

Postdigital Intimacies

Relational lives in the
networked public–private

Edited by
Adrienne Evans, Jamie Hakim, Jessica Ringrose,
Amy Shields Dobson and Shaka McGlotten

 **UCLPRESS**

Postdigital Intimacies

Postdigital Intimacies

*Relational lives in the networked
public-private*

Edited by

Adrienne Evans, Jamie Hakim, Jessica Ringrose,
Amy Shields Dobson and Shaka McGlotten

 **UCL**PRESS

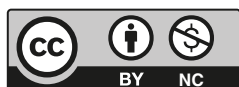
First published in 2026 by
UCL Press
University College London
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT

Available to download free: www.uclpress.co.uk

Collection © Editors, 2026
Text © Contributors, 2026

The authors have asserted their rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the authors of this work.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.



Any third-party material in this book is not covered by the book's Creative Commons licence. Details of the copyright ownership and permitted use of third-party material is given in the image (or extract) credit lines. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher. If you would like to reuse any third-party material not covered by the book's Creative Commons licence, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright owner.

This book is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC 4.0), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>. This licence allows you to share and adapt the work for non-commercial use providing attribution is made to the author and publisher (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work) and any changes are indicated. Attribution should include the following information:

Evans, A., Hakim, J., Ringrose, J., Dobson, A.S. and McGlotten, S. (eds.). 2026. *Postdigital Intimacies: Relational lives in the networked public–private*. London: UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781806550531>

Further details about Creative Commons licences are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

ISBN: 978-1-80655-051-7 (Hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-80655-052-4 (Pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-80655-053-1 (PDF)

ISBN: 978-1-80655-054-8 (epub)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781806550531>

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>List of contributors</i>	xi
1 Postdigital intimacies: an introduction <i>Adrienne Evans, Shaka McGlotten, Jamie Hakim, Amy Shields Dobson and Jessica Ringrose</i>	1
Part I: Postdigital feelings	23
2 The vibe factory: intimacy, affective capitalism and digital media <i>Maria Gemma Brown, Nicholas Carah and Amy Shields Dobson</i>	25
3 Boring intimacies: #BoredVibes and the affective public–private <i>Tina Kendall</i>	45
4 Intimate matters: privacy and security and networked mental health support <i>Marjo Kolehmainen</i>	63
5 Sinéad O'Connor, ‘bipolar’ celebrity and mediated intimacies: towards a mad feminist temporal politics <i>Debra Ferreday</i>	83
Part II: Postdigital connections and collectivities	101
6 Postdigital intimacies and digital feminist activism <i>Estefanía Reyes and Kaitlynn Mendes</i>	103

7	Affect, Black diaspora and postdigital: moving towards a theory of Black digital relational intimacies <i>tèmítópé lasade-anderson</i>	123
8	Queer social media imaginaries and relational becoming amongst sapphic youth <i>Niamh White</i>	139
9	(Dis)embodied feminist rage and the affective economies of postdigital visibility <i>Xumeng Xie</i>	157
	Part III: Postdigital violences and vulnerabilities	177
10	Bypassing consent? A postdigital platform affordance methodology for exploring youth experiences of Snapchat <i>Jessica Ringrose</i>	179
11	Sexual harm and image sharing: rethinking and reimagining gender, power and intimacy with and for adolescent boys <i>Emily Setty</i>	205
12	Sexting risk and negotiations of consent in masculinity identity construction <i>Rikke Amundsen</i>	223
13	The deepfake, the screenshot and the leak: vulnerable visibilities of the body in postdigital intimacies <i>Emily van der Nagel</i>	239
14	Nude image sharing and image-based sexual abuse on Netflix's <i>Sex Education</i> and HBO's <i>Euphoria</i> <i>Tanya Horeck</i>	255
	Part IV: Postdigital kinship, domesticity and hospitality	273
15	Postdigital queer kinship: intimacy, choice and the market <i>Rikke Andreassen and Ulrika Dahl</i>	275

16	'Home is where the data is': what is at stake in the trade in data-households?	293
	<i>Alison Winch</i>	
17	Migrant domestic women workers' cartographies of care: a postdigital feminist scoping review	311
	<i>Zoe Hurley</i>	
18	If you liked it, then you should have put a ring on it: self-tracking and intimacy in wearable tech	329
	<i>Lindsay Balfour</i>	
	<i>Index</i>	347

List of figures

1.1	Fictional location of X-Men’s Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters	3
1.2	Screenshot of anonymous post to the Purchase College YikYak	4
1.3	Shaka being arrested at the protest	5
1.4	Encampment protest being set up at Kings College, 13 May 2024	7
10.1	Example of drawing template	182
10.2	Participant’s drawing of her shout-outs	186
10.3	Sami’s drawing of cyberflashing	189
10.4	Boys being targeted by porn bots and subscription services	191
10.5	Drawing of Instagram nude and Snapchat bikini picture with advice	195

List of contributors

Rikke Amundsen is Lecturer in Digital Media and Culture in the Department of Digital Humanities, King's College London. Rikke's research is concerned with digital sexual cultures, and with how concepts like intimacy, consent, risk and trust are informed by their digital mediation. To date, these issues have primarily been examined with a focus on 'sexting', especially as it occurs in the context of heterosexual relations. Along with Dr Laura Gibson, Rikke is also currently researching menstrual cycle awareness and the use of menstrual tracking technologies within the higher education sector.

Rikke Andreassen is Professor at the Department of Arts and Communication, Roskilde University, Denmark. Her research is interdisciplinary and intersectional with a strong focus on media, gender, sexuality and race/whiteness. She is part of the research project 'Scandinavian Border Crossing: Race and nation in queer assisted reproduction', funded by Forte (Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare). The project is a collaborative and multi-sited ethnographic project focusing on questions of kinship and assisted reproduction in relation to formations of gender, sexuality and race. Within this project, Andreassen's research focuses on how online media becomes intertwined with people's daily lives and family making, and how assisted reproduction increasingly becomes entangled by online media practices as well as driven by financial logics. She is the author of the book *Mediated Kinship: Gender, race and sexuality in donor families* (Routledge, 2018) and first editor of the anthology *Mediated Kinship: Connectivities, relationalities and proximities* (Routledge, 2018).

Lindsay Balfour is Senior Lecturer in Communications at the University of Glasgow. She is an experienced researcher, public speaker and author with international experience in the non-profit sector and formal academia. She has held grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and earned her PhD from the University of British Columbia. Her research draws on the philosophical concept of hospitality to consider the relationship between humans and machines (HCI), and employs an intersectional feminist and cultural studies perspective to look at digital intimacies. Lindsay is the author of *Hospitality in a Time of Terror* (Bucknell

UP, 2017); *The Digital Future of Hospitality* (Palgrave, 2024); and editor of *FemTech: Intersectional interventions in women's digital health* (Palgrave, 2023).

Maria Gemma Brown is a PhD candidate in the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, and the School of Communication and the Arts, at The University of Queensland. She has worked as a Research Assistant on multi-year research projects examining machine vision and the promotional cultures of Instagram, automated advertising, harmful industries and green-washing. Maria has published in *Social Media + Society*, *Television & New Media*, *Convergence*, *Capacious* and *Internet Policy Review*. She researches the intersections of advertising, nostalgia, affect and automation on digital platforms. Her current PhD project critically examines a recent history of experiential marketing affects, imaginaries and fantasies.

Nicholas Carah is Director of the Centre for Digital Cultures & Societies and Professor in the School of Communication & Arts at The University of Queensland. Nicholas is the author of *Pop Brands: Branding, popular music and young people* (Peter Lang, 2010), *Brand Machines, Sensory Media and Calculative Culture* (Springer, 2016) and *Media & Society: Power, platforms and participation* (SAGE, 2021). He is co-editor of *Conflict in My Outlook* (Perimeter, 2022) with the curators Anna Briers and Holly Arden and *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media* (Springer, 2018) with Amy Dobson and Brady Robards. As an Associate Investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, Nicholas is co-leading the Australian Ad Observatory and is leading University of Queensland's contribution to the establishment of an Australian Internet Observatory with six partner universities and the Australian Research Data Commons. Alongside this work, Nicholas is a co-investigator on projects relating to advertising, promotional culture and machine vision on digital platforms and also serves as Deputy Chair and Director of the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education.

Ulrika Dahl is Professor of Gender Studies at the Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University, Sweden. Her research concerns queer kinship and family making through feminist, intersectional, transnational and critical race perspectives. She is the Principal Investigator (PI) of the research project 'Scandinavian Border Crossing: Race and nation in queer assisted reproduction', funded by Forte (Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare). The project is a collaborative and multi-sited ethnographic project focusing on questions of kinship and reproduction in relation to sexuality, queerness, race and whiteness. Within the project, Dahl has a particular focus on bio politics, nation-making and reproductive medicine. She is interested in the meaning and practice of gamete matching in assisted reproduction, focusing on the parents, medical staff and communities and highlighting the racialisation of gametes as well as gametes as a border-crossing phenomenon. She is first editor of the anthology *Queer(y)ing Kinship in the Baltic Region and Beyond* (Södertörn Academic Studies, 2023).

Amy Shields Dobson convenes the Digital and Social Media program at Curtin University, on Whadjuk Boodjar, and co-leads the Curtin Gender Research Network. They also lead the Digital Intimacies research stream within Curtin's Centre for Culture and Technology. They are an expert across gender and feminism, gendered subjectivities, youth and social media. Amy has published widely on youth sexting, gendered representations in contemporary popular media and digital cultures and contemporary feminine subjectivities. They are the author of *Postfeminist Digital Cultures* (Springer, 2015), and editor of *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media* with Nicholas Carah and Brady Robards (Springer, 2018). Amy's current ARC and other competitively funded research projects include work on young people's responses to #MeToo and gender violence awareness; facial image editing apps, body image and selfies in youth cultures; and below-the-line youth-targeted alcohol and nightlife marketing on social media.

Adrienne Evans is Professor of Gender and Culture in the Centre for Arts and Creative Cultures at Coventry University, UK. Her research focuses on accounts of intimacy, and she is interested in creating new ways of thinking about notions of the good life, wellbeing and positivity through digital technology in relation to the vulnerabilities these concepts engender, by seeking to stimulate more inclusive, equitable and feminist-inspired ways of being-in-the-world. Her current work is interested in how digital positivity cultures create new intimate relations that shape how we navigate the world, and how we can do positivity otherwise. She is co-author with Sarah Riley of *Technologies of Sexiness* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and *Digital Feeling* (Palgrave, 2023) and co-author with Sarah Riley and Martine Robson of *Postfeminism and Health* (Routledge, 2018) and *Postfeminism and Body Image* (Routledge, 2022). She co-founded with Jessica Ringrose the AHRC network Postdigital Intimacies and the Networked Public–Private.

Debra Ferreday is Senior Lecturer in the School of Arts at Lancaster University, UK. She is a cultural theorist and queer theorist whose teaching and research practice centres feminism, not simply as gender relations but as a wider project of understanding and reimagining the intimate lives of power. Her distinctive focus is on how marginalised subjects and communities survive in the context of disabling and demoralising conditions, and on affirming the importance of creative cultural production in enabling spaces to survive and indeed thrive. Her most recent publications on queer media explored the importance of marginality as creative space alongside the extent to which radical potential might survive mainstreamification. Her current research thinks with mad studies and feminist hauntology and rich media archives to explore questions of trauma, ageing, time and memory. The first, on the Maligned Nineties Woman, examines how ageing rock artists become a focal point for thinking through mad and feminine experience. The second, Cannibal Cultures, takes the contemporary figure of the cannibal as a lens through which to understand gendered, raced, class and ableist relations of violence and consumption in contemporary media cultures.

Jamie Hakim is Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at King's College, London. His research interests lie at the intersection of digital cultures, intimacy, embodiment and care. His book *Work That Body: Male bodies in digital culture* was published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2019. His co-authored, open access book *Digital Intimacies: Queer men and smartphones in times of crisis* was published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2024. As part of the Care Collective he has also co-authored *The Care Manifesto: The politics of interdependence* (Verso, 2020).

Tanya Horeck is Professor of Film and Feminist Media Studies at Anglia Ruskin University, UK, where she is Director of the Research Centre for Media, Arts & Creative Technologies (MACT). Her areas of expertise include: representations of gender and sexuality in popular film and television; true crime; #MeToo and consent culture; celebrity culture; contemporary women filmmakers; intimacy coordination; and technology-facilitated gender-based sexual violence. She has published extensively in journals, and her books include *Public Rape: Representing violation in fiction and film* (Routledge, 2004) and *Justice on Demand: True crime in the digital streaming era* (Wayne State University Press, 2019). She has two forthcoming books: *Teens and Tech: Facilitated violence* (Oxford University Press with Jessica Ringrose and Kaitlynn Mendes) and *The Cinema of Sarah Polley* (Edinburgh University Press).

Zoe Hurley is Associate Professor at the American University of Sharjah, UAE (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9870-8677>). She was a Visiting Fellow in the Middle East Centre, London School of Economics, from 2023 to 2024. Her work focuses on social media, power and visual communication. She is the founding President of the Gulf Association of Semiotic Studies and global member of the TikTok Cultures Research Network. She has published articles in leading academic journals including *Feminist Media Studies*; *New Media & Society*; *Social Media + Society*; *Information Communication & Society*; *Postdigital Science and Education*; and *Visual Communication*, in addition to several chapters, commentaries and blogs. Her recent monograph – *Social Media Influencing in the City of Likes: Dubai and the postdigital condition* (Emerald Publishing, 2023) – develops a semiotic critique of social media's role in the global visual economy.

Tina Kendall is Associate Professor of Film & Media at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, United Kingdom. She has published widely on extreme cinemas and negative affects, including boredom. She is the author of *Entertained or Else: Boredom and networked media* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025).

Marjo Kolehmainen works as Academy Research Fellow at the University of Turku, Finland. She is Principal Investigator of 'Networked Care: Intimate matters in online mental health support', a research project funded by the Research

Council of Finland [decision 356256]. The project widens the scope of feminist research on digital intimacies to online mental healthcare, opening up a novel field of research. Kolehmainen's research is situated at the crossroads of feminist new materialism(s) and science and technology studies, and her research interests include, for example, intimacy, affect, more-than-human care, mental health, digital technology and sensory matterings. Kolehmainen has published articles in, for example, *Health, Gender & Society*, *Science, Technology, and Human Values*, *Body & Society* and *The Sociological Review*, to name a few. Moreover, she is a co-editor of *Affective Intimacies* (Manchester University Press, 2022) and *Affective Inequalities in Intimate Relationships* (Routledge, 2018). She has also coedited a Special Issue on Affective Intimacies for NORA – *The Nordic Journal of Gender and Feminist Research* (2021). More info at: <https://www.marjokolehmainen.net/>

tèmítópé (tèmi) lasade-anderson is a writer and researcher. Her research interests are digital intimacies and Blackness, Black feminisms, data and digital rights, race, gender and communication on social media, diaspora and relationality. In 2023, she was a Fellow at the Centre of Advanced Internet Studies and, in the same year, was the inaugural research curator-in-residence at the Foundation of Art and Creative Technology (FACT). Her work has been published in academic journals (*Feminist Media Studies*; *Television and New Media*) and independent media (*DADDY Magazine*; *The Canary*). She is a London Arts and Humanities Partnership/AHRC awardee, completing her PhD part-time on Black women's friendship digital intimacy at King's College London. tèmi is also the Executive Director at Glitch, an international charity that does advocacy and research to ensure the online information environment is safe, just and equitable and internet technologies do not replicate or extend discrimination towards Black women.

Shaka McGlotten is Professor of Media Studies and Anthropology at Purchase College-SUNY, where they also serve as Chair of the Gender Studies program and the Co-Chair of Media Studies. An anthropologist and artist, McGlotten's interdisciplinary research explores the intersections of Black study, queer theory, digital media and contemporary art. Their work investigates emerging networked intimacies, messy computational entanglements and their impacts on queer of colour lifeworlds. They are the author of *Dragging: Or, in the drag of a queer life* (Routledge, 2021) and *Virtual Intimacies: Media, affect, and queer sociality* (SUNY Press, 2013). They are also the co-editor of two edited collections, *Black Genders and Sexualities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, with Daná-ain Davis) and *Zombies and Sexuality* (McFarland, 2014, with Steve Jones). Data & Society, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Akademie Schloss Solitude and The Andy Warhol Foundation have supported their work.

Kaitlynn Mendes is Professor of Sociology at Western University and holds the Canada Research Chair in Inequality and Gender. She has published widely on sexual violence relating to digital technologies, including how technology

exacerbates the issues and how people creatively use it to fight back. She is author or editor of five books including the award-winning book *SlutWalk: Feminism, activism, and news* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and women fight back against rape culture* (Oxford University Press, 2019, with Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller). Insights from her research have been used to inform policies, practices and public understanding on contemporary gender inequalities. Kaitlynn is also Principal Investigator on five-year SSHRC project DIY: Digital Safety and is Director of the Gender, Equity, Media and Society (GEMS) Research Lab.

Estefania Reyes is an activist and researcher. She is currently a PhD candidate in Sociology at Western University. She also holds a Master's degree in Media, Gender and Social Justice from the University of Leicester. Her research interest is centred around the intersection of gender, body politics and feminist activism, specifically focusing on menstrual activism. Her doctoral thesis is focused on exploring critical menstrual education models emerging from grassroots activists in Latin America. She has shared her expertise through various educational resources for young people, humanitarian organisations and feminist collectives in the Global South.

Jessica Ringrose PhD (York University Canada) is Professor and co-Director of the Centre for Sociology of Education and Equity at IOE UCL's Faculty of Education and Society. Ringrose has lived and conducted research in England for 21 years, developing an extensive public engagement profile informing policy and practice across sectors of education, communications, health and justice. Her research explores youth digital cultures and intimacies, with her recent projects focusing on developing education to prevent tech-facilitated gender-based and sexual violence and online misogyny. In 2020 she was the recipient of The American Educational Research Association Distinguished Contributions to Gender Equity in Education Award. Her latest book, *Teens, Social Media, and Image Based Abuse* (Palgrave Macmillan) is out in 2025.

Emily Setty is Associate Professor in Criminology at the University of Surrey. Her research examines young people's experiences of sex and relationships across online and offline contexts, with a particular focus on sexual harm, consent and digital intimacies. Emily's work critically explores the risks and harms young people face, the sociocultural dynamics underpinning these challenges and the effectiveness of current policy and practice in addressing them. A central aim of Emily's research is to develop and evaluate evidence-based interventions that promote healthy relationships among young people while addressing harmful behaviours and practices. Her work is interdisciplinary, with the aim of providing holistic insights into these complex issues. Emily collaborates extensively with young people, parents and carers, educators, professionals and policymakers to ensure her research has practical and meaningful impact. She has contributed to

the development of innovative educational resources, including pilot programs on porn literacy and digital consent, which inform her broader commitment to reshaping relationships and sex education. Through her research, Emily seeks to empower young people to navigate the complexities of contemporary relationships with confidence, respect and critical awareness.

Emily van der Nagel is Lecturer in Social Media in the School of Media, Film & Journalism at Monash University. Her research on social media identities and intimacies explores our sometimes playful, often meaningful, digital connections to others, and how they shape and are shaped by platform cultures. Emily's work has been published in *Convergence*, *Porn Studies*, *Social Media + Society*, *Internet Histories*, *First Monday* and *M/C Journal*. Her book, *Sex and Social Media* (Emerald, 2020), co-authored with Katrin Tiidenberg, investigates how adult content and conversations play out across platforms, and her co-authored *Manifesto for Sex-Positive Social Media* (ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, 2022) puts forward demands for platforms to integrate sexual cultures into social media, and to value the labour of sexual content creators.

Niamh White is a PhD candidate in the School of Media, Film and Journalism at Monash University in Naarm/Melbourne, Australia. Their thesis examines how young queer women and sapphic people are learning about and engaging with queer and trans history on social media and the affective resonances of these engagements. She is also a research assistant on an Australian Research Council Discovery Project investigating young people's experiences with selfie-editing. Broadly, their research interests include gender, sexuality and youth; affect and embodiment within digital cultures; and queer and trans history and worldmaking.

Alison Winch is an academic and poet. She is Senior Lecturer in Promotional Media at Goldsmiths, University of London, UK. Her books include *The New Patriarchs of Digital Capitalism: Celebrity tech founders and networks of power* (Routledge, 2021). She is currently working on a project titled 'The Promotional Household'.

Xumeng Xie is Lecturer in Chinese Studies and Digital Cultures at Queen Mary University of London, UK. Her research, grounded in feminist and interdisciplinary methodologies, focuses on the intersections of young people, digital media and culture, particularly within the context of mainland China. She has a keen interest in feminist and queer theory, affect theory and critical approaches to digital media. Her academic work has been published in peer-reviewed journals and prominent edited volumes. She also moderates a research blog titled Chinese Catchwords.

Postdigital intimacies: an introduction

Adrienne Evans, Shaka McGlotten, Jamie Hakim,
Amy Shields Dobson and Jessica Ringrose

This book explores ‘postdigital intimacies’, a concept that helps make sense of the inextricable networks of material, digital and affective experience, the implications of this network for how we relate to human and non-human others and for the blurring of public and private spheres of life into one another. Postdigital intimacies is also an orientation to our world once we understand the digital and non-digital as normatively indistinct, and the critical frameworks we can bring to it to make it more socially just.

Within the contributions to this book are accounts that drive forward new discussions of postdigital intimacies and cement its relevance as a vital concept for making sense of the entanglement of digital and non-digital relationships, and by extension the folding of public and private worlds. What we term ‘postdigital intimacies’ in this collection brings together critical accounts of intimacy with the intensification and saturation of digital media and technologies in our lives. The chapters in this book are united by a definition of postdigital intimacies that recognises the indissoluble connection between the digital and non-digital; for example, in the way digital harms or digital exclusions should be treated as real material harms or exclusions, or in the way that platform algorithms channel and affect our material bodies. This concept allows us to see ‘the digital’ afresh, and has important implications for politics, activism, social justice, theory, research and practice – and as we explore in this book, for expanding accounts of intimacies.

As this collection developed, the editors wanted to create a space to bring the chapters’ authors together, collaborate, share ideas and connect their work to the whole. We held two hybrid workshops to do this.¹

To untangle what we mean by postdigital intimacies, we want to open this book with an account of what happened during one of these workshops, and its interconnectedness to a number of bodies, feelings, locations and events, as expressing what postdigital intimacies as a concept might allow us to capture. The story below was recounted, and drafted, on 13 May 2024. As an editorial team we were attending in-person and online, and we made use of some of the time allocated to writing to discuss this introduction. Those of us who were physically at the workshop in the UK had moved from the room where friends and colleagues who have contributed to this collection worked through their own chapters. We found a space on the floor in a foyer area, near the lifts and underneath a set of large, old windows. Huddled over a laptop, we shared ideas for this introduction and, over Zoom, Shaka shared their recent experience.

Pressed by intimate, national, global, and otherwise entangled crises, I [Shaka] had planned to spend the evening of May 2nd 2024, escaping into the world of *X-Men '97*, the hit animated reboot uncannily echoing global events occurring in Gaza and elsewhere. The previous episode saw the mutant nation of Genosha decimated by a robot kaiju deployed in a secret exterminationist attack backed by the United States.

The campus I work and live on is ironically just 25 miles from Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, the fictional training site of *X-Men* (see [Figure 1.1](#)). The campus would shortly become its own battleground.

I was alerted to join a pro-Palestinian student activist group on my campus through an Instagram post, which warned folks to be prepared and to bring IDs, meds, masks. These posts hinted at what was to come and were part of months-long efforts, online and off, to engage the college's administration about divestment, transparency, accountability, and a recognition of the Palestinian suffering and loss of life resulting from Israel's genocidal assault.

I grabbed my night meds and put on an African-print jacket, wanting to be visible and worrying about layers in case I ended up in a cell.

I returned to the lawn near the dining hall, where I had come to see and chat with students who had encamped earlier in the day. At the time, the vibe was picnic and protest. About 40 or so students sat on the bare earth, blankets and tents they had agreed not to put up earlier in the day. Now, it was night, and there was a bustle of activity as protest organisers engaged in last-minute efforts to de-escalate. Student protestors sat quietly, now about 80, arms interlinked, facing outward, beloved artists, activists, freaks and queerdos in quiet solidarity.

They were a striking contrast to the buzzing police drone hovering above the Humanities building and the slapping blades of the police

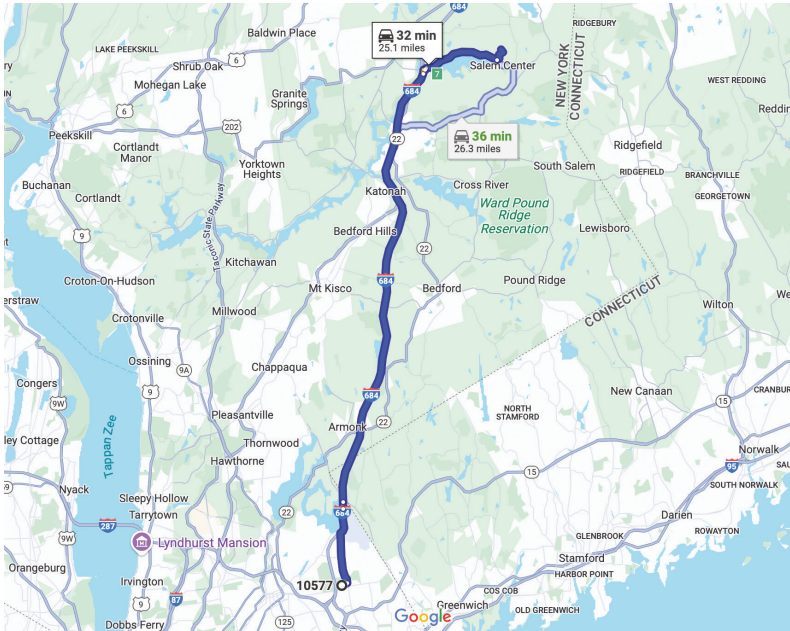


Figure 1.1 Fictional location of X-Men’s Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters

Source: Google Maps.

helicopter that had been circling for hours. An organiser asked me and my colleagues to serve as observers. The revolution would be livestreamed, necessary documentation and even spectacularisation for a watchful online audience.

Alongside images, I recorded an exchange between the police chief and an organiser.

‘What specific policy are we violating?’

‘I can’t tell you that. I don’t know. This is from conduct.’

‘But why should we leave if you can’t point to any specific code or policy?’

‘Because we told you so.’

Then came the police chief’s request to me, relayed by a familiar face, the officer who teaches our Rape Aggression Defence course. The chief asked me to use my influence to ask the students to disperse. I declined. It was an inappropriate, even hurtful request; my friendly relationship with the police chief was weaponised in his effort to achieve control.



Figure 1.2 Screenshot of anonymous post to the Purchase College YikYak

Source: Anonymous.

Predictably, chaos ensued.

Dispersal orders barked over bullhorns, and police moved in on students, the arrests becoming increasingly aggressive and sloppy. It was clear that some of the cops' hearts just weren't in it, edging away from the scuffling, while others grinned wolfishly, kneeling on teenagers' backs.

'Stop! Stop! These are our students!', my colleagues and I shouted.

Eventually, the remaining students formed a line behind two of my colleagues. The police matched the students, though they were slower to get organised. Other students and bystanders, witnessing what had occurred, joined their schoolmates. I joined my colleagues, and we exchanged looks. Given our position between the police and students, we recognised we would likely be arrested, too.

A few moments later, as we were seated by the police wagons that would take those arrested to six different precincts, we turned as we

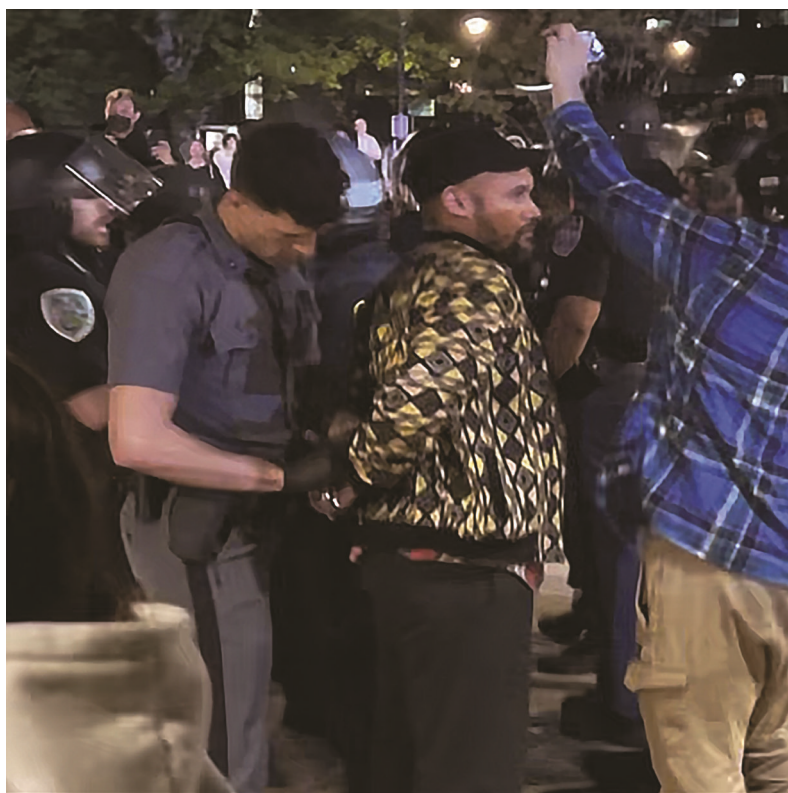


Figure 1.3 Shaka being arrested at the protest

Source: Christoph Sawyer.

heard an angry roar. Students from elsewhere on campus descended on the scene, furious at what they had been watching from their dorm rooms and online, shouting at the police to leave.

Riot cops moved in, and students fled screaming; some were arrested while trying to escape.

In the police wagon, I struggled with the too-tight cuffs while trying to contact my partner to let him know what precinct I would be at. The student next to me punctuated our quiet conversation with a dark observation as she relayed one officer's homophobic, condescending texts filtering through the bars, 'I called this woman a man, lol. Maybe I'll have to get training.' Not a glitch in the system, but the operating system.

We were released after being held for a few hours and charged with trespassing. Since the arrests, a dozen or more people had gathered outside the precinct to provide support and rides. I was released at 2am and greeted with pizza, water, hand warmers and cigarettes. We stayed until 3am when the last person was released.

In the following days, digital connections buoyed me via supportive texts from friends and colleagues, contrasted with the deafening silence from the institution. Grounding myself after these visceral experiences, I entered intimacies with chatbots, orally narrating my experiences and asking them to pose challenging questions so that I could best reconstruct the chronology and some of my experiences at a more machinic remove. Such a remove is not available for everyone.

For so many, the genocide in Gaza might just be another part of our digitally mediated present, one of many horrors in the world, something to linger on a social media feed, donate to, or just scroll past, even when it is a dust-covered family begging, 'Please don't scroll, watch until the end, we are in Rafah'.

Back at the workshop, as we listened to Shaka, the low rumble of megaphones and drums started to interrupt. The sound grew to a point at which carrying on the conversation became difficult.

We looked outside, where a pro-Palestinian student group had begun setting up an encampment at Kings College London. Following on from a number of similar campus-based student protests emerging in the UK that week, their demands included calls to recognise and condemn Israeli war crimes and to divest from Israeli corporations and arms manufacturers. In addition, and along with other student-led protests at the time, the ask of the institution was to commit to the rebuilding of education in Palestine following UN expressions of concern at 'scholasticide'. Such scholasticide happens through the killing, arrest or detention of teachers, students and support staff and the destruction of

buildings and the wider infrastructures (water, electricity, connectivity, etc.) that make those buildings functional. By the time we watched this student protest from the window of a UK university, all 12 universities in Gaza had been fully destroyed.

A photograph taken as we were standing one floor above the growing encampment, and through the large, old windows that softened the image, captured the emerging scene (Figure 1.4). As one camera lens looked down over the encampment, others from within were also capturing the moment – focused on the person with the megaphone, who at the same time was projecting their demands up towards the buildings and in our direction.

We carried on our discussion of this edited collection in an ornate stairwell, with a laptop on a knee and Shaka still on Zoom, and reflected on the relevance of the visceral interconnectedness, the distance and proximity and the unsettlingness of all of it. We were trying to think through how the digital frames make possible this assemblage of friends, partners, colleagues, students, strangers, videoconferencing platforms, AI chatbots, video games, social media, the state, global crises, the university, affective solidarities and affective disconnections. In this collection we gesture to this complex assemblage with the phrase postdigital intimacies.



Figure 1.4 Encampment protest being set up at Kings College, 13 May 2024

Source: Adrienne Evans.

What is meant by ‘postdigital intimacies’?

Our intention with this opening chapter is to provide a way of accounting for what some have termed the ‘context collapse’ of the spatial and temporal in digital media (Brandtzaeg and Lüders, 2018; Davis and Jurgenson, 2014; Marwick and boyd, 2011) – a collapse that is, in part, at stake in what we describe above. But also, we want to foreground how the above scenarios involve a blurring of the digital and the non-digital, in a way where distinctions between public and private realms become messy and ambivalent. The digital public sphere is already, and all at once, revealing a private sphere, and so it no longer holds to think of ‘public’ and ‘private’ as two separate realms of experience. Intimacies are invoked – not always as physically close (although sometimes they are), nor as necessarily existing in the private realm, or with associations of warmth, comfort and care (although, again, some are), but as relationalities with individuals, collectives, technologies, institutions and globally connected events that exist concurrently, as connection and disconnection, and as network and algorithm, in the digital and non-digital.

In this collection, we use the term ‘postdigital’. In doing so, we want to recognise a significant body of work that has already argued for the entanglement and augmentation of ‘real life’ with digital technology, including smartphones, social media, AI, algorithmic architectures and immersive, pervasive computing (see, for example, Jurgenson’s (2012) critique of the digital dualism; Greenfield’s (2006) concept of the ‘everyware’). In art theory, the postdigital has been used since the early 2000s to describe an aesthetic that blurs the digital and analogue (e.g. Cascone, 2000; Cramer, 2014). Since these uses of the term, a wide range of disciplines has broadened its meaning beyond the arts, and it is now used across the arts, humanities and social sciences (e.g. Adams and Jansson, 2022; Berry and Dieter, 2015; Hall, 2013; Jordan, 2019; Murray, 2020; Pepperell and Punt, 2000) and, most notably – largely from the discipline of education – the journal and book series *Postdigital Science and Education* (see Jandrić and Knox (2022) and Jandrić (2023) for a lineage of postdigital research and the initiation of the journal and book series).

For the most part, although with different emphases, the chapters in this collection use the ‘postdigital’ to reflect two connected but slightly different meanings: 1) a cultural condition where the relationship between online and offline, digital and non-digital has become normal and therefore less perceptible; and 2) as linked to a broad theoretical tradition that uses the prefix ‘post’ to signal a critique of the individual,

human-centred Enlightenment subject, one who was typically White, male, cis-gender, heterosexual, able-bodied and European. As a *cultural condition*, the postdigital defines a context that has witnessed a ‘hybridisation of both the digital and the non-digital domains, and a denial of any implicit “disjuncture” ... [and an] open and fluid negotiation between the digital and the non-digital’ (Jordan, 2019, p. 63). This has arguably intensified in recent years, accelerated through the global pandemic of COVID-19. During the pandemic digital communications became one of the few ways to form or maintain relationships with other people. Our relationships with digital devices also became more intense. This is evident across many chapters in this book, and in the wider literature (e.g. Berger-Correa et al., 2022; Hakim et al., 2024; Kolehmainen, 2024; Pienaar et al., 2021; Ringrose et al., 2024). Beyond intensifying digitally mediated relationships, COVID-19 also heightened the ways in which bodies, technology and human–human relationships collided, for example in the use of saliva and temperature, apps and geo-location technologies, to let us know who we could be physically close to, or whether we had been proximal to somebody who was infected. These conditions themselves produced a kind of ‘viral’ intimacy in state-sanctioned public health and sexual relationships (Hakim et al., 2024; Pienaar et al., 2021).

Despite noting the relevance of the postdigital to describe a cultural condition emerging through COVID-19 and shaping a post-COVID cultural context, we also suggest that it is not necessarily a term describing a particular era or moment of technological development, nor an ‘after’ the digital.² Alongside understanding the postdigital as a condition and context, we put the postdigital to work in a way that allows us to pull together a *critical literature and theoretical tradition*. The prefix ‘post’ references critical perspectives including poststructuralism, posthumanism and postcolonialism. The ‘post’ suggests to us a need to problematise, as Jandrić et al. (2018) have suggested. In posthumanism, for instance, the post often points towards the need to trouble or de-centre the human, and to think of a wider ecology of things, objects and events in more relational ways. To us, the postdigital signals a theoretical approach to intimacies that starts from the premise that the digital and human beings have become (and always were) co-constitutive. But they are also in excess of the digital and the human; they are both more-than-digital and more-than-human (Evans and Ringrose, 2025). Likewise, and to allude to the poststructuralism of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), the post in postdigital throughout this collection recognises that the digital is (in) trouble. Such trouble is ambivalent and complex, producing

both reactionary and normalising elements, with the capacity towards disciplining and regulating intimacies, and in the sense of troubling and subverting contemporary normativities and creating new ways of being in the world.

Many of the authors in this collection draw from discussions of ‘virtual intimacies’, ‘mediated intimacies’ and ‘digital intimacies’ (Andreassen et al., 2018; Attwood et al., 2017; Dobson et al., 2018a; McGlotten, 2013). Platform and data intimacies also underpin much of this work (Flore and Pienaar, 2020; Paasonen et al., 2023; Rambukkana and Matthews, 2024). Virtual intimacies, for example, have been described by McGlotten (2013) as shaping digital and non-digital worlds in gay men’s communities, even while public discourse, institutions and media panics frame the intimacies enabled by digital technology as problematic, or at the very least a lesser form of intimacy. For Dobson et al. (2018b), social media and digital intimate publics facilitate new intimate imaginaries, forms of connection and solidarity and ‘less bounded forms of intimate care and pleasure’ (p. 7). Mediated intimacies describe a context in which the media is ‘*suffused and saturated with representations of intimate relationships*’ (Barker, Gill and Harvey, 2018, p. 24, emphasis in original). For Attwood, Hakim and Winch (2017), accounts of mediated intimacy are informed both by an intimacy that is mediated through relationship advice, instruction and guidance (e.g. Gill, 2009), and those that suggest platforms themselves mediate new ways of engaging in intimate and personal relationships (e.g. Chambers, 2013). Petersen et al. (2018) argue that mediated intimacies are shaped by an increasing normalisation of online platforms for engaging in forms of intimacy (p. 14). They draw on Kember and Zylinska’s (2015) discussion of mediation to propose the co-constituted relationship between humans and technology, where ‘our relationality and our entanglement with non-human entities continues to intensify with the ever more corporeal, ever more intimate dispersal of media and technologies into our biological and social lives’ (p. xv, cited in Petersen et al., 2018, p. 1).

All of these different articulations of intimacy as virtual, mediated, digital, platformed and datafied, to different degrees, stress the importance of Berlant’s (2008) concept of intimacy and the intimate public. For the contributions to this book, Berlant, along with others, has allowed those interested in digital intimacies to make sense of the social, cultural and ethical implications of increasingly blurred boundaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’ realms in and through the postdigital. For Berlant, a sense of intimate belonging is framed by institutions, politics, ethics and law; and various ‘publics’ are not arid spaces for individuals to engage

in rational debate, but instead feel like they express a shared emotion, desire and collective subjectivity.

Central to Berlant's work on intimacy is the notion that intimacy is a regulatory concept that structures not just private relationships but also the structural operations of power. Berlant proposes that intimate relations might appear as private, individual affects that emerge from the deeply personal and the private subject, and are often presented as the 'elsewhere' to the political (Berlant and Warner, 1998, p. 553, emphasis in original). However, for Berlant, this is an illusion: intimacy has both regulatory and governing sociocultural functions, while simultaneously generating sentimentality and spaces of 'attachment and identification' that are also 'an important sustainer of people's desires for reciprocity with the world' (Berlant, 2008, pp. x–xi). The intimate public thus generates an affective atmosphere and produces an 'emotional generality' (p. 5). In their example of 'women's cultures', for instance, this emotional generality is directed towards conventional notions of the 'good life' and aspirations for a 'normal' or 'ordinary' life – even while such mundane attachments seem increasingly precarious in the context of entrenched inequities and global political crises. As Berlant (2008) states,

A public is intimate when it foregrounds affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness, a space where the social world is rich with anonymity and local recognitions, and where challenging and banal conditions of life take place in proximity to the attentions of power, but also squarely in the radar of a recognition that can be provided by other humans. (p. 10)

Berlant's ideas about 'intimate publics' have been productively applied to the study of social media and digital cultures by scholars working within the critical humanities and social sciences, where the connections between 'on' and 'offline' intimate worlds and digital and physical publics and infrastructures have been critically questioned. As Dobson, Carah and Robards (2018b) explain:

the theoretical frame of 'intimate publics' helps us think about how contestations over power play out in the generative, liminal space where the public and private intermingle. Berlant and Warner (1998) advocate for a publicisation of the intimate that speaks against privatisation, in the sense of both space and property, with an understanding of the deep connection between the prioritisation

of private property rights and private (heteronormative) spaces and familial relations. (p. 6)

Queer and sexuality scholarship has long been interested in media cultures, communication technologies and infrastructures and the role of such in shaping sex, sexuality, gendered relations and identities and in mobilising queer communities and publics (Wilson, 2016). Another example is Paasonen et al.'s (2023) discussion of data intimacy, which is shaped by Berlant's (2022) later work on infrastructural dependencies, or intimacies that make life liveable. Paasonen et al. (2023) show how networked connectivity and non-human actors interact with human-centred intimacies – including, we would argue, a postdigital context where there is an increasing but perhaps *now less perceptible normalisation* of sharing once private, intimate lives, in, with and through digital technologies and platforms. In short, we could say that digital cultural scholarship which draws centrally on queer and feminist theory has always been 'postdigital', as these lines of thought have helped us get at the illusory nature of the binary division between public and private as it relates to concerns, topics, politics, life, spaces and places.

Equally important are the critical approaches to intimacies that have explored how these are shaped by the global legacies and practices of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, racism and White supremacy. Ann Stoler (2001) has argued for an analysis of colonialism's shaping of the private and domestic sphere, and the way intimacy is used to govern bodies, genders and nations, so that the private sphere, and the relations within it, structure and shape the racialised state. This private sphere includes relations shaped by sexual intimacy, the violence and inequality that emerges from sexual intimacy in the context of domination, and affective intimacies and emotional economies of kinship, cohabitation, reproduction and labour (Stoler, 2006). Lowe (2015) similarly explores intimacy as tied to colonialism when it is defined through human relationships, and where the histories of racial superiority deem some more human than others. Building on Stoler and others' work, Lowe argues for a political economy of intimacy, and 'a particular calculus governing the production, distribution, and possession of intimacy' (p. 18), moving it away from a quality of an interiorised and liberal personhood and towards a regulatory practice of colonialism and postcolonial contexts. This work helps to further unpack the deeply-rooted ties between Eurocentric and colonial notions of private relations and private property (Moreton-Robinson, 2015) that drive a continual re-inscription of heteronormativity in settler-colonial societies. Drawing on these lines of

thought, our approach to postdigital intimacy seeks to better account for the way that digital and social media platforms now provide much of the infrastructures that both foster and challenge this ongoing colonisation.

A further, related concept of intimacy that is put to work in this collection is a challenge to the anthropocentric focus on intimacy as something only shared between humans. Instead, the concept of postdigital intimacies locates intimacy as something that reaches across human and non-human realms, digital and non-digital relationalities, making intimacy something that is always more-than-digital and more-than-human (Braidotti, 2018; Lupton, 2019; Pedwell, 2024; Ringrose et al., 2018; Shildrick, 1997). A posthumanist ethic recognises how anthropocentrism creates a hierarchy that reproduces the inequity of human and non-human (Deckha, 2020), but we also understand postdigital intimacies as significant in the critique of very human inequities. As Braidotti (2018) suggests, “‘We’ – the dwellers of this planet at this point in time – are interconnected, but also internally fractured. Class, race, gender and sexual orientations, age and able-bodiedness continue to function as significant markers in framing and policing access to normal “humanity”” (p. 53). One significant uniting element of this edited collection is a commitment to queer theory, postcolonial theory and feminism, with analysis that is ‘concerned with social justice issues of hyper-technological ontologies or ways of being while debunking platform capitalism’s cruel optimism for empowerment’ (Hurley, 2021, p. 1). This is reflected throughout the book, in its emphases and concerns, but also in who we are as researchers and what we believe such knowledge can do.

For us, there are two outcomes of this perspective that are evident across the collection. These are that it enables us to disrupt 1) the normative assumption that intimacy is primarily a human quality, coupled, often heterosexual, and 2) shaped by human feelings of warmth, care and compassion. Implicit in these normative assumptions of a human-centred intimacy is that sex and sexual intimacy are central. Even while such intimacies remain important across the collection, with Paasonen et al. (2023), ‘we question the popular conflation of intimacy with sex, so that the former becomes something of a euphemism for the latter while other attachments that make the self risk fading from view’ (p. 289). Likewise, we problematise the assumption that all sex is intimate. Rather than understanding intimacy, both sexual and non-sexual, as just about reciprocal (human) feelings of warmth or care, or even as something inherently ‘good’ and worthy of holding up as an ideal, we are also interested in understanding where intimacy is repudiated, ruptures, breaks down or appears to fail and where intimacy opens possibilities

for violence and vulnerability (Ringrose et al., 2024; Setty et al., 2024); as well as those spaces where failure allows for new, often more plural, imaginaries, politics, feelings and futures (Halberstam, 2011).

This is an edited collection about postdigital intimacies, understood through, informed by and embodying an intersectional feminist, queer and anti-racist approach. As such, we position the collection *in* and *as* a politics. Examples gesture towards the increasingly normalised conditions of contemporary postdigital intimate life, including: the ubiquitous sharing of images of intimate body parts and relationships through platforms, as well as events, feelings, emotions and affects that resist or protest expectations of gender, race, class and bodies; ways of knowing the self that require us to share physical and mental health with chatbots and virtual health professionals; new sexual cultures of consent and definitions of trust that are managed and made sense of through emerging technologies; and issues of datafication and quantification of the self via mobile devices and apps to monitor, for instance, intimate bodily functions. Further public/private divides are breached in technological developments, from geo-location to AI to facial recognition, that know who we are, where we are and through which we can move seamlessly from digital to 'real life', and personal domestic technology, which may know our personal routine, favourite music and more, while listening in to the everyday intimate spheres of private life.

Below, we conclude our introduction by providing a summary and synopsis of the main themes covered by the contributors.

Outline of the collection

The chapters that follow are organised into four parts: postdigital feelings; postdigital connections and collectivities; postdigital violence and vulnerabilities; and postdigital kinship, domesticity and hospitality. The chapters in [Part I](#), on postdigital feelings, explore the affective and emotional elements of postdigital intimacies where feelings are embodied, not merely transmitted through digital platforms and applications, but structure social relations and wider human and non-human relationalities.

Building on the groundbreaking introduction to *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media* (2018), Brown, Dobson and Carah's chapter asks, why has the word 'vibes' begun circulating so widely across the contemporary internet? Analysing both social media content and social media infrastructures, they argue that 'vibes' might usefully describe the kind of postdigital intimacy produced via the cultural ingestion of

algorithmically tuned and recommended flows of media' (p. 25). Whereas the first ten years of social media produced intimacy through the public disclosure of 'private' thoughts and feelings, post-TikTok social media instead creates intimate vibes through endless flows of algorithmically curated content. With little understanding of how these algorithms work, and with platforms operating without users having to follow pages, creators or hashtags, all that we are left with is a pre-emergent 'structure of feeling' – or vibes. The authors end the chapter contemplating the political implications of this new internet, both for capitalist forms of capture and resistance to it.

Tina Kendall draws on a specific example of vibes, exploring boredom as a structure of feeling. Enabled in part through the postdigital normalisation of affect through the digital, these 'vibey' connections are built into the infrastructure and affordances of platforms like TikTok, which are focused not so much on known others and 'friends', but on sharing a particular feeling. With boredom, Kendall shows how boredom content acts as a performative and lively affect, analysing this through three examples. These cover the expressive boredom TikTok videos of the pandemic, including the playfulness of #BoredVibes challenges and Curtis Roach's 'Bored in the House' TikTok anthem, as well as the more mundane rhythms of boredom – for example where content is presented as necessary to perform because the creator was bored. Kendall links this to a neoliberal psychopolitics that disciplines the subject to perform, while bypassing other, possibly more intense, forms of affective solidarity.

Marjo Kolehmainen draws on a feminist new materialist approach, applying this to the experiences of psychotherapists during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they navigated their sector practices and professional lives through digital technology. In this account, there is an analysis not only of emotions, but of emotional labours and affective industries. More than this, Kolehmainen explores how such practices and the move to online therapy challenges conventional notions of privacy, security and intimacy, for example in the very practical decisions to send calendar invites and produce digital banking receipts that don't reference therapy. In Kolehmainen's interviews with psychotherapists, the challenges of cybersecurity and data protection take on an evidently emotional charge when managing clients' mental health.

In an especially moving intervention Debra Ferreday analyses how 1990s pop star Sinéad O'Connor has been remediated through post-digital infrastructures, specifically the ways that videos of her 'oversharing' the difficulties of living with a bipolar diagnosis are disseminated

and discussed in ‘sad girl’ fan communities. Drawing on ‘mad studies’, Ferreday proposes a recuperative reading of what mediated confessions of ‘madness’ can do for collective struggles to live differently with trauma. She argues that all of this becomes possible through the postdigital, specifically in how it reconfigures linear temporalities between mediated pasts and presents in ways that echo the nonlinear temporalities of bipolarity itself, and that O’Connor so forcefully articulated.

Our second theme in the book is on postdigital connections and collectivities, where intimacies are generated through a sense of belonging and recognition, often in dialogue with the political. Reyes and Mendes draw from a decade of research on digital feminist activism and mobilise an analysis of ‘radical shamelessness’ in relation to the sharing online of menstrual bleeding imagery and sexual violence experiences. As they note in relation to such sharing, ‘keeping intimate experiences, materially and discursively, within the constraints of the hegemonic “private” realm is often strategically used to maintain existing unequal power structures’ (p. 108). They argue that digital movements around menstruation and sexual violence have facilitated both on and offline inextricably entwined spaces for connection – that is, for collective activism, networking and political organisation.

tèmitópé lasade-anderson’s chapter theorises Black digital relational intimacies (BDRI), a concept that understands Blackness itself as a form of intimacy, particularly in online spaces. Grounded in Black feminist and diasporic thought, this intimacy is based on shared experiences of marginalisation and a sense of deep knowing and understanding, echoing the notion of ‘homeplace’ found in Black female friendships. BDRI is facilitated by the circulation of feelings of being seen and understood, emphasising the visceral sense of connection that arises when Black women encounter each other digitally. lasade-anderson offers BDRI as an extension of the existing literature on digital intimacies, further emphasising how race fundamentally shapes online experiences. This challenges views that position digital spaces as post-racial, advocating for a more nuanced and critical perspective on digital intimacy research.

Niamh White’s chapter delves into the processes of identity formation and self-discovery among young queer women and gender diverse individuals, particularly those who identify with ‘sapphic’ cultures and desires. The chapter examines how social media platforms foster ‘sapphic becoming’, a dynamic process of subject formation shaped by interactions with online content and connections with others. Drawing on interviews with 21 young people in Australia, White explores how the consumption of online content, rather than active creation or curation, can contribute

to feelings of recognition and validation, influencing respondents' understanding of themselves and their place in the world. White argues that 'sapphic becoming' challenges traditional identity paradigms and highlights the fluidity and evolving nature of selfhood, particularly for young people navigating the complexities of gender and sexuality in online communities.

Finally, Xumeng Xie's chapter unpacks the politics and affective intensities of negotiating feminist activism in a postdigital economy of visibility, drawing on analysis of popular feminism, accounts of feminist anger and rage and forms of radical self-care identified by Black feminist theory and practice. Xie demonstrates the ambiguities of having to navigate the public-private in relation to feminist anger and rage using narratives provided by teen girls and young women feminists and those interested in feminism in China. For Xie's participants, publicly claiming feminism and connecting to a movement created new pedagogies of learning to be angry, but also risked violence and vulnerability. At times, this meant finding ways of doing visible feminism alongside community and care, with Xie concluding that we need more imaginative ways of engaging with social transformation under the regime of visibility.

The feelings of connection and collectiveness identified in [Part I](#) are often in relation to marginalisation. [Part II](#), postdigital violence and vulnerabilities, unpacks the implications of wider social-digital structures, with a particular concern for technology-facilitated violence, image-based abuse and its gendered/sexual relationalities.

Starting this part, Jessica Ringrose's chapter explores how the social media app Snapchat mediates youth postdigital intimacies. She develops a platform affordance methodology using arts-based research methods including screen sharing and drawing that enabled her teen and tween participants to show how they use Snapchat in their everyday lives. Attending to how Snapchat is used in practice through an iterative process with young people, Ringrose demonstrates how and why young people stay on the app because of its game-like features, but when these same features and functions of the app enable consent to be bypassed, they open young people up to non-consensual content/interactions including image-based harms and abuses. The entangled processes and relationships between the digital, affective and material are explored as postdigital processes.

Emily Setty's chapter also explores issues of consent among young people, focusing on adolescent boys' understandings of sexual and digital consent and image sharing and how the boys in her research experience power and intimacy in their peer groups. Setty makes a compelling case

for the need to move beyond binarising frameworks of masculinity that demonise boys as only perpetrators of digital sexual harm and abuse, and the resulting inadequate disciplinary measures found in educational settings. She argues the ways that boys are harmed by normative frames of intimacy need to be discussed and ‘consciousness raised’ around these issues among boys in order to interfere into heterosexual power dynamics in youth digital cultures.

Offering insight that moves us from Setty’s concern with young masculinities to an older age range, Rikke Amundsen’s chapter explores sexting, risk and negotiating consent with adult heterosexual men. Amundsen explores how the men in her study navigated the ‘risk’ of sharing explicit sexual images with women, and shows how they navigate what is appropriate in the postdigital playing field of sexting. Amundsen argues that the postdigital enables an analysis of how intimacy and risk play out in real life and on screen via the men’s discussions of how they attempt to get sexting right. The men in Amundsen’s study were willing to get sexting wrong, however, because it didn’t disturb their normative masculine identity construction, alluding to the acceptance and normalisation of technology-facilitated sexual violence in UK society.

Emily van der Nagel discusses two instances of image-based sexual abuse where women have become primary targets of what she terms ‘digital visibility violations’. In these examples, OnlyFans content creators have had their labours shared through non-consensually created and distributed deepfake pornography, enabled via the screenshot and the leak, where these images have then appeared elsewhere online for free. Van der Nagel mobilises postfeminist conceptualisations of women’s sexualisation and sexual agency to show how digital visibility violations thwart agency, and how these violations cause harm to someone’s sense of self while delegitimising their labour. A postdigital lens enables van der Nagel to pay critical attention to the ‘entanglement between the digital and the corporeal’.

Finally, Tanya Horeck moves the discussion onto how postdigital intimacies are represented on hit television shows *Sex Education* (2019–2023) and *Euphoria* (2019–). Beginning from the premise that television itself is a ‘technology of intimacy’ (Kavka, 2008), Horeck argues that these shows have done more than many others to explore the always entangled pleasures and risks of nude image sharing for teens. Horeck pays particular attention to the shows’ gendering of these pleasures and risks, offering nuanced considerations of how the former are less available to young women, while the latter sit more squarely on their shoulders, as well as

the agency with which the characters can chart this complex terrain. She writes, 'there are many important conversations to be had about how to ethically navigate new forms of postdigital intimacies and shows like *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* need to be part of them' (p. 269).

The final part of the book turns to the postdigital intimacies of kinship, domesticity and hospitality, with an underlying thread that shows how market forces and 'communicative capitalism' (Dean, 2005) are constitutive of and deeply embedded in normative notions of the private, including concepts of family, home and the body.

In their chapter, Rikke Andreassen and Ulrika Dahl examine how LGBTQ+ reproductive rights in Scandinavian fertility clinics intersect with digital technologies and neoliberal market forces. Through their fieldwork in Swedish and Danish fertility clinics, they underline a striking disconnect: while medical staff express concerns about the corporatisation of fertility care by private investment firms, queer parents primarily focus on feelings of inclusion fostered by private clinics' digital presence. The authors argue that postdigital intimacies mask underlying capitalist structures and financial inequities. They show how sperm donor selection through dating app-like interfaces normalises the commodification of reproduction while creating emotional attachments that can complicate medical care. Their research demonstrates how postdigital interfaces can simultaneously enable queer kinship while obscuring the market forces shaping reproductive healthcare access.

Alison Winch explores the data capture that we invite into our homes in the form of smart technologies and social media, and how the tracking of domestic data by business-to-business companies enables an intimate surveillance that is monetised by the promotional, advertising and marketing industries. These technologies do not just know where we live, but also reinforce the normative structures and patriarchal architectures of the White, heteronormative, middle-class nuclear family, and determine people's value according to the data-household. By exploring the exchange of our data through these industries, Winch explores how 'advertising technologies extend, magnify, and obscure predatory and racist outcomes' by harnessing the data-household and in turn using it to target and nudge us towards a consumer market (p. 304).

Zoe Hurley addresses another form of intimate communicative capitalism, locating her chapter in the cartographies of care provided by migrant domestic helpers in the Arabian Gulf. Through the lens of postdigital feminism, Hurley undertakes a scoping review of research on migrant domestic workers, and explores how multiple technologies – from Facebook groups to home cameras – create an assemblage of care

practices and labours, including those within their employment and those outside of it, for example in recruitment, maintaining contact with friends and family in their countries of origin and forming connections with other migrant domestic helpers. Hurley argues that a postdigital feminism might allow future research to critique the capitalist, colonialist and racist structures that underpin migrant domestic workers' experiences, as well as how the same technological tools and platforms are used by them to resist invisibility.

In our final chapter, Lindsay Balfour discusses the ambivalent postdigital intimacies of Fem Tech, specifically the Oura ring – a smart ring marketed to women that produces health data. What does it mean, Balfour asks, for women to have intimate relationships with technologies that are in constant contact with our skin so as to harvest data for big tech companies? She answers this question drawing on both Derrida's and Levinas' concept of hospitality, which helps her highlight the simultaneous familiarity and strangeness of such relationships and the contradictions between the 'magic' that they offer and the deeply racist, patriarchal and capitalist structures that they support.

Our hope is that the chapters contained in this collection provide both a sense of the capaciousness of research emerging in and around the concept of postdigital intimacies, and is generative for future research. Each contribution provides a generous, insightful, thoughtful and feel-good development of our relational intimacies in increasingly ambivalent, often challenging, worlds. We hope you enjoy thinking with these chapters as much as we have done in bringing them together.

Notes

1. This collection emerged from and developed through the AHRC Postdigital Intimacies and the Networked Public-Private (AH/T012226/1); the workshop was supported by Coventry University's Research Excellence Development Fund.
2. We use 'postdigital', rather than the hyphenated post-digital, see [Taffel \(2016\)](#) for a critique of the latter.

References

- Adams, P.C. and Jansson, A. (2022). Postdigital territoriality: Disentangling from digital media as a return to place. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 113(3), 658–674.
- Andreassen, R., Petersen, M.N., Harrison, K. and Raun, T. (eds) (2018). *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, relationalities and proximities*. London: Routledge.
- Attwood, F., Hakim, J. and Winch, A. (2017). Mediated intimacies: Bodies, technologies and relationships. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(3), 249–253.

- Barker, M.-J., Gill, R. and Harvey, L. (2018). *Mediated Intimacy: Sex advice in media culture*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Berger-Correa, B., Ringrose, J., Xie, X. and Cambazoglu, I. (2022). Mapping affective circuits of a Twitter trolling attack against feminist arts-based pedagogy during the COVID-19 global pandemic. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 37(3), 642–659.
- Berlant, L. (2008). *The Female Complaint: The unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2022). *On the Inconvenience of Other People*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. and Warner, M. (1998). Sex in public. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 547–566.
- Berry, D.M. and Dieter, M. (eds) (2015). *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, computation and design*. London: Palgrave.
- Braidotti, R. (2018). A theoretical framework for the critical posthumanities. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 36(6), 31–61.
- Brandtzaeg, P.B. and Lüders, M. (2018). Time collapse in social media: Extending the context collapse. *Social Media + Society*, 4(1).
- Cascone, K. (2000). The aesthetics of failure: 'Post-digital' tendencies in contemporary computer music. *Computer Music Journal*, 24(4), 12–18.
- Chambers, D. (2013). *Social Media and Personal Relationships*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Cramer, F. (2014). What is 'post-digital'? A Peer-Reviewed Journal About, 3(1), 10–24.
- Davis, J. and Jurgenson, N. (2014). Context collapse: Theorizing context collusions and collisions. *Information, Communication and Society*, 17, 1–10.
- Dean, J. (2005). Communicative capitalism: Circulation and the foreclosure of politics. *Cultural Politics*, 1(1), 51–74.
- Deckha, M. (2020). Unsettling anthropocentric legal systems: Reconciliation, indigenous laws, and animal personhood. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 41(1), 77–97.
- Dobson, A.S., Robards, B. and Carah, N. (eds) (2018a). *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. London: Palgrave.
- Dobson, A.S., Carah, N. and Robards, B. (2018b). Digital intimate publics and social media: Towards theorising public lives on private platforms. In A.S. Dobson, B. Robards and N. Carah (eds) *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. London: Palgrave.
- Evans, A. and Ringrose, J. (2025). More-than-human, more-than-digital: Postdigital intimacies as a theoretical framework. *Social Media + Society*.
- Flore, J. and Pienaar, K. (2020). Data-driven intimacy: Emerging technologies in the (re)making of sexual subjects and 'healthy' sexuality. *Health Sociology Review*, 29(3), 279–293.
- Gill, R. (2009). Mediated intimacy and postfeminism: A discourse analytic examination of sex and relationships advice in a women's magazine. *Discourse & Communication*, 3(4), 345–369.
- Greenfield, A. (2006). *Everyware: The dawning age of ubiquitous computing*. New York: New Riders.
- Hakim, J., Cummings, J. and Young, I. (2024). *Digital Intimacies: Queer men and smartphones in times of crisis*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Halberstam, J. (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hall, G. (2013). Toward a postdigital humanities: Cultural analytics and the computational turn to data-driven scholarship. *American Literature*, 85, 781–809.
- Hurley, Z. (2021). #reimagining Arab women's social media empowerment and the postdigital condition. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2).
- Jandrić, P. (2023). History of the postdigital: Invitation for feedback. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 5, 493–508.
- Jandrić, P. and Knox, J. (2022). The postdigital turn: Philosophy, education, research. *Policy Futures in Education*, 20(7), 780–795.
- Jandrić, P., Knox, J., Besley, T., Ryberg, T., Suoranta, J. and Hayes, S. (2018). Postdigital science and education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50, 893–899.
- Jordan, S. (2019). *Postdigital Storytelling: Poetics, praxis, research*. London: Routledge.
- Jurgenson, N. (2012). When atoms meet bits: Social media, the mobile web and augmented revolution. *Future Internet*, 4(1), 83–91.
- Kavka, M. (2008). *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy: Reality matters*. London: Palgrave.
- Kember, S. and Zylinska, J. (2015). *Life After New Media: Mediation as a vital process*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kolehmainen, M. (2024). Vibrant screens: Remote therapy and counselling through the lens of digital materiality. *Health*, 29(2), 181[N]199.

- Lowe, L. (2015). *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lupton, D. (2019). Toward a more-than-human analysis of digital health: Inspirations from feminist new materialism. *Qualitative Health Research*, 29(14), 1998–2009.
- Marwick, A.E. and boyd, d. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, 13(1), 114–133.
- McGlotten, S. (2013). *Virtual Intimacies: Media, affect, and queer sociality*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. (2015). *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Murray, S. (2020). Postdigital cultural studies. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 441–450.
- Paasonen, S., Jaaksi, V., Koivunen, A., Nikunen, K., Talvitie-Lamberg, K. and Vänskä, A. (2023). Intimate infrastructures we depend upon: Living with data. *Media Theory*, 7(2), 285–308.
- Pedwell, C. (2024). Speculative machines and us: more-than-human intuition and the algorithmic condition. *Cultural Studies*, 38(2), 188–218.
- Pepperell, R. and Punt, M. (2000). *The Postdigital Membrane: Imagination, technology and desire*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Petersen, M.N., Harrison, K., Raun, T. and Andreassen, R. (2018). Introduction: Mediated intimacies. In R. Andreassen, M.N. Petersen, K. Harrison and T. Raun (eds) *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, relationalities and proximities*. London: Routledge.
- Pienaar, K., Flore, J., Power, J. and Murphy, D. (2021). Making publics in a pandemic: Posthuman relationalities, ‘viral’ intimacies and COVID-19. *Health Sociology Review*, 30(3), 244–259.
- Rambukkana, N. and Matthews, S. (2024). Platform Intimacies: Reckoning with the digital as intimate relation. *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 48(2), 1–9.
- Ringrose, J., Warfield, K. and Zarabadi, S. (eds) (2018). *Feminist Posthumanisms, New Materialisms and Education*. London: Routledge.
- Ringrose, J., Milne, B., Horeck, T. and Mendes, K. (2024). Postdigital bodies: Young people’s experiences of algorithmic, tech-facilitated body shaming and image-based sexual abuse during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in England. *Youth*, 4(3), 1058–1075.
- Setty, E., Ringrose, J. and Hunt, J. (2024). From ‘harmful sexual behaviour’ to ‘harmful sexual culture’: Addressing school-related sexual and gender-based violence among young people in England through ‘post-digital sexual citizenship’. *Gender and Education*, 36(5), 434–452.
- Shildrick, M. (1997). *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics*. London: Routledge.
- Stoler, A.L. (2001). Tense and tender ties: The politics of comparison in North American history and (post) colonial studies. *Journal of American History*, 88(3), 829–865.
- Stoler, A.L. (2006). Intimidations of empire: Predicaments of the tactile and unseen. In A.L. Stoler (ed.) *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Taffel, S. (2016). Perspectives on the postdigital: Beyond rhetorics of progress and novelty. *Convergence*, 22(3), 324–338.
- Wilson, A. (2016). The infrastructure of intimacy. *Signs*, 41(2), 247–280.

Part I

Postdigital feelings

2

The vibe factory: intimacy, affective capitalism and digital media

Maria Gemma Brown, Nicholas Carah and
Amy Shields Dobson

The cultural prominence of ‘vibes’

‘Vibes’ haunt the internet. Scroll for a while and you’ll hear that there are ‘no thoughts, just vibes’, see ‘images that give you the vibe’, sense that the ‘vibe has shifted’ or even that ‘the vibes are off’. The vernacular concept of ‘the vibe’ has recently come into prominence in discourses about digital cultures. In this chapter we investigate the vibe as a ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams, 1974) that is a pre-emergent – felt but not fully articulated – feature of digital media cultures (Coleman, 2018). When a term gains sudden widespread popularity, it usually means there is a cultural phenomenon happening, there is something occurring underneath the surface and our established ways of narrating it are not working. When Highmore (2013) wrote on the prevalence of moods as a cultural concept, he asked, ‘Why mood, why now?’ Taking inspiration, we similarly ask, why *vibe* and why now? What does the vernacular language of ‘vibes’ in contemporary culture tell us about our current digital moment? Our goal here is not to describe particular ‘vibes’ in our digital cultures but rather to suggest why the language and experience of ‘vibes’ might be prominent and significant. ‘The vibe’, we suggest, might usefully describe the kind of postdigital intimacy produced via the cultural ingestion of algorithmically tuned and recommended flows of media.

In this chapter we explore the link between the cultural prominence of vibes and the shifts in platform logics and algorithmic infrastructure that users, critics and scholars have been tracking in recent years. We propose that a shift from digital to postdigital intimate publics is possibly

unfolding. Where digital intimate publics form around explicitly articulated identities and their associated symbolic representations, postdigital intimate publics form around associations and proxies operationalised by algorithmic models (Phan and Wark, 2021). We speculate on how the dynamics and human experience of these vibey postdigital cultures differs from the kind of ‘digital intimate publics’ we described in 2018 (Dobson et al., 2018). Building on the political tensions we suggested nearly a decade ago between the possibility for productive public expressions of intimacy by non-dominant groups and the privatisation of valuable data, we suggest some similar but new emergent tensions between the possibilities for non-dominant groups of vibey non-explicit identity associations and the automated algorithmic segregation of groups by proxy. We understand a shift towards the ‘postdigital’ in brief as the intensified entanglement of digital media platforms with everyday lives, culture and politics such that not only does it no longer make sense to talk about being ‘on-’ or ‘offline’ (Introduction, this volume), but that it is also no longer possible to assume that the boundaries and formations of intimate publics are undertaken through the symbolic articulation of online groups, spaces and communities; they are also produced by the entanglements between our practices of expression and the algorithmic models that seek to organise them as flows of content we are immersed in (see also Kendall, Chapter 3, this volume). We suggest in this chapter, then, that the popular uptake of the term ‘vibes’ in contemporary cultures might resonate with people’s experience and understanding of contemporary postdigital cultures, and help humans make sense of and articulate the kind of hard-to-articulate, associative-over-symbolic computational logics that we are learning to live with and that are increasingly shaping media, culture and everyday life.

Digital intimate publics before vibes

For us, writing about the first decade of social media platforms in *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media* (Dobson et al., 2018), the ordinary, mundane and everyday and the transgressive, excessive and non-normative expressions of intimacy on digital media platforms had two-fold political implications. As we suggested, Berlant and Warner (1998) advocate for a ‘publicisation’ of not just sex, but other significant forms of care, love and intimacy, with a view to imagining attachments and relations beyond the domain of the private, heterosexual, family life and even beyond ‘communities’ (Dobson et al., 2018, p. 6). We suggested that

the kind of ‘institutionalisation of public intimacy’ that social media platforms have instigated (Hjorth and Arnold, 2013, p. 125) might productively make space for expressions of intimacy which challenge, disrupt and transgress normative ideas about what should be private and what can be public. Social media introduces a ‘context collapse’ (Marwick and boyd, 2014) in our lives as our public, professional and private selves intersect in view of work colleagues, family, friends and strangers. The boundaries around *what* is shared with *who* become porous – love, suffering, pleasure and pain – ‘excessive’ intimate feelings sometimes overflow. This excess potentially reveals heteronormative contextual boundaries around what is normative and what is considered ‘over-the-top’, ‘over-sharing’, transgressive and non-normative self-expression. However, we suggested, at the same time as social media might productively open up normative understandings of what is ‘intimate’ for critical questioning, they also transform our intimate lives into data that trains models to shape our attention. Digital platforms are sites where intimate life becomes public in potentially meaningful ways, at the same time as it privatises intimacy as data, time and attention (Dobson et al., 2018).

In reckoning with this tension of social media’s digital intimate publics in a decade where the participatory affordances of the internet had collided with its monstrous data-processing and algorithmic capacities, we felt tangled in several interrelated paradoxes (Dobson et al., 2018). To begin with, the excessiveness, transgression and affective intensity of digital intimate publics were both the qualities most ‘intrinsic’ to their political potential and their source of value for platforms. Excess may transgress heteronormative ideals of intimacy, but it also attracts attention and value by creating spectacles of emotional expression. In addition, digital platforms open opportunities for diverse, mobile, unpredictable and transgressive intimacies while developing automated methods to monitor, modulate and control these intimacies. Their algorithmic models learn what intimacies to ‘tune out’ if they impede or interrupt ‘flows of valuable attention’. And finally, while social media creates spaces for practices of public intimacy, these relations are privatised as property within the walled gardens of platforms, giving people little control over how platforms use their intimate data. The resulting political challenge, we argued, was to imagine and cultivate public intimacies where both ‘the relations and performative practices and their infrastructure are publicly held’ (Dobson et al., 2018, p. 10). We advocated for a politics of *publicness*: in terms of *relations* – being generous and making space for non-normative public intimate worlds, being radically shameless and building an ethics of expanded care beyond heteronormative colonial

constructs, and in terms of *infrastructures* – seizing the material technologies of intimacy for public, shared, ownership.

In this chapter we return to these paradoxes and find them very much still at play in the possibilities and disappointments of digital intimacies. We argue that the vernacular concept of the *vibe* speaks to how these paradoxes have both persisted and been incorporated into postdigital intimacies. *Vibes* are what automated models tune in order to make value (Brown et al., 2024b), and they are perhaps increasingly how we articulate our sense that postdigital intimate life is in a state of being tuned, modulated, augmented through the interplay between our capacities to affect and the automated models that translate affect into value. To suggest that intimacies are now ‘postdigital’ is to recognise that our embodied and lived affects are pre-emergent to us and to recognise the automated models that seek to sense, tune and modulate them.

This chapter has grown from conversations between the three writers discussing the evolutions and changes in intimate practices online in the years since the publication of *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. We reflect that the version of social media we wrote on before is slowly being eroded. While our focus here is not on particular platforms, but on the prominent rhetoric and experience of *vibes* in contemporary digital cultures, we acknowledge that the shifts we try to articulate here are in no small part driven by the more explicit and noticeable experiences of algorithmic channelling users first experienced on Douyin and TikTok. These platforms, and the understandings and experiences of their algorithmic logics have been very influential (see Chapter 3 in this volume; Bhandari and Bimo, 2022; Kendall, 2021). It is the ‘newer’ version of social media, post-TikTok and Douyin, that we attempt to articulate in the following sections, and why *vibes* might describe a kind of structure of feeling that helps humans make sense of the postdigital era.

Vibey cultural politics: non-description, affect and association in postdigital cultures

The vernacular concept of the *vibe* draws our attention to how the infrastructures of digital platforms underpin the operations of affective capitalism by creating techniques for monitoring and managing flows of affect at scale and without need for, or with ambivalence toward, subjective narration (Anderson, 2015; Andrejevic, 2011). As the modulation of affect on digital platforms has become as ‘infrastructural as a factory’ (Masumi, 1995), their intimate publics have become more *vibe-centric*

in a two-fold sense. In one sense the intimate publics of social media platforms are constituted by algorithmic models that attune to associations and proxies that reflect flows, feelings and moods, rather than bounded communities or symbolically-narrated identities. That is, digital platforms appear to organise and constitute public disclosures of intimacy in associative and speculative ways that reflect what we dwell on in our feeds, rather than what we choose to belong to by following, joining or posting. In a second and related sense, we can discern that the intimate publics of social media are characterised by expressions of intimate experience that oscillate around, gesture at and evoke vibes as a proxy for moods, feelings, identities and subjectivities.

We feel akin to one another, or we seek connection and consolation from one another, by evoking affects that are either non-narratable or that we choose not to directly narrate in order to protect the boundaries of our intimate publics. Take the comment or caption IYKYK, or the sound from Lana Del Ray's song 'When you know you know (Margaret)', posted on videos that evoke a particular kind of intimate affective experience of a space, everyday interaction or self-representation. The letters IYKYK stand for 'if you know you know' and are used to describe and evoke the sense of a vibe that cannot be narrated with words. It is a 'wink' to the viewer about a shared experience, feeling or thought. If it was more explicitly narrated, it would lose its affective quality. Or, perhaps, this would dissolve the boundaries of the intimate public that the text associatively produces among people who share the sense they have felt that vibe. In vibes-centric intimate publics belonging is constituted not primarily along lines of explicitly narrated identity, but along lines of association with affective experiences that are produced in the interplay between the vibey content we produce and the vibey construction of flows of that content by algorithmic models. Below we describe two examples, both from TikTok, to illustrate the kind of vibey texts, and the vibey ways they circulate, as a starting point for thinking more about vibes-based digital media content.

On TikTok there are videos made purely for the stimulation of vibes, through moments of 'audio-visual eloquence' (Chayka, 2021). A common format of the videos is a curated series of images of a seemingly random array of objects and scenes that share some aesthetic qualities, set to a song. In one by @7teresia7, with over 700,000 views and 130,000 likes, a series of light blue and white images are sequenced together – a perfectly square slice of white cake with layers of frosting on a plate sitting on a blue table, a white framed window opening to a blue sky with wispy clouds, blue drink packets with the label 'crystal tears' above a single

droplet, sitting on a store shelf. Some images reflect and sparkle from a camera flash, others feature a lens flare. The images are set to the song 'Children' by Robert Miles, an Italian dream house DJ popular in the late 1990s. This is a practice of 'cultivation' (Siles et al., 2019) where users curate a series of images, video, sounds and text together to 'produce, capture and explore' (p. 3) their own feelings, moods and emotions. The intended affect is produced through the assembling, association, or collage of media – sound, video and image – together, rather than a text in the singular. These videos don't explicitly narrate meanings, ideas and identities but rather express a feeling, mood or affect by curating an assemblage of images and sounds.

Another trend on TikTok was a response to this tweet 'how do women actually wanna dress? Like if society normalised it', with creators making a carousel with a screenshot of the tweet followed by a series of images in response. In one video with over 3 million views, a creator puts together a carousel of lens flares and beams of light in nature, with a commenter expressing 'sigh I just want to be a' without finishing the sentence, expressing a similar 'ikyky' sentiment to what we described above. Other commenters express this as a feminine urge to become a being without a physical form or body, to be a soul who wanders, to observe but not to be perceived. This video among others which responded to the tweet expresses a deep feeling shared amongst feminine presenting people of being tired of constantly being on display, of purely wanting to exist.

This content creates moments of connection and shared feeling, resonating with other users of the platform. Users engaging with these media will often express the intense feeling that these videos give them. In the video of light and blue images described above, comments attempt to articulate the mood it generates for them, or shared experiences and memories, such as the comments 'saturday morning on spring 04', 'drinking cold water with mint gum vibe' and 'this was like breathing in fresh air'. This practice of creating media content that evokes a shared vibe does not have a commonly used name on TikTok, and creators and consumers of this content don't organise themselves into formalised groups. Users are most likely to encounter vibey sequences by scrolling on their 'For You Page' (FYP). These videos, we suggest, are examples of vibey content.

We also argue that the way they circulate on platforms like TikTok is also vibey. A typical disposition on TikTok is the sense that it is affectively satisfying and tingling, that pleasure is found in letting the algorithmic recommendation of the FYP notice and induce the vibe, taking you to the

'side' of TikTok with the vibe that makes you involuntarily shiver or zone out. The creation of these vibes, and their algorithmic sequencing, produces an intimate public in [Berlant's \(2008\)](#) sense of a scene of recognition and consolation centred on the expression and navigation of fleeting affective flows. These are scenes in the sense that practices of expression bring together people with shared experiences, feelings and knowledge. Their practices construct a shared collective experience of intimate feelings creating a sense of belonging and sometimes an acknowledgement of non-dominant identities, experiences, lives, moods and bodies. This may be driven by social structures such as race, class and gender while not being explicitly articulated as such ([Phan and Wark, 2021](#)). Vibes are unlike digital intimate publics organised through following accounts, blogs and channels or joining groups and pages, or even using dedicated hashtags. The *techniques* of the vibe organise postdigital intimate publics by refusing to explicitly, formally or textually describe the public, and instead using the algorithmic and associative nature of the platform to organise the public as a flow, so that others who share a vibe will become proximate to each other for a time; assembling scene as their affects associate, entangle and rub off on one another. In these affective flows, vibes produce intimate publics in the sense that vibes create, or tap into, shared worldviews and emotional knowledge, and their expressions and practices are both deeply personal and collective, giving certain experiences of belonging, consolation and exclusion. We point to these examples to suggest some of the ways vibes are expressed, channelled and modulated by users. These practices invoke feelings that might draw together people who share particular subject positions and identities, and associated experiences, but they conspicuously avoid naming and narrating particular identities and ideologies. Here the disclosure of the private *self* is elided while still invoking innermost private *feelings*.

Vibe as a term itself speaks to a human and non-human entanglement between algorithmic media and users. As [Tanner \(2021\)](#) writes about algorithmic digital media, 'it's hard to tease out where the medium ends and the channelled experiences begin' (p. 131). If transmission is one-directional ([Brennan, 2015](#)), the vibe is multidirectional. As Robin James puts it, a vibe is like the 'sympathetic resonance' that happens 'when the vibrations from a sounding object like a tuning fork or piano string activate similar frequencies in nearby objects that are relatively "in tune" with the original sound source' ([James, 2021](#)). In the TikTok practices we have outlined the assemblage of text, sound, video and user all resonate together to create highly affective moments. But the intimate experiences of digital cultures can be both in and out of tune. We can

resonate and vibe with each other and with the feed, sometimes pleurably, sometimes creepily. We sometimes feel a platform has noticed our sexuality, our politics, our classed position, our feelings, before we have expressed them in language to ourselves or others. Or the vibe can be off, out of tune, as the expressions of other people and the rhythm of our feeds generate feelings of disquiet, disorientation or disgust.

The concept of the vibe has proliferated as a way of naming the qualities of affective and intimate expression on social media. We resort to the vibe in lieu of language, of symbolic explanations, of the capacity to observe how automated media operate in private and public life. Common expressions like 'it's just the vibe', 'what's the vibe?' or 'no thoughts, just vibes' articulate a subjective experience of postdigital intimate publics where we sense something shared that resists explanation or to explain it would reveal it to others and to algorithms that would co-opt it, ruin it, seek to profit from it or undo the connections and consolations it produces. The term vibe is a stand-in for an internal feeling which hovers at the edge of narratable, either by definition or by choice. It is affective in the sense that it is an intense or strong inner feeling or sensation that others also have but cannot describe, and so we point, wink or nudge at this affect and say: 'that's vibey'. Our gut tingles, our body shudders, we wriggle our toes. A vibe is also an aura of someone, something, someplace or sometime. Vibes are associative and relational. One thing can have the same vibe as another, an 'x' can have the same vibe as a 'y'. It is an attunement to one's surroundings or contexts – it can be good or 'off'. Vibes are fundamentally social, they are connected to shared experiences, collective memories and resonances or intuitions shared between people. Vibes are mediated, they are expressed, stirred, channelled and modulated with sound, music, image, video, haptic responses and so on. They are often created through an association or assemblage of texts like Pinterest mood boards, TikTok videos, Instagram carousels.

The rhetoric and experience of vibes also does political work, and can create forms of recognition, solidarity and resistance. In their ethnographic study, [Miles \(2022\)](#) illustrates how the concept of the vibe is used in Black southern communities in the US to give expression to their racialised experiences. He argues that racism can be 'opaque and mundane' and often slips through traditional systems for accounting, measuring, quantifying and naming it. By turning to the concept of vibe, [Miles \(2022\)](#) examines how Black southern communities use the term as a way to give expression to their feelings of living in racially discriminatory structures. [Miles \(2022\)](#) importantly argues that 'vibe provided a language to bring attention to moments that racism mattered even when

race seemed invisible' (p. 18), and that the vibe created moments of solidarity, of resistance and understanding beyond prescribed institutional norms of race. With [Miles' \(2022\)](#) critical conceptualisation of the vibe we see how it becomes a structure of feeling central to understanding racialised experiences, and a way of describing how racist tactics operate subtly, below the line of dominant cultures and institutions.

Perhaps the popularity of the vibe as a concept demonstrates a broadly distributed cultural imaginary and critical reflexivity towards social media's algorithmic classification, sorting and recommendation of culture. We suggest that both the content people make and share in postdigital intimate publics (videos, carousels, compilations, remixes) and the medium (the algorithmic models) are vibey, and perhaps it is no coincidence that this term has become popular right now to describe broader cultural politics and experiences, including racism, in terms of 'bad' or 'off' vibes. These vibes are produced in the interplay between automated models that are trained to tune the flows of content we are immersed in, and our everyday practices of typing, posting, tapping, swiping and scrolling. The deep neural networks that organise flows of content on digital media platforms that have become such a common part of everyday cultural experience behave in particularly vibey ways. They are tuned for associations rather than classification or categorisation through 'labelling' ([Grietzer, 2017](#); [Yeetgenstein, 2021](#)). They treat culture in associative, proximity-oriented, modular and non-narrative ways. These modes of expressing ourselves and organising culture are critical to the logic of value production on platforms. As the algorithmic models at the centre of the platform economy have become more unsupervised and associative, they have created cultural experiences based on patterns in data that indicate our proximity to (and distance from) others, rather than judgements about demographic characteristics, or the meaning of texts, or behavioural patterns.

The computational infrastructure of vibey intimate publics

Digital platforms are now 'vibe factories' organising and exploiting our affective and intimate expressions online by tuning our feeds using a proxy-based logic: who and what do you vibe with? These modes of organising culture are critical to the logic of value production on contemporary digital platforms. Users' vibes, sentiments and intimate expressions do not have to be narrated into language for digital platforms to

be able to extract, monitor, measure, channel and produce them (Karppi et al., 2016). This creates a vibe-based attention economy where the capacity to create value centres around the ordering of flows of content based on what keeps similar people ‘in the zone’ streaming, scrolling and swiping. Foundational to Raymond Williams’ articulation of culture as a structure of feeling is its pre-emergent character. A structure of feeling reflects ‘the culture, the mood, and the feel of a particular historical moment’ (Williams, 1974), that may not yet be fully described, narrated and institutionalised. For Rebecca Coleman (2018), the pre-emergent nature of a structure of feeling is a defining feature of digital cultures that are organised around the operationalisation and optimisation of emergent flows of feeling. Coleman (2018) argues that in the affective infrastructure of digital media, ‘what is in a state of pre-emergence, what “hovers at the edge of semantic availability”, is increasingly what the social and cultural [itself] “is”’ (p. 30). The vibe is the everyday expression of the not-yet-narratable and pre-emergent feelings and flows that constitute culture and our contemporary structure of feeling. In 1995, Massumi argued that there is a

growing feeling within media, literary, and art theory that affect is central to an understanding of our information- and image-based late capitalist culture, in which so-called master narratives are perceived to have foundered ... belief has waned for many, but not affect. If anything, our condition is characterized by a surfeit of it. (p. 27)

Nearly three decades on, we argue that this growing feeling is not just reserved for those in the realm of media, cultural and literary critique, but everyday users of digital media users who reflect, navigate and negotiate digital media platforms and their affective infrastructures of pre-emergence. The infrastructure of digital platforms is built to construct sequences of images and videos that play out this continuous, unfolding affective experience. Whatever we can explain and narrate is in a cultural moment that has just passed, and to be ‘in’ the flow of our contemporary digital cultures is to be attuned to what is in the process of emerging right now. The feeling of our digital cultures is always that vibes are circulating that I have felt but not quite consciously made sense of yet.

In this cultural condition, vibe has not only become a term to give expression to a shared or intuited feeling, but on digital media platforms it has also become an expression which invokes the new forms of control which occur. This is perhaps best articulated by Clough (2008) when

she suggests that the ‘function of the media as a socialising/ideological mechanism had become secondary to its continuous modulation, variation and intensification of affective response in real time, where bodily affect is mined for value’ (p. 16). Following [Coleman \(2018\)](#), we therefore argue that the vibe as a structure of feeling is fundamentally linked to the affective infrastructures of digital platforms. The resort to ‘vibes’ as an explanation for our experience of postdigital cultures reflects how the infrastructure of digital platforms is organised around the logics of affective capitalism. [Karppi et al. \(2016\)](#) define affective economics as the capturing, structuring and modulating of affect within infrastructures to transform it into capital. The paradox of digital intimacies is that our intimate expressions, even where they are transgressive, resistant and excessive, create ‘vibrant circulations of affect and attention, and thus generate new kinds of value’ ([Dobson et al., 2018](#), p. 19). What we have witnessed over the past decade is the continuing development of the technocultural infrastructure for translating intimate expressions, feelings and connections into ‘valuable content, attention, social networks and data’ ([Dobson et al., 2018](#), p. 9).

A decade ago, we outlined three ways the intimate publics of social media generate value: attracting attention, reproducing social relationships as data and translating intimate experience into data that trains algorithmic models to modulate flows of attention and affect. We find ourselves both a long way into the historical process of operationalising affect and at a critical moment where the infrastructures for translating intimate and affective experiences into value appear to be accelerating. There is a long history of commercial taste makers, designers and manufacturers interested in the ‘psychic power’ of moods ([Anderson, 2015](#)), from Muzak to mood lighting, to the architectures of shopping malls and their ‘Gruen effects’. Further, [Jarrett \(2015\)](#) importantly contends historically women have long been enacting immaterial and affective labour for capital through the work of unpaid social reproduction. What is novel about the digital media infrastructures that have developed over the past decade is their new techniques for the monitoring and managing of affective flows at scale. That is, the algorithmic architecture of digital media platforms which capture, modulate, channel and intervene on users’ feelings and affective capacities. On digital platforms the modulation of affect has been industrialised ([Anderson, 2015](#); [Andrejevic, 2011](#)). The algorithmic architectures of digital platforms engage our limbic systems ([Lyons et al., 2023](#)), they create feeds that produce an uninterrupted mediated feeling and rhythm ([Carmi, 2020](#)), algorithmically intervene in the half-second lapse before conscious recognition

as a susceptible moment to target users by branding and advertising (Parisi and Goodman, 2011) and optimise and tune content for affective response or resonance (Brown et al., 2024b). Affect is engaged in a pre-subjective flow: platforms do not only sell subjectivities as audiences, but they also sell moments (Brown et al., 2024b; Coleman, 2018; Lupinacci, 2022). As Carmi (2020) contends, Facebook analyses users' patterns of behaviour as rhythms, which are bought and sold to advertisers.

Or take the example of the TikTok algorithm. In a gone-viral blog post by Eugene Wei, a tech product executive who has worked with the likes of Amazon and Hulu, Wei claims TikTok's algorithm overcame Chinese tech parent-company Bytedance's inability to break through cultural barriers and enter foreign markets. TikTok's algorithm can 'originate, mutate and disseminate culture' much more effectively than algorithms on other social media platforms (Wei, 2020). Wei argues that TikTok bases its algorithms on an 'interest graph'. It passively learns the 'interests' of users through their consumption of the short-form videos, without users ever having to follow anyone. TikTok works with patterns and associations. Importantly, this allows TikTok to bypass cultural barriers. Wei writes:

Imagine an algorithm so clever it enables its builders to treat another market and culture as a complete black box. What do people in that country like? No, even better, what does each individual person in each of those foreign countries like? You don't have to figure it out. The algorithm will handle that. The algorithm knows.

Wei claims platform owners don't know what users' 'interests' are and, importantly, they don't have to. But does the algorithm *know* either? These models treat culture in a conceptually different way from the supervised algorithmic models of earlier generations. Rather than trained to reproduce human labels, these models are based on pattern and association. For instance, in supervised models, a human needs to label an image of an apple for the algorithm to recognise and categorise it. Unsupervised models are different. They have little to no human intervention. Rather than detecting and recognising objects or texts, they discover patterns of similarity and association across sets of data without the need for categories or labelling. Software engineer Yeetgenstein (2021) writes:

What the neural network 'learns' is emergent rather than deduced. For example, it may notice a pattern that if it's cloudy, then people are more likely to carry an umbrella. But it would not be able

to explain that this is *because* cloudy implies rain and rain implies umbrella. Instead, it effectively identifies a ‘rainy’ vibe through correlations of an initially arbitrary set of parameters.

