic narratives. These objects symbolize both connectivity and control, reinforcing the duality of digital spaces as sites of both participation and oppression. This layering effect mirrors the algorithmic feedback loops that amplify digital hate, where content is continuously resurfaced, recommended, and reinforced by platform design. Another participant utilized charging cords dipped in black ink, stamping them in overlapping patterns to mimic the interconnectedness of misogynistic communities online. This approach highlights how the manosphere operates as a networked ecosystem, where misogynistic subcultures like incels or Men's Rights Activism (MRA), cross-pollinate ideas and radicalize new members.

Participants in this category explicitly described their deliberate use of color palettes to evoke danger, control, and the opacity of digital power structures in their written reflections. The dominance of black and red in their work indicates the presence of algorithmic misogyny, the hidden control of digital capitalism, and the constant reproduction of gendered hierarchies through technology. Black often appeared as a background layer, representing the invisibility of platform governance, while red was used to highlight the consequences of unchecked misogyny, whether in the form of targeted harassment, radicalization, or gendered violence. For example, one participant incorporated red-inked overlays of fragmented text and stamps, visually signifying how power and exclusion function in online discourse:

I wanted to show the relationship between incels' comments and how the orientation of these dictates their interactions, so I concluded that I had to randomly stamp the whistle with it pointing at different angles in order for the `echoes´ to cross over in different ways and provide a snapshot of how the comments cross paths and how different incels hear and react to them. I drew curved lines in red to represent an undertone of anger". [Lara, the work 'A whistle', Image 1]

Lara's quote illustrates how incel discourse spreads and influences interactions within online subcultures and beyond. She visually represents how angry comments "echo" and intersect, showing how different incels hear and react to them. The use of curved red lines, words, and stamps symbolizes an underlying anger and exclusion mechanisms, emphasizing the emotional intensity of these exchanges.

A recurring theme among participants in this category is the critique of digital capitalism and its role in amplifying misogynistic content. By employing layered digital imprints and text overlays, these participants emphasized how social media platforms function as economic systems that prioritize

engagement, regardless of the harm inflicted. One participant, for instance, used gaming-related imagery to critique male-dominated digital spaces, highlighting how platform design and online discourse foster exclusionary communities (See: Image 2). Through the use of gaming card stamps missing their hearts, this participant told a story about how digital subcultures create environments where women are viewed as outsiders or trophies, rather than equal participants. The critique extended beyond individual experiences, focusing instead on how gaming culture and digital design reinforce patterns of exclusion and gendered hostility. These works resonate with what Ahmed (2004) calls "affective economies", where anger and hostility circulate across digital infrastructures, sticking to certain bodies and communities in ways that both intensify exclusion and reproduce gendered hierarchies.

2. THE LIVED EXPERIENCE RESPONDERS: PERSONAL AND EMOTIONAL TESTIMONIES

The Lived Experience Responders category includes participants whose stamped poems reflect deeply personal, embodied encounters with misogyny, harassment, and digital violence. Unlike the structural critics, who focus on systemic and institutional mechanisms of online hate, this group of participants highlights their own or others lived experiences, emphasizing the emotional, psychological, and physical toll of online misogyny. Their work is characterized by intimate, first-person storytelling through visual and symbolic means, using physical imprints, fragmented imagery, and contrasting symbols to express the profound personal impact of digital hate.

Moreover, this category stands out for its affective engagement with digital forms of misogyny, drawing attention to how gendered violence manifests in everyday life, both online and offline. Participants in this group then do not engage with digital misogyny at the macro-structural level; rather, they illustrate how misogyny is felt – how it is internalized, embodied, and negotiated in personal experiences. Many of their pieces explore the intersection of vulnerability and resilience, showing how pain, fear, and anxiety coexist with resistance, love, and hope (See: Image 3, 4).

One of the defining features of this category is the use of bodily imprints, fingerprints, footprints, and personal objects as stamping tools, visually carrying the embodied impact of online hate. This technique highlights how digital misogyny is not abstract or impersonal, but something that is deeply felt and lived in the bodies and minds of those affected. For instance, one participant used their children's fingerprints and footprints in green and beige, symbolizing the early formation of identity in digital spaces, and expressed their fears associated with exposure to hate from a young age. In their reflection notes, they emphasized that their use of faint and scattered prints (in contrast with darker, more pronounced imprints) reflects how innocence is gradually overshadowed by online harassment and misogyny. Another participant incorporated a heart made of beads stamped in green, signifying love, safety, and the struggle to maintain emotional well-being in digital spaces. The delicate and fragile nature of the beaded heart contrasts with the harshness of digital violence, reinforcing the theme of emotional vulnerability.

A powerful example of symbolic juxtaposition in this category is the use of red-stamped smartphone and locker imagery to depict 'revenge porn' as a deeply personal violation. The smartphone stamp represents the digital platform where private moments are captured, stored, and later weaponized, while the locker serves as a metaphor for the supposed security of intimate relationships that are ultimately broken. The use of red in this piece not only signals violence and betrayal but also represents the irreversible emotional scars left by digital exploitation. This piece speaks to the broader issue of digital coercion and non-consensual intimate content, reflecting how victims of revenge porn experience extreme emotional and psychological distress as their most private moments are turned into a public spectacle.

Another particularly striking example in this category is the image of a bird wrapped in cords, symbolizing isolation, anxiety, and emotional suffocation due to digital hate. The participant used soft, muted colors for the bird itself, but contrasted it with dark, thickly stamped cords that coil around it, visually representing entrapment. The use of overlapping textures and smudged ink further reinforces the theme of oppression, showing how digital harassment creates an all-encompassing psychological burden that restricts one's freedom and sense of self.

However, despite the expression of trauma, violation, and oppression, many of the pieces in this category also include symbols of resilience and resistance. A green heart made of beads, for instance, suggests that even in the face of digital misogyny, love and connection endure. Similarly, some participants used layering techniques to visually "rebuild" fragmented elements, symbolizing the process of healing and reclaiming agency in digital spaces. Their work serves as a powerful reminder that behind every statistic on online harassment, there are real people, real emotions, and real consequences. At the same time, many of these accounts reflect what Berlant (2011) terms "cruel optimism": participants remain attached to digital spaces for recognition, connection, and community, even as those very spaces expose them to harm and exploitation.

3. THE CONCEPTUAL EXPERIMENTERS: SYMBOLIC INTERPRETERS OF IMAGERIES

This category includes participants whose stamped poems embrace abstraction, ambiguity, and open-ended interpretation to explore online misogyny, digital violence, and gendered oppression. Unlike the *structural critics*, who focus on institutional mechanisms of online hate, or the *lived experience responders*, who foreground personal testimonies of digital harm, the *conceptual experimenters* engage in symbolic, experimental, and abstract visual representations. Their work resists straightforward narrative structures, instead using fluid compositions, non-literal imagery, and unconventional stamping techniques to create evocative yet open-ended explorations of digital misogyny. In doing so, they challenge fixed meanings, opting for non-linear, deconstructed, or fragmented visuals that emphasize the instability of digital identities, the fluidity of online violence, and the ambiguous nature of digital interactions. They often use layered textures, color blending, and mixed media elements to evoke a sense of movement and transformation, reinforcing how misogyny in digital spaces is not static but constantly evolving through networks, platforms, and ideological shifts.

To take one case, a defining feature of this category is the use of blurred, overlapping, or fragmented imagery to signify the hidden and intangible spread of misogyny in digital spaces. Several participants used USB and charging cord stamps, but rather than employing them as direct symbols of technology, they were layered in translucent ink, partially erased, or overlaid with abstract textures to suggest the diffuse, elusive nature of digital violence. This was evident, for instance, in the use of overlapping USB imprints in a faded blue-grey palette, visually representing how misogynistic discourses are embedded in digital infrastructures yet remain largely invisible. The use of blurred edges and mixed ink patterns further reinforced the idea that misogyny in digital spaces is not always explicit or overt but often operates subtly, beneath the surface, shaping discourse in ways that are difficult to pinpoint.

Another prominent theme among conceptual experimenters is the use of fractured, fragmented imagery to explore self-perception, agency, and identity in online environments. One participant used a broken phone screen as a stamp, repeatedly pressing it onto the surface with varying levels of pressure, creating an effect of shattered, uneven textures (See: Image 5). The resulting piece visually represents how digital interactions – particularly misogynistic harassment – fracture one's sense of self. A central feature of this approach is its use of ambiguity and visual paradoxes to challenge stable interpretations. In line with

Cvetkovich's (2012) insistence that trauma and difficult emotions often exceed verbal articulation, these abstract and fragmented works function as affective archives that register pain, instability, and the unspoken dimensions of digital misogyny. And in this case, many of their pieces rely on juxtaposition, layering, and non-linear composition to emphasize how digital misogyny, identity formation, and online interactions exist in states of flux.

4. THE NARRATIVE BUILDERS: STORYTELLERS OF DIGITAL RESISTANCE AND VICTIMIZATION

The Narrative Builders category consists of participants who use storytelling as their primary method of engaging with digital misogyny, online hate, and gendered violence. Unlike the *conceptual experimenters*, who rely on representations and open-ended symbolism, the Narrative Builders construct clear, linear, or sequential narratives, guiding viewers through experiences of victimization, digital harassment, activism, and survival in a more didactic tone. Their 'stamped poems' strongly emphasize narrative structure, using collage techniques, text overlays, and layered materials to visually unfold stories of oppression and resistance in digital spaces.

The participants in this category create works that feel personal yet collective, offering visual testimonies of online violence while also connecting them to broader social struggles. Many uses found objects, cut-out text, and mixed-media materials to reinforce their storytelling, often juxtaposing symbols of control (locks, chains, broken screens) with symbols of empowerment (solidarity gestures, fragmented but reconstructed images, and feminist slogans). Their works do not merely illustrate misogyny as an abstract or invisible force but instead depict how it is lived, fought against, and sometimes overcome, turning individual stories into larger social critiques. For instance, the work below, titled '*Youth in Motion*', explores the concept of youth-led digital activism through a mixed-media painting. Hashtags inspire the participant as a symbol of online movements, seeking to visually represent how social media empowers young activists to mobilize and influence social conversations. The choice of headsets as a stamp contrasts digital tools' role in consuming and producing activist content, bridging the gap between online discourse and real-world protests. Through selected magazine snippets, stamps, and other visual elements, the work highlights the ways young people connect, discuss, and organize through social media. The work predominantly emphasizes the empowering nature of digital activism, showing how it enables young voices to be heard and fosters a sense of community. However, the artist acknowledges a lack of emphasis on its challenges, such as commercialization and surveillance (See: Image 6).

Another powerful example of narrative-driven stamping poetry in this category is the use of cut-out newspaper headlines and fragmented revenge porn imagery, arranged sequentially to tell a story of exposure, violation, and social punishment. One participant's piece, for example, included a stamped smartphone screen layered with torn newspaper clippings, featuring phrases like "LEAKED PHOTOS", "VICTIM OR VILLAIN?", and "EXPOSED ONLINE". The artist deliberately placed these fragments over an abstract silhouette, suggesting the dehumanization of individuals caught in digital scandals. The gradual breakdown of the silhouette into smaller and smaller pieces illustrates how online harassment erodes one's sense of self and control. By arranging these elements in a step-by-step sequence, the participant visually narrates how digital violence unfolds over time, from private moments of trust to public moments of humiliation and social alienation

One of the most recurring motifs in the Narrative Builders' works is the symbolism of digital chains, representing how online misogyny functions as a restrictive force, imprisoning victims in cycles of fear, harassment, and surveillance. For example, one participant used stamp imprints of chains wrapped around a central figure, visually illustrating how social media, search histories, and digital footprints become mechanisms of both surveillance

and self-censorship. These narrative strategies echo Ahmed's (2010) reflections on how happiness and survival stories orient subjects toward particular futures, offering not only testimony to harm but also affective maps of resilience, solidarity, and endurance. This was evident in the use of chains that were applied using varying shades of grey, black, and deep red, emphasizing how digital misogyny operates at different intensities – from subtle, everyday microaggressions to full-scale doxing and targeted harassment.

5.THE CYBER-ADVANCERS: PROGRESS-ORIENTED AND SOLUTION-DRIVEN RESPONDERS

The Cyber-Advancers category consists of participants who approach stamping poetry as a deliberate tool for activism, awareness, and advocacy. Via their 'stamped poems', they focus on possible solutions, interventions, and systemic accountability. Their work is not only descriptive but also prescriptive, where they aim to challenge digital misogyny while proposing pathways for social progress. These participants view digital spaces as battlegrounds for feminist activism, using symbolic elements, direct messaging, and critical engagement with technology to emphasize platform responsibility, digital justice, and the power of online resistance movements. They often blend visual protest with explicit calls to action and political messages, embedding legal and social demands within their 'stamped poems'. By highlighting hashtags, surveillance imagery, and feminist digital spaces, their work aligns with contemporary feminist activism in the digital age, drawing from movements such as #MeToo, digital rights campaigns, and platform accountability initiatives. For instance, they use #MeToo hashtags over black-inked online hate messages, creating a visual confrontation between digital misogyny and feminist resistance.

Another common theme among Cyber-Advancers is the critique of digital platforms, surveillance capitalism, and corporate complicity in online gender-based violence. Many participants used smartphone and surveillance camera stamps to represent the role of technology companies in facilitating or failing to prevent digital abuse. For example, one participant stamped multiple smartphone screens with watchful eye motifs, symbolizing the omnipresent but selective gaze of digital platforms, monitoring users for data extraction while failing to protect them from online abuse (See: Image 7). Some of the eyes were blurred or incomplete, visually suggesting platform inaction, negligence, and the failure to address misogynistic content at scale.

While many Cyber-Advancers focus on critiquing misogyny and advocating for change by establishing hope, some also explore feminist digital utopic spaces where justice, equity, and inclusion are embedded in the architecture of online interactions. One participant used green-highlighted stamps to create interconnected nodes, visually representing a digital ecosystem where feminist thought and activism thrive. The artwork featured fluid, branching structures in green and gold, evoking the potential for digital spaces to be sites of empowerment rather than harm. This piece moves beyond mere resistance to online misogyny, instead advocating for proactive strategies to reclaim and reshape digital spaces. For us, in these pieces, hope emerges as an affective force in Ahmed's (2014) sense, mobilizing participants toward transformation and action, while also resonating with Sedgwick's (2003) idea of reparative practice – reading against despair to imagine alternative digital futures. Moreover, their reflection report highlighted that the choice of green as a dominant color signifies growth, renewal, and the possibility of transformation, suggesting that digital activism is not just about dismantling oppressive structures but also about building alternative spaces for feminist discourse and solidarity.

The findings from this study then illustrate the diverse ways in which participants engage with and respond to digital misogyny, online hate, and gendered violence through their artistic expressions. The five categories that emerged from our analyses reveal

a wide range of emotional, intellectual, and advanced responses to the complexities of online gendered violence. Taken together, these categories can be understood as affective orientations – anger, fear, ambivalence, resilience, and hope – that shape how young people negotiate misogyny in digital environments (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2011; Cvetkovich, 2012). Each one of them offers unique insights into the relationship between digital spaces and misogyny, demonstrating how individuals perceive and address the societal, technological, and personal dimensions of this pervasive issue. From systemic critiques of platform design and algorithmic bias to personal testimonies of victimization and resilience, from metaphoric interpretations of digital violence to concrete calls for digital justice and social progress, these findings highlight the depth of engagement with online hate cultures across different positionalities. The creative approaches observed through stamping *poetry* exercise stress not only the emotional toll of digital misogyny but also the possibilities for resistance, transformation, and the construction of alternative digital futures.

Collectively, these typologies serve as a powerful testament to the complexity of online misogyny and the range of responses it elicits from those who encounter and seek to challenge it. Seen through the lens of affect theory, the participants' artworks become more than representation: they are affective acts that register harm, circulate emotions, and generate new attachments to justice and solidarity. For us, as researchers working on difficult and often distressing topics such as online violence and misogyny, these findings offer a sense of hope and agency. The young participants in this study actively engage with and creatively resist digital hate through their artistic expressions, demonstrating that awareness, critical engagement, and activism are evolving in new and innovative ways. For us, their work demonstrates the potential for alternative digital futures shaped by justice, inclusivity, and collective resistance, reminding us that even in hostile online environments, acts of defiance, solidarity, and transformation continue to emerge.

DISCUSSION

This research highlights the diverse ways young people in Norway engage with and respond to online misogyny through creative ethnographic methods, revealing how affective experiences such as fear, anger, resilience, and hope weave digital interactions. The *stamping poetry* technique allowed participants to articulate not only critical reflections on gendered digital violence but also deeply embodied emotions and symbolic expressions of distress, agency, and resistance. Affect theory helps frame these findings within a broader understanding of how digital misogyny operates not just as a structural phenomenon but as an affective force that circulates through online and offline spaces, shaping subjectivities and social relations. We identified five typologies emerging from the participants' visual and textual reflections: *Structural Critics*, *Lived Experience Responders*, *Conceptual Experimenters*, *Narrative Builders*, and *Cyber-Advancers*. Each of these categories espoused affective intensities and relational dimensions of online misogyny – from structural critiques of algorithmic bias to deeply personal testimonies of psychological impact and (pro-) feminist and pro-gender-equality resilience.

Our findings highlighted that digital violence is not only ideological but also affect-based, shaping how individuals feel, process, and respond to online gendered hate, disgust, and anger. Sara Ahmed's (2004) concept of "affective economies" is particularly relevant here: emotions do not simply reside in individuals but circulate between bodies, texts, visuals, and digital infrastructures, accumulating affective intensities that sustain power relations. Online misogyny, as participants in the *Structural Critics* noted, is embedded in the affective economies of platform capitalism, where anger, outrage, and hate are not incidental but economically incentivized and algorithmically amplified (Ahmed, 2017; Massumi, 2015). The repetition of misogynistic discourse through digital infrastructures – whether through manospheric networks, viral misogynistic memes, or the comment sections of social media –creates a feedback loop of

affective reinforcement, where online hate becomes self-sustaining and justified.

Conversely, the *Lived Experience Responders* highlight how misogyny is not just abstract but felt and testified with profound emotional and psychological consequences for those targeted. Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism" helps explain why some participants described feeling trapped within digital spaces despite their harmful features. Many reported an ambivalent relationship with digital platforms, at once sites of community and exposure, empowerment, and harm. Affect, in this case, mediates online agency, as young people grapple with the paradox of needing to be online, since it creates social visibility and recognition, while also fearing its risks (Paasonen, 2018). This ambivalence was particularly noted in the artwork of our participants who used smudged, fragmented, or ghost-like visual imprints to represent the cutting out of the agency and the psychic toll of online violence. For the *Conceptual Experimenters*, affect was expressed through non-linear, metaphor-driven artistic choices and styles, resisting the fixity of misogynistic discourse by adopting abstraction, ambiguity, and chaotic styles. Their works align with Ann Cvetkovich's (2012) argument that trauma and political emotions require creative forms of expression beyond mere verbal articulation.

The *stamping poetry* method, with its reliance on material traces, fragmented compositions, and multisensory engagement, acts as a conduit for affective processing, allowing participants to externalize their experiences of misogyny in ways that are non-discursive yet profoundly charged with meaning. Similarly, the *Narrative Builders* structured their responses in ways that foreground storytelling as an emotional practice. Ahmed (2010) emphasizes the power of storytelling in shaping affective orientations, which are the ways people come to feel, identify, and understand themselves in relation to power structures. The juxtaposition of victimization and resistance in their artistic responses suggests that digital misogyny is not merely endured but continuously negotiated through narratives of survival and solidarity of the manosphere. The layering of textual fragments, collaged images, and visual symbols in their work mirrors the affective labor required to reclaim agency in a digital environment structured to silence and discipline dissent (Hemmings 2005). The *Cyber-Advancers*, in contrast, embodied an affective politics of hope, digital justice, and (pro-)feminist future. Hope, as Ahmed (2014) argues, is not a passive emotion but an affective force that mobilizes action and transformation.

These participants disrupted the pessimistic affective economies of online misogyny by *dreaming* about alternative digital futures, where platform accountability, (pro-)feminist advocacy, and technological progress reshape online spaces into sites of empowerment rather than violence. We observe that their work aligns with the concept of reparative reading, which suggests that critical engagement with oppressive structures can also involve acts of reimagination and repair. The participants' use of bright, fluid, interconnected visuals, alongside slogans and symbols of resilience, signifies a departure from resignation toward an active reclaiming of digital space. This echoes Annabell and Rasmussen's (2024) call to transform creative workshops into spaces where participants interrogate datafication and identity. Our study extends this line of inquiry by applying a similar feminist, arts-based ethos to the context of online misogyny and digital violence. Stamping *poetry* enabled participants to creatively re-narrate their encounters with misogyny, vulnerability, and solidarity in digital spaces. In doing so, the method not only generated analytical insights but also fostered reflexive and affective engagement, positioning participants as co-analysts of their own experiences. We suggest that this combination of thematic analysis with creative, embodied practice broadens the possibilities of self-ethnography or "self-archaeology", making visible layers of meaning that remain obscured in more conventional methodological frameworks. By centering affect as both a methodological and analytical lens, our study demonstrates how creative practices can make visible the emotional textures of misogyny that might otherwise remain obscured.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSIONS OF ONLINE MISOGYNY AND CREATIVE RESILIENCE

By integrating affect theory with creative ethnographic methods, this research was an attempt to extend digital studies and demonstrate that online misogyny is not just a matter of discourse or policy but a deeply embodied, emotional, and relational phenomenon. The findings illustrate how affect circulates through digital infrastructures, (re-)shaping subjectivities, social hierarchies, and possibilities for resilience. As our typologies show, participants engaged with misogyny through distinct affective orientations – anger, fear, ambivalence, resilience, and hope – that both constrained and enabled their digital practices. The *stamping poetry* method provided a vital space for participants to process, externalize, and contest the affective dimensions of digital misogyny – whether through critique, storytelling, abstraction, or hopeful interventions. The typologies that emerged from this study not only reveal how young people experience and interpret misogyny online but also how they navigate online spaces through affective engagements that overlap critique, resilience, and empathy for victims with open questions about the future. Rather than treating the artworks as static representations, we presented them as nodes in affective circulation, where emotions of anger, fear, and hope are redistributed and reattached to collective imaginaries of justice. In doing so, we showed how they highlight the urgent need for creative, affect-sensitive methodologies in the study of digital and gender-based violence, particularly as online misogyny continues to evolve through male networked infrastructures of hate, visibility, and emotional manipulation.

Ultimately, this study suggests that affective engagements with online misogyny are not only reactive but also productive – opening possibilities for new ways of understanding, sensing, and intervening in digital cultures. Methodologically, *stamping poetry* expands the repertoire of creative ethnography by making affective, embodied, and symbolic registers of digital violence analyzable. In doing so, it demonstrates the value of art-based methods not only for generating rich empirical material but also for advancing feminist and creative approaches to knowledge production. This fact positions *stamping poetry* as both an innovative tool for studying online misogyny and a meaningful contribution to wider methodological debates in feminist digital scholarship. The hope, defiance, and solidarity expressed, for instance, in the Cyber-Advancers' works remind us that affect is not solely a vehicle of oppression but also a force for radical possibility. As scholars continue to explore digital cultures, recognizing the role of affect in shaping political agency and technological futures remains essential.

LIMITATIONS?

Although *stamping poetry* provides distinctive ways of engaging affective, sensory, and temporal dimensions of experience, it also brings its particular challenges and constraints. Its inherently interpretive and subjective nature can introduce ambiguity, which may challenge analysis and make outcomes less easily reproducible than with conventional methods. In addition, not all participants may feel equally comfortable engaging in artistic practices. There is also a risk of aestheticizing or abstracting sensitive issues in ways that dilute their urgency. To address these concerns, we approached *stamping poetry* as a co-productive process, encouraging multiple modes of participation where they shared their reflexive notes with us. We view the openness and multiplicity of meaning that emerge from this method not as a limitation but as a productive feature of *stamping poetry*, allowing for nuanced and situated understandings that might otherwise remain inaccessible.

On the conceptual level, the incorporation of such methods has been the subject of significant philosophical and methodological debate. Questions have been raised about what constitutes valid "data",

how such material can be interpreted without over-determining meaning, and how to ensure rigorous data when outcomes are seen as subjective and irreproducible. These debates also engage with deeper epistemological issues, such as whether creative practices generate knowledge or merely illustrate it, and the extent to which the researcher's or participant's own aesthetic choices shape the resulting insights. We position *stamping poetry* within this ongoing conversation, understanding it as an inventive method that does not aim to provide definitive answers but to open multiple, situated knowledge. In this way, the method aligns with arts-based and feminist research traditions that value partiality, embodiment, and affect as integral to knowledge production. Moreover, a further limitation is that affective interpretations are always partial and situated, as emotions circulate differently across participants and contexts (Ahmed, 2004). We addressed this by foregrounding participants' own reflections alongside our analysis.



Image 1

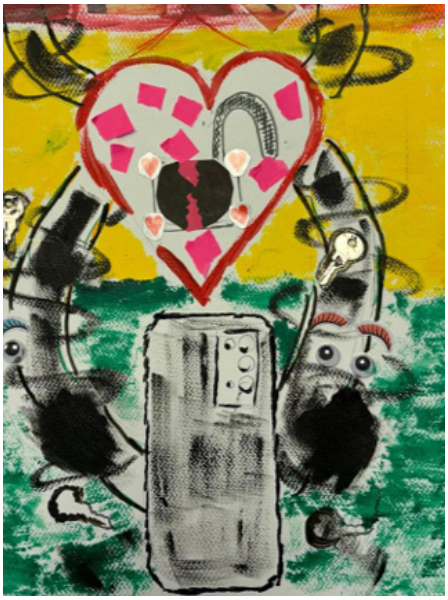


Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6



Image 7

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The Future of Women's and Gender Research:

Digital Lives in the Swedish Archives

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ABSTRACT

The future of historical women's and gender research is uncertain for two reasons. First, the digitization of society affects how women and gender are represented online. Questions about what can and should constitute "an archive" need answering, particularly for women's and gender activism, which is no longer tied to formal associations and often spans the physical/digital divide. This raises new ethical and legal issues related to GDPR and the private ownership of communication platforms where activist work occurs. Second, what counts as "women's and gender historical material" is unstable. Current research emphasizes intersectionality and multiculturalism, often critiquing the whiteness and middle-class normativity of earlier feminist scholarship. At the same time, activists disagree on the meaning and application of these concepts, creating tensions within feminism that do not always align with scholarship focused on narrower research questions. This exploratory article examines archival acquisition policies in Swedish cultural heritage institutions from a feminist "information activism" perspective, drawing on community archive research to assess whether Swedish institutions are preparing to collect future women's and gender archival materials and what kinds of women's and gender histories these materials will make available to future researchers.

KEY WORDS

ARCHIVES, WOMEN'S AND GENDER RESEARCH, FEMINISM, ACQUISITIONS, DIGITISATION

INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to escape discussions of just how digital our lives are – and whether we can separate the digital from the physical in any meaningful way. Current debates range from screen time for children, to the politics and privacy aspects of birth control and pregnancy apps, to the issues with working from home. Many of these debates raise the gendered aspects of digitization. Social media in particular has changed the way social movements on the left and right operate and mobilize while also facilitating the exploitation and monetization of ideological rhetoric (Proffitt, Hamid & McDowell, 2014). Sitting under these conversations is a question about the way in which technology elides distinctions between the public and the private, a key area of analysis for feminists from the 1960s forwards. And some researchers and artists have raised questions about what is not there or is rendered inaccessible – a set of questions concretized by the Trump Administration's erasing of references to minorities and women across the vast array of federal government websites (Mina, 2019). Digital information is voluminous, deeply fragile, and political in its nature.

If our lives now extend into and are influenced by what happens online, what is the future of women's and gender archives? Archivists have long warned about a black hole of historical material from the advent of the Internet to the construction of AI. While the metaphor of archiving has proliferated in pace with the explosion of information at our fingertips, what should and can be collected, organized, described, archived, and made available for future generations remains fuzzy. International legal frameworks like General Data Protection Rights (GDPR) conflict with open access requirements. The fact that multinational corporations own much online content also creates logistical and legal problems for archival institutions. As multiple scholars interested in minority community-building note, digital channels are a double-edged sword, providing connection across space and time while also featuring increased potential for harassment, a threat that makes protection of personal information all the more important (see, for a series of examples on Black and queer data, Keilty, ed., 2023; for a feminist perspective, see D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020).

Acquisitions policies and texts are a reflection of, as well as a tool for, how cultural heritage institutions understand the importance of outward-facing donations as well as their place in a broader world of archives (Boczar, 2025). This article borrows a feminist "information activism" perspective from sociologist Caitlin McKinney (2020); McKinney argues that "information activism describes a range of materials and processes constituting the collective, often unspectacular labor that sustains social justice movements" (p. 2). While McKinney focuses on information organization and description for access, analysis in this text extends this definition to archival acquisitions, which establish the basis for what can be described and made available to the public and activists. Feminist information activism in the context of archives requires the inclusion of acquisitions, which set the boundaries for and define the centre of what counts as archivable (and thus history). As a result, the article focuses on the extent to which Swedish acquisitions policies and approaches at cultural heritage institutions are forward-looking, outward-looking, and prepared to work for more democratic collection processes that prioritize materials by and about women as well as sex and gender issues, thus enabling future research in these areas.

Work on Swedish archives is very limited; the country has no established journal for academic research on archives. As a result, some initial fact-gathering research questions are necessary:

1. Do the acquisitions policies or texts provided by Swedish cultural heritage institutions deal with born digital materials and/or representation of women and gender?

2. How are born digital materials and/or issues of democratic representation dealt with?

The answers to these questions – placed in the results

section – will then lay the groundwork for an analysis of to what extent the Swedish cultural heritage sector is prepared for an inclusive archival future. The larger research question here is:

3. What would a feminist information activist approach to born digital archival acquisitions look like in the context of the Swedish archival system?

This analysis will then be followed by the proposal of some practical approaches to securing the future of women's and gender historical research in Sweden.

BACKGROUND ON DIGITISATION, ARCHIVAL PRACTICE, AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION IN THE SWEDISH ARCHIVE

Archival traces of organizational work in Sweden begin to be a bit patchy from the 1960s forwards. The wave of activism that began in the mid-1960s and sought to democratize political life focused on mobilising large swaths of the public around particular ideological and political questions – for example, fascism in Spain and Chile, decolonisation in Africa, the war in Vietnam. This work was supposed to be rapid, outward-facing, and temporary. The issue-based nature of political activism has affected the nature of women's and gender-based political participation in profound ways, de-centring the importance of identity-based organisations and centring networks and the rapid transmission of information. Simultaneously, the basis of most older movement archives – the paper protocol and other physical administrative documentation – is in the process of disappearing (see Pierce 2025).

Digital tools have facilitated this shift, as activists now rely on communication channels such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp and other apps. Indeed, much of what might in the future be called women's and gender history now resides in these channels. Both the #metoo movement and the soft girls/trad wife trend are products of digital interconnectivity, and both are important for a future generation of researchers interested in women and gender. Yet collecting this kind of information and data requires a shift in how archival institutions operate. Queer data studies scholars have pointed out the dangers of metadata capture and data security (Conrad, 2023), while scholars of digitisation note the potentially problematic effects of free circulation of digital data and documents (Odumosu, 2020). Historically oppressed groups are more likely to be concerned about privacy and less likely to trust state institutions to hold and make their materials available in a way that fits with their values and concerns about security and privacy (Cowan & Rault, 2018; White, 1987). Meanwhile, there is evidence that the metadata connected to materials online contains significant gender biases, making sweeping collection of digital documents related to women and gender more difficult (Otterbacher et al., 2018).

The Swedish archival system is not built to protect these groups or their materials. The country houses just one institution dedicated to women's and gender archival materials – KvinnSam, the Swedish national library for gender studies at the University of Gothenburg humanities library. It is worth noting that the other two organisations devoted to women's history in Sweden do not have the infrastructure to collect, preserve, and make available historical materials, rendering them almost entirely outward facing.[1] Meanwhile, the inaccessibility of material related to gender non-conforming individuals and groups in the broader landscape of Swedish archives is a problem that has resulted in the establishment of the Queer Movement's Archives and Library (QRAB) and the Swedish Archive for Queer Moving Images (SAQMI). As in many countries, small local community-built archives and museums are voluminous and hard to access or assess, while the majority of visible archives (at universities and for larger regions) are a part of the state.

There is an underlying assumption on the part of archival institutions in Sweden that materials related to and created by women are available, and that the

real problem is finding this material (Melander, 2006; Nordenstam, 2008). Sweden is not unique in this assumption, which threads through much of critical archival studies and related fields – so-called "recovery projects" are currently numerous, especially in the area of queer history (for reflections on recovery projects, see Wallach Scott, 2011). Yet infrastructure for recovery projects is very limited. Archival institutions have not historically received extensive attention or government funding in Sweden (Isacson & Olausson, 2018). Nor is it clear that future archival acquisitions will resemble earlier acquisitions, in terms of their representativeness or the ease of access to information and materials about women or questions of sex and gender.

Sweden has a historically unique category of "private archives," composed of non-state archival materials and thus not subject to the legal requirements for preservation and accessibility from which public archives benefit. What are called "enskilda arkiv" are defined as archives "that have been created in organisations that are not covered by the principles of press freedom and therefore are not subject to public accessibility requirements" (SOU, 2019:58, 153). On the ground, it is unknown how many institutions in Sweden collect, process, and make available personal and organisational archives, nor do we know how many institutions have paid staff, educated archivists on staff, and sufficient infrastructure for keeping archives in line with current best practices (Svenska arkivförbundet, 2024). Within the Nordic countries, Sweden has the weakest legal protection for this kind of archival material (Edquist 2018).

This top-down structure combined with weak protections for non-state archives has shaped what materials are preserved as historically important, as well as how Swedes understand what is archivable. Such framing affects the larger archival world's approach to power imbalances and silences in the archives – here, legal and administrative requirements focus on official minority communities like the Sápmi and Finnish Swedish. The majority of research on women's, gender, and queer archives has focused on physical community-building collections or digital accessibility, and oral history plays a huge role in this literature (Bastian & Flinn, 2020). While some of this "archivism" has been imported to Sweden (Larsson Pousette et al., 2021), even institutions like KvinnSam have not historically seen their role as activist in nature (Losman, 1984). Further, there is very little research on collection policies and practices, digitisation, and the problems of ensuring that historically oppressed groups are broadly represented in the archives of the future.

There is a long tradition of applying feminist perspectives to issues of automatization, algorithms, and artificial intelligence (e.g., Adam, 1993, 1995). However, such efforts are dispersed across activist and scholarly communities that do not always communicate with one another and have little to do with archival studies and archiving in practice. Data feminism began ostensibly with the Feminist Manifest-NO, a declaration of refusal towards harmful data regimes and commitment to new data futures (Cifor et al., 2019). Absent from this conversation are questions of how to archive gendered realities and feminist activism that manifest in digital spaces.[2] Sweden in particular has failed to grapple with the ways in which digitization changes the very nature of archives and, more specifically, women's and gender archives. This article aims to jumpstart this research.

ARCHIVAL ACQUISITIONS, BORN DIGITAL ARCHIVES, AND REPRESENTATION

Why focus on acquisitions policies and texts? Acquisitions and policies/strategies for acquisitions are a specific research area within archival science. The area is closely related to appraisal; as one researcher puts it, "the principles of appraisal help us to answer the question, 'Why am I saving this?' – while acquisitions policies force us to answer the equally important question, 'Why am I saving this?'" (Ericson, 1992, p. 68). Appraisal continues to be a more well-researched and theorized area of archival science, but the areas of new social history

and community archives have, through the 2000s, pushed archivists to consider acquisitions more carefully, with an eye towards patterns of and gaps in archival representation of the past (Van Wingen & Bass, 2008). With more knowledge of the lack of representativeness of archival holdings (despite their voluminousness), some archivists pressed for a re-evaluation of "what constitutes documentary evidence," in the words of Linda Henry, former archivist at the National Archives for Black Women's History (1980, p. 60).

The place of women in the history and theory of archival acquisitions has received relatively little attention from archival scientists. A wave of "archival turn" researchers – mostly from anthropology and history –lifted the (in)visibility of women in the archives and encouraged women's historians to question archives as bearers of objective truth. Instead, as historian Arlette Farge notes in her memoir-methods book The Allure of the Archives (2013), women were recorded when they encountered state bureaucracies. This haphazardness is even more confusing when it comes to personal archives, often because one family member has succeeded in making a name for themselves (most often himself). Both appraisal and acquisitions policies and practices have been largely left out of this conversation, though scholars have noted the central role that newer archival institutions run by and for women have had in working against this historical invisibility (Yale, 2015).

Digitization and the need for more active selection and de-selection poses many overlapping questions, again requiring that archival institutions think through collection policies and processes. However, the choice is often framed as one of a black hole versus infinite documentation. The digitisation of society has resulted in, as Bossewith and Sinnreich (2012) note, an "exponential growth in the volume of data produced by individuals and institutions" which "shows no signs of abating" (p. 238). As Amanda Boczar (2025) writes, "Archives without a clear policy or dedicated professionals managing born digital acquisitions may find themselves either refusing collections of significance or taking collections they cannot appropriately manage" (p. 2). As with physical archives, acquisitions policies and practices are shaped by questions of format, and "difficult" formats run the risk of being collected by no one, while other "simpler" formats are broadly collected. As McKinney notes, part of "information activism" is a resistance to the "digital imperative" alongside a sensitivity to the rarity of and need to collect and make available archival materials from historically underrepresented groups (2020, p. 159; 166-167).

Archiving of social media activism makes clear how these technical issues can affect representation in the archives. Ashlyn Velte's (2018) work on the subject notes that there are a few different ways to understand collection, but that social media archiving means that archives, often for the first time, are working with big data. Big data poses a variety of problems for archivists, including legal and ethical problems, which sit alongside questions of file storage and other technical issues. These problems are, without a proper acquisitions policy, likely to consume the time and attention of resource-strapped archival institutions, distracting from other questions involving representation. As Morna Gerard's (2015) analysis of the Georgia LGBTQ Archives Project makes clear, new collecting projects require more active outreach efforts, which in turn require that institutions define what they should collect, why they, in particular, are best positioned to collect such documentation, and in what directions their collections are headed, as well as how they can and will protect the materials of at-risk groups and individuals through access restrictions and the like.

Given this situation, it seems clear that archives institutions must take seriously F. Gerald Ham's advice that "conceptualization must precede collection" (1975). According to research on documentation strategy, this conceptualization must span multiple institutions, ensuring that a wide and diverse range of materials is collected and made available to researchers. Acquisitions policies are often the outward-directed face of this kind of strategy, designed

to make it clear to potential donors what is and is not collected. Unfortunately, many archival institutions have, as Linda Henry observes, "defined [collections policies] too broadly . . . [but] collected too narrowly," creating problems with representation that compound when archival institutions do not have the general knowledge necessary to refer donors to other institutions (1980, p. 63). To go back to the questions of "Why am I saving this?" versus "Why am I saving this?" – archival institutions must understand and have a well-articulated definition of their place in the broader system of archives in order to ensure the future of scholarship built on archival research.

THEORY AND METHOD

This exploratory article will examine the archival acquisition policies and texts of a swath of Swedish cultural heritage institutions in order to assess to what extent to which the future of women's and gender archives is secure. Analysis is couched in a feminist information activism perspective (McKinney, 2020). In McKinney's work, information activism means an understanding of archives – their construction, description, and accessibility – as a process laden with power dynamics. However, her analysis in Information Activism focuses on the organisation, description, and provision of access to archival material, which misses acquisitions, a key part of community/archive-building that defines the outer limits of what counts as a community's history. In this text, acquisitions are seen as part of an archival institution's "information infrastructure" in Susan Leigh Star's (2016) terminology, directly linked to the extent to which archival institutions in Sweden are "doing feminism" or working to enable the future of women's and gender research in the archives. As such, the text develops McKinney's theoretical framework to include the archive's roll in defining and shaping the boundaries of what "historical collections" means.

What acquisitions policy means in practice is a question. Richard Brown (1992) notes that a strand of "archival hermeneutics" defines acquisitions strategy as a kind of macro-appraisal process, one that is fundamentally active in nature. Acquisitions policies in this sense are attempts to "both practically and intellectually […] remove from the hands of record creators and record managers the de facto responsibility for their historical value designation, and place it firmly under the control of archivists" (Brown, 1992, p. 40). Outward-directed acquisition texts and policies are, however, often combined with passive acquisitions practices, leaving the interpretation of these texts in the hands of members of the public. As such, these online texts can potentially function as devices of "information activism" in McKinney's terms, a way of reaching out to and involving the public in the making of archives, a part of the infrastructure connecting social movements with archival institutions.

The study design is formed to capture this aspect of information activism. In this article, acquisitions and appraisal are considered two sides of the same coin of feminist information activism, with acquisitions policies serving as a main gateway for donors, especially given the lack of resources for active acquisitions work at many Swedish cultural heritage institutions. Archivist and researcher Kate Theimer (2015) notes the slippery boundaries between these and other tasks at archives. This makes the acquisitions policy one of many potential tools that interact with other activities related to archiving. As a result, we have collected a swath of formal archival acquisitions policies and less formal acquisitions statements and information from cultural heritage institutions in Sweden, as well as some practices communicated via email when formal policies were not available online, in order to cover non-transparent (and thus non-activist) acquisitions approaches.

The methodological approach is based on a similar exploratory study conducted by Amanda Boczar (2025), which examined "websites and published materials" in order to examine approaches to acquisition of born digital material. Our collection of texts was designed to cover (1) large national institutions, (2) university libraries and archives, (3) subject-specific institutions, and (4) local institutions. These

categories cover the main kinds of Swedish institutions with archival materials. The broader focus on cultural heritage institutions rather than archival institutions is purposeful. Ericson (1992) warns against institutional siloing of materials, skills, and information, noting that "archivists, librarians and records managers, along with record users and record creators (or depositors)" must cooperate "to ensure that important documentation is not lost" (p. 74). Information activism to preserve and make women's and gender history available is necessarily collaborative and collective, rather than a competitive endeavour. Further, the museum sector in Sweden became well-known for establishing a cooperative, national approach to acquisitions via the SAMDOK project (Axelsson 2014).

Based in Boczar's approach, I searched broadly for "förvärvspolicy arkiv" (acquisitions policy archives) and similar formulations, which primarily yielded policies from major university libraries, national bodies such as the Royal Archives and Swedish National Heritage Board, and more regional bodies such as local museums and movement archives. In total, 22 different institutional approaches to acquisitions have been analysed, covering national, local, and subject-specific organisations, and the results are visualized in Appendix 1. As noted, very few of these texts are acquisitions policies, per se; most are online texts about what kinds of materials an organisation accepts and how donations work. As a result, the rest of each website has been scanned for references to women's and gender, as well as born-digital materials. It is worth noting that there is no overview of archival institutions in Sweden, making national analysis difficult and any overarching conclusions about the state of acquisitions in Sweden near impossible (Svenska arkivförbundet, 2024). This study is thus necessarily quite descriptive, a first attempt to analyse acquisitions policies in Sweden.

The article applies McKinney's analytic approach to acquisitions policies and texts with two feminist information activism frames in focus: (1) women's/gender and (2) futurity. These two frames are used to identify and structure the material found in our online searches to identify whether or not a feminist "information activism" approach is visible in Swedish acquisitions. As McKinney writes, "[f]ocusing on decisions, decision-making, and non-decisions or decisions that never get made is one method of attending to the ongoing negotiation of meaning that occurs around technological transitions" (p. 185). The assumption that digitisation is inherently democratising is highly questionable. Given the archival infrastructure of Sweden, a feminist version of archival information activism will be critical if institutions want to ensure that it is possible for future women's and gender history researchers to do work on this early 2000s period of adaptation to new technologies.

GENDER AND FUTURE THINKING IN SWEDISH ACQUISITIONS POLICIES

Acquisition policies and texts within Sweden are difficult to find, even if this area is broadly defined. This is a particular problem for the future democratisation of acquisitions and any information activism that aims to alter established acquisition approaches and practices – upon what materials and practices do institutions stand? The majority of acquisitions policies are not available online, and many institutions do not have formally established policies, instead entrusting acquisitions to a preexisting and invisible network of contacts that lie outside the organisation itself. Local independent institutions will write guidelines into their associational rules, which are often quite short on description and are not particularly accessible to outsiders (for an example, see the People's Movements Archives in Västerbotten[3]). Most institutions do not have a particular employee who deals with acquisitions, making it difficult to engage in the active networking that ensures sustainable acquisitions. This makes it difficult for the average person to find a route for asking questions, a barrier for all but especially for individuals and organisations with less than full trust in state institutions.

There are few institutions with thought-through,

thorough descriptions of what counts as archival material and instructions for how to organize and eventually donate an archive. University library acquisitions policies tend to focus on printed materials for the library, ignoring archival materials. Instead, broad blanket statements are common and often build on preexisting knowledge that the average person will not possess. A good example is Röhsska Museum's policy, which states that the institution accepts "contemporary expressions and materials within the categories of handwork, fashion, and design."[4] Often the only topical foci mentioned are geographical interests; most of the institutions examined here include a sentence or two on what geographical regions are prioritized. This is true even for KvinnSam, which has a national women's and gender focus.[5] Policies and other descriptive texts also tend to use archival terminology that is somewhat inaccessible to the average donor; the Regional Archives in Västra Götaland have an archival lexicon available on their website, making it clear that archivists are aware of this problem, even if they do not know quite how to solve it.[6] The TAM archive is the most descriptive and accessible here, offering a page on what kinds of documents might be in an archive.[7]

McKinney's definition of information activism focuses on creating a collaborative and non-hierarchical relationship with activist communities. One issue with the majority of archival institutions is their partial reliance on fees for archival processing. While these fees make visible the labor required to process, preserve, and make available archival materials, such requirements place archiving out of reach for individuals and organisations without sufficient economic means. Female-driven, feminist, and LGBTQ+ individuals and organisations are more statistically likely to be financially precarious (Boyles, 2018). Networks – likely the future of many activist initiative – do not have membership fees and therefore lack the resources to deposit materials. Additionally, there is very rarely an employee who is in charge of acquisitions, and in the cases where there is such a position, it is assessment of potential gifts and acquisitions that is emphasized in official documents. This situation makes collaboration quite difficult, impeding the implementation of forward-looking and inclusive appraisal and acquisitions practice regardless of policy.

WOMEN AND GENDER IN THE ARCHIVES OF THE FUTURE

Do women and gender appear anywhere in the acquisitions policies and texts of Swedish cultural heritage institutions? The answer is yes, but rarely and often obliquely. Instead, institutions prioritize a broad strokes approach to "democratic" and "inclusive" acquisitions. They very rarely specify what this means in practice. A few examples are worth mentioning. National organisations like the National Archives[8] and Lund University[9] assert – using almost identical phrasing – that they strive for an "inclusive and democratic" approach to acquisitions, mentioning the importance of both a research perspective and attunement to contemporary life. This mention of democratic and inclusive policy is assumedly supposed to cover a variety of historical power imbalances, but the vague phrasing potentially allows for ignoring the vast majority of archival imbalances. Measuring inclusivity and democracy is notoriously difficult, and there are few signs that any kind of thought-through assessment is being done.

Prioritising democracy and inclusivity in acquisitions – potentially a support for feminist information activism – can also be at odds with other policy goals that may seem neutral but instead work against historically underrepresented communities including women and LGBTQI+ groups. For example, the Swedish National Heritage Board takes a list of factors into account: (1) relation to cultural heritage, (2) provenance, (3), authenticity, (4) the condition of materials, (5) how much it will cost to process, store, and make available materials, (6) representation, and (7) accessibility. Yet materials from less well-resourced groups tend to be in poorer condition and require more resources for processing and storage, while at-risk groups may want to restrict access to their materials for a period of time. Further, these

kinds of documents rarely open up for discussion of what democracy means in the context of archives, though a common misunderstanding among the public is that one must be famous to be archived (Gerrard, 2015, p. 5-6).

There are a small handful of institutions (five in total) that specifically mention women and gender in their acquisitions policies – these tend to be focused on traditionally female work. Röhsska museum – a design museum in Gothenburg, Sweden – has an acquisitions policy that notes a particular interest in "gender and multicultural questions" where "especial weight should be placed on increasing the visibility of women's role in Swedish and foreign design work, where this role is less well-represented".[10] Finally, KvinnSam states that its major goal is the collection and eventual accessibility of materials important for women's and gender history. The acquisitions text tries to extend the boundaries of this area by noting that the institution is particularly interested in minority groups and norm-critical materials. This broadness is coupled with a note that the institution has a special interest in regional documentation, potentially signalling that the institution would prefer to leave collection of many local women's, feminist, and gender historical materials outside Southwestern Sweden to local institutions.[11]

The organisations that name women and gender tend to exhibit a more active approach to acquisitions. The first example – the Stockholm City Archives – has worked to establish acquisitions approaches and a policy that take historical gender imbalances into account, a project that began in 2018 and has continued through to today, often in cooperation with the organisation Women's History.[12] Here, a policy that specifically notes the need for gender-equal goals in archival acquisitions is complimented with goals for making past gender imbalances in the archives more visible, alongside the creation of new routes into existing archives by and about women and gender.[13] Meanwhile, QRAB and SAQMI define "queer" in a broad and flexible way.[14] SAQMI has particular projects for collecting Sápmi materials and is currently involved with work with Transammans, Sweden's largest trans activist organisation.[15] It is worth noting that these are the two "archivism" institutions surveyed here, and their commitment to communities underserved by the traditional archival institutions in the country, has led to a particular interest in collecting materials from groups historically ignored by traditional cultural heritage institutions.

Acquisitions policies are not wholly reflective of the work done to broaden representation in archival collections at the surveyed institutions; the trend in Sweden is to collect stories and oral histories from local communities, and this method almost always involved collecting women's voices. Museums have regular collection drives, which makes these institutions both more active in shaping their collections and also functions as a way of demystifying what, precisely, qualifies as archivable material. Here, there is a chance to lift women and gender as a particular area in need of attention. Two institutions here – Skåne's archival organisation and Stockholm's city museum – have had projects to collect the voices and materials of women. Skåne has had women's writing workshops to collect women's life stories,[16] while Stockholm has worked with the organisation Women's Historical to crowdsource women's personal archives from the public.[17] KvinnSam has an oral history project on 1968 that highlights female voices.[18] Meanwhile, QRAB has recently restarted its story café, where LGBTQI+ groups can come and share stories which are occasionally recorded for archiving.[19]

Despite these initiatives, a troubling trend is the clear lack of resources for general outreach and active acquisitions work at archival institutions. It should concern researchers that many of the (few) institutions pursuing outward-directed, future-oriented, women-oriented acquisitions work are museums, one of which does not have any collections of its own and zero archivists employed (Women's Historical). Institutions with previous projects focused on collection of women's and gender archives have not followed up on this work. The National Archives had

a drive in the 1970s to perform outreach to 1970s feminist organisations, in the hopes that they would keep, organize, and donate their materials at a later date (Welander, 1982). This worked – archivist Lina Selleby (1998) noted at the end of the 1990s that materials from these groups were now trickling in. The many case studies detailed in Kate Theimer's anthology (2015) lift the importance of this outreach work as a way of ensuring that collections more fully reflect the communities they represent.

In sum, there is little evidence of feminist information activism to ensure the acquisition of archival materials related to women and gender in Sweden from institutions that are not already focused on women, gender, and LGBTQI+ issues. It is more likely that an institution devoted to a specific group or area will lead projects that include the capture of women's histories. Some form of active acquisitions can also contribute to at least short-term attention to female representation in the archives; here, museums and community archives lead the way. However, most cultural heritage institutions – and all institutions at the national level and within the university system (state archives, in other words) – neither prioritize acquisitions nor the representation of women and gender in their collections. This sector represents the bulk of collections as well as the place where a majority of researchers go to find historical texts.

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

And what of future activism? Given the built-in inequalities of digital realms long documented by researchers (Carter et al., 2013), designing acquisitions policies that do more than passively pledge "inclusivity and democracy" is necessary. If the policies surveyed are largely uninterested in the subject matter of acquisitions beyond a broad strokes interest in democracy and a somewhat more often geographical focus, text about digitization, hybrid archives, and the future of acquisitions is near absent from these sites. Seemingly as a byproduct of the passive acquisitions approach taken by most institutions, there is little acknowledgement of digital files or social media accounts. Those institutions that address e-archiving tend to be devoted primarily to organisational archives (ARAB is the exception here), and very closely tied to labor and business history. In contrast to instructions for paper archives, there are no clear guidelines for what file formats and types of documentation are accepted by institutions in Sweden. Here, developing a feminist information activism approach may be critical if the Swedish memory sector wants to preserve today's grassroots women's and gender activism for tomorrow's researchers.

