The Practices and Subjects of Feminist Digital Activism: Experiences from Slovakia and Czechia[1]

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Abstract: This study explores the developments of digital feminist activism in Slovakia and Czechia amidst rising anti-gender rhetoric and anti-NGOism. In the climate of political change over the past five years, women in both countries began using Instagram to raise awareness of gender-based violence, harassment, and sexism. Through interviews with digital activists, this research examines the online dynamics of these networked publics. It analyses activists' strategies for navigating public/private boundaries and balancing individual and collective efforts in a corporate-controlled online space. Despite the challenges posed by Instagram's influencer-driven structure, these activists use the platform to engage in feminist awareness-raising and advocacy. This study contributes to the scholarship on digital feminist movements by highlighting the potential and limitations of social media to foster new forms of feminist praxis in a hostile political environment.

Keywords: digital activism, gender-based violence, Instagram, networked publics, connective action

In the spring of 2020, when public life shut down due to the Covid-19 pandemic, people in Slovakia not only found themselves in a new social reality but also faced a significant political shift. On 21 March, a newly elected, right-leaning, and conservative government took power and some of the leaders of the anti-gender movement were appointed by the new government to key political or bureaucratic positions. Before 2020, both Slovakia and Czechia had experienced extensive mobilisations against 'gender ideology', joining global anti-gender campaigns against reproductive rights, LGBTQI rights, gender studies, gender-based violence, and supranational organisations, such as the European Union, and treaties, including the *Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence* (the Istanbul Convention) (Kováts, Zacharenko 2021). One of the consequences of the anti-gender movements in Slovakia and Czechia was a shift in focus from the problem of violence against women to the wording of the Istanbul Convention and the alleged threat it posed to children and society (Maďarová, Valkovičová 2021; Svatoňová, Doerr 2024). At the same time, activists against gender-based violence were increasingly attacked and labelled as 'foreign agents' (Maďarová, Valkovičová 2021; Svatoňová 2021).

However, there have been some interesting developments in online campaigning against gender-based sexual violence and harassment. Despite the grim political developments – or perhaps because of them – women in Slovakia and Czechia have created Instagram accounts dedicated to these topics, aiming to engage in awareness-raising and popular education (Eschle, Maiguashca 2007), i.e. to share information about sexual violence but also to collectively produce knowledge.

This study stems from research focused on Czech and Slovak online initiatives that have emerged since 2019. We present an analysis of interviews conducted between 2022 and 2023 with digital activists who set up and manage Instagram accounts addressing issues such as violence, harassment, and everyday sexism. This study contributes to the body of scholarship on the reimagination of diverse feminist communities within the environment of the new social media (Mendes, Ringrose, Keller 2019).

As other authors have noted, the online environment can encompass a variety of advocacy practices. Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019) describe different practices and highlight, for example, the ability of digital platforms to provide a space for voicing previously hidden experiences, such as sexual violence. Other practices observed by these authors relate to opportunities to connect with like-minded people or learn more about feminist thought, which they call 'digitally mediated consciousness raising' (p. 5). The authors emphasise that taking part in online campaigns can be educational and 'acts as a low-barrier entrance for other types of (feminist) activism and political engagement' (p. 5).

The present study examines whether and how these practices are reflected in the Slovak and Czech feminist online environments. We analyse the networks that account managers create, which are conceptualised as networked publics (boyd 2010) or connective actions (Bennett, Segerborg 2015). While previous scholars have sought to distinguish between connective actions and collective actions (Bennett, Segerberg, Walker 2014; Vromen, Xenos, Loader 2015), we aim to contribute to this body of scholarship with a specific focus on the Instagram environment. Although the affordances of the online environment tend to vary and enable specific interactions (boyd 2010), it is important to recognise that online activists actively shape this environment according to their possibilities and needs (Mendes, Ringrose, Keller 2019).

In the analysis, we present the experiences, practices, and subjectivities of digital activism in relation to the dynamics of public/private and individual/collective. In the first part of the analysis, we focus on how the interviewees describe the online environment of Instagram and their communication with followers. The meanings of public and private shift as the activists discuss their interactions within a space that is widely accessible but owned by corporations. The second part of the analysis explores how individual and collective voices, subjects, and practices are shaped within online activism. For instance, the struggles for recognition described by our interviewees reflect their efforts to build horizontal and temporary collective networks. This occurs despite the affordances of the Instagram platform, which favours one-way, product-oriented communication typical of influencers.

Although awareness-raising and popular education on sexual violence and harassment in Czech- and Slovak-speaking online environments represent only one stream of feminist praxis (Eschle, Maiguashca 2007), it is essential to understand the dynamics of these environments and the experiences of the activists themselves. As Černohorská (2016: 61) argues regarding online feminist activism: 'Only by trying to understand what these new platforms and tools mean for (not only) feminist activists in different corners of the world can we understand their role in the future functioning of feminism and other social movements'.

The nature of networked publics: the possibilities of organising online

Digital media have been of significant interest to scholars of contentious politics and social movements for quite some time. Recently, digital activism played an intrinsic role in the Polish nationwide mobilisation known as the Black Protest (Nacher 2020), and the online environment helped connect the transnational fight against patriarchy in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, Fraser

2019). In Slovakia, feminist initiatives relied on online mobilisation in a context where the parliament repeatedly attempted to restrict access to abortion, while anti-pandemic measures limited the possibility of organising street protests. Scholars focusing on international online and offline mobilisations have observed the growth of large-scale action networks that build their own resources, leading many to conclude that the importance of technology for contemporary contentious politics is undeniable (Bennett, Segerberg 2015).

