

## Mobile media, gender and sexuality

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### 1. Media, gender and sexuality

Media plays a crucial role in shaping, negotiating, and challenging gender, sexual identities, and expressions within society and culture (Krijnen and Van Bauwel 2022; Ross 2011). Scholars in the field of media studies, employing various epistemological and methodological approaches to gender and sexuality, have contributed valuable insights across a wide range of topics encompassing representation, audience engagement, and media production. For instance, extensive academic research exists on the portrayal of women and sexual minorities in different media forms and workplaces (Edström 2018; Krainitzki 2016; Ross and Padovani 2017). Studies have also examined audience interaction with mediated sexual content (Paasonen *et al.* 2019; Scarcelli 2015; Smith, Attwood and Barker 2015) and the

negotiation and performance of sexual identities through media consumption (Andreassen *et al.* 2018).

The relationship between gender and media as a topic for the academic work has a long and rich story that intertwines with feminist movements (Krijnen and Van Bauwel 2022). The academic interest in gender (initially, mainly, in relation to women) was not initially considered an important topic of investigation in media studies and, as Van Zoonen (1994) states, it was an important point of critique of feminist scholars in the beginning of the 1970's. Indeed, it was the second wave feminist movement (in 1960's USA), that contributed to some gender awareness in academia.

Three focal areas emerged from feminist academic research: stereotypes and social roles, ideology, and pornography (Van Zoonen 1994). Each of these themes is directly connected to feminist activism. The first theme, social roles and stereotypes, stems from the belief that the media's underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayal of women leave female audience members without positive role models to emulate (Tuchman 1978). Numerous studies have been dedicated to this topic over the years, resulting in two distinct strands of research. One strand focuses on the representation of women in the news media industry and news content itself, while the second strand delves into the representation of women in advertising and popular culture.

The second theme, ideology, is closely linked to feminist activism, albeit in a slightly different manner. Ideology, as a topic, has been and continues to be a crucial aspect of critical cultural studies within academic domains. Scholars from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies approached the study of subcultures, often intertwined with the media, from a Marxist perspective. They drew inspiration from Althusser's notion of the media as "ideological state apparatuses" and Gramsci's ideas on "hegemony" (Krijnen and Van Bauwel 2022). In relation to the CCCS, is also important to remember the big contribution made by the Women's

Studies Group (which included Angela McRobbie, Charlotte Brundson, Dorothy Hobson, Janice Winship, and Rachel Harrison) that permitted academic work on gender and media, from a cultural studies perspective, to encompass the study of media texts and their audiences.

Lastly, an important theme in academic research on gender and media is pornography (Stella 2011). In early discussions on pornography, feminist debates played a significant role in shaping research agendas (Van Zoonen 1994). Generally, pornography is seen as objectifying women, portraying them primarily as objects of male sexual desire and often excluding them as active sexual agents. In its most extreme form, pornography is seen as a cultural manifestation of men's hatred towards women, encapsulated in Robin Morgan's slogan, "Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice", coined in 1977. From this perspective, pornography is considered a violent act against women. In 1988, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon reframed pornography as an act that violates women's equal civil rights, rather than a violent or criminal act. They argued that pornography is central to creating and perpetuating gender inequality, as it is a systematic practice of exploitation and subordination that disproportionately harms women (Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988). These arguments are rooted in important assumptions about media texts and their effects, suggesting that consuming pornography directly influences human behaviour, particularly male behaviour.

Recent research indicates that pornographic images are interpreted in diverse ways and often elicit contradictory reactions, complicating the relationship between the content and its audiences (Attwood 2005). Furthermore, Paasonen (2009) emphasises the significance of contextualising pornography debates within their social and historical contexts. Ideas, thoughts, and normative perspectives are culturally specific, leading to different arguments and viewpoints regarding pornography in different regions around the world.