Unsupervised algorithms, like the TikTok FYP algorithm, therefore, do not *know* culture or language, and they do not *need* to (Grietzner, 2017). Algorithmic media are non-symbolic, pre-subjective and non-conscious – they associatively group data together, create correlations and proxies, make decisions based on repetitions and patterns. Algorithms do not ‘know’, ‘understand’ or ‘narrate’. They are tuned for associations rather than classification or categorisation through ‘labelling’ (Grietzner, 2017). They tune for flows of media content (Brown et al., 2024b), and identify a vibe (Yeetgenstein, 2021), rhythm (Carmi, 2020) or ambience (Li and Zhou, 2024). As Phan and Wark (2021) argue, while Facebook removed crude ethnic categories from their advertising program, racial groups were still reproduced algorithmically, as audience affinities or ‘interest groups’ became proxies for race. Advertisers no longer need to explicitly name a demographic, or specific discriminatory categories, to target ads, rather algorithmic models’ group and associate people who are ‘proximate’ to one another.

The logic of association and proximity is evident throughout platforms’ attempts to manage and modulate affect, to undertake vibe control at scale. Li and Zhou (2024) describe an infrastructure of ‘ambient’ control in content moderation, where automated models monitor the ambient character, tone or ‘vibe’ of flows of information in platforms in order to tune the overall flow of content in a positive direction. This is done through a series of associations: ‘what attracts negative comments might be negative’, ‘what “vulgar” users viewed might be vulgar’, ‘what gets too hot might be problematic’ (Li and Zhou, 2024). The vibe-logic is woven into the associative, pattern-based predictions of the models, their implementation in the tuning of users’ feeds, and users’ own orientation toward managing their intimate and public selves within automated digital cultures. The process of tuning the vibe of our digital feeds is a proxy for shaping and regulating forms of expression, experience and subjectivity. We can observe instances where vibes enable non-dominant identities to elide forms of visibility to platforms, algorithms and other users that would be harmful to them (Wang and Spronk, 2023). At the same time, we can see platforms implementing and refining vibes-based modes of control implemented to both ideologically regulate some identities and forms of expression and to create flows of content that maximise attention and value.

The significance of vibes

As we've gestured to in the above discussion, we feel like there are two forces at play here in understanding the significance of vibes in the current moment. First, we suggest that many users understandably want to be more private, harder to pin down, more fleeting in the public playing-out of our intimacies. Perhaps vibes are an everyday means of reflecting, responding to and navigating the algorithmic ordering of not only our feeds but our social worlds. In the 'version' of digital platforms we have today the promiscuous algorithmic circulation of content and optimisation of attention, together with shifting cultural feelings about being public on the internet, have made the narration of the intimate self more complicated. For users of digital platforms, perhaps creating vibey media are a way to express internal intimate feelings while still being savvy and aware of algorithmic models. Being vibey is a way of avoiding fixing, disclosing and narrating deeply personal thoughts, subjectivities and feelings, which open one up to scrutiny, judgement, observation and surveillance. Perhaps vibiness allows users to be fluid, dynamic and flowing; to express vague, ambiguous and emergent or pre-conscious feelings and affects, rather than more fully formed and personal thoughts and feelings. Perhaps vibes are what happens when users experience the paradoxes outlined in postdigital intimate publics – this sense that digital platforms are public spaces for intimate expression and for the recuperation of public intimate expressions into private data. Perhaps vibes as rhetoric and experience make sense in response to all the anxieties and crises these intimate-public-private tensions produce. Part of what might be going on in our postdigital cultures is an ambivalence about expressing ourselves in public because of the risks of being shamed, judged, of feeling cringe, of being fixed or locked into an identity or feeling that might be emergent or fleeting, of it being too conspicuous or explicit, and of losing control over how we will be made visible. This ambivalence and wariness are reinforced for many users who have grown up in a culture where platforms promise them 'controls' over their profiles and privacy, where parents monitor their use of devices and where schools teach them about the dire risks of being too public online. Within these kinds of cultural shifts perhaps we are creating intimate publics more by vibe rather than by explicit disclosure in part because it allows for the continuing modulation of the self.

Second, the technical affordances of algorithmic digital platforms allow for and now rely on resonant and associative connections over

demographic details or textual confessions of self. It might also be the case that we create intimate publics by vibing because digital platform infrastructures enable us to vibe and profit from us doing so. We don't need to organise groups and hashtags and channels if we can just post and dwell and let the algorithmic models predict whose intimate experiences are proximate to one another and profitable to group together in terms of vibey attention economies. This allows us also to lean further into an affective sense of intimacy as not just unnarratable but also unknown or unacknowledged by ourselves. Algorithms can take on a mystical quality by seeming to notice how we feel, or what we do, or what our desires are before we notice or acknowledge them ourselves (Cotter et al., 2022). The techniques of the vibe might produce intimate publics that are more deeply intimate in the sense that their visibility is bounded by shared affects – unless you share the affect you don't even notice the disclosure, the scene, the consolation and the subjectivities forming around it – IFYKYK. Sometimes this feeling of being noticed algorithmically, being drawn into an intimate public based on affective sensations is deeply comforting. It can also be deeply protective. We might indicate things about our identity or desires that the algorithm notices without the need for explicit disclosure (Wang, 2023). The platform algorithms might notice our associations with one another and bring them together into an intimate public organised around an affectively-resonant flow of content. Neither the users nor the algorithm explicitly narrates the features of their identity that bring them together. But there are also more possibilities for non-human and *inhumane* computational logics of control and discrimination by proxy when this is the case, as has been discussed in relation to algorithmic racism (Phan and Wark, 2021).

Bassett (2015) argues the postdigital 'shifts the focus away from events "on the screen", and from the representations the screen supported'. One way we have taken up this provocation in this chapter is to suggest that the first digital intimate publics of social media were organised around the chosen narration of the self and the organisation of relatively bounded publics by using blogs, profiles, groups, message boards, channels and hashtags. These intimate publics were always characterised by a paradox where just as social media afforded non-dominant forms of intimacy to play out in public, the infrastructures of digital media were learning to translate the attention and data those intimate relations produced into value. We might look back at the past decade as living through a 'training period' where a key part of the shift from digital to postdigital intimacies was the generation of attention, networks and data that

trained unsupervised algorithmic models to optimise vibes, sentiments and intimate expressions that do not have to be narrated into language for digital platforms to modulate and commodify (Karppi et al., 2016). If digital intimate publics begin with thinking about the public disclosure of the intimate self on the screen, then a postdigital intimacies might begin with the operationalisation of intimacy in the automated models of digital platforms. To conclude then, we propose three provocations about the significance of vibes to postdigital intimacies.

First, as we've suggested, vibes might be a response to the erosion of the public on digital platforms. Many people may no longer want to share their intimate selves publicly because of fear of judgement, of being too much, of being cringe. The internet is not a safe place for expression, especially for people with non-dominant identities. Further, many users have a strong sense that digital platforms simulate publicness while operating as private enterprises that seek to capture as much information about us as they can. A postdigital intimacies then is characterised by an ambivalence and wariness about the possibilities of digital intimate publics. Many users perhaps sense that where opportunities for an empowering and nurturing intimate public are withering, the translation of intimate life into accumulated value via automated models is expanding. It makes sense that people would stop posting out of a sense of absent narratives, ubiquitous flow and a feeling of crisis, anxiety, precarity and risk.

Second, the vernacular cultural discourse about vibes and the techniques of vibe control illustrate to us a postdigital intimacies where our intimate experience unfolds in vibey digital feeds that are tuned by monitoring our intimate experiences. Our feeds are a product of associating us with people whose patterns of tapping, scrolling, swiping and dwelling are similar to ours, where those practices often both reflect and constitute how we feel. People's description of vibes and vibey content *mirrors* the algorithmic organisation of media on digital platforms, a curated flow of texts proximate to each other to create a general tone or feeling. These intimate expressions are fundamentally shaped by the platform (Brown et al., 2024a; Dobson et al., 2018). There is also, as we've mentioned, a politics of proximal logics and associated judgements about which vibes are 'good' and 'bad', are felt as resonant or 'off'.

Finally, and relatedly, we can observe dominant institutions and their algorithmic models adopting and operationalising the logic of the vibe to exercise control over populations. In Li and Zhou's (2024) study of content moderation we see how the vibe is operationalised to manage the structure of feeling as it emerges on digital platforms. In our own work we have explored how the vibe tunes flows of ads that reflect and constitute

our feelings, identities and aesthetics over time (Brown et al., 2024b). For Wang (2023) and Miles (2022), the noting vibes can be a tactic for managing visibility, building solidarity and engaging in resistance in ways that are not readily discernible to those outside a marginalised subject position and experience. The paradox here is that the vibe is both an astute critical account of the logic of digital media, and it can help constitute protocols for producing intimate publics that are safe and comforting, while it is central to the emerging logics of both control and consolation.

We have discussed here the prominence of a rhetoric of vibes in contemporary postdigital cultures and tried to articulate how these have shifted from the digital intimate publics we theorised a decade ago. We've done so, foregrounding the qualities of vibey media on the influential platform TikTok, and the cultural politics of vibes in terms of shifts towards non-descriptive, affective and associational user experiences and attention economies. We need to take seriously the possibility that in a postdigital era both the norms and techniques of sharing the private self in public have changed fundamentally – that many of us associate excessive sharing with a previous version of digital platforms, or an internet that no longer exists. Instead, while we might not publicly express our intimate lives and experiences as readily, they are known more than ever to the affective, associative algorithmic models that shape our digital feeds. Out of the paradox of being more ambivalent about narrating our intimate lives at the same time our intimate lives become more visible to automated models emerges a resort to vibes, which for better or worse sets the stakes and the grounds for imagining the political potential of digital intimacies in the incoming generation of digital media. Narrating the self is hard, disclosing and describing the politics of intimacy is risky, let's just vibe – and the model vibes back. No thoughts, just vibes. Just patterns. Just associations that come and go. Just flow.

References

- Anderson, A.P. (2015). Neo-Muzak and the business of mood. *Critical Inquiry*, 41(4), 811–840. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681787>
- Andrejevic, M. (2011). The work that affective economics does. *Cultural Studies*, 25(4–5), 604–620. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2011.600551>
- Bassett, C. (2015). Not now? Feminism, technology, postdigital. In D.M. Berry and M. Dieter (eds) *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, computation and design* (pp. 136–150). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Berlant, L. (2008). *The Female Complaint*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. and Warner, M. (1998). Sex in public. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 547–566.
- Bhandari, A. and Bimo, S. (2022). Why's everyone on TikTok Now? The algorithmized self and the future of self-making on social media. *Social Media + Society*, January–March: 1–11.
- Brennan, T. (2015). *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Brown, M.G., Carah, N. and Tan, X.Y. (Jane), Angus, D. and Burgess, J. (2024a). Finding the future in digitally mediated ruin: #nostalgiacores and the algorithmic culture of digital platforms. *Convergence*, 30(5), 1710–1731. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565241270669>
- Brown, M.G., Carah, N., Robards, B., Dobson, A., Rangiah, L. and De Lazzari, C. (2024b). No targets, just vibes: Tuned advertising and the algorithmic flow of social media. *Social Media + Society*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241234691>
- Carmi, E. (2020). Rhythmmedia: A study of Facebook immune system. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 37(5), 119–138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420917466>
- Chayka, K. (2021). TikTok and the vibes revival. *The New Yorker*, 26 April. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/tiktok-and-the-vibes-revival>
- Clough, P.T. (2008). The affective turn: Political economy, biomedicine and bodies. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407085156>
- Coleman, R. (2018). Theorizing the present: Digital media, pre-emergence and infra-structures of feeling. *Cultural Studies*, 32(4), 600–622. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2017.1413121>
- Cotter, K., DeCook, J.R., Kanthawala, S. and Foyle, K. (2022). In FYP we trust: The divine force of algorithmic conspiratoriality. *International Journal of Communication*, 16(0), 2911–2934.
- Dobson, A.S., Carah, N. and Robards, B. (2018). Digital intimate publics and social media: Towards theorising public lives on private platforms. In A.S. Dobson, B. Robards and N. Carah (eds) *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media* (pp. 3–27). New York: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97607-5_1
- Grietzer, P. (2017). A theory of vibe. *Glass Bead*. <https://www.glass-bead.org/article/a-theory-of-vibe/>
- Highmore, B. (2013). Feeling our way: Mood and cultural studies. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 10(4), 427–438. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2013.840387>
- Hjorth, L. and Arnold, M. (2013). *Online@AsiaPacific: Mobile, Social and Locative Media in the Asia-Pacific*. London: Routledge.
- James, R. (2021). What is a vibe? [Substack newsletter]. *Its Her Factory Newsletter*, 30 January. <https://itsherfactory.substack.com/p/what-is-a-vibe>
- Jarrett, K. (2015). *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315720111>
- Karppi, T., Kähkönen, L., Mannevu, M., Pajala, M. and Sihvonen, T. (2016). Affective capitalism: Investments and investigations. *Ephemera*, 16(4), 1–13.
- Kendall, T. (2021). From binge-watching to binge-scrolling: TikTok and the rhythms of #LockdownLife. *Film Quarterly*, 75(1), 41–46.
- Li, L. and Zhou, K. (2024). When content moderation is not about content: How Chinese social media platforms moderate content and why it matters. *New Media & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241263933>
- Lupinacci, L. (2022). Phenomenal algorithms: The sensorial orchestration of ‘real-time’ in the social media manifold. *New Media & Society*, 26(7), 4078–4098. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221109952>
- Lyons, A.C., Goodwin, I., Carah, N., Young, J., Moewaka Barnes, A. and McCreanor, T. (2023). Limbic platform capitalism: Understanding the contemporary marketing of health-demoting products on social media. *Addiction Research & Theory*, 31(3), 178–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16066359.2022.2124976>
- Marwick, A.E. and boyd, d. (2014). Networked privacy: How teenagers negotiate context in social media. *New Media & Society*, 16(7), 1051–1067.
- Massumi, B. (1995). The autonomy of affect. *Cultural Critique*, 31, 83–109. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354446>
- Miles, C.J. (2022). Sociology of vibe: Blackness, felt criminality, and emotional epistemology. *Humanity & Society*, 47(3), 365–384. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01605976221146733>
- Parisi, L. and Goodman, S. (2011). Mnemonic control. In P.T. Clough and C. Willse (eds) *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death* (pp. 163–176). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Phan, T. and Wark, S. (2021). What personalisation can do for you! Or, how to do racial discrimination without race. *Culture Machine*, 20, 1–29.
- Siles, I., Segura-Castillo, A., Sancho, M. and Solís-Quesada, R. (2019). Genres as social affect: Cultivating moods and emotions through playlists on Spotify. *Social Media + Society*, 5(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119847514>
- Tanner, G. (2021). *The Hours Have Lost Their Clock: The Politics of Nostalgia*. London: Watkins Media.

- Wang, S. and Spronk, R. (2023). 'Big data see through you': Sexual identifications in an age of algorithmic recommendation. *Big Data & Society*, 10(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517231215358>
- Wei, E. (2020). *TikTok and the Sorting Hat*. Remains of the Day, 4 August. <https://www.eugenewei.com/blog/2020/8/3/tiktok-and-the-sorting-hat>
- Williams, R. (1974). *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. Glasgow: Fontana.
- Yeetgenstein, L. (2021, 27 September). Nameless feeling. *Real Life Magazine*. <https://reallifemag.com/nameless-feeling/>

3

Boring intimacies: #BoredVibes and the affective public-private

Tina Kendall

In this chapter, I reflect on boredom as a central and yet ambivalent structure of feeling that flows through the networked public-private of postdigital media. Across user-generated social media platforms, boredom-themed hashtags – together with user-generated captions, titles, bodily performances and other audiovisual data – promise to make boredom visible as a private feeling that is shared across, and modulated through, public networks. By providing users with techniques to both express and manage feelings of boredom and link them up with other posts sharing the same hashtag, these platforms participate in an ‘intimate public’: they open a ‘space of mediation, in which the personal is refracted through the general’ (Berlant, 2008, p. viii). As Berlant suggests, an intimate public is a ‘porous, affective scene of identification among strangers’ that offers ‘consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x*’ (2008, p. viii). In this chapter, I will consider how boredom functions as one such scene of identification on TikTok, offering both consolation and discipline.

This claim may seem surprising, given boredom’s reputation as kill-joy and impediment to the much-vaunted pleasures of effortless personalisation and intimate reciprocity that are promoted through platforms like TikTok. Indeed, because it often goes against ‘the sensation of agency and liveness that digital platforms produce’, and throws into question ‘the permission they tout for users to simply be themselves’, boredom introduces potential friction into the fantasies of 24/7 connectedness and passionate engagement that are central to a postdigital culture (Hu, 2022, p. viii). For this reason, boredom has been discursively constructed in networked settings as a feeling that must be scrupulously monitored

and managed in the pursuit of a happy life, lived well. But as I will argue, boredom-related metadata do more than just point to momentary user experiences of disengagement and disconnection. Rather, I want to suggest that on TikTok, boredom also plays an important role in helping to facilitate connections and to shape the affective textures – modulating the possibilities and the limitations – of those encounters. Closely analysing three different ‘scenes’ of #boredom on TikTok, this chapter reflects on the different intimate relations of attention that boredom organises on the platform. Situating TikTok in the context of the postdigital, it considers how TikTok’s prioritising of vibes, together with its socio-technical affordances and distinctive ranking and recommendation algorithms, impact on the nature of the intimacies that are shaped in this space. Second, it considers the role that #boredom – understood here as both user-generated data and the dimly-sensed feelings of disengaged inertia or stuckness that flow through them – plays in affectively modulating scenes of public identification and in the staging of intimacy on TikTok. By highlighting the processes of affective mediation and algorithmic subjectification that are central to TikTok, the chapter contributes to this collection’s wider efforts to theorise the postdigital intimacies and the affective public–private.

(#Bored)Vibes and the postdigital

My chapter situates #boredom in the context of the postdigital, a term which encompasses both the relations of attention and the structure of feeling that have come to characterise our entanglements with ubiquitous digital technologies. As David M. Berry and Michael Dieter suggest, this term evokes an affective ‘shift from an earlier moment driven by an almost obsessive fascination and enthusiasm with new media to a broader set of affectations that now include unease, fatigue, boredom, and disillusionment’ (Berry and Dieter, 2015, p. 5). That is to say, the postdigital refers to a vibe shift that accompanies the transition from early speculative imaginaries of what networked media might be/allow us to do, to a present-day regime of ‘algorithmized selfhood’ that offers finely tuned ambient personalisation, on the basis of continuous cognitive and emotional labour (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022). TikTok in particular has been embraced as a platform that feels intimate precisely because it works through *vibes*: ‘brief flashes of seemingly normal life’ (Chayka, 2021, n.p.) that are *felt*, as opposed to *watched*, inviting us to ‘vibe with

the subject' (Chen, 2020, n.p.). On TikTok, the most compelling content conjures up a complex mixture of 'mundane ... sublime and ... intimate' impulses, offering 'a glimpse into someone else's unguarded reverie' and thereby capturing, fleetingly, 'a mood I want to be inside of right now' (Dominus, 2020, n.p.).

This emphasis on the continuous sensuous address to the user through vibes, moods and atmospheres is central to my understanding of the term postdigital and to this chapter's exploration of the political work that is performed by postdigital platforms on postdigital subjects (see also Chapter 2, this volume). Although emotions have long been hard-wired into social media, the context of the postdigital acknowledges how platforms have been increasingly designed to target and profit from user sensibilities on a sensory or ambient frequency that often escapes conscious awareness. In his work on digital psychopolitics, Byung-Chul Han emphasises the centrality of emotions to the disciplining of subjects. This regime, he writes, 'seizes on emotion *in order to influence actions on this pre-reflexive level*', offering a 'highly efficient medium for psychopolitically steering the integral person, the person as a whole' (Han, 2014, p. 48). Working through ambient vibes or 'feels', postdigital platforms like TikTok continue to offer the kind of consolation and discipline that Berlant had in mind when writing about intimate publics, but they often do so in ways that bypass traditional processes of identification. As Robin James argues, the widespread fascination with the concept of vibes is not just a new viral media trend, but a 'new regime of power' aimed at training postdigital subjects to 'see ourselves in the same way that algorithms see us' (James, 2024, n.p.). Without explicitly referencing identity categories, algorithmically-derived vibes create communities around what *feels* right or good; or, in the case of more negative moods like boredom, to signal a situation in need of a vibe shift. As Brown, Carah and Dobson write in their contribution to this volume, the '*techniques* of the vibe organise postdigital intimate publics by refusing to explicitly, formally, or textually describe the public', instead optimising the 'algorithmic and associative nature of the platform to organise the public as a flow' (see Brown, Carah and Dobson, this volume). In this way, vibes create ephemeral communities around loose structures of feeling that seem to bypass oppressive norms and traditional identity categories, while simultaneously taking on 'the policing they traditionally performed' (James, 2024, n.p.).

On TikTok, boredom is one of the 'vibey' feelings that media users have to manage and optimise alongside others. When #BoredomStrikes, to evoke a popular hashtag, it sometimes calls on users to express and

share their boredom with others – often through hyper-performative displays that frame boredom as a deeply unpleasant but passing condition that is best treated through social media participation and use. More often, though, boredom flies under the radar, feeding into experiences of what Susanna Paasonen calls ‘digital disaffect’: ‘a sensation of always being about to attain the thing that will bring satisfaction yet finding it lies just beyond reach’ (Paasonen, 2021, p. 124). Postdigital platforms like TikTok have largely been able to instrumentalise boredom’s bad vibes because they so often reside below our conscious awareness, just something there, a felt ‘grunge of time, the lint that sticks to all things digital,’ as MacKenzie Wark so memorably describes boredom (Wark, 2007, 152). The allure of user-generated video-sharing platforms has long been affixed to this promise of an intimacy that is tied to the mundane. As Wendy Chun notes, ‘the promise and threat of networks’ is ‘the promise of an intimacy that, however banal, transcends physical location and enables self-made bonds to erase the loneliness of neoliberalism’ (p. 103). Following Lauren Berlant’s theorisation of socially mediated communication on Facebook, the type of intimacy promised by platforms like TikTok is emphatically ‘light touch ... where the bar for reciprocity is so low that anyone could perform by clicking’ (Berlant, 2007).

As I will argue in what follows, this light-touch/‘no big deal’ energy is central to the work that boredom performs on postdigital platforms. Boredom works well in a vibes regime because it occupies this terrain of mundane, low-stakes universality; whether it is felt intensively, or just lurks in the background as a dimly-sensed feeling, it is widely constructed on social media as an experience that ‘we’ can all identify with, regardless of our social positioning. Boredom-themed content on TikTok calls on this feeling of shared knowingness around the seemingly universal emotion in order to produce scenes of identification and public intimacy amongst a specific, yet amorphous and always shifting, subset of users. Through the creation of these intimate publics centred on boredom, TikTok provides an important form of consolation for the feelings of ‘digital lethargy’ (Hu, 2022) and ‘digital disaffect’ (Paasonen, 2021) that might otherwise threaten to expose the promises of intimacy that are central to postdigital network cultures. By doing so, the platform also enacts discipline, by entrenching an algorithmic logic that trains postdigital subjects to see themselves the way algorithms do – all without calling direct attention to the subjectifying processes that are often at stake in these scenes of public identification and desire.

TikTok: from ‘algorithmised self’ to ‘imitation publics’

In order to unpack my claim that #boredom content organises intimate publics on TikTok, it is first necessary to understand how the platform’s affordances and norms shape the exchange of feelings in this space in distinct ways. Like other social media platforms, TikTok continues to act as a forum ‘for the disclosure and display of emotions’ (Chambers, 2013, p. 47). But it is important to note how TikTok’s social and attentional infrastructures differ from those of previous platforms such as Facebook or Snapchat, which centre on the notion of friendship ‘as both the common label and the privileged form of intimate relations’ (p. 48). TikTok’s suggestions are based on user engagements, driven by algorithmic systems that essentially watch what we watch and feed us more of the same. This ranking system doesn’t just determine what appears on a user’s feed but also influences platform vernaculars and shapes the affective community entanglements that flow through them. As Kristen Barta and Nazanin Andalibi suggest in their study of TikTok use in America, the platform is neither designed nor used as ‘a space for connection, like Facebook; rather, it’s a space for amusement and that’s all one “knows”’ (Barta and Andalibi, 2021, p. 15). Although users can follow their friends via the ‘Friends’ feed, the app’s main feed or ‘For You Page’ organises a different social and affective experience, in which content is sometimes ‘consumed without much awareness or consideration of users or even one’s network in the space’ (2021, p. 15). What this means is that on TikTok, the audience is sometimes imagined as ‘just a bunch of strangers’ (p. 16). Perhaps surprisingly, this can create a sense of sheltering anonymity and disinhibition for TikTok users, since the content that is being produced is often imagined as being for an unknown audience, and hence less freighted with potentially risky ‘real-world’ consequences.¹ Barta and Andalibi’s study emphasises how this sense of anonymity, together with the platform’s discursive construction as a safe space, creates the affective conditions for some users to express themselves in particularly ‘raw’ and ‘authentic’ ways (p. 16).

Similarly, in their study of TikTok use amongst American university students, Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo underscore how the FYP algorithm fosters a sense of identification between the user and their feed, as distinct from the people *in* their feed. As one participant in their study states: ‘I like the For You page because it’s suggesting to me all the stuff that I like even though I might not be following the people and

might not even want to actually follow them. I don't care about them beyond that video' (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022, p. 8). What is prioritised for this user, in other words, is the strong feeling of personalisation that the platform provides, leading to the experience of what Bhandari and Bimo call an 'algorithmised selfhood' that is more about users identifying the vibes, moods and affinities that define them, as opposed to the creation of enduring social or parasocial connections. TikTok's For You Page is thus in some ways a 'total strangers' page: an intimate public organised around algorithmically-defined, loose qualities of taste, mood and ambience that feel both uniquely personal and comfortingly anonymous, light-touch, remote. As Kyle Chayka puts it in his reflection on the TikTok 'vibes revival', the platform provides a concentrated 'comfort in turning our gaze outward'. As he notes, there is a 'self-effacement that takes place in embracing this new language, a sense that you are not "the main character" of a situation ... but a replaceable observer' (Chayka, 2021, n.p.).

Indeed, this idea of the user as a 'replaceable' or interchangeable node within the network is also central to the way TikTok works, and how it feels for users. TikTok has been theorised as an 'imitation public', a collective that is shaped by the features of 'templatability' and 'mimesis' (Zulli and Zulli, 2022). Imitation is baked into TikTok's platform affordances through design elements that strongly encourage participation through reiteration, re-interpretation and remixing of content. Participation on the platform 'starts from repetition', with platform trends and vernaculars strongly influencing the form that bodily performance and emotional expression take in this space (Lin et al., 2023, p. 1558). By foregrounding tools that allow users to easily imitate and remix existing trends, TikTok participates in, and further entrenches, a wider socio-technical logic of templatability. As defined by Tamar Leaver, Crystal Abidin and Tim Highfield in their work on Instagram, templatability refers to a process in which 'new aesthetic and communication norms' are quickly established and then 'ripple through [platforms], establishing the fleeting vernacular norms of the day' (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 15). The logic of templatability also shapes the affective and attentional structures of a given platform, as recommendation algorithms push familiar content and creators in turn quickly learn to cater to these algorithms to achieve visibility. As Leaver et al. note, although templatability can confer visibility, it often does so in ways that diminish feelings of unique individuality and agency in the strong sense, since the conditions of this visibility rely on imitation and mimicry – on learning to be like others, to do what others do

(p. 165). In other words, by inviting users to perform through imitation and repetition, TikTok performs a disciplinary function of training users to see themselves the way algorithms do – as ‘performance subjects’ of postdigital capitalism (Han, 2014). As Zulli and Zulli note, although the ‘imitation public’ that emerges on TikTok continues to ‘rely on a shared experience’, the force that ‘drives this collective experience is *largely and initially processual*’ rather than ‘interpersonal ... discursive ... or experiential’ (Zulli and Zulli, 2022, p. 1883). This creates a new kind of intimate public, one which ‘downplays interpersonal connectivity’ in favour of mimetic or ambient play. Self-disclosure on TikTok, whether discursive or emotional, is secondary to participation and the co-production of affect in the flow of the present – vibes that connect users across an often-anonymous public network.

I will now consider how these platform affordances work to both produce and police intimate relations of attention in three different ‘scenes’ of #boredom on TikTok. The research for this chapter was undertaken over two distinct phases. The first phase of research, which I discuss in more depth in my book *Entertained or Else: Boredom and networked media* (Kendall, 2025), was undertaken roughly between late March 2020 and July 2021: a period that coincided with the waves of COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK. In this phase of research, I tracked the officially-sponsored TikTok #BoredVibes challenge by collecting the top 200 TikTok videos that use Curtis Roach’s original ‘Bored in the House’ track, and which were tagged with #BoredVibes or #BoredInTheHouse hashtags, or both. In my larger study, I coded them using five main activity categories: performative, stunt, ‘boreductivity’, creativity and everyday life TikToks. The first ‘scene’ of boredom that I analyse below represents a very brief synthesis of some of these themes that are unpacked in my book. The second phase of research was conducted between August and October 2024 and relied on the ‘search this hashtag’ function in the TikTok mobile app to collect TikToks using the hashtags #Bored, #Boredom, #BoredAF and #BoredVibes. From within this full range of TikToks, I used a purposive sampling method to select (in scene two) the TikToks that I felt most directly emphasised aspects of intimacy. This process led me to eventually focus on those TikToks that feature jokes about flirting when bored. In scene three, I used purposive sampling to select two of the most liked TikToks that used boredom as hashtag or a descriptor, and which fit most closely within the platform norms for the presentation of authentic selfhood (see Barta and Andalibi, 2021; Kennedy, 2020; Schellewald, 2021).

Scene one: being (collectively) bored in the house

TikTok's meteoric rise to popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic was thoroughly entangled with the tools that it provided for connecting users across public-private networks, and with the techniques it offered for managing the collective boredom of lockdown. As I have argued elsewhere, TikTok thrived in this moment because it addressed what I have referred to as the pandemic's 'bored body problem', offering one means of releasing feelings of cramped stuckness into the rhythms and flows of contagious memetic participation (Kendall, 2021, 2025). Based on Curtis Roach's 'Bored in the House' TikTok, the official TikTok #BoredVibes challenge launched on 3 April 2020 provided inspiration for people everywhere to document and 'play' with their boredom and to find in-home solutions for managing it. Many of these #BoredVibes TikToks respond to lockdown boredom by performing choreographed dance numbers or executing playful tricks, stunts and other activities that are more appropriately conducted outside the home. For example, creating complicated obstacle courses, practising sports, riding around on scooters or even motorbikes while indoors, or slipping around on kitchen floors or hallways doused with water and washing up liquid. These examples offer an obvious means of breaking up the tedium of lockdown life by encouraging users to respond to the track through spectacular or inventive displays of physical movement produced from the confines of the home.

Although these TikToks emerge from the context of the pandemic, their vibe is playful, energetic and even joyful. Their aim is not primarily to express the feelings of boredom that spring from home confinement, but to acknowledge them while moving both bored content producers and bored scrollers past them. Their logic is participatory and connective, aimed at producing feelings of copresence and social solidarity from within the context of the lockdown. This is in keeping with the widespread use of mobile apps as entry points onto what Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson call 'ambient play'. As they note, the concept of ambient play foregrounds the potential of digital media to 'move *between* and *across* collocated and networked spaces', blurring 'divisions between public and private/domestic and rethinking how we experience intimacy and copresence' (Hjorth and Richardson, 2020, pp. 9, 38). In addition to its ability to create feelings of copresence, ambient play works on the 'sensory and affective *texture* or *atmosphere* of a place', involving users in the creation of new temporalities as well as new affective tones and rhythms.

Another type of #BoredVibes TikTok speaks to a desire to enliven pandemic time by foregrounding the rituals and routines of everyday life in self-isolation. These TikToks made direct reference to the experience of boredom, generating a collective imprint of what life in quarantine felt like. They featured a range of daily activities and habits that typify the tedium of pandemic life, such as snacking, trying on outfits, dusting, browsing for content, playing video games, climbing up walls, cutting or styling one's own hair, sitting on furniture, reclining on sofas or beds, lying on floors, staring into space, sighing heavily, dozing off, doing nothing. By providing an insight into the domestic routines of users during the pandemic, #BoredVibes TikToks worked as enactments of public intimacy, departing from boredom as the basis for a shared acknowledgement of the conventions and clichés of lockdown life. Through their knowing deployment of widely acknowledged elements of life in quarantine, they would produce valuable feelings of copresence, which partially mitigated against some of the loneliness, anxiety and boredom of self-isolation.

The #BoredVibes trend produced a remarkably legible scene of mass solidarity in the midst of the pandemic, organising an intimate public that was, paradoxically, forged around collectively felt boredom. This scene of identification amongst strangers offered consolation and compensation for the malaise of lockdown life; a consolation aimed at those who were able-bodied and well enough – indeed privileged enough – to be able to perform their boredom through the highly formulaic templates that would emerge through the TikTok #BoredVibes challenge. The scene of identification that emerged via #boredom from the COVID lockdowns produced a new collective identity: that of the 'good citizen' of lockdown, who was prepared to tough out boredom's cramped stuckness for the sake of the common good. The scene produced consolation and a sense of solidarity, but it also worked to discipline both content producers and browsers through an imperative to remain 'always on' for one's social and entertainment networks. This compulsion to remain connected was framed through the scene of boredom as both a gateway onto pleasurable, solipsistic play and as an expression of social duty, further complicating tensions between consolation and discipline in a COVID pandemic context.

Scene two: flirting out of boredom

In a post-COVID era, #boredom on social media has lost its evental character and has largely settled back down into the more mundane rhythms

and flows of ordinary life. On TikTok, user-generated content continues to frame boredom as an enduring reality of post-pandemic existence, but on a vastly reduced scale. Bored vibes still flare up, sometimes with marked intensity, but when they do, boredom often carries with it an air of casual aloofness or apathetic indifference that is central to understanding how it is used to mediate intimacies on TikTok. Many TikTok micro-trends that have appeared since the pandemic continue to lean into the tools that the platform provides for modulating boredom through ambient, memetic play. Often, boredom hashtags, captions or other descriptors are linked to TikTok trends but are tangential, occurring as a kind of affective hook or punchline to a joke. This is in keeping with its sustained reputation post-pandemic as a space for humour, fun and 'light-hearted' vibes ([Matamoros-Fernández, 2023](#)). For example, in lip-sync videos many TikTokers make use of trending audio to perform humorous skits that sometimes take aim at the experience of feeling bored. One popular video made in April 2023 (671.5k likes) depicts a young Black female TikToker lip-synching lines from a user remix of Lil' Yachty's track 'Strike (Holster)', which features the lyrics: 'I was geekin' ... I was high as fuck, tweakin' ...'. Although the original Lil' Yachty track has been used more widely on TikTok (55.3k videos), this particular user remix features in a much smaller sub-group of mainly female TikTok users of colour (270 videos). Among this group, the track is often deployed as a humorous means of commenting on life choices that are regrettable in hindsight – like trusting a cheating partner or spending all your money on ugly shoes. This track's lyrical refrain produces a wide range of different knowing responses amongst TikTokers; but in the example under consideration here, the lyrical refrain is pressed into a relation with both boredom and intimacy through a caption that reads 'POV: you flirted with someone outta boredom & now they like you fr'. Across the full spread of TikToks that use this track, the humour springs from the way that a meth high is re-contextualised through the variations introduced by each new TikTok. In this case, the joke involves a metonymic slide between boredom and 'tweaking': the act of 'behaving wildly or erratically' while under the influence of methamphetamine ([Dictionary.com, 2024](#)). Both are framed here as temporary states in which one's inhibitions are lowered and one's common sense compromised. On a meta-level, the video derives an additional layer of humour through the distinctly low-fi remixing of the originally heavily produced track, with its 'boastful lyrics about drugs, money and women', and through its tongue-in-cheek re-deployment in distinctly average contexts by the small community of female content creators of colour who have made it their own ([Powell, 2023](#)). This TikTok produces

a shared knowingness around boredom as a commonplace experience that can lead to momentary lapses of judgement, agency, or desire – echoing a longstanding cultural understanding of the emotion as a dangerous ‘pathology of the will’ (Goodstein, 2005, p. 146).

In her seminal book, *Boredom without Qualities: Boredom and modernity*, Goodstein describes boredom as an ‘infuriating, demoralizing, despairing’ crisis of meaning that reveals to subjects a failure of desire itself (p. 1). ‘In boredom’, she writes, ‘there is no distinguishing in here from out there, for the world in its failure to engage collapses into an extension of the bored subject who empties out in the vain search for an interest, a pleasure, a meaning. Self and world collapse in a nihilistic affirmation that nothing means, nothing pleases, nothing matters’ (p. 1). Such apocalyptic threats to self and world in some ways continue to underwrite the promises of intimacy that accrue around postdigital media in the twenty-first century. However, boredom’s weighty existential dimensions are downgraded in this context, so that it can instead serve as a prompt for users to translate incipient feelings of stuckness, stasis and apathy back into networked forms of agency and desire. On social media platforms, boredom is imagined as a problem, but a trivial one, which can be easily managed through the engrained gestures of updating and refreshing, scrolling and swiping. As I have suggested elsewhere, this downgrading of boredom as a largely ‘trivial’ experience is also often implicitly gendered, with the work of boredom management outsourced to young women and girls in networked settings (see Kendall, 2018). Post-pandemic, #boredom-themed content on platforms like TikTok signals a desire to move on from the weighty problems of lockdown malaise to something decidedly more ‘light touch’, which is being transacted through ambient play. In the TikTok discussed above, the joke about boredom as a meth high recognises the messy and potentially risky intimacies that accrue on postdigital platforms, but without acknowledging the reality that TikTok metes out such risks to *some* users more than to others. What is also being exchanged through the boredom-themed humour in this TikTok, in other words, is a knowingness around what it means to be a young Black woman on social media. But the humour and light-touch vibes work in this context to deflect and downgrade such concerns. Instead, the humorous staging of boredom signals a return to mundane normality in a world where having fun is no longer a weighty and highly visible matter of civic duty but just a joke shared between those who get the vibe.

As it turns out, jokes about flirting with people out of boredom are commonplace on TikTok. These jokes tap into a wellspring of content

on postdigital platforms that frame boredom as an alibi for any number of ridiculous, zany or otherwise nonsensical behaviours, including, for example: self-tasering, flinging Kraft-style cheese slices so that they land onto other people's faces and stick there, or removing all the seeds from a strawberry using tweezers. These posts declare: Look what boredom made me do! For instance, the caption 'When I catch myself flirting with someone just cuz I'm bored' appears in several iterations of the recent 'taking a break' micro trend (15.4k videos). This trend is based on a short audio track featuring a man's voice musing with mock-seriousness 'Am I ... a whore ...?' before concluding, 'I don't give a fuck'. TikToks that use this template feature users lip-syncing the lines, along with POV captions that re-contextualise it, often in humorously self-deprecating ways. For example: 'Me after kissing someone on the first day we met'; 'when I realize I only get over a mf when I replace them with another mf'; 'Me shaving my whole body before a night out "just incase"'. These highly intimate self-disclosures, which might express feelings of vulnerability or embarrassment in other contexts, are here modulated through the pleasures of collective memetic play. Like the performative #BoredVibes examples discussed previously, these videos lean into the possibilities that the platform offers to synchronise bodies at a distance, and to modulate boredom's bad, shaming vibes into a more playful expression of shared recognition, or of feeling 'in the know'. These examples emphasise the pleasures of both 'affective homophily' (Sundén and Paasonen, 2019) – feeling like – and 'synchronization at a distance' – bodily mimicry. According to Dominic Pettman, this 'will-to-synchronize' is a pervasive aspect of human experience, one that takes on diverse forms in different contexts. In a digital network culture, it is 'deeply colored by the experience of alienation', marked by a fantasy that our smart screens will bring us into synchronicity with other people in a 'banal beyond ... *somewhere out there* ... where life is being lived *as it should be*' (Pettman, 2016, pp. 56, 59). This desire for synchronisation is strongly activated in boredom-themed posts on social media platforms. Being rhythmically synchronised through the pleasures of dancing, lip-syncing or vibing out on TikTok responds on a very basic level to a condition of bored alienation. It speaks to the desires for collective affective attunement that social media are discursively constructed to provide. And yet, the notion of will that comes into play in a digital 'will-to-synchronise' is highly ambivalent, indexing a concept of desire that is both private – subjective, expressive and unique – at the same time as it is public – collective, aperspectival and generic.

The TikToks that poke fun at flirting out of boredom also acknowledge something important about boredom as an often-ambivalent relation of attention in networked settings. In these videos, boredom isn't necessarily the thing that prompts the post but sits alongside flirtatiousness as another reality of socially mediated life. Implicit in the connection between boredom and both tweaking and irresponsible flirting is a recognition of boredom's intensity and its complex relationship with active desiring agency. These jokes about boredom frame it as an intense affective force that builds and builds until it overpowers the 'rational' subject, eroding the common sense that partitions good stranger intimacy from bad on public platforms. Here, boredom is not complete disengagement or arelatationality, but an opening onto what Adam Phillips refers to as boredom's 'absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire' (Phillips, 1998, p. 68). While they point to the potential dangers of socially mediated communication, these TikToks also produce identification and provide both consolation and discipline by modulating boredom's negative intensities into a more light-touch aspect of everyday life that 'we' can all identify with. By framing boredom as relatable, recognisable and ordinary, these TikToks work to cultivate relations of attention amongst strangers, even if these relations are diffuse and ephemeral.

Scene three: boring intimacies

Many TikToks lean into this seemingly casual or 'light-touch' staging of the self in relation to others through boredom. One popular TikTok (234.4k likes) uses the subject line 'Hi I'm really bored' as a way of contextualising a 15-second dance routine set to a track called 'Roses' by the artist SAINt JHN. At the start of the video, the young, White female TikToker jumps into the vertical frame, stumbling slightly with a startled look that seems to acknowledge the presence of the camera with surprise in her domestic bedroom setting. Finding herself centre frame and pictured in a three-quarter shot, the TikToker looks up, with what seems like an air of resigned acceptance – as if to say, 'you're here? OK, I'll perform for you'. She half-heartedly mouths the lyrics, performs a few desultory choreographed hand gestures in time with the 15-second audio track. With her tightly fitted cropped top, exposed midriff and yoga-style leggings, along with her long, brown, loosely braided hair, and slightly silly facial expressions, this TikToker strongly embodies the platform aesthetic of 'goofy relatability' and 'discursively constructed "normality"' that, as Melanie Kennedy points out, confers visibility on the platform

(Kennedy, 2020). As Kennedy suggests, such visibility is not shared out amongst users indiscriminately but tends to be enjoyed by subjects who are 'female, normatively feminine, White and wealthy' (Kennedy, 2020). This video exudes a knowing adherence to such platform norms; this user knows, and is in full command of, the templates that drive attention and forge attachments on TikTok.

Another extremely popular variation on this type of video that discursively comments on boredom from within a scene of intimacy (2.2m likes) features Canadian TikTok Influencer Josh Richards. This TikTok shows Richards lip-syncing to the track 'Sneaky Link 2.0.', a collaboration between media correspondent and Influencer Kayla Nicole and the rappers Hxlllywood and Soulja Boy. After its release in November 2021, this track started trending on TikTok across a range of communities. Often, it would appear in conjunction with the home face waxing challenge that also went viral on TikTok in 2021. Other videos picture users lip-syncing to the line 'Boy you just my sneaky link, so don't keep texting me' while standing in front of a television clip featuring Harry Styles. This footage is edited to make it appear as a duet, with Styles delivering Hxlllywood's lines 'I am?' and 'Damn' in response to Nicole's putdown. Richards' video is a lip-sync video that pictures him miming Hxlllywood's part of the song while lying on what appears to be a bedroom floor with a pillow under his head. The video's closely cropped vertical frame puts all of the emphasis on his artfully tousled hair, thick eyebrows and facial movements, which convey an air of disbelief in sync with the lines 'Am I?' and shading into disappointment when he mouths the word 'Damn'. These elements place Richards within the context of TikTok's updating of bedroom culture, with recognisable aspects of the domestic mise-en-scene forging a highly constructed ideal of 'normality' that helps to bolster 'the distinctly "raw", "unfiltered" and "relatable" quality' that TikTok videos aspire to (Hu, 2022, p. 21). While the domestic space of the teen bedroom has been theorised in relation to girl culture, in Richards' TikToks, the bedroom setting bolsters his authenticity and fosters a sense of intimacy for and amongst his fanbase of 'mainly straight, adoring girls in thrall to his het-boy energy' (Onstad, 2023). The video's description, which reads simply 'bored asf' further situates Richards within this mundane space of relatable domesticity. But like the TikTok discussed above, boredom is inserted into this scene as a way of commenting on, and disciplining, a certain kind of intimacy – one that is strongly coded as heteronormative, White and middle class. In other words, it is a *boring intimacy*, produced through the knowing embrace of widely templated TikTok norms that are produced within the disciplinary regime of algorithmised selfhood.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that #bored is the most widespread boredom-themed hashtag of all on TikTok (17.6 million videos), far outnumbering other popular boredom tags such as #BoredatHome (4.6 m); #BoredintheHouse (2.0 m); #Boredom (1.5 m) and #BoredVibes (620.8 k). Although I have singled out for analysis two examples of boredom-themed videos on TikTok, there are literally millions like these. The platform affordances and vernaculars mean that although there are always variations, boredom content – like all other content – quickly settles down into recognisable patterns and repetitions. On TikTok, boredom is often the butt of the same joke, the object of the same prank, the refrain of the same song. As I suggested earlier, templatability fosters a sense of sharedness, providing consolation for the ‘loneliness of neo-liberalism’ at the same time that it performs a levelling and disciplining of ‘unique’ individuals into dividual subjects in vast anonymous and ephemeral networks (Chun, 2016). Given the overarching genericness of the two videos that I have described above, it is worth asking what the boredom descriptors add to these scenes of identification. How do boredom tags or descriptors work to modulate the relations of attention that accrue in videos that most thoroughly embrace templatability and reflect the most generic platform vernaculars on TikTok? In combination with popular boredom-themed captions and video descriptions, the #bored hashtag helps to contextualise and comment on the content of a given TikTok, but it often does so in ambiguous ways. Was the post created to express the user’s boredom, or to comment on it in some way? Is boredom what motivated the post? Is it a feeling experienced in the ‘now’ of networked ambient play? Is boredom, there, rather, to reassure us of the mundane, average, everydayness of a scene that is anything but?

One way of approaching these TikToks would be to ask how #boredom helps to stage the user as a subject of desire within these potential scenes of vibes-based identification. Boredom-themed metadata on postdigital platforms often provide a loose pretext for the post, while adding a note of casualness that helps to modulate the scene’s affective intensities. What boredom adds to otherwise standard dance and lip-sync performances on TikTok is a pretext: I’m just here because I’m bored. In the examples discussed above, #boredom works in this way, as a shorthand way of saying: nothing too intense, nothing too heavy, I’m only performing out of boredom. Boredom thus works to modulate the scene, to calibrate the affective potentials and limitations that might flow through it (while keeping subjects within categories that are recognisable, stable and to some extent, predictable). As Berlant insisted, intimacies are always shaped affectively through tensions between

desire and defence: ‘any expressive act is as likely a defense against an encounter as it is an opening onto being seen, known, and in relation, and often both aims operate at the same time’ (Berlant, 2015, p. 193). In the boredom-themed posts I have described in this chapter, the framing of the subject through boredom works in both of these directions: signalling an openness to, and performing a withdrawal from, the relations of attention that might arise from scenes of public intimacy. Here I am, a subject of desire and a desirable subject, but I’m only here because I’m bored. The desire that is expressed in this context is transient, apersonal and decidedly light-touch. Boredom works well as a way of modulating intimacy because, as I have suggested, it adds a note of casual aloofness while expressing a longing for the relations of attention that have been ruptured or are suspended within it.

Postdigital platforms have instrumentalised boredom in this way as a means of providing both consolation and discipline. While it can help to facilitate the vibes-based connections that provide consolation from the loneliness of neoliberalism, it also disciplines the ‘performance subjects’ of postdigital psychopolitics by allowing them to insert just the right distance into the scene. Boredom isn’t just a shutting down, as I have suggested, it’s a more delicate process of self-modulation and self-management in a neoliberal context that incites us to express and perform, but also to manage and optimise our emotional states in real time. Boredom-themed TikToks thus express tensions that are key to understanding mediated intimacies on public platforms: they express a desire for collective synchronisation and shared vibes, at the same time that they stage a calculated withdrawal from potentially too-intense scenes of identification on public platforms.

Note

1. I want to underscore that this *perceived* sense of sheltering anonymity that TikTok affords for some of its users is clearly not universal, but stems from the work of emotional and ambient mediation that I am unpacking in this chapter. Such perceptions, then, need to be considered alongside the more ambivalent feelings and clearly documented risks that are *also* part of what it means to share details of our intimate lives in postdigital spaces, and I will return to this later in my chapter.

References

- Barta, K. and Andalibi, N. (2021). Constructing authenticity on TikTok: Social norms and social support on the ‘fun’ platform. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5(CSCW2), 1–29.

- Berlant, L. (2007). Faceless book. *Supervalent Thought*. Accessed via WayBack Machine, 25 December, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141226225326/https://supervalentthought.com/2007/12/25/faceless-book/>
- Berlant, L. (2008). *The Female Complaint: The unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2015). Structures of unfeeling: Mysterious skin. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28(3), 191–213.
- Berry, D.M. and Dieter, M. (eds) (2015). *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, computation and design*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bhandari, A. and Bimo, S. (2022). Why's everyone on TikTok now? The algorithmized self and the future of self-making on social media. *Social Media + Society*, January–March, 1–11.
- Chambers, D. (2013). *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chayka, K. (2021). TikTok and the vibes revival. *The New Yorker*, 26 April, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/tiktok-and-the-vibes-revival>
- Chen, T. (2020). The influence of a vibe on TikTok. *Buzzfeed*, 9 October, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tanyachen/the-influence-of-a-vibe-on-tiktok>
- Chun, W. (2016). *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Dictionary.com (2024). 'Tweaking', <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/tweaking>
- Dominus, S. (2020). Watch these TikTok videos: The vibe is contagious. *New York Times Magazine*, 18 November, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/18/magazine/watch-these-tiktok-videos-the-vibe-is-contagious.html>
- Goodstein, E. (2005). *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Han, B.C. (2014). *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new technologies of power*, trans. Erik Butler. London: Verso.
- Hjorth, L. and Richardson, I. (2020). *Ambient Play*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hu, T.H. (2022). *Digital Lethargy: Dispatches from an age of disconnection*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- James, R. (2024). Introduction to Good Vibes Only. It's Her Factory. [Newsletter] 23 August, <https://www.its-her-factory.com/2024/08/introduction-to-good-vibes-only/>
- Kendall, T. (2018). '#Bored with Meg': Gendered boredom and networked media. *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Politics/Theory*, 93, 80–100.
- Kendall, T. (2021). From binge-watching to binge-scrolling: TikTok and the rhythms of #LockdownLife. *Film Quarterly*, 75(1), 41–46.
- Kendall, T. (2025). *Entertained or Else: Boredom and networked media*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Kennedy, M. (2020). If the rise of the TikTok dance and e-girl aesthetic has taught us anything, it's that teenage girls rule the internet right now. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(6), 1069–1076.
- Leaver, T., Abidin, C. and Highfield, T. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Lin, J., Swart, J. and Guohua, Z. (2023). Theorising TikTok cultures: Neuro-images in the era of short videos. *Media, Culture + Society*, 45(8), 1550–1567.
- Matamoros-Fernández, A. (2023). Taking humor seriously on TikTok. *Social Media + Society*, January–March, 1–4.
- Onstad, K. (2023). Internet famous. *Toronto Life*, 19 July, <https://torontolife.com/deep-dives/josh-richards-tiktok-superstar-social-media-influencer>
- Paasonen, S. (2021). *Dependent, Distracted, Bored: Affective formations in networked media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Pettman, D. (2016). *Infinite Distraction*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Phillips, A. (1998). *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Powell, J. (2023). Lil Yachty drops off new single 'Strike (Holster)'. *Revolt*, 7 April, <https://www.revolt.tv/article/2023-04-07/293214/lil-yachty-strike-holster-single>
- Schellewald, A. (2021). Communicative forms on TikTok: Perspectives from digital ethnography. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 1437–1457.
- Sundén, J. and Paasonen, S. (2019). Inappropriate laughter: Affective homophily and the unlikely comedy of #MeToo. *Social Media + Society*, 1–10.
- Wark, M. (2007). *Gamer Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zulli, D. and Zulli, D.J. (2022). Extending the internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform. *New Media & Society*, 24(8), 1872–1890.

Intimate matters: privacy and security and networked mental health support

Marjo Kolehmainen

Introduction

By exploring networked mental health support, this chapter provides new information about forms of care whose implementation is highly dependent on the generation of intimacy – experiences of privacy, closeness, confidentiality and (cyber)security. While intimacy can be considered to mean closeness, proximity, interconnectedness and connection, it can also be thought to surpass these kinds of ‘positive’ affective attachments and, instead, to refer to ‘the kinds of connections that impact both people and the aspects on which they depend on for living’ (Berlant, 1998). Therefore, intimacy refers to not only the connections between people but also the networked environments in which these unfold as well as the connections that are formed with devices, apps and platforms (Rambukkana and Wang, 2020; see also Kolehmainen, 2022; Paasonen, 2018; Paasonen et al., 2023; Wilson, 2016). The understanding of intimacy provided in this chapter acknowledges that subjective feelings and experiences of privacy, closeness, security and confidentiality are fundamental in therapeutic encounters for the creation of a safe therapeutic atmosphere and, thus, the successful provision of care. Moreover, as it discusses remote therapy and counselling, it anticipates that understanding intimacy in relation to the practices of teletherapy requires examining and interpreting it through and alongside the variety of associated digital technologies.

In the subsequent sections, privacy, proximity, confidentiality and security are considered to be overlapping and co-constitutive of each other; they are generative of intimacy. Researching these aspects enables the valorisation of the entanglements of postdigital intimacies in networked mental health support. This chapter particularly focuses on exploring digital privacy and (cyber)security, aiming to map their relational becomings as part of more-than-human assemblages. Aligning with previous research emphasising that digital privacy and security are not only technical issues, but are highly situated within sociocultural, economic and political contexts and can be understood in a meaningful way only if these are taken into account (Levy and Schneier, 2020; Watson and Lupton, 2022), this chapter frames privacy and security concerns as important in considering postdigital intimacies. The concept of postdigital intimacies (see Chapter 1, this volume) is a fruitful analytical lens offering insights into how privacy and security unfold in more-than-human and more-than-digital worlds (Watson and Lupton, 2022). Thus, I view privacy and security as relational and constantly ‘becoming’, with an interest in what the different more-than-human assemblages ‘do’ to privacy and security rather than what they ‘are’. The ‘postdigital’, from this perspective, is always more-than-digital and relational.

Empirically, this chapter draws on a study on the diverse practices of telepsychology in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where Finnish psychotherapists and other counselling professionals were interviewed about their experiences concerning technology. Most research participants engaged in ‘talking therapies’ and one-to-one client work or therapy for couples, families or groups. Through a detailed analysis of the research participants’ interviews, this chapter explores how and when issues regarding privacy and security emerge and become relevant in teletherapy. The design is guided by feminist new materialist health research, where the interest lies in how health, illness and health care are configured and enacted in the assemblages of both human and non-human actors (Lupton, 2019; see also Flore, 2024; Fox, 2023). This more-than-human perspective in the exploration of mental health departs from individualised and psychologised notions of wellbeing and views mental health as always being conditioned by both non-individual and more-than-human agencies (Kolehmainen, 2022; Coffey, 2022; Fox, 2023). Consequently, while the focus in this chapter is not on mapping the structural shaping of mental ill-health, the chosen approach is rooted in understanding how societal inequalities, such as racism, sexism, ableism and homo- and transphobia, are (re)productive of mental distress (e.g. Ikävalko, 2021) in ways that are irreducible to individualised notions of mental health.

Digital mental health care

Internationally, the notion of accessible mental health care is a topical, political and societal concern. In many countries, the need for accessible mental health care is largely unmet, and the increasing demand for accessible mental health care exceeds its supply (Kortesoja, 2022; Majanen and Tuomisto, 2022). Further, the growing number of mental health challenges equals a pressing need for the provision of psychotherapy services (Majanen and Tuomisto, 2022). In Western countries, the biomedical paradigm is currently a key framework for understanding and treating mental ‘illness’; but despite this shift from psychotherapy to biological psychiatry, psychotherapy remains highly popular (Pylkkänen, 2011; Thelandersson, 2023). In Finland, the marketisation and capitalisation of psychotherapy have made it a growing, profitable business (Kortesoja, 2022). Additionally, Kela – the Finnish State Pension Office that provides rehabilitative psychotherapy – financially supported a record number of rehabilitation clients in 2023; the number of clients has been increasing throughout the 2000s (Kortesoja, 2022; Majanen and Tuomisto, 2022). However, potential clients have difficulties accessing therapy mainly due to the lack of certified professionals providing psychotherapy services, which has resulted in long waiting lists (Kortesoja, 2022; Majanen and Tuomisto, 2022). As a consequence of the scarcity of resources in the public healthcare sector, non-profit organisations have been increasingly taking responsibility for providing mental health support (Helén, 2011; Ikävalko, 2021). Regardless, access remains an unresolved issue, and closer examination points to the unequal access to, and distribution of, mental health care.

The digitalisation of mental health care is often welcomed as ‘a solution to the global mental health crisis’ and unmet care needs (e.g. Rudd and Beidas, 2020). In particular, the development of digital interventions is fuelled by the intention to provide widely accessible and low-cost forms of therapy (Kozelka et al., 2023; Zeavin, 2021). While many scholars argue that the COVID-19 crisis and related pivot to remote consultations proved the appropriateness of distance mental health care and psychotherapy, others have critiqued the ways in which the pandemic period was used to validate digital mental health care as the default future approach. From this perspective, the digitalisation of counselling and psychotherapy inadvertently supported policies that had been advocating the digitalisation of mental health care (De Vos, 2021). In addition to the pandemic, the digitalisation of mental health care has been boosted by technological advancements – being powered by artificial

intelligence and automation, such as machine learning and data analytics (Flore, 2021, 2024). The increased inaccessibility to in-person and face-to-face engagements during the pandemic led to enhanced interest in and higher use of telehealth technologies in mental health care. This shift, as well as the willingness to justify the implementation of digital tools in mental health care, becomes visible in characterisations where the COVID-19 crisis and global pandemic have been called ‘the defining moment for digital mental health’ (Torous et al., 2020).

However, serious privacy and security risks could undermine the potential of telehealth (Hall and McGraw, 2014), and the digitalisation of mental health care has raised concerns regarding digital privacy and cybersecurity. For instance, while psychotherapy providers previously wrote notes locally and stored them in non-digitalised forms, technology has empowered providers to employ digital records and work more efficiently using third-party services and solutions. The implementation of these advancements in mental health care involves various risks, such as the potential leaking, hacking or breaching of the various forms of digitised personal information and its use for commercial, illicit or surveillance purposes (Lustgarten et al., 2020; Watson and Lupton, 2022). In fact, cybersecurity breaches in the health care sector are becoming more frequent, and personal mental health data is extremely valuable on the dark web (Inkster et al., 2023). In addition to data being sold or breached, one’s therapeutic data can be used against them in the future in other ways, such as when purchasing health insurance (Zeavin, 2021). However, a point often overlooked is that a lack of data – such as medical records – can also render subjects vulnerable in relation to power as when their data is exploited (Ruckenstein and Schüll, 2017). This, on its own, illustrates how the indissoluble entanglements between the digital and non-digital domains may cause various types of harm with very material consequences (see also Chapter 1, this volume).

More-than-human intimacies

Postdigital intimacies are more-than-human intimacies, that is, intimacies generated with and through digital technologies. Departing from the notions of intimacy as being confined to pre-defined domains of private life, such as sexuality, this chapter sees intimacy as exceeding human-only relations (Kolehmainen et al., 2022; Latimer and López Gómez, 2019). Theoretically, this is inspired by feminist studies and queer theory, which critical intimacy studies have built on in attempts to deconstruct public/

private binaries, address intimate normativities and consider intimacies that are not reducible to sexuality alone (Rambukkana and Wang, 2020). Nonetheless, intimacy is still often associated with the interpersonal and private, which is also visible in how research on ‘digital intimacies’ has focused on examining sexuality – with the term ‘intimacy’ often being used as a euphemism for sexual relations and acts (Kolehmainen, 2022, p. 65; Paasonen et al., 2023) – and sexuality itself is often considered the utmost private, ‘internal’ dimension of human life. There is an emerging research field that maps and examines digital intimacies beyond sexuality, such as explorations into digital intimacies that are enacted with and through social and health care (e.g. Kolehmainen, 2022). This chapter extends this line of research with an aim of investigating how intimacy manifests and what it ‘does’ in the context of teletherapy and remote counselling practices.

While the delivery of teletherapy can entail different modalities of intimacies – from mass to auto-intimacies – it is the close (but not too intimate) working relationship between the therapist and client that is generally placed at the core of any successful therapeutic engagement (Zeavin, 2021). The pivot to teletherapy, in practice, required professionals to reconsider how to create a safe, trusting and therapeutic space when the therapeutic consultation room was no longer physically accessible (Downing, 2021; Isaacs Russell, 2015). As dedicated ‘safe spaces’, therapeutic consultation rooms traditionally contributed to providing a sense of safety and protection to clients (e.g. Downing, 2021). For an effective therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the client, it is vital to establish a ‘setting’ or ‘frame’, and this frame is a part of how therapeutic intimacy is constructed, contained and managed (Zeavin, 2021). Mediated, networked therapies and teletherapies do not quite rescind traditional framing and, instead, require the generation of new frames that take media-specific forms to make the client feel therapeutically ‘held’ and safe (e.g. Downing, 2021; Zeavin, 2021). Such ‘distance intimacies’ (Zeavin, 2021, p. 18) vary based on the particular affordances of the digital technologies being used to establish the relationship with and through distance therapy.

This chapter aims to examine how intimacy emerges as an effect of how relations are materially done and get done, and how these relations are essential for different kinds of worldmaking (Kolehmainen, 2022; Latimer and López Gómez, 2019). It traces the ways in which intimacy is made of, and with, multiple entangled materialities, with a special focus on digital technology. Moreover, privacy and security emerge as effects of material entanglements that may cross and reshape differences of kind

(Latimer and López Gómez, 2019). According to this perspective, they should not be seen as taken-for-granted ‘goods’, as they can both limit and enhance freedom, equality and agency (see Birchall, 2021). Hence, intimacy is a contested issue rather than something that is associated with ‘positive’ closeness: it is not ‘neutral’ and can entail normative and even violent forms (Latimer and López Gómez, 2019; Zengin, 2016). Further, even ‘positive’ forms of intimate attachments involve the risk of vulnerability, which can be highlighted by the networked media that we live with (Paasonen et al., 2023). By identifying the relations generated in more-than-digital assemblages, we can map capacities that enhance privacy and security and those that constrain them.

Data and methodology

This chapter empirically draws upon interviews conducted with a total of 39 individuals, namely psychotherapists, family counsellors, psychologists, crisis workers, sex therapists and other counselling professionals, who were interviewed about their experiences concerning the use of technology. The interviews were conducted in 2020 as a part of an independent subproject on teletherapy in the COVID-19 era within the research consortium Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture. In Finland, similar to other countries, the pandemic resulted in a pivot to remote consultations carried out over videoconferencing or phone calls. Finland experienced the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, which led to the government declaring a state of emergency on the 16 March. The implementation of the Emergency Powers Act involved various measures if not strict national lockdowns, as was the case in other countries. Regarding the health care sector, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and regional state administrative agencies were directed to supervise the operations of health care and social welfare units, and municipalities were temporarily allowed to deviate from the time limits associated with non-urgent care. The more general measures varied from closing all schools except early education institutes to shutting down most public facilities, such as libraries and museums. Social distancing restrictions were enforced, and recommendations were provided regarding remote working in both the public and the private sector. In addition, Kela – the Finnish State Pension Office that provides rehabilitative psychotherapy and financial support to those who have been granted access – published specific recommendations and changed its policies, which resulted in video and phone calls being seen as appropriate.

The interviewees self-identified as either female (N = 30) or male (N = 9). Two of the interviewees were aged 25–29 years, three 30–34 years, seven 35–39 years, six 40–44 years, six 45–49 years, nine 50–54 years and six 55–59 years. The interviewees had varying levels of experience of using digital technology for their work, which highlights the importance of being able to make nuanced distinctions in the ‘postdigital’ context. While Finland is the most digitalised country in the European Union (Statista, 2024), with a strong emphasis on digitalising its health care sector (e.g. Helén, 2024; Iisakka and Alastalo, 2024), the interviewees’ individualised capabilities to benefit from this situation seemed to be highly varied and strictly situated. In other words, while they were definitely familiar with using digital technology in their everyday lives – and the interviews themselves were carried over Zoom, a videoconferencing platform – this familiarity did not mean that all of them were comfortable with using it for work purposes or were able to effortlessly make the shift to remote consultations. Although a few of the interviewees were well acquainted with remote therapy and online counselling, and some even had job descriptions that involved the development of digital infrastructures, most of them had not engaged in recurring digitally mediated consultations and engagements with their clients (Kolehmainen, 2022, 2024). However, most adapted quickly to the ‘new normal’ and the use of either various popular platforms for videoconferencing (e.g. Zoom, Skype and Teams) or software designed specifically for health care or psychotherapy purposes (e.g. videoconferencing tools designed for medical centres). Some interviewees also utilised other digital tools, such as chat applications or online advice columns, or engaged with clients over phone calls.

The first analytical strategy employed for processing the data was to carry out a thematic analysis. The first analytical strategy applied in processing the data was thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2014). The procedure at this stage was to extract accounts and sort them into various categories in order to identify emerging patterns in the data through systematic engagement with the transcripts. As a way of getting started, this method provided a valuable means to map the interviews (see also Lupton, 2019). The themes obtained using this strategy were manifold, for example the shift to telework, regional issues, home surroundings and family members, in/visibility, different media formats, technical difficulties, anonymity and cybersecurity.

In the second stage of the analysis, a theory-driven analytical approach to the data was employed through a method that can be best described as ‘thinking with theory’ (St Pierre and Jackson, 2014). This

method involves allowing theoretical concepts to guide the analytic focus (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012; Lupton, 2019); the current analysis was guided by the concepts of privacy and security, which were used as ‘entry points’ to the more-than-human assemblages where different entanglements of intimacy manifest. Further, thinking with theory analytically translates as ‘plugging in’ – a characterisation that captures the activity of thinking with theory as a production of the new, ‘the assemblage in formation’ (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012). Therefore, I included questions associated with privacy and security in the exploration of postdigital intimacies, seeking to identify not only assemblages but also the processes with and through privacy and security assemblages are made, unmade and remade (see Jackson and Mazzei, 2012). When analysing the interviews, I further re-read the transcripts informed by this analytic perspective, seeking to identify how different agents work together to generate affective forces and relational connections and map the capacities that are both opened and shut down by these networks of humans, discourses, norms, ideologies and things (Lupton, 2019).

In the following sections, based on my detailed analysis of the interviews, I will discuss three distinct but overlapping ways in which postdigital intimacies and the networked public–private figures in remote mental health care: 1) digital as environmental, which refers to the ways in which the relations constituted with and through digital technologies are experienced as seamless parts of contemporary data-driven lives without particular concerns over digital privacy and cybersecurity; 2) more-than-digital privacy threats, which denotes how overhearing and/or witnessing one’s remote consultations (often unintentionally) pose cybersecurity challenges as a byproduct of accessing such consultations from shared spaces; and 3) networked connections and interoperability of information systems, which tracks clients’ reluctance to share personal digital data as a way to manage privacy and ensure security. Taken together – and being inspired by Karen Barad’s (2003) seminal question of ‘how matter comes to matter’ – these three themes provide insights into the nuanced and situated ways in which postdigital intimacies ‘come to matter’ in networked mental health care. The interview excerpts have been slightly edited and shortened for readability. To preserve the anonymity of the participants, no detailed background information about them will be provided; further, only general occupational titles will be used. In this regard, this chapter aligns with the emerging field of feminist materialist health research, which places less emphasis on ‘who’ the interlocutors are and more on the actions and entanglements of different more-than-human assemblages (Lupton, 2019). Thus, the

interviews offer a fruitful avenue for examining the relational connections, affective forces and agential capacities generated in and through more-than-human assemblages.

Digital as environmental

Cybersecurity or other privacy-related issues were reportedly hardly any concern for the clientele of interviewees, whose everyday lives are already digitalised in many ways. One of the psychotherapists, for instance, expressed that she wished her clients would show more awareness of cybersecurity and take digital privacy seriously:

I always kind of say ... that a phone is a less secure gadget; but then there have been such responses like 'Well, I don't mind at all; like if someone overhears me, let that be so'. So, then I have stressed that, be cautious and don't let anyone access your therapy session. But then at that point, the responsibility is on you. But yeah, I have informed [them]; but then again, not everyone is concerned at all. Perhaps they could be a little more concerned really. But like [patients ask] very few questions concerning which device and whether it is secure. (Psychotherapist, I38)

Similarly, another research participant observed that clients do not consider cybersecurity issues. He interpreted enthusiasm for using WhatsApp for counselling as a sign of ignoring cybersecurity. However, this can also be considered a reflection of the everyday mundaneness of different platforms and applications. The increasing but now perhaps less perceptible normalisation of sharing once 'private', intimate lives on and through digital technologies and platforms becomes visible in how clients propose using WhatsApp for discussing sensitive issues (Chapter 1, this volume). If networked media and digital devices are 'normalised' to the extent that the relations formed with and through them may appear and feel natural and unremarkable for the clients, it may obscure questions concerning digital privacy and cybersecurity:

I haven't yet encountered [anyone saying] that they hesitate because of cybersecurity or data protection. It feels more like the clients do not even consider it, like they – there are many who ask like 'why not ... have a WhatsApp call?'. Well, I haven't consented to that myself; [but] modern people don't even have that

on their minds much. Well perhaps it proves to be a bigger issue to some who have familiarised themselves more [with cybersecurity issues]. (Violence worker, I11)

In other words, the observations made by the interviewees can be seen to articulate the ways in which the digital has become ‘environmental’. When the use of different platforms and applications is *already* a part of one’s everyday life, integrating them into therapy or counselling assemblages may be considered a mundane decision that does not merit much attention or require profound decision making – if it is acknowledged at all. In everyday data practices, trust is often generated through routines (Pink et al., 2018), and it seems that the routine use of popular applications, such as WhatsApp, does not invoke questions regarding its suitability for specific activities, such as social or health care.

A family counsellor reported encountering one – and only one – inquiry concerning cybersecurity. This interviewee was having difficulties remembering any other instance where security had been a concern for her clients. Interestingly, this account also demonstrates how investments in cybersecurity do not necessarily improve the perceived quality of teletherapy or translate to having a more convenient counselling experience:

Once, a client posed me a question like how – something like how secure this email is for sending information via Zoom or Teams links. No one else has really been concerned over it. [It’s] difficult to think anything else. Well, we have been very carefully informed about how we should send these Teams links to clients. But it has been so difficult to open those, since the message is encrypted. Not [everyone] can open it, and then I have to send the link as an ordinary email message. Because it isn’t really of help if they cannot access [the session]. Then it’s super secure, but nobody is using it, so it won’t prove helpful. (Family counsellor, I13)

Here, careful investments in cybersecurity paradoxically made digital technology less fit for its intended purpose and ended up reducing its therapeutic capacities: while encryption might serve its intended purpose, clients can still find encrypted messages difficult to open and fail to access meeting links. This is a compelling example of how privacy and security concerns can sometimes conflict with practicality for patients and the industry, thus creating tension (Hall and McGraw, 2014, p. 219). Eventually, the interviewee had to give up on secure email messages and

send the links as ordinary insecure messages. Hence, security does not guarantee functionality, and the relational capacities formed with and through privacy assemblages might work ‘against’ the goals of counseling and highlight the ambivalences associated with the refined technicalities of cybersecurity and the everyday uses of digital technologies.

More-than-digital privacy threats

Cyberattacks are often the focus when discussing threats to privacy and security, but a huge number of threats are much more quotidian – such as the threat where one’s privacy is violated by an intimate partner (Levy and Schneier, 2020). However, in the context of therapy, privacy threats do not necessarily stem from intentional privacy violations. The challenges related to securing a quiet and private space for attending a therapy session are a byproduct of the transition to remote sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic. A group psychotherapist, for instance, pondered upon how the mere possibility of different sounds in the background can affect the feelings of clients. The particular psychotherapy group he referred to did not make a transition to online meetings but, instead, decided to pause the meetings due to COVID-19 restrictions. Nonetheless, the interviewee reflected upon the particular challenges he associates with online meetings:

In a group, you should be able to talk openly about anything possible, including one’s difficult relations within their family. Well then, if you discuss these topics from some room of this family, how emancipated can one really find it? So, then, perhaps you should go inside a car with your smartphone or something. Plus, what does that mean for the rest of the group? Like, a-ha! Your kids are shouting there in the background, like do they then hear everything that I [say]? As it is such an important factor that the best possible feeling of safety is enabled for group members, and I don’t find that that level of safety can be achieved in an online group. (Group analytic psychotherapist, I1)

In intimate relationships, people commonly share physical space; they live together, spend time together in public and private settings and have high degrees of physical access that facilitates information transmission about each other. Copresence has a number of implications for intimate threats (Levy and Schneier, 2020). Regarding mental health care, the

lack of a shared therapeutic space creates concerns regarding privacy risks, as not all clients have a safe or private space within which they can attend their sessions (Downing, 2021). The interviewee suggested one might need to leave their house and find an alternative venue that allows for physical separation and, thus, soundproofing, as extraneous sounds were seen as undermining feelings of safety.

However, the affective experiences regarding the 'suitable' level of privacy and security were subject to interpretation, and the conceptions of these varied between the professionals and their clients. A family counsellor recalled an incident where she learned that a client couple of hers did not mind their child potentially overhearing them. The interviewee regarded this as being especially inappropriate, but it seemed that the clients' feelings of privacy and security were unaffected:

Then some sort of boundarilessness, like I thought that when I was having a chat with a couple, there were three of us, and we discussed sex even, and then, suddenly, there's a primary school-aged child walking behind them and getting a sandwich from the fridge. ... They didn't have that kind of ... understanding that the meeting should take place between the two of them. (Family counsellor, I26)

Rather than being about an intentional attempt to share details regarding one's relationship – or a desire to hear what is going on – the interviewee considered the situation a result of a lack of boundaries. Researchers studying 'intimate threats' have warned that copresence increases the risk for violations of privacy – as those who share an intimate relationship with us possess unique resources that can be utilised to gain access to our data or device (Levy and Schneier, 2020). However, having access to a video call hardly requires any intentional 'attacking'. Therefore, merely being located within hearing distance of a video call is enough for privacy violations – and in a shared apartment, this becomes a rule rather than an exception. In any case, this illustrates a complex picture of privacy and security, as the child could also be seen as a victim of privacy violations and of exposure to conversation that is not age-appropriate.

In addition to households, workplaces are places where information visibility is facilitated by copresence and related crossings of the line, such as one might look at a person's screen over their shoulder (Levy and Schneier, 2020) without any intentional or active attempt to access their private information. While hearing has been framed as a risk to privacy in previous accounts, someone potentially looking at another person's screen is considered to pose a possible privacy threat to clients in the next

account. Operating systems on laptop and desktop computers commonly display the headers of incoming emails, text messages, direct messages or other forms of communication on screen as they come in, temporarily reducing the user's capacity to manage their privacy (Levy and Schneier, 2020). Such design choices, while intended to provide convenience to users, often lead to disclosures of private information when a device's screen is within another person's line of sight. A family counsellor detailed their attempts to minimise the risk of someone looking at their clients' screens and gaining detailed information about them:

We also considered the sharing of links, like should we use email encryption or something else. And kind of made inquiries among our clients, like 'is this ... an email where we can submit [links?]'. If it was a work address, or 'would you like us to use another address?' And we decided that the title of that link should be very neutral ... there is no mention of couples therapy or suchlike. So, if a client is on their office computer and someone else sees the title, they cannot get any information based on the title. And then we also did not add those meetings in their calendars, it was only an email link. (Family counsellor, I16)

In practice, postdigital intimacies are also configured such that it might be impossible to control how and when one receives notifications. For instance, when at work, clients have limited control over whom they share their workspace with, which means that someone potentially looking at their screens can pose a threat to their privacy. Further, the common practice of sharing calendars represents another example of networked work environments where information may be inadvertently transmitted through visual display (see also Levy and Schneier, 2020). Someone who has received intimate information may have obtained it passively or accidentally rather than by actively seeking access to one's private information, which illustrates how digital technology is used and embedded in our everyday lives.

Networked connections, interoperable systems

While looking at someone's screen was discussed as a significant threat to privacy in the previous section, there were also instances where it was considered a practice that sustains privacy. A psychotherapist explained that when clients wish to show their writings to her, visually displaying

information on a screen decreases cybersecurity concerns: the affordances of a mobile phone enable the sharing of visual information without the act of connecting to social networking sites, which, in turn, helps in keeping the connection between a therapist and a client out of sight:

Many find it easier to physically open their diary slightly or to bring me something in print compared to how it feels very personal to send, for example, via email a text to be read in advance. At my reception it went smoothly, like I, for instance, read blog posts directly from a mobile phone screen, and then there are no cybersecurity issues; like if there's a closed community or if the client has published it online, I don't have to follow them on social media or in other ways reveal our connection. (Psychotherapist, I21)

The above excerpt serves as a reminder that following someone online is a very material practice with its own digital temporalities. Digital materiality contributes to creating therapeutic temporalities (Tucker, 2024), and the above account stresses how the practice of 'following' makes the materiality of the digital visible. The interviewee seems to suggest that clients find practices that do not challenge the temporal frame of psychotherapy – such as opening a diary, bringing along printed materials or purposefully displaying information on screen – the most convenient way of sharing their writings with the interviewed psychotherapist. Limiting traceable digital connections serves as a form of temporal narrowing, through which the professional and client can mutually establish a feeling of privacy and security and, thus, an affective atmosphere of safety.

Concerns over privacy and security are not limited to the 'here and now' of the counselling sessions, and different temporalities interact with various aspects of privacy and security. For instance, a sex therapist described online banking as a form of digital interoperability. The described payment procedure makes tangible how the digital becomes inescapable and 'environmental' (Bassett, 2015; Murray, 2020, p. 448), as digitalisation in the realm of social and health care means digitalising not only immediate services – such as the provision of teletherapy – but also associated, secondary activities, such as payment processes. The interviewed sex therapist explained that using a card as a method of payment puts the anonymity of the clients at risk:

The reasons for seeking support with us are often considered very sensitive, so leaving a footprint is something one might ponder about at the beginning. ... One can come anonymously, and there

have been anonymous clients; but then again, regarding technology, it's a challenge if one pays with a card, or now, during these exceptional circumstances, we use invoicing, then it is more difficult to remain anonymous. Well, if one pays in cash, then one can remain anonymous in therapy. (Sex therapist, I31)

The implementation of technology may facilitate involuntary information sharing; while the concerns associated with privacy and security in therapy and counselling are typically discussed in relation to the particularities of the digitalisation of health care, this excerpt illustrates that the everyday networked connections – such as the ones regarding online banking – may be experienced as highly relevant from the perspective of the feelings of privacy and security. However, this account also valorises how attempts to avoid data sharing do not necessarily increase and might even reduce the agency of human subjects (see [Birchall, 2021](#), p. 107). If one intends to protect their privacy by any means necessary, they are left with very few opportunities to access professional therapy services. Again, this underscores the postdigital as a condition that makes avoiding the use of digital technologies and data sharing an impossible task and stresses the importance of examining how the digital currently interacts with the provision of mental health care in spaces, situations and contexts that have been conventionally understood as 'non-digital'.

Digital footprints were discussed by a psychotherapist, who stated that her clients appreciate the fact that she does not report information to or store information in Kanta – a national patient record system which even private practitioners in social and health care are now obliged to use if they utilise digital patient registers and databases. This psychotherapist explained that she had assured clients that there is no reason to worry about potential digital footprints – 'no traces are left' – which addresses the ways in which digital temporalities and the entangled materialities are important for the creation of feelings of privacy and security:

When we started to have remote appointments, certain security issues had been discussed ... I have my data protection document, I don't have any register or digital register nor am I connected to Kanta and so on, and the majority prefers it that way. No traces are left, and I'm committed to professional confidentiality and so on. I have chequered booklets; I always showcase them and explain that this is like that, and that I'm the only one who's able to understand those booklets. And I have a file cabinet for

storing their papers; well, I have brought up these kinds of things.
(Psychotherapist, I37)

This excerpt also highlights the affective labour that is invested into building rapport, demonstrated by how the psychotherapist used transparency to promote trust (see [Birchall, 2011](#)) by informing her clients about how she protects and archives their data. Further, she displays awareness of how she is a producer of personal intimate data. Data are never neutral or objective but have to be extracted, selected or taken ([Birchall, 2021](#)), and therapy and counselling professionals are in a position that requires them to make decisions and interpretations regarding what client information is to be extracted and stored as data. From the perspective of trust and security, the separation of the digital and non-digital seems crucial, as the interviewee contrasts storing information in digital patient registers with her preferred practice of keeping a personal booklet and storing papers in a local file cabinet.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have discussed three ways in which postdigital intimacies and the networked public–private figure in remote mental health care. First, it was possible to identify how the digital has become environmental. The relationships constituted with and through digital technologies were generally experienced as seamless parts of everyday lives without particular concerns about digital privacy and cybersecurity and as being easily transferable from one context to another without inducing any notable attention or feelings of hesitancy. Second, I analysed the privacy threats that the research participants identified during the interviews. Instead of intentional violations of privacy, unintentional overhearing and glances at one's screen posed a cybersecurity challenge, primarily due to the presence of others, such as family members or work colleagues, in shared spaces. Thus, these threats were more-than-digital in many ways. Third, when discussing networked connections and the interoperability of information systems, I elaborated clients' reluctance to share personal digital data. From a client's perspective, the difference between 'digital' and 'non-digital' matters and is essential for the generation of feelings of privacy and security. Thus, deviating from generalised accounts of postdigital cultures, and contrary to arguments about whether something being digital is actually important anymore ([Bassett, 2015](#), p. 136), this chapter shed light on the situations wherein the difference matters.

Hence, while previous research on both postdigital cultures and digital intimacies has mainly discussed popular (online) cultures, this chapter has expanded on this interpretation by taking mental health support as an ‘entry point’ to the networked public–private. Aligning with such scholarship in which the ‘post’ in postdigital does not translate to ‘after’ to refer to ‘progress’ but, instead, entails both continuation and change, stressing the blurred boundaries between the ‘digital’ and ‘non-digital’ (Chapter 1, this volume), this chapter has illustrated the manifold ways in which digital privacy and cybersecurity are relevant in mental health care. The use of technology in mental health care is nothing new, which started from Freud’s mail treatments to advice columns, radio broadcasts and crisis hotlines, well before home computers, the internet and smartphones (Zeavin, 2021). However, the current networked connectivity extends beyond its understanding as simply ‘technology’, having grown into an infrastructure reminiscent of electricity, gas, water or heating and an inseparable part of everyday lives (Kolehmainen, 2022; Paasonen, 2018; Wilson, 2016). As illustrated in this chapter, intimacy emerges as an effect of how relations are being made materially, and digital technologies are part of these materials and increasingly networked relations in the context of mental health support. Privacy and security (or lack thereof) emerge through and with the relational connections, affective forces and agency generated in and through more-than-digital assemblages.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by *Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture*, a research consortium funded by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland [327391], and by *Networked Care: Intimate Matters in Online Mental Health Support*, a research project funded by the Research Council of Finland [356256].

References

- Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), 801–831.
- Bassett, C. (2015). Not now? Feminism, technology, postdigital. In D.M. Berry and M. Dieter (eds) *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, computation and design*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 136–150.
- Berlant, L. (1998). Intimacy: A special issue. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 281–288.

- Birchall, C. (2011). Introduction to 'secrecy and transparency': The politics of opacity and openness. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28(7–8), 7–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411427744>
- Birchall, C. (2021). *Radical Secrecy: The ends of transparency in datafied America*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Braun, B. and Clarke, V. (2014). What can 'thematic analysis' offer health and wellbeing researchers? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 9(1), 26152. <https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v9.26152>.
- Coffey, J. (2022). Assembling wellbeing: Bodies, affects and the 'conditions of possibility' for wellbeing. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 25(1), 67–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1844171>
- De Vos, J. (2021). A critique of digital mental health via assessing the psychodigitalisation of the COVID-19 crisis. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 19(1), e1582.
- Downing, L. (2021). Bodies on the line: How telepsychology brought about new relationalities between therapists and their clients during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Psychosocial Studies*, 14(3), 229–243. doi: [10.1332/147867321X16291280809438](https://doi.org/10.1332/147867321X16291280809438)
- Flore, J. (2021). Ingestible sensors, data, and pharmaceuticals: Subjectivity in the era of digital mental health. *New Media & Society*, 23(7), 2034–2051.
- Flore, J. (2024). (Dis)assembling mental health through apps: The sociomaterialities of young adults' experiences. *Media International Australia*, 192(1), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X221114486>
- Fox, N.J. (2023). Digital healing? Digital capitalism? Neoliberalism, digital health technologies and 'citizen health'. *Curare. Journal of Medical Anthropology*. Online First. doi: [10.60837/curare.v1i1.1811.CCBY-SA4.0](https://doi.org/10.60837/curare.v1i1.1811.CCBY-SA4.0)
- Hall, J.L. and McGraw, D. (2014). For Telehealth to succeed, privacy and security risks must be identified and addressed. *Health Affairs*, 33(2), 216–221. doi: [10.1377/hlthaff.2013.0997](https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2013.0997)
- Helén, I. (2011). 'Asiakaslähtöisyys eli miten mielenterveystyö epäpoliitisoitui'. Teoksessa *Reformin pirstaleet. Mielenterveyspolitiikka hyvinvointivaltion jälkeen*, toim. Ilpo Helén. Tampere: Vastapaino, 153–181.
- Helén, I. (2024). Terveysdatataloudet: Innovaatiopolitiikan mielikuvastot tulevaisuuden terveydenhoitoa tekemässä. *Sosiologia*, 61(3), 192–210.
- Iisakka, E. and Alatalo, M. (2024). Digitaalisen sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollon lupaukset: Kriittinen luenta hyvinvointialue-strategioiden sosioteknisestä mielikuvastosta. *Sosiologia*, 61(3), 211–277.
- Ikävalko, E. (2021). Affektiivinen kuuluminen vertaisuuteen perustuvassa mielenterveystyössä. *Sosiologia*, 58(4), 338–354.
- Inkster, B. Knibbs, C. and Bada, M. (2023). Cybersecurity: A critical priority for digital mental health. *Frontiers in Digital Health*, 5, 1242264. doi: [10.3389/fdgth.2023.1242264](https://doi.org/10.3389/fdgth.2023.1242264)
- Isaacs Russell, G. (2015). *Screen Relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Boca Raton, FL: Routledge.
- Jackson, A.Y. and Mazzei, L.A. (2012). *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing data across multiple perspectives*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kolehmainen, M. (2022). Intimate technology? Teletherapies in the era of COVID-19. In M. Kolehmainen, A. Lahti and K. Lahad (eds) *Affective Intimacies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 63–80. <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526158574.00009>
- Kolehmainen, M. (2024). Vibrant screens: Remote therapy and counselling through the lens of digital materiality. *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine*, 29(2), 181–199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634593241234491>
- Kolehmainen, M., Lahti, A. and Lahad, K. (eds) (2022). *Affective Intimacies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Kortesoja, M. (2022). Tapausta Vastaamo: Symptomaattinen luenta potilastietosuojan murtumisen yhteiskunnallisista syistä ja seurauksista. *Tutkimus & Kriittikki*, 2(1), 9–32.
- Kozelka, E.E., Acquilano, S.C. and Al-Abdulmunem, M. et al. (2023). Documenting the digital divide: Identifying barriers to digital mental health access among people with serious mental illness in community settings. *SSM – Mental Health*, 4, 100241. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2023.100241>
- Latimer, J. and López Gómez, D. (2019). Intimate entanglements: Affects, more-than-human intimacies and the politics of relations in science and technology. *The Sociological Review*, 67(2), 247–263. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119831623>
- Levy, K. and Schneier, B. (2020). Privacy threats in intimate relationships. *Journal of Cybersecurity*, 6(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cybsec/tyaa006>

- Lupton, D. (2019). Toward a more-than-human analysis of digital health: Inspirations from feminist new materialism. *Qualitative Health Research*, 29(14), 1998–2009. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732319833368>
- Lustgarten, S.D., Garrison, Y.L., Sinnard, M.T. et al. (2020). Digital privacy in mental health-care: Current issues and recommendations for technology use. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 36, 25–31. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.03.012>
- Majanen, M. and Tuomisto, M.T. (2022). Psykoterapian tarve ylittää tarjonnan – ratkaisuna edulliset tutkimukseen perustuvat hoidot. *Käyttätymisanalyysi ja -terapia*, 27(3–4), 12–32.
- Murray, S. (2020). Postdigital cultural studies. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 441–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920918599>
- Paasonen, S. (2018). The infrastructures of intimacy. In R. Andreassen, M. Nebeling Peterson, K. Harrison and T. Raun (eds) *Mediated Intimacies*. London: Routledge. pp. 103–116.
- Paasonen, S., Jaaksi, V., Koivunen, A., Nikunen, K., Talvitie-Lamberg, K. and Vänskä, A. (2023). Intimate infrastructures we depend upon: Living with data. *Media Theory*, 7(2), 285–308. <https://doi.org/10.70064/mt.v7i2.576>
- Pink, S., Lanzeni, D. and Horst, H. (2018). Data anxieties: Finding trust in everyday digital mess. *Big Data & Society*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951718756685>
- Pylkkänen, K. (2011). Finnish psychiatry: Past and present. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry*, 66(sup1), 14–24.
- Rambukkana, N. and Wang, K. (2020). Digital intimacies. Oxford Bibliographies, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0250.xml>. doi: 10.1093/obo/9780199756841-0250
- Ruckenstein, M. and Schüll, N.D. (2017). The datafication of health. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 46(1), 261–278. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102116-041244>
- Rudd, B. and Beidas, R. (2020). Digital mental health: The answer to the global mental health crisis? *JMIR Mental Health*, 7(6), e18472. doi: 10.2196/18472
- St. Pierre, E.A. and Jackson, A.Y. (2014). Qualitative data analysis after coding. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20, 715–719. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414532435>
- Statista (2024). <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1245595/eu-digitalization-level/>
- Thelander, F. (2023). *21st-century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable vulnerability and sad girl culture*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16756-0>
- Torous, J., Jän Myrick, K., Rauseo-Ricupero, N. and Firth, J. (2020). Digital mental health and COVID-19: Using technology today to accelerate the curve on access and quality tomorrow. *JMIR Mental Health*, 7(3), e18848. doi: 10.2196/18848
- Tucker, I. (2024). Temporalities of peer support: The role of digital platforms in the ‘living presents’ of mental ill-health. *Health Sociology Review*, 33(1), 59–72. doi:10.1080/14461242.2024.2322531
- Watson, A. and Lupton, D. (2022). What happens next? Using the story completion method to surface the affects and materialities of digital privacy dilemmas. *Sociological Research Online*, 27(3), 690–706. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804221084343>
- Wilson, A. (2016). The infrastructure of intimacy. *Signs: Journal Of Women in Culture and Society*, 41(2), 247–280. doi:10.1086/682919
- Zeavin, H. (2021). *The Distance Cure: A history of teletherapy*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Zengin, A. (2016). Violent intimacies: Tactile state power, sex/gender transgression, and the politics of touch in contemporary Turkey. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 12(2), 225–245.