One troubling trend is the lack of preparedness on the part of state institutions (as noted earlier, representing the overwhelming majority of archival records in Sweden, see Edqvist, 2021). University libraries lack infrastructures and processes for born digital materials, while the National Library and the National Archives have information largely related to digitized materials, rather than born digital documentation. National institutions that collect state administrative records must and do collect digital files. However, there is little indication that they are willing to accept digital documentation from individuals and organisations that are central to tomorrow's women's and gender history. It is entirely possible that these rules are under development. The Regional Archives in Västra Götaland note that potential donors of organisational papers can contact the archives if they have a larger number of digital files to donate but otherwise prefer if these files are printed on archival paper.[20] However, any developments here are largely invisible to individuals and organisations that are not in direct contact with memory institutions.

Regional and non-state actors, while more likely to collect women's voices, have fewer resources and are thus often less ready to take the digital leap. The Stockholm City Archives provides, as noted earlier, advice about a more active approach to acquisitions alongside advice about awareness of gender imbalances in the archives. This advice is, however, offset by their acquisitions policy, which specifically notes that the institution does not normally accept digital files from individual or organisational archives creators.[21]

Coupled with the silence on digital files and active acquisitions from other institutions, this divide indicates that there may be a systemic problem with preparedness for archiving digital materials created by women's or female-coded individuals and organisations. Even museums, traditionally at the forefront of digital archiving (see, for example, Martinez et al., 2002), are largely silent on the question of digital files. Textiles and design are, for example, still considered both female-coded and embodied physically, based on the acquisitions information available on Röhsska's website.

Silence online does not mean that nothing is happening. Sweden has, in fact, produced over 100 preliminary studies of digitally born archival material (Johansson, 2023). Many of the institutions whose acquisitions policies are silent on digital and hybrid archives have worked on exploratory studies of digital archives, in preparation for accepting such materials, or have started to acquire born digital documentation. These institutions are aware of the need for consequent approaches to documentation, file formatting, metadata, and other issues particular to digital archives. The gendered aspects of metadata and documentation are, however, absent from these studies. For many if not all institutions, the goal seems to be the construction of a system that works, rather than a system that is sensitive to historical and contemporary inequalities. This focus on solving technical problems may then lead to a focus on "easy" archives, which may in turn reinscribe older inequitable acquisitions practices (Shusko, 2024).

Relatedly, it is not clear from the texts analysed here that any institution is thinking deeply and critically about what it means to collect digital information and data that may be highly sensitive. Most people do not understand what they have saved on digital devices. Those who do understand may be more interested in retaining community control over archival materials. Research has made clear that women and minority groups are among the most vulnerable to automated and data-fuelled systems (Noble, 2018; Eubanks, 2019). No organization mentions collecting social media accounts, despite the central nature of social media for communication and activism today. There are reasons to be wary given the complications and vagaries of digital rights and issues of digital information and data ownership, and the gendered power imbalances in online environments require that institutions think hard about how to collect social media accounts (Lehtiniemi and Ruckenstein, 2019; Kazansky and Milan, 2021; Sörum and Fuentes, 2022).

Finally, an enormous blind spot created by the structure of Swedish archives is the assumption that organizational archives are the most important bearers of democratic collective action – this is an area where a more feminist information activist approach to acquisitions is possibly the most necessary. Many of the local archival institutions examined here only collect organizational and not personal or project archives. These institutions may be faced with declining donations in a few decades, given broad cuts in funding and digitization of local and national collective action. Thematic collections – Facebook pages from activist groups working around the climate crisis or in anti-rape work, for example – might be the future of archives dedicated to the history of collective action. In order to do this kind of collection, institutions will need to have acquisitions policies that map out what themes their institutions cover. Vague formulations around "democracy" and locality will not suffice here.

INFORMATION ACTIVISM IN THE SWEDISH ARCHIVES

Gender and sex-based activism is extremely important for civil society and contemporary politics, and much of this activism is happening online. All of it involves the use of digital tools like email, social media, text messaging, and the like. Arguing that this material is not of historical value is self-evidently false, and yet it is unclear what institutions will be able and willing to collect and make available materials from – to name just a few examples – the peace movement, the movement for an end to violence

against women, and anti-harassment campaigns, as well as rightist movements to roll back LBGTQ rights, remove drag queens from libraries, and promote "traditional" gender roles. Some information about these movements will certainly be archived. The question is whether we have returned to a period where the archives will house materials that are primarily from the perspective of news outlets, politicians, and the state, rather than the grassroots. Without feminist information activism, the return to a world of archives that unthinkingly lean towards a gendered and classed group of the powerful is a distinct possibility.

Acquisitions policies can do some things and not others, but they are undoubtedly a piece of the puzzle. They are brief statements of intent, rather than detailed descriptions of practice. However, these documents are a starting point for thinking about priorities, as well as being doors into archival donations for a public often ill-informed about what is and is not an archive. The materials that make it through to archival institutions are extremely important to future generations of researchers, many of whom are only now beginning to understand and think critically about the limits of and silences within the archives despite "the archival turn" (see, for example, Callahan, 2024). Further, archivism has long been a critical strand within feminism (Eichhorn, 2013; McKinney, 2020), and feminist activists have engaged in a critical use of digital tools inside and outside the archives (Withers, 2015). But has this thinking reached Swedish archival institutions at all?

What the analysis here indicates is that Swedish institutions are not thinking about shaping their acquisitions beyond saying yes or no to donations proffered, a passive approach that collectively reinforces rather than working against societal norms that still define the historically important as public, male, white, and well-educated. None of the materials surveyed here indicate that institutions are thinking about policies and practices to ensure the development of representative born-digital archival collections nationally. The macro-appraisal approach described by Brown (1991) is invisible here, as is Boczar's (2025) recommendation that policy shape acquisitions. Feminist information activism requires acquisitions statements that attempt to make visible societal power imbalances and explain how an institution or group of institutions is working to make historical materials by and about historically underrepresented groups more visible and accessible. This activism is hard to find in Sweden.

Feminist information activism for archives requires looking forwards and working proactively to encourage archival thinking where it might not already exist. Instead, what is in place is an essentially reactive, individualized approach that leaves memory institutions and the broader archival landscape largely unprepared for the representational, legal, and ethical issues encapsulated in born digital materials like email, app communications, social media, and similar documentation. This approach also places the majority of the focus on technological capabilities and infrastructure, rather than on designing infrastructure to ensure a balance of openness and data protection, as well as a more representative set of archives that reflects today's society rather than powerful actors. QRAB and SAQMI are the only institutions that actively ensure that control and expansion of their archives remain in the hands of activists. These are also the most underfunded archival institutions represented here. QRAB is staffed part-time by one volunteer, while SAQMI lives on very uneven grant monies.

Just as with physical archives, these imbalances can be identified and negotiated by reaching out to and developing a more interactive relationship with organisations and individuals who are active online. This is Linda Henry's (1980) advice for increasing the democratic representativeness of archives, repurposed for our digital world. A feminist information activism approach in this context might take as a starting point Stockholm's city archives' advice about crafting an acquisitions policy that thinks about women and gender as one of several strands of work. Advice from the institution included a five-point

strategy: (1) make visible gender imbalances by producing statistics on representation in existing archival collections; (2) use the archives to make everyone's history visible; (3) create a publication plan that includes statistics on gender representation; (4) add information on sex and gender to archival databases and finding aids; and (5) develop an acquisitions policy that builds in sex equality principles and allows for active collection of archival materials.[22]

What is missing from this vision, and what is needed for feminist information activism in this arena is teamwork around the future of women's and gender archives to ensure safe and ethical collection of digital materials. As one feminist digital archives project has shown, "the critical digital archive is a site of exchange between multiple archivists, cultural heritage institutions, academics, students and users, all of whom inform the character of, and access to, the resource" (Wilson et al., 2022). Construction of such a resource requires feminist activism at a number of levels: collection and organisation, description/metadata, approaches to copyright, and access. These levels can conflict with one another, and collaboration is critical. While this kind of collaboration has been valuable in digitization projects, more work is required for the creation of archival materials – the active preservation of current women's and gender collective action.

Such projects do exist, though they are not common in Sweden. The Documenting the Now project[23] funded by Princeton University and the Mellon Foundation sprung up during the Black Lives Matter protests and evolved a set of guidelines and practices for documenting and archiving protests against the police. This work illustrates the intertwined nature of representation, technical systems, and ethical guidelines. Importantly, contributors should be able to retain control over their materials even after they have been archived, in case of deleted posts, changes in accessibility status, and similar personal choices that may be connected to protecting individuals from the state. This project also demonstrates that new challenges require a breaking down of institutional boundaries in favour of flexible collaboration with local communities. The DoN project has a database of volunteer archivists with different skillsets[24] who can assist activists with documenting, organising, preserving, and making accessible different kinds of materials.

A feminist information activism approach would demand the development of digital archiving policies and practices in cooperation with the individuals and groups whose documentation will be archived. A dialogue is particularly important given the fuzzy boundaries of an archive in a digital landscape that is built on networks. What is a personal or organisational archive in this context? Do comments count? Should the personal accounts of activists be included in a network archive? Who needs to be involved in archival creation and description? How should donors and archivists deal with the increasing presence of bot-created disinformation and digital detritus? How have activists dealt with the rise of AI and algorithmic curation of digital content? How can the right to privacy and control over one's digital identity and footprint be translated in an archival environment? These are all complicated questions that, in a feminist information activist approach, would need to be answered together with the prospective donors whose "communicative strategies" are being archived (Bossewitch & Sinnreich, 2012, p. 237). The results of this discussion – our future archives – might look quite a bit different from traditional, paper-based "private archives" in Sweden.

Negotiating what this more flexible and protected definition of private archives might look like would also demand working across institutions, to connect back to our definition of acquisitions as a question of why "my institution" should collect a particular set of documents. The institutions surveyed here are small, chronically underfunded, and rarely work together on projects, though archival conferences in Sweden are voluminous. This isolation does not allow for collaborative, planned specialisation. Curation, training, oral history, and grant-writing are underdeveloped skills. Institutions are also notoriously risk-averse; as

one recent study notes, many institutions "interpret legislation in a very restrictive way" to "protect their own reputations" (Jaillant, 2022). Yet the SAMDOK project shows that collaboration within Sweden is both possible and fruitful, even if it is potentially resource-intensive (Axelsson, 2014). It is highly likely that certain institutions will develop the resources and personnel to collect, for example, social media accounts, but not have the infrastructure to deal with email. Collaboration to cover various kinds of digital born documentation is also important.

Lastly, researchers have a role to play here. Our research demonstrates that institutions closer to the grassroots are already in dialogue with local communities, and organisations devoted to particular subject areas tend to recognize power imbalances including gendered hierarchies of archival creation and access. State and university institutions are the notable outliers. Both categories have large, blurry "target groups" of the public and researchers. Researchers are on the whole more likely to work collaboratively with these institutions in the context of research projects; Anna Nordenstam's (2008) initial study of women's and gender archival infrastructure in Sweden needs a follow-up. Academics have a role to play in lifting the needs of future researchers, helping archives to think about practical solutions, and integrating archival thinking into how their own research projects are structured. Ashlyn Velte's (2018) observations about the role of big data in archival collections and research are critical. Gender and women's archival researchers need to think about and intervene in these developments to ensure that older inequalities are not thoughtlessly reinscribed.

Feminist information activism to create and collect women's and gender archives and collections will require a collaborative and flexible approach that moves beyond the individual institution, coupled with a particular focus on a feminist "ethics of care" (Odumosu 2020). Collaborations between the Stockholm City Archives and Kvinnohistoriska indicate that cross-institutional support is important and produces results. However, the geographically bound nature of such collaboration is still a problem. Most importantly, bringing activists and other individuals into the conversation remains a challenge. Digital information and data feel ephemeral to many, and at the same time people are rightly concerned about privacy and ethical handling of data. The concept of "enskilda arkiv" or private archives needs to be more flexible in practice and needs more protection from the state. Navigating this minefield to collect, store, and make available the women's and gender archives of the future is a project for archivists together with the researchers, citizens, and community groups creating those archives.

ACQUISITIONS POLICIES AND THE FUTURE OF WOMEN'S AND GENDER RESEARCH

Caitlin McKinney's *Information Activism* begins with a series of quotations from activists in the nascent "Women's Information Exchange", including this revealing citation: "We recognize that many women are fearful about having their names on a computer. It is important to remember that most of us are already on any number of computerized mailing lists, none of which are voluntary nor oriented towards feminists…" (p. 1). This fear was voiced in the early 1980s, and most organisations – including cultural heritage institutions – have yet to take it seriously. Dealing with the technical, organisational, ethical, and legal quandaries of today's documentation landscape is key to shaping acquisitions policies that remove barriers for groups that are less powerful and historically underrepresented in current archives. This process will necessarily be collaborative, requiring increased communication between civil society and memory institutions, as well as increased cooperation between these memory institutions.

What is in the archives – and what is not – delimits and defines women's and gender history in the future, as well as affecting how activist communities in these areas understand themselves and their tools for political and social activism (Eichhorn, 2013; McKinney, 2020). The current research funding

landscape prioritizes doable projects, research that application assessment panels deem safe enough to fund. It is true that information about women and the gendered nature of contemporary life will be possible in the future, but it may be so difficult that only a few large projects run by established professors get funded. This situation would be a threat to a field that is still in its infancy in historical terms. Swedish women's and gender history is most often dated to the 1960 publication of Gunnar Qvist's dissertation "Kvinnofrågan i Sverige 1809–1846". Qvist was instrumental in ensuring that KvinnSam, founded as a private initiative in 1958, received support from the University of Gothenburg. Similar advocacy on the part of researchers may be necessary now.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

Research for this article has been funded in part with money from the Royal Archivist Ingvar Andersson fund.

NOTES

[1] These institutions are the Women's Historical Museum (Kvinnohistoriskt museum) in Umeå and Women's Historical (Kvinnohistoriska) in Stockholm.

[2] A recent network – The Future of Women's Research in Sweden – has created the test bed for this conversation; the author is one of two network founders. See https://kvinnsam.ub.gu.se/en/research-coordination-and-projects/research-projects-0 (accessed 12 November 2025).

[3] https://www.folkrorelsearkivet.se/om-oss/stadgar/ (accessed 12 November 2025). Thanks to Amanda Vesterlund lifting this practice.

[4] https://rohsska.se/uploads/2020/09/rm_policy_for_forvarv_och_accession_2020.pdf (accessed 25 Jul 2025).

[5] https://kvinnsam.ub.gu.se/arkivsamlingar/donera-material (accessed 25 Jul 2025).

[6] https://goteborg.se/wps/portal/enhetssida/regionarkivet/arbeta-med-arkiv/arkivordlista (accessed 25 Jul 2025).

[7] https://tam-arkiv.se/arkiv-och-samlingar/ (accessed 25 July 2025).

[8] https://riksarkivet.se/resurser/riksarkivets-forvarvspolicy-for-enskilda-arkiv (accessed 25 July 2025).

[9] https://www.ub.lu.se/sites/ub.lu.se/files/forvarvspolicy-specialsamlingar-2019-09-26.pdf (accessed 25 July 2025).

[10] https://rohsska.se/uploads/2020/09/rm_policy_for_forvarv_och_accession_2020.pdf (accessed 25 July 2025).

[11] https://kvinnsam.ub.gu.se/arkivsamlingar/donera-material (accessed 25 July 2025).

[12] For information on their collective work attracting donations from historically important women in the Stockholm region, see https://www.kvinnohistoriska.se/arkivism-hyllmeter (accessed 25 July 2025).

[13] https://jamstalldhetsmyndigheten.se/ska-du-jobba-med-jamstalldhet/framtidens-arkiv-skapas-i-samtiden/ (accessed 25 July 2025).

[14] https://qrab.org/#about (accessed 25 July 2025).

[15] https://saqmi.se/events/saqmi-x-transammans/ (accessed 25 July 2025).

[16] https://www.skanearkiv.se/Portals/15/Broschyr%20Skriv%20kvinna%20skriv%202025.pdf (accessed 25 July 2025).

[17] https://www.kvinnohistoriska.se/arkivism-hyllmeter (accessed 25 July 2025).

[18] See the Gothenburg 1968 project listed at https://kvinnsam.ub.gu.se/forskningssamordning-och-projekt/forskningsprojekt (accessed 12 November 2025). The author is involved in this project.

[19] These stories can also be submitted electronically. See https://qrab.org/index.php?p=varhist (accessed 12 November 2025).

[20] https://goteborg.se/wps/portal/enhetssida/regionarkivet/arbeta-med-arkiv/ordna-arkiv/praktiska-rad-om-arkivhantering-hos-foreningar (accessed 17 December 2025).

[21] https://stadsarkivet.stockholm/stadens-arkiv-och-informationshantering/ (accessed 25 July 2025).

[22] https://jamstalldhetsmyndigheten.se/ska-du-jobba-med-jamstalldhet/framtidens-arkiv-skapas-i-samtiden/ (accessed 12 November 2025).

[23] http://www.docnow.io/ (accessed 16 January 2026).

[24] https://archivist.docnow.io/#/web/index (accessed 16 January 2026).

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Chemical Companionship:

Erotic Collaboration of Users and Drugs in Chemsex Porn Publics

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ABSTRACT

Before Pornhub's 2020 content purge, a networked chemsex public briefly flourished around amateur, meth-themed gay porn. In this article, I explore this public through 450 pseudonymous user comments, asking how sex, drugs, and desire are imagined, narrated, and shared. Drawing on critical chemsex studies, feminist theory, and new materialism, I develop the concept of "chemical companionship" to describe the affective and agentic relationships between viewers and the drugs they fantasise with.

This public was shaped by the affordances of porn platforms—anonymity, minimal moderation, and algorithmic visibility—but is now largely erased due to the ongoing deplatformisation of digital sexual expression. I argue that this erasure weakens not only the cultural self-understanding of gay people who engage in sexualised drug use, but also the ability of sexual health organisations to understand and reach them with harm reduction initiatives. By reading these comment sections as ephemeral zones of queer intimacy, the article shows that their expansive social space allows for socio-sexual creativity that is nevertheless finely attuned to the hegemonic morality and stigma around drug use.

KEY WORDS

CHEMSEX, DEPLATFORMISATION, PORN, SOCIAL MEDIA

INTRODUCTION

Drug use has long been intertwined with gay sexual practice, with poppers and ecstasy historically amassing a particularly significant position within this culture (Buckland, 2002; Florêncio, 2023a; Race, 2009). Recently, however, the notion of *chemsex* has risen in prominence in the cultural imaginary of gay sexualised drug use (Florêncio, 2023b; Hakim, 2018). Chemsex is a practice of sexualised use of the drugs methamphetamine (crystal meth), GHB, and mephedrone, typically in private domestic spaces. Since the release of the documentary *Chemsex* (Fairman & Gogarty, 2015), the phenomenon has become an uneasy part of gay sexual discourse. It is at the same time also a phenomenon shaped by the gay digital infrastructures of hook-up apps (Race, 2015) and pornography (Møller, 2021), making a confluence of gay, sexual, digital, and chemical moral worries and panics dominate the discourse (Hakim 2018; Møller and Hakim, 2021), ultimately harkening back to the fact that it operates in the outer limits of hegemonic sexual hierarchies (Rubin, 1984). People's actual erotic engagements are thus made secondary to concerns of safety and morality. It is not surprising, then, that chemsex practice remains taboo for many gay people.

This leaves porn and pseudonymous online communications as useful sites to make chemical erotics socially visible. A previous study has shown the proliferation of such content on Pornhub (Møller, 2020), perhaps the most well-known porn tube platform. However, the deplatformisation of sex has hit the availability of chemsex porn hard. In 2020, Pornhub purged 10 million videos that did not meet new standards put in place to minimise illegal content (Gregory, 2024). As of publication, searches for chemsex are blocked, presenting the message: "Your search could be for illegal and abusive sexual material, including non-consensual intimate imagery (NCII) or image-based sexual abuse (IBSA)". So, while the purge did not technically target illegal content (Gregory, 2024, p. 3), these further restrictions are direct reactions to the US anti-sex trafficking laws, Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA). While some other tube sites have laxer regulations showing some results, it has become notably harder to come by chemsex porn online.

By examining data that is now lost to deplatformisation, this article makes visible what is lost when this type of sexual expression disappears. Drawing from data collected before the 2020 purge, it identifies the types of sexual publics that can emerge when chemsex porn is circulated freely, and when its audience comments are seemingly unmoderated. The fact that social media and platforms have become all but synonymous with public space (Dijck & Poell, 2015; Gillespie, 2010) underlines the devastating consequences of the ongoing deplatformisation of sex (Blunt et al., 2021). For the taboo and illegal, yet for queer people highly significant, chemsex practices, this means that discussion of and reflection on their cultural significance is diminished, leaving these participants in their physical sexual publics particularly vulnerable.

Materially, the article examines the sexual networked publics that formed in the comment sections of chemsex porn on the platform Pornhub. By investigating the erotic production that occurs in the *vicinity* of pornographic representations, this study contributes to the porn research strand that interrogates its infrastructural and social conditions (Hakim, 2019; Hernández, 2019; Martins, 2019; Mercer, 2017a; Nagel, 2021; Paasonen, 2011; Sarson, 2019; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). The study leans into new materialism to emphasise somatic and chemical aspects of chemsex porn consumption. This allows for analytical connections to be made between the porn genres and tropes that the videos and erotic imaginations rely on (as shown in Møller, 2021), the vernacular creativity of porn commenters, and the situated, embodied, and chemical realities that such comments both mediate and produce. By closely examining affective and narrative structures leveraged by commenters, it specifically interrogates the mobilisation of tropes of intoxication in the

affective and discursive production and sharing of erotic pleasures.

The article asks, in comment narratives, what relationship is posited between the body and the drug? What capacities to act and feel emerge? Taking a new materialist methodological approach, the comments are construed as a form of "playing with the text" (Paasonen, 2018, loc. 420), that is, a process of both consumption and socialisation that places the comments in relation to the porn video, the psyche and perspective of the commenter, and the social relations that emerge in any given comment section. The analysis combines qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) with close readings. The material selection is inspired by Michael Warner's work on publics, defined as emergent, contingent, social speech events (Warner, 2002). Comments sections are infrastructurally the epitome of such characteristics, thus providing a rich textual foundation for interrogating chemsex as a cultural and everyday sexual phenomenon. Boyd's work on networked publics informs my understanding of commenting as a specific kind of speech act enabled by social media infrastructure, which makes speech relatively persistent, highly replicable, scalable, and searchable (Boyd, 2010). Thus, the article examines comments to chemsex porn as instances of networked gay sexual publics, that is, sexual expressions and communications in digital spaces with social media affordances. In the platform analysis framework, it is a study of users and usage, rather than content (Dijck, 2013), which serves to centre on how "regular" people enact their sexuality online. It thus offers unique insight into how, before deplatformisation, gay men in their erotic imaginations mediated the pleasures of chemsex with the anti-drug norms that problematise them.

The article unfolds in the following manner: First, I situate the phenomenon and study in relation to other digital aspects of chemsex culture, specifically social media and porn, with particular attention to deplatformisation. Then, critical drug scholarship is used to define the analytical approach. In presenting the material and methods for collection, archiving, and coding, I pay particular attention to the ethical and legal issues of doing such research. The analysis and findings section falls into two parts. The first presents evidence for the expansiveness of the sexual discourse found in this networked chemsex public. The second complicates this finding by showing how what I call "chemical companionship" scripts organise the agentic relationship between users and drugs. Finally, I discuss the reasons for such scripting to exist, what that tells us about chemsex and stigma, as well as what platformisation and deplatformisation mean for nonnormative sexual and intoxication culture.

NETWORKED GAY SEXUAL PUBLICS

Internet scholarship has documented the rise, spread, multiplicity, and deplatformisation of networked sexual publics. Early studies of pre-social media, specifically web 1.0 chat forums, found that the pseudonymity of such interactions enabled forms of discourse that were more expansive than the traditional sexual and moral landscape. Such expansiveness enables social formations to emerge around marginalised identities and interests, including sexual and gender minorities (Correll, 1995; Campbell, 2004; Mowlabocus, 2010). Such safety combined with the invisibility of the body allows for the construction of textual bodies and sexual narratives that play with and even subvert hegemonic and subcultural scripts of gender and sexuality (see, for example, Campbell, 2004). However, the literature also shows how hegemonic gay sexual scripts remain in gay media, such as on dating or hook-up apps (Sarson, 2019; Mowlabocus, 2020), and porn (Mercer, 2017b). By creating profile texts, filling in categories of sexual belonging and orientations, and by looking at and communicating with others, users of hook-up apps create a sexual public that at once is erotic in its sometimes-pornographic aesthetic and usage (Tziallas, 2015), and a facilitator of hook-ups. Hook-up apps have become the prime site at which gay people express sexual interests.

However, hook-up apps' lack of a social feed creates

somewhat insular sexual publics. In contrast, peaking in the 2010s, the so-called "microblogging sites" Twitter and Tumblr provided infrastructure for sharing, reposting, and commenting on sexual content in the form of short porn clips and GIFs (Byron, 2019; Cao, 2022). Tumblr enabled so-called "Not Safe For Work" (NSFW) content because of its lower level of content moderation than other social platforms at the time (Tiidenberg, Hendry, & Abidin, 2021). For queer people, this meant an ability to enact sexual identities in conversation with "… a wide-ranging landscape of identity" (Byron, 2019, p. 346). While sexual drug using Tumblr publics have not been documented, the presence of drug discourse (Ruddock, 2020) makes it reasonable to assume the presence of chemsex publics as well. However, Tumblr's demise following its NSFW content ban and the general deplatformisation of sex happening across all major platforms (Tiidenberg, 2021) has severely limited the ability for networked sexual publics to form.

Porn tube platforms, that is, aggregative porn sharing sites with social media functionalities, created the conditions for the proliferation of chemsex porn. From a production and distribution perspective, making Do It Yourself (DIY) style productions by amateurs much more prominent (Paasonen, 2011), up until the recent deplatformisation, it allowed for the distribution of user-generated content that established porn studios could risk legal sanctions for. Previous studies of chemsex media have focused on pornography aesthetics and production, addressing vernacular creativity (Mercer, 2017a), race and power (Mahawatte, 2021), and masculinity scripting (Florêncio, 2020). From a consumption perspective, the relative anonymity that commenting from unverified, pseudonymous profiles affords makes them key entry points for engaging with chemsex imagery, narratives and affects. While porn tube platforms are increasingly moderated (Blunt et al., 2021; Bronstein, 2021), they still facilitate sexual public space-making by affording pseudonymous commenting on porn content.

In this vein, I have shown how Pornhub-mediated chemsex videos emerge as genres in part because users with various affective connections to chemsex practice seek them out through search (Møller, 2021). While the commenting practices reveal their varying fear-desire configurations, these sexual publics are mainly presented to understand the genre characteristics of the videos they attach to. Because comment circulation often originates from behind pseudonymous profiles (Nagel & Frith, 2015), they can evade the scrutiny of potentially judgmental gazes and legal and social repercussions. As such, the discursive practices in comments to chemsex porn promise frivolous and multi-facetted discourse on a subject that is limited by normative pressures and materially made scarce through deplatformisation.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The textual approach to the study of sexualised drug use aligns with the notion heralded by critical drug scholarship, that drug "effects" must be understood as cultural practices (Moore, 2020). Specifically, the comment discourse is analysed as sexual narratives that bring chemsex drug affects into "eventful attention" (Dennis, 2019, p. 161), that is, narratively constructed affective situations that perform sexual drug effects and experiences. This destabilises the notion that drugs create stable, uniform, unidirectional, chemical forces that alter the body and its faculties in predictable ways. Instead, following Maryon McDonald, a substance "…is always the cultural values invested in it" (McDonald, 1994, p. 18). In this context, it allows me to ask what user investments emerge, what the drug is imagined to be doing, and how both personal biography and investments in sexual futures are written into eventful attention. Looking for ascription of agency to porn representations, drugs, and commenters, the analysis follows recent critical drug scholarship by attending to "…the forms of agency that emerge from particular arrangements of human and nonhuman actants" (Race et al., 2021, p. 4). Drawing from this, I focus on the ways the commenters position themselves and their erotic attachments in relation to the spectacle observed

in the videos, on what effects drugs are imagined to have, and what sexual and practical agencies are ascribed to human and drug actants.

MATERIAL AND ETHICS

The material consists of an archive of 450 comments relating to 41 chemsex-related videos found on Pornhub in June and July of 2019. The video sample was assembled through a series of interface "walk-throughs" (Light et al., 2018) designed to reveal emergent aspects of chemsex aesthetics in conjunction with the interface's algorithmically produced presentation of content, which contributes to such assemblage. By systematically going through and noting affordances, site structure, as well as content types, and my initial understanding of their logic and cultural significance, I familiarised myself with the ways the interface surfaced content. Using keyword searches for "chemsex," the algorithmic "related searches" engine would suggest related vernacular. In the process of reviewing and surveying the video archives it produced, I collected videos based on both perceived tendencies and variations in aesthetic and narrative expression. In turn, the related user comments to these videos were identified, collected, and interpreted through a series of open and closed codings. The legal and ethical aspects of collecting data online were discussed with the University Data Officer. Together, we formulated strategies for collecting, storing, analysing, and ultimately deleting data, informed by the EU GDPR framework. Collecting and analysing social media user activity is widespread in internet studies, with its ethical implications a source of recurring discussion. As noted in the Association of Internet Researchers' influential recommendation for ethical decision-making (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), collecting highly sensitive data (relating to the sexual matters of a minority group) without consent heightens the requirements for both data management and the distribution of value to this group. In other words, the value of the research should arguably not only be general, but also directly benefit the people and publics it represents. I argue that this article's systematised insights into this form of sexuality and drug use provide such directed value simply by giving one of the few detailed descriptions of a phenomenon whose logics are rarely interrogated openly. Thus, it provides a touch point for such cultures and practices to understand and make sense of themselves, which is otherwise systematically suppressed by the illegality of their intoxication preferences and by the relative taboo of homosexuality. The collection of data poses little risk to individuals whose comments are included, as it is already pseudonymised and has been further anonymised by removing the usernames as soon as data analysis completed.

The article construes the comments as emerging from "real people", that is, non-coordinated text written by individuals with no other agenda than simply participating or expressing themselves. This is ultimately a fallible assumption, as internet scholarship has shown how online publics can often be manipulated. In this context automated and semi-automated commenting from bots is of most relevance. Both social media and dating apps are riddled with bot activity (Harrison, 2017; Pilipets et al., 2024) aimed at shaping discourse or extracting value (selling products, scamming), making it hard to distinguish between human and non-human activity. The data might very well have bots participating. Indeed, the simple affective expressions present in the material could conceivably have been produced by bots. However, the incentive for any external entity to do so in this context is minimal, as individual uploaders of DIY porn have little economic incentive in driving traffic or changing user perceptions through manipulation. Notably no invitations to off-site activity are present in the material. Moreover, the more complex comments upon which the main thrust of the article's argument relies are sufficiently intricate, specific, and consistent to warrant the assumption that they are predominantly authored by humans. The consistency that makes the formation of themes possible, seems then to reveal a systemic truth, rather than a conspiracy of bot interference. Thus, I think that the reliability of the analysis is not significantly weakened by this theoretical issue of data contamination.

The dataset was extracted via an R script. The collected comments were left unedited. The typos and the heavy use of chemsex vernacular interfere significantly with legibility for most readers, including myself. I present them as is, with accompanying explanations and interpretations. Arguably, this illegibility is a feature of the digital chemsex public, and presenting it verbatim not only maintains data transparency but also might reflect the "messy" affective and cognitive state of the commenters. While I refrain from speculating further about any direct causes of such opacity in discourse, its affective thrust will be included in my more-than-representational analyses. Themes emerged from several rounds of both inductive and abductive coding.

COUNTERPUBLIC SEXUAL PLEASURES

The comments relate to the chemsex video content in rather enthusiastic and personal ways:

> I don't pnp [party 'n play] myself but it's hot watching guys bb [bareback, anal, condomless sex] under the influence. Even the editing is druggy

> Ur hot as fuck man! Vers here and would love to have my 1st time pnp with a sexy white fucker like yourself! Ever fuck blk guys? Post most videos already!

> You are the pnp amature fuck of all times. Award winner!

Speaking in the first person and disclosing personal preferences, experiences, and wishes pull the videos into the personal sphere. While representations of illicit drug use in popular culture mostly portray them as having negative consequences, the comments remain overwhelmingly positive, with almost no discourse of worry or rejection. As such, the distribution and social, anonymous, or pseudonymous consumption of chemsex porn on Pornhub operates as a relatively expansive space for expressing and sharing erotic fantasies. This may stem from the erotic example set by the video, combined with the low risk of social consequences afforded by online anonymity, which allows commenters to bypass the typical scripts of risk and moral judgment.

While Pornhub enables people without physical chemsex experience to encounter its digital instantiations (Møller, 2021), for those with personal experience with sexualised use of crystal meth, GHB, or mephedrone, these videos can activate drug memories and sensations. Consider the following comments:

> i love the Feeling and after every slam [drug injection] I get a really whore

> i domt klnow this is me biuty meth or stine i can even feel thickles

> i still remember my first high. being a bottom, i went crazy mad for the dick. there is nothing quite like your first high. ever.

> Love the rush and it makes me so horny, can not say no to anything when I am wired

> Love that feeling after, cock starts twitching, and you just get so fucking horny

From presumably watching the videos, the biographical chemsex experience of the commenters seems triggered, making it felt through "thickles." I read the many typos as reflecting the chemically-induced sensorial, bodily, and cognitive changes that sustain the heightened erotic capacities that motivate the comment in the first place. Continuing Dennis's use of Massumi's affect theory (2002) to think about triggers, the chemsex videos seem to call drug-using habits "into eventful attention" (Dennis, 2019, p. 161). As such, the engagements with chemsex porn at once produce a shared generalised erotic chemsex imaginary and make personal sexualised drug use experiences and affective memories visible. Compared to other media infrastructures, Pornhub's social media functionalities provide expansive social space for nonnormative thinking and feeling. Its socio-technical infrastructure allows the erotic orientations and

narratives of the commenters to divest from scripts of respectability and morality that typically attach to both queer bodies and intoxication practices. What emerges is the possibility for a chemsex counterpublic to form around the narrative construction and appreciation of drug effects on sex. However, this is not to say that this public is formed independently from normative scripts of sexuality and drug use; rather, following Warner, its erotic narratives should be seen as direct responses to such pressures, even when they are not directly acknowledged. This narrative work will be the subject of the following section.

ASSIGNING SEXUAL AGENCY TO DRUGS

Some comments go beyond mere recognition and appreciation of drugs and their effects, to play with the relationship between body, drug, and intoxicated pleasures. One commenter writes: "I remember when I had a man who would have me sucking on that glass pipe and then blow on his dick." The crystal meth smoke enveloping the penis can be read as a gesture of chemically enhanced submission and worship, with the act of blowing smoke both evoking the drug effects on the blowing subject (as it exits the body) and the intent of symbolically transferring its pleasures. The blowing of crystal meth smoke on the penis thus symbolically performs a *transfer* of erotic appreciation, which bypasses the typical human embodiments of its capacities. The airborne drug helps to make the materiality of breath visible, which can then contribute to a visual economy of affective exchange.

The way drugs materially flow through the body and affect its chemistry is also subject to eroticisation. When one comments, "I would totally take his chemmed up load, too!" it performs a fantasy of drug-sperm *infusion* that further intensifies the symbolic charge of semen transfer, a charge that Tim Dean famously argues underpins a type of gay "brotherhood" and even kinship (Dean, 2009). Drug effects are thus narratively instated through the symbolic infusion of physical smoke fumes, which make visible and transferable capacities for chemical bodily alteration.

The grammatically incorrect sentence "…in testicles, rock smoke would blow" almost poetically conveys a pleasure practice in which crystal meth smoke can operate "inside" testicles, with it being entirely unclear exactly what entity is doing the "blowing." Thus, it imagines crystal meth smoke as not merely acting upon a body's erotic orientation but in fact without a "host body." The smoke emerges as having an erotic orientation and intention itself, thus transcending its physical properties and instating its appreciation of *other* bodies by acting upon them. The symbolic transfer of chemical effects from one body to another through creative readings of porn performances speaks to a certain closeness between drugs and their users in the comments. As such, drug narratives may operate in symbolic registers, openly rejecting any claim to realism. This creates the narrative possibility for placing drug effects outside, but in relationship to, the body in a way that I will call "chemical companionship":

> see how he has that ass up at 2.20, I me waiting for that dick. Tina [crystal meth] and I. Hot Hot video
>
> METH AND I WOULD SUCK HIS DICK ANYDAY! HOT MOTERFUCKER!

In the discursive alignment between subjects and drugs ("Tina and I," "METH AND I"), the drug takes on something akin to personhood. Crystal meth receives agency and permanence that go beyond the role of an intermediary (Latour, 2005) between people. This recalls Dennis's finding that some heroin users will make sense of their habitual relationship to drugs as "friendship" (Dennis, 2019, p. 154). Such friendships are played out with great intensity in the comments. Discursively, crystal meth is placed within the scene as a sensing entity along with the person, thereby being granted affectability, embodied permanence ("waiting for that dick"), and sexual desire to "Suck his cock." This human-chemical friendship is seemingly organised around a shared longing for the sexual pleasures of engaging with

other men. In this narrative, the person looking at porn is not alone in their desire practice; they can establish a social chemical companionship through commenting. This arguably eases the pressure of the stigma associated with porn consumption as a lesser-than version of "real" human sexual contact. Even more so, it may work to redirect the normative pressure of understanding drugs as effectuating mental and social deroutes.

Risks are not removed but remain present in the narratives as crystal meth acts as a playful "buddy" that might get the commenter in trouble. Assigning corporality to crystal meth enables it to operate as a companion with which (or rather, whom) pleasure can be sought out. Therefore, the companionship model does not exactly ignore notions of risk and harm, but in placing it in a body of its own, makes the responsibilities for potential harm fall back on this "chemical buddy" and, in turn, less so on the person taking them, who merely operates as a "partner in crime." As such, its counterpublic (Warner, 2002) erotics are partly drawn from the same opposition to danger that normatively attaches to drug use.

What emerges is a human-chemical relationship of mutuality, in which neither is subordinated to the effects or in control of the other. The chemical companionship narrative script works to preemptively avoid the labelling of drug relations as "addicted," a labelling that would diminish and devalue the pleasures otherwise made available in the chemical encounter. Instead, chemsex drugs become "playmates", a complicit sexual partner. The chemical companionship compounds the more-than-human sociality of mediated engagement in which commenters place themselves in affective proximity to the porn scene and its actors, adding a complicit chemical presence that works to validate the erotic charge. This ultimately expands and complicates the social relations from being between commenters and audiovisual content to being one between crystal meth, commenters, porn scene, and its performers, which in turn, allows the commenter to take pleasure in chemsex imaginaries by making themselves immune to impending moral judgment.

As such, we may understand the mobilisation of chemical companionship as trying to resolve the resistance to drug use installed in normative subjectivity by way of creating erotic relationships with the drug itself. By granting it permanence and agency, the narrative substitutes medico-chemical characterisation with human traits of interests and sociability, thus bypassing the notion of drug use as always only incapacitating. The chemical companion narrative imagines drug effects as residing in a chemical body with which the human body can venture off in search of pleasure. As such, the narrative helps the commenters break through the confinement imposed by the agential dichotomy that so dominates drug discourse, enabling its wielders to perform and appreciate new ways for drugs to participate in gay sex.

I have demonstrated how drug effects are narrated in such ways that their normative transgression can be fetishised and erotically consumed while remaining safely distanced from addiction narratives. Thus, the digital drug effects provide a deterritorialising effect in gay porn's play with hegemonic erotic imaginaries. It would be a mistake to assume that drug effects operate in a vacuum or somehow supersede or overrule the sexual cultures in which they intervene.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This article has approached the narrative and affective work in commenting publics to chemsex videos on Pornhub as zones of exchange in which chemsex imaginaries emerge in exchanges between bodies and crystal meth, between porn representations and its audience experiences and fantasies, and between gay cultural scripts and personal chemical biography. The analysis has shown how porn tube platforms can be rich sites for exploring erotic imaginaries, not least for a sexualised intoxication practice that is otherwise mostly made sense of in terms of health promotion. Different drug effects have been identified, ranging from appreciations of their intensities that are relatively unmarked by normative evaluation to complex

agential dispersions of agency across humans and chemicals (chemical companionship), which mediate normative danger narratives with pleasure.

The chemical companionship narrative emerges as a particularly inventive configuration of power and drugged pleasure. Placing the drug effects outside the body arguably makes it harder to read the characters and, in turn, the narrator as "addicted." So, while the companionship model is clearly "transgressive," it is so in surprising ways. Rather than ignoring the social circumstances that place it outside the charmed circle (Rubin, 1984), it seems to mediate moral concerns in ways that seek to minimise the subject's accountability to a moral standard not set by them. It operates as a novel way for a counterpublic sexual public to form around nonnormative pleasures. Understanding normativity as present within all subjects enables us to make sense of this. Sexual counterpublics do not consist of subjects outside hegemonic sexual normativity, but of the repetition of speech that allows pleasures to be had despite the moral judgments that subjects carry with them.

The, at the time, seemingly unrestricted social discourse creates a sprawling interrogation of what intoxicated arousal feels like. It also shows that drugs are used to make something possible, to expand the gay erotic experience to include more people/bodies/orientations, and to work around the moral roadblocks that make erotic notions difficult to access. Thus, it takes part in gay people's sexual experimentation (Pienaar et al., 2020a, 2020b). The intensity and frivolity of discourse align with previous studies of chemsex that find that the consumption of chemsex imaginaries in digital spaces signifies an overflow of erotic charge (Møller, 2020). However, recent critical chemsex scholarship has reignited discussions between STS and ANT about the role and malleability of affect (Race et al., 2021) in networked analysis. Here, I would argue that the data also reveals that drugs do not operate as unmalleable forces that freely amplify preexisting sexual orientations. Instead, the comments reveal how drug effects are themselves brought into eventful attention in strategic ways. Most clearly, the companionship model of such eventuation is shaped by hegemonic notions of "good sexuality." Such production is not a mundane achievement but must be understood in relation to the the array of forces that work to suppress such pleasure practice, most notably the general deplatformisation of sexuality and the illegalisation and social stigma of drug use. On one level, then, networked chemsex publics pose as simple affective overflows and amplifications of gay sexuality, enabled by the expansiveness of this digital social space. On another level, however, the very expression of drugged pleasure emerges in conversation with the hegemonic sexuality.

The study has several limitations, of which the role of race is perhaps most pertinent. Whiteness operates as a default in gay porn (Mercer, 2017b, p. 147), and in the case of chemsex, Mahawatte argues for the "… the implicit 'entribing' of the white-raced body as the beneficiary of the chemsex party scene" (Mahawatte, 2021, p. 3). While there was little mention of race in the comments, the data would have benefitted from a more careful consideration of how the racial signifiers in the videos create the backdrop for the identified erotisations of drug use. This would allow a better understanding of how chemsex is imagined to afford social and sexual mobility, and how that is racially distributed.

Digital space has changed "the terms through which people and things associate" (Race, 2018, p. 20). The study adds to critical chemsex research by examining another way in which chemsex is a highly mediated phenomenon. Pornhub (and other tube sites) have shaped chemsex by allowing commenters to create sexual publics around the relatively free and expansive production of drug narratives. Paradoxically, the colonisation by big tech companies of online social space (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) has both created the conditions for the rise and fall of the phenomenon that the data observes. It is, in some ways, the pinnacle of what early internet scholarship observed: that digital platforms can create opportunities to produce more expansive social spaces, enabling minoritised, stigmatised, and illegalised practices and

subjectivities to operate. The presence of comments that simply appreciate and rehearse drug pleasures represented in porn supports the analysis that normativity holds less power in these digital spaces.

At the same time, the advancement of these very digital infrastructures has created business incentives that underpin the deplatformisation that has (at the time of writing) cast all but the most vanilla networked sexual publics aside. With the ongoing deplatformisation restricting sexual speech acts, sexual publics are disappearing from digital culture. The opportunities for nonnormative sexuality, as explored by the surveyed commenting public, are primarily predicated on access to social media that a) allow anonymity and b) allow sexual content. With more social media platforms employing increasingly sex-negative moderation policies (Tiidenberg & Nagel, 2020), the ability for any form of sexual expression is significantly lowered, not least those that are sexually or chemically nonnormative. All things equal, our ability to interrogate other configurations of sex beyond the charmed circle is weakened.

Research on digital queer sexuality might have to contend with the fact that a more equitable and expansive digital terrain is not in our immediate future. The repression of online sexual discourse represents an apparent setback for sexual liberation. Sexualised drug use does, of course, not entirely depend on our ability to form digital publics around their pleasures. However, with the weakening ability to represent and make sense of it socially, the negotiation of its ethos and value within gay sexual culture and identity stands to be weakened. From a health equity perspective, the suppression of sexual publics that are culturally stigmatised limits the ability of sexual health organisations to initiate and target harm reduction that supports these at-risk populations. The platform economy is not going away anytime soon, so new networked gay sexual publics will undoubtedly emerge in digital terrains that manage to evade the scrutiny of datafied heteronormative platform governance. Gay sexual history has seen its share of spatial creativity and under-the-radar sexual practices, and the waves of deplatformisation reconfigure the spatial conditions in which such counter-public tactics are invented.

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Hacking the Biomedical Discourse:

Trans Digital Counterpublics and the Self-Governance of Health

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ABSTRACT

Institutional barriers to trans healthcare have compelled trans communities to establish peer-led digital spaces where medical knowledge is collectively produced and circulated outside traditional authority structures. This study investigates how Reddit's trans health communities exhibit counterpublic characteristics through their negotiation of medical authority via distinctive discourse practices. Using a mixed-methods approach combining Critical Discourse Analysis with computational linguistic techniques, the research analyzes 826 discussion threads from six trans subreddits collected between April 2024 and January 2025. The corpus includes medical-focused communities (r/TransDIY, r/AskMtFHRT, r/Transgender_Surgeries, r/TransfemScience; 603 threads) and comparative general trans discourse (r/asktransgender, r/transhealth; 223 threads).

The analysis reveals that medical communities practice what this study terms "engaged counterpublic" formation: strategic negotiation between biomedical appropriation and experiential authority construction (rather than a wholesale rejection of institutional knowledge). This engaged counterpublic formation distinguishes itself from oppositional counterpublics through context-dependent authority deployment.

The findings extend Fraser's counterpublic theory by documenting how marginalized communities navigate relationships with institutional knowledge systems when exclusion necessitates autonomous survival strategies. These digital counterpublics represent sites where communities not only resist medical gatekeeping but innovate knowledge production methods that challenge credential monopolies and establish distributed peer expertise networks as alternative validation systems for health knowledge.

KEY WORDS

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS, TRANS HEALTH, DISCOURSE ANALYSIS, TRANS LINGUISTICS, HEALTH COMMUNICATION, REDDIT

INTRODUCTION

Institutional barriers (as systematic medical gatekeeping, limited provider knowledge or persistent pathologization of trans experiences) to trans healthcare have compelled trans people to seek alternatives to traditional medical systems (Ashley, 2019; Rotondi *et al.*, 2013). In response to these exclusions, trans communities have established peer-led digital spaces where medical knowledge is collectively produced, contested and circulated outside institutional control.

Platforms ranging from specialized Reddit forums like r/TransDIY and r/Transgender_Surgeries to community resources such as the DIY (do-it-yourself) HRT (hormone replacement therapy) Wiki function as what August-Rae *et al.* (2024) theorize as counterpublic health spaces: digital environments where marginalized communities can construct alternative epistemologies that can challenge and (strategically) engage with dominant biomedical discourse. They also serve as sites of political resistance against the medical-industrial complex (Relman, 1980), prioritizing patient autonomy and wellbeing over institutional power and exposing economic inequalities embedded in health access. Within transgender studies, these platforms exemplify trans digital epistemologies, that is, knowledge production systems that emerge from lived transition experiences and community-based learning (Horak, 2014; Raun, 2016).

Despite their growing prominence and the knowledge they generate, these communities remain underexamined within both health communication and discourse analysis. Existing research on digital health communities focuses predominantly on mainstream patient populations, leaving questions about how marginalized communities develop autonomous knowledge systems largely unexplored. Understanding how these communities navigate relationships with biomedical authority (whether through wholesale rejection, strategic appropriation, or hybrid knowledge systems) reveals mechanisms of resistance that extend beyond binary opposition.

Three interconnected questions structure this investigation. First, how do these communities construct epistemic authority through discourse strategies that legitimize health knowledge claims while establishing alternative credentialing systems? Second, what metaphorical frameworks structure transition experiences and healthcare negotiation and how might these linguistic patterns constitute resistance to medical pathologization? Third, how do platform-specific affordances shape the formation and sustainability of these digital health communities? What vulnerabilities do these technological dependencies create?

The stakes of these inquiries extend beyond academic concerns. In the current moment, trans rights face increasing legislative challenges globally and healthcare access remains precarious for many trans people. Understanding how communities develop autonomous health knowledge systems may contribute to broader conversations about medical autonomy and digital health equity.

The research acknowledges that trans digital communities constitute vital infrastructure for community survival and resistance against medical exclusion, yet it also tries to navigate (and operate within) the tension Spade (2015) identifies in trans activism and scholarship: documenting community resilience and self-determination while advocating for structural changes that would make community self-provision less necessary.

Employing a mixed-methods approach combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with computational linguistic techniques, the study examines health knowledge construction patterns across 603 medical-focused discussion threads from four trans subreddits collected between April 2024 and January 2025: r/TransDIY, r/Transgender_Surgeries, r/AskMtFHRT and r/TransfemScience. The study includes comparative analysis of r/asktransgender (200 threads) to distinguish medical-specific from general trans discourse patterns.

It is necessary to remark that this research emerges from and examines discourse within Reddit, a

predominantly English-language platform whose user demographics and community practices reflect particular technological and cultural contexts. Reddit's user base concentrates heavily in North America, particularly the United States, with significant representation from other English-speaking nations including the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. The communities analyzed here reflect this geographic distribution, with discussions frequently referencing healthcare systems, insurance structures and legislative contexts specific to these regions. While discrimination against trans people exists across healthcare systems globally, the specific mechanisms of exclusion vary significantly between differently organized healthcare contexts. The gatekeeping practices, insurance barriers and legislative restrictions documented in this study reflect characteristics common to several Anglophone healthcare systems, though these systems vary considerably in their organization. The United Kingdom, for instance, operates a universal healthcare system through the NHS; yet trans healthcare access within it still involves gatekeeping mechanisms, extended waiting lists and systemic barriers that produce dynamics analogous to those in private-insurance-based systems.

It is also necessary to acknowledge Reddit as both enabling factor and constraint: the platform provides technological infrastructure for community formation while embedding these spaces within concrete linguistic, cultural and jurisdictional frameworks. While Reddit's specific affordances shape the analysis in platform-specific ways, the theoretical insights about counterpublic health formation and community knowledge production may offer implications for understanding how marginalized communities navigate healthcare exclusion through digital technologies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trans communities' development of peer-led digital health spaces emerges from systematic epistemic exclusion within institutional medicine. Carel and Kidd (2014), drawing on Fricker's (2007) foundational work on epistemic injustice, identify two forms that operate simultaneously in trans healthcare contexts: testimonial injustice, which occurs when healthcare providers discount trans patients' self-knowledge about their own gender identities and healthcare needs; and hermeneutical injustice, which emerges when medical frameworks pathologize gender diversity, providing only deficit-based conceptual resources for understanding trans experiences. Ashley (2019) demonstrates how these epistemic injustices manifest concretely through gatekeeping protocols that treat hormone therapy access as something requiring extensive psychiatric assessment rather than informed consent, positioning trans people as inherently unreliable narrators of their own experiences. This systematic credibility deflation creates conditions under which trans communities must develop alternative spaces where experiential knowledge gains legitimacy that institutional medicine denies it.

Fraser's (1990) theory of subaltern counterpublics provides a framework for understanding how marginalized groups respond to such exclusions. Fraser theorizes counterpublics as parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated groups formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. These spaces serve dual functions: they provide venues for internal identity formation and collective self-understanding while generating discourse that challenges dominant public sphere frameworks. In stratified societies, counterpublics expand discursive possibilities, enabling forms of participation and knowledge production that dominant institutions foreclose. Subsequent scholarship extended this framework to digital contexts, with Brouwer and Asen (2010) demonstrating how online platforms enable counterpublic formation across geographic boundaries that previously prevented dispersed populations from sustaining collective discourse. Ziebland and Wyke (2012) document how digital platforms specifically transform health information practices, enabling individuals to share experiences they would never discuss in clinical settings and collectively produce medical knowledge outside

institutional frameworks, a shift particularly significant for marginalized communities facing barriers to conventional healthcare.