## 2. Digital media, gender and sexuality

The connection between digital technologies, gender and sexuality has a long history and feminist theories of gender and technology have evolved over the last forty years (Wajcman 2007; Burgess *et al.* 2016). If the approach of the second-wave feminism considered technology mainly as a reproduction of patriarchy, the 1990s scholars started to celebrate digital technologies as being potentially liberating for women. This gap between technophobia and technophilia has been filled by recent feminist and media scholars producing an important number of studies that, on the one hand, are more critical about technoscience and, on the other hand, are aware of its potential to open up new gender dynamics (Mowlabocus 2010; Light, Fletcher and Adam 2008). Furthermore, the most recent studies focus on the mutual shaping of gender and technology, underlining how neither gender nor technology is taken to be pre-existing, nor is the relationship between them immutable (Van Doorn and Van Zoonen 2008; Krijnen and Van Bauwel 2022).

In its evolution, the field related to digital media, gender and sexuality touched different and important topics: the intertwine between technologies and bodies (Nakamura 2002; Lupton 2015), how communication technologies have been gendered through their social uses (Shade 2007), how people play with their identities in the digital environments (Turkle, 1995), the connection between online and offline spaces (Campbell 2004; Herring and Stoerger 2014), the sexism in the online interactions (Kendall 2002), the cyberqueer spaces (Wakeford 1997), the different approaches to cybersex (Waskul 2003), the online pornography (Atwood 2010), the representation of femininities (Caldeira *et al.* 2018).

### **2.1. Gender, sexuality and digital spaces in early theorisations**

Since the earliest investigations into the internet, many scholars have regarded computer-mediated communication as inherently more democratic than other forms of communication. In the field of gender studies, for example, the internet, initially, was believed to offer women more opportunities than offline life. It is worth noting that during the 1990s, it was primarily female scholars who recognised the potential of new computer-mediated communication forms. Notable works from this period include Elizabeth Reid's "Electropolis: Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat" (1991) and Sherry Turkle's "Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet" (1995).

The perspectives of scholars in the early 1990s align with an optimistic view of the internet as a realm of individual freedom and autonomy, a digital carnival where individuals can present themselves as they desire, free from cultural constraints and judgments. It is a place of simulation that allows access to various aspects of identity, altering our self-perception and understanding of who we are (Bruckman 1996). During this period, online identity was conceptualised as being constructed through multiple experiences, making it fragmented, decentralised, fluid, and empowering as individuals could consciously choose their representations.

One significant characteristic of digital interactions is the absence of the physical body. As Stone (1995) explains, rather than creating an absence, this condition offers an opportunity to reconceptualise the relationship between identity, body, and technology. It is a novel condition brought about by digital media, enabling experiences of being outside one's body or transforming into something other than oneself - an amusement or a new way of working and relating to others. This unique condition gave rise to the metaphor of the cyborg (Haraway 1985) as an effective way to explain individuals' experiences in digital media.

During the mid-1990s, the internet was often seen as a separate sphere from everyday life. The metaphor of cyberspace gained popularity to describe digital environments - an alternative world where individuals could free themselves from the constraints of their physical bodies and emancipate themselves from various forms of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia (Wakeford 1997). Cyberspace was hailed as a realm of identity fluidity, a transcendent space where individuals could be what they couldn't be in real life. Moreover, networked communities were seen as examples of "subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser 1990).

Although the perspectives of the 1990s were important, they often exhibited excessive optimism regarding the freedom offered by digital spaces. To address these limitations, subsequent research by scholars like Campbell (2004) and Kendall (2002) focused on how offline life influences online practices. These studies revealed that online interactions rarely lead to significant changes in gender understandings. In fact, beliefs and prejudices about appropriate masculine and feminine behaviours risk being reinforced in these spaces. Assuming that the absence of the body in online interactions can eliminate issues such as racism and sexism oversimplifies race and gender as socially constructed. It also overestimates the capacity of online interactions to subvert power hierarchies related to gender, class, and racial identities.

Cyberspace has proven to be an important sphere not only for gender issues but also for discussions and exploration of sexuality. The terms "Internet sexuality" or "Online Sexual Activities" (OSA) are commonly used to refer to content and activities related to sex and sexuality on the web. These encompass a wide range of phenomena, including online pornography, sex education, the use of apps for sexual purposes, and mediated sexual interactions like cybersex and sexting.

