

Special Issue / Téma

Convergences: Gender, Communication, and Work

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Dekoloniální feminismus

Vergès, Françoise

Autorka v knize představuje čtivě a výstižně mnohavrstevnatou kritiku současného globálního uspořádání z perspektivy dekoloniálního feminismu, v níž propojuje kritiku rasismu, patriarchátu, kapitalismu a imperialismu. Kriticky se tedy vztahuje nejen k hegemonnímu feminismu, který nazývá „civilizačním“ nebo „bělošským“, ale rovněž k širšímu rámci politické ekonomie současného kapitalismu a koloniality. Svoji úvodní otázkou „kdo uklízí svět?“, kdo pracuje v málo placených úklidových a pečovatelských pracích?, autorka vyzývá ke změně úhlu pohledu na emancipaci žen. Přesvědčivě ukazuje západocentrické založení feminismu hlavního proudu, který přehlíží struktury rasizovaného útlaku žen. Vstupuje tak do živé diskuse o kooptování feministických myšlenek a ukazuje alternativní cestu proti tzv. civilizačnímu feminismu, který se v důsledku podílel a podílí na udržování hierarchicky rasizované kapitalistické společnosti a globální koloniality. V knize přitom plynule propojuje teoretické i praktické analýzy, které vycházejí z rozboru historického a současného (koloniálního) frankofonního kontextu. Tím otevírá témata, která mají globální přesah a jsou vysoce relevantní i v kontextu střední a východní Evropy.

Françoise Vergès je politická teoretička, feministka, nezávislá kurátorka, veřejná pedagožka a dekoloniální aktivistka, která ve svojí práci propojuje aktivismus, výzkum a umění. Publikovala řadu knih a textů ve francouzštině i angličtině o otroctví, koloniální paměti a produkci zapomnění, dekoloniálním feminismu a dekolonizaci umění. Vedle knihy Dekoloniální feminismus v poslední době vyšla v obou jazycích kniha Dělohy žen: Rasa, kapitál a feminismus. Věnuje se také tématu dekolonizace muzeí. Zároveň je spoluzakladatelkou iniciativy Dekolonizovat umění a kurátorkou pravidelného kolektivního workshopu L'Atelier, který propojuje umění a aktivismus ve veřejných antirasistických intervencích.

U příležitosti vydání českého překladu Vergès přijede začátkem března do Prahy a přednese dvě veřejné přednášky.

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Convergences: Communication, Work, and Gender

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The premise of this thematic issue is that work and communication are converging, and that the process is upheld by interactive (digital) technologies. ‘Convergences’ (in plural) was chosen to emphasise the ‘always-existing entanglement’ (McRobbie 2011:61) between the ‘nature’ of work, gender, and other dimensions of identity, such as social class, age, race, ethnicity, educational background, occupational status, job type, bodily and cognitive abilities, non-normative sexualities, and nationality.

The intrinsic link between labour and technology surfaces regularly in public debates, which include concerns about risks to the workforce in the future, as we have seen in the past decade with the rise of generative artificial intelligence (Reeves 2016). Currently, we experience ‘technology’ through the intensification of our interactions with it (Rogers 1986). An interaction necessarily involves another entity (human, non-human); it relies on action and cognition and manifests across different forms of communication, verbal and non-verbal. Interactive technologies have created a media ecology with different genres of participation compared to print media, radio, and television (Madianou, Miller 2013). The increased access to digital infrastructure and the relative affordability of devices have led to an environment in which we alternate between being on- and off-line. A major outcome is that production (remunerated work in the market) and social reproduction (the unpaid work needed to make life itself possible, for oneself and for others) are further enabled to go along. The household is no longer considered the sole site of social reproduction, nor is social reproduction limited to housework and care responsibilities, as it has instead come to be understood as ‘the work of creating and sustaining social forms



and relations of cooperation and sociality' (Weeks 2007: 235). With technological interconnectivity, we are exposed to and compelled to participate in the incessant production of symbols and data (Morini 2007; Virno 2004), both when we are engaged in paid labour and when we are at home, as we are performing domestic work or enjoying our leisure time.

The role of work in (de)focusing gender

Like previous technological milestones (e.g. the steam engine, electricity, the assembly line), computing and the internet – the basis of interactive technologies – have changed labour processes and workplace relations, thereby transforming social dynamics (Moll 2022). Nowadays, the distinction between working life and private life has become untenable, as the subject must take advantage of opportunities to instantiate its potentiality: 'subjectivity itself, in its experiential, relational, creative dimensions' represents what is exchanged in the labour market (Morini, Fumagalli 2010: 236). As such, the central asset becomes one's capacity to mobilise linguistic intellect and communicative competencies (Morini 2007; Virno 2004). *Prima facie*, one might associate these patterns exclusively with today's growing share of intellectually oriented jobs, but as Carlo Vercellone (2005: 3) points out, 'human labour is an activity that reunites within it both thought and action', and employment in industrial capitalism has produced a distortion by emphasising the standardised and repetitive aspects of work. The pioneering study by Shoshana Zuboff (1988) captured the transition from manual dexterity to intellectual capacity in American industries with the integration of computing, and nowadays it is accepted that to accomplish work people need to draw on a mix of intellectual abilities and action-centred skills.

While we are being collectively transformed into a 'labour society' through a diffused system of production (Virno 2004: 101), with a generalised sense of anxiety about the availability (and suitability) of jobs in the background, gender remains a core dimension of personal identity. To paraphrase Donna Haraway (cited in Weeks 2007: 239), we are living in times characterised by both the erosion and the intensification of gender. We know that in more economically developed countries, as well as in less economically developed regions of the world, there has been a steady increase in women's labour market participation (WTO 2017). Women with tertiary education outnumber male graduates, and even though by 1998 one-half or more of all professionalised occupations were held by women (ILO 2004: 50), in what today is labelled 'knowledge work' the earnings disadvantages of women persist (Sauer, Van Kerm, Checchi 2022). Historically, they have been more likely than their male counterparts to be concentrated in precarious forms of labour (e.g. temporary work, part-time positions, underemployment, low-wage jobs with diminished levels of control over

hours and work conditions), both due to segregated occupational patterns and because within the private sphere of life they have been (and continue to be) the main providers of domestic work and childcare (Betti 2018). However, with the onset of post-Fordism and the decline of manufacturing, male workers in industrialised countries have been exposed to insecure employment at higher rates and to jobs that lack regulatory protection and are poorly paid (Kalleberg 2012).

It seems that we are moving irreversibly towards 'equalisation', and that gender as a political category is losing its impact on 'citizenship rights, educational and employment opportunities, levels of income and wealth, access to prestige and power' (Hawkesworth 2013: 3). Female workers are catching up with their male peers, and this enables them to exert more choice in their lifestyles, in key areas such as partnerships, marriage, mothering, and childrearing, and in managing disposable income and consumption patterns (McRobbie 2011: 67). As the emerging generations of women are benefitting from the equality achievements of the first two waves of feminism and living the intellectual sophistication of the third one, it has been suggested that precariousness is becoming a gender-unifying experience (Fumagalli, Morini 2020). Traditionally, young people are a vulnerable category of workers (Esping-Andersen 2000), and they are further disempowered in bargaining for working conditions in a context that is marked by the rising costs of pursuing higher education and of embarking on a particular occupational path, costs that young people and their families bear with limited or inexistent welfare-state support (Antonucci 2018). Among the various forms of precarious work, underemployment is considered to have become 'the global normality for youth in the labour market' (Roberts 2009: 4), which has been defined as an insufficient 'quantity and quality of employment to meet the needs and wants of workers' (MacDonald, Giazitzoglu 2019: 729), in terms of wages, job security, aspirations. This restates the importance of intersectionality for acknowledging how various aspects of one's identity interact and the need to pay attention to how identity categories coexist under the influence of socioeconomic, political, and environmental contingencies.

The amplification of the impact of gender on labour began to occur in the 1970s, with the growth of the service (tertiary) sector, predicated on an influx of female workers. Women were the largest available workforce to enter this labour market, in addition to being considered naturally more qualified to deal with clients in retail, to provide care services, and to perform clerical tasks, which had lost status with the diffusion of education (Blackburn et al. 2002). The distinction between the feminised service sector and the masculinised manufacturing sector has since then faded, as male workers have increasingly taken jobs in service industries, and there has been a diversification of the sector through the rise of the information economy, which has also increased the demand for knowledge work. With the permutation of the econ-



omy, Cristina Morini (2007: 42) argues that women have become a model for the contemporary labour market, both in their historically driven capability to be 'elastic' (Thompson 1983: 193), to stretch themselves in order to have a wage and to maintain their involvement in the domestic sphere, and because of the advantage of bringing to the point of production attitudes and behaviours related to their social reproductive role (e.g. to care for the other, to impart linguistic meaning).

The feminised ethos of labour

The newfound centrality of these dimensions in the labour market – elasticity and social reproductive prospects – has been linked with the presumably low-skilled character of service jobs, creating the expectation for women to always 'give that little extra something' (Grossman 2012: 71) to compensate for the fact that what they were bringing to the table were innate inclinations, not skills that require hard work or the physical strength and authority embodied by the (white) male worker. The growing spectrum of service industries at the intersection with mediatisation has caused the paradigm to shift and made desirable those workplaces and skills that involve 'actions affecting primarily people and paper' and currently relying on screens (Greene, Swenson 2018: 242).

As we have moved firmly into the cultural feminisation of economic life (Adkins 2001), there has been a generalised attempt to extract from the workforce qualities that carry the trace of female labour that is, a labour that is flexible, interactive, affective, and self-aware. Originally, the concept of the 'feminisation of work' referred to the overrepresentation of women in jobs with low status and rewards, since men were clustered in the better unionised branches, while women were segregated in areas of work that were considered low-skilled, conveniently viewed as a natural extension of their domestic roles (Thompson 1983: 203). Thus, the feminisation of work is also the quiet advance of a feminised ethos of labour, which has spread from the 'bottom' of the labour market towards the labour market's specialised branches. What in the past was perceived as female disposition is getting recognition as a skill, i.e. something that takes effort to master and implement, exchangeable in the labour market. Concomitantly the labour market is becoming de-gendered, as the attributes that were traditionally associated with female labour are in the process of being expropriated from female embodiment to become the standard expected from the average worker. An illustration is the transversal demand for soft skills. The quintessential worker, even if in possession of expertise or 'hard' skills, is expected to train and make use of their 'soft' abilities. These skills are intensely cognitive in nature and require intrapersonal and interpersonal exchanges, and in the labour market they are codified, for example, as communication, management, relationship skills,

and continuous learning (Weber et al. 2009). They convey infinite possibilities, and in tandem with interactive technologies they support the multiplication of surplus value.

With the diffusion of education and with computing, the occupational profile of workers who are in demand has changed as well. Women's greater participation in the labour force coincided with these developments and correlates with an economy (with forms of capital accumulation) thriving on social reproduction.

The contributions of this thematic issue

For this special issue, we have prioritised the term 'work' over 'labour', as the former is inclusive of the latter. 'Labour' is the institutionalised form that the organisation of work takes in society, and it is associated with estrangement (alienation) from oneself, from the process and the product of one's effort, and from social relationships, while 'work' refers to the general process by which humans satisfy the various needs that exist at a given time, creating goods, providing services, and simultaneously impacting nature, culture, and society (Fuchs, Sevignani 2013: 240). Work is what it takes to create and maintain life and the world we are inhabiting, it is constitutively reproductive before it is productive. We were interested in the experience of work in its variety, and we sought to explore how communication actualises the potential of work to be a source of toil and hardship and a source of satisfaction and self-expression (Frayssé 2014: 472), and we aimed to provide gendered illustrations of this phenomenon.

Alina Silion's 'The Aftermath of Minds, Hearts and Symbols: A Multidimensional Perspective of Digital Housework' is the sole contribution that focuses on the domestic sphere of life. We know that housework has paved the way to the 'double shift', from which women have not been able to free themselves. What is the impact of interactive and smart home technologies on the division of labour? Do they foster a more equal workload? According to the author, digital housework is mostly performed by men, while women assist the process. Men interact in-depth with these devices in the buying process and in ensuring their proper use and maintenance, and they communicate with household members for endorsement and regulation purposes. Digital housework does not affect (yet) the paradigm of domestic work, it only adds tasks that men are willing to engage with. It raises men's self-esteem, as it enables them to bring technical improvements into the household, while women increase their ability to connect online and offline aspects of life through these technologies.

The study co-authored by Alexandra Codău and Valentin Vanghelescu, 'The Limits and Opportunities of Practicing Journalism in the Digital Space: A Gender Perspective', is a case study on the professional debut of a female journalist in the visible – instantly praising and hostile – digital environment. Their research analyses the twisted outcome of a feature article on a music festival hosted in Romania. The article went



viral and generated not just positive comments – acknowledging the young journalist's work of showing aspects of interest for the community – but also many negative reactions from the publication's online readers. Predictably, the female gender of the journalist was used as significant grounds for justifying the criticism levelled against the piece she had authored. Such a debut would be likely to put a person off pursuing journalism as a career but given the simultaneity of communication practices in the digitised public sphere, the young journalist immediately received 'institutional' support. Well-established media figures, a feminist NGO, and university representatives, along with allied social media users, were able to discursively counter the imprint left by the aggressive and misogynistic speech being expressed online.

The article of Mariana Fagundes, 'The Transnational Construction and Maintenance of Digital Feminist Media Activism: Engagement Practices in the Global South and North', explores how collectives in Brazil and France organise their editorial workflows. Through the accounts of different actors involved in the market production and social reproduction of feminist media projects, the article offers readers a glimpse of the work it takes to produce this type of content as a readily available discursive resource that offers an alternative to the mainstream media's heterosexist biases. The author underlines the precarity of the working conditions in media activism and how symbolic rewards – access to social and cultural forms of capital – to some extent compensate for the low-paid or voluntary nature of work in this field. The exposure granted by these spaces allows authors to gain visibility in the world of activism, and professional recognition in the world of content creation. At the same time, the danger of online harassment endures, feminist websites and blogs are regularly hacked, and their authors are threatened and often have to discontinue their own social media accounts.

Keren Darmon's 'Time to Change the 'Change': Stigma and Support in Blogs about the Menopause' describes a development rarely observed in industries such as public relations, which traditionally seek to follow protocol and maintain 'respectability' in an effort to appeal to audiences – namely, women working in public relations who are using their skills in this case not for the benefit of their clients but to reflect on the transformation that menopause brings about at work. As often happens with occupations that rely predominantly on intellectual skills, bodies are placed in parentheses, except with respect to the concern for the aesthetics of self-presentation. Menopause symptoms – such as low energy levels, impaired memory and concentration, and 'brain fog' – are brought to light in blog posts created by members of women-only networks. 'Menopause talk' is placed at the crossroads of feminist and postfeminist sensibilities: on the one hand, there is the imperative of ensuring women's full participation in the labour market by raising awareness on this specific issue; on the other hand, a step is being taken to de-normalise and to question the expectations that we have from labouring bodies.

Chiara Perin offers an auto-ethnographic account in 'Washing "Dirty Work" in Academia and Beyond: Resisting Stigma as an Early Career Researcher Investigating Sexuality in the Digital'. The paper provides us with insight into the tensions that young women can experience when studying topics related to sexual attitudes and behaviours that cannot be examined using measurable variables and impersonal numbers. The paper also prompts reflection on the disjunctive worlds of academia, where there is one world that provides an environment for engaging with and publishing on hitherto (metaphorically speaking) 'closeted' strands of research, and one that is linked to the institutionalised spaces in which (work-in-progress) theses are defended, diplomas are conferred, teaching commitments are assigned, and (sometimes) job security is granted. Institutional and personal struggles are inherent to gender and sexuality scholarship, as society seems to reject the boundary between the researcher's professional life and personal life. This then seems to be part of the 'dirty work' required to master this area of research.

Concluding remark

How can we bring these theoretical and research insights together? The 'convergence between labour and communication' (Brophy 2011) was the syntagm that inspired us for this call for papers after several years of discussing media convergence and engaging with the scholarship on labour in communication studies. These words were used by Enda Brophy (2011) to capture the alienating uses of communication in the post-Fordist economy, specifically in the form of call centre labour. Our call for papers departed from this syntagm by using 'work'. When we launched the call we decided to keep things open, to accommodate various layers of experience. Around the same time (September 2023), we attended a welcome celebration for first-year students at our university, which to a certain extent augured the direction of this thematic issue. It is customary in the faculty where we teach to invite professionals from the media and communications industries (many of them alumni) to serve as role models for incoming students. The leitmotif established during the event was that if you enter the media and communications industries, you will never feel that you are 'really' working. This view was articulated by one of the (male) invited professionals, after a timid attempt was made by a (female) journalist to discuss instances of personal precarity in the field. As they stepped in front of the audience in the university amphitheatre, the guests active in these industries followed the lead of the second speaker in declaring communication jobs to be among the best occupations in the labour market for the 'usual' reasons: creativity, flexible work schedules, learning new things, and interacting with 'interesting people'. Based this anecdote, and on the articles published in this issue, and with the support of the literature we have cited, we



suggest that communication as such – interpersonal exchanges, content creation, the acts of disseminating, sharing, and commenting on social media posts, etc. – is also what often makes day-to-day labour seem less alienating. When we say this, we are referring not just to the segment of workers who are paid to create and disseminate communication, but also to the increasingly larger section of the population that has become invested in performing its share of paid work (Moulier Boutang 2011). We have become attached to paid work as we have been given the chance to put our thoughts, linguistic intellect and communicative competencies into it, and it thereby contains a part of us, a part of our living power.

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The Aftermath of Minds, Hearts, and Symbols: A Multidimensional Perspective on Digital Housework

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Abstract: Digital housework is one of the outcomes of the spread of interactive, smart technologies in the home. This new type of work consists of domestic, personal, and professional activities that are carried out at home using technological and digital devices. This study seeks to provide a better understanding of the gender implications of the cognitive, emotional, symbolic, and outcome dimensions of digital housework. The research questions used in the study are: (1) What are cognitive, emotional, and symbolic digital housework tasks and their outcomes? (2) What gender patterns can be observed in the performance of cognitive, emotional, and symbolic digital housework? The results are drawn from a thematic analysis of 53 cultural biographies of domestic devices and indicate a distinction between cognitive, emotion, and symbolic digital housework tasks that lead to digital housework outcomes in the form of digital capital. The gender aspects of all the dimensions of digital housework are discussed along with the theoretical and practical implications of the study's findings.

Keywords: digital housework, gender, digital capital

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Today, the domestic realm is saturated with devices, appliances, and digital systems (Lupton, Pink, Horst 2021). Also, domestic work is dynamic and continuously transforming through technological development. Moreover, the way people live and work in their households is of interest because of the transformations caused by the diversification and increased time spent on activities carried out inside the home since the pandemic. In other words, macro-social events have penetrated and are influencing the private domestic life of individuals. Therefore, the new way of living in tech-

nologised domestic spaces requires sociological attention. Furthermore, the gender dimension of technologised domestic activities needs further understanding. These aspects can be captured and illustrated through the practice of digital housework.

To grasp digital housework, this paper provides a theoretical background of the concept and proposes four new dimensions that are relevant when analysing digital housework: the cognitive, emotional, symbolic, and outcome dimension. The research questions are: What are cognitive, emotional, and symbolic digital housework tasks and their outcomes, and what are the gender patterns of performing cognitive, emotional, and symbolic digital housework? By answering these questions, the pervasive practice of digital housework is outlined in order to raise awareness regarding its implications for household members and other stakeholders. Thus, the aims of this paper are to provide a complex conceptualisation of digital housework and address some sociological implications regarding gender roles and dynamics in the household through the performance of cognitive, emotional, and symbolic digital housework and its outcomes.

Theoretical background: What is digital housework?

In the sociological literature, digital housework is defined as: the work of installing and maintaining the digital network in the domestic space (Tolmie et al. 2007), the work of maintaining the online domain (Whiting et al. 2015), the activity of using ubiquitous technological devices in the home (Rode, Poole 2018), the support work for professional activities performed at home (Whiting, Symon 2020), and the work of managing digital data and information (Horst, Sinanan 2021). These definitions comprise multiple elements of digital housework and can be summarised as the work that is implied by the use of digital devices for all the activities undertaken in the house.

More specifically, digital housework represents the transformation of housework in response to the pervasion of technology in the domestic realm. Oakley (2018) described housework as monotonous, fragmentary, routine, continuous, and repetitive, and, by extension, the tasks performed with domestic technologies can be alike. If housework consists of household management tasks, such as grocery shopping, preparing meals, household cleaning, yard work, repairs, paying bills, and childcare tasks such as caring for children, transporting them, and helping them with homework (Schwanen, Kwan, Ren 2014), digital housework consists of those new tasks that directly involve domestic, personal, and professional digital devices used in homes. Since the literature does not provide a comprehensive operationalisation of digital housework, Table 1 presents three identified classifications and several indicative examples of such tasks. Based on the literature, this article ultimately proposes eight

digital housework tasks: technology acquisition, technology installation, digital literacy, technological customisation, technology updates, digital devices and systems automation, technology maintenance, and technology repair.

Table 1: The operationalisation of digital housework according to the literature

Dimensions	Types of tasks	Example of tasks	Example of dimension overlapping
Temporal (Whiting et al. 2015)	Frequent	Cleaning devices	Surface cleaning of devices
	Seldom	Repairing devices	Deep cleaning of devices
Typological (Kennedy et al. 2015)	Physical	Charging devices	Physical cleaning of devices
	Virtual	Syncing digital devices	Virtual cleaning of devices
Teleological (Whiting, Symon 2020)	Functional	Installing devices	Functional cleaning of devices
	Aesthetic	Personalising devices	Aesthetic cleaning of devices

Source: Author.

Digital housework is strongly related to traditional housework because it involves (1) the digital transformation of original housework tasks and (2) the addition of digital tasks to traditional housework. In concrete terms digital housework consists of tasks where household members (1) modify the ways of using digital appliances for housework (e.g. programming a vacuum cleaner robot instead of doing the task manually) and (2) perform previously inexistent tasks for domestic technologies (updating, customizing, maintaining, etc.). Thus, digital housework is a natural continuation of housework determined by the technological advances in home appliances. In this context it is important to mention the division of digital housework as a topic that needs to be explored, since, to the author’s knowledge, no quantitative data yet exist on the gender and generational division of digital housework.

Nevertheless, based on a qualitative study, digital housework, unlike traditional housework, is performed mostly by men (Kennedy et al. 2015). According to Kennedy et al. (2015), the explanation for this resides in the projection of this type of work as a personal interest. Furthermore, since technology is associated with masculinity, the performance of digital housework tasks is a form of power expression in relation to the female partner and other household members (Rode, Poole 2018). In addition, men who undertake digital housework consider women’s preferences and abilities regarding technological devices and exhibit digital chivalry (Aagaard 2023). In other words, digital housework shifts who does some tasks in the household but reinforces gender roles. For example, Martin (2022) discusses how by performing energy housekeeping (a form of housework that implies energy consumption management through digital technologies), men strengthen their position of authority in relation

to the woman partner. Considering these results, digital housework entails transformations in the gender domain that need to be further analysed.

Finally, digital housework has four work characteristics that are relevant for the scope of this paper. Firstly, digital housework has a cognitive dimension involving tasks like planning, programming, learning, and so forth (Aagaard 2023). Secondly, digital housework has an affective dimension, which consists of encouraging an emotional attachment to technology (Horst, Sinanan 2021). Thirdly, digital housework has a symbolic dimension, determined by the role of expertise in the house (Kennedy et al. 2015) and by the co-construction of identity (Rode, Poole 2018). Lastly, digital housework has a dimension to it that relates to outcome in the form of the ability to work from home (Whiting, Symon 2020). These characteristics of digital housework, as being cognitive, affective, symbolic, and an outcome, are the basis for the dimensions of it that are analysed in this paper from a gender perspective. Therefore, theoretical background for these four dimensions of digital housework is provided forwards.

The cognitive dimension of digital housework

The physical side and the cognitive side of digital housework interact and cannot exist in isolation (Mehta, Parasuraman 2013). The cognitive dimension of housework is defined in this paper as the mental tasks that are performed for the purpose of using technology in the domestic environment. Reviewing the literature on cognitive work, we can distil the specific nature of cognitive digital housework. For example, cognitive labour is: invisible for both the person doing it and for other household members; overlooked because of it is immaterial in nature and diffuse and abstract in terms of time-boundedness, control, flexibility, etc. (Daminger 2019). These three characteristics apply to digital housework (Whiting, Symon 2020; Whiting et al. 2015; Tolmie et al. 2007). Therefore, the cognitive dimension of digital housework renders it invisible, overlooked, and diffuse.

Regarding the content of cognitive housework, Daminger (2019) identifies four tasks: the anticipation of needs, problems, or opportunities; the identification of options; choosing between options; and monitoring the processes of addressing needs and executing decisions. These tasks can be performed in both the housework or digital housework domains. While this paper focuses on digital housework, two somehow overlapping but distinctive domains of digital housework are presented below.

Firstly, cognitive tasks can be performed in the physical domain of digital housework. A concrete example given by Aagaard (2023) is the programming of a vacuum cleaner robot through tasks like: identifying and deciding the robot's best route and program to avoid obstacles and monitoring its performance in the house. Secondly, another domain that implies cognitive digital housework is the virtual domain. On

this line, household members express virtual intelligence by: recognising, directing, and maintaining the virtual realm (Makarius, Larson 2017). In other words, the virtual component of digital housework creates an opportunity to perform cognitive tasks by adding a virtual space that needs to be managed. For example, Kennedy et al. (2015) identify the need to plan in advance to download digital content owing to an intermittent connection or the need to sort and organise digital content.

Therefore, using the cognitive attribute proposed by Layer et al. (2009) the intersection of the domains of cognitive tasks and digital housework can produce some specific cognitive digital housework tasks in the following forms: accurately perceiving the characteristics of technologies; processing the stage and condition of devices; acting in a proper and efficient manner regarding the technological needs; checking and retrieving devices; selecting the type and adjusting technology; transmitting technological knowledge in the house; and planning a technological intervention or acquisition. Every example of a cognitive task mentioned here can be assigned to one of the four cognitive tasks proposed by Daminger (2019). Therefore, the cognitive housework tasks proposed by Daminger (2019) can be used to identify the cognitive dimension of digital housework.

Also, the cognitive nature of digital housework can reside in the mental processes and operations that are required to perform it. These operations are: cognitive shifts, interruptions, and workload management (Potter et al. 2005). Cognitive shifts can occur when performing a digital housework task. For example, in the process of repairing a device, attention shifts from the device to the tutorial and back. Also, regarding the use of technology in the house and interruptions to a given activity, two scenarios are possible. The first one is represented by an interruption in the performance of a digital housework task – for example, a phone ringing while a new kitchen robot is being installed. The other one sees digital housework tasks as an interruption in the ordinary use of domestic technologies. In this case, tasks such as updating, learning, repairing, and so on are the interruptions that need to be managed. Therefore, the cognitive work of managing shifts and interruptions is an integral part of digital housework.

Moreover, mental workload management is relevant in the context of performing digital housework tasks that necessitate attention. A domestic technology may not require attention if it is automatised. However, Mehta and Parasuraman (2013) argue that automation can increase the mental workload because of the need to monitor the automatised process. Therefore, digital housework may entail mental work through the task of monitoring digital domestic devices and systems. Therefore, when at least one digital housework task needs to be done, a cognitive stacking load is formed. Considering the existence of multiple devices in the households, this cognitive stacking load can be easily formed and household members have to manage the tasks accordingly. Yet, vigilance and mental fatigue can be managed with tech-

nological cues such as notifications, sound or visual signals, maintenance panels, and a flexible distribution of tasks between the human and the technology. Considering both the requirements and the contributions of technology in the house, the cognitive side of digital housework needs to be carefully defined.

Finally, cognitive housework, is gendered in type and distribution (Daminger 2019). Regarding the gender-typed domains of cognitive housework (logistics, caring for children, social relationships, cleaning, shopping, food, leisure, finances, home and car maintenance), Daminger (2019) finds a difference in focus: the first six are female-led domains and the last three domains are shared. These findings reflect the domains of physical housework that are typically handled by women (Daminger 2019). For example, caring for children and cleaning are women's domains in the case of both physical and cognitive housework, while logistics and social relationships are found to be women-led only in the case of cognitive housework. For the distribution of cognitive housework tasks, Daminger (2019) presents anticipation and monitoring tasks as female-led and identification and decision tasks as shared between partners. This distribution of cognitive housework tasks illustrates a disproportionality regarding the cognitive load of housework. Considering these findings and the specific nature of digital housework in terms of the gender dimension (Kennedy et al. 2015), it is important to establish what the gender patterns of cognitive digital housework are.

Emotion work

Emotion work can be performed in a tech work environment or in a smart house (Beare et al. 2020). Emotion work is defined as the effort to modify a feeling through acts of evoking or suppressing it (Hochschild 1979), the psychological process involved in emotional management (Zapf 2002), and the individual behaviours that influence in a favourable way the affect and emotional condition of others (Strazdins 2000). Therefore, emotion work is performed to manage one's own or others' emotions (Hochschild 1979) and can be found in the organisation of digital housework in the household (Aagaard 2023). In this paper, the emotional dimension of digital housework is defined as the affective tasks that are performed for the use of technology in the domestic environment.

Emotion work is relevant in the technologised domestic environment due to the affective implications of digital devices. Beare et al. (2020) argue that emotional reactions to digital technology are determined by outcome beliefs (the emotional cost and benefit of using technology), motivators (emotions generated by using technology), personality-technology fit (similarity), and task-technology fit (stability). Also, technology creates an emotional attachment and emotional reluctance (Beare et al. 2020). In other words, people can become emotionally attached to technology and

can have counter-feelings regarding technology based on their beliefs, personal characteristics, the technology's features, and so on. These situations can lead to the performance of emotion digital housework when a person is trying to adhere to feeling rules. Feeling rules are the general principles that guide an evaluation of a feeling in a given situation (Hochschild 1979). These are determined by ideologies such as political feminism, progressivism, environmentalism, globalism, etc. An example of emotion work performed to respect feeling rules is: a household member loving the dishwasher because it is environmentally friendly.

Also, emotion work is mainly specific to work relating to people, such as the digital housework task of transmitting tech knowledge within the household, but it is also found, as a subtask, in object-related work (Zapf 2002), such as the digital housework tasks of installing, charging, updating, etc., devices. Therefore, according to Zapf (2002), emotion work has two dimensions: emotional dissonance and emotional effort. An example of emotional dissonance is evoking calmness when feeling threaten by technology surveillance, and an example of emotional effort is accepting domestic video surveillance through habituation. These are personal dimensions because they imply primarily a human-technology emotional interaction. During these interactions, the frequency, attentiveness, duration, intensity, and variety of emotional display is managed through emotional dissonance or emotional effort. Thus, the performance of emotion digital housework can require expressing, suppressing, and sensing emotions when interacting with domestic technologies.

Moreover, from Strazdins' perspective (2000), emotional work has three dimensions: companionship behaviours, help behaviours, and regulation behaviours. Companionship behaviours consist of the process of developing positive emotions through verbal affection and the effort to spend time together (e.g. personalising domestic devices). Help actions include the operation of reducing negative emotions by means of doing things that protect others from stress (e.g. repairing a domestic appliance). Regulation behaviours are represented by acts that determine the self-adjusting of negative and positive emotions through persuasion to stop harmful behaviours and to improve beneficial ones (e.g. transmitting technological knowledge to a household member in need). These emotional behaviours illustrate the social dimension of the emotional work required by digital housework.

Finally, from a gender perspective, a relevant characteristic of emotional work is that the type of work matters more than the personal traits of the individual doing it (Strazdins 2000). The roles that demand emotional work can be both professional (manager, mate, etc.) and familial (parent, spouse, etc.). In this context, another role that is significant in this paper and in 21st-century households is that of expert or person responsible for digital housework (Kennedy et al. 2015). A result from Strazdins' study (2000) is that emotion work is a requirement of the job more than it is a

gender function. Therefore, digital housework can require emotion work from the digital housework expert regardless of who (a man or a woman) is performing the role. Considering all these theoretical data, the specifics of emotion digital housework tasks are to be studied.

Symbolic work

In literature, social-symbolic work is defined as the deliberate endeavours of individuals to shape objects such as individuals and institutions (Shourkaei, Taylor, Dyck 2024), and as intentional efforts to change social arrangements (Geiger, Stendahl 2023). Symbolic work is multidimensional and integrates two types of work that are found explicitly in the digital housework literature: identity work (Rode, Poole 2018) and boundary work (Whiting, Symon 2020). In digital housework, the object of symbolic work may be the use of domestic technology and the social arrangements may involve the distribution of digital housework responsibilities. The symbolic nature of digital housework is therefore defined in this paper as the intentional shaping of tasks that are performed while using technology in the house.

Following the contribution of Shourkaei et al. (2024), symbolic work has three dimensions: a material dimension, a relational dimension, and a discursive dimension. These dimensions are relevant for understanding the concrete forms that symbolic digital housework can take. Firstly, material symbolic work consists of tasks that Shourkaei et al. (2024) classed as input, throughput, and output that have a symbolic aim. For example, material symbolic digital housework can include tasks like: procuring technology, installing devices, the alphabetisation (input), customisation, and actualisation of technology, the maintenance and repair of technological appliances (throughput), and tech automation (output). Secondly, relational symbolic digital housework can reside in a feedback loop between household members or between household members and online tech sites or technological brands. Thirdly, discursive symbolic digital housework can consist of informing and guiding other household members on the use of technology through language, narratives, and symbols (Geiger, Stendahl 2023). Therefore, in both human–human and human–technology domestic interactions, people perform material, relational, and discursive tasks in order to fashion their domestic environment and identities.

Moreover, from a temporal perspective, forms of symbolic work can be staked, aligned, and integrated (Geiger, Stendahl 2023). In other words, the three forms of symbolic digital housework discussed above can interact or be performed in isolation. These data address the quantity of symbolic work that can occur. Geiger and Stendahl (2023) examined the dimensions of symbolic work in relation to the pathways of work to identify six types of symbolic work: material breach work (DIY efforts), discursive

sive breach work (online community), material bridge work (co-innovating), relational bridge work (help request), values work (functioning based on a core value), and amplification work (sharing stories to reinforces community values). These symbolic dimensions and types of work are used to outline digital housework symbolic tasks.

From a gender perspective, Karakulak and Lawrence (2024) describe how two forms of symbolic work (relational and practice work) can shape the construction of gender inequality as a social problem in the context of social partnerships. Concretely, they found that building deep relations (between professional partners) worked to address the problem of gender inequality, while building efficient relationships did not. Likewise, deep practice work (education, role models, social practice disruption) helped to eliminate the barriers preventing women from participating in economic life, but shallow practice work (financial resources and trainings) did not affect these barriers. Therefore, symbolic work can exhibit nuances regarding gender construction and inequalities. Considering these findings, it is important to analyse the impact of performing symbolic digital housework on gender aspects.