Yet, the nature of the spaces and subjectivities emerging through digital activism appears to differ from those of more traditional forms of activist practice. boyd (2010) referred to 'networked publics' as spaces constructed through networked technologies, providing an environment for imagined collectives. Similarly, Bennett and Segerberg (2015) described digitally preserved communication-based networks of individuals sustained by mutual interests or grievances as a form of connective action.

However, the praxis of communication-based online networks is specific and is characterised by its extensive personalisation of politics. Individuals can communicate through easily personalised modes of interaction, such as memes, or they can engage by sharing personal stories via vines (short amateur videos) and images. Bennett and Segerberg (2015) argue that this logic of content production transforms into personalised ideas and framing strategies. Parsloe and Holton (2017: 1119) assert: 'The success of connective action depends on the process of peer production in a culture of self-motivated sharing where individuals are inspired to create and spread articles, images, comments.' Blurring the traditional distinction between the creators of culture and its consumers, individuals who express themselves politically online tend to adopt a dual role as 'prod-users' (Della Porta, Diani 2020). In these spaces, large-scale personal expression serves as the foundation for socialisation, rather than a common group ideological identification or the mobilisation of resources, as found in collective action (Bennett, Segerberg 2015). However, Parsloe and Holton (2017) argue that in-group and out-group sentiments are present in connective actions, suggesting that a certain level of collective identity can emerge and play a role.

Online environments vary, and the form, content, and potential of connective action depend on the respective platform. Online networks and networked publics are often studied in environments designed to facilitate public deliberation, such as Facebook and Twitter/X. Such studies have been particularly useful for understanding initiatives involving collective hashtag sharing, such as #BringBackOurGirls (Papacharissi 2016), as well as initiatives termed 'hashtag feminism' (Chen, Pain, Barner 2018). However, as boyd (2010) and later Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019) explain, social media platforms have specific affordances that influence the types of activities occurring within their boundaries. Bennett and Segerberg (2015) also argue that curation and moderation are essential for transformative dynamics online, as networked publics

must first become organisationally enabled. Only then can they transform into collective action aimed at actual nodes of power (Bennett, Segerberg 2015). This prompts us to exercise caution when comparing the creation and existence of networks across different online environments.

While connective action can evolve into collective action, it often remains online for both personal and structural reasons. Participation in collective action can be costly (in terms of resources) and risky (in terms of social standing or safety) (McAdam 2013). This suggests that individuals who engage in collective contentious actions are either prepared to make sacrifices or will soon disengage from the initiative. Everyday social media interactions are far easier than joining traditional political or civic organisations in a hostile political environment. Moreover, some individuals may turn to online social networks deliberately if they feel disengaged from formal representative politics or struggle to engage with civil society. In this context, Vromen, Xenos, and Loader (2015: 80) argue that 'young people have shifted from a dutiful sense of allegiance to existing political institutions and processes to a more personalised, self-actualising citizenship norm'. This suggests that individualised orientations can lead to certain political engagement, as people express their emotions, grievances, or hopes online (Bennett, Segerberg 2015).

Networked publics are not organic social creations, they are first and foremost organised by constantly evolving networked technologies, whose algorithms actively shape online behaviour, including online sociality (boyd 2010; Van Dijck 2012, 2014). Van Dijck (2012, 2014), for example, emphasises that online environments uphold specific practices that are the direct results of corporate needs. As an example, he speaks of an 'attention economy', where individuals are prompted to seek popularity by constantly sharing their private information, resulting in 'dataveillance'. Both boyd (2010) and Van Dijck (2012, 2014) thus eventually discuss the usefulness of concepts such as privacy when speaking of online environments. Van Dijck (2012) rather sees social media as meeting-, working-, and market-places all at the same time, under the influence of corporate interests, where the different dispositions mingle together. An example of this can be Instagram (owned by Meta), which predominantly serves as a space for 'influencers' – individuals who actively curate their audience for marketing purposes, but who also speak of creating 'safe spaces for their predominantly female followers rather than as political spaces of influence' (Heřmanová 2022: 354). Instead of labelling social media as public or private, Van Dijck (2012: 171) suggests seeking understanding of 'how platforms function as battlefields contesting public, private, corporate (and state) interests'.

Thus, optimism around Web 2.0 has also faced extensive criticism. For example, Flesher Fominaya (2020) notes that participation in connective actions or similar forms of micro-engagement online is often dismissed as 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism', rare-

ly resulting in significant policy change. Similarly, Broučková and Labutta Kubíková (2024: 138) argue that digital technologies have contributed to the rise of 'non-electoral movements', characterised by their self-proclaimed unwillingness to participate in representative politics. From the perspective of feminist social movements, Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019: 9) asked whether such developments do not lead to 'de-emphasising the collective, in favor of self-governed, empowered feminist subject'. Whether we take a critical stance on these developments or not, understanding them is crucial, not only to grasp the shifting dynamics of feminist mobilisations, but also to recognise the everyday realities, costs, and risks of advocating against sexual violence and harassment online. In the same vein, Černohorská (2016) argues that we should focus on the online space, where sharing feminist voices can help sustain a sense of belonging and solidarity.

Some digital media environments can be particularly inaccessible or, conversely, conducive to feminist advocacy and education practices. For example, Vochocová (2018) argues that online social media platforms are often perceived as unfriendly to women because of the prevalence of sexist abuse. Moreover, previous studies show that women are frequently deterred from engaging in overtly political spaces, which tend to be male-dominated, pushing them to non-political online spaces (Vochocová, Rosenfeldová 2019: 134). In response to online misogyny, feminists have devised strategies to reappropriate social media platforms, for example, by creating 'separatist safe spaces' (Clark-Parsons 2018). These curated spaces have the potential to form feminist counter-publics, even for those who are geographically isolated, as they can provide a sense of community and support that may not be available offline (Mendes, Ringrose, Keller 2019).