For a long time, human sexuality has been overlooked by the social sciences and confined to the realms of medicine and psychology. Therefore, exploring sexuality

in relation to digital media not only involves reclaiming a subject intimately connected to society and its functioning but also considering how the structures of media intertwine with bodies and sexualities. In the early 1990s, studies on sexuality on the internet primarily focused on young people, and the scientific debate centred on the benefits and risks associated with engaging in online environments, particularly concerning aspects of identity, including sexuality.

The discussion surrounding sexuality in digital media has notably revolved around two main issues: pornography and cybersex. Initially, early studies on online pornography tended to have a psychological orientation and primarily focused on its effects on users. However, this perspective shifted with the emergence of “porn studies” (Williams 2004), which re-evaluated pornography by analysing it as a cultural product rather than rushing to stigmatise it. These approaches have also emphasised the informational function of pornography, describing it as a form of sex education that goes beyond mere sexual arousal and serves as a tool for performing gender identity (Scarcelli 2015).

Another significant topic that gained attention in digital media and sexuality studies during the 1990s and 2000s was cybersex. However, works on this subject often lacked a description of it as a cultural phenomenon. Instead, the focus tended to be on potential dangers such as web addiction and marital infidelity. In a similar vein to studies on pornography, the issue of compulsive use of cybersex became a consistent theme in research within the field.

Overall, the examination of human sexuality in the context of digital media opens up new perspectives on a previously neglected subject. It involves considering the cultural aspects of pornography, recognising its informational function, and analysing the complexities of cybersex beyond its potential risks.

## **2.2. Digital media, gender and sexuality. From social network to mobile media**

In the early 2000s, the Internet underwent significant changes that had a profound impact on how people perceived digital spaces, particularly concerning online identity and self-representation. Firstly, while the newsgroups, discussion forums, and online games of the 1980s were considered alternative spaces with a limited user base, by the late 1990s, the Internet had become a medium used by millions of people. This shift made it increasingly difficult to imagine the online reality as a cyberspace detached from the physical world. Additionally, the proliferation of mobile phones with internet capabilities further blurred the line between the real and virtual worlds by allowing constant connectivity. Secondly, the increase in connection speeds transformed the web from a predominantly text-based environment into one filled with images and audio-visual content. Lastly, with the emergence of Web 2.0 and the rise of social networks in the early 2000s, the internet definitively transformed into a mainstream communication tool, featuring user-friendly commercial platforms that facilitated sociability, image and video production, and text sharing.

The advent of social networking platforms brought about a re-evaluation of the theoretical perspectives that characterised early web research. Many of these studies aimed to demonstrate how technology usage could impact users' daily lives, including matters of gender and sexuality. However, the limitation of this perspective was its tendency toward determinism, assuming that technology acted as a neutral and autonomous force separate from the society in which it operated, leading to transformations and changes in our everyday reality. A more useful perspective to understand the incorporation of new communication technologies into people's lives is the concept of the "Social Shaping of Technology" (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999). This perspective acknowledges the reciprocal influence and mutual modification that exist between the affordances (potentialities) offered by technology and the ways in which it is used.



Nowadays, studies connected to gender, sexuality and digital media focus on so called platform society (Van Dijck *et al.* 2018) with a specific attention to the algorithms and affordances (Shaw and Sender 2016; Saka 2020). All these studies shows that digital media could reproduce and reinforce the most conventional (and hegemonic) social logic connected to gender and sexuality, favouring some users at the expense of others (young people, women, non-binary people, LGBTQIA+ community, black people etc.) (e.g. Noble 2018), but that they can also help users to perform different gender identities and practices or challenge more conservative visions of gender and sexuality.