The outcome dimension of work

Any work can have various material and immaterial outcomes. Some examples of outcomes from an organisational context are: attitudes, psychological well-being, physical health, motivation, performance, satisfaction, commitment, citizenship behaviour, etc. (Bond et al. 2004; Parker et al. 2003; Wang, Haggerty 2011). Among these, in the case of digital housework, motivation is an outcome that can result from a person gaining social recognition in the household and improving self-esteem through digital housework tasks (Kosfeld, Neckermann 2011). Satisfaction can be obtained by practising virtual intelligence skills like: establishing behavioural guidelines in interactions; coordinating information by using media according to the available tools and task-technology fit (Makarius, Larson 2017) during the performance of digital housework. Therefore, the outcome dimension of digital housework is defined in this paper as any positive results from the performance of digital housework.

However, the main concept that is considered relevant for digital housework outcomes is digital capital (Ragnedda 2018). Digital capital is defined as the set of digital skills and digital devices that a person collects and transfers from one sphere to another (Ragnedda 2018). Ragnedda (2018) argues that having a certain level of digital capital (abilities and resources) influences the usage of other forms of capital (social, political, economic, personal, and cultural) in the online realm, so that new perceivable outcomes occur in offline activities. Hence, a basic assumption is that by performing digital housework people enhance their digital capital. In other words, digital capital is an outcome of digital housework. However, in this paper the emphasis is not on

how digital capital is accumulated but rather on how the accumulation of digital capital through digital housework has a significant outcome for the household member performing digital housework.

Concretely, the interaction of digital capital with other forms of capital results in a set of benefits (Ragnedda 2018). Firstly, from a social viewpoint, digital housework can lead to capacities to connect with online and offline social networks and to transfer social capital and activism in the offline domestic realm. Secondly, from a political standpoint, but applied to the domestic domain, digital housework can increase people's credibility and position within the household. Thirdly, from an economic perspective, through digital housework individuals can use resources to improve their class position or status and online information for resolving household tasks. Fourthly, regarding personal capital, digital housework supports individual's capacities to develop a creative lifestyle and self-esteem and deal with face-to-face interactions. Lastly, culturally speaking, digital housework improves household members' abilities to use, verify, absorb, and elaborate online information. These are some intuitive applications of digital capital interactions with the others forms of capital in the domestic environment. Therefore, digital capital can be used to identify the outcomes of digital housework.

Ultimately, regarding gender, the outcomes of work can differ by sex (Bond et al. 2004). Firstly, a study carried out by Elizur (1994) differentiates between cognitive (e.g. influence), affective (e.g. satisfaction), and instrumental (e.g. pay) work outcomes. The study's findings indicate that men and women ranked the outcomes slightly different. Nevertheless, Rosenbach et al. (1979) consider job dimensions (skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, feedback, and dealing with others) to be the predictors for affective work outcomes (general job satisfaction and internal work motivation) for both men and women. Therefore, men's and women's perceptions of the dimensions of digital housework are important for discovering possible gender differences in the affective outcomes of digital housework. In addition, De Vuyst and Raeymaeckers (2019) identifies differences in the evaluation and accumulation of digital capital between men and women journalists. These differences include women owning undervalued digital capital and women being disadvantaged in the accumulation of digital capital. Considering these data, the gender implications of digital housework outcomes are of interest.

Methodology

The objective of this paper is to identify the gender implications of the proposed dimensions of digital housework. A qualitative methodology is used to achieve this because it is able to capture and analyse digital housework practices in detail. Thus,

two research questions are addressed: (1) What are the cognitive, emotional, and symbolic tasks of digital housework and their outcomes? (2) What are the gender patterns of performing cognitive, emotional, and symbolic digital housework? By answering these questions, the implications that digital housework has for domestic gender aspects like task distribution, roles, identities, and dynamics can be addressed.

To answer the research questions, 53 cultural biographies of digital domestic objects are thematically analysed. These social documents are gathered in a doctoral research project that conducted a sociological investigation based on semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted in 10 Romanian technologised households. A section of the interview focused on building cultural biographies for

Table 2: A list of devices described with cultural biographies according to their category of use

Domestic devices	Kitchen robot: Thermomix (2 biographies)
	Microwave oven
	Dishwasher
	Coffee machine
	Electric oven (2 biographies)
	Electric stove
	One Pot kitchen pot (2 biographies)
	Air fryer
	Kitchen robot: Ninja
	Refrigerator
	Classic vacuum cleaner
	Vertical vacuum cleaner (4 biographies)
	Vacuum cleaner robot (2 biographies)
Personal devices	Telephone (11 biographies)
	3D printer
	Laptop (3 biographies)
	Dyson hair dryer
	TV
	Radio
	PC
	Electric nail cutter and lamp
	Electric toothbrush
Professional devices	Laptop (12 biographies)

Source: Author.

the most used or recent domestic, personal, and professional digital devices. Thus, the instrument used to collect the data is designed to catch the transformations digital housework has brought about in domestic, personal, and professional life (see Appendix 1). However, the resulting cultural biographies of domestic devices offer a detailed narrative of technology use in the house and are used to identify the dimensions and outcomes of digital housework and their gender implications.

Constructing the cultural biographies of objects is a method that consists of using things to describe the social realm. Kopytoff (1986) suggests that people and objects construct themselves reciprocally in a world of commodities. Likewise, Dant (2001) argues that material objects are part of people's lives and that social lives impact objects. Objects can therefore reveal cultural aspects of the social world in how they acquire meaning through the way they are used (Dant 2001). Also, the anthropological method of constructing the cultural biographies of objects analyses the materiality of the social world by considering that objects have agency and lives (Hoskins 2006). From this perspective, domestic technologies, as ordinary objects, are the focus of the biographies in this paper and reveal changes in the everyday life of domestic practices and routines through their stories. Thus, the cultural biography of objects is the method used here to capture the social domestic practices that involve digital appliances.

Table 3: Sociodemographic data of the sample

Type of family relations	Married couple	Household 2, Household 9
	Married couple with children	Household 3, Household 6, Household 10
	Multigenerational family	Household 1, Household 4, Household 8
	Siblings	Household 5
	Live alone	Household 7
Status of employment	Employed*	Household 1, Household 2, Household 5, Household 6, Household 7, Household 9, Household 10
	Employed and maternity leave	Household 3
	Employed and retired	Household 4
	Employed and student	Household 8
Age structure	Young couples (27–36 years)	Household 2, Household 3, Household 6, Household 9, Household 10
	Young people (27–44 years)	Household 5, Household 7
	Multigenerational (18–65 years)	Household 1, Household 4, Household 8

*All the employed respondents work full time.

Source: Author.

Therefore, the biographies of domestic technologies were analysed using a set of categories, defined in reference to the literature. In other words, the analysis instrument (see Appendix 2) contains cognitive, emotional, symbolic, and outcome categories that are followed throughout the thematic analytic process. The cultural biographies analysed describe the domestic, personal, and professional digital devices that are used in the household and are thus the object of digital housework (see Table 2). Moreover, Table 3 provides a sociodemographic description of the households included in the study. The sample is a convenience sample accessed by the researcher through her personal network. However, the households are both smart houses (4) and technologised houses (6).

Findings

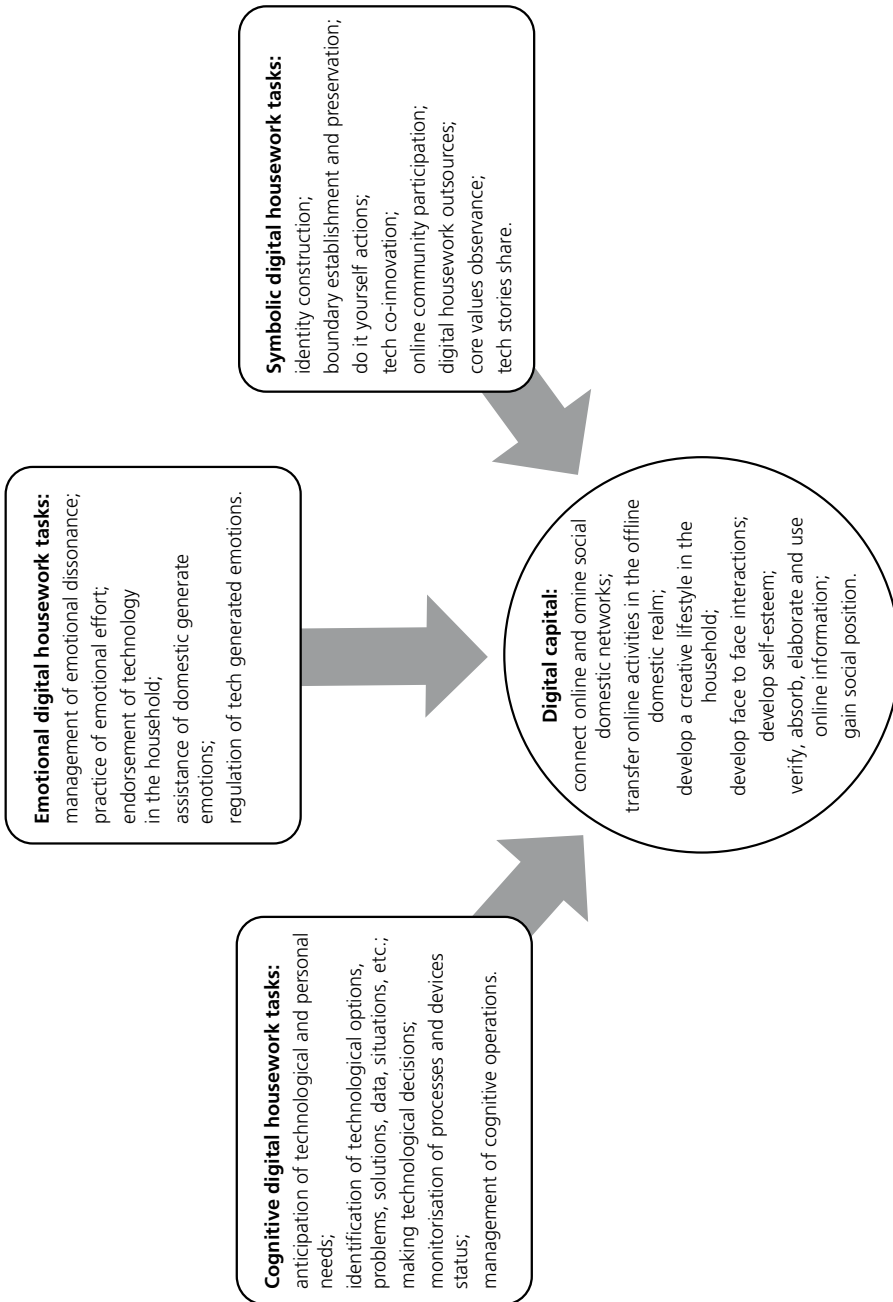
I analysed four dimensions of digital housework in order to draw out the multidimensional nature of digital housework. Beside the main tasks that form digital housework, I identified another three new categories of digital housework tasks and the outcomes of performing them. These digital housework tasks are cognitive, emotional, and symbolic and their outcomes are included in the construction of digital capital. Figure 1 summarises the answer to the first question of this study.

Cognitive digital housework

First and foremost, all digital housework tasks have a cognitive component. Within them, there is a purely cognitive digital housework task: gaining digital literacy. The process of digital literacy involves various cognitive operations but, rather than being treated as a self-standing cognitive digital housework task, digital literacy is considered a skill that transcends all cognitive digital housework tasks. The other main digital tasks have both a cognitive side and a physical one. From them, five generic cognitive digital tasks of digital housework are derived using the biographies of domestic devices, as explained below.

The anticipation of technological and personal needs involves acknowledging a personal need for new and specific technologies (e.g. a vacuum cleaner robot to vacuum the large amount of dust that accumulates in the house) and the need for domestic technologies to function properly while they are being used (e.g. positioning the fryer on the kitchen counter next to the hood to prevent the smell from spreading through the house) or while they are operating independently (e.g. creating space for the robot vacuum cleaner). The cognitive digital housework task of anticipating needs is accompanied by processes of planning tech acquisition and interventions.

Figure 1: Digital housework tasks and outcomes



Source: Author.

Identifying technological options, problems, solutions, situations, etc., is done by means of various operations: searching for technologies, perceiving them accurately through online promotional offers and online video materials, searching for and processing online reviews of certain devices, finding preferred settings (e.g. the preferred setting on an electric toothbrush), detecting problems through tech reparation tasks (e.g. finding a motherboard failure while trying to repair a laptop battery), and discovering the best solutions by means of trial and error: *'I searched through the settings until I found it. I tried a lot of things trying to see where the problem was coming from until I found it, more by accident.'* (female, age 18).

The cognitive digital housework task of making technological decisions includes: deciding whether to perform a certain task, where time and financial costs are the main factors considered; deciding when to perform it (e.g. frequently at the last minute); deciding where to place devices; deciding what digital devices to buy, use, learn, customise, automate, repair; and deciding how to carry out any given digital housework task. Therefore, digital housework has a strong decision-making component embedded in it.

The monitoring of processes and the state of devices is a task that especially appears in the process of tech acquisition, in the process of tech automation, and in the process of tech maintenance. It consists of the cognitive tasks of checking and processing prices and promotional offers at different moments in time; monitoring the actions and routines of automatised domestic technologies through small gestures of helping or avoiding digital devices; and monitoring the state and condition of the devices in order to change parts that do not work, add consumables, maintain their proper condition, etc. This cognitive housework task is constantly required and household technology regularly needs this kind of attention.

The management of cognitive shifts, cognitive workloads, cognitive fatigue, and interruptions is undertaken with or without the help of technology. Cognitive shifts appear when updating digital devices and are managed through update resistance or through digital literacy. Cognitive workloads are specific to tech maintenance and are neglected or managed with the help of technology (e.g. logistics apps and settings). Cognitive fatigue is managed through technology automation (e.g. smart plugs for remote control). Interruptions can occur when technology is in use and are managed through the digital housework task of tech maintenance, repair, learning, etc. Also, they can occur through notifications and sound signals when a digital housework task or something else is being done and are managed through multitasking or boundary setting.

Emotion digital housework

Like cognitive digital housework, emotion digital housework is woven into the fabric of digital housework. Firstly, the feeling rules that guide it, identified in the cultural biographies of domestic devices, are as follows: technology has two faces (feminist); technology is our friend (progressist); through technology we should help the environment (environmentalist); new is (always) better (globalist). Secondly, emotion digital housework is determined by: outcome beliefs, where the task of maintaining technology seems insignificant compared to the benefits of using it for housework; motivations, where the technology is seen as a time-saving option or where a person has a passion for technology and using it generates a sense of satisfaction; a personality-technology fit, where a person develops an emotional attachment to the technology; or a task-technology fit, where technology is used for domestic routines and can be replaced in order to better meet a domestic need.

Emotion digital housework incorporates both human–technology and human–human emotional management. Two emotion digital housework tasks performed in relation to domestic technologies are: emotional dissonance (e.g. expressing interest and excitement in the human–technology interaction) and emotional effort (e.g. expressing excitement instead of anxiety or discomfort regarding tech repair). Three emotion digital housework tasks performed in relation to another household member are: companionship, help, and regulation behaviours. In companionship behaviour, household members strengthen the feeling rules by expressing an appreciation for technology and by spending time and making an effort to perform and explain digital housework to others: *'I admit I let him look at it and see exactly how it works and then it's easier to explain [it] to me.'* (female, age 30). Help behaviour is the main emotional digital housework task because through digital literacy and the digital automation of devices others are protected from stress and personal relationships are improved. Regulation behaviour is rare but can be expressed through the digital housework task of acquiring technology and developing digital literacy.

Symbolic digital housework

In the cultural biographies of domestic devices eight symbolic digital housework tasks were identified (see Figure 1). They are exemplified further.

The identity of household members is constructed through the performance of digital housework in relation to family roles, gender roles (discussed separately), personal characteristics, and personal interests. Firstly, young adults establish their identity as technology users and specialists in the household and become providers of knowledge and help for their parents. Secondly, the personal inclination towards

expressing curiosity, seeking change, solving problems, and other technological interactions determines the construction of a digital houseworker's identity. Lastly, the individuals that invest in advanced domestic technologies form their identity around the experience of living in a smart house.

Boundary work is performed through digital housework in order to maintain the desired work–life balance (e.g. establishing a place for the professional devices), to limit the negative effect of technology upon personal health (e.g. buying a laptop with screen filters and protectors for the eyes), and to keep a healthy connection with other household members (e.g. designating a member who is responsible for digital housework). Furthermore, a common example of the task of boundary work is limiting the time spent on the usage of apps (by household members) through tech customisation.

Tech DIY actions include the following examples: creating a personalised light system in the house using sensors; using a Dyson extension in a personalised manner; repairing a vacuum cleaner cable with tape, etc. The co-innovation of digital domestic systems is performed more in collaboration with tech stores and suppliers by creating digital domestic configurations in the house using the technologies that are available on the market and accessible to the digital houseworker. The practice of co-innovation was not identified among household members while doing digital housework.

Online community participation is practised mainly while buying and learning about new devices by appealing to online resources such as *'Reviews of specific mom groups.'* (female, age 28). A common symbolic, relational digital housework task is the outsourcing of digital housework tasks. It is the reverse of DIY actions and consists of externalising mainly the installation and repair of domestic devices. Another aspect of outsourcing is the delegation of digital housework tasks within the household.

The observance of core values is performed through technology progress in the household, technology control, and early tech adoption. On the one hand, technology is considered a value. On the other hand, in relation to domestic technology use, value is placed on personalisation, adaptability, upsurge, curiosity, and the fulfilment of personal and technological needs. The symbolic digital housework task of sharing stories about personal technologies amplifies the effects of digital housework. It is performed both within households, through discursive practices, and between them, which leads to the spread of the use of digital domestic devices.

The outcomes of digital housework

The outcomes of digital housework can be efficiently synthesised in the concept of digital capital. In other words, the main and comprehensive outcome of digital housework is the accumulation of the digital capital of household members. The digital

capital formed through digital housework contains multiple digital housework outcomes that consist of improved digital abilities and social position.

By performing digital housework people can connect with online and offline social networks (e.g. combining social resources in the process of searching devices). Also, household members can transfer online activities (e.g. analysing video materials) to the offline realm (e.g. analysing domestic devices), especially through the cognitive digital tasks of identifying and managing information about technological repair. Another outcome is the development of a creative lifestyle, which is manifested in system tech installation and automation in the household. The development of face-to-face interactions is also an outcome of the symbolic digital housework task of outsourcing the repair of devices. Moreover, the symbolic digital housework tasks of tech DIY actions and identity construction can lead to the outcome of self-esteem development: *'I'm so proud of them, I liked the smart part, that's why I bought some sensors, some stuff.'* (male, age 33). In addition, digital alphabetisation can result in the improved abilities of verifying, absorbing, and using online information regarding domestic technology. Finally, another outcome of performing any digital housework task is the improvement of social position within the household and within society by gaining credibility and status based on tech expertise.

The gender dimension of digital housework

In this section the gender patterns of the digital housework dimensions discussed above are explored. Firstly, I analyse who performs cognitive, emotional, and symbolic digital housework tasks and how. Secondly, I identify the ways in which digital housework benefits both men and women. Table 4 presents the key findings regarding gender differences in the performance and outcomes of digital housework.

These findings show that cognitive digital housework is mostly performed by men, while women assist with the anticipation of personal needs, the identification of limited technological options and solutions, the monitoring of domestic devices, and multitasking in domestic life. Regarding emotional digital housework, women perform tasks in relation to technology through the management of emotional dissonance and emotional effort, while men seem to present less emotional tech dissonance and, thus, focus on the domestic endorsement of, assistance with, and regulation of tech-generated emotions for women. Symbolic digital housework tasks are both shared (identity construction, DIY actions, online community participation, and digital housework outsources) and specific to men (tech co-innovation, core value observance, and the sharing of tech stories) or to women (boundary establishment). Thus, through symbolic digital housework men and women build different identities (men – relational identity; women – individual identity) and domestic arrangements (men

Table 4: Key gendered digital housework findings

Digital housework dimension	Key findings regarding the MALE performance of digital housework	Key findings regarding the FEMALE performance of digital housework
Cognitive	Anticipate both personal and technological needs	Anticipate only personal needs
	Identify technological options, problems, solutions, etc.	Identify technological options, problems, solutions, etc. (only among women aged 18–34)
	Monitor devices and tech processes	Monitor devices and tech processes (if used personally for housework)
	Make decisions about technology	Trust men with making the decisions about technology
	Manage the cognitive operation for all the household members; manage cognitive shifts, workloads, fatigue, and interruptions by age	Manage interruptions through multitasking
Emotional	Perform human–human emotional management	Perform human–technology emotion management
	Gender feeling rule: Men like and understand technology	Gender feeling rule: Women need assistance in domestic technology use
	Express interest and excitement (in the case of younger men) and friendship (in the case of older men) about technology	Express confusion but contentment through the management of emotional dissonance
	Perform technological endorsement, assistance, and regulation in relation to women	Perform emotional effort
Symbolic	The constructing of an identity as tech experts, helpers, and providers	The construction of an identity as responsible, resourceful, and flexible domestic workers
	Co-innovate	Set boundaries
	Install complex DIY systems and configurations	Undertake simple DIY actions
	Outsource a few digital housework tasks: such as installation and repair	Outsource installation, alphabetisation, and repair to persons outside the house and delegate most of the digital housework tasks inside the house to others
	Participate in online communities especially for digital housework purposes	Participate less in online communities for digital housework purposes
	Observe core tech values and share tech stories	Not involved in symbolic discursive digital housework tasks

Outcome	Improve ability to transfer online activities to the domestic realm; improve ability to verify, absorb, elaborate, and use information; develop self-esteem and social position in the household	Develop ability to connect online and offline in social domestic networks, engage in a domestic lifestyle and in face-to-face interactions
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Source: Author.

– systems construction, women – tech use personalisation); they also participate in online communities and outsource digital housework in distinct ways (men participate more and outsource less while women participate less and outsource more). These observations of shared symbolic tasks reveal that men focus on technological development and valorisation while women focus on technological preservation and limitation.

The outcomes of digital housework impact men and women differently depending on the specificity of the cognitive, emotional, or symbolic digital housework task performed. In other words, men and women can perform (1) different cognitive, emotional, and symbolic digital housework tasks or (2) the same cognitive, emotional, and symbolic digital housework tasks but do so differently, according to their genders. This has a direct impact on the personal outcomes of the digital housework performed. Therefore, as indicated in Table 4, men and women benefit differently from the outcomes of digital housework.

Discussion and conclusion

Understanding the implications of digital housework for gender sheds light on the transformations brought about by the penetration of technology into the domestic sphere. Also, considering the qualitative nature of this study, these implications need to be further explored. These findings, however, have implications for sociological knowledge regarding housework, digital housework, and gender.

First and foremost, given that housework includes digital housework, it is possible to draw one implication, which addresses a new characteristic. Housework has already been perceived as having an emotional dimension (Oakley 2018) and a cognitive dimension (Damingier 2019). Concretely, the symbolic nature of digital housework adds a new perspective on housework for the household members and contributes to the dynamics of task distribution. The result is that men take charge of the performance of digital housework (in accordance with findings from the literature, confirmed in this study by the quantity of tasks undertaken by men). Therefore, men are more involved in housework through digital housework. The extent to which they take over housework responsibilities has yet to be explored, but the findings of this study confirm

men's involvement in digital housework at a higher level than women's. Therefore, with the diversification of housework tasks determined by technology, men participate in housework undertake only through the tasks of digital housework, but they do not get involved in the other traditional housework tasks. In other words, men take on work that has symbolic significance. The implication of this preference is that men become more involved in the domestic realm as long as they can construct an identity, endorse technology use in the household, make technological decisions, and so on.

More precisely, digital housework does not replace traditional housework; it only transforms it by changing the type of tasks performed in order to clean, cook, wash, and so on and by adding new additional tasks on top the original housework tasks. Therefore, even if some housework tasks are automatised and the quantity of housework performed by women may decrease, this is offset by the new digital housework tasks that need to be undertaken. Women tend not to be the digital housekeeper of the home, but they involuntarily perform various types of digital housework tasks on a daily basis. So, the second implication that can be drawn by considering digital housework an independent domain is that it creates new gender role transfers within households. In this study, women were found to have a more individualistic approach to digital housework while men tended to take over the social role in the household by getting involved in relational emotional digital housework and creating relational identities. This implies a role transfer regarding social interactions in the household, where men have a double responsibility: the management of devices and the management of interactions between devices and household members (women).

Another gender implication is determined by the fact that housework benefits the entire household while digital housework directly benefits the person who performs it. In addition, while housework is considered a burden that rests on women shoulders, digital housework is not perceived as burden, so even if it is largely men's responsibility, it does not have the same attributes. Considering these differences between housework and digital housework, gender plays a double role. Firstly, while men tend to get involved in digital housework, they are the ones who quantitatively benefit more from it without feeling it to be a burden. Secondly, the fact that gender shapes how men and women perform digital housework, as the study findings indicate, implies that the outcomes differ accordingly. Therefore, the difference in the performance of the same digital housework leads to differences in the quality of the benefits men and women get from it. Digital housework benefits men's abilities, self-perception, and status in the household and women's domestic lifestyle and social interactions. Therefore, there is a gendered double standard regarding the performance of digital housework.

Lastly, given that the performance of digital housework is gendered, the outcome of undertaking this type of work – digital capital – is also gendered. The implication

of gendered digital domestic capital, which is the accumulation of personal benefits by performing digital housework, is that digital housework fosters gendered digital inequalities. In other words, since digital capital contributes to digital inequalities (Ragnedda, Ruiu 2020), gendered digital capital generates disparities between men's and women's skills, resources, and personal benefits. This study highlights how the formation of gender-specific digital capital can lead to inequalities by creating a vicious but advantageous circle between the performance of digital housework and the formation of digital capital for men and a vicious but necessary circle between household management and social interactions for women. The nuance that the study of digital capital as an outcome of digital housework highlights is the need to consider the digital divide within households, as microunits of society, in order to address gender inequalities. Therefore, gendered digital capital is especially relevant in the contemporary digitalised world.

In conclusion, digital housework is a multidimensional concept that can be grasped through a detailed analysis focusing on cognitive, emotional, symbolic, and outcome dimensions. Using 53 cultural biographies of domestic devices this study revealed that, as well as the concrete digital housework tasks performed in order to use appliances, it is also necessary to perform cognitive, emotional, and symbolic digital housework tasks. The performance of digital housework tasks results in a series of outcomes that are concretised in digital capital construction. Gender plays a significant role in the performance of both cognitive, emotional, and symbolic digital housework tasks and in the assumed outcomes of digital housework performance. Digital housework both fosters and transfers gender roles in the household. Also, while digital housework tends to ease the housework performed by women, it creates new opportunities for men.


The implications of these findings are twofold: from a theoretical perspective they offer a theoretical tool of inquiry and from a pragmatic perspective they represent a basis for policy implementation regarding consumer, domestic, and work culture. One limitation of this study is the retrospective methodological approach that underpins the results. Nevertheless, the significance and contribution of this study are that it fills a gap of knowledge regarding the dimensions of digital housework and provide new data on the field of the sociology of work and the sociology of gender that can be further evaluated. As future research directions, digital housework needs to be studied through quantitative sociological investigations in order to understand the impact of domestic technology use on housework, work–life balance, human–technology relations, and the like. By considering digital housework, sociologists, the producers of technologies, and policymakers can better understand the particularities of the domestic and professional work that takes place in the home and take action.

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Appendix 1

Research instrument: section of semi-structured interview design to capture cultural biographies of devices

1. Select one of the newest appliances in your home that you use frequently to do domestic work and describe it in detail. Say everything you think is relevant about it.

1. Pre-purchase period:

1.1. Who purchased this device and when?

1.2. What was the main reason why you decided to buy this new appliance?

1.3. What did you do with the device you had before?

1.4. What did you consider when choosing it? Mention at least three criteria (for example: price, company, appearance, etc.). By what process did you acquire information? How long did it take to find what you wanted?

2. Familiarisation period:

2.1. Who installed and introduced the home appliance? Where is it positioned?

2.2. How did you learn to use this technology? How long did it take you to familiarize yourself with it?

2.3. On a scale of 1 to 5, how well do you feel you use the device domestic? What are its main features that you use? What feature do you know it has but haven't used yet?

3. Use of the appliance:

3.1. Have you customised this device in any particular way? Through specific settings, name, mode of use?

3.2. How do you use this device on a typical day to get things done in the house? What is different when you use it? What did it add? Does it cause you inconvenience in domestic work? Do you also use it for anything else?

3.3. Apart from you, who else uses this device and how?

4. Device maintenance and replacement:

4.1. How do you maintain your home appliance? What exactly do you do? At what point? How often? How long? Do you follow a certain sequential order? How do you organise its maintenance?

4.2. What do you dream of buying related to this device?

4.3. What do you do when the device stops working properly or breaks down? Has it happened? How did you proceed? How would you proceed?

4.4. What are the main reasons why you would change this device?

Appendix 2

Data processing tool: Category schemes for thematic analysis of cognitive, emotional, symbolic and outcome dimensions of digital housework

1. Categories of cognitive digital housework tasks

Domains of digital housework	Cognitive digital tasks
Technology acquisition	Anticipate technological needs
	Plan tech acquisition
	Perceive options accurately
	Identify of suitable options
	Make decisions
	Monitor technological offers
Technology installation	Anticipate technological needs
	Identify best spatial position
	Manage mental workload
	Manage cognitive shifts
Digital literacy	Searching information
	Identify useful information
	Process data
	Make decisions
	Transmit technological knowledge
Technological customisation	Anticipate personal needs
	Identify preferred or needed option
	Make decisions
Technology update	Make decisions
	Manage cognitive shifts
Digital devices and systems automation	Anticipate technological and personal needs
	Identify efficient solutions
	Make decisions
	Monitor technology's actions
	Manage mental fatigue
Technology maintenance	Anticipate technology's needs
	Process the stage and condition of devices
	Identify technological situations
	Check devices
	Make decisions
	Manage mental workload

Technology repair	Identify of technological solutions
	Process the stage and condition of devices
	Make decisions
	Organise tech interventions
	Manage cognitive shifts
	Manage interruptions of tasks

2. Categories of emotion digital housework

Dimensions	Indicators
Emotion work	Emotional dissonance
	Emotional effort
	Companionship behaviour
	Help behaviour
	Regulation behaviour
Feeling rules	Political feminism
	Progressivism
	Environmentalism
	Globalism
Emotion–technology relations	Outcome beliefs
	Motivators
	Personality-technology fit
	Task-technology fit

3. Categories of symbolic digital housework tasks

Types of symbolic work	Identity work
	Boundary work
	Material breach work
	Discursive breach work
	Material bridge work
	Relational bridge work
	Values work
	Amplification work

4. Outcomes of digital housework

Dimensions	Indicators
Symbolic outcomes	Social recognition
	Self-esteem
Practical outcomes	Satisfaction
	Motivation
Material outcomes	Ability to connect to online and offline social networks
	Ability to transfer social capital and activism to the offline realm
	Increased credibility and status within the household
	Use of resources to improve class, position, or status
	Use of online information to resolve household tasks
	Ability to develop a creative lifestyle
	Ability to develop face-to-face interactions
	Ability to develop self-esteem
	Improves abilities to use, verify, absorb, and elaborate online information

The Limits and Opportunities of Practising Journalism in the Digital Space: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract: This study explores the professional debut of women journalists in the digital environment in Romania, focusing on the dynamics of gender identity. The research examines the phenomenon of the viralisation of the first material published by a young journalist and the subsequent online reactions to it on social media. The case study method is used to analyse the discursive and institutional consequences of this event, observing the reactions of various stakeholders (the author, readers, journalists, NGOs, and the academic community). The findings highlight the opportunities created by the viral nature of the debut article, which provides the journalist with a discursive platform post-publication to address gender-related issues and enhances her visibility. However, the analysis also exposes significant challenges faced by the journalist, such as sexist and misogynistic discourse in the comments on social media, demonstrating that in the public sphere of Romania, a woman journalist's online debut is viewed and analysed not just in terms of professional standards but also from a gender perspective.

Keywords: journalistic debut, gender identity, digital hostility, misogynistic discourse, viralization

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Theoretical background

This article analyses the phenomenon of journalistic debuts in the digital space from a gender perspective. The goal is to identify the limits and opportunities that female journalists face in their current professional environment. In particular we observe

the empowering and disempowering effects that online exposure has on journalists. The digital space – after going through an optimistic phase in which the benefits of the democratisation of communication were highlighted along with the promise of egalitarianism and free expression – is regarded in the literature also as a medium in which the asymmetries and the unequal distribution of power in society are reproduced (Fuchs 2014; van Dijck et al. 2018; Zuboff 2019), in a setting permeable to hate speech and disinformation. Moreover, even if platforms are based on an inclusive philosophy, the inclusion appears exploitative, as it normalises the pervasive platformisation of social life and daily communication, which benefits certain actors who gain near-monopolistic control over platform communications and design (Hroch et al. 2024). Even for ordinary users, platforms offer technological affordances that enable them to become predators and exploiters.

Previous studies have highlighted the vulnerable position of journalists in relation to the public, drawing attention to the digital hostility they encounter (Stahel 2023; Holton et al. 2021; Riives et al. 2021; Lewis et al. 2020) and the lack of a systemic approach on the part of media organisations, which treat the problem of digital hostility as an issue for journalists themselves and not for the organisation (Holton et al. 2021). On the other hand, how fragile journalists are is also determined by the organisational culture of the media outlet for which they work, revealing gender-based asymmetries among colleagues/ staff and management (Apostol 2018), which are reinforced by the pressure of hegemonic masculinity in the behaviour of male journalists (Riives et al. 2021). Furthermore, from a feminist perspective the media transform women into objects and invite everyone to view them as such. Sarah Projansky argues that the ‘media incessantly look at and invite us to look at girls. Girls are objects at which we gaze, whether we want to or not. They are everywhere in our mediascapes. As such, media turn girls into spectacles-visual objects on display’ (Projansky 2014: 5 quoted in Banet-Weiser 2015: 56–57). The same phenomenon is found among men. There is empirical evidence confirming that men are objectified, too, though less than women, and presenting commercials, films, action figures, and video games as primary sources, noting that the methods of objectification are similar for both genders (Thompson 2020). This implies that the media create the rules through which gender norms are socialised and the context for exposure and, further, serve as the opportune setting for public criticism.