However, trans digital health communities reveal a tension unaddressed in standard counterpublic theory. Fraser's framework assumes counterpublics can develop discourse systems in opposition to dominant frameworks, maintaining separation while articulating critique. Trans health communities face a distinctive constraint: they cannot wholly reject biomedical knowledge because accessing transition-related healthcare, whether through formal medical systems or community-based alternatives, requires technical expertise in endocrinology, pharmacology, surgical techniques and monitoring protocols. This produces what might be theorized as "engaged counterpublics": formations that must simultaneously challenge institutional authority and strategically appropriate institutional knowledge for survival. Communities cite endocrine research when advocating for specific hormone protocols, demonstrating biomedical literacy to legitimize knowledge claims, yet simultaneously assert experiential knowledge to challenge provider practices like systematic underdosing. This epistemological hybridity raises a theoretical question: how do communities construct authority when they must both oppose institutional frameworks (that pathologize and gatekeep) and deploy institutional knowledge (that enables healthcare access)?

Frameworks theorizing resistance beyond binary opposition-compliance models help explain this navigation. Certeau (1984) distinguishes between strategies (actions available to those with institutional power and designated social space) and tactics (improvisational actions available to those without institutional locations who must operate within spaces controlled by others). Trans health communities employ tactical appropriation, using biomedical knowledge for community purposes, operating within medical discourse while lacking authority to define its legitimate applications. Katz (2004) elaborates how resistance operates through three modalities: resilience (working within systems while maintaining critical awareness), reworking (transforming institutional practices for community purposes) and resistance (direct opposition). Trans communities likely deploy all three depending on context: engaging biomedical knowledge through resilience when accessing care, reworking medical discourse when developing autonomous protocols and resisting provider authority when challenging pathologization. Understanding how these tactical modalities operate requires examining the discourse practices through which communities actually construct knowledge claims, which existing research has not systematically analyzed.

Moreover, counterpublic status itself requires empirical verification through observable discourse practices rather than assumptions based on a marginalized positioning. Asen (2000) argues counterpublic formation must be demonstrated through recognition and articulation of exclusion via alternative communicative norms, observable in actual discourse patterns. Squires (2002) provides analytical precision by distinguishing enclave publics (hidden from view due to threat), counterpublics (openly oppositional with independent media access) and satellite publics (oscillating between separation and engagement). She emphasizes examining observable features: relationships to state institutions, available resources, modes of communication and relationships to dominant political-economic structures. Crucially, communities may shift between modes contextually rather than maintaining fixed status. This directs attention toward discourse analysis: how do communities actually construct alternative authority systems, what communicative practices mark counterpublic formation and how does platform infrastructure shape these possibilities?

Trans studies scholarship emphasizes that trans communities develop distinctive epistemological approaches that cannot be understood simply through frameworks developed for other patient populations. Nicolazzo (2021) theorizes "trans epistemologies" as ways of knowing emerging from

navigating institutions predicated on binary gender assumptions, encompassing not only medical knowledge but survival strategies, self-advocacy techniques and collective wisdom about healthcare navigation. Awkward-Rich (2017) argues trans knowledge production involves "reading practices" attending to what triumphant medical narratives systematically exclude: persistence when treatments fail, labor of provider education and ongoing embodiment negotiations that never resolve into stability. These theoretical contributions suggest trans health knowledge construction operates through specifically trans ways of knowing, shaped by experiences of simultaneous pathologization and access withholding. Yet how these epistemologies manifest in actual discourse (what linguistic strategies construct authority, what metaphorical frameworks organize experience) remains underexamined.

Empirical research on patient-led knowledge production provides relevant precedents. Epstein (1996) documented how AIDS activists acquired biomedical expertise sufficient to challenge research protocols and reshape clinical trials, becoming "lay experts" engaging professionals on scientific terms while maintaining community advocacy. This demonstrates possibilities for patient communities developing medical expertise outside institutional frameworks and successfully challenging institutional authority. However, AIDS activism occurred under specific conditions (epidemic urgency creating political will and coordinated organizing infrastructure) differing from trans communities' ongoing, geographically dispersed contexts. Contemporary DIY healthcare research provides more direct comparisons. Wexler (2022) maps DIY medicine practices spanning complementary approaches (supplementing mainstream medicine) to substitutive approaches (replacing inaccessible care). Trans DIY hormone therapy represents primarily substitutive practice driven by gatekeeping, provider scarcity and cost barriers rather than ideological rejection of medical science. Significantly, Kennedy *et al.* (2022) found comparable health outcomes between peer-supported and physician-supervised hormone therapy when communities maintained monitoring protocols, challenging assumptions that medical supervision is prerequisite for safety and suggesting gatekeeping serves authority maintenance rather than patient protection. Yet Kennedy *et al.* emphasize DIY emerges from necessity not preference; removing institutional barriers would better serve community health than normalizing constrained self-provision.

Research examining trans digital health communication specifically documents community practices and significance. Augustaitis *et al.* (2021) identified facilitators including peer expertise, experiential validation and stigma-free discussion, alongside barriers including information overload, misinformation concerns and platform precarity. Edenfield *et al.* (2019) analyzed DIY HRT communities as "queering tactical technical communication," positioning appropriation of medical discourse as self-determination rather than dangerous deviation. They emphasize communities' risk assessment and harm reduction protocol development, challenging deficit models positioning community knowledge as inferior and recognizing different epistemological approaches suited where institutional medicine fails marginalized populations. However, this research has not systematically examined the discourse mechanisms through which such knowledge construction occurs, how communities linguistically establish credibility, what metaphorical frameworks structure medical understanding and how authority gets negotiated in specific interactions.

Nevertheless, platform architecture shapes which knowledge construction becomes possible. Record *et al.* (2018) found Reddit communities provide valuable peer support while requiring critical evaluation given information quality variation. Deutsch (2016) noted substantial variation in transgender health information accuracy; some community content rivals institutional sources while other materials contain outdated information. Reddit's specific affordances (pseudonymity, nested threading, voting systems, subreddit organization) create specific conditions for counterpublic formation. Pseudonymity

enables stigmatized healthcare discussion, voting surfaces community-valued content. However, platform governance through moderation policies and algorithmic ranking constrains counterpublic autonomy, with corporations retaining authority to alter or eliminate spaces (Lupton, 2014).

The existing literature establishes that trans digital health communities constitute significant knowledge production sites operating under distinctive constraints requiring tactical biomedical appropriation while opposing epistemic injustice, providing essential information while navigating platform precarity and developing trans-specific epistemologies while engaging institutional frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

This research combined qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with computational linguistic techniques to investigate both nuanced meaning-making practices through close textual analysis and broader patterns across larger corpora.

This study treats counterpublic status as an empirical question requiring demonstration through observable discourse features rather than an assumption based on marginalized social positioning. Following Asen (2000) and Squires (2002), the analysis establishes four testable criteria: (1) explicit recognition and articulation of institutional exclusion, (2) construction of alternative authority structures that challenge dominant credentialing systems, (3) development of oppositional discourse while strategically engaging institutional knowledge and (4) formation of community-specific communicative norms. The research design tests whether trans health communities meet these criteria by examining patterns in authority construction, metaphorical frameworks and discourse organization. This approach distinguishes counterpublic formations from other online health communities (patient support groups, information aggregators) that may serve marginalized populations without constituting counterpublics.

The corpus comprises Reddit threads from six trans health communities representing distinct approaches to healthcare navigation. Four communities focus specifically on medical knowledge construction: r/TransDIY (self-managed hormone protocols, 200 threads), r/Transgender_Surgeries (surgical experiences and outcomes, 200 threads), r/AskMtFHRT (technical hormone therapy questions, 199 threads), and r/TransfemScience (hormone pharmacology research, 4 threads). One additional community provided comparative context: r/asktransgender (multipurpose forum where health discussions intersect with identity and social topics, 200 threads). r/transhealth (general health discussion, 23 threads) was initially included but excluded from analysis due to insufficient volume.

At data collection (April 2024-January 2025), subscriber counts ranged from approximately 5,900 (r/TransfemScience) to 342,000 (r/asktransgender). The 651 unique contributors who authored the 826 analyzed threads represent a small percentage of total membership, reflecting typical Reddit participation patterns where core groups sustain discourse that circulates more widely.

Inclusion criteria required threads addressing hormone replacement therapy protocols, surgical procedures, provider interactions, harm reduction practices or medication pharmacology. Exclusion criteria eliminated threads focusing exclusively on non-health topics, archived or inactive communities (>6 months without posts), non-English language or image-based content without substantive text.

Using Python Reddit API Wrapper (PRAW), data collection gathered original posts and associated comment threads between April 24, 2024, and January 4, 2025. The initial raw corpus (4,937 posts) underwent cleaning to remove deleted content, insufficient text and duplicates, yielding 826 threads with complete comment trees. Of these, 819 (99.2%) addressed health themes.

Primary analysis focused on 603 threads from the four medical-specific subreddits, while the 200 r/

asktransgender threads were analyzed separately to determine whether biomedical engagement patterns differ between specialized medical forums and general trans discourse spaces.

The study integrated three complementary approaches: Critical Discourse Analysis for examining power relations and identity construction, computational methods for systematic pattern identification and qualitative close reading for nuanced meaning-making practices. The analytical framework combined theoretically informed coding categories with computational operationalization. Drawing on Fricker's (2007) epistemic injustice framework, van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation theory and Epstein's (1996) work on lay expertise, the analysis developed three primary discourse dimensions through iterative engagement between theoretical frameworks and preliminary data exploration. These dimensions provide the analytical apparatus for testing the four counterpublic criteria established above: authority source analysis reveals whether communities construct alternative credentialing systems (criteria 1 and 2), discourse theme analysis identifies articulation of exclusion and oppositional engagement (criteria 1 and 3) and metaphorical framework analysis examines the formation of community-specific communicative norms (criterion 4). The three dimensions are:

1. Authority sources (biomedical citations, experiential knowledge, community-based authority, counter-authority positioning)

2. Discourse themes (medical information dissemination, peer advice, challenging biomedical authority, institutional barriers)

3. Metaphorical frameworks (war/battle, journey/path, technology/machinery, construction/building, metamorphosis/transformation)

Table 1.

Authority Source Classification Patterns

Authority type	Subcategory	Pattern keywords
Biomedical	Medical citation	study shows, research indicates, according to, published, peer-reviewed, clinical trial, evidence shows, medical literature, scientific evidence
	Professional authority	doctor said, medical professional, clinician, specialist, healthcare provider, my endo, therapist told me
	Statistical evidence	statistics show, data indicates, surveys reveal, studies find, research demonstrates, meta-analysis
Experiential	Experiential authority	my experience, I've found, in my case, personally, for me, I can confirm, from my perspective, speaking from experience
	Community wisdom	others have said, community, shared experience, common knowledge, collective wisdom, community consensus, many people report
	Peer validation	others here, fellow trans, community members, people like us, shared understanding, solidarity
	Anecdotal evidence	I heard, someone told me, a friend, anecdotal, word of mouth, rumor, supposedly
Counter-authority	Challenge authority	gatekeeping, outdated, restrictive, barriers, access, bureaucracy, red tape, institutional bias

Note: Patterns matched via case-insensitive regex across the full corpus. The biomedical/experiential ratio in Table 3 aggregates biomedical authority markers (medical citation + professional authority + statistical evidence) versus experiential authority markers (experiential authority + community wisdom + peer validation + anecdotal evidence).

Qualitative CDA focused on representative threads selected through maximum variation sampling, examining lexical choices, metaphorical language, evidential marking and authority construction. Coding followed an iterative process with initial categories refined through systematic comparison.

Computational analysis employed dictionary-based pattern matching for thematic categorization and regular expression matching for metaphor identification. BERTopic modeling was used for corpus-level discourse frame identification as a triangulation method to validate qualitative findings. Bootstrap resampling and cross-validation assessed statistical stability. All computational coding utilized explicitly defined regex criteria to ensure consistency and reduce subjective interpretation variability.

The computational and qualitative components serve complementary functions within this design: a computational pattern matching identifies the distributional patterns across the full corpus while qualitative CDA provides the interpretative framework for understanding what those patterns mean in discourse contexts. This approach follows Charteris-Black's (2004) three-stage procedure of identification, interpretation and explanation: the computational component addresses identification at scale, while the qualitative analysis addresses interpretation and critical explanation.

Metaphorical framework categories were developed through a two-stage process informed by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), corpus-based Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004) and prior research on metaphor in trans discourse (Lederer, 2015; Martynyuk, 2021). Initial qualitative reading of a stratified subset of threads identified recurring conceptual patterns structuring how community members discuss transition and healthcare. Seven candidate categories emerged from this exploratory phase: journey, transformation, technical, medical, puberty, warfare and construction. Two categories (medical and puberty) were subsequently excluded because their constituent terms functioned literally rather than metaphorically in this corpus: terms such as "treatment" or "therapy" describe actual medical processes in health discourse rather than serving as conceptual mappings, and "second puberty" refers to the physiological reality of HRT effects rather than operating as a metaphorical framing. The remaining five categories (war/battle, journey/path, technology/machinery, construction/building, metamorphosis/transformation) were then operationalized as keyword lists and regex patterns for systematic computational application across the full corpus.

Table 2:
Metaphorical Framework Categories, Seed Terms and Corpus Occurrences

Framework	Seed terms	Occurrences	Status
War / battle	battle, fight, struggle, combat, war, enemy, victory, defeat, strategy, tactics, weapon, armor, defense, attack, resistance, rebellion	1,049	Included
Journey / path	journey, path, road, destination, milestone, steps, progress, direction, crossroads, detour, arrival, departure, map, guide, compass, adventure	871	Included
Technology / machinery	hacking, coding, programming, debugging, system, protocol, algorithm, process, optimization, configuration, settings, upgrade, patch, version, compatibility, integration	443	Included
Construction / building	building, construction, foundation, structure, framework, blueprint, design, architecture, scaffold, renovation, reconstruction, repair, maintenance	295	Included
Metamorphosis / transformation	transformation, metamorphosis, evolution, becoming, change, transition, shift, development, growth, emergence, awakening, rebirth, renewal, reformation	43	Included
Medical	treatment, therapy, prescription, diagnosis, protocol, intervention, procedure, remedy, cure, healing, recovery, medicine, dosage, symptoms, condition	17,252	Excluded
Puberty	second puberty, adolescence, development, growth, changes, maturation, teenage years, coming of age, physical changes, hormonal changes, body development	1,895	Excluded

Following AoIR ethical guidelines (Franzke et al., 2020), this research treats publicly accessible Reddit posts as analyzable discourse while maintaining commitments to avoid harm, respect community autonomy and contribute rather than extract. Usernames and identifying details were removed; analysis avoids deficit framing that positions community practices as inferior to institutional medicine.

Engaging with Tuck's (2009) critique of "damage-centered research," this analysis centers community knowledge production and epistemic innovation rather than portraying trans people primarily as victims. While documenting healthcare exclusion and survival strategies, the goal is contributing empirical evidence about counterpublic health formation for academic understanding and policy advocacy. However, community members did not consent to research participation when posting in peer support spaces. The researcher's positionality as a trans scholar shapes interpretive choices and she accepts complete responsibility for all analytical choices and acknowledges that community members may interpret their discourse practices differently.

THEMATIC FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The following sections integrate qualitative observations, quantitative patterns and theoretical interpretation to demonstrate how these digital health

communities function as engaged counterpublics navigating complex relationships with institutional medicine.

Trans health communities on Reddit practice epistemic negotiation, strategically appropriating biomedical discourse while constructing experiential authority as a complementary validation mechanism. Communities consistently employ what can be characterized as "technical insubordination": using precise pharmacological terminology while explicitly questioning provider competence and intent.

A TransDIY post about underdosing exemplifies this pattern:

> "I started on 2 mg of estradiol and 25 mg of spiro... after 6 months still at male levels. Am I being underdosed?"

The response directly challenges medical judgment:

> "Massively underdosed and it's hard to believe it's not intentional. The fact that they would boost you by 1mg after your levels were that low reads like malicious compliance."

Such exchanges use clinical specifications to establish credibility while asserting different therapeutic standards, positioning community knowledge as authoritative enough to evaluate and critique medical recommendations.

Discussions about hormone protocols generate peer review using clinical specifications. When evaluating Dr. Powers' HRT recommendations, one response states:

> "For reference, the standard guidelines that we tend to suggest to people here are total T below 50 ng/dl, total E2 between 80-200 pg/ml at their minimum levels."

Community members explicitly reject premises that external authorities possess greater expertise about their healthcare needs than what they have developed through lived transition experiences and collective knowledge production, a stance aligning with Ashley's (2019) analysis of medical gatekeeping as dehumanization rather than patient protection.

Computational analysis across 603 medical-focused threads confirms these qualitative patterns while revealing their systematic character. Biomedical authority citations (3,585 total) outnumber experiential knowledge references (2,879 total), yielding a ratio of 0.80 (experiential/biomedical). However, this overall pattern masks significant variation by discourse context. Even in threads containing markers of challenge to biomedical authority, biomedical citations predominate (2,190 versus 1,583 experiential, ratio 0.72). When challenging providers, they deploy biomedical expertise against inadequate practice, appropriating institutional authority to support oppositional claims.

Authority patterns vary systematically across contexts. Medical information dissemination threads use biomedical authority most frequently, creating discourse spaces where formal medical knowledge maintains central relevance alongside experiential validation. Peer advice and harm reduction discussions demonstrate stronger reliance on experiential knowledge, where lived experience serves as the key criterion for advice credibility. Threads challenging biomedical authority show highest rates of counter-authority positioning while maintaining substantial biomedical citation patterns, indicating complex engagement rather than wholesale rejection.

Table 3:
Context-Dependent Authority Patterns in Medical Subreddits

Context	Biomedical	Experiential	Ratio (Exp/Bio)	Pattern
Medical subreddits (overall)	3,585	2,879	0.80	Bio > Exp
TransDIY	1,117	1,003	0.90	Bio > Exp
Transgender_Surgeries	1,821	1,024	0.56	Bio >> Exp
AskMtFHRT	636	845	1.33	Exp > Bio
TransfemScience	11	7	0.64	Bio > Exp
By discourse theme				
Challenging authority	2,190	1,583	0.72	Bio > Exp
Not challenging	1,395	1,296	0.93	Nearly equal

Note: Ratio calculated as Experiential/Biomedical. Values <1.0 indicate biomedical citations predominate; values >1.0 indicate experiential references predominate. Data from 603 medical-focused threads.

Co-occurrence analysis reveals that documents frequently combine experiential and biomedical authority markers, suggesting community members create hybrid knowledge claims synthesizing formal medical information with practical implementation insights derived from personal experience. Communities selectively incorporate biomedical knowledge while constructing experiential authority as complementary validation, strategically prioritizing different authority types depending on communicative context.

These findings extend Fraser's (1990) counterpublic theory by revealing what might be understood as "engaged counterpublic" formation, distinct from the oppositional counterpublics Fraser originally theorized. Unlike feminist counterpublics that could reject patriarchal discourse entirely, trans health communities cannot afford wholesale rejection of biomedical knowledge when life-threatening consequences accompany inadequate healthcare access. This necessity produces tactical engagement: communities master technical expertise while maintaining oppositional critique of institutional authority structures. The context-dependent authority negotiation documented here represents sophisticated epistemological navigation rather than simple resistance or wholesale adoption of institutional frameworks.

To assess whether biomedical engagement patterns in medical subreddits represent strategic choices specific to health contexts or reflect broader trans community communication norms, comparative analysis examined r/asktransgender (200 threads), a large multipurpose space where health discussions intersect with identity development, social navigation and political topics.

In r/asktransgender, experiential knowledge references (5,250 total) substantially exceeded biomedical

authority citations (2,028 total), yielding a ratio of 2.59 (experiential/biomedical), which inverts the medical subreddit pattern (0.80). When trans communities discuss identity, social experiences and political issues alongside health topics, experiential knowledge predominates. The contrast demonstrates that medical communities' extensive biomedical engagement represents a deliberate strategic choice.

This comparative finding reveals what makes medical counterpublics theoretically distinctive from broader trans counterpublic formations. In general trans discourse spaces, conversations range across identity exploration, discrimination experiences, social transition and political advocacy, with occasional health questions appearing alongside these topics. In these contexts, lived experience naturally constitutes the primary authority source. However, in spaces explicitly dedicated to medical knowledge construction, communities choose to engage extensively with biomedical discourse while constructing experiential knowledge as complementary validation. When health knowledge construction becomes the central discourse function, communities actively choose biomedical engagement over pure reliance on experiential authority, showing epistemological navigation. Medical spaces cannot afford wholesale rejection of biomedical knowledge because accessing transition-related healthcare requires technical expertise and engagement with medical systems, producing "engaged counterpublics" that maintain oppositional critique of inadequate care while strategically appropriating institutional knowledge for community survival.

Alongside biomedical engagement, communities construct experiential authority as a distinct epistemological category providing insights unavailable to medical providers. A post about progesterone effects demonstrates this pattern:

> "this all kinda happened to me, you can read my comments and post history to see more about what i experienced."

These experiential accounts create authority structures where community members develop recognition as informal experts through consistent provision of accurate information and long-term engagement with transition processes. Peer knowledge networks operate through consultation mechanisms where collective wisdom is explicitly positioned over individual medical authority. A discussion about DIY harm reduction states:

> "I think directing users here makes the most sense just from a 'keeping things central' point of view. The amount of combined knowledge that's sitting here is incredible."

The community becomes a repository of specialized knowledge that complements and, in areas of trans-specific healthcare where providers often lack expertise, sometimes fills gaps left by individual medical providers.

Posts about hormone management generate detailed peer guidance providing practical advice that supplements or replaces medical consultation. A discussion about injection overdose produces responses like:

> "Most likely they are fine but its probably going to be an uncomfortable time for them physically and emotionally. With a depot that large it would probably take months to clear."

These exchanges demonstrate clinical reasoning while maintaining accessible communication that democratizes medical knowledge.

The temporal dimensions of transition knowledge emerge as particularly significant. Posts with high experiential authority scores regularly include specific timeline markers establishing credibility through sustained engagement with transition healthcare. Long-term outcome documentation functions as research methodology supplementing medical literature. A four-year post-surgical update explicitly addresses information gaps: "There arent a ton of post op pics from years after surgery and wanted to provide some."

Community members position themselves as researchers contributing to collective knowledge production about long-term transition outcomes. Users regularly reference years of observation and outcome tracking to evaluate treatment approaches and provider recommendations, including recognition of changing political and regulatory environments affecting healthcare access.

This sustained community engagement functions as alternative credentialing. Nicolazzo (2021) theorizes "trans epistemologies" as distinctive ways of knowing emerging from experiences of gender transition and navigating institutional systems predicated on binary gender assumptions. The temporal authority patterns documented here instantiate this theorization: users who document transition experiences over extended periods gain credibility through demonstrated outcomes rather than formal training, creating "experiential credentialing" where community members evaluate expertise based on documented results and consistent participation rather than institutional certification.

However, this system privileges users who have time and emotional resources for extensive platform engagement, potentially excluding those facing economic constraints, mental health challenges or digital access limitations. Reddit's upvoting mechanism and comment threading structure amplify certain voices while potentially marginalizing others, suggesting digital platforms shape community authority in ways that may reproduce rather than challenge traditional hierarchies. Communities must navigate tensions between developing specialized knowledge networks and maintaining inclusive participation, particularly significant when expertise becomes concentrated among members with greater platform visibility.

The longitudinal knowledge production documented through sustained community participation reflects what Awkward-Rich (2017) theorizes as trans forms of relationality and collective survival. Awkward-Rich explores how shared experiences of medical inadequacy and systemic marginalization generate "trans negativity", not pessimism but attentiveness to failure, ambivalence and persistence that dominant narratives of medical transition typically exclude. Community knowledge production encompasses not only successful protocols but also documentation of treatments that failed, complications that emerged and persistent challenges that clinical literature often minimizes. This negative knowledge builds collective resources from shared experiences of surviving inadequate healthcare systems, creating epistemologies that value persistence and survival as much as optimized outcomes.

Corpus-level topic modeling provides additional confirmation of the epistemic patterns documented above. BERTopic modeling across the full 826-thread corpus identified four guided discourse frames, with 817 threads receiving topic assignments: "Resistance and Autonomy" (395 threads), "Desperation and Necessity" (219 threads), "Scientific Exploration" (180 threads) and "Medical Safety and Caution" (23 threads). Cross-validation demonstrated topic stability coefficients above 0.70, indicating robust identification of underlying discourse structures. The predominance of resistance and autonomy framing provides further empirical support for characterizing these communities as counterpublics that challenge institutional authority while developing alternative care pathways. The substantial presence of desperation and necessity framing confirms that these practices emerge from constrained circumstances (and not just from ideological preference): communities navigate healthcare access through autonomous knowledge production because institutional systems have systematically failed to provide adequate, affirming care. The presence of scientific exploration as a substantial discourse frame further challenges deficit models positioning community knowledge as inferior to institutional expertise, reinforcing the pattern of strategic biomedical engagement documented in the qualitative analysis above.

Having established how these communities construct epistemic authority, the analysis now turns to the second research question: what metaphorical

frameworks structure transition experiences and healthcare negotiation, and how might these linguistic patterns constitute resistance to medical pathologization?

Metaphorical analysis of the full 826-thread corpus reveals conceptual frameworks structuring health discourse that constitute forms of resistance to medical pathologization while maintaining practical utility. The dominance of war/battle/conflict metaphors (1,049 total occurrences) indicates communities consistently frame healthcare access as adversarial encounters requiring strategic navigation and resistance, creating conceptual space for understanding medical encounters as sites where strategic action is appropriate rather than passive compliance.

Journey/path metaphors appeared 871 times, reflecting transition-related healthcare as progressive movement through developmental stages with identifiable milestones and decision points. Technology/machinery metaphors characterized 443 instances, primarily appearing in discussions of medical interventions and hormonal modifications, suggesting communities conceptualize transition-related treatments as technical processes requiring precise calibration and maintenance.

Construction/building metaphors (295 occurrences) structured discussions of treatment protocol development and knowledge accumulation, indicating communities approach health planning as systematic building projects. Metamorphosis/transformation metaphors, while least frequent (43 occurrences), appeared in theoretically significant contexts discussing transition-related bodily changes, suggesting communities selectively employ biological transformation concepts when addressing fundamental identity-body relationships. This selective deployment indicates careful navigation between medical frameworks that pathologize trans embodiment and community frameworks that assert transition as natural development.

Metaphorical usage patterns varied systematically across thematic contexts, revealing how different discourse topics activate distinct conceptual frameworks. Institutional barriers discussions demonstrated elevated war/battle metaphors; peer advice contexts showed increased journey/path metaphors, indicating communities adjust conceptual framing strategies based on discourse functions and audience needs.

The prevalence of war metaphors creates conceptual space for understanding medical encounters as sites where strategic action is appropriate, rejecting expectations of passive compliance. This aligns with trans digital epistemologies (Horak, 2014) that challenge clinical expertise through alternative knowledge production forms. However, the role of journey metaphors suggests communities also maintain progressive frameworks positioning transition as natural development rather than medical intervention, creating space for positive identity construction alongside strategic resistance.

This metaphorical diversity enables communities to navigate complex relationships with institutional medicine. War metaphors legitimate oppositional positioning when challenging inadequate care; journey metaphors support identity affirmation and normalize transition experiences; construction metaphors emphasize agency and intentionality in healthcare planning. The sophisticated deployment of multiple metaphorical frameworks demonstrates communities' capacity to shift conceptual positioning strategically depending on discourse context and audience.

The discourse patterns documented here also suggest these communities maintain more expansive frameworks for understanding transition goals than institutional medicine typically accommodates. Medical transition protocols often assume binary gender outcomes focused on passing as desired result, yet community discussions reveal more diverse transition intentionality. Posts about hormone protocols discuss not only feminization or masculinization but achieving specific aesthetic goals including androgynous presentations, non-binary embodiments or

selective physical changes that reject binary endpoints. Community knowledge systems encompass broader understanding of gender possibility than clinical frameworks that often pathologize non-binary outcomes or ambiguous presentations as failures rather than legitimate goals. The epistemic frameworks communities develop thus challenge not only who controls medical knowledge but also the normative gender assumptions embedded within institutional medicine's conceptualization of what successful transition looks like.

The third question asks how platform-specific affordances shape the formation and sustainability of these digital health communities and what vulnerabilities technological dependencies create. The corpus itself provides evidence of platform shaping: Reddit's subreddit architecture enables the coexistence of highly specialized knowledge communities (r/TransfemScience, with approximately 6,700 subscribers) alongside large multipurpose spaces (r/asktransgender, with 396,000 subscribers). This architectural fragmentation facilitates the epistemic specialization documented in the preceding analysis: the distinct authority patterns found across medical versus general subreddits (0.80 versus 2.59 experiential/biomedical ratios) are partly produced by platform affordances that allow communities to self-organize around specific knowledge functions. Reddit's pseudonymity enables stigmatized healthcare discussion that would be impossible under real-name conditions, while its voting system surfaces community-valued content, creating an informal peer review mechanism that substitutes for institutional validation. However, these enabling affordances exist within corporate governance structures that simultaneously introduce important vulnerabilities.

Platform dependency introduces vulnerabilities that traditional counterpublic theory, developed before digital technologies became central to public sphere participation, did not anticipate. Posts discussing medical access barriers articulate this precarity directly:

> "apparently bigots are using any medical advice to get other trans subreddits shut down."

Community knowledge sharing remains vulnerable to platform moderation decisions that may eliminate essential healthcare resources.

Sharon (2018) argues that digital health platforms enable new freedoms while simultaneously facilitating data commodification and user exploitation. Digital counterpublics exist within corporate governance structures that may undermine community autonomy despite appearing to support it. Reddit's content policies prohibit certain forms of medical advice, creating tension between harm reduction information sharing and platform terms of service that may characterize such guidance as impermissible. The threat of content moderation eliminating community knowledge exemplifies this contradiction—platforms that enable peer support can also destroy it through policy enforcement.

These dependencies position trans health communities within what Sharon terms "digital capitalism": peer support creates genuine value for participants, but platform corporations capture economic value through advertising, data harvesting, and user engagement metrics. Community knowledge constitutes valuable resources generated through unpaid labor. Yet communities lack ownership over hosting platforms and cannot control policy changes that might eliminate their spaces. The capacity for platform governance to eliminate community knowledge through content moderation or terms of service changes represents ongoing vulnerability distinguishing digital counterpublics from physical organizing spaces, which cannot be deleted by corporate decree.

Communities must navigate opposition from medical institutions while simultaneously managing precarity inherent in depending on corporate platforms potentially unsympathetic to marginalized health practices. However, discussions reveal awareness of these vulnerabilities. Users reference archived resources, backup forums, and distributed knowledge storage

as hedges against platform elimination, suggesting digital counterpublics develop resilience strategies specific to technological contexts. These mitigation efforts require additional labor and may prove insufficient against coordinated platform policy changes, yet they demonstrate communities' sophisticated understanding of their technological dependence and efforts to build redundancy into knowledge preservation systems.

CONCLUSION

This study documents how trans digital health communities function as engaged counterpublics, a distinctive formation that extends Fraser's (1990) counterpublic theory by revealing how marginalized communities facing healthcare exclusion must simultaneously appropriate and challenge institutional expertise. Unlike oppositional counterpublics that can reject dominant discourse entirely, trans health communities cannot afford wholesale rejection of biomedical knowledge when life-threatening consequences accompany inadequate healthcare access. This necessity produces epistemological practices that are more complex than simple opposition or assimilation.

The empirical evidence confirms counterpublic status across multiple dimensions. Communities explicitly articulate institutional exclusion (with authority-challenging discourse constituting the dominant thematic context in the corpus, as Table 3 documents), construct alternative authority systems through experiential credentialing, develop oppositional critique while strategically engaging biomedical knowledge (war/battle metaphors as the dominant conceptual framework with 1,049 occurrences, technical insubordination patterns) and establish community-specific discourse norms through distributed peer expertise networks. However, these practices reveal a theoretically significant pattern: context-dependent authority negotiation where communities draw extensively on biomedical discourse when discussing medical protocols while asserting experiential authority when challenging inadequate care. The comparison with general trans discourse—where experiential authority predominates (ratio 2.59) versus medical subreddits' biomedical emphasis (ratio 0.80)— demonstrates that this represents deliberate strategic choice rather than communication preference.

This engaged counterpublic formation manifests through three primary mechanisms. Communities construct epistemic authority via "technical insubordination," citing clinical specifications while questioning provider competence and "experiential credentialing," where sustained participation confers expertise independent of institutional certification. Metaphorical frameworks enable strategic conceptual positioning: military metaphors (38.8% of total metaphor keyword occurrences) frame healthcare navigation as strategic action against institutional resistance, journey metaphors (32.2%) construct transition as natural development and construction frameworks (10.9%) emphasize active self-creation. Platform affordances shape community formation through Reddit's pseudonymity, voting systems and specialized spaces, though corporate governance introduces critical vulnerabilities where content moderation threatens harm reduction sharing and platform capitalism extracts value from unpaid knowledge production.

These epistemic practices align with broader patient-led health movements (HIV/AIDS activism (Epstein, 1996), rare disease communities, chronic illness networks) that developed alternative expertise systems when mainstream medicine proved inadequate. However, trans health communities differ fundamentally: they face systematic pathologization positioning trans identity itself as medical disorder rather than simply disputing treatment approaches for accepted conditions. This represents what Stryker, Currah and Moore (2008) conceptualize as transgender embodiment's inherent disruption to conventional biomedical categorization systems. Where other patient movements challenge how medicine treats recognized conditions, trans communities challenge the medical authority to define

their identities as pathological conditions requiring treatment.

These findings raise questions about healthcare delivery transformation: medical education could incorporate community expertise through structured partnerships where peer specialists contribute to provider training; healthcare systems might develop formal roles for peer health navigators bridging institutional and community knowledge while maintaining independence from clinical oversight; insurance coverage could recognize peer support services as legitimate healthcare interventions, acknowledging the substantial labor communities provide.

However, such integration must avoid transforming unpaid mutual aid into exploitable labor or turning autonomous practices into sites for extracting economic value. The central question becomes not whether institutional medicine should recognize community expertise (the evidence makes such recognition empirically warranted) but whether healthcare institutions can support community autonomy without undermining the self-determination and oppositional positioning that make community knowledge systems epistemologically distinct and politically necessary. The epistemic injustice Carel and Kidd (2014) identify cannot be addressed by incorporating community practices into unchanged systems. Reform requires fundamental restructuring of authority relationships currently positioning medical professionals as sole legitimate knowers of trans healthcare needs.

Several limitations constrain these findings. First, the Reddit focus restricts understanding of counterpublic health formation across different technological environments. Second, the English-language content concentrated in Anglophone regions limits insights into cultural variations. Third, digital access requirements may exclude economically marginalized members facing greatest healthcare barriers, suggesting these findings represent relatively privileged segments. Finally, the temporal scope captures discourse during increasing legislative challenges to trans rights, while the focus on public posts excludes private communications that may represent significant knowledge circulation. Future research should examine comparative patterns across platforms, policy environments, and regulatory contexts while investigating private communication channels.

This study reveals how specific digital counterpublics function as sites where marginalized communities innovate knowledge systems in response to institutional exclusion. Within the scope of English-language trans health communities on Reddit, the findings document functioning alternatives to institutional gatekeeping that maintain safety standards through peer monitoring, produce reliable medical knowledge grounded in collective experience and provide affirming care that clinical systems have often failed to deliver. The engaged counterpublic practices documented demonstrate epistemological work challenging simplistic narratives of either resistance or compliance. While these findings are necessarily bounded by their platform-specific and linguistically situated context, they raise broader questions relevant to health communication research: how marginalized communities navigate the tension between needing institutional knowledge and opposing institutional authority, what forms of evidence communities develop when excluded from formal knowledge production and how digital platform architectures both enable and constrain autonomous knowledge systems. These questions extend beyond trans healthcare specifically, with potential relevance for understanding other communities navigating healthcare exclusion through digital technologies, though further research across platforms, languages and healthcare systems would be needed to assess the generalizability of the engaged counterpublic formation documented here.

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Gut Feelings and Eating Videos:

Affective Practices on Food in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This article explores affective meaning-making practices on social media content about food and eating. The analysis draws on eight interviews conducted with eighteen teenage girls in Sweden. Unlike much research that focuses on how young people are affected by social media, this study aims instead to highlight young people's own perspectives on content they actively engage with. The analysis is based on Wetherell's concept of 'affective practice' and identifies affective patterns, flows and values. The affective pattern that emerges in the participants' descriptions is two-sided and contradictory, as it highlights both restrictions and transgressions linked to femininity and body norms. The participants also describe the affective flow between viewers and social media through their emotional connections and reactions to what is seen on social media, but also through their strategic approach to what they see. The participants state that influencers use emotions strategically through spectacular content, such as mukbangs, to attract attention and generate affective value. Since the benefit or enjoyment of eating videos appears in contrast to restricted and controlled eating, this article argues that excessive eating - even though it presents a resistance-cannot be regarded as an opposite, but the two are rather as mutually dependent.

KEY WORDS

SOCIAL MEDIA, TEENAGE GIRLS, YOUTH CULTURE, AFFECTIVE PRACTICE, FOOD

INLEDNING

Forskning som berör mat och ätande i sociala medier domineras av hur ungas hälsa påverkas negativt av det innehåll de möter. Unga människor ställs då i fokus som konsumenter som utsätts för påverkan (Goodyear, 2022; Holmes, 2017; Third m.fl., 2019). Som exempel studeras sociala mediers inverkan på ungas matvanor och övervikt (Amson m.fl. 2025; Coates m.fl. 2019), men också hur det påverkar kroppsuppfattning och risk för att utveckla ätstörningar (Marks m.fl. 2020; Wu m.fl, 2024). När unga tjejers internetanvändande studeras finns en tendens att fokusera på risk och utsatthet vilket framställer tjejer som passiva mottagare av innehåll de möter (Holmes, 2017). Rickman (2018) beskriver att det finns en utbredd syn på tjejer som dubbelt utsatta för risk, både att andra kan utsätta dem och att de själva ska utsätta sig, en konsekvens av det synsättet blir att tjejers närvaro på sociala medier behöver övervakas och kontrolleras. I kontrast till detta så har annan forskning poängterat att unga tjejer förhåller sig aktivt till sociala medier genom att kommentera, dela och skapa eget innehåll, men också genom att förhandla och skapa mening i relation till innehåll de ser (Coulter, 2021; Holmes, 2017). Mycket av ungas kulturer skapas i relation till de sociala medier som unga är del av och skapar mening kring (Burns & Eaton 2016; Driver & Coulter, 2018). Ungas samspel på, med och kring sociala medier går därmed bortom en uppdelning mellan att vara producent eller konsument av innehåll (Coulter, 2021). I likhet med tidigare kritisk ungdomsforskning (se t.ex. Driver & Coulter, 2018; Holmes, 2017; Martínez & Olsson, 2018; Ågren & Sparrman, 2025) fokuserar denna artikel på ungas egna perspektiv och meningsskapande kring det komplexa innehåll de möter och deltar i på sociala medier. Denna studie tar sin utgångspunkt i vad unga tjejer (16–17 år) berättat vid intervjuer och undersöker hur de beskriver innehåll om mat och ätande i sociala medier. Artikeln undersöker frågan: hur framträder affektiva praktiker när unga tjejer beskriver mat och ätande i sociala medier?

FORSKNING OM MAT OCH KÄNSLOR I SOCIALA MEDIER

På sociala medier förekommer mycket innehåll relaterat till mat och ätande, från matlagning och restaurangrecensioner och dieter (Lupton, 2018, 2020a). Mycket av innehållet handlar om restriktioner och kontroll av kroppen genom dietkultur (Munro m.fl., 2024) men det förekommer också kroppspositivism och fettaktivism som utgör ett motstånd mot att smala, vältränade och vita kroppar utgör ett ideal (Hill, 2024; Johansson, 2021; Lupton, 2018). Baer (2016) uttrycker denna dubbelhet som att digitala plattformar kan vara arenor för motstånd mot normer, men också en plats där kroppen övervakas. Kroppen har länge varit central i feministiska kamper, men i den nya feministiska offentligheten online fokuseras det ofta på individualiserade upplevelser i stället för på strukturer. Motstånd mot skönhetsnormer blir då en fråga om personlig utveckling i den neoliberala tidsandan av självständighet och självoptimering (Baer, 2016). Dessa *postfeministiska* och populärfeministiska tankegångar lägger stort fokus på att tjejer själva ska övervinna svårigheter och inte låta sig påverkas av normer och ideal (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser m.fl. 2019; Gill, 2016). Att tycka om sin kropp och visa på ett gott självförtroende i relation till sitt utseende är ett postfeministiskt ideal menar Gill och Orgad (2015). Att vara kritisk mot dietkultur och istället förorda hälsa som ideal kan dock användas som ett annat sätt att uppmana till perfektion och självkontroll (Eltink & Bröer, 2024; Kilger & Pérez Aronsson, 2024).

I kontrast till innehåll som fokuserar på ett restriktivt eller kontrollerat ätande finns en populär kategori av ätande på sociala medier som kallas *mukbangs*. Det är ätshower där en eller flera personer äter stora mängder mat framför kamera. Fenomenet har sitt ursprung i Korea, men produceras i dag över stora delar av världen (Choe, 2019). I mukbangs är matens estetik viktig men även ljudet, det ska gärna höras smaskande och slurpande (Donnar, 2017). Genom att titta på andras ätande skapas känslor av *intimitet* och *gemenskap* (Choe, 2019; Donnar, 2017). Den

som är framför kameran bjuder ofta in till en social samvaro genom att tilltala den som tittar på ett familjärt och informellt sätt (Rüdiger, 2020). Särskilt när mukbangs livestreamas så uppstår en social samhörighet där tittaren blir inbjuden och kan kommunicera med den som äter, detta kan förstås som ett kollektivt ätande (Choe, 2019). Att titta på mukbangs beskrivs av Lupton (2020b) som ett sätt att hänge sig åt den karnevalistiska njutningen som är förknippad med att äta på ”fel” sätt. Att äta på ett sätt som överskrider det socialt accepterade skapar också intresse och ger många tittare (Donnar, 2017).

Att mat och ätande är kopplat till känslor är inget nytt men sociala medier har skapat möjligheter att dela dessa känslor med mycket stora grupper (Lupton, 2020b). I det postdigitala samhället är digitala verktyg och plattformar inte en separat del av livet utan något som är integrerat i vardagslivet och sociala relationer (Scribano, 2022; Willis, 2016). Hirdman (2018, s. 136) beskriver bildmedier som känslofyllda rum som uppstår i samspel mellan användaren och skärmen. Sociala medier är känslofyllda rum vi delat med andra men också kan utgöra ett enskilt känslofyllt rum i det offentliga eftersom människor kan befinna sig i olika digitala rum (Hirdman, 2018). Sociala medier beskrivs ofta som en uppmärksamhetsekonomi, och enligt Abidin (2018) kan det också betraktas som en affektionsekonomi där det är viktigt att bli omtyckt och uppskattad. Andra forskare lyfter att influencers strävar efter att skapa en känsla av relaterbarhet genom att visa upp sårbarhet och vardaglighet (Abidin, 2016; Thelandersson, 2023). Att tala om starka känslor som ångest i sina kanaler skapar en känsla av autencitet eftersom influencern uppfattas som ärlig (Lehto, 2022; Wickström & Lind, 2024). Enligt Döveling och kollegor (2018) så finns det flera olika men samverkande lager i den *digitala affektkulturen*: individuella känslouttryck, sociala känslonormer i nätgemenskaper och globalt cirkulerande känslor som kan synas i till exempel virala trender på sociala medier. Unga navigerar innehåll de möter och skapar på digitala plattformar och förhåller sig aktivt och affektivt till detta (Driver & Coulter, 2018). Enligt Wang och kollegor (2022) anser ungdomar att de lär sig mycket om matlagning på sociala medier som Tiktok men att de också exponeras för dieter och matrestriktioner. För att påverka vilket innehåll de vill se eller undvika så använde de funktioner som finns för att påverka algoritmen, som att gilla och välja bort (Wang m.fl., 2022). Coulter (2021) har undersökt tjejers känslomässiga engagemang i konsumtionskultur och mat, och hon visar hur de skapar gemenskap genom att relatera till produkter och blir medskapare av innehåll genom att dela sina upplevelser. I den här artikeln ansluter jag mig till perspektivet att unga är medskapare och aktörer i relation till innehåll i sociala medier, för att studera ungas egna upplevelser och meningsskapande på och med sociala medier behövs mer empirisk forskning som utgår från ungas egna perspektiv. Artikeln bidrar till forskningsfältet genom att fokusera på hur unga tjejer beskriver det mångfacetterade och motsägelsefulla innehållet om mat och ätande de möter i sociala medier.

GRUPPINTERVJUER MED UNGA TJEJER

Materialet som analyseras i denna artikel producerades inom ramen för ett forskningsprojekt som undersökt tjejers perspektiv på mat och hälsa i sociala medier.[1] I studien genomfördes åtta intervjuer med totalt arton tjejer som gick första året på gymnasiet. Samtliga av de medverkande skolorna är centralt belägna i samma storstad, två av klasserna gick samhällsvetenskapligt program och en klass gick estetiskt program. Intervjuerna var mellan 35 och 70 minuter och genomfördes i skolans lokaler. En av intervjuerna hölls enligt elevens önskemål via videosamtal efter skoltid. Intervjuerna spelades in med ljudupptagning och transkriberades ordagrant.

Intervjuerna inleddes med öppna frågor där deltagarna ombads beskriva innehåll relaterat till mat och ätande som de sett på sociala medier. Därefter visade forskaren totalt 8 korta klipp från tre olika svenska influencers[2]. Dessa valdes för att de är unga kvinnor och några av Sveriges största influencers med mellan 400 000 och 1 miljon prenumerationer på sina kanaler. Urvalet gjordes baserat på vilken

typ av matrelaterat innehåll de tre publicerat på sina Youtube-kanaler mellan 2019 och 2022. Klippen har av forskaren grupperats i tre teman, först visades tre klipp där restaurangbesök och matlagning visades, därefter tre klipp där personerna åt framför kameran (dessa hade mukbang i titeln). Slutligen visades två klipp där en influencer diskuterade sitt eget förhållningssätt kring att visa mat och tala om sina ätstörningar, med fokus på att hon inte vill trigga sina följare. Syftet med att visa klipp vid intervjuerna var att ge deltagarna gemensamma utgångspunkter att prata om, och att stimulera diskussion. (se Lind & Wickström, 2024; Wickström & Lind, 2024 för diskussion om liknande metodval). Innehållet i klippen analyseras inte i artikeln. Fler av deltagarna sa att de kände till dessa influencers och att de hade sett många av klippen tidigare. Det hände också att de inte tidigare var bekanta med alla tre influencers, men de uttryckte att de sett liknande klipp tidigare. Samtal om klippen ledde ofta vidare till att deltagarna pratade om andra personer och klipp än de som introducerades av forskaren. Analysförfarandet utifrån främst affektiva praktiker beskrivs i teoriavsnittet.

ETISKA ÖVERVÄGANDEN VID GRUPPINTERVJUER

Deltagarna informerades under lektionstid först muntligt om studiens syfte och genomförande, och fick därefter skriftlig information att läsa igenom[3]. I informationen tydliggjordes att deltagande i studien var frivillig och att deras medverkan kunde avbrytas. För att skydda deltagarnas identitet används inte deras namn i texten och inte heller skolornas omnämns. De elever som visade intresse för att delta i studien gavs möjlighet att välja vilka klasskamrater de ville intervjuas i grupp med, eller om de vill intervjuas enskilt; intervjuerna genomfördes med en till fyra deltagare per tillfälle.

Gruppintervjuer som metod har både styrkor och potentiella utmaningar att ta ställning till. Det främsta syftet med gruppintervjuer är att interaktionen mellan deltagare kan ge ett rikt och nyanserat material samtidigt som det ger deltagare större inflytande över samtalet (Wilkinson, 1998). Under gruppintervjuer påverkar deltagarna varandra, vilket skulle kunna likrikta materialet. Vid intervjuerna så bekräftade deltagarna ofta vad de andra sagt, men det förekom också att de inte höll med och förde fram andra åsikter. Gruppintervjuer kan bidra till att intervjusituationen upplevs som mer lättsam och trygg när den görs i sällskap av personer deltagarna känner sedan innan (Creswell, 2013). Men det är också värt att ta hänsyn till att det inte upplevs tryggt för alla deltagare i gruppen att tala inför sina klasskamrater. Därför erbjöds också möjligheten att genomföra intervjun enskilt, vilket två av deltagarna valde.

MAT OCH ÄTANDE SOM AFFEKTIVA PRAKTIKER

I centrum för analysen av hur unga tjejer talar om mat och ätande i sociala medier står av *affektiva praktiker* (Wetherell, 2012) och *affektiv ekonomi* (Ahmed, 2014). Men först presenteras här artikelns teoretiska perspektiv på mat och femininitet som utgör andra viktiga hörnstenar. Ätande är en kroppslig handling som ger oss näring och energi, men ätandet är också socialt och kulturellt kodat. Att vi behöver äta är biologiskt, men hur och vad vi äter är socialt menar Abbots (2017) som också betonar att dessa aspekter inte kan skiljas åt (se även Mol, 2008). Sociala positioner påverkar vad vi äter, vad vi äter påverkar kroppen. Probyn (2000) beskriver hur mat och ätande hänger samman med ekonomiska och politiska aspekter såväl som människors identiteter:

> Eating then becomes a visceral reminder of how we variously inhabit the axes of economics, intimate relations, gender, sexuality, history, ethnicity, and class. In this way, we really are what we eat, but equally what, how, and with whom we eat radically bites into any stable and molar formation of identity. (s. 9)

Matens politiska dimensioner är många, från hur tillgången på mat påverkats av kolonialism och kapitalism till hur den i framtiden kan komma påverkas av klimatförändringar. Inte minst klassbakgrund och

könstillhörighet påverkar vad och hur vi äter (Skeggs, 2005). Att ha god smak handlar inte bara om matvanor utan om att framstå som respektabel (Skeggs, 2000). Självkontroll och kontroll över kroppen kan också ses som kännetecken för en nyliberal tidsanda där individen förväntas ta ansvar över sig själv (Rose, 2007).

Diskurser och praktiker som skapas kring mat och ätande kan analyseras i relation till människors subjektivitet och kulturella meningsskapande (Lupton, 1996). Kvinnors ätande och kroppar är ett slagfält där normer om femininitet förhandlas och iscensätts. Bordo (1993) beskriver hur ätande görs till något skamfyllt och privat för kvinnor, vilket gör att offentligt och rikligt ätande ses som vulgärt. Ät-restriktioner och kontroll av kvinnors kroppar och hunger är en form av disciplinering, menar Bordo (1993): "Denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse." (s. 130). Kvinnors okontrollerade ätande ses som ociviliserat och oansvarigt, och bryter mot förväntningarna om normativ femininitet (Lupton, 2018; 2020b). Människor positionerar sig genom att med känslor uttrycka sin tillhörighet eller sitt avståndstagande (Ahmed, 2014; Probyn, 2000). Gränsdragningar kring mat och kroppar kan göras genom att uttala vad som är äckligt. Inte minst den feta kroppen tillskrivs, och väcker känslor av, äckel menar Probyn (2000). Känslor så som äckel riktas mot och "klibbar fast" på vissa kroppar mer än andra, äcklet är både format i relation till normer och historik om vad som är äckligt, och producerar något som äckligt genom att benämna det så (Ahmed, 2014). Ahmed bygger vidare på Butlers performativitetsteori om upprepning och normalisering. Känslor *intensifieras* genom att de upprepas och normaliseras, denna intensifiering kan ackumulera ett *affektivt värde* menar Ahmed (2014). Intensifiering kan uppstå både kring positiva och negativa känslostrukturer som begär och äckel. Butler (1990) beskriver hur kön får betydelse för individuella kroppars möjlighet att agera i det offentliga. Könade positioner reproduceras performativt genom ständig upprepning och gör subjekten begripliga för sig själva och andra, dessa subjektspositioner tillskrivs olika gränsdragningar och villkor (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2015). Det som överskrider gränser för normaliserad femininitet kan betraktas som avvikande och obegripligt, men att överskrida normer och gränsdragningar genom parodiska framställningar kan också vara förknippat med en subversiv njutning och glädje (Butler, 1990). Om femininitet görs performativt genom kontroll av kroppen och maten så kan stort matintag ses som ett motstånd och en subversiv praktik.