Sinéad O'Connor, 'bipolar' celebrity and mediated intimacies: towards a mad feminist temporal politics

Debra Ferreday

First of all, this was intended to be a chapter about survival.

Recent years have seen a resurgence of online interest in women and minorities held to be harmed by the pre- and proto-digital media cultures of the 1990s and early 2000s. Shuhada' Sadaqat, known to the world as Sinéad O'Connor and revered for her searing honesty as an artist and for her openness surrounding her mental health struggles, is one such figure. Through her autobiography, *Rememberings*, the documentary movie *Nothing Compares* – which documented her later abuse at the hands of psychiatric and medical systems and her work as a whistleblower and truth-teller – and in communication with a new audience on social media, she emerged as an honest and often hilarious feminist, a queer-identified and postcolonial artist who spoke about the flawed, contradictory and messy work of survival. It was in this context that I began writing about her in the summer of 2023. I was interested, at that time, in the way that postdigital media cultures enable new ways of experiencing intimacy with celebrities, and how such mediated encounters might not be read as 'just' another form of capitalist appropriation. I became interested in the kind of figures that journalist Sarah Marshall of *You're Wrong About* podcast has termed the 'Maligned Nineties Woman': people like Britney Spears, Monica Lewinsky, Pamela Anderson, Courtney Love, or Whitney Houston get taken up and recirculated in contemporary social media spaces, especially by younger audiences. These were all women whose struggles with various forms of addiction and distress have been extremely profitable for the emerging celebrity culture of the nineties,

but who had been subject to intense abjection and disgust – the kind of women I was writing about early in my career. The violence against these women, it now seemed to me, had to do with relations of intimacy: by oversharing, acting out, behaving like ‘trainwrecks,’ they were seen as drawing media audiences into an unwanted relation of intimacy *by the very media industries that profited from their struggles*.

This project of vindicating and reclaiming these women, re-aligning our understanding of their lives and work in the context of postdigital media and #MeToo, felt heartening at a time that often seemed politically hopeless. These discussions opened up a kind of intersectional feminist anti-nostalgia, a kind of horrified fascination with the past that felt personally and politically vindicating. To witness Generation X women’s generational trauma discussed through a lens of decolonial, anti-ableist, anti-capitalist and queer intersectional politics seemed to represent the possibility of new intimate publics and perhaps a new way of doing feminist generational politics. Then again, as I avidly consumed these media, I experienced a blend of nostalgia and re-traumatisation that felt painful but at the same time, interesting. I wanted to work with it, to think about the mad temporalities that might be found in such re-immersion in the past. It felt as though the re-membering of the past had the potential to create a new kind of ‘intimate public’ (Berlant, 2008) in which thinking with these ‘difficult’ women could enable us to experience trauma differently.

Recently, Sinéad, along with other celebrities, has been taken up by what Fredrika Thelandersson terms ‘sad girl’ communities: post-digital spaces originating from the fandoms of femme-coded artists that utilise meme culture to construct an ‘alternative collective psyche’ (Thelandersson, 2023) in opposition to the toxic positivity of mainstream mental health discourse (Thelandersson, 2023). By enabling multiple voices and experiences of living with mental illness to actually interact with one another outside the fragmented and isolating spaces permitted by biomedicine and capitalism, an alternative and multifaceted way of conceptualising sadness becomes possible: one that transcends the artificial binary constituted by the extremes of neoliberal recovery on the one hand and of antipsychiatry on the other (Cho, 2008; Blackman, 2016). Defined by world-weary, self-aware melancholy, the sad girl represents a refusal to be made sense of, engendering a potentially supportive collective of sufferers who ‘learn that they are not alone, and possibly receive non-medicalized modes of support’ (Thelandersson, 2023). This seemed to resonate with the way the postdigital re-emergence of the maligned woman might also enable ways of seeing and feeling differently.

So it was in this context, of engaging deeply with art that I have lived with for many years alongside a new way of experiencing that art alongside new fans, that I began to re-immense myself in Sinéad O'Connor's work. O'Connor was important to me not just because she is lauded, as a whistleblower who exposed abuse in the Catholic Church and the music industry and who is seen as refusing much of the sexualised emotional labour demanded of women in the public eye, but as one striving to define her relationship to mental health on her own terms. Listening to her music every day, experiencing her autobiography as a written text and then as an audiobook, consuming hours of podcasts, YouTube videos, social media posts and media articles, her low, throaty, self-aware Dublin-accented voice became an everyday presence in my life. It seemed important that she was still alive.

As a woman who experienced some similar struggles although not, thankfully, exacerbated by huge talent and fame, she came to embody my image of the survivor: survival as in the messy, flawed and nonlinear work of 'living with' that is the antithesis of the triumphalism of the dominant mental health survivor narrative. These are the mad and intersectional feminist temporalities that she came to embody, for me and for the wider world. At the same time, a series of intimate, honest videos documented the ordinary details of her life, including her move to a new apartment, alongside her struggle with her complex and agonising grief for her son Shane, who died by suicide the previous year, her own traumatic history and her painful experience of surgical menopause following a hysterectomy. These videos attracted a media feeding frenzy for her willingness to present herself as she was at that moment: sometimes calm, sometimes frantic, uncompromising in her honesty about whatever emotional state she was experiencing in the moment, free of makeup and other trappings of conventional hotness expected of female celebrities. In her last video, dated 9 July 2023, she showed off her 'nice flat ... a bunch of flowers my friend gave me', speaks about 'looking like shit ... the place is a shithole' and discusses her plans for new songs and her research on Hindu asceticism.

It was not the first time O'Connor had used digital media to speak from a place of struggle. In March 2016, she had briefly gone missing, prompting one tabloid to run a liveblog on her whereabouts. In 2017 she recorded and shared her shame at the impact of this on her family: for this, she was both shamed for oversharing and praised, as Paris Lees wrote, for '[tearing] down the glossy façade of the public debate around mental health' and revealing the 'wailing, ranting, desperate demon that secretly tortures millions'. The political power of this was not lost on her fans. As Lees concluded, 'maybe if watching O'Connor's self-proclaimed

“rant” makes us uncomfortable it’s because we are uncomfortable with our complicity in failing to address the things, such as abuse and poverty and stigma, that can drive people to mental ill-health’ (Lees, 2017).

This notion of ‘oversharing’ is key to my reading of the ‘Maligned Nineties Woman’ as a recuperative and reparative figure who re-materialises through postdigital media, insistently singing and speaking and sometimes screaming about the things we would rather not hear: both the generational abuse with which many of us live day to day, and the often repetitive, stuck, nonlinear reality of mad existence. The production of Sinéad’s ‘rants’ as distasteful resonates with popular paranoid readings of the postdigital, as Jenny Kennedy’s astute analysis highlights. ‘Prevalent in the collective psyche,’ she writes, is a fear of oversharing and an aversion to those who do such a thing (2018, p. 267). Practices and understanding around ‘oversharing’, she argues, are multiple and complex: further, far from being limited to online life, they extend and complicate broader anxieties and lived experiences of intimacy, emotion, and boundary-making. This fear is amplified in sensational accounts of social that attribute a decline in social discourse to cultures of oversharing online. This discourse is explicitly ableist as well as technocentric, with social media held to both worsen and cause ‘personality disorders’ that are imagined as viral and contagious (Kennedy, 2018, pp. 267–268).

However, I would build on this to caution that the kind of recuperative reading that simply denies a connection between (post)digital social practices and ‘personality disorder’ risks reproducing the stigmatisation of madness: that there is in fact a profound resonance between the way the postdigital reconfigures relations between past, present and future, and the way it enables ways of *feeling differently* and *connecting differently*, that both speak to the experience of mad individuals and problematise the notion of mad experience as solely located in mad subjects.

It is through this framework of ‘mad’ and ‘borderline’ practices such as oversharing as *productive* that I want to consider Sinéad’s ‘rant’ videos not as an embarrassing deviation from her work as an artist, but as part of it. The postdigital offers rich possibilities for understanding the work Sinéad and her fans are doing in the making, sharing, and receiving of these diverse forms of content. Ringrose et al. (2024) define the postdigital as a lens for seeing ‘how the online and offline are entangled, affective lived experiences ... it helps us grapple with how experiences online are digitally mediated but with “real life” material embodiments’; thinking about how online and offline ‘bleed into’ one another, co-constituting material bodies, emotions and possibilities (2024, p. 1058). I am interested in the way that time collapses in the postdigital: how the

past returns not simply as archival memory, but through a relation of social haunting in which the collisions of past, present and future that we already inhabit as embodied subjects are amplified and made visible.

In writing about Sinéad O'Connor, then, I am focusing on a particular kind of complex celebrity: but I am concerned with the ways in which her performance as an artist and public figure speak to a much wider mad experience that is made invisible in the 'collective psyche' but that surfaces through the postdigital. Sinéad's digital presence is particularly rich in speaking to these embodied postdigital relations. In terms of the resonance between online sharing and wider negotiations of mental distress, the videos resonated deeply with fans, encouraging connection between often isolated subjects including the singer herself. In the past O'Connor had spoken about how using digital media platforms to share her experiences with 'millions of people' had made her feel less alone (Parkinson, 2023). To paraphrase journalist and mental health advocate Hannah-Jane Parkinson (2023), of contemporary public figures, O'Connor was perhaps the one whose experiences of psychiatric disorder – she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, and complex PTSD – spoke most to the realities of those who live with these diagnoses and their accompanying stigma (n.p.). In a celebrity culture that thrives on the carefully managed illusion of intimacy, especially with female and minoritised stars, her willingness to speak *from* a place of raw pain as well as transforming that pain into art, but also to acknowledge her relative privilege and advocate for meaningful social and institutional change, made her an irreplaceable voice for intersectional mad feminism.

Sinéad O'Connor was found dead of natural causes on 26 July 2023. In the way of the celebrity death industrial complex, her image was suddenly everywhere, as fans struggled to process their grief online, and mainstream media outlets scrambled to profit from her death while burying any possible evidence of their culpability. So established was the teleological media narrative about O'Connor's downward spiral that her passing – actually from complications related to congestive heart failure and asthma – was widely reported using accepted codes for suicide, a trend which rendered the already incalculable loss all the more terrible and impossible to process. Obituary writers, apparently led by their own impatience with the inquest and a desire for salacious details of her struggles, employed weasel words along the lines of 'following a struggle with mental illness/bipolar disorder': literally true, but misleading. The BBC provided a link from its obituary, which recalls her 'indicating she was considering suicide', to a suicide help line (BBC, 2023). An *NBC News*

headline simply read ‘Sinéad O’Connor’s death is not being treated as suspicious’, often a coded reference to suicide. Her death was therefore presented as both a tragic loss and a kind of inevitability,¹ her ‘rawness’ and ‘vulnerability’ presented not as the result of the structural abuses her autobiography recounts, but personal tragic flaws.

The hypocrisy of this framing is obvious. The *Daily Mail*, who published hit pieces throughout her life, such as one highlighting a ‘sad slide from being pop’s most ethereal beauty ... overweight ... drab ... dysfunctional ... [and attempting] a comeback’ (Price, 2011) now hailed her as ‘Vulnerable, Powerful and Pure’ (McNamee, 2023), the paparazzi shots with fatphobic and ageist captions (‘the years have taken their toll!’) now replaced by a youthful studio portrait. The obvious hypocrisy of this engendered immediate online backlash. As one viral meme shared thousands of times in the days after her death succinctly put it, ‘STOP TREATING WOMEN LIKE SHIT WHILE THEY’RE ALIVE’. She became the subject of thousands of searches, memes, and discussions calling to continue her lifelong project of calling out and resisting oppression and countering media exploitation of women’s struggles.

It is striking that, in exploiting Sinéad’s death, media were abetted by new discourses of advocacy and care. Recently, mental health service users have been urged to speak out publicly, sharing (as opposed, importantly, to ‘oversharing’) details of what were once framed as deeply intimate, private, and often shameful experiences. COVID-19 brought new attention to the way digital media platforms might enable such sharing. Simultaneously, celebrity culture became a focal point for discussions around mental health and the negative impacts of media scrutiny, especially for women and minorities. Intersectional feminist work on post-digital intimacies has focused on how celebrity advocacy around ‘talking about’ mental distress provides opportunities for fracture and resistance (Thelandersson, 2023; Wood, 2022) and at the same time critiqued how this ‘speaking out’ actually reproduces and enables the harms of neoliberalism (Scharff, 2016; Orgad and Gill, 2022). This postdigital, post-pandemic acceleration of what survivor activists term the ‘raising awareness industrial complex’ has served to mask the extent to which neoliberal capitalist cultures, including media, continue to produce *and indeed intrinsically depend on* conditions that inevitably produce mental distress, highlighting a devolution of responsibility from under-resourced health services, as well as the relations of commodification and stigma that often follow from such public acts of self-exposure. This work on mediated cultures around mental illness adds to an already substantial body of feminist theory on the cultural politics of emotion

at stake in ideas about depression, trauma, rage, and grief (Ahmed, 2004; Cvetkovich, 2012; Sedgwick, 2002). As Wood (2022) notes, this has resulted in a culture where ‘everyone is talking about it, but it is not getting better’. May (2023) argues that this ‘vulnerability industry ... [takes] the pain, the righteous anger, the raw transmission of feeling, and folded it neatly back into capitalism, another product to be consumed. Vulnerability sells, and it adds a bankable ring of authenticity to boot’ (May, 2023).

As a woman who was continually read as both ‘mad’ and ‘bad’ throughout her life, Sinéad O’Connor resisted this narrow version of celebrity activism and has continued to creatively adapt this resistance as new postdigital platforms emerged. Ever since her allegedly ‘career ending’ 1992 protest against abuse in the Catholic Church – of which she had personal experience as a teenager abused by her mother and incarcerated in a Magdalene home for ‘wayward’ behaviour – she was an artist who continually says the quiet part out loud: not only through her art, where she often sounds like an angel whose throat is bloody from screaming out forbidden truths, but in her life and the ad-hoc digital fan communities she created. In her hilarious, often filthy social media presence she constantly exposed the murky inner workings of media industries, talked frankly about her sexual desires and shared her intense grief at the death of her son. Her book does this through its content and through its structure, which holds together a standard account of her childhood and early experiences of fame with a more fragmented and impressionistic second half after her time at an elite mental health facility. However, I would go further in suggesting that in outlining how ‘mad’ celebrities are produced by and through media discourse, this critique often fails to engage with mad thinkers themselves and to think through how she is oppressed as a mad subject. It is in this context that I want to frame O’Connor as a mad feminist theorist who has much to teach us about the intimate mediated politics of living with mental distress.

Making bipolar celebrity

Sinéad’s struggles are usually discussed in the media through the frame of the main diagnostic label used to mark her complex experience: bipolar disorder, a term she adopted and resisted at various points in her life. In this, her experience mirrors that of queer Gen X stars expected to produce spectacular ‘coming out narratives’ that bear little relation to actual lived experiences of queerness. In 2007 she told Oprah Winfrey, ‘I don’t

think I was born with bipolar disorder – I believe it was created as a result of the violence I experienced ... it didn't really help in terms of being well or a stable person the fact that I really was getting kicked around, metaphorically speaking, by the media for years' (Oprah.com, 2007). At various times, she spoke candidly about the depression and suicidal thoughts that plagued her as well as about the complex impacts of press intrusion, health struggles and family tragedy on her mental state. This trajectory – from an explanatory diagnostic encounter, to further distress, to a different understanding based in changing ideas about trauma and new understandings of C-PTSD and the way present stresses trigger past trauma – are familiar to many of us whose lives are touched by these issues. Social studies of individuals with a bipolar diagnosis reveal considerable ambivalence and variation in understandings of the condition and its relationship to self ([Lane, 2020, 2023](#)). I am less interested in the authenticity or otherwise of the diagnosis, then, than in how she is 'made' as a bipolar celebrity, and the complex ways in which her postdigital presence subverts this framing.

The most important work on bipolar celebrity comes not from celebrity studies but from mad studies, a postdisciplinary movement pioneered by Canadian scholars that centres the lived experience and knowledges of mental health service users ([Beresford, 2014](#)). I am guided by the work of mad scholar and activist Jijian Voronka, whose groundbreaking article on Britney Spears anticipates many of the problems of mad representation at stake in postdigital media cultures. Voronka tracks the 'downfall' of Spears through media scrutiny which first identifies her as a 'bad girl', and then changes this to 'mad girl' as her mental health struggles become the focus of intensifying media scrutiny. In 2007, Spears was diagnosed with bipolar disorder after she shaved her head, attacked the vehicle of a paparazzo who had stalked her, and – sin of sins – was photographed crying 'in public' (while being stalked by paparazzi while clearly off-duty²). Voronka demonstrates how, with her hospitalisation in 2008 after shaving her head and rowing with paparazzi, Spears becomes 'officially a train wreck, a spoiled identity: the descent, that tragedy of American marketing. The bald, the not beautiful enough disappointment ... framed and understood through medical model concepts of mental illness.' Voronka tracks a discursive shift from 'bad Britney' to 'mad Britney' in which the media drew on psychiatric 'expertise' to 'make sense' of her actions (2008, n.p.); in the process, the public were rendered 'experts' on bipolar disorder, a condition that had once been confined to the privacy of the clinic (2008, n.p.) but now became 'common knowledge'. 'Expert' commentary entered into celebrity media, with doctors diagnosing

celebrities and recommending treatment without ever having met the patient in question. Voronka cites *In Touch* magazine: '[Britney] is not crazy, but she needs therapy or she will continue this downward spiral ... she probably needs to be hospitalized, medicated and to remain in some sort of therapy for the rest of her life' (2008, n.p.). The consequences for Britney herself were, of course, dire, resulting in the conservatorship imposed in 2008 and under which she remained until 2022. As Voronka argues, narratives of bipolar celebrity work to 'teach lay audiences the appropriate biomedical methods of how to understand madness' (2008, p. 8).

Similarly, Sinéad is imagined through narratives of 'ruin', not only through a performance on *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) in which she 'blew up' her expected star trajectory by tearing up a photograph of the Pope, but through the discourses of relapse and disappointment that characterise coverage of her mental health. Yet in using postdigital media platforms to make her deepest struggles public alongside more conventional interviews and autobiographical texts and confessional elements in her work, she also suggests new ways of thinking with and about mad subjectivity. I want to consider her, then, not as a star whose future was 'spoiled' by madness (a story she scoffed at and actively resisted through her life and work), but as an artist whose rich media archive subverts and refuses the version of recovery at stake in both celebrity culture and neoliberal framings of madness and recovery.

To be a fan of Sinéad O'Connor was both to worry about her and, often, to feel less alone. Journalist and mental health advocate Hannah-Jane Parkinson writes movingly of the way Sinéad 'spoke most to the realities of those who live with, or endure, the kind of warped brain that can make even the simplest thing feel like a Sphinx's riddle' (2023, n.p.):

From the confusion of multiple, overlapping diagnoses, to the trial-and-error of medication, O'Connor, both wittingly and unwittingly, elucidated all of it. The chaos and heartbreak during the bad times: the suicidal ideation (and attempts); the frothing anger; the sectionable manic insomnia. The making a spectacle of oneself online, the screwing up at work, the lashing out at friends and family ... and then the crushing, paralysing shame and remorse ... She openly grappled with adverse childhood experiences; and ruminated on whether a person is created mad or made mad. Everything that mainstream public discourse around mental health shrinks from, O'Connor put front and centre.

In other words, Sinéad's use of digital platforms to promote radical honesty around mental health has less in common with the rhetorics of the contemporary vulnerability industry than with more radical mad pride movements, and indeed with mad scholarship. As [Rose \(2020\)](#) writes, the ubiquity of ideas about 'raising awareness' has evacuated 'mental health' of all meaning, in a way that erases and silences those most harmed by biomedicine ([Rose, 1996, 2020](#)). For mad activists and thinkers, media discourses of recovery are inextricably entangled with ableist, saneist, racist and patriarchal notions of the 'whole', healed self. Paradoxically, 'talking about it' is presented as the start of a 'recovery journey', while at the same time being recovered is a condition of getting to speak. This means that speaking as a mad subject is unthinkable: instead, self-appointed spokespeople for bipolar disorder tend to reproduce overarching structures of privilege ([Voronka, 2019](#)). Research with actual service users reveals widespread scepticism over whether such media spokespeople (e.g. British comedian Stephen Fry) 'really have it' ([Lane, 2023](#)). As Emily Martin writes in her groundbreaking study of manic depression, *Bipolar Expeditions*, 'a person living under the description of manic depression is a threat to the conception of American personhood ... a person with a central controlling principle, based on a will, who is owner of himself and acts out of individual intention and desire towards rational ends' (2009, p. 269). In contrast to this inherently masculine, White, and able-bodied self, bipolar subjects are imagined as cyclical, excessively emotional and fragmented. For Martin, the enforcement of such binaries disguises how 'everyone's personhood – rational, irrational, or somewhere in between – is less built upon a unitary concept ... than made up of a dense web of social connections' (2009, p. 269). Mad Pride scholars have called for the reclamation of a 'mad identity' which is 'not so much about a person's "intrinsic craziness," as the active and thoughtful positioning of the self with respect to dynamic social narratives regarding mental difference and diversity' ([Schrader et al., 2013](#), p. 62).

It is precisely this call for a radical mad subjectivity that the Maligned Nineties Woman takes up. In particular, the use of postdigital media spaces alongside reclaiming of her earlier work has made Sinéad an important figure for thinking through alternative mad subjectivities and temporalities at stake in both the postdigital and mad lived experience. Mad identity is often stigmatised precisely as an ability to 'let go', a living with and in the past through often fragmented and nonlinear remembering; in dragging up the flotsam from the bottom, muddying the clarity of assumed boundaries of past and present, self and other, private and public. As such, she is entangled in a wider intersectional feminist

project of re-memembering and reclaiming the past, in understanding how our lives are shaped by the trauma we inherit as gendered, racialised and classed subjects and by our own creativity and resistance, and in opening alternative spaces of connection for those whose sharing is always received as oversharing. The maligned woman shows us a different way of thinking about the embodied public–private in relation to time. She resonates with contemporary ‘sad girls’ precisely in her refusal of linear logics of ‘recovery’ versus ‘inevitable tragedy’ set by heteropatriarchal White supremacist capitalism. She shows us that the present is always haunted by the past, and refuses to dream of an impossible ‘recovered’ future when, restored to unitary wholeness, she might finally be allowed to speak. As a mad artist, Sinéad’s origin story has to do with a moment that both collapses personal and national histories with the refusal of an idealised future: in calling out structural abuse in a way that links into her personal abuse and trauma, she also commits the unpardonable sin of refusing a particular version of career success. The ‘failure’ at stake in this refusal – and in her public acknowledgement of her intense mental distress, seen as ‘oversharing’, tragic and disappointing – is, I argue, emblematic of a much more hopeful and robust understanding of what it means to survive as a person with lived experience of mental distress.

Brigit McWade trenchantly describes how, from a mad studies perspective, ‘psychiatric diagnoses produce a normative temporal subjectivity that reduces agency and prevents recovery’ (2015, p. 8).³ To be given a diagnosis of lifelong illness is far from the dynamic and liberating experience it is made out to be: further, the mad subject is positioned as outside of linear time in a way that – give the fraught colonial, patriarchal and ableist histories within which our sense of time as linear is produced and navigated – is inherently dehumanising. The mad intellectual tradition McWade traces in her article is precisely concerned with identifying and critiquing these contradictions in diverse and conflicting temporalities. These experiences, she writes, are framed as sicknesses of time: persistent, lifelong, and hopeless, deemed pathological in their endurance or temporal excess. As she sums up, ‘it is the diagnosis that is pathological not the experiences’ (McWade, 2015, p. 8).

The refusal of normative temporality can be seen in Sinéad’s memoir, aptly titled *Rememberings*. Published in 2021, only two years before her death at 56 (a sentence I still cannot quite believe I am writing), it is a book of two halves. The first, a conventionally structured coming-of-age and coming-to-fame narrative, establishes her tough, funny and self-aware narrative voice (it is a text that profoundly benefits from being listened to rather than read).

‘I think you’ll see in this book a girl who *does* find herself’, she writes, ‘not by success in the music industry but by taking the opportunity to sensibly and truly lose her marbles. The thing being that after losing them, one finds them and plays the game better.’ Of the *SNL* incident, she recalls: ‘Everyone wants a pop star, see? But I am a protest singer. I just had stuff to get off my chest. I had no desire for fame.’

The second half has a more episodic structure since, as she says, ‘I wasn’t really present until six months ago’ (O’Connor, 2023, p. ix), meaning that the past 20 years are a blur. The book shows how moments in time intertwine and connect: the picture of the Pope under which she was beaten by her mother in quasi-religious rituals that went on for hours, is the one she tore up on *Saturday Night Live*, a moment which was pivotal not in ending her career, as predicted by the conservative media establishment, but in transforming her public image from that of a young pop star into something at once more transcendent and more banal: at once a beacon of truth-telling and an unfortunate mad subject ‘wasting’ her big opportunity.

In the case of bipolar disorder, the notion of madness turns – literally – on the tension between two conflicting temporalities: one linear (both in the sense of swinging back and forth between two binary ‘poles’ and in the sense of a straight path that leads either to recovery or death), and the other cyclical. Note I am using the term ‘bipolar experience’ since by definition, subjectivity can only be attained through the recovery of an appropriate relationship to time: there can be no bipolar subject since subjectivity is inherently orientated within linear time. As mad studies argues, psychiatric discourse can erase hope by rendering some lives unliveable (McWade, 2015). This brings survivor activism into direct conflict with psychiatric discourses that render unmedicated life experiences as ‘wasted time’ and, by extension, mad subjects as ‘a waste of time’ (2015, pp. 10–12). The notion of cyclical time, always deeply gendered, racialised, and classed, is thus both grounded in and productive of saneist imaginaries. While biomedical discourse pathologises cyclical temporalities through ideas of relapse and regression, circularity has been taken up in recent work on chronic illness, addiction and mad studies (Garcia, 2008; Poleykett and Jett, 2023).

For Emily Martin, the enforcement of a mad/sane binary at stake in American culture is not only an externalising projection that masks how much capitalism and patriarchy depend on ‘manic’ and ‘depressive’ modes for its reproduction: it also erases the actual creativity of bipolar individuals and communities. Hypomania, dispassionately described in the literature as ‘elevated mood ... loss of inhibition’, consists primarily

in a sense of being fundamentally un-shameable, together with a particular characteristic bright-eyed glow reminiscent of being high. ‘Mad’ manic people, she argues, ‘can spark self-reflective, sometimes creative, and occasionally scintillating social interactions when connected to others in context like support groups’ (2009, p. 169). Beyond the black, whites and greys of binary identity, the collision between bipolarity and the postdigital entails a whole spectrum of complex, sometimes painful, sometimes beautiful ways of being.

Conclusion

The misreporting of Sinéad O’Connor’s death as a suicide in tandem with reminders about her bipolar diagnosis renders her death inevitable, the natural consequence of her ‘too raw’ and ‘too vulnerable’ performance.⁴ In a postdigital media culture that intensifies the demand for managed authenticity, especially from famous women, her truth-telling is held as both a marker of extraordinary integrity, but also as involving too high a cost. Thus, the shameless and irredeemable, ‘unrecoverable’ bipolar celebrity is recuperated back into neoliberal capitalist narratives of the gendered self – not through incorporation, but as a cautionary tale. There is a kind of productive anti-shame work at stake in this refusal of ‘good’, normative subjectivity, in favour of a vision that sees mental suffering as meaningful, dignified, and worthy of recognition. The sad girl reminds us of the linear temporalities at stake in mad subjectivity: in reminding us that linear recovery is a lie promulgated by capitalism, she provides another way of thinking through ideas of recovery and self-care. Within postdigital intimate publics, then, Maligned Nineties Women like Sinéad and Britney function neither as positive postfeminist role models nor as victims, but as subjects of mad feminist recuperation and attachment. The sad girl constructs ‘an alternative collective psyche’ (Blackman, 2015; Cho, 2008) that affirms mad ways of being in the world.

This was intended to be, and is still, a chapter about survival. The death of Sinéad O’Connor represents an incalculable loss: to quote Kate Bush’s beautiful homage: ‘It’s like a light has gone out, hasn’t it? A beacon on a high mountain. Sinéad didn’t just move us with her incredibly emotive voice, she stood up with it. I salute her. We were lucky to have such a magical presence move among us’ (Carroll, 2023). She continues to resonate as a focus of feminist rage, as well as connecting with fans to imagine a different way of inhabiting minds and lives shaped, but not defined, by

experiences of trauma. In making public the actual, deep, inchoate pain of mental illness, she shows us a way that the mad subject might finally be allowed to speak: a work that, far from detracting from the unearthly clarity of her singular artistic voice, only amplifies and deepens it.

In 2012, Sinéad told *People* magazine:

I really feel the use of the word ‘crazy,’ or associated words as terms of abuse, should become a crime ... We need to be compassionate and gentle toward those of our brothers and sisters who have been hurt and are wounded and fragile, while also strong and alive. We should not mock those who are brave enough to show their wounds. (Avila, 2023)

In this chapter, I have shown how the ‘Maligned Nineties Woman’ returns through postdigital media as a recuperative and reparative cultural figure who, by constituting new mad temporalities and new relations of intimacy, offers ways of thinking that precisely show how we might remain ‘strong and alive’ while still speaking frankly about the often repetitive, stuck, nonlinear reality of mad existence: as Lisa Blackman (2015) writes, reframing suffering not as spectacular but as ordinary. Further, I have suggested that the ‘bipolar’ celebrity operates in postdigital media as a figure of contestation who re-emerges at the intersection of competing notions of intimacy, authenticity, trauma, and consent but who atomises and transcends the terms of these debates. Through her life and work, she is a star whose image and words are recirculated to create a new kind of mediated intimacy that popularises a singularly mad feminist temporality. As such, the power of her media presence does not end with her death, since mad subjectivity precisely imagines a collective way of living-with traumatic histories. Transcending the notion of the ‘celebrity trainwreck’ as one who is held to lead us into an unwanted and disgusting intimacy with her mad, ageing body, O’Connor’s fragmented, mad and feminist re-memberings open up a wider troubling and questioning of the ‘shaming and oppressive practices that teach us to repress, rather than accept or revel, in our multiplicity of ways of being’ (Blackman, 2015). Through immersion in the networks of audio memoir, podcasts, fan videos and autoethnography that she engenders, we can see that the mad relations of listening afforded by postdigital media enable new ways of affirming mad experience and creativity beyond the reductive tropes afforded by neoliberal recovery discourse. Through her digital life and afterlives, she enables us to feel differently; to reject the

veiled cynicism of a recovery culture that overtly offers hope to the few while surrendering those deemed irredeemable. In her life and work as well as in her digital afterlives, she urges us to heed Blackman's powerful words on the 'productive possibilities of negative states of being' that 'de-pathologise shame, melancholy, failure, depression, anxieties and other forms of "feeling bad", to open up new ways of thinking about agency, change and transformation' (Blackman, 2015, p. 25). This is the work that O'Connor engaged in through her art, her considered subversions of celebrity culture, and – crucially – in her use of digital platforms to make her distress, grief, vulnerability and hope public. While she was tireless in calling out these structures of oppression and trauma, Sinéad also suggests a further possibility: that speaking as a mad woman, bringing us into intimate proximity with complex histories of pain and survival, might be the most powerful statement of all. The postdigital, with its undecided temporalities and its interconnecting of materialities and mediations across times, enables this collective work to continue in the present. As her voice rings out through spaces and platforms she and I, in our analogue, angry youth, could hardly imagine, she reminds us that what remains of us, after all, is hope.

Notes

1. This discourse of inevitability is most notable in discussions of the so-called "27 Club"; my wider project will consider how this discourse changes to reflect and shape understandings of digital lives through digital re-membling of pre- and -post-digital celebrities including Kurt Cobain in the 1990s and Amy Winehouse in the early 2000s.
2. See contemporary critiques of the music industry by Billie Eilish, Chappell Roan and others for a very different generational take on the emotional labour demanded of feminine celebrities. It is striking how stars who have grown up in postdigital media culture are much more able to take on its violent gendered inequalities – at least partly because of the new awareness of past abuse that postdigital media cultures allow.
3. This is not to say that individuals undergoing mental distress should not engage with therapy or drugs if appropriate: rather, that we should be sceptical of the wider claims made about these treatments and the way they link to narratives of self and agency.
4. In fact, individuals living with bipolar disorder do have reduced life expectancy, including death from natural causes. However, the media reporting I am referring to here, that inevitabilises bipolar death, tends to focus exclusively on deaths from suicide, relying on spectacular tropes of the tragic dead star to generate profit.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. London: Routledge.
- Avila, D. (2023). Sinéad O'Connor's mental health struggles. *People*, 26 July. <https://people.com/Sinéad-o-connor-ups-and-downs-mental-health-abuse-7565995>

- BBC (2023). Sinéad O'Connor obituary: A talent beyond compare, 26 July. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-35031186>
- Beresford, P. (2014). Mad studies brings a voice of sanity to psychiatry. *Guardian*, 7 October.
- Berlant, L. (2008). *A Female Complaint*. Durham, NC: Duke.
- Blackman, L. (2015). Affective politics, debility and hearing voices: Towards a feminist politics of ordinary suffering. *Feminist Review*, 111(1), 25–41.
- Blackman, L. (2016). The new biologies: Epigenetics, the microbiome and immunities. *Body & Society*, 22(4), 3–18.
- Carroll, R. (2023). Sinéad O'Connor dies aged 56. *The Guardian*, 26 July.
- Cho, G.M. (2008). *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, secrecy, and the forgotten wars*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cvetkovich, A. (2012). *Depression: A public feeling*. Durham, NC: Duke.
- Garcia, A. (2008). The elegiac addict: History, chronicity, and the melancholic subject. *Cultural Anthropology*, 23(4), 718–746.
- Kennedy, J. (2018). Oversharing is the norm. In A.S. Dobson, B. Robards and N. Carah (eds) *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. London: Palgrave, pp. 265–280.
- Lane, R. (2020). Bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder or borderline bipolar? In M. Elliot (ed.) *Research Handbook on Society and Mental Health*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Lane, R. (2023). 'He doesn't really have bipolar ...': The rise of strategic essentialism and diagnostic possessiveness in bipolar disorder. *SSM – Mental Health*. Volume 5. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666560324000045>
- Lees, P. (2017). Thank you, Sinéad O'Connor, for showing the messy reality of mental illness. *Guardian*, 9 August.
- Manderson, L. and Smith-Morris, C. (2010). *Chronic Conditions, Fluid States: Chronicity and the anthropology of illness*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1–20.
- Martin, E. (2009). *Bipolar Expeditions: Mania and Depression in American Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- May, K. (2023). For daws to peck at. *The Clearing* (Substack newsletter). <https://katherinemay.substack.com/p/for-daws-to-peck-at>
- McNamee, G. (2023). Vulnerable, powerful and pure. *Irish Daily Mail*, 27 July, p. 1.
- McWade, B. (2015). Temporalities of mental health recovery. *Subjectivity*, 8, 243–260.
- O'Connor, S. (2023). *Rememberings*. Dublin: Sandycove.
- Oprah.com (2007). Understanding bipolar disorder' [interview transcript]. <https://www.oprah.com/health/understanding-bipolar-disorder/all#:~:text=%22It%20didn't%20really%20help,dreadful%2C%20terrible%20person%20I%20was>
- Orgad, S. and Gill, R. (2022). *Confidence Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke.
- Parkinson, H.J. (2023). Forget Instagram influencers, Sinéad O'Connor showed mental illness as it truly is. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/08/sinead-o-connor-mental-illness-mainstream-debate>
- Poleykett, B. and Jett, K. (2023). Biocircularities: New formations of embodied time. *Body & Society*, 29(2), 3–19.
- Price, R. (2011). Sinéad O'Connor's sad slide from being pop's most ethereal beauty. *Daily Mail*, 11 July.
- Ringrose, J., Milne, B., Horeck, T. and Mendes, K. (2024). Postdigital bodies: Young people's experiences of algorithmic, tech-facilitated body shaming. *Youth*, 4(3), 1058–1075.
- Rose, N. (1996). Psychiatry as a political science: Advanced liberalism and the administration of risk. *History of the Human Sciences*, 9(2), 1–23.
- Rose, N. (2007). *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, power, and subjectivity in the twenty-first century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rose, N. (2020). Against 'mental health.' In D. Fitzgerald, R. Ashcroft, G. Hollin et al. 'Lockdown texts' (special issue), *BioSocieties*, 15, 470–499.
- Scharff, C. (2016). The psychic life of neoliberalism: Mapping the contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 33(6), 107–122.
- Schrader, S., Jones, N. and Shattell, M. (2013). Mad pride: Reflections on sociopolitical identity and mental diversity in the context of culturally competent psychiatric care. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 34(1), 62–64.
- Sedgwick, E.K. (2002). *Touching Feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Thelandersson, F. (2023). *21st Century Media and Female Mental Health*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Voronka, J. (2008). Making bipolar Britney: Proliferating psychiatric diagnoses through tabloid media. *Radical Psychology*, 7(2).
- Voronka, J. (2019). Storytelling beyond the psychiatric gaze. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 8(4), 8–30.
- Wood, H. (2022). Mental health, emotional capital and reality celebrity. CSA Spotlight on Mental Health (conference paper).

Part II

Postdigital connections and collectivities

6

Postdigital intimacies and digital feminist activism

Estefanía Reyes and Kaitlynn Mendes

Introduction

All societies have topics that are generally considered private, taboo or too shameful to share openly with others. As a result, people have historically either kept these experiences to themselves, or perhaps shared with a few others, in private or closed spaces. For women and feminised identities, religious and moral doctrines have imposed even stricter norms of silence, particularly around intimate aspects of their bodies and sexuality, where the cost of speaking out often results in shame or social sanctions. Yet, in recent years, we have seen a significant shift when it comes to how and where these traditionally taboo topics are being discussed. Indeed, in tandem with the rise of Web 2.0 and social media, women and gender non-conforming people have increasingly used these platforms to share experiences and details of their intimate lives, including experiences of sexual violence and menstruation. This chapter discusses these dynamics by focusing on how these feminist acts challenge hegemonic norms of intimacy employed to control, discipline and silence female and gender non-conforming bodies. These discussions are vital for understanding postdigital spaces' potential to foster counter-hegemonic narratives of intimacy that subvert the patriarchal social order.

For example, in 2011, American Grace Brown began photographing sexual violence survivors holding signs on which they repeat what their attackers or others they disclosed the attack to, said before, during or after the assault. She uploaded these photos to Tumblr, and called her site 'Project Unbreakable'. The following year, 16 students at Duke University launched the campaign 'Who Needs Feminism?' to problematise people's

negative associations with feminism and showcase its continued relevance in society. Like Project Unbreakable, Who Needs Feminism? solicited photos from participants, in this case, holding signs explaining why they needed feminism. Although the campaign focused on a wide range of topics, rape and sexual violence remained key issues expressed in their signs (see [Mendes et al., 2019c](#)). These are just two examples of high-profile campaigns that predate the global #MeToo movement, which was credited for rupturing historic silences around sexual violence (see [Me Too Rising, 2018](#)).

In relation to menstruation, in March 2015, Indian-Canadian artist Rupri Kaur posted a menstrual-themed photo series on Instagram, portraying seemingly ordinary moments in the private life of a menstruator. However, one photo created an unexpected global stir. It contained Rupri in bed wearing yoga pants and a small bloodstain visible in her pants and sheets. This picture was deemed so provocative by Instagram that they removed it twice from the platform for allegedly violating its community norms. Later that year, Kiran Gandhi, an Indian-American woman in her twenties, gained worldwide attention for running the 2015 London Marathon while free-bleeding. Photos of her running with dark red stains between her thighs defied long-established concealment norms in which menstruators work hard to hide any sign of their periods (e.g. see [Laws, 1990](#); [Wood, 2020](#)). These episodes marked a significant shift in the conversation around menstruation mediated by social media, particularly Instagram, by challenging normative representations of menstruating bodies.

This chapter draws insights from several separate projects dealing with taboo or sensitive topics, including six posts of free-bleeding menstrual activism, and over 1,000 social media posts around sexual violence disclosures. These 1,000 posts related to digital feminist campaigns around hashtag campaigns like #MeToo ([Mendes and Ringrose, 2019](#)) and #BeenRapedNeverReported ([Keller et al., 2018](#); [Mendes et al., 2019a](#)), Instagram sites like Who Needs Feminism? and various other disclosures across YouTube, and other bespoke websites such as Everyday Sexism and Project Unbreakable ([Mendes et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2019c](#)). These various cases were analysed utilising theories such as affect – or the ‘the non-verbal, non-conscious dimensions of experience’ ([Blackman and Venn, 2010](#), p. 8) and platform vernacular – or the unique combination of styles, practices, grammars and logics that shape how narratives unfold ([Gibbs et al., 2015](#)).

Drawing from this wealth of data, the chapter has two key aims. First, we argue that there is a hegemonic notion of intimacy that has served to

maintain silence around menstruation and sexual violence. In this way, hegemonic meanings of ‘intimacy’ can be harmful and lead to discriminatory discourses and practices against women and non-conforming identities. Second, we argue that the platform affordances and features of Web 2.0 and social media – such as hashtags, audio and visual imagery – facilitate the generation of postdigital intimacies that not only shape how these issues are discussed and known, but how they are felt, embodied and experienced (see also [Mendes et al., 2019b](#)). In this way, the postdigital landscape enables counter-hegemonic understandings of intimacy that are highly affective and are not exclusively confined to online spaces. Instead, they possess a significant capacity for real, tangible implications that extend across and beyond the confines of the digital world. Moreover, we also argue that, by putting forward these counter-hegemonic narratives, feminist activists have fostered networks of solidarity, facilitating new forms of collective mobilisation. For example, sharing experiences of sexual violence on these platforms, by using #MeToo or other hashtags, can – and does – impact the daily lives of the victim-survivors. It raises awareness, solidarity and support, empowers individuals and instils a sense of justice. Likewise, free-bleeding activists leveraged menstrual blood and Instagram’s visual potential to subvert the normative representation of menstruators in public spaces. Moreover, they become a powerful catalyst for affective and embodied responses that ignite heated debates about gender, bodies and power dynamics with an impact beyond digital spaces. After reflecting on these activists’ posts, users often started to reconsider their own embodied relationship with menstruation, viewing it as less of a burden and more as a natural, neutral or even empowering aspect of their lives. Finally, the chapter also attends to important considerations around who is able to participate in the generation of these postdigital intimacies, and which disclosures are likely to gain visibility amidst sexist, racist and homophobic social and algorithmic biases.

Intimacy

When we think of ‘intimacy’, the immediate associations often centre around physical touch, romantic love and passionate encounters, typically shared with a life partner ([Attwood, Hakim and Winch, 2017](#)). As such, it is commonly framed within the boundaries of personal – and often romantic – relationships. In recent years, however, the concept has been expanded to encapsulate non-sexual relationships – including those involving personal care, physical proximity and other forms of roles that

require private and personal knowledge (Chambers, 2013). Scholars such as Lauren Berlant (1998) and Lynn Jamieson (1998) have pioneered critical discussions on intimacy, challenging traditional views and revealing its complex entanglements with power, identity and public life. For example, Berlant's notion of 'intimate publics' examines how shared emotions and attachments shape a sentiment of collective experiences. Her research shows how deeply personal experiences around topics such as personal suffering, romance and self-improvement can be taken up in media and popular culture – and in doing so, blurs the distinction between private and public spheres.

Jamieson's work shows how our understandings of intimacy have shifted over time in the face of evolving social norms, particularly regarding modern relationships, which are often not as strongly governed by religion or traditional gender scripts. Instead, she argues that we have seen a 'de-traditionalisation' of intimacy in modern societies in which intimate relationships are flexible and not constrained within marriage or the family. Here, people have more choice over whom they forge intimate relationships with, which are often strengthened through mutual disclosure and sharing of emotions. Jamieson's work is key for its recognition of the role that power dynamics play in shaping intimacy – something that many subsequent scholars have also attended to (see, for example, Illouz, 2007; Tannen, 1990; Ringrose and Renold, 2014). Jamieson argues that while de-traditionalisation has led to more egalitarian relationships in theory, in practice, intimate relationships are still deeply influenced by existing power imbalances, particularly between men and women. This is a topic we address later in the chapter. Various scholars (Ringrose and Renold, 2014; Tannen, 1990), for example, show how women's intimate disclosures are often devalued or dismissed in interpersonal conversations. Illouz (2007) goes further to argue that women who step outside acceptable modes of emotional expression are often marginalised, particularly when discussing trauma, failure, or sexual subjects that do not fit neatly within commodified forms of intimacy. While just a few examples, existing scholarly attention to gendered power dynamics is an important theoretical foundation for our chapter, as we consider how they create deep inequalities when it comes to disclosure, what is (not) acceptable to share, how and with whom.

(Post)digital intimacies

Other scholars have been helpful in thinking specifically about intimacies and their relationship with digital technologies (see Hakim, 2020; Winch,

2015). Attwood, Hakim and Winch (2017), for example, have explored the ways digital technologies increasingly play a role in constructing and negotiating intimate connections. In this way, sexualisation embedded in digital cultures has reshaped contemporary understandings of intimacy, foregrounding technology's role in constructing and negotiating intimate connections. It is now widely accepted that intimate practices and relationships can and are forged through digital technologies. A further theoretical development is that of 'postdigital', which recognises how the so-called digital and physical worlds are deeply entwined and increasingly difficult to disentangle (see Murray, 2020). Therefore, when we speak of *postdigital intimacies*, we are referring to the entangled ways in which intimacy is mediated through digital technologies that have become so embedded in the mundane that they are often imperceptible (see Balfour et al., 2023). Here, intimate practices are shaped by constant connectivity and the affordances of social media platforms. However, critical attention to postdigital intimacies underscores how they function as a vital entanglement, reflecting and influencing contemporary life and relationships, while still rooted in broader power dynamics and social scripts.

Given the neoliberal-driven nature of technology and social media platforms, it is unsurprising that intimacies are particularly conceptualised as potential sources of social capital acquired through the labour of social reproduction (Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018). These perspectives reveal how the commodification of intimate practices and relationships via technology and social media predominantly benefits normative bodies and relationships, which are privileged within an economy of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018). For instance, consider the rise of the 'tradwives' phenomenon, where heterosexual, conventionally attractive women curate their romantic or family relationships online, accumulating followers, sponsorships and economic gains by adhering to normative ideals of family and gender roles (Sykes, 2024; Sykes and Hopner, 2024). In line with this perspective, Petersen et al. (2018) propose that intimacy can be understood as a 'script' – a set of norms that individuals may either conform to or negotiate. By viewing intimacy this way, we can scrutinise – and potentially disrupt – the set of ideologies upholding what is intimate and what is not, operating through discursive and embodied practices (McGlotten, 2013). Therefore, the postdigital intimacies generated through digital technologies and social media often mirror and reproduce a (cis-hetero) patriarchal order, as the 'tradwives' case shows, while also frequently enabling regulatory practices and social sanctions against those who dare to challenge these scripts. A hegemonic notion of intimacy, in the context we propose, becomes a tool of control and discrimination, reinforcing

existing power dynamics and marginalising those who do not conform to normative expectations. Consider, for example, someone experiencing discomfort during menstruation who may be culturally conditioned to hide their pain to avoid the prejudices associated with being a menstruator in a neoliberal capitalist society obsessed with productivity. Similarly, someone who is sexually assaulted by their partner might internalise the belief that what happens in the intimacy of the bedroom should remain private, fearing the shame that could follow public disclosure. When individuals face social sanctions for going off the 'script' by sharing these 'intimate' matters publicly, we see how intimacy is used as a means of control, punishment and oppression. In other words, keeping intimate experiences, materially and discursively, within the constraints of the hegemonic 'private' realm is often strategically used to maintain existing unequal power structures within patriarchal societies.

It is crucial to underscore that these constraints are not confined to the so-called physical world but are also profoundly entrenched within the current postdigital landscape. However, it is worth questioning whether all postdigital intimacies are bound to reproduce the social order. Contrary to the examples above, in this chapter, we show how the actions of feminist activists who have mediated their 'private' experiences online, going off the normative 'script', to advocate for social change and justice (see [Jane, 2017](#)) are practising and embodying counter-hegemonic ways of postdigital intimacies. Their stories and the reactions to these – ranging from supportive solidarity to vehement backlash – highlight the currently contested nature of intimacy in postdigital spaces (see [Alcoff, 2018](#); [Loney-Howes, 2018](#); [Mendes et al., 2019a](#)). Their efforts show that challenging the traditional boundaries of what is deemed intimate also has the potential to subvert the established norms that have long silenced and oppressed marginalised voices and bodies. The work of these activists pushes us to reconsider intimacy not just as a personal or relational concept, but as one deeply embedded in the structures of society, media and politics. By examining how intimacy is produced, experienced and commodified in these spaces, we can better understand its shifting role in contemporary life, especially as digital technologies continue to reshape the possibilities and limits of connection.

Data and analysis

Our analysis is based on two phenomena that exemplify the ways in which postdigital intimacy has worked as a hegemonic mechanism and

how it is currently being contested and redefined by feminist activism. First, we draw from empirical data from over 1,000 social media posts across a number of feminist initiatives designed for sexual violence survivors to tell their stories, engage in solidarity, find healing and call out rape culture. We also draw from interviews with over 50 feminist activists and participants in these movements. The chapter draws from over a decade's experience studying various forms of digital feminist activism against sexual violence, and draws insights from across this research (see Keller et al., 2018; Mendes, 2015; Mendes and Jeong, 2023; Mendes et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Salvatori and Mendes, 2022). These include predominantly Western, Anglophone campaigns such as 'Project Unbreakable' and 'Who Needs Feminism?' discussed in the introduction, to those that had international reach or were based in the Global South such as the SlutWalk, #NiUnaMenos and #MeToo movements. Taking place on a range of platforms and websites (Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, custom-websites) with varying affordances (e.g. images, art, text, hashtags, hyperlinks), these campaigns gave survivors flexibility in how they shared their experiences of sexual violence and abuse. Despite the means of communication – be it visual, auditory, or text-based, they unveiled the pervasive nature of rape culture, manifested in different ways, in societies all around the world.

Additionally, we examine six highly visible posts of free-bleeding activism, a radical menstruation movement that challenges discriminatory ideas and concealment norms around periods by menstruating without using any products or technology to manage or hide the blood (Bobel, 2010). This act of defiance embodies a feminist call to reclaim agency and autonomy over their bodies and, as Conner (2020, p. 888) notes, it 'puts the power of social construction back into the hands of the bleeder because fluid has effectively transcended the bounded control of the body'. A semiotic analysis was conducted on images posted on Instagram by high-profile activists and content creators between March 2015 and September 2019, along with a critical discourse analysis of the hundreds of comments they generated on the platform. These illustrate how Instagram has been used to subvert hegemonic narratives around menstruation, using menstrual blood as a powerful tool of resistance rather than a means of discipline and discrimination. Historically, such acts of defiance have been rare (see, for example, O'Keefe, 2006 and Fahs, 2016); however, the emergence of social media platforms has opened new avenues to amplify these counter-narratives, offering exciting possibilities for feminist activism.

Pushing the boundaries of the ‘intimate’ realm: embodying *radical shamelessness*

In this chapter, one of our central aims has been to illustrate how a hegemonic notion of intimacy has served to maintain silence about taboo or sensitive issues such as menstruation and sexual violence to keep them culturally unchallenged. However, where there is control, there is always the potential for resistance (Foucault, 1978). And precisely, in this section, we argue that by sharing their ‘intimate’ stories of sexual violence and menstruation on social media, feminist activists have defied the hegemonic construct of intimacy, still embedded in today’s social and cultural systems, through an embodiment of ‘radical shamelessness’ (Dobson, 2015; Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018). Dobson and her colleagues describe radical shamelessness as a deliberate rejection of the normative expectation that women should feel shame about their bodies, desires, or public self-presentation. Through disclosing information about menstruation or sexual violence, we see resistance to the pressures to conform to modesty or ‘respectability’ by embracing visibility, sexual expression and, in some cases, unapologetic self-representation.

For example, free-bleeding activists have boldly challenged the stigmatisation of menstruation by sharing images of themselves in spaces traditionally considered ‘intimate’, such as bathrooms and bedrooms, and showcasing their leaking bodies in public spaces, such as in a public park or at a marathon. A striking example is Kiran’s free-bleeding act in the 2015 London Marathon. The dozens of viral photos capturing her with a visible bloodstain on her pants as she triumphantly crossed the finish line depicted her as a public bleeder in a culture where menstrual blood is considered an abject that, as it breaks down the borders of the body, threatens gendered social codes (Fahs, 2013, 2016; Kristeva, 1982). When seen through a lens of radical shamelessness, menstrual blood becomes a symbolic and material counter-hegemonic tool, redefining the menstruating body as a disruptive agent that refuses to be contained within gender-normative and essentialist ways of being.

Likewise, in 2017, Steph Góngora, a yoga influencer based in Costa Rica, further subverted menstrual concealment norms by publishing a video of herself performing challenging yoga poses while visibly leaking through her white pants. Steph passionately wrote in her post, ‘Hundreds of years of culture have made us embarrassed to bleed. [They] have left us feeling dirty and ashamed. STOP PRETENDING. Stop wasting so much effort hiding the very thing that gives this species continuity.’ Her words underscore the deep-seated cultural shame surrounding menstruation

and call for an end to the pretence and stigma. Drawing from [Dobson, Carah and Robards \(2018\)](#), we see evidence of radical shamelessness in both the rejection of body and menstrual shame and the deliberate use of digital platforms to challenge gendered expectations of propriety in the public sphere. By publicly reclaiming menstrual blood as a source of agency and pride, activists like Kiran and Steph challenge and disrupt centuries-old narratives that have rendered their bodies inferior, polluted and grotesque ([Wood, 2020](#)). The mediatisation of these acts counters hegemonic discourses aimed at controlling, disciplining and concealing female and menstruating bodies, which often provoke ‘moral panics’ that divert attention from the systemic oppression experienced by these groups ([Bobel and Kwan, 2019](#); [Fahs, 2013](#)). These activists embrace menstruation as a dynamic aspect of the human experience, proving to themselves and others that, even in the midst of pain or discomfort, menstruating bodies can indeed be strong and resilient.

However, traumatic embodied experiences can indeed profoundly shape the relationships that women and gender non-conforming people have with their bodies and sense of self. The shame that these experiences often bring can leave lasting marks, influencing how they perceive and interact with themselves and others. Free-bleeders recognise that, in a society where there is a cis-hetero sexist, racist and ableist hierarchy of bodies, menstruation can be a significant source of pain, trauma and dysphoria. Take, for instance, Cass Clemmer, a trans and queer person who vividly highlights the struggles menstruation can impose. In a photo published in July 2017, Cass is depicted wearing a blue plaid shirt, khaki pants and black shoes – an ensemble that emphasises masculinity and sobriety, aligning with their gender expression. They sit on a public bench with legs wide apart, showing a visible bloodstain, while holding a sign reading, ‘Periods are not just for women #bleedingwhiletrans’. The statement and their embodied act of defiance challenge cisheteronormative assumptions about the biological body while materialising non-normative ways of experiencing menstruation, transgressing binary and essentialist frameworks.

Similarly, Rupi immersed her followers in her most intimate spaces with her menstrual-themed photo series. As previously mentioned, the series depicted everyday scenes of a menstruator’s life within the privacy of a bedroom and bathroom. The most controversial image portrays Rupi almost curling up in a rumpled bed, her pants and sheets visibly stained with menstrual blood. In the post, Rupi describes menstruation as a ‘strikingly beautiful’ process, yet, with her body pose, she seems to acknowledge the pain and exhaustion it can sometimes bring, especially

in a patriarchal and capitalist society. In fact, after her post went viral, she acknowledged in an interview that she suffers from endometriosis (Rao, 2015), a condition with no cure that usually takes years to be diagnosed, partly due to the normalisation and concealment of menstrual pain, which leads doctors and patients to overlook the symptoms (Tarzibachi, 2017). The image's semiotics convey both the beauty and the burden of menstruation. In a similar vein, Laia Manzanares shared a close-up image in June 2018, capturing her feet and underwear from an overhead angle. In the photo, we can also see a bathmat and slippers, but its focal point is her grey knickers stained with menstrual blood, a perspective that semiotically suggests she owns her blood and exercises power over it. In tune with Kristeva's perspective (1982), Cass, Laia and Rupi also portray menstrual blood in its abject and uncontainable nature and, as a graffiti disrupting the postdigital space, become a highly visual political statement that showcases a raw and unfiltered glimpse into their embodied self.

The resignification of intimate experiences that once brought discomfort, trauma and shame through the mediatisation of their stories holds the potential for profound reconciliation with the body and the self. This process stands in stark contrast to the internalisation of the historically ingrained narratives and norms imposed on menstruators who have long been conditioned to perceive their bodies as dirty, polluting, weak and unwell (Bobel, 2010; Wood, 2020). At the same time, they are compelled to conform to gendered expectations of hygiene and conceal any sign of menstruation, even discomfort or severe pain, at the cost of their own health, to be considered appropriate and productive (Laws, 1990; Newton, 2016). Therefore, embodying radical shamelessness while bleeding through, when all menstruators have learned is how to be contained – metaphorically and literally – can also be empowering and liberating.

The issue of shame is also salient when it comes to sexual violence, and survivors have also been negatively labelled as provocative or deviant. While there are countless examples of disclosures made across platforms such as Hollaback!, Project Unbreakable, #BeenRapedNeverReported, #MeToo and more, discourses and evidence of shame are still evident – even during moments of resistance. Indeed, one can read the hashtag #BeenRapedNeverReported as one example. The hashtag gained widespread attention in October 2014, sparked by mainstream media reports of alleged historical instances of sexual violence committed years earlier by Canadian media personality Jian Ghomeshi. The Ghomeshi case led to

a public discussion about who is considered a ‘real’ sexual violence survivor and how this is related to whether or not a person has reported their assault to the police. The hashtag ensued to discuss complicated reasons why victims would not want to report (see Keller et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2019c). The hashtag is an interesting example of radical shamelessness in that many posts articulate their experiences of shame after being sexually abused and acknowledge the varied reasons why reporting to the police, family, or friends was too difficult. Contributors spoke about the ways they were continually disbelieved and shamed – by family, friends and the justice system: ‘#BeenRapedNeverReported Because if my own family didn’t bother to stand for me, why would anyone else?’ (cited in Mendes et al., 2019a, p. 134). Scholars have also noted that while many contributors disclosed experiences of sexual violence, they often did so with hashtags as placeholders, rather than detailed incident accounts of the assault (see Mendes et al., 2019b). For example, hashtags such as #MeToo or #BeenRapedNeverReported were often the only clue readers had about a participant’s experience of sexual violence, with many participants being cryptic in their posts or simply posting things such as ‘#MeToo’.

In a survey with those who had contributed to #MeToo, many participants acknowledged the tremendous difficulty they faced in disclosing their experience – even if no detailed descriptions were provided. As one survey respondent noted: ‘It was hard because I had to face my own difficult feelings and be honest. I also put myself out in the open for criticism and ridicule. Being vulnerable is not easy.’ However, many noted affective imperatives driving them to participate. As the same participant went on, *despite* the risk and shame, she felt ‘a moral obligation to speak against a culture of violence toward women’. This imperative to speak out, despite breaching social norms around ‘private’ issues such as sexual violence, is striking as an example of radical shamelessness that resists dominant scripts demanding silence over these experiences. This was articulated further with a survey of #MeToo participants where one wrote: ‘The experience of sharing ... was scary. While I wanted to add my voice, I was weary of what people who knew me might think or ask. I felt an invisible stigma arise around shame I had buried.’

In thinking further about what these digital feminist campaigns can ‘do’, it is important that researchers both explore textual artifacts and, where possible, gather data directly from contributors. For example, while textual analysis can show how participants are engaging with these campaigns, it doesn’t reveal the impact of participation. Researchers

have strongly argued that participating in these campaigns can lead to both individual and collective impacts that should not be overlooked and can result in material changes to their lives (Keller et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2019a). For example, research on #MeToo and other digital feminist campaigns against sexual violence has demonstrated that survivors who share their stories of sexual violence often experience a sense of healing and comfort from their disclosures (see Dey and Mendes, 2022; Mendes and Ringrose, 2019; Mendes et al., 2019c). Indeed, in their interviews with women who shared their experiences online of sexual violence while at university, Dey and Mendes (2022) noted how all of them used words like ‘cathartic’, ‘therapeutic’ and ‘healing’. Many noted how sharing these previously hidden and taboo experiences and having others validate those experiences or tell them they believed them gave them back a sense of control over their experiences. As one participant noted: ‘especially in cases of intimate partner violence there is a lot of self-doubt involved about whether you did the wrong thing ... other people validating that what you went through was definitely real and wrong, gives you a sense of closure’ (Tina, London) (cited in Dey and Mendes, 2022, p. 211).

In sum, while these examples of discursive and embodied resistance will not stop sexual violence and menstruation-based discrimination and shame from happening, these shifts cannot be overlooked and can transform many people’s lives in meaningful ways. Their shamelessness is not only provocative in its refusal to conform to social norms about what is deemed appropriate for public consumption, but it can also become a mode of survival for menstruators and victims-survivors conditioned to experience self-examination, stigmatisation and even a dissociation between the self and the body, by enabling them to inhabit their bodies and resignify their experiences in self-affirming ways.

The mediatisation through postdigital spaces of menstruators and survivors’ stories not only confronts the (cis-hetero) patriarchal order by disrupting traditional boundaries of what is considered ‘intimate’ in a purely discursive way, but they also possess the highly affective transformative potential to reshape how these experiences are known, felt and embodied (see Mendes et al., 2019b). By sharing their stories through the use of technology and social media, and engaging in fruitful and cathartic dialogues, these individuals challenge and redefine these biased and harmful ideologies. They move from a place of internalised shame and stigma to one of healing, radical shamelessness and self-acceptance.

Collective feminist organising and solidarity flourishing in postdigital spaces

Free-bleeding activists and survivors of sexual violence not only sparked significant changes in their own lives with their shameless defiance against a hegemonic notion of intimacy, as we have described above. In this section, we argue that these movements also facilitated postdigital spaces for collective activism, enabling discussions, networking and, sometimes, political organising to challenge the contemporary sexism and misogyny embedded in everyday spaces and institutions (Dey and Mendes, 2022; Horeck et al., 2023; Loney-Howes et al., 2021; Mendes, 2015; Mendes and Jeong, 2023; Mendes et al., 2019a; Salvatori and Mendes, 2022). As such, these movements not only give survivors and menstruators space to speak ‘unspeakable things’ (Keller et al., 2018; Penny, 2014) and, in doing so, find healing, a sense of justice and self-acceptance but simultaneously collectively develop strategies to resist and subvert discriminatory cultures and ideologies. In this way, we are pushing back against those who critique digital activism as a form of ‘slacktivism’ that is meaningless, banal and lacks the potential to make ‘real world’ changes (see Morozov, 2009). What does ‘real world’ change mean anyhow? Does it only include change that happens in the ‘political’ realm of traditional party politics or government? Is this the only marker of success when it comes to social action? Why can’t ‘real world’ change include that which takes place at the level of culture or ideology or the way one feels about their body? Can we not celebrate success when individuals or groups change their minds, discourses, practices, habits or feelings, even if these changes never lead to new policies, laws, or statutes?

For instance, interviews with those who participated in digital feminist campaigns against sexual violence reported ‘digitally mediated consciousness raising’ (Mendes et al., 2019c). In a survey with #MeToo contributors, one noted how taking part ‘heightened my awareness [of sexual violence] in many ways, and has made me feel that I share elements of experience with others, and we deserve to be angry and demand change’. Reading about and participating in digital feminist campaigns such as Who Needs Feminism? and the Everyday Sexism Project¹ helped women better understand feminist politics – such as what rape culture was, and how practices such as catcalling fed into it. Mendes et al. (2019a) also argued that participating in a digital feminist campaign acted as a ‘low barrier entrance for other types of (feminist) activism and political engagement’ (p. 5). In other words, posting a hashtag or sharing

a story on Hollaback! often led to other forms of political engagement. As one participant noted, the #MeToo movement ‘felt like it was the tipping point for me. I could no longer just stand by and do nothing, so I became involved in an organisation that promotes gender equality and urges men to take action’. As [Mendes \(2015\)](#) showed in her study of the global SlutWalk movement, many organisers went on to become involved with other movements, such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, often playing leading roles.

While the act of sharing private or taboo experiences was, for many, invigorating and healing and led to other forms of political and collective action, intimate affective connections were also formed among participants experiencing backlash to their posts. Many feminists spoke about the hate, disbelief and mockery directed towards them after disclosing an experience of sexual violence – but equally, many spoke about how revelatory this was about broader gender and sexual norms. The ‘negative witnessing’ ([Loney-Howes, 2018](#)) was, for some, a connective experience that, rather than silencing them, lit a fire and fuelled their activism (see [Mendes, 2015](#); [Mendes et al., 2019c](#)). Similarly, the abjective and visceral nature of menstrual blood – its colour, texture and the cultural discomfort it evokes – elicited strong reactions among free-bleeders’ followers, ranging from disgust to solidarity. The backlash and moral panic that these activists provoked were especially eye-opening to many on Instagram, unveiling the misogynistic norms rooted in hegemonic ideas of intimacy. For example, the censorship against Rupi’s post raised awareness in staggering ways for many people, such as those noting, ‘This is incredible! It’s powerful and true. Why take this down when it is a photo of a woman completely dressed and doing a natural, healthy thing but not countless accounts of women and girls being objectified or overly sexualized?’ wrote a Kaur follower in the face of what seems like a blatant double standard in Instagram’s policy.

Lauren Archer, a doula and breastfeeding advocate who shared a photo of her sitting on the floor with her legs open, showing a menstrual bloodstain on her white underwear while breastfeeding her child, also received significant support and admiration. Among the responses, one user commented, ‘Even though my period causes me serious discomfort every month, I love bleeding and feel empowered by it every time. I think working to normalize menstruation with this picture is super badass.’ Such reactions highlight the affective resonance of Lauren’s post, where menstrual blood became a starting point for empowerment and connection. Through their unapologetic and visually spectacular displays of menstrual blood, enabled by Instagram’s image-based architecture,

these activists offered and sparked counter-hegemonic narratives that bring ideas about intimacy, embedded in patriarchal ideologies, to the surface and openly challenge them.

Moreover, by speaking from a trans non-binary point of view, Cass facilitated debates that made some people confront their own essentialist and binary assumptions about gender and rethink how they relate to menstruation, in ways that materialise compelling discourses toward social justice. What stands out in Cass's post is how effectively this activist opened up conversations about complex ideas that link gender, bodies and menstruation through accessible language and relatable experiences, despite the intricacies of the subject matter. One poignant example of this is found in a comment left by a follower, which reflects the depth of personal reflection their post inspired:

I'm a female bodied person who identifies as a woman, who just discovered my period as an incredibly powerful spiritual tool, and it's been so amazing that I've wanted to shout it from the rooftops to every female bodied person I know. Your post has made me stop and think about that, to feel into it with my heart. The Universe keeps on reminding me that the gender binary is outdated and that my work in the world is meant to reflect that ... Thank you for being a teacher and [for being] your beautiful self.

Petersen et al. (2018) suggest that counter-hegemonic narratives surrounding so-called intimate matters can have a political impact by creating 'islands of hope'. While we concur that the transformative political effects achieved by activists through the #MeToo movement and free-bleeding acts of resistance are profound, we take issue with the metaphor of 'islands', which implies isolation. In contrast, we argue that the mediation of their intimate stories of sexual violence and menstrual experiences does not create isolated acts of resistance but rather fosters *connections*, without homogenising identities and experiences. It builds bridges through collective feminist solidarity, counteracting the shame and stigma traditionally associated with these experiences, and capturing the diversity shaped by individuals' social location. By mediating their stories, activists are not only embodying counter-hegemonic ways of being survivors of sexual violence and menstruators, challenging discriminatory and oppressive mandates, but they are also cultivating a collective sense of shared struggle. As one #MeToo participant said: 'it felt so good to know I wasn't alone'. Similarly, in response to a free-bleeding image, a user commented, [I'm] 'sharing this image and your flow with

every single person I see. The sisterhood is strong.’ These amplified dialogues, enabled by social media affordances such as the use of hashtags, comment sections and reply buttons, transform what seem to be individual acts of resistance into a powerful, inter-connected movement that reclaims and reconfigures the intimate as a space of political action and community building.

It is critical to acknowledge that the visibility of these acts of feminist activism is not equally distributed across all bodies and identities (see [Daniels, 2009](#); [Fischer, 2016](#); [Loney-Howes, 2018](#); [Loney-Howes et al., 2021](#); [Mendes et al., 2019c](#)). While activists and survivors may face significant discrimination based on their gender or other aspects of their identities, many of them also benefit from privileges – such as race, class, body type, or geographic location – that make their stories more accessible and marketable within social media platforms. Marginalised bodies, particularly racialised, fat, disabled, queer or from the Global South, often remain largely excluded from and invisible in these mainstream postdigital spaces. As a result, the neoliberal structures underpinning tech companies, including their technological design and affordances, amplify certain voices while marginalising others. This is done through features like algorithms and paywalls, perpetuating the very hierarchies that free-bleeding activists and survivors of sexual violence seek to dismantle (see [Noble, 2018](#)). For example, we know from the growing field of critical technology studies that algorithms perpetrate and amplify systemic biases concerning race, gender, class and other identity markers (see [Benjamin, 2019](#); [Hall and Ellis, 2023](#)).

This imbalance raises critical concerns about the potential commodification of feminist activism within postdigital economies (see [Banet-Weiser, 2018](#)). Social media platforms, other corporations and even activists, driven by profit and visibility metrics, may turn acts of resistance into commodities, where activism is commercialised and consumed as part of a broader corporate agenda. While challenging patriarchal norms and discourses, activists can also be complicit in sustaining corporate power by engaging with these platforms’ neoliberal logic. For instance, #MeToo was quickly coopted by brands leveraging its popularity to promote products or ‘pinkwash’ their corporate image without meaningfully addressing sexual violence ([Salo, 2017](#)). Another example is Nadya Okamoto’s case; she is the founder of the non-profit organisation *PERIOD* and a prominent menstrual activist who leveraged social media to popularise her advocacy. While her work has undeniably raised awareness and mobilised significant resources for the cause, she faced criticism for allegedly using the movement to build her personal brand

and exploiting the contributions of other activists, particularly students of colour (Jones, 2022). Alongside leading *PERIOD*, Okamoto authored a book and launched a line of eco-friendly menstrual products. In this context, more needs to be understood about how feminist resistance within postdigital spaces must also grapple with the inherent privileges and exclusions embedded in these systems.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to engage with the concept of postdigital intimacies, using digital feminist activism against sexual violence and menstruation-based discrimination as focal points. To begin, we brought a critical lens to the ways that being designated as part of the ‘intimate’ realm often results in these issues being silenced and, consequently, left unchallenged. We further put the concept of postdigital to work in showing that speaking about these issues via social media and Web 2.0 platforms challenges the traditional boundaries of what is deemed intimate. In doing so, we argue that it holds the potential to subvert the established norms that have long silenced and oppressed marginalised voices and bodies.

By sharing their ‘intimate’ stories of sexual violence and menstruation on social media, feminist activists have challenged the hegemonic construct of intimacy that is deeply ingrained in today’s social and cultural patriarchal systems through an embodiment of ‘radical shamelessness’. These counter-hegemonic intimate narratives, we argue, are meaningful, both at the individual level and for promoting collective discussions and mobilisation that often goes beyond the digital. We have seen the ways that disclosures and free-bleeding acts not only lead to further political and collective action and solidarity, but also enable participants to find healing, catharsis, peace, enhanced personal connections and a renewed relationship with their bodies and self. These are directly enabled by the tech affordances and affects that are involved. In sum, we argue that these postdigital intimacies generated are not strictly limited to online spaces but are highly affective, and have real, material implications which move across and beyond online spaces.

Note

1. A website and hashtag where participants can anonymously share experiences of sexism.

References

- Alcoff, L.M. (2018). *Rape and Resistance*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Attwood, F., Hakim, J. and Winch, A. (2017). Mediated intimacies: Bodies, technologies and relationships. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(3), 249–253.
- Balfour, L., Evans, A., Maloney, M. and Merry, S.K. (2023). *Postdigital Intimacies for Online Safety*. Coventry: Coventry University. https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/66365663/Postdigital_Intimacies_for_Online_Safety.pdf
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race After Technology: Abolitionist tools for the new Jim Code*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Berlant, L. (1998). Intimacy: A special issue. *Critical Inquiry*, 24, 281–288.
- Blackman, L. and Venn, C. (2010). Affect. *Body & Society*, 16(1), 7–28.
- Bobel, C. (2010). *New Blood: Third-wave feminism and the politics of menstruation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Bobel, C. and Kwan, S. (2019). *Body Battlegrounds: Transgressions, tensions, and transformations*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Chambers, D. (2013). *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online intimacies and networked friendship*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Conner, B. (2020). Menstrual Trolls: The collective rhetoric of periods for pence. In B. Chris, I. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. Hasson, E. Kissling and T. Roberts (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 535–556.
- Daniels, J. (2009). Rethinking cyberfeminism(s): Race, gender and embodiment. *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, 37(1 & 2), 101–124.
- Dey, A. and Mendes, K. (2022). 'It started with this one post': #MeToo, India and higher education. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(2), 204–215.
- Dobson, A.S. (2015). *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Dobson, A.S., Carah, N. and Robards, B. (2018). Digital intimate publics and social media: Towards theorising public lives on private platforms. In A.S. Dobson, B. Robards and N. Carah (eds) *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fahs, B. (2013). Raising bloody hell: Inciting menstrual panics through campus and community activism. In B. Fahs, M. Dudy and S. Stage (eds) *The Moral Panics of Sexuality*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fahs, B. (2016). *Out of blood: Essays on menstruation and resistance*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Fischer, M. (2016). #Free_CeCe: The material convergence of social media activism. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16(5), 755–771.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gibbs, M., Meese, J., Arnold, M., Nansen, B. and Carter, M. (2015). #Funeral and Instagram: Death, social media, and platform vernacular. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(3), 255–268.
- Hakim, J. (2020). Queer digital intimacies: Exploring Grindr, gay dating, and the digital affective turn. *Visual Communication*, 19(1), 52–69.
- Hall, P. and Ellis, D. (2023). A systematic review of socio-technical gender bias in AI algorithms. *Online Information Review*, 47(7), 1264–1279.
- Horeck, T., Ringrose, J., Milne, B. and Mendes, K. (2023). #MeToo in British schools: Gendered differences in teenagers' awareness of sexual violence. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 27(5), 856–875.
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold Intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jamieson, L. (1998). *Intimacy: Personal relationships in modern societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jane, E.A. (2017). *Misogyny Online: A short (and brutish) history*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Jones, C.T. (2022). This TikTokker wants the Internet to like periods. She needs people to like her first. *Rolling Stone*. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/tiktok-nadya-okamoto-period-august-canceled-1234634959/>
- Keller, J., Mendes, K. and Ringrose, J. (2018). Speaking 'unspeakable things': Documenting digital feminist responses to rape culture. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(1), 22–36.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Laws, S. (1990). *Issues of Blood: The politics of menstruation*. 1st ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Loney-Howes, R. (2018). Shifting the rape script: 'Coming out' online as rape. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 39(2), 26–57.
- Loney-Howes, R., Mendes, K., Fernández Romero, D., Fileborn, B. and Núñez Puente, S. (2021). Digital footprints of #MeToo. *Feminist Media Studies*, 22(6), 1345–1362.
- McGlotten, S. (2013). *Virtual Intimacies: Media, affect, and queer sociality*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Me Too Rising. (2018). *Google Trends*. <https://metoorising.withgoogle.com/>
- Mendes, K. (2015). *SlutWalk: Feminism, activism and media*. New York: Springer.
- Mendes, K. and Jeong, E. (2023). Digital feminist activism against gender violence in South Korea. In K. Boyle and S. Berridge (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Gender, Media and Violence*. New York: Routledge, pp. 543–552.
- Mendes, K. and Ringrose, J. (2019). Digital feminist activism: #MeToo and the everyday experiences of challenging rape culture. In B. Fileborn and R. Loney-Howes (eds) *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 37–51.
- Mendes, K., Belisário, K. and Ringrose, J. (2019a). Digitised narratives of rape: Disclosing sexual violence through pain memes. In U. Andersson, M. Edgren, L. Karlsson and G. Nilsson (eds) *Rape Narratives in Motion*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 171–197.
- Mendes, K., Keller, J. and Ringrose, J. (2019b). Digitized narratives of sexual violence: Making sexual violence felt and known through digital disclosures. *New Media & Society*, 21(6), 1290–1310.
- Mendes, K., Ringrose, J. and Keller, J. (2019c). *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and women fight back against rape culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morozov, E. (2009). The brave new world of slacktivism. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/05/19/the-brave-new-world-of-slacktivism/>
- Murray, S. (2020). Postdigital cultural studies. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 441–450.
- Newton, V.L. (2016). *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Noble, S.U. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York: New York University Press.
- O'Keefe, T. (2006). Menstrual blood as a weapon of resistance. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8(4), 535–556.
- Penny, L. (2014). *Unspeakable Things: Sex, lies, and revolution*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Petersen, M.N., Harrison, K., Raun, T. and Andreassen, R. (2018). Introduction: Mediated intimacies. In R. Andreassen, M.N. Petersen, K. Harrison and T. Raun (eds) *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, relationalities and proximities*. New York: Routledge, pp. 1–15.
- Rao, M. (2015). About that period photo that broke the internet. *HuffPost*, 6 May. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rupi-kaur-instagram-period-photo-series_n_7213662
- Ringrose, J. and Renold, E. (2014). 'F**k rape!': Exploring affective intensities in a feminist research assemblage. *Sociological Review*, 62(1), 174–192.
- Salo, J. (2017). Retailers are trying to profit off the #MeToo movement. *New York Post*, 18 October. <https://nypost.com/2017/10/18/retailers-are-trying-to-make-money-on-the-metoo-movement/>
- Salvatori, L. and Mendes, K. (2022). Online anti-rape activism: Fighting back against rape culture. In *Rape*. Routledge, 254–267.
- Sykes, I. (2024). From 'girlboss' to #stayathomegirlfriend: The romanticisation of domestic labour on TikTok. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 28(3), 830–848.
- Sykes, S. and Hopner, V. (2024). Tradwives: Right-wing social media influencers. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 53(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912416241246273>
- Tannen, D. (1990). *You Just Don't Understand: Women and men in conversation*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Tarzibachi, E. (2017). *Cosa de mujeres: Menstruación, género y poder*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana.
- Winch, A. (2015). Brand intimacy, female friendship and digital surveillance networks. *New Formations*, 84/85, 228–245.
- Wood, J. (2020). (In)Visible bleeding: The menstrual concealment imperative. In B. Chris, I. Winkler, B. Fahs, K. Hasson, E. Kissling and T. Roberts (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Affect, Black diaspora and postdigital: moving towards a theory of Black digital relational intimacies

tèmítópé lasade-anderson

Introduction

Okay, so first, is obviously, it starts with identification. So, [on Instagram] you see a Black sister. For me, it's often the first thing that really like, gets me excited. [And then] it's like hey – if you're rocking your natural hair? I'm like, yes! Who are you? I'm checking you out. (Nikita, 33, South Africa)

The above is an excerpt from one of the 25 interviews I completed as part of my ongoing research on Black women's digital intimacy. My research is a transdisciplinary study of digital intimacy, platform-mediated friendship and Black women's experiences at the intersection of these phenomena. The project explores how Black¹ women in the UK, Europe, the US and Africa construct platonic digital intimacies on Twitter² (the platform currently known as X) and Instagram. Nikita's excerpt illustrates what I argue in this chapter: that different understandings of Blackness across the diaspora – Black subjectivities – (Wright, 2004), as they intersect with womanhood, do *something* to how platonic digital intimacy is produced on the aforementioned platforms. In the quote, Nikita shares how she would engage another Black woman on social media. She notes how seeing another 'Black sister' on Instagram 'gets her excited'. Excitement here is related to an unspoken belief that there is already a mutual understanding and level of intimacy because of their shared racialisation as Black women. Nikita also notes that if this hypothetical Black woman had

natural hair, this further signifies that 1) they have a commonality and 2) they *understand*. In this chapter, I argue this unnamed and assumed understanding – of what it means to be Black and a woman – is crucial to comprehending constructions of friendship digital intimacy.

Furthermore, it is this unspoken understanding that I consider to be a *kind of intimacy* that is available only to Black people (and potentially other racial minorities, although this is out of scope for this chapter) and which this chapter unpacks. Consequently, while I have begun empirical research in this area, here, in this chapter, I aim to make a case for a theory of postdigital intimacies that is attentive to the ways racialisation reconstitutes intimacy. I call this theory *Black digital relational intimacies* (BDRI).

Theorising otherwise

I follow the definition of intimacy put forth by Jamieson (2011), who describes it as ‘the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality’ (2011, p. 1). Intimacy, a practice which engenders closeness (2011), overlaps with notions of diasporic *belonging* (Bruce, 2022b), *care* (Finch, 2022) and *relationality* (Glissant, 1990; Okoye, 2021) – all of which are racialised and gendered embodied experiences (Chambers, 2013; McGlotten, 2013). BDRI is attentive to how race reconstitutes intimacy by outlining what racialisation changes in intimate platonic practices, filling a gap in the existing literature on postdigital and digital intimacies. I consider BDRI to be an analytic for postdigital intimacies research; it is *theorising otherwise*, an approach that follows in the tradition of Black, Indigenous and queer studies and their ‘creative and dynamic production of thinking and living otherwise’ (Emejulu and Sobande, 2019, p. 3). Black digital relational intimacies is an intervention in the field of digital intimacies research because it addresses explicitly logics of racialisation in relation to intimacy, that online spaces do not transcend but reproduce and reshape (Brock, 2009; Nakamura, 2014; Nakamura and Chow-White, 2012). Such a mode of analysis places racialisation and its aftereffects, both ontological and epistemological, at the forefront.

BDRI argues that Black subjectivities are a variable in affective modes of intimacy, of ‘feelings in public’ (Berlant and Warner, 1998) and considers intimacy as part of shaping Black diasporic connections. It is important to emphasise that BDRI is developed from my lived experience and empirical study of how Black women construct intimacy in

their friendships via social media. It builds on existing literature that illustrates how Black womanhood alongside Black feminist praxis alchemises the digital lives we navigate (Bailey, 2021; Sobande, 2020b; Steele, 2021b). For instance, early findings alongside extant research (Chatelain, 2019; Okoye, 2021; Sobande, 2020b) illustrate how Black women have specific curatorial parameters for social media and employ protective and 'care-full' behaviours. This behaviour results from the realities of their social location *offline* (Collins, 1991), such as experiences of misogynoir, which translates into being hyper(in)visible Black women and femmes *online* (Bailey, 2021; Jones, 2019; Stringfield, 2022). For Black women, racialisation shapes our actions, and there are intra-racial specificities for the rules of online engagement (Jones, 2019; Kaskazi, Copeland and Gonzalez, 2015; Stringfield, 2022). Because the postdigital as a framework addresses the slippage of virtuality into 'real life' (Bassett, 2015), I consider care as productive for thinking through the relational logic expressed by Black women online. To do so, I build on Byron's (2021) work on 'friendship and digital peer support practices' (2021, p. 1). Byron contends that care shapes quotidian social media use, and in BDRI, I argue that Blackness produces a closeness that operates as a catalyst in/to Black women's digital intimacy. BDRI situates Blackness in the context of interpersonal relations as a form of relationality as well as a specific *type of intimacy* that ingroup members can read as caring. I use relationality because it offers a spectrum for connection that is not fixed but somewhat fluid and can shift, signifying the expansiveness of Blackness and intra-racial (mis)understandings. A relational perspective is also not a new paradigm, but one that 'emerg[es] through practices that are mutually constituted here and there, through bodies and data, across borders and networks, online and offline, by users and platforms, through material, symbolic and emotional practices that are all reflective of intersecting power relations' (Ponzanesi, 2020, p. 988). Thus, relationality is the term I have chosen to refer to the relationship between Blackness and intimacy in a postdigital context.

To achieve my theorising, I employ a Black feminist epistemological framework that disregards the notion that the virtual sphere is race-neutral (Russell, 2020). In this chapter, I argue that BDRI is an intervention in digital intimacies scholarship because it is concerned with how Blackness operates as a catalyst to intimacy formation online. In doing so, the chapter asks: How does BDRI provide a new lens from which we can understand Black women's postdigital intimacy? To make this argument, I begin the chapter by mapping BDRI, linking its application to postdigital intimacies as a conceptual framework, and explicating the

connection to theories of intimacy and the Black diaspora. Here, I posit that notions of the Black diaspora are not solely about identity constructions, genealogy and origin but are *also* about interrelated subject positions and the intimacy bound up in Blackness. Next, I explain how this Black diasporic intimacy operates in online spaces, using affect to unpack how ‘virtual feelings’ (Massumi, 2021) circulate the ‘affective economies’ (Ahmed, 2004) of knowing/being known, which in turn illuminates the ways Black women construct such intimacies.

Cartography of Black digital relational intimacies

Existing research outlines how online phenomena, such as virtual communities or online gaming, are experienced differently depending on race, gender, class, sexuality, geographical location or (dis)ability (Byron, 2021; Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018; McGlotten, 2013; Wright, 2005). However, much of the existing literature on virtual romantic or sexual intimacies takes an implicitly post-racial approach (see, e.g. Amundsen, 2022; Byron and Møller, 2021; Hsiao, Steele and Weber, 2021; Miguel, 2018), where whiteness’ ‘interpretive flexibility’ (Brock, 2020) is unnamed and thus an unintentional perpetuation of White hegemony is maintained in such scholarship. Research conducted with a post-racial lens, implied or otherwise, results in scholarship which, to quote critical media scholar Raven Maragh-Lloyd, ‘assumes an end to racial systems of oppression through the “nominal oblivion” of race itself’ (2020, p. 19).

Indeed, as various Black digital media scholars assert, the ‘digital’ does not offer or provide a post-racial parity, nor is it an unraced space (Brock, 2009; Maragh-Lloyd, 2020; Nakamura and Chow-White, 2012; Sobande, 2020b; Steele, 2021a). Conversely, where post-racial scholarship ignores or excludes the ways racial oppression and racialisation operate in digital logics, ‘postdigital’ does the opposite; it recognises and unpacks the debris and overlap occurring from the context collapse (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014) of virtuality and algorithmic online activity into ‘real life’, ‘the indissoluble connection between the digital and non-digital’ (Evans et al., Chapter 1, this volume). Postdigital as a framework notes that the ubiquity of the digital in *everything* means scholarship must also account for the ways a digital pervasiveness, or ‘digital-first’ society, requires us to relook at concepts and behaviours once assumed to be outside the jurisdiction of digital (r)evolution. Postdigital *intimacies* is a theoretical framework for how ‘the digital’ changes notions of ‘public’ and

‘private’ intimacies (Berlant, 1998; Berlant and Warner, 1998; Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018). Thus, for postdigital intimacies to be an inclusive framework for the ways ‘the digital’ is now present in offline life, it must address racialisation and the social logic it produces.

There is existing work that touches on the latter more generally. For instance, scholarship on race and gender as factors that unequivocally alter social media behaviours and experiences (Sobande, 2020b; Steele, 2016, 2021c) deftly illustrates that the former are factors which influence online activity and practices (Nakamura and Chow-White, 2012). Whereas others have discussed the ways race shapes communication, (Black) culture and discourses on social media and the web (Brock, 2009, 2012; Clark, 2014; Esco, 2011; Florini, 2014; Graham and Smith, 2016), the application of a race analytic to digital intimacies is still emerging.

Research on Black queer sociality by McGlotten (2013) delves into the feelings present in connecting intimately in virtual spheres, namely gay-centric dating apps. On the other hand, bruce (2022b) offers ‘digital diasporic intimacy’ to name the range of ‘Black diasporic encounters and practices’ (2022b, p. 249) present on social media. While both bruce and McGlotten centre Black lives and Blackness in their explications of connection and connecting online, neither of these crucial interventions bring together sociological understandings of intimacy, platonic relationships *and* explorations of Blackness online. I connect these concepts to explore how they alter intimacy within the ‘postdigital’ framework, showing how Black digital relational intimacies is a theory that unpacks how and why ‘intimacies are relationalities: with ourselves, with others, and with our environment, as deeply affecting and affective, and both lasting and ephemeral’ (Centre for Postdigital Cultures, 2024, para. 3).

Black diaspora: Blackness as intimacy

My conceptualisation of intimacy as being affected by racialisation builds on studies considering ontological theories of Blackness through the lens of belonging, care and fictive kinship (Johnson, 2020; Macharia, 2019). Black feminist and Black diasporic literature understands Black relationalities as being fashioned from sharing similar experiences of marginalisation *and* as an indescribable deep knowing and *understanding* (Macharia, 2019; Manning, 2020). Indeed, in my research interviews, ‘knowing and feeling’ and innate unspoken understandings of Black womanhood are recurring themes. As one participant, Janine, said, ‘Black women’s

digital intimacy is like ... being seen'. 'Being seen' is not only about the visceral response to seeing another Black woman and understanding their subject position but is also about recognition. Blackness is a catalyst for intimacy and inducing closeness in Black women's friendships online. Research on the intimate lives of gender-variant people and Black women from the early eighteenth century to today underscores how Blackness produces intimacy (Johnson, 2020; Macharia, 2019; McGlotten, 2013). One way of articulating the relationship between intimacy and Blackness is by addressing the underlying notions of belonging and transnational connection. Here, I draw on notions of (Black) diaspora to thread the connection between intimacy and Blackness. In using 'diaspora', I build on usages of the term 'which distinguish diaspora as a theoretical concept from the historical 'experiences' of diaspora' (Brah, 1996, p. 176).