It is therefore valuable to study the specific networks and practices that facilitate the creation of collectives within the highly personalised practices of cognitive political engagement. As Eschle and Maiguashca (2007: 296) argue in their research on globalised feminist activism, 'resistance can be expressed in multifaceted ways and in diverse locations. As we have seen, many of the practices of our interviewees seek to develop self-esteem, raise consciousness and enhance emotional tranquillity.'

Anti-harassment and violence awareness-raising on Instagram in Slovakia and Czechia: A case study

The social and political context
While Slovakia and Czechia have experienced over 30 years of separate political development, there are striking parallels in the evolution of their movements addressing gender-based violence and, or more precisely, in opposition to these initiatives.

In recent years, in both countries, issues such as gender-based violence and access to sex education have been politicised by diverse anti-gender actors. By using 'inflammatory language [they aim to] create persuasive scenarios in order to trigger a collective hysteria' (Svatoňová 2021: 139) against politics tackling gender, sexual, or reproductive inequalities. The anti-gender ideology campaigns portrayed the Istanbul Convention as a threat to the heteronormative gender order in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Sekerák, Rosůlek 2023) and succeeded in getting the ratification process postponed or stopped. At the same time, the debates surrounding the Istanbul Convention have shifted from issues such as cooperation between different state, public, and civil society actors to efforts to stop and prevent gender-based violence and issues such as the ideological influence of the West and parental control over children's education. The anti-gender campaigns thus further undermined trust in the authorities and the legal system, which was already limited owing to the social stigma faced by survivors of violence. This stigma contributes significantly to the high prevalence of sexual violence and harassment in Slovakia and Czechia (Nyklová, Moree, Maufras Černohorská 2022).

Despite efforts by feminist civil society to address various forms of gender-based violence since the early 1990s and some improvements in services, public attitudes, and legislation, significant challenges remain. While Czechia has introduced a specific law criminalising domestic violence, a major issue persists: half of the perpetrators of rape and sexual violence receive only conditional sentences (Havelková, Andreska 2020). Slovakia, on the other hand, lacks a specific law criminalising domestic violence, and, furthermore, its criminal code still requires victims/survivors to physically resist the perpetrator for the act to be classified as rape or sexual violence.

Recent developments in both countries have likely been influenced by the limited impact of #MeToo initiatives in the late 2010s, with only a few instances of national media coverage on sexual violence or harassment during the height of the international movement (Havelková, Andreska 2020). Nevertheless, these issues have since been addressed by a network of non-governmental advocates, led and supported by the national branches of Amnesty International, forming what has been termed a 'consent movement'. The primary aim of this movement has been to reform criminal codes to include a consent-based definition of rape, as required by the Istanbul Convention. So far, only the Czech coalition has succeeded in mobilising parliamentarians to update the legal framework. Another significant challenge tackled by these coalitions – and identified by advocates in both countries for decades – is the low level of awareness among professionals within the justice system regarding issues such as trauma-informed approaches to survivors of sexual violence and the dynamics of the cycle of intimate-partner violence. This lack of knowledge and awareness contributes

to the limited access to justice for survivors (Nyklová, Moree, Maufras Černohorská 2022).

Over the past three decades, the provision of services to survivors and professionalised awareness-raising and popular education have primarily been the work of non-governmental actors. Both Czechia and Slovakia have experienced 'strong resistance to explicit feminist organising' since 1989 (Papcunová 2021: 97), resulting in the establishment of formalised organisations. These organisations are now under constant pressure to professionalise in order to compete for tender-based grants, which are necessary to meet the needs of their clients. At the same time, they are dealing with shrinking state resources (Císař 2019; Valkovičová, Očenášová, Minarovičová 2022). Over the past decade, this financial precariousness has been compounded by increasing political hostility, with clerics and politicians labelling feminist activists as a threat, referring to them as 'the dangerous gendrists' (Sekerák, Rosůlek 2023).

Thus, formalised organisations, which draw their resources from the European Union or other international funding schemes such as the EEA grants, have been targeted by anti-feminism and heterosexism (Musilová, Valkovičová, Želinská 2023; Svatoňová 2021). More general political anti-NGO sentiment (Novakova 2022) has been demonstrated by the use of ostracising rhetoric towards NGOs and laws harassing or limiting their work. Parallel to these developments, some informal initiatives have emerged in recent years, such as the grassroots movement of Czech university students campaigning against sexual harassment, bullying, and other forms of exploitation by university staff. This began with the 2021 initiative of arts students called 'You Don't Have to Endure It' (Nemusíš to vydržet).

The agenda of online awareness-raising and popular education about sexual violence and harassment has been adopted also by numerous Czech and Slovak Instagram accounts run by individuals and groups, which could be described as 'informative' pro-feminist initiatives (Maufras Černohorská 2019a). Possibly because of the dire developments described above, offline collective actions, which are both risky and costly, seem burdensome compared to the accessibility of social media. Considering that 68% of people in Czechia and 60% in Slovakia participate daily in online social networks – and these proportions rise to 97% for young people aged 16–29 in Czechia and 83% in Slovakia (Eurostat 2024) – digital activism can more easily be integrated into everyday life. As past scholarly accounts (e.g. Maufras Černohorská 2019b; Mendes, Ringrose, Keller 2019) have identified the digital space as particularly conducive to the creation of feminist counter-publics (Fraser 1990) in hostile environments, this research project set out to study the various practices of anti-violence and anti-harassment activism on Instagram.