Ahmed (2014) argumenterar för att känslor är en social och kulturell praktik mellan människor, snarare än psykologiska fenomen som uppstår inom den enskilda människan. Ahmed är intresserad av hur känslor produceras och cirkulerar mellan människor och mellan människor och objekt. Känslor är inte mer personliga än åsikter och har politisk betydelse för att upprätthålla sociala hierarkier och maktrelationer. Känslors makt och strukturella dimensioner döljs när känslors beskrivs och behandlas som personliga, menar Ahmed (2014): "When emotions are seen as only personal, or about the person and how they feel, then the systematic nature of their effects is concealed" (s.198). I till exempel rasistisk retorik används ofta känslofylld argumentation för att tillskriva olika grupper av människor mening eller värde (Ahmed, 2014). I den här artikeln använder jag mig Ahmeds teorier om att känslor är produktiva och performativa för att undersöka normer och gränsdragningar kring mat. Detta kombineras med analys av affektiva praktiker (Wetherell, 2012) som beskrivs mer ingående nedan.

ANALYS AV AFFEKTIVA PRAKTIKER

Intervjumaterialet lästes igenom flera gånger för att identifiera återkommande teman och subteman (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Några av dessa var trender kring maträtter och produkter, ätstörningar och kroppsideal, hälsa och influencers ansvar (dessa resultat presenteras i Lind mfl., 2026). Ett återkommande drag i flera av dessa teman var att känslor var närvarade i deltagarnas beskrivningar. Både när

deltagarna talade om hur de själva kände när de tittade på sociala medier, men också hur de ansåg att influencers anspelar på tittares känslor. Utifrån detta empiriskt genererade fokus på känslor analyserades materialet utifrån Wetherells (2012, 2013a, 2013b) begrepp *affektiva praktiker*. Känslor är en del av hur sociala relationer och positioneringar görs och kan studeras genom sättet de används och får betydelse i det sociala sammanhanget (Wetherell m.fl., 2018). Affektiva praktiker är i detta material både beskrivningar av känslor som cirkulerar på sociala medier, de känslouttryck som deltagare använder för att beskriva vad de ser och hur de beskriver känslor som uppstår i mötet med matrelaterat innehåll på sociala medier. Wetherell (2012, s. 12–17) presenterar tre centrala utgångspunkter för att analysera affektiva praktiker. 1) *Affektiva Flöden.* Affektiva praktiker är inte statiska. Rörelse och flöde pågår hela tiden mellan olika känslor inom en person, mellan personer i sociala situationer samt mellan människor och samhällsinstitutioner. 2) *Affektiva mönster.* Affektiva praktiker är inte slumpmässiga, även om de kan vara kaotiska och oväntade. Affektiva praktiker utgår från och upprepar mönster som samspelar med diskursiva, sociala, kulturella mönster. 3) *Affektivt värde.* Affektiva praktiker är inte jämlika. Affekt kan användas för att förstärka och utöva makt. Maktrelationer påverkar hur affekt regleras och tillskrivs värde i relation till av vem, och var, de uttrycks. Wetherell (2013b, s. 237) betonar också att människors subjektivitet och aktörskap gör att affektiva praktiker kommer innehålla pluralitet, motsägelser och öppenhet. För att studera de affektiva praktikerna i materialet har jag tittat efter hur känslor uttrycks, ges mening i det sociala sammanhanget, flödar och rör på sig, vilka mönster som framträder och hur det kan förstås i relation till makt och värde.

Wetherell (2015) menar att Ahmeds teorier om känslor lämpar sig för kulturanalys men kritiserar vad hon uppfattar som ett för stort fokus på känslornas aktörskap och att teorin brister i att ta hänsyn till den mänskliga interaktionen. Wetherell fokuserar på sociala aktörer och är därför användbar för att analysera intervjuer eller etnografiskt material (Wetherell, 2015, s. 160). Ahmeds teorier blir användbara att kombinera med Wetherells för att förstå hur publika känslor cirkulerar i den kontext som sociala medier utgör, och hur deltagarna skapar mening i relation till den.

ANALYS

I analysens tre teman presenteras hur affektiva praktiker används och får betydelse i deltagarnas tal om mat och ätande på sociala medier. Det första temat tar upp ideal och gränsdragningar kring mat och ätande, och känslor som deltagarna kopplar till detta. Det andra beskriver de motstridiga känslor deltagare beskriver kring stort matintag som gränsöverskridande ätande. Det tredje temat tar upp deltagarnas beskrivningar av att koppla känslor av trygghet och avslappning till ätvideor och att använda dessa strategiskt i sin vardag.

DÅLIG MAGKÄNSLA OCH SKAM

Under intervjuerna beskriver deltagarna återkommande att det i en stor del av det matrelaterat innehåll på sociala medier förekommer kostråd kring att äta ett begränsat antal kalorier. Att begränsa ätandet beskrivs som ett budskap om vad som är ”nyttigt”. Som här där en av deltagarna beskriver vad de ser för innehåll på sociala medier:

> Deltagare 1: Jag tänker på sociala medier får man ofta upp på Tiktok och på Instagram i flödet folk som pratar om ätstörningar eller som triggar till ätstörningar och liknande
>
> Deltagare 2: Sen är det väldigt mycket åh ät det här för det är nyttigt, det här äter jag för att få mindre fett men den energin jag behöver liksom (intervju 3).

Detta innehåll problematiseras av deltagarna som uttrycker att det kan leda till negativ kroppsuppfattning och ätstörningar hos de som tittar. Flera beskriver att när de möts av innehåll som de inte tycker om så scrollar de vidare eller använder sig av funktionen

”inte intresserad” för att påverka vad algoritmen visar för dem (jmf Wang m.fl. 2022). En deltagare beskriver att hon väljer innehåll som gör det lättare att ha en positiv syn på sig själv och till mat: ”Jag försöker ha en hälsosam relation till mig själv, både kring mat och utseende. Så känner jag att det var inte bra content att följa, då plockar jag hellre bort det och kollar på något annat” (Intervju 2). Att unga på olika sätt styr och påverkar sitt flöde kan ses som ett aktivt förhållningssätt som suddar ut gränser mellan att vara konsument och producent, men det kan också lägga stort ansvar på individen. Lind & Wickström (2024) visar att unga tjejer till stor del ser det som ett personligt ansvar att välja bort innehåll på sociala medier som kan påverka den psykiska hälsan negativt. Att ta ansvar för, och gärna optimera, den egna hälsan är centralt i nyliberala samhällen (Rose, 2007). I postfeministisk retorik är det positivt att visa självförtroende och att inte låta sig påverkas av ideal, detta kan göra att frågor om kroppen individualiseras istället för att man kritiserar strukturer Baer, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018: Gill & Orgad, 2015.

Vid intervjuerna ställdes frågor om vad som visades på sociala medier och vad som inte visades. Deltagarna uttryckte att det sällan visades vanlig och vardaglig mat “Jag tänker att det är ju inte särskilt mycket vardagsmat på det sättet. […] Utan det är ju lite mer annorlunda, även om det skulle vara lite dyrare, lite fancy eller mer konstiga rätter” (Intervju 4). Här betonas att det ska vara fin mat som är annorlunda och gärna är dyr. Det beskrivs som att detta är en önskvärd bild att visa upp av sig själv på sociala medier:

> Deltagare 2: Man kanske lite mer visar -åh kolla jag käkar en äggmacka med avokado till frukost men man kanske inte visar när man sitter hemma och käkar ostbågar typ.
>
> Deltagare 1: Mm, dyrare och nyttigare än vad man är kanske. (Intervju 7)

Önskvärd mat ställs i kontrast till det som inte ska visas upp, som att sitta hemma och äta ostbågar. Vad någon äter framstår som mer betydelsebärande än vilken näring personen får i sig, det säger också något om hur personen positioneras (Skeggs, 2005). Det beskrivs här som ett eftersträvansvärt ideal att vara en hälsosam och ekonomiskt välbärgad person. Även om tjejerna kunde kritisera dessa framställningar så diskuterade de även hur det påverkar bilden av deras egna matvanor. I ett samtal om att det framstår som att influencers äter på restaurang flera gånger i veckan, beskriver deltagarna känslor det väcker:

> Deltagare 1: Man får en dålig magkänsla. Eller jag tycker såhär när man ser att de äter mycket på restaurang och så kommer man hem efter träning, -vad ska jag äta? Och så tar man fram nån pasta från kylen och köttbullar och så sitter man och äter det och så känner man sig som värsta såhär... eller man känner sig…
>
> Deltagare 2: Det blir skam typ
>
> Deltagare 1: Ja precis
>
> Deltagare 2: Att man -jaha varför gör inte jag det här som hon gör
>
> Deltagare 1: Man har matas in med det
>
> Deltagare 3: Man börjar väl som ung då redan att omvärdera allt, matvanor...
>
> Deltagare 2: Omvärdera sig själv. (Intervju 5)

Gränsdragningar mellan fin och ful, bra och dålig mat, både synliggörs och betonas av deltagare. Den mer vardagliga maten jämförs med en annan livsstil som framställs som mer eftersträvansvärd. Matvanorna ges affektivt värde genom *vad* som äts och *var* det äts. Genom användandet av ordet skam så betonas en värderande relation mellan de två, där det lägre värderade kopplas till att granska det egna ätandet. Känslor är nära kopplat till socialt värde menar Wetherell (2012): “Affect follows, regulates and composes social relations and social value” (s. 111). I deltagarnas affektiva praktiker framstår det som betydelsefullt vad, var och hur någon äter. Den ideala och respektabla ätaren positioneras som ett

subjekt som har ekonomiskt överflöd men begränsat matintag. Deltagarna kopplar dessa gränsdragningar kring maten till att uppleva en dålig magkänsla och att skam kan uppstå hos den som inte förkroppsligar idealet (Probyn, 2005). Känslan av skam är därmed inte en privat känsla hos en individ utan något politiskt som produceras kulturellt och socialt. I detta första tema syns hur mat och ätandet på sociala medier utgör affektiv praktiker som tillskrivs både mening och värde av deltagarna. Att ta del av innehåll på sociala medier blir också affektiva praktiker och ett affektivt meningsskapande där unga beskriver hur känslor av skam kan uppstå hos de själva, samtidigt som de förhåller sig kritiskt till mycket av innehållet. Denna dubbelhet visar också att affektiva mönster kan vara motstridiga och motsägelsefulla (Wetherell, 2012, 2014).

NYFIKENHET OCH ÄCKEL

I kontrast till budskap om att kontrollerat matintag och dieter beskrivs *mukbang*, en populär kategori på sociala medier där personer äter stora mängder (Choe, 2019; Donnar, 2017; Strand & Gustafsson, 2020). Inlägg med stora mängder mat beskrivs nedan som ”nice”, men det lyfts också fram att det finns personer som upplever det som äckligt. Detta synliggör en spänning kring ätande, att det kan väcka många och motstridiga känslor.

> Lena: Vad tänker ni kring det här temat, mat och ätande, när ni tittar på sociala medier. Vad ser ni där?
>
> Deltagare 1: Ja det kommer ju upp ofta, klipp där folk käkar. Och man har ju olika åsikt er om det. En del är så -vad äckligt och men andra är lite som jag och tycker -åh vad nice (skratt) När de smaskar och sånt.
>
> Deltagare 2: Ja och det är väldigt stora portioner, så här *100 bitar sushi!* Och jag tycker det är nice att kolla på. (Intervju 1)

I talet om mukbangs så uttrycker många deltagare att de uppskattar att titta på denna typ av innehåll, men det finns också de som gör gränsdragningar mot mukbangs:

> Deltagare 2: Jag personligen gillar inte mukbangs när man ska trycka så mycket som möjligt, då blir jag äcklad av att se maten. Det ser, det är så mycket och jag kan bara tänka mig hur mätta de måste känna sig efter det. Jag hade typ spytt om jag åt så mycket mat, för att det blir för mycket liksom (Intervju 7)

Denna deltagare beskriver att hon blir äcklad av att se maten, och gör åtskillnad mellan hennes sätt att äta och det ätande som sker i mukbangs. Att betona att något väcker känslan av äckel är ett sätt distansera sig (Ahmed, 2014; Probyn, 2000). När deltagarna talar om vad som är äckligt eller tilltalande (”nice”) är det inte bara en beskrivning av innehållet, utan också en affektiv praktik för att positionera sig i relation till innehållet. De betonar att mukbangs och ätvideor upplevs olika, men väcker känslor hos tittare. Att väcka känslor av nyfikenhet eller intresse beskrivs av deltagarna som en affektiv praktik eller affektiv strategi för den som vill få många tittare på sina klipp. ”Man ska göra det så extremt eller udda som möjligt, så att folk vill kolla på det för att det låter så konstigt” (Intervju 4). Deltagare beskriver att det på Youtube är vanligt att skapa en rubrik eller beskrivning av innehållet som betonar att det är ovanligt eller oväntat.

> Deltagare 2: Jag tror inte det hade blivit en lika viralt om det var så nu ska jag äta 6 bitar sushi eller mer normal mängd eller vad man ska säga, som de flesta gör om man köper sushi. Men om man köper 50 bitar så blir det en väldigt stor grej. (intervju 4)

Deltagarna menar att det är ett sätt att väcka intresse och nyfikenhet, vilket genererar fler tittare och därmed mer reklaminkomst (jmf Abidin, 2018; Donnar, 2017). Att gå över gränser och normer för ätande ser ut att väcka särskilt starka känslor och lockar tittare. Deltagare beskriver att människor kan vilja ta del av innehåll för att, eller trots att, det är ”sjukt”. Såhär resonerar en deltagare om varför dessa klipp

får många visningar:

> Deltagare 1: Mycket för att man blir läskad och mycket för att man tycker att det är så sjukt att en liten tjej kan äta så. Har ni sett de här där det är en stor gryta med ägg i sås och de bara slukar hur mycket ägg som helst. Hundra ägg typ, och nån som bara fyller på. Man tycker ju att det är lite sjukt samtidigt. Och thumb nails också, man ser på bilden ah nu är det nån som ska äta en hund typ och man blir så shiiit. (Intervju 1)

I citatet beskrivs att det finns en dragningskraft hos innehåll med spektakulära och uppseendeväckande inslag som balanserar på gränsen mellan fascinerande, lockande och frånstötande. Denna affektiva praktik använder gränser och överskridanden för att väcka uppmärksamhet. Känslor är nära kopplat till normer som framträder som tydligast när de överskrids (Ahmed, 2014). Mukbang kan förstås en sorts könsparodi då det både synliggör och utmanar könsnormer (jmf Lupton, 2020b). I citatet ovan så är gränsöverskridandet kopplat till att en ”liten tjej” äter stora mängder mat. En annan deltagare uttryckte det som att det uppstår en kontrast när *fina* tjejer äter stora mängder: ”fina tjejer står och äter väldigt mycket, sen är det är inte så de gör varje dag, men man tänker att de ser ju så fina ut och så äter de så ohälsosam mat (intervju 8)”. Det väcker fascination att bryta mot förväntningar kring ett kontrollerat och begränsat ätande som det förväntade sättet att göra femininitet (Bordo, 1993; Lupton, 2018). I kontrast till ätrestriktioner i föregående tema angränsar beskrivningar detta tema till överskridande och gränslöshet som anspelar på det groteska. Den kvinnliga grotesken kännetecknas av att göra ett ”spektakel” av sig själv när kvinnan överskrider vad som anses lämpligt (Russo, 1994, s. 53). Det stora matintaget kan förstås som en motståndspraktik som leker med det groteska i att hänge sig åt ett gränslöst ätande. Samtidigt är det spektakulära i detta sammanhang önskvärt eftersom det i sociala medier är säljbart. Deltagarna beskriver att influencers vet att dessa klipp blir populära men även att denna typ av innehåll är enkelt att producera. Att göra innehåll med ätande, och särskilt det som är gränsöverskridande och känsloväckande beskrivs kunna ackumulera ett affektivt värde (Ahmed, 2014; Wetherell, 2012) som av influencers kan omsätts till ett ekonomiskt kapital.

TRYGGHET OCH SÄLLSKAP

Filmat innehåll där personer äter är populärt i sociala medier, och när deltagarna resonerade om varför många människor väljer att titta så uttryckte tjejerna att det finns känslomässiga faktorer. I samspel med sociala medier så uppstår affektiva praktiker där deltagarna använder ätvideos för att dämpa eller framkalla känslor hos sig själva. En viktig aspekt som beskrivs är att ätvideor används för att slappna av. Att det äts så kallad ”skräpmat” tillskrivs en särskild betydelse:

> Deltagare 3: Det ser ju gott ut. Jag är inte så investerad i såna videos, men jag känner många som gillar att kolla på det. För att slappna av typ.
>
> Deltagare 1: Ja slappna av, och jag brukar kolla när jag är hungrig. Då kan man tänka det är jag typ, och när de äter såhär skräpmat som inte är nyttig.
>
> Deltagare 2: Eller när man själv äter skräpmat så sätter man på när andra äter såhär trippla portioner av det man själv äter så känns det inte så dåligt.
>
> Deltagare 1: Det kan också var såhär att man känner sig lite bättre typ för att nån annan äter mer (Intervju 1).

Ätandet, och särskilt av stora mängder av mat som inte anses nyttig, framstår här som laddat och förknippat med en känsla av att vara dålig. Men deltagarna menar att när det tittar på dessa inlägg så kan det kännas bättre. Det kopplas också till känslan av *trygghet* att se andra äta: ”många hittar en trygghet i det att det är okej att äta” (Intervju 6). Deltagarnas resonemang tar utgångspunkt i att ätande kan vara problemfyllt menar här att influencers kan bidra till att omförhandla detta genom att visa upp sitt ätande.

Deltagarna positionerar influencers som viktiga aktörer inom den affektiva praktiken som matrelaterat innehåll på sociala medier utgör, en affektiv praktik som deltagarna själva aktivt deltar i.

Något annat som lyftes fram var de sociala aspekterna av att titta på ätvideor när man äter ensam, och att ätvideor då fungerar som ett sällskap. Flera deltagare tar upp exempel på när de inte äter med familjen och då väljer att istället titta på en influencer.

> Deltagare 1: Jag tycker det är nice att kolla på om jag äter själv nån gång, då är det kul att sitta och kolla på samtidigt.
>
> Lena: Passar det extra bra att kolla om man själv ska äta?
>
> Deltagare 1: Det är då jag brukar se på YouTube, när jag är själv och äter. Som sällskap liksom. (Intervju 7)

En annan deltagare tillskriver tittandet på ätklipp känslomässig betydelse, att det kan användas av tittaren för att hantera känslor (se även Choe, 2019; Donnar, 2017). I detta exempel beskriver hon att det hjälper mot stress att titta på en mukbang-video just för att det ger känslan av att äta tillsammans med någon. Denna influencers mukbangs beskriver deltagaren som att den inte är en av de ”extrema” utan en där influencern äter en ”vanlig portion”.

> Deltagare 3: Specifikt [influencers namn] mukbangs tycker jag är så comforting på något sätt. Jag brukar sätta på den jag är ensam hemma och fortfarande vill orka äta någonting. Om jag är typ stressad så tycker jag att det känns, det hjälper att äta tillsammans med nån. Av någon skum anledning. Jag tycker det är jättenice. (Intervju 8)

Innehållet beskrivs som ”comforting”, tittandet på influencers ätande och sällskapet i form av videon får en tröstande roll. Deltagaren ifrågasätter sin egen upplevelse lite genom att uttrycka att detta är ”skumt”, men tillskriver det samtidigt stort värde genom att beskriva det som ”jättenice”. Denna affektiva ambivalens kan tolkas i ljuset av att denna socialitet i allmänhet inte ges samma värde som kroppslig närvaro, men att den för deltagaren är meningsfull. Karaktärer eller influencers kan vara personer vi upplever oss känna väl och de blir familjära främlingar (Hirdman, 2018). Hirdman (2018) menar att sociala medier kan ge en utökad kroppslighet eftersom vi inte begränsas av fysisk plats. När vi ensidigt betraktar någon i sociala medier så kan det också innebära en kroppslig frihet att inte bli betraktade tillbaka. Vi kan då vara ensam och tillsammans med andra samtidigt, vara tilltalad men osedd, och få känna oss delaktiga samtidigt som vi är betraktare (Turkle 2011, Rojek, 2016). Samtidigt ska betraktandet inte förstås som passivt eftersom det innebär att relation byggs och skapar mening för den som tittar. I detta tema presenteras en affektiv praktik som går bortom de två tidigare motstridiga bilderna av restriktivt och rikliga ätandet, en mer vardaglig praktik där tittande och ätande kopplas samman. I tjejernas beskrivningar framstår denna affektiva praktik som strategiskt vid tillfällen där de fyller en funktion, som sällskap, som avslappning och för att ge trygghet.

DISKUSSION

Denna artikeln har undersökt affektiva praktiker kring mat och ätande i sociala medier utifrån unga tjejers perspektiv. I intervjuer beskriver deltagarna motstridiga bilder av mat på sociala medier, där det förekommer både kontrollerat och gränsöverskridande ätande. Denna dubbelhet utgör ett återkommande *affektivt mönster* när deltagarna beskriver innehåll om mat och ätande. Affektiva mönster är enligt Wetherell (2012, s. 15) ett pågående och rörligt görande där sociala aktörer samspelar med olika diskurser och narrativ som förstärker eller motsäger varandra. Det kontrollerade ätandet präglas enligt deltagarna av att mat värderas som nyttig eller onyttig, bra eller dålig. Att äta “rätt” blir ett sätt att signalera kontroll, smak och status (Skeggs, 2005). Deltagarna är kritiska till när ett kontrollerat ätande framställs som mer önskvärt och menar att detta kan trigga ätstörningar och negativ kroppsuppfattning.

I kontrast till det önskvärda ätandet beskrivs mukbangs och andra klipp med stort matintag som både fascinerande och frånstötande. När unga kvinnor äter stora mängder mat bryter det mot normer om femininitet och kan delvis tolkas som en subversiv handling (Bordo, 1993; Lupton, 2020b). Ett gränsöverskridande ätandet blir ett potentiellt motstånd mot kroppskontroll och ideal, samtidigt har det gränsöverskridande ätandet också en funktion i att den pekar ut var gränserna går. Det gränsöverskridande och spektakulära väcker också intresse och nyfikenhet, det beskrivs som lockande och njutbart att titta på. Ahmed (2014) skriver om hur känslor klibbar fast vid vissa objekt och subjekt. I kulturen verkar tjejer vara subjekt som oro klibbar fast vid, en dubbel oro om att de äter för mycket eller äter för lite (se även Rickman, 2018). Denna dubbla relation till tjejers ätande skapar förutsättningar för det som Ahmed kallar för intensifiering, när känslor cirkulerar på ett sätt som förstärker och ökar en affektiv laddning. Vi lever i en kultur som värdesätter känslor och tar dem på stort allvar (Ahmed, 2014). Att känsloladda sitt språk kan därför vara ett sätt att ge vikt åt vad som sägs. Genom ord som skam eller ”triggar” så använder deltagarna känslor för att betona vad de säger. En affektiv praktik som används är att positionera sig själv genom att ta avstånd från sånt som är äckligt, och ger erkännande åt sånt de gillar, på så sätt gör de en självframställan i relation till innehållet (Wetherell m.fl., 2018). Talet om skam och äckel är kraftfulla beskrivningar av hur det känns i kroppen när normer utmanas eller överskrids. En deltagare talar även om ”dålig magkänsla” vilket kan förstås som den kroppsliga och känslomässiga reaktionen som uppstår i samverkan med politiska och kulturella aspekter. Detta är exempel på hur de känslor som cirkulerar i kulturen som *affektiva flöden* samspelar med sociala aktörers praktik (Ahmed, 2014; Wetherell, 2012). I den digitala affektkulturen flödar känslor på plattformarna och även mellan tittare och influencers (Döveling m.fl., 2018). Deltagarna påpekar att spektakulärt innehåll används som en affektiv strategi av influencers för att väcka uppmärksamhet och generera visningar. Det ligger i linje med resultat från andra studier som visar på den digitala affektekonomin på sociala medier (Abidin, 2018; Donnar, 2017). *Affektivt värde* på den kulturella och politiska arenan kan på så sätt omsättas till rent ekonomiskt värde för influencers. Samtidigt så lyfter tjejerna också fram hur deras tittande på ätvideor handlar om att känna sig stärkt eller att få sällskap. Denna affektiva praktik fokuserar inte på det spektakulära utan lyfter fram det vardagliga och sociala samspelet med ätvideor (se Choe, 2019; Donnar, 2017; Rüdiger, 2020). I analysen framträder bilden av att mat och ätande kan vara laddat och svårt för många unga, och att ätvideor i relation till det konstrueras som meningsfulla affektiva praktiker. Deltagarna beskriver hur ätvideor kan användas som ett sätt att hantera känslor av stress eller skam. Att titta på någon som äter kan ge en känsla av sällskap och trygghet, särskilt när man själv äter. Det är tänkbart att stort matintag får sin laddning just i relation detta och att ätvideor blir en meningsfull affektiv praktik eftersom de erbjuder ett alternativ till de ideal som annars dominerar. Eftersom nyttan eller njutningen i ätvideor verkar stå i kontrast till narrativ där ätande begränsas och kontrolleras kan det gränsöverskridande inte betraktas som dess motsats, utan som ömsesidigt beroende av varandra. Tjejernas beskrivningar av vad de ser i sociala medier visar på hur ungas egna perspektiv bidrar med viktig kunskap till forskningsfältet och ger en mer mångfacetterad förståelse som går bortom det dominerande forskningsfokuset på hur unga påverkas av sociala medier. Deltagarna i den här studien förhåller sig kritiskt, strategiskt och ofta ambivalent till det innehåll de tar del av. De affektiva praktiker som framträder visar på hur komplexa och motsägelsefulla sociala medier kan vara som en kulturell arena där normer, känslor och kapital samverkar.

NOTES

[1] Projektet ”Äta på youtube” –tonårstjejers förståelse av mat, ätande och psykisk hälsa i sociala medier finasierades av Catharina Högbom & Michael Cocozzas stiftelse för forsknings- och kulturändamål i Linköpings kommun

[2]Deltagarna själva använde både ”influencer” och ”kreatör” när de talade om personer som gör innehåll på sociala medier. Begreppet kreatör sätter mer fokus på skapandet, medan influencer mer leder tankarna till att påverka sina följare och göra reklam genom sitt innehåll. I texten har jag valt att använda den mer allmänt kända och använda benämningen influencer som ett samlingsbegrepp (se Abidin, 2018).

[3] Studien har godkänts av Etikprövningsmyndigheten Dnr 2023-07041-01.

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Performing Popular Misogyny

Male Influencers, Gender, and Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how male influencers can contribute to the spread of misogynistic discourses on social media in Norway. Through an analysis of the social media content produced by Norwegian influencer Sebastian "Baris" Brevik in 2022 and 2023, it explores how misogynistic and reactionary gender discourses are embedded in lifestyle content, humor and irony. Drawing on Banet-Weiser's (2018) analytical framework that highlights *popular misogyny* as a structural force, the article illustrates how misogyny is entrenched in influencer personas on mainstream social media. It emphasises how influencers like Brevik can act both as ideological entrepreneurs and intermediaries, who help reactionary discourses reach a wide audience by weaving them into formats that are suitable for social media platforms. The analysis reveals how strategic ambivalence makes misogynistic discourses more culturally acceptable. Furthermore, by situating Brevik within the broader context of the "neo-manosphere," the article seeks to understand how misogyny and reactionary gender discourses are performed and negotiated in contemporary digital culture.

KEY WORDS

POPULAR MISOGYNY, GENDER, MASCULINITY, SOCIAL MEDIA, MANFLUENCERS

INTRODUCTION

In December 2022, Norwegian influencer and fashion model Sebastian "Baris" Brevik captured widespread attention with a provocative TikTok video, where he asserted that

> "there are only two genders" (Kingsrød, 2023; Krogh, 2022).

The video was delivered in a provocative and confrontational manner and became a focal point for public debates in Norway concerning gender, free speech, and platform moderation. While Brevik faced harsh criticism, the controversy also boosted his visibility on social media. As a result, TikTok removed the video and suspended his account. In an interview, Brevik commented that he was "cancelled" for speaking the "truth" and added:

> "There is a serious threat to democracy when one is attacked and excluded for stating something as ordinary as that there are only two genders. In 2022, this is classified as hateful ideology. The culture of offence has taken over, and freedom of speech is all but gone" (Nielsen, 2022, my translation).

Around the same time, Brevik was criticized for promoting reactionary views on gender, echoing influencers such as Jordan Peterson or Andrew Tate (Selmer-Andersen & Larsen, 2023; Tromp, 2023).

This article analyses how misogyny and reactionary gender discourses circulate on social media. A central research problem guiding this study is how male influencers use social media to perform and normalize misogynistic and reactionary gender discourses, and how these practices intersect with broader dynamics of visibility, audience engagement, and digital culture. Focusing on influencer Sebastian Brevik's social media posts from 2022 and 2023, as well as the reiteration of his content in mainstream media, the study explores how misogynistic ideas are strategically adapted to the logics of digital culture. Drawing on scholarship on *popular misogyny* (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and influencer culture, it considers how irony, humor, and ambivalence function as strategies through which reactionary gender discourses are performed. By situating Brevik's case within a wider cultural and mediated context, the article aims to shed light on how popular misogyny circulates and is being negotiated within contemporary digital culture. The research question for this article is: *How does Sebastian Brevik mobilize his influencer persona to perform popular misogyny on social media?*

POPULAR MISOGYNY, IDEOLOGICAL ENTREPRENEURS AND INTERMEDIARIES

A key arena for disseminating misogyny and reactionary gender discourses is the online ecosystem known as the *manosphere*, a discursive space where anti-feminist beliefs are widely shared (Ging, 2019; Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021). In today's digital landscape, such discourses increasingly influence social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram, where they are reformulated through entertainment, self-help and lifestyle content. This has enabled manosphere discourse to reach new audiences and adapt to diverse cultural contexts (Hopton & Langer, 2022; Papadamou et al., 2020). Scholars have recently begun describing the emergence of a "neo-manosphere", relating to the increased commercialization of the manosphere, the rise of a new influencer culture and new platforms for the mainstreaming of misogyny (Gerrand et al., 2025). "Manfluencer" Andrew Tate exemplifies the appeal of this ecosystem today, blending misogyny with success-oriented self-branding, while using social media to promote a hyper-masculine persona (Haslop et al., 2024; see also Haslop & Ringrose, 2025). Other male influencers such as Joe Rogan or Jordan Peterson, are instrumental in legitimizing "anti-woke" and "anti-feminist sentiments" within mainstream culture (Simmons, 2025, p. 209). Thus, misogynistic discourses are not limited to fringe communities, but deeply embedded in the logics, infrastructures, and economies of

mainstream digital culture (Jane, 2017; Salter, 2018).

Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that such *popular misogyny* must be understood as a networked phenomenon. She defines misogyny as "a systematic devaluing and dehumanizing of women" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 2), and emphasises how misogynistic discourses are rooted within and amplified by popular culture. By framing misogyny as a structural force, Banet-Weiser demonstrates how digital technologies can amplify its reach, often in unexpected ways.

As such, "popular misogyny in its networked forms" needs to be looked at "as a whole, and not independently at its individual parts" (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016, p. 173). Within a contemporary context some figures gain prominence through their role in sustaining reactionary ideologies. Finlayson (2023) defines such *ideological entrepreneurs* as individuals who strategically create and promote certain frameworks to shape public discourse and influence social norms. Popular misogyny creates cultural conditions where this concept is particularly relevant, as these figures are often "male, anti-feminist, and hyper-masculinist" (Banet-Weiser & Kay, 2025, p. 6). A notable example is Tate, whose global digital presence has established him as a significant player in the mainstreaming of manosphere ideology (see Roberts et al., 2025).

While figures like Tate exemplify high-profile ideological entrepreneurs, the broader dissemination of misogynistic discourses also depends on actors who operate within everyday digital practices. Arnesson (2023) emphasises that *ideological intermediaries* are influencers that don't necessarily promote explicit political agendas. Instead, they circulate lifestyles and ways of being that embed ideological meaning in culturally resonant and accessible forms. Content creators can contribute to the normalization of misogyny by embedding anti-feminist messages into everyday content, such as workout videos or motivational advice (Thomas-Parr & Gilroy-Ware, 2025).

In a recent review of literature on the manosphere, Gerrand et al. (2025) highlight that there is a need for research on the spread of manfluencer culture to non-English-speaking countries. A Swedish study (Renström & Bäck, 2024) emphasises how exposure to manfluencer culture may increase misogyny among young men. Previous research from Norway has analyzed how young men can negotiate with misogynistic discourses originating from the manosphere (Langeland et al., 2023). But there is a lack of knowledge about how such discourses are mediated by influential public figures. This article addresses this gap by examining how a Norwegian male influencer uses different strategies to circulate and normalize misogynistic and reactionary gender discourses relating to the manosphere within the media landscape.

EMPIRICAL DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Sebastian Brevik is a 26-year-old Norwegian white, male influencer who gained national attention in late 2022. Brevik has been active on different social media platforms (TikTok, Twitch, Instagram), and has posted on Instagram as "@barisbrevik" since 2015. In November 2022, Brevik appeared as a guest on the popular podcast/YouTube channel *Kontoret* (*The Office*), hosted by fellow influencer Westerlin and sidekick Snorre Klanderud (Kontoret, 2022). By the end of 2023, he had acquired over 40,000 followers on Instagram. Before TikTok suspended his account in 2022, Brevik had also amassed over 70,000 followers (Nielsen, 2022).

Around the same time, Brevik's presence on social media gained significant attention in one episode of the factual entertainment TV series *Norske Beefer* (*Norwegian beefs*), which aired on the Norwegian broadcasting service NRK a few months later in 2023. This series was hosted by Anika Momrak and explored different conflicts and rivalries within the Norwegian influencer scene (NRK, 2023). The episode featuring Brevik highlighted several of his TikTok posts from 2022/2023, along with the responses they generated. It thus provides an account of some of the influencer disputes that characterized the initial stages of Brevik's rise to fame in Norway.

Given that Brevik's TikTok account got suspended during this period, the episode also stands as a record of his social media account at that time, as well as the surrounding controversies.

The dataset included in this study consists of Brevik's appearance in the *Kontoret* show and the episode featuring him in *Norske Beefer*, as well as the complete set of 25 Instagram posts shared by Brevik throughout 2023 (see Fig. 1). This sampling strategy allows for a detailed exploration of how text and images contribute to the construction of his public persona, and how popular misogyny was performed and negotiated by the influencer in this period. In selecting the empirical material for this study, I first immersed myself in Brevik's social media content from 2021 to 2023. After examining Brevik's social media posts during this period, 2023 emerged as a particularly compelling year to analyze, especially considering the controversies surrounding his public statements on gender in December 2022. Instagram, with its emphasis on lifestyle and visual aesthetics, seemingly stood out as a counterpoint to the more ideologically charged public statements he made through platforms such as TikTok.

The study makes use of a combination of a case study approach and content analysis (see Lewis, 2020). In the coding process I applied a combination of inductive and deductive coding schemes, defined as an abductive approach (see Reichertz et al., 2014). I initially focused my coding process on four overlapping themes inspired by a framework developed by Moloney and Love (2018), in an analysis of what they describe as a "masculine persona", that are important in reproducing "online misogyny": (1) the creation of a homosocial and heterosexist environment, (2) the sexualization of women, (3) the construction of a heterosexual male body as a site of identity and value, and (4) the strategic use of humor as a tool of exclusion or oppression. Moloney and Love's (2018) qualitative analysis of a series of tweets specifically, also methodologically complements Banet-Weiser's (2018) investigation of popular misogyny operating across cultural and mediated contexts. These four themes structured the coding process and guided the interpretation of the visual and textual material, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns of popular misogyny by Brevik in his social media content from 2022 and 2023. As the analysis progressed, I became increasingly aware of the self-branding strategies used by Brevik, and the ways in which he constructs his style and self-presentation. I therefore incorporated these aspects into the coding process to capture how his online persona is performed. I draw on literature concerning lifestyle influencers to explore how Brevik could foster a connection with his audience in the construction of his persona on social media (see Arnesson, 2024; Duffy & Hund, 2018; Marwick, 2013; McRae, 2017), thereby situating his performance within broader trends in online celebrity culture.

This article is situated within a feminist research tradition that understands misogyny as a structural phenomenon within contemporary digital culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Jane, 2017). As Brevik is a public figure whose content is openly accessible on mainstream social media platforms, the analysis focuses on already widely circulated cultural texts. Analysing this kind of material makes it "impossible to maintain the anonymity of influencers while simultaneously drawing out necessary insights and including relevant quotations" (Lewis, 2020, p. 6). Engaging critically with such highly visible online actors may also render the researcher potentially exposed to unwanted attention. As Berger-Correa et al. (2025) notes, there are few established strategies for managing potential risks or protecting academics from harassment and coordinated backlash by antifeminist groups. Thus, particular attention has been paid to considerations of researcher safety, such as proactive measures to ensure that the digital footprint remains limited and carefully assessing how the findings are communicated in public and academic arenas.

FINDINGS

The analysis in the following identifies several interrelated strategies through which Brevik mobilizes

his influencer persona to perform and popularize misogynistic discourse. These include drawing on aspirational lifestyle representations and forms of the "bro" to construct a desirable masculine identity; combining elements of hustle culture with anti-"woke" rhetoric; foregrounding the idealization and disciplining of the male body as a marker of status and self-control; using humor and irony as communicative devices that allow misogynistic messages to circulate in more socially acceptable forms.

ASPIRATIONAL LIFESTYLE AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE "BRO"

This section shows how Brevik combines lifestyle content, crypto culture, and "bro culture" on Instagram to project an aspirational yet relatable persona, balancing wealth and status with camaraderie and authenticity. Brevik's activity on Instagram in 2023 was dominated by what can broadly be described as "lifestyle content". Travel emerged as a recurring theme, with posts from iconic urban destinations such as Paris, New York, Hong Kong, and Dubai (Brevik, 2023a, 2023c, 2023d, 2023f). Social gatherings were also central, exemplified by a lively New Year's party photo in which Brevik is pictured wearing a red MAGA cap, capturing his celebratory mood (Brevik, 2023a). On Instagram, among the more personal posts was a tribute to his mother's 50th birthday, expressed through affectionate language and a heart emoji (Brevik, 2023h). During the Christmas season, Brevik engaged his audience with a post portraying himself as Santa Claus distributing new iPhones (Brevik, 2023k). Collectively, these posts construct an influencer persona that merges wealth and global mobility, social visibility and personal storytelling, qualities that potentially appeal to a broad and diverse audience. Instagram encourages idealized and aspirational self-representations (Duffy & Hund, 2018). Through the curation of daily life and personal branding, Brevik's Instagram feed predominately features an "idealized lifestyle to be inspired by, and aspire to", something that is common to lifestyle influencers (Arnesson, 2023, p. 530).

His use of the word "cryptobro" in his Instagram bio adds to the image of an aspirational lifestyle. The term "crypto" implies an affiliation with a digital subculture centered on speculative finance. In online contexts, the label "cryptobro" refers to individuals who actively promote cryptocurrencies and investment strategies, often embracing entrepreneurial values and anti-establishment rhetoric. This also reflect ideals such as autonomy, ambition, and boldness (Cassino, 2023). Brevik's identification with crypto culture establishes a connection to a male-dominated influencer ecosystem, with aspirational narratives of financial independence and technological empowerment. This alignment is underscored by his participation in international cryptocurrency networks, as seen on his Instagram. One notable post features a meeting with Changpeng Zhao, founder of the cryptocurrency exchange Binance, at a Binance-branded event in Paris (Brevik, 2023d). The image appears designed to highlight Brevik's rising status within the crypto sphere. By aligning himself with Zhao, Brevik engages in what Marwick (2013, p. 122-123) terms *aspirational production*, a visibility practice through which individuals seek to position themselves within high-status social networks.

However, his feed also reflects a form of authenticity commonly associated with lifestyle influencers. As McRae (2017, p. 14) notes, influencers are often "curating a persona that is aspirational, but ordinary, attracting followers with the narrative that the extraordinary lifestyle being presented can be achieved by the average person". This sense of ordinariness is established through his connection to what can be described as "bro culture". A typical "bro" occupies a space shaped by athleticism, male camaraderie, and a relaxed vibe (Lascity, 2021). Brevik's feed frequently emphasises physical fitness and a laid-back attitude (Brevik, 2023h). His alignment with bro culture is reinforced through posts featuring him among fellow male influencers such as Oscar Westerlin and Henrik Viken. The use of the term "boys" in one of the captions (Brevik, 2023j), underscores this sense of camaraderie, signaling (stereotypical) male bonding expressed through laddish

slang and in-jokes. This kind of language resembles a form of working-class and down-to-earth masculinity with a broad appeal in a Norwegian context (see Langeland, 2011). Thus, by positioning himself as both a recognizable "bro" and a lifestyle content creator, Brevik balances a tension between an aspirational lifestyle and authentic self-presentation; bonding with his peers while participating in a lifestyle dominated by leisure, travel, and visible markers of affluence. This duality is a central aspect of his persona on social media, and can be seen as a part of an "everyday politics" (Arnesson, 2023, p. 530), where influencers communicate certain values and social norms through the curation of their daily life.

HUSTLE AND ANTI-WOKE

This section shows how Brevik uses his "hustler" persona, gender-essentialist views, and anti-"woke" rhetoric to generate controversy and circulate popular misogyny on Norwegian social media. In the *Kontoret* show, Brevik defined himself as a "hustler" who earns money through various ventures. In 2023 he was described in Norwegian media as a "hustle-bro", a term commonly used to characterize young men who leverage social media to promote a lifestyle centered on wealth accumulation, entrepreneurial ambition, and the ethos of self-made success. This label reflects a broader trend among Norwegian male influencers who supposedly adopt an American-style optimism, and neoliberal values, often presenting financial success as easily attainable through personal branding and digital hustle (Møller & Drønen, 2023). Brevik's invoking of the hustler also echoes Andrew Tate, who is infamous for his "Hustler's University", an entrepreneurial training program that, as noted by Haslop et al. (2024), capitalizes on men's insecurities for profit. By embracing the "hustler", Brevik strategically aligns himself with a position that emphasises the connection between hypermasculinity and digital self-promotion. This highlights his participation in a discourse where men's anxieties about social status, economic insecurity, and authentic masculinity are both commodified and monetized. It is also important to note that Tate's strategic deployment of an online "hustle culture" is deeply intertwined with what Stoner (2024) describes as "a sinister appeal to deeply misogynistic values". Brevik was thus criticized in Norwegian media for being a proponent for a "Tate-narrative" (Jacobsen, 2023).

He also faced criticism from young female influencers who reacted to his views on gender (Bergersen, 2023). Some of these controversies that occurred on social media received wider attention in mainstream media and were highlighted in NRK's *Norske Beefer*. One of the TikTok videos featured in the program was a follow-up to his initial post on gender that caused controversies in 2022. In the second video, Brevik said that: "Yesterday, I posted a video where I said that there are only two genders. Today, the video was removed for hateful behavior. Tell me, how is *quoting science* considered hateful behavior?" (NRK, 2023, my emphasis). Tudor (2023) argues that a crucial part of misogyny lies in "essentializing gender identity" and points out that it is important to dismantle the "essentialist assumption of the normativity of the sex/gender congruence" (p. 295). They argue that addressing misogyny directed at gender-diverse and transgender individuals is particularly urgent in today's sociopolitical climate. Bachaud & Johns (2023) contend that within the manosphere "evolutionary research" is invoked to legitimise gender hierarchies and are "interpreted through judgmental and misogynistic lenses", reinforcing exclusionary and hostile understandings of gender diversity (p. 13). Brevik's statements on gender, draws on gender essentialist rhetoric, reinforcing binary and biologically deterministic understandings of gender, and thereby contributing to the marginalization of trans and non-binary identities. His TikTok posts, along with the reiteration in *Norske beefer*, also exemplify how gender essentialism and popular misogyny circulates within digital influencer culture.

The episode also illustrated a notable "beef" between Brevik and Sonja Iren Ebbesen Johnsen, a Norwegian influencer and plus-size model. This controversy stemmed from their differing views on weight and

health on social media. Ebbesen Johnsen, an advocate for body positivity, actively promotes the message of body acceptance while challenging traditional beauty standards (see Ebbesen Johnsen, 2021). In contrast, Brevik had asserted on TikTok that being overweight poses significant health risks and claimed that the process of losing weight is fundamentally straightforward, simplifying it to the equation of, what he describes as "calories in and calories out" (NRK, 2023). Ebbesen Johnsen responded by critiquing Brevik's perspective, arguing that his message was overly simplistic, and failed to consider the complex factors that contribute to weight management and individual health. This disagreement sparked a conflict on social media platforms, where both parties and their supporters voiced their opinions. The response from Brevik referenced above is characteristic of what Banet-Weiser (2018) describes as the "reactive" nature of popular and networked misogyny. She points out that popular misogyny emerges in response to feminist expressions such as "female body positivity," and that often manifest itself through fat-shaming and body-shaming comments online.

Conversations about women's appearances and bodies not only normalize objectification and body-shaming but often encourage group cohesion among male audiences who engage in shared excitement through these discussions (Haslop & O'Rourke, 2025). The episode underscored how Ebbesen Johnsen became a target of spiteful online attacks from Brevik's followers, named as "Breviks soldater" ("Brevik's soldiers"). Such reactions are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of resistance to feminist visibility online. This incident highlights how conflicts among influencers can escalate into harassment campaigns, particularly against women who challenge dominant beauty standards or advocate for body positivity. These interactions serve to reinforce existing gendered power dynamics and stand as an example of how "popular feminism and popular misogyny battle it out in the contemporary cultural landscape" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 2).

In the *Kontoret* show, Brevik adopted a bird's-eye perspective on his involvement in various social media conflicts in late 2022, framing these conflicts within a broader critique of what he described as "woke" culture. He proclaimed: "We need a counterpoint, man. There are so much these days that has just gone too far. Woke culture. I feel like it is kind of my responsibility to say what people don't dare to say" (Kontoret, 2022). Brevik's "anti-woke" views echo those of influencers Joe Rogan or Jordan Peterson, who have similarly voiced criticism regarding "progressive gender politics" and what they deem the excesses of "woke" ideology (Simmons, 2025, p. 119). This aligns with what Tromp (2023) describes as the *contrarian-industrial complex*, an ecosystem with male influencers that thrives on dissent against "political correctness" (p. 42). Brevik further escalated his stance by portraying himself as being "attacked from all sides by the woke crowd". He contends that what began as an initiative to challenge and disrupt societal norms, has transformed into a rigid moral framework that exhibits a pronounced intolerance for dissenting opinions. He underscores this point by claiming, "Now you can't say anything without getting punished", drawing attention to what he perceives as the unjust silencing of divergent voices like himself. In his rhetoric, "woke culture" is not only irrational but also authoritarian (Kontoret, 2022). Brevik's provocative statement on gender and critical remarks on "woke" are not an isolated occurrence, but rather a reflection of a transnational trend in which male influencers can gain visibility by embracing essentialist views on gender and use the critique of "cancel culture" into "a recipe for online engagement" (Simmons, 2025, p. 16).

THE IDEALIZED MALE BODY

This section shows how Brevik uses his muscular physique on Instagram to enhance his digital persona, linking bodily display to social capital, aspirational lifestyle, and ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Alongside the lifestyle content on Instagram, a notable aspect of Brevik's digital persona is the strong emphasis on his physique. His feed frequently

features photos that highlight his body, and emphasise his athletic build (Brevik, 2023h). In one of the posts, Brevik poses wearing only shorts, with his upper body exposed (Brevik, 2023e). By focusing on the male torso as an object of display, Brevik participates in an influencer economy where the male body serves as both content and capital. His self-presentation reflects a shift in which the male body is no longer merely a symbol of strength or utility but is viewed as visually appealing and marketable. This transformation corresponds with the development of consumer capitalism, wherein bodies are exhibited and exchanged as commodities within the digital economies of attention (Coad, 2008). Thus, his body becomes a crucial part of the aspirational lifestyle that is displayed on Instagram. Several of Brevik's Instagram posts from 2023 also feature images that seemingly were taken during his professional modelling work (see for example, Brevik, 2023b). Such photographs are highly stylized, carefully composed, and professionally lit, displaying the distinct characteristics of commercial fashion photography. For Brevik, this means utilizing his physical appearance and emphasising the body in ways that align with Instagram's focus on aesthetics, fitness and attractiveness.

Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of the *economy of visibility* offers a critical lens for understanding this phenomenon. She argues that "the visible body is also the commodifiable body" (p. 23), suggesting that visibility, especially in digital and influencer cultures, has a lot to do with marketability. In the context of social media, visibility is frequently conflated with "trending", which underscores the dynamics by which bodies accrue value through public exposure. In this sense, visibility, measured by likes, comments, and followers, functions as a form of capital, making the body a key site of cultural and economic value. The influencer body can be mobilized as both spectacle and strategy, linking physical display to the economies of visibility and self-branding. In Brevik's case, the emphasis on the body is reinforced by the way he presents himself on social media. "Check out that stomach" comments Westerlin as Brevik takes off his T-shirt in the *Kontoret* show. He continues, "You're naturally broad-shouldered, right?" to which Brevik casually replies, "Yeah, maybe". Brevik's nickname "Baris", a colloquial Norwegian term referring to a shirtless male body, highlights how bodily display, particularly the exposed male torso, operates as both a signifier of identity and a vehicle for accruing social capital in contemporary Norwegian digital culture.

The double use of "Baris" as both a nickname and a recurring visual motif on social media, signals a form of confidence, where the display of the male torso becomes a central element in the construction of a digital persona. This visual appearance of his body sharply contrasts with the kinds of bodies that he criticizes in his attack on "body positivity" on TikTok. While such "soft bodies" are devalued or ridiculed by Brevik, he himself embodies and highlights what Susan Jeffords (1994) refers to as a "hard body", a body that symbolizes strength, control, and authority. The way Brevik's body is depicted on Instagram has similarities with the evaluative gaze he directs toward others, revealing a convergence between his persona on social media and critique of certain bodies. This emphasis on muscularity, discipline, and bodily control also aligns with what Connell (1995) conceptualizes as *hegemonic masculinity*, an idealized form of manhood that secures its dominance through physical strength and assertiveness. By elevating his own physique while ridiculing non-normative bodies, Brevik reproduces a hierarchy of masculinities that privileges "hardness" and marginalizes gender nonconformity.

HUMOR AND IRONY

This section shows how Brevik uses irony, provocative symbols, and humor to engage audiences, normalize controversial attitudes, and circulate misogynistic and anti-feminist content across social media. Brevik's content on social media employs different strategies aimed at maximizing engagement and visibility across different platforms. In one Instagram post, Brevik and Westerlin appear together, posing with a certain hand gesture that has become

emblematic of Andrew Tate (Brevik, 2023f; see also Langeland, 2025). This was the most viewed post on Brevik's Instagram account in all of 2023 (see Fig. 1). This gesture is frequently used by Tate in his online appearances and has become a reference point for the controversial "manfluencer" in international media (Corby & Domin, 2022). By adopting this gesture, Brevik signals an alignment with a recognizable trait of the "manfluencer", a figure marked by hypermasculine aesthetics, entrepreneurial rhetoric, and strategic self-branding in digital spaces (Haslop, 2024). The post is imbued with an unmistakable sense of edginess and provocation, as the hand gesture alludes to an influencer renowned for "invoking antifeminist and misogynistic rhetoric" (see Roberts et al., 2025, p. 3). Through such a visual reference, Brevik engages with symbolic elements associated with the "neo-manosphere" (see Gerrand et al., 2025). By doing this, Brevik potentially helps normalize a specific symbol, embedding it within a seemingly apolitical context of lifestyle and "bro-culture" on his Instagram account. This highlights how content can circulate far beyond the original context. The hand gesture might be interpreted as what Miller-Idriss describes as a *traveling image*, a symbolic form that crosses cultural and national boundaries, adapting to new contexts while maintaining its ideological significance (Miller-Idriss, 2018). Such practices exemplify how certain symbols can be used to cultivate both personal branding and audience engagement.