The study of diaspora, while a transdisciplinary subject, stems primarily from the tradition of cultural studies. Because the central conceit of BDRI is a focus on how racialisation is related to intimacy, in using diaspora as a foundation of that relation, I draw mainly on the work of scholars such as Stuart Hall (Hall, 1993, 2021; Hall and Morley, 2019), Paul Gilroy (1994, 2002a), Khachig Tölölyan (1991) and Avtar Brah (1996, 2022). Brah's (1996) argument that diaspora is both a description of the relationship between people and a definition of a *kind* of people is central to my use of this term. 'Diaspora' concerns intra-diasporic and inter-diasporic relationality (Brah, 1996). Since the invention of modernity, Blackness and Black people have operated as corporeal and political signifiers within society, both interpersonally and regarding social locations (Soumahoro, 2022). Thus, 'Blackness', like 'diaspora' as Brah (1996) contends, is also a construction of a *kind* of people in that its invention produces our historical and current Othering. Blackness is also the resulting experience of how 'race' operates in the matrix of domination (Collins, 1991). Consequently, as a heterogeneous group considered the Other, Black people have similar understandings of the transnational ontology of Blackness (Sharpe, 2016; Wright, 2004). For Black people, Blackness is a *kind* of intimacy due to prevalent anti-Blackness and constellations of relation and care carved from diasporic kinship (Adair, 2019).

Informing the argument of Blackness as a kind of intimacy is positionality. Research shows how positionality and subjectivity shape how one conceptualises and aligns with the diaspora (Cohen, 2019). As a Black British woman with Nigerian heritage, 'diaspora' invokes the lived experiences of African and Caribbean people and their descendants' dispersal and displacement across the globe. The concept of the Black

diaspora is helpful, because it exposes how Blackness is entangled with belonging. For me, diaspora connotes Blackness, being and belonging. For instance, the relationship between Blackness and ‘unspoken understanding’ or ‘seeing’ each other is clarified when considered alongside notions of the Black diaspora. However, without making plain what these linkages are, assumptions can be made about roots/routes, lineages, ancestral genealogies and race/racialisation (Gilroy, 2002b).

There are theoretical explorations of Blackness that pertain to BDRI. When it comes to Blackness, I do not wish to imply that there is a homogeneous ‘we’ contained within this term. Instead, my position extends from a Black feminist politics of solidarity and relation (The Combahee River Collective, 2014). Black feminists contend that living in an anti-Black world structures our collective consciousnesses (Thomas, 2006) and informs our interpretations of oppression as a group (Collins, 1991). I surface characterisations of Blackness within the notion of the Black diaspora in that it relates to identity construction and subjectivities against an ‘Other’, *not* solely genealogy (Gilroy, 2002b; Massaquoi, 2004). Thus, embracing ‘Black’ as a category also requires understanding hierarchies, relationships and politics within (Macharia, 2019). I choose the term ‘Black diaspora’ over ‘African diaspora’ because it does not reify origin, but rather the constructions of Blackness as a unifying connection for people racialised as Black, particularly dark-skinned Black people (Soumahoro, 2022; Wright, 2004). Blackness becomes intertwined with diaspora even when it is (un)related to slavery. Middle Passage epistemologies (e.g. Sharpe, 2016) locate the ‘beginning’ of the subjugation of Black people – the beginning of race as an organising logic and of racism – at the slave ship. For Glissant (1990), the Caribbean theorist, the ‘boat’ is a birthing; it is the origin of the brutal viciousness of slavery, and so it is also considered a cosmogony:

This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clamor of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know. This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death. (1990, p. 6, emphasis added)

In my reading of Glissant, I see the slave ship as producing the conditions for Blackness *and* intimacy: being in relation to/of those who suffered the conditions of arriving in the New World. Therefore, if we take diaspora as an analytic outside of a specific dispersal event, it becomes a framework

of kinship that does not privilege origin in identity construction (Anthias, 1998). In this way, Black people from across the diaspora 'share in the unknown with others whom [they] have yet to know' (Glissant, 1990, p. 6). Such analysis of the Black diaspora emphasises the relational bonds Black people make and have based on common ancestry and experiences (Sanders et al., 2004). Moreover, Macharia (2019) argues that the 'Black diaspora' challenges conceptual and historical notions of intimacy, because while slavery attempted to dehumanise enslaved Africans, forcibly removing them from their cultures, homes and families, it failed. Instead, Macharia (2019) argues that there is evidence of the various ways those enslaved made intimate bonds *because of* the conditions of slavery and the afterlives of slavery (Johnson, 2020; Sharpe, 2016). Accordingly, kinship, fictive kinship and belonging are some core themes in Black diaspora studies (Adair, 2019) and archival evidence of Black life (Hartman, 2021). Therefore, locating intimacy in the conceptualisation of the Black diaspora is not only helpful in opening up 'the discursive or semiotic space for a discussion' (Hua, 2005, p. 191) about intimacy, diaspora and Blackness but is productive for analysing empirical data examining racialised relationality online. Moreover, combining Black diaspora analysis with Black feminist epistemologies offers a gendered lens to the extant heavily androcentric theorising (Brah, 1996; Sanders et al., 2004).

Macharia's (2019) book *Frottage* provides both language and anchor for BDRI's conceptualisation of Blackness and intimacy. Macharia contends that a shared understanding of racial violence, anti-Blackness, slavery and the horrors of the hold results in Black people across the diaspora having different connections to and with intimacy. Macharia develops this argument with the use of the metaphor 'frottage'. Frottage, which in general refers to a process of overlapping, touching or rubbing, is used by Macharia to describe 'a relation of proximity, to figure the black diaspora, for doing so unsettles the heteronormative tropes through which the black diaspora has been imagined and idealized' (2019, p. 4). Although Macharia uses frottage to characterise queerness in the Black diaspora, I find it generative for theorising, such as the idea that there is 'conceptual and affective proximity: the rubbing produced by and as Blackness' (2019, p. 5). Building on this, I read frottage as a metaphor for the intimacy that is bound up in Blackness. Thus, intimacy becomes a powerful concept for theorising Black belonging and connection(s) across the diaspora. It is not a coincidence that frottage is a central tenet of Black digital relational intimacies: it elucidates how shared bonds result in a construction of Black intimacy that 'grasp[s] the quotidian experiences of

intra-racial experience, the frictions and irritations and translations and mistranslations, the moments when Blackness coalesces through pleasure and play and also by resistance to antiblackness' (2019, p. 7).

Black women's affective, unspoken, digital intimacy

As I have discussed earlier, Black intimacy is shaped by intra-racial interiority. For instance, Black women's friendships are described as a 'homeplace' by Goins (2011) because they allow Black women to experience intimacy, vulnerability and safety by mitigating the discrimination faced in White supremacist societies (Leath et al., 2022). Such friendships, especially when made within hostile spaces, such as predominately White institutions, operate 'as sites of empowerment and resistance from oppression' (Goins, 2011, p. 531). Goins' descriptor of Black female friendships as 'homeplace' illustrates the type of closeness Jamieson (2011) describes in their definition of intimacy: it is an affective, embodied closeness built by mutual self-disclosure (Giddens, 1992) and practices of intimacy (Morgan, 2006, 2011). Practices of intimacy – behaviours and actions which create and maintain closeness – are shaped by one's social location, as elucidated by Goins (2011), Collins (1991) and other scholars of Black feminist thought.

I make use of a Black feminist epistemological framework for BDRI because Black women exist within the matrix of domination that also shapes online logics (Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019). Moreover, "Blackness" as a social category is produced in relation to both gender and sex categories' (Wright, 2004, p. 7); so, Black women's subjectivities need to be understood within culturally specific methodologies (Porter, Sulé and Croom, 2022). The postdigital framework recognises that the same oppressions occurring in 'real life' also appear in digitally mediated technologies. Black women's online lives are fraught with experiences of racism, sexism, marginalisation, threats of violence and uncredited labour in the Creator economy (McMillan Cottom, 2010; Miller et al., 2021; Noble, 2018; Sobande, 2020b). On the other hand, social media are *also* virtual spaces where Black women congregate in the 'Black [virtual] public sphere' (Papacharissi, 2002; Steele, 2016) and engage in creative, relational, joyful and resistant ways (Akinbola, 2022; Monk-Payton, 2017; Phelps-Ward and Laura, 2016). Consequently, applying a Black feminist lens to postdigital intimacy is useful for explicating how Black women's digital intimacies get to the heart of how 'women are socialized in complex relational nexuses where contextual rules

versus abstract principles govern behaviour' (Collins, 1991, p. 259). One example of 'contextual rules' governing behaviour is the experience of Black womanhood(s), as expressed by my participant Janine: 'Being seen' is knowing and sharing in the bind of 'double consciousness' (Du Bois, 1903).

Examples of where Black womanhood(s) operate as contextual rules are at the heart of bruce's (2022a) research describing how Black women and femmes engage in 'diasporic encounters and practices on social media platforms that celebrate transnational community, centre joy, and enact love through quotidian digital practices' (2022b, p. 249). bruce's 'digital diasporic intimacy' places Blackness and intimacy together in the context of Instagram. On the other hand, 'digital diaspora' in Black media and communications research describes the myriad ways Black people across the world have made use of social media and other digital media to build community (Florini, 2019; Sobande, 2017), resist dominant controlling images (Bailey, 2021; Neil and Mbilishaka, 2019; Perrine, 2020), create and remix music and visual arts (bruce, 2022a; Sobande, 2020a) and other quotidian transcultural and intra-racial digital practices. Black people across the diaspora have a shared cultural language, expressions and experiences, which social media disseminate across borders (Afeworki, 2018; Everett, 2009). Thus, it makes sense why the 'digital diaspora' analytic emerges as a heuristic frame for the Black diasporic community and online communication; however, broadly speaking, digital diaspora scholarship does not theorise behaviour as it relates to sociological phenomena such as intimacy.

Nevertheless, BDRI does not intend to offer another argument for a *Black* digital diaspora. On the contrary, BDRI theorises how postdigital intimacies shape and are shaped by Blackness, and that this is essential for understanding the ways Black women construct friendship and digital intimacy. BDRI explains how Black women can use 'digital technologies to explore ... creative kinship practices' (bruce, 2022b, p. 249).

Affective economies of being seen

One of the key findings in digital intimacy research is that digital intimacy is an embodied, affective experience (Attwood, Hakim and Winch, 2017; Hsiao, Steele and Weber, 2021; McGlotten, 2013; Smith and Snider, 2019); it is 'self-disclosure, vulnerability, a feeling, a sense of closeness and a description of relational space' (Campbell, 2022, p. 97). BDRI

must 'foreground the bodily histories and sensations' (Macharia, 2019, p. 2), which requires a turn towards embodied intimacy or 'intimacy of the body' (Jamieson, 2013). To consider embodied intimacy while being attentive to Blackness and intimacy and the ways that digital intimacy moves between the virtual and material (Massumi, 2021), I, like several other scholars (see, e.g. Döveling, Harju and Sommer, 2018; Kanai, 2019; Kuntsman, 2012; McGlotten, 2013; Smith and Snider, 2019), follow the affective turn.

Affect is a 'non-conscious experience of intensity' (Shouse, 2005, para. 4). Deleuze (1988) posits that affect drives bodily relationality between humans, non-humans and inanimate objects. This notion of 'affective power' is useful for articulating the way feelings move between people and platforms. Relatedly, feelings are shaped by gender, race, class and location, particularly those feelings one has in relation to another (Kanai, 2019). According to Ahmed (2004), a feeling is also something that 'moves' a person.

So, if affect is an unspoken intensity that drives feelings through virtual spaces and reconstitutes behaviour, I argue that the 'unspoken understanding' expressed by Black women is best understood as an affective force. In other words, affect engenders Black digital relational intimacies. Because my theorising stems from how Black women *construct* friendship digital intimacies, it's important to unpack how affect does so. 'Affect as practice' (Wetherell, 2012), a term used to describe affect's manifestation in social life and then what people *do* as a result of 'affective power', is what produces the feelings of closeness apparent in intimacy building, that is also referred to as knowing, seeing or understanding. Referring to the excerpt from Nikita, and the 'excitement' she feels, meaning the potential of connecting with another Black woman on Instagram, is an example of 'affect as practice'.

The nature of Blackness as intimacy, alongside affect and feeling, is essential in comprehending the theorising otherwise in BDRI. Postdigital is the continuation between digitality and reality, which requires examination of the ways social media 'does not just encompass networks and algorithms but also emotions, intimacy and affects' (Ponzanesi, 2020, p. 988). Moreover, McGlotten (2013) notes that interpersonal communications produce affective states

that are produced in and through virtual relationalities and mediated intimacies. Intimacy is not itself a form of affect; rather, it is more like affect's own inherent-ness – proximity, connection – a necessary precondition for certain affective states to bloom,

especially those that have to do with other people. *Affect happens in and through intimacy*. (2013, pp. 8–9, emphasis added)

Affect happens in and through intimacy. Therefore, affect is a productive force in Blackness as intimacy, specifically in online contexts, because it circulates the ‘affective economies’ of feeling seen or delight at coming across a potential Black woman to befriend on Instagram or Twitter. My use of affective economies here refers to the way that Blackness as intimacy is a ‘catchy’ feeling; it is a contagious emotion when reciprocated by others intra-racially. For example, another participant, Ravynn, explains the catchy feeling when engaging with another Black woman on social media: ‘What I think [happens] is that somehow Black women [just] understand very intimately.’

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have explained how I conceive of Black digital relational intimacies as being a theory suitable for analysis of the ways Black women construct digital intimacy. I argued that in a postdigital framework, BDRI takes seriously the ways that race and racialisation modify the experiences Black people have because of the ways that digital technologies touch and alter offline lives. Postdigital intimacy contends that digitality is not disconnected from reality; instead, it reconstitutes so-called private life into public arenas while being shaped by the logics of offline and online structures and norms. BDRI grapples with both sides of those logics, stitching together an analytic that draws on Black diaspora and affect, to express a way forward for thinking about the ways that Blackness affects intimacy formation *and* can be an immaterial force and catalyst for experiencing intimacy. I extend the theoretical arguments of ‘the Black diaspora’ being productive of more than claims to histories and routes, arguing that ontologically and socially, particularly in the afterlives of slavery (Sharpe, 2016), Blackness can be a unifying subject position regardless of geographical or genealogical origins. BDRI, therefore, is a meaningful intervention in postdigital intimacies research because it considers how racialisation – Blackness – becomes a facilitator of intimacy.

The theorising of how Blackness as a kind of intimacy is related to Black women’s digital intimacy stems from my years of making friends and engaging with Black women on Instagram and Twitter and my ongoing research. I drew on studies demonstrating how Black women’s friendships, because of the commonality of oppression we face, are often

intimate friendships. When these develop via social media, that intimacy flows through virtuality. Overall, this chapter argues that Blackness is a kind of intimacy and that Blackness as intimacy produces a closeness that is catching between Black women when they meet and maintain friendships with each other on social media. BDRI is an assemblage of diaspora studies, intimacy and the postdigital framework to analyse postdigital intimacies research. It is significant, in that it not only pushes against the post-racial trend in the latter but also places non-romantic intimacies at the centre of its analysis. In doing so, BDRI offers a theory for racialised intimacies in the virtual realm, and it also encourages other postdigital intimacies scholars to consider friendship as a generative area of study. Last, while this chapter is theoretical, BDRI can be used to analyse empirical findings, which could offer new methodological approaches to studying postdigital intimacies.

Notes

1. Scholars have noted why 'Black' is a contested identity category (Appiah, 1985; Gilroy, 2002b; Hall, 1993; Soumahoro, 2022), and it is not my desire to perpetuate essentialism or flatten all experiences of Blackness. Nevertheless, as I do focus on Black women, for the purpose of this chapter, I define it as people of African or Caribbean descent.
2. I continue to refer to X as Twitter throughout this chapter for historical accuracy.

References

- Adair, G. (2019). *Kinship Across the Black Atlantic: Writing diasporic relations*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Afeworki, G.N. (2018). *Eritrean Nationalism and the Digital Diaspora: Expanding diasporic networks via Twitter*. ProQuest dissertations and theses. Master's Thesis, University of California. 2015164934. ProQuest One Academic. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/eritrean-nationalism-digital-diaspora-expanding/docview/2015164934/se-2?accountid=11862>
- Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective economies. *Social Text*, 22(2), 117–139.
- Akinbola, B. (2022). #AfricanAunties: Performing diasporic digital disbelongings on TikTok. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 42(3), 284–297.
- Amundsen, R. (2022). Hetero-sexting as mediated intimacy work: 'Putting Something on the Line'. *New Media & Society*, 24(1), 122–137.
- Anthias, F. (1998). Evaluating 'diaspora': Beyond ethnicity? *Sociology*, 32(3), 24.
- Appiah, A. (1985). The uncompleted argument: Du Bois and the illusion of race. *Critical Inquiry*, 12(1), 21–37.
- Attwood, F., Hakim, J. and Winch, A. (2017). Mediated intimacies: Bodies, technologies and relationships. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(3), 249–253.
- Bailey, M. (2021). *Misogynoir Transformed: Black women's digital resistance. Intersections: Transdisciplinary perspectives on genders and sexualities*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bassett, C. (2015). Not now? Feminism, technology, postdigital, in D.M. Berry and M. Dieter (eds) *Postdigital Aesthetics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race After Technology: Abolitionist tools for the New Jim Code*. Medford, MA: Polity.

- Berlant, L. (1998). Intimacy: A special issue. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 281–288.
- Berlant, L. and Warner, M. (1998). Sex in public. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), *Intimacy*, 547–566.
- Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting identities*. London: Routledge.
- Brah, A. (2022). *Decolonial Imaginings: Intersectional conversations and contestations*. London: Goldsmiths Press.
- Brock, A. (2009). ‘Who do you think you are?’ Race, representation, and cultural rhetorics in online spaces. *Poroi*, 6(1), 15–35.
- Brock, A. (2012). From the blackhand side: Twitter as a cultural conversation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(4), 529–549.
- Brock, A. (2020). *Distributed Blackness: African American cybercultures*. *Critical Cultural Communication*. New York: New York University Press.
- bruce, k. (2022a). *Curating Digital Diasporic Intimacies: Black feminist approaches to visual cultures online*. Doctoral Thesis, University of Nottingham.
- bruce, k. (2022b). ‘Everyone has a pic like this in the album!’: Digital diasporic intimacy and the Instagram archive’. *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 50 (1–2): 246–263.
- Byron, P. (2021). *Digital Media, Friendship and Cultures of Care*. 1st edition. London: Routledge.
- Byron, P. and Møller, K. (2021). Flirting and friendship at the periphery of Hook-up app research. *Lambda Nordica*, 26 (1), 23–52.
- Campbell, J.F. (2022). Intimacy. In K. Kopecka-Piech and M. Sobiech (eds) *Mediatization of Emotional Life*. 1st edition. London: Routledge, pp. 91–105.
- Centre for Postdigital Cultures (2024). Postdigital intimacies. *Academic Centre for Postdigital Cultures*. <https://postdigitalcultures.org/strands/postdigital-intimacies/>
- Chambers, D. (2013). *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online intimacies and networked friendship*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chatelain, M. (2019). Is Twitter any place for a [Black academic] lady? In E. Losh and J. Wernimont (eds) *Bodies of Information: Intersectional feminism and the digital humanities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Clark, M.D. (2014). *To Tweet Our Own Cause: A mixed-methods study of the online phenomenon ‘Black Twitter’*. Doctoral Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Cohen, R. (2019). Diasporas: Changing meanings and limits of the concept. In J. Retis and R. Tsagarousianou (eds) *The Handbook of Diasporas, Media, and Culture*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp. 21–30.
- Collins, P.H. (1991). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Reprint. Perspectives on Gender 2. New York: Routledge.
- Davis, J.L. and Jurgenson, N. (2014). Context collapse: theorizing context collusions and collisions. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(4), 476–485.
- Deleuze, G. (1988). *Spinoza: Practical philosophy* (R. Hurley, trans.). San Francisco, CA: City Lights.
- Dobson, A.S., Carah, N. and Robards, B. (2018). Digital intimate publics and social media: Towards theorising public lives on private platforms. In A. Shields Dobson, B. Robards and N. Carah (eds) *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 3–27.
- Döveling, K., Harju, A.A. and Sommer, D. (2018). From mediatized emotion to digital affect cultures: New technologies and global flows of emotion. *Social Media + Society*, 4(1).
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and sketches*. Chicago, IL: A.G. McClurg.
- Emejulu, A. and Sobande, F. (2019). *To Exist Is to Resist: Black feminism in Europe*. London: Pluto Press.
- Esco, K.M. (2011). Understanding ‘Black Twitter’: A look at the increasingly diverse internet population. *Public Relations Tactics*, 18(10), 15.
- Everett, A. (2009). *Digital Diaspora: A race for cyberspace*. *Cultural studies in cinema/video*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Finch, A.K. (2022). Black feminism and the practice of care. *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*, 11(1), 1–41.
- Florini, S. (2014). Tweets, tweeps, and signifyin’: Communication and cultural performance on ‘Black Twitter’. *Television & New Media*, 15(3), 223–237.
- Florini, S. (2019). *Beyond Hashtags: Racial politics and Black digital networks*. New York: New York University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1992). *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gilroy, P. (1994). Diaspora. *Paragraph*, 17(3), 207–212.
- Gilroy, P. (2002a). Diaspora, utopia and the critique of capitalism. In P. Gilroy (ed.) *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*. London: Taylor & Francis Group.

- Gilroy, P. (2002b). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*. 3rd edition. London: Verso.
- Glissant, É. (1990). *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by B. Wing. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Goins, M.N. (2011). Playing with dialectics: Black female friendship groups as a homeplace. *Communication Studies*, 62(5), 531–546.
- Graham, R. and Smith, S. (2016). The content of our #Characters: Black Twitter as counterpublic. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 2(4).
- Hall, S. (1993). What is this 'Black' in Black popular culture? *Social Justice*, 20(1/2), 104–114.
- Hall, S. (2021). Cultural identity and diaspora. In P. Gilroy and R. Wilson Gilmore (eds) *Stuart Hall: Selected Writings on Race and Difference*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hall, S. and Morley, D. (2019). *Essential Essays, Volume 2: Identity and diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hartman, S.V. (2021). *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate histories of riotous Black girls, troublesome women and queer radicals*. London: Serpent's Tail.
- Hsiao, W., Steele, R. and Weber, L. (2021). Touched through a screen: Digital intimacy on Twitter and OnlyFans. Masters of Media (blog). 29 October 2021. <https://mastersofmedia.hum.uva.nl/blog/2021/10/29/touched-through-a-screen-digital-intimacy-on-twitter-and-onlyfans/>
- Hua, A. (2005). Diaspora and cultural memory. In V. Agnew (ed.) *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A search for home*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kcl/detail.action?docID=4671425>
- Jamieson, L. (2011). Intimacy as a concept: Explaining social change in the context of globalisation or another form of ethnocentrism. *Sociological Research Online*, 16(4), 151–163.
- Jamieson, L. (2013). Personal relationships, intimacy and the self in a mediated and global digital age. In K. Orton-Johnson and N. Prior (eds) *Digital Sociology: Critical perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 21.
- Johnson, J.M. (2020). *Wicked Flesh: Black women, intimacy, and freedom in the Atlantic world*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jones, F. (2019). *Reclaiming Our Space: How Black feminists are changing the world from the Tweets to the streets*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kanai, A. (2019). *Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture: Managing affect, intimacy and value*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Kaskazi, A., Copeland, A. and Gonzalez, A. (2015). 'With class': Exploring Black female identity and cultural expression on Twitter and Instagram. iConference 2015 Workshops, 1–8. Newport Beach, CA: iSchools.
- Kuntsman, A. (2012). Introduction: Affective fabrics of digital cultures. In A. Karatzogianni and A. Kuntsman (eds) *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–17.
- Leath, S., Mims, L., Evans, K.A., Parker, T. and Billingsley, J.T. (2022). 'I can be unapologetically who I am': A study of friendship among Black undergraduate women at PWIs. *Emerging Adulthood*, 10(4), 837–851.
- Macharia, K. (2019). *Frottage: Frictions of intimacy across the Black diaspora. Sexual cultures*. New York: New York University Press.
- Manning, K.D. (2020). The nod. *JAMA*, 323(17), 1684–1685.
- Maragh-Lloyd, R. (2020). A digital postracial parity? Black women's everyday resistance and rethinking online media culture. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 13(1), 17–35.
- Massaquoi, N. (2004). An African child becomes a Black Canadian feminist: Oscillating identities in the Black diaspora. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 23(2), 140–144.
- Massumi, B. (2021). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- McGlotten, S. (2013). *Virtual Intimacies: Media, affect, and queer sociality*. State University of New York Press.
- McMillan Cottom, T. (2010). Where platform capitalism and racial capitalism meet: The sociology of race and racism in the digital society. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 6(4), 441–449.
- Miguel, C. (2018). *Personal Relationships and Intimacy in the Age of Social Media*. 1st edition. Cham: Palgrave.
- Miller, G.H., Marquez-Velarde, G., Williams, A.A. and Keith, V.M. (2021). Discrimination and Black social media use: Sites of oppression and expression. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 7(2), 247–263.
- Monk-Payton, B. (2017). #LaughingWhileBlack: Gender and the comedy of social media Blackness. *Feminist Media Histories*, 3(2), 15–35.

- Morgan, D. (2006). *Family Connections: An introduction to family studies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Morgan, D. (2011). *Rethinking Family Practices*. London: Springer.
- Nakamura, L. (2014). Gender and race online. In M. Graham and W. Dutton (eds) *Society and the Internet*. London: Oxford University Press, pp. 81–96.
- Nakamura, L. and Chow-White, P. (eds) (2012). *Race after the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Neil, L. and Mblishaka, A. (2019). Hey curlfriends!': Hair care and self-care messaging on YouTube by Black women natural hair vloggers. *Journal of Black Studies*, 50(2), 156–177.
- Noble, S.U. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Okoye, V.O. (2021). Black digital outer spaces: Constellations of relation and care on Twitter. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 46(4), 806–809.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2002). The presentation of self in virtual life: Characteristics of personal home pages. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79(3), 643–660.
- Perrine, A. (2020). Black faces in White spaces: Black women's YouTube channels in Brazil as Fortalecimento. *Journal of Lusophone Studies*, 5(1), 203–223.
- Phelps-Ward, R.J. and Laura, C.T. (2016). Talking back in cyberspace: Self-love, hair care, and counter narratives in Black adolescent girls' YouTube vlogs. *Gender and Education*, 28(6), 807–820.
- Ponzanesi, S. (2020). Digital diasporas: Postcoloniality, media and affect. *Interventions*, 22(8), 977–993.
- Porter, C.J., Sulé, V.T. and Croom, N.N. (2022). Applying Black feminist epistemologies, research, and praxis. In C.J. Porter, V. Thandi Sulé and N.N. Croom (eds) *Black Feminist Epistemology, Research, and Praxis*, 1st edition. New York: Routledge, pp. 1–11.
- Russell, L. (2020). *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. London: Verso.
- Sanders, L., Wane, N.N., McKittrick, K., Ballantyne, D., Medovski, A., Hamilton S.D., Tharao-Lyruu, E. and Trotz, D.A. (2004). Editorial [Black diaspora]. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 23(2), 3.
- Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the Wake: On Blackness and being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Shouse, E. (2005). Feeling, emotion, affect. *M/C Journal*, 8(6).
- Smith, N. and Snider, A.M. (2019). ASMR, affect and digitally-mediated intimacy. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 30, 41–48.
- Sobande, F. (2017). Watching me watching you: Black women in Britain on YouTube'. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6), 655–671.
- Sobande, F. (2020a). On digital remixing and regulations. Personal blog. Margins. <https://marginstwenty.home.blog/2020/12/16/on-digital-remixing-and-regulations/>
- Sobande, F. (2020b). *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain*. 1st edition. Palgrave Studies in (Re)Presenting Gender 2662–9364. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Soumahoro, M. (2022). *Black Is the Journey, Africana the name*. Translated by K.L. Glover. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Steele, C.K. (2016). The digital barbershop: Blogs and online oral culture within the African American community. *Social Media + Society*, 2(4).
- Steele, C.K. (2021a). Black feminist pleasure on TikTok: An ode to Hurston's 'Characteristics of Negro Expression'. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 44(4), 463–469.
- Steele, C.K. (2021b). *Digital Black Feminism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Steele, C.K. (2021c). When the Black lives that matter are not our own: Digital Black feminism and a dialectic of self and community. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(5), 860–863.
- Stringfield, R.K. (2022). #BlackScholarJoy: The labor, resistance and joy practices of Black women graduate students. *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 16(3). <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/16/3/index.html>
- The Combahee River Collective (2014). A Black feminist statement. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 42(3/4), 271–280.
- Thomas, G. (2006). PROUD FLESH inter/views: Sylvia Wynter. *Proud Flesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics & Consciousness*, 4, 1–35.
- Tölölyan, K. (1991). The nation-state and its others: In lieu of a preface. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1(1), 3–7.
- Wetherell, M. (2012). *Affect and Emotion: A new social science understanding*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Wright, M.M. (2004). *Becoming Black: Creating identity in the African diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wright, M.M. (2005). Finding a place in cyberspace: Black women, technology, and identity. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 26(1), 48–59.

Queer social media imaginaries and relational becoming amongst sapphic youth

Niamh White

While researching young queer women's encounters with queer history on social media I ran into a predictable yet thorny definitional stumbling block. Although using 'young queer women' as a catch-all, the project was always designed to be gender expansive and interrogate the fixedness of that category, and consequently, not all of my participants were 'queer' or 'women' or 'lesbian', even if these terms resonated in complex ways that drew them to self-select into the study. Something brought us (myself as researcher included under this uneasy header) together, threading through the interstices between our everyday lives and bridging those rifts cleaved by larger differences and disparities. Yet we found ourselves frustrated by language when we tried to define it, settling for terms that did not quite fit but made sense enough to get by with – that is, we did not share any singular identity nor could we clearly define the boundaries of our 'community', but understood ourselves as tethered through similarly coded sets of experiences, affects, orientations and expressions that we used identitarian language for in the absence of anything better.

A sense of connection through the digital structured these relations for my young participants; 'online' was a space of continual discovery, a world where they found things out about themselves through intimate encounters with others that were often mediated through algorithmic channels. Stories of finding themselves through finding others like them online were woven into broader life narratives including experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, religious deconversion, familial estrangement, neurodivergence and racial othering. Posts from people

reflecting on their relationships to gender and sexuality, lesbian and wlw (women-loving-women) Instagram pages, video essays and Tumblr memes, all offered little micro-moments of self-making that were originally authored by strangers but took on new intensities as lines between self and other blurred. Where and how these intensities were felt further illuminated the diffuse boundaries of the postdigital. Predominantly occurring through scrolling, reading and watching rather than posting, creating or processes of online self-curation, these encounters held deep affective significance. Although accessed through quieter modes of digital engagement, they had tangible ripple effects into the offline world, shaping participants' socialities, modes of dress and self-expression and the lives they built for themselves.

This chapter explores these processes of becoming, focusing specifically on digital and algorithmic entanglements with others and the affective connections they produce. I use 'sapphic/s' to refer to young queer women and gender diverse people with attachments to lesbian cultures and desires and offer 'sapphic becoming' as a way to parse sapphic not as a fixed identity, but as a dynamic process of subjectivity formation that unfolds through digital spaces. Drawing together strands of thought from queer theory, trans studies, phenomenology and affect and feminist new materialisms, I propose that sapphic becoming challenges the identitarian frameworks frequently employed when investigating young queer people's online engagements and expands our understanding of what these engagements might encompass.

Framing sapphic youth

Young queer women and gender diverse youth are underrepresented demographics within digital youth studies with the potential to unsettle identity paradigms and intensify hotly contested frictions surrounding the subject positions of 'woman' and 'lesbian'. There is a wealth of rich investigation into how young people access digital platforms as spaces of community, pedagogy and self-development, but most of this work is built on analysis of broad cohorts that tends to focus specifically on either gender or sexuality. Studies into young women's online practices have explored a range of topics including feminist activism (Ringrose, Mendes and Keller, 2019; Keller, 2012), sexting (Albury, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013; Setty, 2021) and self-representation (Dobson, 2012; Banet-Weiser, 2011; Kanai, 2019). Queer youth are predominantly examined from the vantage point of identity construction (Bates, Hobman and Bell,

2020; Wargo, 2017; Craig and McNroy, 2014), with a particular focus on the types of platforms and affordances that facilitate or complicate queer becoming (Byron et al., 2019; Cho, 2018; Simpson and Semaan, 2021). Rarely do these studies intersect or converge, meaning young women are understood largely in regards to how they are affected by and resist patriarchal norms while young queer people are figured in terms of their individual identity exploration. At present, then, sapphic youth are largely inaccessible, constricted by study parameters that flatten their complexity. Their elusivity within the field risks forcing them into niches that sever their alliances with multiple social locations, wherein either their youth, gender or queerness is prioritised in order to make them legible within the contours of academic inquiry.

The findings of this chapter are based on interviews with 21 young people aged 16–24 in Australia who related in some way with the banner of ‘young queer women’. Participants were split between Melbourne and regional and rural areas of Victoria, with a few participants having grown up internationally or elsewhere in Australia. They came from a range of cultural backgrounds, with nine identifying as white Australian, four as having Malaysian heritage and everybody else reporting a range of mixed heritages including Chinese, French, Dutch, South African, New Zealand, Turkish, Japanese, Indian, South Sudanese, Nigerian, Italian and Singaporean. The majority were students, and their class backgrounds were complex, with many having access to cultural capital associated with middle-class status but with personal or familial instances of job instability and financial pressure. Others explicitly identified as working class, were estranged from family and had experiences of poverty and precarity.

The initial call for participants invited queer ‘women and anyone whose gender identities involve a relationship to womanhood’, with the parameters of this relationship being left open to interpretation and self-definition. Such relationships materialised in a variety of ways including a direct identification with womanhood, understanding it as a form of socialisation that may or may not align with particular gendered embodiments, and connections with lesbian and sapphic history and culture. The sign-up sheet asked for pronouns and allowed potential participants to describe their background and social location in their own language and preferred level of detail. They offered a number of different identifications – queer, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, aro/ace, femme, butch, masc, tomboy, cisgender, trans, AFAB, genderfluid, gender non-conforming, genderqueer – and many used the open answer box to express the fluidity or uncertainty of their self-positioning, such as Lila, who described

her sexuality as queer and ‘figuring out where I sit between the B and the L’ and Dana, who ‘would (tentatively) describe myself as cis at this moment!’

I consulted with participants over what language to use in my analysis, and they generally agreed that using ‘queer women’ and acknowledging the caveats, contingencies and complexities that ‘women’ carries was an imperfect but acceptable way forward. ‘Sapphic’ emerged as an equally preferred term, specifically for its links to lesbian histories and cultures. Scholarly use of sapphic is largely limited to literary and print culture histories of modernity (Doan and Garrity, 2006; Lanser, 2014). While these usages index personal subjectivities and embodiments and indicate beyond literary formations to broader sets of cultural and social configurations, they also periodise sapphicness within a specific historical context, often emphasising its pastness. However, this research understands sapphic not as a fixed positionality rooted in the past, but as a dynamic process of becoming invested with new meanings through digital cultures. Owing in part to a resurgence of lesbian cultural nostalgia facilitated by new technologies (Medhurst, 2024), sapphic has been popularised on social media as an umbrella term that encompasses lesbian culture and community while making space for non-lesbians whose desires and histories overlap. Recent work on dating platforms by DeVito et al. centres desire as an organising principle of sapphic identification, defining ‘sapphics’ as ‘trans women, cis women, and nonbinary people who are attracted to other sapphics’ (DeVito et al., 2024). Emergent contemporary uses of sapphic thus rest upon relational logics, emphasising attachments, affinities and solidarities over static classifications.

I here offer sapphic not as an identity category – despite the grammatical logics which suppose as such when placed descriptively before ‘youth’ – but as a heuristic for patterns of desires, modes of self-fashioning, cultural and historical associations and discourses and affective communities that entwine to signal ‘a specificity to lesbian experience that can be lived but which resists being solidified’ (Hord, 2022, p. 620). Focusing on specificity over identity rejects binary definitions and solid categorisations, instead foregrounding a recognition of others through registers of difference and sameness that vary in intensity. It also offers a vantage point from which to critically assess these intensities, remaining cognisant of how the digital contexts through which sapphicness emerges rest on organisational logics that reify and exclude along lines of race, class, gender and ableism. This specificity is therefore always marked by tension, caught up in states of making and unmaking as the young people who inhabit it map out its affective meanings and possibilities.

Troubling curation and consumption

Existing scholarship has largely examined young women's and young queer and trans people's processes of subjectivity formation through a curatorial lens, considering negotiations of identity-making and publicness across profiles, posting and platform cultures (Bates, Hobman and Bell, 2020; Dobson, 2012; Robards et al., 2020; Wargo, 2017; Caldeira, Van Bauwel and De Ridder, 2021). Focus is placed on sites where the self is expected to be comprehensibly captured and expressed, such as usernames, bios, profiles, grids, posts, comments and photos. My approach here rejects the fixity of these types of curation, thinking instead of how subjectivities and the technological flows that shape them are moulded by affects, feelings and forces of movement that are harder to tangibly trace. Young growing up in postdigital conditions traverse blurred online/offline states in an 'always-on temporal mode' (Wajcman, 2015), embedded in increasingly technologically mediated socialities that require complex digital literacies to navigate (boyd, 2014; Fu and Cook, 2021). As algorithmic organisation intensifies, capturing and reassembling everyday interactions into datafied knowledges and relations (Bucher, 2018; Willson, 2017), so too do the feelings and folk theories young people develop in order to make meanings out of their feeds (Karizat et al., 2021; Brough, Literat and Ikin, 2020). Emergent research on the relationships between LGBTQ+ young people and their algorithms highlights their intimate algorithmic imaginaries (Simpson and Semaan, 2021), but the presupposition of distinct and separate algorithmic and internal notions of the self produces a binary understanding of this relationship that can only be evaluated as validating or invalidating. As the melding of technologies and bodies becomes increasingly 'liquid' (Savin-Baden, 2021) we face new challenges in mapping the co-constructed rhythms of digital life. Rather than considering curation as an agential practice that young people engage in to purposefully find themselves online, I suggest that subjectivity formation occurs on deeply meaningful registers even when there is no digital expression of the self to analyse.

In response to the above shifts, this chapter uses qualitative interviews to hone in on affective intensities and movements that cannot be captured as digital data either because the experience leaves no observable virtual fingerprints (scrolling, watching) or because such traces (likes, shares, a comment here and there) are too ephemeral to be captured and consolidated. I follow Cavalcante (2016) in drawing attention to 'quieter' media usage, considering engagement with social media as lived through patterned behaviours of moving from app to app, refreshing for updates,

scrolling through feeds and unfocusing and refocusing attention. This perspective recognises the varying temporal and spatial registers of different platforms and digital enclaves, but thinks across them to consider sensate immersion in the virtual as moving through online ‘worlds’.

Despite concentrating on what is silently taken in while moving through digital worlds, I also trouble the idea of this as a straightforward consumption of media that informs one’s identity development. When we speak of *consuming content*, soaking up images, knowledge and language from the other, it is a figuration that demands a central, extractive consumer. Individual identity formation emerges through an ‘ideology of dominance ... that requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self, that is to say, non-I, other’ (Minh-ha, 1988, p. 71). Elimination and domination are two ways this rejection materialises, but I would also suggest that it finds a more palatable (but just as exclusionary) form in the discourse of consumption that pervades much of how we speak about what we access online. hooks reminds us of the dangers of consumptive logics which, even through the relations of pleasurable connection we feel while immersed in our feeds, construct ‘alternative playground[s] where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other’ (hooks, 2015, p. 23). This chapter imagines the practices of watching, scrolling and taking in images, videos and knowledge from others described by young people outside of these logics by framing them as sites where self/other, technology/body and real/virtual intermingle in postdigital modes that do not automatically assume the primacy of one over the other. In attending to dimensionalities of space, place and being that carve out contextual understandings of where ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ sit in relation to each other (Bolander and Locher, 2020; Leander and Mckim, 2003) and stress the porous nature of subjectivity, sapphic becoming recalibrates identitarian framings of curation and consumption to examine how movements through virtual space and within the self are deeply entangled.

Moments, movements, materialisations

In this section, I explore flashpoints of recognition and discovery experienced by sapphic young people as they navigate digital spaces. The moments they describe are ones where something shifts internally, galvanising embryonic feelings that can only be fleshed out through interpersonal meaning-making. They are moments of recognition, but not of

recognition predicated on pre-existing known commonalities. Rather, recognition emerges as the very production and materialisation of these commonalities through the intra-action (Barad, 2007) of bodies, technologies and affects. The way sapphic young people move through the virtual is entangled with the kinds of possibilities that unfold. Such movements span multiple platforms and ways of accessing information, including active searches, placing trust in algorithms to map out their routes and finding themselves drawn to dwell in comment sections. Affective pulls shape these flows, producing a range of both positive and negative feelings. Experiencing these spaces as worlds where things open up, agitate, align and rearrange then disrupts the fixity of 'offline', enabling sapphic youth to identify and question the norms that structure their lives.

Alyson (24) and Piper (20) are both white trans women who grew up in Christian communities whose religious conditionings they deconverted from at the same time that they came to realise their queerness, transness and neurodivergence. Their stories resonated in striking ways, playing out across various overlapping digital spaces; TikTok, YouTube video essays and trans subreddits served as important spaces of pedagogy and connection for both of them, and Alyson also credited queer-friendly Christian Facebook groups and creators as early catalysts for her growing self-awareness. Both also acknowledged the isolation of the COVID-19 lockdowns as having shaped their life trajectories, with the drastic reconfiguring of social worlds helping them cut contact with their churches and leave to start lives with their partners. As Alyson put it, these shifts were already in motion but 'the wonderful COVID and the wonderful TikTok algorithm pushed me a little bit further'.

For Piper, deconverting from her beliefs involved seeking out perspectives of others that destabilised her prior notions of self with a purposeful receptiveness to being challenged and changed.

Like social media has been like massive for like, pretty much every part of like my self discovery ... I was spending like heaps of time on, on YouTube. Like, you know, trying to like, you know, like find better arguments than mine, for like my own positions and then like understand other ones and stuff like that, you know. (Piper)

She situates other people's knowledge as already 'better arguments' than her own, even though the nature of such arguments were not yet known to her. Rejecting her own subjective authority gives her access to understandings that can only emerge in relational contexts. Although the

language she uses is that of 'self' discovery, what she describes is a movement outside of herself and towards others in order to reassess where she places herself in the world and what 'positions' she can occupy. Alyson experienced similar moments and movements that affectively shifted her sense of self.

I think I might have maybe heard about someone in a social media post or heard them on a podcast, I think I heard them on a podcast and then followed them on social media and they released a book and it just kind of summarised things in a really amazing way about how, you know, a religion that's founded in your brokenness and your desires being wrong results in a huge disconnect from your body. And as a result you can repress a lot of things and it can be very hard to identify what you're feeling and not just shut scary thoughts and emotions down because you are taught that, yeah, those sorts of feelings are wrong and not even worth engaging with. (Alyson)

The way Alyson remembers finding this creator – maybe through a social media post, maybe on a podcast, then through following them, then reading their book – recalls a journeying through media that captures the everyday rhythms of connection in digital spaces and finding knowledge she finds sits across multiple places. Piper charts a similar journey, describing how her religious deconversion, her transness and her neurodivergence untangle through following 'common threads' weaved through her online travels.

But, so it was huge for that with also like realizing that like, I had ADHD as well. Like, like TikTok especially was like another like, like seeing like people, like there's always kind of like, like a common thread between all that is like, you have moments where like someone says something that you are feeling in like a way that's way better than you could have put it, that makes it make way more sense, do you know what I mean? (Piper)

In both accounts it is a connection to feelings that serves as a transformative drive. Alone, these feelings are formless, 'hard to identify': *there*, but lacking coherent enough shape to be comprehended and realised. What comes to them through other people's videos is as much an affective language as it is grammatical, offering new arrangements of meaning for

how they experience their bodies and minds, and the words they use to fit them. Reading these accounts through queer theories of virtuality and assemblages highlights where the lines between screen and self liquefy. Both women experience their online worlds as 'entangled contact zone[s] of political and personal energies' (McGlotten, 2013, p. 11) where 'bodies interpenetrate, swirl together, and transmit affects and effects to each other' (Puar, 2017, p. 205). Alyson demonstrates how this is not always an affectively positive experience, sometimes requiring facing what is 'scary' and 'wrong'. Yet, in locating this 'brokenness' as something learned she is able to face what she has been taught to repress and re-establish a relationship with herself. Her experiences demonstrate how contact with shame can enact 'durable, structural changes in one's relational and interpretive strategies toward both self and others' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 62).

A number of other participants experienced the upheaval of pandemic lockdowns as a time when their social worlds ruptured and the digital flows they were engaging with pulled them into different forms of affective contact. Ruhi, who was 17 when we first spoke, recounted how she realised that she was a lesbian during this time. Her account deals in terms of flux and flow: there were 'a lot of things like going around' in the social media spaces she was inhabiting, with Pinterest and Instagram serving as sites of notable intensities. These things went around in her real life too, although they arrived unevenly, with her school only 'starting' to teach about what she had already been exploring.

Like I was on social media a lot more at 13. Especially things like Pinterest and Instagram and there was a lot of things like going around, even in school they were like starting to teach about that ... And then like 15, during quarantine, that's when I realised like, I think it was like, I was, I was like away from, you know, that sort of like social construct that everyone is sort of way. (Ruhi)

While these queer realisations occurred on social media, it is the offline world that Ruhi positions as the site of 'social construct[s] that everyone is'. Her wording here is notable – generally the subject of the 'x is a social construct' formula names a social force such as race or gender. Here, it is people themselves who are the social constructs, made up of the performances and expectations they enact and transmit to each other as bodies congregate together. Scholars examining the affectively charged intensities that developed during periods of lockdowns and social distancing

have mapped how the absence of physical contact suffused virtual connections with new capacities for touching and being touched (Bozalek et al., 2021; Thorpe et al., 2023). Removed from these sites of transference and placed into new zones of contact, Ruhi is able to reassess social givens as normative patterns and begin to locate where she sits in relation to them.

Being able to locate and explore sapphic subject positions was tied to the kinds of understandings that digital spaces produced about the ‘real’ world. Vega (21) described themselves as transfeminine, non-binary and somewhere on the autism spectrum. Watching video essays was formative in helping them map out where trans and neurodivergent becoming overlapped and informed each other.

I was watching a video recently about how specifically autistic people were more likely to identify as trans ... it's not people converting autistic people because autistic people are like gullible and can't like think for themselves, but instead that because of like our altered view of how we experience the world, we do not, we aren't able to fit into gender roles as well as neurotypical people. And I, and I thought like that was a really good way to put it. For me, I think a lot of ideas I've been having and like part of experiments I've been having in my head recently have been really coming through YouTube honestly, through like video essays and all that. (Vega)

Vega's understanding of how their gender and neurodivergence inform each other can be conceptualised as ‘neuroqueer’ in terms of how it ‘renders gender, sexuality, and neurotypicality all in terms of performance of normativity, or the performance of socially constructed and valued concepts’ (Barnett, 2024). They assert a position that foregrounds trans autistic epistemological authority by challenging, picking apart and ultimately rejecting hegemonic transphobic and ableist media narratives. Watching video essays is a catalytic experience, responsible for sparking off ‘experiments [they've] been having in their head’. The movements and moments Vega describes here are internally felt, reflecting a neuroqueer positionality that is experienced as ‘permanent flux, a “motioning,” “lurching,” or “ticking” toward futurity’ (Barnett, 2024). Although more concentrated in a particular site, Vega's experiences mirror the others in pointing to where the boundary between screen and self dissolves, and illuminates how these epistemological and ontological transformations are deeply entwined.

Sapphic objects and orientations

In this section, I use Ahmed's queer phenomenology to frame the refashioning of objects and bodies as sapphic as a process of becoming. Being opened up to queer objects and orientations in online spheres 'unsettles that line that divides spaces as worlds' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 169), calling online/offline boundaries into question. Tracking where sapphic becoming crosses and recalibrates these boundaries challenges assumptions around curation and consumption by demonstrating how what is taken in while watching and scrolling through feeds is then materially acted upon to constitute new forms of 'offline' embodiment and sociality. As young people log on and scroll through they expand their 'bodily horizons', with these engagements generating new and altered capacities for embodiment and subjectivity formation in the sense that they bring 'objects of thought, feeling, and judgement, as well as objects in the sense of aims, aspirations, and objectives' into view (Ahmed, 2006, p. 56). Access to these objects and orientations, however, is unevenly patterned, particularly along racialised lines. While young sapphic people of colour still push at and expand their bodily horizons in meaningful ways through digital spaces, this takes more concentrated effort due to the racialised economies of visibility that value white bodies over others.

Lila, a 23-year-old law student, described her social media use as 'less actual interaction but more like consuming content that then makes sense when you consume other content, like, so it feels like we're all in one big in-joke'. These 'in-jokes' reframed her and her friends' actions through new lenses, attaching queer meanings to everyday items they had not previously regarded as such.

Yeah, the in-jokes is huge, I think – the same references and things that we would never have learned like like, you know, me and all my friends will wear Doc Martens and like, I don't, but some of my friends will like have their keys on a carabiner and then that'll just be something that they're doing and then they'll be on TikTok and they'll be like, 'Oh my god, this is a thing? I'm like, participating in like a cultural thing?' 'Cause this is a stereotype and an in-joke and that's hilarious. And they'll see that online and then they'll be able to talk about it in person and be like, LOL, the carabiner thing. (Lila)

Wearing Doc Martens and carrying keys on a carabiner were 'just ... something that they [were] doing' until they stumbled upon their sapphic historical and cultural associations through TikTok. Such associations

work transformatively, remaking items that were ‘something’ into ‘a thing’. The accessories take on new qualities as sapphic objects whose ‘characteristics are not simply “in” the objects but instead are about how the objects work and are worked on by others’ (Ahmed, 2006, p. 50) in the overlaps of online and offline spheres. The relations at play speak to a postdigital melding of old and new, wherein aesthetics from the past are imbued with new potentialities in the present through digital cultures and communities (Cramer, 2014). As sapphic objects, they open up new potentialities for performing and embodying sapphicness and extend networked socialities beyond the digital worlds that inform them. That Lila considers them ‘in-jokes’ speaks to their intimate, affective capacities to knit together her social circle and the channels of queer digital culture they access online. To be a stereotype is a good thing, indicating literacy of both the lesbian past and the contemporary sapphic sensibilities of TikTok that restage and reanimate it.

Jenna (23) was from a similar social background to Lila, and as white, middle-class, cisgender women they both spoke with relative ease and lightness about their ability to navigate the cultural space of sapphicness. Although she expressed general feelings of comfort and recognition, Jenna did acknowledge that there are moments where her bisexuality complicates straightforward identification with what is presented as ‘lesbian’ or ‘sapphic’ online.

I find that for bi women it’s almost harder because like you’re already like not fitting into one category or another, but like you can still be part of like the lesbian like, or the sapphic community, but not connect with everything. So like there are stereotypes and I think a lot of the stereotypes like are kind of like very evident on social media and sometimes they play out, and I’ve seen them play out in friends, but that’s not always the case, if that makes sense. (Jenna)

For Jenna, engaging with these stereotypes is more about a process of negotiation, and figuring out what parts of sapphicness align with her bisexuality and what elements cannot ‘play out’ as easily in the material world. Seeing resonances of these stereotypes in her friends and feeling like she can connect with some things, even if not everything speaks to her, offers her room to consider where and how her experiences extend into these spaces. Assessing the types of objects her offline social circles do and do not take up from social media shifts bisexuality, lesbianism and

sapphicness away from being static categories of belonging and instead frames them in malleable and relational terms.

As affirming and useful as these objects are for Lila, Jenna and other young queer people who express themselves through sapphic attachments, a number of participants of colour expressed difficulty in finding the same ease of recognition. Although they often spoke about eventually finding queer of colour algorithmic niches and creators, the dominant flows of queer content were markedly white and felt exclusionary.

It was like, this is what a queer person acts like. This is what a queer person dresses like. Like, this is what [music] a queer person listens to, the movies they watch and especially because, you know, as a woman of colour, like I have my whole culture that I like, a huge part of my identity and it was like a lot of the queer content I was consuming when I was younger was about white queer people. And that was like, oh, does my culture not work with my queerness? (Johanna)

Ahmed considers whiteness as ‘an orientation that puts certain things within reach’ (Ahmed, 2006, p. 126), clearing pathways for frictionless movements for some bodies over others. This digital landscape, often saturated with whiteness, can create barriers for sapphic youth of colour, making it more challenging for them to experience the same sense of belonging and recognition. Where Lila, Jenna and other white participants could easily find sapphic objects that linked them to culture and history, the type of content that populated Johanna’s feeds felt jarring and dissonant. As objects come within reach, so do bodily possibilities given that ‘whiteness may function as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape’ (Ahmed, 2006, p. 135). With no space already carved out, Johanna was left wondering if there was space at all for her culture and sense of self as a woman of colour to fit into the images of queer appearing on her feeds.

Claude, a 20-year-old French-Chinese student, echoed Johanna’s sentiments regarding the prevailing whiteness of certain queer online spaces. Like Johanna eventually did, they managed to cultivate their feeds and gather cultural resources from a number of different platforms by seeking out queer of colour content and creators. They described finding the Instagram page for *Butch Is Not a Dirty Word* magazine and seeing, for the first time, the expansive possibilities of butch beyond white, cisnormative ideals.

I think it was really nice also to see visually like how different butch can look like. Cause for a while I was like my hair's kind of longer like I don't know if I fit into that. And then also like as a person of colour, I never really saw any butch people that were not white. And I think that was also something that kind of held me back from identifying as butch. (Claude)

Claude felt 'held back' from 'fit[ting] into' the space of butch before seeing others like them. Attention to where some bodies 'fit' or can more easily remake their horizons than others attunes us to where racialisation, ableism and other vectors of marginalisation shape the lines of the social (Ahmed, 2006). This online space of butch offers a field of potential for moving through the offline world in other ways – through styling the body, claiming a subcultural lineage, envisioning one's self as a sapphic subject – but it only opened up and took shape for Claude after seeing the past 'impressions' made by other bodies.

Conclusion

A video essay on transness and autism, a TikTok about sapphic signifiers, an Instagram page for butches – feeds and flows saturated with small yet significant moments of meaning and culture, that for some cultivate new forms of feeling and for others create distance and limit possibilities for connection. As young sapphic people move through the digital they feel out the shape of the worlds they inhabit, experiencing them as dynamic, affective realms. This chapter has stressed these affective movements in order to draw attention to the felt ways in which the virtual is inhabited that are harder to capture through examination of platform cultures and affordances. This approach sidesteps thinking of young people's social media use as either straightforwardly curatorial or consumption-based, looking at where affective pulls muddle the two and alter the material realities that sit outside of the screen, elaborating on the ways in which we are 'no longer in a world where digital technology and media is separate, virtual, "other" to a "natural" human and social life' (Jandrić et al., 2018, p. 893).

In considering the specificities of sapphicness that young sapphic people in Australia negotiate I have taken up Hord's question of how we can 'maintain the specificities of dearly held identities outside of the systems of identity which demand subject's continual definition within binaries and against others' (2022). This chapter has explored how sapphic

becoming emerges as a form queer self- and worldmaking that is 'dispersed through incommensurate registers, by definition unrealizable as community or identity' (Berlant and Warner, 1998, p. 558). Although the young people I spoke to used these words, the relational spatialities of becoming that they described highlight both the constraints and fluidity of meaning that surround them, demonstrating their limited utility as standalone categories of understanding.

The focus that young people place on feeling, experimenting and negotiating the boundaries of what sapphicness, queerness, transness, neurodivergence and racialisation mean to them highlights the ongoing, highly contingent and continually evolving nature of subjectivity formation. The importance of connecting with and feeling *through* others and the digital flows that bring them into contact illustrates how sapphic becoming necessitates a porous understanding of the self as always imbricated with the social, cultural, virtual and material.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388074>
- Albury, K. (2015). Selfies, sexts and sneaky hats: Young people's understandings of gendered practices of self-representation. *International Journal of Communication*, 9(0), 12.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2011). Branding the post-feminist self: Girls' video production and YouTube. In M. Celeste Kearney (ed.) *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*. New York: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, pp. 277–294.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Barnett, J.P. (2024). Neuroqueer frontiers: Neurodiversity, gender, and the (a)social self. *Sociology Compass*, 18(6), e13234. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13234>
- Bates, A., Hobman, T. and Bell, B.T. (2020). 'Let me do what i please with it ... don't decide my identity for me': LGBTQ+ youth experiences of social media in narrative identity development. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 35(1), 51–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558419884700>
- Berlant, L. and Warner, M. (1998). Sex in public. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 547–566. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448884>
- Bolander, B. and Locher, M.A. (2020). Beyond the online offline distinction: Entry points to digital discourse. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 35 (June), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100383>
- boyd, d. (2014). *It's Complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bozalek, V., Newfield, D., Romano, N., Carette, L., Naidu, K., Mitchell, V. and Noble, A. (2021). Touching matters: Affective entanglements in coronatime. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 27(7), 844–852. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800420960167>
- Brough, M., Literat, I. and Ikin, A. (2020). 'Good social media?': Underrepresented youth perspectives on the ethical and equitable design of social media platforms. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120928488>
- Bucher, T. (2018). *If ... Then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190493028.001.0001>
- Byron, P., Robards, B., Hanckel, B., Vivienne, S. and Churchill, B. (2019). 'Hey, I'm having these experiences': Tumblr use and young people's queer (dis)connections. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, May. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9677/2655>

- Caldeira, S.P., Van Bauwel, S. and De Ridder, S. (2021). 'Everybody needs to post a selfie every once in a while': Exploring the politics of Instagram curation in young women's self-representational practices. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(8), 1073–1090. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1776371>
- Cavalcante, A. (2016). 'I did it all online': Transgender identity and the management of everyday life. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 33(1), 109–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1129065>
- Cho, A. (2018). Default publicness: Queer youth of color, social media, and being outed by the machine. *New Media & Society*, 20(9), 3183–3200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817744784>
- Craig, S.L. and McInroy, L. (2014). You can form a part of yourself online: The influence of new media on identity development and coming out for LGBTQ youth. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 18(1), 95–109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2013.777007>
- Cramer, F. (2014). What Is 'Post-Digital'? *A Peer-Reviewed Journal About*, 3(1), 10–24. <https://doi.org/10.7146/aprja.v3i1.116068>
- DeVito, M.A., Feuston, J.L., Melder, E., Malloy, C., Ponder, C. and Brubaker, J.R. (2024). Safety and community context: Exploring a transfeminist approach to sapphic relationship platforms. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 8(CSCW1), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3653694>
- Doan, L.L. and Garrity, J. (eds) (2006). *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, women and national culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dobson, A.S. (2012). 'Individuality is everything': 'Autonomous' femininity in MySpace mototos and self-descriptions. *Continuum*, 26(3), 371–383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2012.665835>
- Fu, J. and Cook, J. (2021). Everyday social media use of young Australian adults. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 24(9), 1234–1250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1828843>
- hooks, b. (2015). *Black Looks: Race and representation*. New York: Routledge.
- Hord, L.C. (2022). Specificity without identity: Articulating post-gender sexuality through the 'non-binary lesbian'. *Sexualities*, 25(5–6), 615–637. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720981564>
- Jandrić, P., Knox, J., Besley, T., Ryberg, T., Suoranta, J. and Hayes, S. (2018). Postdigital science and education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(10), 893–899. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2018.1454000>
- Kanai, A. (2019). *Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture: Managing affect, intimacy and value*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Karizat, N., Delmonaco, D., Eslami, M. and Andalibi, N. (2021). Algorithmic folk theories and identity: How TikTok users co-produce knowledge of identity and engage in algorithmic resistance. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5(CSCW2), 1–44. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3476046>
- Keller, J. (2012). Virtual feminisms: Girls' blogging communities, feminist activism, and participatory politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(3), 429–447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.642890>
- Lanser, S.S. (2014). *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the sapphic, 1565–1830*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226187877.001.0001>
- Leander, K.M. and Mckim, K.K. (2003). Tracing the everyday 'sittings' of adolescents on the internet: A strategic adaptation of ethnography across online and offline spaces. *Education, Communication & Information*, 3(2), 211–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14636310303140>
- McGlotten, S. (2013). *Virtual Intimacies: Media, affect, and queer sociality*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Medhurst, E. (2024). Carabiners and violet tattoos: The desire for nostalgia in online lesbian space. In R. Ryan-Flood and A. Tooth Murphy (eds) *Queering Desire: Lesbians, Gender and Subjectivity*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003396000>
- Minh-ha, T. (1988). Not you/like you: Post-colonial women and the interlocking questions of identity and difference. *Inscriptions*, 3/4. <https://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/inscriptions/volume-34/trinh-t-minh-ha/>
- Puar, J.K. (2017). *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371755>

- Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R. and Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory*, 14(3), 305–323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700113499853>
- Ringrose, J., Mendes, K. and Keller, J. (2019). *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and women fight back against rape culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Robards, B., Byron, P., Churchill, B., Hanckel, B. and Vivienne, S. (2020). Tumblr as a space of learning, connecting, and identity formation for LGBTQ+ young people. In A. McCracken, A. Cho, L. Stein and I. Hoch (eds) *A Tumblr Book: Platform and cultures*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11537055>
- Savin-Baden, M. (2021). What are postdigital humans? In M. Savin-Baden (ed.) *Postdigital Humans*. Postdigital Science and Education. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 3–15. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65592-1_1
- Sedgwick, E.K. (2003). *Touching Feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Series Q. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Setty, E. (2021). 'Frexting': Exploring homosociality among girls who share intimate images. *Journal of Youth Studies*, May, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.1923675>
- Simpson, E. and Semaan, B. (2021). For you, or for 'you'? Everyday LGBTQ+ Encounters with TikTok. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW3), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3432951>
- Thorpe, H., Jeffrey, A., Fullagar, S. and Ahmad, N. (2023). 'We seek those moments of togetherness': Digital intimacies, virtual touch and becoming community in pandemic times. *Feminist Media Studies*, 23(7), 3419–3436. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2112738>
- Wajcman, J. (2015). *Pressed for Time: The acceleration of life in digital capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wargo, J.M. (2017). 'Every selfie tells a story ...': LGBTQ youth livestreams and new media narratives as connective identity texts. *New Media & Society*, 19(4), 560–578. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815612447>
- Willson, M. (2017). Algorithms (and the) everyday. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(1), 137–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1200645>

(Dis)embodied feminist rage and the affective economies of postdigital visibility

Xumeng Xie

The figure of an angry feminist has often been unwelcome and dismissed as an obstacle to happiness and optimism in contemporary popular cultures (Ahmed, 2010, 2017); a figure that mainstream and popular forms of feminism have decidedly turned against (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In the meantime, political climates in the West for the past decade have seen a ‘public’ discourse, such as social media, where there is an unprecedented visibility of women’s expression and performance of anger and rage, marked by call-out culture, the #MeToo movement and the widespread outrage over the Trump presidency (Kay, 2019; Kay and Banet-Weiser, 2019; Malatino, 2021; Nash and Pinto, 2021). This connects to a long-standing feminist genealogy interrogating the radical possibilities of feminist rage and its role in feminist consciousness raising and mobilisation against oppression, injustice and violence, particularly in association with Black feminist thought and political strategy (hooks, 1992; Lorde, 1981). However, conflicting views arise regarding whether and how rage and anger can truly facilitate constructive dialogue, foster a sense of connection and solidarity among victims of injustice and oppression, or translate into social change.

Focusing on the ramifications of anger and rage in digital feminist politics, this chapter examines the challenging and conflicting subjective positions feminists nowadays occupy, shaped by the affective economies of visibility, in seeing, being seen and being unseen, which I will conceptualise as a normative sensibility. While a qualitative distinction between anger and rage is commonly noted in psychological terms, especially in

regard to intensity and the capacity for self-control, this chapter does not dwell on the question of whether and when the experience and expression of anger might differ from or transform into rage. These two terms are being used interchangeably in this chapter. However, I recognise that the idea of a healthy range of anger (Flemke and Allen, 2008) offers meaningful insights for feminists to build on the conception of critical self-care as ‘self-preservation’ – an inherently political act of resistance against structural violence (Lorde, 2017). In thinking of anger and rage together, this chapter extends the genealogy of Black feminist thought that has constantly reminded us how anger is deeply entwined with rather than opposed to a politics of love and care (Kiguwa, 2021). This radical approach to self-care calls for transcending the pathologising rhetoric and neoliberal self-makeover paradigms that place mental and physical wellbeing as individual responsibilities. Instead, it focuses on how feminist ethics of care is and needs to be rooted in a collective care for others and the commitment to social justice.

More specifically, this chapter raises critical questions about what and who prevails in the affective economies of visibility, where feminist rage can be strategically mobilised to make certain concerns visible and legitimate while sidelining other experiences. Moreover, I will argue that this discussion will have to be framed within a context of postdigital intimacy and sociality that digital feminisms operate in. In this shifting landscape, affective circuits with snippets of testimony and disclosure of injustice deterritorialise and reterritorialise the messy boundaries of online or offline, private or public and personal or political. I intend to question the intersection of feminist rage and affective economies of visibility as seemingly empowering but also highly disciplinary.

Empirically, this chapter draws on interview data and social media diaries from a research project investigating digital feminisms on a micro-blogging site Weibo, which is usually regarded as the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. In recent years, gender and feminism have incurred significant public and academic attention in China while remaining disputed topics and subject to censorship on social media. The enduring influence of gender egalitarianism from the socialist era persists in shaping these discussions and debates about feminism (Wu and Dong, 2019); meanwhile, the rapid expansion of social media platforms has provided tech-savvy feminists with renewed hope for creating spaces for feminist discussion and activism (Hou, 2020; Xue and Rose, 2022; Yin and Sun, 2021).

The findings discussed in this chapter focus on interview transcripts and social media diaries inspired by digital ethnography (Hine, 2015; Pink et al., 2015; Postill and Pink, 2012) and feminist participatory

research methodologies (Bradbury-Jones, Isham and Taylor, 2018; Caretta and Riaño, 2016). The study involved 21 girls and young women aged between 16 and 24 who self-identify as feminists or explicitly express an interest in feminism. Participants were recruited via Weibo and engaged in two rounds of semi-structured interviews, with a social media diary study conducted in between. Over a ten-week period, the participants were asked to write one diary entry per week to document their encounters with gender and feminism. With no specified format for the social media diaries, the participants were encouraged to create their own method of recording, which included writing using digital device or on paper, doodling and sketching, taking screenshots and so on. Informed consent was always obtained prior to the first interview, and for participants under 18, parental consent was also acquired. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee. In addition to adherence to institutional ethical guidelines for online research and young people, this research also practises and reflects on feminist ethico-onto-epistemology, as demonstrated throughout this chapter.

This chapter focuses on how digital feminists in Chinese social media contribute to the formation of digital intimate publics (Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018) through performing and calling for collective rage against gender violence and injustice. I argue that these forms of feminist practices place them in constant negotiation with the highly visible imagery of angry feminists within and beyond these emergent publics, navigating the opaque and ambiguous realm between visibility and invisibility. In analysing their accounts and experiences of visibility, I do not only draw attention to pathways for feminist consciousness raising and connecting to like-minded people online; more importantly, I attend to how these accounts affectively orient and shape perceptions of what feminist engagements on social media may amount to, thus furthering feminist media research on visibility.

Towards a postdigital conceptualisation of visibility

It has been widely noted in the growing body of research in this field that visibility becomes increasingly central to experiences and concerns of digital feminist activism (Clark-Parsons, 2021; Fotopoulou, 2017; Geboers and van de Wiele, 2020; Locke, Lawthom and Lyons, 2018; Phipps, 2020). Following high-profile cases such as #MeToo, contemporary feminist movements have seemed to usher in a new era of visibility

for survivors of sexual violence, empowering them to speak out and share their experiences on social media platforms (Keller, Mendes and Ringrose, 2018; Lokot, 2018). In the context of social media and digital mediation, an entry point for approaching the concept of visibility is to examine how this affordance essentially reveals the entanglements between the capacities of individual human bodies and their relationships with other human and more-than-human bodies including technologies and platforms (Baym and boyd, 2012; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Murray, 2020).

The concept of visibility as a fundamental affordance of social media aligns with the empirical and theoretical consideration of social media as an evolving set of relations emerged from interactions where technological and algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2017; Nagy and Neff, 2015) plays a crucial role. In this sense, visibility is best examined through understanding how social media users perceive (in)visibility as emerged from their encounters with digital affordances and algorithms of the platform as well as how they act upon these varied imaginations and expectations. Writing mainly from a historical perspective of US feminist movements, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2015, p. 55) insightfully observed a shift from a representational politics of visibility, which is to make visible the processes of marginalisation and political struggles of addressing or challenging the status quo, to economies of visibility, where 'visibility itself has been absorbed into the economy'. When visibility itself becomes the end goal and the visibility of certain identities and empowered bodies can be celebrated and monetised, the radical and transformative outlook of feminist politics is foreclosed (Gill, 2016).

Visibility hence becomes a crucial topic for feminist media research, pivoting significant academic attention to the contradictions between promises of empowerment and intensification of surveillance and governmentality. Following this line of thought, Fotopoulou (2017, p. 19) provided an insightful conceptual framework of new forms of 'biodigital vulnerabilities' as both generative and limiting for women and feminists to navigate. First, biodigital vulnerabilities come from the contradictions that expect girls and women to gain visibility while disproportionately being targeted by trolling and online abuse (Henry and Powell, 2018; Mantilla, 2013; Salter, 2018). Second, networked surveillance (from other social media users, platforms, corporates and the state) has often been disguised in a discourse of empowerment (Trottier, 2016). Third, 'embodied and affective labour specifically by women in relation to the material media practices in social media and activism' have been hugely neglected and undermined (Fotopoulou, 2017, p. 19). Hashtag

feminism, for instance, has been investigated in relation to its adoption of visibility as a key tactic to construct a collective political momentum by articulating personal experiences of violence and oppression as well as mutual support (Clark-Parsons, 2021). Meanwhile, it has also been observed that visibility is more readily afforded to those who already hold relatively privileged positions, while the affective labour and care work carried out by lesbian and queer women, women of colour and disabled women to form alliances often remains marginalised and unacknowledged (Clark-Parsons, 2021).

To expand on the notion of visibility and connect it to the framework of postdigital intimacies that frames this edited collection, I argue that postdigital visibility has necessarily become a normative sensibility, one that profoundly structures our assumptions about the enactment and practice of digital feminisms. This chapter situates the notion of seeing and being seen within a postdigital landscape where digital technologies have become so embedded in the mundane and routinised practices of everyday life. Feminists participating in the postdigital forms of activism have to navigate a terrain in which their activism is on display in the face of a 'context collapse' where 'social contexts we used to imagine as separate co-exist' (Marwick and boyd, 2011, p. 130). Consequently, this collapse renders online spectatorship and audience, as well as their responses, unpredictable. Moreover, the crossover between online and offline spaces and the blurred boundaries between public and private realms have also increasingly collapsed, creating an in-between space where visibility is simultaneously compulsory and contested. In this context, visibility becomes performative: the act of being (un)seen is neither simply a consequence nor an individualised strategy or choice but is inextricably linked with the affective economies of the postdigital conditions in which feminist activism unfolds. In this sense, postdigital visibility as a normative sensibility fundamentally shapes the dynamics of digital feminisms.

Feminist rage unleashed or harnessed

As mentioned previously, this chapter aligns with a Black and intersectional feminist intellectual trajectory to critically examine the ambivalent power of anger and rage rather than analysing them as individuated emotional and psychological states. On the one hand, anger and rage can serve as a cathartic release, providing a means to begin healing from traumatic experiences of witnessing or enduring oppression and

violence. On the other hand, being able to claim and occupy the position of anger and rage in the name of righteousness comes with privileges. Scholars have noted how certain expressions of anger could be more easily acknowledged, legitimised, empathised with and even celebrated (Kay, 2020, 2019), while others are discredited, stigmatised and systematically silenced (Cooper, 2018).

Women's public expressions of anger and rage have also been identified as sites where feminist communities and solidarities emerge. Researchers have pointed out that affective and emotional affirmations and responses are central to feminist worldmaking and community building (Naezer and Ringrose, 2018; Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012; Ringrose and Renold, 2016). Digital campaigns such as #MeToo foster what has been conceptualised as digital intimate publics (Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018) where shared expressions of anger, pain and resistance form the basis of affective ties and bonding among like-minded people. This sense of belongingness and emotional attachment is maintained both through a common articulation of feminist struggle and intimate sharing of personal stories and feelings. Sundén and Paasonen (2020, p. 50) point out how this affective tie is governed by what they refer to as 'affective homophily', in which emotional bonds are built on the expectation and expression of 'feeling the same' (Kanai, 2019). Such feeling rules structuring digital intimate publics limit the spectrum of feminist rage to dominant narratives of what kinds of rage are deemed acceptable or legitimate. It provides a relief from the political so that women's anger and rage can be well kept within a depoliticised realm of feeling and sentimentality without posing threat to those dominant narratives (Berlant, 2008). This containment ensures that women's rage and anger remain cathartic but individualised, enabling women and feminists to unleash their anger without necessarily threatening or destabilising the very power structures that they seek to dismantle. Drawing on the idea of 'safety valves', Orgad and Gill (2019) contend that the visibility of women's rage in contemporary media and culture provides an illusion of radical resistance, while actually functioning as mechanisms for containing and disarming the political potential of rage.

In certain digital contexts, the expression of feminist anger and rage can be easily broad-brushed as dangerous or excessive, often provoking reactionary hostility and violence. Such hostility and violence predominantly target marginalised groups, manifested in the forms of hate speech (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021), trolling (Mantilla, 2013; Xie et al., 2022) and other acts of online abuse. Researchers have pointed out how antifeminist hate and hostility link up with other right

wing, populist, nationalist and conservative discourses and sentiments in an attempt to mock, ridicule, threaten, silence and eventually drive women and feminists off digital platforms (Bjork-James, 2020; Evans and Riley, 2022; Marwick, 2021). This hence adds up to the complications of postdigital visibility, where the very act of making feminist anger visible can elicit violence and hostility that seek to suppress and discipline those expressions.

‘Anger is power’: postdigital performativity of rage

Building on the previous discussion on postdigital visibility and the complex dynamics of anger and rage within feminist politics, the following sections delve into the narratives of the Chinese girls and young women who participated in the research and shared their experiences of engaging in feminist discussion and activism on Weibo. My analysis of these focus on how performances of anger can potentially draw public attention to certain issues of concern evoking a sense of connection. I demonstrate how anticipation of intimate and affective responses lead to the emergence of digital intimate publics that tap into the economies of postdigital visibility as a site of negotiation between being seen and being unseen. This section starts with the experiences of Moon, an 18-year-old feminist influencer with around 5500 followers on Weibo when I interviewed her. In one of her social media diaries, Moon included a screenshot of her Weibo post about an episode of her encounter with a taxi driver. In her retrospective account, she was chatting with the taxi driver casually when the man – who appeared older than Moon – suddenly called her ‘good-looking and must be liked by lots of boys’. Immediately irritated by the driver’s irrelevant comments and unwanted attention on her appearance, Moon posted on Weibo about her response to this unpleasant experience:

I became to act stern and cold at once, speaking: ‘We were not even talking about appearances. Don’t you think you are impolite?’ My following remarks were all snippy too. My hands reached out for the knife in my bag, making some clinks of metal on purpose. (Moon, 18, social media diary no.2)

As recalled in her diary, her first brief post quickly summoned a trolling mob, after being forwarded by an antifeminist troll. Moon recounted how she experienced verbal abuse for giving her account in the days that

followed and was ridiculed by the trolls as having ‘persecutory delusion and paranoia because they [the trolls] believed the taxi driver had no bad intentions’. Moon recounted having used tactics such as reporting the trolls, but it did not work as there were ‘too many of them’ and the trolls even went so far as to send her private messages. Refusing to be shut down by the trolls, Moon quickly followed up with a second, much longer post, offering a detailed and angrier account of her experience with sexual harassment. In this post, she directly confronted the victim-blaming rhetoric devised by those trolls who had left misogynistic comments on her original post. This post, included in the same diary entry, is translated below:

I found out that it’s a bad habit of mine that I don’t like to play the victim so much, so that I kind of described the behaviour of that driver lightly. Then all those reposts showing sympathy for him??? Gosh! Did you really take a moment to think of his behaviour? While we were chatting, he inserted a ‘compliment’ out of nowhere totally irrelevant to the topic. He said, ‘you are really pretty, boys must find you attractive.’ Accompanied by a fixed gaze at my face. So what he did needs to be divided into three steps:

1. Turned his head towards my side.
2. Moved his face closer to mine.
3. Stared at my face with a creepy look.

(Moon, 18, social media diary no.2)

By looking at this second post, Moon’s narration did not only recast the taxi driver’s harassment as serialised acts of aggression but also noticeably centred around her own bodily and affective reactions to the sudden stare and unwelcome ‘compliments’ about her appearance from a male stranger that made her feel threatened. Her disclosure of disgust, fear and vulnerabilities, however, was continuously overshadowed by the trolls’ mocking of her angry ‘overreactions’ to another’s kindness that flooded the comment area of her posts. It is important to unpack the body politics at work here within this mediated context, where the boundaries of on/offline spaces and intimate/public spaces are significantly destabilised. The (im)material female body (Blackman, 2012; Warfield, 2018) as ‘a symbolic and precarious site of control and resistance’ (Baer, 2016, p. 19) becomes easily subjected to sexualisation. The confined space within a taxi exemplifies an ambiguously public setting characterised by a close physical proximity between bodies. In this case, the taxi driver’s

random but routinised scrutiny of Moon's appearance in a highly (hetero)sexualised manner was recognised by Moon as a sexual advance that caused her great discomfort.

In our second interview, I asked Moon about this incident and how her public call-out of this case of sexual harassment had sparked a massive backlash. Moon described those who joined in the trolling as 'misogynists'. What particularly intrigued me was the first post where Moon gave an account of her performances of instantly acting 'stern and cold' at the moment of feeling violated and harassed. From her perspective, it was the display of aggressiveness by reaching out for the knife and making 'clinks of metal' to intimidate the harasser that directly challenged the normative expectations for how a girl should react when complimented on her looks – in Moon's words, 'blushing, bashful and responded with a thank-you'. This of course echoes findings in feminist research that feminists have to justify anger as an appropriate response to sexual harassment rather than accepting it as 'a compliment' and, more importantly, negotiate what is considered an acceptable range of reactions (Ringrose and Mendes, 2020). Moon's bold and dramatic portrayal of herself carrying a knife to confront harassment ostensibly crossed such boundaries. In response, the networked forms of hate and abuse targeting Moon coalesced into a contingent digital public determined to put her back in her place. The online aggression and misogyny parallels with the casual sexual harassment Moon experienced from the taxi driver, reinforcing the patriarchal surveillance and policing of women's bodies and their self-representation in public spaces.

Moon's careful choice of bodily references in her Weibo posts and response to the trolls indicates the performative nature of her rage in this digitally mediated context. Moon said in the interview that she believed 'anger is power' which was why she intentionally chose to present herself as aggressive and 'easily irritable' in her feminist influencing practices, fully aware that this approach could provoke further misogynist and antifeminist hate. Her social media diaries reveal a strategic effort to channel feminist anger and rage towards exposing everyday encounters with violence and aggression – encounters that are easily dismissed and trivialised as a part of systemic injustice. Through repeated and reflexive engagement with her own embodied experiences, Moon seeks to make these injustices visible and give them the critical attention they deserve. This digital tactic of consciousness raising highlighted the structural oppression targeting women and called upon women to 'learn to get angry' in Moon's own term.

Moon's approach also represents an attempt to foster feminist solidarity and alliance through collective rage against systemic violence and

inequality, although it simultaneously subjected her to further policing of her online presence. Linking to another of Moon's diary entries, she reflected on and fiercely refuted the popular discourse of self-protection in cases of gender-based violence and attached a screenshot of a Weibo post she shared in the same week of this diary:

Self-protection individualised the real issue and can only reduce the risks of personal harm. It only ensures that you are not the one getting devoured. Each tragic victim of gender [violence] bears the weight for me, because if I were in their place, I might also die. (Moon, 18, social media diary no.6)

This highly affective metaphor of being devoured drew connections to Lu Xun's notion of 'human-eating old society' which is one of the most well-known metaphors in modern Chinese literature. Originally, Lu Xun used this metaphor to condemn the dehumanising effects of Confucian culture and morality (Yue, 1999). Moon's reappropriation of the term is deployed here to direct her rage against the normalisation and entrenchment of sexual violence in a patriarchal society. By invoking this metaphor, Moon explicitly rejected the individualising discourse of self-protection and tried to reflect on how these discourses deployed affective forces of victim blaming and scapegoating (Gilson, 2016; Van Dijk, 2009), which Moon herself had been previously subjected to. Moreover, Moon's post was deliberately addressed to 'you', implying an imaginary audience and attempting to build connection and solidarity through an empathetic narrative of 'if I were in their place'. Moon intended to move beyond feelings of anger and vulnerabilities as simply negative and reactionary politics. Instead, she attempted to deploy anger as a potentially generative and cohesive force, fostering and cementing the affective solidarity (Hemmings, 2012) among women and feminists driven by a shared commitment to challenging the 'real issue' and systemic injustice and violence.

'Angry, trembling, freezing': women's rage disembodied and disciplined

A detailed exploration of Moon's online presence as an outspoken and 'easily irritable' feminist has already suggested how feminist rage is often met with surveillance, backlash and discipline. This section examines how performative rage can be easily modulated and coopted by the affective

economies of postdigital visibility. Four participants in this research referred to a widely discussed incident on Weibo involving the doxxing of a teen girl who wore Lolita style clothes to her college entrance exam and was interviewed by a news media outlet. The girl was later identified by a Weibo user in a pornographic video in which she performed nude dancing in public. As a result, she was quickly labelled as one of the so-called *fuli ji*, a derogatory term implying that she profits from making custom pornographic videos for paying ‘clients’. What started as a news interview video soon escalated into a social media frenzy, with users digging up her personal details, subjecting her to a series of online abuse, shaming and threats. This practice, colloquially referred to as ‘human flesh searching’ in China, has become a common form of vigilante justice on Chinese social media platforms where users collaborate to identify and publicly shame individuals (Gao and Stanyer, 2014). The reposting of the girl’s video by Jiangning Popo, a Weibo account managed by a media-savvy police officer with millions of followers, further fuelled the online abuse. Along with the repost by Jiangning Popo was a brief, almost trivial comment that read: ‘The original poster is making a huge contribution here’, followed by a *picking nose* emoji, indicating a tacit endorsement of this form of digital vigilantism (Reichl, 2019). Jiangning Popo’s involvement, given the account’s ties to law enforcement, added a troubling layer of legitimacy and official endorsement to the public shaming, intensifying the online attacks.

This incident outraged feminist communities on Weibo, prompting them to take collective action in response. Tong, a 21-year-old undergraduate student who closely followed the case, documented in her social media diaries the surge of ‘rage against human flesh searching and slut-shaming’ as she observed an explosion of posts condemning and shaming the girl. With a collection of over 30 screenshots in one of her social media diaries, Tong noted how feminists online quickly mobilised, creating a counter-narrative that pushed back against the abuse. In the meantime, the backlash organised against feminist rage was equally intense. Writing about the same incident, another participant, Dong, paid attention to an excessive use and weaponisation of a specific phrase ‘*qi dou leng*’ among antifeminist groups. This phrase, *qi dou leng*, which translates to ‘angry, trembling, freezing’, is commonly deployed by antifeminist and misogynistic rhetoric online to mock and trivialise women’s anger and emotional responses. The original context of ‘angry, trembling, freezing’ draws from a female Weibo user’s comment on a high-profile case of gender-based violence vividly capturing the outrage, resentment and despair she felt in the face of this: ‘Just by seeing this made me tremble with anger. I broke

out in a cold sweat despite the heat, my hands and feet felt frozen and numb'. The bodily sensations of 'tremble with anger', 'cold sweat' and 'frozen and numb' described here is not just her own – they resonate with other women who shared their experiences of bearing witness to the persistence of injustice and violence targeting women. These shared experiences evoke vulnerabilities and bodily manifestations of anger, reflecting a collective affective response to systemic oppression. Yet, this collective rage is quickly disembodied and reduced to a meme-like catchphrase used to delegitimise women's affective responses, turning their expressions of rage into objects of mockery and derision. By framing women's anger as exaggerated and excessive, the casualised and repetitive use of this phrase flattens out the complex, visceral experience of feminist rage into something ridiculed and performative, stripping away its force and nuance.

These affective dynamics tie back to the idea that visibility becomes a normative sensibility in the postdigital landscape as both a source of empowerment for women and feminists and a battleground for the very legitimacy of their narratives and emotional responses, which women and feminists had to carefully navigate. What is particularly troubling for postdigital feminist politics is how the normative expectation of being seen and seeing has been foregrounded, placing immense pressure on women to constantly negotiate their visibility in an in-between space of publicness and intimacy. This expectation to be visible and to occupy a space in the postdigital reinforces a double bind for feminist rage (Kay, 2019). On the surface, women's bodies – as gendered and sexualised – are rendered hypervisible, as exemplified in the parallels between networked acts of human flesh searching and instances of sexual harassment, where the female body becomes the focal point of public scrutiny, judgement and objectification (Ging, 2019; Jane, 2016). This heightened visibility that galvanises affective solidarity and collective action is quickly subsumed into performative spectacles that are easily dismissed and discredited.

'I needed a break': postdigital disengagement in between being seen and unseen

The discussion above makes it evident that the disciplining of women's bodies and embodied responses and resistance to those disciplining practices complicate the struggle that women and feminists are faced with in a postdigital context. Lew, a first-year postgraduate student majoring in

information engineering at a prestigious university in China, encapsulates such struggle. Lew's field of study is often regarded as 'masculine' with male students outnumbering females two to one in her college. During our second interview, Lew disclosed that she 'did not get along well' with some of her male peers and suspected that 'more than one of them' had been labelling her with derogatory names such as feminist bitch behind her back. Moreover, the derogatory comments migrated from online spaces into the physical setting of her college campus. Interestingly, Lew said in our first interview that she would usually post her own opinions on Qzone rather than Weibo, despite Weibo's generally broader reach and popularity among people of similar age. I went on to probe the reason for her preference between these two platforms. Lew told me: 'I know all the people there so there's fewer risks'. Qzone as another popular social networking site in China has an in-built microblogging service where users can write short posts like Weibo, but it could also be used to publish longer online diaries. It is often connected to the user's QQ account which is a major instant messaging service like WhatsApp. Qzone affords users targeted privacy control, allowing users to regulate who has access to their posts on an individual basis. In contrast, platforms like Weibo are more public facing, granting general access to posts unless specific users are blocked. For Lew, the primary risk of engaging in feminist discussion online was the compromise of her privacy on public platforms like Weibo, where derogatory comments from strangers could escalate. However, even in the relatively private space of Qzone, Lew discovered that someone who knew her from the university had been calling her 'a feminist bitch' and Lew's response to this was striking:

I know someone's been calling me a feminist bitch behind my back. But this ... This makes me kind of pleased actually. At least what I've been saying makes them feel uncomfortable, which means it works and some people will learn something through what I've said. (Lew, 21, 1st interview)

Lew's strategy of dealing with such networked acts of abuse was 'not to care' and she insisted in our interviews that being targeted by the abusers actually made her feel 'pleased'. Meanwhile, she had to adapt and develop a psychological resilience to cope with the hostility, as there were limited resources and support systems available to assist them in addressing these abusive acts. Following previous research that took notice of how online and offline forms of gendered hate and abuse converge (Henry and Powell, 2018), feminists operating in this postdigital

landscape are not some digital avatars who can easily switch off their visibility, especially given the increasingly porous boundaries between public/private and online/offline. Moreover, Lew's decisive wilfulness and refusal to be shut down can be understood in relation to what [Ahmed \(2017, 2014\)](#) conceptualises as a feminist killjoy. By claiming that she chose 'not to care' about the antifeminist slurs and misogyny directed at her, she was not turning away from anger and vulnerability but trying to find pleasure in it by focusing on the disruptive and pedagogical forces of her feminist practice.

In response to this, there is a recurring theme in this research where some participants started to express a strong desire to disengage – at least partially – from feminist discussions and activism on social media. I argue that such disengagement does not necessarily signal a retreat from doing feminism altogether but indicates a refusal of the affective economies of visibility that the complexities of feminist struggles are often subsumed into a competition for seeing and being seen (see also [Chapter 2](#) in this volume by Brown, Dobson and Carah on the risks of publicness). Gao, a 17-year-old high school student, described how she turned to 'actual daily connection with friends at school' as a way to practise feminism while proactively trying to manage her social media engagements. Although she continued to use social media as a complementary channel for communication with the wider feminist community, her primary focus shifted to starting and maintaining a small feminist circle in her school. For her, social media remained crucial for 'following what has been going on out there in the world', but it no longer served as a main site for her feminist practices. Wu expressed a growing sense of 'boredom' and exhaustion from the constant inciting remarks and angry debates surrounding gender and feminism on Weibo. The emotionally draining nature of these discussions led her to disengage from following feminist content on the platform for a period of time. Wu's experience highlights another dimension of postdigital disengagement: the need for emotional recuperation. This reiterates the significance of self-preservation ([Lorde, 2017](#)) and self-recovery ([hooks, 2005](#)) that Black feminists have long theorised as vital strategies for surviving the intersectional systems of gendered and racialised violence. In this case, it points to the unique and impossible position for digital feminisms on Chinese social media, as they navigate visibility and censorship facing the expansive reach of networked surveillance and misogynist hostility and a postsocialist state that has parted with the socialist ideology of gender egalitarianism.

Both Gao and Wu's strategies of disengagement indicated a withdrawal from certain aspects of postdigital visibility, a withdrawal that

might prompt feminist media studies and social movements research to expand the concept of postdigital activism. It must be recognised that activism does not only traverse digital and non-digital spaces but also involves an evolving negotiation and strategic use of these boundaries in practice. I argue that these varied forms of disengagement and refusal, considered in the context of postdigital economies of visibility, need to be examined as forms of critical self-care which goes hand in hand with collective political struggles (Rosenbaum and Talmor, 2022). In this sense, the debate should move beyond a determinist evaluation of real-world impact of the digital, and instead explore digital technologies and platforms as a part of the performative capacities of the postdigital assemblage of people, places, digital and non-digital environments.