Methods, approaches, and the sample

According to DataReportal, around a third of the population in Slovakia and Czechia used Instagram in 2024. With the number of users increasing every year, this social network has become a valuable resource for civil society, including NGOs, who use the platform to reach the young cohorts of online users. We decided to engage in discussions with both Czech and Slovak Instagram account managers because of the linguistic proximity, which allows for easy cross-border following. In the course of 2022 and 2023, we identified a total of 12 Slovak- and 12 Czech-language accounts and invited them for a research interview.

We eventually secured a total of 9 interviews conducted between April 2022 and August 2023. Details about the interviewees and the accounts are summarised in Figure 1. The interviews were conducted both online and offline in Czech and Slovak. As the figure shows, the interviewees were a fairly homogeneous group of women, mostly students or graduates, living in large cities. They were also all civically engaged, as the figure shows: of the 9 civic activities asked about,[2] the average number reported by the interviewees was 5. The figure also shows that, at the time of the interview, the interviewees had a maximum of 3 years' experience running the Instagram account, reflecting the novelty of such initiatives.

Some of these accounts were informal, often run by a single person as a leisure activity, while others had more structure and were established as group initiatives, later transforming into registered organisations. The discussions with the interviewees also showed these differences in praxis and commitment. During our interviews, 7 out of 9 interviewees identified as activists. However, discussions often shifted to the relative criteria for this identification, as one interviewee explained:

I personally see it as activism, but I don't know if I would say that I am doing activism in front of others. […] It's something that I study, I dedicate myself to, I try to stay informed and in the loop. So that falls into that activism box for me. And then I realise what other people are doing in activism, and that's when I'm like, I probably wouldn't call myself an activist. In front of other people (laughter). (Account F)

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[2] The interviewees were asked whether they have actively taken part in the following 9 activities in the past 2 years: Reading/watching news; membership in an activist initiative (outside of Instagram) – e.g. in a civic association; active participation in elections/voting; participation in an online petition; participation in a formal petition or signature collection; participation in a live protest/march; organising a fundraiser (material or financial support); financial support for civic initiatives or associations; mass comment on a law; support for other NGOs (online and offline).

We aimed to learn more about their motivations for opening and running such accounts, how they create content and communicate with their followers, and how they make decisions about what to publish. When reviewing the interviews and reflecting on the dynamics that shape these Instagram accounts, two dimensions stood out as particularly thought-provoking: 1) how the public/private dynamics are negotiated in the praxis of online activism and how this shapes interactions between subjects of networked publics; and 2) what individual and collective subjects, voices, and practices are formed within this particular praxis.

To better understand these two dimensions, the transcribed and coded interviews were analysed using a mixed approach, employing both theory and a data-driven reflexive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke 2019) that recognises the involvement of researchers in generating specific themes from the data. We acknowledge that our subjectivities as researchers who participate in feminist advocacy work both inside and outside academia shaped the coding and theme development processes. Our perspectives are further impacted by the work of Eschle and Maiguashca (2007), who emphasise that the politics of resistance can have a variety of forms.

Analysing the public/private dynamics of managing an Instagram account

The account managers often described their popular education and awareness-raising experiences in terms of public and private, contributing to the ongoing feminist discussions on the relationship between the public and private spheres. So, what meanings do public and private acquire when discussed in relation to the nature of Instagram accounts or the relationship with followers? What do the stories of digital activism, narrated through the lens of public/private negotiation, look like?

Public space as accessible, risky, and regulated

When talking about the structure of Instagram's environment, interviewees perceived their accounts as 'public spaces' owing to their presumed accessibility. As one account manager claimed, their account was 'definitely public', because 'everyone who has Instagram has access to it' (Account I). The term public was thus primarily used in line with social media practices, meaning that no permission is needed to access the account. Interviewees were often aware that access to Instagram depended on having specific financial and epistemic resources, which were essential for effectively navigating the platform. However, these potential barriers were frequently overlooked, and the accounts were generally treated as accessible to anyone within their target group.

The accessibility of public accounts was understood as an advantage of Instagram activism; however, it also came with a price: 'Sometimes the interactions are not good

Figure 1: Characteristics of the analysed Instagram accounts

Account	Date and type of interview	Place of residence	Educational attainment	Current employment	Civic activity (out of 9)	Approx. number of followers in August 2024	Date of account registration	Appx. duration of managing account
Interviewee - Account A (SK)	28 April 2022 – offline	Bratislava	University degree (MA)	Entrepreneur	5	10.1 K	November 2019	3 years
Interviewee- Account B (SK)	18 April 2022 – offline	Bratislava	University degree (BA)	Student	7	13.4 K	May 2020	2 years
Interviewee- Account C (SK)	28 August 2023 – online	Bratislava	High school	Unemployed	4	500	May 2022	1,5 years
Interviewee- Account D (CZ)	19 July 2023 – online	Prague	University degree (BA)	Student, part-time employment	2	1.4 K	November 2021	1,5 years
Interviewee- Account E (SK)	19 June 2023 – offline	Bratislava	University degree (MA)	Full-time employment	9	6.8 K	July 2020	3 years
Interviewee- Account F (SK)	17 August 2023 – online	Bratislava	University degree (BA)	Student, part-time employment	3	4.3 K	May 2021	2 years
Interviewee- Account G (CZ)	13 July 2023 – online	Prague	High school	Student, part-time employment	6	14.4 K	September 2020	2 years
Interviewee- Account H (CZ)	21 January 2023 – online	Vienna	University degree (BA)	Student, entrepreneur	5	1.2 K	July 2021	1,5 years
Interviewee- Account I (CZ)	27 October 2022 – online	Prague	High school	Student, part-time employment	3	26.6 K	September 2020	2 years