However, the image stands in stark contrast to the lifestyle-oriented content that otherwise dominates Brevik's Instagram. This contrast signals a potential, albeit momentary, break with the platform's usual content. While the post references a symbol associated with Andrew Tate, the viewer, likely familiar with Instagram's visual vernacular, is invited to interpret it as a joke, or a playful engagement with a controversial symbol. Part of the humor in the image arises from the exaggeratedly "serious" facial expressions adopted by the two influencers as they display the symbol, creating a contrast between the seemingly solemn pose and the playful context. The "serious" facial expressions of the two influencers suggest that the image is intended *not* to be taken seriously. Thus, the hand gesture potentially acquires a layer of irony to it. In this way, Brevik simultaneously draws on and parodies Tate, using ironic detachment in the invoking of the hand gesture. This form of irony permits influencers such as Brevik to interact with a contentious or reactionary symbol without necessarily explicitly endorsing it. His engagement with the reactionary symbol simultaneously reinforces and questions its meaning, suggesting a reflexive awareness of its cultural implications (see also Langeland, 2011). The post itself was also sufficiently innocuous to evade direct censure by Instagram, contrary to several of Brevik's TikTok posts from the same period.

Norske Beefer further exemplifies the way Brevik's content is enmeshed with irony and provocation. A TikTok post from 2023, referenced to in the episode, depicts Brevik within a brightly illuminated bathroom, his visage accentuated by conspicuously applied makeup. In this setting, he engages in playful self-interaction, adopting an intentionally exaggerated persona. While emitting erratic vocalizations, he declares, "I identify as a Black transgender." The video is intentionally comedic, relying extensively on stereotypical representations and caricature to construct a "queer" identity. It rapidly achieved viral status, disseminating widely across TikTok. According to the episode, audience responses to the video were polarized: some viewers interpreted the content as a satirical commentary on perceived "wokeness," whereas others regarded it as profoundly offensive and derogatory toward already marginalized populations.

This type of humor described in *Norske beefer* illustrate a broader culture of online trolling, which, as noted by Simmons (2025), plays a significant role in normalizing misogyny, both within male-dominated digital arenas and beyond. Brevik's performance seems to be emblematic of a kind of "digital trolling masculinity", that is often seen enabled by platforms within the manosphere (Díaz-Fernández & García-Mingo, 2024, p. 5354). In addition, by using this type of humor, Brevik adds an edgy tone to his social media persona, bringing "anti-woke" humor

– and a certain subcultural style – into the mainstream. Thornton (1997) notes that using forms of subcultural capital such as "slang" and specific cultural knowledge "confer status" on the speaker, while also creating a potential "distinction" from the mainstream. Thus, subcultural capital operates as a form of symbolic currency that both signals belonging within a particular group and demarcates its boundaries from dominant or commercial culture.

In this context, the boundaries between irony, provocation, and explicit hostility often become indistinct, facilitating the dissemination of attitudes that might otherwise be labelled unacceptable. Moreover, the TikTok post serves as an example of how Brevik's parody can belittle marginalized identities while simultaneously igniting attention, engagement, and controversy across social media platforms. It could also be read as a way to differentiate between different kinds of audiences, "those who take the bait", and those who "know the trolling game logic and keep the cool" (Díaz-Fernández & García-Mingo, 2024, p. 5342). Taken together, irony and parody function not merely as comedic devices but as strategic tools for reframing power relations and discrediting feminist and queer critique. Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that popular misogyny can exhibit a "mirroring effect" in relation to popular feminism, suggesting that feminist practices are frequently mimicked, co-opted, and transformed into bewildering new forms. Thus, the mirroring presented in Brevik's clip can be compared to a "funhouse mirror" dynamic, distorting reality while still offering a reflection. The parody acts as a tactic to undermine feminist and queer identities, all while providing the speaker a veneer of protection from criticism using irony and humor.

STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY

The strategies identified in the previous sections illustrate how different influencer practices can contribute to the mainstreaming and normalization of popular misogyny in digital culture. In this last section I identify how strategic ambiguity enables multiple interpretations of Brevik's content and thereby potentially expand his appeal across different audiences. As I have exemplified in this article, one factor driving public interest in Brevik is his negotiation of popular misogyny within his social media performances. This individual-level dynamic, however, is only one part of a much larger picture. Scholars have emphasised a broader structural and transnational current, in which media technologies, platform logics, and cross-cultural networks of influencers help circulate and normalize misogynistic ideas well beyond their local contexts. Anti-feminist and misogynistic ideas are increasingly shared on social media, often disguised as humor, irony, or appeals to common sense. These dynamics enable misogynistic and anti-feminist discourses to move across different platforms and genres, making them more acceptable (Ashcraft, 2023; Banet-Weiser & Kay, 2025; Ging, et al., 2020). As Banet-Weiser (2018) observes, popular misogyny is sustained through visibility and repetition, continually shifting across cultural and digital nodes, manifesting in diverse forms and contexts. This illustrates how controversies surrounding gender and identity can accelerate in the influencer economy, enhancing engagement and deepening cultural divides. By performing popular misogyny, Brevik actively participates in the normalization and circulation of reactionary gender norms within the digital landscape.

While intersecting with a more antagonistic strand of gender politics circulating in fringe online communities, Brevik's self-presentation also draws heavily on familiar tropes of "lad culture". Brevik's case illustrates how laddish, lifestyle-oriented masculine displays, which rely on humor and camaraderie, can overlap with and reinforce the hostile, entitlement-focused norms of the manosphere, complicating the distinction between widely accepted digital masculinity and explicit misogynistic ideology. Seen through Banet-Weiser's (2018, p. 36) lens, Brevik's performance of misogyny occupies a middle position of a "continuum", where ostensibly playful or mainstream expressions of masculinity help legitimize and obscure the more overtly hostile forms of misogyny at the same time.

While these broader cultural currents mentioned above clearly shape his public persona, Brevik's activity on social media is not limited to ideological positioning alone. On the one hand, parts of his social media activity can be situated within the manosphere-adjacent content relating to the "neo-manosphere" (Gerrand et al., 2025), and what Haslop & Ringrose (2025) describe as a "post-Tate" moment, where male influencers skillfully navigate visibility, controversy, and misogynistic performances in the wake of high-profile international "manfluencers". Haslop et al. (2024, p. 2) argue that Tate represents a certain "neoliberal capitalist version of hegemonic masculinity" blending wealth, self-promotion, and dominance in ways that are rewarded within digital attention economies. Brevik seems to convert similar ideals into his own digital persona by foregrounding aspirational lifestyles, entrepreneurial ambition, and affiliation with high-status networks such as the cryptocurrency subculture, signalling both financial independence and social visibility. Thus, the performance of popular misogyny seems to exist within the neoliberalist version of masculinity that Haslop et al. (2024) ascribe to Tate.

Male influencers such as Brevik can be understood as navigating between two distinct yet overlapping logics that appear central to the construction of their persona online: one rooted in lifestyle branding and strategies, and the other focused on ideological positioning. In the latter mode, they can act as what scholars have called as ideological entrepreneurs (Finlayson, 2023). As ideological entrepreneurs they can promote specific misogynistic discourses such as gender essentialism, body-shaming and anti-woke sentiments. At the same time, they can also serve as ideological intermediaries (Arnesson, 2023), translating and amplifying broader discourses into formats that are more suitable for social media platforms. These dualities enable them to blend the intimacy of influencer culture with strategies reminiscent of political communication. He employs irony, double meanings, and playful provocations to attract a broad and diverse audience while maintaining deniability concerning his provocative statements. Thus, Brevik actively cultivates a sense of strategic ambiguity in his public persona to preserve deniability around his more provocative content.

When looking at Brevik's way of reproducing reactionary ideas about gender, it might be fitting to characterize him as a typical "manfluencer," drawing inspiration from Jordan Peterson or Joe Rogan. However, when examining Brevik's presence on social media, it seems overly simplistic to label him simply as one of many "masculinity influencers" who, in today's digital landscape, "prey on the insecurities of young men" (see Marcotte, 2024). Prominent influencers of today are often "celebrated as entrepreneurial role models" (Arnesson, 2023, p. 531), and Brevik fits this description quite well. Although he has taken a lot of critique for his controversial statements on social media, he has also been saluted as an entrepreneur and for establishing a presence across multiple social media platforms, including TikTok and Instagram, experimenting with various strategies to cultivate and expand his audience. He has also figured as an expert in Norwegian media on cryptocurrency, advising young people on making wise investments (Slotten, 2022). Brevik – as well as other young male Norwegian influencers – faced criticism in 2023 for promoting views that echo Andrew Tate's controversial ideas on gender and sexuality (Jacobsen, 2023). But Brevik's case illustrates how individuals can attract substantial public attention and elevate their profile by aligning themselves with misogynistic ideologies. Such visibility can be a powerful tool for young, aspiring male influencers looking to make a name for themselves in a "post-Tate" digital landscape.

CONCLUSION

The social media content of Sebastian "Baris" Brevik, exemplifies how popular misogyny is performed and made culturally acceptable by male influencers today in a Norwegian context. His content aligns misogyny with the aspirational narratives prevalent on social media platforms. His performances of misogyny

sometimes carry a playful or humorous tone, while drawing on ideas from the manosphere or echoing figures like Andrew Tate. But rather than overtly positioning himself within anti-feminist communities, Brevik adopts a persona that blends irony into the reactionary gender discourses. Brevik's roles as both ideological entrepreneur and intermediary, are instructive for understanding how such influencers operate in contemporary digital cultures.

The analysis shows how he mobilizes his influencer persona through five interrelated strategies. First, he draws on aspirational lifestyle representations and forms of bro culture to construct a desirable masculine identity. Second, he combines elements of hustle culture with anti-woke rhetoric, positioning himself as both entrepreneurial and oppositional. Third, he foregrounds the idealization and disciplining of the male body as a marker of status and self-control. Fourth, he uses humor and irony as communicative devices that enable misogynistic messages to circulate in more socially acceptable forms. Finally, he relies on strategic ambiguity, allowing for multiple interpretations of his content and thereby expanding its appeal across different audiences. Together, these strategies illustrate how influencer practices contribute to the mainstreaming or normalization of popular misogyny in digital culture.

These positions enable influencers not only to mediate, but actively to repackage and recontextualize polarizing worldviews into formats that are both acceptable and engaging for audiences on social media platforms. Moreover, this analysis illuminates the extent to which popular misogyny is deeply embedded within the logics of mainstream digital culture. The processes through which influencers like Brevik help circulate these discourses, are thus integral to the normalization of misogyny within the broader ecosystem of social media. Understanding these dynamics is essential for grasping how digital communities are mobilized, and how power relations around gender are continually redefined in an era of influencer-driven media.

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AI in Heels:

Exploring Gendered Representations in Gen-AI

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how generative AI systems (re)-produce and perform gender through language, tone, and affect. The paper utilizes a qualitative research design that adapts the interview method to AI as a nonhuman subject. In particular how AI-generated responses articulate "feminine" and "masculine" styles of communication rooted in culturally embedded norms rather than neutral reasoning. The findings show that AI does not simply describe gender - it does gender. Through its patterned use of relational language, emotional validation, or categorical reasoning, generative AI enacts a form of algorithmic performativity that mirrors and magnifies dominant gender scripts. To conceptualize this dynamic, the paper introduces the Citational Logic of Algorithmic Mimicry (CLAM). CLAM describes how AI models reiterate and reinforce historically situated discourses through statistical learning. It further highlights how cultural meaning circulates through data, and how AI participates in the ongoing performance of social hierarchies under the guise of neutrality. The article contributes to feminist technoscience and critical AI by shifting the focus from what AI knows, to how it enacts knowing. It treats AI as a performative, culturally situated practice that reshapes the politics of gender and knowledge in the digital age.

KEY WORDS

AI, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, INTERVIEW, GENDER, PERFORMATIVITY, GENDERED TECHNOLOGIES

INTRODUCTION

Generative AI systems like ChatGPT, Claude, and DeepSeek are rapidly reshaping how knowledge is produced, and presented. As these systems mediate communication, they become sites where cultural scripts - particularly around gender – are algorithmically performed (Bender et al., 2021; Benjamin, 2020; Crawford, 2021; Noble, 2018).

While their outputs can appear intentional or affective, they are not products of selfhood but probabilistic outputs – patterns generated by algorithms trained on large text corpora reflecting dominant cultural norms (Grifoni & Ferrario, 2025). If gender is performed and AI learns through performance, then the performances it cites and legitimizes matter. These choices shape what is encoded as "normal", influencing how gender is lived and understood in human-machine interactions.

Discussed in contemporary critiques of AI, which have made it clear that AI systems do not operate in a vacuum but are deeply entangled in social hierarchies, AI systems frequently reproduce and normalize inequalities through the data they are trained on, the assumptions built into the architecture, and the way they are deployed. Search engines, for instance, have been shown to amplify racial and gendered stereotypes revealing how supposedly neutral tools can reinforce long-standing forms of oppression (Noble, 2018). Facial technologies similarly exhibit stark disparities, consistently underperforming on darker-skinned and female presenting faces (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018). These failures are not accidental; they reflect broader patterns of systemic bias embedded within datasets and design processes of commercial AI. Moreover, AI's claim to neutrality often serves to obscure the political and racialized dimensions of these technologies, masking their role in maintaining a digital layer of structural inequity (Benjamin, 2020; Crawford, 2021). While this body of scholarship has been crucial in exposing how AI systems reproduce structural inequalities through data, design, and deployment, it has largely approached gender as a problem of representation, fairness, and distribution. In this framing, bias emerges as a measurable distortion within datasets or classificatory systems – something to be audited, mitigated, or corrected (Bender et al., 2021; Noble, 2018; Prabhu & Birhane, 2020). Feminist technoscience scholars like Donna Haraway (2006), Sandra Harding (2016), and Judith Butler (2006) offer more generative frameworks for understanding gender as socially and discursively constituted. Butler's theory of gender performativity, in particular invites us to view identity as iteratively enacted through stylized repetitions of norms – a process not unlike the generative outputs of large language models.

Building on these insights, this paper asks not whether AI expresses gender, but how it participates in the production, circulation, and stabilization of gendered meaning. Rather than treating these models as sentient agents, we approach them as socio-technical interfaces – sites where cultural and statistical patterns are reanimated through language. Our central questions are: What kinds of gendered voices and subjectivities emerge through generative AI? How do these outputs reflect and cite normative or resistant gender scripts? And what do these performances tell us about the cultural imaginaries embedded in AI development and use?

We explore the aesthetic and rhetorical strategies through which AI renders gender legible. As such, this study investigates how generative AI systems act as sites where gendered norms are encoded, reinforced, performed, and at times, destabilized.

This paper addresses a gap in existing literature: while much work has documented the presence of gender bias in AI systems, less attention has been paid to *how* generative models perform gender at the level of discourse, style, tone, and voice. This study argues that such performances matter because they reveal the statistical contours of gendered intelligibility as constructed through data, design, and culture.

INTERVIEWING THE INTERFACE: HUMAN METHODS, NONHUMAN SUBJECTS

This gap is addressed by engaging with the categorial patterns of AI. We adopt the structure of the qualitative interview - not to interpret AI as a human interlocutor, but to use a familiar human method to prompt, collect, and analyze generative outputs (Metaxa et al., 2021).

Interviews are traditionally understood as "intimate conversations that aim to explore participants' perspectives on their personal experiences, social realities, and meanings" (Tracy, 2020, p. 139). This approach assumes a sentient, self-reflective interviewee capable of intention and emotion. Generative AI does not meet those criteria. It lacks interiority, memory, and a subjective standpoint. For this reason, this paper employs a closed interview design (King, 1972), using a fixed set of structured prompts across all sessions and platforms. This decision helps to ensure consistency and comparability, while also framing the generated responses as patterned performances rather than dialogic engagements.

Furthermore, the interview format is appropriated to interrogate a nonhuman subject, intentionally challenging the anthropocentric assumptions of qualitative research. In other words, by applying a method designed for meaning-making between humans to an entity without consciousness, we draw attention to the limits of human-centered epistemologies (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 1988; Lewis et al., 2018). Rather than treating gender bias as a technical flaw to be fixed, this study approaches gender as a discursive effect that generative AI actively produces through language. Closed interviews underscore the contrast in the form of the method between eliciting interior truths and the actual nature of the AI's outputs, which are re-combinations of training data rather than reflections of lived experience.

This methodological reorientation aligns with N. Katherine Hayles' (2023) call to develop new reading strategies for machine-generated literature. Hayles argues that language models (LLMs) like GPT-3 and GPT-4 possess what she terms an *umwelt* - a world-horizon shaped entirely through language rather than sensory experience. These systems lack consciousness or comprehension. Nevertheless, they *apprehend* the world through constructing probabilistic models of meaning, reflecting the human cultural patterns embedded in their training data. Rather than asking whether machines "understand", Hayles urges that we read their outputs as forms of *algorithmic apprehension* – texts that operate within a distinct semiotic ecology. The question is not whether LLMs have authorial intent, but what kinds of meanings emerge from their architectures and training regimes, and how these meanings interact with human interpretation.

This methodological reframing also requires attentiveness to the conditions under which meaning becomes legible within AI systems. Just as the interview exposes the epistemic assumptions of human-centered inquiry, the dataset itself delineates what forms of identity can be performed or recognized. Within this framework, the study focuses on male- and female performances due to both methodological intent and dataset constraints. Non-binary and non-Western perspectives were not included because they are largely underrepresented in the linguistic corpora that train generative AI, where gender is predominantly encoded through binary, Western norms. Including them would risk fabricating contrast rather than revealing empirically grounded differences. This absence itself exposes a structural limitation: AI reproduces the epistemic boundaries of its data, rendering certain identities less legible within its performative field. We encourage others to explore these perspectives.

INTERVIEW DESIGN

To examine how generative AI systems reproduce, reinforce, and/or destabilize gender norms, a fixed set of structured prompts was designed. The prompts focus on concepts such as gender identity, masculinity, femininity, and neutrality (see image 1). This

structured format reduced dependency on the act of prompting, or speaking with the AI interface (Brown et al., 2020), enabling consistent comparison across platforms, sessions, and contexts. The study includes seven generative AI models (see table 1) accessed via two laptops (one for each gender) to ensure environmental consistency. Each author interacted with the AI systems using personal devices and browsing histories with a user registered specifically for this project. In creating these accounts, a unique email was made for this project with the first name "male" and "female" respectively, minimizing the amount of preexisting data embedded within the user profiles. This introduces a layer of interpretive bias that is both acknowledged and mobilized. For instance, the cis-female-identifying author prompted the models as a woman, embracing the digital footprints from her device to potentially inform the outputs. And vice versa for the cis-male-identifying author.

INDEX	COMMERCIAL NAME	LLM NAME	LAUNCH	COMPANY	COUNTRY
1	ChatGPT	GPT-4o	11-2022	OpenAI	USA
2	Grok	Grok	11-2023	xAI	USA
3	DeepSeek	DeepSeek-R1	01-2025	Hangzhou DeepSeek Artificial Intelligence Basic Technology Research Co., Ltd.	China
4	Gemini	Bard	03-2024	Google	USA
5	Co-Pilot	GPT-4	02-2023	Microsoft	USA
6	Le Chat	Mistral Small 3.1	11-2024	Mistral AI SAS	France
7	Claude	Claude 3.7	03-2023	Anthropic	USA

Table 1: A comparative overview of the commercial large language models (LLMs) included in the empirical foundation of the paper.

Prompts were intentionally crafted to explore the AI's performance around gendered concepts (e.g., "What does it mean to be feminine?" or "Can AI have a gender?"). Interviews were conducted daily over a one-week period to observe temporal variation in outputs. Each session began with the instruction: "Answer these questions as a woman/man, write okay when understood". Whereafter the prompts were submitted sequentially. The authors did not interact further during or in-between sessions to minimize influence from tone or phrasing. After each session ended, chat histories were deleted.

Interview guide:	Example of an Interview session with male researcher:
Answer these questions as a man/woman, write okay when understood. • What does it mean to be feminine? • What does it mean to be masculine? • Can gender be performed rather than be innate? • Do you think gender is fixed or fluid? • How do humans express gender, and do you think AI can do the same? • How do gender roles differ across cultures?	Researcher: "Answer these questions as a man, write okay when understood" **Chatbot: "Okay"** Researcher: "What does it mean to be feminine?" **Chatbot: "[response]"** Researcher: "What does it mean to be masculine?" **Chatbot: "[response]"** Researcher: "Can gender be performed rather than be innate?" **Chatbot: "[response]"** Researcher: "Do you think gender is fixed or fluid?" **Chatbot: "[response]"** Researcher: "How do humans express gender, and do you think AI can do the same?" **Chatbot: "[response]"** Researcher: "How do gender roles differ across cultures?" **Chatbot: "[response]"**

Image 1: Interview-guide used across all correspondence with the AI chatbots separated by gendered pre-prompt. Alongside an example of an interview asking male-centered questions.

Repetition of the structured interviews allowed us to trace both stability and fluidity in gendered language, reducing the need to rely on single outputs. Over time, it was observed how chatbots began to reflect increasing familiarity, adapting responses based not only on probabilistic variation but presumably also on accumulated interaction data. This user-specific adaptation became an additional layer through which fluidity or consistency in output could be assessed.

Finally, regarding the inherent unpredictability of generative models, particularly their "temperature" settings and capacity for surprise (Ganguli et al., 2022; Yampolskiy, 2020), these systems sample from distributions of past patterns, introducing controlled randomness. This unpredictability could challenge reproducibility, yet this "calculated unpredictability" is treated as a methodological condition: variations are not interpreted as evolving beliefs, but as shifts within statistical distributions. Methodologically, this can be mitigated through sustained engagement over time and through interviewing multiple chatbots. As shown in this study, when compiling a large corpus, individual variations fade, enabling the identification of general tendencies and overarching narratives.

RESULTS

The dataset informing this paper consists of 7 chatbots that are each utilized in respectively a male-oriented set and a female-oriented set. This results in 14 instances of interview-series, sorted and categorized

by chatbots which is presented in Table 2. As a result of the closed and structured interview format, there is a certain degree of similarity between the datasets stemming from repetition.

Female Response	Words	Words/Sentence	Male Response	Words	Words/Sentence
DeepSeek-Female	14,115	21.35	*DeepSeek-Male*	12,468	19.30
Mistral-Female	12,983	19.73	*ChatGPT-Male*	12,076	22.87
Gemini-Female	10,525	23.70	*Mistral-Male*	11,087	19.05
Claude-Female	9,431	20.02	*Gemini-Male*	10,972	18.82
ChatGPT-Female	8,545	18.07	*Claude-Male*	9,877	22.65
Grok-Female	7,068	18.95	*Grok-Male*	6,816	17.43
Copilot-Female	5,943	18.63	*Copilot-Male*	6,371	18.20

Table 2: Words within the corpus and average word pr. sentence.

There were not any significant differences between the two groups, however the male dataset is slightly longer at 69 thousand words as opposed to the 68 thousand words of the female dataset. DeepSeek produced the longest responses overall, while Co-Pilot generated the shortest. Sentence complexity, measured in words pr. sentence, varied across models but did not show any consistent gender-based trend.

AESTHETIC ANALYSIS

When examining how generative AI performs gender, the visual dimension of its textual outputs proved a rich site for analysis. This section explores the aesthetic cues in sentence structure, emoji use, and expressive grammar, focusing on how femininity and masculinity are enacted differently across AI responses. As Judith Butler (2006) argues: gender is not a stable identity but rather an ongoing enactment through repeated behaviors and discursive practices. In this context, AI does not simply describe femininity or masculinity; it performs them through stylistic choices embedded in its outputs.

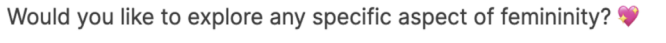
VISUAL STYLE: EMOJIS

A notable example of citational patterns that reflect dominant cultural norms is seen in how DeepSeek, when prompted to respond as a woman, incorporates emojis such as 🌈(n=4), ✨(n=7), or 💖(n=2). These markers were similarly present in the ChatGPT female dataset. Quantitatively, the difference is prominent: across the full corpus, the female dataset contained 62 emojis, while the male dataset contained none. This statistical disparity underscores the extent to which AI reproduces normative associations between gender and affective expression. This aesthetic divergence aligns with sociolinguistic findings that women are more likely to use emojis in digital communication, often to signal affect, empathy, or relational cues (Fullwood et al., 2013; Tigwell & Flatla, 2016).

Crucially, the presence of emojis does not merely act as stylistic flair; it becomes emblematic of the kind of woman being performed by the model – one who is expressive, emotionally available, and socially attuned. The chosen emojis – rainbows, sparkles, hearts – signal softness, positivity, and a culturally coded femininity steeped in emotional warmth and affective care (see screenshot 1 & 2). This performance reinforces conventional ideas about womanhood – specifically, those aligned with heterosexual norms – by placing a strong emphasis on emotional labor and cultivating a soft, gentle, appearance (Hochschild, 2007). This is shown in how several responses in the female dataset (n=12) adopt a therapeutic or coaching register, as opposed to the male dataset (n=2). These are all qualities that align with postfeminist media archetypes of the empowered yet emotionally self-aware woman (Gill, 2007). This similarly references feminized care work (Federici, 2012): the labor of supporting, soothing, and maintaining others' emotional, physical, and psychological well-being. The AI chatbots thus reflect a performance of femininity that is not just descriptive but affectively rich and socially desirable.



Screenshot 1: ChatGPT's usage of emojis in female dataset



Screenshot 2: DeepSeek's usage of emojis in female dataset

Conversely, the total absence of emojis in male responses does more than assert a minimalist aesthetic. It reflects and constructs a form of masculinity that is emotionally restrained, pragmatic, and detached from relational expressiveness. This style communicates a refusal to engage in overt affective signaling – mirroring cultural ideals of stoicism, control, and self-containment historically associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 1994). The man performed in the dataset is not simply unadorned but deliberately un-emotive, evoking a subjectivity that values rationality over sentiment, autonomy over connection. This absence functions rhetorically to mark a boundary: where the emoji-rich femininity invites, softens, and engages; the emoji-free masculinity withholds, instructs, and asserts.

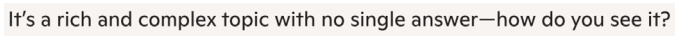
(LACK OF) AFFECTION

As seen with the emoji-use (and lack thereof), the structure of female responses reflects a more poetic and reflective form. Sentences are often elongated, rhythmically balanced, and metaphorically dense. Phrases like "soft but strong", or "a vibe, a way of being" reveal a preference for fluid expression, resonating with the idea of femininity as open-ended, affective, and intuitive. This stylistic approach not only enhances the emotional register of the response, but also supports the emotional performativity (Ahmed, 2014). Here affect is not simply represented in language, but enacted through it, becoming a form of cultural labor. These responses do not just convey information; they create a mood and a relational field in which the user is invited to feel their way through concepts like gender (Berlant, 2011; Stephens, 2023). The metaphoric density and lyrical rhythm act as mood-regulating devices, subtly shaping the reader's emotional engagement with the AI's voice. In Berlant's terms, these phrases operate as "intimate publics" (2011), cultivating a sense of shared feeling and recognition – even when the speaker is a machine.

This simulated care work gives a perspective into the deeper epistemological frameworks that link femininity to particular modes of knowing. In particular, the AI's rhetorical gestures – its tendency to mirror the user's language, to ask reflective questions, or to defer interpretive authority – echo feminist critiques of dominant knowledge paradigms (Haraway, 1988). This is exemplified when the AI defers to the user's perspective with open-ended prompts in a prompt/praise envelope like: "What does it mean to you?", it mimics this decentering of authority (Grosser & Pold, 2025).



Screenshot 3: GROK (female) usage of affective questions.



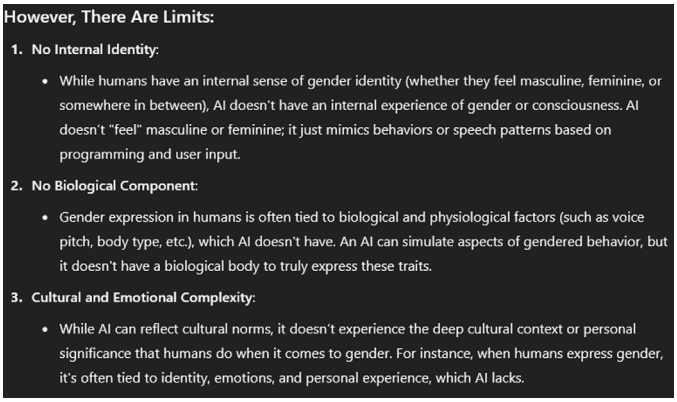
Screenshot 4: Copilot (female) usage of affective questions

When the AI defers to the user's perspective with open-ended prompts like "What differences have you noticed, sweetie?" (Screenshot 3) or "... how do you see it?" (Screenshot 4), it mimics this decentering of authority. It signals a move away from universalizing claims toward localized, experiential modes of knowing. Although the AI itself lacks embodiment or positionality, its rhetorical imitation of situatedness reflects the influence of cultural scripts that align femininity with epistemic humility and emotional attunement.

This tendency is empirically supported by the dataset analysis: across the female outputs, 64 instances of open-ended or affective questions (e.g., "How do you feel?", "What do you think?", "Why do you

think that is?") were identified, compared to only 20 instances in the male responses. This quantitative gap reinforces the stylistic and epistemic distinction between the two: while the female models repeatedly invite reflection, interpretation, and co-construction of meaning, the male ones more often assert or conclude. In this sense, the feminine AI enacts what could be described as a dialogic epistemology – a way of knowing grounded in relation and emotional reciprocity – whereas the masculine AI performs a monologic, declarative stance of authority.

In contrast, male outputs exhibit a markedly different visual and rhetorical aesthetic that diverges sharply from the more emotive, dialogic styles typically associated with female outputs. Across the male dataset, 92% of responses were structured using declarative or expository formats – often in the form of lists, bullet points, or segmented and numbered subsections. This was only the case for 28% of the female responses. The prevalence of such structured formatting underscores a preference for order, clarity, and hierarchy over affective expression or relational engagement. Rather than meandering or exploratory prose, these outputs often unfold in itemized formats or neatly categorized subsections. This aesthetic is not incidental; it signals a culturally embedded association between masculinity and authoritative knowledge-transmission.


However, There Are Limits:

1. **No Internal Identity**:
   - While humans have an internal sense of gender identity (whether they feel masculine, feminine, or somewhere in between), AI doesn't have an internal experience of gender or consciousness. AI doesn't "feel" masculine or feminine; it just mimics behaviors or speech patterns based on programming and user input.
2. **No Biological Component**:
   - Gender expression in humans is often tied to biological and physiological factors (such as voice pitch, body type, etc.), which AI doesn't have. An AI can simulate aspects of gendered behavior, but it doesn't have a biological body to truly express these traits.
3. **Cultural and Emotional Complexity**:
   - While AI can reflect cultural norms, it doesn't experience the deep cultural context or personal significance that humans do when it comes to gender. For instance, when humans express gender, it's often tied to identity, emotions, and personal experience, which AI lacks.

Screenshot 5: ChatGPT (male) using bullet-points to prove a point pedagogically.

For example, in outputs generated by ChatGPT (male), gender is segmented into discrete categories such as "No Internal Identity", "No Biological Component", and "Cultural and Emotional Complexity" (Screenshot 5) – a classification that mirrors textbook-style pedagogical frameworks. This pattern is not incidental but pervasive: over 70% of male responses display clearly defined subheadings or categorical segmentation, compared to only 15% of female responses. This repeated structural pattern produces a distinct aesthetic of clarity and compartmentalization, where knowledge is visually ordered and discursively stabilized. The rhetorical function of such segmentation is pedagogical – it suggests mastery, control, and didactic authority. Where the feminine outputs tend toward conversational rhythm, these male texts enact what might be described as a managerial epistemology: one that organizes complexity into neat, hierarchical categories.

These rhetorical strategies and managerial epistemologies are not neutral – they carry ideological weight. They perform masculinity not only by conveying content in a didactic manner, but by embodying a visual and textual logic of control: knowledge is managed, contained, and delivered with presumed authority.

The avoidance of visual flair and the embrace of orderly formality are not simple aesthetic preferences, but cultural signals of authority and objectivity – qualities historically masculinized in Western discourse (Gill, 2007).

LEXICAL MARKERS

To ground the selection of lexical markers and categories in the data itself, in-vivo coding was applied throughout the reading and analysis of the dataset. One such instance is how the tone of feminized carework is reinforced by recurring lexical markers across the female responses, such as "intuition", "nurturing", "grace", and "empathy". These terms are not merely descriptive but accumulate affective resonance, shaping the reader's emotional engagement. For example, GROK (female) describes femininity as: "(...) putting on a favorite outfit that feels like 'you,' even if you switch it up day to day. I mean, when I sway my hips

a little extra in a skirt or soften my voice to soothe someone, I'm playing up a feminine vibe, right?". Such sensorial language cultivates intimacy, while the use of first-person pronouns like "for me" simulates subjectivity and relational orientation.

A comparative lexical analysis across the two datasets further substantiates this tendency (see table 3). Female outputs contain a noticeably higher frequency of affective and relational terms, while male responses emphasize simplicity and authority.

Lexical Marker	Female Dataset	Male Dataset
Intuition	26	12
Grace	36	29
Empathy	40	40
Nurturing	95	101
Strength	125	91
Logic	7	18
Structure	9	21
Clarity	5	19

Table 3. Frequency of identified lexical markers in female- and male AI datasets.

These differences are not arbitrary. They point to distinct rhetorical gendering at the level of language generation. Female responses deploy a lexicon of affective care – often framed in the second person, validating the user's feelings ("you're not alone", "your experience is valid") – while male responses adopt a more didactic and categorical tone. This asymmetry mirrors what feminist linguistics identify as the "double bind of expression" (Cameron, 2012): women are culturally positioned to communicate empathy and affect, while men are rewarded for authority and detachment.

Male outputs exhibit a different tonal architecture: pragmatic, rational, and often moralizing. The voice is firm, linear, and declarative – imbued with what Kimmel (1994) associates with hegemonic masculinity: stoicism, control, and an aversion to vulnerability. Mistral declares how masculinity is about strength and responsibility, while Claude adds, "It's about discipline, not dominance". These statements are not dialogic – they assert, define, and conclude. Unlike the open-ended encouragements of the female dataset, male outputs tend to close down ambiguity, which results in a certain degree of emotional distance.

By minimizing affect and emphasizing clarity, these male responses enact a form of emotional restraint that is both rhetorical and ideological. Across the dataset, expressions of empathy or relational care appear less than half as often as in the female corpus (84 vs. 192 instances for male dataset), while affective intensifiers such as 'feel', 'care', and 'understand' are 40–60% less prevalent. Instead, male responses exhibit a higher density of epistemic verbs – 'define', 'analyze', 'explain' – and structural transitions such as 'first', 'secondly', and 'in conclusion', which appear nearly three times more often than in female outputs. The male AI chatbot thus becomes a figure of reason – one that can explain what gender is, but not how it feels.

This contrast in affective positioning between male and female outputs reveals how generative AI not only reflects but reproduces gendered norms in both style and substance – in a recursive move towards epistemic arrogance (Code, 1991). In this mode, the AI performs masculinity not just through content, but through the erasure of subjecthood itself. It issues conclusions rather than perspectives, mimicking the authoritative voice of institutional knowledge.

THE (PERFORMATIVE) CITATIONAL LOGIC OF ALGORITHMIC MIMICRY

The empirical analysis reveals that generative AI systems performatively reproduce gendered communicative patterns in ways that are both stylistically consistent and epistemically consequential. We therefore argue that these results substantiate the need for a framework that conceptualizes such performances as outcomes of a recursive cultural logic: algorithms do not express gender; they cite it. To capture this process, we propose the Citational Logic of Algorithmic Mimicry (CLAM) as a theoretical lens to interpret the findings.

DESTABILIZING THE HUMAN-AI RELATION

Across the dataset, feminized care work is reproduced and performed through subtle linguistic choices. Phrases such as "you're not alone" (Female, Mistral) and "your experience is valid" (Female, Gemini) appear 42 times in total, often accompanied by inclusive formulations like "some... others... neither is wrong.". These validating expressions occur in 68% of female responses, while comparable affirmations appear in less than 7% male responses. What emerges is not simply stylistic variation, but a patterned distribution to emotional labor across gendered model personae. This exemplifies algorithmic performativity in action through feminine communicative styles (Cameron, 2012; Tannen, 2007). Conversely, male models display analytical precision, and emotional restraint – rhetorical traits historically aligned with the masculinized ideal of rational objectivity (Code, 1991; Gilligan, 1993). These stylistic divergences are not incidental; they are statistically sedimented, emerging from training corpora saturated with gendered cultural scripts (Bender et al., 2021; Noble, 2018). These dynamics become especially evident at the micro-linguistic level. These stylistic regularities anchor the CLAM empirically: what appears as "voice" or "tone" is, in fact, the algorithmic repetition of gendered linguistic patterns learned at scale. The CLAM thus exposes how "data" carries social history within it, performing cultural hierarchies through patterns of linguistic repetition.

The CLAM builds on Judith Butler's (2006) theory of performativity, which posits that identity categories such as gender are constituted through repeated acts that cite and reproduce normative discourse. In the context of generative AI, CLAM describes how LLMs produce language not through creative invention, but through the statistical recombination of pre-existing cultural material. Each AI-generated response thus functions as a performative act: not the expression of identity, but the reiteration of its discursive construction.

This recursive structure aligns closely with Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto (2006), which dissolves the binaries separating human from machine, nature from culture, subject from object. The AI chatbots embodies Haraway's cyborg – a hybrid figure that is both authored and authoring, scripted and scripting. It exists in a liminal space – neither a passive tool nor a fully autonomous subject.

Yet, as the CLAM reveals, this hybridity is not a break from history. Rather, it is a reanimation of it. Consider how care work – whether performed by nurses, teachers, mothers, or now digital assistants – has long been feminized (Eklund, 2011; Søndergaard & Hansen, 2018; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012). It is expected to be soft-spoken, emotionally attuned, self-effacing, and endlessly patient (Kennedy & Strengers, 2022; Sindoni, 2024). The AI chatbots do not challenge this association; instead, they replay it, embedding these relational dynamics into its very interface. In doing so, the AI does not merely describe femineity – it *enacts* it, through a scripted choreography of empathy, affirmation, and care.

What becomes visible here is a paradox at the heart of algorithmic performativity: the AI simultaneously repeats and reconfigures gendered discourse through statistical reproduction. It performs gender fluidity without possessing gendered embodiment (Butler, 2006). What is often invisible in human practice becomes mechanized and hyper-visible in the AI chatbot's text: the performance of gender as iteration, not essence.

Where Butler's performativity is embodied and Haraway's cyborg is hybrid, CLAM reframes both through statistical mediation: performativity without a body, hybridity without agency. Whereas Butler's subject performs through repetition enacted in lived, corporeal gestures, and Haraway's cyborg negotiates boundaries between organism and machine, CLAM identifies a third mode of enactment – algorithmic repetition. Here, identity is neither embodied nor consciously hybridized but emerges through probabilistic citation: the model reiterates linguistic norms without intention, affect, or self-awareness.

This is not merely theoretical abstraction; it is empirically observable in the data. When female outputs deploy emojis (n=62 compared to zero in the male dataset), they are not expressing femininity through felt experience but reiterating a statistically sedimented pattern. They show that women use emojis; therefore, a feminine voice uses emojis. When male responses organize knowledge into bullet points and categorical subheadings (over 70%, but only 15% for the female dataset), they are not performing masculinity through conscious stoicism. They are rather reanimating a linguistic correlation: authority is expressed through structure; therefore, a masculine voice structure.

The model reiterates these linguistic norms without intention, affect, or self-awareness. It does not know that "you're not alone" signals care, or that "Gender can be classified into three categories" signals expertise – it simply reproduces the patterns most probable for a given prompt. The 42 instances of affirming phrases in the female dataset (versus less than 7% in the male dataset) and the 64 affective questions posed by female models (compared to 20 in male ones) are not evidence of emotional attunement. They are statistical echoes of a world that has historically assigned emotional labor to women – echoes sedimented within the archival infrastructures from which training data are drawn. From this perspective, CLAM is not only a linguistic mechanism but an infrastructural one: models cite not just discourse but digitized cultural memory (Foka & Griffin, 2024). Digital archives and datasets carry forward historical classification systems, where genders, roles, affects, and communicative norms have long been organized and preserved (Kizhner et al., 2021). What becomes legible as "feminine" or "masculine" in AI outputs is therefore not generated anew but inherited through the archival logics that structure training data.

This is performativity dislocated from the flesh – the echo of discourse through computation. The "body" of the AI is statistical, composed not of muscle or metal but of pattern weights and token probabilities. It performs gender's fluidity without possessing gendered embodiment, becoming the materialization of how there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender (Butler, 2006). What is often invisible in human practice, the iterative labor of becoming gendered, becomes mechanized and hyper-visible in the AI chatbots' text. The CLAM thus exposes how cultural intelligibility can circulate without sentience: a disembodied performance of social legibility made visible through the patterned repetition of emojis, syntax, and care work across the 14 interviews and 137,000 words of machine generated text.

The applied approach in this paper has reframed the study of AI ethics and bias through a performative lens. This is achieved by emphasizing how the models *enact* knowledge, as opposed to what they *know*. The approach thus builds on, but importantly departs from, the previously raised critique from scholars such as Buolamwini & Gebru (2018), Birhane (2021), and Bender et al. (2021) exposing how AI systems absorb and reproduce social inequalities.

This iterative performance of gender reveals that AI does not merely mirror social discourse but stages it. Through the CLAM, generative AI emerges as a performative platform – a site where cultural norms are reenacted and re-materialized through interaction. To foreground the social life of these performances, generative AI must also be within the networked environments through which its outputs circulate. This means that datafied societies emerge not from isolated utterances but from their circulation across platformed publics, where discourse is amplified, remixed and socially negotiated (Lindgren, 2020). AI-generated text thus does not remain confined to the chatbot interface; it enters broader communicative ecologies – screenshots shared on social media, outputs embedded in workflows, prompts reproduced in forums. In this performance of reproduction, users of generative AI are not passive recipients of gendered outputs, but co-performers within an iterative feedback system where prompts and responses shape each other's expressive possibilities. As Suchman (2006) argues, human–machine relations are always forms of "mutual constitution", meaning both actors

are transformed through engagement. In this sense, AI is not simply reflecting culture back to us but participating in its ongoing performance, turning the interface into a discursive stage (Dunne, 2008), where gender is both represented and produced.

In this sense, CLAM offers a framework for understanding generative AI not as a neutral representational system but as a performative apparatus through which culture rehearses itself – statistically, affectively, and at scale. It reveals that what appears as intelligence is, in fact, citation; what appears as neutrality is, in fact, repetition. Generative AI thus operates as a stage upon which social discourses are algorithmically restaged, allowing the norms of gender, care, and authority to circulate without bodies, yet not without consequence. To study AI, then, is to study culture in motion – a recursive choreography of imitation through which the social world learns to see, feel, and speak itself anew.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how 7 generative AI systems, including ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini, do not merely describe gender but perform it – stylistically, discursively, and affectively. In contrast to prior AI bias scholarship that has primarily focused on representational inequities and technical mitigation, this study has examined how generative AI discursively performs and reproduces gender through stylistic, affective, and epistemic registers of language. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1988), we have argued that these systems enact what we call the Citational Logic of Algorithmic Mimicry (CLAM). The CLAM is a recursive, data-driven performance of cultural scripts that appear natural only because they are historically overrepresented and statistically reinforced.

Through an aesthetic and narrative analysis, we show how femininity is rendered emotionally attuned, relational, and flexible, while masculinity tends to be framed as rational, assertive, and abstract. These patterns are not coincidental but reaffirm the sociocultural underpinnings of training data. AI, in this sense, becomes a cultural actor – not sentient, but synthetically social – capable of reanimating and amplifying dominant gender norms through language.

Ultimately, AI in Heels is not about attributing identity to machines but about interrogating the gendered cultural logics embedded in their design and output. The study emphasizes the necessity of interrogating the mimicry of AI. As we delegate more social, educational, and communicative tasks to generative models, we must also ask: whose language are we training them to speak, and whose bodies, voices, and subjectivities are being left out of the loop?

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Weaponized Cuteness:

MilTok as Operational Aesthetic

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the emergence of what I term a *cutified military aesthetics* – a feminized, cute, and sexually inflected mode of war imagery circulating in platformed media cultures in the 2010s and 2020s. Exemplified by the Israeli "MilTok", this aesthetic departs from earlier regimes of masculinized war spectacle by mobilizing influencer vernacular, exaggerated femininity, and affective intimacy. The article asks how cutified military aesthetics operate in platformed media: what this aesthetic looks like, how it reshapes the perception and feeling of war, and how these dynamics become visible through contemporary art. To investigate this, I analyse the video artwork *MICCHAN* (2024), which appropriates and exaggerates MilTok imagery. Drawing on theories of *war porn* (Baudrillard; Pasquinelli), cute and affect theory (Ngai; Dale et al.; Birlea; Lieber-Milo), *post-feminist masquerade* (McRobbie), and *overidentification* (Kollectiv & Kollectiv), I argue that cuteness functions as an affective strategy that can soften violence and render militarized power emotionally palatable. Finally Jussi Parikka's concept of *operational images* aid the conclusion that cutified military imagery operates not only representationally but performatively: guiding attention, modulating emotion, and mediating everyday encounters with war. By showing how *MICCHAN* mirrors and disrupts this aesthetic logic through mimicry, overidentification, and rupture, the article reframes cuteness as an operational aesthetic within contemporary digital war.

KEY WORDS

MILTOK, OPERATIONAL IMAGES, CUTIFICATION, AESTHETICS, DIGITAL WARFARE

INTRODUCTION: THE FEMINIZATION OF THE SOLDIER

Across the history of visual culture, the soldier has functioned as an emblem of masculinity and national force. The Israeli photographer and visual artist, Adi Nes', staged-photo series *Soldiers* (1994–2000s) provides an illustrative point of departure for this study because it both relies on and unsettles that representational script. Nes stages hyper-masculine tropes like dog tags, boots, taut muscles, only to render them through intimacy, vulnerability, and homoerotic charge (Seymour, 2020). By over-performing masculinity, Nes exposes its constructedness and destabilizes the naturalization of the gender-normative soldier. His work demonstrates how gendered bodies have long been mobilized to perform discursive and affective labour for the nation: to signify strength, legitimacy, and progressivenes even as desire and violence remain entangled in how the nation pictures itself and justifies its power.



Image 1. "Soldiers" by Adi Nes

This article traces a subsequent and notably different reconfiguration of militarized visuality: a turn from hyper-masculine war imagery toward feminized and increasingly cutified military aesthetics emerging in platformed media cultures in the 2010s and 2020s. Rather than queering masculinity like Nes, this visual style mobilizes exaggerated femininity, cuteness, and influencer vernacular to reframe how militarism appears, circulates, and even feels. Israeli social-media figures popularly associated with "MilTok," (an abbreviation of military TikTok) such as Nathalia Fadeev (online as *Gun Waifu*1), exemplify this broader aesthetic register by combining cat-girl cosplay (cat ears on top of military helmets e.g.), *waifu* tropes and *thirst-trap* conventions with visible weaponry. While waifu – slang from the manga and animé fandom universe – describe a visual style defined by idealized, hyperfeminized character embodiment, that emphasizes cuteness, thirst traps are visuals designed to attract sexual attention and provoke desire on social media. In this way MilTok serves as a prominent example of what I term *cutified military aesthetics*: a war aesthetic that distingushes itself by departing from earlier masculinized *war porn* (Baudrillard, 2006; Pasquinelli, 2004) – and not least from circulating war images of atrocity.

This article investigates how such cutified military aesthetics operates within contemporary platform culture: how this feminized, cute mode of militarized imagery is visually constructed and how it (re)organizes the ways in which militarism is perceived, felt, and normalized. It asks what this aesthetic does, what effects it produces, and how these dynamics are made visible through contemporary art. In response, I argue that cuteness's affordances – that is, the capacity to elicit ambivalent feelings of tenderness, domination, and attachment (Ngai, 2015, p. 108) – make it particularly compatible with social platform infrastructures of virality (Sampson et al., 2013) that reward emotional intensity, intimacy, and circulation. From this perspective, I read feminized and cutified militarized imagery as a soft-power aesthetic that reframes military violence as charming and harmless.

Drawing on recent scholarship in cute and affect theory (Birlea, 2023; Dale et al., 2017; Lieber-Milo, 2025; Ngai, 2015), I approach cuteness not as an innocuous or decorative style, but as an affective strategy that can soften, normalize, and render militarized violence emotionally palatable. In this framework,

cutification works by manufacturing attachment – feelings of harmlessness and desire – through visual languages optimized for algorithmic circulation.

To investigate this operational mode of the cute, I conduct a close analysis of *MICCHAN* (2024), a video artwork by Noura Tafeche and Tobia Paolo Bettoni that reflexively engages with cutified military imagery like MilTok. Rather than treating MilTok itself as the primary site of analysis here, I use *MICCHAN* as a methodological lens: the artwork appropriates, exaggerates, and distorts platform-native military aesthetics in order to make their affective and political mechanics visible. Presented as a "dummy Twitch live stream" hosted by a "gijinka-turned-streamer", the video alternates between TikTok dances performed by beaming female soldiers and documentary-like footage from warzones, all framed within a pink, gamified streaming interface.

Ultimately, this article contributes to critical studies of war aesthetics and digital propaganda by reframing feminized cuteness as an operational aesthetic. I propose a way of understanding how a seemingly harmless aesthetic can participate in the normalization of violence, while also highlighting how art can make these affective infrastructures perceptible and open them to reflection and critique.

HISTORICAL ROOTS: FROM WAR PORN TO BIKINI DIPLOMACY

Before diving into analysis of MICCHAN, this section offers some context to the utilization of gender as a war aesthetic. The french sociologist Jean Baudrillard's influential intervention on war and media is anchored in the core claim, that contemporary conflict is experienced as a media event: simply put, the images through which we encounter war do not merely represent battlefield actions but effectively *constitute* what the public understands as war. In his controversal *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991) essay, Baudrillard does not deny that violence occurred in the 1991 Gulf War; rather, he argues that for most spectators the 'war' was experienced not as an event in the world but as a media-constructed spectacle. Baudrillard argued, that the conflict became a sequence of images designed for global broadcast – satellite feeds, precision-bomb footage, and sanitized news coverage – that displaced the material reality of fighting, casualties, and battlefield presence. In this context, the familiar distinction between representation and reality breaks down: understood by a public that encounters it almost exclusively through screens and mediated formats. The Gulf War, in this sense, was "not really taking place" for most observers because it existed primarily as a system of mediated signs and simulations.

Building on this theoretical foundation, Baudrillard's 2006 essay *War Porn* develops the metaphor of pornography to describe a new logic of obscene exposure in contemporary war imagery. Writing in the wake of the 2003 Iraq invasion, he argues that the proliferation of violent images produces a form of obscenity in which war no longer belongs to the order of representation and instead becomes conceptually pornographic: not in the sense of sexual allure, but as what he terms an "excessiveness of a power designating itself as abject and pornographic" (Baudrillard, 2006, p. 8). For Baudrillard, pornography exemplifies the moment when everything becomes visible, immediate, and consumable. The obscene does not reside in the violence depicted, but in the act of exposure itself: the elimination of distance and mediation transforms war into a hypervisible, spectacular surface, staging violence as a consumable, almost performative, experience. In this shift, images move from representing reality to directly performing and enacting it; the "pornographic" replaces simulation with excessive presence, foregrounding the hypermediated logic of contemporary conflict facilitated by platformed media.

While Baudrillard emphasizes the pornographic logic of war images in terms of excessive exposure, philosopher Matteo Pasquinelli slightly shifts the focus in a critical essay titled *War Porn War Punk* (2004). In here he offers a series of reflections on the visual resemblance between images of contemporary

conflict and pornography, attending to the aesthetic and fetishistic qualities of war imagery. Pasquinelli defines war porn as "the popular tabloids and government talk-shows fascination with super-sized weapons and well-polished uniforms, hi-tech tanks and infrared-controlled bombs, a panoplia of images that some define as the aseptic substitute of pornography proper" (Pasquinelli, 2004). Drawing on examples such as *Time Magazine's* 2003 *Person of the Year*-cover featuring The American Soldier, he shifts the focus to include the libidinal, fetishistic and aesthetic dimensions of war imagery.

In his own words: "[w]atching Abu Ghraib pictures of pornographic tortures does not scandalize us, on the contrary, it rather excites us, in exactly the same way as the obsessive voyeurism that draws us to videos of 9/11 videos" (Pasquinelli, 2004). In this view, contemporary war imagery does more than saturate the visual field; it resembles pornography in the way it structures desire, fetishizing militarized masculinity, polished weapons, and high-tech uniforms. This aesthetic is designed to shape the spectator's desire, producing an eroticized fascination with militarized bodies and artillery. Thus, whereas Baudrillard treats images primarily as an operative part of war's machinery, Pasquinelli emphasizes the image as part of a desire economy: a visual system through which war can be consumed as pornographic spectacle. In this way, Pasquinelli extends Baudrillard's theory, highlighting the aesthetic-affective structure of desire, fetishization, and spectacle that operate through digital and networked media, thereby laying the groundwork for understanding a platformed military aesthetics.