A good point of observation of the intertwining between gender, sexuality and the platform society is represented by the use, design and creation of mobile applications (m-apps). According to a report by Statista (2021), 218 billion apps were downloaded from Google Play and the Apple Store in 2020. The massive use of m-apps in different categories, from social platforms to dating and gaming, health, fitness and self-tracking apps, suggests that people are increasingly using apps to connect with others and interact with multiplatform content. As a result, these mobile technologies have become an indispensable part of life as an extension of the self (Drusian, Magaudda and Scarcelli 2022). In this sense, people's use and different appropriations of mobile apps are essential to understanding how they challenge or constrain their personal experiences, particularly regarding how they (re)negotiate their sexual and gender identities (Lupton 2015; Scarcelli 2022). Indeed, as feminist scholarship has highlighted, gender and sexuality are likely to be challenged, (re)constructed and transformed (also) using m-apps (Fotopoulou 2016; MacLeod *et al.* 2019; Ringrose 2013).

Therefore, it is important to question how gender and sexuality are constructed in media production and consumption, identify dominant ideas, discourses and how symbolic materials are outcomes of social arrangements that legitimise an essential social division.

Understanding technology as producing meaning, subjectivity, and agency shaped by power relations and adopting a critical perspective of contemporary digital media, in this special issue scholars analyse mobile apps affordances, grammars, platform politics and content, as well as their uses, appropriations and embodiment, in order to make sense of how they are shaping normativity and also challenging traditional gender practices and identities. The papers included in this special issue are presented in the following sections.

### **3. The contents of this Special Issue**

#### ***3.1. Apps, gender and sexualities***

The heterogeneity and multidisciplinary nature of apps is the focus for Rachele Reschiglian and Olga Usachova's contribution to this special issue entitled "Understanding apps concerning gender and sex(ualities): A scoping review". The authors focus on the social sciences domain to examine how the academic literature portrays apps concerning gender and sexuality over the past decade.

The article presents a scoping review from the search for "app", "gender" and "sex", seeking to identify articles and links between other research areas and determine how they intersect with social science. Focused on peer-reviewed journal articles in English, the scoping review identified quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods studies that considered the use of apps focusing on gender and sex from different analytical lenses. The analysis of 76 articles identified refer to mapping four macro-themes: dating, sex education, violence, and health.

Regarding dating, the authors assessed seven directions of scientific research:

- I. digital romance - as a digital social practice, in the context of the relevance of digital romance for the LGBTQIA+ community, given the impacts

of the Covid-19 pandemic on everyday life and in particular on relationships and sex lives, and also given the association between alcoholism and the mediated use of dating apps;

- II. app affordances and surveillance - the ethical implications of using big data from apps, intensified surveillance to prevent sexual harassment and abuse, consent to computer-mediated sexual activities through specific affordances, and the appropriation of affordances that contribute to receiving information and health prevention resources;
- III. gendered use of technologies - the role of affordances, norms and practices for challenging or restraining normative gender role expectations and the reinforcement of normativity that anchors on the argument that dating apps are fun for men and dangerous for women;
- IV. intersectionality - race, gender and sex intersect in image-focused dating apps culture; masculinities - multiple masculinities are present in partnering culture by embodied social practices;
- V. self-presentation - identity presentation through affordances and images is considered a performance of gender and/or sex;
- VI. stigma - non-normative sexual orientation and race are mottos for social sexual discrimination and acts of violence across mobile apps.

The dimension of sex education is intertwined with discourses related to the use of the apps. Moreover, the literature focuses on how mobile apps address sex education or sexual health narratives. The authors state that research comprises two strands: considering the apps' technical possibilities and content-related inquiries.

The macro-theme of violence focuses on research on gender-based violence-reporting apps and apps in platform economies. Approaches to intimate partner violence are usually a product of the so called "patriarchal consumer surveillance",

which monitors women's bodies and has a negative impact. Nevertheless, the literature also notes that violence-reporting apps may positively impact the victims' mental health. The impact of apps on women's lives is also analysed through the lens of platform economies considering risks and negative experiences for this vulnerable population by highlighting the affordances and grammar of the apps.