Source: Authors.

and sometimes people write not very nice things, it just happens in those comments. It's up to us then to keep our environment safe' (Account I). Publicity in this sense means that on platforms such as Instagram, hate-speech or victim-blaming are a constant threat. Nevertheless, it was generally claimed that the curated audience of Instagram provides a certain shield that would not be possible on Facebook or TikTok:

So, from my perspective as the account owner, it's safe – for example, on Instagram I've never had such situations as on TikTok. I'm also on TikTok, there were threats of rape of beating, I don't know what else, and I was actually in a weird state because of it, like, a mess. (Account A)

The account managers' experiences in the online realm have led them to conclude that regulating this environment is essential for achieving their goal of fostering a supportive atmosphere for their followers, particularly for survivors of sexual harassment and violence. While such regulation was seldom expected from the owners of social media platforms, it was primarily undertaken by the account managers themselves as a form of gatekeeping. Despite the accessibility of these accounts, it was acknowledged that maintaining a presence on these platforms is a privilege they can revoke. For example, the interviewee managing Account I stated that they had not often experienced online hate: 'Occasionally, there will be someone in the comments who seems to comment on every post, and we usually notice and handle it.' In such rare cases, they either block or restrict the intruder's account.

Although Instagram and Facebook are both owned by the same company, their environments and rules differ. Compared to Instagram, Facebook was perceived by the account managers as a space where it is difficult to reach a curated audience unless one is prepared to pay Meta for the desired reach. On Facebook, there is a higher likelihood of attracting unwanted audiences predisposed to hate speech and victim-blaming. As the interviewees explained, the lack of regulation enforced by Facebook creates an environment that is, at best, difficult to work in and, at worst, hostile.

Contrary to expectations, what digital activists experience from the corporations that own the social media platforms is the regulation of their content based on company policies, enforced through simplified, machine-executed word searches:

You can't write words like 'assault' (…) because they'll start taking your content down or blocking you. You have to start playing with words and using characters that won't trigger their system to flag it as harmful. I understand why it's important to censor certain words like 'sex' on Instagram in some way, and please let's do that, but at the same time, it affects educational accounts, too. Yes, this also applies to topics such as violence. (Account E)

The technical framework, key rules, and content of public accounts, as well as the behaviour of digital activists, are therefore shaped by private businesses. The prod-users share their agency with algorithms, which, for feminist digital activists, results in a significant loss of agency (Adams, Applegarth, Simpson 2020). However, the account managers actively resist these limitations and seek strategies to navigate this environment ethically. On the one hand, they participate in the 'attention economy' (van Dijck 2012) and aim for the widest reach. On the other hand, as they describe, they refuse to publish certain posts that might be popular and favoured by algorithms, or they modify the content for ethical reasons.

The constant and uncertain negotiation of privacy

The negotiation between various forms of public and private also influences how the boundaries of privacy are maintained within the relationship between followers and account managers. It has become common for individuals to voluntarily share their personal experiences of violence victimisation for anonymisation and subsequent public dissemination by some accounts as awareness-raising tools. This practice raises new questions regarding the boundaries of privacy online and underscores the problematic nature of sharing personal information on platforms where such information can be misused, as expressed by this helpless account manager: 'Once I put that information out there, it no longer belongs to me; anything can happen to it, and it may not just be due to human actions.' (Account E) Others reflected on their own responsibilities to uphold the boundaries of privacy in such an amorphous environment.

Some of the accounts in this study deliberately engaged in sharing personal experiences of harassment or violence. This required a certain level of contact with followers, as well as access to private information. For this reason, some account managers adopted specific tools to limit individual contact:

Sometimes our primary method is that people just send us messages through the form on the website, and because of that, it's anonymous and we can't actually track who those people are. Sometimes people write to us and confide in us through messages, and then we forward them to the questionnaire. (Account I)

So, the specific tools did not prevent individuals from messaging the account managers directly. Because of situations like this, some of the account managers were concerned about the privacy of their followers:

I don't perceive [Instagram] as a safe space at all. I actually wonder why they open up to a stranger like this. They don't know who is on the other end. And as I mentioned to you earlier, they sometimes actually know me in person, but

don't know it is me behind the account. (…) But I think this mainly speaks to the fact that the need to get it off their chest is greater than worrying about who is on the other side. (Account B)

The risky environment of social media leads to the formation of communities with limited communication. Moreover, many interviewees reflected on the fleeting and temporary nature of their Instagram pursuits: 'It's more like a hobby, well, like when someone just starts making critical memes about reasonable issues. It's kind of like that, that when we have the inspiration, we'll share it.' (Account H)

To a certain extent, this observation may help explain why the account managers spoke relatively little about the temporality of Instagram as a social media platform. While it's evident that social media landscapes can undergo drastic transformations, potentially becoming inhospitable for advocacy efforts (as evidenced by experiences with platforms like Twitter/X), concerns about such precarity did not emerge much in our interviews. Instead, the prevailing sentiment revolved around the notion that if the environment changes unfavourably, one can simply 'go elsewhere'.

Furthermore, when we were discussing followers reaching out to seek help, particular in relation to issues of sexual harassment and violence, some account managers expressed frustration over common misconceptions that they provide specific services. As one account manager said:

I feel that we can fall into the trap of thinking that when someone shares content about how to cope in a difficult situation or deal with anxiety, that person might start feeling like, 'Okay, I have therapy now because there's this great account managed by experts, so it's awesome, right?' I think they start seeing us as the help they need, which is very misleading. (Account E)

However, all the interviewees emphasised their sense of responsibility to redirect followers seeking help to other accounts and organisations. The manager of Account E said: 'Of course, we always state our competencies, provide links for help and support, and emphasise that we are here for primary prevention.' She stressed that they cannot provide specific assistance, but 'we express our belief in the person, thank them for sharing, appreciate their courage in seeking help, and share those links'.