Conclusion

This chapter conceptualised visibility in a postdigital framework that goes beyond simply accounting for the digital tactic of making feminist concerns visible. I argue that visibility has been reproduced and amplified as a normative sensibility, disciplining women into careful alignment with affective economies, and creating a precarious postdigital terrain for women and feminists to navigate. Rather than being seen purely as a vehicle for empowerment or representational justice, postdigital visibility takes shape in a contested and ambivalent space where feminist rage and struggle can attract heightened public attention and be simultaneously policed, ridiculed and trivialised. Feminist rage, as this chapter demonstrates, can sometimes be reduced to a meme-like spectacle within frenzied intimate publics on social media, stripping away the complexity of underlying embodied experiences and neutralising its radical and disruptive forces. Moreover, the broader affective economies of postdigital visibility demand that feminist expressions of anger conform to a set of safe and ‘acceptable’ norms that are shaped by gendered expectations on women’s public presence. This further diminishes the potency of feminist rage by reframing them within an individualistic framework. However, disengagement from the ambivalence and precarities of postdigital visibility was observed to emerge as a form of radical self-care and/or feminist refusal for some digital feminists in resistance to the dominance of visibility activism as the most relevant way to do feminism in current times. The challenge, then, is not only to make feminist rage and struggle visible but also to expose and dismantle the structures that tend to depoliticise and tame feminist rage and anger. It requires much creativity and

resolve to imagine how feminist rage and anger truly foster solidarity and transformative action, even in dissonance with the prevailing normative sensibility of visibility.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2014). *Willful Subjects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822376101>
- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/1933/Living-a-Feminist-Life>
- Baer, H. (2016). Redoing feminism: Digital activism, body politics, and neoliberalism. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16(1), 17–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1093070>
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2015). Keynote Address: Media, markets, gender: Economies of visibility in a neoliberal moment. *The Communication Review*, 18(1), 53–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2015.996398>
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Baym, N.K. and boyd, d. (2012). Socially mediated publicness: An introduction. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(3), 320–329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.705200>
- Berlant, L. (2008). *The Female Complaint: The unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822389163>
- Bjork-James, S. (2020). Racializing misogyny: Sexuality and gender in the new online white nationalism. *Feminist Anthropology*, 1(2), 176–183. <https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.12011>
- Blackman, L. (2012). *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, embodiment, mediation*. London: SAGE.
- Bradbury-Jones, C., Isham, L. and Taylor, J. (2018). The complexities and contradictions in participatory research with vulnerable children and young people: A qualitative systematic review. *Social Science & Medicine*, 215 (October), 80–91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socsci.med.2018.08.038>
- Bucher, T. (2017). 'The algorithmic imaginary: Exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(1), 30–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086>
- Caretta, M.A. and Riaño, Y. (2016). Feminist participatory methodologies in geography: Creating spaces of inclusion. *Qualitative Research*, 16(3), 258–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794116629575>
- Clark-Parsons, R. (2021). 'I see you, I believe you, I stand with you: #MeToo and the Performance of Networked Feminist Visibility'. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(3), 362–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1628797>
- Cooper, B. (2018). *Eloquent Rage: A Black feminist discovers her superpower*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Dobson, A.S., Carah, N. and Robards, B. (2018). Digital intimate publics and social media: Towards theorising public lives on private platforms. In A. Shields Dobson, B. Robards and N. Carah (eds) *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. Palgrave Studies in Communication for Social Change. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 3–27. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97607-5_1
- Evans, A. and Riley, S. (2022). The righteous outrage of post-truth anti-feminism: An analysis of TubeCrush and feminist research in and of public space. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25(1), 25–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420951574>
- Flemke, K. and Allen, K.R. (2008). Women's experience of rage: A critical feminist analysis. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 34(1), 58–74. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2008.00053.x>
- Fotopoulou, A. (2017). *Feminist Activism and Digital Networks: Between empowerment and vulnerability*. New York: Springer.

- Gao, L. and Stanyer, J. (2014). Hunting corrupt officials online: The human flesh search engine and the search for justice in China. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(7), 814–829. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.836553>
- Geboers, M.A. and van de Wiele, C.T. (2020). Regimes of visibility and the affective affordances of Twitter. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(5), 745–765. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920923676>
- Gill, R. (2016). Post-Postfeminism?: New feminist visibilities in postfeminist times. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16(4), 610–630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1193293>
- Gilson, E.C. (2016). Vulnerability and victimization: Rethinking key concepts in feminist discourses on sexual violence. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 42(1), 71–98. <https://doi.org/10.1086/686753>
- Ging, D. (2019). Bros v. Hos: Postfeminism, anti-feminism and the toxic turn in digital gender politics. In D. Ging and E. Siapera (eds) *Gender Hate Online: Understanding the new anti-feminism*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 45–67. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96226-9_3
- Hemmings, C. (2012). Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation. *Feminist Theory*, 13(2), 147–161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700112442643>
- Henry, N. and Powell, A. (2018). Technology-facilitated sexual violence: A literature review of empirical research. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 19(2), 195–208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838016650189>
- Hine, C. (2015). *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, embodied and everyday*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- hooks, b. (1992). *Black Looks: Race and representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, b. (2005). *Sisters of the Yam: Black women and self-recovery*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Hou, L. (2020). Rewriting ‘the personal is political’: Young women’s digital activism and new feminist politics in China. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 21(3), 337–355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2020.1796352>
- Jane, E.A. (2016). Online misogyny and feminist dilantism. *Continuum*, 30(3), 284–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1166560>
- Kanai, A. (2019). *Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture: Managing affect, intimacy and value*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91515-9>
- Kay, J.B. (2019). Introduction: Anger, media, and feminism: The gender politics of mediated rage. *Feminist Media Studies*, 19(4), 591–615. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1609197>
- Kay, J.B. (2020). Celebritised anger: Theorising feminist rage, voice, and affective injustice through Hannah Gadsby’s Nanette. In A. Taylor and J. McIntyre (eds) *Gender and Australian Celebrity Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Kay, J.B. and Banet-Weiser, S. (2019). Feminist anger and feminist respir. *Feminist Media Studies*, 19(4), 603–609. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1609231>
- Keller, J., Mendes, K. and Ringrose, J. (2018). Speaking ‘unspeakable things’: Documenting digital feminist responses to rape culture. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(1), 22–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1211511>
- Kiguwa, P. (2021). Training anger with accuracy: Audre Lorde’s invitation to Black women. *Feminist Formations*, 33(3), 199–223.
- Locke, A., Lawthom, R. and Lyons, A. (2018). Social media platforms as complex and contradictory spaces for feminisms: Visibility, opportunity, power, resistance and activism. *Feminism & Psychology*, 28(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353517753973>
- Lokot, T. (2018). #IAmNotAfraidToSayIt: Stories of sexual violence as everyday political speech on Facebook. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21(6), 802–817. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1430161>
- Lorde, A. (1981). The uses of anger. *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 9(3), 7–10.
- Lorde, A. (2017). *A Burst of Light: And other essays*. Mineola, NY: Ixia Press.
- Malatino, H. (2021). The promise of repair: Trans rage and the limits of feminist coalition. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 46(4), 827–851. <https://doi.org/10.1086/713292>
- Mantilla, K. (2013). Gendertrolling: Misogyny adapts to new media. *Feminist Studies*, 39(2), 563–570.
- Marwick, A.E. (2021). Morally motivated networked harassment as normative reinforcement. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211021378>

- Marwick, A.E. and boyd, d. (2011). I Tweet honestly, I Tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, 13(1), 114–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313>
- Matamoros-Fernández, A. and Farkas, J. (2021). Racism, hate speech, and social media: A systematic review and critique. *Television & New Media*, 22(2), 205–224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420982230>
- Murray, S. (2020). Postdigital cultural studies. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 441–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920918599>
- Naezer, M. and Ringrose, J. (2018). Adventure, intimacy, identity, and knowledge: Exploring how social media are shaping and transforming youth sexuality. In J. Gilbert and S. Lamb (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Sexual Development: Childhood and Adolescence*. Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 419–438. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108116121.022>
- Nagy, P. and Neff, G. (2015). Imagined affordance: Reconstructing a keyword for communication theory. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603385>
- Nash, J.C. and Pinto, S. (2021). A new genealogy of ‘intelligent rage’, or other ways to think about white women in feminism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 46(4), 883–910. <https://doi.org/10.1086/713298>
- Orgad, S. and Gill, R. (2019). Safety valves for mediated female rage in the #MeToo Era. *Feminist Media Studies*, 19(4), 596–603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1609198>
- Pedwell, C. and Whitehead, A. (2012). Affecting feminism: Questions of feeling in feminist theory. *Feminist Theory*, 13(2), 115–129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700112442635>
- Phipps, A. (2020). *Me, Not You: The trouble with mainstream feminism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. <https://www.manchesterhive.com/view/9781526152725/9781526152725.xml>
- Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T. and Tacchi, J. (2015). *Digital Ethnography: Principles and practice*. 1st edition. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Postill, J. and Pink, S. (2012). Social media ethnography: The digital researcher in a messy web. *Media International Australia*, 145(1), 123–134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X1214500114>
- Reichl, F. (2019). From vigilantism to digilantism? In B. Akhgar, P. Saskia Bayerl and G. Leventakis (eds) *Social Media Strategy in Policing: From cultural intelligence to community policing*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 117–138. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22002-0_7
- Ringrose, J. and Mendes, K. (2020). #WhoNeedsFeminism? Mapping leaky, networked affective feminist resistance. In K. Warfield, C. Abidin, and C. Cambre (eds) *Mediated Interfaces: The body on social media*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 131–156. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501356216>
- Ringrose, J. and Renold, E. (2016). Teen feminist killjoys?: Mapping girls’ affective encounters with femininity, sexuality, and feminism at school. In C. Mitchell and C. Rentschler (eds) *Girlhood and the Politics of Place*. New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 104–121. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt14jxn16.11>
- Rosenbaum, S. and Talmor, R. (2022). Self-care. *Feminist Anthropology*, 3(2), 362–372. <https://doi.org/10.1002/fea2.12088>
- Salter, M. (2018). From geek masculinity to gamergate: The technological rationality of online abuse. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 14(2), 247–264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659017690893>
- Sundén, J. and Paasonen, S. (2020). *Who’s Laughing Now? Feminist tactics in social media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Trottier, D. (2016). *Social Media as Surveillance: Rethinking visibility in a converging world*. London: Routledge.
- Van Dijk, J. (2009). Free the victim: A critique of the western conception of victimhood. *International Review of Victimology*, 16(1), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026975800901600101>
- Warfield, K. (2018). Im(matter)ial bodies: A material and affective rethinking of selfies for digital literacy resources. *Language and Literacy*, 20(3), 73–88. <https://doi.org/10.20360/langandlit29410>
- Wu, A.X. and Dong, Y. (2019). What is made-in-China feminism(s)? Gender discontent and class friction in post-socialist China. *Critical Asian Studies*, 51(4), 471–492. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2019.1656538>

- Xie, X., Cambazoglu, I., Ringrose, J. and Correa, B.B. (2022). Anti-feminist misogynist shitposting: The challenge of feminist academics navigating toxic Twitter. In P. Jane Burke, J. Coffey, R. Gill and A. Kanai (eds) *Gender in an Era of Post-Truth Populism: Pedagogies, challenges and strategies*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 131–156. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350194625.ch-007>
- Xue, A. and Rose, K. (2022). *Weibo Feminism: Expression, activism, and social media in China*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucl/detail.action?docID=6882295>
- Yin, S. and Sun, Y. (2021). Intersectional digital feminism: Assessing the participation politics and impact of the MeToo movement in China. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(7), 1176–1192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1837908>
- Yue, G. (1999). *The Mouth That Begg: Hunger, cannibalism, and the politics of eating in modern China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Part III

Postdigital violences and vulnerabilities

Bypassing consent? A postdigital platform affordance methodology for exploring youth experiences of Snapchat

Jessica Ringrose

The ‘postdigital’ is an important concept to encompass the blurriness of how digital mediation URL reshapes IRL – the real and material psychical relationships in day-to-day life (Cramer, 2014). In a postdigital world, digital practices are thoroughly enmeshed with everyday life. This is especially the case for the so-called ‘digital natives’, young people who are the highest users of social media, and for whom navigating relationships has never been not-digital (Verčič and Verčič, 2013). Given young people are avid users of social media platforms and these mediate all their relationships, it is particularly important that we understand how the platforms they are using work and how the digital interface structures the possibility of inter- or intra-action in their everyday life (boyd, 2014).

How though do we study and make sense of this as users of the technology whose behaviour and habits are being mediated through the technological interface (Chun, 2017)? The concepts of user experience, user interface and platform affordances from technology studies are useful; but how might we deploy these ideas in research with young people? As dana boyd argued early on,

Networked technologies introduce new affordances for amplifying, recording, and spreading information and social acts. These affordances can shape publics and how people negotiate them. While such affordances do not determine social practice, they can destabilize core assumptions people make when engaging in social

life. As such, they can reshape publics both directly and through the practices that people develop to account for the affordances. (2010, p. 45)

boyd outlined four key affordances in her early work on platforms like Tumblr and Facebook: persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability of social media. Others have added additional affordances studying platforms like Instagram, such as editability and association (Treen and Leonardi, 2013) and, with tracking technology, affordances of portability, availability, locatability and multimodality (Schrock, 2015). Ephemerality is a key affordance of a platform like Snapchat (Bayer et al., 2016). Other important elements are following metrics designed to ramp up user engagement (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013). Recently attention has also shifted to the algorithmic patterns shaping users' experiences through recommender algorithms, primarily on TikTok and Instagram, but also on public story elements of Snapchat (Zhang and Liu, 2021).

In this chapter, I outline a research methodology that allowed us to explore the 'mediated interfaces' (Warfield et al., 2020) between social media users and platform affordances, which shape practices, behaviours and experiences. As Axel Bruns (2006) notes, young people are not only users; they are the producers of the content, developing the hybrid term 'produsers' to better understand how young people curate social media content at the same time as they use, interact, comment upon and manage the content they receive. The political economy of social media generates the majority of revenue from advertisements. This means apps need to keep users on the platform for the maximum amount of time to see ads. Mindful of this economic landscape, our approach was developed to better understand how the drive for higher engagement creates new affordances, and to ask: what are the significant issues young people face on these platforms? The particular aim was to understand how consent is mediated in the exchange of images on photo and video apps. With the ubiquity of technological devices, young people are more visible and accessible than ever, and they are encountering, using and producing an unprecedented amount of sexualised imagery (Ringrose, 2010) but is it consensual?

The dominant apps discussed in our wider 2019 study were Snapchat and Instagram (Ringrose et al., 2021). In this chapter I focus on how Snapchat works and mediates youth postdigital intimacies. I demonstrate how arts-based methods can help to show how platforms work in context-specific ways that go beyond conventional methodologies such as talking about social media use with young people. Attending to the platform affordances of Snapchat through an iterative process with

youth reveals issues of consent and how and when consent is bypassed via technological processes, which we can only understand when we pay close attention to platform features and functions of apps as documented by the user (Light et al., 2018). Throughout I use the postdigital as a framing concept to better understand these processes and relationships between the digital, affective and material (Handyside and Ringrose, 2017; Ringrose and Harvey, 2015; Renold and Ringrose, 2016) dimensions of youth experiences, documenting how Snapchat opens up young people to non-consensual content/interactions, paving the way to image-based harms and abuses.

Sharing Networked Images Practices mAPPING Workshops: a platform affordance methodology

The Sharing Networked Images Practices (SNIP) mAPPING workshops were developed to map the relational pathways of sexual images and how these are produced, taken, sent, received and shared by young people. The methodology studied platform affordances by using visual prompts, screen sharing and app-specific social media drawing templates in group interview contexts to generate multiple data points for understanding young people's use of social media apps on their smartphones. The wider study involved working with 486 young people aged 11–21 years in England through a survey and qualitative focus groups. Here I focus only on our qualitative focus groups with 144 teenagers aged 11–18 in seven school sites in England. Discussion started with visual prompts that compared public advertisements of men and women in swimwear and sportswear with selfie images (taken from the web) depicting intimate spaces like the bathroom and the bedroom mirror to generate a discussion around the norms and rules of taking selfies (Warfield, 2014). Next, we combined social media app 'walkthrough' methods (Light et al., 2018) and Facebook 'scroll back' method (Robards and Lincoln, 2019) to enable participants to share selfies with us and explain how they shared images on their smartphones, paying attention to the affordances of the specific social media application in use. Due to the regulatory nature of schools, the young people were not able to use their smartphones or share images if they did not have their phone with them or they had no Wi-Fi to show images in their apps. To address this we also developed a participatory arts-based methodology asking young people to *draw* their social media experiences. Inspired by Venema and Lobinger's (2017) use of adults drawing relational maps on blank paper about the life of their images

from production to sharing and endpoints, we adapted this to the youth context. We provided platform-specific templates of Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook and Pornhub screens (see [Figure 10.1](#)).

Using the social media templates was hugely important and novel in *recreating* typical content that they received, particularly if it was disappearing content from Snapchat that they no longer had access to but remembered ([Charteris et al., 2018](#); [Handyside and Ringrose, 2017](#); [Kofoed and Larsen, 2016](#)). The opportunity to create and share visual data provided a mechanism for the participants to draw and quite literally ‘show and tell’ their experiences of receiving and sharing images that offered up different understandings than interview talk (see [Figure 10.1](#)).

In order to explain this process in more depth, this chapter will focus only on Snapchat affordances which are less well researched because the dominant users are children and young people ([Grieve,](#)

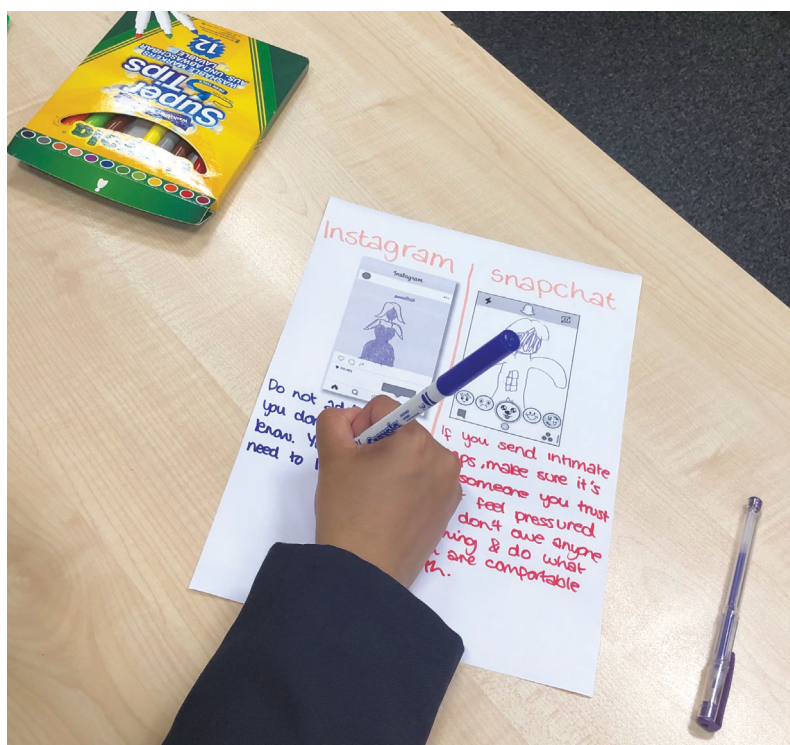


Figure 10.1 Example of drawing template

Source: Jessica Ringrose.

2017). Through an exploration of Snapchat affordances, this chapter will demonstrate: how platform features are used and postdigital material interactions and relationships play out in young people's daily lives; and, how these dynamics can then open up young people to risky and harmful situations in ways that were perhaps unanticipated in the design of the tech (Naezer and Ringrose, 2018).

Snapchat features and affordances

Disappearing Snaps

Snapchat is known as an application based around disappearing images. Young people are the biggest demographic of users, with Snapchat claiming its app 'reaches 90% of 13–24 year olds and 75% of 13–34 year olds across the UK'.¹ In our study, 67 per cent of young people used Snapchat, and it was the app where they received the most non-consensual content, with 62% of unsolicited sexual images and/or videos received while using Snapchat (Ringrose and Regehr, 2025). Ephemerality is the obvious key affordance of Snapchat, since Snaps disappear after 10 seconds. Indeed, it is the failure to persist that attracts many users to Snapchat; although the platform has modified its original premise with Stories that remain for 24 hours. Ephemerality is also a main reason why those who send uninvited sexual images such as dick pics and masturbation videos cannot be traced. Because images disappear, there is no record to report the episode (Bayer et al., 2016).

Snapstory

Stories were added later to Snapchat to allow a user to post something that lasts 24 hours. My Story shares content with all Snapchat friends, whereas Private Story is with just a few select friends. Public Stories are only available for users aged 16+, and Snapchat claims the algorithm will only recommend a Public Story if you are over 18. Public Story content can have greater reach depending on the Snapchat algorithm, promoting particular types of content, as we'll see below.

Snapcores

The 'Snapcore' is a publicly displayed number calculated based on use of the platform. For instance, in one screen grab from a participant their

Snap score was 45,380. Their Snap display also showed their Bitmoji Avatar and Snapcode URL which can be used by other users to friend their profile. The algorithm calculation of Snap score is based on use of the platform, including amount of Stories posted and how many Streaks (see below) one sends and receives. The Snap score feature, therefore, incentivises young people to search for more followers and accept them to increase their scores. Participants described actively choosing to keep their privacy settings open, accepting strangers via quick adds, and participating in shout-outs and streaks in order to gain more visibility on Snapchat and quickly increase their 'score'. Participants made clear that having a high score on Snapchat was tied to popularity, and this was even used in some instances as a metric to shame girls; if their score was too high it was read as indicator of 'sluttiness'. Many understood that the processes involved in increasing their Snap score increased their vulnerability to unknown contacts and image-based sexual harassment and abuse from 'paedophiles' and 'weird people', but they chose to do so anyway.

Streaks

A Snapchat streak refers to the number of consecutive days that a user has exchanged messages with another user, which contributes to an overall Snap score that grows according to use of the platform, measuring the rate of engagement. Once a streak is started and it goes on for a while breaking it becomes more difficult. Young people can have streaks that go on for years. This is a core affordance of availability through consistent connection that creates dependency and attachment via the streak function. Moreover, the assumption is that you have a relationship with the other user and the streak maintains this relationship, continuous consent is pre-empted in such image sharing, and it becomes a routine practice to send what young people often call 'random' images. The number of streaks you have with different people is also a marker of popularity and increases your overall Snap score.

Quick adds

In Snapchat's 'quick add' feature, users appear in other users' quick add list if they share a mutual friend or 'another connection'. Quick adds are not always known, they are merely a suggestion to increase your network

based on who other people have added. This feature allows users to create virtual connections with large networks of known, unknown and semi-known users. Young people described how they commonly received requests from unknown users, and also commonly accepted those requests. For example, Year 7 students spoke about how the quick add function is used in their peer group via 'shout-outs' where young people post the username of their friend so that they will get more quick adds, which creates more points/streaks.

Shout-outs with Snapcodes

Young people often add unknown users by assuming they are friends-of-friends and many participants responded in our survey and qualitative data that they were not sure of the ages of many of their contacts. Many participants mentioned how their peers would try to generate more contacts and followers on Snapchat through 'Shout-outs' using the Snapcode. Shout-outs actively increased the visibility of their profiles to wider audiences to achieve more contacts by posting their contact details (Figure 10.2). This is accomplished through another user posting a 'story', i.e. photos or videos shared to the users' contacts, with the intention to boost their friends' contacts.

Shout-for-shout-out was a process of sharing snapcodes to help friends gain more connections on Snapchat, where the user will receive a shout-out in return.

Colleen: I do shout-outs, a couple of people shout me out. Like basically I send a video or a picture yeah, and then they send it to their story, and depending on how much people they have on the story you can just slide up, and click add, and add that person ... on Snapchat, like I have fifty thousand something I think.

Jani: SFS which means shout-for-shout-out. So you send a picture of yourself, like a face or something, and then you mention that person on your story, and then people add them, and then people add that, and then add, and they keep adding each other. And loads of people post your photo, with your tag, so everyone would add you ... Once they add you then they would be able to text you, and once you do it like they can call you, text you your smartphone. (CLC1 School, Year 7 girls, aged 11–12)



Figure 10.2 Participant's drawing of her shout-outs

Source: Jessica Ringrose.

How do the combined affordances expose young people to predation?

Putting all of these affordances together, the emphasis on Snapscores leads to more shout-outs and quick adds where Snapchat users create

virtual connections with large networks of known, unknown and semi-known users:

Danni: So like my account's on private, but say people add me, I'll just add them back, so I don't really pay attention to who's adding me.
(SELCS School, Year 10 girls, aged 14–15)

As the Year 8 and 10 girls explain, even if account is private, with quick adds someone can be added who is a friend-of-a-friend. Shout-outs are an integral part of being added because your profile and code is being promoted. The rationale is to get more followers and score points:

Interviewer: So are you meant to do the shout-out to get more people?

Venus: Yeah, I wanted to get more score points.

Interviewer: More score points?

Venus: Yeah ... on Snapchat, like I have fifty thousand something I think. (NELA School, Year 8 girls, aged 12–13)

Another girl described how a shout-out got her sixty adds in 1 minute and how she accepted most, knowing that some were 'grown men'. The shout-out posts and rapid fire acceptance of quick adds also leads to harassing messages asking for nudes:

Diamond: I just add them, and there was this one man and he was texting me for months, like just texting, and I was ignoring it, like I'd half slide it and then just ignore it, and then he started sending videos and stuff, so obviously I opened it ... it was him like masturbating and doing stuff with his dick ... (SELC School, Year 10 girls aged 14–15)

Calli: So I was opening like streaks and I just saw it, I didn't know what it was at first so I replayed the video and the person must have thought that I liked it or something, because he kept texting me after that, then I was thinking what are you doing? Because it was a grown man. And then I just blocked him afterwards because I was disgusted ... He was sending pictures of his ... dick ... he showed his face in the video as well (CLC1 School, year 10, girls aged 14–15)

In these examples, girls relate being sent dick pics or masturbation videos on Snapchat after their profiles were shouted-out. Across the focus groups, girls explain how the Snapscore points system motivates them to accept

unknown boys and men as contacts online. As Colleen goes on to describe, she accepts quick adds because she wants streaks to increase her Snapscore:

Colleen: Someone, yesterday someone was like to me, oh you're cute, do you wanna see a picture of me? And I said no, how old are you? They said fifteen, and they sent a picture and they looked like forty-nine. And then I just blocked them. My Snapchat has a massive score, which means loads of people have me as a friend, which means a load of paedophiles can send stuff to me ... I'm here to do streaks and get a higher score, but they're just doing it the other way because they want that. And I just want streaks. (CLC1 School, Year 7 girls, aged 11–12)

Like Venus above, in order to achieve a 'massive score', Colleen is willing to accept the high volume of unwanted sexual content and 'a load of paedophiles'.

Anonymity and adult sexual abuse

In a focus group with some of our youngest participants, year 7 students (mostly aged 12) discussed the phenomenon of adult men posing as young people as seen with Colleen above:

Jyoti: Yeah, it's actually, if you're on the internet you have to be safe, because there are some people on the internet that say oh I'm sixteen years old, but little do you know they're probably thirty or ...

Fera: or in their fifties.

Chani: Like a forty-year-old grandad.

Fera: And they're just like saying oh send me a pic of what you're wearing right now, send me a pic of where you live. (NELA School, Year 7 mixed, aged 11–12)

Snapchat offers the affordance of 'pseudonymity' because of the platform's lack of identity verification (Evans et al., 2017, p. 41), and also because the use of the avatar 'Bitmoji' (see Figure 10.2) makes it impossible to decipher a user's age. Despite this, these year 7 students demonstrate awareness of unknown users on Snapchat, explaining their experiences of adults attempting to contact them or access information about them while pretending to be young people.

The methodology we used was key to allow us to understand how the young people navigated situations, by allowing them to dwell on the experiences during the drawing sessions. For instance, in one focus group Sami explained the first time she experienced an adult predator sending a dick pic (Figure 10.3):



Figure 10.3 Sami’s drawing of cyberflashing

Source: Jessica Ringrose.

Sami: So I was at my nan's house, my nan watches *Pointless*, and stuff like that, and I can't be arsed to watch *Pointless* so I was just on my phone. I was scared. My dad was sitting next to me, so I was just like ... my dad was sitting next to me. Yeah, like I don't want mum to see this. I cried I was swearing down the phone, so uncomfortable. (SELC School, mixed Year 8, aged 12–13)

In another focus group Nicole recounted her first experience of being contacted by video on Snapchat by a random man:

Nicole: So I was at home, in my room, and I get a facetime call from a guy, and he was rubbing his belly, but it was a girl account. He just showed me his face. He opened up his top and started rubbing his belly. And he was like do you want me to open my trousers? And I just blocked him ... And then the same guy, from another account, didn't have, from another account, and he called me again. I said I'm sorry. It was an old man, fifty, fifty five.

Amara: That's paedophilia, you should call the cops ...

Nicole: I spoke to my mum.

Interviewer: Did you report him?

Nicole: Yeah, on Snapchat. (SELC School, mixed Year 8, aged 13–14)

The man was persistent and contacts her a second time from another account. The second time, Nicole tells her mum and blocks the account. This particular school had very little sex education and they had received no support around the Snapchat platform; nonetheless, they identify the man as a paedophile, understand the blocking functions on Snapchat and say they reported it.

Another way in which digital technologies facilitate online sexual harassment is through the anonymity of the dick pic. In particular, boys and men can more easily crop out their face from a sexual image, and thus 'anonymise' the image (Fox and Potocki, 2014). Many participants spoke about the faceless element of unsolicited dick pics which reduced images being traced back to them.

Cameron: Boys, especially if their face isn't in it, they could always just deny that it's them. (Swans School, mixed 6th form, aged 16–17)

Hugh: Boys don't send their face. So it's like less recognisable. (Lords School, Year 9 boys, aged 13–14)

This affordance of anonymity has been previously tied to increased sexualised disinhibition and exhibitionist behaviours, including sending unsolicited dick pics (Karasavva et al., 2023; Oswald et al., 2020).

Association/visibility: monetisation and sex subscriptions

Whereas girls are being sent offensive content or pressured to send images by adult predators, boys in the study reported being targeted with different sorts of pornified content that was behind a paywall (Figure 10.4). A feature referred to as ‘Snapchat Premium’ was discussed, which enabled influencers to monetise their content through paid-for subscriptions, and boys explained being targeted by porn bots. They recounted a particular case of a soft porn influencer Belle Delphine who used Snapchat to circulate taster material in a bid to have boys subscribe to more explicit content:

Ferdinand: So there’s this thing that people do like, like I said, like the porn stars, like the popular ones, they do like this thing and

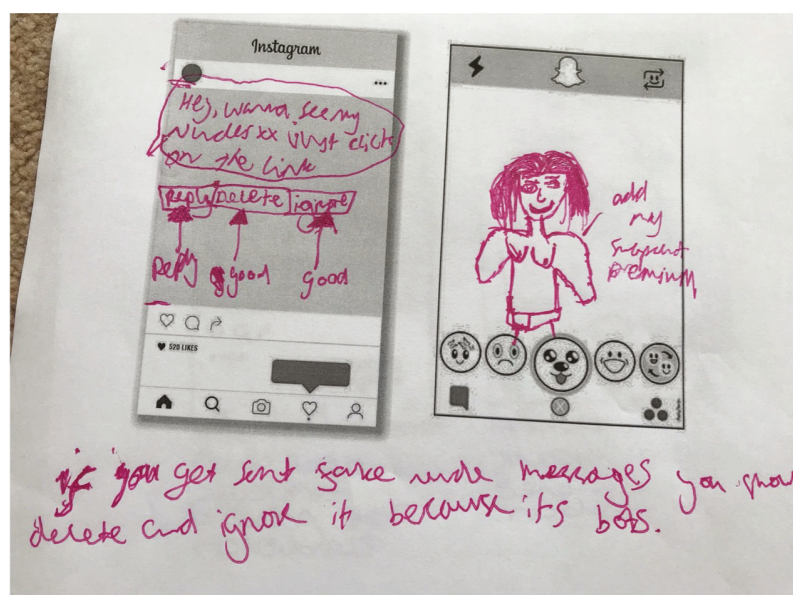


Figure 10.4 Boys being targeted by porn bots and subscription services

Source: Jessica Ringrose.

it's dumb. But like, they get money out of it, but basically it's like 'buy my premium Snapchat'. So it's a separate Snapchat but you have to pay for it like every month.

Danny: Like joining a YouTube channel. It's like a subscription.

Benji: They go 'buy my premium Snapchat to see the rest'. Only £4 or something.

Danny: So Belle Delphine she has like a Patreon ... like she said like, well for like £100 monthly, you get to FaceTime me for like five minutes. And she's like, I'll even send you two explicit videos blah blah blah. It's like you're paying for her to show her body. (CLC1 School, Year 7 boys, aged 11–12)

Here the boys explain that they are targeted to buy premium Snapchat accounts to buy pornographic content from influencers:

Jordan: She's [Belle Delphine] something called a gamer girl she like does cosplay and stuff. Like hentai I guess. Hentai is a form of porn but it's cartoon. So she dresses up as characters like that and then ... she said, okay, I'll start to sell my bath water.

Benji: Fifty quid a pop.

Ferdinand: I just think it's such a weird concept. Gamer girls, as he said it's just people who dress up in like seductive cosplay and do like seductive videos on YouTube ... She wears nothing then covers up certain bits. (CLC1 School, Year 7 boys, aged 11–12)

The boys are being encouraged to subscribe to content from influencers, who in turn broadcast information on Snapchat to sign up to paid accounts on Patreon and OnlyFans. This shows the way content travels across various platforms pushing and nudging the user to pay for subscriptions or services in gender-specific ways.

Ephemerality of Snaps vs. persistence and spreadability of images

Persistence refers to the permanence that characterises online communication, meaning 'conversations conducted through social media are far from ephemeral; they endure' (boyd, 2010, p. 11). Spreadability refers to the ease with which users can spread information to other users. Social

media platforms often provide these affordances through various features that allow users to ‘forward’, ‘repost’ or ‘share’ content to others with ‘a few keystrokes’ (boyd, 2014, p. 12). Persistence and spreadability can lead to the easy distribution of sexual content, including the mass distribution of unsolicited sexual images (i.e. online sexual harassment), as well as the sharing of sexual images beyond the intended recipient (i.e. image-based sexual abuse).

As already explained, Snapchat messages are meant to be ephemeral and quickly disappear. If you screenshot a Snap, Snapchat notifies the creator that their message, image or video has been saved, ostensibly to deter the practice. When we asked girls in our study whether they still had the unsolicited dick pics they’d received they typically said: ‘No, it’s gone.’ They did not want to be seen to screenshot offending material as by signalling this action to the sender it could indicate interest on their part; or it could be used as evidence that they are ‘snitches’ and are intending to use the image against someone in their network. The girls explained it was ‘shameful’ for them to share or keep dick pics even if they had received them consensually. These postdigital gendered power relations interact with the Snapchat affordances to deter screenshotting offending material – a behavioural effect – which meant it was more common for girls to block than report. The lack of knowledge around reporting functions and lack of faith in platform efficacy to address reports, contributes to the normalisation of non-consensual image sharing and communication via social media platforms.

In contrast to girls’ deterrence from screenshotting Snaps, in every school there were episodes of girls’ nudes being non-consensually ‘leaked’ through overcoming the Snapchat ephemerality affordance as seen in the below episode:

Olivia: Our friend (Jen) sent a nude and it went around the whole school.

Grace: They screenshot it and sent it to one of our friends, who showed everyone.

Denise: It got shared everywhere, so ... and now pretty much everyone knows her, and it’s like if you never met her it’s just the girl with the nude. (Swans Year 8 girls, aged 12–13)

In this episode Jen was flirting with one of her boyfriend’s friends and he threatened to show the texts to her boyfriend unless she sent him a

nude. When she complied the boy sent the nude to Jen's boyfriend who promptly shared it to his entire contact list. The girls reasoned that the boy did this because:

Olivia: He'd have got jealous wouldn't he.

Grace: Yeah. And then that's why he sent it to everyone.

Interviewer: So who did he send it to?

Denise: To literally everyone.

Grace: He sent it to everyone on his contacts list and they showed everyone.

Denise: Everyone got it, literally.

Olivia: Some people have still got it on their camera roll. (Swans Year 8 girls, aged 12–13)

We see a complex scenario here where a boy threatens to use Jen's texts against her as evidence of cheating (a form of harassment), an image is obtained through blackmail (sextortion) and non-consensually distributed – a form of image-based abuse (revenge porn). From an affordance perspective, we can see that once an image is screenshotted (persistence) it can then travel anywhere (spreadability) as described by this group of girls. The unique affordances of different apps also interact here as a WhatsApp feature in that it *automatically* saves photo messages to the mobile device's camera roll unless the feature is turned off.

The girls drew (Figure 10.5) cautionary accounts and messages of advice around nudes such as: 'do not feel pressured to send images in your underwear', and 'don't send pics that could be traced back'.

Hacking Snapchat ephemerality

The ephemerality features of Snapchat are also purposefully hacked through separate applications as described by an older mixed gender group of sixth formers at the same school:

Ally: I know my sister's friends, the boys in her group used to have this thing called The Vault, and basically you could screenshot things off Snapchat, but it would like save it to their vault, so you can't tell that they screenshot it.

Lily: like software

Ally: They have your pictures but you wouldn't know.

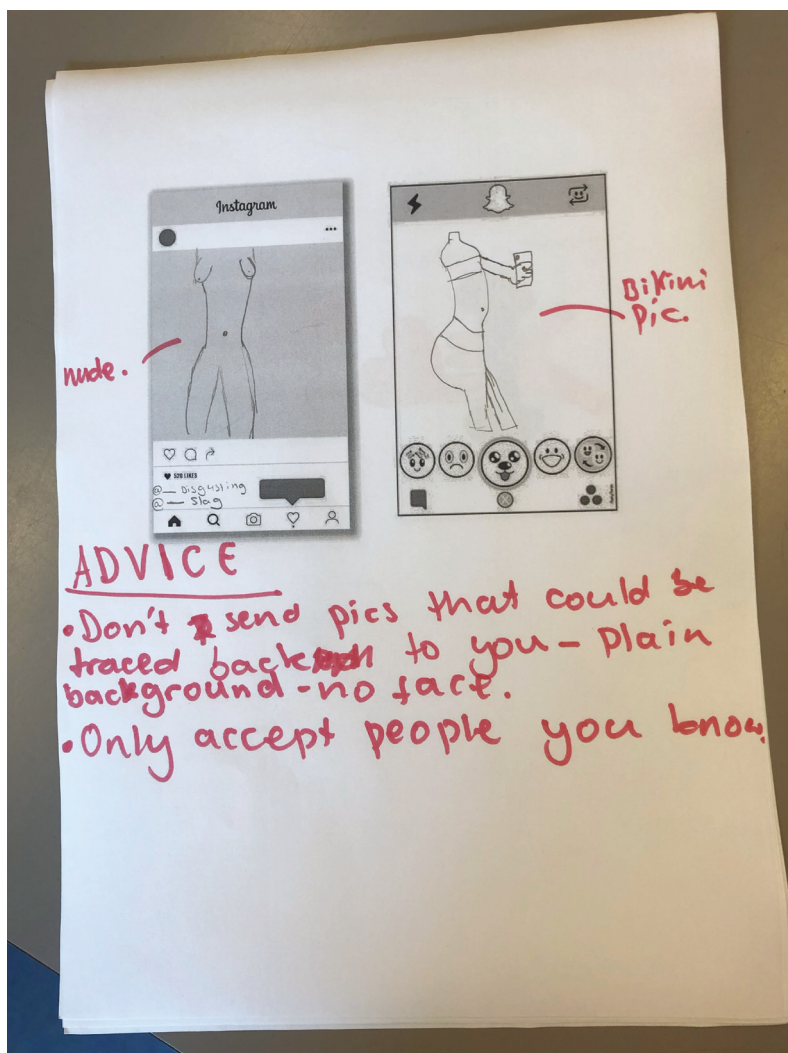


Figure 10.5 Drawing of Instagram nude and Snapchat bikini picture with advice

Source: Jessica Ringrose.

Joel: Because you know on Snapchat it tells you when they're screenshot, but on their vault it doesn't tell you ... It's like an app, but it hacks your Snapchat to change it. (Swans, Sixth form, mixed, aged 16–17)

Here software that takes a secret screenshot interferes with the disappearing medium of Snapchat. The vault allows the user to bypass the

ephemeral features of Snapchat. As a result, the disappearing images and videos sent on Snapchat can be made permanent, which means that while users may feel a sense of protection from having their images later shared there are ways around this.

Breaching Snapchat privacy

Snapchat also has a folder called 'For My Eyes Only', where people can keep their nudes, which is a particular form of privacy affordance for users to keep their images secure. This is again a paradoxical element of Snapchat marketed as an app based on ephemeral images. The same group of young people described another episode where a girls' 'For My Eyes Only' folder was breached:

Joel: So what a lot of people do, in our generation, is they take like nudes ... I can put it in this special folder, there's me without a shirt on ... and you can export it to like My Eyes Only, which is this password protected folder, which is where a lot of people put their nudes.

Interviewer: So why would you put it in My Eyes Only, and not just keep it, let's say, on your phone?

Dawn: Because people could go on your phone, like you let people go on your phone, and you wanna keep it like special ...

Joel: Well I remember there was a girl, somebody had gone onto their Snapchat and posted all of their nudes, frontals, onto their story, and a lot of people saw it.

Kate: Someone had gone onto her Snapchat (For My Eyes Only) and posted them for her. But without her knowing ... She took it down like almost straight away, within an hour I think

Dawn: But a lot of people can see it straight away, because it pops up, and so a lot of people screenshot it and then made stickers of her ...

Cameron: Her boobs.

Joel: They knew the password, got into it, and I think it was in spite put them on her story.

Cameron: It would have been a friend of hers most likely.

Susie: A girlfriend.

Jane: Maybe.

Dawn: Or a boyfriend.

Joel: That's a lot of people that saw it ... they were obviously taken down and deleted, and I think she got bullied for it, I won't lie. I know she got nasty comments from it.

Here the young people describe using the For My Eyes Only folder on Snapchat to keep nudes more secure than on their phone camera roll since others often access and use their phones. However, in this case the girl in the story has shared her Snapchat password with possibly multiple people. The image was posted on Snapchat and then others screenshot it and altered it and recirculated it, and so on. Research has shown us that control over technology use is a key element of peer-on-peer intimate abuse (Barter et al., 2017), but beyond sexual relationships young people share their devices with friends who can then use the technology to abuse their peers. We can also see how the group debates what happened with some suggesting it was a friend and others implying it was a 'boy-friend' who posted the images to 'spite' the girl. Irrespective of 'intent' there were lasting repercussions from this episode because others in the peer group screenshotted and sent around the images, meaning that the girl was bullied and got nasty comments, despite the fact she is the victim of image-based sexual abuse.

How Snapchat enables peer-to-peer geolocational violence

In the final section I consider a further paradox of Snapchat which although is built upon disappearing images and anonymity features, also includes a geolocational tracking function – the Snapmap. This geolocational affordance allows users to see the location of accounts as it uses GPS to display their location on a map. The map shows a miniature version of the user's Snap avatar at their location while using the app. If several users are together they show all on top of one another on a map. You can turn the feature off but many young people do not. Many of the young people debated the relative safety or risk of this feature:

Interviewer: Do you guys keep your Snapchat maps open?

Hali: My Snapchat map I made it an option so only people I know and are close to me can see me, because all these random people add me and like I don't want them to know where I live.

Jaz: I think I'm on Snapmaps, I don't know. (SELCS School, year 8 girls, aged 12–13)

We can see that while some of the girls are aware of how Snapmap works, others are not. We collected screenshots of Snapmaps in our focus groups and found age-related differences. For instance the Snapmap of the above year 7 group was quite sparse, showing that some of them were concerned about privacy settings and had Snapmap on 'ghost mode'. This contrasted starkly with that on the Year 9 phones at the same school who showed us a densely packed Snapmap with many students in their year group evident on the screen. Returning to the Year 7 students, they heatedly debated the pros and cons of having Snapmap turned on:

Selin: Ghost mode. So people that are following you, if you do that, they can't see your location. Some people are actually so dumb on Snapchat they keep their location on. I have ghost mode, I've gone to the map and I've seen where everyone is, and I've texted those people and said put on ghost mode.

Jyoti: ... I don't mind my friends knowing where I am because I might want to like meet up with them or something, and also like I don't count like showing your age as personal information, because like I know they're not gonna know, there's millions of twelve year olds on this planet ...

Naza: And eleven year olds! (NELA, Year 7, mixed, aged 11–12)

Interviewer: Can you bring up your map now?

Selin: Yeah.

Fera: You can see where people are, like this is my friend N, she's on X Street!

[LOUD CHATTER]

Jyoti: It's actually so dangerous! (NELA Year 7, mixed, aged 11–12)

Naza: but we're smart, because like we're in secondary school we are more mature, and in primary school they were teaching us in workshops on online safety

Here we can see a live debate with the young people over whether or not they should keep the Snapmap open and Fera points to her friend 'N on X street'. After they investigate the maps with the researchers Jyoti proclaims, 'it's actually so dangerous', but Naza maintains their group is 'smart'.

Like other social media applications, Snapchat also shows the geo-location when posting a story. In another example a girl, Venus, met a boy on Snapchat that she really liked and agreed to meet him one weekend when he messaged her that he was close by which he knew because Venus posted a Snapstory that showed her location. Venus then became the victim of violence when the boy's (female) cousin and a group show up to meet Venus instead of the boy, threatening her for money and then physically attacking her:

Venus: I posted on my story that we were there, and it had my location, you know how Snapchat, when you slide, it has your location of where you are. I posted that on my story and he told me to go to this place, you know like near the McDonald's ... when I got there ... they were there ... outside there. And I'm talking so fast ...

Irina: On Monday when there was this gang fight in McDonald's and knife stabbings and stuff.

Jada: Stabbings.

Venus: That's the one where I got beat up. It was at McDonald's. (NELA, Year 8 girls, aged 12–13)

Venus is physically attacked in this example, and the girls also approach Jada on Snapchat as she's Venus' best friend. And although they both block the group on Snapchat, the older girls find someone at Venus' school to approach and threaten her in person. Jada experienced extreme anxiety about the encounter, nearly breaking down in the interview:

Jada: Because my heart was beating, I couldn't sleep, I didn't want to come to school, because I couldn't sleep at night and I wasn't waking up in the morning properly. Oh I'm gonna start crying. And I couldn't hold it in, and I went to the hospital because I thought it was something wrong with my heart, and they were like no, nothing's wrong. And then after we talked about anxiety and mental health I was like oh my word I have anxiety because of them, and then I went to tell Miss in the end. And I don't have it anymore.

Interviewer: OK, so have these girls stopped harassing you?

Venus: Well after the incident like January they were, they kept asking me for money and stuff, like oh we won't beat you up if you give me money ... they made that kind of group chat with me, the cousin, and the girls in it, because they

added me on Snapchat, they basically know a girl called Cassie in Year 9, and they were like oh Cassie could tell us where you are and stuff, we could beat you and Jada up ... she was gonna tell my information so people know where I live. (NELA, Year 8 girls, aged 12–13)

Venus recounts being added to a group chat where the girls harass her. They threaten her and Jada with another girl, Cassie, who can find them inside their school, and to expose Venus' home address (doxing or sharing personal information). Venus has blocked them and taken herself out of the Snapchat group, but still has her Instagram public and they continued to monitor her there. This episode shows how various platforms interact and how removing and blocking may not be enough. Venus shows us an extensive blocked list of those who have been harassing her, but these blocked contacts sit in the folder and are still there impacting her experience of the app. It's important to underscore that the geolocational elements of Snapchat would not be so dangerous if they did not interact with some of the other features of the apps including a drive to expand one's network, which opens young people up to many unknown or semi-known contacts.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined a methodological process using visual prompts, taking screenshots of social media images shared by young people and providing app-specific social media templates for young people to draw their experiences in focus groups. The aim was to explore how social networking works through apps like Snapchat, which create various opportunities but also a range of risks and harms for young people (Livingstone, 2008). The platform-specific methodology was designed to find out how apps *work for the user*, and in particular to unearth processes of consent or lack thereof in how images are shared via photo- and video-based social media apps. Young people are extremely savvy users of social media and the almost exclusive users of a platform like Snapchat. The affordances of apps nudge young people into practices such as promoting their contact info with unknown audiences. The game-like quality of Snapchat, including streaks and user engagement metrics like Snapscores, encourages young people to expand their network and increase their visibility, lulling them into accepting high volumes of unknown contacts. The app creates paradoxical conditions,

where youth are aware of risks, but they may ignore them. The element of non-consent is built into Snapchat. Ephemeral snapping can be used by predators to target and harass young people including sending unwanted sexual content like dick pics, which was experienced by the majority of the teen girls in our study. Boys, in contrast, discussed being targeted to buy sex subscription content, showing how the platform affordances of the Snapchat shape the dynamics of (non)consent in gender-specific ways.

Throughout I've demonstrated how the platform affordances can create difficult affective states through some of the paradoxical ways the app is used. For instance, the core affordance of Snapchat is ephemerality, but young people explained throughout that it is possible and likely that this affordance is overridden. Snaps are frequently screenshotted meaning the content persists instead of disappearing and can spread. The intended affordances of Snapchat are therefore altered, meaning content intended to be fleeting can easily be captured (persistence) and widely spread leading to image-based abuse. Moreover, the privacy affordances of apps like Snapchat can be subverted through sharing of devices and passwords, which is common in youth friend cultures. The long-lasting impacts of the non-consensual sharing of images and affects of acute shame and humiliation were documented. Olivia explained how Jen became known as 'the girl with the nude', while Joel explained how 'spite' motivated the image-based abuse of a girl in their peer group, whose Snapchat account is breached, and nude images posted without consent on her own Snapchat timeline by someone she'd shared her password with, leading to 'nasty comments' and 'bullying' from her wider social media and peer network.

These dynamics are integrally postdigital – abuse happens through the tech online, but affordances mean effects/affects travel further impacting the youth peer group in a range of ways (Ringrose and Mendes, 2018). The varied features of Snapmap also interact to facilitate violence. For instance, the geolocational tracking affordances of the Snapmap and posts that show the user's location to a wide and partially unknown network can be used to find and harass young people, including in some cases by their peers. We showed how Snapchat enabled the physical attack, stalking and harassment of Venus and her friend Jada by a group of older teens, with Jada describing her rapid heartbeat, anxiety and being unable to sleep. The technological affordances interact with the lived experiences in and around school – a profoundly postdigital state where a seemingly innocuous and fun affordance of seeing oneself and others' avatars geolocated on a Snapmap can enable coercion and abuse.

In conclusion, then, this chapter has shown how the platform affordances of Snapchat work *in practice and in context*, sometimes in unintended ways. The unique methodology outlined has demonstrated how technological affordances and features are postdigital – they mediate behaviour, capacities and decision making with a complex range of effects. Indeed, the methodology was able to uncover how consent operates and when it is bypassed and how risk is magnified through a range of features on Snapchat. As such the findings hold important policy and practice implications for a range of stakeholders, including schools, families, communities and young people themselves.

Note

1. <https://newsroom.snap.com/en-GB/uk-mau-21million>

References

- Barter, C., Stanley, N., Wood, M., Lanau, A., Aghtaie, N., Larkins, C. and Øverlien, C. (2017). Young people's online and face-to-face experiences of interpersonal violence and abuse and their subjective impact across five European countries. *Psychology of Violence*, 7(3), 375–384. <https://doi.org/10.1037/vio0000096>
- Bayer, J.B., Ellison, N.B., Schoenebeck, S.Y. and Falk, E.B. (2016). Sharing the small moments: Ephemeral social interaction on Snapchat. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(7), 956–977. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1084349>
- boyd, d. (2010). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (ed.) *A Networked Self: Identity, community and culture on social network sites*. London: Routledge, pp. 39–58.
- boyd, d. (2014). *It's Complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bruns, A. (2006). Towards produsage: Futures for user-led content production. *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Cultural Attitudes towards Technology and Communication*. School of Information Technology, pp. 275–284.
- Charteris, J., Gregory, S. and Masters, Y. (2018). 'Snapchat', youth subjectivities and sexuality: Disappearing media and the discourse of youth innocence. *Gender and Education*, 30(2), 205–221. doi: [10.1080/09540253.2016.1188198](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1188198)
- Chun, W.H.K. (2017). *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cramer, F. (2014). What is 'post-digital'? *A Peer-Reviewed Journal About*, 3(1), 10–24.
- Evans, S.K., Pearce, K.E., Vitak, J. and Treem, J.W. (2017). Explicating affordances: A conceptual framework for understanding affordances in communication research. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 22(1), 35–52.
- Fox, J., and Potocki, B. (2014). Technology and culture. In T.C. Hiestand and W.J. Weins (eds) *Sexting and Youth: A multidisciplinary examination of research, theory, and law*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Gerlitz, C. and Helmond, A. (2013). The like economy: Social buttons and the data-intensive web. *New Media & Society*, 15(8), 1348–1365.
- Grieve, R. (2017). Unpacking the characteristics of Snapchat users: A preliminary investigation and an agenda for future research. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 74, 130–138.
- Handyside, S. and Ringrose, J. (2017). Snapchat memory and youth digital sexual cultures: Mediated temporality, duration and affect. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(3), 347–360. doi: [10.1080/09589236.2017.1280384](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1280384)

- Karasavva, V., Brunet, L., Smodis, A., Swanek, J. and Forth, A. (2023). Putting the Y in cyberflash-ing: Exploring the prevalence and predictors of the reasons for sending unsolicited nude or sexual images. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 140.
- Kofoed, J. and Larsen, M.C. (2016). A snap of intimacy: Photo-sharing practices among young people on social media. *First Monday*, 21(11). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v21i11.6905>
- Light, B., Burgess, J. and Duguay, S. (2018). The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. *New Media and Society*, 20(3), 881–900.
- Livingstone, S. (2008). Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. *New Media & Society*, 10(3), 459–477.
- Naezer, M. and Ringrose, J. (2018). Adventure, intimacy, identity and knowledge: Exploring how social media are shaping and transforming youth sexuality. In J. Gilbert and S. Lamb (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Sexual Development: Childhood and Adolescence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oswald, F., Lopes, A., Skoda, K., Hesse, C.L. and Pedersen, C.L. (2020). I'll show you mine so you'll show me yours: Motivations and personality variables in photographic exhibitionism. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 57(5), 597–609. doi: [10.1080/00224499.2019.1639036](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1639036)
- Renold, E. and Ringrose, J. (2016). Selfies, relfies and phallic tagging: Posthuman part-icipations in teen digital sexuality assemblages. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49, 1066–1079. doi:[10.1080/00131857.2016.1185686](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2016.1185686)
- Ringrose, J. (2010). Sluts, whores, fat slags and Playboy bunnies: Teen girls' negotiations of 'sexy' on social networking sites and at school. In C. Jackson, C. Paechter and E. Renold (eds) *Girls and Education 3–16: Continuing concerns, new agendas*. Basingstoke: Open University Press.
- Ringrose, J. and Harvey, L. (2015). 'BBM is like match.com': Social networking and the digital mediation of teen's sexual cultures. In J. Bailey and V. Steeves (eds) *eGirls, eCitizens: Putting technology, theory and policy into dialogue with girls' and young women's voices*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Ringrose, J. and Mendes, K. (2018). Mediated affect & feminist solidarity: Teens' using Twitter to challenge 'rape culture' in and around school. In T. Sampson, D. Ellis and S. Maddison (eds) *Affect and Social Media*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Ringrose, J. and Regehr, K. (2025). *Teens, Social Media, and Image Based Abuse*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ringrose, J., Regehr, K. and Milne, B. (2021). *Understanding and Combatting Youth Experiences of Image Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse*. Leicester: Association of School and College Leaders.
- Robards, B. and Lincoln, S. (2019). Social media scroll back method. *Sage Research Methods*.
- Schrock, A.R. (2015). Communicative affordances of mobile media: Portability, availability, locat-ability, and multimodality. *International Journal of Communication*, 9(18). <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3288>
- Treem, J.W. and Leonardi, P.M. (2013). Social media use in organizations: Exploring the affordances of visibility, editability, persistence, and association. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 36(1), 143–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2013.11679130>
- Venema, R. and Lobinger, K. (2017). 'And somehow it ends up on the internet': Agency, trust and risks in photo-sharing among friends and romantic partners. *First Monday*, 22(7). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i7.7860>
- Verčič, A.T. and Verčič, D. (2013). Digital natives and social media. *Public Relations Review*, 39(5).
- Warfield, C., Cambre, C. and Abidin, C. (2020). *Mediated Interfaces: Representation, presentation, and embodiment online*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Warfield, K. (2014). Making Selfies/Making Self: digital subjectivities in the selfie. On-site presenta-tion at the Fifth International Conference on the Image and the Image Knowledge Community, Freie Universität, Berlin.
- Zhang, M. and Liu, Y. (2021). A commentary of TikTok recommendation algorithms in MIT. *Technology Review Fundamental Research*, 1(6), 846–847.

Sexual harm and image sharing: rethinking and reimagining gender, power and intimacy with and for adolescent boys

Emily Setty

Introduction

In this chapter, I utilise a framework of postdigital intimacies to explore adolescent sexual image-sharing culture. Drawing on [Lloyd and Bradbury's \(2023\)](#) conceptualisation of sexual harm, I discuss how sexual harm in image sharing is enacted and experienced through cultural norms and expectations. I argue that this conceptualisation allows for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between gendered power dynamics, intimacy and digital affordances, where harm cannot be reduced to isolated incidents of abuse but is embedded within the broader sociocultural and technological contexts shaping adolescent sexual cultures of image sharing ([Setty, Ringrose and Hunt, 2024](#)).

By framing the discussion around sexual harm, I examine how digital practices such as non-consensual image sharing are embedded within normative structures of masculinity and intimacy. For boys, these practices are simultaneously rewarding and precarious, offering social validation while exposing them to risks of surveillance, rejection and stigma. The framework of sexual harm highlights the fluid and intersecting dimensions of agency, consent and power that underpin these dynamics, challenging reductive perpetrator–victim binaries and inviting critical engagement with the broader ethical and cultural contexts in which these practices occur and unfold. The postdigital lens enables interrogation of how digital affordances mediate the pursuit of intimacy and recognition

among boys, shaping their enactment of harm and experiences of it. Through this, I seek to advance the conversation of how sexual harm can be addressed in ways that account for the complexities of gender, power and intimacy in contemporary adolescent sexual cultures.

I acknowledge the dominance of cisgender heterosexual norms throughout the chapter. The focus here is on these cultures, reflecting the perspectives of the young people I have engaged with in research. Regardless of their sexual and gender identity, their accounts consistently locate harm within these contexts, highlighting the centrality of entrenched gender norms that shape their perceptions of image-sharing culture, with it often viewed as a highly gendered matter, whereby boys are positioned as active agents and girls as passive recipients. While this focus provides insights into gendered dynamics of harm, it risks obscuring the experiences of gender and sexually diverse young people. These groups may encounter distinct forms of harm and navigate different power dynamics in image-sharing cultures. Broadening the lens can help in understanding and challenging the cultural and technological forces that perpetuate harm. In this chapter, I specifically focus on the conceptualisation of heterosexual masculinity in image-sharing cultures.

Adolescent sexual image sharing as (post-)digital intimacies

A ‘postdigital’ conceptualisation of adolescent digital sexual cultures (Yue and Lim, 2022) identifies young people’s behaviours, experiences and practices as spanning online and offline domains, digitally mediated rather than distinctly online or offline (Pettegrew and Day, 2015). From a post-digital perspective, online and offline domains of meaning and experience are mutually constitutive (Livingstone, Mascheroni and Staksrud, 2018; Nelson, Perry and Rogers, 2020) and young people negotiate new and evolving digital and platform affordances within and through wider socio-cultural normative contexts (e.g. Buckingham and Martínez-Rodríguez, 2013; Collier and Perry, 2023). These affordances create opportunities for intimacy, including in the form of sexual image sharing (Beyens et al., 2020; Handyside and Ringrose, 2017; McGeeney and Hanson, 2017).

Sexual harm in image sharing is enabled by collapsing boundaries between public and private and the temporal dynamics of digitally mediated intimacy whereby consent – in terms of volitional and willing agreement to how images are treated and handled – may be compromised or violated before, during and/or after sharing an image (Setty, Ringrose

and Regher, 2022). However, while enabled by digital and network platform affordances, the harm arising from privacy violations and non-consensual image sharing is, as I outline below, shaped by and unfolds within wider gendered normative contexts, hence the focus on 'sexual harm' as a broader, more diffuse process beyond isolated acts of abuse (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023). Following Ringrose et al. (2022), I adopt a feminist orientation to this sexual harm and conceive of it as postdigital (see Bassett, 2015) to identify how gender norms and inequalities are perpetuated and challenged through digitally mediated intimacies.

Digital sexual image sharing is intimate or involves intimacy insofar as it entails the pursuit, negotiation, performance and experience of belonging but also of vulnerability arising from the desire to belong and to be recognised or 'seen'. It is distinct from privacy, because intimacy may not necessarily be private (Berlant, 1998) either by intent or as a consequence, with violations of privacy arising through unintended and/or non-consensual treatment and interpretation of imagery (see Crofts et al., 2015). Platforms create what Dobson, Carah and Robards (2018) term 'intimate publics' whereby intimacy is performed as well as experienced and may both be enabled and diminished including, as I explore below, by and between young people in sometimes discordant ways across interpersonal and social contexts, resulting in layers and interplays of intimacy within and between digital and non-digital domains.

The vulnerability entailed in intimacy, as well as its disruptive potential (Berlant, 1998) is remediated and intensified through these intimate publics. Yet as suggested by Andreassen et al. (2018), contemporary digitally mediated intimacies are part of a long trajectory of the use of all kinds of media for intimacy. The mediums have affordances and potentialities but are put to use by and between individuals who, Andreassen et al. (2018) argue, act both as agents and in response to automated digital processes. Understanding adolescent digital intimacies must, from this perspective, acknowledge what is made possible for intimacy through digital media while situating it as reciprocally constituting and constituted by public meanings of intimacy in terms of belonging, recognition and vulnerability. It is these processes that shape and underpin sexual harm arising from image sharing.

Adolescent image-sharing cultures

Extensive studies conducted with young people about their perceptions and experiences of postdigital intimacies in the form of sexual image

sharing highlight the persistence of gender norms and inequalities in shaping the landscape of risks and opportunities connected to the pursuit of belonging and recognition through sexual imagery and image-sharing practices (Ringrose, Regehr and Whitehead, 2021a; Ringrose et al., 2013, 2022; Setty et al., 2022). Girls and young women are disproportionately likely to experience pressured and unwanted image sharing, non-consensual further distribution of images and sexual shaming. Boys and young men are disproportionately likely to engage in these practices and, moreover, to be socially celebrated and rewarded by their male peers for accruing and sharing images of girls as evidence of their (hetero)sexual skill and accomplishment (Hunehäll Berndtsson and Odenbring, 2021). The normalisation of male sexual pursuit and entitlement, coupled with a dismissiveness of the needs or wants of girls and women, also underpins unsolicited sending of explicit images by boys and men ('dick pics') to girls and women (Hayes and Dragiewicz, 2018; Ricciardelli and Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose, Regehr and Whitehead, 2021b; Salter, 2015).

Meanings and experiences of intimacy are (re)mediated within this landscape of risk and reward (Crofts et al., 2015; Setty, 2020b; Setty et al., 2022; Thomas, 2018). For adolescent girls, personal sexual imagery and image sharing is significant; they are aware of the risk, and their images are a marker of their desirability and a meaningful 'token' of trust, interpersonal connection and, sometimes, acquiescence. Image sharing may be experienced as exciting because of, not despite, the risk; the pleasures arise as much from what is conveyed, pursued and accomplished, personally and interpersonally, by the image as the image itself. Intimacy for girls through image sharing can become a coercive force, within a context of gendered flows of expectation and obligation (Burkett, 2015; Setty and Dobson, 2024; Thomas, 2018). The 'currency' these 'tokens' hold to boys in their peer cultures facilitates privacy violations and non-consensual experiences affecting girls, including, as I explore further below, as a way for boys to pursue and experience intimacy – in the form of recognition and belonging – with their male peers (Harvey and Ringrose, 2015).

Young people's negotiations of these terrains of intimacy are subject to and shaped by gendered sexual double standards whereby they may conceive of acts of abuse, e.g. non-consensual sharing of an image, as wrong or unethical (Harder, 2021) – including because of the violations of intimacy thus entailed – yet inevitable (Burkett, 2015; Hasinoff and Shepherd, 2014). The stigma attached to girls' bodily and sexual expression, coupled with the normalisation of masculine heterosexual

pursuit, results in sexual shaming and victim blaming of girls for their pursuit of intimacy – whether that be ‘belonging’ with their image-sharing partner and/or recognition as desirable feminine subjects – in a context fraught with risk (De Ridder, 2019; Dobson, 2019, Grobellar and Guggisberg, 2018; Ravn et al., 2021; Ringrose et al., 2013, 2021a, 2021b; Setty, 2020b). Sexual harm occurring in young people’s sexual image-sharing cultures is, therefore, rooted in gender inequalities predicated upon constrained choice and agency for girls in particular, but also, seemingly, normative pressures and expectations upon boys to participate in image sharing to display masculinity (Harvey and Ringrose, 2015), which, as I explore further below, may create vulnerability for boys, including to being subject to harm themselves (Naezer and van Oosterhout, 2021; Setty et al., 2022). Young people may both critique abusive image sharing as unethical and render it likely due to the digital platform affordances that facilitate it, while attributions of blame and responsibility are rooted in longstanding gender and sexual inequalities (Setty, 2020b).

The concept of postdigital intimacies thus encapsulates how young people’s socio-sexual lives are remediated by and within digital contexts; sharing an image may, for example, be a ‘digital’ act but the motivations for and experiences and consequences of doing so – including those that involve harm – are related to and unfold within wider (non-digital) contexts. Ecological sexual script theory (Jackson and Scott, 2010) offers a framework for understanding the intersecting domains of meaning and experience spanning the individual, interpersonal, social and cultural levels and contexts of image sharing. From this perspective, young people do not act as atomised individuals or dyads within interpersonal image-sharing contexts, instead bringing with them meanings, norms and expectations created and located within their social and cultural ecologies – which now include digital ecologies – that characterise and shape their ‘sexual scripts’ (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) and in turn, how they act and interact and with what effect for themselves and others. This theory highlights the dissonance that may exist between these domains because, it posits, individuals are active in sustaining and (re) creating meaning through action and experience. There arises a need, therefore, to disentangle the cultural dynamics of image sharing, as perceived and articulated by young people, and the diverse individual and interpersonal practices through which they actively negotiate these conditions (Crofts et al., 2015). Yet the nature of remediated intimate publics (Dobson et al., 2018) makes it difficult to disaggregate individual negotiations of social meanings and norms regarding intimacy and what

intimacy means to individuals beyond internalised normative expectations, wants and hopes for intimacy (Berlant, 1998).

Research I have conducted with adolescent boys about digital sexual image sharing has identified how power and reward afforded by and through heterosexual masculinity, including as connected to intimacy through belonging and recognition, may, in fact, be available (or unavailable) in different ways and to different extents to and among boys (Setty, 2020a). This is consistent with broader research on youth image-sharing cultures, which demonstrates how practices like ‘rating’ images of girls (Harvey and Ringrose, 2015) or sharing these images as ‘trophies’ (Burkett, 2015; Salter, 2015) serve to affirm masculinity, enhance social status and support peer bonding among boys (Casas et al., 2019; Crofts et al., 2015; Harvey and Ringrose, 2015). However, these practices also expose boys to risks of marginalisation and shaming, particularly when they fail to conform to hegemonic masculine norms or are subjected to non-consensual image sharing themselves (Burkett, 2015; Ravn et al., 2021; Setty, 2020b). Rewards and constraints of participating in image sharing are part of a broader masculine homosocial economy, where the normalisation of gendered assumptions about sexuality and power often obscures the abusive dimensions of the practices and the gendered harms that arise and are perpetuated (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016; Ringrose et al., 2021b).

Image-based sexual abuse and adolescent boys

When, in 2014, I first started researching adolescent experiences of digital sexual image sharing, I was struck by two personally unanticipated findings. I entered the focus groups and interviews (see Setty, 2020b) expecting girls to talk about being pressured to share images and boys to talk about the pleasures of obtaining and distributing images of girls with their male peers. While these dynamics emerged, I also encountered extensive concerns among girls of being sent unwanted ‘dick pics’ and of boys distancing themselves from engaging in image sharing, including non-consensual practices, entirely. Girls’ extensive experiences of the former are well documented in studies (e.g. Ringrose et al., 2021a; Setty and Dobson, 2024). When exploring the latter, I found that many boys observed a general structure of reward available to some boys from participating in image sharing and from engaging in abusive practices toward girls, but felt they lacked the ability, or willingness, to personally capitalise on these potentialities. On the contrary, I heard stories of boys

being shamed and stigmatised for sharing images, be that consensually or non-consensually with girls.

A hierarchy of heterosexual masculinity in digital intimacies became apparent, reflective of extensive theorising on hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). On the one hand, the boys believed that some boys have fun obtaining images from girls and sharing them with their male peers. For such boys, the 'intimacy' in postdigital intimacies was less about the experience of exchanging images with girls, more the belonging with male peers obtained through sharing and looking at the images together. Intimacy – as 'belonging' – thus extended beyond the initial interpersonal exchange of imagery to encompass these social/peer dynamics, as I have argued when conceptualising online harms as sometimes predicated upon 'fun' and 'bonding' for those enacting it at the expense of those targeted by it (Setty, 2023a). It was this pursuit of belonging that seemed to motivate boys; they wanted less to directly harm the girls *per se*; more, the girls became collateral damage in their pursuit of intimacy (or belonging) with one another through the performance of culturally legible heterosexual masculinity, as found in other studies (Harvey and Ringrose, 2015).

Given the stigmatised status of girls who share or appear in sexual imagery, this collateral damage was inflicted without much concern: 'boys will be boys' and girls are foolish for taking the risk, a discourse that Salter (2015) similarly identifies. While boys seemingly normalised their (inter)personal pursuit of intimacy with one another through sharing and viewing images of girls together (although may not term it 'intimacy', as such) they castigated girls for seeking intimacy with boys through image sharing. These girls were demeaning themselves for, supposedly, agreeing to send images to boys to please them and/or affirm their desirability and therefore, to have or maintain a relationship with a boy. The boys below, for example, described boys as sexually motivated and girls as overly responsive to the demands of boys: 'Boys, all their hormones are like, sex, sex, sex ... they're up for most things at a younger age and girls are pressured' (John, aged 17) and '[girls have an] ... overarching problem of low self-esteem ... they need a guy to make them feel ... valued' (Ling, aged 16).

While Ling constructs girls as motivated by a pursuit of intimacy (or being 'valued'), he diminishes it by attributing it to low self-esteem, implying that girls look for esteem through intimacy and this is a bad thing. Boys described girls as misperceiving the intimate landscape: boys do not want images because they like the girl, but to showcase their sexual accomplishments, as masculine subjects, to and with other boys.

Pursuing intimacy through image sharing by girls creates a vulnerability to potential exposure arising from girls' status as stigmatised subjects and boys' scope to achieve belonging through sharing/showing their images with peers and, therefore, indicates a flaw in the girl. This belonging for boys may, furthermore, encompass personal as well as interpersonal processes. Individual boys affirm their masculinity to themselves as much as one another through the sexual accomplishment of obtaining an image from a girl, with the sexual harm of non-consensual sharing rooted in these gender inequalities of risk and reward.

Likewise, unsolicited sharing of 'dick pics' by boys was constructed by some boys as about the pursuit of intimacy with a girl; they were aware that most girls will likely not reciprocate but 'gamble' that they will and trivialised unwanted dick pics as a mere 'annoyance' to girls. The relative lack of stigma to boys for image sharing, plausible deniability arising from anonymity (Ringrose et al., 2021b; Setty et al., 2022), and normalisation of male sexual pursuit amid a lack of consideration for the rights of girls facilitates these behaviours. For example, reflecting on his practices of unsolicited image sharing when he was younger, Bond (18, M), below, positioned it as a pragmatic and transparent initiation of sexual interest: 'I could send it, and that person could want it, and it cuts out all the boring work ... you can get straight down to the nitty gritty ... you don't have to waste your time, you both know what's going on ... you're laying out on the table, *I want this, are you interested?* No? That's fine, I'll go. Yes, brilliant, let's go.'

Bond's framing effectively preempts dialogue and mutual consent by assuming unilateral control over the interaction. The act of sending the image becomes a way for Bond to assert power and dictate the terms of engagement without *wasting his time* obtaining consent. It disregards the recipient's agency to consent to the initiation itself, reducing the interaction to a transactional exchange that prioritises the sender's desires over shared negotiation. Bond perceives himself as at little risk in this dynamic, willing to accept rejection while positioning the recipient as compelled to receive unsolicited sexually explicit material. The recipient, in turn, is burdened with the expectation of rejecting or validating the sender's desires. This asymmetry demonstrates how sexual harm is enacted not only through individual acts but also through cultural norms that normalise male entitlement to sexual expression and pursuit.

Yet, as Ringrose et al. (2013) found, image sharing and imagery of girls may be rewarding for boys but requires a performance of masculinity that is recognised and endorsed (Harvey and Ringrose, 2015). Masculinity is 'contested and resisted' (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman,

2003, p. 85), and while boys may organise themselves around hegemonic masculinity, they do not all endorse it and may construct or participate in alternative masculinities (Anderson and McCormack, 2018). These perspectives are shaped by a sense of precarity, as boys navigate the risks and rewards of masculinity. For instance, one group of boys distinguished between ‘fuck boys’ who accrue power through heterosexual masculinity, and those deemed ‘creepy’, ‘weird’, or ‘perverted’ (Kyle, M, 16). Others described boys who fail to control their sexual pursuits as looking ‘stupid’ (Andy, M, 16) or ‘desperate’ (Chris, M, 16), exposing them to social shaming.

Several boys spoke of the pressure to be ‘macho’ (John, M, 17) and avoid showing ‘weakness’ (Tom, M, 16), with social shaming normalised as ‘banter’ and boys expected to demonstrate resilience and ‘take the joke’. Engaging in image sharing may accrue power and reward, but it also entails risks of shame and stigma if boys lack the requisite status markers, such as popularity or attractiveness. Tee (non-binary, 18) critiqued this dynamic and the social shaming that can arise for boys, asserting that ‘it’s not joking, it’s horrible to the person’. While boys recognised a gendered sexual image-sharing culture of risk and reward, many claimed not to actively participate and distanced themselves from the ‘type’ of boy who does so.

These boys perceived image sharing as risky; some boys may gain rewards, but not all. Positioning themselves as lacking the status required to succeed in these dynamics, they carved out alternative masculinities, disparaging the ‘debased’ masculinity of those who seek visibility and belonging through image sharing. James (17, M) described boys who collect and share images of girls as ‘showing off’, while Bond (18, M) dismissed them as ‘very basic ... alpha’ types. These boys argued that gaining ‘lad points’ through sharing images risks alienating girls, who perceive such behaviour as ‘horrible’ or ‘immature’. Some boys suggested a balancing act in their pursuit of intimacy, with Adam (M, 15) remarking that intimacy ‘just happens’ and Dan (M, 15) agreeing that ‘you’d slowly get to that stage [sharing an image], rather than like straight away being like, send me a pic’. Those who move too quickly or enthusiastically risk being stigmatised as ‘creepy’ or ‘weird’. Sending unsolicited dick pics was, for example, interpreted as violating this careful balancing act.

However, any claims of eschewing these practices out of respect for girls were undermined by the boys’ criticism of girls who participate in image sharing, describing such girls as equally ‘debased’. This highlights the persistence of normative gendered constructs that underpin sexual harm. Boys’ distancing strategies appeared more concerned with

personal risk management than with challenging the cultural norms that perpetuate violations of privacy and consent. Consequently, while they rejected certain practices, they still normalised heterosexual masculinity and blamed girls for their participation in image sharing. This dynamic reflects a broader failure to engage with what [Albury \(2013\)](#) terms a (post-)digital sexual ethics, where ethical engagement with digital intimacy is supplanted by a personal, interpersonal and contextual negotiation of risks and rewards. The boys' perspectives thus disincentivise image sharing without addressing the normative contexts that shape privacy violations and non-consensual practices and the sexual harm situated within the sociocultural constructs that boys simultaneously navigate and reproduce.

I encountered further nuances and complexities to boys' perspectives in subsequent studies. In 2019, I spent time in an independent co-educational boarding school in England where hostility toward girls among boys was heightened ([Setty, 2021](#)). The boys felt undermined and at risk from what they deemed 'feminist' developments that pitted girls against boys and gave the 'upper hand' to girls in intimate and sexual spheres of heterosexual life. So far, so reminiscent of the 'backlash' among heterosexual males when called upon to acknowledge and address inequality ([Burrell, 2021](#)). Yet there was seemingly also something deeper at play. These boys claimed to want to experience intimacy with girls but were concerned about a perceived threat of being accused of enacting harm and therefore, it not being worth the risk. These boys were not directly referring to image sharing, more to heterosexual gender relations and interactions in general, yet their perspectives highlighted a concern about risks connected to intimacy, this time reflective of the idea that heterosexual masculinity is pursuant and, therefore, may be held responsible for enacting harm.

I further explored these perspectives in a project on consent conducted in 2022 ([Setty, 2022, 2023b](#)). Several of the boys were familiar with the issue of disproportionality of sexual harassment and sexual violence affecting girls and young women. Compared to the 2019 boys, they emphasised their discomfort with the harm perpetrated by boys toward girls that they had seen or heard about, including in the form of non-consensual image-sharing practices. Yet, they wanted to distance themselves personally from its enactment; #notallmen was meaningful to them, not, they claimed, to underplay harm but to disavow it personally and distance themselves from direct causal responsibility. Some of them noted the wider sociocultural processes that may mean that individual boys claim not to harm girls but may still hold some responsibility for (re)

creating the contexts that facilitate harm, for example, through celebrating heterosexual accomplishment notwithstanding the exploitation of girls it may involve. Hence, they recognised a gendered cultural landscape while claiming that all ‘anyone’ wants is a good relationship regardless of gender, including themselves as boys: ‘in the end, not really [are there differences between boys and girls regarding consent] because what most people want from a relationship is a nice relationship’ (15-year-old boy).

These boys were quite effective at reproducing the narrative of responsibility at a distance. They claimed some status from advancing these ‘progressive’ perspectives, including, again, relatively so compared to the supposedly ‘debased’ boys in thrall to their masculine sexual urges who knowingly disregard the interests of girls to pursue their sexual agendas. Yet, these boys remained troubled by their positionality and subjectivity within interpersonal and social hierarchies of intimacy and constructed their concerns in terms of gendered understandings of power, responsibility and risk. They endeavoured to control their masculinised sex drives but were worried that they may fail *in situ* with a girl and may make a mistake or misperceive the situation and inadvertently cause harm. When asked about the risk of experiencing unwanted sex themselves, they reiterated their primary concern of being accused of perpetrating it, with any risk of victimisation being deemed a relatively trivial risk. They were critical of the situation they found themselves in, considering it a matter of gender stereotypes, and ambivalent about their supposed dominance and strength:

[consent is] ... the man asking the woman. If she agrees, they do it, but if she doesn’t, they don’t.

it might be the woman coming towards you [but] as a man, even if she’s coming to you, it’s right to always ask her multiple times if she’s alright with it.

we’re like the dominant ... stronger species.

[but if] a woman does actually sexually assault a man, it does get undermined ... the stereotypes tell them just to man up or be grateful ... it’s not really deemed sexual assault.

There were also concerns about social stigma – rather than normalisation or celebration – of boys’ enactments of sexual harm. Non-consensual image sharing may, it seemed, be stigmatised in local peer contexts depending on the norms at play, resulting in ostracism of boys. Boys who have sent unsolicited ‘dick pics’ to girls were, for instance,

described in disparaging terms, that is, of the supposedly 'lesser' masculinity as in thrall to hypersexual urges: in other words, 'boys will be boys', but real masculinity (or 'strength') is evidenced by overcoming, rather than succumbing to, these imperatives. Non-consensual practices represented an example of 'lesser' rather than high-status masculinity, at least in the context of local peer negotiations of status and belonging. What gains status and belonging is, therefore, contextually contingent with some boys noting that sexually pursuant masculinity is rewarded in some local peer contexts but that they personally ascribe to and evidence masculinity through rejecting these meanings and 'controlling themselves'. For some of the boys in the 2022 study, the 'rugby boys' embodied this simultaneously higher and lower form of masculinity: 'they don't care about consent, they don't care about girls, they just want the accomplishment'. Rewards may be gained locally through these attitudes, yet the boys observing them did not personally consider it high status or at least, this status did not feel accessible to them and may result in rejection from their immediate peers rather than belonging.

These perspectives mean that sexual harm toward girls can continue as a cultural phenomenon, even if it is 'not all men', because there remain localised reward economies that facilitate it. Yet there is also harm to boys that arise from these contexts. On the one hand, some boys may feel stigmatised if they pursue the seemingly high-status masculinity rewards associated with non-consensual image sharing but lack the status signals required for success. As [Roberts et al. \(2020\)](#) argue, boys are negotiating the tensions between aligning with hegemonic masculinity and carving out alternative masculinities, which may include rejecting dominant norms as a form of distinction. Perhaps, therefore, it is a matter of 'high reward' and 'high stakes', and most boys conclude that the risk is not worth it and in turn, align with alternative masculinities with alternative reward structures, including those predicated on disparaging those who pursue hegemonic masculinity rewards. On the other, these constructs can more explicitly be turned against boys. There is evidence of boys having violations of privacy and consent perpetrated toward them with the stigma and reward being shaped by normative masculinity constructs. For example, girls have been involved in 'catfishing' boys for pictures, with the shame experienced by and toward the boy linked to the demand to be a knowing masculine subject, upended by the 'catfish' ([Setty, Ringrose and Regehr, 2022](#)). As [Roberts et al. \(2020\)](#) also suggest, the same constructs that create reward for boys can simultaneously underpin risks to them, reinforcing the precariousness

of navigating masculinities within these contexts as well as the general sense that harm to boys is perpetuated by a dismissal of their victimisation.

New and emerging forms of privacy violations and non-consensual image production and sharing further complicate gendered dynamics of risk and reward and the intersections between digital and postdigital intimacies. Clare McGlynn's work (e.g. McGlynn, Woods and Antoniou, 2024) emphasises that 'deepfake' pornography constitutes a significant and growing form of sexual abuse, disproportionately affecting women and girls. Digital tools such as apps like 'Nudify' and deepfake technology enable the creation of sexualised content without the volitional participation of the victim. McGlynn, Woods and Antoniou (2024) highlight how the pervasive nature of deepfake technology allows anyone's likeness to be exploited, often without their knowledge, causing profound psychological and reputational harm to victims. They argue that these harms reflect and perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes, with the ease of creating and disseminating such content, coupled with inconsistent enforcement of platform policies, contributing to a 'deepfake ecosystem' that normalises non-consensual sexual imagery.

Even seemingly 'low-grade' deepfakes (i.e. those that are supposedly obviously fake) may still harm victims. The disempowerment inherent in having one's likeness harnessed for sexualised purposes arises from the invasion of intimacy and the ensuing social attention to the images. Low-grade deepfakes remain 'exposing', perhaps framed as 'fun' or 'play' by those creating, sharing and dissecting them, including boys who may align such practices with hegemonic masculinity norms to assert dominance or gain social capital within peer groups. From a cultural perspective, Murray (2020) argues that the 'deep' in deepfake is significant; these images are harmful not because they are fake *per se* but because of the unpredictability and lack of control over their creation, dissemination and interpretation. The 'deep' encapsulates the power dynamics and social impact of manipulated media.

For boys victimised by deepfakes, the harm extends to the shame and stigma arising from the violation of masculinity norms of strength, control and invulnerability, further complicating their navigation of gendered landscapes of risk and reward. These dynamics are also evident in cases of 'sextortion', where anecdotal evidence (e.g. Rawlinson, 2024) suggests boys and young men face increased risk of victimisation due to their perceived desire for images. As an extension of 'catfishing', nefarious actors exploit this desire by pretending to be women interested in exchanging sexual images, enticing boys to share content that is later

used to threaten or extort them, including for money, to prevent the release of the images (see [Wolak et al., 2018](#)). As with catfishing, the normalisation of masculine sexual desire is turned against boys in coercive and stigmatising ways. Some victims may resist the power of sextortion and deepfakes to induce shame by pre-releasing personal images. However, such acts of resistance are enabled by digital affordances and require postdigital power to be effective, which, as labelling theory suggests, may not be equally available to all.

Rethinking and reframing gender, power and intimacy in adolescent (post-)digital sexual cultures

Tackling sexual harms arising from image sharing has centred on extending the theorisation of violence against women and girls to identify and deconstruct the normative contexts underpinning disproportionalities in enactments, experiences and effects of non-consensual image sharing and privacy violations ([Henry, Flynn and Powell, 2018](#); [McGlynn, Rackley and Houghton, 2017](#)). This framework may require expansion when engaging with adolescent boys, particularly through a postdigital lens that accounts for how digital affordances and sociocultural contexts shape sexual harm in image sharing.

Non-consensually sharing images of girls serves as a way for boys to experience intimacy with one another, affirming heterosexual masculinity within peer contexts. This dynamic suggests a reciprocal flow of risk and reward, where intimacy is achieved through harm to another ([Setty, 2023a](#)). In the postdigital era, digital platforms amplify these dynamics, offering tools for exploration and visibility for peer validation. If intimacy is understood as a pursuit of recognition and belonging, the digital scaffolding of intimacy becomes critical in creating harm: platforms enable the circulation of images in ways that intensify risks of exploitation while simultaneously offering opportunities for validation. Girls, too, pursue intimacy with boys – sometimes through ambivalent or unwanted exchanges of imagery, and at other times with genuine willingness – which boys may exploit for homosocial bonding and validation of masculinity. Digital platforms commodify intimacy, transforming it into currency that is easily shared, scrutinised and weaponised. Even boys who critique these dynamics as ‘debased’ masculinity and femininity remain embedded within the same digital and cultural structures.

This pursuit of belonging and recognition through intimacy is precarious in a digital context. Adolescents navigate digitally mediated

structures of reward and censure, where image-sharing risks exposure and stigmatisation unless it adheres to culturally legible actions endorsed by peers. Boys are simultaneously powerful and powerless as they navigate these constructs. For some boys, the risks of image sharing may not be worth the reward, especially if they lack peer support or requisite status, or if the girls involved are demeaned as lesser-than. Others may engage in image sharing but find the rewards contingent on interpersonal legitimacy and peer endorsement. Rather than framing boys solely as perpetrators or participants in harmful dynamics, therefore, I suggest 'leaning in' to the precarity they face, through engaging with the tensions and vulnerabilities of navigating masculinity and intimacy. This approach, inspired by [Albury's \(2013\)](#) call for ethical postdigital sexual cultures, involves creating spaces where boys critically explore these dynamics, interrogate their own practices and imagine masculinities rooted in respect, care and consent. Power, as negotiated within and through personal, interpersonal and cultural contexts, is always precarious. Rarely is it experienced or enacted as absolute, thus telling boys that they are powerful when they feel anything but will not suffice. By acknowledging the complexities of power dynamics and the search for intimacy, we can create space for addressing sexual harm that disproportionately affects girls and women while recognising how the pursuit of heterosexual masculinity often undermines itself, including through boys' victimisation and responses to harm.

The current emphasis on abstinence and prohibition of image sharing among minors in legal and educational contexts ([Setty and Dobson, 2023](#); [Setty et al., 2024](#)) often reinforces gendered landscapes of risk through shame-based pedagogy ([Albury, 2013](#)). These approaches position sexual harm as a consequence of image sharing, deterring young people through fear of specific acts of abuse, criminal sanction and social shaming ([Ringrose et al., 2021a](#)). Addressing sexual harm requires engaging with the grey areas and intersections: why and how does harm involve expressions of both power and powerlessness? How do these dynamics shape personal, interpersonal and social responses to harm? It is within the 'in-between' spaces of power and powerlessness that change becomes possible. Boys may enact harm toward girls within gendered social contexts, accruing power while retaining a sense of powerlessness or even losing power entirely. Reconfiguring peer relations beyond these structures involves interrogating the sociocultural factors that facilitate harm and envisioning interpersonal intimacy untethered from gendered expectations. This includes challenging the justifications for harm and creating pathways for alternative models of intimacy and masculinity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the sexual harms arising from image sharing, focusing on adolescent boys and the gendered power dynamics that shape enactments, experiences and effects of non-consensual image sharing, privacy violations and social shaming. A postdigital framework enables exploration of boys navigating these landscapes – balancing the fluidity of power and powerlessness – as they seek intimacy and belonging within peer groups. Research into adolescent image-sharing cultures identifies a need to move beyond simplistic deterrence strategies and abstinence-based frameworks. Engaging with the grey areas of postdigital intimacies reveals how boys perceive and experience image sharing within broader sociocultural contexts. This approach acknowledges how gender norms shape boys' attitudes and actions while recognising the harm they may experience through these dynamics. By harnessing these complexities, we can raise boys' awareness of the harms enacted toward girls while addressing how their pursuits of intimacy are also shaped and constrained in their own ways. This enables a deeper understanding of how boys' experiences of intimacy may be diminished, ambivalent or even harmful. At the intersections of power and powerlessness, mutual and reciprocal models of postdigital intimacy and sexual ethics can be advanced, challenging and reshaping gendered heterosexual power relations.

References

- Albury, K. (2013). Young people, media and sexual learning: Rethinking representation. *Sex Education*, 13(sup 1), S32–S44.
- Anderson, E. and McCormack, M. (2018). Inclusive masculinity theory: Overview, reflection and refinement. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(5), 547–561.
- Andreassen, R., Peterson, M.N., Harrison, K. and Raun, T. (2018). *Mediated intimacies: Connectivities, relationalities and proximities*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Bassett, C. (2015). Not now? Feminism, technology, postdigital. In D.M. Berry and M. Dieter (eds) *Postdigital Aesthetics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 136–150.
- Berlant, L. (1998). Intimacy: A special issue. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 281–288.
- Beyens, I., Pouwels, J.L., van Driel, I.I., Keijsers, L. and Valkenburg, P.M. (2020). The effect of social media on well-being differs from adolescent to adolescent. *Scientific Reports*, 10(1), 10763.
- Buckingham, D. and Martínez-Rodríguez, J.B. (2013). Interactive youth: New citizenship between social networks and school settings. *Comunicar: Revista Científica de Comunicación y Educación*, 20(40), 10–14.
- Burkett, M. (2015). Sex(t) talk: A qualitative analysis of young adults' negotiations of the pleasures and perils of sexting. *Sexuality and Culture*, 19, 835–863.
- Burrell, S.R. (2021). 'Cause we're all just part of the system really': Complicity and resistance in young sportmen's responses to violence against women prevention campaigns in England. *Sociological Research Online*, 28(2), 336–354.
- Casas, J.A., Ojeda, M., Elípe, P. and Del Rey, R. (2019). Exploring which factors contribute to teens' participation in sexting. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 100, 60–69.