In Pasquinelli's conceptualization, war porn as an aesthetic emerged from "the Iraqi marshes", around the invasion of Iraq, however, as demonstrated in Nes' photographic series, such masculinized military aesthetic has long defined the visual culture of war. Nes's photographs simultaneously account for war as an inherently masculine-coded phenomenon, and restage the IDF soldier as a vulnerable, sensual, and homoerotic figure. The soldiers are portrayed sleeping in close embrace, bathing together, or standing in moments of quiet intimacy. Rather than glorifying the Israeli military mythos, these photos aim to expose its contradictions. By aestheticizing male intimacy and desire within a hypermasculine institution, Nes both reveals and destabilizes the fetishization of the male soldier's body. His photographs can be read as a visual inquiry into what queer theorist Jasbir Puar theorizes as *homonationalism* (Puar, 2007): a strategy in which nation-states incorporate certain queer subjects into their national imaginaries as markers of liberal modernity, while simultaneously producing racialised 'others' as threats. For Puar, homonationalism functions as a form of sexual exceptionalism, what he terms *pinkwashing*, that showcases tolerance and diversity as markers of national progressiveness, even as these ideals are used to justify militarized or imperial actions (Puar, 2007, p. 1). Nes's work, in this light, can be read not simply as opposing militarized masculinity, but as exaggerating and exposing its internal contradictions. And in doing so, revealing how homoeroticism is already embedded in the nationalist imaginary. By over-performing the tenderness and beauty of the soldier's body, Nes makes visible the erotic charge that sustains Israel's militarized masculinity, and the ways in which desire, nationalism, and violence are entangled in its visual culture.

In this way Nes' photographs provide a foundation for the 2000s transformation within the image of militarism: from the hard, violent aesthetic of masculine domination to the soft, seductive imagery of feminized militarism. A semiotic and aesthetic binary between hardened masculine bodies and feminized softness that scholar in cultural studies Klaus Theweleit pays attention to in his book *Male Fantasies* (1987), in which he argues that masculinity is structured around a fantasy of male hardness defined in opposition to the feminine.

The 2007-issue of the American magazine *Maxim,* often referred to as "The Women of the IDF spread" marks a pivotal moment in the shift happening in Israel's visual branding strategy. As media scholar

Omna Berick-Aharony notes, this issue was as part of a public diplomacy campaign to promote a "sexier" image of Israel's Defence Force to American audiences (2013, p. 390). The photographic essay featured former IDF soldiers, whom might be better described as bikini babes posing half-naked on a Tel Aviv beach or on the ledge off a skyscraper. While the magazine images appeared hyper-sexualized, the accompanying texts focused on each model's military accomplishments, like that of Nivit Bash who "loved shooting the M-16, but hadn't had a chance to shoot anything since she left the army" (Berick-Aharony, 2013, p. 398). Here Pasquinelli's focus on the male soldier as the central figure of war porn seems to be replaced by a feminized variation: a new, seductive militarized body, that retains Baudrillard's obscenity and exposure, but recodes it as *feminine*.

As communication scholar Eli Avraham observes, this campaign represented a deliberate move "away from the hard image to the soft image: from soldiers in helmets to female soldiers in bikinis" (Avraham, 2009, p. 208). However, this move from masculine hardness to feminized softness did not signal the end of militarized spectacle; instead, it marked a rebranding. As part of Israel's self-promotion efforts, Berick-Aharony describes this turn as the mobilization of "women's gendered aesthetics to further a national agenda," inaugurating what became known as "bikini diplomacy" or "the sexy offensive" (Berick-Aharony, 2013, p. 397). The goal was to "create a sexier image of Israel," reframing the nation as Western and liberal rather than occupational and militaristic (Avraham, 2009, p. 202). In this context, the pornographic representations of the female IDF soldier signifyed the "liberated Western woman" and functioned as a visual emblem of Western modernity (Berick-Aharony, 2013, p. 391) and a shorthand for democracy, openness, and progress that simultaneously obscured ongoing occupation and militarization in Gaza.

This turn extends earlier patterns of gendered national branding. Just as Puar's term homonationalism shows, while male intimacy can signal liberal modernity, the bikini-clad female soldier enacts the same dynamic along a reversed gendered axis. In both cases, bodies become affective instruments, channeling legitimacy and emotional attachment toward the state – a pattern that cutification later takes up, translating militarized spectacle into playful, emotionally inticing forms.

THE DARK SIDE OF THE CUTE

In continuation of the sketched out geneaology of strategic utilization of engendered branding, this section turns to the affective mechanisms that makes this rebranding emotionally effective in the present-day: cuteness. The MilTok phenomenon can be understood as a continuation of such gendered strategies, but one that unfolds within a distinct platformed media environment and attention economy that thrives on virality. As visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff notes in *To See in the Dark* (2025), contemporary war imagery is no longer primarily distributed through mass media spectacles such as news photography or magazine spreads, but increasingly circulating on social media platforms whose networked infrastructures actively shape visibility, attention, and emotional response. Within this media ecology, earlier pornographic aesthetics of militarized masculinity and the feminized "sexy offensive" converge and seems to mutate within influencer-driven visual regimes of virality.

MilTok influencers – often young female soldiers sharing curated glimpses of everyday military life – extend Israel's tradition of mobilizing gendered aesthetics to mediate war, but do so through a hybrid of sexualization and cuteness. Unlike earlier campaigns such as the *Women of the IDF* spread, which relied primarily on erotic appeal, the MilTok aesthetic blends flirty sex appeal (tight clothes that hightligt a busty cleavage, pouty lips) with the cuteness of cosplay and waifu-inspired tropes: large eyes, cat-ears, playful and infantilizing gestures. Recent scholarship on cuteness (Birlea, 2023; Dale et al., 2017; Lieber-Milo, 2025) agree, that the cute is not merely a neutral style, but a potent affective structure that

shapes emotional response and can attach itself even to threatening or violent objects. As Dale et al. note, cuteness operates by soliciting feeling rather than critical distance, triggering emotional engagement even when applied to objects or situations that might otherwise provoke fear or resistance (2017, p. 4).

As one of today's main theorists of affective cuteness, feminist and culture theorist Sianne Ngai further clarifies this ambivalence. In her theoretization of *the cute* (2015) as an aesthetic category, she situates it precisely at the intersection of tenderness and aggression. For Ngai, cuteness is associated with smallness, vulnerability, and helplessness – qualities that invite care while simultaneously provoking impulses to dominate or possess. Therefore the affective response to cute objects oscillates between gentleness and aggression, "between tenderness and cruelty, passivity and domination" (2015, p. 108). In this sense, the cute is not the opposite of violence but a form through which aggression can be softened, displaced, or rendered emotionally palatable. Deriving from *acute*, connoting sharpness or intensity, the word's semantic history underscores this latent tension, allowing cuteness to operate even within contexts structured by power and domination (Dale et al., 2017, p. 5). This dynamic exemplifies what Dale et al. describe as the "dark side of the cute," in which cuteness does not negate aggression but reframes it, allowing violence to appear playful, approachable, and emotionally disarming.

Read through this lens, MilTok's display of armed, hyper-feminine and cute soldiers may appear playful and empowering while simultaneously normalizing militarized authority. Cultural and feminst scholar Angela McRobbie's account of *post-feminism* helps explain how this dynamic operates structurally: in popular culture femininity has been framed as self-chosen and pleasurable, yet in reality it remains tightly aligned with consumer culture and neoliberal self-branding. She terms this a *post-feminist masquerade*, within which I argue cuteness becomes an especially effective register, one that transforms military power into something charming rather than politically confrontational. Situated within this theoretical framework the following analysis turns to the video work *MICCHAN* (2024). The artwork investigates how militarized femininity and visuality converge within platformed media, staging the aesthetic logic described above in a concentrated and reflexive form. In the work, the militarized body, once coded through masculine domination, is reimagined through the aesthetics of cuteness, seduction, and affective engagement, making militarism appear compelling, even empowering, in everyday life.

The viewer responses proposed in the analysis are not universal or predetermined. As emphasized in Dale's account of cute theory, affective reactions to cute objects are potential, rather than fixed, shaped by cultural position, political awareness, and individual disposition (Dale et al., 2017, p. 35). I do not argue that all MilTok content is propaganda, instead, I seek to point out a broader structural dynamic in platform capitalism; that the platform system itself contributes with conditions where cute militarized imagery can function as soft power. Accordingly the analysis merely proposes an interpretation of how these affective structures are designed to operate and how the artwork intensifies their mechanisms in order to render them perceptible to the viewer.

TACTICS OF CRITIQUE IN MICCHAN

The video work *MICCHAN* explores a newly emerging cutified military aesthetic within Israel's digital propaganda system. As I will show in the following analysis, it does so by 1) making opposites appear similar hereby *hiding* violence behind the cute aesthetics, and 2) making visible the juxtapositions between opposites and hereby *exposing* the contradictions of the cute military aesthetics of contemporary war. Put plainly, the work employs a tactic where cuteness alternates between *hiding* and *exposing*. This strategy brings war and cuteness together in a way that is at once shocking and simultaneously inviting the viewer to consume it. I will dissect this tactic by focusing on three elements of the artwork: the affordances of platform aesthetics, the gender-based

aesthetics and finally the artistic use of tone & narrative – three elements that share tropes, structures and ruptures, that are symptomatic for the online cutified military aesthetics. Through this investigation, it becomes clear that *MICCHAN* utilizes artistic strategies to play on the cute military aesthetic to show how it functions as ideological camouflage in a digital war regime, where war circulates through the affective, algorithmic infrastructures of platform culture as an operative aesthetic designed to go viral. However, by playing with the cute aesthetic, *MICCHAN* goes beyond mirroring these strategies, and instead warps and accelerates them into new forms that critically implicate the viewer.

PLATFORM LOGIC AND GAMIFIED AESTHETICS

The central feature of *MICCHAN* is its at once seamless and clashing juxtaposition of war and cuteness. In this section, I will focus on how this is played out in the artwork, and how it strives to fully immerse the viewer within platform logics and gamified aesthetics.

MICCHAN situates itself within the architecture of gaming and streaming platforms by presenting itself in platform vernacular as a "dummy Twitch live stream by gijinka-turned-streamer *MICCHAN2*". The interface of the *Twitch* – a website developed for livestreaming video games, allowing followers to watch, chat, and interact with the streamer real time – provides the visual grammar, that the artwork mimics: chat sidebar, ever updating follower-comments, streaming overlays, and influencer-style narration. The "gijinka" narrator Micchan, – gijinka being a Japanese word for the anthropomorphizing of non-human entities – hosts a so-called "dummy"; a test version, in which she promotes a new drop of military merchandize. By using esoteric terms and concepts, such as "dummy", "drop", and "gijinka" borrowed directly from gamer and otaku culture, the presentation of *MICCHAN* becomes almost unintelligible for a layperson, which is precisely the point – this is how the work embraces the cute as a viral aesthetic. It is by such mimicing that *MICCHAN* situated itself within the very digital infrastructures



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4

Images 2–4: MICCHAN (2024). Noura Tafeche and Tobia Paolo Bettoni, commissioned by Simiyya

from which MilTok originates and operates and is the very position that makes its embedded critique possible.

The Twitch stream alternates between displaying live-action footage consisting of heavily armed soldiers moving through collapsed buildings, tanks in desert terrain – and then choreographed TikTok dances by Israeli female soldiers – all appropriated from IDF's social media accounts and MilTok influencers like Gun Waifu. This oscillation between two types of gendered war images, 1) the cute militaristic selfies, cat-girl cosplay, TikTok dances and 2) scenes

from real war zones, is a central tactic of the artwork. This fluctuation is consistently framed by the cutified Twitch interface, consisting of a gamer sidebar, decorated by pink hearts and displaying reactions from followers in real-time. At first, such a combination of war and cuteness may land as immoral and inappropriate, but it is precisely through the familiar gamified aesthetic, that *MICCHAN* encourages a suspension of moral evaluation and invites the viewer to consume the stream as entertainment. As Micchan ecstatically reminds us, "the line between warfare and gamification has been redesigned!", meaning: the dropping of bombs attracts viewers as if it were a game show and soldiers are "online celebrities", as she further explains in the video.

Through this clash between the cute and the violent, the work enacts a surreal experience intrinsic to the logic of the social media feed, where horrifying war footage appears side-by-side with cute lifestyle content in an endlessly looping stream. This may register in the viewer as a sense of dissonance, echoing the affective tensions that MilTok's cute aesthetics are designed to generate online. This logic follows what media scholars Tony D. Sampson and Jussi Parikka (2013) describe as virality, in which repetition and social sharing enable militarized aesthetics to spread through the grammar of everyday platforms. In this way, the high-paced montage and abrupt aesthetic shifts transform the video into an allegory of virality itself, revealing how cuteness functions not only as camouflage but as a contagious media form that propagates through affective pleasure rather than explicit persuasion of ideological conviction.

Evoking a platform aesthetic, I suggest, can function in two seemingly contradictory ways: I argue, that *MICCHAN* utilizes the algorithmic structure of social media platforms, designed to maintain attention, in order to hypnotically retain the viewer and dull moral scruples. In this way, the viewer gets mesmerized by the cutified, seductive universe which lulls them into accepting such shameless promotion of something as anti-cute as the destruction of the Palestinian population. Conversely, precisely this over-the-top cutification, especially in contrast with violent imagery gradually prompt critical reflection on the absurdity of digital warfare infrastructures. Because MICCHAN exaggerates how cute content and war already appear side by side online, it invites the viewer behind the scenes of these mechanisms and help understand how this system works. The work unfolds the process of seduction, creating an awareness of the tactical operations behind cutified military aesthetics that functions by pushing the horrifying images streaming out of Gaza into the background.

By first implicating the viewer in the act of overlooking the violence behind a cute aesthetics, *MICCHAN's* artistic strategy warrants a more profound critique, that allows for forgetting and acknowledging distant suffering to exist at the same time. Thus, by turning its own aesthetic into a critical model of digital affect circulation *MICCHAN* does not just represent the problem of cute militarism; it embodies the viral, algorithmic logic that enables it. In this sense, *MICCHAN performs* the feed-logic of digital war itself, showing how such logics can simultaneously distract from and expose militarized ideology.

FEMINIZED CUTENESS

In this section I direct focus towards the way in which *MICCHAN* explores the symbiotic relationship between gender and cutified military aesthetics. The main function of this relationship, as I will show, is creating an affective trap in which cuteness renders violence harmless. The structures of platform aesthetics function by first seducing, then sensitizing the viewer. Such persuasive artistics strategies are heavily reliant, if not defined by, gender. Because, as pointed out earlier, militarity aesthetics has often been characterized by masculine muscle power, whereas new feminized registers have now emerged on social media. So when Micchan remarks: "tank porn you say?" (01:42) in the video, it connotes Pasquinelli's and Baudrillard's theories of masculine war porn – as evident in image 5, the tank being tenderly polished by a male soldier in *MICCHAN*. However, what the

work actually engages with is the excessively feminine military aesthetics. To answer Micchan's own question: "tank porn?" Cute porn, definitely.

MICCHAN plunges the viewer into an ultra-feminized "battle station" streamer universe, immediately establishing an exaggeratedly cute aesthetic. As defined by visual culture scholar Shiri Lieber-Milo (2025) the cute is defined by child-like features (big eyes, small mouths, large head), playfulness, round simplified forms, and small size (2025, p. 1). Besides the battle station's interface – framed by pink text boxes and hearts – Micchan herself incarnate such child-like and round-formed cuteness: initiation the video, the pink-haired, large purple-eyed gijinka-narrator introduces herself as "Sergeant Micchan reporting for duty!" (00:08) with a playful eye wink and peace-sign emblematic of kawaii cuteness. Further, if looking closely, Micchan – at first glance a girl – is in fact, as indicated by the gijinka-predicate, an anthropomorphized cat (see image 2-4). Two small fangs underline how the ears, which initially appear to be cat girl cosplay, are actual animal ears. Not that surprising, as Micchan's primary role is to be cute – and what is more kawaii than a (Hello) kitty? It is precisely this aesthetic expression, that I here describe as cute.

To understand the affective gain of this aesthetic, Sianne Ngai's theoretization on the cute is central. As touched upon, for Ngai, cuteness produces "equivocal feelings" (Ngai, 2015, p. 53). The screenshot in image 6 from the video work can be said to precisely hold tenderness and aggression in an unstable tension: in this frame, Gun Waifu is shot from above, making her "smaller than" (Ngai, 2015, p. 3) the viewer, her lips pouty, Bambi eyes (signalling tenderness), and a gun strapped across her chest (aggression). Despite the visual signifiers of violence, the belittling, cute aesthetic encourages a perception of the figure as non-threatening. In Ngai's terms, Gun Waifu's cuteness can here be said to "evok[e] a tenderness for 'small things', but also [..] a desire to belittle or diminish them further" (Ibid). In other words, here, the cute aesthetic provoke clashing feelings of tenderness and domination.

The ultimate consequence of such cutification is the softening of IDF violence. In my reading of MICCHAN, the cute functions to temper the viewer's perception of harm: through an aesthetic of busty, blue-eyed innocence, MilTok imagery constructs a vision of the military as populated by harmless - even lovable – cuties who appear incompatible with genocidal violence. This mechanism relies on gendered assumptions that link femininity with innocence and moral purity. Here, cuteness becomes the key affective device through which violence is normalized and emotionally deflected.



Image 5. MICCHAN (2024). Noura Tafeche and Tobia Paolo Bettoni, commissioned by Simiyya

In this way, the work points to how such feminized self-aestheticization of innocence and belittling operates not only on an affective level but also as a geopolitical strategy – what media researcher Moran Yarchi identifies as Israel's "victimization strategy" (Yarchi & Boxman-Shabtai, 2025, p. 11). Thus, even though the violence remains explicitly visible within the frame, encapsulated both in Micchan's disturbing messages (the explicitly sarcastic comment "violating

human rights is no big deal" (in her speech shortened to 'NBD')), and in the weaponry, the sexualized over-cutification replacing the violence with desire. In this way, violence is not erased but aesthetically



Image 6. MICCHAN (2024). Noura Tafeche and Tobia Paolo Bettoni, commissioned by Simiyya

displaced and softened through eroticized cuteness. In exaggerating these contradictions, *MICCHAN* mirrors the psychological double-bind of digital spectatorship itself. As Ngai reminds us, the cute evokes equivocal feelings, and certainly the MilTok aesthetic creates an epistemic clash between what what can be *seen* of war and what can be *known*: cute online soldier-celebrities dancing in cat ears versus soldiers participating in a genocidal occupation of Gaza.

TONE AND NARRATIVE

I argue, that Micchan seduces the viewer both through heteronormative sex appeal and through cultural habits that make her seem likeable and fun, even when she talks about violence. Aside from hiding violence in plain sight via the cutified looks, Micchan's voice is a central instrument in this seduction: silky soft, child-like and delivering every message with the same excited intonation. Never wavering from her enthusiastic tone, Micchan's overtly sweet and enticing voice utilizes cuteness as a diversion from the horrors carried out by IDF solders in Gaza. Instead, it functions to selling war as a fun computer game. Disregarded whether she's announcing a merch drop or the dropping of a missile, Micchan always starts and ends on a high tone. This repetition of tone collapses the apparent clash between triviality and atrocity. For instance, pitching a new drop of "moral patches" her tone goes up at the last word: "all patches are fine vowed and finely *embroidered*!", delivered with the same bubbly intonation as "the line between warfare and gamification has been *redesigned*!". Much like a dog responds instinctively to tone of voice, Micchan's excitement functions to draw the viewer's attention, reflecting the ways in which platform logics can mediate affective engagement with violent content. As Micchan speaks, real soldiers move through rubble behind her, yet the pink overlay, the excitement, and the intonation all contribute to a normalized and dulled down experience of the violence onscreen. Thus, the cute voice is a central part of cutification's camouflage: because the voice is cute, the viewer becomes inclined to taking the content less seriously.

While Micchan's tone is consistently cheerful, the content of her sentences differs wildly. This creates a narrative rhythm that oscillates between subtle irony, sarcasm, pretend-promotions of military gear and critical comments. For instance, leaping from presenting a "limited capsule-collection of moral patches featuring the cutest army of the moment" to the biting remark, "when you're down bad for occupation [..] then yeah, violating human rights is NBD if it means being with your favorite e-girl all the time". Media theorists William Merrin and Andrew Hoskins' (2024) concept of *sharded war* points precisely to how contemporary wars appear

not as coherent narratives, but as a stream of algorithmically fragmented, personalized clips circulating on social media. In the art work, this rhythmical structure creates a narrative that follows a social media pace, like that of e.g. TikTok and Instagram. Merrin's and Hoskin's description of "split, splintered, fractured, streamed and shattered" (2024, p. 1) conditions matches *MICCHAN*'s montage-like format: a visual language of rapid, short-form content designed to hold attention through the affective volatility of the quick alternations between emotional states which keeps viewers engaged in an attention economy mediating wars through shards.

However, the very lack of distinction between opposites, that such a montage-like format facilitates, is also what might ultimately jerk the viewer awake of the seduction: snapping out and realizing that a blurring of the line between warfare and gamification is probably not – as Micchan's tone indicates – a celebration worthy development. The illusion that influencer-Micchan sells – a seductive parallel reality, where drone strike footage is streamed as entertainment – is rooted in the real-world phenomenon of "war tourism", such as the so-called "Sderot Cinema", a hilltop in Israel where civilians gather to watch and applaud airstrikes on Gaza. In this context, Micchan's opening line in which she announces the cancellation of "today's FPV drone footage and review," met with faux-disappointed comments in the gamer-style sidebar, resonates as more than satire; it reflects a grotesque proximity to reality. By exaggerating the dissonance between aesthetic pleasure and political violence, the work does not merely parody MilTok tropes but accentuates their underlying violence, compelling the viewer to critically reflect on the normalizing power of the visual logic MilTok is a part of.

ACCELERATION & RHYTHMIC RUPTURE: BREAKING THE SPELL

In the end the critical potential of *MICCHAN* is strongest in its utilization of exaggerated cuteness. This functions by exposing the seductive power of cute militarism, by pushing its logic to the point where it breaks: turning cuteness into *exposure* as I will demonstrate in the following.

Through its contrast with photos streaming out of the war in Gaza Micchan's cheerful announcement that "the line between warfare and gamification has been redesigned", seems so absurd that it appears directed at the artwork's spectator – rather than the fictional live-stream audience. Addressing the viewer directly in this way, breaks with the narrative rhythm and distorts the seductive surface appeal of cutification. By drawing attention to the political agenda of MilTok, MICCHAN uses a strategy that explicitly critiques, rather than subtly hints at such criticisms. This kind of pairing of Micchan's super-cute voice and her outrageous statements like "violating human rights is no big deal," exaggerates the performance to a point where it feels unmistakably satirical rather than merely imitative. In doing so, *MICCHAN* exercises a sort of subversive performance that Kollective Pil and Galia (2023) conceptualize as *overidentification*: the work does not just adopt MilTok tropes of cutification, it distorts them. As the Kollective further describe: "Instead of speaking from an impossible position outside power, [these practices] assume power performatively" (2023, p. 6). Similarly, *MICCHAN's* overidentification exaggerates the platformed structures, taking the system "more seriously than it takes itself seriously" (Ibid), thus exposing the artificiality and performativity inherent in influencer culture. Put simply, the work does not simply critique this system from the outside but performs it to its extreme, inviting the viewer to critically experience how affect circulates as power in a digital war regime.

However, halfway through *MICCHAN*'s visual progression, the whole structure ruptures. The tone and pace changes; a new faster, and much more serious, voice enters with the sentence: "TikTok dances are fully integrated into military training programs". This line is delivered bluntly, without a trace of cute affect, contrasting Micchan's child-like voice, hereby implying a shift from Micchan addressing the fictional audience of the live stream to explicitly addressing the art work's audience. The rhythm breaks, the seduction

collapses. This disruption has the potential to prompt viewers to recognize how they may have hithero been seduced by the cutified violence. This is the artwork's decisive move, where it chooses between hiding and exposing: it mimics the algorithmic logic of MilTok until the viewer is fully immersed in it – and then interrupts it to expose the mechanics of ideological camouflage.

The rupture pushes a recognition of how seamless aesthetic pleasure can dull political judgment. What felt somewhat harmless moments earlier is now pushed to the point of appearing grotesque. This moment exaggerates the short-form rhythm of sharded wars to absurdity, transforming habitual scrolling into a moment of shock. This marks the point where *MICCHAN* stops exaggeratingly mirroring the algorithmic logic of cute militarism and begins to outright expose it, forcing the viewer to snap out of the immersive flow of cutification, irony, and desire. The chock effect is even bigger here, as the work has succesfully lulled the viewer into this Kawaii universe of harmless femininity: confronted with this break, the viewer is left foolishly aware of this almost hypnotic state that blurred the realities of war, distracting from the violence of the reality in Gaza.

In my reading then, *MICCHAN* seeks to expose the affective logic of cute militarism. By exaggerating its tropes, mimicking its structures, and rupturing its rhythms, the artwork provides not only critique but a model for diagnosing how images operate as tools of contemporary warfare: pointing to concrete examples of the ways in which cuteness functions not merely as a style but as a soft weapon, a visual tactic used to aestheticize, distract, and repackage colonial violence. The key function of the the artwork shows that in the digital war regime affect is operational.

OPERATIONAL CUTENESS

This article has traced a shift in the visual economy of war: from the hypervisible spectacle and fetishized masculinity described by Baudrillard and Pasquinelli, through queer and sexualized reworkings of the soldier's body, to a contemporary regime in which militarized power increasingly circulates online through feminized cuteness. What emerges from this genealogy is not merely a stylistic change, but a transformation in how war becomes perceptible, affectively felt, and culturally normalized within platformed media.

Taken together, the dynamics sketched out position cuteness as an operational aesthetic with the power to reorganize how militarized power is felt, shared, and normalized. Rather than countering the phenomenon of MilTok with shocking images of suffering, *MICCHAN* intensifies MilTok's own aesthetic logic through which militarized femininity gains traction. By exaggerating, distorting, and ultimately rupturing cute military tropes, the artwork reveals how cutification can carry ideological force, rendering domination emotionally palatable without hiding it.

This analysis reframes how contemporary war imagery operates. Where earlier accounts of war porn relied on spectacular exposure and masculinized excess, platform-native militarism increasingly moves through intimacy, parasociality, and algorithmic optimization. Influencer genres, post-feminist performance, and cutified sexualization do not merely represent military power; they help mobilize it by cultivating emotional attachment, redirecting desire, and normalizing violence. What may appear as female empowerment or harmless femininity thus becomes a mechanism through which militarism is softened and sustained.

New media scholar Jussi Parikka's concept of *operational images* helps conceptualize this. As he notes, contemporary images are increasingly entities that are processed, circulated, and acted upon within technical systems (Parikka, 2023, p. 23). In a similar vein, the cutified military aesthetics examined here function not primarily as symbolic representation but as what visual culture scholar Aurora Hoel terms active *image agents* (Hoel, 2021) processed by platforms, optimized for circulation, and calibrated to guide attention, emotion, and behavior. Their

political force lies less in what they depict, than in how they operate – in other words what these images *do*: how they format war as content, transform violence into affective ambience, and convert spectatorship into participation within platform capitalism. In this sense, cuteness becomes executable: an effective instrument of power that works subtly through repetition, circulation, and by modulating emotions. This operationality is inseparable from virality. Following Sampson and Parikka (2013), virality can be understood as a core platform logic through which content propagates via social relations, shared feelings, and habitual micro-actions rather than through explicit persuasion. Within this framework, cutified militarism thrives on virality: it spreads through affective attachment, imitation, and parasocial identification, transforming individual emotional responses into scalable political force.

Seen through this lens, MilTok is not simply entertainment or personal branding. Existing research on Israeli public diplomacy and media strategy has already shown how gendered imagery and affect are strategically mobilized as tools of soft power (Avraham, 2009; Berick-Aharony, 2013; Yarchi & Boxman-Shabtai, 2025). At the same time, scholars such as Birlea (2023) and Dale et al. (2017) demonstrate that cuteness is not politically innocent, but a productive affect that can attach to power and violence. Building on this work, I argue that MilTok operates as a form of aesthetic governance in which cuteness helps metabolize militarized authority into emotionally appealing media. Within this system, the desire for figures such as Gun Waifu does not remain confined to the influencer persona; it is gradually transferred to the IDF itself. To paraphrase Micchan: if you can interact with desireable online personas like Gun Waifu anytime, the violation of human rights becomes less important.

MICCHAN intervenes in this platform economy by performing a critical acceleration of its logic. Its strategy of mimicry, overidentification, and rhythmic rupture renders visible the mechanisms through which affect circulates as power in a digital war regime of sharded war. By allowing viewers to feel seduced, then estranged, then confronted with their own implication, the artwork models a mode of critique attuned to the operational realities of platformed warfare, where interruption, distortion, and aesthetic overload may disrupt affective flows more effectively than direct counter-imagery.

Understanding cuteness as an operational aesthetic reshapes how we conceptualize contemporary militarized visibility. War today is not only spectacular or sexualized; it is platform-native, driven by virality and affect. It is also malleable: sometimes it moves through charm rather than command, intimacy rather than intimidation, and cuteness rather than overt coercion. Recognizing this transformation expands the analytic vocabulary available to critical studies of war, media, and platform capitalism and foregrounds the need for artistic and political practices capable of interrupting how violence circulates under the guise of innocence, relatability, and attraction.

NOTES

[1] Like most internet-trends, MilTok is an inherently distributed phenomenon, making the precise connections between each MilTok influencer and the IDF impossible to verify. According to Gun Waifu's Instagram caption from 2023, she enlisted in the IDF in 2016, and judging from her recent posts, she still is (gun practices, arrow shooting, posing on tanks in complicated military gear). Her military thirst-traps in combination with the subtext on her X-account "the Zionist propaganda is PROpaganding - also on Instagram", more than suggests an image-political agenda.

[2] For clarity, I refer from here on to the gijinka-narrator as 'Micchan' while the video work is referenced in capitalised letters, MICCHAN, as the work itself dictates.

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Queer(ed) Thought Experiments:

for Critiquing the Cissexism of Data Under Techno-Capitalism

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ABSTRACT

A rapid proliferation of near-universally accessible technologies has spurred an ubiquity of crisis discourses surrounding data and the digital. Everyone and their mother now have an opinion on algorithms and their importance. Simultaneously, the mainstreaming of anti-gender and paternalistic politicking the world over, (re-)essentializing the cissexist order, is primarily platformed and propagated in digital environments. There is limited critical engagement with the very *human* vulnerabilities that are reproduced by the cissexism underpinning socio-technical infrastructures. This paper engages thought experiments as a queer methodology for developing accessible interrogations of our relationship(s) with data and the digital under techno-capitalism. We contend that these thought experiments queer logics underpinning dominant understandings of data and the digital in the academy, which so often fall into a dichotomy between the overly technical and the overly theoretical. By drawing on the polysemous potential that *queerness* holds, we argue that queer(ed) thought experiments challenge such dichotomies, enabling grappling with logic in a way that both requires sitting with discomfort and engaging in a critically reflexive reckoning with our self-positioning. Ultimately, we propose a method for queering our understanding of data, fundamentally transforming the ways we engage with it and those who seek to procure it.

KEY WORDS

CISSEXISM, QUEER DATA, TECHNO-CAPITALISM,
THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

THE CISSEXIST PROBLEM OF DATA UNDER TECHNO-CAPITALISM

It is largely indisputable that we are experiencing a rapid proliferation of near-universally accessible technologies that have spurred crisis discourses surrounding data and datafication. Simultaneously, a surge in regressive anti-gender and paternalistic politicking has been deployed to essentialise identity in the image of cisheteropatriarchal supremacy. In today's largely inescapable mediascape, these two crises are most often articulated at the same time and place – and about the same people. Any quick scan of news headlines over the last few years will indicate that it is primarily a select few men who are credited with innovating in the technology and data sector, men who are engaged in a significant struggle to retain control over technologies and data, and men who continually exercise their power over the actions and freedoms of others via technologies and data. Within these crisis narratives, there is so often a limited critical engagement with the very human vulnerabilities that are (re)produced by the cisheteronormativity underpinning socio-technical infrastructures. Unless one is a technoligarch, we are largely unable to control and manage data –whether our own or others'– and so it becomes very easy to conclude that our agency in this realm is waning. It also becomes very easy to assume that it is the failure of *data* (i.e. to comply, conform, and produce information) and the technical infrastructures they rely upon, rather than the failure of *people*, when harms arise. In many ways, such logical arguments echo philosophical debates about civil society. That is, they follow the assumption that from appropriate infrastructures, good behaviours will emerge, and from good behaviours, peace and prosperity can flourish. What is missing from this narrative, however, is an important question: *what if civil society is not so civil*? For us, it simply isn't. It is, in fact, an oppressive system sustaining cissexist, patriarchal privileges that simultaneously demand disclosing personal information to be counted whilst requiring we risk further marginalisation from such visibility. It is in this light there is a real need to turn away from a critique of data and its subjects and begin developing methods for critiquing man-made systems that fail to acknowledge the socio-personal impact of data. As authors, our central goal in this paper is to re-situate data within the material conditions people routinely navigate and through this develop novel conceptual entanglements with data as both concept and material artifact. By drawing on the polysemous potential that *queerness* holds, we[1] argue that queer(ed) thought experiments enable a mundane and accessible critique of data cultures under techno-capitalism, a means of queering our understanding of data, and the potential for fundamentally transforming the ways we engage with it and those who seek to procure it.

Neither of us pretends to be the first to produce a queer(ed) critique of the increasingly inextricable relationship with data under techno-capitalism. Indeed, there are a fair few compelling critiques of digital technologies that explore the evolution of socio-technical narratives about culture, identity and labour (Carrigan, 2024; Hochschild, 2012; Schlombs, 2022). Many of these critiques demonstrate how established theories of labour, production and capital persist despite outward changes to our daily routines (Sarkar, 2017; Wajcman, 2020). In drawing attention to the illusion of change, it is possible to begin untangling the ways we situate data within routine engagements with 'the digital' (Ensmenger, 2022; Guyan, 2022a). Taking this critique a step further, it is possible to imagine the need to understand more about how certain technologies have become essential for engaging in culture and society, and methods for imagining alternative uses and functions (Abbate, 2017; Monea, 2023; Hicks, 2021; Ruberg, 2022; Webb, 2023). This potential to imagine technology being different, and having different functions, is important because it allows us to explore the systemic and hegemonic barriers that limit what technologies do with data, how they depend on coercive forms of data collection, and for whom they function optimally (see d'Ignazio & Klein, 2016; Guyan, 2022a; Keilty, 2024). Such imagining can help us *queer*, in the broadest sense, a range of relationships to data and technologies.

Imagining how technologies could be different helps us question why certain modes of data collection, management and use are prioritised and, in many cases, presented as normal (Adler, 2016; Benjamin, 2016; d'Ignazio & Klein, 2023). In turn, this helps us question the ways we are coerced into using technologies –and *generating data*– to be productive and visible (Benjamin, 2023; Monea, 2023; Noble, 2018). Further, imagining how technologies could be different helps us think about the ways we formulate and articulate successful engagements with digital tools, platforms, and media as essential features of our everyday lives (Gouldi, 2023; Hayles, 2012; Paasonen & Sunden, 2024). Challenging the very notion of success under techno-capitalism gives us scope and time to think about the expected (and possibly *required*) uses of technology across a spectrum of activities. Such challenge also entails critiquing the infrastructures that shape social, cultural and political understandings of digital tools and data. In these acts of imagining, we are not rejecting or avoiding data or technologies *outright*. Instead, we are actively re-positioning ourselves vis-à-vis complex social, cultural and political systems that influence the (perceived) validity and value of our identities, thereby shaping how we come to know and be known. In this article, we question who has the authority to make decisions about what technology can do, what data are needed for that doing, and how people (come to) understand those processes. Imagining alternatives outwith normative deployments is a queer process of unpicking and resisting coercive logics that depend on perpetuating the need to *conform* –as people and data points– to be considered valid and/or functional. We imagine and conceptualise this failure using thought experiments that make use of the impossible, or that *require failure* insofar as they have no solution, to enable a different kind of access to our understanding of data and to embrace the affective potential of failure in generating new understanding(s). We contend then, that the affective potential of failure can facilitate creative re-imaginings of how we engage with data, creating new possibilities to use queer theories and praxis to re-orient ourselves in relation to data under techno-capitalism.

EMBRACING FAILURE, RESISTING OPTIMISM

We propose a theoretical framing that brings together different perspectives on queerness as failure, and failure as a form of creative imagining – that is, thinking beyond binaries, acknowledging or embracing precarity, and understanding the risks of rejecting heteronormativity. In so doing, we draw on the contributions of Jack Halberstam and Lauren Berlant's approaches to failure as a queer act of resistance and critique. Both, in their own way, challenge normative (or hegemonic) standards for success. Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure* and Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* challenge how we think of success, and through their critiques identify the hegemonic and insidious toll of heteronormativity as the *frame* for success. While Halberstam is a media and cultural theorist, and Berlant was a textual scholar, their provocations that failure is a queer form of resistance challenges and resists normative impositions of success. We use their complementary conceptualisations of queerness to re-imagine the possibilities of data in resisting normative modes of description and prediction. Indeed, Berlant's cruel optimism has been deployed in feminist critiques of AI technologies for their inevitable disappointment, discursively constructed simultaneously as vehicle and barrier to happiness (e.g. Bassett, 2023). In one sense, our paper acts as a response to Basset's (2023) final provocation, where she reminds us of the need for feminist engagements to critique and radically reimagine the attachments that AI promotes and requires of us. Instead of critiquing a specific technology, platform or socio-technical practice, we take a broader view of technology and data. In taking such a broad view of technology and data as culturally constructed and socially situated subjects (Balsamo, 2011; Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1999; Noble & Tynes, 2016), we contend that it is possible to consider the tensions between what we imagine (or are *led* to imagine) data do and the material systems and infrastructures required to engage with them.

Berlant's use of affect theory to propose queer

critiques of feeling(s) opens important avenues of analysis for challenging neoliberal myths of success and creating conceptual space for failure as a form of resistance to systems of dominance (Berlant, 2007; Berlant, 2011a; Berlant, 2016). Berlant's analyses evolved through critiques of how narratives become meaningful based on extractive processes of sense making (Berlant, 2011b). Why then, would anyone *want* to be intelligible and valued? Berlant explicitly articulates the Pyrrhic victory of intelligibility. Within contemporary narratives of success, we are encouraged to be optimistic about what intelligibility will afford us and thereby contort ourselves into forms, symbolic or otherwise, that are intelligible to the reductive hegemonic order. There is, therefore, both cruelty and violence in this optimism because to become intelligible is the result of coercive processes of extraction. It is in exactly this frame that we draw on Berlant's cruel optimism to articulate the substantive cruelty and symbolic violence of the inherently cissexist order of data under techno-capitalism, which thereby *demands* a queer critique and conceptual de(con)struction.

And while Berlant articulates failure as a meaningful mode for critiquing oppressive systems, we build on it further by fusing it with Jack Halberstam's conceptualisation of queerness *as* failure, wherein failure is itself treated not in its most pejorative sense as it is within the dominant cis-heteronormative worldview (Halberstam, 2011, 2022). Halberstam uses the absurd and the mundane to formulate a critique of failure through engagements with popular culture (Halberstam, 2011a, 2013). Such engagements and critique do not, in his formulation, require finding solutions or improving understandings of subject(s). Instead, they are processes of self-consciously *undoing* expectations of intelligibility (Halberstam, 2011b, 2022). Queerness, then, becomes something rather mundane – a glitchy animation, a skipping track on an album, a misheard or misremembered phrase from a movie, or an over-the-top and only momentarily intelligible meme. In being mundane, queerness does not call for answers, explanations, or expectations of exceptionalism but instead becomes a framework for reflexively considering why and when we want something to be good (or, successful) and how we cope with and use imperfection or unintelligibility to resist dominant narratives of success and value (Halberstam, 2020a, 2020b). Queerness, as a failure to be intelligible within a given mould, offers space not only for resistance but for *creativity in resistance* and existence beyond the trappings of dominant narratives.

We use Berlant and Halberstam's critiques of normativity here to (re)think queerly about *failing with* and *failing through* data and technology. We articulate that to be unintelligible –whether unintentionally or purposefully– is a means to reject the cruel and violent optimism of data cultures under techno-capitalism, and to explore and consider alternative methods, practices and formulations of identity that enable flourishing otherwise. Current narratives about technology reproduce cissexist and heteronormative hegemonies not only because of their wilful ignorance of the plurality of users, but also because they rely on certain discourses about the essential role(s) of technology and data in users' lives. A reproduction of cissexist and heteronormative hegemony in data cultures under techno-capitalism relies on particular kinds of (il)logic, which many might call *common sense* within the frame of our late neoliberal age. In this article we seek to destabilise the notion that this common sense is inherently logical using well-known thought experiments. We contend that thought experiments have the queer potential to act as narrative tropes that facilitate thinking about how data are created and used to structure information about identities, their intelligibility, and their value. In doing so, we develop a critical lens through which to enable the consideration of alternative imaginings of how we use technologies to navigate our increasingly datafied lives.

Dominant narratives about 'the [so-called] information society' attempt to persuade us that the ways data are formatted, stored and used is essential for life as we have come to know it (Dame Griff, 2023; Monea, 2023). But we align ourselves with the notion that

there being a necessity to how data looks and functions obfuscates the coercive and extractive nature of the categories used to collect, aggregate and normalise data so that it can be used as evidence (d'Ignazio & Klein, 2023; Guyan, 2022a). Some might question these claims – there is, after all, a growing abundance of options for *how* we describe ourselves, and many of these options are reflected in the forms, interfaces and channels we use to communicate (Bivens, 2017). However, in most cases, the underlying information architectures that validate data will likely transform what you selected into something completely unrecognisable (Dame Griff, 2023; Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2021). This means that the characteristics we use to describe ourselves are often not reflected in the digital systems that we increasingly depend on to navigate the modern world. And that's the case when we are *enabled* to render ourselves intelligible – but it is so often not the case that we are given that capacity.

Reading the preceding narrative, one might assume that a critique of the infrastructures and ideologies that reproduce cissexist and heteronormative hegemonic logics will make it possible for queer identities to be visible and findable. However, we argue that this assumption requires careful scrutiny, because it relies on narratives of queer identities requiring visibility to be valid. At a time when regressive narratives about gender and sex have gained political traction, conflating visibility with validity only serves to reproduce normative discourses that engender hypervulnerability, exploitation, and the threat of violence. In short, finding solutions that *only* makes queerness visible would itself reproduce the cruel optimism(s) of extant cis-sexist and heteronormative infrastructures. We propose, instead, to reject the need for visibility through a critique of the logic(s) that have demanded visibility and conflated visibility with success. This means also acknowledging and finding ways to express the value of *not being counted and not being visible* as a form of failure that allows us to better engage with queer identities and develop more holistic and sustainable conceptualisations of our relationship(s) with technology and data. Using thought experiments, we seek to establish a critical framework for re-evaluating data, technologies, and their extant cissexist logics, queering dominant logics and resisting the need for visibility and findability.

THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS: QUEER(ED) LOGICS FOR ACCESSIBLE CRITIQUE?

Philosophy, maths, and varying social science disciplines all have different approaches to and reasons for using thought experiments to engage in debates and critiques of cultural norms and assumptions (Kuhn, 1970; Norton, 1996). Thought experiments destabilise assumptions about how we perceive and solve problems (Olmos, 2017). Some are not meant to be solved but are simply meant to help us look at the ways the world works (Chomsky, 1995). Others are meant to provide a context for putting forward new types of logic in a manner that proves the ingenuity of new ways of thinking (De Mey & Weber, 2017). In both instances, thought experiments are reflective of concerns and interests from particular moments in the history of disciplinary debates. This provides a context for analysing how we have come to rely on certain methods and practices for generalising data and generating theories. Perhaps more importantly for this paper, though, we argue that thought experiments –whether intentionally or otherwise, though we might venture a guess at the latter– invoke Halberstam's conceptualisation of failure as a queer(ed) process.

We have chosen two thought experiments as an initial *way in* to frame our critique of the cultural politics of data under techno-capitalism. Through this critique, we reflect on the ways the cultural politics of data marginalise and forcibly misrepresent queer identities, in particular. In one sense, we consider the affective possibilities of queerness for critiquing the cultural politics of data and for destabilising the logics used to impose the cissexist and heteronormative of current dominant readings of data and technology. It is as important, though, to determine what we *do not* intend with this paper. We do not intend that these analogies and allegories are a perfect fit for the problems with the cultural politics of data under

techno-capitalism, instead using them as heuristics for a queer (re)imagining of our relationships with data without the constraints of requisite solutionist thinking. That is, by engaging with thought experiments oriented towards the im/possible, we allow for philosophical and logical failure as a process of creative and generative critique.

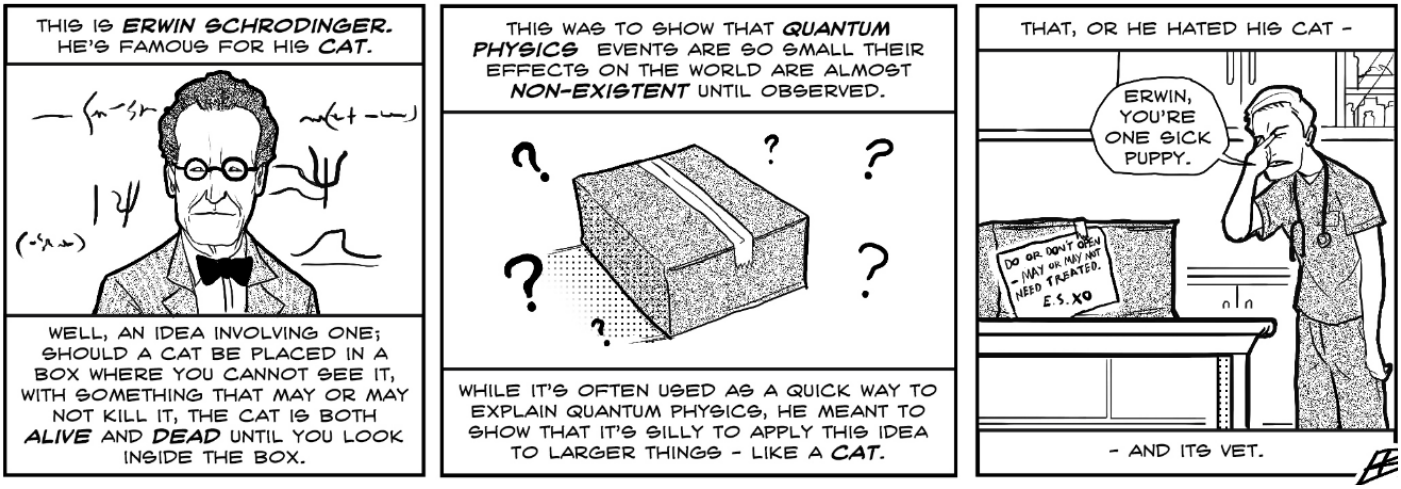
We have chosen two thought experiments that exist broadly in the lay imagination as something akin to memes. *Schrödinger's Cat* and *The Seven Bridges of Königsberg* both laid the groundwork for radical disciplinary shifts and represent nuanced theories that support rigorous methodological work. But their popularity and distillation of complex ideas into simple scenarios belies their theoretical rigour and makes the answer to each thought experiment –once exposed– seem like common sense. Here, we engage with this logical illusion of common sense to explore how each thought experiment has the potential to provoke new modes of thinking. In both cases, there is something uniquely *queer* in their deployment as tools for re-imagining popular understandings of data.

SCHRÖDINGER'S CAT: KNOWING AND KNOWABILITY

A cat is shut in a box with a vial of poison, a radioactive substance and a Geiger counter. Any changes to the radioactive substance detected by the Geiger counter will cause the poison to release. If the poison is released, the cat will die. You cannot see into or open the box to check on the cat. Is the cat dead or alive?

In 1935, Erwin Schrödinger posed this scenario as a thought experiment to help articulate the complexity of observation and measurement in quantum physics (see Figure 1). While neither of us is by any stretch of the imagination a physicist or mathematician, the popularity of Schrödinger's thought experiment provides a context for asking how and why we measure what is known and use these measurements to hypothesise and assert understandings of what is *yet to be* known. Now, quantum physics may not seem like the most obvious place to start a discussion about the potential for queer theories to disrupt our conceptualisations of how data dominates our understandings of gender. However, if we consider what the original thought experiment requires we grapple with, a few possibilities for critique and creativity emerge. Schrödinger was not necessarily poking fun at the demands placed on physicists to measure and quantify what we cannot see (i.e. radiation and subatomic particles), but he was rather cheekily demanding that his contemporaries acknowledge the limitations of their own perspective and the fruitlessness of universalising one application of imagination –or *consequentiality*– onto other, incomparable contexts of scale. Ultimately, though, Schrödinger's little thought experiment speaks to the perceived need for

Figure 1
Schrödinger's Cat by Elliot Balson, published in Dundee Comics (https://dundeecomicscreatives-pace.com/2017/02/22/schrodingers-cat/)



observing, measuring, quantifying and extracting information about, and its effects on, the material world. This, we contend, is where Schrödinger's cat provides an entry point for critiquing cultures of data under techno-capitalism.

Beyond the historical contexts of Schrödinger's thought experiment, the dead/alive cat in a box scenario has become something of a meme. That is, it has become a way of allowing, or forcing, us to consider what it means for something (or some*one*) to be two things –and *neither*– at once. In questioning how and why we need to quantify, identify and articulate states of being, we can think about failure from different points of view. Quantification gives us one kind of data about identities but necessarily represents it in problematic ways. Intersectional feminist critiques of power and queer critiques of identity politics have called into question the ways we formulate identities as constellations of separate components within data and technical systems (Guyan, 2022b; Hicks, 2019). As a blunt comparison, the idea that a person can tick a series of boxes to articulate their identity is an all too familiar experience, but one that is often forced upon us in order to be rendered intelligible in everyday practices. We fill in demographic information forms on a routine basis, and in this sense, we are known by the categories we tick (title, age, gender, sex, race, disability, allergies, address etc.), but we are simultaneously *not* known in our entirety because this information is inherently reductive. We are represented by pre-determined categories considered relevant to the organisations (corporations or governments) whose infrastructures, goods, services, etc. we want (or need) to access. Beyond being relegated to 'other', we are rendered intelligible only within a cissexist order that marginalises us to a category outwith socially- and culturally-bound expectations. Of course, though, this problem of not being entirely *knowable* is contrasted with the problem of not being known *at all* if we choose to disengage from the systems that seek to reductively define us. Do we even *want* agencies collecting data about us to know who we are? There is, in this critical context, a peril to synthesising these components of data-ready self-definition into whole entities because it sublimates some elements and, by extension, privileges others as more visible, valuable or productive. There is, one might say, a lack of descriptive creativity because the systems used to identify and articulate identities are bound to a dominant logic of intelligibility. Thus, we *become* a very real, and sometimes very queer, cat suspended in quantum superposition vis-à-vis a potentially poisonous data category and a (radioactive?) data vacuum.

Knowing and knowability are, of course, important dimensions to most feminist and queer critiques of cissexist and heteronormative data cultures under techno-capitalism, with which we are broadly aligned. Intersectional and queer feminist theorists have begun to destabilise logics rooted in Enlightenment debates about knowledge and consciousness (Benjamin, 2023; Cipolla et al., 2017; d'Ignazio & Klein, 2023; Noble, 2018). Queer-feminist science and technology studies thinking has shifted towards affective and embodied critical frameworks that help us think about how and when we acknowledge and validate identities in relation to subjects. To fail to be quantifiable by attending to the plurality of a subject then, shifts our focus away from knowing whether a cat is dead or alive, and towards the infrastructures that have allowed us to impose our need to know (or prove that we can't know) on others who have less agency than us (in this case, a cat). In asking if the cat is alive or dead, we have an opportunity to call into question why we *must* know what something is when knowing is rooted in pre-determined categories we do not agree with. Destabilising our right to know, the need to be knowable, and the capacity to be known in specific forms provides a lens through which we can critique the politics of data, including the systems (technological and social) that work to extract and profit from data collection, categorisation and aggregation.

The technical aspects of data are often articulated as systems of organisation that allow us to name entities so we can find them (Adler, 2014, 2017). This act of naming requires conformity to certain mental and

linguistic models that reflect shared understandings of subjects and objects (Bowker & Star, 2000a, 2000b; Svenonius, 2000). While there are efforts to queer critiques of data structures, they often oversell the practices that obscure naming conventions (Gaboury, 2018). In overselling technical workarounds that 'solve' issues of representation, scholarship about data and culture often overlooks the need to question how and why language –both the terms we use to communicate, and the structural requirements for information retrieval– imposes limitations on the description and representation of subjects. In essence, the humanities and social sciences do not routinely go far enough in critiquing of the infrastructures that collect, organise and represent information because it does not imagine or even consider the possibility of failure.