According to Reporters Without Borders, for many journalists, being targeted by hate speech after the publication of an article is now routine (RSF 2018: 7): “‘It used to be the news organisations that were attacked but now it is the journalists themselves as individuals”, the editor of a French media outlet told RSF’ (RSF 2018: 7). Previous studies have shown how online abuse and the pressure on journalists to develop a ‘thick skin’ in their online relationship with the public have become normalised (Lewis



et al. 2020; Riives et al. 2021). Furthermore, journalists are increasingly pushed to promote themselves and their work on social media, feeling obligated to build a brand and develop closer relationships with their audiences (Lewis et al. 2020). Equally important is the fact that, according to the conclusions of 'The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence against Women Journalists', 'the social networking platform Facebook was rated the least safe of the top five platforms or apps used by participants' (ICFJ 2022). The same study identified several types and methods of online attacks on women journalists worldwide, noting that these attacks are becoming increasingly sophisticated (ICFJ 2022). This sophistication aligns with the evolution of technological affordances in virtual spaces and the digital culture shaped by platform society.

Regarding the gender perspective, in this study we refer to the definition given by Laura Grünberg, according to which 'feminist theories for which gender is a central category of analysis emphasize the gender dimension of social reality, thus the gender perspective of any aspect of social life under study' (Grünberg 2002: 284 in Miroiu 2002; authors' translation). The author explains that 'from a feminist point of view, any study, theoretical analysis, sectoral or global policy must pay attention to the importance of the meanings and consequences of what is culturally defined as woman and man, as well as the feminine ways in comparison to the masculine ways of thinking, knowing, feeling, valuing, and acting' (ibid.; authors' translation).

Stahel (2023) notes that historically disadvantaged groups, particularly women and ethnic minorities, are those most likely to face hostility in journalism. However, there is a notable lack of research focused on the experiences of their advantaged counterparts (Stahel 2023).

In the field of journalism, the concept of digital hostility encompasses vulgar, pathologising, disparaging, offensive, and threatening verbal messages received via any electronic medium, whether publicly on social media or privately through email, text, or phone, and distinguished from merely negative comments by their pejorative and threatening tone (Stahel 2023: 412). Although explicit theoretical categories of hostility are rare in the literature on journalists, we identified three types based on observed recurrent forms of hostility relating to identity, professional devaluation, and severe threats, all based on empirical evidence (Stahel 2023: 412). These categories are: identity-based attacks relating to gender (sexism) or race (racism); the devaluation of professional work like job performance criticism; and particularly severe threats or threats from repeat offenders (Stahel 2023: 412).

From the perspective of gender identity and the occupational ideology of journalism, studies show that there are no major discrepancies between the ways in which women and men seeing their journalistic activity (Apostol 2018: 40). Feminist theory emphasises that differences and inequalities appear because 'female journalists are exposed to a sexist work environment, characterized not only by an unequal distri-

bution of social capital between genders but also by the symbolic privilege of the “masculine” (Apostol 2018: 3). Female journalists must handle a dual pressure: to prove their professionalism while maintaining traditional femininity and to adhere to occupational values and present themselves as feminine, accepting sexist jokes and benevolent sexism, including compliments and gestures from colleagues (van Zoonen 1998 quoted in Apostol 2018).

The International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), with support from UNESCO, published a study in November 2022 on online violence against women journalists. The study’s authors claim that ‘The Chilling: A global study of online violence against women journalists is the most geographically, linguistically, and ethnically diverse research ever published on the theme’ (ICFJ 2022). According to the findings of this study, nearly 73% of the journalists surveyed had experienced online violence. As per their responses, 25% of the threats were physical threats, while 18% were of a sexual nature.

Holton et al. (2021) identified notable differences between the online harassment of male and female journalists. Male journalists experienced less harassment, typically dismissing it as minor off-colour comments or jokes, often from persistent trolls or critics, with little impact on their social media engagement (Holton et al. 2021). Online attacks on male journalists refer to specific skills or competence, general knowledge, education, and age/generation stereotypes (Riives et al. 2021).

Conversely, female journalists faced more frequent and severe harassment, often focused on their gender or perceived sexuality, and this harassment is more sustained, spanning multiple social media platforms and blurring professional and personal boundaries (Holton et al. 2021). Women in politics or sports journalism were particularly targeted, facing a questioning of their credentials, verbal assaults, lewd images, threats of physical violence, and exposure of personal information, significantly impacting their well-being (Holton et al. 2021).

Other studies have shown that journalists with larger audiences, a strong social media presence, and working in television on political topics are those who experience more general digital hostility, with women and migrant journalists facing less general hostility but higher levels of sexist, racist, and xenophobic hostility, and a particularly strong link between television work and hostility, especially involving repeat offenders, was observed for these groups (Stahel 2023). This heightened visibility places journalists at greater risk of recurring and severe online abuse compared to ordinary internet users (Lewis et al. 2020).

Other scholars affirm that male journalists’ experiences with online abuse remain under-researched, partly due to masculine stereotypes that inhibit them from acknowledging and reporting harassment (Riives et al. 2021). This phenomenon is described in reference to hegemonic masculinity as a ‘blockage’ that forces men to re-

press emotions, potentially leading to severe mental and physical strain (Riives et al. 2021). Even though alternative masculinities have emerged, they are often ridiculed, reinforcing traditional gender norms (Riives et al. 2021).

Despite the abuse, journalists often stay online because of the demands of their job, and this leads them to develop coping strategies like avoiding reading comments or limiting their social media use, which can result in audience disengagement and impact their reporting or career longevity (Lewis et al. 2020). Female journalists are particularly likely to leave the profession, change positions, withdraw from social media, or self-censor due to harassment, even though they are encouraged to develop a 'thick skin' (Lewis et al. 2020). While harassment is pervasive and media organisations lack systematic approaches to address it, leading to self-censorship, this paradoxically does not deter journalists from engaging with audiences, as harassment is sometimes seen as misguided participation (Lewis et al. 2020).

The subject of this research cannot be understood without adequate contextualisation of the dynamics of gender roles in Romania, which could have explanatory value. According to the study 'Gender Barometer 2018', even though conservative pressures do not have the same magnitude as in other countries in the region, 'Romania is particularly facing anti-gender equality rhetoric and the demonetization of gender equality themes' (Grünberg 2019; authors' translation). Regarding legislative efforts and institutions focusing on combating discrimination, the following should be noted:

In 2002, Parliament passed the Law on Equality of Opportunities and Treatment between Women and Men. In 2003, an article concerning the principle of equality of opportunities between women and men was introduced into the Constitution. In the same year, the Law on Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence was passed. Key institutions were established to implement these laws: the National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD) and the National Agency for Gender Equality between Women and Men (ANES). ... Unfortunately, with the implementation of new austerity measures at the beginning of 2011, ANES lost its budgetary autonomy, and the County Commissions for Gender Equality (COJES) were closed, thus indicating that gender discrimination was considered an unimportant issue for the political leadership of the ruling party (PDL). (Miroiu, Bucur 2019: 77–78)

Another important aspect of the Romanian context relates to mentalities. Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu address, in 'The Birth of Democratic Citizenship: Women and Power in Modern Romania' (*Nașterea cetățeniei democratice. Femeile și puterea în România modernă*), describe how women and men relate to marital relationships: 'In 2000, 92% of men and 91% of women approved the statement that men are the

“head of the family”. ... Seven years later, only 49.7% of men and 33.7% of women still believed that men should be the “head of the family” (Miroiu, Bucur 2019: 83; authors’ translation). The two authors also note that ‘before 1940, women considered themselves subordinate to men in marriage, but by 2010, they had come to expect partnerships and appreciation for their role in building and maintaining the household’ (Miroiu, Bucur 2019: 85; authors’ translation).

It is worth mentioning that, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), in 2023 Romania ranked last in the European Union on the Gender Equality Index (which highlights developments in gender equality every two years), with a score of 56.1 out of 100, which is 14.1 points below the EU average.

The debut analysed in this study takes place in the field of Romanian journalism that is historically perceived, in our country, as more of a literary expression motivated by talent rather than a solid professional education based on rules, techniques, and rigorous ethical norms oriented towards social responsibility (Gross 2023: 119).

To understand the sociocultural and professional context of our cases analysis it is important to note the following about the Romanian journalists condition: ‘Journalists are presented as timid professionals, with low self-esteem, subject to changes in their terms and conditions of work’ (Surugiu 2016: 182 in Randle 2016). It is worth mentioning, again with the aim of understanding the sociocultural and professional context in which Romanian journalists conduct their work, that, according to Reporters Without Borders, in 2023 Romania occupied the 53rd position out of a total of 180 countries on its index of press freedom in the world (Reporters without Borders 2023).

The present study analyses the example of a debut in digital media because ‘the mass media play an important role in contemporary society, shaping public relations and private practices, and maintaining and changing rules, representations, and ideological assumptions’ (Rovența-Frumușani 2002: 47; authors’ translation). An example in this sense is a study on the presence of women and men in audio-visual news programmes on internal and external politics. The study carried out by Media Trust Romania in 2023 analysed five national television stations and found that men overwhelmingly predominate on these TV programmes (74.2%) over women (25.8%) (Media Trust Romania 2023). On the other hand, our research does not start from the assumption that the digital environment and social networks are completely different from the society in which they operate. ‘In other words, there is no reason to think that gender representations within new media will be any different to the gender representations elsewhere. But having said that, the Web provides opportunities for individuals and groups to provide alternatives to the existing set of dominant ideas about women and men, on their own websites’ (Gauntlett 2005: 53).

Regarding the feminisation of the journalist profession in Romania, the 2015 GMMP report indicates that in Romania women dominate in the role of presenting news on



the radio (92%) and TV (69%), while there is a more balanced gender representation among authors of articles (55% women, 45% men) (Apostol 2018: 45).

In the report 'Media Freedom in Romania Ahead of Super Election Year: Mission Report on Media Capture, Legal Obstacles and Journalists' Safety', published in 2024, the International Press Institute (IPI), Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT), and Free Press Unlimited (FPU) describe the organisational culture within Romanian media institutions in which female journalists work:

It is no coincidence that, with the exception of assaults in the forest,¹ every case the mission encountered involved the targeting of a woman journalist or the wife of a male journalist. So, while statistics suggest that threats to Romanian journalists are comparatively low, it is also clear that below the surface lies a hostile culture for women journalists, who are forced to operate with the expectation that misogynistic insults and threats of assault can be 'part of the job'. There is a freedom of expression crisis for women journalists which must be at the heart of the country's safety strategy.

This shows us that despite the seemingly low overall threat to Romanian journalists according to statistics, there is an underlying hostile environment specifically targeting women journalists, who are compelled to accept misogynistic insults and threats as a normal part of their profession.

Methodology

In our research, we aim to understand the discursive and institutional consequences of a young journalist's debut in the Romanian media, considering the opportunities and limitations that the digital space offers for professional legitimacy. The research questions are:

1. Do power structures in society reproduce in the digital environment?
2. How is user discourse configured in the online environment from a gender perspective?
3. How is a journalist who is just starting out in this professional field perceived?

We utilised the case study method, which Robert K. Yin describes as an investigation that examines a current phenomenon in its actual context (Yin 2005: 30). Ac-

¹ This refers to the journalists and whistle-blowers who stood up to the phenomenon of illegal lumbering in Romania and were subjected to violence.

cording to the same author, case studies are most suitable when exploring 'how' or 'why' questions, particularly in situations where the researcher has limited influence over events and when the researcher is studying a recent phenomenon within a real-life setting (Yin 2005: 15).

In this work, we chose to analyse the case of a 19-year-old journalist, a student in the field of communication sciences who faced a dual phenomenon at the beginning of her press career. Her debut text – 'I pretended to be a foreign tourist at Neversea to see how friendly Constanța is with tourists from other countries' (M-am dat drept o turistă străină venită la Neversea ca să văd cât de friendly e Constanța cu turiștii din alte țări) – went viral on G4media.ro, a national media platform, and garnered approximately 100,000 views. However, the same text attracted around 900 comments from readers on the publication's social media platform, some of which were aggressive, sexist, or misogynistic in nature.

It's worth noting that Delia's text received over 46,000 views on *Info Sud-Est*, the regional publication in which the report was initially published. According to the author, the text had a reach (impact) of approximately 400,000 users on Facebook about two weeks after publication. On the other hand, the author mentions that approximately 80% of the comments 'were negative, abusive, inciting violence, defamatory, or contained unsubstantiated claims' (ibid.).

Journalist Delia Dascălu's text addressed a topic of public interest, namely how prepared the port city of Constanța was to welcome foreign tourists arriving for the Neversea music festival held on the beach near the historic centre of Constanța. Just a few days before the festival began, the journalist conducted an experiment from the perspective of a tourist, using participatory observation as a documentary technique. She found, on-site, that there were no road signs in English at the Constanța Train Station in the city of Constanța to guide tourists to the city's historic centre, nor were there any special signs in English with information about the Neversea festival. After interacting with several people, she concluded that very few individuals spoke or understood English and were able or willing to provide foreign tourists with directions. The conclusion of her report is that a foreign tourist coming to Constanța for the Neversea festival would greatly struggle without a mobile phone with internet access.

We viewed Delia Dascălu's first journalistic article as aligning with one of the specific types of case studies outlined by Robert Yin:

- (a) it serves as a critical examination of an existing theory;
- (b) it addresses a rare or distinctive scenario;
- (c) it represents a typical or common case;
- (d) it aims to reveal new insights;
- or (e) it involves a longitudinal study (Yin 2005: 65).

Her debut as a journalist can more specifically be categorised as rare because of the post-publication echoes that this first article generated, making the debut an event in itself. To understand this phenomenon in depth, we chose to use the embedded case study method, analysing the discursive and institutional reactions that this exposure produced from all the stakeholders involved: the text's author, readers, journalists, NGOs, and representatives of the academic community. Additionally, we examined the report 'Media Freedom in Romania Ahead of Super Election Year: Mission Report on Media Capture, Legal Obstacles and Journalists' Safety' published in 2024.

To study the readers' reactions, we opted for a quantitative content analysis of the comments on Facebook to the post 'I pretended to be a foreign tourist at Neversea to see how friendly Constanța is with tourists from other countries' (M-am dat drept o turistă străină venită la Neversea ca să văd cât de friendly e Constanța cu turiștii din alte țări), and we assessed the frequency of types of messages. To extract the comments, we used the ESUIT application. This gave us a corpus of 891 comments resulted, which we exported to Excel. We preserved the authors' spelling, punctuation, and original wording. We then manually categorised the comments thematically using the following coding scheme:

- C1. Comments unrelated to the post/without direct reference to the journalist/user-to-user replies
- C2. Comments related to the subject/with direct reference to the journalist
 - C2.1. Positive comments
 - C2.1.1. Comments that appreciate or admire Delia's journalistic initiative
 - C2.1.2. Comments that share the author's viewpoint in the journalistic text/provide arguments in support of the author's viewpoint
 - C2.2. Negative comments
 - C2.2.1. Insulting/misogynistic comments that trivialise women and contain explicit sexual content
 - C2.2.2. Disparaging comments about the journalist/comments criticising the subject matter/approach/execution of the report/the irrelevance of the subject/irony
 - C2.2.3. Comments that are insulting/contain profanity, not necessarily related to gender

This coding scheme resulted in the distribution of comments as indicated in Table 1.

Another key component of this study was the interview we conducted with the article's author. For this step of the research, we opted for a structured interview. We asked the following questions during the interview: 'How did you create the article and what were your expectations?'; 'How did you monitor its virality and what was

Table 1: Comments distribution

Code	No. of comments
C1.	521
C2.1.1.	29
C2.1.2.	74
C2.2.1.	58
C2.2.2.	187
C2.2.3.	22

Source: Authors.

relevant for you in this process?'; 'Did you receive messages of solidarity from other journalists?'; 'Was there contact with other institutions and NGOs after publication?'.

Additionally, we analysed the social media and media reactions of the following stakeholders: Andreea Pavel, editor-in-chief of *Info-Sud Est* newspaper (a post on her personal Facebook account); Daniela Palade Teodorescu, former editor-in-chief of *Avantaj* (Advantages) and *Cariere* (Careers) magazines, shared Andreea Pavel's post in the 'Feminism for Real' Facebook group; Victor Ilie, a former journalist at *Rise Project* and *Recorder* shared Andreea Pavel's post on his personal Facebook account; Adrian Mihălțianu, editorial director of *PressOne* publication shared Andreea Pavel's post on his personal Facebook account; Alexandru Tudor, a journalist at *Canal SUD* (Channel South) shared Andreea Pavel's post on his personal Facebook account; Ana Otilia Nuțu, a policy analyst at *Expert Forum* for energy and infrastructure shared Andreea Pavel's post on his personal Facebook account, a statement on the Facebook page of the feminist organisation *Centrul Filia* (Filia Centre) (a stand-alone post); a statement on the Facebook page of the Journalism Specialisation at the Faculty of Letters, Ovidius University of Constanța (a stand-alone post); journalist Sabina Fati wrote the article 'Is Gheboasă Misogynistic? Are the harassers of the journalist also going to get fined?' (*E Gheboasă misogin? Iau amendă și hărțuitorii jurnalistei?*)' for the Romanian edition of *Deutsche Welle*.

Findings

Opportunities

Regarding the opportunities generated both by the virality of her debut text and, seemingly paradoxically, by the social media comments on it, we learned from the interview with Delia Dascălu that these opportunities led to a context conducive to the young journalist expressing herself on gender-related subjects:

This offered me space to start talking about similar cases to mine and about women's safety in the media. I mean, in a way, I wanted to write about this even before the report, but I didn't know how to package it. (...) It offered me space and it gave me a voice. The attention on me at that time gave me the opportunity to speak and to be heard, so I wasn't speaking by myself. (authors' emphasis)

Another opportunity identified by the beginner journalist relates to her media exposure, in the sense that she was approached to publish a text about her situation in the Romanian edition of *Deutsche Welle*: 'DW contacted me to write that article'. Last but not least, Delia Dascălu's debut text allowed her to become popular online:

A lot of people were telling me, 'This is you, look, you appeared [in my feed – eds.]. Or, 'Look, a friend of mine or a friend of a friend ... Everyone was messaging me and telling me that I had appeared somewhere and somehow just with the reposting of the article, not something written about me or anything like that. Many said it was a harmless experiment or a cute experiment about how Constanța prepares for tourists or how Constanța prepares for the summer season, meaning that those who shared it were actually quite positive overall. (authors' emphasis)

Positive reactions of this kind, mentioned by the journalist, were also observed in the social media comments that we analysed. Thus, from a thematic point of view, we identified comments that appreciate and admire Delia's journalistic endeavour (C2.1.1.) and comments that share the author's viewpoint in the journalistic text/provide arguments in favour of the author's viewpoint (C2.1.2.).

Examples for each category of these comments can be found in Table 2.

The numerous comments surrounding Delia Dascălu's experiment before the Neveersea festival attracted the attention of both other journalists and organisations,

Table 2: Positive discourse

English (authors' translation)	Romanian
'I really liked how you wrote. You are very talented. I enjoyed reading it!' (C2.1.1.)	'Mi a plăcut mult cum ai scris. Ești foarte talentată. Am citit cu plăcere!' (C2.1.1.)
'Congratulations, this is how action should be taken to enlighten the minds of the authorities.' (C2.1.1.)	'Felicitări așa trebuie acționat să îi luminăm mințile edililor.' (C2.1.1.)
'Well done, clever girl! You showed the reality. Unfortunately, in some comments, we see that the truth hurts.' (C2.1.1.)	'Bravo, fată isteță! Ai arătat realitatea. Din nefericire, în unele comentarii, observăm că adevărul doare.' (C2.1.1.)

'Congratulations to the young lady for the article, and good luck with college. I hope she has the strength to stay in the country after graduation. I didn't last long. And for all the idiots with "get lost" and other garbage, if you had read the article to the end, you would know she's a journalism student at Ovidius. She has a future ahead of her. You jerks aren't even good enough to be trash. The latest edit – how can you say that Romania is a normal country, when in response to an okay and decent article by a journalism student, heaps of idiots with frothy mouths appear, but those same idiots bow down to people like FiRea,* who even steal from old people in nursing homes and treat them like animals?' (C2.1.1.)	'Felicitări domnișoarei pentru articol, și baftă cu facultatea. Sper ca ea să aibă puterea să rămână în țară după absolvire. Eu n-am rezistat prea mult. Iar pentru toți idioții cu „hai sictir” și alte mizerii, dacă citeați articolul până la capăt aflați că e studentă la Ovidius, jurnalism. Ea are un viitor în față. Sictiriții ca voi nici de gunoi nu sunteți buni. Ultimul edit-cum naiba să spui că România e o țară normală, când la un articol ok și decent al unei studente la jurnalism apar grămezi de idioți cu spume la gură, dar aceeași idioți le pupa mâinile și picioarele unora ca FiRea, care fura până și de la niște bătrâni din azile și îi tratează ca pe animale?’ (C2.1.1.)
'Congratulations on the experiment, this is who we are, we don't know or don't want to promote tourism!' (C2.1.1.)	'Felicitări pentru experiment, așa suntem, nu știm ori nu vrem să promovăm turismul!' (C2.1.1.)
'Congratulations for the initiative. Well done! You will become an excellent journalist.' (C2.1.1.)	'Felicitări pt inițiativa. Un mare bravo! Vei deveni un jurnalist excelent.' (C2.1.1.)
'Sad :(but true, on our highways and roads there are signs and indications only in Romanian, for those who don't speak Romanian, it's very difficult without a Romanian to guide them :(.' (C2.1.2.)	'Trist :(dar adevărat, pe autostrazile și drumurile noastre sunt indicații ie indicatoare doar în română, pentru cine nu vorbește română e foarte greu fără un român care să îl ghideze :(.' (C2.1.2.)
'(:) :) Ignorance, everyone knows 2–3 words in English, but the rudeness is as big as the People's House! :) :)' (C2.1.2.)	'(:) :) Ignoranță, toată lumea știe 2 3 cuvinte în engleză, dar nesimțirea este mare cât casa poporului! :) :)' (C2.1.2.)
'It's a shame that this city with great potential is not at all prepared for foreign tourists who could contribute significantly to the country's economy. We are dumber than a box of hair.' (C2.1.2.)	'E păcat că acest oraș cu un potențial foarte mare nu este deloc pregătit pt turiști străini care ar putea contribui destul de mult la economia țării. Suntem proști și pulbere de dobitoaci.' (C2.1.2.)
'We don't know how to promote ourselves, to turn what we have beautiful and natural into an oasis of peace and prosperity for both locals and tourists.' (C2.1.2.)	'Nu știm să ne promovăm, să facem din ceea ce avem frumos, natural o oază de liniște și bunăstare atât pt localnici cât și pentru turiști.' (C2.1.2.)
'Incredible... I'm reading and it feels like going back in time... The same scenario as before '89... how sad...' (C2.1.2.)	'Incredibil... citesc și pare o întoarcere în timp... Același scenariu ca înainte de '89... ce trist...' (C2.1.2.)
'We want tourists, but we drive them away with our behaviour. Where is the Romanian hospitality?' (C2.1.2.)	'Vrem turiști, dar tot noi îi alungăm prin comportamentul nostru. Unde este ospitalitatea românească?' (C2.1.2.)

Source: Data collected by the authors.

* A reference to former mayor of Bucharest and minister in various governments, Gabriela Firea, a controversial politician. 'Rea', which the author of the comment emphasised in her name, translates from Romanian into English as 'evil'.



creating an opportunity for solidarity to form with the rookie journalist. Andreea Pavel, editor-in-chief of *Info Sud-Est*, commented in a post on her Facebook profile on 28 July 2023 about how readers received Delia's debut:

The debut in the Romanian press of a 19-year-old student who has been working with us for several months gave rise to a wave of bile and sickness. Delia was hit by a wave of hatred, misogyny, and incitement to violence and rape. If she were a man, these comments wouldn't exist. She published a report, which quickly went viral, claiming to be a foreign tourist who came to Neversea to see how friendly Constanța is to foreign tourists. The article's idea, construction, and illustration were discussed and decided in the editorial office, together with me and Leonte [Cristian Andrei Leonte, project manager at Info Sud-Est]. The opening featured a selfie of her at Neversea, after she'd finished the press experiment. But the real experiment came later. For her and for us as well.

The comment about Delia Dascălu, written by journalist Andreea Pavel, was shared on 29 July 2023 by several individuals: by Daniela Palade Teodorescu, former editor-in-chief of the magazine *Avantaje*, in the Facebook group 'Feminism for Real'; by Ana Otilia Nuțu, an analyst at *Expert Forum* specialising in public policies on energy and infrastructure and public companies and regulatory authorities; by Victor Ilie, a journalist at *RISE Project*; and by Adrian Mihăltianu, editorial director of *PressOne*. Mihăltianu also made an ironic comment on Delia Dascălu's case accompanied by an emoji expressing anger: 'This really makes you want to do journalism, especially as a woman'.

Another young journalist, a graduate of the same specialisation as Delia Dascălu at Ovidius University in Constanța and currently a reporter at *Canal SUD*, shared the same comment by Andreea Pavel on his Facebook account on 28 July 2023 and added a comment: 'Take heart, Delia Dascălu!'

There were further reactions not only on social media but also in the actual mass media. The Romanian edition of the prestigious publication *Deutsche Welle* devoted space to this topic twice: first, in a text by Delia Dascălu titled 'Just Because I'm a Girl. Misogynistic Romania' (Doar pentru că sunt fată. România misogină) and published on 8 August 2023; second, in a text by journalist Sabina Fati titled 'Is Gheboasă Misogynistic? Are the Harassers of the Journalist also Going to Get Fined?' (*E Gheboasă misogin? Iau amendă și hărțuitorii jurnalistei?*), published on 11 August 2023.

Regarding the stance of institutions towards the aggressive comments directed at Delia Dascălu, the first reaction came from the journalism specialisation programme at the Faculty of Letters at Ovidius University in Constanța that Delia is enrolled in. The undergraduate study programme posted a message on its Facebook page on 28 July 2023, unequivocally expressing support for Delia's journalistic endeavour:

After she penned a report on how Constanța welcomes tourists on the eve of the Neversea festival, a text that was picked up by G4 Media and garnered tens of thousands of views, Delia Dascălu, a second-year journalism student, faced a wave of extremely harsh comments, some with explicit language. Delia wrote about the tough experience that followed the publication of her first text in the national press, which you can read by accessing the link in the first comment. The team at the UOC Communication Sciences supports the honest and passionate work of all its students. Well done, Delia! We stand with you!

Another organisation that took a stand against the phenomenon faced by journalist Delia Dascălu at the beginning of her journalistic debut was Centrul Filia, which defines itself as ‘an organisation that amplifies women’s voices through direct work in communities and activities of advocacy, activism and awareness, studies, and analysis’. It further describes itself as follows: ‘We build a supportive society where the diverse rights and needs of women are respected and where equal opportunities are offered to everyone’ (authors’ translations). On 11 August 2023, the organisation posted the following comment on its Facebook page:

About violence and sexism against women journalists. A few days ago, Delia Dascălu, a 19-year-old student, made her debut as a journalist with a report about the Romanian seaside.

In response to her article, the young woman received a wave of sexist and insulting comments. (...) We express our solidarity with Delia and with journalists who constantly face incitements to violence, sexual harassment, sexist comments, and discrimination as a result of their work.

In addition to the discursive reactions and reverberations in the media circles, Delia Dascălu’s case has become a subject of research for the International Press Institute (IPI), Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT), and Free Press Unlimited (FPU), who mention the journalist in the report ‘Media Freedom in Romania Ahead of Super Election Year: Mission Report on Media Capture, Legal Obstacles and Journalists’ Safety’, published in 2024:

Her first article described her experience of pretending to be a foreign tourist arriving in Constanta and speaking only English. Her second article, ‘Did the Bitch Get Away Unraped?’ [A scăpat neviolată panarama?], described the avalanche of misogynistic abuse she received for having ‘defamed’ the city. Dascălu ends the article by citing ‘The Chilling’, a study by the International Center for



Journalists, which reports that in 2020 73% of women journalists experienced online harassment and that three-quarters of women have considered leaving journalism as a result.

Being featured in a high-profile report increases Delia's visibility, enhances her reputation, and can lead to new professional opportunities, such as speaking engagements and collaborations, and can help her to advance her career and expand her network. However, this increased prominence may also make her a more appealing target for online trolls and harassers, potentially amplifying the harassment she faced.

Limits

Delia Dascălu's journalistic debut with the report 'I Pretended to Be a Foreign Tourist at Neversea to See How Friendly Constanța is to Tourists from Other Countries' (M-am dat drept o turistă străină venită la Neversea ca să văd cât de prietenoasă e Constanța cu turiștii din alte țări) not only attracted what can be considered a series of opportunities, it also highlighted the limitations that accompany exposure in the online environment. Discursively, these can be observed in the numerous comments made by users on Delia's text on the G4media Facebook page.

For the author, as revealed by her responses in an interview with her, these limitations are related both to the very large number of comments and to the content of these comments, which she considers inappropriate:

Interviewer: It was shocking from what perspective?

Delia Dascălu: Shocking mainly from the perspective of the large number of comments and what was on people's minds. How many sick ideas they pictured in their heads to be able to leave comments or imagine me as if I were an actress or a prostitute or many other things like that. It was shocking to see how far they could go with these things from a simple article about the fact that people are not friendly to foreigners in Constanța. It was shocking both in terms of the volume and the extremes they went to with the comments.

The shock of the young journalist was even greater because she had no expectations about the impact of her debut text:

I didn't expect anything at all. It was my first article, they told me to just write it as if it were a diary, to go and tell a friend what I did as an experiment. And I had no expectations. I mean, in my mind, the article was very harmless and experimental in itself.

Table 3: Hostile discourse related to profession

English translation	Romanian
'In a few words, you've turned crap to dust.' (C2.2.2.)	'In cateva cuvinte, ai facut rahatul praf.' (C2.2.2.)
'Honestly, I find this post idiotic and in poor taste. It's not obligatory for everyone to speak English ... Let's be serious, inappropriate behaviour, with airs of ... I'll refrain from further comments...' (C2.2.2.)	'Sincer,mi se pare o postare idioata si de prost gust.Nu este obligatoriu sa stie toti sa vorbeasca in engleza...Sa fim seriosi,comportament deplasat,cu aere de...Ma abtin de la comentarii...' (C2.2.2.)
'Go to another country and speak Romanian. See who pays attention to you or tries to speak with you in the same language.' (C2.2.2.)	'Mergi în alta tara și vorbește pe Românește. Vezi cine te baga în seama sau încearcă sa vorbească cu tine pe aceeași limba.' (C2.2.2.)
'...Ciolacu* doesn't even know how to speak Romanian! How can you expect that the woman selling tickets at the restroom speaks English?' (C2.2.2.)	'...Ciolacu nu știe sa vb.nici lb. română!Ce pretenții ai la o femeie care vinde bilete la wc.sa vorbească English:!)' (C2.2.2.)
'And what do 'tourists' expect, to have English teachers employed at the kiosks or shops?' (C2.2.2.)	'Și ce-ar vrea "turiștii", să fie angajați profesori de engleză la tonete sau buticuri?' (C2.2.2.)
'-Daniela Stefanescu excellent journalist? An excellent journalist who conducts experiments and detective investigations to see how ordinary people promote tourism would add a few words to encourage tourism, so that ordinary people can learn how it's done! I mean, if the pretext of the investigation was to see if a foreign tourist can manage with information from locals to get to the Neversea festival, then write at least two words in the article about Neversea and why a foreign tourist should go there. Don't have expectations primarily of others, others like the lady in the restroom!' (C2.2.2.)	'-Daniela Stefanescu Jurnalist excelent ? Un jurnalist excelent care face experimente și investigații detectivistice să vadă cum știu oamenii de rând să promoveze turismul , adăuga și câteva cuvinte de promovare a turismului , ca să se învețe de către cei de rând cum se face ! Adică , dacă pretextul investigației a fost ca să vadă dacă un turist străin se poate descurca cu informații de la localnici cum să ajungă la festivalul Neversea , apoi scrie și tu în articol măcar două cuvinte despre Neversea și de ce ar trebui turistul străin să ajungă acolo . Nu cere în primul rând de la alții , alții ca doamna de la WC!' (C2.2.2.)
'These guys mimicked VICE until they messed it up.' (C2.2.2.)	'Au furat ăștia meserie de la VICE până s-au prostit.' (C2.2.2.)
'Well, be grateful that people helped you as much as they could. Surely you didn't expect to find English speakers in the public toilet in Constanța. Come on, get real! :rofl: :rofl:' (C2.2.2.)	'Ei na, zi merci că te-au ajutat oamenii așa cum au putut. Doar nu te așteptai să găsești vorbitori de limba engleza la toaletă din Constanța. Hai pi buni! :rofl: :rofl:' (C2.2.2.)
'Your expectations of the restroom lady, luggage storage clerk, or pastries seller are too high.' (C2.2.2.)	'Cam mari pretențiile de la o taxatoare wc,de la taxator bagaje de mână,vânzătoare fornetti etc.' (C2.2.2.)
'Why should the lady in the toilet or the shopkeeper know English ... I'm sure they don't know it in Germany or France either...' (C2.2.2.)	'De ce ar trebui femeia de la budă sau vânzatoarea din magazin sa stie engleză..sunt sigur ca nici in Germania sau Franta nu stiu...' (C2.2.2.)

Source: Data collected by the authors.

* The Prime Minister of Romania and head of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) at the time.

A thematic analysis of the content of the comments indicates that the negative discourse from users can be divided into three categories: C2.2.1. Insulting/misogynistic comments that trivialise women and contain explicit sexual content, C2.2.2. Depreciative comments towards the professional/comments criticising the subject/approach/execution of the report/irrelevance of the subject/irony, and C2.2.3. Comments that insult/contain swearing, without necessarily being related to gender.

Although we anticipated, from a quantitative perspective, that these messages would be triggered by gender-related factors, the research shows that the predominant discourse involves criticism of the journalistic text Delia Dascălu wrote. Specifically, users reproach the journalist, among other things, for not including in her text actual information describing the *Neversea* music festival and for expecting the staff at the restrooms in the Constanța Train Station to speak English. This feedback reflects a keen sense of disagreement with the report's premise and a belief that the report does not provide meaningful information or fair commentary on the issues it addresses. Examples from this category of comments can be found in Table 3.