Other questions regarding the responsibilities of these account managers resurfaced as we discussed communication with survivors of violence and harassment. For example, one account manager claimed: 'We're not sure about our [legal] responsibility if someone reports a crime to us.' (Account H) According to the interviewee, this concern was significant enough to deter them from publicly requesting or sharing experiences that could be punishable under the criminal code in Czechia.

Reflecting on the meanings of public and private in the context of feminist digital activism

Our examination of the relationship between public and private in the context of digital activism builds upon previous feminist thought across the East-West divide. In the West, feminist analyses of public/private dynamics exposed patriarchal principles in the attribution of gender roles and thus extended the meaning of the political beyond the sphere of state and government, as represented by the saying 'the personal is political' (Millet 2016 [1970]). On the other hand, post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe has shown how the public and private spheres, as well as the activities conducted within them, were completely transformed under the regime of state socialism (Havelková 1995). In an authoritarian regime, it was important to keep the state out of 'the personal' and to guard the boundaries.

In the age of global online social networks, feminist actors collect and publish individual stories to politicise the issues that need to be publicly discussed and politically addressed, while at the same time protecting the privacy and security of users. They are in a position of constant negotiation between making things public and gaining publicity, on the one hand, and protecting followers' sense of safety and concern for their private information, on the other. Beyond public and private, however, the space of social networks is also a corporate space that mixes old components in new ways and produces new forms of communication and interaction (Van Dijck 2012).

When interviewed online, activists described their accounts as public, whereby they meant that their accounts were available to all Instagram users without limitation. They were aware that the online platform is owned by a corporation that sets the rules for their work and bears responsibility for their safety. Some interviewees even reflected on how, in their struggle to reach their target audience, the form and frequency of their activities, as well as their language, were influenced by the platform owner's rules and changing algorithms. As feminist digital activists resist and navigate this environment, their subjectivity is shared with algorithms (Adams, Applegarth, Simpson 2020). Nevertheless, the space of Instagram is considered widely accessible, good at reaching the target group, and easy to navigate. Therefore, this social media platform is understood and articulated as public.

In the context of digital activism, the private sphere has transformed into 'something techno-economic' (Almendros 2023: 57) and is often discussed in relation to personal information that can be leaked or stolen. Simultaneously, the private also encompasses personal stories that, through the process of publication, become shared and thus enter the public domain. As Almendros explains, technocommunication is characterised by 'the end of the distinction between the public and the private, which has been reinforced by the privatisation of the public and the publication of the private' (ibid.: 55).

Within this process of reconstituting the public and private spheres, new forms of subjectivity are emerging. Digital activists, whether individuals or collectives, are able to share content with far less effort compared to offline activism, and they can connect with their target audience regardless of location or occupation. However, when engaging in the 'attention economy' and striving to reach a wide audience while maintaining the visibility of their accounts, activists must invest significant effort into the visual presentation of their work, the frequency of their online activities, and the language they use, all with minimal direct contact with their followers. They are acutely aware that their visibility and ability to achieve their goals are determined by the algorithms of social media platforms. Thus, although Van Dijck (2012) emphasises that within the attention economy users contribute to establishing the norms and values on which the algorithms operate, our interviewees do not reflect on this aspect.

Despite activists' ongoing resistance, feminist online activism remains constrained by male-dominated big tech companies. Simultaneously, given the growing political hostility towards gender-related issues in Slovakia and Czechia, coupled with increasing economic instability and the time-intensive nature of offline activism, online social platforms remain more accessible and less risky spaces for activist practice.

Analysing the collective/individual dynamics in digital activism

During discussions with Instagram account managers, several key aspects of activist work were highlighted. They reflected on the day-to-day realities, including the technical complexities, of their online awareness-raising efforts. A notable dynamic that emerged was the tension between fostering a sense of collectiveness and the individualism that often surfaced within these awareness-raising platforms.

Establishing a network that fosters a sense of collectiveness appeared to require a deliberate selection of followers or audience. Many managers described how their decision to engage on Instagram was shaped by the platform's audience demographics. As the manager of Account G explains: 'When we were defining our target group, we told ourselves, "well, young people don't really use Facebook anymore".'

In discussing the pursuit of an appropriate audience, the account managers frequently referred to a specific cohort, suggesting a desire to connect with individuals who not only shared similar age demographics but also aligned values. It became clear that they were seeking out others who resonated with their beliefs and principles.

We, in addition to Instagram, have other social networks and we specifically knew which target group we wanted to reach. Thus, our main communication channel became Instagram. This is because we are dealing with a broad

audience that is, in some ways, specific and younger than the target group on Facebook. They are also different in mindset, being a bit further along than on Facebook, and more open. (Account E)

Instagram's algorithms provide account managers with the ability to target and connect with their desired audiences, a feature our interviewees emphasised as superior to Facebook's. There appears to be a higher likelihood on Instagram that the platform will recommend accounts to users based on their interests and preferences. It was implicitly understood in our interviews that effective awareness-raising hinges on engaging with the right audience, which in turn helps account managers achieve their goals. These goals often reflect a form of transient collectiveness, such as fostering collective consciousness, amplifying a collective voice, or sustaining a collective network.