The health dimension concerns the connection between apps and health-related topics affecting gender and sex(uality). Reschiglian and Usachova have identified four main trends:

- i. health promotion - studies show how apps are essential in facilitating health information;
- ii. HIV promotion - apps have been shown to promote safe behaviors across gender groups and sexual minorities;
- iii. specifically indicated apps - research is interested in gendered groups and their use of apps concerning understanding of genders and sex;
- iv. parenting - parenting-related apps may support new parents. However, they can also fail by reinforcing traditional gender roles of women as caregivers and ignoring same-sex couples or single-parent families.

The paper shows that gender and sex narratives concerning apps are mainly binary and focused on the surveillance of women. However, a more positive digital landscape is presented for normative male-presenting persons.

### ***3.2. Social media platforms and gender***

Ana Marta Flores and Eduardo Antunes reflect on how social media platform usage varies based on gender and whether the affordances of these platforms differ in terms of the (re)construction and performance of gender identities. In the paper "Uses, perspectives and affordances: an exploratory study on gender identity for

young adults in social media platforms in Portugal”, the authors explore the connection between gender identity and the uses of digital social platforms among young adults.

The authors contend that studying digital social interactions requires a critique of who produces the design and a look at who and what is being represented. It follows that a gender lens enables understanding symbolic representations of gender and sexual identities.

The authors depart from conceptualising gender as a notion under social construction. Furthermore, considering the ubiquity of the digital in contemporary socialisation processes, the authors argue that gender and gender identity intersect with technology. Therefore, digital social relations are also rooted in the offline realm and its socialisation processes. Regarding the multidimensional aspects of identity construction, the influences of digital environments can be very relevant, assuming that they contribute to the construction and reconstruction of gender identity images, operationalising different ways of understanding the concept of gender from behaviors supported by social platforms. Likewise, a relevant argument for consideration is that digital identity can expand the boundaries of human corporeality.

The paper is anchored on a mixed-methods approach implemented to assess if social media use differs according to gender and if and how the affordances of these platforms vary considering (re)constructions and performances of the gender identities of young adults. First, the authors present an overview of social media platform usage through tracking smartphones of 342 young adults in Portugal. Secondly, data from focus groups is examined using critical thematic analysis. Finally, the six most recurrent apps in the tracking results and focus groups were analysed through the walkthrough method.

Results from the tracking study show a gender-based difference in time spent on social media, with women spending an average of 73,41 minutes and men having

an average of 53,46 minutes daily on these platforms. The most used apps were YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Messenger and TikTok. Although men have higher average daily minutes per user in WhatsApp and TikTok, YouTube is the app with more gender-difference usage with a greater prevalence for women.

Focus groups reveal two macro themes: i). efforts of neutrality anchored to normativity; ii). gender awareness and sexual identity issues as an ally. Furthermore, the results show that young adults identify digital spaces as an extension of the self. Even though most participants show difficulty in explaining how their uses and appropriations of social media may contribute to negotiating their identities, results show that although some imaginaries are challenged, others still prevail. For example, some participants have a discourse of neutrality, considering gender from a binary perspective and claiming it is not an issue. Other participants challenge the normative narrative, showing awareness of different gender minorities. The walkthrough method sheds light on how platforms take this into account. For example, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Messenger allow the user to define their gender. Furthermore, Meta platforms allow specifying pronouns. However, WhatsApp does not offer the option to add gender or pronouns.

The authors conclude that this exploratory study reinforces the argument for the prevalence of the use of social media by young adults. However, although platforms allow different options for gender identification, it does not mean that gender can be constructed and performed there, as the focus group results demonstrate.

### ***3.3. Platform economy: labour market and imaginaries of femininity***

In “Femininity as a gig? An interface analysis of childcare and sugar dating platforms” Di Cicco and Vandevenne, the authors seek to assess how the design and affordances of childcare and *sugar dating* platforms assemble gender in careers

mainly performed by women and to comprehend whether these role expectations reinforce or contest normative imaginaries of femininity.