One distinct direction of the negative discourse from users relates to the gender dimension. Specifically, these are comments that insult, contain misogynistic compo-

Table 4: Hostile discourse related to gender

'Article written as a joke, all the shops have prices displayed, and she didn't have to point with her fingers, lies as big as China, go away you country-defaming rag.' (C2.2.1.)	'Articol scris la mișto, toate magazinele au prețul afișat și nu trebuia să arate pe degete, minciuni cât china, marș tu zdreanță care defăimezi țara.' (C2.2.1.)
'Isn't this the girl from OnlyFans?' (C2.2.1.)	'Păi așa nu e tipa aia de pe Onlyfans? ('-')' (C2.2.1.)
'I pretended to be a wh*re ... oh wait, that's what I am anyway!' (C2.2.1.)	'M-am dat drept o tâ*fă... aaah stai, oricum asta sunt !' (C2.2.1.)
'They figured out that you're just a bimbo and that's why they ignored you! So, IGNORED again.' (C2.2.1.)	'S-au prins si ăia ca esti doar o fandosita si de aia ti-au dat flit! Asa ca, FLIT, inca odata.' (C2.2.1.)
'And no one f*cked you?' (C2.2.1.)	'Și nu te futut nimeni?' (C2.2.1.)
'Cut off your hooves!' (C2.2.1.)	'Taie ti copitele!' (C2.2.1.)
'Idiot.' (C2.2.1.)	'Idioată.' (C2.2.1.)
'Did she get away not raped, the tramp?' (C2.2.1.)	'A scapat neviolata, panarama?' (C2.2.1.)
'Next year try being a prostitute.' (C2.2.1.)	'La anul să încerce ca prostituată.' (C2.2.1.)
'And ... The guys took you around the corner for a bl*wjob, and then you happily went to the festival ... The end!' (C2.2.1.)	'Si ... Te-au luat baietii dupa colt , la o mumu, si dupa ai plecat fericita la festival ... The end!' (C2.2.1.)

Source: Data collected by the authors.

nents, trivialise women, and have explicit sexual content. Despite the fact that these are not the predominant comments, they can be a warning signal regarding the safety of female journalists in the online environment because of the aggression, vulgarity, and explicit sexuality they express. In other words, they represent an indicator of the limits encountered by a journalist at the beginning of their journalistic debut and, at the same time, demonstrate how vulnerable they can be when exposed in the digital space. Examples of comments can be found in Table 4.

Table 5: Hostile discourse related to generational conflict, local pride, and anti-foreigner sentiment

'Blah blah blah and now go to a psychiatrist.' (C2.2.3.)	'Bla bla bla si acum du-te la Psihiatru.' (C2.2.3.)
'To hell with you, generation of illiterates, lazy people, and druggies!!!!' (C2.2.3.)	'La cacat cu voi, generatie de inculti, lenesi si drogati!!!!' (C2.2.3.)
'We sh*t on you!' (C2.2.3.)	'sa ne kkm pe tine!' (C2.2.3.)
'Oh, what "big" problems for the poor foreign tourists coming to Constanța. Isn't it so that in Cluj tourists had an official translator each? :rofl: XD (;-Ṽ-). P*ss off! (π) ;)' (C2.2.3.)	'Vai, vai ce probleme "mari" pentru săracii turiști străini veniți în Constanța. Nu așa că la Cluj turiștii, aveau fiecare translator din oficiu? :rofl: XD (;-Ṽ-). Hai SICTIR! (π) ;)' (C2.2.3.)
'Get lost!' (C2.2.3.)	'Hai marș!' (C2.2.3.)
'Oh, what shall we do ... Leave the country and that's it. P*ss off!' (C2.2.3.)	'Vai, ce sa ne mai facem... Pleaca din tara si gata. Mars!' (C2.2.3.)
'Like why don't shopkeepers know English? Like she took money from her parents to go to the concert and like they didn't want to tell her in English how much the water costs. When getting hired at a supermarket like you should at least know English. Jesus, it's unbearable to live in this country. Like parents send their kids abroad for studies. P*ss off and leave us alone.' (C2.2.3.)	'Gen de ce nu stiu like vanzatorii engleza?like ea a luat bani de la parinti sa mearga la concert si gen aia nu au vrut sa ii spuna in engleza cat e apa. La angajare la supermarket like trebuie sa stii gen macar engleza. Jesus, nu mai e de trait in tara asta. Like o trimit parintii gen in afara la studii. Hai mars si lasa-ne.' (C2.2.3.)
'You're pathetic, complaining that the toilet attendant and the grocery store cashier didn't know English. Let me tell you something in English: go to hell, worthless "journalist".' (C2.2.3.)	'Esti jalnica , te plangi ca nu stia engleza aia de la wc-ul public si vanzătoarea de la alimentara. Îți spun eu ceva in engleză : hai sictir , "jurnalistă" de doi bani.' (C2.2.3.)
'We write reports and think we're big shots.' (C2.2.3.)	'-Facem reportaje si ne credem balene-n galeata.' (C2.2.3.)
'And are we treated differently in other countries? Stop eating sh*t and get to work!' (C2.2.3.)	'Și ce noi suntem primiți altfel in alte țări? Nu mai mâncați căcat si la muncă cu voi.' (C2.2.3.)

Source: Data collected by the authors.

Another and no less important direction that we identified in the users' comment-son the reportage written by Delia Dascălu involves insults and swear words that are not necessarily related to gender. However, even in these comments, an aggressive attitude is evident. The comments reflect a generational conflict, with disdain for the younger generations, who are perceived as in moral or cultural decline, and expressions of nationalism and local pride through defensiveness about local language skills and criticism of those who leave or complain about the country. Additionally, there is strong anti-foreigner sentiment directed against tourists and a resistance to change, and particularly to the expectation that local workers should know English. To illustrate we selected the examples as presented in Table 5.

By contrast, Delia Dascălu's report drew predominantly unrelated comments that do not directly refer to the subject matter, ones that did not directly address the journalist or that represented back-and-forth responses between users. Following the analysis, we noticed the diversity of these comments, mentioning topics ranging from famous football players to the former mayor of Constanța, from user quarrels to invitations to download online games. These comments are illustrated by the examples below:

Table 6: Discourse unrelated to the subject matter

'Should have taken Raducioiu (footballer – ed.) too, he knows Italian!!!!' (C1)	'Trebuia să-l iei și pe Raducioiu, știe italiana!!!!' (C1)
'The.first.time.they.rip.you.off.Truth.is,a beer. costs.three.times.more.in.Italy.I've.been.on.the.beach.in.Italy.' (C1)	'Prima.data.te.fura.astai.adevarul.o.bere.pret.de.trei.fata.de.italiaeu.am.fost.pe.plaja.an.italia.' (C1)
'Dan Butnaru, stupid communist.' (C1)	'-Dan Butnaru comunist prost.' (C1)
'I recommend you this game. Install it here: www.remi-online.ro/rt/10144464 .' (C1)	'Iti recomand acest joc. Instaleaza-l de aici: www.remi-online.ro/rt/10144464 .' (C1)
'Mihai Micuțu, go to hell.' (C1)	'-Mihai Micuțu hai sictir.' (C1)
'Romania, land of yearning and longing.' (C1)	'România, plai de of și dor.' (C1)
'Howeverawful Mazare [former and controversial Mayor of Constanta – ed.] was, money was being made.' (C1)	'-Cat de nasol a fost Mazare, se faceau bani.' (C1)
'Shove that festival directly up your a**. Filth, drunks on the streets, junkies, and the list goes on.' (C1)	'Sa va băgați festivalul ăla direct în coooor. Mizerie, bețiți pe străzi, drogați, siista este lunga.' (C1)
'Whoa!' (C1)	'Haoleo!' (C1)
'Miu Nicolae George, applicable to you too, a peasant in LONDON.' (C1)	'-Miu Nicolae George valabil si ptr tine,un țăran la LONDRA.' (C1)

Source: Data collected by the authors.

Discussion

The current study demonstrates that the digital environment, from a gender perspective, reproduces societal power structures. Our research shows how a journalist at the start of her career is perceived not only as a media professional but also as a young woman, or, in some cases, solely as a young woman. In other words, the inquiry highlights that some of the prejudices and stereotypes related to gender in society are replicated in online discourse. Nevertheless, the results indicate that the same digital environment empowers young female journalists, offering opportunities for visibility and engagement and a platform to address critical social issues, including gender-related topics, which could significantly boost their careers. In a broader context, this suggests that the digital space can be both constraining and liberating for female journalists: on one hand, it continues to propagate gender-based inequalities, while on the other, it offers tools to challenge these inequalities by amplifying diverse voices and encouraging democratisation in the media field. This aligns with European trends, where digital platforms are also seen as a way to bypass traditional media gatekeeping and exclusion, fostering inclusivity and greater diversity in the public sphere.

The paper further suggests that the misogynistic discourse of social media users leaves a female journalist making her debut exposed to denigration, ridicule, sexualisation, and aggression. These discursive forms from social media users can act as triggering factors that marginalise women in media and other public roles, diminishing their agency. Such hostility not only can affect the psychological well-being of female journalists but also poses a significant threat to their professional engagement and career longevity. The pressure to develop a 'thick skin' in response to online abuse, as noted by Lewis et al. (2020), often leads to self-censorship or withdrawal from the profession, thus limiting the potential impact of digital journalism. Regarding gender-based harassment, this form of hostility is not unique to Romania but is reflective of broader European and global trends, where female journalists are disproportionately targeted with misogynistic abuse and many experience severe and sustained harassment (Stahel 2023; Holton et al. 2021; Lewis et al. 2020).

Another key finding of this study is that the digital space puts newcomers in the media at risk of professional cancellation by social media users. While some users harshly criticised, often without justification, the editorial approach of the debutant journalist, others praised and supported her work. This highlights the precarious nature of media careers in digital environments, where the actions of users can influence public perception and professional standing. The expressions of solidarity from various stakeholders in this research – whether by sharing the journalist's perspective or challenging the online violence driven by her gender identity – serve as indicators of

acceptance and professional legitimisation in the industry. This solidarity may counteract online violence and could potentially shape public perception of the journalistic profession, shifting the narrative from negativity to recognising it as a vital and credible field. Such support networks are essential for fostering resistance among female journalists in the digital age, providing a safety net against online hostility and empowering them to continue their careers in journalism despite the risks they face.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates how the viral spread of an article can generate a mixed perception, where the journalistic work is simultaneously praised and criticised. This duality implies that while the digital environment may reinforce traditional societal biases, it simultaneously offers journalists opportunities for resistance and empowerment. The study highlights important dimensions for examining the impact that an a debut in journalism can have in the digital environment, emphasising the complexity and heterogeneity of online discourse, which cannot be reduced to a single variable. Our findings reveal that the digital hostility experienced by journalists at the start of their careers has two facets: the first relates to gender issues and reflects the power structures within society, while the second involves professional criticism, which may be more or less justified but sometimes even seeks to discredit the journalistic profession.

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The Transnational Construction and Maintenance of Digital Feminist Media Activism: Engagement Practices in the Global South and North

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Abstract: The article observes, from a transitional perspective, how feminist activists appropriate digital spaces to produce informative content about gender equity and how they organise themselves to maintain feminist media projects in terms of content production and public access to this information. The research focuses on analysing three Brazilian publications (*AzMiná*, *Lado M*, and *Think Olga*) and three French ones (*Georgette Sand*, *Les Glorieuses*, and *Madmoizelle*). The global North-South category is mobilised to propose a dialogue between feminist journalism practices in Brazil and France, using both countries because they are important players on the international geopolitical scene. I use theories of gender studies and feminism as bibliographical support and draw on the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism correlated with social worlds from a Beckerian perspective to trace the conventions and forms of cooperation, interaction, and negotiation used by the journalists and contributors to these publications. The methodology is based on in-depth interviews with actors who participate to different degrees in the composition of the world (of feminist media activism) – content producers, support teams, and audiences – and direct observation of the practices developed by participants in these spaces to enable a multi-site comparison and provide transnational evidence of the ways in which digital feminist media work.

Keywords: transnational feminisms, digital media activism, engagement

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For more than a decade, we have seen a variety of feminist initiatives emerge on the internet, which are of different persuasions but have in common the use of digital tools to disseminate content. In this context, neofeminism has emerged, a concept that defines the new women's political movements emerging in the 21st century, driven by mobilisations from the Global South – from countries such as Brazil, Egypt, and India (Borba, Moreira 2015; Pinheiro-Machado 2019). This phenomenon is strongly connected to the internet, enabling a combination of digital practices and actions in the physical space (Jouët 2022).

This article analyses a segment of digital feminism, feminist media activism, which, in short, is the process in which feminist activists use sociotechnical devices to build new forms of creation and writing on the web using digital technology, online platforms, social media, and the appropriation of journalistic techniques. This is a new digital practice, which has been gaining momentum since 2015, in which feminist collectives, NGOs, and publications share information on the internet relating to the gender debate and the rights of women and feminised groups. Although they are projects with different statuses (non-governmental organisations, collectives, women's magazines, feminist magazines, websites), they share the central aim of producing quality feminist information, based on journalistic investigations and precepts of form and writing derived from standard reporting.

Based on fieldwork and 63 in-depth interviews with actors who make up the space of feminist media activism in Brazil and France, this paper uses ethnography as a methodology for understanding the construction of the social world¹ (Becker 1982; Morrisette, Guignon, Demazière 2011) of feminist media activism and its ways of functioning. Thirty interviews were conducted in France and 33 in Brazil with different participants in the social world (reporters, editors, columnists, readers, and accounting and fundraising teams, etc.) from October 2020 to November 2022. The relevance of the work is that it proposes listening to in-depth accounts of the trajectories of the members of this space and monitoring, through field research, the forms of cooperation and negotiation the group uses to maintain their projects.

Media activist content has a collaborative, intersectional, and activist character and is concerned with extending the narrative to defend certain causes, involve the public, and pluralise the debate on gender through feminist media activism (Santos, Miguel 2019). Groups that produce media activism have started to use digital-media technologies to carry out engaged interventions. To mediatise the content they

¹ The notion, proposed by Becker (1982), is based on the interactionist view that the social world is a procedural entity, which is continuously being constructed/constituted and reconstructed/reconstituted through the interactions between actors and the cross-interpretations that organise the exchanges between them (Morrisette et al. 2011: 1).

produce, they rely on sociotechnical devices. The term sociotechnical proposes the observation of technology as an interrelational system that combines technical and sociological characteristics (Coutant 2015), in an articulation between the technical sphere and the complexity of the social (Miège 2007), which includes the use of the internet and social networks for various purposes and the use of computers, cell phones, smartphones, geolocators (GPS), and other technological instruments that enable socialisation between people. Media activists orientate their action strategies towards ensuring that information is up to date, which is made possible by the absence of a programme schedule. They exploit the technical possibilities of mobile communication by streaming transmissions and are able to publish videos and photos on social networks on a minute-by-minute basis (Sousa 2017). In terms of production, professional activists use a variety of audiovisual formats, such as videos, audio, images, memes, and gifs, as well as texts, and seek to carry out mobile and cyber-digital journalism.

Media activism is, therefore, a phenomenon that predates the internet and interactions on digital networks, but which is being strengthened in a scenario of mutations that are transforming the medium and altering processes of the production, reception, and circulation of content. However, the movement is by no means limited to the online environment, it is a practice that is built up as it permeates the stories and intimacies of the actors who make up the milieu and who insert themselves into events in such a way as to ensure that media activism goes beyond the simple fusion of the notions of media and activism (Braighi, Câmara 2018). It is a concept that is expressed not only through words and techniques but above all through people.

Feminist media also find support in networked productions, tracing new forms of creation and writing from technology (Lemos 2009) and using these spaces to implement their desires for a less hierarchical militancy (Blandin 2017) in relation to traditional militant bodies such as trade unions. In cyberspace, publications can engage in debates that journalists are not usually able to delve into when writing for the hegemonic media (Ferreira, Vizer 2007; Andrade, Pereira 2022), bringing up agendas that deal with human rights or the rights of women, LGBTI+ groups, and racialised people. Appropriating new media is more than an instrumental process, it is also a cultural and social movement (Manovich 2005), a way for minority groups to make themselves socially visible, giving rise to a new way for them to politically exercise their rights (Martín-Barbero 2014: 108).

A sociotechnical community dimension was then created within the feminist movement, which was used by activists to mobilise, giving rise to the concept of cyberfeminism, which refers to all the possibilities offered by technologies for society to break free from patriarchy (Blandin 2017). An example of the appropriation of digital tools by the feminist movement is the communication strategies of the 'Ni Una Menos'

movement in countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. The mobilisation was a form of offline activism facilitated by information and communication technologies. Extending this specific case to the world of online activism, it is possible to list the impacts of the use of technology on political action: rapid interaction, the multiplier effect, internal organisation, network cohesion, and global reach. The use of ICTs by cyberactivists has facilitated the mobilisation of participation and the coordination of actions and has been used as a tactical tool in itself (Accossatto, Sendra 2018: 123).

Driven by cyberfeminism, publications such as magazines, websites, NGOs, and feminist collectives are sharing information in the digital environment related to the gender debate and the rights of women and feminised groups, giving rise to the notion of digital feminist media activism. Without neglecting professional techniques and ethics (Sousa 2017), media activism absorbs resources characteristic of network communication to reach out to the public. For example, it uses hashtags, terms associated with information that have high potential for organising and distributing content (Hollanda 2019).

The activists of this new generation are experts in the production of visual narratives (images, video, etc.) and in the use of unconventional repertoires of action (such as humour and satire) aimed at the internet (Jouët 2018). Feminist publications require certain know-how and specific digital production skills from their contributors (Jouët 2022). Sociotechnical devices contribute to the propagation of a journalistic production model that includes concepts of activism and allows the focus to shift away from strictly factual news, deepening the coverage of issues related to human rights. The construction of a digital technoculture (Van Dijck 2013) allows media activists to use technology and rely on the skills that members of the group who are more proficient with these tools have to amplify their activism and compensate, in some way, for the considerable discrepancy in funding for their projects and for traditional media journalism.

Methodological paths

The article is based on an analysis of feminist and digital media activism projects – in other words, an analysis of online publications that produce journalistic information, claim to be feminist, and focus on the gender debate. In Brazil, through the Agência Pública project, which mapped independent journalism in the country, it was possible to identify 18 proposals that fall within this scope. In France, bibliographical readings and studies mapping gender activism and journalism in the country over the last few decades revealed 14 such publications (Bard, Chaperon 2017; Blandin 2017; Hache-Bissette 2017; Olivesi 2017; Jouët 2022).

I decided which projects to select based on their social media profiles, interactions (measured by engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments), and their numbers of followers. The selected projects in Brazil are the *Think Olga* NGO, the magazine *AzMina*, and the website *Lado M*. The selected projects in France are the *Georgette Sand* collective, the newsletter *Les Glorieuses*, and the magazine *Mad-moizelle*.

To choose what media activists to interview, I checked the 'about us' tab or equivalent on the websites of each selected media project. When the names were not clearly listed on the websites, I turned to the projects' LinkedIn page to locate the participants. Some names were also located via social media or on the projects' websites. To locate readers, I used the strategy of identifying profiles on social networks that interact through comments with the publications studied.

Over the course of four years (between 2019 and 2023), digital ethnographies were conducted in the content publication spaces of the projects studied and, when there were physical offices or face-to-face meetings, in the newsrooms and meeting spaces of the media activists. As for the number of interviews, for each publication I tried to talk to five of its contributors (which includes support staff, as well as reporters, columnists, designers, among others) and five readers. In the process, I discovered that there were no or very few men on the project teams. Likewise, male readers were sparse and those I did find and contact did not get back to me, with the exception of one reader of the *Lado M* website, who is the only male representative of the audience of these projects.

In general, the interviews were conducted remotely, via conventional phone calls, audio calls on WhatsApp, or video calls on Zoom or Instagram, depending on the preference of each interviewee. Face-to-face interviews were conducted only with the French media activists – since the period of interviews in Brazil took place during the pandemic – and only with those who accepted or preferred to meet me face-to-face (there were five in total).

The in-depth interviews had a semi-structured format, based on scripts of questions prepared in advance, which allowed me, however, some freedom to go down paths that were not initially planned. The interview scripts were divided into three types: the first focused on feminist media content producers (reporters, columnists, editors), the second focused on the support team (with more specific questions about what kind of work they do and what their roles and influences are within the group), and the third was designed to be applied to audiences. I tried to let the interviewees tell their own life stories. The interviews mainly covered the professional and personal trajectories of the feminist media activists and their readers. From there, it was possible to understand the group's path in terms of careers, journalism, and political activism.

From South to North – transnational digital feminisms

The political, social, and historical differences between Brazil and France indicate that the development of the feminist movement did not take place in parallel in these countries. In Brazil, at the beginning of the 1970s, an ongoing military dictatorship was at its height, while in France feminists were winning important rights in terms of gender politics, such as access to legal and safe abortion for all. These mismatches in the activist scene and in the progress made on equality issues are still reflected today in the way feminist activism is organised in each country and in the way the social world of feminist media is constructed from North to South. This is because the experiences and trajectories of the people who make up this world are equally affected by historical and political events.

Sociohistorical research themes, such as economic development, industrial policy, race and ethnic relations, national identities, the emergence of democratic and authoritarian governments and gender and women's rights, have gained prominence (Rueschemeyer, Mahoney 2003). Drawing a parallel between cases in Brazil and France as representative of the global South and North seems therefore to support the application of a transnational perspective to analysing the world of digital feminist media activism, permeated by the context of engagement based on the use of sociotechnical devices.

Elements of national identity and the habits of using technology or even militant and activist tools make observing these two cases more dynamic as the field unfolds and analyses begin to emerge. Factors such as digital immersion, for example, make Brazilian militant movements stand out in activism on networks, where new techniques of militancy and engaged action are launched online. This happened with media activism initiatives in Brazil in 2015, long before MeToo and its developments in France.

The interdependence of phenomena between different places is linked to factors such as globalisation, reciprocal influences, an increase in the cross-cutting nature of public policies, and the growing role of international actors in terms of public actions (Hassenteufel 2014). It is this context that has led me to conduct transnational research on a recent sociopolitical phenomenon that is unfolding not only in Brazil and France but around the world.

Sociodemographic profiles of media activists and audiences

Understanding elements of the trajectories of media activists and audiences from a demographic, age, ethnic, and gender perspective can help us understand how their performances are reflected in the exploitation of activist and journalistic practices and allows us to better situate them in the social world.

Among media activists, there is a concentration of young women in their twenties and thirties from an upper-middle- or upper-class background with higher education, who are producing feminist information on the internet. Considering the ethnic-demographic data for Brazil, where more than half of the population is racialised, there seems to be less racial diversity in Brazilian publications, with French media being more inclusive, even though concerns about intersectional and decolonial agendas are more strongly expressed in the narratives of the Brazilian interviewees.

A significant share of the professionals interviewed live in large urban centres, not least because of the demands of their work and the geographical concentration of media systems and/or activism in feminist projects. The vast majority of the group live in metropolitan areas with more than 1 million inhabitants, and they are mainly concentrated in the greater São Paulo area and in and around Paris. The dynamics of the world of feminist media activists follow the logic observed by Becker (1982) about dissident social worlds, which begin with a local reach and then, if they manage to establish themselves, achieve a distribution that reaches other locations. More details on the group's demographic information are available in Appendix 1.

As for the sociodemographic profile of readers, of the 30 people interviewed (14 Brazilians and 16 French speakers) who read, watch or listen to content produced by feminist publications, 29 are women. Only one man who is part of the feminist media audience agreed to take part in the research.

Just 2 interviewees, both French, declared themselves to be racialised. Another 14 people indicated that they considered themselves white (8 Brazilians and 6 French). There were also 14 individuals who did not refer to racial issues (8 Francophones and 6 Brazilians). Possibly because they didn't consider the issue to be relevant in the narrative of their own trajectories, which would indicate that racial inequalities tend to affect this group less directly and that these readers have been less sensitised to the anti-racist debate in their activist journeys.

Unlike the media activists who collaborate directly with feminist media, readers live in cities and regions with smaller urban agglomerations, generally below 1 million inhabitants. Contrary to what I initially assumed, the publications seem to be reaching regions that go beyond the main centres of journalistic production and financial concentration in their respective countries. Information from digital feminist media projects is reaching audiences in small and medium-sized towns, peripheral regions, and even rural areas.

Regarding the academic and professional profiles of the readers interviewed, there is a clear concentration of individuals from the humanities, a group that numbers 25 people. Only 5 readers have a background in the exact or biological sciences. The significant presence of readers linked to the field of communications among the interviewees is also worth noting, with 6 people having a degree in this area. Also

noteworthy is the number of people whose professions relate to the field of art and culture, who accounted for around one-third of the public interviewed. A summary of the readers' demographic information is available in Appendix 2.

Thus, it can be seen that the groups of collaborators in the projects analysed here, who come from different locations and socioeconomic backgrounds, are different ages, and whose media activist and feminist practices are being transnationalised, are trying to create, through the production of digital feminist information, an inclusive and unifying narrative that is effective in combining spontaneity and organisation and new and old activist practices at the national level, but with global potential.

The main aspects characterising digital feminist media activism

Actors in the world of digital feminist media activism are motivated to participate in this world by the possibility/opportunity to explore a professional path that has the potential for social impact through engaged action. These publications seek to produce journalism with a gender perspective, creating content informed by the concept of diversity and seeking out a polyphony of sources, in an anti-patriarchal logic of breaking with the hegemony of male voices. These are incipient initiatives by young professionals in independent journalism, using multimedia language, with their own production logic, generally without consolidated financial autonomy (Rocha, Dancosky 2018: 407). Media activists value the fact that in feminist media it is possible to write about one's own experiences and give the journalistic content a certain personal touch. The practice moves through the mobilisation of personal narratives to deal with the collective, a characteristic of the new feminisms (Hollanda 2018; Pinheiro-Machado 2019).

Feminist media activist publications are not horizontal. These structures reproduce the forms of organisation observed by Ferron (2016) in the context of French-speaking alternative media, where relationships based on an unequal distribution of economic, political, and journalistic capital exist in such a way as to allow a group of people to occupy dominant positions over others. There is a reproduction of business logic within the groups, which means that women who are appointed leaders or coordinators have more power, while others have less space or voice. For example, the existence of exclusive communication groups for specific people has been identified, where the inclusion of members is based on emotional criteria and not necessarily on professional and technical grounds.

These hierarchical and emotional configurations mean that some employees feel less listened to and taken seriously than others. Co-optation mechanisms² (Juban et

² Understood as the search for and selection of a candidate within a restricted network of people known directly or indirectly or through recommendations from members of that network (Juban et al. 2015).

al. 2015) were observed in the recruitment processes and the access and permanence of new members in the social world, with recurring cases of media outlets that tend to choose people they know or who belong to circles of acquaintances to make up their teams, limiting the expansion of the diversity of repertoires – in terms of profiles, stories, and experiences – within the scope of digital feminist media activism.

Existing relationships and personal affinities between actors seem to factor more immediately into the structuring of this practice and into the ways in which media activists organise and interact with each other, forming subgroups and segments within the world. The hierarchies within feminist media, which seem to be based not only on professional relationships but especially on emotional ties, prevent publications from achieving greater representation and heterogeneity within their teams and, consequently, from producing content that reflects this diversity, resulting in unequal distributions of resources and power. In the case of feminist publications, cooptation dynamics limit the space to a profile of media activists that is largely made up of white women from big cities and with higher education degrees from renowned institutions.

Media activism reproduces the unequal distribution of the – economic and political – capital of hegemonic journalism, so that these imbalances allow certain individuals or groups to occupy dominant positions in the social world, while others – notably those who work as occasional collaborators, volunteers, or freelancers – become dominated. Despite the precarity that engaged media inherit from journalism, however, these publications have the advantage of offering symbolic rewards (Ferron 2016) – of social and cultural capital – that compensate for the voluntary or low-paid nature of professional practice.

Forms of team interaction and organisation

Intersections with other worlds allow people from outside the world of journalism to participate in feminist media activism, as is the case with a third of the contributors interviewed. Most of this group invests themselves in support activities, working mainly to raise material resources for the group, recruit staff, and create and maintain networks of contacts for these publications. However, as the teams are small, more than half of them are also assigned to writing and editing processes and in this way they are introduced to journalistic conventions.

In terms of work organisation, there is a certain flexibility for the actors to divide up the tasks and choose their topics of interest to work on. Generally, each one deals with a subject that has to do with their area of training (journalism, writing, music, administration) or with professional or personal experiences (such as talking about the experiences of a Latin American woman taking part in an exchange programme in Europe or writing about the experience of being a disabled woman), and they can



dedicate themselves to other topics depending on the circumstances. The editors, for example, specialise in different themes, while the support staff are allocated to areas such as fundraising and community management. Decision-making processes are centred on the group's leaders, who are responsible for determining fundraising methods, strategies for recruiting people, and the distribution of tasks between teams. These professionals have long-standing ties to the publications and in most cases have been part of the teams since the given project's inception or early days.

It is the financial relationships that tend to determine the forms of participation and engagement of collaborators in the projects' publications. Half of the media activists interviewed work for pay. The other half join publications to do voluntary work. Volunteering is concentrated in publications that do not have regular or direct funding (the *Lado M* website and *Georgette Sand* collective), which do not seek to monetise their projects. A third of media activists say they don't need to have an extra job beyond the one at the feminist publication where they work, since they are employed as full-time members of the media and, financially, this job is viable for them. The 20 interviewees who are not permanent members of the media outlets studied have alternative jobs to their work as feminist media activists. Most of them are journalists who combine more than one occupation (freelancer, regular journalist for another media outlet, communications consultant, writer and creator of their own feminist publication). The others are professionals in other areas: teachers and financial auditors.

There are also interviewees who contribute unpaid to feminist media as columnists. This group's professional relationship with the publications is based on being given space on the website in exchange for creating content – generally not on a regular basis and with no deadlines – which, although it doesn't involve financial benefits, generates prestige and visibility for both parties. The permanent staff of *AzMina*, *Les Glorieuses*, *Madmoizelle* and *Think Olga* are only hired for a fee.

As for the volunteers, as well as believing in the feminist cause, they keep volunteering because their activist work gives them personal satisfaction and professional recognition, as they gain visibility in the media by being part of feminist project teams. They also report using the publications as laboratory spaces where they can develop creative exercises and experiment with new content, from which we can infer that the writing and editing practices of feminist publications are based on conventional journalistic standards but go beyond them. Media activists appropriate the precepts of media activism as a social and political phenomenon, acting as a laboratory for innovation and experimentation with media and social models capable of creating forms of self-management of communication (Pasquinelli 2002).

The ways in which media activists participate in publications refers to new organisational arrangements for work and financial support, in which companies, associa-

tions, individual micro-entrepreneurships, and other formats make news production possible. More than just a legal form of employment relationship, these arrangements have become alternative spaces for the survival of journalistic activity and converge in the search for creative ways to carry out news production, although these organisations often do not offer paid work (Figaro, Marques 2020).

The formats of professional participation in and contribution to engaged media have been rendered more flexible by the modern-day configurations of capitalism and the increased use of the internet, where there are looser employment ties and more work is being done on the basis of informal, fixed-term, or freelance contracts by workers who are working remotely or in a hybrid arrangement and often combining more than one form of paid activity. On the one hand, the financial fragility of the interviewees is exacerbated by the precariousness of their careers as journalists, while on the other hand their digital activism and use of sociotechnical devices in their work expand the possibilities for greater visibility and professional recognition. Thus, the experience of media activism is marked by financial precariousness as opposed to the constitution of professional and cooperative networks of action, enhanced by the circulation of information through the digital space.

Thus, it is possible to identify an important distinction between the ways in which feminist media are organised and maintained: there are publications that have permanent funding (which constitute themselves as media companies or NGOs, for example) and can offer fixed employment or at least some form of remuneration to their collaborators; and there are organisations that are fundamentally based on volunteering.

This means that publications that fall into the first group – the magazines *AzMina* and *Madmoizelle*, the newsletter *Les Glorieuses*, and the *Think Olga* NGO – choose to allocate a larger number of people (around a third of their members) to financial and administrative activities in order to find ways to support themselves financially. The content producers and support staff recognise that, although there is personal pleasure and professional recognition to be derived from the practice of producing information of an engaged nature, the difficulty of obtaining funding cuts across the social world and, consequently, the routines and work of the actors who make up that world. The predominant view of media leaders and regular collaborators is that funding is a key element in guaranteeing the continuity of publications. These publications are more akin to those in the world of journalism and business communication and want to pay their collaborators. The media activists behind these publications believe that to produce and disseminate engaging information, it is necessary to give in to commercial and market logic.

Publications that are structured without the support of private companies and sponsors, such as *AzMina* magazine and the Georgette Sand collective, rely more heavily on collective funding and contributions from the public. The interviewees



who worked in the hegemonic media before joining the world of media activism and who work in publications without advertisers emphasise the advantages of doing financially independent journalism, without having to adapt to the demands of private sponsors. Some of the publications analysed (*Les Glorieuses*, *Madmoizelle* and *Think Olga*), however, choose to resort to financial support from private companies and institutions to guarantee the maintenance of their projects.

In short, the informational and journalistic publications analysed here seek to reconcile private sponsorship with public funding and state fundings to support social projects. In these cases, the media activists try to make it clear in the content that there is funding, specifying in their materials who the sponsors are. Across the board, the instability of projects is a constraint that surrounds media activists' narratives and creates a fear in them that their activist actions will not continue. In the world of feminist media activism, financial factors seem to be the main obstacle to the functioning of this space. The funds raised by the publications directly influence the channels' production routines (Duarte et al. 2017), so that when they get more funding, they consequently produce more content and increase their teams, and vice versa.

The forces and conventions surrounding feminist media activism

The world of digital feminist media activism is constantly influenced by forces that come from the economic, political and technological fields, and the dependence on or autonomy of each publication from these fields varies according to the status and forms of funding and maintenance of the groups. As engaged media gain visibility in other worlds, such as journalism and culture, an expanded network of actors is formed who are engaged in promoting these information production spaces, backed by networks of sponsorships from individuals and legal entities – such as companies and institutions.

Feminist media activism takes conventions from the world of journalism, with which it intersects and dialogues directly, to establish itself as a practice for producing information that is recognised as serious and reliable. In the interviews with contributors to the publications studied, what stood out was the concern with using journalistic techniques of verification and checking in the production of content. The audiences also emphasised the use of investigative journalism resources in the work of media activists, listing the statistical and data base of feminist media as the most relevant resource when asked about the differences between them and hegemonic newspapers. The world of media activism is also based on the conventions of political militancy, with the foundations of militantism underpinning the ways in which projects are conducted and maintained, from financial capture mechanisms to the very involvement of collaborators in activist spaces, a relationship that transcends the professional and personal lives of group members.

Therefore, the circulation of conventions and the ways in which conventional models reach the world of feminist media activism are processes associated with the collaborators' relationships with the journalistic production environment, with the practices of using sociotechnical devices, such as computers and cell phones, and with immersion in feminist collectives and militant movements and/or with the engagement of individuals in activist actions. The ways of working in these environments are absorbed and reproduced or adapted to a focus on producing feminist information.

The regular renewal and expansion of the teams, with the arrival of young professionals, also seem to contribute to the maintenance of the feminist media, which is immersed in a mutational context intrinsic to the digital environment and therefore needs to find ways to reinvent itself permanently. This observation reveals, on the one hand, a mechanism for renewing conventions by rejuvenating newsrooms. On the other hand, it implies limiting the possibility for contributors to develop career projects in these publications. Feminist media, then, maintain themselves while creating tactics to reinvent themselves over the years and as technologies change. There is a feedback loop between the public's demand for feminist media content – not only from women but also from men who want to understand gender debates from a didactic perspective – and the need for feminist publications to count on the financial support of these publics to continue to exist. In other words, the maintenance of publications depends on the support of individuals, as both donors, funders, and distributors of media activist products.