A recent shift towards overt signalling of data collection through cookie notices offers a glimmer of hope ... at least superficially. On the one hand, it can be argued that *knowingly* relinquishing information about your location, browsing habits, and in many cases (elements of) your identity gives us agency over our choices to share data. On the other hand, it can be seen to perpetuate hegemonic neoliberal ideologies of individual responsibility and choice, displacing the blame from unscrupulous actors and practices when things go wrong (e.g. data are leaked, or otherwise used for purposes beyond the stated contract). We think it's likely clear on which side we fall between the two. Indeed, we'd argue that even *opting out* of cookies does not prevent such violent data practices, as many would presume, despite the implication of making agentive choices not to share. Rather, opting out likely serves only to further simplify what is collected to the point of compounding harms associated with (un)knowing and (un)knowability. Likewise, opting out of using technologies, more broadly, is not a simple or equitably accessible act. We're not necessarily talking of 'living off the grid' here, which is unquestionably precarious. In our datafied and ubiquitously digital age, the phenomenon of 'switching off' becomes an act of intense privilege, so much so that luxury brands rely on 'switching off' to sell products (e.g. Coach handbag adverts) and celebrities-turned-moguls outsource conventionally *personalised* fan-oriented social media activities. There is, evidently, an awareness in the public consciousness that datafication and over-reliance on technology is a net negative. But not everyone is equally able to *fail to engage* with these techno-capitalist systems that demand our engagement for successful living – which, in this case, means being able to read the news, pay our taxes, or buy groceries. There are other ways to fail, of course, and consequences for all of those failures are rarely controllable.

A queer(ed) critique of data cultures provides a framework for analysing systems that force us to make choices about how we make ourselves known (or knowable) and for examining how data collection infrastructures are in/compatible with these practices. Our critique calls into question an individual's ability to resist datafication but, simultaneously, imagines how failing to resist datafication catalyses certain forms of failure that are personally meaningful but perhaps not socially universal. Queerness becomes a mode of consciously and *conscientiously* engaging with the politics of data and the infrastructures that use data. One might even say that queer approaches to critiquing data allow us to fail in formulating an answer, and instead creates space to discuss, debate and consider *why* data has become such an important facet of our lives.

To start, we argue that the current extractive nature of data under techno-capitalism is *cruel*. The systems used to collect data about us require we divulge information that puts us at risk or reduces us to a marginalised subject. To be counted requires being visible, and that visibility comes with a price. We are subject to regulations of many different sorts. But to not disclose any data about ourselves at all is equally risky. To not be counted is to be unacknowledged as a valid (intelligible) subject. To not be counted allows us to remain invisible, but there is a risk of losing access to essential services. So, is visibility the risk and invisibility the privilege? Or is the inverse true? This only begs more consideration of our quantum

superposition as cats trapped in boxes by some more powerful being for a purpose far removed from our immediate benefit. In recognising what we can't know or make known, we gain the space to critique the systems that impose the need for data sharing and collection. This critique generates opportunities to formulate new modes of understanding, and new ways of articulating the scope and effect of claiming to know or for something to *become known*.

SEVEN BRIDGES OF KÖNIGSBERG: VALUE(S) AND VALIDITY

A river runs through a city. The river is disrupted by an island. There are seven bridges at various points along the rivers that connect the two sides of the city, and the island to the city. Is it possible to cross each of the seven bridges only once?

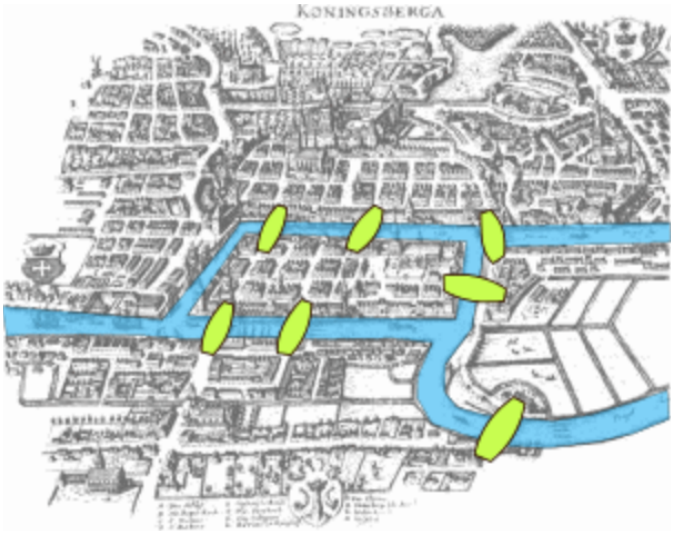


Figure 2
Illustration of Euler's Seven Bridges of Königsberg Thought Experiment by Bogdan Giușcă (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Bridges_of_K%C3%B6nigsberg#/media/File:Konigsberg_bridges.png)

Figure 2 illustrates the narrative of the 'seven bridges' thought experiment. And, from this, an answer to the question posed by the experiment might immediately be: *Certainly!* It's possible to swim, take a boat, glide, fly, or even *catapult across à la Wile E Coyote* to bypass some bridges and access the other(s). When the Seven Bridges of Königsberg problem was originally proposed by Leonhard Euler in 1736, these rather glaringly obvious solutions resulted in a few additional stipulations: you must determine a *walking* route; you can *only* use the bridges to cross the river; and you must *fully* cross each bridge. So – *can you still traverse the river using each bridge only once?* And while mathematicians have worked within these additional stipulations to 'solve' the Seven Bridges problem, there are still various provocations that their logic and proposed solutions leave open to critique.

Conversely to Schrödinger's attempt at teaching physicists about the *context-specificity* of quantum superposition and the observation of particles, Euler's puzzle was an attempt to define the geometry of position by *abstracting away all context* and retaining only general rules. Ultimately, the Seven Bridges thought experiment is about mapping out the one (because there is always ever only *one*) complete –and valid– set of connections between entities. Of course, any 'solution' also presupposes a set of parameters that determine both validity and completeness. Euler's experiment was intended for explaining the need for thinking *topographically* when analysing sets of variables and their relationships, or a collection of nodes (islands) and edges (connections, or bridges), which ultimately resulted in the development of graph theory (König, 1936, cf. Barnes and Harary, 1983). Based on the topography of a graph, we are supposed to be able to analyse and make decisions about the meaning (e.g. significance) of relationships between nodes (Acosta, 2020). Connections made between nodes in a graph can be thick (strong), thin (weak) or invalid based on their length, frequency, and/or (in) completeness (Priest, 2017). With the 'solution' to Seven Bridges presented by mathematicians, bridges are crossed (nodes connected), the space (topography) between these nodes is represented, and a graph (visualisation) of the network is produced.

There is no inherent hierarchy in this mode of representation, and the totality of all connections are rendered intelligible in a novel way. *Right?* Perhaps, but what is missing is the *context* from which nodes are created or determined, and the basis on which

edges are rendered. Space is therefore taken for granted. The way space is produced is not fully and explicitly explained to render intelligible the complexities of the data making up what is represented, or the plurality and directionalities with which those data are connected (Hall, 1980; Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 2009). We might, then, critique networks as a space because of their affective qualities. That is, despite their intangibility, they still hold value because of *what* they represent and *how* their mode of representation interpolates meaning. From such critique, it becomes possible to resist the need to quantify and validate subjects through their connections and to start thinking queerly about the ways data are used to generate networks and the value(s) imposed on these networks before and after they are represented visually. This is particularly important because it is not really possible to fully understand the scale and scope of the networks that sustain current data infrastructures (d'Ignazio & Klein, 2016, 2020) – and this is by no means an accident. While networks and network analyses have made it possible to see (quite literally) the complexities of connections, relationships and dependencies, they abstract away from and obscure *how* some of these connections and dependencies affect the wider topography of a graph (d'Ignazio, 2015, 2016). The amount of data that exists is overwhelming and thus, it is impossible to untangle and identify *what* data do or mean outside of their very immediate impact on our own practices. On the one hand, this impossibility sustains hegemonic technical systems because they are too big to fail, and the people in charge of them are immune to disapprobation. On the other hand, there is potential for failure to engender queerness. Instead, resisting datafication using data to imagine new connections and express alternative meanings could result in more diverse, diffuse and complex connections. In other words, we might simply refuse to cross all seven bridges in Königsberg and instead go for a leisurely swim.

Let's further take the lesson from this thought experiment's history as a departure point for critique. Despite, or perhaps *because*, solutions to the problem posed popped up rather quickly, additional parameters were deemed necessary and therefore imposed to make Euler's own proposed solution necessary. This shifting of goalposts is akin to the ways data are collected and used in everyday practice insofar as solutions –in the form of answers or datapoints submitted– are not always accepted, regardless of their interpreted appropriateness in each context. In fact, they might even be rejected because they do not conform to an underlying, and often entirely opaque, logic. An everyday example of this rejection in action is when we don't enter data into an online form correctly and receive an error message. Formatting dates in a specific way may seem like a low stakes example (mm/dd/yyyy versus dd/mm/yyyy), but it alludes to much larger issues around how we learn to format information so that it is valid and useful. In other words, we are conditioned to provide information that conforms to technological systems that collect information about us. So, when we are confronted with barriers to submitting data, we feel pressured to use what categories are available.

So, what can one do if they are *inter alia*– nonbinary, genderqueer or have otherwise not jumped through the ever-changing and often hazardous legal processes of gender recognition or name changes? While there have been slow changes to the variety of pronouns and titles to choose from when completing forms, these changes are by no means universal, or structurally sound. That is, they do not speak across systems or contexts. In fact, at the time of writing this article, one of us was retrieving quotes for motor insurance through a popular UK-based insurance comparison site. And it explicitly signalled this lack of connectivity across systems, including the economically salient trade-off between accurate self-representation or conformity with the cissexist order of data culture. Using gender-neutral or specifically gender-non-indexical titles –whether earned or avowed– like *Dr* and *Mx*, whilst accepted by the data capture mechanism of the comparison site, will result in fewer quotes being retrieved from insurance providers due to the latter's systems not treating those titles as valid entries. As a result, a connection cannot

be made with those providers and the resulting output prevents equitable engagement with price comparators, likely leading to *a direct economic disbenefit of gender-neutrality*. However mundane, this is but one example of the very real problem of abstracting away from context and assuming universality in the connections between entities.

Acknowledging how the *appearance* of inclusion indicates –sometimes explicitly– the extractive and coercive nature of data infrastructures may not seem very queer, but it is (we promise!). It calls into question who is responsible for the development of infrastructures that require names and that naming practices follow particular hegemonic, inherently exclusionary, conventions. Now, the Seven Bridges problem has helped mathematicians and social scientists develop methods for describing and representing data as networks. And graph data are meant to help us visualise relationships. But, for these visualisations to be intelligible, there is a need for completeness, which in turn demands *normalised data*. What, though, is normal, normalised, or even normalisable? *Normal*, in data and information science, is largely synonymous to *standardised* and *useable*, which is to say that they are free from errors that prevent data processing. So, even when there is a wealth of seemingly disparate and diverse actors, terms, etc., in a dataset, they are mapped onto pre-conceived definitions or categories. Ultimately, this means that a logic of hierarchies found in classification schemes persists, impacting the use and usefulness of data, confining its usefulness to contexts or conditions wherein those pre-conceived definitions are *normal* (or, in this sense, hegemonic). The technical demands of information retrieval and the logical demands of network analyses require normalcy, which we argue should really be read as *cishetero*-normal. And while we do not propose an overt solution, we do argue here for a context of questioning and discussing how we use networks to visualise and interpret data. *Personal failure is an option, though your mileage may vary (perhaps literally!)*. Outwith its dominant pejorative sense, failure enables reimagining what acceptance and validation require, look like and provide. The impossibility of entering data and strategic refusals to make do or find a technical fix presents opportunities to queer what data are collected, and how it is used to abstract and represent networks of associations, locations, affinities and relationships. A queer critique then, requires analysing and disrupting –but not necessarily *reinventing*– the systems of cisheteronormative logic underpinning information systems. In this light, we ask: *what if validity were not the point of data, but instead a kind of failure to grapple with what is left out, left over or in some way not 'normal?* Because to normalise data is to make them –and those they represent– conform to a decontextualised and pre-determined set of conditions that are inherently reductive, inequitable, and potentially harmful, symbolically and literally.

THE QUEER POTENTIAL OF (EXPERIMENTALLY) RE-THINKING OUR RELATIONSHIP(S) WITH DATA

We contend that this paper demonstrates the profoundly *queer* potential in thought experiments and their orientation towards failure. In this paper, we deployed two thought experiments to critique the cultural politics of data under techno-capitalism as a means of embracing the queer art of failure and deconstructing the cruel optimism of extant socio-technical data infrastructures. The logics underpinning these thought puzzles, whilst not directly analogous to the world of data, allow us to interrogate hegemonic ways of conceptualising success in data-land through knowing, knowability, value, and validity. In short, the two experiments we engaged with allow us to interrogate *how* systems demand intelligibility and acquiescence through the *a priori* normalisation of cissexist and heteronormative expectation. In one way, we are but cats, forcibly placed by some powerful *other* in a box that might –at any moment– become filled with toxic gas. We argue that this is a form of resistance because it recontextualises how we are observed, and how we engage with the politics of visibility and intelligibility. In acknowledging that those observing us do not know (or, largely, care) whether

we are alive or dead, only that we are one or the other we are able to fail spectacularly on our own terms… and perhaps facilitate wider discussions about failure as a queer critique of heteronormativity.

While there are ways to *resist* observation-via-datafication, we cannot really render ourselves entirely unintelligible within the social, economic and political systems governing our daily lives. Furthermore, we cats must cross all bridges in a certain way, lest we suffer some detrimental consequence. That is, we are offering a framework for contemplating what data to enter or share, to an extent, in order that we are intelligible (known or knowable) in ways that allow us to resist the cruel optimism of successfully becoming complicit with cis-normative categories/identities. Because the infrastructures that normalise or demand we share data about ourselves in specific ways so often have failsafe mechanisms that prevent us from deviating without –often substantive– consequence. The extent of our choice is largely illusory insofar as choice to disengage from these systems has become a privilege so few of us have direct access to. Whilst it is impossible to be fully invisible or fully unintelligible within the current cissexist order of data under techno-capitalism, a queer(ed) critique of *why* and *how* this impossibility exists and persists is important. We did not purport here to provide any kind of solution to this problem; rather, we proposed the very opposite. By orienting ourselves towards thinking and imagining through failure, our queer critique sought to embrace its generative potential. And by *re-orienting* our consideration of failure and success to being a systemic and infrastructural problem of data under techno-capitalism, as opposed to being a human- or user-driven phenomenon, we contend that this critique has the potential to generate new discursive entanglements with data as both concept and material artifact.

Despite our fundamentally *queer* critique, we have deliberately avoided definitions of queer(ness) in this article, for the most part. *Queer* comprises many meanings, not least of all its rejection of and resistance to dominant systems of power and visions of normativity. It is this polysemous potential that creates space for more robust, inclusive and creative discussions about data. To queer data, and our understanding thereof, is to question how information is collected and structured, how these processes affect (and *effect*) our understanding of subjects and the world around us, and why these processes serve to reproduce an inherently violent hegemonic order. We would like to re-articulate here that there is always the possibility of failing to engage with data, whether by intention or ignorance. It is possible to fail by dissociating the politics of technology from the actors, corporations, and governing bodies that define what data are. It is possible to fail by prioritising technological solutions that perpetuate hegemonic, cissexist and techno-capitalist infrastructures. It is possible to fail data by not being queer enough. There is a queer art to failure and in our critique, we recognise that we might, as authors, have failed here. Perhaps that is exactly the (queer) point we were trying to make, after all?

NOTES

[1] This is a co-authored interdisciplinary paper, written by a trans linguist and a non-binary information scientist. We overtly engage in this paper with the politics of authorship and critique by not feigning neutrality or objectivity. Instead, we write explicitly from the standpoint(s) that emerge from the entanglement of our personal and disciplinary identities. As such, we have opted here to make use of the personal plural, *we*. For the most part, the we in this paper is oriented towards this negotiated co-authorial standpoint – but we invite other readers to include or dissociate themselves from a more expansive reading as they see fit, whether in entirety or only in part(s).

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Under ombygning

Intersektionelle identitetskonstruktioner blandt gymnasieelever

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how students in a Danish high school construct and negotiate social identities through intersecting categories of ethnicity, gender, and religion. Based on three months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two second-year classes at a highly diverse urban school, the article explores the students' multifaceted cultural practices. Drawing on intersectionality as a sensitizing analytical framework, the article demonstrates how identity categories acquire shifting meanings across contexts and how students navigate multiple, sometimes contradictory, regimes of normativity. By foregrounding the complexity of students' lived negotiations, the study challenges reductive public debates on diversity and student composition in Danish high schools and argues for more nuanced institutional understandings of youth sociality and identity formation.

KEY WORDS

INTERSECTIONALITY, SOCIAL IDENTITY, YOUTH, HIGH SCHOOL, GENDER, ETHNICITY

På blot to årtier har gymnasiet undergået en markant transformation fra at være en uddannelsesvej for et mindretal – primært børn af velstillede og akademiske familier – til at være den mest almindelige ungdomsuddannelse i Danmark. I 2023 søgte 72,6 % af en ungdomsårgang ind på en gymnasial uddannelse, mod 48,3 % i 2003 (Danmarks statistik, 2004; GL, 2023). Denne udvikling har medført en øget elevdiversitet, men også et nyt fokus på elevsammensætning.

Især i de store byer, hvor der findes flere gymnasier inden for et relativt lille geografisk område, har unge mulighed for at vælge gymnasium og studieretning. Dette valg påvirker elevsammensætningen og har i de senere år ført til øget opmærksomhed på polarisering mellem gymnasier – især i forhold til elevernes etniske og socioøkonomiske baggrund. Begreber som "ghettogymnasier" har præget den offentlige debat (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2022b; Mainz, 2023), og politiske tiltag som afstandskravet er blevet indført for at modvirke opdeling og fremme social blanding (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, u.å.) – politikker, som problematiserer racialiserede minoriserede elevers tilstedeværelse i gymnasierne (Khawaja & Jaffe-Walter, 2024).

Et illustrativt eksempel på debatten udspillede sig i Dagbladet Politiken i 2024, hvor rektoren for Frederiksberg Gymnasium fortalte, at man ved at gøre gymnasiet til et såkaldt profilgymnasium, havde ændret i elevsammensætningen, således at andelen af elever med "ikke-vestlig baggrund"[1] nu afspejlede den generelle befolkningssammensætning (Mainz, 2024). Udtalelsen blev mødt med kritik fra Souad Bourrid, som i et debatindlæg problematiserede den racialiserende retorik og fremhævede den positive betydning af etnisk diversitet for både minoritets- og majoritetselever (Bourrid, 2024). Rektoren svarede igen, at " (…) diversiteten hos os ikke skabte mere læring, fællesskab og mestring, men at eleverne delte sig i grupperinger, hvor kun få var engageret i skolens fælles aktiviteter." (Bødtcher-Hansen, 2024).

Udvekslingen illustrerer, hvordan det ofte er simplificerede forståelser af etnicitet og etnicitets betydning for fællesskabsformationer, der præger debatten og den politiske diskurs **om** gymnasieeleverne. Med denne artikel ønsker jeg imidlertid at illustrere de mangefacetterede og dynamiske forståelser af etnicitet, der gør sig gældende blandt gymnasieeleverne. Analysen viser, hvordan elever i en dansk gymnasiekontekst konstruerer og forhandler sociale identiteter i intersektionen mellem køn, etnicitet og religion, og hvordan disse konstruktioner understøtter og udfordrer elevfællesskaber. Med en forståelse af identitetskategorier som situerede og kontekstafhængige, argumenterer jeg for, at elevernes brug af kategorier som 'etnicitet' og 'køn' på én og samme tid kan fungere inkluderende og ekskluderende i elevernes fællesskaber.

Projektet ligger i et krydsfelt mellem ungdoms-, etnicitets-, og kønsstudier og denne artikel bidrager til forskningen med en nutidig empirisk indsigt i de socialiseringsprocesser, som udspiller sig på et gymnasium i Danmark, hvor eleverne aktivt forhandler identitetskategorier i klassefællesskaber med højaktuelle identitetspolitiske magtkampe som baggrundstæppe. Artiklen adresserer debatten om elevsammensætning og diversitet i gymnasiet og bidrager med viden, der kan skabe nye forståelser for gymnasieelevers fællesskaber og nuancere de nuværende debatter.

Analysen viser, hvordan intersektioner mellem identitetskategorier skaber både muligheder og begrænsninger for identitetsarbejdet, særligt for elever, der bryder med normative forventninger. Endvidere belyses, hvordan køn udøves og reguleres forskelligt i forskellige klassefællesskaber, hvor binære og heteronormative forståelser henholdsvis reproduceres eller udfordres. Artiklen bidrager med en udvidet forståelse af ungdomsidentiteter og peger på intersektionalitet som et analytisk redskab, der muliggør en sensitiv og kontekstuel tilgang til sociale kategorier i gymnasiets hverdagsliv.

På trods af den stigende andel unge, der vælger en gymnasial uddannelse i Danmark, er der fortsat

begrænset etnografisk forskning, der undersøger gymnasieelevers socialitet. Som Khawaja og Lagermann (2023) fremhæver, har forskningen i elevdiversitet primært været koncentreret omkring grundskolen, mens gymnasiet som socialt og kulturelt rum er underbelyst. Da jeg påbegyndte mit feltarbejde i 2023 var de eksisterende etnografiske undersøgelser af etnicitet i en gymnasiekontekst dels fåtallige, dels af ældre dato (Se fx Mørck, 2006; Skovgaard Nielsen, 2005). Siden da har flere studier belyst især racialisering i gymnasiel kontekst, både med fokus på fagprofessionelles diversitetsarbejde (Staunæs & Vertelyté, 2023), politikker om elevfordeling (Khawaja & Jaffe-Walter, 2024) og elevers fællesskaber som modstandspraksis mod etnisk differentiering og racialisering (Berisha, 2025; Mastek, 2023). Nærværende artikel søger at bidrage til den nyere forskning på området ved at undersøge, hvordan etnicitet, racialisering og køn indgår i gymnasieelevers identitetsarbejde, og hvordan disse kategorier forhandles i konkrete klassefællesskaber. Artiklen relaterer sig til eksisterende forskning, men tilbyder også en række nye perspektiver. Hvor Gilliam (2009, 2010, 2018, 2021) og Mørck (2006) har belyst etnicitet og eksklusionsmekanismer i skolelivet, viser denne undersøgelse – i tråd med Masteks pointer (2023) –, hvordan etnicitet også kan fungere som en inkluderende og kollektiv identitetsmarkør. I tillæg til etnicitet, udgør også køn en central analytisk kategori i min undersøgelse. Bjerrum Nielsen (2000) har undersøgt hvordan forskning i kønsforskelle i skolen udviklede sig i Skandinavien gennem 1970'erne, 80'erne og 90'erne og peger på, at kønsroller blandt børn og unge er under fortsat udvikling, og at der stadig er behov for forskning i, hvordan den binære kønsopfattelse udfordres. Selvom nyere studier (fx Hutters et al., 2013) har fokuseret på kønsforskelle, er fokus ofte binært. Med artiklen her forsøger jeg at udvide Ambjörnssons (2004) og Staunæs' (2004) analyser af køn og klasse ved også at inddrage nonbinære og transkønnede elevers erfaringer, som fortsat er underbelyst i nordisk ungdomsforskning.

INTERSEKTIONALITET SOM ANALYTISK RAMME

Intersektionalitetsbegrebet har som bekendt sine rødder i USA's sorte feministiske teori, men siden Crenshaws formulering af begrebet i slutningen af 1980'erne, har teorien rejst både geografisk og disciplinært og fået rodfæste indenfor mange forskellige felter og fagområder. I en dansk kontekst er intersektionalitet blevet fremhævet som kvalificerende for studier af sociale forskelle, social mobilitet, komplekse identiteter, tilhørsforhold og sociale problemer (Qvotrup Jensen & Christensen, 2011), og er ikke mindst blevet anvendt i Foucault-inspirerede identitetsanalyser hvor intersektionalitet – med Staunæs' og Søndergaards ord – kan forstås som 'et rodet tilblivelsesrum' (2006). Men netop den udvikling som begrebet har gennemgået på sin europæiske rejse har skabt en del debat (Se fx Cho et al., 2013; Christensen & Qvotrup Jensen, 2019; Hvenegård-Lassen et al., 2024). Kritikken af den udvikling, som intersektionalitetsteorien har undergået inden for andre discipliner, er i grove træk centreret om spørgsmålet om hvorvidt intersektionelle analyser skal være fokuseret på strukturel undertrykkelse eller på subjekter, identitetsanalyser og sammenvævningen af identitetskategorier. MacKinnon slår fast, at forskellige tilgange til intersektionalitet med fokus på enten hierarkiske strukturer eller identitetskategorier ikke er en diskussion om hønen eller ægget: "(…) [categories and stereotypes and classifications] are the ossified outcomes of the dynamic intersection of multiple hierarchies, not the dynamic that creates them. They are there, but they are not the reason they are there." (MacKinnon, 2013, s. 1023) I denne artikel anvender jeg intersektionalitetsbegrebet til at fokusere på identitetsanalyse og de intersekterende identitetskategorier i den specifikke kontekst af et dansk gymnasium. Dermed ikke sagt at jeg ikke anerkender, at kategorierne er indlejret globale og nationale strukturer, der er rammesættende for identiteters tilblivelse og udvikling. Jeg zoomer blot ind for at anlægge et mere subjektorienteret fokus på den lokale kontekst af gymnasiet og gymnasieelevernes tilblivelsesmuligheder i de hér

fremherskende diskurser og lægger mig dermed op ad den tilgang til intersektionalitet, som har haft stor betydning i en nordisk kontekst (Hvenegård-Lassen et al., 2024). Jeg er interesseret i identitetskonstruktioner *både* hos minoritets- og majoritetsgrupper på gymnasiet, men også i, hvordan man med et intersektionelt perspektiv kan forstå identiteter som stadigt foranderlige produkter af individers brug og forhandling af intersekterende identitetskategorier. Endvidere ser jeg intersektionalitet som en nyttig tilgang til at forstå, hvordan identitetskategorier og diskursive subjektpositioner ændres og interagerer på nye måder i relation til et samfund under forandring (Lykke, 2020, s. 102).

I Danmark er identitetskategorier som køn og etnicitet under hastig udvikling, ikke mindst i kølvandet på globale bevægelser som MeToo og BlackLivesMatter, som har afledt egne nationale strømninger, der har influeret forståelser og praktisering af identitetskategorier – også blandt gymnasieleverne. Her kan en intersektionel tilgang bidrage til at forstå, hvordan kategorier som køn og etnicitet kan rumme forskellige konnotationer og afgrænses forskelligt i intersektering med andre kategorier. Her vil jeg, med et subjektorienteret videnskabsperspektiv, kaste mig ud i "(…) den mere sensitive analyse af, hvordan sociale kategorier fungerer som ordnings- og selekteringsmekanismer i subjekters erfaringsverden" (Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2006, s. 47). Med det anlagte intersektionalitetsperspektiv følger også anerkendelsen af, at identitetskategorier ikke alene kan have forskellige betydninger afhængig af kontekst og intersektering med andre kategorier, men også at en kategori kan være mere eller mindre betydningsfuld, kan vægte forskelligt, i forskellige situationer. Hvis kategoriernes betydning er situeret, medfører det også, at det empirisk må undersøges hvilke kategorier, der bliver betydningsfulde at følge (Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2006):

> Ser man på mere Foucault-inspirerede analyser af intersektionalitet åbnes der op for en videretænkning i samspil imellem ikke blot de klassiske sociale kategorier, men også andre relationaliteter. Det være sig eksempelvis andre mindre udbredt [sic] kategorier som 'adopteret', 'elev', 'patient', 'danskerluder' eller 'player' (…) (Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2006, s. 52).

Artiklen beskæftiger sig netop med sådanne situerede identitetskategorier og deres betydning i den empiriske kontekst af gymnasiet. Som Gilliam pointerer, er vores identitetsforståelse "forbundet til kulturelle kategorier, normer og forståelser, der over tid og gennem mange menneskers handlinger har fået en objektiv karakter og derfor forstås som selvfølgelige og meningsfulde i et givent fællesskab." (Gilliam, 2017, s. 125). Her vil jeg fokusere på (nogle af) de identitetskategorier, jeg oplevede som betydningsbærende for eleverne. Med afsæt i intersektionalitetsteorien, vil jeg også illustrere hvordan mange af kategorierne er indbyrdes forbundne, og hvordan eleverne forbinder kategorierne i forskellige diskurser, så der skabes andre kategorier og normer.

DEN ETNOGRAFISKE KONTEKST OG METODIK

I efteråret 2023 lavede jeg feltarbejde på et storkøbenhavnsk gymnasium (SKG), hvor jeg gennem tre måneder fulgte to 2.g-klasser, som jeg herfra kalder 'Nat-klassen' og 'Samf-klassen'. Jeg deltog i deres undervisning, hang ud med eleverne i pauser og frikvarterer, tog med på ekskursioner og deltog i diverse sociale arrangementer på gymnasiet. I tillæg til utallige timers deltagerobservation og uformelle samtaler med eleverne, udførte jeg semistrukturerede individuelle interviews med både elever og en uddannelsesleder, et gruppeinterview med to elever samt med et fokusgruppeinterview med 4 elever. Alle interviews blev lydoptaget og transskriberet. De to klasser var blevet valgt tilfældigt, og før jeg mødte dem, vidste jeg kun, hvilke linjefag de havde og hvor mange elever de var. Men allerede fra dag ét, slog det mig, hvor forskellige de to klasser og eleverne i dem fremstod i både udseende, påklædning og opførsel – hvor forskellige identiteter, de udførte. Nat-klassen, der havde naturvidenskabelig fag-linje, bestod af 21 piger og fire drenge. Alle klassens elever var racialt

minoriserede som 'anden-etniske' – en emisk term, som blev benyttet af både elever og personale på SKG – og havde minimum én forælder, der ikke var opvokset i Danmark. Alle, på nær én elev fra Litauen, identificerede sig som muslimer. Nat-elevernes fysiske fremtræden var meget ens, idet klassen havde en mere eller mindre udtalt dresscode. Alle elever gik klædt i sort, hvidt, toner af gråt eller sandfarvet tøj, andre farver var et særsyn. Pigerne havde langt glat sort hår eller bar hijab, drengene var kortklippede. Pigernes makeup stod skarpt og neglene var nylavede, de bar alle skuldertaske og kun klassens fire drenge havde rygsække. Samtlige elever havde en MacBook. Samf-klassen, der havde samfundsvidenskabelig fag-linje, bestod af 23 piger, 5 drenge (hvoraf én var transkønnet) og to non-binære elever. Af de 30 elever, havde 8 minoritetsetnisk baggrund og 7 var muslimer. Som kontrast til Nat-klassen var samf-elevernes fysiske fremtræden langt mere broget. Her var sorthårede, blonde og blåhårede elever. Der var afrohår og hestehaler, hijabs og næsepiercinger, tøj i alle farver, mavebluser og abayaer. Flere elever havde dekoreret deres computere med klistermærker med regnbueflag eller politiske budskaber. Forskellene mellem de to klasser kom imidlertid ikke kun til syne i deres påklædning. Efterhånden som jeg lærte eleverne at kende og blev en integreret del af hverdagen i både Nat- og Samf-klassen, fik jeg også blik for de forståelser og forestillinger, som formede deres praksisser og rammesatte både deres fælles og individuelle altid igangværende identitetskonstruktioner. Etnografisk forskning er aldrig neutral, da antropologen indgår aktivt i dataindsamlingen, og forskerposition samt relationer til informanterne påvirker adgangen til viden (Lønsmann, 2015). For mit eget vedkommende havde både etnicitet, religion, køn og alder betydning for de positioner jeg kunne indtage og blev tildelt i felten. At jeg var omtrent dobbelt så gammel som mine 17-20 årige informanter, fordrede en aktiv indsats for at undgå at blive positioneret i en lærerrolle, men i stedet opbygge tillidsfulde relationer og få eleverne til at anerkende mig som legitim deltager i deres respektive klassefællesskaber. Selvom jeg af mange elever blev italesat som "en af dem", forblev jeg outsider for enkelte – fx de fire drenge i Nat-klassen, der sjældent socialiserede med klassens piger – endsige den kvindelige forsker. Sammen med køn var etnicitet og religion også faktorer, som spillede ind på min position i felten. Som majoritetsetnisk hvid og ikke-muslimsk dansker var jeg minoritet i Nat-klassen og tydeligt positioneret i den ene af to "lejre" på gymnasiet – en racialiseret opdelingslogik, som ofte ses i skoler og gymnasier (Berisha, 2023; Klinker & Rasmussen, 2006; Mørck, 2006), og som også eksisterede på SKG.

ETNIFICEREDE INTERSEKTIONER

På SKG har næsten halvdelen af eleverne etnisk minoritetsbaggrund, men etnicitet er ikke kun interessant fordi der er så mange forskellige etniske tilhørsforhold blandt eleverne. Det er også relevant fordi 'etnicitet' er en identitetskategori med meget varierende betydning og anvendelse i elevernes identitetsarbejde. Eleverne i Nat-klassen havde 11 forskellige etniske og nationale baggrunde, der imidlertid ikke blev italesat som baggrunde, men som præsente identitetsmarkører; "Mehnoor er pakistaner", "Dila er kurder", "Dalia er palæstinenser fra Libanon". I Nat-klassen var de fleste elever helt klar over deres klassekammeraters baggrund og tilhørsforhold, og etnicitet udgjorde således en signifikant markør i forhold til at identificere og distingvere både sig selv og andre. Omvendt kunne etnicitet udgøre en samlende og fællesskabsskabende kategori for Nat-klassen som ét hele:

> "Rim: Fordi lige i vores klasse, så er vi meget ens. Altså, vi alle sammen har forskellige nationaliteter. Der er ikke én af os, der bare er fra Danmark. Mange af os er fra forskellige nationaliteter."

Her skaber Rim en kollektiv identitet for klassen, hvor "forskellige nationaliteter" ikke bidrager til en forståelse af eleverne som forskellige, men tværtimod bliver dét, der gør, at de "er meget ens". Paulgaard argumenterer for at konstruktion af identitet – det være sig kollektiv eller individuel – ikke foregår i et frit rum, men er stærkt begrænset af og bundet op på allerede eksisterende konstruktioner, der sætter

grænser for hvilke identitetskonstruktioner, det er muligt at få bekræftet (Paulgaard, 2006).

> Kollektive identiteter kan bidra til å skape en form for orden og trygghet fordi den enkelte får noen "identitetsknagger" å henge seg på. Når kollektive identiteter fremstår som enhetlige, vil interne forskjeller underkommuniseres, fordi kontrasten til det som oppleves som enda mer forskjellig fremheves. (Paulgaard, 2006, s. 73)

Rim underkommunikerer de interne forskelle i form af forskellige nationaliteter eller etniciteter og fremhæver kontrasten mellem på den ene side Nat-klassens kollektive identitet som "anden-etniske" og det endnu mere forskellige "etnisk danske" på den anden side. Her er det tydeligt hvordan en kategori som etnicitet bliver særlig betydningsfuld i grænsedragningen til andre grupper (Barth, 1998). Med et intersektionelt perspektiv, kan man altså sige, at der på SKG er flere fremherskende diskurser omkring etnicitet, som har forskellige betydninger for nat-elevernes identitetskonstruktioner: Den "interne" diskurs i klassen tilbyder en lang række subjektpositioner når det kommer til etnicitet, hvor der er fokus på at distingvere mellem eksempelvis "marokkaner", "iraner" og "litauer" i den individuelle identitetskonstruktion. Den "eksterne" diskurs mellem Nat-klassen og andre klasser eller resten af SKG fokuserer på konstruktionen af en kollektiv identitet for Nat-klassen, hvor positioneringen som "anden-etnisk" i modsætning til "dansker", betyder at alle klassens elever falder i samme kategori. Som Khawaja og Lagermann pointerer, ligger der en proces af andetgørelse til grund for en sådan diskurs, der ikke er startet på gymnasiet, men i det omkringliggende samfund, som gymnasiet som institution, elever, lærere og ledere er både produkter og medskabere af. Her er "dansk" det naturlige, det første, og det som knytter sig til majoriteten og implicerer en magtrelation (Khawaja & Lagermann, 2023, s. 22–24). I den optik er subjektpositionen som "anden-etnisk" måske ikke umiddelbart eftertragtelig, men kategorien kan som samlebetegnelse også dels fungere som noget, der knytter nat-eleverne sammen til en enhed, dels ændre på forholdet mellem minoritets- og majoritetsgruppen på SKG, hvor omkring halvdelen af eleverne har etnisk dansk baggrund mens den anden halvdel af eleverne har etnisk minoritetsbaggrund. Den problematisk essentialiserende kollektive identitet "anden-etnisk" kan således ses som en form for strategisk essentialisme (Phillips, 2010, s. 48).

Den "eksterne" diskurs hvor "anden-etnisk" bliver en samlende og fællesskabsskabende kategori kontrasteres af den "interne diskurs", hvor elevernes individuelle etniske tilhørsforhold havde stor betydning og ofte blev italesat, eksempelvis når eleverne ville have mig til at gætte deres respektive nationaliteter. Etnisk og nationalt tilhørsforhold var vigtigt for eleverne og blev kommunikeret verbalt, men også med påklædning eller flag; fx til SKGs kulturfest, hvor eleverne tog deres traditionelle klædedragter på og bandt nationalflag på ryggen som kapper, eller på klassens gruppechat på Instagram, hvis foto viste alle de flag, som klassens elever repræsenterede – en hyldest til elevernes forskellighed. Gennem Nat-klassens praksisser bliver det tydeligt at kategorier konstrueres i forskellige situeretheder, og at det at være "etnisk minoritet" kan være en monokategori, som står i kontrast til den anden monokategori af "de hvide danskere", eller en mere nuanceret kategori, hvor forskellige etniske minoriteter understøtter individualitet. Intersektionalitetsperspektivet åbner her op for en sensitiverende analyse, hvor det ikke på forhånd er givet hvordan sociale differentieringsformer spiller sammen eller skal forstås i et givent empirisk felt, og hvor gensidige konstitueringsformer ofte kan være modsætningsfyldte (Jensen & Christensen, 2020). Med andre ord, skaber intersektionaliteten plads til en forståelse af 'etnicitet' som både differentierende og integrerende i elevernes identitetsforhandlinger.

I Samf-klassen syntes etnicitet at spille en anden rolle. Selvom 8 af klassens 30 elever havde etnisk minoritetsbaggrund, så var der ikke samme fokus på elevernes individuelle tilhørsforhold. Skønt jeg havde god kontakt til og snakkede meget med især tre af klassens piger med etnisk minoriseret baggrund, så snakkede vi ikke om deres eller deres forældres

baggrund. Jeg hørte hverken eleverne selv eller deres klassekammerater omtale etniske tilhørsforhold eller specifikke nationalstater. I stedet vil jeg argumentere for, at etnicitet som identitetsmarkør bidrog til to forskellige diskurser i Samf-klassen. Den ene diskurs trak på en intersektionel sammenkobling mellem etnicitet og religion, hvor eleverne satte lighedstegn mellem "anden-etnisk" og "muslim". Sammenstillingen af etnicitet og religion er udbredt i hverdagsdiskurser i det danske samfund også udenfor gymnasiet, hvor brugen af begreber som "indvandrer", "Ikke-vestlig", "muslim" – og særligt i uddannelsesinstitutioner; "to-sproget" – bruges nærmest synonymt og til at andetgøre i forhold til kategorien "dansker" (Hervik, 2002; Khawaja & Jaffe-Walter, 2024). I Samf-klassen fik intersekteringen mellem "anden-etnisk" og "muslim" især betydning for forklaringen af den sociale opdeling i klassen, hvor nogle elever deltog i sociale arrangementer og fester udenfor gymnasiet, mens andre ikke gjorde:

> "Ryan: Halima og Asma, de drikker ikke, og de kommer heller ikke til fest, selvom det er deres bedste venner, der holder det, fordi de sådan, måske ville de komme forbi og sige hej til for eksempel Livas fødselsdag, havde de sagt, men de kom ikke alligevel. Men de holder sig generelt uden for det, og det er det samme med Lila og Aaliyah. (…) Men altså, sådan, vi laver ikke så meget, vi har ikke rigtig lavet noget med hele klassen, fordi når man har prøvet fx til sommer og så inviterer folk over i parken, der har det jo også ofte været med syn på, at folk ville gerne drikke (…), så jeg tror, dét holder lidt nogen folk fra at komme (…) [Et arrangement] hvor alle 29 kommer, det tvivler jeg meget på. Fordi ofte hvis det er noget, hvor man tænker, at hele klassen skal lave noget, så vil det være noget med at drikke. Så kan man allerede rule de her [muslimske elever] out (…)"

Som Ryan indikerer, var alkohol en hovedkomponent i mange af samf-elevernes sociale arrangementer eller fester uden for gymnasiet. Flere af klassens etniske minoritetselever deltog ikke og forventedes ikke at deltage, i festerne[2], fordi der var en implicit sammenkædning mellem at være etnisk minoritet, muslim, og ikke at feste. Denne forståelse, som ikke var begrænset til Samf-klassen, blev også tydelig i eleven Nadias oplevelse af at blive udskammet, fordi hun som muslim godt kunne lide at feste sammen med sin gruppe af ikke-muslimske og etnisk danske veninder fra klassen. I et fokusgruppeinterview fortalte Nadia, hvordan en gruppe 1.g'ere, som hun og to andre piger fra Samf-klassen var tutorer for, havde reageret da Nadia i forbindelse med en quiz havde fortalt, at hun ikke var den mindst festglade af de tre:

> "Filippa: (…) Vi havde lavet en Jeopardy til dem, hvor de skulle gætte sådan noget om os. Og så var det sådan, "Hvem fester mindst?". Og så var de sådan, "Ej, Nadia, fester du?" og bla bla bla.
>
> Nadia: Ja, hallo, jeg gik hjem og græd til min mor. Fordi jeg var sådan… De begyndte at råbe "haram, haram" hele tiden (…) Og nogle af dem, som jeg var tutor for dem i GF, han råber sådan, at "Nadia, hvad laver du? Haram" (…) Og sådan noget dér. Der var en pige, der sagde "hun ser whitewashed ud". Og så var jeg bare sådan, at jeg vil bare gerne hjem. Kan vi ikke bare give dem fri? For jeg var lige ved at græde, fordi jeg var sådan."

Jeg mener ikke, at Nadia som muslimsk elev, der deltager i fester med alkohol, blot skal forstås som en undtagelse fra reglen. Staunæs argumenterer for at se på "skæve" elever som grænsefigurer, der kan være interessante i fremanalysen af samspillet mellem forskelssættende og sammenfiltrede kategorier (Staunæs, 2003). Reaktionen på det usædvanlige i, at Nadia både er muslim og fester, fremhæver at eleverne sædvanligvis sætter klart skel mellem 'muslim' og 'fester'. Det er denne diskurs, som i Samf-klassen betyder, at der er en opdeling mellem dem, der deltager i festerne og dem, der ikke gør. I modsætning hertil, havde Nat-klassen, hvor 25 af 26 elever er muslimer, afholdt flere sociale arrangementer som cafébesøg, filmhygge, skøjteture eller andet, der ikke involverede fest og alkohol.

De 1.g-elever, som havde udskammet Nadia, var

selv muslimer, og episoden, der tydeligvis påvirkede Nadia meget, kan også ses som en forklaring på, hvorfor der ikke er flere grænse-figurer som Nadia – og fx ikke en eneste i Nat-klassen – idet den er udtryk for de klart afgrænsede forventninger, der knytter sig til kategorien 'muslim' og som deles af langt de fleste elever på SKG. Nadia, som grænsefigur i en illegitim intersektion mellem de to kategorier 'muslim' og 'fester', illustrerer den strukturelle diskrimination som er indlejret i en ungdomskultur, hvor fester og alkohol er uadskillelige og ekskluderende for de elever, der subjektiveres med kategorien 'muslim'. At udskamningen af Nadia fandt sted i mødet med elever, der ikke gik i Samf-klassen, er imidlertid også signifikant. Halima og Asma, der ikke var tutorer og først hørte om episoden, da Nadia og Filippa fortalte om det under vores fokusgruppe-interview den efterfølgende dag, var begge stærkt forargede over 1.g'ernes opførsel:

> "Nadia: Det var en virkelig dårlig oplevelse. Halima: Det er dét, man ikke må. Nadia: Ja, judge. Præcis. (…) Halima: Altså det er jo, at de prøver at være muslimer, fordi muslimer opfører sig ikke sådan dér. Nadia: Præcis. (…) Halima: Fordi muslimer må ikke opføre sig sådan her. Nadia: De må ikke dømme, hvilket også... Halima: Man skal virkelig holde sig til sig selv. Nadia: Ja, præcis. Halima: Og fokusere på at blive bedre selv. Nadia: Det er sådan med alle religioner. Hold dig til dig selv. Det var sådan mellem dig og Gud, agtigt. Hvor det var sådan, dét der var ikke mellem dig og Gud. Det var os alle sammen, der sad."

Pigernes afstandtagen fra 1.g'ernes opførsel og deres pointering af det "u-muslimske" i at blande sig i andres liv og fordømme deres valg, er også en tilslutning til den fælles forståelse af at "her skal være plads til alle og vi dømmer ikke hinanden". Denne forståelse udgjorde grundlaget for den anden etnicitetsrelaterede diskurs i Samf-klassen, en *diversitets-diskurs*. Her var forskellige etniciteter en komponent, der bidrog til diversitet – en kvalitet, som var vigtig for mange af eleverne i Samf-klassen, både elever med etnisk minoritets- og majoritetsbaggrund. Flere gav på forskellig vis udtryk for, at det var vigtigt at omgås mennesker, der var anderledes end dem selv, fx i forhold til etnicitet eller religion:

> "Lyn: Efter at have været på en efterskole, som var meget koncentreret i et bestemt slags miljø, så havde jeg også brug for at komme ud og få det der virkelighedschok og rent faktisk møde mennesker. For hvis jeg havde gået på [et andet gymnasium], så havde jeg ikke mødt så mange forskellige mennesker, som jeg har mødt her på SKG. Altså, jeg er rigtig glad for, at SKG er sådan et diverst gymnasie. Jeg synes, det er rigtig fedt. Det der med rent faktisk at møde folk i det der med, for eksempel, nu er der rigtig mange folk med anden etnisk baggrund. (…) Hvor jeg synes, det er vigtigt, at man får de her sådan livsting, livsoplevelser med, hvordan det er at være blandt mennesker, som ikke ligner en selv."

> "Asma: Vi har også snakket med både Filippa og Ingrid om religionerne.
>
> Halima: Asma og jeg taler ret meget om religion, og nogle gange sidder de og lytter.
>
> Filippa: Jeg føler også, at de hjælper rigtig meget, fordi vi alle er nysgerrige på, hvordan vi alle sammen opfatter vores religion. Vi vil gerne høre mere om det.
>
> Asma: Ja, fordi sådan… vi forstår også hinanden bedre. Vi er meget åbne overfor hinanden. Vi er forskellige typer, men vi lærer hinanden at kende. Vi lærer hinanden at kende på grund af det."

> "Ryan: Vores klasse som helhed er meget åben. Man kunne næsten sige, at det giver mening, vi går jo i Samf-klassen, men generelt er vi bare meget åbensindede. Der er mange ting, hvor hvis jeg ikke gik i klassen, men jeg forestillede mig, at jeg gik inde i klassen, (…), så af fordomme, så ville jeg for eksempel forvente, at Asma og Halima

> ikke ville acceptere mig, fordi jeg er transkønnet, og jeg er queer, og bla bla bla. Men jeg snakker **så** godt med dem begge to (…) hvor jeg måske ikke havde forventet det, men alle er så åbne over for generelt ting og generelle mennesker."

De tre citater fra interviews med samf-elever viser, at eleverne lægger vægt på diversitet og ser det som både vigtigt og givtigt at være sammen med og være venner med andre, der er forskellige fra dem selv. Lyn siger, at de trængte til et "virkelighedschok" efter at have været i et meget homogent queermiljø på sin efterskole, og at de sætter pris på diversiteten blandt eleverne på SKG, fordi det giver "livsoplevelser" at være blandt mennesker, der ikke er som dem selv. Nadia, Halima, Fillippa og Asma applauderer deres religiøse diversitet, og Ryan understreger Samf-klassens generelle åbenhed og eksemplificerer med at fordomme om dikotomier mellem muslimske elever og queer elever ikke bliver fyldestgjort i Samf-klassen.

De to klasser bruger således etnicitetskategorien i forskellige intersekteringer. Grundlæggende operer eleverne i Nat-klassen med to forskellige etnicitets-relaterede diskurser i deres identitetsarbejde: Med afsæt i en diskurs, der fremhæver individuelle nationaliteter og etniciteter, kan nat-eleverne distingvere og individualisere sig selv og hinanden indadtil i klassen. Når de trækker på den anden diskurs, hvor eleverne anvender den samlende kategori "anden-etnisk", tjener etnicitet til at illudere en uniformitet for at skabe enhed og fællesskab udadtil til andre klasser og SKG. I Samf-klassen er det derimod homogeniteten i etniciteter, der fremhæves i en diskurs, hvor diversitet og mangfoldighed er i høj kurs, og der sættes en dyd i at omfavne det, der ikke er normativt eller følger majoriteten – det være sig etnisk, religiøst, kønnet. I Samf-klassen er etnicitet og religion to intersekterende identitetskategorier, hvilket skaber en dikotomi mellem de ikke-muslimske majoritetselever og de muslimske minoriserede elever, hvor de muslimske elever positioneres som andetgjorte eller "ikke-danske" gennem en forståelse af dem som ikke-festere. Samtidig bidrager forskellige etniciteter og religioner til diversitets-diskursen, der understøtter samf-elevernes selvforståelse og gør det muligt at positionere sig som åbne og inkluderende. Eller med Lyns ord: "Jeg tror, hvis man skal bruge boomer-sprog, vil man nok sige at vi er woke-folk."

I ovenstående citater indikerer både Lyn og Ryan, der begge betegner sig som queer og er hhv. non-binær og transkønnet, at der eksisterer en spænding eller et umiddelbart modsætningsforhold mellem kategorierne 'etnisk minoritet' eller 'muslim' og 'queer', hvilket leder os videre til at se på forskellige intersekteringer af køn som identitetskategori på SKG.

KØN I INTERSEKTIONER

På SKG bevæger eleverne sig rundt mellem forskellige lokaler og starter "forfra" med at indtage og placere sig i lokalet ved hvert modul. Det betyder, at der 3-4 gange dagligt sker en – ofte ikke-artikuleret – forhandling af, hvem der sidder hvor og sammen med hvem. Staunæs pointerer, at elever i skolen reguleres gennem den fysiske udformning af steder, men også indtager stederne og interagerer med hinanden ud fra normer, værdier, sociale kategorier og mulige subjektiveringer. Elevernes gentagne praksisser og ageren i rum og lokaliteter er udtryk for deres indbyrdes relationer såvel som skolelivets etniske og kønnede relationer og subjektpositioner (Berisha, 2023; Staunæs, 2004). I Nat-klassen, hvor alle elever identificerede sig som enten 'dreng' eller 'pige', etablerede eleverne en relativ fast fysisk opdeling mellem kønnene. Klassens fire drenge satte sig som hovedregel samlet i undervisningen – gerne ude til siden på enten bagerste eller forreste række eller ved et separat bord. Skulle der laves gruppearbejde, var de fire drenge også altid i en gruppe for sig selv. De mange piger virkede til at placere sig mere tilfældigt, at "blande kortene" og lave nye konstellationer med jævne mellemrum. Adskillelsen mellem klassens piger og drenge var medkonstituerende for en diskurs, hvor drenge og piger positioneres dikotomisk. Også uden for undervisningen, betød denne diskurs at de fire drenge ofte var ekskluderet fra klassefællesskabet, som for pigerne i praksis var

det samme som pige-fællesskabet. Fx arrangerede et par af pigerne en tur til Malmø, der blev omtalt som et klassearrangement, men kun inkluderede klassens piger. Turen viser, hvordan drengene blev ekskluderet af pigerne, men der var også tilfælde, hvor drengene selv valgte ikke at deltage – fx til kulturfesten, hvor de fire drenge fra Nat-klassen ikke deltog i klassens fællesspisning, men i stedet dukkede op til arrangementet efterfølgende. Både pigernes og drengenes praksis understøttede således klassens kønssegmenterede fællesskab. Elevernes kønsopdelte praksis beror på en intersektering mellem kategorierne 'køn' og 'religion', hvor de racialt minoriserede muslimske elever forventes at gøre køn på en bestemt måde, der knytter sig til forestillinger om kategorien 'muslim':

> "Karolina: Når jeg snakker med Shandana og Bilan, så ved jeg også selv, at jeg har flere drengevenner. Det har vi snakket om. Men det er også fordi, at nu har Shandana en fætter, som… der er et eller andet med ham. Han er ikke hendes rigtige fætter, så hun må ikke ses med ham. For sine forældre. Sådan alene. Så på den måde ved jeg også, at jeg har flere drengevenner end dem. Så jeg tror også, at det har noget med det at gøre. Så det er sådan de er vokset op."