The authors point out that digital platforms produce new configurations of work and employment, assuming a twofold role of employers and market intermediaries. Techno-normative forms of governance and control based on emotional engagement impact job opportunities considering that platforms infrastructures implement rules of visibility and presence materialised in rankings, ratings and feedback. Although individualisation and the precarious nature of the labour market involving men have been studied, more is needed about feminine segments of the platform economy. Di Cicco and Vandevenne argue that platform-mediated work reinforces gender inequalities endorsing the undervaluation and under-recognition of women. Therefore, this paper is a step forward in research on the topic. By discussing how technologies have affected work relationships and practices for childcare and sex workers, the authors explore how the infrastructure of on-demand platforms shapes gender in work roles.

The platform sex workforce is heterogeneous, comprising blurry boundaries between professional and amateur working conditions and work and leisure time. Furthermore, *sugar dating* can be defined as a form of instrumental intimacy provided through commercial sex, which promotes asymmetrical relationships that often blur the notion of consent. Women commonly perform childcare, often gendered through a stereotypical understanding of femininity.

In childcare and sex work, the gendered nature is anchored to regimes of visibility and invisibility on the platforms. This idea results in a flexibilisation of work, blurring the domestic sphere and the global capitalist market. Concerning platforms, gendered affordances shape user behavior founded on the interpretation of gender by the platform's designers and users. Based on the assumption of gendered affordances, the authors propose their study on the representations of femininity in the platforms' interface.

The case studies selected for this paper are the platforms ‘Seeking’ and ‘Babysits’. Using the walk-through method, Di Cicco and Vandevenne analysed the interfaces of both platforms. Additionally, visual analysis was conducted to frame the representation of femininity in the interfaces.

Results show that the gendered nature of the affordances is more evident in ‘Seeking’ than in ‘Babysits’. Nevertheless, the platform provides imagery targeting a young female audience. Both platforms reproduce normative gender roles as well as economic ones, reinforcing traditional power relations. Aesthetics of ‘Seeking’ and ‘Babysits’ also portray explicit expectations encompassing femininity. Moreover, the transactional nature of the arrangements on both platforms is obscure, highlighting asymmetric rules and roles. As affordances greatly influence users’ behaviors and practices, the study reveals that both platforms create ambiguity concerning relationships between workers and clients, which can lead to a devaluation of work and highly demanding actions to be visible. Flexible and low-paid work derives from a link between occupational role expectations, the gender role and asymmetric rules. Therefore, the authors conclude that a gendered division of reproductive labour related to the feminisation of work relies on stereotypical images of women as dependent and caregivers.

#### ***3.4. Gender and sexuality across self-categorisation affordances***

Campaioli’s paper “Hiding the gender binary behind the ‘other’: A cross-platform analysis of gender and sexuality self-categorisation affordances on mobile dating apps”, argues that mobile dating apps are spaces that may promote intimate and sexual encounters and have the ability to shape the meaning of gender and sexual identities. Therefore, they analyse the platform design of dating apps through gender and sexuality self-categorisation affordances.



Departing from the perspective of sociotechnical artifacts, the author argues that design choices materialised in affordances of dating apps as interface elements may reproduce or challenge discourses of gender and sexuality. Considering the technology's intimate entanglement, Campaioli claims that affordances derive from a premeditated algorithmic structure that may impact the experience of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, transgender and non-binary users. Furthermore, the author states that self-categorisation affordances are gendered and emanate from the hegemonic discourses on gender and sexuality.

The popularity of dating apps is well demonstrated in the scientific literature, highlighting the visibility of the LGBTQAI+ community. However, growing evidence shows that these apps convey heavy risks for vulnerable users that are exposed to harassment and violence. Moreover, dating apps offer a stage to misogyny, cyber victimisation and sexual harassment of women, as well as people whose gender and sexuality are socially marginalised. This violence is a continuum of offline violence intertwined with power relations.