In addition, changes in the world of journalism itself influence the establishment and maintenance of the world of media activism. Engaged digital media emerged at a time when the profession of journalist was being transformed in the face of sociotechnical devices and in response to the repositioning of audiences, who are also beginning to produce content. At the same time, the intersection with activism allows the group to create new production spaces and encourages professionals who produce engaged information to rethink notions of neutrality and objectivity. For the journalists interviewed who used to work for hegemonic newspapers, these changes encourage them to redefine their career paths and move closer to producing activist information.

Digital feminist media activism is constituted not just by the sum of individual and separate practices behind it, but rather also through a dynamic and collective infrastructure moulded by cultural elements that encompass the specific characteristics of each locality or region in which the publications are developed, but which integrate experiences from multiple realities and territories. The transnational nature of the publications allows hope and optimism to circulate among the professionals, backed by the confidence that it is possible to improve situations of social injustice.



Choosing to adhere to the practice of digital feminist media activism seems to be a way for the contributors to this space to amplify emotions of hope in their daily professional and personal lives. The intersections between journalism, digital activism, and feminist political engagement create a transnational social world, maintained by bonds of identification and empathy between the media activists themselves and their audiences. Media activism is not merely a professional choice or a career-related area of activity; it is enshrined in the routine of these people as a model of life, in which working time merges with time for other activities linked to living, and interactions between the group's participants form a vital space of community activity (Malini, Antoun 2013). Intersecting journalism and feminism, this engaged practice appropriates the characteristics and action strategies of social movements, building an inventive, performative and effective news production environment.

A new form of activism in the face of old gender barriers

Within the context of the reproduction of hegemonic forces, journalism tends to replicate the wider general inequalities in society, so that the professional culture of journalism generally adopts a masculine point of view of what is news and what is not (Wolf 1992; Silva 2010). Journalistic practice encompasses social representations about women and men, as well as expectations about the social roles of the actors who make up the world of journalism (Machado, Schons, Melo-Dourado 2019). In general, culture takes on male interpretations of what should or should not become news, since decisions about what is worth watching or not are based on men's points of view.

In an attempt to subvert this structure, feminist media try to construct discourses that reflect on gender as a way of giving meaning to power relations (Scott 1986), while at the same time dealing with their own constructions and deconstructions of stereotypes that perpetuate forms of domination. They make writing and news production choices that are different from the traditional ones, using new conventions relating to news values and production processes that permeate journalism. To realise this shift in discourse and modes of information production, feminist media activists end up using formats from the so-called women's press and recreate and reinforce these models online.

There are discursive and content equivalences between these strands, with the feminist press using strategies that come from the women's press, such as the use of the first person singular or the second person plural in texts, the use of lists and tutorials, and the use of more informal and relaxed language to get closer to the reader (Lévêque 2009; Olivesi 2017). But there are also relevant differences, such as the fact that feminist journalism often covers topics related to the body, but in a way

that tries to give them a perspective that encourages women to feel good even if their bodies don't meet the socially stipulated standards of weight, measurements, size, and colour. By making use of resources and themes from the so-called women's press, feminist media activism publications offer, for example, texts in the form of entertainment tips (which range from advice on love relationships, motherhood, and work to movie and series suggestions) – a recurring content presentation strategy in magazines conventionally aimed at women (Bittelbrun 2019) – while still producing in-depth investigative reports – based on the methods of informative journalism. At the same time, they use technological tools to disseminate their content.

Feminist media activism is guided by the pedagogical concern of providing a kind of political education on gender for readers (Silva 2017). The producers of this content challenge established conventions and reformulate journalistic production practices, seeking to position women as agents of their own lives and to detach them from the prejudices and stereotypes that aim to condition the female gender to be a supporting player in the sociopolitical debates that impact the totality of their existence. Using cell phones, computers, social networks, and other sociotechnical devices, activists appropriate the technological environment to achieve their demands and set out to master techniques on how to cause a stir and make noise on the internet, exploiting the viral potential of social media (Jouët 2018) and provoking new forms of activist and journalistic production that emerge from the historical mutations of the feminist movement.

The exchanges between engaged media and audiences via social networks reveal how transformations in journalism resulting from the implementation of new technologies can lead to changes in interactivity practices and in the nature of audience contributions (Calabrese, Domingo, Pereira 2015). To open up space to receive contributions from female readers, some of the publications (*AzMina*, *Lado M* and *Madmoizelle*) are willing to host and reproduce the testimonies of women who want to share their stories. As *Lado M* reporter Vanessa explains (interview, 19 July 2021), this process is conducted in such a way that, when editing the texts, the media activists are careful to respect the people who are sharing difficult experiences and to warn people the stories' readers that they may come across sensitive topics.

AzMina and *Madmoizelle* have specific sessions in which stories shared by the public are published. The teams receive the testimonies from readers, talk to the people who are telling the story, collect details and elements they consider important from the stories, and then organise the text in a journalistic format. When they think it's appropriate, they also consult specialists, such as doctors and psychologists, for additional information or content.

A reporter named Océane, who was in charge of *Madmoizelle*'s testimonials section, explains that the space was created because the publication received a lot of



emails and contacts from readers who wanted to share their personal experiences. The interviewee received these emails and prepared the articles based on the stories. She says that she had a lot of work to do because the readers created emotional bonds with the publication, so the team considered it important to meet each demand, responding and giving feedback to the public: 'At that time, *Madmoizelle* was a bit like an older sister for many girls and young women, so there was a lot of work to be done because there were a lot of emails and it was important to try to respond to as many people as possible' (interview, 2 September 2022).

In the world of digital feminist media activism, audiences take on the role of support staff for the practice, through consumption, dissemination, and engagement through the reuse of the products made by the publications analysed to build their own forms of activism. While feminist publications become alternative environments to hegemonic media, proposing counter-discourses to dominant social representations, they are also spaces for exchanges between content producers and followers, who become part of a feminist community (Jouët 2022). Readers are continuously and assiduously committed to this social world, collectively contributing to its maintenance.

Interactions with audiences are the factor cited as the main foundation for sustaining the world of digital feminist media activism. The dissemination of feminist information and the availability of contact channels with readers creates powerful support and reception networks around these publications, as indicated by a statement from Carolina, a journalist and the institutional and fundraising director of *AzMina* magazine:

We directly reach readers who are looking for information on how to get out of an abusive relationship, on how a legal abortion works, women who have been raped and can't access legal abortion services. We give them information on how to access their rights. When they read the articles, the testimonies, the reports, they find the strength to get out of abusive relationships, to get out of the violence they have suffered. Almost every week we receive testimonials from women thanking us for this work. (interview, 6 November 2020)

The media activists believe feminist publications are maintained because there are specific audiences who are interested in the issue and who form communities that support these publications: 'I think community is the word. The internet has been moving towards these niches' (Nana, a contributor to *Lado M* and *Think Olga*, interview, 1 September 2021). Audiences also describe their admiration for the media activists' willingness and ability to mobilise. Operations manager Rafaela (a reader of *Les Glorieuses*) believes that there are different scales of activist investment possible for women, depending on their trajectories and life contexts, and she admires the work of feminist activists who manage to act beyond their own social circles:

Every feminist woman, at her own level, is doing something. For me, it's about fighting for my salary without shame. It's about encouraging other people around me to do the same thing, to open up, to talk to other people about it. What I'm doing is microscopic, it's in my little universe. Some women who are incredible do it on a much larger scale. (interview, 22 September 2022)

In addition to engaged action, the reactions of the public corroborate the notion that journalists have a collective power of influence as a group (Neveu 2019). Maintaining journalistic investigative techniques lends credibility to the work of media activists, which means that contributors to feminist publications gain recognition in the world of journalism and in other spaces – through awards, participation in events and lectures, and the reproduction of their content in other media. Digital feminist media activism, therefore, depends on conventional mechanisms linked to journalism to establish itself and continue.

The relevance of engagement by audiences

The readers interviewed usually rely on two central arguments to justify their interest in following the publications that make up this research: 1) Audiences point out that the content proposed by feminist media tends to be based on a greater foundation in statistics and data than hegemonic newspapers, and it is this characteristic that makes around two-thirds of readers follow these publications; 2) Readers complain that mainstream media present information in a more general way than engaged media, without contextualising the facts and only noting events – as in the case of feminicides, where the deaths are pointed out, but not the circumstances that lead to these losses.

Thus, annoyed by the perception that there is a lack of visibility for issues relating to women's rights and feminised groups in the world of journalism, audiences look for news content that reinvents conventional journalistic logic. They believe that, although gender issues are beginning to be addressed in the hegemonic media, this is done from a perspective that does not debate the origin of the problems, focusing only on reporting situations of violence, without presenting the sociostructural circumstances surrounding them.

Cultural producer Keyla, a reader of *AzMina*, claims that mainstream newspapers have historically continued to blame women who are victims of sexist situations, without giving credence to what they say or relativising the actions of men who harass or rape them: 'It's never a more affective look at the situation of women and what they are going through' (interview, 11 July 2021). Debora (a *Madmoizelle* reader), a stage manager in film shoots, speaks in a similar vein: 'I think that women who are

victims of violence are immediately put in the position of being to blame, like all she had to do was not go out at midnight, not go out wearing a miniskirt, not be alone on the street, even in broad daylight, or even at 3 o'clock in the afternoon' (interview, 4 August 2022). Cassie (a *Madmoizelle* reader) also views classic media with suspicion and prefers to be informed by engaged media, as she believes that these publications 'talk about real things and use real words too' (interview, 21 July 2022).

The widening of contact with engaged media and activist spaces through the digital sphere prompts the audiences of feminist publications not only to question the discourses of the hegemonic media, but also to stop consuming information from it and to give preference to media activism – and not just feminist media. Therefore, the central space of engaged interaction for the readers interviewed is digital. It is through sociotechnical devices such as smartphones and laptops that they manage and give meaning to their activist habits and practices. In results that converge with those shown by Jouët (2018), when she conducted in-depth interviews and an ethnography on neofeminism and how feminists use digital media to promote their cause, this research shows that the audiences interviewed are or have been willing to interact online, making comments, sharing content, signing petitions, and engaging in debates. Digital media allow the feminists interviewed to express themselves, exchange ideas, and build their identities (Jouët 2018). In addition, depending on whether there is a need to externalise concerns related to the gender debate, these women can join demonstrations and street performances or engage in the creation of authorial feminist content.

The audiences interviewed want to support the feminist cause in some way, and they have sociotechnical devices at their disposal to do so. The engagement of this group takes place at different levels. There are figures who limit themselves to sharing posts from feminist projects they follow, while other readers drive activism by getting involved in online campaigns and digital actions.

Even if there is a hidden audience and even if we take into account the difficulties of measuring the circulation of digital content, the sharing of feminist information by followers is an amplifier of the movement's discussions. The appropriation of sociotechnical devices by activists has shown itself to be an elementary promoter of agendas and discussions in the context of neo-feminism, making the role of individuals whose circles of contact did not usually dialogue with gender reflections strategically relevant, a reality that is altered by the digital activism of these interviewees.

In short, there are processes of negotiating experiences in the digital and physical spheres that have different meanings in each of these universes and lead to different attitudes on the part of the actors who circulate in these spaces. In the context of technology-mediated communication, individuals feel more comfortable expressing their opinions without fear of retaliation, restrictions, or limitations based on the con-

ventions of the social worlds in which they move. In emerged in the interviews that in the stances they adopt these activists seek not just to reflect on the inequalities in the world around them but also to assert the legitimacy of their actions and opinions, positioning themselves and defending the agendas for which they are engaged, especially in the environment of digital interactions (Breda 2022).

The platforms on which audiences defend the feminist cause can be considered spaces of activism in themselves, while at the same time they try to combat violent reactions against the feminist cause and activism on these platforms that are one of the products of the regression of rights and are also driven by access to sociotechnical devices in contemporary times (Breda 2022). Although she feels stressed and dejected in the face of the attacks she faces, Anna, a reader of *Georgette Sand* (interview, 12 August 2022), says that she continues her commitment because activism is for her a source of excitement and euphoria. This statement reinforces the idea that exposure to anti-feminist violence generates ambivalent emotions among readers. While they feel exhaustion and feelings of fear, anger, and frustration, they also feel encouraged to continue their actions because, to some degree, this engagement brings satisfaction and joy and, above all, it triggers a sense of identification with and belonging to the group.

Conclusion

In the space of feminist media activism, the digital environment is used as a tool to give visibility to the actions of the members of this world. Both media activists and audiences rely fundamentally on the publications' websites and especially on social media to communicate and disseminate feminist content.

Having reference feminist figures within the group helps those publications gain visibility at an early stage. But the visibility that these people receive leaves them more exposed to attacks from anti-feminist groups, so that there are changes in the publications' strategies to remove the focus from the figure of a single person and redirect it towards the structure of the collective. The existence of continuity in the work of media activists is linked to factors such as the influence and previous contacts of insider members, who can mobilise social, political, and cultural capital through networks that help make projects visible and publicly recognised.

Factors such as the possibility of continuing the projects, organisation, the quality of the materials produced, recognition, the creators' previous experience with the social world of journalism, the media strategy for the dissemination of content, and the development and management of fundraising techniques all contribute to maintaining the social world. There are also certain forms of cooperation and interaction that contribute to the existence of the social world. Individuals show that they want



to remain in this space because of the feedback they receive both from audiences and from the publications' colleagues and leaders, which is converted into appreciation and recognition for the work they do. In addition, the actors maintain a relationship of admiration for the practice of media engagement.

The continuity of the social world is based on a set of conventions appropriated from journalism and activist spaces by the contributors and adapted to the space of feminist media engaged in the digital sphere. In this sense, the existence of dissident professionals from other worlds – such as journalism and political activism – who are committed to producing feminist information is relevant. The ways in which actors negotiate, emphasising the importance of support teams and the role of audiences, make it possible for the practice of feminist media activism to continue.

The teams fundamentally rely on digital platforms and applications to interact with the entire group and to create and edit content. Face-to-face interactions are nevertheless also valued and desired by the group and especially by the collaborators in leadership positions, who try to create options for physical meeting places to carry out the work.

The forms of professional participation in and contribution to engaged media have been rendered more flexible by the modern-day configurations of capitalism and the increased use of the internet, where there are looser employment ties and more work is being done on the basis of informal, fixed-term, or freelance contracts by workers who are working remotely or in a hybrid arrangement and often combining more than one form of paid activity. On the one hand, the financial fragility of the interviewees stems from the precariousness of the journalist profession, while on the other hand their digital activism and use of sociotechnical devices in their work expand the possibilities for greater visibility and professional recognition.

Reflecting on the changes taking place in the media environment also means rethinking our understanding of the position that journalism has historically been assumed to occupy as lying between economic, political, and intellectual powers (Darras 2017). To avoid naïve readings of journalistic practice, it is important to interpret the relationships that pass through journalism from the perspective of economic interests and pressure groups (Neveu 2019). The power of journalists needs to be questioned and should not be understood as an immediate ability to generate influence in the social sphere.

From positions of economic and political privilege and the mobilisation of previously existing social and cultural capital, media activists, especially people in leadership positions, use power mechanisms to try to break with the structures of domination in terms of the gender, race, and sexual orientation that they want to combat. They take advantage of the fact that they are women circulating in decision-making spaces in academic (renowned educational institutions), media (contacts with journalists

from hegemonic, widely-circulated media), and political (professional or personal links with individuals in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches) terms to implement strategies for founding and maintaining feminist projects.

They mostly come from families whose mothers and fathers had access to higher education and who were able to pass on social capital – with past relationships or access to people in prominent positions in society and able to contribute to the visibility and spread of the publications – to their daughters as well as cultural capital – diplomas and degrees and an accumulation of experiences that allow the media activists to expand the creative and innovative potential of their projects, such as a strong command of their own language and knowledge of foreign languages – and symbolic capital – in the form of personal, professional, family, and academic recognition and prestige.

The ethnographic observation of transnational circulations, connections, and spaces (Saunier 2004) described in this paper shows how the group can act as a solidarity network and how joint co-operation practices accentuate its members' sense of belonging to a wider collective. The internet and social media are established as an inherent part of the world of digital feminist media activism. Sociotechnical devices are thus a medium that shapes the social experience of this kind of activism, providing challenges and opportunities for teams and transforming the boundaries of interaction and identity experiences (Hine 2017). Digital activism and online interactions provide the support that underpins the existence of engaged media and function as networks that foster these projects with the support of their audiences.

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Appendix 1

Table 1 presents the group’s interviewees’ demographic characteristics in terms of age, gender, ethnic-racial self-declaration and place of residence:

Table 1: Sociodemographic profile of feminist media activists

Name	Age group	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	City
Agustina Ordoqui (<i>Les Glorieuses</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	White	Buenos Aires – Argentina
Amanda Celio (<i>AzMina</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	White	Rio de Janeiro (RJ) – Brazil
Anthony Vincent (<i>Madmoizelle</i>)	From 25 to 29	Male	Black	Paris (Île-de-France) – France
Bárbara Fonseca (<i>Think Olga</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	White	Interior of São Paulo (SP) – Brazil
Blanche Baudouin (<i>Georgette Sand</i>)	From 40 to 44	Female	White	Tours (Touraine) – France
Bruna Escalreira (<i>AzMina</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	White	São Paulo (SP) – Brazil
Carolina Oms (<i>AzMina</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	White	São Paulo (SP) – Brazil
Catarina Ferreira (<i>Lado M</i>)	From 25 to 29	Female	Black	São Paulo (SP) – Brazil
Chloé Thibaud (<i>Les Glorieuses</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	White	Paris (Île-de-France) – France
Cris Guterres (<i>AzMina</i>)	From 35 to 39	Female	Black	São Paulo (SP) – Brazil
Emilie Rappeneau (<i>Madmoizelle</i>)	From 20 to 24	Female	White	Paris (Île-de-France) – France
Fayrouz Lamotte (<i>Georgette Sand</i>)	From 25 to 29	Female	Racialised (Moroccan origin)	Luxembourg – Luxembourg
Flay Alves (<i>AzMina</i>)	Not mentioned	Female	Black	São Luís (Maranhão) – Brazil
Gabriella Feola (<i>Side M</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	White	São Paulo (SP) – Brazil
Leandra Migotto (<i>AzMina</i>)	From 45 to 49	Female	White	São Paulo (SP) – Brazil
Luisa Toller (<i>AzMina</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	White	São Paulo (SP) – Brazil
Malu Bassan (<i>Lado M</i>)	From 20 to 24	Female	White	São Paulo (SP) – Brazil



Marguerite Nebelsztein (<i>Georgette Sand</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	White	Nantes (Pays de la Loire) – France
Mariana Miranda (<i>Lado M</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	White	São Paulo (SP) – Brazil
Marília Moreira (<i>AzMina</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	Black	Salvador (Bahia) – Brazil
Marjana Borges (<i>Think Olga</i>)	From 25 to 29	Female	Black	Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul) – Brazil
Mathilde Larrère (<i>Georgette Sand</i>)	From 50 to 54	Female	White	Paris (Île-de-France) – France
Mathis Grosos (<i>Madmoizelle</i>)	From 20 to 24	Male	White	Paris (Île-de-France) – France
Megan Clement (<i>Les Glorieuses</i>)	From 35 to 39	Female	White	Montreuil (Île-de-France) – France
Morgane Frebault (<i>Georgette Sand</i>)	From 35 to 39	Female	White	Tours (Touraine) – France
Nana Soares (<i>Think Olga</i> and <i>Lado M</i>)	From 25 to 29	Female	White	São Paulo (SP) – Brazil
Océane Viala (<i>Madmoizelle</i>)	From 25 to 29	Female	Racialised (Cameroonian origin)	Alfortville (Île-de-France) – France
Paula Chang (<i>Think Olga</i>)	From 35 to 39	Female	White	Campinas (SP) – Brazil
Rayana Burgos (<i>AzMina</i>)	From 20 to 24	Female	Brown/Black	Recife (Pernambuco) – Brazil
Rebecca Amsellem (<i>Les Glorieuses</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	White	Paris (Île-de-France) – France
Sophie Castelain-Youssouf (<i>Madmoizelle</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	Black	Saint-Ouen (Île-de-France) – France
Vanessa Panerari (<i>Lado M</i>)	From 25 to 29	Female	White	São Paulo (SP) – Brazil
Verena Paranhos (<i>AzMina</i>)	From 30 to 34	Female	Brown/Black	Salvador (Bahia) – Brazil

Appendix 2

Table 2 shows in more detail the sociodemographic profiles of the audiences, presenting only the information explicitly mentioned by them:

Table 2: Socio-demographic profile of the audiences interviewed

Name	Age	Race/Ethnicity	City	Media
Alicia	23	White	São João Del Rei (Minas Gerais)	<i>Think Olga</i>
Angel	50	Branca (daughter of Spanish immigrants)	Tours (Centre-Val de Loire)	<i>Georgette Sand</i>
Anna	27	Not mentioned	Small town near Toulouse (Occitanie)	<i>Georgette Sand</i>
Carol	41	Not mentioned	São Paulo (São Paulo)	<i>AzMina</i>
Cassie	27	Not mentioned	Tourcoing (Hauts-de-France)	<i>Madmoizelle</i>
Cecilia	17	Not mentioned	Sousa (Paraíba)	<i>Lado M</i>
Christel	43	White	Tarn (Occitanie)	<i>Madmoizelle</i>
Cristine	30	Not mentioned	Curitiba (Paraná)	<i>AzMina</i>
Crystal	21	Not mentioned	Nantes (Pays de la Loire)	<i>Georgette Sand</i>
Dayane	No mention	White	Maceió (Alagoas)	<i>Think Olga</i>
Debora	30	Not mentioned	Island of Corsica	<i>Madmoizelle</i>
Fany	42	White	São Paulo (São Paulo)	<i>Lado M</i>
Fleur	No mention	Not mentioned	Nomad	<i>Madmoizelle</i>
Inès	26	Racialised (family of Algerian origin)	Ain (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes)	<i>Les Glorieuses</i>
Julie	33	White	Val de Marne (Île-de-France)	<i>Les Glorieuses</i>
Karla	No mention	White	Jaboatão dos Guararapes (Pernambuco)	<i>Think Olga</i>
Keyla	24	Not mentioned	Osasco (São Paulo)	<i>AzMina</i>
Laetitia	44	Not mentioned	Namur (Belgium)	<i>Les Glorieuses</i>
Laura	23	Racialised (Black)	Bordeaux (Nouvelle Aquitaine)	<i>Madmoizelle</i>
Lucie	38	White	Caen (Normandie)	<i>Georgette Sand</i>
Magali	No mention	White	Nice (Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur)	<i>Georgette Sand</i>
Maria Cecilia	Over 60	Not mentioned	Toledo (Paraná)	<i>Think Olga</i>
Nathalie	57	Not mentioned	Lyon (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes)	<i>Les Glorieuses</i>
Ophélie	No mention	Not mentioned	Liège (Belgium)	<i>Madmoizelle</i>



Patricia	46	White	Novo Hamburgo (Rio Grande do Sul)	<i>Think Olga</i>
Rafaela	35	White	Nyon (Switzerland)	<i>Les Glorieuses</i>
Suzanna	40	White	Recife (Pernambuco)	<i>Lado M</i>
Tamara	40	White	São Paulo (São Paulo)	<i>AzMina</i>
Tayná	25	Not mentioned	Araraquara (São Paulo)	<i>AzMina</i>
Victor	29	White	Santo André (São Paulo)	<i>Lado M</i>

Source: Author.

Time to Change the 'Change': Stigma and Support in Blogs about the Menopause

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Abstract: This article empirically explores how women who are members of UK-based women-only networks for women working in the media and communications industries blog about the menopause, specifically Bloom (www.bloomnetwork.uk), Women in Advertising and Communications Leadership (www.wacl.info), and Women in Public Relations (www.womeninpr.org). The over-arching research question in this paper is: How do women who are members of women-only networks for women working in communications blog about the menopause? I seek to answer this question by exploring whether the selected blog posts' texts on the websites of women-only networks have a feminist and/or postfeminist sensibility. Specifically, do they engender an individualistic approach and/or promote solidarity? Furthermore, I examine the texts for indications regarding the 'sources and solutions for gender inequality in the workplace' (Gill, Orgad 2015: 340) and ask: What can this tell us about the networks' position vis-à-vis the menopause, feminism, and postfeminism? Discourse analysis reveals an entanglement of feminist and postfeminist sensibilities in the narratives constructed in the blogs, which can be characterised by two main interpretative repertoires, Stigma and Support, the implications of which call for multilevel and multifaceted changes to support mid-life women in the contemporary media and communications workplace and beyond.

Keywords: women in communications; blogging the menopause; women-only networks

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Drawing on scholarship that explores cultural representations of women, work, and ageing from a feminist perspective, as well as self-representation through digital technologies, this paper analyses blogposts about the menopause written by female members of women-only networks for women working in communications in the UK.



The most recent census conducted by the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA 2020) reveals that in the UK, the PR industry is predominantly female, at 68%. The census also reveals that a 'gender pay gap' exists and that this can be explained by a 'leadership gap', wherein men cluster in the more senior, higher-paid roles (ibid.). Annual surveys by GWPR confirm a similar picture globally (Global Women in PR 2022a, 2023) and the Chartered Institute for Public Relations' recent PR Population report corroborates these findings (CIPR, Chalkstream 2024). Similarly, according to research by the Alliance for Inclusive and Multicultural Marketing (AIMM) and the Association of National Advertisers (ANA), women make up almost 70% of advertising professionals and yet they comprise just over 50% of senior-level executives (ANA, AIMM 2022). It is in this context that women-only networks for women working in media and communications are fascinating subjects of research as they share a goal of improving the number and diversity of and the outcomes for women in related industries. In addition, last year GWPR found that only three in ten female PR agency workers see themselves working in agency roles in their fifties (2023), which is the average age at which women in the UK experience the menopause (British Menopause Society 2022). This requires further examination and I propose to start by exploring what women working in communications, who are members of women-only networks write about in their professional blogs about the menopause.

In her seminal book *The Change: Women, ageing and the menopause*, Greer states that 'there is evidence that women devise their own private ways of marking the irrevocability of the change' (2019: 3). I am keen to examine the ways of marking the change devised by women working in communications who choose to blog about their experiences on the websites of the women-only networks to which they belong. After all, these women are experts at managing relationships and reputations and creating narratives. And this is relevant now because as Orgad and Rottenberg conclude in their review of UK news coverage of the menopause from 2001 to 2021, menopause is 'enjoying a moment' (2023: 2).

I am responding to Orgad and Rottenberg's (2023) call for further study encompassing media genres other than news media, with my proposal to study blogs. Blogs, short for web logs, are 'a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal (or log) for an individual' (Coleman 2005: 274) and are considered 'sophisticated listening posts of modern democracy' (ibid.). The study of blogs is important, not least because they offer 'immense potential for decentralised networking and discussion' (Carstensen 2014: 490) and have the potential to shed light on the ways in which women working in communications talk about the menopause and its attendant workplace challenges and opportunities. According to Thumim, in her book *Self-representation and Digital Culture*, '[t]he concept and discourse of self-representation contains a valorisation of experience which has a therapeutic function and at the

same time invokes the possibility of material political outcomes' (2012: 9), making it a suitable framework for a feminist project, in which the private and public are closely intertwined. Moreover, the use of blogs by women as a form of self-representation is well established (Carstensen 2014; Carter 2014; Gajjala, Oh 2012; Keller 2012, 2016; Lacey, Perrons 2015; Mendes 2015; Wajcman 2000).

Here I conduct feminist discourse analysis (Gill 1995, 2009; Gill, Kelan, Scharff 2017; Lazar 2007, 2009), employing the method of interpretative repertoires (Wetherell, Potter 1988), 'to identify patterns across and between texts and to connect these to wider contexts and social formations' (Gill 2009: 351) and to shed light on the ways in which women working in communications, who are members of women-only networks, talk about the menopause during this period of rising visibility of 'the change' (Jermyn 2023; Orgad, Rottenberg 2023). Thus, I aim to make a contribution to the topic of workplace (in)equality, forms of resistance, and communication, facilitated by interactive technologies, namely blogs.

In this introduction, I define key terms and set out the aims of the article. Next, in the literature review, I examine central issues from the literature and provide an overview of the current situation of women working in the media and communications professions, namely advertising, marketing, and public relations. Then, in the methodology section, I explore the ways in which women who are members of UK-based women-only networks for women working in the media and communications industries blog about the menopause, specifically Bloom (www.bloomnetwork.uk), Women in Advertising and Communications Leadership (www.wacl.info), and Women in Public Relations (www.womeninpr.org). This is to investigate how the women in these networks who choose to blog about the menopause construct their narratives. The analysis takes a feminist perspective, seeking to identify the sensibility/ies with which the posts are written, whether feminist and/or postfeminist. Finally in the discussion and conclusion, I point to the ways in which the examined blogs about the menopause shed light on how the convergence between women working in media and communications, networking, and interactive technologies produces an entanglement of feminist and postfeminist sensibilities characterised by anger at a lack of information and support from employers and government, combined with hope that through female solidarity change can be brought about in relation to the 'change' and perhaps beyond.

I choose to focus on women who are members of women-only networks for women working in media and communications because I believe that these networks 'have the capacity to realise and advance women's freedom' (Darmon 2024: 243). At the same time as discussing women's freedom, it is necessary to acknowledge that we are living and working within a neoliberal context. Eagleton-Pierce defines neoliberalism as 'commonly associated with the expansion of commercial markets and the privileging

of corporations' (2016: xiv) and states that 'studying neoliberalism means uncovering the reoccurring struggles over capital accumulation but always with an eye on how such processes are shaped by a range of conditions' (2016: xv). One such condition is the 'growing interest in networks' (Eagleton-Pierce 2016: 126). He argues that networking is widely seen as 'the process of intentionally pursuing contacts for personal gain' (Eagleton-Pierce 2016: 127), and that this is something 'distinctly neoliberal' (Eagleton-Pierce 2016: 127). From this standpoint, he observes that 'the appeal to social networking is commonly considered an important, even essential, activity for building and sustaining a professional career' (2016: 127), and that the concept of the network, particularly since the advent of the internet and platforms like LinkedIn, has become even more popular. In a pertinent example for this article, Eagleton-Pierce reminds us that networks can and do also serve forces other than neoliberalism: 'Thinking of networks as forces of liberation is also very common within social movements and civil society groups, such as in some feminist activism' (2016: 126). Thus, here I explore the blog texts written by members of women-only networks for women working in media and communications about the menopause to examine how they construct their narratives and whether they use their platforms to call for feminist change.

Taking a feminist perspective, I adopt Gill's definition of feminism and use the term 'to signal a concern with enduring gender inequalities and injustices' (2007: 25). In response to Dow's (1995) call for feminist scholars to situate themselves explicitly within feminism, I follow Mendes' lead and 'classify my position and the project as having a "feminist cultural studies perspective"' (2015: 45). I wish to acknowledge that while the term 'gender' has in recent years become contested, much of the literature that explores women in media and communications as well as the literature about post-feminism, women and work uses the terms 'women' and 'gender' interchangeably when discussing the ways in which women are treated and discriminated against in society and in work. And thus, so will I, for clarity and consistency. Furthermore, while this paper's focus is the menopause, I wish to clarify that I do not – and nor do the blog authors – interpret the menopause as the only limit placed on professional women's career development. Indeed, discrimination against women in the workplace starts at the very beginning of their career (if not before, if one considers the various ways in which women and girls are discouraged from school-age onwards from considering certain subjects and career pathways), when the spectre of motherhood (Jeffery 2023) can be a hindrance – along with menstruation – to being hired and/or promoted; followed by the realities of motherhood – if entered into – along with additional caring responsibilities that disproportionately fall to women (e.g. Criado Perez 2019); and ultimately, for those who have managed to survive these obstacles – not to mention the misogyny and sexual harassment/assault that are frequently encountered in the professional work environment – the arrival of the menopause.

In this article I aim to begin to respond to Jermyn, who states that ‘it is imperative that scholarly interests converge to critique and amplify attention to the manifold significant ramifications of the menopausal turn’ (2023: 7) and to Orgad and Rottenberg (2023: 16), who call for studies ‘across various media genres and cultural contexts ... beyond news media’, by studying discourse about the menopause in women’s blogs. It is also a response to Steffan who posits that ‘there exists a paucity in empirical studies that explore how menopause is actually experienced at work’ (2021: 197). The research is also informed by Toth and Aldoory’s (2021: 56) call for studies to further ‘build our understanding of discourse analysis... to reveal how gender meanings are built and reinforced’, which I endeavour to accomplish in the empirical work presented here. Thus the over-arching research question in this paper is:

- How do women who are members of women-only networks for women working in communications blog about the menopause?

I seek to answer this question by exploring the following questions:

- Do the selected blog posts’ texts on women-only networks’ websites have a feminist and/or postfeminist sensibility?
- Specifically, do they engender an individualistic approach and/or promote solidarity?

Within the discourse analysis, I examine the texts for indications regarding the ‘sources and solutions for gender inequality in the workplace’ (Gill, Orgad 2015: 340) and ask:

- What can this tell us about the networks’ position vis-à-vis the menopause, feminism, and postfeminism?

Literature review

In this section I will review the literature about blogging, self-representation, and network sociality, about women, work, and networking, and about the menopause to set in context the empirical work that follows, which aims to address the question of how women who work in communications blog about the menopause. And what can this tell us about the menopause, feminism, and postfeminism?

Blogging, self-representation and network sociality

Various forms of internet-enabled media – including blogs – have the potential to both infiltrate the mainstream news media and to communicate directly with publics (Castells 2009). Blogs – short for web logs – are online, publicly visible personal accounts, which can be viewed as windows into complex socio-political-cultural insights (Coleman 2005). This makes them an important object of study, with the capacity to help us to ‘understand the relationship between public and private meanings, between texts and technologies’ (Silverstone 1999: 18). This is particularly relevant

when studying the public self-representations of a personal and even private topic such as the menopause. I position blogs as self-representations, on the basis that they are 'consequent upon the self speaking on behalf of itself' (Thumim 2012: 4), rather than being spoken about by others, in contrast to mass media, for example. Thumim's approach is particularly relevant to the research presented in this article because she focuses on the political potential of self-representation and on the emotional dimension of its content; a combination of personal and political which is pertinent to the blogs about menopause, in which women write about their experience of 'the change' and call for a variety of changes to how menopause is discussed and managed within their work contexts and in which they acknowledge the personal and political benefits of blogging.