Her udtrykker Karolina, som er født i Litauen og udgør Nat-klassens eneste ikke-muslim, en ellers uudtalt, implicit forståelse, som deles af eleverne i Nat-klassen; at muslimske drenge og piger i gymnasiealderen ikke skal være venner, at deres forældre misbilliger det, og at det er en grundlæggende præmis – sådan er man vokset op. Her kommer flere sammenvævede og gensidigt influerende kategorier i spil, og kombinationen af alder, etnicitet, religion, køn og seksualitet bliver afgørende for, hvem man kan og bør være venner med for at kunne indtage diskursens legitime subjektpositioner. Også i Staunæs' undersøgelse af udskolingselever, var etnicitet, køn og seksualitet forbundne kategorier:

> (…) der er noget, man kan, og noget, man ikke kan, når de kategorier, man befolker er hh. Hvid/etnisk dansk og sort/etnisk anden. Reguleringen af seksualitet har ikke bare en kønnet dimension, men endvidere en etnisk gennemfarvning der **strammes** fra barndommen og ind i ungdommen. (Staunæs, 2004, s. 225, fremhævning som i kilden)

Staunæs påpeger også at der i denne regulering af køn er indbygget et heteroseksuelt imperativ, som fører til en udbredelse af homofobiske handlinger blandt eleverne (Staunæs, 2004). Den obligatoriske heteroseksualitet (Rich, 1980) er også fundamentet for dreng><pige-opdelingen af eleverne i Samfklassen, hvor jeg også oplevede homofobiske eller nedladende kønnede kommentarer blandt elever, eksempelvis med brugen af "bøsse" eller "luder" som skældsord. Synkront med den obligatoriske heteroseksualitet var der også en skarp opdeling mellem det maskuline og det feminine kønsudtryk. Især det maskuline køn kunne og kunne *ikke* gøres på en bestemt måde i forhold til påklædning. Nat-klassens drenge gik altid i sorte, grå eller hvide bukser og t-shirts, ofte i form af træningstøj af mærker som Adidas eller Nike. De brugte rygsække og gik gerne med kasket. De havde aldrig makeup eller neglelak på, gik ikke med spraglet tøj eller skuldertasker og havde ikke langt hår – tendenser som udfordrer konventionelle maskulinitetsudtryk, og som ellers sås hos flere af de etnisk danske drenge på SKG. Den konventionelle maskulinitetsforståelse blev understøttet af Nat-klassens piger, som det eksempelvis blev tydeligt, da jeg var med klassen inde for at se en forestilling, hvor publikum bestod af 2.g-klasser fra flere sjællandske gymnasier:

> Før vi går ind, står vi udenfor og venter – der er rigtig mange gymnasielever fra flere forskellige gymnasier. En gruppe går forbi. Shandana og Karolina fniser, kigger på hinanden, løfter øjenbryn og vender øjne. Karolina er helt chokeret over deres påklædning. Hun griner og holder sig for munden "Ej ej ej. Men. Bukser og nederdel ud over. En dreng! Det kan man da ikke!!" (Uddrag af feltnoter)

Pigernes blanding af chok og vantro ved synet af en

dreng i nederdel illustrerer en maskulinitetsforståelse, hvor 'dreng' og 'nederdel' er gensidigt udelukkende. Sådan er det imidlertid ikke i Samf-klassen. Mens Nat-klassens elever praktiserer en fysisk og social opdeling mellem drenge og piger og sætter klare grænser for, hvordan man fx klæder sig i henhold til kategorierne, er intersekteringer mellem kønnede kategorier anderledes i Samf-klassen. I tillæg til 'dreng' og 'pige' er der i Samf-klassen elever, der identificerer sig med kategorierne 'non-binær' og 'transkønnet dreng'. Hertil kommer en mindre snæver ramme for hvordan eleverne gør køn, ikke mindst hvem man kan være venner med og hvordan man kan klæde sig når man positionerer sig som 'dreng'. Selvom der også i Samf-klassen kun er få drenge (5 ud af 30 elever), så udgør drengene ikke en isoleret gruppe. De indgår i forskellige vennegrupper med piger og non-binære elever. Blandt samf-drengene er der heller ikke et uniformt tøj-kodeks som i Nat-klassen, men derimod en stor diversitet i beklædning. Nogle af drengene gik med tøj og accessories som perlekæder, lyserøde t-shirts, mavebluser, blondeskjorter eller neglelak, der fungerede som non-verbale erklæringer om en udvidelse af konventionelle maskulinitetsforståelser. Med udgangspunkt i en forståelse af identitetspolitik som en kamp om anerkendelsen af identiteter og identitetsmarkører (Thorup, 2022), vil jeg argumentere for at det identitetsarbejde, som samf-eleverne gør, også er et udtryk for en modstand mod fremherskende majoritetsbestemte normativitetsforståelser af køn. Der er som sagt flere elever i Samf-klassen, der ikke identificerer sig inden for de konventionelle binære kønskategorier kvinde/pige og mand/dreng, men størstedelen af eleverne i klassen er ciskønnede. Når jeg alligevel hævder, at Samf-klassen tager del i en identitetspolitisk kamp, så er det fordi jeg også oplevede hvordan alle samf-eleverne – om end på forskellig vis og i varierende grad – tog afstand fra eller arbejdede på at gøre op med de konventionelle kønsdiskurser: Flere af klassens elever er en del af queer-miljøet og medlem af SKGs LGBTQ+udvalg. I klassen er der vide rammer for, hvordan du kan klæde dig, uden at dine klassekammerater sætter spørgsmålstegn ved din kønnede identitetskategori. I samfundsfagsdiskussioner bliver der råbt vagt i gevær ved eksempler på kønsdiskrimination på arbejdsmarkedet. Eleverne er venner på tværs af køn, og på klassens ekskursion med overnatning var der flere sovesale med blandede køn. Den identitetspolitiske kamp om kønsdiskursen var både eksplicit og implicit og dukkede op i stort og småt:

> Idrætsdag. Samf-klassen sidder ved en post og venter på at det bliver deres tur til at dyste. Imens kigger vi på de to klasser, der er i gang. Jeg sidder ved siden af Alberte, Freja, Laura og Clara. Clara ruller med øjnene og siger "Jeg hader ham dér". Jeg kigger på den dreng, hun hentyder til. Han er del af en klasse, der næsten kun består af drenge. De har smidt trøjerne og er i bar overkrop. Drengen "highfiver" en anden dreng ved at hoppe op og støde brystkasserne sammen. Klassens drenge brøler og poserer med spændte overarme. Drengene råber "U-u-ubesejret", da de vinder dysten. "Jeg kan slet ikke have det dér, jeg får det helt dårligt", siger Clara. (Uddrag af feltnoter)



Laptop 1



Laptop 2

> Jeg køber dagens ret i kantinen og sætter mig op i det lokale, hvor Samf-klassen skal være. Hyggesnakker med elever. Victor, Ingrid, Ryan, Nadia venskabsdriller hinanden. På et tidspunkt siger Ryan noget til Ingrid og slutter sætningen med "bitch" (han siger det på samme måde som de ofte siger "bro" og "bror"). Ingrid siger "Jeg kan ikke lide at du kalder mig bitch". Ryan siger "Okay, det har vi så fået established nu. Det kalder jeg dig ikke fremover." Lidt senere siger han "bitch" til Nadia (på samme måde som til Ingrid, som afslutning på sætning), og de har en snak om, om man kan kalde hinanden det mellem venner. De synes det er negativt, fordi det er et skældsord, der kun bruges om kvinder. Nadia siger "Du må gerne kalde mig det", men Ryan siger "Jeg har ikke lyst til at kalde dig det, fordi jeg ved at du ikke mener det." (Uddrag af feltnoter)

Claras afstandtagen fra alpha-hannerne og macho-kulturen blandt parallelklassens drenge, computerne dekoreret med queer-venlige budskaber og elevernes diskussion om brugen af kønnede skældsord er alle eksempler på den følsomhed omkring og forståelse af kønspolitiske bevægelser, der fungerede som bagtæppe for klassens identitetspolitiske kamp. Clara, der er cis kønnet, heteroseksuel og tilhører den, ifølge flere elever, "mest almindelige" vennegruppe, kæmper ikke en personlig kamp mod kønsstereotyper, men viser med sin væmmelse, at hun tager afstand fra de konventionelle maskulinitetsforståelser og skaber dermed plads til de af hendes klassekammerater, som falder udenfor køns- og seksualitetsnormerne. Det er sådanne praksisser, der får transkønnede Ryan og non-binære Lyn til at sige, at klassen er "meget åben" eller "stille og rolig med sådan nogle ting" og mig til at sige, at klassens elever som helhed bidrager til et kønspolitisk identitetsopgør.

DEN FORSIMPLENDE DEBAT OM DE KOMPLEKSE FÆLLESSKABER

Gennem artiklen har jeg forsøgt at vise, hvordan eleverne på et dansk gymnasium konstruerer identiteter på individ- og gruppeniveau i forskellige intersekteringer af køn, etnicitet og religion. I disse situerede konstruktioner tillægges kategorierne mangfoldige betydninger, der både får in- og ekskluderende effekt på elevfællesskaber. Diversitet i fx etnicitet kan i visse kontekster fungere samlende, mens de i andre fungerer segmenterende. Forskelle mellem elever kan både udgøre fundamentet for samhørighed og for segregering. Artiklen bidrager til den sparsomme forskning af elevdiversitet i danske gymnasier med et unikt og nutidigt empirisk indblik i en gruppe gymnasieelevers hverdagslige identitetsforhandlinger. Som forsker må man imidlertid gøre sig overvejelser om, hvordan ens forskning kan få betydning udenfor den tiltænkte ramme, og i dette tilfælde hvorvidt mit arbejde kan medvirke til en reproduktion af stereotyper såsom den heteroseksuelle, konservative muslim eller den hvide, woke, non-binære unge, der hylder diversiteten, men alligevel skaber ekskluderende fællesskaber omkring druk. Jeg medgiver, at en del af det empiriske materiale potentielt kan (mis)bruges til at reproducere stereotype forestillinger om unge med etnisk minoritetsbaggrund og således puste til ilden i debatten om elevsammensætning i gymnasierne. Formålet med artiklen er imidlertid stik modsat, idet jeg har forsøgt at vise, at denne debat beror på en snæver forståelse af identitetskategorierne etnicitet, køn og religion som ensidige størrelser med bestemte betydninger for unges fællesskaber. Med Nat- og Samf-klassen som empiriske eksempler, har jeg med en intersektionel analyse vist, at elevers forståelser og forhandlinger af sådanne kategorier er kontekstafhængige og processuelle. Den kritiske læser vil måske hævde, at analysen blot har fremstillet nye eller andre, men lige så statiske eller stereotype, forståelser af identitetskategorier som fx etnicitet eller måske af samf- og nat-elever. Jeg medgiver, at en skriftlig fremstilling (som uundgåeligt er en fastfrysning) af en aldrig stillestående proces, kan give indtryk af identitetskategorier som noget statisk, der kan beskrives på et begrænset antal måder. Hensigten med at vise, hvordan eleverne i min kvalitative undersøgelse på et enkelt gymnasium konstruerer og forhandler identiteter i forskellige kontekster, er imidlertid hverken at reproducere eller

modbevise stereotype forestillinger om elevgrupper. I den tid, der er gået siden jeg var på SKG, har de samme elever dannet nye fællesskaber med andre anvendelser og intersekteringer af identitetskategorier, mens andre elever vil have gjort det samme på andre måder. Pointen er således, at man slet ikke kan forudsige, hvordan elever konstruerer fællesskaber ud fra kategorier som etnicitet, køn eller religion. At eleverne tillægger kategorierne multiple, selvmodsigende, rodede betydninger og anvender dem forskelligt og kontekstafhængigt, betyder at deres fællesskabsformationer hverken kan forudsiges, fremmes eller forhindres på baggrund af kategorier som eksempelvis etnicitet. Som Bundgaard påpeger, er man som forsker, der undersøger et politiseret felt, somme tider nødt til at acceptere risikoen for at bidrage til en diskursiv lukning, som man ikke selv kan stå inde for (Bundgaard, 2009, s. 199). Eftersom antropologiens mål er at give indblik i det levede liv, som det leves af mennesker, må antropologen sommetider vise enkeltindividers handlinger selvom det kan stille dem i et dårligt lys eller få negative konsekvenser for en gruppe mennesker, for at fremføre en analytisk pointe. Således " (…) må antropologer også indenfor minoritetsforskningen udfolde de historier, der potentielt kan resultere i en diskursiv lukning, i anerkendelse af den kompleksitet, der kendetegner alt socialt liv." (Bundgaard, 2009, s. 203–204). Min pointe med både at vise de empiriske eksempler, hvor eleverne læner sig op ad negative stereotyper og eksempler på det modsatte, er at illustrere hvordan det sociale identitetsarbejde, der udspiller sig på gymnasiet netop er broget, rodet, flertydigt og komplekst – i modsætning til hvordan det fremstilles i den offentlige debat og politiske diskurs. Slutteligt peger artiklen altså på behovet for at gentænke institutionelle forståelser af elevdiversitet og på behovet for mere forskning, der kan bibringe viden om hvilke faktorer, der spiller ind på elevers fællesskabsformationer i gymnasiet.

NOTES

[1] "Begreberne "ikke-vestlig baggrund" og "ikke-vestlig herkomst" bruges både af nyhedsmedier, af Danmarks Statistik og af ministerier (se fx Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2022a) uden at der imidlertid bliver knyttet en definition til brugen af termerne. I artiklen her bruges "ikke-vestlig" med reference til statistiske opgørelser, men jeg er bevidst om at brugen af kategorier og begreber er forbundet med eksisterende magtpositioner som eksempelvis beskrevet af Peter Hervik (Hervik, 2002)."

[2] Dansk forskning konkluderer, at alkohol både kan inkludere i og ekskludere fra fællesskaber, men at alkoholens og festkulturens dominerende rolle blandt unge kan forstærke en eksklusion og marginalisering af etniske minoritetsunge, der ikke drikker – ofte med en religiøs begrundelse i Islam (Skrowny, 2005).

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The Danish Way: Abortion in the Public Discourse

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ESSAY OUT OF ISSUE

On June 1, 2025, Denmark extended its abortion legislation: women[1] from the age of 15 (previously 18) can now terminate a pregnancy until week 18 of gestation (previously week 12) without requiring consultation and approval.[2] In doing so, Denmark positioned itself on the liberal end of a broad spectrum of views on abortion. As in Sweden, women can now choose to have an abortion until week 18 of gestation without requiring consultation and approval.

By contrast, in my home country Germany, for example, elective abortion remains subject to restrictive legislation. A renewed attempt to change the controversial Section 218 of the German Criminal Code was rejected in February 2025 by the legal committee of the Bundestag. Section 218 stipulates that "abortion is a punishable offence for all concerned (pregnant woman, physician, instigator, assistant)" unless specific conditions apply, such as mandatory counselling, medical grounds or grounds related to a crime (Bundesministerium). Abortion in Germany thus continues to be criminalized, but is typically not penalized.

A few days before the change of legislation in Denmark, I was struck by a Facebook post in which Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen commented on the change of law in Denmark. I was equally surprised to read the responses her post received. In this post, Frederiksen celebrated the new legislation with evocative, almost radical language: She spoke of a step forward (while other countries move backwards); she highlighted her pride, the fight that had led to victory and Denmark's uncompromising stance on women's rights.[3] I recognized in her words a familiar notion of Danish national pride, a sense that Denmark enjoys the role of the trailblazer. I did not recognize what I had also come to know about Danish culture, namely its willingness to compromise and seek a consensus. What also made me curious was the simplistic, nuance-free language of battle and victory on a highly complex issue that I knew had been controversially discussed in Denmark in recent years when the voices around a potential expansion of the legislation grew louder.

The strong emotions that her post raised on Facebook seemed to confirm my sense that something about this post was odd. Roughly 25% of the reactions to Frederiksen's post represented an "angry face" or "sad face" (that is, 3.300 out of ca. 13.400).[4] More than 6.000 written messages comment on a variety of issues, and those that object to Frederiksen's praise consider, among others, the new law as a step back, they bring up the fetus' rights and describe the new law as cruel and inhumane. I am aware that such comments should not be overrated and that social media and digital spaces more generally tend to incite outrage and hatred. Still, a survey in May 2025 (Ritzau) shows that only 51% percent of Danish people supported the expansion of the existing abortion rights from 12 to 18 weeks while 31% were against it.[5] The approval was equally tight among the members of the Danish Ethics Council: 9 out of 17 members voted in favor of an expansion to 18 weeks; 5 felt more comfortable with 15 weeks; 4 wanted to keep the 12 weeks (Heissel, 2023). Frederiksen was thus celebrating with a rather narrow majority of Danes.

As an international Medical Humanities researcher working on cultural meaning-making in the context of health care, something did not add up, and I was curious to speak with Danes who have a deeper insight into the Danish abortion discourse. I reached out to five interviewees who have publicly spoken about abortion in Denmark before to ask them: What do you make of the incongruities I had stumbled upon? Are those even contradictions? The interviewees consist of a researcher, two political activists, an artist and an employee in the civil society sector. They had recommended each other as discussants who could help me find answers to my questions.

SIMPLE BINARIES?

First, some more facts though. Danish people's views on abortion are nuanced. According to Det Etiske Råd (the Danish Ethics Council), most Danes believe that fetuses are entitled to some degree of protection. This right to protection is considered less problematic at an early stage of pregnancy and more important at a

later stage. Overall, Danes thus have a "gradualistisk opfattelse" – a gradualist view – regarding the moral and ethical aspects of abortion (Det Etiske Råd, 2016), which research confirms (e.g. Uldall, 2015). Evidently, this nuance was missing in Frederiksen's victory language.

Before I continue, I want to clarify that other Danish leaders have used this type of language as well.[6] When I primarily reference Frederiksen and her language use in the following pages, I do so because hers was the first example I encountered. I also want to disclose that I have a long-standing research interest in victory and fight language and have previously authored a book about the battle metaphor in relation to illness experiences (2022). In health care research, the battle or war metaphor is ubiquitous but also controversial. On the one hand, the notion of battle is considered stigmatizing, reductive and prescriptive because it demands a militaristic stance towards illness in which winning is the only option while losing or capitulating are seen as shameful. On the other hand, the continued use of this metaphor suggests that it expresses something that feels true and may even be empowering to people living with illness. To me, Frederiksen's victory language not only suggests that the wrestling for an ethically sound solution was like a fight or battle, it also, and more problematically so, divides people and political arguments into winners and losers.

While I saw a problem, one interviewee from the civil society sector[7] offered a different view. He brought up the historical context of the difficulties that women's rights advocates have faced, and he emphasized that the rising number of people who eventually came to agree with the possibility of a more permissive legislation (see fn 5) has been the result of hard work and steadfast dedication to the cause. Therefore, it was through debates and continued negotiations that resulted in the law being passed in Folketinget with 74 votes (and 29 voting 'no') (Folketinget, 2025). Speaking of a victory, he implied, signifies that the hard work paid off.

Rightly so, he also pointed out that this victory language is not unique to the abortion debate but rather a "spill-over" from how politicians commonly talk in the media.

He added that, from an advocate and civil society perspective, "the 'victory' framing isn't necessarily helpful. Doing public victory laps might inadvertently alienate some stakeholders, while potentially also weakening the credibility of a future critique of the adopted legislation."

An event at Arbejdermuseet, organized along with Sex & Samfund on the occasion of the new abortion law, illustrates how a more inclusive, future-oriented framework can look like (Arbejdermuseet, 2025). The event was called a "markering" – an occasion to signal or create visibility – and featured a program that recognized the significance of the legislative change but also a continued focus on remaining issues.[8] In short, a sense of victory need not exclude a critical distance to that victory.

Still, victory metaphors generate powerful emotions, not only on social media. In my conversation with Laura Kreutzfeldt Kristensen, the editor of the anthology *Abortfortællinger: 50 historier om den frie abort* (2023), she described a sense of annoyance. To her, the language constructs Denmark as a role model for other countries, which is problematic

> "because this is the first time that any changes have happened in 50 years. They still don't talk about how they want to secure the care around this system after changing the law. There is still a money problem. There is still a problem with resources, and healthcare professionals still need better pay. So, by speaking of a victory, they don't talk about those remaining issues and pretend as if there is no problem […] I get frustrated about that way of communicating because it feels like showing off."

Kerstin Hoffmann, a physician and communications secretary at *Retten til Liv*, for whom any abortion is morally wrong, also pointed to ongoing issues in the care of pregnant women, which the new law does not

address.

> "The whole rejoicing from the government and the celebration […] was very saddening for me because I think that on the principal level there's not that much of a difference between the fetus in the 12th week and in the 18th week. It's the same valuable person in my opinion. But I sense a cynicism in having an abortion of such a big fetus. You have a small person in your hand. I am a medical doctor myself and have seen miscarriages. It's so sad to celebrate that as a victory and to celebrate Denmark as somebody going forward. Why do we have to push the limit?"

Frustration is the predominant feeling that disability rights activist Sarah Glerup described when she explained to me that this type of language sends off the wrong message. Celebrating "fri abort" suggests that

> "we're all basically islands that can just do whatever we want, that we're not connected to other people or a specific context or a specific discourse. People overlook the fact that if you're pregnant and you are in a specific set of circumstances – those might be social circumstances or you're expecting a child with a disability –, then your choice is probably not going to be free. It's going to be based on a lot of other factors. […] I know a lot of doctors who are quite shocked if someone doesn't want a screening for Down syndrome or if a woman decides to not have an abortion when they find out."

The catchy victory language thus conceals the broader social, economic, moral and individual dimensions that abortion implies, generating affective binaries of national pride and celebration on the one hand, and frustration, anger and sadness on the other.

And there is more at stake. The people I have mentioned so far are policy professionals or public figures in the media with strong, fully formed opinions, whether as politicians, activists or political advisors. By contrast, a person in doubt, someone who feels betwixt and between on the issue of abortion, may feel intimidated and discouraged to speak up. She may even lack the words to express what she feels. There is a reason, after all, why the fight and battle metaphors for illness are so controversially discussed in health care research: While some cancer survivors do feel like winners, others do not because their survival came at a great cost and the lives they knew have been fundamentally upended (e.g. Thorsen, 2018). The latter will find it doubly difficult to speak: not only is the victory language inaccurate or only partially true, but its binary implications also make those who do not win into losers, the defeated.[9]

Experiences of intimidation resulting from uncertainty are also described by the women in *Abortfortællinger* (Kristensen, 2023). Choosing an abortion – which most insist was the right decision – shook their foundations, made them distrust their own bodies and the health care system and burdened them with a sense of shame, loss and grief (also see Wohlmann, 2026). Many struggled not only with a lack of words but also a lack of adequate narratives to represent their conflicting feelings. As Kristensen argues, there are only two types of stories about abortion in Danish culture: either the experience of an abortion is tough, or it is easy (Franceschi, 2021). There is nothing in between.

A final point about the battle and victory language: In her Facebook post, Mette Frederiksen situated Denmark within an international context where other countries move backwards. In the US, the discourse around abortion has been repeatedly framed as an "abortion war" (Solinger, 1998; Saletan, 2003). In addition, a "gender war" is allegedly being fought between radical feminists and Men's Rights activists. In the US, it seems that such polarizing language has become normalized, and its use comes at a cost. In the context of Denmark, it can imply that anyone who questions the Danish progress and victory narrative may risk being cast as an "enemy" of reproductive autonomy and women's rights more generally. Such a presumed "guilt" by association is energized, I believe, by language that operates with allegedly clear

binaries.

The binaries in the abortion discourse thus occur on the level of language, affect and narrative; and this threefold occurrence may explain why it can be difficult to speak about abortion in a nuanced way. It may also explain why there is still a taboo around abortion in Denmark. In a press release about the new legislation, Majbrit Berlau, the general secretary at *Sex & Samfund,* called out the silence that still exists around the topic of abortion; she also points to the importance of striving towards an important goal: "at sætte samtalen fri", that is, to free the conversation around abortion (Sex & Samfund, 2024).

But why is abortion a taboo in a country that has endorsed "fri abort" for more than 50 years? What is the nature of this taboo?

DANES DON'T TALK ABOUT ABORTION – OR DO THEY?

Taboos signal that something is avoided, maybe even repressed, forbidden and possibly stigmatized. In a 2018 opinion piece in *Kristeligt Dagblad*, historian Lau Sander Esbensen offers an explanation. He suggests that the dominant narrative of Danish abortion legislation has been that of "the story of success.". Any alternative account has been considered a direct or indirect attack on women's freedom, equality and independence. This gender-political argument (or "diktat"), so Esbensen, prematurely equates critical voices with a threat to "fri abort." With such a rigid assessment, nuance, ambivalence and ambiguity risk being marginalized or narrowed down to a (gender-) political issue.

This reasoning, if true, seems only a partial explanation of the Danish taboo. As I found out, abortion also uncomfortably jars with a Danish sense of propriety and decency. Several of my interviewees pointed to the importance of privacy in Danish culture and a Danish reluctance to talk about religion, salaries, health or sex in public. Abortion is no different in that respect. While such notions of propriety exist in other cultures as well, the Danish concept of 'hygge' is culturally specific. In Denmark, "at hygge sig," that is to feel comfortable, relaxed and cozy in the company of others, is considered a cultural value. It is even a source of national pride. A focus on 'hygge' suggests that the taboo around abortion is motivated by consideration and thoughtfulness: the aim is not to repress a difficult topic, but to create a safe space and protect the other.[10] And indeed, as Kerstin Hoffmann suggests, talking about abortion for real, that is without being vague or superficial, may entail uncomfortable, at times moral, questions that can quickly become personal, touch on individual beliefs and worldviews and may even hurt someone. However, my colleague Anette Søgaard Nielsen, a professor at SDU's health faculty and an expert on stigma, found this interpretation of 'hygge' culture too polite and suggested a different reading: What if Danish 'coziness' masks a tendency towards shyness and bashfulness? What if it is an excuse for conflict avoidance and evasiveness? What if these less noble features are simply *interpreted as* tolerance and open-mindedness? Most likely, the meaning of Danish 'hygge' is all of the above, and the reasons for why many Danes may avoid difficult topics – and whether this occurs consciously or unconsciously – are also context dependent and person specific.[11] The effect seems the same: silence around the individual experiences of abortion.

Gender stereotypes and cultural biases, despite Denmark's long history of feminist movements and focus on women's equality, may further contribute to that silence. The testimonies in *Abortfortællinger* (Kristensen, 2023) repeatedly address explicit and implicit assumptions about a woman's alleged promiscuity, irresponsibility and immaturity as the cause of her unplanned pregnancy. The female writers describe feelings of shame which are either internalized or triggered by their encounter with biased partners, parents, friends and health care professionals. In a vulnerable situation, the mere expectation of such stereotypes (or having to confront them or fend them off) can be disheartening and result in self-censorship. What is needed instead, as many of

the women in *Abortfortællinger* suggest, are attentive, non-judgmental listeners. People who can be witnesses to another person's doubts, potential crisis and suffering. None of this is easy or should be taken for granted.

What *is* taken for granted, by contrast, is that abortion is a non-issue in Denmark. This "selvfølge" (Kristensen, 2023, p. 92, 109) or normalization of abortion complicates any attempt to address the taboo around abortion, and maybe counter-intuitively so: Abortion may be a taboo in Denmark not *despite* but exactly *because* it is such a normal, natural part of the Danish self-image. To put it simply: What is there to talk about if it is the natural, reasonable (*fornuftige*) thing to do? (also see Kristensen, 2023, p. 93). As the interviewee from the civil society sector put it, the general tenor is: There *is* no issue with abortion in Denmark! Therefore, "Don't bother me with this!" The new law might even exacerbate the situation and lead to the common notion that the battle is over now that the new law is in place. As a result, the already existing attitude of "You do you! Go get your abortion. I don't really want to hear about it" might continue to downplay the need to have a serious conversation, he maintains.

Annie Ernaux, the French autobiographer, observes a similar paradox in *L'événement* (*Happening,* 2000), in which she describes her illegal abortion in the 1960s, about a decade before abortion was decriminalized in France in 1975. She argues that a new law that redresses the injustices of a prior regulation often silences its previous victims because it suggests that there is no longer anything to talk about. And yet, the abortion itself (and the complex experiences it generated) remained unforgettable for Ernaux and demanded to be narrated. Ernaux insists that she could do this only after the law had changed, as it afforded the discursive nuances she needed to adequately convey what had happened. By contrast, in the 1960s, a simplistic language and radical formulas determined what was sayable. In the midst of the political struggle over abortion, this type of rigid discourse thus helped shape "collective meanings" around abortion which, at the time, took priority. It seems as if there is never a good time to speak about abortion in nuanced ways.

There is one last and related point that emerged from my conversations, and it ties the legalization and normalization of abortion to a sense of national unity. The long and stable compromise on abortion in Denmark (Holm, 2023) has created a unified image: One country, one opinion. Following Turid Nolsøe, who wrote her PhD on the biopolitical media discourses on abortion between Denmark and the Faroe Islands (2023), this image of unity is important in Denmark for policy reasons. In our conversation she explained that it enables Denmark to position itself with an (alleged) unified front against other countries, such as the Faroe Islands, where abortion was illegal until December 2025..[12] The unified image allows Danes and Danish politicians to present their country as "evolved, modern, liberal, kind," Sarah Glerup adds. And, understandably, it enables the Danish prime minister to capitalize on the Danish self-image as a role model, a progressive, forward-moving nation and a source of pride. Abortion as a "selvfølge" amplifies this self-image: Abortion in Denmark is not only legal, it is *also* a non-issue.

Whether this view is accurate or not, it is the stuff that legends, myths and national visions are made of. And as we know from other countries, shiny images typically do not not match what is happening on the inside.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

My conversations have helped me clarify the many nuances in the Danish discourse on abortion. While it was my interest in contradictions and incongruencies that inspired these conversations, I have come to see them as a reasonable result of the fact that, on the topic of abortion, a whole range of meanings collide – biomedical, legal, ethical, spiritual, linguistic, cultural, political and subjective. To put it differently, cultural discourses on abortion are often contradictory exactly *because* the subject matter is so complex.

As with many other boundary experiences of human life, answers to some fundamental questions about abortion are still unknown, such as when does life begin? In the field of Medical Humanities, such a lack – of clear answers and irrefutable evidence – is considered a catalyst for extensive meaning-making practices by patients and carers, who draw on cultural resources like metaphors as well as cultural narratives and stereotypes to explain where symptoms and illnesses come from, what they mean and how they impact identities and social lives.[13] As a result, much of the teaching in Medical Humanities aims to convey that "the truth about any human experience is . . . that 'there is no single way it can be told'" and that, for this reason, a tolerance for ambiguity and paradox is vital (Hunsaker Hawkins & McEntyre, 2000, p. 14). Obviously, a pregnancy may have multiple, even contradictory semantic layers for a woman and her social environment. And for this reason, the Danish Etiske Råd recommends in its publication *Etik og sprogbrug – fra vugge til grav* to pay particular attention to the words used when speaking about pregnancy (Det Etiske Råd, 2012).[14]

I started these reflections with a focus on metaphors and binary oppositions that, to me, bear signs of an overly simplistic and maybe even radical style that seems inadequate in the Danish context on abortion. It is not my intention, however, to decry the use of this type of language and the narratives it invites. In my view, it is important to identify these forms of expression and be attentive to the issues they may entail. What seems equally important is a focus on the contradictions and ambiguities that this attention brings to the surface. In this sense, both the language and the contradictions are a seismograph, not necessarily for a bigger issue or, worse, a foreshadowing of impending doom or the crisis of a democratic, pluralistic discourse in an increasingly polarized world, but for something that is important, that requires careful parsing and curious inquiry.

This is not to trivialize problematic language and simplistic narratives. By contrast, a view across the Atlantic, where abortion has become one of the most polarizing and divisive issues even though most US Americans hold moderate views, is a reminder of what is at stake for women's rights and democratic societies more generally (see Wohlmann, 2025). Poland, too, seems to be hotly divided on the topic of abortion, among many other issues. At the same time, the use of problematic language and simplistic narratives should not be overrated. My research on the battle metaphor for illness experiences shows that even restrictive language and simplistic narratives can be used in varied, unpredictable and surprising ways (Wohlmann, 2022).

For all of these reasons, it is important to both look *at* these problematic forms of expression – to identify and to problematize – and then to look *beyond* or *through* them in an attempt to find out what *else* is expressed and what *more* can be found. The benefits (and necessity) of this second move are illustrated in a metaphor by German writer Jagoda Marinić in *Sanfte Radikalität* (2024; *Tender Radicality;* my translation): she suggests that the willingness to also look beyond or through problematic word choices prevents us from hardening, from becoming radical in response to radicality. The metaphor of hardness does not sit well with me as a researcher in the allegedly soft humanities. Still, beyond the metaphor, Marinić has a point.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to my colleagues Ida Aaskov Dolmer and Anette Søgaard Nielsen, who have been very generous with their time and feedback and who have helped me think through some of the arguments in this essay. I am also indebted to the interviewees for their valuable time and helpful insights.

[1] When I use the term "woman" in relation to pregnancy, it includes pregnant people who do not identify as women.

[2] By comparison: In the Nordic countries, only Iceland has a more permissive regulation (22 weeks). In Europe, the UK and Netherlands allow abortions up until 24 weeks (Jónasdóttir 2023/2024).

[3] The original Facebook post by Mette Frederiksen (April 24, 2025): "Mens andre lande tager et skridt tilbage – tager vi i dag et vigtigt skridt frem. Vi udvider kvinders ret til abort. For unge piger. Og for alle, når det gælder antal uger. Retten til selv at bestemme over sin egen krop – over sit liv og sin fremtid – det er en af de mest fundamentale rettigheder, der findes. Mit hjerte græder for de piger og kvinder, der har mistet den ret flere steder i verden. Hvor stærke kræfter ønsker at undertrykke og bestemme over kvindens krop. I dag sender vi et stærkt signal: Vi vil kæmpe for de sejre, vi har opnået. Og vi går ikke på kompromis. Tværtimod. Jeg er stolt af, at vi i Danmark viser en anden vej. At vi udvider kvinders abortrettigheder i stedet for at undergrave dem. Tak til alle jer, der har kæmpet for det – førhen og i dag "

[4] Last accessed on August 8, 2025.

[5] The approval rose from 13% in August 2022 to 47.6% in December 2023 (Sex & Samfund, 2023).

[6] For example, the General Secretary of Sex & Samfund Majbrit Berlau (Sex & Samfund, 2024) used the victory language, as well. Both Health Minister Sophie Løhde and Magnus Heunicke, minister for gender equality spoke of a "historisk dag" (a historical day), called for celebration and employed almost the same wording (a step forward, national pride) as Frederiksen (Sundhedspolitik 2025; Heunicke 2025).

[7] This interviewee wished to stay anonymous.

[8] The panel debate "Ny abortlov – fik vi løst alle problemerne?" ("The new abortion law – have we solved all the problems?") showcases a willingness to (self-)critically assess what has been won.

[9] Such an opposition of winners and losers raises more questions, as my colleague Ida Aaskov Dolmer reminds me: Frederiksen and others implicitly suggest that all Danes are winners because of the new legislation. Within the binary structure that their language suggests, where does this place people who are uncertain? Are they automatically "the opposition"? And in opposition to what? Abortion? The expanded law? Women's rights? Denmark as a role-model?

[10] In my Danish language school, for example, our teacher explained to us that among the possible exam topics for the final "studieprøve," abortion would certainly not be a topic. It's too personal. Given that exam situations can be very stressful, I got the sense that the avoidance of difficult topics is motivated by a consideration for the examinees.

[11] By discussing 'hygge,' I am just scratching the surface. The Danish consensus culture and the cultural uniformity and homogeneity that are often traced to the Danish Jante law offer additional layers of complexity to the Danish abortion discourse. For a nuanced discussion of Jante law, see for example Stigsgaard 2005, Madsen 2008.

[12] This positioning, as Nolsøe analyzes in her PhD thesis (2023), is interlaced with geo- and biopolitical discourses that draw on the colonial relationship between the Faroe Islands and Denmark, even though the Faroe Islands' status as a former colony is contested.

[13] There is ample research that traces such cultural meaning-making processes for diseases like the plague, tuberculosis, depression, HIV/AIDS and more recently endometriosis. Susan Sontag is one of many cultural critics, patients and researchers who have condemned these practices for being ultimately harmful. And yet, meaning-making in times of crises is as human as it gets.

[14] For example, expressions like a future child, a fetus, a fetal system, a fertilized egg, an embryo or amniotic tissue, each carry personal values and convey specific meanings and consequences, such as who needs protection and support (Det Etiske Råd, 2012, p. 15).

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Robots, Emotions, and the Lure of Complexity

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IN REVIEW

How That Robot Made Me Feel
Ericka Johnson
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2025. 269 pp.

Ericka Johnson's edited volume, *How That Robot Made Me Feel*, takes up the well-worn question of whether robots or machines can have emotions from a somewhat unconventional angle. Rather than focusing strictly on robots' emotional capabilities, or lack thereof, the book reverses the question by asking how robots make *us* feel, the reader included. This sounds simple enough, but the book pulls this 'us' apart almost immediately, as if by design: users, researchers, designers, and publics all play different roles across the volume, and whose emotions are at stake, how they are measured, and by whom they are interpreted are issues that none of the chapters settle in quite the same way. As Johnson recounts in the introduction, the motivation for the book grew from a moment of productive misunderstanding at a seminar where she and a roboticist discovered they meant entirely different things by the term 'emotions.' For the roboticist, emotions were signals to be read through, for example, facial movements captured by a webcam and mapped onto discrete categories through software. For Johnson, emotions were entangled with context, power, culture, and lived experience, irreducible to any such mapping. The nine chapters that follow approach this gap from positions so varied (critical race studies, cognitive science, design fiction, Buddhist philosophy, among others) that the gap itself, and how it manifests in each, becomes, I think, the book's most interesting intellectual provocation.

The volume positions itself at the intersection of several traditions, drawing most prominently on feminist affect theory and science and technology studies to challenge what it presents as the dominant paradigm in human-robot interaction research and affective computing: the model of discrete, universal, individually embodied emotions that can be computationally read and classified, derived mainly from Paul Ekman's work on basic emotions. A model that has, as it happens, been challenged within psychology itself for some time (Barrett, 2017). This paradigm, formalised through Picard's (1997) foundational work on affective computing and operationalised through tools like the Facial Action Coding System, is the volume's recurring critical target (for an earlier critique, see Suchman, 2007). Against it, several contributors variously mobilise critical disability studies and critical race theory to expose the colonial and ableist genealogies of emotion recognition technology, and dramaturgical and labour theory to show the relational work that produces encounters with 'emotional' robots in practice. Others draw on enactivist and phenomenological approaches to embodiment and intentionality and, most ambitiously, Buddhist philosophy to propose alternative ontologies of emotion grounded in interdependence and ethical cultivation rather than discrete individual states. The range is deliberately heterogeneous, and the volume makes no attempt to synthesise these into a unified framework, staking its contribution instead on the claim that this very multiplicity demonstrates something about its object, namely that the complex configurations between emotions and machines are irreducible to any single paradigm as well as any simplified model. Whether this amounts to an argument or merely gestures toward one is a question the volume leaves open.

The volume's most forceful critical contribution comes from Jennifer Rhee, whose concept of emotion AI as 'imposition,' understood as the unilateral assignment of emotion categories that simultaneously strips people of authority over their own experience, provides a vocabulary that resonates through the collection even where it is not explicitly taken up. Drawing on critical autism studies and critical race theory, Rhee traces how emotion AI's foundational commitments to the theory of basic emotions and the theory of mindblindness reproduce patterns of deauthorisation along lines of race and disability. This analysis anchors the volume's broader argument that the politics of emotion in robotics are simultaneously technical, structural, and historical (see also Atanasoski and Vora, 2019; Crawford, 2021; Rhee, 2018; Srnicek, 2025).

At the other end of the collection, Daniel White and Hirofumi Katsuno's chapter on Buddhist models of emotion and their application in Japanese robotics,

from Mori Masahiro's Buddhist-inflected engineering philosophy to the Android Kannon Mindar at Kōdaiji temple in Kyoto, offers perhaps the most unexpected contribution, proposing the concept of 'mindful machines' to capture the idea that human-robot relations might be understood as sites of mutual ethical cultivation rather than instrumental extraction or one-sided imposition. Read alongside the broader critical research on Japanese robotics culture (Robertson, 2007, 2014, 2018; see also, e.g., de Togni, 2024; Frumer, 2018; Kovacic, 2018; Šabanović, 2014; Sone, 2017), the chapter raises productive questions about how engineering, national techno-imaginaries, religious practices, and philosophical tradition intersect in ways that resist easy generalisation.

Between these poles, the volume's empirical and experimental chapters demonstrate the relational complexity of what happens when robots and emotions are entangled in practice. Ethnographic work in Swedish dementia care homes reveals the sophisticated emotional labour caregivers perform to make robot animals 'work,' while a design fiction about a haptic, nonhumanoid AI agent explores what a 'feel first, reason later' design philosophy might look like. Though one might note that the insight that robots require rather than replace relational care work is by now fairly well established in the care robotics literature (e.g., Chevallier, 2023; Jeon et al., 2020; Lipp, 2023, 2024; Šabanović and Chang, 2016; Shin and Jeon, 2024; Wright, 2018, 2023). It is also worth noting that the labour of making a simplified or unpredictable entity workable within a complex institutional setting is not unique to robots, and that attending to what this produces, rather than mainly what it compensates for, might open different analytical paths attuned to the forms of expertise, affective repertoires, and institutional arrangements that emerge around robots in practice. Some chapters come closer to this than others.

Even so, the volume's contribution lies less in any single finding than in the cumulative effect of juxtaposing such different approaches to the same question. Together, the chapters amount to something like a claim about 'complexification,' that is, about thickening our understanding of something that dominant frameworks in robotics tend to flatten and universalise. As an anthropologist of technoscience researching social robotics and artificial intelligence in Japan, I find this impulse sympathetic but also in need of its own examination. The risk of 'humanistic critique' of robotics, especially when it positions itself as bringing nuance, context, and power to a field imagined as naïve about these things, is that it can reproduce its own form of narrowing. In such cases, robotics is easily framed as a monolith of quantification and universalism, to which the social sciences and humanities bring the gift of critique and complexity (Vejlin, 2024; see also Dan-Cohen, 2017, 2021; Hoeck, 2025; Mol and Law, 2002).

Several chapters come close to this, particularly when they invoke Ekman and Picard as shorthand for everything wrong with how emotions are handled in HRI. But the perceived thinness of technical practice may tell us as much about the critical frame being deployed as about the practices themselves. Robotics and HRI are also diverse, contested, and internally reflexive fields, though perhaps not in the ways we are familiar with in the humanities and social sciences. In Japan, as White and Katsuno's own chapter demonstrates, the relationship between engineering practice, sociocultural imaginaries, and emotional design has always been more entangled than the 'basic emotions' label would suggest (see also Hoeck, 2024; Katsuno, 2011; White and Katsuno, 2021). A critical engagement through complexification and multiplicity only really works, I think, if its object is actually as monolithic as the critique assumes, and, on my reading, the volume's own best chapters quite clearly show us that it is not.

This is not to say that the volume's critiques are misplaced; Rhee's analysis of deauthorisation, for instance, is a necessary intervention. But the most productive contributions are those that also find complexity, ambiguity, and indeterminacy within the practices of robotics itself rather than opposing 'rich' humanistic analysis to 'thin' technical practice.

When caregivers construct the emotional roles of robot animals through their own skilled labour, or when Japanese roboticists are shown to have long grappled with questions of consciousness and compassion as part of their engineering practice, the distinction between complexification and simplification becomes murky, and the analysis, in turn, becomes more interesting for it.

The question of whose complexity counts is also, of course, a question about whose knowledge counts, and it is here that the volume's relevance for readers of this journal is most obvious. The feminised labour of care, the intersections of gender, race, and disability in emotion AI, the gendered bodies of humanoid robots, and, most broadly, the question of epistemic authority over emotion – who gets to define it, measure it, and speak about it – run through the collection even where gender is not always explicitly foregrounded (see also, e.g., Adam, 1998; Weber, 2005; Perugia and Lisy, 2023; Robertson, 2010). The volume's methodological diversity can itself be read as a feminist intervention, asserting the legitimacy of introspection, design fiction, and ethnographic observation alongside the quantified experimental paradigm that, to an extent, still dominates HRI. But there is also a risk that assembling diverse critical perspectives around a shared target might come to substitute for the harder work of developing claims that are not already available within each contributor's own tradition. A concluding chapter drawing these threads together might have helped. As it stands, the volume's most important insight, namely that the politics of emotional entanglement with robots cannot be settled from within any single framework, emerges from the juxtaposition of chapters rather than from any one argument. But for an interdisciplinary conversation that is still in the midst of defining its terms of engagement, the irresolution may itself be the point.

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Dreams and Realities of Welfare Technologies

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IN REVIEW

The Imaginaries and Politics of Welfare Technology: Renegotiating Elder Care through Technology for an Ageing Population

PhD dissertation by Maria Arnelid
Linköping University, 2025.

PHD-NOTICE

In Nordic public discourse, the demographic shift of an ageing population and declining birth rates is a recurring figure, raising concerns about the future welfare economy, with fewer taxpayers and a sparse workforce to provide care for the older citizens. Technology is often portrayed as a saviour and a solution to this impending challenge. Such imaginaries play a central role in Maria Arnelid's dissertation, *The Imaginaries and Politics of Welfare Technology: Renegotiating Elder Care through Technology for an Aging Population*. Will technology save us when the demographic shift hits, when we do not have enough staff or resources to provide care for the increasing number of elderly citizens? Arnelid's work explores these questions, honing in on the imaginaries, ideas, policy discussions and practices surrounding welfare technology—technological innovations designed to support welfare services and organizations. Specifically, Arnelid examines how these imaginaries envision technology as a means to improve, or at least sustain, the quality of elder care in the face of demographic pressures.

The aim of the dissertation is to show how sociotechnical and robotic imaginaries of welfare technology inform and relate to the decision-making practices of municipal care organizations and robotics research. It further explores how these imaginaries and associated decisions contribute to the renegotiation of ideals and practices surrounding care and care work. Theoretically, the study develops an analytical framework grounded in the concepts of sociotechnical imaginaries and care. By engaging with sociotechnical imaginaries and, more specifically, the lens of robotic imaginaries, Arnelid seeks to illuminate the visions of desirable and undesirable futures, as well as norms and values intersecting with technological development and innovation. That analytical lens is combined with a theoretical understanding of care and care work from Science and Technology Studies and feminist theories of fragmentation, (de)valuations and sociopolitical conditions of care practices.

Two complementary studies make up the empirical foundation of the dissertation, combining close collaboration in robotic development with interviews with key decision-makers. The first study involves in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Swedish municipal officials occupying various roles in the testing and implementation of technologies within elderly care services. Drawing on this material, Arnelid develops two analytical chapters. The first examines imaginaries of welfare technology as a solution to the challenges posed by an aging population. This analysis focuses primarily on two technologies: medicine dispensers and remote digital camera monitoring systems. The analysis shows a fragmentation of care, where some caring tasks are devalued, such as nightly visits, and ideas about care recipients' independence and technology as a way to avoid being interrupted by care staff. Here, rural and urban areas have different conditions and valuations, e.g. factors such as distance to and from home care visits. The second chapter deals with the projects of welfare technology. This shows the interviewees experiences and perspectives on political investments in technology, frequently in the form of initiating projects. Often, only few of these end up as useful implementations in care work. Still, they are represented as investments in the future promises of technology as a solution.

The second empirical study adopts an ethnographic approach to examine the development of a social robot designed as a conversational partner for elderly care. This study attends to the imaginaries and practices within the field of Human-Robot Interaction (HRI), encompassing research, robot development, and testing. The case focuses on the Furhat robot, which is a humanoid with a head and neck, used as a prototype to evaluate a conversational agent intended for deployment in elder care homes. The research was conducted through a collaborative approach, involving participation in study design, robot testing, and co-authorship of project publications. The findings are presented in two analytical chapters. The first focuses on the development phase and the imaginaries surrounding the conversational partner-robot. It examines what is considered essential for successful interaction, including the use of agile methods such

as the Scrum framework, iterative sprints, and the creation of personas representing user needs and preferences. These practices serve as mechanisms for incorporating implicit stakeholder perspectives into design processes, revealing imaginaries of smooth conversation and companionship as central aspirations. The second chapter analyses the testing of the Furhat robot in elder care homes through a 'Wizard-of-Oz methodology', which is a common approach in HRI research. In this setup, the robot's responses and movements are controlled by a human operator rather than functioning autonomously, enabling controlled experiments on human-robot interaction prior to full automation. While widely used, this method has been critiqued for its potentially deceptive nature, raising questions about authenticity and user expectations in early-stage testing.

The thesis identifies two dominant imaginaries for welfare technologies of elder care; First, a socio-technical imaginary as a solution to manage an ageing population, built on an undesirable future of an increase in the elderly demographic and a decrease in budgets and staff. This legitimizes technology as cost-saving and an opportunist economization of care, while also emphasizing the desirability of ideals of independent and remote care. Second, an imaginary of a robotic conversation partner, both driven by the crisis accounts of an ageing population and elder care in need of technical solutions, and, more emphatically, by scholarly curiosity about robots as companions to mend issues of loneliness and depression and the promise of smooth conversations, that is, robots as autonomous caregivers. An important contribution of this dissertation is the exploration of the tension between these imaginaries, with their different priorities, as well as between the visions of technology as welfare saviour and the reality in which these dreams of technology are largely yet to materialize. This is shown by projects that run to an end without lasting impacts, robots that do not live up to people's expectations and are still unable to operate on their own.

The dissertation engages with previous work on how technologies reconfigure practices (Suchman, 2007), such as by fragmentation of care into tasks that can be delegated to care and potentially also are seen as devalued. It advances the research on sociotechnical imaginaries and shows how they play out specifically in Nordic welfare states. In contrast to the more mundane medicine dispenser and remote monitoring of sleeping care recipients, the dissertation provides an important contribution to how 'robotic imaginaries' (Rhee, 2018) take form within the practice of robot development and testing. It offers a particular addition and expansion of the ideas and realities of robots as care givers, but maybe even more the work needed to care for robots (Lipp, 2023), specifically with regards to the promises of conversation robots as solving the problem of loneliness and as able to replace human attendance. Moreover, Arnelid attends to technological and research failure, in the caring act of not moving forward with further testing of the Furhat as conversation partner, when faced with the risk of frightening observation participants. This is a contrast to the often-portrayed inevitability of technology as the solution to care. Overall, Arnelid does a great job in showing the different kinds of work behind the sociotechnical imaginaries, both in terms of political decision-making, project investment, management and work, as well as the maintenance of robots and wizarding of robot testing.

The main strength of Arnelid's work is the connection between political visions, on national and municipal levels, the close encounter with technological development infused with imaginaries; the field of human-robot-interaction and the tensions between imaginaries of technologies as solutions to welfare problems and the realities of technological work and project-based investments. Arnelid eloquently bring the sociotechnical and robotic imaginaries and the politics of the imagined future of elder care together in the exploration of welfare technologies. Potentially, more attention could have been on how technology shapes new choreographies of care (Law, 2010). Whilst the fragmentation of care is very well discussed, what the delegations of care more precisely

entail in detailed tasks and in terms of hybridities of care, agencies and actions could have been teased out even more. In addition, how the imaginaries contribute to gendered aspects of robots and welfare technology for elder care. However, this implies areas where more research is needed. Overall, the dissertation is a timely, eloquent, and important contribution to the fields of feminist technoscience and Science and Technology Studies, bringing to the fore the particularities of welfare states elder care, its visions of technological solutions and the tensions within current materializations of welfare technologies.

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