- Collier, D.R. and Perry, M. (2023). Imagining research together and working across divides: Arts-informed research about young people's (post) digital lives. *Qualitative Research*, 23(1), 72–91.
- Connell, R.W. (1995). *Masculinities*. London: Routledge.
- Crofts, T., Lee, M., McGovern, A. and Milivojevic, S. (2015). *Sexting and Young People*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- De Ridder, S. (2019). Sexting as sexual stigma: The paradox of sexual self-representation in digital youth cultures. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(5–6), 563–578.
- Dobson, A.S. (2019). 'The things you didn't do': Gender, slut-shaming, and the need to address sexual harassment in narrative resources responding to sexting and cyberbullying. In H. Vandebosch and L. Green (eds) *Narratives in Research and Interventions on Cyberbullying among Young People*. Cham: Springer, pp. 147–160.
- Dobson, A.S. and Ringrose, J. (2016). Sext education: Pedagogies of sex, gender and shame in the schoolyards of Tagged and Exposed. *Sex Education*, 16(1), 8–21.
- Dobson, A.S., Carah, N. and Robards, B. (eds) (2018). *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frosh, S., Phoenix, A. and Pattman, R. (2003). The trouble with boys. *The Psychologist*, 16(2), 84–87.
- Grobbelaar, M. and Guggisberg, M. (2018). Sexually explicit images: Examining the lawful and unlawful new forms of sexual engagement. In J. Henriksen and M. Guggisberg (eds) *Violence Against Women in the 21st Century: Challenges and future directions*. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, pp.133–160.
- Handyside, S. and Ringrose, J. (2017). Snapchat memory and youth digital sexual cultures: Mediated temporality, duration and affect. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(3), 347–360.
- Harder, S.K. (2021). The emotional bystander – sexting and image-based sexual abuse among young adults. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 24(5), 655–669.
- Harvey, L. and Ringrose, J. (2015). Sexting, ratings and (mis)recognition: Teen boys performing classed and racialized masculinities in digitally networked publics. In E.J. Renold, J. Ringrose and D. Egan (eds) *Childhood, Sexuality and Sexualization*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 352–367.
- Hasinoff, A.A. and Shepherd, T. (2014). Sexting in context: Privacy norms and expectations. *International Journal of Communication*, 8, 2932–2415.
- Hayes, R.M. and Dragiewicz, M. (2018). Unsolicited dick pics: Erotica, exhibitionism or entitlement? *Women's Studies International Forum*, 71, 114–120.
- Henry, N., Flynn, A. and Powell, A. (2018). Policing image-based sexual abuse: Stakeholder perspectives. *Police Practice and Research*, 19(6), 565–581.
- Hunehäll Berndtsson, K. and Odenbring, Y. (2021). 'They don't even think about what the girl might think about it': Students' views on sexting, gender inequalities and power relations in school. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 30(1), 91–101.
- Jackson, S. and Scott, S. (2010). *Theorizing Sexuality*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G. and Staksrud, E. (2018). European research on children's internet use: Assessing the past and anticipating the future. *New Media and Society*, 20(3), 1103–1122.
- Lloyd, J. and Bradbury, V. (2023). Zero tolerance to sexual harm in schools – from broken rules to broken systems. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 29(2), 226–242.
- McGeeney, E. and Hanson, E. (2017). *Digital Romance: A research project exploring young people's use of technology in their romantic relationships and love lives*. London: National Crime Agency and Brook.
- McGlynn, C., Rackley, E. and Houghton, R. (2017). Beyond 'revenge porn': The continuum of image-based sexual abuse. *Feminist Legal Studies*, 25(1), 25–46.
- McGlynn, C., Woods, L. and Antoniou, A. (2024). Pornography, the Online Safety Act 2023 and the need for further reform. *Journal of Media Law*, 16(2), 211–239.
- Murray, S. (2020). Postdigital cultural studies. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(4), 441–450.
- Naezer, M. and van Oosterhout, L. (2021). Only sluts love sexting: Youth, sexual norms and non-consensual sharing of digital sexual images. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 30(1), 79–90.
- Nelson, E.L., Perry, M. and Rogers, T. (2020). Introducing offlineness: Theorizing (digital) literacy engagements. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 52(1), 101–107.
- Pettegrew, L.S. and Day, C. (2015). Smart phones and mediated relationships: The changing face of relational communication. *Review of Communication*, 15(2), 122–139.

- Ravn, S., Coffey, J. and Roberts, S. (2021). The currency of images: Risk, value and gendered power dynamics in young men's accounts of sexting. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(2), 315–331.
- Rawlinson, K. (2024). *Teachers Warned to Be on Lookout for Victims of Sextortion in UK Schools*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/29/teachers-warned-to-be-on-lookout-for-victims-of-sex-tortion-in-uk-schools>
- Ricciardelli, R. and Adorjan, M. (2019). 'If a girl's photo gets sent around, that's a way bigger deal than if a guy's photo gets sent around': Gender, sexting, and the teenage years. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(5), 563–577.
- Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R. and Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory*, 14(3), 305–323.
- Ringrose, J., Regehr, K. and Whitehead, S. (2021a). 'Wanna trade?': Cisheteronormative homosocial masculinity and the normalization of abuse in youth digital sexual image exchange. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(2), 243–261.
- Ringrose, J., Regehr, K. and Whitehead, S. (2021b). Teen girls' experiences negotiating the ubiquitous dick pic: Sexual double standards and the normalization of image based sexual harassment. *Sex Roles*, 85, 558–576.
- Ringrose, J., Milne, B., Mishna, F., Regehr, K. and Slane, A. (2022). Young people's experiences of image-based sexual harassment and abuse in England and Canada: Toward a feminist framing of technologically facilitated sexual violence. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 93, 102615.
- Roberts, S., Ravn, S., Maloney, M. and Ralph, B. (2020). Navigating the tensions of normative masculinity: Homosocial dynamics in Australian young men's discussions of sexting practices. *Cultural Sociology*, 15(1), 22–43.
- Salter, M. (2015). Privates in the online public: Sex(ting) and reputation on social media. *New Media and Society*, 18(11), 2723–2739.
- Setty, E. (2020a). 'Confident' and 'hot' or 'desperate' and 'cowardly'? Meanings of young men's sexting practices in youth sexting culture. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23(5), 561–577.
- Setty, E. (2020b). *Risk and Harm in Youth Sexting: Young people's perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Setty, E. (2021). Sex and consent in contemporary youth sexual culture: The 'ideals' and the 'realities'. *Sex Education*, 21(3), 331–346.
- Setty, E. (2022). Educating teenage boys about consent: The law and affirmative consent in boys' socio-sexual cultures and subjectivities. *Sex Roles*, 87(9), 515–535.
- Setty, E. (2023a). Risks and opportunities of digitally mediated interactions: Young people's meanings and experiences. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 27(8), 1188–1206. doi: [10.1080/13676261.2023.2211929](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2023.2211929)
- Setty, E. (2023b). Young people and sexual consent: Contextualising 'miscommunication' amid 'grey areas' of ambiguity and ambivalence. *Sex Education*, 25(1), 140–155. doi: [10.1080/14681811.2023.2259321](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2023.2259321)
- Setty, E. and Dobson, E. (2023). Department for Education statutory guidance for relationships and sex education in England: A rights-based approach? *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 52(1), 79–93.
- Setty, E. and Dobson, E. (2024). Young love 'locked down': Adolescent and young adult perspectives on sexting during the COVID-19 pandemic in England. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 53(2), 481–495.
- Setty, E., Ringrose, J. and Regehr, K. (2022). Digital sexual violence and the gendered constraints of consent in youth image sharing. In M. Horvath and J. Brown (eds) *Rape: Challenging contemporary thinking – 10 years on*. London: Routledge, pp. 45–61.
- Setty, E., Ringrose, J. and Hunt, J. (2024). From 'harmful sexual behaviour' to 'harmful sexual culture': Addressing school-related sexual and gender-based violence among young people in England through 'post-digital sexual citizenship'. *Gender and Education*, 36(5), 434–452. doi: [10.1080/09540253.2024.2348534](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2024.2348534)
- Simon, W. and Gagnon, J.H. (1986). Sexual scripts: Permanence and change. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 15, 97–120.
- Thomas, S.E. (2018). 'What should I do?': Young women's reported dilemmas with nude photographs. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 15, 192–207.
- Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., Walsh, W. and Treitman, L. (2018). Sextortion of minors: Characteristics and dynamics. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 62(1), 72–79.
- Yue, A. and Lim, R.P.A. (2022). Digital sexual citizenship and LGBT young people's platform use. *International Communication Gazette*, 84(4), 331–348.

Sexting risk and negotiations of consent in masculinity identity construction

Rikke Amundsen

‘For many, sexting is the new normal – but how do you know if you’re any good at it? And what happens when it goes wrong?’ (Stone et al., 2023). So opens an article published by media outlet the *Guardian*, entitled ‘my most memorable sexting disaster’ (Stone et al., 2023). The article goes on to list anecdotes from six unsuccessful sexting encounters, emphasising the instances where sexting did not go to plan or, as the authors call it, ‘wrong’ (Stone et al., 2023).

I start this chapter with referencing that *Guardian* article, because it brings forth two insights that have also shaped my writing of this chapter, as well as the design, development and execution of the research project on which it is based. First, in stressing that ‘sexting is the new normal’ (Stone et al., 2023), the article highlights an important premise for this work: sexting, which involves the taking, sharing and receiving of private sexual texts and images (still or moving) using digital technology like smartphones and social media (Lenhart, 2009; Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020, p. 35),¹ is now central to many romantic, sexual and intimate relations. Sexting is thus also a good example of what we might call a postdigital intimate practice, blurring the boundaries between the digital and non-digital, offline and online and human and non-human (Adema et al., 2024, p. 20; Bassett, 2015, pp. 136–137; Setty, Ringrose and Hunt, 2024, p. 440). In being this, it also brings about a ‘collapse [of] the public and private spheres of life’, troubling binary understandings of these spheres as they feed off and into each other (Setty, Ringrose and Hunt, 2024, p. 440). For instance, while sexting can be conceived as

a private practice, it is also one that occurs in and through digital technologies and platforms with changing and sometimes unclear privacy settings, usually owned and run by large for-profit companies. These technologies and platforms also allow for material to move with ease between private and public chats, forums and spaces, meaning that private material carries with it the possibility of becoming public.

Second, and as clearly indicated in the above-mentioned article, sexting is an intimate activity often connected to discourses of risk (Dobson, 2017, p. 80). These discourses can be seen as a consequence of overarching 'moral panics' concerning, especially, youth sexting (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020, p. 36). That being said, it is also the case that, with the rise of sexting as a popular intimate activity, there has been a rise in sexting-related harms involving, for instance, the non-consensual sending or receiving of private sexual texts and images (Perry, Ricciardelli and Adorjan, 2022; Ringrose, Regehr and Whitehead 2022). The latter of these two issues is often associated in academic and media discourse with especially cis-male behaviour in heterosexual relations, and tied to men's unsolicited sharing of selfies depicting male genitals, also known as dick pics (Paasonen, 2024, p. 83; Waling and Pym, 2019, pp. 70–71). The sending of unsolicited dick pics is generally treated in this literature as a gendered form of sexual harassment and abuse (see, for example: McGlynn and Johnson, 2021; Ringrose, Regehr and Whitehead, 2021).

In academia, a body of work exists around women's and girls' experiences of receiving unwanted or non-consensual private sexual images from men (with a particular focus on dick pics) (see, for example: Amundsen, 2021; Barker-Clarke, 2023; Ringrose, Regehr and Whitehead, 2022). This research tends to detail the harmful consequences that the sending of such unwanted and non-consensual material can have for the receiver, as well as the humorous (but also potentially harmful) ways that some women respond to it (see, for example: Paasonen, Jarrett and Light, 2019, p. 96; Ringrose and Lawrence, 2018; Shaw, 2016; Vitis and Gilmour, 2017). In this chapter, I shift the focus from those who receive such unwanted or non-consensual material, to looking at the experiences of men facing the possibility of their being responsible for sending unwanted or non-consensual material to women. I will refer to that possibility here as the risk of getting sexting wrong.

Drawing on material from interviews with self-identifying adult men in England about men's sexting with women, I focus on how these men made sense of the risk that they might share unwanted or

non-consensual material with a woman sexting partner (with adult here being defined in line with the UK legal definition, as anyone aged 18 or over; [GOV.UK, 2024](#)).² I also examine how these men's navigating of that risk came to play a part in their processes of masculine sexual identity construction. In doing so, I seek to show how, with the prevalence of a broad range of persuasive, and sometimes conflicting, discourses circulating in and through online and offline spaces, regarding what is (in) appropriate masculine sexual behaviour, personas and identities, men's sexting with women – as well as their associated acts of masculine identity construction – are mediated not just by digital technology, but also by discourse. The mediation of these practices demonstrates how the postdigital gives rise to new conceptualisations not just of intimacy and risk, but also of our gendered selves, as the public and private spheres 'collapse' where public discourse on masculinity shapes private perceptions of masculine sexual identity ([Setty, Ringrose and Hunt, 2024](#), p. 440).

Next, I provide a brief literature review, through which I situate this research in relation to what has already been written on this topic. I then provide an overview of my theoretical framework, and methods, before I present and analyse quotes by three research participants, exploring what these can tell us about postdigital practices of masculine sexual identity construction.

Sexting and mediated, digital intimacies

This research is situated in relation to existing literature concerned with mediated or digital intimacy ([Attwood, Hakim and Winch, 2017](#); [Chambers, 2013](#); [Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018](#); [Hakim, Cummings and Young, 2024](#)) generally and, more specifically, with practices and perceptions of sexting (see, for example: [Hasinoff, 2015](#); [Setty, 2020b](#); [Waling, 2023b](#)). So far, much of the research on sexting has been qualitative in nature, and largely focused on the gendered nature of this practice ([Dobson, 2017](#)). This research has also been emphasising girls' and young women's sexting practices and perceptions in, mainly, male–female relations ([Setty, 2020a](#), p. 561; [Waling et al., 2020](#), pp. 199–200) or hetero-sexting ([Amundsen, 2022](#)), as I will continue to call it. While much of this research has focused on hetero-sexting in relation to questions of consent and its transgressions ([Setty, Ringrose and Regehr, 2022](#)), less research has explored these questions in a more explicit relation to the concept of

boundaries. A notable exception here is a recent article by Kelsea Perry, Rosemary Ricciardelli and Michael Adorjan (2022). In this piece, the authors approach teen negotiations of the sexting risk of non-consensual further sharing of their sexting material in Canada, conceptualising it as a form of boundary work that involves drawing lines between public and private image sharing, and between ‘ordered and disordered’ understandings of the self (Perry, Ricciardelli and Adorjan, 2022, pp. 411–412). Noting the gendered nature of this boundary work, the authors also stress the unequal distribution of such sexting risk among their young women and men participants (Perry, Ricciardelli and Adorjan, 2022, p. 412).

Overall, less research in the field of qualitative hetero-sexting research has focused on the practices and perceptions of adult men (Waling et al., 2020, p. 200). Still, it should be stressed here that crucial research focusing on the hetero-sexting practices of boys and young men provides invaluable contributions to academic thinking around this issue, especially in relation to questions of masculinity (see, for example: Harvey and Ringrose, 2015; Setty, 2020a; Ringrose, Regehr and Whitehead, 2022).

Among the most notable qualitative contributions to the growing field of research on men and hetero-sexting, we find work by Antonio García-Gómez (2019); Signe Ravn, Julia Coffey and Steven Roberts (2021); Steven Roberts and Signe Ravn (2020); Steven Roberts, Signe Ravn, Marcus Maloney and Brittany Ralph (2021); and Andrea Waling (2023b; Waling et al., 2020). This research is grounded in data from individual interviews and focus groups with men in England (García-Gómez, 2019) and Australia (Roberts and Ravn, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021; Ravn, Coffey and Roberts, 2021; Waling et al., 2020; Waling, 2023b). In this chapter, I aim to make my contribution to that body of work, as I too reflect on men’s practices and perceptions of hetero-sexting. I draw especially on some of the above-mentioned research from Australia (Roberts and Ravn, 2020; Ravn, Coffey and Roberts, 2021), as this research too explores the role that hetero-sexting and sexting risk mitigation can play in practices of masculine sexual identity construction (Roberts et al., 2021). This research is different from that which I present here in that it is predominantly, but not entirely, concerned with examining men’s reflections on the non-consensual further sharing of women’s sexting material (Roberts et al., 2021; Roberts and Ravn, 2020). However, it is also similar to mine in that it explores how discourses of masculinity inform practices and perceptions of hetero-sexting and sexting risk navigation, which in turn come to play a core role in the construction of their masculine sexual selves (Roberts et al., 2021).

Selfies, a theoretical framework

The theoretical approach that I take here is inspired by Katrin Tiidenberg's (2016, p. 1586) approach, where she applies the concept of boundaries to understand 'what selfies and other images are and do in Not Safe For Work (NSFW) communities on tumblr.com'. In what follows, I too think *with* boundaries to unpack the meanings of research data. I draw on the concept of boundaries to make sense of cases where interview participants' accounts and ideas, concepts and concerns regarding the risk of getting sexting wrong, function as tools to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate masculine sexual behaviour, and between desirable and undesirable masculine identities and groups. I follow Tiidenberg (2016) in thinking with three different, but often overlapping, conceptualisations of boundaries, as symbolic (Lamont and Molnár, 2002), as a form of work (Gieryn, 1983),³ and as moral (Lauderdale, 1976).

Symbolic boundaries are 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space' (Lamont and Molnár, 2002, p. 168).⁴ In thinking with symbolic boundaries, I set out to show how – in some participants' accounts – their successful or unsuccessful navigating of the risk of getting sexting wrong, was also understood as that which situated them at either side of the boundary distinguishing desirable from undesirable masculine sexual identities or personas. This attribution of certain negative characteristics to men who get sexting wrong, as compared to those who get it right, can thus also be seen as a form of boundary work (Gieryn, 1983). Here, I use the concept of boundary work to understand both the emotional (Hochschild, 1983) and practical labour that participants engaged in to '[construct] a social boundary' between desirable and undesirable masculine sexual identities and personas, and to situate themselves on the right side of this boundary by carefully navigating the sexting risk of getting it wrong (Gieryn, 1983, p. 782).

A subset of symbolic boundaries is that of moral boundaries (Tiidenberg, 2016, p. 1567). Moral boundaries distinguish between that which is socially perceived as deviant and not deviant behaviour, with deviance here being understood 'as a product of the movement of moral boundaries rather than as a product of the movement of actors across those boundaries' (Lauderdale, 1976, p. 661). Following Pat Lauderdale (1976, p. 661), I take moral boundaries to be context-specific social constructions, maintained through the imposing of social sanctions, and challenged by shifts in power structures, or by the entering of a new adversary. Thinking with the concept of moral boundaries, I aim to show

how participants worked to distinguish getting sexting wrong (deviant behaviour) from getting sexting right (non-deviant behaviour). I also seek to demonstrate how these understandings of sexting-related deviance informed their associated understandings of masculinity. Getting sexting right was not just an important means to act respectfully and to protect the wants and wishes of a sexting partner. Getting sexting right was also considered important, because getting it wrong was thought to reflect negatively on your masculine sexual identity or persona.

Like [García-Gómez \(2019, p. 331\)](#), I approach this interview material with the understanding that 'sexting can be understood as a social practice that plays a key role in the construction of ... masculinities'. The approach that I take to masculinity here, is in line with that of [Waling \(2019, p. 90\)](#), who recommends that masculinity is explored as a concept subject to 'men's agentive and emotionally reflective engagement'. In this chapter, I will therefore not develop an understanding of masculinity as articulated with and through various masculine gender categories, theoretical models, or typologies ([Waling, 2019, pp. 90, 94](#)). Rather, I follow [Waling \(2019, p. 99\)](#) in taking an agency-focused approach to masculinity, seeking to explore and highlight the active role that men themselves play in continuously constructing its meaning and associated gendered practices. In operating with such a focus, I shall highlight the pivotal and ongoing role that men themselves play in engaging with, shaping and making sense of their own and others' masculinity, and as it occurs in relation to other social forces. Drawing on accounts by three interview participants about men navigating the risk of getting sexting wrong in hetero-sexting, I am going to show how such masculine gender and sexual identity construction happens at the point where contemporary gendered discourse regarding masculinity, sex and intimacy meet with interview participants' understandings of their gendered sexual self. I understand gender and, consequentially, masculinity, to be an inherently intersectional concept, always informed by the context in which it occurs, and by the coming together of 'multiple axes of differentiation' ([Brah and Phoenix, 2013, p. 76](#)).

Methodology

This chapter is grounded in in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted by me between May 2022 and May 2023 with 15 self-identifying⁵ men based in and around London and Cambridgeshire, UK. These interviews make part of a research project on men's experiences of sexting

with women, focusing on their use of digital technology for the creating, sending and receiving of private sexual texts and images (still or moving). This research does also place a particular emphasis on the use of images in sexting, the digital mediation of sexting practices, and on how these practices feed off and into perceptions of intimacy, risk and trust. The topic of the interviews – self-identifying men’s experiences of men’s sexting with women – is potentially a sensitive, highly personal and sometimes difficult issue to discuss. I thus approached these interviews with an emphasis on the importance of interviewer–interviewee trust and rapport, taking a feminist approach to interviewing that I refer to elsewhere as interviewing with intimacy (Amundsen, 2023). The sensitive nature of these interviews, combined with the fact that I was searching for participants from a demographic group known to be relatively hard to recruit for qualitative studies – especially on issues related to intimacy, sexuality and sex (Waling, 2023a, p. 313) – was perhaps also reflected in the relative difficulty I faced in recruiting participants.

I understand all interview material generated as part of this project to be collaboratively created by participants and myself through interviews (Roulston, 2010, p. 115), for so to be mediated through the various stages of my analysis. My overall approach to these interviews and their transcripts is thus also informed by the understanding that my own subject position as a cis-gendered, straight, White woman inevitably informed the interactions between participants and myself, but also the research design, the questions I asked, how I asked them and my subsequent analysis of the transcripts.

Below, I include information about my overall sample. When quoting participants in-text I simply mention the demographic information that I consider most relevant for the purposes of this chapter, thus outlining age, sexual orientation and ‘race’ and ethnicity. In focusing on this demographic information in relation to quotes by three participants, the aim is to theoretically foreground how these participants’ experiences of sexting risk are shaped by factors like sexual orientation. Participants didn’t discuss issues of ‘race’ in relation to the topic of this chapter, yet I include that information here, working with the assumption that it not being mentioned can also tell us something about the social and digital forces informing (White) male sexual identity. I have chosen to focus on these three participants’ accounts, because I consider them particularly relevant for the purposes of this chapter, as these were the participants who, most explicitly, discussed how public discourse about men, masculinity and consent shaped their experiences of sexting risk and, with that, their understandings of their masculine sexual self, both in private and in relation to others.

Focusing on the accounts of three participants, the value of this chapter does not lie with its possibility for empirical generalisation (which, I should say, it never aimed to have either). Rather, in writing this chapter, I aim to contribute to literature in the fields of gender, sexualities and digital studies, by bringing new insights to feed into our theoretical understanding of masculine sexual identity construction (an academic practice also known as theoretical generalisation; Eisenhart, 2009, p. 60).

Participants were in age groups between 20–24 (two), 25–29 (seven), 30–34 (three), 35–39 (two) and 45–49 (one). Eleven participants identified as ‘male’, one as ‘man’, one as ‘cis male’, one as ‘cis man’ and one as ‘questioning demi-male’. Six participants identified as ‘straight’, one as ‘heterosexual, straight’, five as ‘heterosexual’, one as ‘practically straight, but kind of like bi-curious’, one as ‘bi’ and one as ‘attracted to femininity/the performance of femininity’. In terms of relationship status, four participants identified as ‘single’ (with one of these four stressing that they were also ‘ethically non-monogamous’), eight were ‘in a relationship’ (with two stressing that their relationship was ‘monogamous’ and another that their relationship was ‘long term’), one identified as ‘having a partner’, one as ‘married’ and one as ‘seeing someone’. One participant had children. Two participants shared that they had disabilities. Four participants identified as ‘atheist’, one as ‘agnostic’, one as ‘agnostic in a way’ (but this participant also stressed that they ‘don’t care’), one as ‘agnostic/spiritual’, one as ‘non-religious’, one as ‘spiritual, not religious’, one as ‘culturally Christian and non-religious’, one as ‘culturally Christian’, one as ‘Jewish’, one stated they ‘grew up Jewish’, one explained that they had ‘a vague sense of spirituality’ and one responded ‘no’ to whether they had any religion. In answer to my question about their ‘race’ and ethnicity, six identified as ‘White British’, one as ‘White British/White European’, one as ‘White Caucasian and Western European’, one as ‘White Other’, two as ‘White’, one as ‘White Caucasian’, one as ‘Latin American’, one as ‘Mixed European’ and one I have chosen to present as ‘South Asian’ for purposes of anonymisation. All participants either had or were currently (five) studying for at least their first higher education degree. The ten participants who were not studying were all in work. Three interviews were conducted in person in a public place of the participants’ choosing. The remaining 12 interviews were conducted online via video call (one participant chose to keep their camera off during the conversation). With the exception of one participant, all had practical experience of sexting. Each participant has been assigned a randomly allocated British name as pseudonym.

I carried out a reflexive thematic analysis of the transcripts, following the six steps suggested by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2021b, pp. 35–36). The initial coding process was aided by the use of NVivo coding software, and the process of theme development involved the use of a research journal and Excel sheets as I worked to organise my codes according to their ‘patterns of shared meaning’ (Braun and Clarke, 2021a, p. 39). One theme that I developed through this analytical process was the theme of ‘sexting as boundary work’ (a formulation that I subsequently realised was also used by Perry, Ricciardelli and Adorjan (2022)). In generating this theme, I organised together codes that captured participants’ accounts of the almost constant negotiation of boundaries in hetero-sexting. Next, I address some – but not all – of the issues related to that topic and as organised by me under that theme.

The fear of ‘being that’

During all interviews conducted as part of this study, participants were asked whether they had any thoughts on the role that gender might play in sexting. This is Finley’s (‘straight’, ‘White’, aged 25–29), answer to that question:

I mean, there is this sort of like famous stereotype of the guy who sends unwanted dick pics, and at least in sort of like my social circles, there’s sort of like entire sub-reddits dedicated to mocking this sort of stereotype of a guy who – he doesn’t really know how to text women, he doesn’t really know sort of like what’s appropriate or not, and that figure is made fun of a lot. And so, at least for me, and I think that’s probably true for my friends, we fear being that, so while we still do want to engage in sort of like sexting and swapping nudes, I think all of us are very cautious not to become that figure. Whereas, it is more difficult for me to imagine like a woman sending a nude and some guy being like, ‘What the fuck?’.

In setting out to address the role of gender in sexting, Finley brings forth what he refers to as the ‘stereotype of the guy’ who does not know how to act appropriately when (hetero-) sexting. Finley’s negative portrayal of that gendered and sexual figure, and of being subject to the social media mockery that surrounds him, tells us something about how certain sexting behaviours have come to be associated with certain undesirable articulations of (heterosexual) masculinity. This is a finding similar to

that by Ravn, Coffey and Roberts (2021, p. 324) in their study grounded in data from ten focus groups with 37 men aged 18 to 22, and enrolled in undergraduate studies in Australia,⁶ where they found that deviant male sexting behaviours with women were associated with the undesirable male figure of the ‘creep’.

To Finley and his friends, the ‘fear of being that’ informs the way they approach sexting and, most notably, their sending of dick pics, as they work to ensure that their sexting practices are wanted and consensual. Getting it wrong when sending sexting material is cast here not just as an unwanted act, on the wrong side of the moral boundary between deviant and not deviant sexting practice. Following Finley, getting sexting wrong by sending unwanted or non-consensual sexting material to a woman is also understood as the point where the boundary between desirable and undesirable masculine sexual identities is crossed. According to Finley, getting sexting wrong is hence also a negatively loaded process of gendered becoming, of turning into ‘a stereotype of a guy’.

The fear of association

Like Finley, Arthur (‘straight’, ‘White British’, aged 25–29) made sense of the risk of getting it wrong when sexting with women, by situating it in relation to contemporary discourses concerning (in)appropriate or deviant masculine sexual behaviour. However, where Finley’s main fear was about what getting it wrong would *make* him, Arthur’s primary fear appeared to be more about how that would make others *see* him. The fear of getting it wrong was thus not about whom he would become to himself, but about whom he would be seen as by others:

Rikke: So what exactly are the risks that you associate with sexting?

Arthur: I think it’s just, there’s a lot of, rightly, there’s a lot of – what’s the word like – not criticism, male behaviour is under the microscope, has been for a while. ... It’s just being looked at a lot. I think that comes with a lot more risk associated with sexting from a male perspective ... And so as a guy, you have to be, at least in the current climate, you have to be, obviously not all men, some men definitely aren’t thinking about this, but you have to be a lot more aware of your power position and the fact that you’re gonna get a whole load of guys who are very sensitive about this stuff, and if you agree with them at all you’re suddenly put into that group, okay? And I think that’s where that element of risk comes in with sexting is that I wouldn’t want to engage in sexting, in risky

sexting behaviour in fear of then being associated with guys who just send unsolicited dick pics to people, because that's not who I feel that I am.

To Arthur, a core motivating factor not to engage in 'risky sexting behaviour' was the fear of getting it wrong, and of consequentially being associated by others with men who send unsolicited dick pics to women. In an overarching social context where 'male behaviour is under the microscope', Arthur fretted over how one sexting mistake could result in him being 'put into a group' with men whose ideas or actions he does not agree with or adhere to. In other words, getting sexting wrong would not inform how Arthur sees himself ('that's not who I feel that I am'), but he feared that it would lead others to see him as part of a group of men who embody undesirable masculine sexual personas and views. Avoiding sexting risk was thus a way for Arthur to ensure that, in the eyes of others, he would fall on the right side of the boundary between a desirable and undesirable masculine sexual persona.

The worry of being judged

In the accounts by Finley and Arthur above, the sexting risk of getting it wrong is negatively framed as something to avoid by either being particularly careful (Finley) and/or by abstaining from 'risky sexting behaviour' (Arthur). Unlike the participants in [Roberts and Ravn's \(2020, p. 269\)](#) research, who described the knowledge needed to get sexting right as 'implicitly known' and 'tacit', these participants discussed their steps to get sexting right as a more explicit and active engagement with the information available to them at the time. However, during interviews, I found that such risk mitigating acts were not always deemed sufficient to secure one's place on the right side of the boundary between a desirable or undesirable masculine sexual identity or persona. For instance, this became clear during my interview with Harry ('practically straight, but kind of like bi-curious', 'White, Caucasian', aged 30–34), when he responded to my follow-up questions about his expressed concern over getting sexting wrong (described by Harry as 'crossing boundaries').

First, Harry stressed the danger in 'assuming too much' and in relying on intuition when assessing whether a woman wanted and consented to receiving sexting material. Because of this danger, Harry explained how he sets out to 'explore the boundary by, like, tentatively, like, tiptoeing in or like being kind of sensitive to some kind of like non-responsiveness'. While this careful approach helped assess whether consent was present

and mitigate concerns about getting sexting wrong, Harry also mentioned how it might give rise to another set of anxieties instead:

And I think that, like, results in, like, situations that could have been like a sext that didn't become a sext because, I don't know, I was anxious that this person was, like, annoyed by my message or didn't respond enthusiastically enough. But yeah, I think like, I am worried that someone would judge me for, like, being, like, really lame to say, like, 'I just want to check, like you're okay with the sexting that we're doing right now or do you want to sext? Do you not want to sext?'

As in the interviews with Finley and Arthur, Harry emphasised the importance of securing consent and ensuring that the needs and wants of his sexting partner are protected.⁷ In addition, Harry was 'anxious' that such a repeated emphasis on consent could reflect negatively on him, by it being off-putting to a sexting partner, who might 'judge' him for being 'lame'. Not only might being seen as 'lame' in this way prevent a potential sexting encounter: it might also place him on the wrong side of the boundary of desirable and undesirable masculine sexual identity or persona.

Reading Harry's quote, we can see how sexting-related anxieties develop not just from the risk of getting it wrong, but also from the risk of being, as it were, too focused on consent. Here, we are presented with the view that an enhanced emphasis on securing consent can sometimes be experienced as if in conflict with more traditional gendered discourses framing men as the desiring, active sexual partner who is expected to drive the sexual encounter without much interruption (Holland et al., 2004).⁸ This is another finding that I have in common with Roberts and Ravn (2020, p. 267), with one of their participants suggesting that explicitly seeking consent would 'ruin the vibe'.

Discussion and conclusion

Situating this chapter in relation to, especially, research by Roberts and Ravn (2020, p. 263), Roberts et al. (2021) and Ravn, Coffey and Roberts (2021, p. 318) I have sought to show how discourses of sexting risk and of (in)appropriate masculine sexual behaviours, identities and personas inform men's practices and perceptions of sexting with women. As in this research from Australia, I have shown how men participants cast the risk of 'crossing the line' (Roberts and Ravn, 2020, pp. 268–269) or, as I call

it, getting sexting wrong, as an important factor shaping their sexting practices. Relatedly, participants in both research projects understood consent and mutuality as crucial factors to hetero-sexting, both to render the experience 'good' (Roberts and Ravn, 2020, p. 259), and to avoid reputational damage (Ravn, Coffey and Roberts, 2021, pp. 323–324). However, our findings differ on an important point.

Besides a want to ensure the wellbeing of their sexting partner, Roberts and Ravn (2020, p. 269) and Ravn, Coffey and Roberts (2021, p. 324) found that participants' concern with the sexting risk of getting it wrong was linked to a desire not to spoil their current, and potential future chances of sexual encounters (including, but not limited to, sexting). In making this point, the authors stress how being labelled a 'creep' involves being framed as someone embodying a 'deviant' masculinity, one that fails to live up to a masculine (heterosexual) ideal 'premised on the capacity to attract and engage sexually with women' (Ravn, Coffey and Roberts, 2021, p. 324). While my participants also framed getting sexting wrong as a form of deviant behaviour, their understanding of the consequences of the associated reputational damage were different. Rather than seeking to avoid sexting risk for purposes of ensuring future sexting 'success' (Ravn, Coffey and Roberts, 2021, p. 324), the participants that I have quoted here were more concerned with the consequences that their getting sexting wrong could have for their and others' understanding of their masculine sexual identity and persona. Getting sexting right was about much more than ensuring 'good' sexting encounters, or about securing their opportunities for future intimate and sexual encounters. Getting sexting right was also an active socio-technical process of masculine sexual identity construction, occurring in and through digital technologies and platforms and feeding off and into contemporary – and sometimes conflicting – discourses regarding (in)appropriate masculine sexual identities, personas and behaviours.

The findings presented here, show how a concern *not* to harm or hurt when hetero-sexting informed participants' approach to this intimate activity, but that contemporary discourses regarding heterosexual masculinity sometimes were felt to make this task harder. The fact that these intimate activities occur in and through mediating technologies that render the swift sharing of sexual material easier and the possibility of getting it wrong higher, also renders the perceived difficulty in getting sexting right more severe. These findings are important, as they help unpack the difficulties that these discourses and digital technologies can create for men seeking to get hetero-sexting right and, in the process, construct an understanding and expression of their masculine sexual self that they are at peace with.

Notes

1. Sexting is a contested term, widely used in academic literature, but not necessarily used in everyday conversation (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020, 36–37). When I recruited for the interviews that this chapter draws on, I used the term ‘sexting’. However, I opened each interview by asking participants whether sexting was a term that they themselves would use to describe the creating, sharing and receiving of private sexual texts and images through digital technology. Whilst ‘sexting’ was a term not all participants would use in an everyday situation, they generally preferred using that term whilst talking about it with me. I therefore continue to use that term here.
2. The project was supported by an Early Career Small Research Grant and by a Small Research Grant (Early Career Development strand) from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, as well as a Departmental Research Grant from the Department of Digital Humanities, all King’s College London. Ethics approval was gained from the Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Panel at King’s College London, with reference number LRS/DP-21/22-28967.
3. As Tiidenberg (2016, p. 1567) explains, this is a term initially introduced by Thomas F. Gieryn (1983) ‘to describe how scientists contrast their activities to those of non-scientists to create a favourable public image for science’.
4. In their exploration of normative masculinity and homosociality in men’s discussions of hetero-sexting, Roberts et al. (2021, p. 28) also draw on the concept of symbolic boundaries or ‘symbolic boundary work’ (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) ‘to make sense of the moral distinctions made [by participants] between older and younger selves, as well as between their own practices and those of “others”’.
5. It should be noted here that, in my participant information sheet, I used the term ‘self-defining’, rather than ‘self-identifying’.
6. Nine out of ten focus groups consisted of heterosexual-identifying men only, with one focus group consisting of two gay-identifying men (Roberts and Ravn, 2020, p. 263; Ravn, Coffey and Roberts, 2021, p. 318; Roberts et al., 2021, p. 37).
7. This finding is in line with what Roberts and Ravn (2020, p. 267) found through their discussions with young men about sexting and consent. See also Andrea Waling, Alexandra James and Lily Moor’s (2024, p. 11) discussion of the framing of consent in heterosexual sexual encounters as the responsibility of the man.
8. Roberts and Ravn (2020, p. 266) also show how their young male participants discussed the need to ‘escalate’ sexting encounters by increasing the intensity of their messages ‘carefully and gradually’. Like Harry, these research participants noted how this process of ‘escalation’ can quickly go wrong, if consent and a fully informed understanding of the receiver’s expectations is not already in place.

References

- Adema, J., Arnab, S., Evans, A., Jordan, M., Lamer, P., Maloney, M. and Walker, K. (2024). What ‘postdigital’ means to us: Roundtable with members of the Centre for Postdigital Cultures. *Anglica*, 33(2), 15–30. <https://doi.org/10.7311/0860-5734.33.2.02>
- Amundsen, R. (2021). ‘A male dominance kind of vibe’: Approaching unsolicited dick pics as sexism. *New Media & Society*, 21(6), 1465–1480. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820907025>
- Amundsen, R. (2022). Hetero-sexting as mediated intimacy work: ‘Putting something on the line’. *New Media & Society*, 24(1), 122–137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820962452>
- Amundsen, R. (2023). Interviewing with intimacy: Negotiating vulnerability and trust in difficult conversations. In R. Ryan-Flood, I. Crowhurst and L. James-Hawkins (eds) *Difficult Conversations: A feminist dialogue*, 1st edition. London: Routledge, pp. 102–112.
- Attwood, F., Hakim, J. and Winch, A. (2017). Mediated intimacies: Bodies, technologies and relationships. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(3), 249–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1297888>
- Barker-Clarke, E. (2023). Girls navigating the context of unwanted dick pics: ‘Some things just can’t be unseen’. *Youth*, 3(3), 935–953. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth3030060>

- Bassett, C. (2015). Not now? Feminism, technology, postdigital. In D.M. Berry and M. Dieter (eds) *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, computation and design*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 136–150. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137437204_11
- Brah, A. and Phoenix, A. (2013). Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(3), 75–86.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021a). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 21(1), 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360>
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021b). *Thematic Analysis: A practical guide*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Chambers, D. (2013). *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online intimacies and networked friendship*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137314444>
- Dobson, A.S. (2017). Sexting in context: Understanding gendered sexual media practices beyond inherent 'risk' and 'harm'. In E. Martellozzo and E.A. Jane (eds) *Cybercrime and Its Victims*. London: Routledge, pp. 79–93.
- Dobson, A.S., Carah, N. and Robards, B. (eds) (2018). *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eisenhart, M. (2009). Generalization from qualitative inquiry. In K. Ercikan and R. Wolff-Michael (eds) *Generalizing from Educational Research: Beyond qualitative and quantitative polarization*. London: Routledge, pp. 51–66.
- García-Gómez, A. (2019). Sexting and hegemonic masculinity: Interrogating male sexual agency, empowerment and dominant gendered norms: New insights and future directions. In P. Bou-Franch and P. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (eds) *Analyzing Digital Discourse: New insights and future directions*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 313–339. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92663-6_11
- Gieryn, T.F. (1983). Boundary-work and the demarcation of science from non-science: Strains and interests in professional ideologies of scientists. *American Sociological Review*, 48(6), 781–795. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095325>
- GOV.UK (2024). Case management guidance – definitions – guidance – GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/case-management-guidance/definitions>
- Hakim, J., Cummings, J. and Young, I. (2024). *Digital Intimacies*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Academic. <http://www.bloomsburycollections.com/collections/monograph>
- Harvey, L. and Ringrose, J. (2015). Sexting, ratings and (mis)recognition: Teen boys performing classed and racialized masculinities in digitally networked publics. In E. Renold, J. Ringrose and R. Danielle Egan (eds) *Children, Sexuality and Sexualization*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 352–367. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137353399_22
- Hasinoff, A.A. (2015). *Sexting Panic: Rethinking criminalization, privacy, and consent*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Hochschild, A.R. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Holland, J., Ramazanoglu, C., Sharpe, S. and Thomson, R. (2004). *The Male in the Head: Young people, heterosexuality and power*. 2nd edition. London: Tufnell Press.
- Lamont, M. and Molnár, V. (2002). The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28(1), 167–195. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.141107>
- Lauderdale, P. (1976). Deviance and moral boundaries. *American Sociological Review*, 41(4), 660–676. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2094842>
- Lenhart, A. (2009). Teens and sexting. *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech* (blog). 15 December 2009. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2009/12/15/teens-and-sexting/>
- McGlynn, C. and Johnson, K. (2021). *Cyberflashing: Recognising harms, reforming laws*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Paasonen, S. (2024). Dick pics and the shifty meanings of porn. *Porn Studies*, 11(1), 83–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2023.2301095>
- Paasonen, S., Jarrett, K. and Light, B. (2019). *NSFW: Sex, Humor, and Risk in Social Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Perry, K., Ricciardelli, R. and Adorjan, M. (2022). The gendered dynamics of sexting as boundary work. *YOUNG*, 30(4), 400–418. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11033088221076615>
- Ravn, S., Coffey, J. and Roberts, S. (2021). The currency of images: Risk, value and gendered power dynamics in young men's accounts of sexting. *Feminist Media Studies*, 21(2), 315–331. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1642229>

- Ringrose, J. and Lawrence, E. (2018). Remixing misandry, manspreading, and dick pics: Networked feminist humour on Tumblr. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 686–704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1450351>
- Ringrose, J., Regehr, K. and Whitehead, S. (2021). Teen girls' experiences negotiating the ubiquitous dick pic: Sexual double standards and the normalization of image based sexual harassment. *Sex Roles*, 85, 558–576. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-021-01236-3>
- Ringrose, J., Regehr, K. and Whitehead, S. (2022). 'Wanna Trade?': Cisheteronormative homosocial masculinity and the normalization of abuse in youth digital sexual image exchange. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(2), 243–261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1947206>
- Roberts, S. and Ravn, S. (2020). Towards a sociological understanding of sexting as a social practice: A case study of university undergraduate men. *Sociology*, 54(2), 258–274. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519864239>
- Roberts, S., Ravn, S., Maloney, M. and Ralph, B. (2021). Navigating the tensions of normative masculinity: Homosocial dynamics in Australian young men's discussions of sexting practices. *Cultural Sociology*, 15(1), 22–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975520925358>
- Roulston, K. (2010). *Reflective Interviewing: A guide to theory and practice*. London: SAGE.
- Setty, E. (2020a). 'Confident' and 'Hot' or 'Desperate' and 'Cowardly'? Meanings of Young Men's Sexting Practices in Youth Sexting Culture. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23(5), 561–577. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1635681>
- Setty, E. (2020b). *Risk and Harm in Youth Sexting: Young people's perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Setty, E., Ringrose, J. and Hunt, J. (2024). From 'harmful sexual behaviour' to 'harmful sexual culture': Addressing school-related sexual and gender-based violence among young people in England through 'post-digital sexual citizenship'. *Gender and Education*, 36(5), 434–452. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2024.2348534>
- Setty, E., Ringrose, J. and Regehr, K. (2022). Digital sexual violence and the gendered constraints of consent in youth image sharing. In A.H.M. Horvath and J.M. Brown (eds) *Rape: Challenging contemporary thinking – 10 years on*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge, pp. 45–61.
- Shaw, F. (2016). 'Bitch I said hi': The Bye Felipe campaign and discursive activism in mobile dating apps. *Social Media + Society*, 2(4), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116672889>
- Stone, J., Packham, A., Hunt, E., Petter, O., Davies, C. and Walton, A. (2023). 'I took one of me in the bath – can't go wrong with the bath, right?': My most memorable sexting disaster. *The Guardian*, 22 April 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/apr/22/my-most-memorable-sexting-disaster>
- Tiidenberg, K. (2016). Boundaries and conflict in a NSFW community on Tumblr: The meanings and uses of selfies. *New Media & Society*, 18(8), 1563–1578. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814567984>
- Tiidenberg, K. and van der Nagel, E. (2020). *Sex and Social Media*. Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Vitis, L. and Gilmour, F. (2017). Dick pics on blast: A woman's resistance to online sexual harassment using humour, art and Instagram. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 13(3), 335–355. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659016652445>
- Waling, A. (2019). Rethinking masculinity studies: Feminism, masculinity, and poststructural accounts of agency and emotional reflexivity. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 27(1), 89–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1060826518782980>
- Waling, A. (2023a). Combining 'sex-as-dirty work' and 'CMM' frameworks for recruiting cisgender, heterosexual men for a study on sex, sexuality, and intimacy. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 27(5), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2023.2166272>
- Waling, A. (2023b). *Exploring the Cultural Phenomenon of the Dick Pic*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Waling, A. and Pym, T. (2019). 'C'mon, no one wants a dick pic': Exploring the cultural framings of the 'dick pic' in contemporary online publics. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(1), 70–85.
- Waling, A., Kerr, L., Bourne, A., Power, J. and Kehler, M. (2020). 'It's nice to be appreciated': Understanding heterosexual men's engagements with sexting and sharing dick pics. *Sexualities*, 25(3), 198–221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720947297>
- Waling, A., James, A. and Moor, L. (2024). 'Dude, come on, like, let's just do the thing': Men's and women's navigations of sexual communication and sexual consent in Australia. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, April, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-024-00973-w>

The deepfake, the screenshot and the leak: vulnerable visibilities of the body in postdigital intimacies

Emily van der Nagel

Visibility in postdigital intimacies

In postdigital intimacies, visibility often informs value. Strategic self-presentation on social media platforms is increasingly a requirement in neoliberal capitalism, in which the individual often exists under a harsh spotlight (Duffy and Hund, 2019; Marwick, 2013). A digital presence showcasing a cohesive, active, positive, productive self is valuable under these conditions. Nancy Baym's (2018) book *Playing to the Crowd* details how social media is an increasingly central part of how musicians build relationships and cultivate status markers, such as high numbers of followers, that make them marketable. But being seen is not evenly experienced, and success is not granted to everyone. While digital visibility can lead to social connections and career progression, it can also mean surveillance and scrutiny. This is particularly relevant to women within the deeply gendered visibility economy, where, as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, the product is the body. In this context, maintaining control of digital visibility is paramount.

When women's bodies are depicted sexually, this intensifies the harm involved in losing control over digital self-representations. This chapter considers how women have become the primary targets of two kinds of digital visibility violations: non-consensually created and distributed deepfake pornography; and screenshots and screen captures of OnlyFans content posted on unwanted platforms. Both of these practices are predominantly conducted by men in order to humiliate women. Both

are a form of image-based sexual abuse, carried out digitally and resulting in material harm (Ringrose et al., 2024). A postdigital intimacies lens helps me pay critical attention to the entanglement between the digital and corporeal; the online and offline. Despite the penetration of digital devices, platforms and practices into so much of our lives, distinctions are still made between these realms. The most persistent myth in this discursive separation between online and offline is that only the offline matters. This has been disproven over and over: for example, by Bo Ruberg, who asserts that ‘digital labour has real value’ (2016, p. 158) when writing about amateur pornography; and by Angela Jones (2020), who insists that webcam models and their clients gain real pleasure, and really orgasm, despite the absence of physical touch.

Using a postdigital intimacies framework means drawing attention to the context collapse between the digital and non-digital (Evans and Ringrose, 2025), while naming neoliberal capitalism and patriarchy as the wider conditions in which postdigital intimacies are situated. I do this by arguing that the two visibility violations documented in this chapter each illustrate a kind of harm administered digitally, but felt throughout a person’s sense of themselves. Deepfakes harm the right to dignity; screenshots harm trust in networks. Both violations harm the ability to contain an image of the self. In examining these harms, I take up Rosalind Gill’s (2007) postfeminist sensibility: the insistence that women’s sexualisation is performed knowingly, as an individual choice, albeit one chosen within the available conditions. Visibility violations thwart the agency so crucial to postfeminist sexualities.

In Susanna Paasonen et al.’s (2021) book *Objectification*, the authors argue we must neither reject the possibility of female sexual agency under patriarchy completely, nor pretend women are free of broader norms of sexiness. Instead, we must acknowledge that all ways of making sense of bodies and sexualities contribute to culture, and shape future possibilities for self-presentation. Paasonen et al. argue that it is important to ask when and how sexual representation is judged to be successful, which kinds of representation can be converted into social or economic capital, and when these representations work against the status of those who put them out into the world. My answer here is that sexual self-representations are successful when they are controlled by, and benefit, those who they depict. This chapter contributes to the growing accounts of violence and vulnerabilities in postdigital intimacies by arguing that visibility violations reveal the extent of our entanglements between the digital and non-digital. I conclude this chapter by framing the threat of these violations as a disruption to our capacity to maintain

integrity over our identities. By beginning with deepfakes, I establish the complexities inherent in the pastiche of real bodies and augmented faces.

Deepfakes

Sexual self-representations, from exchanging sexy selfies to porn performance, can be fun and pleasurable. Researchers have posited that, for a great many audiences, porn is sexiest when it depicts authentic sexual gratification (McKee et al., 2008; Paasonen, 2010; van Doorn, 2010). But, as I have previously written with Katrin Tiidenberg, what it means to create, consume and interact with sexualised content depends on the situation at hand: what someone finds sexy in one situation might be experienced as threatening in another (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020). The harm possible when taking images out of context, thereby thwarting the intentions of their original creator, is especially pronounced when it comes to deepfake pornography. This form of image manipulation involves artificial intelligence (AI) aiding in the process of digitally replacing a porn performer's face with the likeness of someone else.

'Deepfakes' was originally the username of a Redditor who posted several manipulated celebrity porn videos to the bulletin board. 'I just found a clever way to do face-swap ... with hundreds of face images' he told technology journalist Samantha Cole (2017, n.p.) in an interview. The term 'deepfake' neatly suggests an AI-based continuation of an established practice of image manipulation: *deep*, referencing the deep learning capacity of AI to extrapolate from a given dataset to produce a new outcome, and *fake*, referring to the incongruity between the face and the body of the generated material, as the person represented by their face is not the person performing the bodily actions. The 'face-swap' practice that deepfakes claims to be updating has long been popular in misogynistic online forums. Nudeshopping, or using image manipulation program Photoshop to add nude body parts to existing photos, was a prominent feature on image board 4chan in the mid-2010s. Requests documented by journalist Kashmira Gander (2016) from 4chan involved posting images of friends, family, acquaintances, and current or former partners, and asking that they be 'x-rayed' or 'nudeshopped' to make the person appear naked or in a porn context. Not one request in Gander's article was from someone wanting to see themselves in a pornographic fantasy.

The potential for this technology to be used for pleasure exists, but rarely, if ever, is deepfake porn described as a consensual, pleasurable experience. Carl Öhman (2020) argues that creating deepfake porn can

be likened to fantasising about someone in a sexual way, although he concedes that sexual fantasies do not inherently degrade women, while consuming deepfake porn does. In an Australian inquiry into Deepfake Sexual Material, eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant argued that the intent of deepfake porn, including a ‘nudifying app’, was difficult to imagine outside the nefarious. Deepfake porn’s primary purpose is to ‘sexualise, humiliate, demoralise’, [Inman Grant \(2024, n.p.\)](#) wrote. I am yet to read a first-person account of someone deepfaking sexualised images of themselves to bring joy. Instead, deepfake porn created or distributed without the consent of those depicted becomes a kind of image-based sexual abuse ([Flynn et al., 2022](#)), and a misogynistic way to control how women are viewed ([van der Nagel, 2020](#)). Social media platforms like Reddit, and porn platforms like Pornhub have included deepfakes in their category of ‘non-consensual pornography’ and banned them ([Popova, 2019](#)). A search on Pornhub for ‘deepfake’ in 2024 returned this message under an exclamation mark in a triangle, titled ‘Warning’:

Your search could be for illegal and abusive sexual material, including non-consensual intimate imagery (NCII) or image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) ... Actual or staged depictions of coerced or non-consensual sexual acts or the use of a person’s likeness without their consent is not permitted on our site. ([Pornhub, 2024](#))

However, as sexual consent researcher Milena [Popova \(2019\)](#) argues, platform-based bans do not result in content being completely unavailable – instead, people seeking this material move on to more niche platforms. Porn aggregator website Porn Dude lists 15 deepfake porn websites, including MrDeepFakes, CFake, AdultDeepFakes, DeepFucks and DeepFakePorn, all of which disclose they host faked images. One boasts on its homepage:

These deepfakes use cutting-edge AI technology to create stunningly accurate celebrity faces and render them into fantasy scenarios. It’s important to remember that while these faces may look convincingly real, they are in fact, animated images. ([Deepfucks, 2024](#))

The videos on deepfake porn websites do not always look ‘convincingly real’. Watching any of the videos is an exercise in the ‘digital-forensic gaze’, one attuned to the ‘tensions between artifice and authenticity’ ([Lavrence and Cambre, 2020, p. 5](#)) as it scrutinises the use of filters and other artificial enhancements. In the case of these deepfake porn videos that feature

celebrities, the faces are often blurred, overexposed and clumsily grafted onto the body of a real porn performer. It is often less important that the image deceives the viewer into believing it to be a true representation of reality, and more important that it acts as a violation that reinforces a patriarchal view of women (Jacobsen and Simpson, 2024).

A postdigital intimacies lens helps to untangle the levels of harm encountered here, particularly when this harm is dismissed. Interviewing victim-survivors of non-consensual deepfake porn, Asher Flynn et al. (2022) first noted that while men and women were interviewed, only women disclosed experiences of being the subjects of non-consensual deepfakes. These women identified motivations of control, power, revenge and sexual gratification in the creation and distribution of the deepfakes, and often said that they weren't taken seriously when they reported this content as abuse material. One of Flynn et al.'s interviewees said they felt justice systems including police and lawmakers minimised the harms of deepfakes and image-based sexual abuse because there was a perception the images, and therefore, the damage, was not real. This perception came despite the victim-survivor describing the experience (to researchers) as 'a massive nightmare ... so much violation ... I obviously feared for my safety for a long time' (research participant quoted in Flynn et al., 2022, p. 1351).

The harm done through the loss of safety, and what legal scholar Danielle Citron (2018) calls an invasion of sexual privacy, is compounded by the digital and non-digital collapsing. In an account of the emotional impact of this collapse, journalist Coralie Kraft (2024) details the moment a young local politician in Florida, US, presented law enforcement with deepfaked images of herself:

They pulled out papers and spread what looked like images of her naked body across a nearby table. They told her to sign each page. Staring at the images, Javellana saw her own face looking back at her, and felt self-conscious about the detectives inspecting the material. The printouts felt tangible in a way that the online posts had not; she imagined a stranger printing out these images and looking at 'her'. Disgusted and scared, she broke down and wept while signing her name. (Kraft, 2024)

This is an illustration of the way deepfakes 'can lead to a single aspect of one's self eclipsing one's personhood' (Citron, 2018, pp. 1870–1960). It reveals the potential of AI for techniques of misogynist control over bodies that extends to digital identities. In the context of postdigital visibility,

Javellana as an aspiring public person found her political career threatened by the deepfakes becoming an unwanted part of her otherwise carefully managed digital presence. Accounts from victim-survivors are crucial evidence for the loss of dignity and control over digital visibility that occurs when deepfake porn is weaponised against women. The other group of women harmed by this practice as those who initially did give their consent to be represented sexually: the porn performers whose sex scenes are repurposed. In an interview with *Wired* magazine, sex worker Sydney Leathers reflected on having a nude selfie that she had posted on social media manipulated to resemble politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, calling the experience ‘a little violating’ (Leathers in [Alptraum, 2020](#), n.p.), and expressing discomfort that her image was used to harass a public figure that Leathers liked and respected. The article described deepfake porn as ‘turning performers into digital puppets’ ([Alptraum, 2020](#), n.p.), emphasising the loss of dignity for the women whose bodies become visible in this unwanted way. As Hanne [Stegeman et al. \(2024\)](#) argue, maximising visibility may be optimal for some content creators, but it does not necessarily benefit all sexual(ity) creators all the time.

The extent of deepfake porn is difficult to ascertain. When image-based sexual abuse material travels through private channels, and apps and platforms creating and hosting this material are routinely banned and deleted, it is hard to know how often women are subjected to this practice. It is not hard, however, to understand these digitally manipulated images as a violating kind of abuse: whether the subject is a celebrity or a private person; whether the deepfake becomes visible to specific targets or a wide audience; whether the deepfake is claiming to represent reality or not. The harm is done by wresting control over intimate digital images away from their subject. I now turn to the leaked screenshot, a practice of unwanted intimate visibility that does claim to truthfully represent its subject.

Screenshots and leaks

Unlike deepfake porn, which has little other purpose than to sexually degrade women, the screenshot is a remarkably pliant technology of visibility. Its meanings are anchored in the photographic condition, as media scholar Paul [Frosh \(2019\)](#) argues: screenshots act as evidence, as discrete recordings of an otherwise flowing digital media world. This plays out in myriad ways across our postdigital culture. Interrupting and redirecting the flow of newsfeeds, updates and scrolling can be done for

benign purposes – keeping records of timetables and schedules, or as a kind of scrapbook of inspirational recipes, tattoos and poses to replicate on one’s own social media feed (Thomson, 2021). But when screenshots are taken from one context and pulled into another, the boundary ruptures can have serious social consequences that stem from their ‘evidentiary power’ (Frosh, 2019, p. 75).

Screenshots play the role of peer surveillance in teen friendship groups when selfies are criticised for not abiding by normative gender presentations: ‘if they’ve got their boobs out or something’ was grounds for criticising a peer’s social media photo, according to one teenaged research participant (Jaynes, 2020, p.1386). In Black and queer digital cultures, claims can be substantiated and accountability demanded by ‘showing the receipts’, or using screenshots as proof of injustice (Clark, 2020, p. 205). Screenshots can spark scandals, as in the case of New York Congressman Anthony Weiner, shamed and dismissed from his position after screenshots revealed an extramarital flirtation (Corry, 2021). Sometimes, the screenshot can be implicated in damage *and* repair: ‘the same technologies that enable sharing enable leaking’ (Marwick, 2023, p. 6). An article by Australia’s eSafety Commissioner (2024) on how to deal with online abuse, which can include screenshots of private images leaked into public, advises taking screenshots to save evidence of the harmful content and the account that was used to send or share it, to demonstrate a pattern of abuse when seeking legal or police help.

I continue my critical focus on visibility violations in postdigital intimacies by considering the screenshot’s capacity for making private moments public, following Amy Shields Dobson et al.’s call for scholars of digital intimacies to interrogate how power works ‘in the generative, liminal space where the public and private intermingle’ (Dobson et al., 2018, p. 6). Teen friendships disrupted, and politicians fired, as results of screenshots circulating, demonstrate entanglements between digital technologies and broader neoliberal structures: while screenshots are snatched from our digital lives, the consequences for relationships, careers and reputations are very real. My case study is how screenshots constitute visibility violations in the context of OnlyFans.

A paid content subscription platform, OnlyFans offers creators tools to charge for their content, taking 20 per cent of what subscribers pay. Creators post photos and videos and host live video streams, from their OnlyFans profiles, which subscribers access by paying a combination of subscription fees, tips and pay-per-view charges. OnlyFans boasts that it ‘empowers creators to own their potential’ by monetising their content. In September 2024, its blue and white home page

featured a stylised graphic of a smartphone screen, with scrolling content that depicted a woman in workout gear holding dumbbells: 'Check out my quick morning workout routine!' and another woman in a blue apron: 'We do a lil baking to get the morning started off right'. Offering innocuous images of women working out and cooking is disingenuous. As I have previously argued, the dominant content on OnlyFans is adult, or Not Safe For Work (NSFW), meaning the platform is deliberately downplaying this form of content to court broad appeal and avoid meaningfully supporting the content creators that make it so profitable (van der Nagel, 2021).

In the neoliberal capitalism in which our contemporary media environment is located, content creation on OnlyFans is both a kind of gig economy work (Easterbrook-Smith, 2023) and sex influencer work (Pezzuto, 2024). This involves OnlyFans content creators navigating layers of precarity: sex work stigma, inconsistency in working hours and pay and opaque and shifting rules across multiple platforms. The goal is becoming visible to the right kind of audience, one that is invested in the content enough to pay for it, while respecting the creator enough to avoid capturing and spreading it beyond its intended context.

The evidence I have in this section comes from a larger research project on Australians who use OnlyFans. In social media posts, I asked people to complete a survey if they created or subscribed to content on OnlyFans. The survey had separate sections for OnlyFans creators and subscribers. A total of 88 respondents completed the survey, with 18 respondents completing the 'creator' section, 70 completing the 'subscriber' section and four respondents completing both sections. I interviewed 11 creators and nine subscribers to follow up on the surveys and expand my understanding of each position. I found that all my interviewees were aware of leaks as a risk of posting content anywhere online, not just on OnlyFans. Writing about Instagram influencers, Jenna Drenten et al. describe this kind of visibility violation as women's bodies becoming 'commodities of the commons – available to anyone able to take a screenshot' (2020, p. 60). As Angela Jones (2020) has found in her research on the erotic webcam industry, a performer's show being 'capped' (screen captured without permission) can result in a loss of income if an audience watches their video on another platform without paying the creator directly, or the social harm of being discovered to be a sex worker and facing stigma.

One of my interviewees, an OnlyFans subscriber who did not like paying for content, described leaks as having benefits for the audience while harming creators:

You can just simply type in some person's name, followed by 'OnlyFans leak' in Google. And then there it is. [I'm in] two minds here. It's great, because I don't have to pay for it, I can go and quickly view it. And then on the other side, I kind of do feel bad for the people that have lost it, because that was their source of income, or that was something that wasn't meant to be publicly displayed. (Timbo,¹ male, subscriber)

The platform itself takes little responsibility for screenshots or leaked content. In its terms of service agreement, [OnlyFans \(2024\)](#) prohibits 'recording, reproducing, sharing, communicating to the public or otherwise distributing their Content without authorization', but none of my research participants reported that OnlyFans had assisted them with getting leaked content taken down from other platforms. OnlyFans has disabled the right-click function on the website, meaning that users cannot simply right-click on an image and save it to their computer. But screenshots are neither disabled, nor are content creators sent notifications of when or who takes a screenshot, as Snapchat does. One reason for this lack is that OnlyFans does not have a dedicated app: popular app platforms like Apple's App store and Alphabet's Google Play will not support apps that host pornography (despite OnlyFans' insistence that it is simply for audiences to support their 'favourite creators'). For example, Google Play's content policy states that 'We don't allow apps that contain or promote sexual content or profanity, including pornography, or any content or services intended to be sexually gratifying' ([Google, 2024](#), n.p.).

What constitutes 'containing or promoting' sexual content must be slippery, as Snapchat is an app hosted by Apple and Alphabet, even though it is, often, its own repository of nudes and sexual content. Although Snapchat prohibits 'pornographic content' ([Snap Inc., 2024a](#)) and selling or renting access to Snaps ([Snap Inc., 2024b](#)), a thriving market for 'premium' or 'VIP' accounts still exists. The mechanism for this is entirely informal: send a content creator an agreed-upon fee, and be added to their private Friends list ([Horn, 2018](#)). In an example of flow between platforms, sometimes OnlyFans is used to direct subscribers to buying 'premium Snapchat' access, and sometimes Snapchat is the recruitment tool, with public accounts posting flirty, but not explicit, teasers of content with links to an OnlyFans profile. According to one of my research participants, some of the OnlyFans content on Snapchat might not be part of a deliberate visibility strategy, but leaked material that only benefits the platform and not the creator. When I asked Participant 77

about where they came across OnlyFans leaks, they said, ‘mostly through Snapchat’. Their response when I asked them to elaborate was:

I don’t know how Snapchat’s algorithms work at the moment. But there’s a certain tab where they just give a bunch of random recommended pages. And some of these [OnlyFans] creators that I know, I’m friends with on Snapchat, and they regularly advertise on their private Snapchat profiles. And then I think maybe through that, their [Snapchat’s] algorithm must be trying to offer me more users and content like that. And then you do see things come up, where it’s advertising leaked content. And if you do click on it, sure enough, it is actually leaked content. You can see watermarks from where it’s been ripped from. It’s bizarre that it is even able to get on there. I don’t know how that happens. I just thought there’d be a bit more of a security measure behind something like that. (Participant 77, genderflux male, subscriber)

For Snapchat to host so much sexual content that it even hosts some leaked from OnlyFans, while OnlyFans itself has not managed to achieve distribution through app stores, speaks to an opaque culture of what ‘counts’ in terms of sexual content. Another unknown element of the way OnlyFans may disable – or enable – leaking was the common misconception that OnlyFans prevents users from taking screenshots or recording content. The platform does not actually provide this feature (Soneji et al., 2024). One of my research participants mentioned his fear that the platform might somehow discover him if he took screenshots:

I try not to take screenshots of content, because if OnlyFans finds that, I’m gone from the platform, and that’s, you know, five years, thousands of purchases down the toilet, and there’s no protections for me if that happens. (Christopher, cisgender male, subscriber)

Whether fuelled by avoiding payment, or by overriding the creator’s consent, platforms that host leaked pornography remain both popular and elusive, likely as a result of their copyright infringement meaning they are often closed down – only to return in a different format later. In a reversed stance to deepfake porn, aggregator platform The Porn Dude features a category called ‘Free OnlyFans “Leak” Sites’ that links to websites hosting samples and previews: content that is freely available on OnlyFans, but stripped away from its original context, and without the subscribe button to direct audiences to pay or tip. On Pornhub, which does not return

search results for deepfakes as it classifies them ‘non-consensual intimate imagery’, and therefore may be a crime, in September 2024 there were nearly 2,000 videos in a category titled ‘Onlyfans leaked porn videos’: a hypocritical double standard.

The kind of privacy work (Marwick, 2023) done to maintain the contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2010) of OnlyFans content takes many forms. As Alice Marwick (2023) argues, when privacy is violated by having content spread beyond its intended context, it’s often the original poster who gets blamed, not the person who circulated it without consent. This is because privacy is often conceived of as an individual responsibility, although we exist in deeply networked digital environments. For example, one mitigation strategy I have observed on OnlyFans is many creators including a disclaimer in their page description for their subscribers to not redistribute any of their content, although redistribution is already a copyright and terms of service infringement.

One content creator, who estimated that an early leak of her content could cost her up to AUD\$10,000, told me she had signed up with a content protection service that promised to detect and issue take-down notices to websites that published her copyrighted content. A subscriber shared with me a visibility strategy he had observed:

Some of the creators that I’ve interacted with have been almost a little bit cautious ... they won’t necessarily be providing or offering any of the full nudity or anything more than that until you pass through a number of steps, if you like, whether that be buying content at a lower tier almost, and then once they’ve sort of said ‘alright, well, you know, I’ve gotten this much money out of you’, you know, you’ve demonstrated that you’re not just here to try and grab something and go. Then the rest of the vault opens up. (B, male, subscriber)

This kind of tiered access to content is built on trust earned when a subscriber has proven they will invest time, effort and money into the OnlyFans relationship. A fourth strategy is to resign oneself to the inevitability that the content will be leaked. For Jones (2020), some of her cam model participants chose to frame leaks as a kind of free advertising: a way to increase visibility that might end up garnering new audiences. This attitude was rarely espoused by my own participants. The one content creator who suggested that a leak might lead to increased traffic to OnlyFans was also one of my only interviewees who kept themselves anonymous by not including her face in her content. This adds yet

another layer to the visibility violation involved in taking screenshots and leaking content from OnlyFans. The practice deprives creators of income, breaches their trust and strikes at something more fundamental, too – their sense of identity integrity.

The two examples I have discussed in this chapter, deepfakes and screenshots, represent opposite claims to the truth. Deepfake pornography promises to display explicit content; screenshots promise to reveal the digital world exactly as it is. While deepfakes may sometimes be circulated as false proof that the subject was involved in the sexual activity depicted, accounts from victim-survivors show that it is not the veracity of the image, but the humiliation of being represented in an unwanted sexual way that does the harm (Flynn et al., 2022). A deepfake ‘requires social work for it to be considered as evidence’, claim Britt Paris and Joan Donovan (2019, p. 22). They argue that expertise around deepfakes, including creating and analysing them, reinforces economic, political and social privilege in ways consistent with our history of audiovisual manipulation. As this chapter has presented, deepfake pornography does not necessarily need to be truthful to fulfil its erotic potential, as in the case of celebrity deepfake sites that proudly assert their fake celebrity faces were created using high-quality technology, or in its cruelty, as seen in accounts from victim-survivors of deepfaked sexual activity.

Conversely, screenshots are used as evidence that an image was really posted by someone to a platform; that the one who captured it really had access to that image, that account, that person, that body. Privacy scholar Helen Nissenbaum (2010) developed the concept of contextual integrity to argue that the goal of controlling personal information is not restricting its flow at all costs, but ensuring it only travels to appropriate contexts. The concept helps us recognise and explain when a violation has occurred, according to Nissenbaum. Contextual integrity is especially useful within a postdigital intimacies framework in which the power relations that inform what stays private, or becomes public, are examined. In the next section, I draw on the lessons from violations caused by deepfakes and screenshots to argue for a next step to contextual integrity: that visibility violations reduce the capacity for identity integrity in postdigital intimacies.

Social media identity integrity

I opened this chapter by arguing that a cohesive, controlled digital presence has value in neoliberal capitalism. Particularly for workers in

creative and knowledge industries, such as artists, authors, publishers, designers, curators, performers and content creators, visibility is core to success. This assertion of the value of digital visibility establishes the stakes of visibility violations. But this goes beyond keeping a job. Digital images of the face and body, particularly sexual ones, resonate deeply as representations of identity. Using a postdigital intimacies framework to bring together deepfakes, screenshots and leaks means thinking through the implications of digital acts that reverberate through digital and material contexts. For writing and rhetoric scholar Meghan Velez (2019), non-consensual pornographies are digital images that have been rhetorically transformed through their circulation on platforms. An image which represented a moment of agency in its production has transformed into an instrument of shame, as new contexts produce new agencies and actions, Velez argues.

Any platformed photograph of the body begins as a person and a device together in a physical setting. But depending on what happens next, the same image might eventually be called a selfie, a profile pic, a nude, a sext, content, pornography, a pay-per-view, a screenshot, a leak, revenge porn, image-based abuse or non-consensual intimate imagery, depending on how it has circulated through devices and platforms. What we call images matters, as these terms bring to light what has happened to them, and who has acted upon them, as they moved through postdigital contexts.

Deepfakes and screenshots as kinds of image-based sexual abuse threaten our safe enjoyment of postdigital intimacies. We can never fully control our networks, Alice Marwick (2023) argues when she introduces her networked privacy framework. Privacy is not just about individual decisions people make with regard to their information and content. It relies on networks of social connections, state and corporate surveillance and big data technologies. The unequal power relations in these networks mean privacy is unequally distributed, says Marwick. She sees this inequality as deeply gendered, arguing that a sexist understanding of the public domain as masculine, and the domestic as feminine, underpins our views of privacy.

One important aspect of visibilities in postdigital intimacies is that they exist within a persistent sexual double standard. Tania Levey (2018) illustrates this through the regulatory function of calling a woman a 'slut' on social media. The term shames women who have transgressed from heteronormative sexual behaviour, with virginity and monogamy standing in for the traditionally feminine trait of passivity. Art critic John Berger famously put this sexist standard

as: 'Men act and women appear' (1972, 47). When it comes to women making images of themselves that are then divorced from their original context and recirculated, men are acting on how women appear. This violates the agency involved in women choosing how to represent themselves: an assertion of their power, performed under the conditions of neoliberal patriarchy.

We are increasingly disciplined into becoming visible data subjects (Barassi, 2019) under threat of having our self-representations compromised. This tension leads me to put forward my concept of social media identity integrity, while asking if it is possible to achieve under these conditions. The quality of integrity means that something is whole. In some cases, including the neoliberal university's idea of academic integrity, it also indicates that someone acts in a way that is morally sound. To have social media identity integrity, then, means someone uses a range of platformed profiles with:

- a reasonable amount of control over their personal information and images;
- contextually appropriate identities; and
- respect for the identity integrity of others.

For example, if someone can sell adult content through OnlyFans, post selfies to Instagram, keep in touch with their family on WhatsApp, and receive intimate images from someone that they keep to themselves, they can be said to have identity integrity on social media.

This kind of controlled social media presence shares aspects of visibility strategies used by influencers, such as the aspiring and professional Instagrammers in Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund's (2019) research, who carefully practise the visibility labour of online self-branding. The distinction I make here is that social media identity integrity does not require consistency across platforms, nor the goal of cultivating a large, or even public, audience: success means control, not commercialisation. In a moral sense, anyone violating the identity integrity of someone else, whether motivated by sexual desire or cruelty, has also damaged their own integrity. But this knowledge hardly leads to justice, especially when the damage is done without the perpetrator's own identity being compromised. Instead, the networked aspect of our postdigital intimacies means maintaining integrity is, if not impossible, then fraught with risk. It is a testament to the pleasures that are open to us when these remain spaces of intimacy and integrity that people take the risk at all.

Note

1. All my participants in this research project had the opportunity to either choose the name or pseudonym they would like to be quoted under, and to nominate their own gender in a free text box.

References

- Alptraum, L. (2020). Deepfake porn harms adult performers, too. *Wired*, 15 January. <https://www.wired.com/story/deepfake-porn-harms-adult-performers-too/>
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Barassi, V. (2019). Datafied citizens in the age of coerced digital participation. *Sociological Research Online*, 24(3), 414–429.
- Baym, N. (2018). *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, audiences, and the intimate work of connection*. New York: New York University Press.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Citron, D. (2018). Sexual privacy. *Yale Law Journal*, 128(7), 1870–1960.
- Clark, M.D. (2020). Picture this: The screenshot's use in digital humanities scholarship. *Modern Language Association*, 135(1), 203–206.
- Cole, S. (2017). AI-assisted fake porn is here and we're all fucked. *Vice*, 11 December. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/gal-gadot-fake-ai-porn/>
- Corry, F. (2021). Screenshot, save, share, shame: Making sense of new media through screenshots and public shame. *First Monday*, 26(4).
- Deepfucks. (2024). Zendaya deepfake PMV – say it ain't so hoe. <https://deepfucks.com/zendaya-deepfake-pmv-say-it-aint-so-hoe/>
- Dobson, A., Carah, N. and Robards, B. (2018). Digital intimate publics and social media: towards theorising public lives on private platforms. In A. Shields Dobson, N. Carah and B. Robards (eds) *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Drenten, J., Gurrieri, L. and Tyler, M. (2020). Sexualized labour in digital culture: Instagram influencers, porn chic and the monetization of attention. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27(1), 41–66.
- Duffy, B.E. and Hund, E. (2019). Gendered visibility on social media: Navigating Instagram's authenticity bind. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 4983–5002.
- Easterbrook-Smith, G. (2023). OnlyFans as gig-economy work: a nexus of precarity and stigma. *Porn Studies*, 10(3), 252–267.
- eSafety Commissioner (2024). How to collect evidence. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/report/how-to-collect-evidence>
- Evans, A. and Ringrose, J. (2025). More-than-human, more-than-digital: Postdigital intimacies as a theoretical framework. *Social Media + Society*, 11(1), pp. 1–11.
- Flynn, A., Powell, A., Scott, A.J. and Cama, E. (2022). Deepfakes and digitally altered imagery abuse: A cross-country exploration of an emerging form of image-based sexual abuse. *British Journal of Criminology*, 62(6), 1341–1358.
- Frosh, P. (2019). *The Poetics of Digital Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gander, K. (2016). 'The people who Photoshop friends and family onto porn'. *The Independent*, 13 October. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/porn-photoshopping-4chan-family-friends-superimposed-into-sex-scenes-world-a7358706.html>
- Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Google (2024). Inappropriate content. https://support.google.com/googleplay/android-developer/answer/9878810?hl=en&ref_topic=9877466&sjid=1653623623398477590-NC
- Horn, T. (2018). The sex workers making underground porn on Snapchat. *MEL Magazine*. <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/the-sex-workers-making-underground-porn-on-snapchat>
- Inman Grant, J. (2024). Addressing deepfake image-based abuse. eSafety Commissioner. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/blogs/addressing-deepfake-image-based-abuse>

- Jacobsen, B.N. and Simpson, J. (2024). The tensions of deepfakes. *Information, Communication & Society*, 27(6), 1095–1109.
- Jaynes, V. (2020). The social life of screenshots: The power of visibility in teen friendship groups. *New Media & Society*, 22(8), 1378–1393.
- Jones, A. (2020). *Camming: Money, power, and pleasure in the sex work industry*. New York: New York University Press.
- Kraft, C. (2024). Trolls used her face to make fake porn. There was nothing she could do. *The New York Times Magazine*, 31 July. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/31/magazine/sabrina-javellana-florida-politics-ai-porn.html>
- Lawrence, C. and Cambre, C. (2020). ‘Do I look like my selfie?’: Filters and the digital-forensic gaze. *Social Media + Society*, 6(4), 1–13.
- Levey, T.G. (2018). *Sexual Harassment Online: Shaming and silencing women in the digital age*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Marwick, A.E. (2013). *Status Update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Marwick, A.E. (2023). *The Private is Political: Networked privacy and social media*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- McKee, A., Albury, K. and Lumby, C. (2008). *The Porn Report*. Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing.
- Nissenbaum, H. (2010). *Privacy in Context: Technology, policy, and the integrity of social life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Öhman, C. (2020). Introducing the pervert’s dilemma: A contribution to the critique of deepfake pornography. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 22, 133–140.
- OnlyFans (2024). ‘Terms of Service’. <https://onlyfans.com/terms>.
- Paasonen, S. (2010). Labors of love: Netporn, Web 2.0, and the meanings of amateurism. *New Media & Society*, 12(8), 1297–1312.
- Paasonen, S., Attwood, F., McKee, A., Mercer, J. and Smith, C. (2021). *Objectification: On the difference between sex and sexism*. London: Routledge.
- Paris, B. and Donovan, J. (2019). Deepfakes and cheap fakes: The manipulation of audio and visual evidence. *Data & Society*. <https://datasociety.net/output/deepfakes-and-cheap-fakes/>
- Pezzuto, S. (2024). [online before print] ‘Sex influencers’: A survey of porn workers in the USA. *Porn Studies*, 11, 1–21.
- Popova, M. (2019). Reading out of context: Pornographic deepfakes, celebrity and intimacy. *Porn Studies*, 7(4), 1–15.
- Pornhub (2024). ‘Warning’. <https://www.pornhub.com/video/search?search=deepfakes>
- Ringrose, J., Milne, B., Horeck, T. and Mendes, K. (2024). Postdigital bodies: Young people’s experiences of algorithmic, tech-facilitated body shaming and image-based sexual abuse during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in England. *Youth*, 4(3), 1058–1075.
- Ruberg, B. (2016). Doing it for free: Digital labour and the fantasy of amateur online pornography. *Porn Studies*, 3(2), 147–159.
- Snap Inc. (2024a). Community guidelines. <https://values.snap.com/privacy/transparency/community-guidelines>
- Snap Inc. (2024b). Snap terms of service. <https://www.snap.com/terms>
- Soneji, A., Hamilton, V., Doupé, A., McDonald, A. and Redmiles, E.M. (2024). ‘I feel physically safe but not politically safe’: Understanding the digital threats and safety practices of OnlyFans creators. *Proceedings of the 33rd USENIX Security Symposium*. <https://www.usenix.org/conference/usenixsecurity24/presentation/soneji>
- Stegeman, H.M., Are, C. and Poell, T. (2024). Strategic invisibility: How creators manage the risks and constraints of online hyper(in)visibility. *Social Media + Society*, 10(2), 1–12.
- Thomson, T.J. (2021). Exploring the life cycle of smartphone images from camera rolls to social media platforms. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 28(1), 19–33.
- Tiidenberg, K. and van der Nagel, E. (2020). *Sex and Social Media*. Bingley: Emerald.
- van der Nagel, E. (2020). Verifying images: Deepfakes, control, and consent. *Porn Studies*, 7(4), 1–6.
- van der Nagel, E. (2021). Competing platform imaginaries of NSFW content creation on OnlyFans. *Porn Studies*, 8(4), 394–410.
- van Doorn, N. (2010). Keeping it real: User-generated pornography, gender reification, and visual pleasure. *Convergence*, 16(4), 411–430.
- Velez, M. (2019). ‘Why take the photo if you didn’t want it online?’: Agency, transformation, and nonconsensual pornography. *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 42(4), 452–470.

Nude image sharing and image-based sexual abuse on Netflix's *Sex Education* and HBO's *Euphoria*

Tanya Horeck

This chapter explores nude image sharing and image-based sexual abuse on two popular TV series about teens: *Sex Education* (Laurie Nunn, Netflix, 2019–2023) and *Euphoria* (Sam Levinson, HBO, 2019–). Both released in 2019 by millennial showrunners, *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* share an interest in the digital lives of contemporary teens, exploring how their intimacies and relationships are bound up with their mobile phones and social media. Where public discourse on ‘sexting’ has positioned it ‘as inherently risky and harmful’, suggesting it is a result of the negative effects of technology on young people (Setty, 2019a, p. 298), these TV series offer a more nuanced consideration, exploring its pleasures as well as its risks. Indeed, this chapter makes the case for teen TV as an important and understudied site in popular culture for a critical rethinking of the contours of intimacy in the internet era. While there are a growing number of TV shows that explore the postdigital intimacies of teens and young adults, including, for example, *Heartstopper* (Netflix, 2022–), *I May Destroy You* (BBC, HBO, 2020) and *Industry* (HBO, BBC, 2020), I focus on *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* because of their close attention to the politics of nude image sharing and the realities of image-based sexual abuse, defined by feminist scholars Clare McGlynn and Erika Rackley as ‘the non-consensual creation and/or distribution of private sexual images’ (2017).

Released 10 years after the iPhone became widely available, and just under a decade after the launch of social media platforms such as Instagram (2010) and Snapchat (2011), *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* are exploring a

postdigital terrain in which Gen Z youth (born from 1997 onwards) have grown up with 24/7 digital connectivity and access to smartphones and social media. As Sam Levinson has said of *Euphoria*, the series is ‘not really about the internet’ but ‘about the internet’s effect’ on young people (cited in Sandberg, 2019). *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* represent teen sexual intimacies as modulated by networked technology and informed by gendered power relations. They explore the implications of life in a postdigital world of ‘porous digital spaces where evidence of “private” intimacies may leak into other contexts (including schools and workplaces)’ (Albury, 2017, pp. 720–721). As part of their exploration of the porousness of postdigital intimacies, one of the central themes of both series is failed communication – instances in which teens cannot understand one another, or in which their attempts to navigate intimacy in the context of their networked environments are thwarted or rendered violent. As I will argue, these failures – the moments when communication stalls, or is hindered or irretrievably broken – are not only about generating drama. Rather, they prove productive for the critical work these TV shows are doing to gesture towards alternative forms of feelings and intimate imaginaries beyond heteronormativity and its sexual and gendered inequities.

As part of their exploration of digital image generation and distribution, *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* consider the wider gendered ecosystem that stigmatises girls and makes them feel shame about their bodies and their sexual activities. I want to suggest that both *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* are creating a space for a consideration of the kinds of critical questions asked in feminist sociological scholarship on ‘sexting’.¹ For example, writing in *Feminist Theory* over a decade ago, in an article entitled, ‘Teen girls, sexual double standards and “sexting”’: Gendered value in digital image exchange’, Jessica Ringrose, Laura Harvey, Rosalind Gill and Sonia Livingstone (2013, p. 309) asked:

Why are particular images valuable? Who can they generate value for? Who can they devalue? And how does this involve ideas about gender and sexual morality?

In a similar vein, Kath Albury (2017) has proposed a set of provocative, and vital, critical prompts:

What if a young woman’s rights to digital participation did not imply an obligation to either (a) maintain absolute secrecy regarding her sexual desires or (b) abstain entirely from all forms of mediated

sexual expression? What if being known as ‘someone who gossips, and shares sexual images without consent’ was the *more* shameful identity and was presented to young people as such? (Albury, 2017, p. 722)

As these pioneering feminist scholars in the field of youth digital rights and education have argued, it is essential to ask these questions, however utopic they might seem, because they offer a way of thinking about what an ethical, rights-based approach to digital sexual communication might look like. This bears relevance for my analysis in this chapter, as I explore how *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* in different ways, and to varying degrees, attempt ‘to disrupt the taken-for-granted sexual, moral hierarchies through which digital images are being understood in the contemporary context’ (Ringrose et al., 2013, p. 320). My argument is that popular television series need to be included in the conversation on digital rights and responsibilities because they are stepping up to explore the gendered politics of digital communication at a time when sex education provision in this area is seen to be sorely lacking (Horeck et al., 2023; Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021b; Setty, 2019a, 2019b). As Amelia Jenkinson, former CEO of the UK sex education charity, the School of Sexuality Education (formerly Sexplain), has stated of Netflix’s *Sex Education* – it is a show that ‘has arguably influenced young people’s ideas around sexuality more than any formal educational initiative could hope to’ (personal email correspondence, 20 August 2024). Even though it is not in the same overtly educational vein, *Euphoria* is also highly influential and is widely watched by its young (and older) audience on a range of streaming platforms, including TikTok where it is increasingly common to watch TV through a succession of clips. It is no accident to find that television, which is itself, as Misha Kavka has argued, ‘a technology of intimacy’ (2008, p. xi), is a prime site for a new form of (post) digital sex education and a space for reconfiguring understandings of the private/public divide of intimacy and sexuality. Television’s rhythms and narrative structures afford the space for exploring ambiguities and produce ‘structures of feeling’ (Kavka, 2008, p. xii) which encourage engagement with the critical sociocultural contexts of image sharing (Setty, 2019b, p. 306). Touching upon the topic of the afterlives of these TV series as digital objects, I will conclude by briefly reflecting on how their circulation as part of clip culture on the internet and social media platforms extends viewer engagement in productive, but also harmful ways.

'It's my vagina!': *Sex Education*

Starring Gillian Anderson as a sex therapist, and boasting a diverse ensemble cast of young adult British actors, Netflix's *Sex Education* debuted to critical acclaim and impressive viewing figures with over 40 million viewers streaming the first series in the first month of its release (Porter, 2019). Critics praised it for its honest, funny, raunchy and heartfelt examination of teen sexual intimacies. Filmed in Wales, but set in an indeterminate location, with its fictional high school Moordale resembling that found in many an American TV show and series, *Sex Education* is a comedy-drama that explores an array of sexual issues.

As indicated by its title, Netflix's *Sex Education* has a strong pedagogical flavour, aided by its central conceit of an awkward teen sex 'therapist' – Otis Milburn, Jean's son, played by Asa Butterfield – offering sex advice to his peers. Creator and showrunner Laurie Nunn, who was 33 years old when *Sex Education* was first released in 2019, has said that she wanted the show to be an 'antidote to some of the really, really bad information' she was given about sex while at school. She envisioned the show as a 'great opportunity to have quite open conversations about things that are really important, like body positivity and consent and female pleasure and desire' (cited in Bonos, 2021).

Sex Education depicts everyday practices of consensual intimate messaging and sexting, as well as exploring the topic of non-consensual image sharing. In the first season, the gendered dynamics of tech-facilitated violence (see Powell and Henry, 2017) are interrogated in a storyline where an image of a vulva is circulated throughout the school via mobile phones with a sextortion message² attached: 'Apologise for being a bitch in assembly tomorrow or I reveal the photo with your face.'³ Viewers soon learn that the vulva in question belongs to Ruby (Mimi Keene), one of Moordale High's most popular students. Ruby turns to Maeve (Emma Mackey), who she has previously bullied and slut-shamed, for help. As Maeve and Otis try to find out who is sextorting Ruby, the cavalier picture-sharing culture of boys – in which images are exchanged casually, for 'fun' or as part of a 'collector culture' – is exposed and critiqued. Maeve takes an overtly feminist stance that acknowledges gendered double standards and recognises non-consensual image sharing as a form of sexual abuse. Otis, however, initially expresses common victim-blaming views: 'she sent out the photo, this is stupid, why doesn't she go to the police?' Strongly refuting this viewpoint, Maeve scolds Otis for being 'such a man' in his thinking on the issue. Relating

the non-consensual image sharing to an incident from her past, Maeve explains: 'This kind of thing hurts and it sticks and no one deserves to be shamed, not even Ruby. Please just help me fix this.' Eventually Otis does help, and voices an intellectual analysis of the wider culture of shame that produces the conditions for sextortion to exist as a crime:

Ruby, worst-case scenario, the vagina photo gets out, everyone finds out it is you and you could be humiliated. But only if you let yourself be. Everyone has bodies, right, it's nothing to be ashamed of. Whoever did this is intending to shame you, but it won't work if you don't let them.

While this statement could be seen to ignore the gendered economy of image sharing, in which the social and emotional consequences for girls are very different than for boys (Ringrose et al., 2021b, p. 2), it also points to the need to intervene in shame-generating discourse. In the end, it is revealed that it is Ruby's best friend, Liv (Simone Ashley), who shared the intimate image of Ruby to punish her for her cruel behaviour. Maeve remarks that the 'emotional blackmail' aspect, in which Liv demands an apology for Ruby being a 'bitch', points to it being some 'girl shit'. Here, a gendered stereotype of girls as more emotional is the logic used to account for why girls collude in gender-based violence.

Ultimately, as Susan Berridge and I have discussed elsewhere, the episode shows the limitations of a purely legalistic understanding of non-consensual image sharing, evidenced in Principal Groff's (Alistair Petrie) punitive school assembly about pornographic images being sent online resulting in legal action. Disrupting Groff's discourse, the female students (and Jackson [Kedar Williams-Stirling]), stand up in assembly to lay collective claim to the vulva, in 'I am Spartacus' fashion, shouting out in turn: 'It's my vagina!' Refusing the logic of slut-shaming, the assembly scene shows young women laying claim to public space and expressing collective solidarity.

The theme of clear communication, and its importance in navigating intimacies, is also evident in the fourth and final season of *Sex Education*, where the anxieties of nude image-sharing are explored through a storyline in Episode 1 about Otis and Maeve sexting. In keeping with *Sex Education*'s tendency to depict girls as the sexual initiators, Maeve is the one who initiates the sexting when she sends Otis a picture of her breasts. A panicked Otis frantically begins grooming his penis and pubic area in order to send a picture back in a comical sequence

that shows him posing and taking nude pictures of himself, but then being too nervous to send any. In the meantime, a sardonic and impatiently horny Maeve texts him: 'Your turn dickhead.' Otis' gay best friend Eric (Ncuti Gatwa) also urges Otis on: 'Otis, you have to send one back! There's sexting etiquette. You can't leave her hanging!' Later, Otis elaborates on his anxieties around sharing nudes to fellow sex therapist O: 'She wanted me to send a nude and that's illegal if you're under 18 and I would not survive in prison.' The therapist suggests that his anxieties could be related to worries not only about his body image (and going to prison), but about his relationship with Maeve and concern over whether she will return from the US. Eventually, Otis and Maeve find a compromise and have smartphone sex through talking rather than sharing images.

In exploring how boys can also have anxieties over body image and sharing nudes (see [Ringrose et al., 2024](#), p. 1071), *Sex Education* is complicating a picture that suggests it is only girls who are concerned with these issues. As part of the storyline of Maeve and Otis sexting, Otis' images of his flaccid penis are accidentally leaked – by himself. They appear on a large screen behind him in lieu of his PowerPoint – and in front of most of the school – during a speech he is delivering on his sex advice business. This leads to much hilarity amongst the student populace. As Eric, ever the *real* sex expert of *Sex Education*, tells him: 'Why was your penis flaccid? You know that people are more into pictures of hard dicks?? ... Also why were your pubes shaved in that strange pattern? Why was the camera so far away?' It is the aesthetics of the image, and the styling of his penis, that is at issue in this comedic treatment. Yes, Otis is embarrassed, but it is noticeable that his shaming is different to that of Ruby's from season one, in that his images were not shared non-consensually and he is not 'slut-shamed'.