From collective consciousness to collective voice
When discussing the objectives of their online platforms – and specifically what they aim to accomplish – the account managers consistently emphasised raising awareness about sexual harassment and violence. Although they expressed this goal in various ways, their messages converged on similar themes. For example, they aimed to ensure that people 'have a better idea of what sexual violence [looks like]' (Account I), to 'inform and convey expert information regarding the topic of sexual violence and sexual harassment' (Account D), or to achieve 'a change in public awareness. Because quite often it's not just about the experience ending for the assaulted person ... there isn't enough social support for them' (Account C).

Additionally, the account managers expressed a strong desire to connect with audiences who approach these issues from a similar perspective. This connection aimed to foster a collective consciousness within their audience, characterised by shared perspectives and even emotions.

I see my followers as mainly girls between 18 and 30 years old, who are right at the point of realising that something is bothering them and that they have the right to be bothered by it. They are trying to find a group of people they can identify with and somehow legitimise the feeling that it's okay to feel this way, to understand why they feel this way, what can be done about it, and to confirm that they are not crazy, but that this is really bad, and it shouldn't be like this. (Account B)

While a transient collectiveness, defined by the collective consciousness of individuals participating in specific online spaces, is accessible to virtually anyone, the account managers also highlighted a particular subgroup within their audience: individuals

who have experienced sexual violence or harassment. For certain account managers, their ultimate goal was to 'give a voice to the survivors' (Account I).

For some of the accounts examined in this study, the majority of their content comprised experiences shared by their followers – persons with experience of harassment or violence. When discussing their motivations for disseminating such content, the account managers frequently reflected on why someone would choose to share personal experiences of sexual violence or harassment. This sharing was often framed not as a request for help, but as a desire for a space where such experiences could be voiced and acknowledged: 'And mostly, it's that they don't even want advice or to be directed to another organisation, but rather they want someone to listen to them.' (Account F)

One account manager even noted that, for some survivors, the platform serves as a space where they can share their experiences of sexual violence or harassment for the first time, often with the desire for anonymity.

We often have stories where people write to us explicitly saying that it's like the first time they've actually realised, maybe after reading those individual stories, or it's the first time they're confiding in someone, that they've been carrying it with them for some time. I think it's … It's good for these individuals that they have someone to confide in, and there isn't actually that pressure to confide in someone in person. (Account I)

In this context, a recurring theme in our interviews was the belief that many survivors of sexual violence and harassment do not seek justice, particularly given the political climate in the two countries. Instead, they find solace in being heard and recognised online. As one account manager articulated:

'They don't have … hope for any consequences, they don't want like, to be advised on how to report it, or who to complain to, how to fix it. There's minimal faith in that correction. It's just validating their feelings, I think.' (Account B)

Other digital activists went so far as to explain that sharing one's own experience on an Instagram platform can provide a sense of support:

I think our main goal is to show that the person isn't alone in this and that it's okay to share it, and actually, to give courage to other people who are struggling, that they're not alone. (Account D)

The notion of emotional support emerged in several interviews, where account

managers discussed the importance of 'contributing to the feeling that we are not alone' (Account C) and demonstrating to survivors that 'they are actually not alone in dealing with it' (Account H). This need may stem, on the one hand, from the limited development of #MeToo initiatives in the Czech and Slovak contexts and, on the other hand, from the strong desire for emotional validation among survivors. As a result, Instagram accounts become spaces where individual experiences are transformed into a collective narrative on a daily basis, amplifying individual voices and creating a unified collective voice.

Collective network vs collective action

The Instagram platforms were meant to be more than mere online forums for survivors' narratives; they aimed to foster a supportive community. While their goal was to cultivate an environment that rejects victim-blaming narratives and supports survivors of violence and harassment, the collective network may be limited to supportive responses from fellow followers in the comments section.

A recurring experience shared by the account managers was that their followers viewed the account – run by anonymous individuals – as either an open space for voicing their experiences or as a public service providing useful information. This suggests that online networked collectiveness has its limitations in this context. Although the account managers frequently referred to their audience as a supportive 'community', it became clear in other instances that their engagement with followers was largely one-sided. Followers often perceived them as anonymous public figures to whom they could reach out. This was particularly evident when discussing the various types of interactions observed on their accounts, with private messages being the most prevalent form of engagement:

Probably the most common thing is that people just send us a message, like regarding a post … or they give a like, like when we share it on stories. But I think people prefer messages. (Account D)

When discussing their objectives, some account managers also addressed the issue of impact. They acknowledged that certain goals could be achieved online, such as raising awareness on specific issues or organising online petitions and fundraising efforts. However, they described initiatives that require offline collective action as more challenging to accomplish. One interviewee openly shared their reflections on the nature of their online impact:

Sometimes we really think about it, all four of us [account managers], whether our work makes sense. Like how it simplifies feminism and people follow us

who primarily agree with us, so we actually say to ourselves, well, 'does it make sense?', and that's why we move it beyond the online space. (Account G)

Another account manager discussed the limitations of targeting a like-minded audience, suggesting that it may have a limited, or even negative, impact: 'I sometimes feel that when people share those things, it just accumulates negative energy in everyone and everyone gets pissed off', explained the manager of Account A. She concluded, 'we feel frustrated, like nothing will improve'.

Some interviewees also strongly believed in the need to conduct awareness-raising activities offline. However, there was a consensus that organising offline events or initiatives is considerably more challenging than engaging in online awareness-raising efforts. According to several interviewees, such organisation requires specific leadership skills and additional resources. Consequently, they openly acknowledged that arranging offline events or initiatives was never their primary objective.