Mainstream mobile dating app interfaces use images for self-presentation, anchoring on geo-localisation and promoting gamification in developing romantic relationships and/or sexual encounters. Campaioli claims that subtle forms of symbolic violence are embedded in digital technologies' affordances and design. Nevertheless, these formats of violence are not explored in scientific literature. Therefore, the paper is a step forward in analysing how gender and sexual identities are constructed on dating apps and how the available categories report and concur in shaping current narratives on gender and sexuality.

The categorisation of users by gender on social platforms such as dating apps depends on the user's motivation and the platform's options focused on commercial opportunities aiming for data collection. This information is used for the recommender algorithmic systems of these apps. However, gender and sexual categorisation also affect users' experience and constrain or reproduce discourses on

gender and sexuality in materialising the interfaces of artifacts. Therefore, there is a process of constant mediation between social understandings and technologies that results in gendered affordances.

Focusing on platform design, the paper examines the construction of gender and sexual identity as categories in 12 dating apps (Grindr, Tinder, Badoo, Once, happn, Feeld, Romeo, Her, Zoe, OkCupid, LOVOO, Taimi) using the walkthrough method. From an intersectional approach, the author analysed gender and sexuality on the level of environments of expected uses and the level of self-categorisation affordances in the profile creation process. Results demonstrate that even though some apps mold a binary and static understanding of gender, others do not force self-definition. Nevertheless, popular apps tend to conceal a binary construction of gender, which may affect gender non-conforming users.

### ***3.5. Feminist social media activism and health issues***

Alice Buonaguidi and Chiara Perin present a contribution on how Italian feminist digital activists and advocates address issues of chronic pelvic pain on social media. The paper “Resisting Bìbut Embracing Fragility: Exploring Prominent Themes Emerging from Online Feminist Activists and Advocates’ Posts Addressing Conditions Characterised by Chronic Pelvic Pain on Instagram” presents the prominent discourses deployed by Italian feminist activists and advocates on Instagram addressing the pain and experiences of people dealing with vulvodynia, adenomyosis, endometriosis and painful bladder syndrome. Tackling the institutional and mainstream discharge of chronic pelvic pain, the authors analyse counter-discourses informed by feminist practices. Furthermore, the focus is on portrayals that oppose the androcentrism pervading the medical practice that assembles women as biologically vulnerable and inherently fragile.

There has been a global explosion of feminist social media activism in the past decade. Digital platforms have increased the visibility of feminist causes and social

justice issues, giving pace to what some authors consider to be a fourth wave of feminism focused on an intersectional perspective and reaching broader audiences. Nonetheless, digital feminism is also focused on post feminism, anchored to the individualism rhetoric from the neoliberalism paradigm and adopting economic profit-oriented logic.

The scientific literature shows that women use technology more to learn about their health. In this sense, social media have become vital emancipatory spaces for women and sexual minorities whose bodies are made invisible. It follows that spaces like Instagram enable women to obtain information and support to deal with their health conditions.

The empirical study carried out by Buonaguidi and Perin employs a thematic analysis of the Instagram posts of nine profiles belonging to activists and advocates. The selection of profiles was based on involvement in feminist activities focused on women's health and the presence of explicit and implicit connections and shared narratives with online feminist networks. The thematic analysis identified three macro-themes: structural fragility, delegitimation as fragility, and counter-discourses on fragility.

Findings show that Instagram posts indicate how chronic illnesses and pain comprise a disruption in women's lives and compel a changeover in their sense of self and identity. The authors state that this social media platform may address the insufficiency of recognition of these issues and diseases. Furthermore, feminist activists and advocates unravel mainstream discourses depicting their signs as fictional and the product of hysterical women simulating illnesses. Due to patriarchal and sexist constructions of medical practice, these conditions have been made invisible in mainstream discourses. Therefore, activists promote transformative feminist narratives, practices and vocabularies concerning health, sexual and reproductive rights, as well as deconstructing gender stereotypes. Socio-technical

infrastructures and affordances of Instagram allow activists to contribute to creating a collective identity focused on sharing individual experiences and assembling shared identity models that move away from fragilities and vulnerabilities and promote practices of resistance.

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