While self-representation by women using digital technologies is not specifically discussed by Thumim (2012), it is explored by many other scholars (e.g. Carstensen 2014; Carter 2014; Gajjala, Oh 2012; Keller 2012, 2016; Lacey, Perrons 2015; Mendes 2015; Wajcman 2000). Blogs are also a key element in what Wittel (2001) calls 'network sociality', which he posits consists of 'fleeting and transient, yet iterative social relations' (2001: 51) and is characterised by a blurring of work and play, which I take here to also mean the personal, for as he continues to state: 'The assimilation of work and play corresponds with the blurring of boundaries between work and private life' (2001: 69). Willson goes on to state that internet platforms, such as blogs, enable 'collaborative, communal and interpersonal engagements' (2009: 493). Furthermore, Miller states that blogging 'is based on the notion that information is a commodity that is used to build and maintain relationships... an exchange of substantive information achieved through dialogue' (2008: 389). Thus the choice to analyse blogs is important in the context of women writing about the menopause because of the potential this format holds for combining the personal with the political, especially when the blogs are situated within a professional, women-only network environment. This is even more apposite given the professional belonging of these women and their audience. For as Wittel also states, network sociality is predominant in the 'cultural industry' (2001: 53), of which the fields of media and communications are a distinct part (Conor, Gill, Taylor 2015).

Women, work and networking

In their introduction to a special issue of *The Sociological Review* about gender and creative labour, Conor, Gill and Taylor assert that

Despite the myths of the CCI [cultural and creative industries] as diverse, open and egalitarian, inequalities remain a depressingly persistent feature of most fields. Whatever indices one considers – relative numbers in employment, pay,

contractual status or seniority – women as a group are consistently faring worse than men. (2015: 5)

This assertion remains frustratingly true almost a full decade after its publication. In this article I focus on women in advertising, marketing, and public relations, all of whom tell a similar story: a predominantly female workforce, with a significant gender leadership and pay gap. For example, the Public Relations and Communications Association's (PRCA) December 2020 census tells us that, in the UK, the public relations industry continues to be principally female, at 68%, but with only 43% of those ticking the 'female' box in leadership positions. It also highlights a gender pay gap of 21% and states that 'this can be explained by the fact that the respondents ... are largely in senior roles which tend to be more male dominated' (PRCA 2020), thus demonstrating a leadership gap as well as a pay one. Similarly, the Alliance for Inclusive and Multicultural Marketing (AIMM) and the Association of National Advertisers' (ANA) 2022 report demonstrates that women make up 67.5% of the workforce but only 55.6% of senior level roles (ANA, AIMM 2022). These gaps are important to note because according to Sørensen:

The gender gap in management positions has, from feminist perspectives, been interpreted in different ways. From a liberal feminist perspective, the gender gap is a symbol of underlying structures producing different opportunities for men and women. Within the framework of neoliberal culture, however, gendered patterns have also come to be interpreted as merely the result of individual choice. (2017: 299)

I agree that gender leadership and pay gaps are a feminist issue and will therefore set out here what I mean by 'feminism' for the purposes of this paper. Feminism is often discussed in terms of waves. While this concept can be contested, it is at the same time generally agreed that the first major organisation of feminism in the West dates to the mid-19th century and the cause of women's suffrage (Bryson 2003). It is also widely agreed that feminist activism did not cease upon the granting of the right of women to vote and that calls for the further advancement of women's rights and freedoms in the 1970s constitute a 'second wave' of feminism (ibid.). The period from the second wave onwards, namely since the 1980s, remains contested both in terms of time and character. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the school of thought which posits that this period is characterised by a simultaneous acknowledgement and repudiation of feminism (Gill 2016; McRobbie 2009), also known as postfeminism. Central to the notion of a postfeminist culture is Gill's assertion that 'postfeminism should be conceived of as a *sensibility*' (2007:

254; italics in the original). In articulating the elements of this sensibility, Gill states that it is organised 'around notions of choice, empowerment, self-surveillance, and sexual difference, and articulated in an ironic and knowing register in which feminism is simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated' (2007: 271). She goes on to assert that postfeminism is characterised by 'an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas' (2007: 255), wherein, according to McRobbie, feminism must remain 'unavowed' (2009: 118) and even be 'disparaged' (McRobbie 2009: 116). These aspects are further explored in the empirical section of the paper and it is pertinent to state that I adopt the approach posited by Gill, Kelan and Scharff (2017: 227), namely that I am 'interested in critically interrogating postfeminism as a distinctive sensibility or gender regime, not in "signing up" to postfeminism', and that I aim to analyse postfeminist culture rather than be a postfeminist-analyst. Furthermore, it is important to note the connections made by Gill, Kelan and Scharff between postfeminism and neoliberalism:

First, both appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves in wider society. Secondly, it is clear that the enterprising, autonomous, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism. Thirdly, it would seem that women, to a much greater extent than men, are called on to work on and transform their selves – and particularly to remodel their interiority, their subjectivity, for example to make themselves into more confident or 'resilient' subjects in the workplace. (2017: 231)

It is this calling upon women to 'adapt' in order to better succeed in the workplace that I am interested in here. Will the female members of women-only networks who blog about the menopause call upon women to adapt their ageing bodies to the workplace, as the findings of research carried out by Steffan (2021) – who interviewed women about their experiences of going through the menopause at work – suggest they might? I am interested in how women who are members of women-only networks and work in communications blog about the menopause especially because, having accrued years of valuable experience through which they have overcome some of the persistent obstacles that professional women face during their career – the 'gender gap' in both leadership and pay, the theoretical and actual motherhood penalty, the sexual harassment and assault – they are now faced with a new, female-only challenge. And indeed, the *PR Population Report* recently demonstrated that 'female practitioners [are] leaving practice mid-career or not getting support to

progress to senior roles' (Waddington 2024), which generally coincides with the age at which they are likely to be starting their menopause journey (British Menopause Society 2022). And it is these challenges, among others, that women-only networks state as their mission to support members to overcome (e.g. Global Women in PR 2022b; Women in PR 2022).

In writing about the creative and cultural industries more broadly, Conor, Gill and Taylor highlight the function of networking and state: 'In these settings reputation becomes a key commodity, and networking and maintaining contacts a key activity for nurturing it. This is achieved ... in the affective labour of updating profiles, tweeting, blogging and engaging in diverse self-promotion' (2015: 7). However, while it is widely recognised that networking is 'commonly considered an important, even essential, activity for building and sustaining a professional career' (Eagleton-Pierce 2016: 127), its benefit to women remains contested. In their thematic review of the literature on women and networking, Topic et al. identify the general practice of networking as creating barriers for women, because it is 'a masculine practice that adversely affects women, primarily working mothers and those with caring responsibilities ... but also other women, as many report sexism and sexual harassment' (2021: 6). They also find a contradiction in studies about women-only networking between those who claim that it 'can create a bottom-up approach and help women advance in their careers' (18) and those who suggest that it 'does not always impact promotions' (15). Furthermore, when it comes to the increasing popularity of women-only networking (Jacobs 2023), which Pini, Brown and Ryan state are often 'established because women have been marginalised in mainstream organisations' (2004: 290), they are seen by some as separatist (ibid.). Accusations of elitism and posturing have also been levelled at women-only networks (Jacobs 2023), along with the critique that they display a postfeminist sensibility and 'could do more by adopting feminist advocacy approaches' (Yeomans 2020: 45). On the other hand, in their analysis of women-only networks across four female-dominated industries – not including those studied here – Villesèche, Meliou and Jha claim that these networks can be reconceptualised 'as political arenas in which women's freedom can be realised and advanced' (2022: 1918), specifically in relation to the world of work. Considering these contradictory positions, I believe that women-only networks are important to study because they 'provide women with the opportunity to join a public group and share their views on work-related issues that matter to them' (Villesèche et al. 2022: 1904), not least in terms of 'naming gender harassment and discriminatory practices' (Pini et al. 2004: 289). And this is especially so in creative cultural industries such as advertising, marketing, and public relations, which are predominantly female and yet still plagued with bias and discrimination against women. I now turn to discussing the relevance of the menopause in this

context, bearing in mind the important point made by Jacobs that ‘there is a fine line between creating awareness, which is positive, and exacerbating stigma, which is not’ (2024).

The menopause

In their examination of two recent decades of news coverage of the menopause, Orgad and Rottenberg provide an overview of how feminist scholarship over the years has documented the ways in which ‘ageing women in the West have been rendered culturally and socially invisible and/or disdained and demeaned’ (2023: 3). That said, they find that ‘menopause is, indeed, enjoying a moment’ (Orgad, Rottenberg 2023: 2), the evolution of which can be characterised by ‘an unprecedented period of pronounced public cultural conversation and promotion around a newly inflected era of menopause consciousness and comprehension’ (Jermyn 2023: 2). Jermyn goes on to term this new era the ‘menopausal turn’ (ibid.). She, alongside Orgad and Rottenberg, identifies a recent proliferation of celebrity women going public about their own menopausal experiences as a key driver for the menopause’s new cultural visibility, particularly in the US and the UK.

The menopause, or the Change (Greer 2019), commonly refers to the period women enter once menstruation has stopped for 12 months, which in the UK is experienced at around the age of 50 (Spector et al. 2024). The lead-up period, known as the peri-menopause, can last between five and ten years (ibid.) and can be accompanied by a variety of symptoms, the combination and expression of which can be different for each woman (British Menopause Society 2022) and might include: hot flushes and night sweats – experienced by 70–80% of women – as well as disturbed sleep and insomnia, low energy levels, low mood, anxiety, low libido, low sexual drive, impaired memory and concentration, a sensation of ‘brain fog’, joint aches, headaches, palpitations, vaginal dryness, and urinary symptoms. Menopausal symptoms last on average for more than seven years and it is estimated that more than a third of women experience long-term menopausal symptoms which may continue for several years beyond that (ibid.).

The menopause is an important topic to research because at this moment ‘there are more older women than in any other historical period’ (Orgad, Rottenberg 2023: 4) in the US and the UK and their presence in the workforce and as an economically active group is also on the rise (Jacobs 2024; Jermyn 2023; Orgad, Rottenberg 2023; Steffan 2021). In addition, the contemporary woman can expect to live more than half her life after the Change (Greer 2019). It is also relevant because women of menopausal age now are those who, compared to previous generations of women, entered the workforce in record numbers and into a diversity of industries in the 1990s, and who are being encouraged to stay in paid work beyond mid-life (Orgad, Rottenberg 2023).

However, 'there exists a paucity in empirical studies that explore how menopause is actually experienced at work' (Steffan 2021: 197), which is a gap that this research aims to begin to address. I agree with Steffan that '[a]s older women, with their older bodies, become more prevalent in the labour force, it is time that the older female body at work has a greater spotlight on the organizational stage' (2021: 198). Discussion of a rise in the visibility of the menopause in the workforce and in the wider media culture is complicated by the current neoliberal moment, which is characterised by a postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007). As Jermyn states, it can be understood 'as an evolution and extension of neoliberalism and postfeminism ... which share a pre-occupation with rising to the challenge of better managing the self' (2023: 3).

I argue that it is pertinent to study the self-representation of menopause by women working in advertising, marketing, and public relations, in particular, for as Conor, Gill and Taylor state: 'it is becoming increasingly clear that gender is mediated by age ... with women concentrated in the youngest cohorts of the CCI [cultural and creative industries] workforce' (2015: 6). If we wish to address the drain of talented and experienced women from these industries as they transition into the menopause, a good place to start is to attend to what women of that cohort tell us.

Methodology

In this section, I present the methodological approach, research design, and methods I employed. Feminist methodology is a broad church and I adopt Reinhartz's (1992: 6) definition of feminist research methods as 'methods used in research projects by people who identify themselves as feminist or as part of the women's movement'. While there is no single way to conduct feminist methodology, it does imply a commitment to work 'for the transformation of the condition of the lives of women' (Brunskell 1998: 39), as well as 'a reflexivity which stresses the accountability of the analyst' (Gill 1995: 166), which must take place from the very beginning of the research process (Hesse-Biber 2012). That is the intention here.

To answer the research question 'how do women who are members of women-only networks for women working in communications blog about the menopause?', I studied blogs about the menopause written by female members of the following UK-based, women-only networks for women working in advertising, marketing, and public relations: Women in PR, Bloom, and WACL. To conduct this study, blog posts on the sites of women-only networks for women working in communications in the UK were searched on 31/05/23 for blogs about the menopause (see Appendix 1). Eight relevant posts were identified on two sites: Bloom (bloomnetwork.uk) and WACL (wacl.info). The posts were written between 2021 and 2023. In addition, I have also included five blogs about the menopause, written by members of Women in PR, which appeared on PR Week's website between 2021 and 2023, as none ap-

peared on the womeninpr.org.uk website itself. The search for these additional posts was conducted on 20/02/2024. The texts analysed here are the only ones about the menopause written by professional women in the communications industries and posted on relevant platforms that I was able to find in my searches.

Orgad and Rottenberg (2023) document a significant increase in the visibility of the menopause in UK news coverage, with a particular rise since 2021, when the first celebrity documentary about the menopause aired on UK TV. Women blogging about the menopause on women-only networks' platforms for women working in communications has also been visible since 2021, with five on the topic appearing that year, four appearing in 2022, and four in 2023. This also tracks with Greer's observation that: 'Before 2000 we heard hardly one word in their [middle-aged women's] voices; now online blogs and chat rooms resound to a chorus of female protest and complaint' (2019: 11). This rise of women's voices highlights the importance of considering women's self-representation alongside their representation by others in the mass media.

Web-based texts are good examples of what Sørensen calls 'compressed narratives' (2017: 302), in which 'since space is limited, texts need to communicate effectively' (ibid.). Discourse analysis, 'a concern with discourse itself, a view of language as constructive and constructed, an emphasis upon discourse as a form of action, and a conviction in the rhetorical organization of discourse' (Gill 2007: 58), is used here to examine the selected texts. Discourse analysis was chosen to address the 'how' part of the research question. Discourse analysis was also chosen because it 'has an enormous amount to offer feminists', according to Gill (1995: 167), in particular in exploring 'a range of questions concerning the reproduction of gender power relations' (ibid.), in this case in relation to women, work, and the menopause.

When conducting discourse analysis, I follow the approach that is associated with sociology and social psychology (e.g. Gill 1995, 1996; Potter 1996; Potter, Wetherell 1994; Tonkiss 1998; Wetherell, Potter 1988). I employ the method of interpretative repertoires, which according to Wetherell and Potter 'can be seen as the building blocks speakers used for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena' (1988: 172). Gill further states that interpretative repertoires allow researchers 'to go beyond individual or discrete expressions to begin to identify patterns across and between texts, and to connect these to wider contexts and social formations' (2009: 351). I have found interpretative repertoires particularly useful in highlighting the ways in which feminist and postfeminist sensibilities are negotiated within the texts through the choice and use of language.

The starting point of the analysis is Darmon's (2017: 43) framework, which combines Gill's (2007) elements of postfeminist sensibility with proposed elements of feminist sensibility to operationalise the theory and apply it. Table 1 sets out the key

elements of Gill’s postfeminist sensibility alongside Darmon’s corresponding elements of feminist sensibility. These offer useful concepts to operationalise when analysing texts and exploring what they reveal about feminist and postfeminist sensibilities in contemporary media culture. All of the sensibility elements detailed in the table below were held in mind while conducting the analysis.

Table 1: A summary of sensibility elements

Postfeminist sensibility	Feminist sensibility
Choice	Equality
Individualism and empowerment	Solidarity and politicisation
Natural difference	Intersectionality
Irony and knowingness	Anger and hope
Feminism as passé or done wrong	Feminism as current and relevant

Source: Author.

An inductive approach is taken, in which first the detailed analysis is carried out and then emerging patterns are related to the theoretical framework. In order to conduct the inductive, empirical work, I read and re-read the texts in detail multiple times, taking notes and paying attention to linguistic content, meanings and topics, form, grammar and cohesion, and trying to reveal the constructive processes, argumentative organisation, taken-for-grantedness, the variation and consistency within and between texts, as well as silences and gaps (Gill 1996; Potter, Wetherell 1994; Tonkiss 1998). As a result of this close reading, I identified two main interpretative repertoires – Stigma and Support – which contain within them a variety of discourses about women, the menopause, and work, which reflect an entanglement of feminist and postfeminist sensibilities. These discourses contain within them sensibility elements which are particularly relevant to the ways in which the discourse of the two interpretative repertoires is constructed: individualism & empowerment, solidarity & politicisation, and anger & hope (bolded in the table above).

Analysis

Stigma

Within the repertoire of ‘Stigma’, there are discourses about the fear and shame experienced by menopausal women – including in relation to their job performance – about the mass exodus of mid-life women from the workforce as a result of the menopause and about the negative impact this has both on women and on the industry. Following their review of the social sciences literature on stigma, since Goff-



man's 1963 text on the topic, Link and Phelan (2001: 382) conclude that 'stigma exists when elements of labelling, stereotyping, separating, status loss and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows these processes to unfold'. The discourses in the Stigma repertoire reveal to varying degrees a concern with all of the attributes identified by Link and Phelan.

In the blogs, we are reminded that, as Steffan says, '[t]here is not always a desire to disclose menopause at work' (2024: 1). For example: 'It was embarrassing and distressing. I started to hide and for a short time literally went to ground'; 'we just don't talk about it'; 'I felt it had to be kept a secret because no one else was talking about it either'; 'this deeply personal experience can be difficult and embarrassing to disclose in the workplace, where mid-life women can already feel invisible, isolated, and marginalised'. This is a recognition that with all the progress that the new-found visibility of the menopause is supposed to have engendered, there is still the fear that 'the price we are expected to pay for this is in giving a free pass to some very old-fashioned sexism' (Smith 2024: 4). Women are worried that if they talk openly about their menopause at work, it could be just another stick with which to beat them. For example: 'Fessing up to a hot flush opens you up to the double whammy of both sexism and ageism, so it's better to say nothing'. Indeed, Steffan's research findings point to 'the potential of menopause to disrupt, reduce, or interrupt women's confidence' (2021: 210). This is particularly evident in the discourse about women's fear of not performing on the job. For example: 'I was afraid of the changes that were happening and felt somehow ashamed that my normal capable self couldn't cope'; 'I wasn't sleeping well and had become increasingly anxious, which was both out of character and far from helpful in a demanding role'; 'I occasionally forgot the end of my sentences (mid pitch)'; 'I was embarrassed about my overwhelming heat surges, during presentations, meetings and social events'; 'how can you be responsible for running an agency when you struggle to remember basic words and names'; 'My memory was patchy, I'd be mid-presentation and I'd forget my words and my mental health was suffering as I experienced bouts of anxiety from one day to the next'. These are examples of what Steffan calls 'menopause talk', in which 'for some women, that strong sense of self can be interrupted and weakened to the point where individuals find themselves in precarious work outcomes' (2021: 211). Indeed, in the Stigma repertoire there is discourse about mid-life women fearing their menopause will have negative repercussions on their employment. For example: 'We keep quiet because we fear for our jobs'; 'fear of recrimination'; 'There is an understandable fear that sharing these experiences may negatively affect careers'. This evidence tallies with Link and Phelan's conceptualisation of stigma, which suggests that it is 'likely to be a key determinant of many of the life chances that sociologists study, from psychological well-being to employment, housing, and life itself' (2001: 382), in this

case, a fear of being exposed as suddenly incapable of doing the job and thus at risk of losing employment or being denied new professional opportunities.

The discourse in the Stigma repertoire has a distinct postfeminist sensibility, in that it carries within it an acknowledgment of the requirement to perform 'a neoliberal identity of menopause endurance – coping with the menopause in various ways: coping in silence, coping with unknown bodily changes, and coping by hiding the ageing body' (Steffan 2021: 205). Thus, for example: 'Talented and experienced women find themselves clouded by memory issues, dogged by joint and muscular pain, second-guessing their abilities and experiencing a huge dent to their confidence. Often it can feel as if the simplest thing is just to quit work – which only further impacts their confidence and sense of self'. This example demonstrates the ways in which women's internal surprise at hitherto unfamiliar 'inadequacy', brought about by menopause symptoms, leads to fears of external consequences in the form of work-related penalties, which are further complicated by attendant dents to their confidence. Thus, the discourse in the Stigma repertoire has a distinct postfeminist sensibility, in that it carries within it an acknowledgment of the requirement to be confident and display confidence. At the same time, there is also resistance to this trend in the discourse, which displays a feminist sensibility characterised by anger and politicisation, thus presenting an entanglement between postfeminist and feminist sensibilities. For example, 'the near-furious urge to challenge the stigma surrounding the menopause and the lack of workplace support for its many symptoms' displays fury, while 'what a shame it will be to win the working parent battle only to then lose these amazing colleagues at aged 50 because of the menopause' and 'it's time to start preventing such a mass exodus and retain a more substantial layer of experienced and talented women in our industry' display a recognition of the personal being political. There are also acknowledgements of solidarity: 'the lack of understanding and support for them [menopausal women] at this time means so many are leaving the industry ... leaving younger staff without experienced female role models'. Thus we see that on the one hand women are acutely aware of the requirement to conform to 'popular neoliberal feminist dispositions' (Orgad, Rottenberg 2023: 12), remaining capable, confident, and coping, and aware of the risks of sexism in the workplace that disclosure brings. On the other hand, there is push-back against the repercussions of this stigma that leads women to leave the jobs they love and leaving younger women without the role models they need, which carries within it a distinct discourse of solidarity and thus feminist sensibility.

Support

Within the repertoire of 'Support' there are two main discourses. The first is a critique of the lack of existing information, support, and understanding of the menopause and menopausal women, as well as a recognition that better information and



support from government and in the workplace are needed. This discourse is also about seeking information and help independently to counter the paucity. The second discourse is about the important and positive impact that support from other women can provide: a solidarity between menopausal, younger, and older women.

The lack of sufficient information and appropriate support for menopausal women at work is reflected in Steffan's call: 'Employers should shift their focus on menopause management from reactive to proactive' (Steffan 2021: 211). And it is overwhelmingly reflected in the discourse of the Support repertoire, as seen in the following statements: 'support at work is lagging sadly behind this progress. Not having a supportive policy for older working women is both discriminatory and short sighted'; 'We keep it quiet because there are no HR policies that relate to us'; 'the menopause seemed the missing link within workplace training, policy and culture'; 'There was no menopause policy at my workplace, it simply wasn't visible as necessary or needed'; 'support and understanding at work is still the exception not the norm'. These texts reflect a feminist sensibility not only in the recognition that the personal is political – as discussed at the end of the Stigma section – but also in that they place the responsibility for solving the problem of the lack of support squarely with management rather than with the individual. For example: 'The only way to remove the stigma and ignorance is to make menopause education mandatory and introduce policy changes'. Furthermore, they identify that this is a structural issue that leads to discrimination and requires structural change to be resolved: 'what are we doing to offer reassurance to women facing into mid-life that they can still have a rewarding career in comms, post 50?'; 'companies need to be fighting to retain the women that work for them'. This discourse reflects a pushback against the economic drive to keep women over fifty in the workplace without attending to their particular needs. Furthermore, the economic benefit of supporting menopausal women is also highlighted. For example: 'the onus should be on every business leader to give women a fighting chance as they manage the balance of personal and professional challenges. And in doing so, their retention levels of all these brilliant, highly experienced and capable women will soar – win-win'; 'It's clear that helping women better manage their menopause benefits everyone'. These messages are often aimed directly at industry leaders: 'Supporting perimenopausal and menopausal women is an intersectional issue that will ricochet positive impacts on gender and age-related biases within your business'; 'Identifying what you can do to mitigate the impact of menopause is not only the right thing to do, it's a business case for future survival'; 'It's not "the right thing to do", it makes commercial sense, and your businesses will be all the richer for it (in both senses)'. The case for supporting women is thus also asserted as the case for supporting business.

In addition to identifying a problem outside of individual women, which reflects a feminist sensibility, the discourse in the Support repertoire also focuses on a range

of solutions. For example: 'to drag the menopause and all that leads up to it, out of its anachronistic closet'; 'to educate, elevate and empower this stage and ultimately to lead policy change in the industry'; 'menopause is a conversation we need to be having, and fast – first, by giving it a voice, and second, by developing kick-ass HR practices and policies that help mid-lifers flourish in their PR careers'; so as to create 'lasting change for women in the workplace'. The desired outcomes of these proposed solutions have a feminist sensibility, in terms of both acknowledging and addressing perceived sexist discrimination: 'there have been a plethora of workplace menopause policies appearing that point, hopefully, to a long overdue change to the terrible midlife discrimination of women in our industry'. And they also seek to create a better future in solidarity with younger women: 'Expanding education and awareness seems key, so women will benefit from better support and understanding in the future'; 'a policy ... for women down the line to benefit'. The discourse also carries a marker of hope: 'we remain hopeful that workplace attitudes and policies will continue to emerge and evolve'; and 'there is a sense of a new lease of life where you can do things differently'. This discourse is also reflected in Steffan's assessment of the justification for conducting research into the menopause so that the 'generations who follow will be better prepared for the transition of menopause and its potential impact on all aspects of life, including the workplace' (2021: 1). That said, there is also discourse with a postfeminist sensibility of individualism and doing things for yourself and by yourself, 'with a ton of research and a lot of being kind to me, I've developed a fairly robust toolkit for the rest of my ride'; 'I started to investigate the evidence and do my own research ... with that knowledge I invested in my future health'. However, this discourse of supporting oneself is intertwined with a discourse with a feminist sensibility that acknowledges that solidarity and structural change are required: 'finding safe, reliable help and support should not be down to luck, it should be a given'; and 'The wholesale change in attitude we need will inevitably be slower than we would like, but the onus should be on every business leader to give women a fighting chance as they manage the balance of personal and professional challenges'. This again demonstrates the entanglement of both postfeminist and feminist sensibilities.

Additional discourse with a feminist sensibility can be found in the Support repertoire in the form of solidarity with other women: 'Hearing other women's stories and how they coped is, above all, what helped me when I was really losing the plot'; 'I find myself something of an agony aunt to other menopausal women'; 'It's hard to describe how validating it is to hear that what you're feeling is normal. That you're not actually losing your mind. That it's natural and things will be ok'; 'I listened to other women going through the same changes but in different ways and realised I wasn't alone'; and 'Allyship is key'. And there is a call for those who have benefited from

this support to: ‘help other women that feel the same way’; ‘listen to other women’; and acknowledge that ‘we are in this menopause moment together’, ‘you don’t need to experience this alone’, and ‘this is a call to action, to all women who want to ask questions about the menopause and be listened to in the hope that our collective experiences will inform change for the future’. The discourse recognises the personal, public, and even political ways in which support from other women is meaningful.

Finally, in relation to the much-cited, mediated celebrity interventions (e.g. Jermyn 2023; Orgad, Rottenberg 2023) as well as those by women in the communications industries who have been vocal about their menopause, the discourse in this repertoire is itself supportive. For example: ‘It’s down to the courage of certain women who stood up, spoke out, shared their stories and agitated for long overdue action’; ‘these women stand together determined to draw a line under the unnecessary waste of experienced resources’. These expressions of solidarity with and gratitude for women in the public eye who have helped to drag the menopause into the open reflects a feminist sensibility that goes some way to responding to concerns expressed by some scholars that the current menopause ‘turn’ or ‘moment’ might be delimited or otherwise negatively impacted by its association with the culture of celebrity.

Discussion, limitations and further research

Women who are working in media and communications and reaching the menopause during its current, new visibility are women who have responded to the call to participate fully in the world of work. These women are well educated and have worked hard to succeed in work and life. Having faced a myriad of obstacles in which their biology, in the form of menstruation and the spectre of motherhood (Jeffery 2023) alongside the reality of sexual harassment and assault, has played a key part throughout their careers, the bloggers are now confronted with the new and often-ignored realities of being female: the menopause.

In this paper I have sought to examine how members of women-only networks in media and communications industries blog about the menopause. The purpose is twofold: first, because ‘networking as social practice is considerably under-researched’ (Wittel 2001: 71) in general and the feminist potential of women-only networks in particular requires further research (Darmon 2024); and second, because it is imperative to explore ‘the extent to which the “coming out of the closet” of menopause benefits ageing women’ (Orgad, Rottenberg 2023: 15). Therefore, the over-arching research question posed here is: How do women who are members of women-only networks for women working in communications blog about the menopause? And the sub-questions are: Do the selected blog posts’ texts the websites of women-only networks have a feminist and/or postfeminist sensibility? And do they engender

an individualistic approach and/or promote solidarity? Furthermore, within the discourse analysis, I examine the texts for indications regarding the 'sources and solutions for gender inequality in the workplace' (Gill, Orgad 2015: 340) and ask: What can this tell us about the networks' position vis-à-vis the menopause, feminism, and postfeminism?

The findings of the discourse analysis conducted on the examined blogs align with the following assertion: 'While the menopausal turn frequently calls on individual women to step up and arm themselves with information and assistance ... it is also a movement in which many of its strident voices callout what they perceive to be the shortcomings of an insufficiently responsive and informed government and medical establishment' (Jermyn 2023: 6). Thus, I suggest that the menopause 'turn' or 'moment' is characterised by an entanglement of feminist and postfeminist sensibilities that demonstrates the feminist potential of solidarity and collective action and the constraints of individualism; it is, after all, well documented that 'women internalise external discourses that shape how choices are produced, constructed and limited in the neoliberal world of work' (Villesèche et al. 2022: 1906). Therefore, I am not surprised to find discourses with a postfeminist sensibility in both the identified repertoires – 'Stigma' and 'Support' – and I am at the same time encouraged by the simultaneous cleavage to discourses with a feminist sensibility in both. That said, feminism itself is rarely mentioned and is perhaps even 'unavowed' (McRobbie 2009: 118).

The analysis demonstrates the complex ways in which members of women-only networks for women working in communications blog about the menopause. They demonstrate a sensibility that is characterised by an entanglement of feminist and postfeminist sensibilities, which I argue is characteristic of this moment. Women currently in mid-life have been led to believe by popular culture that the goals of feminism have been achieved and that it is now passé (Gill 2007). And yet they are suddenly confronted with the reality in which it is needed, wherein women once again find themselves being urged to fit female bodies and needs into a world designed by and for men (Criado Perez 2019). So, they try to cope individually with the menopause at work and beyond, only to discover that solidarity and structural change are still needed. They use the tools afforded by the network sociality (Wittel 2001), namely blogging, to call on their sisters, not to change themselves but to support each other and demand that their employers implement the structural changes required to support menopausal women, now and in the future.

It is also important to note that changing stigma will not be achieved only by introducing the 'kick-ass HR policies' suggested by some bloggers. For as Link and Phelan argue, to really change stigma 'any approach must be multifaceted and multilevel ... [and] must ultimately address the fundamental cause of stigma' (2001: 381), which in the case of menopause is its negative cultural capital stemming from the pervasive-



ness of gendered ageism (Orgad, Rottenberg 2023). I believe, however, that blogging about the menopause and calling for structural change by members of women-only networks in communications is a positive step in the right direction, which hopefully can spread out beyond the communications industry to benefit all women as they experience the menopause at work.

I propose that further study be conducted into the function, purpose, and role of blogging and of women-only networks for women working in communications – in relation to the menopause and beyond – in order to further explore their potential for feminist transformation (Villesèche et al. 2022) within the networks and their sector as well as elsewhere. For example, interviews with members of the networks studied here (Bloom, WACL and Women in PR) could provide important insight into members' thoughts and aspirations and could enhance our growing understanding of the impact of technologies and menopause on contemporary working women.

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Washing ‘Dirty Work’ in Academia and Beyond: Resisting Stigma as an Early Career Researcher Investigating Sexuality in the Digital

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Abstract: During my PhD studies, my ethnography of the r/NoFap subreddit involved grappling with challenges that questioned my research design, academic posture, political stance, gender identity, sexuality and desire and asked for mutable choices to deal with them. With over 1.1 million members, predominantly men, this Reddit channel advocates abstinence from pornography consumption and excessive masturbation as a means to overcome a self-diagnosed porn addiction, porn overuse, and compulsive sexual behaviour. The related conversations are dominated by evolutionary narratives on gender and sexuality, men’s sexual entitlement to women, and the heteronormative coital encounter as an imperative. Academic literature has identified heterosexist, patriarchal, and misogynistic discourses in the community (Prause, Ley 2023; Burnett 2021; Hartmann 2020; Taylor, Jackson 2018). My ethnographic journey demanded substantial emotional labour as I navigated potentially toxic technocultures (Masanari 2015) and non-sex-positive environments. What I had not foreseen was the systematic stigma, discomfort, and delegitimation in both institutional (academic) and non-institutional contexts (social and familial). This paper provides a detailed account of these experiences, shedding light on the personal, institutional, and emotional struggles inherent in gender and sexuality scholarship as a result of the pervasive stigma and delegitimation. This account aims to shed light on the consequences of doing ‘dirty work’ and suggest strategies of personal resistance, with the awareness that transformative actions cannot be merely individual but are necessarily structural and collective.

Keywords: sexuality studies, stigma, dirty work

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The last decade has seen the expansion of local, regional, and global groups, websites, forums, blogs, channels, and profiles on the most diversified platforms that seek and promote abstention from masturbation, pornography, and orgasm. This composite and loose community is mainly, but not exclusively, attended and formed by heterosexual men, and it commonly falls under the umbrella term 'NoFap'. Its name comes from the onomatopoeic slang term 'fap', which refers to male masturbation. These fragmented homosocial online spaces are discursively held together by the belief that abstaining from porn and masturbation and quitting a self-diagnosed porn addiction, porn overuse, and compulsive sexual behaviour can massively improve health and quality of life as well as work productivity and sexual life.

The headquarters of NoFap is the online Reddit community r/NoFap, where the number of members almost doubled from 477k in 2020 (Hartmann 2020) to 1.1 million in 2023 (r/NoFap, Sept 2023). On r/NoFap, the Reddit channel of NoFap, it is possible to find posts discussing abstinence, pornography, the porn industry, masturbation, erectile functioning, gender, sexual orientations, masculinity, relationships, self-development, confidence, productivity, attractiveness, sex work, trafficking, suicide, mental health, the state of modern society, vulnerabilities, stigma, sexual health, muscularity, energy, and shame, with a general male-oriented heterosexual tone.