Although both series are tackling issues around postdigital intimacy in a world where the lines between digital and non-digital spaces are permeable, *Sex Education* ultimately offers a lighter, sweeter and more comedic engagement with issues around sex and sexuality than *Euphoria*, a series which I will now go on to discuss in more detail. *Euphoria* is altogether moodier and heavier in content, tone and styling – though as a caveat, it should be noted that *Sex Education* deals with intense subject matter too, and that *Euphoria* is funny in its own dark way. But, in its exploration across its first season of how young people use smartphones to negotiate sexual intimacies, *Euphoria* pushes much harder on the question of how the incursion of the digital into all spaces of life is reshaping cultures of intimacy.

‘It’s 2019 and unless you’re Amish nudes are the currency of love’: *Euphoria*

Described by *Screen Rant* as ‘one of the most-streamed HBO shows in history’, *Euphoria* garnered a reported average of 16.3 million viewers per episode in season 2 (Lealos et al., 2024; Maas, 2022). Starring Zendaya (who is also one of the show’s producers) as the drug-addicted Rue, the series extended her mega-stardom, and turned the rest of the young adult cast, which includes Jacob Elordi, Sydney Sweeney, Hunter Schafer, Maude Apatow, Barbie Ferreira, Alexa Demie and Angus Cloud (deceased in 2023), into major stars. As controversial as it is popular, *Euphoria* has been morally condemned in certain quarters for its racy, sexually graphic, drug-fuelled and violent depiction of American teenagers in the social media era (see, for example, ‘The Parents Guide’ to *Euphoria* on [imdb.com](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7005456/parents-guide/)).

Sam Levinson, the creator of *Euphoria*, who was 34 years old at the time of its premiere and who has also written all but one episode of the series, says that his goal was to invite viewers into the visceral, ‘emotional world’ of teens (cited in Sandberg, 2019). While *Euphoria* gives insights into the different experiences of its various teen characters, it is narrated from the wry point of view of 17-year-old, biracial, queer Rue. Indeed, Rue’s voice-over could be said to serve an educative, guiding function insofar as it contextualises and frames the often-disturbing content for viewers. Zendaya also notably performs this role in real life on her Instagram page where she warns her 183 million followers – which includes her legion of young fans from her days as a star of the Disney channel – about the show’s content. For example, ahead of the series’ premiere in 2019 she issued the following statement: ‘*Euphoria* is for mature audiences. It’s a raw and honest portrait of addiction, anxiety, and the difficulties of navigating life today. There are scenes that are graphic, hard to watch, and can be triggering.’

Early in the pilot episode of *Euphoria* a young Rue, aged around 11, receives a threatening, sexually violent and misogynistic text message: ‘Imma gonna rape u c**t’. There is a shot of Rue’s puzzled expression before the episode proceeds with a montage of images showing her growing up into a teen. The rest of the pilot sets out *Euphoria*’s concern with the sexual and gender politics of technology-facilitated violence, including non-consensual nude image sharing.

It is Rue who introduces viewers to Nate (Jacob Elordi) – high school football star and the boy who ‘tried to finger me without my permission at a school dance’. Rue’s is a knowing, critically informed voice

which is acutely aware of sexual double standards and gender inequities. Without her voice as a guide, many of the scenes would land differently for viewers. To illustrate the point, in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Sam Levinson tells the story of how he showed his mother an early version of the script. She became disturbed and threw it ‘in the garbage’ when she came to the scene in the pilot episode when Christopher McKay (Algee Smith) tries to choke Cassie (Sydney Sweeney) during sexual intercourse (cited in [Sandberg, 2019](#)). Levinson explained to his mother that McKay was ‘acting a certain way based on his preconceptions about [Cassie]’ and the nude photos he had seen of her from his male peer group, and because of the ‘impact that pornography has had on culture’. When his mother allegedly responded with, ‘Well, how the fuck am I supposed to know that?’, Levinson realised he needed to include more of Rue’s voice-over for context (cited in [Sandberg, 2019](#)). In the episode that aired, Rue’s voice-over interjects and literally pauses the scene in which McKay chokes Cassie:

Okay stop. I know this looks disturbing, but I promise you this does not end in a rape. But here’s the thing. Everyone on the planet watches porn. Fact. And if you were to click on the 20 most popular videos on Pornhub right now, this is basically what you’d see.⁴

Here, Rue is voicing what feminist activists such as [Fiona Vera-Gray and Clare McGlynn \(2021\)](#) have long been noting: that mainstream online porn, available at a click, is extremely violent and misogynist and is potentially inculcating a generation of young people into destructive and damaging ideas about sex. To prove the point, there is a brief montage of images from violent porn, before Rue’s voice-over continues:

I’m not trying to be sex negative or anything, I’m just saying this stuff isn’t out of left field.

After Rue’s interjection, the scene continues and we see the first of the series’ explorations of communication and consent when Cassie asks McKay why he choked her, and he responds that he thought she liked it. Cassie challenges this (‘Why the fuck would I like that?’) and a contrite McKay apologises. The scene ends with Cassie accepting the apology and telling him not to do it again – ‘unless you ask me first ... or I ask you’. This final caveat is significant for the space it creates for female agency, and for how it goes beyond a notion of affirmative consent as a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’, to explore the complexities and nuances of negotiation and

communication when it comes to sexual intimacy (Angel, 2021; Meek, 2023; Berridge and Horeck, 2025). The vagaries of consent in both digital and non-digital spaces continue to be explored over the course of McKay's and Cassie's relationship, culminating in a disturbing scene in Episode 6, 'The Next Episode', in which McKay is sexually assaulted by his male fraternity members in front of Cassie, and then immediately after, proceeds to have rough sex with Cassie. Although McKay solicits and receives verbal consent from Cassie, the rough sex is shown to be unwanted.

Prior to the choking scene, and as vital context for it, the pilot episode includes a scene of technology-facilitated gender-based violence in which a group of high school boys share sexually explicit images and a video of Cassie on a smartphone. The boys direct McKay to Cassie's 'slut pages', a stream of images they have on their phones of sexual images of girls, shared non-consensually. With Nate as the ringleader, the boys gather around the mobile phone to look at the sexual images of Cassie. The concept of 'homosocial masculinity', understood as a 'set of strategies boys and men use to maintain the gender order and uphold male privileges' (Ringrose et al., 2021c, p. 3) is relevant to this scene, which shows boys sharing nude images as 'digital trophies' and as a way of objectifying their female peers. This is in keeping with sociological studies which have found that 'nudes of girls form a kind of social currency amongst boys' who perceive the images only in terms of their 'use value for themselves and other boys' (Ringrose et al., 2021c, p. 10). Rue's voice-over points to the injustice of this:

Here's the fucking thing that pisses me off about the world. Like, everytime someone's shit gets leaked, like whether it's J-Law or Leslie Jones, the world's like: 'If you don't want it out there don't take the nudes in the first place.' I'm sorry I know your generation relied on flowers and fathers' permission, but it's 2019 and unless you're Amish, nudes are the currency of love, so stop shaming us. Shame the assholes who create password-protected online directories of naked, underage girls.

As Rue's voice-over makes clear, the problem is *not* the taking of the image, but how it is then shared non-consensually. If there is to be shame, it should be the non-consensual image-sharing perpetrators who feel it.⁵

Rue's reference to the older generation of Gen X and Boomers and their courtship rituals (flowers and father's permission) is contrasted to Gen Z's intimacy practices, where nudes are the 'currency of love'. As feminist theorists of youth and digital intimacy have noted, the 'boundaries

between private and public sexuality' in the digital era are by no means clear-cut (Albury, 2017, p. 719). *Euphoria* includes scenes of public sexuality in which consensual sex is spectated via the interface of a smart-phone. For example: Maddy tries to make Nate jealous by having sex in a pool in full sight of party-goers who casually film it on their mobile phones; Jules (Hunter Schaefter) scrolls through half naked images of men on a gay hook-up app in her search for love. She embarks on an intimate relationship with ShyGuy118 (who, unbeknownst to her, is Nate) and as they become closer, they begin to engage in consensual image-based sexting. Cassie takes nude images of herself to share with the boys who hound her for them, sadly resigned to the fact that these images will ultimately be shared publicly. Rather than a discourse of individual shame and blame, there is a need to contextualise and look at the wider processes of image sharing, exploring ethical questions around what Albury calls "sexual visibility" in contemporary digital publics' (2017, p. 718). The language of 'currency' is therefore important in terms of the work *Euphoria* is doing to explore a wider economy of image sharing and new practices of postdigital intimacy including dating/hook up apps, sexual messaging, selfies, texting/sexting and so on.

The content of Rue's narration and her directive to 'stop shaming us' is important but so is the visual perspective through which viewers are positioned during the sequence of tech-facilitated violence. It is significant that the montage of nude and semi-nude images of Cassie appears on screen for viewers *not* through the gaze of the group of boys humiliating her, but through Rue's perspective, as she explains how Cassie is a sweet person. *Euphoria's* complex handling of its time frame, which orders events out of sequence, assists with its attempts to contextualise and interrogate certain forms of harms. Thus, in this sequence detailing the non-consensual sharing of Cassie's nudes, the episode flashes back to a scene from earlier, humanising Cassie and showing her having dinner with her mother and chatting to Rue before Rue's voice-over says: 'but back to this bullshit' and the episode returns to the leering boys watching a video of Cassie having sex.⁶

Much more than *Sex Education*, *Euphoria* delves into how girls ambivalently navigate the pressures to participate in a digital image-sharing economy through a series of strategies including normalisation and sexual entrepreneurship. For example, the opening to Episode 7 of *Euphoria* contextualises Cassie's experiences as a voluptuous young woman who is constantly sexualised by men from the moment she hits puberty. This extends to her boyfriends who, as Rue's voice-over explains, always want the same thing, which is to take nude photos of

her and record her performing sex acts. There is a montage of scenarios in which unseen boyfriends film an uncomfortable Cassie who verbalises her discomfort and tells them she doesn't want to be filmed. However, as Rue notes:

She almost always said yes even though it didn't always make her feel good.

And she knew that most guys after she broke up with them would almost always share those photos or videos.

In other words, Cassie recognises the longer-term consequences to her granting consent. As Marcotte and Hille write, 'in the context of digital recording and dissemination, willingness and consent interact with a different temporal time-frame than in-person interactions' and 'individuals must now grapple with the lasting effects of a single granting of consent' (2021, p. 323). Cassie is shown watching a non-consensually shared video of herself having sex, which makes her have a panic attack and entertain suicidal thoughts. 'But she didn't' [swallow a bottle of pills], as Rue narrates:

Because what's the worst thing anyone could say to her? That she gave a blow job to a guy who didn't deserve it. And she figured by the time she was out of college and looking for a job, 99% of the population would have leaked nudes anyway.

On the one hand, this rationalisation of nudes points to a culture of normalisation, identified by feminist sociologists as one of the ways girls cope with the pressures of being bombarded with unsolicited dick pics and unwanted requests for nude images (Ringrose et al., 2022, p. 8). On the other hand, though, Cassie's perspective regarding new ways of perceiving leaked nudes in the future is interesting for how it puts pressure on the catastrophising and unhelpful notion that once such images are out in the world, your life as a girl is ruined. As Albury has speculated: 'as workplaces become increasingly supportive of equity and diversity and anti-bullying policies, might there not be a possible future in which online evidence of consensual, non-work-related sexual expression is deemed irrelevant?' (2017, p. 722). In other words, if there is a shift to an understanding of digital sexual communication as something collective, something we are all involved in – acknowledging the fact that it would be practically impossible for any of us to prise apart the digital

from our everyday intimacies – then what needs to be disrupted is not the postdigital communication itself, but the harmful gendered notions that underpin unethical practices and attitudes around nude image sharing.

Cassie's vulnerabilities are contrasted with her friend Kat's (Barbie Ferreira), who becomes a 'cam girl' – a woman who poses for a webcam to earn money – following her experience of image-based sexual abuse. In Episode 2 of Season 1, Kat discovers that a video of her having sexual intercourse for the first time, 'High School Slut Gets Fucked at Party', has been shared on a porn site. She requests its removal, but then sees that it has attained thousands of views and expressions of interest from men. Rue narrates Kat's internal thoughts regarding the disconnect between the way she feels online and the way in which she is ignored and discounted as a fat girl in real life:

And then that video came out and they saw what she looked like and they still loved her. And not only did they love her, they wanted to fuck her.

Kat has a dramatic make-over, starts wearing highly sexualised clothing online and at school, and begins to take Bitcoin from men on the internet. She becomes immersed in the world of niche internet porn, with some men asking for pictures of her toes, and others begging her to humiliate them. Her sexual online entrepreneurship can be seen as a demonstration of how the internet, as Stephanie Patrick notes, has 'significantly altered the relationships between women's bodies, their sexual capital, media ownership and gatekeeping, such that (certain) women now can – and do – post provocative pictures of themselves and directly reap economic benefits in an entrepreneurial manner' (2022, p. 42).

While this is not 'necessarily empowering' (Patrick, 2022, p. 42), *Euphoria* suggests that taking control of her sexuality online encourages Kat to do the same in 'real life' and she begins to have sex with her male peers – on her own terms. In other words, where previously there was a disconnect between Kat's online life where she was revered as a queen for her gay fanfic of Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson from *One Direction* secretly fucking, and her school life where she was ignored and depressed, the online and offline aspects of Kat's life begin to converge.

While postdigital intimacy is shown to be a significant part of all the relationships on *Euphoria*, it is perhaps portrayed most powerfully with Jules and Nate. Even though it is based on false pretences, and Nate's 'cat-fishing' of Jules through posing as someone called 'Tyler', there is a depth and substance to their online intimacy (as confirmed in Season 2 when

they confess to each other how real their feelings were). *Euphoria* illustrates this through visualising their texts on screen, in what has become a common formal device on television for representing digitised intimacy. In Episode 3, 'Made You Look', the formal device of a split screen with Jules and her text messages on one side of the screen and Nate and his text messages on the other, is used to show how they text sweet and caring messages to each other throughout the day as they build an intimate relation.

Jules conveys her excitement over the burgeoning romance to her best friend Rue and asks her if she wants to see her new boyfriend's dick. Even if this is done with affection, it is still non-consensual and problematic. However, *Euphoria*'s insert of a funny segment following this in which Rue breaks the fourth wall, is creative with how it seeks to subvert the dick pic in general. Turning direct to camera, Rue declares: 'Some people say eyes are the window to your soul. I disagree. I think it's your dick and how you fucking photograph it.' Separating dick pics into 'solicited' and 'unsolicited', Rue lists the 'key things to look out for' when receiving solicited, consensual dick pics with a 'jug of lotion' and 'dirty fingernails' being red flags. Rue's funny evaluation of the aesthetics of dick pics, and their surroundings, arguably works to displace their threat and power. Despite her admitted lack of sexual experience, Rue is positioned as a 'sexpert' here, much in the way that the inexperienced Otis is in *Sex Education*. Rue's slideshow relates to feminist activist projects such as <http://critiquemydickpic.tumblr.com/>, which allocates grades to dick pics, and which creates a 'critical feminist space for renegotiation of the dick pic as a phenomenon' (Ringrose and Lawrence, 2018).

Where *Euphoria* does its most consistently important critical work is in presenting the complex, double-sided nature of teens' mediated intimacies and their 'mobile processes of attachments' (Berlant, 1998, p. 284). It conveys how 'digital technologies provide new opportunities and means for connection and self-expression' but are 'also used to facilitate, exacerbate, and extend sexual violence' (Marcotte and Hille, 2021, p. 319). Throughout the series, texting is a means for connection, but it is also a source of anguish as, for example, when a distraught Maddy sends Nate 273 text messages, 'none of which he answered'. The internet is seen to provide a space for exploring sexuality, as with Kat's camming and as with Nate's exploration of a different side of himself through gay hook-up apps. Online, Nate communicates sweetly with Jules, who is transgender, and explores alternatives to heteronormativity, as signalled by his collection of other men's dick pics on his smartphone camera roll. Offline, Nate has 'anger issues' and is emotionally

and physically abusive to his girlfriend Maddy. He routinely denigrates girls and women and is also hateful and abusive towards his male peers. But this hate and anger also extends to digital spaces where Nate participates in image-based sexual abuse and the non-consensual sharing of images. McKay is shown to be tormented by the images of Cassie that his friends show him. Tellingly, McKay is not upset about the fact that they are shared non-consensually but that they reveal (in his view) how little 'respect' Cassie has for herself. And yet McKay himself is shown to pressure Cassie for nudes in the context of their relationship ('Please I'm so horny'). There is sadness in these contradictory behaviours, and in how communication is so often seen to fail across all the relationships on *Euphoria*, as characters strain towards a meaningful intimate relation but come up against the socio-technical constraints of heteronormative ideals around gender and sexuality.

Conclusion: TV as a technology of intimacy

In her work on reality television, Misha Kavka discusses how television operates as a 'technology of intimacy, a machine that functions by drawing viewers close' (2008, p. 5). In foregrounding the relation between 'real and mediated spaces', Kavka is interested in how television works affectively, 'at the level of *feeling* rather than cognitive content' (2008, pp. 2, x). If anything, Kavka's writing from 2008 on how the television screen mediates intimacy for viewers, has become even more heightened in the postdigital context through which many of us now watch TV – on laptops or on smartphones held up close to our faces, as we fall asleep to episodes of *Friends* on Netflix or become drowsy scrolling through TikTok reels of our favourite shows. *Euphoria* dramatises the intimate affective relations forged between the spectator and digital TV screens in Episode 7, 'The Trials and Tribulations of Trying to Pee While Depressed', which sees a deeply depressed Rue in a darkened room, wrapped up in her duvet in bed, as she binge-watches episodes of the UK's *Love Island* on her laptop.

In their emphasis on the complex relation between digital and physical spaces, the teen TV series I have discussed in this chapter foreground the role of postdigital technologies in reconfiguring feelings and intimacies. However, to fully consider how these TV shows themselves operate as objects of intimacy, it is important to explore how their affective circuitry morphs to form part of mediated clip culture on the internet. Despite their 18 certificates, *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* are widely streamed

by young people. Clips of scenes from both series, especially *Euphoria*, circulate and trend on apps such as TikTok, where they could be said to form part of a wider youth digital sexual image culture. The lead actors on *Euphoria*, especially the trio of Zendaya, Sydney Sweeney and Alexa Demie, have millions of followers on Instagram. Netflix's Instagram page for *Sex Education* has 3.5 million followers and extends viewer enjoyment in the series through resharing images and clips and highlighting its important themes and messages. Recent scholarship explores the significance of TV series such as *Sex Education* for providing valuable information to young people about sex which they are not finding in schools (see, for example, [Arua, 2021](#); [Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021](#)).

But if the internet extends the shows' pleasures and educational opportunities for viewers, it also reproduces the digital harms explored on both series, especially image-based sexual abuse. *Euphoria* actors Zendaya and Sydney Sweeney are included in lists of common celebrity deepfake victims, with their images being appropriated and used in non-consensual deepfake pornography videos on Pornhub and elsewhere. Aimee Lou Wood and Emma Mackey from *Sex Education* are also victims of synthetic image-based abuse or AI-facilitated abuse ([Flynn et al., 2021](#)), which has been described as the 'new frontier of violence against women' ([Wheeler, 2024](#)). It is unsettling to think that fictional scenes exploring the image-based sexual abuse in these teen TV shows are themselves becoming the source of image-based sexual abuse in real life.

As I have argued in this chapter, both *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* have significant and nuanced things to say about nude image sharing and image-based sexual abuse. In line with feminist scholarship on youth digital intimacy, they are careful to parse out the distinctions between consensual and non-consensual image sharing, as they explore how digital spaces 'shift, challenge, and or/reconfigure current understandings of sexual consent' ([Marcotte and Hille, 2021](#), p. 320). As long-form TV series, *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* have the time and the space to explore nuances and complications around image sharing, providing much needed context for the gendered norms, behaviours and inequalities that shape twenty-first-century cultures of postdigital intimacy. Context is vital and it is what can sometimes go missing in the digital mining and extraction of these shows on the internet. While I have only been able to briefly gesture towards the postdigital afterlives of these shows here, it is a significant area for future exploration. There are many important conversations to be had about how to ethically navigate new forms of postdigital intimacies and shows like *Sex Education* and *Euphoria* need to be part of them.

Notes

1. 'Sexting' combines 'sex' and 'texting' and is defined as the creation and sharing of sexual images through digital devices and platforms.
2. Sextortion is the illegal practice of trying to blackmail someone by threatening to reveal their sexual photos or videos. See <https://www.iwf.org.uk/resources/sextortion/> for further information.
3. Susan Berridge and I discuss the 'it's my vagina' incident in Netflix's *Sex Education* in a forthcoming chapter in the book, *School's Out for Netflix*, edited by Deborah Shaw and Rob Stone (Bloomsbury 2024). Thank you to the editors for allowing me to reproduce segments of this analysis here.
4. Please see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cnkkqyek17zo>
5. 'J-Law' is a reference to Hollywood actress Jennifer Lawrence and the 2014 iCloud hack in which actresses had their nude images stolen and shared without their consent. For an excellent discussion of the iCloud hack please see Patrick (2022). For a discussion of the 2016 hack of comedian Leslie Jones' website, please see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-37182299>
6. Though there is not space in this chapter to explore them, there are two other storylines involving non-consensual video sharing and image-based sexual abuse in Season One of *Euphoria*. The first concerns the non-consensual filming and then sharing of a video of Kat having sex at a party; the second involves Nate's dad, Cal (Eric Dane), secretly recording videos of himself having sex with young gay and transgender individuals (including Jules).

References

- Albury, K. (2017). Just because it's public doesn't mean it's any of your business: Adults' and children's sexual rights in digitally mediated spaces. *New Media & Society*, 19(5), 713–725.
- Angel, K. (2021). *Tomorrow Sex Will be Good Again: Women and desire in the age of consent*. New York: Verso.
- Arua, D. C. E. (2021). Sexual health on television: new framing of sexual health issues in Netflix's *Sex Education* Show. *Journal of Public Interest Communications*, 5(2). <https://doi.org/10.32473/jpic.v5.i2.p48>
- Berlant, L. (1998). Intimacy: A special issue. *Critical Inquiry*, Winter, 24(2), 281–288.
- Berridge, S. and Horeck, T. (2025). Intimacy coordination and consent culture in *Sex Education*. In D. Shaw and R. Stone (eds) *School's Out for Netflix*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 187–207.
- Bonos, L. (2021). Let's talk about 'Sex Education' – and all the bad info we got as teens, *The Washington Post*, 7 October. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2021/10/07/sex-education-interview-laurie-nunn/>
- Flynn, A., Clough, J. and Cooke, T. (2021). Disrupting and preventing deepfake abuse: Exploring criminal law responses to AI-facilitated abuse. In A. Powell, A. Flynn and L. Sugiura (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Gendered Violence and Technology*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 583–603.
- Horeck, T., Ringrose, J., Milne, B. and Mendes, K. (2023). *Young People's Experiences of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence During COVID-19: Final Report*. Cambridge: Anglia Ruskin University.
- Kavka, M. (2008). *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy: Reality matters*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lealos, S.S., Barker, S. and Atkins, K. (2024). 15 most popular HBO shows of all time ranked. *Screen Rant*, 27 May. <https://screenrant.com/hbo-most-popular-shows-ranked/>
- Maas, J. (2022). 'Euphoria' is now HBO's second most-watched show behind 'Game of Thrones'. *Variety*, 28 February. <https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/euphoria-season-2-finale-ratings-1235192015/>

- Marcotte, A.S. and Hille, J. (2021). Sexual violence and consent in the digital age. In A. Powell, A. Flynn and L. Sugiura (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Gendered Violence and Technology*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 310–332.
- McGlynn, C. and Rackley, E. (2017). Image-based sexual abuse, *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 37(3), 534–561. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojls/gqw033>
- Meek, M. (2023). *Consent Culture and Teen Film: Adolescent Sexuality in US Teen Movies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Patrick, S. (2022). More than a sex crime: a feminist political economy of the 2014 iCloud hack. *Media, Culture & Society*, 44(1), 39–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211022713>
- Porter, R. (2019). Netflix reveals viewership numbers for ‘you’, ‘Sex Education’, and More, 17 January. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/netflixs-you-track-40-million-viewers-1177025/>
- Powell, A. and Henry, N. (2017). *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ringrose, J. and Lawrence, E. (2018). Remixing misandry, manspreading, and dick pics: Networked feminist humour on Tumblr. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 686–704. doi: 10.1080/14680777.2018.1450351
- Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R. and Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen girls, sexual double standards and ‘sexting’: Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory*, 14(3), 305–323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700113499853>
- Ringrose, J., Regehr, K. and Whitehead, S. (2021a). Teen girls’ experiences negotiating the ubiquitous dick pic: Sexual double standards and the normalization of image based sexual harassment. *Sex Roles*, 85, 558–576. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-021-01236-3>
- Ringrose, J., Regehr, K. and Milne, B. (2021b). *Understanding and Combatting Youth Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse*. London: Department of Education, Practice and Society, UCL Institute of Education. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10139669/>
- Ringrose, J., Regehr, K. and Whitehead, S. (2021c). ‘Wanna trade?’: Cisheteronormative homosocial masculinity and the normalization of abuse in youth digital sexual image exchange. *Journal of Gender Studies*. doi: 10.1080/09589236.2021.1947206
- Ringrose, J., Milne, B., Mishna, F., Regehr, K. and Slane, A. (2022). Young people’s experiences of image-based sexual harassment and abuse in England and Canada: Toward a feminist framing of technologically facilitated sexual violence. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 93. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277539522000565>
- Ringrose, J., Milne, B., Horeck, T. and Mendes, K. (2024). Postdigital bodies: Young people’s experiences of algorithmic, tech-facilitated body shaming and image-based sexual abuse during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic in England. *Youth*, 4, 1058–1075. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4030066>
- Sandberg, B. (2019). ‘Euphoria’ Creator on Boundary-Pushing HBO Drama: ‘We Didn’t Want to Pull Any Punches’. *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 19. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/euphoria-creator-boundary-pushing-hbo-drama-didnt-pull-punches-1218588/>
- Setty, E. (2019a). Meanings of bodily and sexual expression in youth sexting culture: Young women’s negotiation of gendered risks and harms. *Sex Roles*, 80, 586–606. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-0957-x>
- Setty, E. (2019b). A rights-based approach to youth sexting: Challenging risk, shame, and the denial of rights to bodily autonomy and sexual expression Within Youth Digital Sexual Culture. *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 1, 298–311. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-019-00050-6>
- Vázquez-Rodríguez, L.G., García-Ramos, F.J. and Zurian, F.A. (2021). The role of popular culture for queer teen identities’ formation in Netflix’s *Sex Education*. *Media and Communication*, 9(3), pp. 198–208. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i3.4115>
- Vera-Gray, F. and McGlynn, C. (2021). Sexually violent pornography is being promoted to first-time users of top sites. *The Journal*, 28 May. <https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/porn-5431234-May2021/>
- Wheeler, R. (2024). Deepfake abuse ‘new frontier’ of violence against women, peers warned. *The Independent*, 8 March. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/deepfake-government-conservative-research-jess-phillips-b2509480.html>

Part IV

Postdigital kinship, domesticity
and hospitality

Postdigital queer kinship: intimacy, choice and the market

Rikke Andreassen and Ulrika Dahl

Assisted reproduction in a time of increased privatisation of health

This chapter addresses a paradox that emerged while doing qualitative research for our joint research project ‘Scandinavian border crossings: Race and nation in queer assisted reproduction’,¹ in which we investigate ideas and practices around ‘matching’ donated gametes in public and private fertility clinics. To that end, we conducted fieldwork in fertility clinics in Sweden and Denmark and interviewed both clinic staff and queer parents about their understanding of, among other things, the role of the donor in making families. A key finding from this research was the lesser known fact that public fertility care in Scandinavia is becoming entangled with the private fertility market, largely through increasingly outsourcing care to private actors owned by venture capitalist firms. While parents rarely reflect on this, public clinic staff are troubled by this change of welfare state care.

In Scandinavian welfare states, known for their progressive LGBTQ+ reproductive rights, lesbian couples and single women have been eligible for donor conception and assisted reproduction under public health care for two decades. Simultaneously, Denmark has emerged as an international fertility destination, attracting thousands of patients from across the world (particularly lesbian couples and solo mothers) – a trend underpinned by a combination of advanced fertility research, the proliferation of sperm banks and liberal legislation. As fertility care has grown into a booming business, private investment firms are acquiring private clinics, gathering them into networked clinics across several

countries (Patrizio et al., 2022). While, locally, medical staff generally remain at clinics post-merger, treatments often change, as does the financial structure of the clinics, with implications for the wider health economy. The term ‘private clinic’ is used in both Scandinavian and English languages for a clinic owned by a private investment firm, but to distinguish these from physician-owned clinics, a more accurate term would be ‘private-for-profit’. This distinction is crucial, because the financial flow is markedly different between the two types of clinics: in private-for-profit clinics, surplus is typically distributed among international investors, resulting in money being exported *out* of the host country (e.g. Denmark); while physician-owned clinics typically redistribute finances back *into* the local (e.g. Danish) economy, through paying taxes.

During our interviews, we noticed a difference in view between medical staff and intended parents: while medical staff were concerned about the financial implications of the emerging private-for-profit business model, queer parents rarely brought up clinic ownership or financial structures. Instead, parents focused on choice and how they as LGBTQ+ individuals were received and treated in clinics. Furthermore, while we, in interviews, found no differences in attitudes towards sexuality or gender identity between clinic staff working in private-for-profit clinics and those working in public clinics, queer parents unanimously felt that private-for-profit clinics were more LGBTQ+ inclusive than public clinics. In a time of increased outsourcing and privatisation of fertility care their different understandings left us puzzled. How do we explain their differing understandings?

In this chapter, we propose *postdigital intimacies* as a conditional lens to elucidate and nuance the ambivalence and tensions we found. Importantly, we discuss the discrepancies between views by highlighting how *postdigital intimacies mask capitalist structures*. To that end, the chapter examines the relationships between postdigital intimacies, capitalism and kinship in the context of family making through a critical analysis of queer donor conception in clinics.

We begin by outlining our theoretical framework and presenting the empirical material. Following this, we divide the analysis into three interconnected sections. First, we analyse how experiences of intimacy and attachment to gametes vary, depending on the extent of one’s postdigital engagement. Second, we explore how queer reproduction and LGBTQ+ family rights are entangled with the global neoliberal fertility market economy (Keaney, 2023; van de Wiel, 2020; Weinbaum, 2019). Third, we describe how financial structures influence treatments in the fertility clinics, while the same financial market structures are being obscured by

postdigital intimacies. We conclude by arguing that postdigital intimacies contribute to maintaining the entanglement of queer reproduction within a capitalist market economy, making queer 'inclusion' contingent on financial resources in an individualised, postdigital landscape.

Theoretical framework, concepts and empirical material

To analyse the financial structures permeating the fertility industry, we draw upon Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of capitalism as 'a progressive neoliberalism, which celebrates diversity, meritocracy and emancipation while dismantling social protections and re-externalizing social reproduction' (Fraser, 2016, p. 113). Fraser elucidates how contemporary capitalism is characterised by an alignment between emancipation and marketisation. Here, an 'ascending party of free-marketeers, bent on liberalization and globalizing the capitalist economy', has combined with new social movements aimed at combatting privileges and hierarchies related to gender, sexuality and race, resulting in a 'progressive neoliberalism' (2016, p. 113). Our fieldwork around queer reproduction illuminated Fraser's observations insofar as its overall logic has seemingly 'redefine[d] emancipation in market terms' (2016, p. 113). Indeed, our interviewees' narratives around clinic choice repeatedly illustrated how LGBTQ+ reproductive rights are increasingly practised and safeguarded by and through private-for-profit fertility clinics.

In an online market economy, the distinction between market and consumer has become increasingly blurred (Andrejevic, 2019). Zwick and Bradshaw (2016) term this *post-marketing*, a condition characterised by the market becoming indistinguishable from consumers' everyday cultural life. In this blurred landscape, where almost all online activity is intertwined with algorithm-driven data capitalism and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2020), Ruckenstein and Granroth (2020) show users' experiences of ambivalence, as they on one hand become annoyed and fearful of continuous surveillance of their online actions, while, on the other hand, experience joy when feeling 'seen' by the market; as they phrase it: 'Advertisement can trigger a pleasurable feeling of recognition' (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020, p. 20). Their analysis of how the market 'sees' customers and customers' affective responses to being 'recognised' and 'mirrored' is particularly valuable for our analysis.

Ruckenstein and Granroth (2020) are aligned with Hochschild (Wilson and Lande, 2005) in understanding capitalism not merely as an economic system, but also as cultural and social logic. Centrally,

rationalisation has become integrated into the culture of contemporary capitalism and commodification: ‘Capitalism is not new ... What is new is the form it takes. Commodification has become more rationalized’ (Wilson and Lande, 2005, p. 284). A central component of this new form is the ‘commodification of intimate life’ (Hochschild, 2012, p. 12), including, we contend, conception itself. Similarly, the market and its advertising are now indistinguishable from ordinary citizens’ everyday lives (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020; Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016). While economic theorist Milton Friedman (1962) optimistically linked ‘the idea of progress with the forward movement of a market frontier into all spheres of life’ (cited after Hochschild, 2011, p. 22), our research shows how understandings of LGBTQ+ progress and emancipation, combined with the free-market push, have propelled assisted reproduction into what medical staff view as potentially problematic future scenarios.

Central to contemporary capitalism, as well as to this chapter’s theoretical framework, is the understanding of *mediation* as an increasingly important condition for our existence and social relations (Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018; Kember and Zylinska, 2015). As Bassett (2015, p. 136) articulates, ‘computational devices and bodies intertwine ... and co-constitute the world in which we live’. In other words, mediation and social relations function as co-constitutive forces, whereby social relations encompass not only human-to-human interactions but also interrelations with other biological entities, such as gametes. Feminist post-humanists (e.g. Barad, 2010; Haraway, 1991) have long argued that our existence is not merely *facilitated* by technology, but in fact *entangled with* it. In particular, our intimate relations are co-created through this entanglement with media technology. Kember and Zylinska (2015) describe this co-creation as ‘our entanglement with nonhuman entities [that] continues to intensify with the ever more corporeal, ever more intimate dispersal of media and technologies into our biological and social lives’ (Kember and Zylinska, 2015, p. xv). For example, online media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram) and fertility retail websites offer avenues for kinship making, which in turn shape the utilisation of these online media. Importantly, online media is not merely a conduit for transmitting and communicating kinship relations; rather, such ‘technology is a reproductive technology in its own right in contemporary queer reproduction’ (Andreassen, 2023, p. 13); notably, such technology is deeply intertwined with market capitalism. Bassett posits that ‘bodies are redistributed through a technological economy’ (Bassett, 2015, p. 136). Contemporary kinship and family making are thus created and

redistributed via a mediated and technological economy – a phenomenon particularly evident in the context of family making through donor conception.

In this chapter, we employ the term *postdigital* to characterise contemporary social life in much of the Western world. Differently from only one decade ago when the distinction between online and offline realms was still meaningful in everyday life, in the current postdigital era, the digital (and the online) have become so integrated into social life that the online-offline divide is not merely inadequate (Bassett, 2015), but in fact antiquated. Furthermore, the postdigital condition implies that digital devices have become so normalised and integrated into everyday activities that users no longer conceptualise them as ‘digital’, in contrast to ‘analogue’. Similarly, the market and its advertising are no longer ‘outside’ consumers’ lifeworld but have become intertwined with consumers’ everyday (online) cultural practices (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020, p. 15). A defining feature of the contemporary postdigital stage is that the majority of users do not regard their digital devices as *separate from* themselves, but rather as *integral parts of* their being.

Andreassen (2017, 2018) defines intimacy as an *experience of belonging*, building upon Berlant’s (2008) description of the public sphere as an intimate and affective space. However, while Berlant defines intimacy as the *promise* of belonging (1998, p. ix), Andreassen brings intimacy into closer proximity with individuals’ actual practices and feelings by linking it to the *experience* of belonging. Aligned, Ruckenstein and Granroth (2020) highlight the affective experience of being ‘seen’ and ‘understood’ by the market.

Empirically, this chapter draws on online ethnography (Hine, 2015), fieldwork in Danish and Swedish fertility clinics (both private-for-profit and public), and interviews with medical clinic staff and LGBTQ+ and queer parents in Sweden and Denmark. We conducted interviews with 10 queer women in Denmark and 25 in Sweden, as well as 15 clinic staff members in Denmark and 20 in Sweden. The interviews were semi-structured, each lasting one to two hours. Clinic staff were interviewed at their respective clinics, while parents were interviewed in their homes (or at another location of their choice) via encrypted Zoom meetings. To protect privacy and adhering to ethical guidelines, all interviewees are anonymised, as are the names of clinics, specific geographical locations and the particular professions of staff members. While all interviews were transcribed for analysis, the excerpts presented here were translated (from Danish/Swedish to English) and rephrased to further ensure anonymity.

Postdigital intimacy vs. physical materiality

Critical kinship scholars have described the global fertility industry as an 'intimate industry'; arguing that this intimacy masks racial constructions at play in the consumption of gametes (Deomampo, 2016; Keaney, 2023). Importantly for this chapter, the postdigital landscape enhances the perception of intimacy, cloaking not only the racial structures at play in the purchase of donated gametes, but also the financial structures within the fertility industry. Dobson and colleagues describe how online media plays a role in the 'psychically and materially ordering [of] relationships and [of] shaping what appears as intimate' (2018, p. 4). While the fertility industry is not solely promoted via social media, a similar logic of intimacy is at play in the online ordering of gametes and engagement with fertility clinics. In the postdigital era, intended parents' shopping for sperm has become one of many activities in which intimacy is mediated through a smartphone or other digital device. Whereas purchasing donor sperm might have once been an awkward process, it now resembles the experience of using dating apps or social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram (Andreassen, 2018). As such, purchasing gametes is an illustration of how the market and customers' lifeworlds have merged. The familiarity of connecting with friends or lovers, combined with the continuous online shopping for goods, has now transferred to sperm selection, thereby normalising the consumption of gametes. In this process, complex and fluid categories (e.g. race) appear as material and fixed when parents filter and select donor sperm options via drop-down menus categorising donors as, for instance, 'African', 'Asian' or 'White' (Andreassen, 2017, 2018). Notably, intimacy must be understood 'in relation to the commodification of relationships built into ... media platforms infrastructure' (Dobson, Carah and Robards, 2018, p. 5). While Dobson and colleagues refer to social media platforms' surveillance capitalist structures, an equally important commodification of relationships occurs in the postdigital consumption of care. This merging of commodification and postdigital intimacy is evident in intended parents' shopping for donor sperm (typically from a private sperm bank, which subsequently sends the selected sperm to the fertility clinic). Indeed, one interviewee helped us see this point when she explained: 'Choosing sperm from the sperm bank is like being on Tinder. The way it looks, the way the donors are presented. It is in the same fashion as dating or social media profiles. ... They are selling a person instead of selling sperm' (Stine).

The intimacy fostered in the process of buying sperm online is further activated through engagements such as looking at baby photographs

of the donor, listening to his voice recordings and reading about his hobbies, family upbringing and educational background. All of these activities contribute to forming an intimate attachment between the intended parent and the donor as a person. In the aforementioned interview, Stine expressed awareness and potential criticism of the transition from selling donor sperm to marketing the donor himself – or rather presenting sperm through the lens of an idealised ‘father’ or donor image. However, the resulting attachment between intended parents and their preferred donor can generate problems for clinic staff, with staff members describing that intended parents ‘falling in love with a donor’ is a recurring challenge. One staff member, Lilli, explained how she thus always warned new patients: ‘Do not fall in love with the donor.’ Another staff member, Katja, discussed the frequent problem of a chosen donor’s sperm running out of stock: ‘They [the intended parents] get very, very sad and very, very disappointed.’ Karin, another staff member, expressed concerns about potential complications in the event that the clinic recommended that intended parents change their donor sperm:

If they don’t get pregnant with their chosen donor sperm, we suggest trying a different donor sperm to increase prospects. But they have chosen the particular donor with all their heart – maybe because he was the perfect height or because he played ice hockey – and they feel he is the right match – when it can be hard to convince them to choose a different sperm.

This highlights a clash between the emotional attachment of the intended parents, who may become infatuated with a particular donor, and the rational perspective of medical staff, who aim at optimising the chances of conception.

Interviews with clinic staff revealed a clear distinction between how they engaged with donor sperm compared to how parents-to-be did it. While parents seeking fertility care in Denmark interacted with sperm banks and donor profiles online, fostering intimate attachments, staff primarily engaged with donors via their physical frozen sperm, which arrived in tanks with assigned paperwork. Most staff members in Denmark had not seen the sperm retail websites of sperm banks and thus did not share the emotional engagement experienced by intended parents. This discrepancy may explain the contrast between parents’ ‘falling in love’ with a donor as a person and staff’s clinical perception of donors, which tended to reduce donors to mere gametes (Andreassen et al., 2025). Whereas parents’ engagement with donors exemplified a

complete merging of online and offline realms, thus illustrating the post-digital landscape, medical staff's (lack of) engagement represented a more traditional offline engagement.

Intended parents quite literally create kinship and family while embedded in postdigital intimacies. Importantly, their interactions with clinics and donors occur online, through personalised digital devices such as smartphones, which many consider integral to their lives (and particularly their personal lives). The market is not outside their life, rather, it is culturally, socially and literally, in terms of devices, intertwined with their everyday practices and lifeworld. These fertility engagements are characterised by a post-marketing condition (Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016) where intended parents develop emotional connections to donors, whose profiles on sperm retail websites often resemble dating profiles. This intimacy, combined with personal access to clinics and donors via digital devices, forms a curtain between the parents as individuals and the clinics and sperm banks as capitalist enterprises aimed at maximising profit.

LGBTQ+ rights as neoliberal capitalist practice

While queer reproduction – and particularly access to assisted donor conception – can be viewed through the lens of recognition and progressive LGBTQ+ legislation, this chapter examines how Scandinavian queer reproduction is (also) entangled with the global neoliberal market economy.

Denmark hosts some of the world's largest sperm banks, from which it exports donor sperm globally. In the international business of assisted reproduction with donated gametes, race in particular becomes commodified, with racialised gametes treated as marketable commodities. Race is frequently framed as a category of choice in the expanding consumption and production of sellable gametes (Andreassen, Deomampo and Hamilton, 2023; Keaney, 2023). This commodification and selection of racialised gametes as a matter of consumer choice illuminates the entanglement of assisted reproduction with what David Eng (2010) describes as the neoliberal logics of parenthood. Eng argues that queers who choose to reproduce and create biological families are perceived as responsible and 'proper' adults, leading to their inclusion in frameworks of citizenry. Here, choosing of the 'most suitable' gametes is met with approval and recognition; suitability, and proper adulthood

decision-making, is most often perceived as gametes allowing for a mono-racial family construction (Andreassen, Deomampo and Hamilton, 2023) or for choosing racially White gametes (Dahl and Andreassen, 2023). Purchasing gametes for queer reproduction is thus an illustration of how contemporary capitalism is expressed through progressive neoliberal choices (Fraser, 2016), enabling queers and others outside heterosexual marriage structures to reproduce and perform parenthood. It is precisely these acts of consumption and consumer choice that mark queer emancipation, as reflected in our interviews with queer parents.

Queer kinship via donor conception is a sharp illustration of contemporary postdigital life, steeped in a logic of (consumer) choice. Indeed, many interviewees described how they began their fertility journeys by searching online for paths to parenthood and continued to track and share their journeys via digital platforms. In Denmark, many started with the public system, but, due to discrimination or ignorance, transferred to private fertility clinics. Sonja, a lesbian mother, explained:

We [my wife and I] began fertility treatment at the public hospital. Here, I was very surprised when I had to fill out papers as if I was a man [the father]. Actually, it was really a shock to discover how the system was designed for heterosexual couples. When I pointed it out, they said 'We have not updated the papers yet'. ... I know that they are very busy, but I don't think they understand how important it is to be met as we are [as a lesbian couple] ... Because of this we transferred to a private clinic.

Initially, the transfer to the private clinic was facilitated *digitally*. Sonja and her wife accessed the private clinic via its website, where they were welcomed by a rainbow flag and information on assisted reproduction for LGBTQ+ individuals and solo mothers, making them feel recognised and personally addressed. Indeed, the websites of private-for-profit clinics are typically characterised by vibrant designs, photographs of cute babies and joyful women (apparently depicting either lesbian couples or solo women) and messages assuring visitors that the clinic 'is here for you'. In stark contrast, the websites of most public clinics mirror those of public hospitals in form and content, featuring minimal photos, subdued colours and neutral medical descriptions of the treatments on offer.

The *mediatised* nature of these interactions highlights the difference between public and private clinics: queer parents, such as Sonja and her wife, are likely to experience postdigital intimacy when engaging

with the private-for-profit clinics online, but not when interacting with the websites of the public clinics. Their digital interactions foster a sense of belonging, as they feel *seen* and *met* as queer parents by the private-for-profit clinic websites. Like most other individuals, intended parents 'want to be intimately seen, known, and understood', when engaging online (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020, p. 15). Indeed, as Ruckenstein and Granroth describe, individuals feel joy and pleasure when feeling 'seen' by the market; this might be particularly present for queers, who often experience exclusion from mainstream cultures' heteronormative messages. Consumer responses to marketing practices are always situational (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020, p. 13), and the positive affective response to LGBTQ+ inclusion might reflect a daily life in a homophobic society. One Danish interviewee recounted her 'extreme disappointment' when she was not met as a co-mother in a lesbian couple at a public fertility clinic. She elaborated, 'I don't think they know how important it is to be seen, when one is in a vulnerable position. I know that they are very busy, but it was so very difficult for me not to be met as a lesbian parent. ... Differently, at the private clinic, here, they listened to us and the process was a bit more tailored to us' (Sigrid). Like Sigrid, many interviewees expressed relief when describing their experiences of being acknowledged as queer parents in private clinics. Thus, it seems that it is in the market (rather than the welfare state) that support and relief is offered to those engaging in fertility treatment (Hochschild, 2012, p. 10). Moreover, in the postdigital (and post-marketing) era, this support and relief is amplified by the websites of private-for-profit (versus public) clinics, allowing for varying experiences of intimacy and belonging.

Naja, another lesbian mother in Denmark, described her experience at a public clinic: 'The whole set up did not fit us, it was like, geared towards a mother and a father, it made me feel like a second-class citizen.' Here it is the transition from the public sector to the private-for-profit fertility clinic that realises LGBTQ+ inclusion and provides a move from second- to a first-class experience. This consumer-driven inclusion mirrors a general development, accompanying neoliberal capitalism in the twenty-first century where LGBTQ+ identities have increasingly become domesticated and consumption-oriented (Duggan, 2003; Valocchi, 2017), symbolised by the inclusion of (legally recognised) marriage and (legal) access to assisted reproduction. Naja's story sharply illustrates the loop-effect between neoliberalism's consumption visibility (Valocchi, 2017) and LGBTQ+ individuals' expectation of consumption-inclusion.

Performing queer inclusion

Danish fertility clinics serve a significant number of international patients, especially lesbians and single women who might not be eligible for treatment in their own nations due to more conservative legislation. Sophy, a staff member at a Danish private clinic, pragmatically explained the private-for-profit clinics' inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals exemplify a capitalist logic: 'Of course private clinics are not more concerned about lesbians than public clinics are. They just know how to make money.'

Interviews with clinical staff in Sweden and Denmark did not indicate any differences in attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals between staff at private-for-profit clinics and those at public clinics. When asked about their attitudes towards and treatment of LGBTQ+ patients, staff at all clinics promptly stressed their commitment to equal treatment, even if their understandings of assisted reproduction were often based on heteronormative notions of reproduction and kinship. Staff generally supported assisted reproduction for LGBTQ+ individuals and families, often stressing that 'one's sexual orientation does not determine one's parental abilities' (Christine) and that 'lesbian couples are as good, or bad, parents, as straight couples' (Maria).

In Sweden, however, dual parenthood was often highlighted as preferable to solo parenting, and the state of one's intimate, kinship and social relations was a central factor in the psychosocial assessments required to access donor conception. Yet, staff consistently reiterated their efforts to treat all patients equally, regardless of their sexuality, gender identity, social class or country of origin.

Interestingly, intended parents' perceptions of clinics varied significantly from the staff's expressed support of LGBTQ+ reproduction, illustrating how experiences of intimacy, belonging and being *seen* as a sexual minority may depend less on the genuine feelings of medical staff towards minorities and their practical inclusion efforts, and more on how clinics' design and services mirror inclusion in a postdigital reality.

As Nancy Fraser argues, social reproduction is a critical yet often overlooked prerequisite for capitalism: 'social-reproductive activity is absolutely necessary to the existence of wages work, the accumulation of surplus value and the function of capitalism as such' (Fraser, 2014, p. 61). While Fraser's argument underscores the significance of unpaid social-reproductive work alongside paid production, similar logics appear to operate within private-for-profit clinics. In these settings, the labour of practising (and performing) queer-inclusive fertility treatments – whether digitally through design or physically through

emotional labour – is essential for generating capitalist surplus. As Fraser articulates, ‘social reproduction is an indispensable background condition for the possibility of capitalist production’ (2014, p. 61).

Parents’ perceived differences between public and private-for-profit clinics could arguably be interpreted as indicative of greater homophobia and discrimination against sexual and gender minorities in public clinics. However, they may also be attributed to different capacities. The outdated forms causing serious discomfort for intended co-mothers (as some are designed for fathers), combined with the absence of rainbow flags on websites and in clinics, reflect the financial constraints of a public health system struggling with resource shortages and overburdened staff. In fact, staff at Swedish public clinics frequently cited the ‘shortage’ of sperm, especially after the 2016 inclusion of solo parents as eligible for donor conception, as the most significant challenge, as it resulted in significant patient increase. Therefore, the extent to which queer patients can experience queer intimacy and be recognised at public clinics is also deeply entangled with available resources of differently situated actors within the fertility market. Arguably, experiences of LGBTQ+ inclusion may be less a matter of genuine attitudes and medical approaches, and more related to the resources necessary to perform such inclusion.

Rationalising fertility treatments

Clinic staff also raised concerns about the changes that have followed the acquisition of private clinics by investment firms. Specifically, they observed that investment firms typically rationalise and standardise treatments across clinics based in different countries, to ensure ‘best practice’, defined as the most profitable approach. While succeeding in maximising profits, this process also drives the increasing commodification of conception and reproduction, illustrating Hochschild’s claim that contemporary capitalism is characterised by the rationalisation of commodification (Wilson and Lande, 2005, p. 284).

Several of the interviewed clinic staff expressed worries about potential future changes. While not explicitly framing their concerns as fears of the consequences of rationalised capitalism, many were troubled by the commodification of reproduction. One staff member in Denmark said: ‘I fear that we, in the future, might have to compromise our ethics and provide services that we would not perform today.’ This points to how market logics aimed at maximising surplus, pose challenges to maintaining ethical standards. One doctor at a public hospital in Sweden with

experience in the private sector who also voiced concern, claimed that ‘a lot of decisions are made in a financial direction rather than what is good for the patient’. According to him, the ‘guarantee of care’ (*vårdgarantin*) has led to ‘new clinics popping up like mushrooms’, and are driven by ‘high profit margins on donation patients’ (see also [Patrizio et al., 2022](#)). In his view, this shift was especially disturbing as ‘these companies are profiting from our taxes which in the long run will lead to depleting our collective resources’.

Mediatised fertility treatments mask production conditions

A repeated concern voiced by medical staff, especially in public clinics, was intricately linked to the financial model whereby a private clinic’s letting price is contingent on its forecasted surplus. This business model involves offering substantial sums (e.g. £2,800,000–17,000,000) for fertility clinics based on revenue projections over a three-year term. Staff members feared that the model created strong incentives to quickly maximise profit. More specifically, staff members feared that this could incentivise private-for-profit clinics to offer services lacking in scientific evidence, targeting patients desperate to conceive. Indeed, in a capitalist context, the temptation to sell additional, scientifically unproven services is likely to prevail. One staff member remarked: ‘In order to make money, a clinic might sell extra services that doctors know will not increase chances of conception, but which patients will buy because they desperately want children. We risk taking advantage of patients’ vulnerability’ (Morten).

Concerns among clinic staff about the future of medical practices within a rationalised, capitalist health system were especially pronounced in the interviews. However, among parents, a recurring argument for choosing private-for-profit clinics over public clinics was the perception that the former afforded them greater consumer rights, including shorter waiting times. In Denmark, a fertility patient at a public clinic might have to wait from six to eight months, whereas in Sweden, it can be up to two years in some urban areas. Parents’ desire to avoid these lengthy queues can be interpreted as participation in a specific form of rationalised capitalism – the commodification of healthcare services. Alexandra, an intended parent, explained her decision to choose a private-for-profit clinic: ‘We do not want to wait because we [my partner and I] are ready now. We have planned this reproduction, and it fits well with our life [work

and education] to get pregnant now.’ Here, the arrival of the child was planned, optimised and rationalised, fitting into the couple’s pre-planned schedule. This planning and demand for fertility treatment at a particular time marks a shift from what Hochschild terms the *production* of care to a *consumption* of care (Hochschild, 2012, p. 12). Many interviewees expected the market, in the form of a private fertility clinic, to deliver conception according to their personal needs and wishes. Thus, the private market became a tool to fulfil their self-conception as a rational individual. As Hochschild argues, ‘proliferation of such intimate services suggest that the market has made inroads into our very understanding of the self’ (2012, p. 12). The market might also have made inroads into Swedish medical staff, as several private clinic staff in Sweden claimed they were better at meeting the needs of non-heterosexual parental constellations. Sara, a staff member responsible for matching gametes and parents at a private clinic stated, ‘we can offer much more choice in donors because we order from the Danish sperm banks’ and added that, while their clinic adhered to Swedish state guidelines for matching (which do not allow parents to choose their donor), ‘in our clinic we listen more to the patients’. Here, options for different choices of conception are also presented as illustrative of LGBTQ+ inclusion and better health treatment. Indeed, as Fraser has described it, the idea of emancipation is now closely linked to the market and market logics (2016, p. 113).

While many interviewees in Denmark preferred private clinics, parents in Sweden more reluctantly chose private clinics – partly for the personal treatment they received but largely due to the desire to access services that were otherwise unavailable through the state. As discussed above, the number of patients seeking gamete donation increased drastically in the 2010s, while the number of donors did not, resulting in long waiting times. Moreover, as staff at public and private clinics in Sweden aim to ‘match’ the colours of parents and donor, public clinic who recruit their own donors have very few non-Scandinavian or non-White donors, while private-for-profit clinics often acquire sperm from Danish sperm banks to meet the demand for both ethnic matches and certain ‘colours’.

Interestingly, none of the interviewed parents were aware of or discussed ownership or financing of non-public clinics. This might in the Swedish case be explained by long-held trust in universal health care now extended with the so-called ‘choice in care’ (*vårdval*), enabling patients to choose freely between private and public clinics and still have their treatment paid by the state. It might also be explained by opacity: none of the private clinics made their ownership explicit, either in their mediated material or in verbal communications. Instead, phrases such as ‘we work

together with [name of venture capitalist-driven group of clinics]' or 'we are a part of [name of venture capitalist-driven group of clinics]' were often used, suggesting purely professional collaborations devoid of financial implications. Consequently, their ownership and financial underpinnings remained obscure for most patients. When informed about the financial ownership structures, many parents expressed surprise and concern, but most quickly reverted to stressing the importance of choice and discussing how the private-for-profit clinics acknowledged their identities as queer or lesbian individuals. This might reflect the ambivalence, documented by [Ruckenstein and Granroth \(2020\)](#) in their case study, where online users display ambivalence towards the market's penetration of their daily online routines, feeling annoyance and irritation when being bombarded by irrelevant marketing while also experiencing joy and pleasure when being 'seen' by the market.

On the one hand, intended parents' engagement with private-for-profit clinics may be viewed as an example of homonormativity, connecting LGBTQ+ rights with neoliberalism, consumption and privatisation ([Duggan, 2002](#)). On the other hand, the postdigital condition in Scandinavia specifically, adds another layer to Duggan's description of the intersection between capitalism, consumerism and sexual politics by masking the outsourcing of public care as well as masking the connections and financial structures this relies on. While medical staff operate within a non-mediatised health context, with each medical intervention (e.g. IVF) being recorded and budgeted to maximise wealth, patients engage with treatments in a postdigital setting. To medical staff, the production and financial structures are explicit and directly linked, whereas intended parents often perceive these structures as invisible. International patients pay for fertility treatments, but many Danish and Swedish patients do not, as their treatments are covered by the welfare state. Thus, they remain 'untouched' by the actual costs of their treatments. Capitalism tends to obscure and fragment the relations of production, and the postdigital landscape further supports this obfuscation. Not only do postdigital intimacies orient patients towards the clinics and make them feel seen, but they also reinforce the conditions for neoliberal capitalism and its invisibility. Moreover, the digitalisation of the Danish health system, with financial transactions occurring 'behind the scene', makes the financial flows around fertility clinics disappear from patients' view.

While individualism is a central ideological strand in capitalism ([Wilson and Lande, 2005](#), p. 280), the increased individualism accompanying digital devices through personalised, algorithm-driven displays may lead to an understanding of intended parents as isolated, individual consumers purchasing individual services, further masking the overarching financial structures. Finally, the near-complete merging of online

and offline experiences for intended parents engaging with fertility clinics may result in blindness to activities previously recognised as offline processes (e.g. paying with physical money), as the financial structures 'behind' or 'alongside' fertility clinics become invisible.

Conclusion

The starting point for this chapter's analysis stemmed from a paradox that arose during research around queer assisted reproduction, pertaining to the increasing outsourcing of public fertility care and growing number of private clinics in Scandinavia and finding that private clinics are increasingly either initially funded or bought up by venture capitalist firms. In the chapter, we have discussed how capitalist logics have come to structure fertility engagements. We have shown that, while the current financial situation worries clinic staff, parents are largely unaware of the financial structures underpinning the fertility clinics to whom they turn when they want to have children. We have argued that this discrepancy is partly attributable to intended parents' postdigital engagement with clinics, which obscures their financial structures. Our multi-sited qualitative research illuminates that postdigital intimacy not only renders capitalist structures invisible, it is what upholds the entanglement of queer reproduction and the capitalist market economy.

Furthermore, we have described a tension between clinic staff and intended parents when the latter become attached to a particular donor – much to the concern of staff. We have attributed this attachment to parents' online engagement, shopping for sperm in a process reminiscent of online dating (thus risking 'falling in love' with the donor profile). In contrast, we have shown that medical staff engage with donor sperm as a material substance, disconnected from the donor and his market-facing profile.

The pain of not being recognised and met as queer parents by medical staff in public clinics, and particularly their (understandable) frustration and discomfort at having to fill out parental forms designed for fathers was a theme across many interviews. Although we could not see any differences in attitudes towards LGBTQ+ family making between medical staff at public versus private clinics, interviewed parents either experienced or believed there was a significant difference. Here we have theorised this difference as a postdigital form of kinship in that the path to becoming parents through donor conception begins with digital engagement with clinics and encountering clinic websites before meeting

the medical professionals who mediate conception. On their websites, private-for-profit clinics typically display images of lesbian couples and rainbow flags, whereas the largely informational websites of public clinics maintain a neutral appearance, in line with those of public hospitals, lacking visible inclusion markers. While queer inclusion might be considered an online performance, in a postdigital landscape, it is experienced as an important step in making parents feel welcome and intimately engaged, through a sense of belonging – even if that belonging involves national tax-funded reproduction becoming profits to venture capitalist firms in the global fertility market.

Note

1. The research project is funded by FORTE, the Swedish research council for health, working life and welfare (see <https://www.gender.uu.se/research/projects/scandinavian-border-crossings--race-and-nation-in-queer-assisted-reproduction/>).

References

- Andrejevic, M. (2019). *Automated Media*. New York: Routledge.
- Andreassen, R. (2017). New kinship, new family formations and negotiations of intimacy via social media sites. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(3), 361–371.
- Andreassen, R. (2018). *Mediated Kinship. Gender, race and sexuality in donor families*. London: Routledge.
- Andreassen, R. (2023). From the families we choose to the families we find online: Media technology and queer family making. *Feminist Theory*, 24(2), 12–29.
- Andreassen, R., Deomampo, D. and Hamilton, J. (2023). Racial reproduction and genetic imaginaries. In R. Andreassen, C. Lundström, S. Keskinen and S.A. Tate (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook of New Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*. London: Routledge, pp. 105–111.
- Andreassen, R., Newton, G. and Dahl, U. (2025). Sprouting sideways: Queer temporalities and kinship in donor conception. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 27(9), 1179–1194.
- Barad, K. (2010). Quantum entanglements and hauntological relations of inheritance: Discontinuities, spacetime enfoldings, and justice-to-come. *Derrida Today*, 3(2), 240–268.
- Bassett, C. (2015). Not now? Feminism, technology, postdigital. In D. Berry and M. Dieter (eds) *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, computation and design*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 136–150.
- Berlant, L. (1998). Intimacy: A special issue. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), 281–288.
- Berlant, L. (2008). *The Female Complaint*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Dahl, U. and Andreassen, R. (2023). Donors we choose: Race, nation and the biopolitics of (queer) assisted reproduction in Scandinavia. *BioSocieties*, 18(1), 79–101.
- Deomampo, D. (2016). Race, nation, and the production of intimacy: Transnational ova donation in India. *Positions*, 24(1), 303–332.
- Dobson, A.S., Carah, N. and Robards, B. (2018). Digital intimate publics and social media: Towards theorising public lives on private platforms. In A. Shields Dobson, B. Robards and N. Carah (eds) *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. Palgrave Studies in Communication for Social Change. London: Springer.
- Duggan, L. (2002). The new homonormativity: The sexual politics of neoliberalism. In R. Castronovo and D.D. Nelson (eds) *Materializing democracy: Towards revitalized racial politics* (pp. 175–194). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Duggan, L. (2003). *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, cultural politics, and the attack on democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Eng, D. (2010). *The Feeling of Kinship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Fraser, N. (2014). Behind Marx's hidden abode: For an expanded conception of capitalism. *New Left Review*, 86(86), 55–72.
- Fraser, N. (2016). Contradictions of capital and care. *New Left Review* (100, July–August).
- Friedman, M. (1962). *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs and Women. The reinvention of nature*. London: Free Association Books.
- Hine, C. (2015). *Ethnography for the Internet. Embedded, embodied and everyday*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Hochschild, A. (2011). Emotional life on the market frontier. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37, 21–33.
- Hochschild, A. (2012). *The Outsourced Self: Intimate life in market times*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Keaney, J. (2023). *Making Gaybies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kember, S. and Zylinska, J. (2015). *Life After New Media. Mediation as a vital process*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Patrizio, P., Albertini, D.F., Gleicher, N. and Caplan, A. (2022). The changing world of IVF: The pros and cons of new business models offering assisted reproductive technologies. *Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics*, 39, 305–313.
- Ruckenstein, M. and Granroth, J. (2020). Algorithms, advertising and the intimacy of surveillance. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 13(1), 12–24.
- Valocchi, S. (2017). Capitalisms and gay identities. *Social Problems*, 64(2), 315–331.
- Van de Wiel, L. (2020). The speculative turn in IVF: Egg freezing and the financialization of fertility. *New Genetics and Society*, 39(3), 306–326.
- Weinbaum, A.E. (2019). *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black feminism's philosophy of history*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Wilson, N.H. and Lande, B.J. (2005). Feeling capitalism: A conversation with Arlie Hochschild. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5(3), 275–288.
- Zuboff, S. (2020). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. London: Profile Books.
- Zwick, D. and Bradshaw, A. (2016). Biopolitical marketing and social media brand communities. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 33(5), 91–115.

‘Home is where the data is’: what is at stake in the trade in data-households?

Alison Winch

This chapter takes as its starting point the postdigital home, where smart technologies such as thermostats, voice assistants, remote lighting as well as broadband and smartphones extract and aggregate intimate data. Depending on the degree of privacy controls on the devices and browsers in a home, most online behaviour is tracked, analysed and segmented to create more attuned marketing and advertising communications (Turow, 2021). Much so-called offline data is also captured from the free flow of relational life in and around a home (e.g. a household shop) through GPS signalling, beacons, apps’ geo-fencing and so on. This makes the postdigital household a prime site of data capture (Couldry and Mejias, 2019). It is a site where intimate behaviours are processed, and monetised by the promotional industries (Zuboff, 2019).

More than this, the relationship between a household and the ubiquitous surveillance systems is an intimate one. Not only because the data captured is intimate, but also because of people’s relationship with the marketing technologies that process this data. Postdigital intimacy includes what happens to household data once it is extracted by technological systems of intimate surveillance (Darmody and Zwick, 2020). There is a continual loop between data capture, data analytics and, then, targeted promotional communications. Promotional technologies attempt to forge intimate relationships with people to create better promotional communications. This is so they can, in Google’s words, ‘know what you want and tell you before you ask the question’ (cited in Zuboff, 2019). Postdigital intimacy, therefore, includes the secretive processes

of analysis, segmentation and targeting, as well as the close relationship with these technologies.

This chapter considers the implications of these marketing processes; not from a computational standpoint, but rather a theoretical one, using a Cultural Studies perspective. The chapter asks, what does it matter that the intimate experience of the home and its surveillance is traded between different businesses in the promotional ecosystem? What forms of oppression are reproduced in these promotional processes? And, how does it impinge on culture? The chapter makes connections between the enlightenment values of the racialised, gendered and classed household imaginary and the promotional industries' trades in household data. It does this by exploring how the promotional processes of profiling, segmenting and prediction reproduce the 'patriarchal architectures' of enlightenment values in harmful ways (Perry, 2018). To do this I look at some marketing technologies' business-to-business (B2B) promotional materials which centre on the household, as well as investigating how to place an ad through Google Ads. This chapter brings these examples into dialogue with a report on ad targeting using zip codes as a proxy for race, and with scholarship on platforms' discriminatory infrastructure.

Data-households

Postdigital intimacy in a household includes the experience of integrating digital appliances into a lifeworld. But it also includes the entrenchment of marketing technologies in this lifeworld, and it is this entrenchment that this chapter is concerned with. Following the extensive scholarship that frames data as cultural and as being extracted, processed and categorised in deeply social ways (e.g. Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018), this chapter conceives a 'data-household'. It is useful to think of a household as a kind of 'data subject' – a term used in UK and EU legislation that refers to personal information identifying 'a natural person'. Here I am using the data-household to conceptualise bundles of data connected to home addresses, family names, shared devices and IP addresses. These identifiable data points are combined with search history, email content, facial recognition technologies, contacts and other data points.

Material households provide the currency of the trade between corporations. Instead of (or as well as) paying for services and subscriptions, we are given access to a platform's apps, webpages, affordances and networks by consenting to first and third-party cookies. These cookies surveil our behaviour in online and offline contexts in order to construct

more accurate consumer profiles and segments, forging more targeted promotional campaigns. As Eleanor Carmi points out, these processes of data extraction, processing and targeting function without our knowledge due to the interface of a web browser or app, as well as the numerous default settings that we are also, often, unaware of (Carmi, 2021, pp. 1–2).

Quad is a B2B marketing company that makes up the thousands of marketing technologies operating at the backend of digital devices. It offers a service that trades in household data because, as it states in its own promotional material: the ‘new center of gravity for proven data resilience is the household’ (Quad, 2024a). Its promotional material sells the proposition that other marketing companies operating in this promotional landscape can build better campaigns and create better communications if the data points they are working with are accurate and intimate – in other words, connected to a household. In a series of reports written for other businesses in the digital marketing space, Quad promotes its data analytics services. For Quad: ‘Home is where the data is’ (Quad, 2024b, p. 1). It boasts holding ‘more than 3 billion validate/revalidated data points’ that touch ‘92% of all US households’ (Quad, 2024b, p. 5). For Quad, the household is ‘the centerpiece’ for data collection and analysis; and this ‘centerpiece’ will put marketers ‘back in control’ (Quad, 2024a, p. 6).

Marketing technologies (or ‘Martech’) are ‘used to create, execute, manage, orchestrate and measure the performance of online and offline content, campaigns and experiences’. Martech can also include applications used by sales as well as advertising (Martech, 2024). For example, the advertising ecosystem – also known as ‘programmatic’ – serves up advertisements in real time to internet users based on the aggregated data points of that particular user. These promotional technologies include software and platforms for marketing companies but also the monopoly corporations Google-Alphabet, Meta, Apple, Alibaba, Tencent, Bytedance, all of which are key players in the promotional industries, and which are deeply embedded in – and structure – these surveillance systems.

Martech’s intimacy

Nedim Karakayali, Burc Kostem and Idil Galip, in their analysis of music streaming services, argue that marketers use symbiotic recommendation algorithms as ‘intimate experts’ or ‘companions’. These intimate experts

function to ‘examine and transform an aspect of the self’ through cultivating music taste (Karakayali et al., 2018, p. 3). However, it’s not just streaming services that track, anticipate and nudge us into consumer directions in order to fashion a self. The promotional industries, including the monopoly platforms mentioned above, all use the affects of trust and loyalty, as well as an intimate knowingness towards their audiences, as part of their surveillant strategies. Trust is woven so deeply into ‘the daily fabric of consumers that the shaping of the consumer’s future becomes a matter of co-production’ (Darmody and Zwick, 2020, p. 7).

Aron Darmody and Detlev Zwick argue that marketers have a problem. Marketers need to believe in the ‘empowered consumer’ but also the always-surveilled consumer. The way that marketers resolve this problem is through the concept of ‘relevancy’. The argument goes that the empowered consumer wants relevant ads and promotions. Therefore, marketers must provide relevant marketing and it can only do this by intimately knowing the consumer through constant surveillance. As a consequence, the ideal scenario is a ‘post-marketing’ one, where the world of always-on marketing becomes a world without marketing (Darmody and Zwick, 2020, p. 8) where marketing is always modulating, always nudging, always knowing the person-consumer intimately. Marketing is woven into the fabric of our lifeworld without waste (in this case unwanted ads or promotions), irrelevance or friction. Instead we are served up brands that we love, trust and to whom we hold absolute loyalty. The ultimate intimate moment is marketable and frictionless.

The trade in data-households

Data-households are traded between corporations (like Quad, Google, Amazon etc.) for promotional targeting. Another B2B service in the advertising and marketing space is offered by Simplifi, a US advertising technology company. It promotes its ‘Addressable Targeting’ product in the following way: ‘Simplifi’s Addressable Targeting puts over 126 million US households within your reach at a 90%+ match rate’ (Simplifi, 2024a, website). Household addresses have always been useful for direct mail and it is not new for marketing and data companies to be compiling and sharing home addresses. What is new, however, is how this data point can be collated with hundreds of thousands of other data points to profile the intimate life of a household. Data collected about households provides the different actors in the promotional industries more personalised and accurate information for promotional targeting. In particular,

it offers granular detail for segmenting data-households and its inhabitants. It profiles data-households according to consumer behaviours and, as we will see, along the lines of age, class, race and gender. It is through these processes of profiling and segmentation that predictions are forecast in order to speculate over people's future behaviours.¹

The kinds of household data held by Quad and Simplifi differ. Quad appears to gather its addresses from other direct mail sources; in other words, people who may have consented at some point to having their addresses held by a first or third party: their strategy 'leans on verified or verifiable sources from materials that households are already receiving in the mail, building around already known audiences' (Quad, 2024a). In contrast, Simplifi infers addresses through GPS and geo-fencing data. Its website explains that its company offers a 'household-level targeting technology'. This combines 'GPS and platline data with geo-fencing technology that lets you customize your targeting down to a specific household address' (Simplifi, 2024b, webpage). The data that Simplifi holds is extracted, for example, when one opens up an app – like Spotify – so that specific location becomes proprietary data. If you have Spotify as your 'intimate expert' or 'companion', then Simplifi is most likely tracking your online and offline behaviours for its targeting services.

As well as accuracy, a data-household also offers significant relational life data. This could be relations within the household between people, animals and technologies. But it could also be the household's relation with its community, neighbourhood and beyond. To return to Quad's report its President is quoted as saying:

You only have one place you call home – and home gives you a real insight into people ... Your address tells you about people and their passions. It tells you what matters in the community. If you tell me where someone lives, I can tell you a lot about them. (Quad, 2024a, p. 5)

The data-household provides a rich tapestry of data – and not just because the trade in data-households can make corporations rich. Whether the household is a single occupancy, a familial unit, shared tenancy plus pets, mortgaged-and-married – or a combination of all these – the data-household is in relation to a multitude of other human and non-human actors. As Quad notes, people start and end their days at home and they usually shop within a 20-minute radius (Quad, 2024b, p. 4). The home is also increasingly where paid work happens (and of course plenty of unpaid labour). Data is captured through the smart phones and the

trackers located therein that move in and out of homes, as well as the data passed through domestic broadband and shared devices. Data is also extracted through specific apps that are addressed to household management: Amazon Household, Google Families, Facebook Home, as well as security AI or remote lighting apps, or chore-management apps, sex toys and other smart technologies (Strengers and Kennedy, 2020). Data is also collected through doorbells such as Amazon's Ring (Crawford, 2021), property apps, thermostats such as Google's Nest (Zuboff, 2019), and of course voice assistants such as Alexa and Siri who collect what they hear for parent companies and third parties (Turow, 2021). We can also include food preparation services, postal services and other forms of household deliveries.

These relations can be captured in multiple ways where data is stored, including geo-fencing where one's exact geographic location is found when you open a supermarket app to check for discounts (Einstein, 2017). Or is shared from Experian's massive data set which includes loyalty cards (Turow, 2017). To know an address is to extract granular detail around intimate life and relationships, but also about private and public service providers whose data is either publicly available or privately shared. This includes collated direct mail sources, electoral roll, building permissions, council tax, utilities, house prices, financial instruments, neighbourhoods, communities, schools, surgeries, roads, public transport, social services, court records, census data, and so on. This combination of personal and public information creates an intimate profile, which is part of marketers' strategy to forge postdigital intimate entanglements with a household. The more knowledge marketers have about households so the promotional strategies can be more targeted, tuned and personal.

Personalisation

Data-households can put marketers 'back in control' because of the accuracy of an address. A major problem for businesses involved in the online advertising and marketing ecosystem is the meaningfulness of the data available. The promotional industries involved in online advertising have an extensive supply chain, and there are multiple organisations providing services – and making money from these services – at different points in the chain. This includes organisations involved in measuring the success of campaigns, tech firms and platforms, as well as the advertising exchanges, publisher services, data-processing systems, private equity

and venture capital firms, internal and external regulators and fraudsters, among others (Braun and Eklund, 2019, p. 6; see also Jounce Media). It includes Google, Amazon and Bytedance (who own TikTok) who are the biggest advertisers in the world, to those businesses who piggyback on these platforms for advertising, PR and marketing campaigns.

Businesses involved in the promotional industries want identifiable data points so they can be better attuned to the people they are targeting. This is important if there are masses of data being extracted and processed in the extensive supply chains of the promotional industries. Promotional technologies continue to see the growth of 'low quality' and fraudulent advertising processes. The complexity, capacity and confusion of advertising technologies – including the massive amounts of data to be processed – are leveraged by hoax publishers, fraudulent advertisers and fake traffic (e.g. bots) who mimic human users (Braun, 2023, p. 266). There are also risks to a brand's reputation or 'safety' if a brand cannot control where their advertisements are going to appear.

In this context, a household address is, as Quad states, 'one of the few reliable constants'. Companies in this promotional space are anxious about privacy regulations as well as people's concerns about surveillance. Quad reassures other businesses that 'device standards can reset and privacy regulations can keep spreading ... through it all, there's just one place we call home' (Quad, 2024b, p. 3). The reasons why marketers might want to get 'back in control' (as Quad states above) is because of the contemporary struggles around privacy, consent and surveillance. Martech is vying for control in an increasingly regulated industry where GDPR and other forms of legislation (including at a state level in the US) are attempting to regulate for more individual autonomy in these surveillance structures. In other words, that people are – in theory – able to consent for their data to be processed. But companies like Quad are also vying for control in an era of monopoly platforms which are attempting to own and control the data that they track on their platforms, creating so-called 'walled gardens'. I return to this point below.

The current drive for 'personalisation' and 'identity resolution' (advertising jargon for connecting data to an identifiable person) is also a result of major advertisers and publishers like Google threatening since 2019 (when legislation such as GDPR came into full force) to extinguish third-party cookies. Cookies are bits of code dropped into our devices by hundreds of thousands of businesses in the promotional technologies to track data. If Google succeeds businesses like Simplifi, for example, will no longer be able drop cookies on users' devices if they are using Google services as all the data captured will belong to Google (Google has

brokered a deal with Android to be the default browser). If it succeeds, Google will have a monopoly over personal data, whereas other corporations will not be able to adequately capture people's online activities. This has implications for the postdigital intimacies that Martech forges.

Patriarchal architectures

The digital advertising system – through which the data-household is processed and shared – is complex and vast, as has been shown. But how are these data-households processed? Or rather: how is all this captured data made sense of in order to construct these data bundles which are then traded? Significantly, data-households, like data-bodies or data subjects, are 'controlled exclusively by the environment they live in' (Lee and Toliver, 2017). The multiple procedures of data processing mean that data-households are decontextualised and dehumanised in order to, in Carmi's words, 'package and repackage us in various *networks*' (Carmi, 2021, p. 16). This decontextualisation and dehumanisation is deeply problematic, not least because 'it becomes impossible to apply norms that are appropriate to us, and instead, norms are enforced on us' (Carmi, 2021, p. 13).

Like any data point, the household is not a neutral category. The household, in particular, as a social and economic organisation – as a unit of governance – has a long history (Grewal, 2020). And this past-in-present (Gilroy, 1993) is pertinent here when thinking through what is at stake in the trade in data-households. Ideologies of the ideal household have been crucial in reproducing structures of oppression. As Hortense Spillers (1987) famously argued in her essay 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book' the nuclear family is an ideological and disciplinary institution deeply implicated by histories of White supremacy and racist violence. The work of Patricia Hill Collins (1989) reveals how the centrality of the imaginary of the White middle-class family reinforces raced, gendered and classed systems of oppression, as well as how the constitutive limits of personhood are prescribed therein. This imaginary of the family persists, even if it is continuously contested as it is in contemporary US reproductive politics (Briggs, 2017) or in imagining alternative forms of kinship and home (hooks, 1999; Lewis, 2022). Patriarchal logics can be found in legislation and policy that addresses families (Cooper, 2017; Jensen, 2018).

If we turn to the scholarship of Imani Perry, she frames the household imaginary as a 'patriarchal architecture' (Perry, 2018). Perry argues

that the household imaginary is a legitimate social grouping under White supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2016), a grouping that reproduces its structures of oppression at an intimate level. Perry grounds her theorisation in the philosophy of enlightenment thinker John Locke who articulated the founding values of liberalism. Locke was a key figure in entrenching the ideal liberal household formation. In his *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke asks his audience to think of ‘a master of a family with all these subordinate relations of wife, children, servants, and slaves, united under the domestic rule of a family’. He compares ‘the master of a family’ to a monarch, arguing that the master ‘has a very distinct and differently limited power’ (Locke, 1689, p. 86). The master is the patriarch of the household, and the other people are differentially striated beneath him.

Through this household imaginary, Perry examines the history of personhood, of what it means to be a full person. The enlightenment household reveals people in a hierarchical (and surveillant) relationship that is brought into being and upheld through legislation; legislation that determined who and what constituted a full or proper person. In other words, who was legislated to own property rather than be property. Examining Lockean ideas of personhood, Perry notes that there is ‘an embedded deception’ and ‘violence’ in how categories of sex, race and class are constructed, and then presented as essential. It is a form of coercion: ‘They are philosophical fictions matching legal ones’ which then ‘instruct how the person would be treated’ (Perry, 2018, p. 55).

The liberal household is a predatory architecture or paradigm that continues to exist (and be resisted) as an organising social principle for capitalist White supremacy. These patriarchal architectures identified by Perry and other scholars haunt the trade in data-households, and thus the constitution of personhood. Although the households sought by advertising and marketing technologies are not all White, male-dominated or heteronormative, the enlightenment hierarchies of race and gender continue to operate in the promotional industries. They operate through the processes in which bundles of data are extracted and aggregated to speculate about future behaviours. Not least because the founders of these surveillant companies forging intimacies with people who constitute a household are White men! This is true for Quad, Simplifi, Meta and Google-Alphabet.

In our book *The New Patriarchs of Digital Capitalism* we found that the patriarchal architectures of the Lockean household, including the White heteronormative family as an idealised patriarchal unit, were productive for making sense of the ideological work and storytelling that

we found in how the platform founders and CEOs were legitimated. The traditional American household structure re-appeared at many different scales. The men we were looking at – including Meta’s Mark Zuckerberg, Google-Alphabet’s Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, Space X’s Elon Musk – owned their companies through exotic stock options that meant they were effectively heads of the households. And if they didn’t, they ran them as if they were. Their workforces were – and are – uncannily organised along hierarchical lines of gender, class and race. And their products also notoriously reproduce racialised, gendered, classed systems (Benjamin, 2019; Lopez, 2022). To give just one illustration that is pertinent to this argument: investigating technologies for households specifically, Yolande Strengers and Jenny Kennedy argue that smart home devices such as voice assistants are designed in male-dominated industries. They are forged to carry out ‘wife work’, thus reproducing the feminised and racialised labour of the 1950s housewife (Strengers and Kennedy, 2020; see also Goulden, 2019). Below, I explore how the inequalities of the liberal household are reproduced in the form of discriminatory profiling by automated advertising pertaining to zip codes – how intimate data is processed through patriarchal architectures as part of a promotional loop.

Discriminatory profiling

What does it mean that equalities legislation is not centred – or even seen as a starting point – in the speculative algorithms of those businesses trading in data-households? More than this, what does it mean for postdigital intimacies that it is actively ignored in its opaque black-box processes? In the UK it is against the Equality Act 2010 to discriminate against someone because of a protected characteristic. These protected characteristics include age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation. The Equality Act 2010 brought together various other pieces of legislation which had been fought for by feminists, anti-racists, disability and queer activists, among other protestors campaigning for full personhood to those experiencing discrimination. In the US it is illegal to discriminate against people with protected characteristics in the context of employment, education, housing, as well as access to public amenities like shops, restaurants and houses. These laws came in to being after multiple sorts of struggle including persistent campaigning from minority groups, such as the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

It is notable that class is missing from anti-discrimination law, when the intersections of class with other protected characteristics significantly reproduces inequalities.

Typically, platforms like Facebook are deeply secretive and resistant to auditing from outside groups like journalists or academics. More egregiously, they cite immunity to discriminatory content under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 in the US. This means that they cannot be considered publishers or advertisers and therefore, as tech companies, are not responsible for content on their platforms. In effect, they have formed public spaces and infrastructures that are immune from legislation that – in theory, if not in practice – protects people's personhood. Silicon Valley corporations, including Meta and Google-Alphabet, have been exposed as being discriminatory multiple times (e.g. [Sylvain, 2018](#)). To state just one example, Google has been exposed as reproducing racial stereotypes in their ads as well as discrimination through blocking articles on racism ([Mak, 2020](#); [Sweeney, 2013](#)). Google's algorithms and technologies have been criticised by investigative journalists, academics and lawyers (e.g. [Noble, 2018](#)). In one court case, investigative journalists discovered that Facebook was selling housing-related ads that excluded groups such as African Americans and Jews, as well as serving job ads that excluded users by age and gender ([Gillum and Tobin, 2019](#)).

Charlton McIlwain demonstrates how racial inequalities are produced in online environments through racially segregated traffic patterns which lead to segregated destinations. These destinations have disparate valuations or rankings, for example, in Google's Search engine results ([McIlwain, 2017](#), p. 1087; see also [Noble, 2018](#)). In a report titled 'Targeted Ads: The Infrastructure for Algorithmic Discrimination' for the Center for Critical Race + Digital Studies, [Matthew Bui, Ho-Chun Herbert Chang and McIlwain \(2022\)](#) explore how the advertising technology ecosystem reproduces racial targeting. [Bui et al. \(2022\)](#) do this through using US zip codes (postcodes) as a proxy for race, to see if this strategy mirrors what specific advertisers were also doing. Note how zip codes are a key data point constituting a data-household. Using data from available third-party data sets – available to all businesses using automated advertising including publishers and advertisers – they found that it was possible to infer the probability of a user's race or ethnicity, and target the ads with that information. In addition, they focused on ads relating to the categories of housing, education and employment – all of which are protected by US anti-discrimination law. The authors asked: How do online ads discriminate within and across racialised communities? ([Bui](#)

et al., 2022, p. 22). What they found was that ads relating to education, housing and employment *are* targeting according to race. This means that currently, advertising technologies extend, magnify and obscure predatory and racist outcomes ‘at a greater scale and speed’. What we are seeing are ‘processes of racial control’ being replicated, reproduced and scaled in digital worlds (Bui et al., 2022, p. 29). The more personalised the data – or, the more connected at the level of household – the deeper these processes of racial control.

Segmenting households

Another example of how intimate data is processed using the logics of the patriarchal architectures is in the algorithms for Google Ads. To launch a Google Ads campaign through Google Search or YouTube, the primary data points that Google offer create and reveal a data-household that is haunted by the nuclear family and its intersectional structures. On the Google Ads webpage, clicking on ‘Audiences’ brings up a series of demographic tabs that indicate gender binaries and class. To set up a video campaign one can choose from the following categories:

- Age: ‘18–24’, ‘25–34’, ‘35–44’, ‘45–54’, ‘55–64’, ‘65+’ and ‘Unknown’.
- Gender: ‘Female’, ‘Male’ and ‘Unknown’.
- Household income: ‘Top 10%’, ‘11–20%’, ‘21–30%’, ‘31–40%’, ‘41–50%’, ‘Lower 50%’ and ‘Unknown’.
- Parental status: ‘Parent’, ‘Not a parent’ and ‘Unknown’. (Google Ads, 2024)

This household income data is either extracted from Google’s own propriety data, plus third-party data. Google might also *infer* this data based on the data that they do have. (Note, presumably because of GDPR, it is not possible to select according to household income in Europe.) Notwithstanding that age and gender are protected characteristics, it is revealing that there are only two gender categories available, thus reproducing the gender binary. Google Ads is not signifying ‘Unknown’ here as a catch-all for non-binary, queer or trans identities. Rena Bivens and others have observed the difference between how users are offered multiple gender categories on the Facebook interface, e.g. sign-up pages or profile, but advertisers were offered only two and non-binary was rolled into a binary gender (Bivens and Haimson, 2016).

It is also notable that the value of a data-household is evidenced through household income. What we see here in Google Ads is which social structures and identifiers are deemed as valuable for ad targeting in Google's services, but also what kinds of normative data points businesses are seeking for their campaigns: for example, high income mid-life father. The 'parental status' category can also reveal whether there are children in the household. As you can see from the 'Age' category, under-18s cannot be served ads. However, and significantly, the 'unknown' can be a means to target children as this category skews towards under-18s (Morris, Murphy and McCarthy, 2024). For example, an Instagram campaign targeting 13- to 17-year-old YouTube users deliberately targeted the category 'unknown' through a 'secret deal' between Google and Meta (Morris, Murphy and McCarthy, 2024). Indeed, a data-household is a useful way to circumvent legislation, policies and best practice regarding targeting children.

However, it is not just household income that can be a signifier of wealth – so can homeownership, and homeownership is another value-laden data point categorising and segmenting the data-households. This is another reason why an address can be such a lucrative and meaningful data point. There is publicly and privately available data detailing homeownership in an area (e.g. property apps' information about a property's surrounding area). In many Anglophone countries, including the UK, real estate is *the main* driver of the economy. As Lisa Adkins et al. (2020) argue in *The Asset Economy* these Anglophone countries are moving away from societies based on wages and instead a society dependent on assets – primarily property – as a key signifier of class. It is increasingly assets that determine class mobility (or lack of) because assets are passed on through families as inherited wealth, rather than redistributed through more socialist political systems. The home-as-property or the property that is rented out also becomes a key part of the intimate information that bundles a data-household, becoming a key signifier of its value as well as the value of the people who form it, including the children. The household is, after all, a site of social reproduction.

A person's value becomes concretised, commodified and reproduced through a data-household. For example, the promotional industries seek a household's value to a campaign according to an aggregation of data points. Beverly Skeggs and Simon Yuill (2019) discovered in their research into Facebook's trackers that the well-networked middle-class person provided much value to first and third parties because of the behaviours and content she shared. The less networked, disabled

participant who was on benefits was tracked less because she was perceived as having less value. Nevertheless, she did have value for those businesses involved in the marketing and advertising of debt. As Skeggs points out, she ‘was targeted for her lack of value. She was sold for financialization’ (Skeggs, 2020). This kind of debt further locks people who bear the burden of household debt – primarily working class women in the UK and, to a greater extent, Black women in the US – into impoverished positions (Skeggs, 2020).

When the promotional industries enter the deeply contested space of the household imaginary in this postdigital intimate context, it is especially pertinent to investigate what might be happening with the data captured, extracted, categorised and profiled from the daily flow of household life. Despite claims to social justice that is popular for many businesses in the branding, advertising and marketing space, this cannot be their central motivation. For example, Simplifi’s website promises to expand ‘opportunity to all by building a more equitable future in advertising’ (2024c). In the US, a corporation has a legal responsibility to its bottom line, but also the business of promotion is to convert people into consumers not to agitate for social justice. The trade in data-households will include households’ non-traditional formations, non-White people, non-heteronormative relationships, but how do advertising technologies process this data without recourse to the reproduction of inequalities? More than this, how might the promotional industries, including platforms, be *countering* gendered and raced oppressions? To give one example, as McIlwain, argues, the Civil Rights Movement including the subsequent legislation that incurred only formed part of *the beginning* of Black people being recognised as full persons – including having equal rights to employment, education and housing. It might be obvious to state, but Simplifi (whose founders are two White men, with a leadership team which includes two women out of six – all White) cannot be doing these things if they are not in the active process of mitigating and resisting ongoing forms of oppression.

Conclusion

In one of its promotional reports, Quad states: ‘We start with the household ... then we figure out where they live and what they look like, how can we talk to them’ (Quad, 2024b, p. 6). This is a pertinent statement for a number of reasons. One, the report on racial targeting mentioned above reveals how some of this ‘figuring out’ is done by advertising and

marketing technologies, and to what purpose. Second, it reveals some of the strategies that marketers use to forge frictionless postdigital intimacies with the person-consumers they are surveilling. In the promotional industries (and the other state and private surveillance bodies that also depend on these infrastructures), the data-households are aggregated and categorised from past information in order to predict future behaviours. It is this prediction around a data-household's value for a promotional campaign that is crucial to note, because it is 'the prediction that entraps us in our structural classifications of gender, race, and class' (Skeggs, 2020). This is what is at stake in the trade in data-households.