It's not my goal to organise something like that because I think it carries a great responsibility. People don't realise that organising a fundraiser or a march is a lot of work. I don't get involved in that. Let those who have the capacity and abilities do it. (Account B)

The above can be read in line with how Sandra Lee Bartkey (1975) conceptualises the transformation of feminist consciousness – as a deeply personal yet political shift in perception that requires not only the recognition of one's oppression, but also the acquisition of one's own agency. The big challenge here, then, seems to be not the creation of (an online) collective consciousness of the oppressed, but rather their empowerment and ability to imagine change.

Reflecting on negotiating the individual/collective voice, subjectivity, and praxis

In the process of negotiating individual and collective subjectivity, feminist online activists engage in struggles for recognition (Fraser 2013). In a society where survivors of sexual violence often feel unheard and their experiences devalued, feminist online activists strive to serve as platforms for these voices, as well as initiators and facilitators of connective networks. By publicly sharing personal experiences of sexual violence and harassment, account managers channel individual voices into a stronger and potentially political collective voice for survivors. Through the acts of sharing and following, individuals can become part of a connective network and join this symbolic feminist community.

The praxis of digital activism is aimed mostly at young women who use Instagram regularly and can be effectively engaged. As a result, digital activists build digital spaces of like-minded individuals, similar age groups, and those with shared experiences of sexism and sexual violence. While this approach can foster a sense of community, it also limits the potential to build continuity and follow up on previous feminist efforts, knowledge, and mobilisations – unless Instagram activism is accompanied by other activities.

Another dimension of the struggle for recognition is oriented towards the broader public. Awareness-raising and popular education activities aim to engage Instagram users, who are seen as mediators between the feminist online platform and the offline general public. The goal is to challenge sexist cultures and sensitise society to issues of sexualised violence, which are often accompanied by distrust towards institutions of justice or political representation. As Fraser (2013: loc. 125) concludes: 'Unable to transform the deep gender structures of the capitalist economy, they preferred to target harms rooted in androcentric patterns of cultural value or status hierarchies.'

Consequently, feminist digital activism on Instagram serves as a tool for connecting with young people, sharing the experiences of survivors of sexual violence or harassment, and raising awareness. It can form a collective network and act as a foundation for a potentially mobilised feminist collective subject. However, the shift from connective to collective action is challenging, thus pointing again to the requirements of digital space moderation. While some engage in offline activities and consider them a necessary part of awareness-raising and addressing sexual violence and harassment, others are more comfortable with online activities. As communication with members of these networked publics is largely one-sided and limited – this is due in part to the account managers' capacities and privacy concerns – feminist online activism on Instagram has limited potential to transform economic, social, and political structures unless combined with other forms of feminist praxis (Eschle, Maiguashca 2007).

Conclusion

In the context of increased political pressure against 'gender' and civil society across countries, informal digital activism provides an important source for producing feminist knowledge, sharing experiences, and forming feminist individual and collective subjectivities. The online environment and social networks are particularly significant for young people, as the internet is interwoven into the fabric of their everyday lives. Despite being governed by multinational corporations, this environment offers affordances and provides followers with a space to engage in personalised politics. Many of our interviewees spoke openly about becoming Instagram account managers be-

cause of this affordance – they felt the need to produce awareness-raising content as they transitioned from being users to 'prod-users'. While such a practice has the potential to draw many people into online environments, this type of engagement may reach its limit with people sharing their ideas or emotions. Doing so seems sufficient in order to become an empowered feminist subject, but it does not necessarily lead to collective action.

This study examined the experiences of digital activists who established Instagram accounts over the past five years with the aim of raising awareness about sexual violence and harassment in Czechia and Slovakia. We conclude that for studying the dynamics of connective and collective actions, digital platforms matter, as interviewees described various reasons for preferring Instagram to other platforms, including less hate speech and a more curated audience. Accounts aimed at raising awareness are widely accessible to young people, who are also the target audience of such accounts, and they are therefore considered public. The public space is understood as a space that is open to all users of a platform and is not restricted. However, this space is also risky in two ways: It is open to hate speech and harassment, and the misuse of information is a constant threat. Therefore, the public sphere in this context also represents a space in need of regulation and protection.

Instagram's affordances are important for its goal of creating inclusive 'communities' or 'separatist safe spaces'. Yet achieving this goal can be exhausting. Account managers must constantly interact with the norms and expectations of Meta, a governing authority that is both present and absent (e.g. in its handling of hate speech). At such moments, it becomes clear that what is considered a public sphere is, in fact, a private space owned by a global corporation.

In the process of rethinking the public and the private, new types of subjectivities are being born. Digital activists can share content with limited effort compared to offline activism and they can connect with their target audience regardless of their location or occupation. But this does not mean that such work is devoid of ethical issues and questions of responsibility, which account managers have to navigate. Moreover, they must invest significant effort into the visual aspects of their work, the frequency of their online activities, and the language they use because algorithms determine their visibility and ability to reach their goals. Digital activists, therefore, share their agency with algorithms, and online feminist praxis is disciplined by male-led tech companies. However, activists actively resist. They look for ways to amplify the voices of the survivors of sexual violence and harassment, to raise awareness of the topic, and to intervene in the public sphere – sometimes even beyond the space of the internet.

Digital activists are part of the struggle for the recognition of survivors of sexual violence and harassment, who feel unheard and devalued. They also provide a wel-

coming space in countries where survivors rarely report incidents owing to fear of the authorities and secondary victimisation. These networks can foster a sense of community, but they often lack continuity with previous feminist movements. The transition from online connective action to offline collective action is also challenging for both followers and account managers. As a result, feminist activism on Instagram alone has limited potential to drive broader economic, social, or political change unless it is combined with other forms of feminist practice. The value of such digital feminist praxis lies in connecting people, sharing survivors' experiences, and raising awareness about sexual violence and harassment.

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