While NoFap users often state that they actively engage in the fight against misogyny, since they decide to abstain from pornography, which, according to them, degrades women, previous literature on NoFap communities and spaces has stressed the presence of strong indicators of misogynistic attitudes, entangled with heteronormative beliefs, in the NoFap environment. For instance, members' narratives and conversations are dominated by 'strongly heterosexual male tenor' tropes (Taylor, Jackson 2018: 624), emphasising essentialist and evolutionary narratives on men and women and a construction of masculinity rooted in rationality and self-control, where the heteronormative coital imperative (McPhillips, Braun, Gavey 2001) is envisaged as the promised land for men and men's sexual entitlement to women is an asset (Meenagh 2020). By contrast, masturbating is defined by members as an emasculating and vile activity that hinders subjects from reaching their full potential. Masturbation is depicted as a practice that is hierarchically inferior to 'real sex' with a 'real woman' (while porn actors and sex workers are defined as 'pixel women'), with the result that non-heteronormative sexualities and queer sexual practices are delegitimised, silenced, or pathologised. This is in a digital context like Reddit where the risk of being doxxed (having personal information leaked without consent) or harassed or becoming a target of shitstorms from some community members is high, especially those with anti-feminist views (Massanari 2017). A recent paper by Prause and Ley (2023) investigating violent content in r/NoFap revealed a high prevalence of expressions of violence within this subreddit, particularly directed at the pornogra-

phy industry, sex workers, and women. The study also underscores the concerning trend of threats aimed at scientists, primarily directed at women researchers. Additionally, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism considers NoFap a component of online extremist misogyny (Prause, Ley 2023) and the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment (VERA-2) identifies 'NoFap' as a term associated with online violence and misogyny (Chan 2023).

r/NoFap configures itself not only as a non-safe space but also as a potentially risky environment for a gender and sexuality researcher who identifies as a transfeminist¹ sexually fluid questioning woman. However, contrary to initial expectations, the most daunting aspects of my ethnographic journey conducted as an early career researcher as part of my PhD degree, were not merely field confrontation, navigation, and interaction, but rather the systematic stigma, discomfort, and delegitimisation experienced in both academic and non-academic contexts. While these shortcomings are identified through subjective experience and might not be representative of the challenges faced by other researchers digging into similar ethnographies, I believe this project sheds light more generally on the difficulties in gender and sexuality scholarship. Drawing on the suggestions of Keene (2022), my aim here is to provide an account of my research journey and illuminate the consequences of engaging in what the literature defines as 'dirty work'. I also discuss strategies of personal resistance, recognising that transformative actions must extend beyond individual efforts to encompass structural and collective change.

Conceptual background

Everett Hughes (1958) introduced the term 'dirty work' to describe labour that is essential for the public good yet is perceived as degrading, repulsive, and disgraceful, a concept further elucidated by Irvine (2014) as work that is socially necessary but stigmatised. Scholars such as Irvine (2014) and Keene (2022) effectively characterise

¹ Transfeminism is a movement of resistance and a theory that views gender, arbitrarily assigned at birth, as a social construct, a construct that is exercised as a tool of a power system that controls, oppresses, and limits bodies to fit the heterosexual, racist, ableist, and patriarchal social order. Transfeminism is grounded in the material realities, lives, experiences, and precarities of trans, feminist, and queer people. It acknowledges the complexity and diversity of gender and sexual identities and recognises the interwoven nature of the patriarchal and capitalist oppressions that affect all individuals who are not white heterosexual cis-men (https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/abbiamo_un_piano.pdf). *'Transfeminisms are network movements that use gender, migration, cross-cultural contexts, vulnerability, race, and class as transversal spaces to build emancipatory alliances against cis-hetero-patriarchal and racist violence'* (Valencia 2018). To do so, transfeminist movements move away from the neoliberal reconversion of feminism's critical apparatus and traditional 'biological policies' or cis-women policies.



sex and sexuality research as a form of ‘dirty work’ because of its marginalised status within western academia and society at large. According to Keene (2022), conducting research on sex and sexuality-related topics can be viewed as a type of ‘dirty work’ because it is often tolerated but marginalised, delegitimised, and considered unimportant within academic and broader societal contexts, despite its significant public relevance.

This delegitimation extends to sex and sexuality researchers themselves, impacting their career trajectories and ‘reputations’ and subjecting them to stigma by contagion. Researchers frequently encounter their work being trivialised and face challenges in obtaining validation from colleagues (Fahs, Plante, McClelland 2017). The sociologist Janice M. Irvine (2014) asserts that specific institutional practices within the US university system contribute to the stigmatisation of sexuality research, perpetuating patterns of institutional inequality. These practices include limited training opportunities, lack of funding, poor job prospects, dismissive and ‘visceral responses’ responses from review boards, lack of validation from colleagues, and derogatory remarks and jokes about the researchers’ sexuality, who are often portrayed as ‘perverts’ or ‘sex-crazed’. Sexuality researchers also experience difficulties disseminating their work within academia, the publishing system, and the public sphere. Irvine (2018b: 1234–1235) describes how sex and sexuality research and topics have been ‘trivialized, sensationalized, or stigmatized by journal editors or reviewers’.

Despite the expansion of sexuality research, which examines sexuality as a domain of analysis, and not as a biological drive or characteristic, across disciplines in the social sciences and humanities and has been driven by influences such as poststructuralism, feminist and queer theories, activism related to AIDS, and trans activism, this progress has not eliminated repression, conflicts, and stigma. Irvine (2014) argues that although sexuality research may receive some recognition and may have become ‘trendy’ within certain academic and activist circles, it still faces challenges in achieving academic legitimacy. This field remains marginalised, and sexuality scholars continue to experience stigmatisation or, at best, controversy in the westernised academic environment because of their work (Irvine 2018a: 16). Incorporating sexuality studies into research may cast suspicion on researchers owing to the stigma surrounding sex and sexuality, producing occupational bias, as noted by Irvine (2003). But as Keene (2022: 2) has explained, *‘such experiences are not confined to the walls of the ivory tower’*.

The sexual culture of western societies, as discussed by Irvine (2014), is affective and characterised by contradictory emotions such as desire, excitement, and fear, being sex recognised as vital but also repulsive at the same time. This is in part because sexuality is political; systems of power organise it in ways that benefit, support, and celebrate certain subjectivities and practices, while they simultaneously scold, admonish, and restrain others (Rubin 2007: 171). Thus, sexuality is submerged and immersed

in conflicting interests, systems of power, discourses and practices of oppression/repression/reproduction (Foucault 1978), and political manoeuvres.

This contributes to the production of widespread public stigma and moral/social panics targeting specific populations or practices defined as deviant, degenerate, and to be eradicated to ensure the survival of society, leading to the criminalisation of certain behaviour and the proliferation of discourses dictating appropriate forms of sexuality and acceptable discourse on the topic. Sex and sexuality research provides tools to treat *'sexual variety as something that exists rather than as something to be exterminated'* (Rubin 2007: 155). By legitimising sexuality as a central area of individual and collective experience and knowledge production, sexuality research becomes a political project of resistance against sexual and social stigma, advocating for the existence and recognition of non-heteronormative practices, bodies, and lives. Sexuality research becomes simultaneously a way to deconstruct stigma and violent oppressive power dynamics and a battleground where stigma and oppression are enacted, thus highlighting the complex dynamics involved in studying and challenging societal norms surrounding sex and sexuality.

Methodology

During my PhD research, I adopted a digital ethnography approach to the study of the r/NoFap community on Reddit, conceptualising it as a form of ethnography conducted 'on, through and about digital media' (Abidin, de Seta 2020: 6) while also taking advantage of digital methods (Caliandro 2018). This approach particularly emphasises the epistemological integration of computational techniques in the ethnographic continuum to understand the complexities of online communities, especially within platformised digital environments. This is because within digital platforms user relations and the processes of content production tend to be massive, real-time, networked, and algorithmically structured, all of which are features that the ethnographer should keep in mind and understand when 'seeking' the help of computational tools. The goal is to avoid extractive reasoning and metric-based analysis when examining societal phenomena and instead maintain a qualitative perspective.

My approach involves a creative amalgamation of computational and qualitative methods, grounded in an inductive framework (Brown 2019; Ford 2014). By repositioning computational techniques as integral components of the ethnographic process, I aimed to integrate them seamlessly into the broader continuum of ethnographic inquiry. During the one-year-long ethnographic research that I conducted from December 2022 to December 2023, I engaged with both the community and the language of the machines that structure the community. The digital ethnography within the r/NoFap community started with two months of lurking (silent observation) using



a new Reddit profile. This phase provided crucial insights into the community's overall atmosphere and dynamics, prompting ethical reflections on the researcher's positioning within the field. During this preliminary stage, a covert ethnography approach was adopted, where I refrained from revealing my identity as a researcher and from explicitly disclosing any social categories to which I recognise myself as belonging. The decision to conduct covert ethnography primarily stemmed from ethical considerations, which are sensitive both to the researcher and the specific context. From the start of the initial lurking phase, the community exhibited a strong homosocial atmosphere, hosting heterosexist, patriarchal, and misogynistic discourses (Hartmann 2021; Burnett 2021; Taylor, Jackson 2018). This is coupled with what appears to be a non-sex-positive environment, stigmatising non-heteronormative sexual practices and upholding conservative values concerning family, relationships, sexuality, and what they refer to as a modern porn-corrupted society.

While taking notes during my r/NoFap field immersion to address specific ethical and personal challenges related to the content and interactions within the community, which I will not elaborate on here, I began to notice structural challenges affecting my academic, professional, and social life. At that point, I started to take fieldnotes, mostly in the form of reflexive journaling (Janesick 2015), on events occurring outside the r/NoFap community fieldwork, such as conferences, workshops, board reviews, chats with friends and colleagues, and random encounters with strangers that were still connected to my work and research topic. What happened was that '*Research in the field can become real life and real life can become research*' (De Craene 2024: 9). Reflexive journaling offered me an opportunity for spontaneous reflection on significant experiences as they occurred and how they resonated with my work, my identity, and, more generally, my life within and outside academia.

Reflexivity, a core feminist practice (Rose 2007; Harding 1991; Haraway 1991), was crucial in helping me understand and manage my emotions, ultimately empowering me. Embracing feminist (auto)reflexivity, as described by Jordan (2018), allowed me as an ethnographer to critically reflect on power dynamics, my position, and my influence on the events around/in me and my research topic. In this sense, this approach considers the personal aspects of body, desire, and emotions as inherently political.

In the literature, feminist reflexivity involves continuous pauses and examinations at every stage of the auto/ethnographic process. This means reflecting on who we are, what we observe, what we feel, and what we believe. Such introspection serves as a powerful analytical tool for deciphering personal experiences and uncovering related hidden power structures, especially in relation to gender and sexuality. However, this approach extends beyond the systematic analysis of personal experiences and emotions; it facilitates the confrontation of tensions, conflicts, and contradictions within and beyond the field. By doing so, it reveals complexities masked beneath the

surface of what is presented as logical and progressive. Importantly, it breaks free from methodological positivist limitations, allowing emotions to be integrated into the auto/ethnographic process. Recognising power and position also challenges the traditional notion of the ethnographer's detachment and emotional neutrality in research (Adjepong 2022; Mama 2011; Naples 2003). This reflexive process legitimises personal feelings, emotions, and desires, acknowledging their centrality in gaining critical insights into some taken-for-granted aspects of social life (Delamont 2009).

In this sense, thanks to the article by Keene (2022), I realised that my personal experiences were reflecting the structural and sociocultural challenges of doing and investigating 'dirty work'. I then decided to systematically analyse my personal experiences in the form of autoethnography, connecting them to a broader understanding of cultural experiences (Ellis et al. 2011) of being a sexademic (Keene 2022). This work took the form of a situated autoethnography that pays attention to power dynamics, embodied emotions and reactions, and forms of violence and oppression based on the autoethnographer's specific social identities and standpoint (Tarisayi 2023). Thus, doing autoethnography is necessarily handling research as a socially conscious and political act (Javaid 2020).

Therefore, the reflections presented in this paper return to the experiences of a white, European, able-bodied, fluid, and questioning woman, who easily and often 'passes' (sometimes strategically) as a cis-straight woman. For these reasons, compared to other marginalised subjects and underrepresented groups, I may encounter some privileges in conducting sex and sexuality research in and beyond academia. However, while individuals with different backgrounds, identities, and bodies may produce different results and observations (Are 2022), it is essential to highlight various insider experiences of challenges in sexuality scholarship. This necessary partiality helps to illuminate the current state and differential impacts of power dynamics and the stigma of doing and investigating 'dirty work' on diverse bodies, identities, and subjectivities.

The fieldnotes were qualitatively analysed to identify emotional and discursive patterns and connections between personal experiences, the existing literature on the stigma associated with sexual and sexuality research, and feminist activism's strategies to resist oppression and violence in and outside the workplace. Starting with an initial file containing all my reflexive journaling, various poems, and drawings collected during my PhD studies, related to what Keene (2022) defines as 'institutional, professional, and personal hurdles encountered during a dirty work journey', I began to trace common themes according to these three dimensions. I then divided the data into institutional, professional, and personal hurdles, linking these experiences to the findings in the existing literature presented in the 'Conceptual background' section above and the complex range of emotions described in the journaling for each event



noted. This resulted in two main topics: ‘Embodiment and intimate hurdles’ and ‘Systemic + Stigma = Systematic hurdles’.

Following the analysis below, I provide an account of the strategies of personal resistance that I employed, with the aim of offering insights and possible suggestions for researchers embarking on sex and sexuality research.

In presenting the results of this autoethnography, I acknowledge that some information may lead to the identification of cited individuals as professors on my doctoral board and as colleagues and friends. I have made every effort to ensure anonymity to protect myself from potential accusations of libel, negative repercussions in the workplace, and potential risks to my future academic career. The decision to speak my truth is not taken naively and does not overlook the potential vulnerabilities or impacts on the people involved, even when they are in positions of power. Rather, it is the result of extensive reflection on the need to legitimise marginalised, stigmatised, and delegitimised voices and knowledge productions both within academia and in broader society. Analysis of the everyday experiences of sex and sexuality researchers can be used to critique structural power systems and illuminate how they operate in daily interactions, and this is not solely with the purpose of a callout and identification of people involved in the situations (De Craene 2024). Above all, it is a commitment to the political responsibility of reclaiming our spaces and voices, which are too often silenced, marginalised, and demeaned within the academy and beyond (Keene 2022).

Findings and discussion

During my year-long ethnographic journey in the r/NoFap subreddit, I grappled with challenges that questioned my research design academic posture, political stance, personal life, gender identity, sexuality, and desire, and to which I had to respond with various decisions. As described in the methodology section, I’ve grouped these issues into two main clusters:

Embodiment and intimate hurdles: This section addresses the impact of my desires and corporeality, considering the physical and mental repercussions and emotional labour involved in engaging with gender, sex, and sexuality research.

Systemic + Stigma = Systematic hurdles: This section explores the challenges posed by systematic stigma, discomfort, and delegitimation in both institutional and non-institutional contexts.

The first section of the findings, ‘*Embodiment and Intimate Hurdles*’, explores the impact of conducting gender and sexuality research on my desires and corporeality.

ty, the mental repercussions, and the difficulties of finding spaces to verbalise these challenges and seek support. This is also a consequence of the structural omission of emotions and the erotic, the 'awkward surplus', from academic research. The second section addresses the systematic stigma encountered in both academic and non-academic contexts, which I term 'systegmatic', a fusion of 'systemic' and 'stigma'. This term encapsulates the obstacles stemming from systematic stigma, discomfort, and delegitimation encountered within institutional (academic) settings and in non-institutional contexts (the social and familial spheres) as I navigate the landscape of gender, sex, and sexuality research as an early career researcher. The third and final section provides suggestions and insights on how to address and cope with these hurdles as a transfeminist and positioned gender, sex, and sexuality researcher. As Keene (2022: 15) argues, referring to the practice of sharing the difficulties of doing 'dirty work' in and beyond academia: *'When sex and sexuality researchers provide brave reviews of their research journeys, they help to illuminate the consequences of doing dirty work, or detail how they survived them. This awareness-raising may provide a sense of shared understanding or community for those of us researching in the sex and sexuality space, but also help new scholars feel more prepared as they commence risky research projects.'*

Embodiment and intimate hurdles

The role of my desire and corporality emerged prominently during the research. My body and the bodies of the participants were omnipresent in my ethnography, even without their materiality. Shared images, specific trigger words, explicit stories from members, and the stigmatisation and pathologisation of non-heteronormative sexual practices all summoned my contradictory emotions, desires, and sexual fantasies into the field. As noted by McLelland (2002) in his study on online gay culture in Japan, the researcher inevitably responds physically, experiencing attraction or aversion to the sexual narratives and images encountered. Cupples (2002) discussed how we cannot escape our sexuality when we are positioned in the field, as it is an essential aspect of our research journey that must be recognised and addressed.

My stance on pornography and masturbation came under scrutiny as the solitude in a non-sex-positive environment significantly impacted my sexual desire and overall sexual life, often proving to be detrimental. The fieldwork expanded my knowledge of porn genres and sexual practices, most of which were unknown to me. I had to document myself and search for definitions and visual representations of content labelled by the community as degenerate and unhealthy. The anti-porn atmosphere combined with the expansion of my porn knowledge changed and interrogated my porn consumption and my relationship with self-pleasure. Establishing clear boundaries between myself and the material required considerable effort. Deliberately utilis-



ing my body and self-pleasure became a means of resistance, particularly when confronted with content that stigmatised my preferences as deviant. Additionally, there was a deliberate reclaiming of the notion that both the content and I were considered deviant, and it was possible to find pleasure in this reappropriation.

I do question my position in relation to pornography; my consumption of porn material has changed drastically. It is hard not to be affected by the group tone. I started to use the language (like brain fog or the matrix) and the same humour.
(Fieldnotes, 05/04/2023)

Grauerholz et al. (2013) examine how, in traditional sociological ethnographies, researchers feel hesitant to speak about attraction in/during a research encounter and the management of related feelings. According to Adjepong (2022), this is because researchers tend to conform to academic insistence on objectivity and positivism, demanding the suppression of feelings and challenging emotions in the field as well as political stances. The author highlights how the erotic can be pervasive in ethnography and that it involves not just sex or sexual intimacy between researchers and interlocutors. Anima Adjepong (2022) describes it as an ineffable and powerful energy that connects not just people and artefacts and that creates an exchange, guiding our decisions and movements in the world. This does not mean that the erotic always unveils as pleasure, but it means that it can be present in a full range of emotions, including sadness, stress, anxiety, and disgust. Emotions such as anger, pity, eroticism, desire, inadequacy, shock, frustration, and discomfort consistently shaped my journey, and they need to be acknowledged and reflexively discussed.

In this regard, citing McLelland (2002), my exploration of the NoFap community, although confined to my office or home, constituted an online journey with not just physical but also mental repercussions, triggering anxiety, disgust, and discomfort. Engaging with the community almost daily for a year proved to be mentally draining. Confronting the prevailingly non-sex-positive atmosphere, the subtle hate speech, and benevolent sexism posed significant challenges. Feeling compelled to address and initiate reflections on the community's language of hate and violence became a point of necessity, although it was rarely well-received. Moreover, the subreddit is pervaded with posts on anxiety, depression, and suicide, often reinforcing negative emotional cycles and portraying a pessimistic, irretrievable view of human existence. These posts often served as triggers for my own struggles with anxiety disorders and depression.

So I decided to stay away from the field since this weekend was my birthday and I took a bit of time off. It's a cloudy morning and the light is unbearably white.

It's a rainy but humid May. A dear friend of mine is here with me, she will go home in the late afternoon. The sub is constantly surrounded by negativity – it is like a backdrop, an atmosphere, an omnipresent feeling that heavily affects me. It is a negativity coupled with distrust in society, pain, and emotional distress.' (Fieldnotes, 29/05/2023)

Indeed, navigating the fieldwork involved negotiating and carefully managing the tension between pleasure and danger (Vance 1984), a challenge I struggled to address and articulate in my research and writing.

'Is my body resisting or indulging? Why is there more honour in resisting than indulging? What if indulging is a form of resistance? My multiple pleasures will save me.' (Fieldnotes, 02/10/2023)

How not to get aroused? My desire is constantly triggered and my body is here with me on the journey. [I] cannot do without it. At the same time, I am a bit disgusted about these men talking about the feeling of the vagina dismantling women's bodies into pieces, using a metonym to refer to women's bodies, reducing their identity to it, reducing desire and pleasure to penetration, making the idea of a woman and a vagina homogenous. (Fieldnotes 16/09/2023)

Building on the theories and insights from Irvine (2014) and Kulick and Wilson (1995), Florian Vörös (2015) argues that while sexuality and related emotions are somewhat accepted when the scientific subject is embodied by others/by other people, it poses a challenge for traditional social science when embodied by the researchers themselves. The attempt to create a clear distinction between embodied objects and disembodied subjects does not align with the intricate and complex reality. This complexity often results in self-dismissal, making it challenging to acknowledge how the research has impacted me and to find spaces in which to verbalise these challenges and seek support.

I find [it] difficult to face what I feel, a rollercoaster of anger and resignation. To name my emotions in the confusion, to legitimise them, to name their sources as they are. There is violence there; there is fear. In the end, there is power and it is excoriating. A scarification that I cannot have the pleasure to touch. (Fieldnotes, 29/11/2023)

Anima Adjepong (2022) refers to the omission of the erotic, emotions, and uncomfortable instances from research as an 'awkward surplus'. They are edited out because



they are believed to disclose too much about the researcher's personal considerations, comfort, and well-being, ultimately impacting the goodness and soundness of the research. This occurs within the context of an erotophobic academy (De Craene 2024) that diminishes and dismisses radical reflexivity by refusing to acknowledge the central role of the researcher in shaping knowledge, especially regarding erotic/sexual/sexualised interactions, emotions, and desires (De Craene 2024). This work demonstrates the pervasiveness of this 'awkwardness' in the production of knowledge, both within and beyond the ethnographic research conducted during my PhD years, and its impact on the research, its trajectories, and the life of the researcher as an agent within the field. Acknowledging this helps expand our understanding of the mechanisms of knowledge production and embraces the complexity of a reality where emotions and experiences cannot be edited out and massively contribute to the structuring of reality. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge that production is always situated and positioned and thus necessarily 'partial' – partial in the sense of being non-objective and without claims of universality.

In this regard, Haraway, in 'Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature' (1991), dismantles the idea of the existence of pure and objective knowledge: all knowledge is historically, contextually, and personally situated. Haraway proposes an epistemological alternative to the objectivism typical of western sciences and the abstraction of philosophical cultural relativism. This methodological approach departs from the scientific narratives of western cultures, which traditionally link objectivity to relational distance, transcendence, and the division between the acting subject and the object of investigation. Situating what is being studied allows us to localise it and to hold the subjects and objects involved in the discursive and material construction of knowledge accountable. Consequently, partiality, rather than universality, becomes the condition for rationalising complex and contradictory knowledge, moving away from simplistic claims and embracing the 'partly understood' (Haraway 1988). Localising and situating mean embracing a certain degree of vulnerability and resisting the closure and finiteness of assumed knowledge. The seemingly objectivity of situated knowledge is thus a categorical rejection of a 'simplification in the last instance' (Haraway 1988: 590). For Haraway (1988), the translation of the social is always interpretative, critical, and partial. This interpretation of social data is primarily political: on one hand, theoretical critique problematises the social and relational reality in which we are immersed, the knowledge of phenomena, and the assumptions according to which we structure our understanding; on the other hand, it considers the researcher's viewpoint, their positioning, and the theoretical and methodological choices applied, to be fundamental. Therefore, the decision to write this article and include this auto-ethnographic section in my doctoral thesis, from which this work is derived, stems from a political stance aimed at legitimising emotions and desires

and making visible what is commonly labelled in the academic world as ‘research surplus’. In this way, this surplus is finally dignified to the category of the thinkable and therefore existent, recognising its significant impact on knowledge, its producers, and its consumers.

Systemic + Stigma = Systematic Hurdles

While I was seemingly prepared to encounter emotional hurdles, what I failed to anticipate, rather naively, was the extent of the pervasive delegitimisation and stigma within and beyond my professional environment, encroaching upon my social networks/circles and identity. Reflexive accounts of doing sex and sexuality research, as a form of ‘dirty work’ (Hughes 1958; Irvine 2014), highlight how researchers in these topics are vulnerable to experiencing stigma by contagion, being labelled ‘dirty workers’ (Ashforth, Kreiner 2014). They are marginalised through institutionalised practices within universities and circuits of knowledge production (Irvine 2014; Msibi 2014), subjected to barriers and peculiar requests in review processes and publications (Irvine 2014; Allen 2019), and trivialised by colleagues (Fahs, Plante, McClelland 2017), impacting teaching and career progression (Irvine, McCormack 2014). The stigma also extends outside academia and work-related contexts (Attwood 2010), resulting in personal consequences such as discrimination and online abuse (Javaid 2020), gendered experiences of sexualisation and objectification, hostility and aggression (Keene 2022), and identity crises (Israel 2022; Keene 2022).

The academic stigmatisation surrounding the study of masturbation and porn consumption became evident early, during my project colloquiums, where I found myself compelled to justify why I chose to investigate the NoFap practice specifically, facing resistance and scepticism from white cis-male professors regarding the legitimacy of my research. I was repeatedly asked to explain why I specifically chose to explore the construction of masculinity and sexuality through a practice related to pornography and masturbation, and why I didn’t opt for something more ‘acceptable’ and ‘mainstream’. This painful experience persisted when I was met with giggles every time I mentioned the word ‘masturbation’ during my presentations. Additionally, there was a request that I sanitise my language in my presentation and the provocative title, as they were deemed too ‘evocative’ and ‘eccentric’. Similarly, the aforementioned uncomfortable behaviour manifested in the opposite way during conferences, where male professors and scholars expressed excessive enthusiasm about my project. They engaged in personal oversharing, assuming I was comfortable discussing both my and their personal solo sexual experiences, irrespective of the power dynamics and gendered status of the interaction. Janice Irvine explains how the common experience of women-socialised sociologists researching sex and sexuality is being sexualised in the workplace, *‘producing stereotypically gendered expectations about their*



desires and availability' (2018a: 18). The explicit statements from these scholars and, less often, precarious colleagues highlighted how my project was considered 'cool' because it introduced something 'spicy' and 'sexy' into the academic discussion. As Keene argues (2022), sexuality research is claimed to bring more 'enjoyment' to research, but this fun is then offset by trivialisation, mockery, and the undermining of the seriousness of the work, both within and outside of academia (Fahs, Plante, McClelland 2017). I experienced Fahs, Plante, and McClelland's (2017) description of doing critical sexuality studies as engaging in work that is simultaneously trivialised and fetishised because it is deemed easy, enjoyable, sexy, and not meaningful. These experiences reveal the academic boundaries and gendered power relations in defining which topics, methods, and bodies can be considered legitimate in research in the context of the machist and masculinist academic structures and politics of science and knowledge production (De Craene 2024). At the same time, my reluctance to oppose or sanction discomforting situations and the strategic exploitation of certain subordinate positions has led to a sense of not being taken seriously and feeling sexualised or stereotyped as the kinky, sexually open researcher. While I embrace this definition as constitutive of my personal identity when I feel I am in safe spaces to counteract the stigma, it cannot be imposed by external privileged and 'powerful' subjects, nor can it constitute an assumption in professional interactions. This constitutes processes of sexualisation by colleagues and scholars because of my research topic and produces a 'personification' of the dirty work of sex research, externally imposing upon the researcher the identity of a dirty worker themselves (Irvine 2018a) and confusing a person's professional life with their personal life (Fahs, Plante, McClelland 2017). This is why I dedicated my entire doctoral journey to finding conferences and networks that felt relatively safe, avoiding troubling contexts or consciously participating in them as a disruptive act, but refraining from interacting outside my presentation to minimise the possible negative impact. I deliberately steered clear of spaces where I might encounter individuals with delegitimising perspectives, aiming instead to construct my own positive, supportive bubble. As Aliraza Javaid argues (2020: 1222), *'strategically avoiding certain places where certain identities are likely to be unwelcome and deeply stigmatized can be life-saving'*. Again, however, safety is coupled with a form of conscious and painful self-silencing.

Moreover, this stigma extended beyond the academic sphere. It influenced people's perception of me outside the academic environment, significantly impacting my life and further blurring the line between my personal and professional life to the extent that, in certain contexts, my identity became tied to people's perceptions of my work. As discussed by Keene (2022), doing dirty projects implies, because of the sociocultural stigma attached to them, that it is not just the participants of our research who are under scrutiny, but we are as well. This results in both professional

and personal costs (Fahs, Plante, McClelland 2017; Keene 2022). I have encountered this in three distinct ways:

1. I faced dismissal and scepticism regarding the relevance of my research, primarily from family, relatives, and adults, often accompanied by laughter and awkwardness. Over time, I engaged in 'closeting practices' (Irvine 2014: 649), steering away from explicit terms like 'masturbation' and 'pornography' and opting for more widely accepted and 'neutral' language such as 'I am investigating the construction of sexuality in male-dominated digital spaces'. I became progressively more hesitant to share or disclose the nature of my work. However, this self-policing, often resulting in self-censorship, done in an attempt to ensure my own safety and the comfort of others, did not ultimately leave me feeling safe, happy, or comfortable. Instead, I constantly found myself on alert, pressured to conform to societal norms, 'hyperaware of my surroundings', and afraid of 'ruining the mood' or potential attacks. This emotional labour has been, and continues to be, extremely heavy taxing.
2. People who learned about my research through friends often categorised me as an expert in male masturbation, men's sexuality, and penile matters. This often led to gendered and hypersexualised allusive jokes about my own sexuality and assumptions about my sexual availability. Men were frequently obsessed with interpreting my words for signs of 'sexual degeneracy', attributing my interest in male masturbation to questionable motives. On one occasion, an unknown individual speculated that my fascination was rooted in Freudian penis envy. According to him, this envy was so strong that it had turned into a desire to be a man, and that must be why I am so fascinated with trying to understand men and what they feel, and why my appearance does not fully align with 'traditional femininity'. For others, I am so into male masturbation simply because I crave it or because I am a 'sex-obsessed' person.
3. Friends introducing me as the 'porn expert', implying that I possess comprehensive knowledge of all porn categories and insinuating that I am open to discussions on topics ranging from their sexual interests to pornographic habits and even inquiries about penis size. Establishing and maintaining boundaries became a constant endeavour, extending beyond the confines of my fieldwork. As in the case of Israel (2002), the association between myself and my research topic was constantly attached to my identity, eventually becoming my identity. In 'friendly' contexts, my control over how much I wanted to share was limited by the choices of others.



Ultimately, assumptions were made by others as to why I had decided to pursue this line of research (Javaid 2020). They wondered what it was my personal intimate background story capable of explaining why I needed to engage in ‘this kind’ of study so far away from the norm. What was the skeleton in my closet?

Strategies to resist the stigma of doing dirty work within academia and beyond

Throughout my PhD journey, from which the reflections in this article are drawn, I grappled with a spectrum of emotions: sadness, disgust, anxiety, a feeling of being overwhelmed, and a pervasive sense of unworthiness. My emotions and perceptions permeated the data, and by recognising them I was able to dig into my strategies, conflicts, identity, and bodywork in the field. Above all, I experienced a profound anger, not just concerned with the field, but also directed at the patriarchy and westernised academia, and even within myself. Recognizing and reflexively addressing this anger made me aware of its power. Anger allowed me to be conscious of these challenges, and it puts me on the alert to take care of myself by finding an empowering way to positively embrace it. This awareness served as a catalyst for me to empower myself, fostering a motivation to imbue my research with political significance, and heightening my awareness of my position within the academic landscape and the direction of my research. It compelled me to be fully present and engaged. To approach these emotions, particularly anger, I first needed to understand them and then articulate them in words. Firstly, reflexivity, as a fundamental practice rooted in feminist epistemologies of situated knowledge and knowledge production (Rose 2007; Harding 1991; Haraway 1991), played a fundamental role in helping me navigate and make sense of my emotions and ultimately gain power over (and thanks to) them in and beyond the field. Embracing feminist (auto)reflexivity, as outlined by Jordan (2018), allowed me as an ethnographer to critically reflect on power dynamics, my position, and my influence within and outside the field. This approach extends to considering the notions of body, desire, and emotions as personal in the political. Secondly, poetry immensely helped in not only facilitating the reflexive process of understanding these emotions but also embodying a tangible manifestation of that understanding. Inspired by Lea Dorion’s reflections (2021) on Audre Lorde’s (2019) cultivation of the writing moment as an emancipatory process, I embarked on a journey into the transformative potential of poetry as a place where the power dynamics can be subverted and the ethical constraints of silence can be surpassed. Lorde (2017) describes the politics of poetry as a unique form of expression capable of articulating profound and oppressive emotions. Throughout the research process, within and beyond the fieldwork, poetry became a source of solace and empowerment. It played a particularly crucial role in reclaiming a voice that was deliberately muted by my decision to withhold my

identity within the group. Subsequently, this voice was further marginalised or delegitimised as a result of a combination of internal and systemic constraints. Poetry, in this context, emerged as a transformative force, enabling me to not only confront but also overcome the deliberate silencing and delegitimation and thereby reclaim agency and expression in my research narrative.

Poetry was crucial during my lonely PhD journey, and it proved to be essential, although not always sufficient, in the context of my research on sexuality. Through this experience, I've come to realise that supportive collective actions are essential for sex and sexuality researchers so that they can at least diminish or share the burden of these personal and systemic shortcomings. Below I present a non-exhaustive list of practical suggestions, with the awareness that transformative actions cannot be merely individual but are necessarily structural and collective:

My first suggestion is to connect with fellow scholars and researchers in Gender and Sexuality Studies to help you discover people who may help in addressing some of these challenges and to gain insights from their experiences (Keene 2022).

My second suggestion, in conformity with Keene (2022) is that when it is possible to do so and when done as institutional and not independent research, you should secure strong and supportive supervision and foster relationships with your 'mentors' that enable open discussions about the emotional hurdles inherent in researching sex and sexuality.

My third suggestion is to explore the opportunity to discover a collective feminist space within the university or your local community and nowadays even online. Seek out a supportive environment where individuals share a commitment to feminist principles. These spaces are more likely to provide meaningful discussions, collaboration, exchanges of ideas, and support.

Within certain collective or feminist spaces, there may be opportunities to engage in informal debriefing sessions or access mental health support. These resources are often equipped with the language and tools necessary to address issues surrounding power dynamics, gender, and sexuality. These spaces can provide a valuable outlet for individuals to discuss and process the challenges they may encounter in these domains, and can offer a supportive environment that acknowledges and addresses these challenges.

Conclusion

To conclude, I acknowledge the unavoidable partiality of my experience. However, I believe it speaks of broader systematic and systemic dilemmas, doubts, and shortcomings in the ethnographic study of sexuality, especially within male-dominated spaces, both online and offline. Situating myself in this framework, I echo Keene's



(2022) call for researchers to openly share their journeys, illuminating the consequences of engaging in ‘dirty work’ and offering prospective researchers a more informed perspective on potentially ‘risky’ projects. Moreover, as discussed by De Craene (2024), it is essential to shed light on the context in which we conduct and write research to illuminate how power relations, institutional academic structures, and everyday practices privilege certain forms of knowledge production by stigmatising, silencing, delegitimising, or dismissing others. However, as illustrated in this paper, exposing oneself as a sex researcher or a sexademic, exposing emotions and potential vulnerabilities, involves significant personal and professional risks, challenges, and forms of both material and symbolic violence and oppression. In the literature, as well as in my experience, sex research has a long history of being considered unscientific and still generates academic and societal distrust, stigma, and delegitimation. Indeed, this paper serves not only as a reflection but as a call to action, emphasising the imperative need for a supportive community within the realm of sex and sexuality research. Such a community can foster a shared understanding that can guide those embarking on demanding research endeavours like mine. Following Keene (2022), recognising the need for a supportive space, my ultimate aspiration is to foster an environment that cares for and supports an understanding of stigmatised topics related to sex and sexuality. Let’s create a safe space for the dirty to thrive! This community already has a possible name: in the direction of a political demand, we can reappropriate and resignify the name ‘dirty workers’, which we proudly are because we decide and we choose to be so, and because sex and sexuality exist as a central and legitimate part of human existence.