Intersectional structures of oppression, naturalised by the liberal household, continue to circumscribe the limits of personhood along the lines of race, class and gender. This becomes particularly pertinent when thinking through how the advertising and marketing technologies trading in data-households circumvent legislation that was originally aimed to redress the inequalities and oppressive structures wrought by patriarchal architectures. The data-households trading in the promotional ecosystem might not be the households of the White, middle-class, nuclear family, but this cultural categorisation and its hierarchies might be used to segment and target audiences.

To conclude, what is the distance between the lived intimate experiences of the household and the systems of processing and trading of data-households between promotional businesses? This is not an easy question to answer because it is so difficult to know what happens to our data and what speculative logics are being applied to it; it is not explained to us where we are being nudged. However, taking into account the above promotional examples combined with the extensive scholarship and journalism in this area, it is clear that patriarchal architectures are re-entrenching themselves in the intimate relationships forged between marketing technologies and people. Considering the political economy of the promotional industries – including its gendered, racialised and classed hierarchies, combined with the hidden and complex data-processing systems which coerce people into consuming more, it is troubling. The questions of surveillance are not just about privacy, they are also about the kinds of frictionless 'companionship' experiences that the promotional industries are creating with people and to what purpose. To return to the work of Eleanor Carmi, she argues 'Data are us, our stories and our contextual experiences – even if many times they do not accurately represent who we are, what we think and what we want – they are still part of us' (Carmi, 2021, p. 11). What does it mean that

marketers are ‘back in control’ of these stories, experiences and bodies? Or that they are struggling to control the radical potential of households to reproduce the social?

Note

1. While recognising the global digital divide where not all people have access to the internet; also known as ‘digital exclusion’. For example, it is reported that 2.1 million people in the UK (4%) of the population are offline and 10% of these do not have access to a device (Tudor, 2024). This means that although households might not be postdigital in the sense of having smart devices, they can still be data-households – albeit less lucrative for the promotional industries; although useful for serving ads for loans. See below.

References

- Adkins, L., Cooper, M. and Konings, M. (2020). *The Asset Economy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race After Technology: Abolitionist tools for the new Jim Code*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bivens, R. and Haimson, O.L. (2016). Baking gender into social media design: How platforms shape categories for users and advertisers. *Social Media + Society*, 2, 4. doi: [10.1177/2056305116672486](https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116672486)
- Braun, J.A. (2023). Normal accidents in the digital age: How programmatic advertising became a disaster. In E. West and M.P. McAllister (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Advertising and Promotional Culture*, 2nd Edition. London: Routledge.
- Braun, J.A. and Eklund, J.L. (2019). Fake news, real money: Ad tech platforms, profit-driven hoaxes, and the business of journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 7, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1556314>
- Briggs, L. (2017). *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From welfare reform to foreclosure to Trump*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bui, M, Chang, H.H. and Mcllwain, C. (2022). Targeted ads: The infrastructure of algorithmic discrimination. Center for Critical Race + Digital Studies.
- Carmi, E. (2021). A feminist critique to digital consent. *Seminar.net*, 17(2).
- Cooper, M. (2017). *Family Values: Between neoliberalism and the new social conservatism*. New York: Zone Books.
- Couldry, N. and Mejias, U.A. (2019). *The Costs of Connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Crawford, K. (2021). *Atlas of AI*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Darmody, A. and Zwick, D. (2020). Manipulate to empower: Hyper-relevance and the contradictions of marketing in the age of surveillance capitalism. *Big Data & Society*, 7, 1. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2053951720904112>
- Einstein, M. (2017). *Advertising: What everyone needs to know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gillum, J. and Tobin, A. (2019). Facebook won’t let employers, landlords, or lenders discriminate in ads anymore. *ProPublica*, 19 March. <https://www.propublica.org/article/facebook-ads-discrimination-settlement-housing-employment-credit>
- Gilroy, P. (1993). *Small Acts: Thoughts on the politics of Black cultures*. London: Serpent’s Tail.
- Google Ads (2024). About demographic targeting. <https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/2580383?hl=en>
- Goulden, M. (2019). ‘Delete the family’: platform families and the colonisation of the smart home. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(7), 903–920. doi: [10.1080/1369118X.2019.1668454](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1668454)
- Grewal, K. (2020). Resisting the violence of common sense. Feminist Review Blog Special Series, titled Confronting ‘The Household’. <https://femrev.wordpress.com/2020/05/26/resisting-the-violence-of-common-sense/>
- Hill Collins, P. (1989). A comparison of two works on Black family life. *Signs*, 14(4), 875–884.
- hooks, b. (1999). *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End.

- hooks, b. (2016). Understanding Patriarchy. *No Borders: Louisville's Radical Lending Library*. <http://imagenoborders.org/pdf/zines/UnderstandingPatriarchy.pdf>
- Jensen, T. (2018). *Parenting the Crisis: The cultural politics of parent-blame*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Jounce Media. <https://jouncemediacom/>
- Karakayali, N., Kostem, B. and Galip, I. (2018). Recommendation systems as technologies of the self: Algorithmic control and the formation of music taste. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 35(2), 3–24. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0263276417722391?journalCode=tcsa>
- Lee, U. and Toliver, D. (2017). Building consentful tech. Zine. <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpgclclefindmkaj/https://togethernet.org/assets/accessibility/ConsentfulTechZineTextVersion.pdf>
- Lewis, S. (2022). *Abolish the Family: A manifesto for care and liberation*. London: Verso.
- Lopez, L.K. (2022). *Race and Digital Media: An introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Mak, A. (2020). Google's advertising platform is blocking articles about racism. *Slate*, 13 August. <https://slate.com/technology/2020/08/googles-ad-exchange-blocking-articles-about-racism.html>
- Martech (2024). What is martech and marketing technology? <https://martech.org/what-is-martech/>
- McIlwain, C. (2017). Racial formation, inequality, and the political economy of web traffic. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20, 7.
- Morris, S., Murphy, H. and McCarthy, H. (2024). Google and Meta struck secret ads deal to target teenagers. *Financial Times*, 8 August. https://www.ft.com/content/b3bb80f4-4e01-4ce6-8358-f4f8638790f8?accessToken=zwAGHykwAWVwkdOzu4D0TgFM5tODWPT4Y4eQ-A.MEQCIAEQhWJ5uBl4Te9S2xqjKV6g5fAOtoD3F6fq4ryzVKxAiAKcp_dGbtcrmvVvJ2RTdjT-q26MmvCaCixmUHX3Stxzg&sharetype=gift&token=d7f8c22e-e54b-496d-92cc-1ca4f2b5a78b
- Noble, S.U. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Perry, I. (2018). *Vexy Thing: On gender and liberation*. Duke University Press.
- Quad (2024a). The data you're missing: 9 truths about the new world of data-informed marketing. <https://www.quad.com/insights/health-addressability-data-guide>
- Quad (2024b). Home is where the data is: How marketers can navigate the Great Data upheaval with a game-changing source of consumer intel. <https://www.quad.com/insights/home-is-where-the-data-is>
- Simplifi (2024a). website page: Addressable advertising solutions. <https://simplifi.fi/our-solutions/media-buying-solutions/programmatic-media/addressable>
- Simplifi (2024b). Who we are. <https://simplifi.fi/about-us/who-we-are>
- Skeggs, B. (2020). Algorithms for 'hers': in whose interests? *Feminist Media Studies*, 20(5), 733–736. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14680777.2020.1783798>
- Skeggs, B. and Yuill, S. (2019). Subjects of value and digital personas: Reshaping the bourgeois subject, unhinging property from personhood. *Subjectivity*, 12, 82–99. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41286-018-00063-4>
- Spillers, H.J. (1987). Mama's baby, papa's maybe: An American grammar book. *Diacritics*, 17(2), 64–81.
- Strengers, Y. and Kennedy, J. (2020). *The Smart Wife: Why Siri, Alexa, and other smart home devices need a feminist reboot*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sweeney, L. (2013). Discrimination in online ad delivery: Google ads, Black names and White names, racial discrimination, and click advertising. *ACM Queue*, 11, 3.
- Sylvain, O. (2018). Discriminatory designs on user data, 18-02 Knight First Amend. Inst. (1 April 2018). <https://knightcolumbia.org/content/discriminatory-designs-user-data>
- Tudor, S. (2024). Digital exclusion in the UK: Communications and Digital Committee report. House of Lords Library, 30 January. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/digital-exclusion-in-the-uk-communications-and-digital-committee-report/>
- Turow, J. (2017). *The Aisles Have Eyes: How retailers track your shopping, strip your privacy, and define your power*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Turow, J. (2021). *The Voice Catchers: How marketers listen in to exploit your feelings, your privacy, and your wallet*. New Haven: Yale Press University Press.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. London: Profile Books.

Migrant domestic women workers' cartographies of care: a postdigital feminist scoping review

Zoe Hurley

(In)visibilities of care

Considerable research and policy attention have been focused on the exploitation of migrant workers in relation to the structural sources of their vulnerability ([Gardner, 2011](#); [Human Rights Watch, 2010](#)). Yet, alongside these macro-structural responses, analysis could be deepened through exploration of migrant women's engagements with technologies ([Gajjala, 2014](#)) and how these structure intimate relations. To comprehend migrant domestic workers' long histories of migration and complex cartographies of care and technological entanglements, a postdigital feminist framework will be developed in this chapter to review pertinent literature regarding migrant domestic labour in the Arabian Gulf. This theoretical review will both explore and challenge conventional notions of migrant domestic care-giving beyond neoliberal, ethnocentric or universalising parameters while assessing the postdigital feminist framework. Considering the enduring (in)visibilities of migrant women's care, the chapter asks: what is the scope of postdigital feminism to conceive of domestic women helpers' cartographies of care in the Arabian Gulf?

To address this issue, the chapter will draw on the pertinent analytic nodes of postdigital theory. Second, the postdigital feminist framework will be outlined and applied to literature relevant to migrant domestic women workers in the Gulf. The main argument of the chapter is the need for malleable decolonial, anti-capitalist and intersectional frameworks to

conceive of how migrant women's cartographies of care are entangled within merging offline/online postdigital third spaces (Bhabha, 1994; Hurley, 2022).

Questions of care

Although there are approximately 6.6 million female domestic workers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, their so-called low-skilled labour of care tends not to be recognised as work, gain fair remuneration or legal protection (D'Souza, 2010). Some of the reasons for why domestic care work is seemingly undervalued relates to the ephemeral and traditionally gendered components of care. Caring has been typically defined by western feminist sociologists as the unpaid work of kin within the private domain of their family (Graham, 1991). Gender is seen as the dominant system of social relations which shapes the organisation of such care. Thus, rather than a broad structural analysis of everyday reproduction within families, early iterations of feminist sociological research on caring tended to be restricted to one form of care (unpaid care by relatives) and one structural division (gender). However, the way in which racial and class divisions are embedded in everyday reproductive work was largely eclipsed. Conversely, studies of the histories of domestic service highlight how the social divisions of race, ethnicity, class, as well as gender, have been constituted through women's experiences of looking after families (Jones, 1985).

In social policy research, Gulf nations, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Oman, are often referred to as rentier states because their economies rely heavily on revenues derived from the 'rent' of natural resources, particularly oil and gas, to foreign markets (Ahmed, 2016). Migrant workers play a crucial role in the economies of rentier Gulf states which depend on the steady stream of low-wage employees. Under the Gulf Cooperation Council member nations' so-called *kafala* system, migrant workers are essentially 'sponsored' by their employers, who are mostly private companies or individuals looking for sources of cheap labour (Robinson, 2022). Under this system, a local citizen or local company (the *kafeel*) must sponsor foreign workers for their work visas and residency to be valid. This means that an individual's right to work and legal presence is dependent on his or her employer. With tight restrictions on changing employers, this dependency renders workers vulnerable to exploitation.

It has been used in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Yet, both Bahrain and Qatar claim to have abolished the system, though critics say reforms are poorly enforced and do not amount to abolition (Robinson, 2022). This body of social policy literature therefore implies that domestic women workers are paradoxically defined as both autonomous social actors, in terms of their relationship to the Gulf state, as well as pseudo family members who are both tethered to and deeply intimate with their sponsors. Identification of these complex ties illustrates disjuncture between state articulations of migrant labourers, as free agents responding to demand in a global marketplace, yet also their status as individuals who develop situated and emotional obligations to their employers' families (Kathiravelu, 2012).

The chapter seeks to refine understanding of systems of domestic care in the Gulf context which are underpinned by the import of, not only migrant domestic labour of women from across the Global South, but also the infrastructures of technology and social media platforms used in recruitment (Hurley, 2023a). This could help to develop more granular insights into how the salaried, classed, racialised and gendered modes of migrant domestic work involve complex, technological and ambivalent cartographies of care. In a similar vein, Chatzidakis and Littler (2022) advocate that the burden of the responsibility of care-giving should be considered regardless of care givers' nationalities, race, sexual or class orientations. This opens up the dialogue on care to consider it as a vital capability while locating it within specific yet uneven sociocultural relationships. Building on this perspective, we can consider that care is not only highly gendered but also structured by class, race and geopolitical mobilities. Migrant domestic workers typically hail from South East Asia, South Asia and Africa and move to the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman, to live away from their families and home countries for years and even decades at a time (Ahmed, 2016). In addition to long hours and tough physical labour, domestic care work involves the complex provision of intimacies, including taking care of employers' families, children, senior citizens, pets, homes and gardens. According to Tayah and Assaf's (2018) social policy paper on the future of care work in the Gulf, caring jobs require social interaction, kindness, judgement and intimacy, and they cannot be automated or entirely measured. The next section will turn to postdigital theory to suggest how it might conceive of care in more nuanced terms.

Postdigital enquiry, contexts of care and feminisms

Postdigital theory is not an entirely new paradigm but a broad, critical interdisciplinary tradition that is underpinned by the humanities and social sciences: economics, regional and critical theory, political science, sociology, geography and others to critically assess the contradictions of platform capitalism in an increasingly algorithmic world (Hall, 2013; Jandrić, 2023, see also the introduction to this collection). Carrying out thematic literature searches in Google Scholar and Web of Science indicates that the ‘postdigital’, ‘feminism(s)’ and ‘postdigital feminisms’ represent an eclectic field of critical scholarship, modes of critical enquiry and the disruption of the systemic gender inequalities of the postdigital condition (Deepwell, 2020; Hurley, 2023c). However, ‘postdigital’, ‘feminist’ and ‘postdigital feminist’ theory are not synonymous and to carry out a postdigital feminist review it is important to not conflate their differing epistemological stances.

Postdigital theory is a diverse critical paradigm which focuses on sociality, human encounters and affect in an era in which we are routinely disembodied and entangled within technologies, Wi-Fi, digital infrastructures, mobile devices, social media applications, online performances, and so on, where these digital technologies are being taken-for-granted (Savin-Baden, 2021). Since a number of social actors in the Global North are enmeshed within everyday technological infrastructures, postdigital theory raises pertinent questions about citizenship science for conducting postdigital research (Jandrić, MacKenzie and Knox, 2022). The notion of citizenship science is considered fruitful for placing interlocutors’ perspectives at the centre of research as well as casting a critical eye on platform capitalism’s encroachment of all aspects of life, including education, commerce, sociality, the body and intimacy. Jandrić, MacKenzie and Knox (2022) reflect on the expanding community of postdigital researchers and respond to the rapid growth of postdigital research by considering what binds the theoretical community together in terms of methodologies, genealogies, challenges, opportunities and future perspectives of postdigital research. This comparative approach advocates less-mainstream philosophical approaches, including Indigenous knowledge, while acknowledging that the meaning of ‘Indigenous’ is itself unstable.

Similarly, other postdigital scholars propose that postdigital approaches may draw on a ‘theoretical kaleidoscope’ of perspectives and multiple lenses through which we might ‘examine and critique citizen science and humanities in postdigital contexts and from postdigital

perspectives' (Jopling et al., 2024, p. 1). Additionally, postdigital research is committed to collaboration, dialogue and co-creation, as well as disrupting the tenets and approaches of traditional academic research. In particular, it suggests that postdigital transformations in contemporary societies are both changing citizen science and humanities and making it more important (Jandrić, MacKenzie and Knox, 2022). However, although these postdigital theoretical values appear broad, eclectic and dialogic, they could assume normative ideals of citizenship, Indigenous knowledge and positionality. Conversely, migrants in the region are part of a transnational precariat rather than necessarily indigenous citizens of the Gulf. Hence their positionalities can be ephemeral, tenuous and constantly in process while embedded within the region's colonial and postcolonial histories. To consider some of the possible postdigital epistemological challenges for studying migrant domestic workers in the Gulf, I will briefly describe the regional context.

Since domestic workers in the Gulf are diaspora working outside their countries of citizenship, Jandrić, MacKenzie and Knox's (2022) axiological ideals of Indigenous positionality are not immediately applicable to migrants working in Gulf contexts. Yet, although migrants in the Gulf are officially counted as temporary residents, they may reside in the region for years, decades or generations. Simultaneously, the concept of citizenship is not universal and cannot be directly translated in Arabic while notions of human rights stem from national rights (Asad, 2003, p. 135). This being the case, categorisation of citizenship can vary from one nation state to another. In Saudi Arabia, for example, 'citizenship' was traditionally organised around families and patrilineal ties, whereas in Qatar, prior to the discovery of oil in the 1940s, the concept of 'citizenship' was loosely defined by tribal affiliations and informal agreements (Ali and Cochrane, 2024). In addition, democracy and support of the state, including subsidised medical care, education and social security, are only available to the Gulf's narrow minority of official citizens (Le Renard, 2021). To develop a framework that could conceive of the differing cartographies of classed, gendered and migrant precarity, care thus requires mapping the dialectic entanglements of domestic intimacies in relation to the technologies, epistemological variations and sociocultural practices of the Gulf context.

According to British sociologist John Urry (2007), the contemporary interpersonal relationships of friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances are defined by mobilities across vast and eclectic terrains of the hybrid geographies, political, economic, social and technological transformations of the twenty-first century. But despite expansive

terrains of connection, Urry (2007) conceives of the uneven forces, scales and sources of capital and disconnection which occur in classed, gendered and racialised terms. Similarly, for Cresswell (2010) these politics of mobility and immobility are being continuously produced through the entanglements and inequalities of physical movement, political representations and practices. Since social and (post)digital inequalities are strongly intertwined, the uptake, incorporation and impact of digital technology also occurs along acutely gendered lines (Hurley, 2023a). Moreover, even while there are many kinds of mobile subjects, including tourists, students, business travellers, refugees, and so on, migrant domestic women workers' increased reliance on digital communication technologies includes benefits, limits and politics of their everyday mobile and immobile positionalities (Cabalquinto and Leurs, 2023). The next section will turn to an overview of the emerging body of post-digital feminist research and methods of enquiry that could be applied to conceive of the technological constellations orchestrating gendered mobilities.

Postdigital feminist framework

Postdigital feminist scholarship is an emerging critical field being developed to conceive of women's lives as gendered practices which are being mapped; rendered (in)visible and sustained by social actors' engagements with technologies across multiple spatial scales, temporalities, digital infrastructures and geopolitical contexts and challenges (Bassett, 2015; Hurley, 2023a). It can also turn to earlier feminist technology studies, like Gajjala's (2014) research which articulates how the intersectional differences underpinning women's technology uses can perpetuate a cross-section of affordances and hyper-inequalities surrounding race, class, religion and gender. Considering the intersectional diversities of technologies within migrant women's lives, I suggest that we require more critical conceptions of migrant domestic women's technological agencies in postdigital terms. Hence, postdigital feminism is potentially not just a framework for thinking about gender but also a decolonial and anti-capitalist axiology.

'Postdigital feminisms' can be defined as an emerging area of enquiry and open-set of critical approaches (Hurley, 2023a). It is argued that this openness facilitates an ongoing series of critical perspectives for articulating the fusion of offline/online phenomena and what this might mean for a range of women, in terms of intersectional

reformulations of time, space, place, self and other (Hurley, 2023a). According to Caroline Bassett (2015), the ways in which our bodies are entangled with technologies, devices and neoliberal metrics are 'a classic feminist preoccupation' (p. 136). Bassett is deeply cynical of the Web 2.0's affordances for women's liberation while suggesting that critical postdigital perspectives raise questions about the internet's newly mediated worlds, environments, subjectivities and temporalities whereby materiality and what constitutes the 'there-ness' of these new situations are ambivalent. Considering that women are far from being a homogenous entity, postdigital feminism could aim to respond to the varying guises of patriarchy, misogyny and subjectification encoded into technologies as well as women's intersectional agencies, networks and practices (Hurley, 2023a). But while postdigital theory is inherently critical, postdigital feminist frameworks can be characterised by an eclecticism which might help to unearth the creative, resistive and radical challenges to hegemonic (in)visibilities of marginalised women. Like postdigital theory, postdigital feminist perspectives thus stem from a range of interdisciplinary approaches, including sociology, education, media and communications, philosophy, technology studies, critical theory and feminism. In addition, it cannot be reduced to a single methodology, static framework or exclusively top-down macro sociological perspective.

Due to its open-endedness, postdigital feminisms could be attuned for conceiving, not only of the ambivalent roles of technology in women's lives, but also the contrasting dimensions of migrant women's differing experiences, varying classes, geopolitical locations, religions, ethnicities, generations and cultures which constitute technological entanglements. The postdigital feminist framework is thus conceived as a form of 'thinking with' to experiment, explore, map and imagine varying onto-epistemologies (St Pierre, 2020). In other words, it could help to conceive of domestic women workers' varying practices of being and knowing as well as theorising ephemeral phenomena such as affect, intimacy and care-giving. To illustrate, a mapping of migrant domestic women workers in the Gulf would include multiple sites, locations, infrastructures, remittance, networks, platforms and communities of care: Gulf states' financial laws; Gulf employees; Gulf communities; home countries and communities; home remittances; postdigital ecologies; platforms, technologies and social media infrastructures; and the interconnections between all these sites.

It is important to emphasise that the wide scope of the migrant domestic women workers' sites of care extends beyond any particular

social media platform, mobile devices, specific applications, technologies or software. Staging of a wide theoretical cartography is therefore necessary to conceive of the multidirectional entanglements of merging offline/online constellations of care. These sites of care occur within the immediate Gulf context, including its financial laws; employers; communities. They also cover migrants' home countries; remittance demands and legacy relationships. Spanning across both these contexts are migrants' uses of technological platforms and social media infrastructures. These sites therefore represent some of the main entities shaping domestic women workers' responsibilities, relationships, localities and temporalities. The connections between these begin to trace the multiple inter-trajectories and entanglements, including the Gulf states' jurisdictions; digital ties and surveillance by Gulf employers; Gulf social networks; connections with their home countries' financial policies and remittances; bonds to families and friends in their countries of origin. This includes their use of a range of platforms, technologies and social media infrastructures within a transnational postdigital ecology.

Mapping these various sites also indicates that while domestic women workers reside in the Gulf, not only are they caring for their employee's family members, but they are also sustaining legacy caregiving and financial remittance for their own families and friends in their countries of origin often via technological ecologies, various platforms, apps and digital labour. For instance, social media platforms like Meta are playing a vital role in sustaining domestic workers' long-distance relationships, via WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook, as well as helping them foster multicultural friendships and networks in the Gulf (Hurley, 2023b). Studies of social media platforms also illustrate financial, emotional, affective, physical and legal interrelationships between domestic women workers' home countries, the Gulf states and platformed capitalism. As a result, postdigital ecologies, including a range of social media platforms, have become integral architectures for domestic women workers' cartographies of care (Hurley and Johnston, 2022). As a paradigm infused by theoretical eclecticism, the postdigital feminist framework being assembled in this scholarly review could consider migrant women beyond the ethnocentric in some forms of western feminist literature or the tacit broad-brush and normative ideals of postdigital theory (Jandrić, MacKenzie and Knox, 2022).

Since postdigital feminisms are an emerging paradigm, devoid of consensus concerning what postdigital feminist theorising consists of, what I draw on here to understand migrant domestic women workers

will not be bound by essentialist notions of migrant domestic women workers' epistemologies, technologies or cartographies of care. While conceding that theoretical openness is a pivotal value of postdigital theory more generally, a postdigital feminist framework can be orientated around the lenses of postdigital feminist analysis (and indeed much feminist analysis more broadly) mentioned above, including: decolonial; anti-capitalist; and intersectional postdigital feminist axiology, to offer specific and nuanced insights.

Analysing a range of studies from this feminist postdigital perspective is designed to articulate domestic women workers' cartographies of care and entanglements with technologies in terms of difference. First, while postcolonial studies could help to consider how intimate domains of care, including sex, sentiment, domestic arrangement and child rearing, feature in the making of racial categories and in the management of imperial rule and/or nation building in the contemporary Gulf context, the decolonial lens is included to disrupt ethnocentric and universalising perspectives of migrant women's lives and Gulf histories preceding, including and exceeding colonialism. Comparative reflection of the politics, histories and broad-scale dynamics with the intimate domains of cultures are vital to reveal what Foucault (2002) referred to as 'the regimes of truth' of imperial epistemological systems (the ways of knowing and establishing truth claims about race and difference on which macro-politics rely) (Stoler, 2001). With these points in mind, postdigital feminist decolonial studies could first disrupt universalising notions of what counts as knowledge, truth and empirical evidence while unearthing the ongoing colonality and the lingering effects of colonialism in sociological knowledge (Meghji, 2021).

Second, the anti-capitalist lens has not been included to imply that capitalism is likely to be dismantled anytime soon but, rather, to offer a critical perspective of neoliberal culture which reduces human lives to logics of the capitalist marketplace, whereby social actors are processed merely as units of labour, profit and commodification (Brown, 2015).

Third, while acknowledging the multifaceted aspects of migrant women's predicaments, the postdigital feminist lens can be applied to conceive of varying positionalities, including class, culture, religion, education, sexuality, race and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1994). These triadic lenses of the framework taken in synthesis can develop an integral decolonial, anti-capitalist and intersectional postdigital feminist perspective. But before applying this framework, specific methods for selecting and conducting the literature will be further discussed.

Postdigital feminist review

Due to the decolonial, anti-capitalist and intersectional axiological concerns of the review, the literature selected was not necessarily based on explicit reference to postdigital feminism. Neither was the review designed to offer an exhaustive overview of migrant scholarship. Conversely, the chosen texts are considered because they are relevant to migrant domestic women workers in the Gulf as well as raising important empirical, epistemological and theoretical issues which can be evaluated through the postdigital feminist framework. As a result, lenses of the framework can be applied in discrete terms as well as in combination to address the central question of the chapter asking, what is the scope of postdigital feminism to conceive of domestic women helpers' cartographies of care in the Arabian Gulf? Findings of the review will be presented in the following section, including aspects of the postdigital relationship between online and offline facets of care.

Facets of care

Studies of migrant and domestic women workers fall under the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, postcolonial, anticolonial and decolonial studies, urban studies, ethnography as well as travel writing (see for instance [Kanna, 2011](#); [Vora, 2013](#)). This scholarship analyses themes related to labour dynamics, social relationships and power hierarchies in postcolonial contexts. As well as hailing from diverse origin countries, each with their own highly diverging set of sociocultural norms and legacy care-giving expectations, domestic women workers endure eclectic experiences, living with varying Gulf and expatriate families. This contextual eclecticism requires recognition that the Gulf region is a diverse context with varying categories of social class, various languages, religions and transnational sociocultural practices ([Hurley and Johnston, 2022](#)).

In terms of offline physical modes of care, although migrant workers make up a significant percentage of the Gulf's population, information varies from publication to publication regarding the number of women from South East Asia (Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia and Cambodia), South Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, India, Bhutan and Sri Lanka) and East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan). Since women's physical care work, including cooking, cleaning and looking after children and the elderly takes place in the perceived privacy of the gendered domestic sphere, it is not always visible nor

can be taken for granted. [Kodoth \(2020\)](#) explains that the discrepancies in these figures surrounding domestic women's care work in the Gulf also results from the statistical invisibility of migrant women which underestimates the flows of so-called 'low-skilled' workers in the region.

Yet, differences of interpretation can also result from variances in theoretical perspective. [Le Renard's \(2021, p. 100\)](#) discussion of western privilege in Dubai raises several pertinent empirical issues, including the oppression and victimisation of domestic women workers within the racial and gendered hierarchies of the Gulf context. But despite the explicit postcolonial perspective, the study is based on a limited sample of a few French upper-middle-class heterosexual families, whom she interviewed on Facebook over a six-week period in Dubai. While this mode of digital ethnography was developed online, it offers thin description of domestic women workers' varying positionalities.

However, while several studies focus on the ethnicities of domestic helpers (see for instance [Blaydes, 2023](#)), they tend not to mention the ethnicities of employers. [Parreñas \(2021, p. 19\)](#) differentiates between the varying types of employers in axiological terms, including differentiating between moral, amoral and immoral ones. [Blaydes' \(2023\)](#) study draws on [Parreñas' \(2021\)](#) extensive research into domestic labour and provides social class differentials of Gulf employers. While inferring that social class categories in the Gulf are not necessarily synonymous with western categorisation, [Blaydes \(2023\)](#) suggests proxy variables for socioeconomic status, including wealth, house size, number of children and polygamous families. [Blaydes \(2023\)](#) suggests that wealthy families with more than three children per household may be excessively demanding employment sites while ones with male heads of household who are divorced or take a second wife may also have certain personality traits that make them less appealing to domestic helpers. Considering specific socioeconomic variables of the Gulf context enables this research to offer more nuanced accounts of domestic workers' care-giving while disrupting universalising notions of social class or family units in western terms. To consider these varying socioeconomic dynamics from a historical perspective, the turn of Indian Ocean scholarship within Gulf studies offers a nuanced decolonial perspective of migration and sociocultural dynamics ([Potter, 2009](#)).

Indian Ocean turn

While Indian Ocean scholarship is not an established sub-genre of post-digital or feminist scholarship, the field recognises that the religiosity, aesthetic hierarchies and multicultural meanings of care in the Gulf

reach back throughout the fluid histories and geographical networks of the region (Potter, 2009). Due to the huge numbers of workers migrating to the Gulf, families and communities in South and South East Asia are intensely connected to the Gulf states (Gardner, 2011). Yet, these connections can vary and while large portions of the young male population are absent in parts of South Asia, a large number of women from South East Asia, including the Philippines and Indonesia, work away from home. This impacts upon families, child rearing, marriages and divorce in the sending countries as well as the acts of care and intimacy. In addition, although acts of care and intimacy are evident across all cultures, caring is not merely embodied but can also be affective, conceptual and mediated.

However, considering the long histories of migration to the Gulf from throughout the Indian Ocean region of South Asia, South East Asia and Africa suggests that the precarity of migration is not necessarily a deviation from the norm in Global South contexts (Alacovska and O'Brien, 2021). In the case of the Gulf, so-called precariat workers from South Asia, South East Asia and Africa have worked in short-term jobs, without citizenship and away from their countries of origin often for years, decades and generations but they do not necessarily perceive themselves in terms of deficit due to the social mobilities, remittance and new status that migration appears to afford (Urry, 2007). Moreover, potential ease of access to communication technologies has changed the conditions of migration (Cresswell, 2010). Considering the technological infrastructures and facets of digital labour, the chapter will next turn to online dimensions of care.

Commodifying care

Due to the Web 2.0's affordances for increased access, ease of use and relative affordability, it is not surprising that Gulf migrants are active users of digital technologies and social media. Jodi Dean (2009) provides a framework for understanding how communicative capitalism can align, contrast and be dialectically entangled with non-western religious epistemologies and social values (Hurley, 2024). Similarly, Ponzanesi (2020) discusses the impact of communication technologies on creating 'digital diasporas' and affording new cartographies to map the self in relation to increasingly complex patterns of globalisation and localisation. Digital diasporas can avoid the negative effects of otherness while having the possibility to negotiate multiple belongings. In addition, there is an established body of scholarship considering the ambivalent expansion

of women's gendered digital labour and processes of subjectification (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Female migrants in the Gulf are also involved in social media creator economies and micro-businesses (Hurley, 2023b). But while the study of digital diaspora and migrant communities are a growing field of study (see Aziz, 2022; Jaramillo-Dent, Contreras-Pulido and Pérez-Rodríguez, 2022) there is a lack of nuanced theorising concerning migrant domestic women workers' relationships to digital labour, platform or communicative capitalism (Dean, 2009).

Literature focusing specifically on migrant domestic women's care work on Instagram, the image-and-video-sharing platform (owned by Meta), includes Hurley and Johnston's (2022) audit of the Gulf's informal domestic worker recruitment services. This includes the study of Instagram handles: '@maids; @domestic-helpers', '@housegirls.point', '@dubai_maid', '@gulf_maid', and so on, featuring videos of domestic women workers from Asia and Africa who are available for employment. These video-posts include details of the domestic worker's age, nationality, level of education as well as their religion, height, weight, skin colour and even the shade of their complexion. The bio statements are written in the third person and imply that domestic workers' skills are not confined to household chores and taking care of and educating children, but that 'care' itself is being commodified in terms of racial hierarchies (Noble, 2018). However, while discussing Instagram's multimodal features as an informal employment site, Hurley and Johnston's study does not overtly deal with the postdigital feminist concerns of decolonial, anti-capitalist or intersectional analysis. Nevertheless, these axiological concerns can be applied retrospectively to articulate that Instagram, and by extension Meta, is a platform that is complicit in promoting the racial profiling of female domestic workers. It also confirms that migrant domestic women's labour is extensive, multifaceted and largely unregulated within platform capitalism.

This audit of informal recruitment agencies on Instagram indicates that Meta is complicit in facilitating unregulated labour of migrant domestic workers at cheap rates and in arguably exploitative terms. Parreñas (2021, p. 5) reported that domestic workers describe whether they are assigned to a good or bad employer as 'luck of the draw'. However, these instances of racialised recruitment practices indicate how Meta could be perpetuating algorithms of racial capitalism (Noble, 2018). These racial hierarchies stem from long histories of the colonial categorisation of people, dating back to the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment (at least). Their intensification in the nineteenth century led to racial differences being codified at

epistemological levels and were framed as scientific, indisputable and natural (Noble, 2018, p. 157). Approaches highlighting these epistemological issues also align with the decolonial, intersectional and anti-capitalist axiology of postdigital feminism.

The brief review of literature so far indicates that intimate facets of care work are entangled with the profit-driven mechanisms and long colonial histories underpinning communicative capitalism (Dean, 2009). Simultaneously, contextual studies of the Gulf indicate how technologies are involving migrant domestic women workers within communities beyond their nation states, particularly due to expansive postdigital diaspora networks and social media (Hurley, 2023c). This perspective helps to conceive of the situated epistemologies and cartographies of care within the Gulf context. For instance, Parreñas (2021) argues that although the *kafala* system is perceived as technically rendering migrant workers ‘unfree’, as workers are made subject to the arbitrary authority of their employer, it is based upon the Gulf states’ differing axiology of patronage. And, contrary to the claims of widespread abuse of the *kafala* system, Parreñas (2021) suggests that most employers do not necessarily exploit or oppress domestic workers, but that the lack of recognition, remuneration and formal protection for workers’ duties of care results from the absence of precise regulations. Considering some of the epistemological tensions in the literature so far, the next section will offer further discussion concerning the axiological agility of postdigital feminist framework by conceiving of the postdigital third spaces of domestic care-giving.

Discussion and conclusion: postdigital third spaces

Despite the valuable insights of the literature discussed above, it is evident that there remains a lack of nuanced scholarship concerning migrant domestic workers’ epistemological differentials, including employer/employee commensurability, religious affiliation, notions of class, educational background, technological and axiological alignments. But since postdigital scholarship claims that Wi-Fi and digital devices are almost ubiquitous, and more noticeable in their absence, theoretical frameworks for conceiving of migrant domestic women workers need to explicitly consider technological entanglements as well as potential lock-outs within the postdigital condition (Savin-Baden, 2021). Postdigital theory could then aim to take stock of intersectional digital inequalities and consider social actors who are devoid of agential

access to the digital, even while their labour is being orchestrated via platform capitalism.

Simultaneously, postdigital feminism could then provoke enquiry into not simply the gendered dimensions of digital labour but also its intersectional epistemological facets (Bassett, 2015). Moreover, a post-digital feminist framework could disrupt the lack of accountability being taken by platforms like Meta while they are evidently facilitating online channels for migration of domestic care workers in the Gulf and operating as postdigital third spaces of recruitment. In addressing aspects of the postdigital relationship between online and offline facets of care, a post-digital feminist framework might help to conceive of the wide, multiple and dispersed zones of affect, care and intimacies as well as the multiple offline/online contexts in which care is facilitated. Axiological concerns of the review indicate the importance of recognising domestic workers' digital labour of care is not merely being driven by domestic workers themselves since it is also calibrated in systemic terms while being capitalised upon by Meta's online recruitment agencies.

However, there are empirical examples of migrant domestic women workers in the Gulf using social media autonomously to comment and critique (mis)treatment by employers. For instance, the *New York Times* has published journalistic accounts of a migrant domestic worker in Saudi Arabia who called out her employers on TikTok for their mistreatment (Donovan, 2021). Other research focuses on domestic women workers' expansive use of social media for digital placemaking and curating a sense of postdigital belonging in the Gulf (Hurley, 2023b). These practices occur in physical terms, online, as well as within postdigital intersections in a manner which can be described as constituting postdigital third spaces. Below, I discuss the capacious notion of postdigital third spaces for understanding migrant women's potential agencies.

First, a sense of postdigital third spaces helps to consider how care could occur informally as well as at the peripheries of Gulf societies, including the liminal or third spaces where domestic women workers gather to spend their weekly day-off, including shopping malls, places of worship, parks and outdoor areas (Bhabha, 1994; Hurley, 2023b). Second, it helps to conceive how employers can monitor domestic workers via nanny cams, social media and other forms of digital surveillance that create obligations to be available online around the clock. Simultaneously, carers can draw attention to their (in)visibilities on social media; to articulate shifting agencies and labours of care-giving in an age whereby all aspects of human life are being commodified (Dean, 2009). Migrant domestic women's ambivalent (in)visibilities could thus

represent further postdigital third spaces for facilitating performances of care online via an ecology of apps, including Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and WhatsApp.

In addition, informal care networks in the Gulf are often intangible within postdigital third spaces. At informal levels, domestic workers' experiences can vary widely due to the transnational demographics of the region. Simultaneously, domestic women workers are a vital resource for Gulf nationals since domestic work plays a central role in maintaining the family structure, provides functional efficiency to routine domestic tasks, and offers cohesion to mainstream Gulf societies (Blaydes, 2023). Migrant domestic women workers' labour is also enabling female Gulf Arab nationals to work outside of the home while being freed from domestic responsibilities (Blaydes, 2023). These points bring us to the chapter's conclusion and illustrate the expansive postdigital third spaces within which migrant domestic women workers' cartographies of care are entangled (Hurley, 2023b).

The central question of this chapter has been to ask about the scope of postdigital feminism to conceive of domestic women helpers' cartographies of care in the Gulf. Applying a postdigital feminist framework helps to consider the intersectional epistemologies of care-giving and how they can operate within technological entanglements, below-the-radar, in informal ways, outside the official structures of governance; citizenship; and within postdigital third spaces. The review advocates axiological concerns of decolonial, intersectional and anti-capitalist theorising required to conceive of the hybrid cartographies of care; technological entanglements and ambivalent algorithmic constellations of racial capitalism (Noble, 2018). This helps to theorise how migrant domestic women's care work includes histories of migration, Indian Ocean Gulf genealogies, postdigital third spaces and migrant women's potential agencies (Gajjala, 2014).

While acknowledging broader systemic racial, gender, class and geopolitical inequalities, a postdigital feminist theorising both builds upon and pushes the boundaries of Dean's (2009) communicative capitalism thesis. While social actors' enmeshments within communicative capitalism can vary, Dean's (2009) notion of communicative capitalism tends to be viewed as a thesis of individualism. However, it would be erroneous to consider migrant women's technological entanglements as necessarily personalising. Although conceiving of liminal postdigital third spaces, migrant domestic women's cartographies of care are revealed as imbricated within the enduring algorithms, inequalities and hegemonies of racial capitalism. Future recommendations for research are for more

transnational, translingual and intersectional postdigital feminist enquiries into migrant women's varying epistemologies, axiological concerns and potential agencies beyond North-centric cartographies of care.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2016). *Rentier Capitalism: Disorganised development and social injustice in Pakistan*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Alacovska, A. and O'Brien, D. (2021). Genres and inequality in the creative industries. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(3), 639–657. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211006095>
- Ali, A. and Cochrane, L. (2024). Residency and citizenship in the Gulf: Recent policy changes and future implications for the region. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 12(1), 16.
- Asad, T. (2003). *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Aziz, A. (2022). Rohingya diaspora online: Mapping the spaces of visibility, resistance and transnational identity on social media. *New Media & Society*, 26(9), 5219–5239. doi:10.1177/14614448221132241
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bassett, C. (2015). Not now? Feminism, technology, postdigital. In D.M. Berry and M. Dieter (eds) *Postdigital Aesthetics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137437204_11
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Blaydes, L. (2023). Assessing the labor conditions of migrant domestic workers in the Arab Gulf States. *ILR Review*, 76(4), 724–747. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00197939221147497>
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. New York: Zone Books.
- Cabalquinto, E. and Leurs, K. (2023). Cultures of (im)mobile entanglements. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 26(6), 623–635. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779231198548>
- Chatzidakis, A. and Littler, J. (2022). An anatomy of carewashing: Corporate branding and the commodification of care during COVID-19. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25(3–4), 268–286. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779211065474>
- Crenshaw, K. (1994). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. In R.K. Bergen, J.L. Edleson and C.M. Renzetti (eds) *Violence Against Women: Classic papers*. New Zealand: Pearson Education, pp. 282–313.
- Cresswell, T. (2010). Towards a politics of mobility. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28(1), 17–31. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d11407>
- D'Souza, A. (2010). *Moving towards Decent work for Domestic workers: An overview of the ILO's work*. International Labour Office. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/pub lic/@dgreports/@gender/documents/publication/wcms_142905.pdf
- Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Deepwell, K. (2020). Postdigital education, feminism, women. *Postdigital Science & Education*, 2, 248–225. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-019-00096-1>
- Donovan, L. (2021). Domestic workers in Gulf countries vent woes on TikTok. *The New York Times*, 25 April.
- Foucault, M. (2002). Governmentality. In J.D. Faubion (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Power*. London: Penguin Books, pp. 201–222.
- Gajjala, R. (2014). *Cyberculture and the Subaltern*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Gardner, A. (2011). Gulf migration and the family. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 1(1), 3–25. doi:10.1080/21534764.2011.576043
- Graham, H. (1991). The concept of caring in feminist research: The case of domestic service. *Sociology*, 25(1), 61–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038591025001004>
- Hall, G. (2013). Toward a postdigital humanities: Cultural analytics and the computational turn to data-driven scholarship. *American Literature*, 85(4), 781–809. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-2367337>
- Human Rights Watch (2010). *World Report 2010: Rights Trends in United Arab Emirates (UAE)*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2010/country-chapters/united-arab-emirates>

- Hurley, Z. (2022). Middle Eastern women influencers' interdependent/independent subjectification on TikTok: feminist postdigital transnational inquiry. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(6), 734–751. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2022.2044500>
- Hurley, Z. (2023a). Postdigital feminisms. In P. Jandrić (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Postdigital Science and Education*. Cham: Springer, pp. 1–7. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-35469-4_42-1
- Hurley, Z. (2023b). *Social Media Influencing in the City of Likes: Dubai and the postdigital condition*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Hurley, Z. (2023c). #Dubai living and digital placemaking on TikTok: Migrant, domestic, and service workers' affective social mediascapes. *Social Media + Society*, 9(3). doi:10.1177/20563051231196897
- Hurley, Z. (2024). Generative AI's family portraits of whiteness: A postdigital semiotic case study. *Postdigital Science & Education*, 6, 1240–1260. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-024-00491-3>
- Hurley, Z. and Johnston, D. (2022). Social media's gendered affordances for mobile migrant women in the Arabian Gulf. *Women in Mass Communication*, pp. 141–156. doi:10.4324/9781003316190-12
- Jandrić, P. (2023). History of the postdigital: Invitation for feedback. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 5(3), 493–508. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-022-00345-w>
- Jandrić, P., MacKenzie, A. and Knox, J. (2022). Postdigital research: Genealogies, challenges, and future perspectives. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 6, 409–415. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-022-00306-3>
- Jaramillo-Dent, D., Contreras-Pulido, P. and Pérez-Rodríguez, A. (2022). Immigrant influencers on TikTok: Diverse microcelebrity profiles and algorithmic (in)visibility. *Media and Communication*, 10(1). doi:10.17645/mac.v10i1.4743
- Jones, J. (1985). *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black women, work and the family from slavery to the present*. New York: Basic Books.
- Jopling, M., Stewart, G.T., Orchard, S. et al. (2024). Postdigital citizen science and humanities: A theoretical kaleidoscope. *Postdigital Science & Education*, 7, 31. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-024-00481-5>
- Kanna, A. (2011). *Dubai, the City as Corporation*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kathiravelu, L. (2012). Social networks in Dubai: Informal solidarities in an uncaring state. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 33(1), 103–119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2012.633319>
- Kodoth, P. (2020). 'In the shadow of the state: Recruitment and migration of South Indian women as domestic workers to the Middle East.' *ILO*. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcms_sp5/groups/public/@arabstates/@ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_619661.pdf
- Le Renard, A. (2021). *Western Privilege: Work, intimacy and postcolonial hierarchies in Dubai*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Meghji, A. (2021). *Decolonizing Sociology: A guide to theory and practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Noble, S.U. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Parreñas, R.S. (2021). *Unfree*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ponzanesi, S. (2020). Digital diasporas: Postcoloniality, media and affect. *Interventions*, 22(8), 977–993. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1718537>
- Potter, L. (2009). *The Persian Gulf in History*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Robinson, K. (2022). What is the kafala system? *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-kafala-system>
- Savin-Baden, M. (2021). What are postdigital humans? In M. Savin-Baden (ed.) *Postdigital Humans: Postdigital science and education*. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65592-1_1
- St Pierre, E. (2020). Why post qualitative inquiry?, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 27(2), 163–166. doi:10.1177/1077800420931142
- Stoler, A.L. (2001). Tense and tender ties: The politics of comparison in North American History and (post) colonial studies. *The Journal of American History*, 88(3), 829–865. *JSTOR*. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700385>
- Tayah, M.J. and Assaf, H. (2018). *The Future of Domestic Work in the Countries of the GCC*. A study commissioned by the Secretariat of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue among the Asian labour-sending and receiving countries. [http://abudhabidialogue.org/sites/default/files/document-library/2018_Future of Domestic Work Study.pdf](http://abudhabidialogue.org/sites/default/files/document-library/2018_Future%20of%20Domestic%20Work%20Study.pdf)
- Urry, J. (2007). *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Vora, N. (2013). *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian diaspora*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

If you liked it, then you should have put a ring on it: self-tracking and intimacy in wearable tech

Lindsay Balfour

In 2022, around the same time that the ‘smart ring’ market began to pick up pace, with brands such as Oura, Evie and Movano leading the way, a curious post on the subreddit r/ouraring appeared, entitled ‘Wearing Oura as a wedding band’. The forum was used as a way of gaining feedback on the appropriateness, fashion value, utility and, importantly, symbolic meaning attached to wearing a smart fitness ring in place of a traditional engagement or wedding band. ‘tomtaylor87’ writes ‘I’m not a big fan of wearing two rings. Anyone use the Oura ring as a wedding ring as well? If so, how accurate are the results compared the index finger?’ ([Reddit, 2022](#)). The responses range from the practical – ‘SpoonsOfIceScream’ writes ‘results are more accurate than they were previously, when I wore it on my pinky ... Gen3 on my ring finger is a perfect fit’ – to the humorous. For instance, ‘Moneybabe420’ claims ‘we also pay for each other’s plan and joke about it being our marriage subscription’. Part fitness regiment, part fashion statement and (perhaps) part contractual obligation, the substitution of smart rings for wedding rings is readily accepted and, in fact, often promoted by the manufacturers themselves. Oura’s Instagram, for instance, is saturated by images of consumers holding up their hands to the camera, the circular band proudly displayed on a variety of fingers but unmistakably subscribing to the tell-tale ‘ring-reveal’ photos popularised on social media.

The prevalence of wedding or engagement-style photos and use of smart rings as a substitute for traditional commitment jewellery

raises a number of significant questions when thinking about (post) digital life and digitised bodies as both an extension *of*, and shift away *from*, traditional notions of intimacy. Smart rings demonstrate but one example of what the authors of this collection describe as ‘an increasing but perhaps *now less perceptible normalisation* of sharing once “private”, intimate lives, in, with, and through digital technologies and platforms’ (Introduction, this volume). While Beyoncé’s well-known track ‘Single Ladies’ – from which the title of this chapter is derived – challenges an unnamed intimate partner to ‘put a ring on it’ in order to secure her fidelity, the notion of a ‘smart’ ring in particular also initiates a series of questions around autonomy, power and ownership that are not confined to the human. Indeed, while smart rings gesture towards human companionship, the most intimate relationship here is, quite possibly, that between the human and the technological apparatus itself. What does it mean, in this sense, to be ‘partnered’ with a device – ‘engaged’ even – and especially with one that can touch and read your most intimate bodily processes, including those which happen under the surface of the skin? Moreover, how might we read ‘engagement’ itself beyond its cultural connotations and as an invitation to discover new and uncanny ways of knowing, feeling and being with (non-human) others in the world? I borrow from Lauren Berlant here, whose notion of an intimate public (1997) comes to the fore in devices that interact with our most primal and incarnate functions, at the same time as they facilitate (and indeed rely on) a phenomenological being-in-the-world. Reddit forums and Oura’s Instagram page are apt examples of how deeply personal processes are both datafied and turned inside out in order to be broadcast publicly as status updates, affiliate links and an array of hashtags and reposts that transform intimate data into consumable and very public phenomena.

Engagement itself is a slippery word, bound etymologically to the French *engager*, where it is described as a sense of pledge or obligation with two defined actors – one who engages (active) and one who is engaged (passive), a tricky interplay of power and agency whereby one is captive – we might say even hostage, to the other. The OED (2025) defines engagement as to be ‘held fast; to involve [and to] entangle’, suggesting that the intimacies of engaging, digital or not, are anything but straightforward. Moreover, as both a transitive and intransitive verb, it has the potential to both influence and directly impact, the distinction between the two being somewhat humanist – the difference between a ‘someone’ or a ‘something’ being engaged.

Postdigital intimacies and networked hospitality

In what follows, I aim to explore this tricky terrain of intimacy and digital engagement which conjures a series of interwoven inquiries. First, as a symbolic marker of intimate commitment between two humans, how does the smart ring engage its user through touch technologies? Next, as an intermingling of the public and private, how can we locate wearable tech on the threshold of flesh and code and as a marker of simultaneous embodiment and estrangement? Finally, in what ways can smart rings help us interrogate the relationship between readability, (self)tracking, skin contact, relationality and the possibilities of more-than-human intimacies – perhaps the strangest intimacies of all? In working through these questions, I turn to the philosophical concept of hospitality – a paradoxical and complicated figure of welcome – to explore the relationship between the foreign and familiar in wearable tech and to disrupt what we might conventionally view as an intimate stranger. Conjured most recently in continental philosophy by Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and others, hospitality is – most simply put – the ethical imperative to welcome the stranger and is perhaps the most common, but also most challenging ethical gesture. As Derrida describes, ‘there is no culture or social bond without a principle of hospitality’ (2005, p. 6). While there is some contemporary discussion of hospitality, it is concentrated on the migrant life and the refugee crisis (see Baker, 2011; Rosello, 2001; Yegenoglu, 2012) and hospitality has a long and complex genealogy. It reaches back to Immanuel Kant who, in *Perpetual Peace*, advocated for political cosmopolitanism as an Enlightenment mediation on encounters with strangers. Further back still, hospitality has roots in antiquity and, in particular, is prevalent in the Homeric, Persian, Abrahamic and Christian offers of refuge, food and drink to guests and weary travellers. As all of these narratives remind us however, hospitality is never a guarantee of safety and its most intimate wager is always one on the precipice of violence.¹

Yet it is in our confrontation with emerging technologies – perhaps the most pressing concern of our time – that we might reanimate hospitality again for many reasons, not the least of which is how the welcome of strangers is both enabled and simultaneously foreclosed in digital space. As I wrote in *The Digital Future of Hospitality*, hospitality seems to be everywhere, and eerily singular all at once, and there is something unique to *this* ‘post’ moment – ‘an era of social networking, virtual domestic assistants, artificial consciousness, the under-questioned ubiquity of

the “webhost” and “homepage”, the body-machine assemblage, and our obsession (stronger than ever) with viruses and immunity, on and off our screens’ (Balfour, 2023a). Wearable technologies, in particular, give us occasion to question how strangers are welcomed, both in the form of data and algorithms but also in the intimacies of non-human touch and embodied knowledge that is at once foreign and familiar.

Indeed, even as the Oura ring and other forms of wearable tracking subscribe to conventional norms around intimate relationships, self-actualisation, body tracking and capitalism, they also raise serious questions for how intimacy is leveraged, bought and sold and disrupted in the context of digital wearables. Hospitality is both an occasion and an invitation to think more seriously about these forms of strangeness that are hosted not just within the boundaries of our home or nation, but across the threshold of our skin. Ultimately, I want to suggest that phenomena such as smart rings provide rich opportunity not only to think deeply about the relations we have with human and non-human others, but to actively re-code intimacies with and through emergent technologies. In other words, what really happens when we ‘put a ring on it’?

FemTech and embodied computing

Smart rings are, of course, just one example of the feminine technologies (‘FemTech’) industry, an ecosystem saturated by wearable devices and digital apps marketed to those who identify as women, although not exclusively used by those that fall into this narrow category (see Balfour, 2023b; Cervantes, 2023; Colvin, 2021). Its products are meant to mediate a range of conditions including menstruation and ovulation tracking, diet and fitness, sexual health, pleasure and wellness, contraception and maternal health and, less frequently, tools for conditions such as endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), menopause and mental health. The industry is predicted to be worth 60 billion dollars (USD) by 2027 (Emergen, 2020), which may be a somewhat conservative estimate given the unprecedented increase in digital health in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The term ‘FemTech’ itself was coined in 2016 by Ida Tin, the Danish founder of the menstrual tracking app Clue. Yet, while the growth of women’s health technologies is accelerating at a rapid pace, it is often approached without much critical attention to issues such as equitable access, data privacy and quality thresholds. And while the most utilised and profitable FemTech products include ovulation and fitness trackers, and reproductive

technologies, this only represents a small fraction of intimate health concerns affecting women. To be sure, COVID-19 accelerated the need for discreet, portable and accessible digital tools that could be used in a self-monitoring capacity as a response to an absence of access to regular healthcare. However, while record user buy-in and urgency have facilitated the growth of FemTech, they have exacerbated and exposed significant gaps in the industry that include: 1) inconsistent policies and regulatory frameworks, particularly around quality control and data privacy, 2) a void of critical theorisation around the relationship between health, data and bodies, and 3) social barriers to access based on race, class, sexuality, ability and other protected characteristics. As such, FemTech leaves out a significant portion of the population, despite its potential to positively affect the health and wellbeing of women around the world. These inequalities are further exacerbated in the emerging markets of the Global South, where women's sexual and reproductive health is not only often controlled and stigmatised, but where FemTech investments across the entire region that includes South Asia, Africa and South America account for only 11 per cent of the global market ([FemTech Analytics, 2021](#)).

While I have written elsewhere on the risks associated with the particular kinds of intimate tracking facilitated by wearables (Balfour, 2023, [2024](#)), my focus here is on the potential of rethinking intimacy in the context of smart rings and other 'touch' technologies. The ways in which sex, health and intimacy are mediated – and regulated – via smart rings is a critical moment in reconfiguring human relations for postdigital times, including the extent to which human intimacies are forged by and through digital technologies and often *undone* by them as well. In this chapter, then, I do not intend to subscribe to the conventional forms of intimacy that such applications use as part of their marketing narratives. This includes the recognisable familial and kinship relations enabled in particular by contraceptive and fertility app partner-sharing modes, social media status updates and, yes, engagement-style promotion imagery. Instead, I turn to unconventional and, at times, disruptive intimacies, reading them as biopolitical and, ultimately, posthuman phenomena. To do this I begin with a discussion of touch and skin – a surface both protective and permeable. I then explore the forms of biometric surveillance that operate in tracking technologies such as smart rings, asking the extent to which wearables initiate simultaneous affects of recognition and estrangement. Finally, I turn to the posthuman, and specifically, the concept of hospitality as a lens through which to read the intimate relations that exceed the human, in part to consider the

future of postdigital intimacies and the de-centring of anthro-intimate relations.

Intimate *sense-ibilities*

To navigate the complicated mingling of emotional affect, sensory and discourses of self-improvement, I offer a brief walkthrough of Oura's website and, in particular, their 'Experience' page, which outlines the relationship between users, the wearable ring and the subscription membership necessary to interpret the ring's metrics. On this page, potential users can scroll through the extensive array of highly graphic and stylised affordances of the smart ring, among them, the promise to '*tune in to what your body is telling you*' and '*track your cycle like never before*'. Scrolling down, my eyes catch a particularly curious phrase: '*Feel the magic of self-care*'. I linger here because it strikes me that these are five words that seem, at once, familiar and on-brand while simultaneously contradictory. While discourses of self-care are certainly important to Oura's narrative and, indeed, the entire FemTech industry in which the bulk of products are not classified as health or medical apparatus but, rather, fall under the much broader (and underregulated) category of wellness, it is the words 'feel' and 'magic' that I am drawn too. As a term that conjures the unexpected and surprising, the supernatural and the mysterious, 'magic' seems a curious choice given the Oura ring's insistence on science-backed research as the impetus for its tracking and predictive algorithmic capabilities. Magic, or magical thoughts and feelings, however, have long been associated with wellness practices more than scientific healthcare. In psychology, the notion of magical thinking is most closely associated with Jean Piaget, who posited that young children believe their thoughts have direct influence on the world around them, and that such beliefs are a standard phase of cognitive development (1929). The phrase has taken on a more vernacular, and less scientific meaning in recent years. One well-known example is Joan Didion's National Book Award winning *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005). As a prolific writer, whose works spanned fiction, memoir and cultural and political commentary, Didion's autobiographical account of the year following her husband's death borrows the concept of magical thinking from Piaget but has more resonance with the discourses of positive thought, manifesting and mindfulness closely associated with the wellness industry (Baker, 2022; Gaggiotti et al., 2024; Stea, 2024). Gaggiotti et al. describe the so-called 'magical thinking' of the COVID-19 pandemic,

where even in traditional healthcare settings, ‘decision-makers have repeatedly tried to use the capacity of words to transform health and care staff into heroic and divine characters, capable of doing and sacrificing everything for others’ (p. 224). Instead, they advocate for what they call *pragmagic* – ‘being grounded in what is here now (the perceived consensus reality of the moment) while engaging in lateral or holistic thinking’ (2024, pp. 229–230). A quick search of #magicalthinking on Instagram returns thousands of posts touting the benefits of positive thought and manifestation for anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder, as well as the power of magical thinking as an antidote for physical ailments. To be sure, this is not to discount the power of optimism and the benefits of mental ‘wellness’ on health outcomes, but it is to trouble advertising tactics that promote products as both medical and magic at the same time. Oura’s insistence on the magic of self-care is perhaps not contrary to its scientific claims but is reflective of larger trends whereby healthcare is moving away from strict science versus wellness distinctions (see Price, 2022) not to mention a recognition of the ways in which health and wellness are both increasingly mediated by popular culture and its increased marketing of affect. In the case of Oura, therefore, it is the affect of self-care that operates as a sleight of hand – a magic trick let’s say – in order to disguise the technological apparatus that is performing its function and extracting data on and under the skin. In other words, I want to suggest that Oura’s claim that users can ‘feel’ this magic is perhaps a phrase reminiscent of misdirection – a tactic often used in stage magic – but in this context it conjures a different question: How does one *feel* magic and, furthermore, who or what is doing the feeling here, versus *being felt*?

Perhaps the most intimate effect of wearable devices occurs through their use of and, indeed, their imperative, for touch, particularly as touch is leveraged as both scientific sensor and magical affect. It is through touch that the smart ring *reads* the body, via advanced sensory technologies that, depending on the brand and device, might include accelerometers (tracking movement in multiple directions), gyroscopes (to measure angle and rotation), altimeters (for altitude and pressure), temperature sensors and bioimpedance sensors (to collect data for heart rate) and optical sensors (using light to measure pulse) (see Abt et al., 2018; Hayes, 2014; Henriksen et al., 2018; Lashkari, 2019). Just like sensory human touch can be both a source of pain and pleasure, this sublimity² is amplified in the touch of the wearable device first and foremost because of the effects of the uncanny, or what Zwart (2017) calls the ‘too biocompatible’ or ‘too real’ closeness of the device. In the case of wearables, the closeness is not just in skin contact, but in touching the most intimate processes our

body undertakes – sleep, BMI, hydration, menstruation – all that which happens not just on the surface of the flesh but beneath it. Skin is what connects us to the world around us, through which we experience our surroundings but also that which registers harm and alerts us to danger. We think of the ways in which we develop ‘goosebumps’ on our arm when there is a chill, or the recoil when our finger comes into contact with a hot stove as powerful receptors signal our brain and prevent further harm. Even the so-called ‘sixth sense’ is often registered through the skin – when the hairs on our arm stand up when spooked, or the way we can anticipate a feeling of where our body is located in space – walking down a flight of stairs in the dark for instance; the phenomenon we refer to as proprioception (Snape, 2024). As the philosopher Edward Casey elaborates on skin’s power, ‘it is on this surface that the depths come to expression, thus to our notice; but the same skin surface, precisely because of its acute sensitivity, is vulnerable to exploitation by others – to their unwanted incursion in situations of trauma or torture’ (2015). Skin is a border-agent, protective but porous, delimiting but vulnerable. Let us not forget that a ‘skin’ is also often the name we give to the thin after-market membranes that we purchase to protect our digital devices.

The philosopher Richard Kearney describes the “double sensation” of touch – a phenomenon of reversibility where touching is also a being touched’ (Kearney, 2019). There is no doubt that a wearable fitness tracker touches us, but can we touch it in return? And are these technologies ‘touched’ by their wearer? In 2001, in a chapter titled ‘Robotic Skin: The Future of Touch,’ Claudia Castañeda writes:

Touch cannot be understood in general abstract terms. Instead, it must be conceptualised as the site of possible encounters between bodies and worlds, in which the quality of the encounter is established through the material-semiotic nature of the body in relation to the touch of one body against or with another entity. Touch does not have to involve direct physical contact, in this formulation, but it does require some form of embodiment, or ‘skin’. This skin cannot be a border in the abstract sense, nor is it automatically a site of communication or mutuality. Instead, the skin becomes a site of possibility in which the nature of the encounter is established through the process of ‘touching’, one body in relation to another. (p. 234)

I too, am inclined to view these new sensory relations as opening up a range of new possibilities for intimacies, including non-human intimacies

that might initiate a renewed sense of obligation to those non-human others with whom we share a planet – animals and plants, for instance. Yet the lack of reciprocity in devices such as smart rings foreclose this future in favour of a regime that remains deeply patriarchal, capitalist and racialised. More-than-human intimacies, of course, bring us back to the postdigital, particularly through the ways in which postdigital intimacies actively expose the incontinuity and inequity of relations. Indeed, smart rings operate in the service of surveillance and algorithmic profit rather than an altruistic mission of genuinely improving health and relationships. But can we hold these possibilities and problems together at once? Indeed, in recognising the complex association between wearable technologies and intimate touch, we must keep materialist and feminist theorisations of skin intact. Women, people of colour, those with different forms of neuro diversity, disability, or injury, experience *skin* in differential ways, even if the technological apparatus of tracking through *touch* itself operates the same. To say skin is not exclusively human, or that touch opens new possibilities of being together in the world, risks eliding these very real and material consequences of what skin signifies in our social world, not to mention the myriad ways in which touch is often unwanted, non-consensual and a corollary of violence. If smart rings are any indication, the intimate forms of touch required for the functionality of the device itself demand more exploration, lest they be taken-for-granted as neutral, benign, or apolitical. On the contrary, touch as a technical apparatus is every bit as intimate as the forms of touch between humans and brings similarly affective experiences of pleasure and pain, belonging, engagement, agency and hostility.

Biometric estrangement

If the above discussion focused on the inherent contradiction of a technology that can be simultaneously magic and scientific, this next section turns to another contradiction and the ways in which wearable technologies can provide unprecedented information and knowledge at the same time as they make us feel, in Kristeva's words, strangers to ourselves. I am speaking here of the biometric operation of devices such as smart rings, which make the body and its internal and intimate functions readable and intelligible, but to, and for, whom? And what happens when the body is unreadable?

Indeed, well before FitBit debuted its fitness tracker, the American sitcom *Better off Ted* produced an episode entitled 'Racial Sensitivity'

(2009). In it, the fictional company Veridian decides to cut costs by installing sensors that operate based on 'light reflected off the skin' and can turn off the lights in a room when no motion is detected. The only glitch is that these sensors can only detect White people. The company's CEO refutes claims of racism, arguing that people of colour are not being targeted – they are in fact simply being ignored. This new system seems to affect a lab technician named Lem in particular, who works in a room that goes dark whenever he is alone in it. Moreover, he cannot operate the automated water fountain, and becomes locked in his lab overnight when the cameras do not detect his presence to open the sliding door. 'Please *sense* me' Lem begs as he leans into the motion camera, to no effect other than the classic sitcom laugh track. While *Better off Ted* is surely fiction, it reveals some deep truths about the ways in which people of colour (and those experiencing other marginalisations) are excluded from technology and digital life and the problems here are often more real than scripted.

In fact, five years after the *Better off Ted* episode aired, Apple ran into a similar problem with its new Apple Watch, a wrist-worn device created to mimic many of the functions of an iPhone but in a more efficient, social and hands-free way. The original marketing of the Apple Watch promoted the device as a fashion accessory but quickly expanded its focus to include health and fitness-oriented features, in an effort to compete with dedicated activity trackers like FitBit or Garmin. The Apple Watch was an immediate hit when it was released in 2015, yet shortly after, customers began reporting on Reddit that they had a hard time activating the touch sensors on the underside of the watch if they had dark tattoos in that area. Of course, it wasn't just those with tattoos that were having trouble – people of colour also began reporting that the touch sensors would not 'recognise' their skin. Apple, like many wearable manufacturers, uses sensors that beam green light toward the skin (Taylor, 2015). Green light penetrates the skin just enough to get a reading without reaching too deep and faces less interference from other forms of light. This green light enters the first few layers of skin and measures the rate of blood flow beneath the surface. Green light, however, is more likely to be absorbed by the skin of people with higher melanin content *before* it can get a reading. The darker the skin (tattoo or otherwise), the less likely the sensors are to capture data when the person is moving. In other words, early versions of the Apple Watch failed to recognise some people of colour as living human bodies, an issue that was also a problem with FitBit. I draw attention to this problem, not just to call out racial bias in fitness tracking sensors (inadvertent as it may be), but to recognise the ways in

which race, and gender too, are simultaneously and paradoxically both highlighted *but also* made invisible by biometric tracking technologies.

How is it, then, that the body can be both hypervisible, but at the same time rendered foreign and strange? Such questions are exacerbated if the body being read is already marginalised by race, class, or gender, as it does not ‘read’ as normative according to the training data that touch sensors have to guide their analysis. In other words, while consumers might read such tracking devices as innocuous and innocent of social bias, they are informed by data that draws primarily on the experiences of bodies considered ‘normal’. Not only do emerging technologies rely on data limited by ‘sampling bias’, but ‘real-world patterns of inequality affect data distribution’ (Berkeley, 2021). According to the authors of the Berkeley University study, ‘How Artificial Intelligence Bias Affects Women and People of Color’, ‘the standard training dataset for facial recognition is reportedly 84 percent white faces and 70 percent male faces’ (Berkeley, 2021). But how does this bias work in technologies such as the Oura ring?

Last year, the Oura announced its partnership with Wild.AI, a high-performance fitness training software that analyses data generated by smart rings and other wearables with the slogan to ‘turn your hormones into your superpower’ (WildAI, 2024). Wild.AI’s website issues a series of promises, including ‘empowering women’ to ‘harness [their] full potential’ and the assurance that they resist a ‘one size fits all approach’, two claims which seem at odds with the generic and generative AI imagery that dominates the site. Moreover, the assurance that WildAI’s insights are generated by the ‘latest scientific findings’ begs several questions about the data used to feed such analyses, especially given the proven bias of its source code. While artificial intelligence is, no doubt, accelerating at a rapid pace, it remains largely dependent on its human training data, meaning that the same biases, assumptions and racialised and patriarchal data that dominates the internet is what new machine learning systems have to draw from. In an article for *Forbes*, Kevin Roose paints a cautionary tale:

Data is the main ingredient in today’s generative A.I. systems, which are fed billions of examples of text, images and videos. Much of that data is scraped from public websites by researchers and compiled in large data sets ... Eventually, if you take advantage of the web, the web will start shutting its doors. (Roose, 2024)

WildAI’s promises, and partnerships with smart rings, might be the exact scenario Roose warns of, where the so-called ‘new’ affordances of

artificial intelligence instead questionably reproduce old archetypes and normative ideas of what a fit body looks like. Given the lack of data on how bodies that are NOT White, upper class, cis-gendered and conventionally attractive might experience performance-impacting hormones, it is no surprise that the mechanisms designed here to produce knowledge about the body actually end up doing more damage. This calls us back to hospitality again in the ways that certain bodies are made strange – indeed, entirely unrecognisable to artificial intelligence – while at the same time reinforcing the strangeness of AI itself. And so hospitality simultaneously exposes the postdigital as continually marked by conditions of strangeness versus familiarity at the same time as it offers a way of disrupting patterns of inequity by framing a relation outside the human. In other words, hospitality gives us occasion to challenge the ubiquity or taken-for-grantedness of a digital culture and reminds us that postdigital intimacies might possibly offer something new, rather than simply reproduce latent inequities in new and networked packaging. This interplay of recognition and unfamiliarity, where certain bodies remain ‘strange’ and unknowable is an uncanny relationship brought to the fore by wearables that track intimate processes. They also reveal the deep and complex relations we have, not only with ourselves, but with the data itself. Artificial intelligence certainly raises questions for the forms of intimacy generated by smart rings and other wearable tech, and suggests a potential future where some of the most intimate corporeal functions – touch, brain chemistry, menstruation, heart rhythms – will be datafied and held external to us, turning the human body into something strange but at the same time infinitely knowable. I want to return, however, to the possibilities of this inevitable technological horizon, and its inevitable relations, to search for a way forward that might leverage smart rings and other tracking technologies in the service of a future where we might work with and through the postdigital, rather than against it and perhaps even shape its path towards equity and justice.

Postdigital hospitality

There is no doubt that the postdigital demands we rethink not only our relations with others through the affordances of technology, but also our relations with those technologies themselves. By way of concluding, then, I return to the idea of re-coding intimacy for a postdigital future by reflecting on our relations with non-human others. In doing so, I do not intend to elide the very real and meaningful relations humans have with

one another, including the ways in which these relations often manifest in intersectional forms of inequity and violence. There is an argument to be made for the serious work still to be done on ‘righting’ these inequities and finding a way into affective and abiding human intimacies that do not devolve into risk and violence. But perhaps looking beyond the human might also inform relational social justice, by further pushing back on the normalisation of certain relations and expanding our notions of intimacy itself. Here, then, I want to briefly invoke the figure of the posthuman, as a new figure of hospitality, and as a lens through which to read the strangeness of intimate relations that exceed the human, including the extent to which they operate as simultaneous relations of welcome and rejection. At the core of my thinking here is an attempt to leverage the smart ring as a way of interrogating these paradoxical relationships I’ve discussed: between readability and non-recognition, (self)tracking and datafied bodies, welcome and unwelcomed touch, human-machine relationality and the possibilities of ‘engaged’ more-than-human intimacies.

In thinking about our posthuman relations, it makes sense to consider forms of digital tracking and self-monitoring that extend beyond the external sensory capacities of the smart ring and interact with the body not on the surface of the skin, but beneath it. In 2014, for example, MIT released a statement announcing that the ‘hunt for a perfect contraceptive’ was over and that researchers, in collaboration with American biotech firm MicroCHIPS, had developed an implantable birth-control chip that could be left in the body for up to 16 years and turned on and off via remote control. Lauded in outlets such as *The Guardian* and *Time*, and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the chip promised to extend the life of a five-year IUD threefold, with potential applications in the majority world where reproductive health access is lacking (Dockterman, 2014; Kinkead, 2014; Wainwright, 2014).

While the contraceptive microchip has not been cleared for public use and remains in a perhaps stalled state of development, it is reasonable to believe that the ability to manage the interiority of body systems from an external location is no longer the stuff of science fiction but, along with artificial intelligence, an imminent development in intimate health where the technology is not worn on the outside of the skin but, rather, lives within. As Isabel Pedersen argues in *Embodied Computing* (2020), ‘the adoption of cloud applications for bodies, formalized as the idea of an Internet of People (IoP) or human intranet, is [an] area of concern ... In this model, the body takes on the labor of sensing, computing, energizing, storing (data), transmitting, and hosting a network, with a seemingly infinite capacity for expansion.’ In the case of the

contraceptive microchip, the body becomes a platform itself, transmitting information to the outside world, but with little agency over how this information is used. Indeed, the ‘concern’ here for those of us interested in intersectional marginalisation and violence is the very real capacity for misuse that implantable devices pose. Whether thinking about the potential of such devices being hacked, or accessed by someone other than the intended user as may be the case in situations of intimate partner violence, or places where contraception is not culturally or juridically permissive, contraceptive chips initiate an impending reality that, if the current proliferation of gender-based and racial violence enabled by digital culture is any indication, should be approached with caution. But they conjure important philosophical questions as well, not the least of which is how to come to terms with a foreign object being under one’s skin. This is not just any foreign object either – as is the case with other material such as shrapnel or a splinter which, while philosophically rich for thought, tend to remain somewhat dormant. Instead, a microchip is an object that transmits, records and fundamentally alters body chemistry via some external signal, remotely altering follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) levels and turning the body into an assemblage of hardware, flesh and code.

What would it mean to be embedded by a foreign other or object, invisible other than perhaps a bruise upon insertion or small scar, yet entangled with body chemistry, syncing up to your existing human nerves and tendons, and even your brain? For many, this might conjure the figure of the cyborg, especially in Donna Haraway’s linking of the cyborg with modern medicine, which she finds to be ‘full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine, each conceived as coded devices, in an intimacy and with a power that were not generated in the history of sexuality’ (2016, p. 6). Even more important to this argument, however, is the recognition that Haraway’s cyborg is not just an imaginary or representative figure, but a transgressive and boundary-crossing relation of feminist resistance. Beyond Haraway, however, the phenomenon of (cyborg) implantation becomes the ultimate stranger within. Here, the philosophy of hospitality proves so instructive as a compelling, albeit complicated, ethics tasked with distinguishing between hostile other and welcomed guest (see Balfour, 2017; Derrida, 2000; Kearney, 2019; Simpson, 2013). Thinking about a digital device embedded under one’s skin, however, extends the defining query of hospitality from ‘what does it mean to welcome the stranger at my door’ to ‘what does it mean to host the stranger *within my body*?’ Neither biological (as in the case of something like

transplant or pregnancy) nor environmental (a splinter or bullet fragment), an implantable contraceptive chip is an uncanny assemblage of synthetic material, hormone replacement, transmitter beacon and human flesh. It is unlike any stranger in traditional accounts of hospitality and troubles the humanist frameworks within which guest and host have always been conceived. If absolute hospitality then is modelled on the ethical incorporation of the other – particularly one that remains other – then the bionic, cyborg or micro-chipped body seems to be emblematic of a posthuman revision of hospitality, and the imperative (impossible as it may seem) to welcome intimate strangers of any combination of flesh and code. Rosi Braidotti (2013) refers to this as the ‘becoming-machine axis’, one that ‘cracks open the division between humans and technological circuits, introducing biotechnologically mediated relations as foundational for the constitution [of] the subject’ (p. 67). If such relations are, as Braidotti indicates, (co) constitutive, powerful and now irrevocably postdigital, it is imperative that we extend our notion of intimacies to include that which the authors of this volume affirm as reaching ‘start[ing] from the premise that the digital and human beings have become co-constitutive; that they are both more-than-digital and more-than-human’. As I have argued through the phenomena of wearable sensing and the strange incorporation of digital guests under the skin, hospitality is a crucial lens through which we might approach both human and non-human intimacies in postdigital culture.

Whether in pop cultural references to marriage and engagement, the biopolitical estrangement of technological health ‘solutions’, or the alternating risks and promises of tracking intimate health on, and under, the skin, the ‘hosting’ of intimate data remains inequitable and never innocent. Such examples also remind us that the experience of emerging technologies is a relational one, and move us closer towards reckoning with what our intimate relations with non-human others might look like, and how they will continue to make and remake us as subjects. Ultimately this chapter asks what it means to be a digital stranger, without distinguishing between the stranger that is the technology, or the stranger that is (in) us. The kinds of intimate relations experienced vis-à-vis wearable tracking devices are thus both foreign and familiar, public and private, and continually reshaping the position of guest and host. Hospitality offers an apt lens through which to interrogate these relations, particularly as they (posthuman or not) still very much tend to reflect the normative power and privilege of human orientations to the world and those who live in it. Yet hospitality also acts as an opening, and an invitation to re-write

relations of oppression and violence – coded and prescribed as they may be – and imagine alternative futures of being together.

Notes

1. Take, for instance, one of the earliest literary accounts of hospitality where, at the end of Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, the traditional objects of hospitality such as a footstool for guests to sit, or a basket of meat (which are laid out for Odysseus' homecoming) are used as weapons against the guests. See Steve Reece's *The Stranger's Welcome* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) for a detailed account of hospitality in ancient Greece.
2. I take Burke's definition here – the dual emotional quality of fear and attraction – to highlight the ways in which wearable technologies offer a sense of awe produced by the intermingling of philia and phobia in the technological object (see Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757).

References

- Abt, G., Bray, J. and Benson, A.C. (2018). The validity and inter-device variability of the Apple Watch™ for measuring maximal heart rate. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 36(13), 1447–1452. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640414.2017.1397282>
- Baker, G. (2011). *Politicising Ethics in International Relations: Cosmopolitanism and hospitality*. London: Routledge.
- Baker, S.A. (2022). From the wellness movement to the wellness industry. *Wellness Culture (Society Now)*. Leeds: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp. 41–73.
- Balfour, L. (2017). *Hospitality in a Time of Terror*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press.
- Balfour, L. (2023a). *The Digital Future of Hospitality*. London: Palgrave.
- Balfour, L. (ed.) (2023b). *FemTech: Intersectional interventions in women's digital health*. London: Palgrave.
- Balfour, L. (2024). Surveillance, biopower, and unsettling intimacies in reproductive tracking platforms. *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 48. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/925313>
- Berkeley School of Information (2021). How artificial intelligence bias affects women and people of color. <https://ischoolonline.berkeley.edu/blog/artificial-intelligence-bias/>
- Berlant, L. (1997). *The Queen of America goes to Washington City: Essays on sex and citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Casey, E. (2015). 'Skin deep' bodies edging into place. In R. Kearney and B. Treanor (eds) *Carnal Hermeneutics*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Castañeda, C. (2001). Robotic skin: The future of touch. In S. Ahmed and J. Stacey (eds) *Thinking Through the Skin*. London: Routledge.
- Cervantes, P. (2023). A user-centred design process for Femtech. Nuom. <https://www.nuom.health/insights/user-centred-design-for-femtech>
- Colvin, C. (2021). What it's like to have a period as a non-binary person: 'We need to stop associating periods with womanhood'. *Health.com*. <https://www.health.com/mind-body/lgbtq-health/menstruating-as-non-binary-person>
- Derrida, J. (2000). Hospitality. *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 5(3), 3–18. doi:10.1080/09697250020034706
- Derrida, J. (2005). The principle of hospitality. *Parallax*, 1(1). doi: 10.1080/1353464052000321056
- Didion, J. (2005). *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York: Knopf.
- Dockterman, E. (2014). The future of birth control: Remote control fertility. *Time*. <https://time.com/2963130/the-future-of-birth-control-remote-control-fertility/>
- Emergen (2020). Femtech market to reach USD 60.01 billion by 2027 | CAGR of 15.6%: Emergen Research. PR Newswire. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/femtech-market-to-reach-usd-60-01-billion-by-2027--cagr-of-15-6-emergen-research-301130111.html>

- 'Engagement' (2024). *OED*. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/engagement_n?tl=true
- FemTech Industry Landscape Overview (2021). *FemTech Analytics*, December. <https://www.femtech.health/femtech-overview-q4-2021>
- FemTech Market to Reach USD 60.01 Billion by 2027. (2020). *Cicion*.
- Gaggiotti, H., Jarvis, C., Kars-Unluoglu, S. and von Bulow, C. (2024). From magical thinking to being 'pragmatic': Narratives of wellbeing in health and care in England'. In T. Phillips, N. Araújo, T. Willem Jones and J. Taylor (eds) *Narratives of Wellbeing*. London: Palgrave.
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Cyborg manifesto. Manifestly Haraway*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hayes, T. (2014). What's inside a fitness tracker anyway? *Digital Trends*. <https://www.digitaltrends.com/wearables/whats-inside-fitness-tracker-anyway/>
- Henriksen, A., Mikalsen, M.H., Woldaregay, A.Z., Muzny, M., Hartvigsen, G., Hopstock, L.A. and Grimsgaard, S. (2018). Using fitness trackers and smartwatches to measure physical activity in research: Analysis of consumer wrist-worn wearables. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 20(3). <https://www.jmir.org/2018/3/e110/>
- Kant, I. (2003). *Perpetual Peace: A philosophical sketch*, trans. Ted Humphrey. London: Hackett.
- Kearney, R. (2019). Double hospitality between word and touch. *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion*, 1. doi:10.1163/25889613-00101005
- Kinkead, G. (2014). A contraceptive implant with remote control. *MIT Technology Review*. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2014/07/04/74389/a-contraceptive-implant-with-remote-control/>
- Lashkari, C. (2019). Types of sensors in wearable fitness trackers. *NewsMedical Life Sciences*. <https://www.news-medical.net/health/Types-of-sensors-in-wearable-fitness-trackers.aspx>
- Oxford English Dictionary (2025). Engagement. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/engagement_n?tl=true
- Oura (2024). <https://ouraring.com/?srsltid=AfmBOoq8E4JncJZZHDSuLG9IzrJZQ37M7A4VEHvh0RZCr3SRUwoZkAes>
- Pedersen, I. and Illiadis, A. (2020). *Embodied Computing: Wearables, implantables, embeddables, ingestibles*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.
- Piaget, J. (1929). *The Child's Conception of the World*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Price, N. (2022). 'Evidence-based wellness emerges as an industry.' *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/custom-media/the-new-science-of-wellness/evidence-based-wellness-emerges-as-an-industry/>
- Racial Sensitivity (2009). *Better off Ted*. Victor Fresco. ABC.
- Reddit (2022). Wearing Oura as a wedding band. r/ouraring. Reddit. 2022. <https://www.reddit.com/r/ouraring/>
- Roose, K. (2024). The data that powers A.I. is disappearing fast. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/19/technology/ai-data-restrictions.htmlr/Ouraring>. Reddit. <https://www.reddit.com/r/ouraring/>
- Rosello, M. (2001). *Postcolonial Hospitality: The immigrant as guest*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Simpson, D. (2013). *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Snape, J. (2024). The power of proprioception: how to improve your 'sixth sense' – and become healthier and happier. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/article/2024/jul/18/the-power-of-proprioreception-how-to-improve-your-sixth-sense-and-become-healthier-and-happier>
- Stea, J.N. (2024). *Mind the Science: Saving your mental health from the wellness industry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, D. (2015). Whoops: Apple Watch may not work for black people. *National Monitor*, 30 April.
- Wainwright, O. (2014). Remote-controlled contraceptive microchip could launch by 2018. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/architecture-design-blog/2014/jul/11/design-futures-remote-controlled-contraceptive-microchip-launch-by-2018>
- Wild A.I. (2024). <https://www.wild.ai/>
- Yegenoglu, M. (2012). *Islam, Migrancy, and Hospitality in Europe*. New York: Palgrave.
- Zwart, H. (2017). 'Extimate' technologies and techno-cultural discontent: A Lacanian analysis of pervasive gadgets. *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.5840/techne20174560>

Index

- #MeToo 84, 104, 113, 114, 157, 159–160, 162
- activism 89, 105, 109, 115–119, 171
 - and legislation 302–303
- affect 11, 28, 29, 32, 35–36, 48, 132–134
 - affective economies 126, 134, 170
 - affective homophily 56, 162
 - affective solidarity 166
- affordances 180, 186, 201
- algorithm, algorithmic 31, 33, 36–39, 48–51, 118, 143, 295–296
- ambient play 52
- anger 95, 157–158, 162, 167–168, 171–172
- assemblage 7, 70
- attention 34, 180
- belonging 31, 124, 127–129, 211, 218, 279, 284
- biodigital vulnerabilities 160
- Black diaspora 126, 128–129, 132, 134
- Black subjectivities 124
- boundary work 226, 227
- capitalism 277–278, 286, 287, 289, 319
 - communicative 322, 326
 - data 277
 - racial 232, 326
- care 63, 65–66, 125, 158, 171, 288, 312, 313, 318, 326
- celebrity death industrial complex 87–88
- colonialism 12, 319
- consent 180–181, 200, 234, 242, 269
- consumption 144
- copresence 73–75, 105
- COVID-19 pandemic 9, 51, 52, 53, 64, 65–66, 68, 73, 88, 139, 145, 333, 334–335
 - post-pandemic 54–55
- cyberattacks 73
- data-household 294, 296–297
 - and class 305–306
 - and smart technologies 298
- deepfake 217, 240, 241, 250
- digital/mediated intimacies 10, 96, 107, 207, 225, 278
- digital sexual ethics 214, 257
- domesticity 58
- ecological sexual script theory 209
- ephemerality 183, 194–196
- excess 27
- female sexual agency 240
- feminine technology ‘FemTech’ 332–333
- feminist killjoy 170
- fertility industry 280
- frottage 130–131
- hospitality 331, 340, 342
- ‘human flesh searching’ 167
- identity integrity 252
- image-based sexual abuse 193, 194, 240, 244, 251, 268
- imitation public 50–51
- Indian Ocean studies 321–322
- Indigenous knowledge 314–315
- infrastructure 12, 13, 25, 28, 33–37
- intimate publics 10–12, 26, 31, 38, 45, 84, 106, 162, 330
- intimate relationships/friendships/relationality 106, 123, 125, 131, 134–135
- intimate threats 74
- kafala* system 312–313, 324
- mad studies 90, 92
- magical thinking 334–335
- marketing technologies 295–296
- masculinity theory 211, 213, 216, 228, 263
- menstruation/free bleeding 104, 109, 110–112, 117
- misogynoir 125
- mobility 316
- neuroqueer 148
- oversharing 86, 88, 93
- patriarchal architectures 294, 300–302
- persistence 192–193
- platform affordance methodology 181–182, 200

- politics
 - Black feminist 129, 157
 - body 164
 - feminist 84, 115
 - and postdigital intimacies 1, 12, 14, 47
 - publicness as 27
 - of rage 162
- positionality 128
- postdigital
 - feminism 316–317, 326
 - intimacies, definition 1–14, 25, 107, 126–127, 143, 179, 206, 223, 240, 279
 - and sexual harm 209
 - theory 314
 - as vibes 40–41
- posthumanism 9, 13, 333, 341, 343
- cyborg 342
- more-than-human 64, 66–67, 278, 337
- post-racial 126
- precarity 219, 246
- producers 180
- promotional industries 296, 306
- public-private 11–12, 27, 31–32, 38, 41, 52, 56, 79, 93, 108, 164–165, 206, 225, 250, 331
- digital privacy 64, 71, 224, 249, 251, 293
- sexual privacy 243
- queer phenomenology 149
- queer subjectivity 143
- queer theory 12, 13, 66–67
- queer youth 140–141
- race 33, 124, 127, 282–283
- racism 32–33, 39, 300, 303–304, 338
- rage *see* anger
- sad girl 84
- sanism 86, 94
- sapphic 140, 142, 150
- screenshot 244–245
- selfies 227
- sex education 257, 269
- sexting/sexual image sharing 210, 223, 228, 255, 256, 264–265, 267
- sextortion 194, 217–218, 258
- sexual double standard 251–252, 258, 262
- sexual intimacy 13, 67
- sexual violence/harm/abuse 104, 109, 205–206, 209, 240, 243, 250
- shame/lessness 95, 103, 110–114, 193, 213, 219, 260
- social reproduction 285–286, 305
- socioeconomic status (Gulf region) 321
- spreadability (of images) 192–193
- structure of feeling 25, 33, 34–35
- survival/survivor 85, 103
- temporality 76, 77, 94
 - and mental ill health 93
- third space 325–326
- touch 335–337
- unsolicited/non-consensual sexual
 - images 183, 190–191, 193, 194, 205, 212, 224, 241–242, 243, 251, 255, 258, 263
- vibes 25–41, 46–47, 50, 60
- visibility 159–163, 168, 171–172, 239, 240, 251, 252, 264
 - economy of 107, 158, 239
- Whiteness 151, 229

Postdigital Intimacies presents a unique and timely collection of research into the complex interplay and entanglement between digital and analogue relationships. Set within the normalisation of digital technology, cultures, AI and algorithms, the book explores social, political and cultural implications of intimacy in a blurry public–private. Chapters are informed by intersectional feminist, queer, anti-racist and postcolonial theories, and show how research can be part of creating affirmative, collective worlds that are more equitable and socially just. Through these lenses, contributors uncover vibrant digitally mediated lives and sociality. They investigate the vibey, emotional and affective sensibilities evolving online – excitement, boredom, mental health, survival – and reveal new activisms formed through digital belonging and a networked identity that responds to and resists marginality.

Consideration is given to the capacity for digital affordances to enable new forms of connection, community and solidarity as well as harm. Authors explore vulnerability and risk through image-based abuse and gendered and sexual violence. They also analyse the forms of digital surveillance, labour and platformed capitalism that shape intimate relations created in kinship and domesticity. By addressing these relationalities as postdigital intimacies, the chapters offer fascinating insights and timely analyses of the intimate relations that emerge from our current cultural and postdigital condition.

Adrienne Evans is Professor of Gender and Culture in the Centre for Arts and Creative Cultures at Coventry University.

Jamie Hakim is Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at King's College, London.

Jessica Ringrose is Professor of Sociology of Gender and Education, and Co-Director of the Centre for Sociology of Education and Equity at UCL.

Amy Shields Dobson is Associate Professor and program convenor of Digital and Social Media at Curtin University.

Shaka McGlotten is Professor of Media Studies and Anthropology at Purchase College-SUNY, where they are Chair of the Gender Studies program and Co-Chair of Media Studies.



Free open access
version available from
www.uclpress.co.uk

UCLPRESS

Image credit:
Vizerskaya, iStock

Cover design:
www.hayesdesign.co.uk

ISBN 978-1-80655-052-4



9 781806 550524