Once we realise that we are exposing ourselves through our work, we can feel fear for ourselves. Yet, as Audre Lorde (2017) powerfully epitomized, the transformation of silence into language produces fear because it is an act of self-revelation, and this is always fraught with danger. In the end, Lorde’s profound wisdom resonates: ‘Our silence will not save us’ (Lorde 1984).

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Americká maskulinita pod tlakem změn

Ondřej Frunc

Besen-Cassino, Y., Cassino, D. 2022. *Gender Threat: American Masculinity in the Face of Change*. Stanord: Stanford University Press.

Yasemin Besen-Cassino a Dan Cassino se ve své publikaci zaměřují na zachycení základních strategií, kterými muži v USA kompenzují změny ve vnímání své maskulinity. Čerpají z velkého množství kvantitativních i kvalitativních dat a nastiňují základní přehled strategií, které je možné v dalších výzkumech výrazně rozšířit a dále tak prohloubit znalosti o směrech, kterými se různí muži vydávají, pokud cítí ohrožení vlastní maskulinity. Kniha *Gender Threat: American Masculinity in the Face of Change* (2022) je aktuálním textem ke studiu maskulinity v USA. Věřím, že sledováním myšlenek autorů se můžeme inspirovat ve výzkumu maskulinity v Evropě i v České republice.

V první stati Besen-Cassino a Cassino popisují ohrožení mužské identity a upřesňují, z jakých pozic vycházejí a z jakých budou ve svém textu maskulinitu zkoumat. Autoři uvádějí, že muži v USA věří, že svět stojí ekonomicky, sociálně a politicky proti nim. To ovšem vyvracejí data – 80 procent amerického kongresu je stále obsazeno muži, muži mají vyšší platy než ženy za stejnou práci a všech 45 prezidentů USA byli muži.

41 procent mužů participujících na výzkumu říká, že se cítí aspoň lehce utlačováni. Víra v to, že muži jsou dnes znevýhodněni, je podle autorské dvojice sice nepodložená, ale zakotvená v reálných pocitech a v tom, jak muži vnímají sami sebe a svou roli doma, v práci a ve společnosti. Ve společnosti jejich privilegia pomalu mizí a nejsou tak jednoznačná, jako byla dříve. Pokud byli muži na vrcholu několik tisíc let, i malý pohyb k rovnosti může být pocítován jako diskriminace.

Klíč k pochopení mužského pocitu ztrácející se půdy pod nohama nespočívá dle autorského dua v pohybu k rovnosti. Jde podle nich spíše o sdílené představy o tom, co znamená být mužem. Pokud autoři mluví o genderové identitě, myslí tím konstrukci víry mužů ve zvyky a chování, které je dělají muži. Tu vnímají autoři odděleně od osobní sexuality, která je pro ně blíže biologické charakteristice.

Autoři ukazují, že koncepce mužského genderu, kterou muži udržují, je zároveň flexibilní i velmi křehká. Flexibilní, protože za správné situace jsou muži schopni opustit aspekty svojí genderové identity, která nefunguje, a bez větších obtíží je nahradit. Například si uvědomují, že už nejsou vládci svých domácností, a kompenzují to například nákupem střelných zbraní, chozením do kostela nebo trávením času se svými dětmi. Na druhou stranu je křehká, pokud muži nedostojí požadavkům svého genderu. Autoři navazují na West a Zimmeman ve vnímání toho, že muži „dělají“ gender, performují maskulinitu ve své každodennosti.

Už první sociologové a psychologové – například Alfred Adler – přemýšleli o této ohrožené identitě jako o hlubokém existencionálním ohrožení mužů. Kniha se tak zaměřuje na situace, které muži vnímají jako ohrožení vlastní maskulinní genderové identity, a dále zkoumá, jak muži upravují své chování a návyky, aby toto ohrožení kompenzovali.

První část knihy autoři věnují práci a ekonomické situaci. Tvrdí, že recese v letech 2008–2009 měla na muže disproporční vliv. Mark Pery, profesor ekonomie na University of Michigan-Flint, o tom referoval jako o „mancecession“. Podle dat Brookings Institutions Hamilton Project 70 procent ztracených pracovních míst bylo obsazeno muži, nezaměstnanost mužů se zvýšila ze 4 na 11 procent, 6 milionů mužů v USA přišlo o práci. Pro muže také trvala krize déle. Muži byli zaměstnáni v cyklických profesích, jako jsou stavebnictví, výroba a finanční služby, které byly nejvíce zasaženy recesí. Ženy byly naproti tomu zaměstnány ve službách, a tak recesí tolik netrpěly.

Besen-Cassino a Cassino dokládají data o masivním navýšení stresu v mužské populaci USA. Muži prožívají dopady krize o to hůře, o co méně jsou zasaženy ženy. Muži v krizi vydělávají méně než ženy, ale myslí si, že by měli vydělávat víc. Jsou naštvaní a uražení. To všechno, dle autorů, akcelerovalo krizi identity. Zároveň ženy ekonomicky i sociálně posilují a blíží se k rovnosti. Ženy mají hlavní příjem ve 42 procentech rodin. Z hlediska dosaženého vysokoškolského vzdělání tvoří ženy 57 procent bakalářů, 59 procent magistrů a 52 procent doktorů... Stále však zůstává rozdíl v majetku a příjmech ve výši 10–20 procent. Například většina žen dokončuje doktorské studium, ale jejich zastoupení mezi profesory je nízké.

Mužské biologické výhody se však do budoucna smazávají. V dnešní ekonomice už nejsou muži lépe připraveni. Autorské duo připomíná Connel, která říká, že chování obsažené v hegemonní maskulinitě nutně konstruuje maskulinitu jako onnipotentní nebo podřizující ženy a funguje jako nástroj udržování nerovnosti. Autoři ale mluví o tom, že výše zmíněné neplatí pro všechny muže, a zaměřují se na alternativní maskulinitu a jejich konstrukce

V knize *Package deal, Mariage, Work and Faterhood in Mans live* antropolog Nicolas Townsend definuje moderní maskulinitu v USA jako založenou na 4 pilířích: otcovství, manželství, vlastnictví domova a zaměstnání. Vzájemně se tyto struktury podporují a prolínají. Jeden z čestných způsobů vypořádávání se s tímto tématem je alternativní maskulinita.

Když jako muži nejsou schopni prezentovat a naplňovat obecně přijímané představy o vlastní maskulinitě, hledají jiné cesty. Některé jsou pro společnost výhodné, například zvýšená empatie k otcovství, některé však maladaptivní, například sexuální obtěžování v práci, vlastnění zbraní atd.

V několika následujících statích se autoři věnují jednotlivým kategoriím, jak se muži snaží kompenzovat svou maskulinitu. Jedná se o kategorie náboženství, držení zbraní

a sledování pornografie. Podle autorského dua jsou tyto kategorie odpovědí na genderovou výzvu na úrovni každodennosti i v politické rovině v USA.

V kategorii náboženství autoři analyzují komunitu „Promis Keepers“, v níž muži hledají pozici leadera, která je jim odepřena v domácnosti, skrze církev. Tato strategie se vymezuje proti gay mužům a proti feminizmu. Muži, kteří cítí, že jejich hodnota mizí, se tak skrze hledání dalšího prostoru k nabývání moci snaží udržet svou dominantní pozici.

Další pozorovanou strategií je domácí držení zbraní: Dle autorů zde můžeme sledovat přímou úměru: čím se muži cítí méně mocní, tím víc zbraní nakupují. Zároveň křivka nákupu zbraní dle dat autorského dua nekoreluje s kriminalitou, ale zcela jasně s mužskou nezaměstnaností. Muži, kteří vyhledávají tuto alternativu, vnímají sebe sama jako „hodné kluky, co chrání komunitu proti migrantům,“ a často také mluví o ochraně před vládou a její korupcí.

Jako další strategii identifikují autoři sledování pornografie, ve které dominují ženy, a pozorují zde další přímou úměru: čím hůře se muži cítí, tím „tvrdší“ pornografii si podle nich dopřávají, aby si potvrdili svou dominanci nad ženami.

Poslední část knihy, věnující se alternativní maskulinitě, tedy nadějeplnější části pro budoucnost, může být pro současné muže nejpřínosnější. Besen-Cassiono a Cassiono zahajují své úvahy o alternativní maskulinitě u proměny přístupu amerických mužů k vaření a dalším domácím pracím.

Podle autorů změnu pohledu mužů na vaření přinesla popkultura, konkrétně kuchařská soutěž Iron Chef, svého druhu první, kterou sledovali ve významné míře i muži. Tato soutěž prezentovala vaření jako maskulinní, nikoli ženské. Mytí nádobí zůstalo, překvapivě, i po úspěchu Iron Chefa stále ženskou doménou. Šlo zřejmě o první vlaštovku, která přiblížila domácí práce maskulinitě, nicméně jen za velmi specifických podmínek. Nezaměstnaní muži v USA totiž stále většinou necítí, že vaření a domácí práce jsou součástí jejich maskulinity.

Zároveň ženy, které doma mají nezaměstnaného muže, by ocenily dělbu domácí práce. Nezaměstnaní muži jsou na jednu stranu pod velkým tlakem své vlastní identity, na druhou stranu by si jejich ženy přály, aby se více zapojovali v domácnosti, pokud nechodí do práce. To ale může být s představami o maskulinní identitě v rozporu. Ztráta práce je rovna konci identity a domácí práce tuto krizi ještě podpoří. Dle autorského dua se jedná o jeden z nejčastějších důvodů rozvodů v USA.

Alternativní maskulinity přinášejí ale i jiné cesty a pohledy. Domácí práce je pro některé muže dokladem vlastních kvalit jako dobrého partnera a otce. Zároveň mohou vlastním příkladem inspirovat děti. Existuje tedy alternativa? Část mužů to tak vnímá: Být dobrým otcem, ukazovat dětem, že domácí práce jsou i zábava, jít příkladem a učit se spolu nové věci vnímají jako znak své maskulinity a její kvality.

Otcovství je jeden z hlavních obsahů maskulinity v USA. Otcové vydělávají více peněz a tráví v práci více času než bezdětní muži, po práci si s dětmi hrají a emočně se

s nimi sbližují. Autorské duo si proto klade otázku, zda alternativou není také větší přítomnost mužů v domácnosti, která by vedla k menším pocitům osamění a úzkosti u žen s dětmi a zároveň by mohla pomoci překonat i vyšší ekonomické náklady spojené s výchovou dětí.

Alternativní otci zpovídání autory knihy zároveň vypovídají v rozhovorech o tom, že se jim hůře socializuje, protože je pro ně složité zapadnout do rodičovské komunity tvořené většinou matkami.

Z výzkumu se také ukazuje, že nejprímějši cestou k empatizaci s ženami a nacházení cest k alternativní maskulinitě jsou dcery. Ač muži nechtějí opouštět negativní aspekty hegemonní maskulinity, jako otcové začínají s ženami empatizovat. Začínají se zabývat tím, jak zlepšit svět a učinit ho rovnocenným. To je zároveň, podle autorů, jediná cesta z krize maskulinity – aktivismus mužů a boj za rovnoprávnost, skrze který muži nebudou pouze hledat obranné strategie pro sebe sama, ale budou systém měnit tak, aby byl spravedlivý vůči všem.

Jak tedy podle autorů vypadá budoucnost? Na jednu stranu končí období ekonomické dominance mužů. Na druhou stranu v politické i ve všech dalších oblastech muži nadále drží své pozice.

Jako přínosnou a inspirativní vnímám v publikaci šíři použitých dat, především těch kvantitativních. Je také zajímavé, že většina maladaptivních strategií byla dokládána právě kvantitativními daty, zatímco strategie alternativní maskulinity byly prozkoumávány především skrze rozhovory.

Knihy představuje pokus důsledně sledovat, jak muži v USA v měnícím se světě reagují na svou vlastní představu maskulinity a jak ji upravují. Jedná se o užitečnou a inspirativní prezentaci různých příkladů tohoto procesu. Zároveň kniha představuje výzvu pro budoucí výzkum, který by na ni v budoucnost mohl navázat a téma dále rozšířit.

Stížnost jako předmět fenomenologické analýzy i nástroj institucionální kritiky

Magdaléna Michlová

Ahmed, S. 2021. *Complaint!* Durham: Duke University Press.

Saru Ahmed asi není třeba čtenářstvu genderově zaměřeného periodika dlouze představovat. Za explicitní zmínku na úvod však možná stojí formální obrat, ke kterému profesorka gender studies z britské Goldsmiths, University of London, a proponent-

ka queer fenomenologie a teoretická afektu nedávno dospěla: poté, co vyšly najevo případy genderové podmíněného násilí na domovské univerzitě a netečnost, se kterou se k nim přistupovalo, opustila na protest akademii a veškerou svou publikační činnost dočasně nasměřovala na svůj blog s názvem *feministkilljoys*. Přidala se tak mezi podobně frustrované a demotivované akademičky*ky, které*ři instituci sice opustily*i, ale nadále veřejné dění komentovaly*i na alternativních platformách, jako je třeba vlastní blogová doména. Zatímco Marku Fisherovi, politickému filozofovi, kterého deprese a frustrace systémem dohnala až k sebevraždě, vyšel sborník až in memoriam, Sara Ahmed svůj editovaný výběr blogových příspěvků v knižní podobě vydala v minulém roce (v originále *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way* vydalo nejprve nakladatelství Allen Lane, poté Seal Press a v letošním roce i Penguin Books).

Jestliže je blogování antitezí k akademickému psaní a publikování, *Complaint!* představuje jejich syntézu. Ahmed v monografii propojuje důkladnou analýzu vlastních etnografických dat se čtenářstvu přístupným a veskrze osobním líčením. Takový žánr se, naštěstí pro příznivkyně*ce poetické antropologie, v posledních letech rozrůstá: jak píše Alma Gottlieb ve své stati *Why do I write anthropology? Why do you? A manifesto for prioritizing passion and poetry as we scale up for social justice* (2023), subjektivitu výzkumnice*íka už nejen respektujeme, ale od společenské vědy přímo očekáváme. Své vlastní zkušenosti s poskytováním *feministického ucha* (viz dále) přeživším a přihlížejícím násilí Ahmed protkává širší společenskou kritikou a daleko nad rámec nenormativního vědeckého bádání formuluje apel: instituce musí brát stížnosti vážně.

Jako akademická pracovnice působila Ahmed přes dvacet let, nejprve jako profesorka ženských studií na Lancasterské univerzitě a poté jako profesorka rasových a kulturních studií a ředitelka Centra pro feministický výzkum na Goldsmiths, odkud na konci roku 2016 odešla. Výzkum, který tvoří jádro monografie *Complaint!*, zahájila ještě před svou rezignací, ale právě svým odchodem z akademie mu umožnila opustit zaprášené zdi univerzity a proniknout do veřejného diskurzu.

Rezignaci na svou funkci na Goldsmiths oznámila Ahmed prostřednictvím příspěvku na svém blogu 30. května 2016: „Teď není vhodná chvíle na to, abych dlouze vysvětlovala, jak jsem k tomuto rozhodnutí dospěla. (...) Řeknu jen to, že odstupuji na protest proti netečnosti vůči problému sexuálního obtěžování. Rezignuji, protože si tato práce vyžádala příliš mnoho. (...)“

Rezignace je záležitostí feminismu. (...) Občas je nějakou situaci potřeba opustit z feministických důvodů. Ať už skončím kdekoli, budu feministkou. (...) Budu odlamovat zdi, kousek po kousku.“ 27. srpna pak navázala příspěvkem s titulkem „Rezignace je záležitostí feminismu“. Mimo jiné v něm dodává: „Žít feministický život znamená být feministkou i v práci. Být feministkou v práci znamená snažit se organizace, které nás zaměstnávají, proměnit. Tato poměrně zřejmá skutečnost má některé výmluv-

né důsledky. Když se snažíme otrást zemi domu, otrásáme také základy své vlastní existence.”

Kritika vlastní instituce má svá úskalí i výhody: člověk tak trochu řeže větev, na které sám sedí. Taková praxe ale ukrývá i subverzivní (podvratný) potenciál. Srečko Horvat (2017), chorvatský filozof a aktivista, hovoří o subverzi jako o zásadním mechanismu pro zpochybňování dominantních ideologií a mocenských struktur. A přesně to Ahmed v *Complaint!* dělá: zpochybňuje samotné základy institucionální moci a samoúčelnost, která ji často obklopuje. Zkoumáním toho, jak vlastní instituce řeší stížnosti týkající se diskriminace a násilí, odhaluje nesoulad mezi deklarovanými závazky k rozmanitosti a skutečnými postupy, které násilí udržují. Důrazem na konkrétní institucionální selhání narušuje Ahmed představu loajality k instituci a nabádá ostatní, aby struktury a praktiky, jichž jsou součástí, spíše zpochybňovali, než aby na nich nekriticky participovali.

Ahmed se do podobné kritiky nepustila poprvé. V roce 2012 publikovala monografii s názvem *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, v níž shrnuje poznatky z rozhovorů s osobami pověřenými agendou diverzity při univerzitách a vysvětluje, proč jsou instituce vůči této práci mnohdy rezistentní. Bolestný nesoulad Ahmed spatřuje v propasti mezi symbolickým závazkem instituce diverzitu (genderovou, etnickou, rasovou aj.) podporovat na straně jedné a reálnou zkušeností osob diverzitu ztělesňujících na straně druhé. Institucionální závazky se v tomto světle stávají non-performativny: nedělají, co hlásají.

Complaint! je, jak Ahmed sama tvrdí (s. 22), jak knihou o stížnosti, tak knihou o univerzitě jako takové: o univerzitě přesahující jedno konkrétní fyzické prostředí nebo něčí afiliaci. A stejně tak i o práci na univerzitě. Ze stránek *Complaint!* srší víra Ahmed v potenciál univerzity coby prostředí tak otevřeného, pečujícího a kritického, jak je jen v mezích staletí staré instituce možné. Jako z ostatně každé její publikace je z *Complaint!* znát autorčino balancování mezi (místy až ve frustraci ústící) kritikou struktur, jichž je součástí, a pevné víry v jejich radikální proměnu. Stížnost považuje za předmět *fenomenologie instituce* (s. 19), což je klíčový moment knihy, který však čtenářstvo znalé jejích předchozích publikací – zejména *Queer fenomenologie* (v orig. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* vyd. Duke University Press v r. 2006) – asi nepřekvapí. Takový předmět je částečně negativně vymezený: tato jeho část je jako kus ledovce ukrytý pod vodou. Jeho negace spočívá v *tichu* a Ahmed jej chápe coby nedílnou součást analýzy: „Naslouchat stížnosti znamená naslouchat tichu: tomu, co není řečeno, co není vykonáno, s čím se nic nedělá.”

S cílem poodhalit to, jak s mocí nakládají ti, kteří jí disponují, zkoumá Ahmed způsoby a důsledky toho, jak jsou osoby podávající institucím stížnosti konstruovány jako stěžovatelky*. Snaží se vysvětlit, proč jsou jen některé stížnosti v rámci všech podaných skutečně vyslyšeny, respektive za jakých okolností: pokud jsou považovány za

pocházející od správných lidí – těch, kteří neohrožují institucionální status quo, dobrou pověst univerzity nebo přímo pozici některých akademiků*ček). Tvrdí, že „vnímat někoho jako stěžující*ho si představuje efektivní způsob, jak ji*ej znevážit“. Naznačuje, že být pokládán*a za osobu, která si *jen* stěžuje nebo *pořád* na něco stěžuje, vybízí k tomu nevěnovat tolik pozornosti samotnému obsahu stížnosti. Do kontrastu s nedůslednými, nebo dokonce (stěžovatelky*e) retraumatizujícími institucionální mechanismy – a s cílem pochopit stranu stěžovatelek*ů – pak staví svou metodu *feministického ucha*, kterou jako součást feministické pedagogiky poprvé představila už v knize *Living a Feminist Life* (2017): „Být feministickým uchem znamená naslouchat tomu, kdo není slyšet (...)“ (s. 20)

Jestliže je *feministické ucho* Ahmed metodou, *Complaint!* představuje poměrně ucelenou metodologii, v rámci které upozorňuje mimo jiné třeba na důležitost fyzického prostředí, ze kterého je výzkumný rozhovor veden. „Během naší konverzace – dost intenzivní a náročné konverzace – na náš stůl přistála beruška. ‚Jé, podívejte, beruška!‘ V nahrávce je slyšet naše beruškou zaujaté žvatlání: ‚Ta je krásná, ta je rozkošná!‘ A pak mě, jak říkám: ‚Ale ne, teď se převrátila na záda.‘ Potom zase ženu, se kterou jsem rozhovor vedla: ‚Jednu mou známou osobu nedávno beruška pokousala.‘ A já na to: ‚Berušky koušou? Nevypadají jako stvoření, která by kousala.‘ A pak smích. Beruška se k nám ještě několikrát během konverzace vrátila, na což jsme pokaždé se zájmem poukázaly. Poslech těchto nahraných svědectví mi připomněl, jak jsou rozptýlení důležitá a cenná,“ líčí Ahmed v *Complaint!* (s. 11–12). Z vlastních zkušeností, které s vedením výzkumných rozhovorů má, vyvozuje klíčovou roli fyzického prostředí jako takového a předmětů v něm: jak mohou okna nebo dveře v místnosti, ze které je rozhovor veden, upomenout výzkumné partnerstvo k jiným oknům či dveřím jiných místností, zkrátka: jak mohou předměty podněcovat výpovědi a konverzace? To, co nás v přítomnosti obklopuje, se může stát „referenčním bodem“ (s. 12) nápomocným při snaze popsat události v minulosti. Za nejzajímavější z předmětů ve své analýze pokládá dveře a věnuje jim celou jednu kapitolu knihy. Líčí především to, v jakých souvislostech se objevují napříč rozhovory, které vedla: „Jestliže nás stížnosti poučují o dveřích, dveře nás poučují o moci: komu je institucí umožňováno a komu zabraňováno se jimi někam dostat.“ (s. 25)

Ahmed píše poeticky a poněkud tajemně. *Complaint!* je ostatně dílem popularizačním textem s potenciálem oslovit širší publikum. Hlavní výzkumné otázky stojící v jeho jádru je ale přesto možné identifikovat – je jich hned několik a občas připomínají spíše uzel než úhlednou sadu. Ahmed v *Complaint!* zkoumá, jak jsou stížnosti na případy genderově podmíněného násilí zastavovány nebo potlačovány systémem, který je zde od toho, aby je řešil. Ptá se však rovněž i po tom, jaké zážitky a zkušenosti vedly osoby k tomu, že nad stížnostmi jako nástrojem dobrání se spravedlnosti v rámci instituce začaly zvažovat. Zkoumá také způsoby, kterými si lidé stěžují, co pro ně stížnos-

ti znamenají a k čemu jim slouží. Na všechny z otázek pak hledá odpovědi hluboko ve struktuře – v moci, kterou nejen univerzita, ale obecně každá instituce disponuje. S poměrně ambiciózní změti otázek však stále zachází opatrně a obratně a k problému tak komplikovanému důsledně načrtává schéma, které lze sledovat jako červenou nit – byť s trochou vlastního úsilí čtenářstva poučeného především fenomenologií a institucionální kritikou, což částečně rozporuje autorčin cíl posloužit knihou širšímu zájmu.

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Střední a východní Evropa ve středu zájmu:

Neviditelná práce a genderová nerovnost v akademii

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Górska, A. M. 2023. *Gender and Academic Career Development in Central and Eastern Europe*. New York: Routledge.

Polská socioložka Anna Górska v úvodu knihy deklaruje, že se snaží ukázat příběh žen v akademii, který je plný skluzavek, žebříků, labyrintů a bariér (s. 3). Odborný přínos knihy podle ní spočívá primárně v komplexním pohledu na akademickou práci, gender a střední a východní Evropu (dále „CEE region“). Důraz na tento region je důležitý zejména proto, že hlasy akademiček z tohoto geografického kontextu stále v existující literatuře chybí. Většina publikací na téma genderové nerovnosti v akademii pochází ze západní Evropy a Severní Ameriky. Zároveň publikace, které v tomto regionu vznikají, jsou často psány v národních jazycích, což limituje dopad výzkumných zjištění v akademické sféře, která je anglocentrická.

Do čtení knihy *Gender and Academic Career Development in Central and Eastern Europe* jsem se proto pouštěla s očekáváním přehledné diskuze tématu zasazené do

kontextu asymetrické produkce vědění v současné „globální“ akademii. Kniha popisuje akademické genderové nerovnosti ve střední a východní Evropě a je tak důležitým příspěvkem k existujícím publikacím na toto téma. Široké pole tématu konceptualizuje skrz obvyklé rozdělení akademické práce na výuku a výzkum; zároveň přidává dimenzi administrativní práce. Tyto dimenze akademické práce jsou nahlíženy perspektivou akademické pozice od juniorních výzkumnic až po seniorní akademičky. K této diskuzi využívá Anna Górska existující výzkum a literaturu a doplňuje je daty ze svého vlastního kvalitativního výzkumu s 50 akademičkami napříč CEE regionem. Poskytuje tak široký přehled o situaci akademiček v regionu. Klíčovým závěrem je, že genderové linie stále organizují akademickou sféru, která reprodukuje nerovnosti na individuální, institucionální i regionální úrovni.

Ve čtyřech částech a 15 kapitolách se nejdříve dozvídáme historii a kontext akademické sféry ve střední a východní Evropě a nahlížíme akademii jakožto „genderovanou a genderující“ organizaci (s. 9–41). Na to navazuje diskuze o situaci akademiček podle stádia jejich kariéry, která je rozdělena na začínající, pokročilou a seniorní (early, middle and senior). Górska analyzuje situaci z pohledu „vytrácejících“ se akademiček ze seniornějších pozic. Toto ztracení vysvětluje na základě literatury komplexním souhrnem faktorů: rozdílné příležitosti a bariéry pro ženy a muže, diskriminace na základě genderu nebo důležitost sociálního kapitálu, který je ženám hůře dostupný než mužům.

Důležitou součástí této kapitoly je důraz na seniornější fáze akademické kariéry a role genderu v tomto stádiu, protože v dosavadním výzkumu genderové nerovnosti se pozornost upírala převážně na brzké fáze budování kariéry. Důležitost zaměření se na tuto pozdější fázi spočívá mimo jiné v tom, že ženy se často „zaseknou“ ve střední fázi kariéry, která v českém kontextu odpovídá pozicím odborné asistentky a docentky. Tedy se jedná o relativně dlouhou fázi mezi získáním doktorátu a jmenováním profesorkou. Toto zaseknutí může být způsobeno i tím, že od žen se v této fázi očekává více výuky a administrativní činnosti než od mužů akademiků, což ale neumožňuje dosáhnout kariérního postupu tak snadno jako věnování se výzkumu. Na základě svých dat zdůrazňuje Górska kritickou roli sociálního kapitálu v této fázi kariéry, kde bez „politických konexí“ není možné postoupit dál (s. 81). Zároveň se u žen v seniorní fázi kariéry častěji vyskytuje neochota chápat svou pozici jakožto žen v akademii – ženy v těchto pozicích měly tendenci tvrdit, že jejich ženství nehrálo během jejich kariér žádnou roli; dokonce se častěji než mladší výzkumnice vyjadřovaly negativně o ostatních ženách v akademii. Ženy se tak samy stávají součástí reprodukce bariér, které v akademické sféře existují; stávají se z nich „hlídačky a včelí královny“ (gatekeepers and queen bees) (s. 95).

V kapitole o „viditelné a neviditelné akademické práci“ (s. 101–152) je genderová nerovnost probírána optikou tenze mezi výzkumem a výukou a jejich relativního hodnocení v současném nastavení akademického kariérního postupu. Tato tradiční tenze

je doplněna diskuzí o pozici administrativních pracovních a pracovníků, což je skupina, která z analýz akademické sféry bývá vynechávána (s. 127–137). Zároveň Górska věnuje část textu analýze administrativní zátěže akademických pracovních, což je také téma, které je ve výzkumu akademické sféry spíše marginalizováno. Dostáváme se tak ke komplexní analýze toho, jak je akademická práce žen specifická v porovnání s muži, k čemuž Górska využívá metaforu neviditelné práce, která je součástí i výzkumné dimenze, v níž jsou ženy častěji v pozici administrátorek. Překážky, kterým ženy čelí, tak nespočívají jen v druhu práce, který v jejich akademické kariéře převažuje (např. ženy se věnují výuce častěji než muži), ale i v tom, jak jsou za tento druh práce hodnoceny (muži jsou za výkonu hodnoceni lépe než ženy).

Střední a východní Evropa jako specifická kategorie

Kniha se potýká s několika úskalími, která pramení ze zaměření na specifický region střední a východní Evropy. Snaží se balancovat, ke kterému publiku se obrací. Pro publikum z CEE regionu je to však čtení v podstatě nepřekvapivé. Pro anglicky mluvící čtenářstvo pak ale chybí hlubší diskuze toho, co vůbec je ona *specifičnost regionu*, která v úvodu odůvodňuje existenci anglicky psané knihy.

Kniha se pokouší o něco, co sama v úvodu charakterizuje jako značnou výzvu: „Střední a východní Evropa je sice součástí Evropy a Evropské unie, nicméně je rozdělena na mnoho heterogenních národů. Její instituce odrážejí tuto rozmanitost.“¹ (s. 9) Druhým dechem hned ale pokračuje, že navzdory tomu mají univerzity v tomto regionu sdílenou historickou koncepci a jsou podřízeny kulturním, socioekonomickým a vědeckým tlakům. Nicméně tyto faktory nejsou dále rozebrány a diskuze, která se vyskytuje v následujících kapitolách knihy, se k nim už neodkazuje. To znamená, že diskuze knihy jednak neposkytuje kontext pro srovnání, v čem spočívá specifičnost CEE regionu v porovnání s literaturou na toto téma v „západní akademii“; zároveň se ale nepouští do diskuze toho, jak se liší země v rámci CEE regionu od sebe navzájem. Vzniká tak vágní dojem určité homogenosti CEE regionu, která ale není pojmenována a vztažena ke zbytku akademie.

Knize, pro kterou je klíčové geografické vymezení, pak také chybí odpovídající úroveň reflexivity toho, k jakým datům a srovnáním se odkazuje. V knize je používána perspektiva Evropské unie, aniž by to bylo nějak problematizováno. Jak by byla analýza knihy ovlivněna, kdyby se místo evropských srovnání využila perspektiva globálního kontextu, srovnání s Asíí, Afrikou, Jižní Amerikou? Kniha tyto otázky neřeší a srovnání s EU bere jako východisko, které není vysvětleno. Literatura a konceptuální rámec jsou převzaty ze západní literatury a analýza není specificky upravena pro CEE region.

¹ Překlady citací jsou moje vlastní.

S předchozím bodem souvisí také určitá kritika neoliberálního uspořádání, která se v knize vyskytuje spíše implicitně. Autorka používá následující argument: „Zdánlivě ‚objektivní‘ kritéria jsou ve skutečnosti genderovaná, a nejen že nevyklučují předpojatost, ale dokonce ji zhoršují.“ (s. 155) Nicméně nenásleduje kritická diskuze současného nastavení akademického hodnocení a jeho reflexe z perspektivy, která by vzala v potaz provázanost kapitalismu, neoliberálních institucí a postkoloniálního dědictví současné akademické sféry. Ačkoliv chápu, že kritické diskuze v tomto směru nelze zahrnout do každé odborné publikace, autorka se nesnaží popsat svou pozicionalitu v kontextu těchto struktur. Strukturální aspekty autorka na jedné straně kritizuje jako diskriminující vůči ženám, na druhé straně na ně do určité míry spoléhá jako na nástroj pro vyřešení genderové nerovnosti v budoucnu.

Gender = žena?

Na závěr považuji za důležité zmínit ještě jeden kritický aspekt. Gender jakožto klíčový koncept není v knize nijak definován. Kniha je součástí série *Routledge Studies in Gender and Organization* (editorka: Elisabeth K. Kelan), která se tematicky a teoreticky zavazuje ke zkoumání genderu a organizací z konstruktivistické perspektivy. Navzdory tomu se zdá, že diskuze genderu je v knize rovnítkem pro diskuzi pozice žen, aniž by bylo reflektováno, jak tato kategorie může vyčlenit určité perspektivy z tohoto zkoumání. Důraz na ženy je obhájěn velmi krátce v úvodu: dát ženám hlas. Zaměřovat se na ženské akademické dráhy je samozřejmě legitimní záměr výzkumu, nicméně tento záměr by měl být diskutován jako takový. Tento styl používání genderu jakožto rovnítka pro analýzu žen v lepším případě znamená limitaci diskuze a analýzy jako takové, v horším případě evokuje spojitost s TERF feminismem a vede k exkluzi nebinárních identit z akademické diskuze na toto téma. Vnímám tady klíčový rozdíl mezi „genderem“ jakožto analytickým konceptem, který je společensky konstruovaný, a „ženstvím“, které je specifickým příkladem této konstrukce v současné společnosti. V knize tyto nuance nejsou diskutovány, spíše nasedají na kvantitativní uchopení těchto konceptů, navzdory deklarované konstruktivistické kvalitativní perspektivě.

Knihu považuji za zdroj, který je přínosné mít v hledáčku, ať už se genderové nerovnosti v akademické sféře věnujeme dlouhodobě, nebo se teprve chceme zorientovat. Musíme ale reflektovat určité nedostatky týkající se chybějící reflexivity ohledně provázanosti lokální a globální akademie a vymezení pojmu centrální a východní Evropy. CEE je stále region, který je interně heterogenní navzdory sdíleným historicko-kulturním procesům. I přes to je kniha užitečným zdrojem literatury a existujícího výzkumu genderové nerovnosti v akademické sféře, ať už ve střední a východní Evropě, nebo

v západní Evropě a Severní Americe. Pro publikum, které se tématu v tomto regionu věnuje, nepřináší zásadně nové myšlenky. Je ale psána srozumitelným sociologickým jazykem a může tak sloužit jako užitečný výchozí bod pro někoho, kdo se v tématu chce odborně zorientovat. Existence této knihy je důležitým poselstvím, které zní: „Ano, genderová nerovnost v akademické sféře existuje.“ Každá věta této knihy podporuje tento klíčový argument a sleduje, jak konkrétně se projevuje ve střední a východní Evropě.



Redakce časopisu Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research děkuje za spolupráci recenzentkám a recenzentům, kteří se podíleli na hodnocení statí dvacátého pátého ročníku časopisu v roce 2024.

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