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Introduction

Michael Bossetta

2023 shall be remembered as the year Artificial Intelligence (AI) became democratized. While the capacity for language models to generate human-like output was predictable, the speed and scale of generative AI's adoption was not. Over 100 million people use ChatGPT per week, and the large language models that power the emerging generative AI genre are being integrated into products and services across various societally relevant sectors.

While momentous adoptions of technology catch headlines and upend the status quo, it is important to remember that speed and scale are not the only means of societal transformation. Painstaking, rigorous attention to concepts and cases can push forward knowledge in ways that generative AI cannot. Although smaller in scale, individual research projects like the theses in this volume demonstrate the capacity for self-awareness and social critique that remains – and will remain – uniquely human. In presenting an overview of these theses, I aim to highlight how each has broadened our understanding of a concept in a way that demonstrates this capacity.

In this eighth edition of the *Excellent MSc Dissertation* series, five students present condensed versions of their Master's theses, completed for the MSc degree in Media and Communication Studies at Lund University. These students presented their dissertations in May 2023 and earned the highest mark. During the Fall of 2023, the dissertations were revised to a shorter length of 14,000 words for publication in the series *Förtjänstfulla examensarbeten i medie- och kommunikationsvetenskap* (FEA). The series was launched by Media and Communication Studies at Lund University in 2008 to reward and increase the visibility of high quality student research.

In Chapter 1, L. Leáo Alves broadens our understanding of media representation through an analysis of male queer engagement with the popular podcast series *My*

Dad Wrote a Porno. Although the series does not include queer characters or themes explicitly, Alves finds that the podcast's open discussions of sexuality and lack of queer *misrepresentation* open up a safe space for queer fans to engage with like-minded (but sexually different) others in online fandom communities. Supporting these arguments with interview data, Alves brings nuance to the concept of media representation by convincingly demonstrating that the absence of representation can carry with it the absence of judgement. Thus, under some conditions, a lack of media representation can be positive and pro-social by focusing attention to commonalities, rather than differences.

In Chapter 2, Klara Avsec focuses on a more coercive form of media representation *in absentia* by exploring the framing and alliance-building strategies of deplatformed far-right opinion leaders on Telegram. Through a multi-case research design involving four countries, Avsec shows how prominent far-right activists take to encrypted channels to reappropriate the shared experience into a symbolic resource of techno-social victimhood. These actors construct "Big Tech" as a potent empty signifier and leverage bans as social currency that is used to level competing victimhood claims, inhibiting alliance-building between affected actors. Avsec's thesis broadens our understanding of alternative far-right media by providing empirical evidence that challenges preconceived notions of intra-group solidarity and a more general homogeneity that the usage of 'far-right' implies.

In Chapter 3, Yunshan Jiang dissects the intricate and intimate relationships between queer drama series characters and their LGBTQ+ fans. Through a poetic analysis of *Killing Eve* coupled with interviews with female LGBTQ+ fans, Jiang illustrates how queer characters on screen can represent emotional authenticity and cultural transgression via their dress, bodies, sexuality, and rage. Yet, Jiang shows how genre-bending productions can veer into exhibiting stereotypical tropes that cause disengaged fans to participate in finding community through online channels, for example by writing and sharing alternative endings. Jiang's thesis broadens our understanding of modern fandom and its cultural resonance by examining the production, reception, and interaction between complex TV, queer studies, and digital fandom.

In Chapter 4, Anna Ledro similarly challenges stereotypical tropes through a feminist focus on believability in the Johnny Depp v. Amber Heard trial. Combining visual analysis of TikTok content with interviews of Gen Z women,

Ledro shows how the evidence informing the digital jury goes beyond that presented in court. Audiovisual framing, identity performance, and gender stereotypes blend with court-based evidence to complicate the age-old notion of believability in the modern media spectacle. Ledro's thesis broadens our understanding of justice, where rigid norms interact with memeified representations and audience identities in ways that remove the blindfold from believability as an objective construct.

In Chapter 5, Mercy Malikwa analyzes a different form of mediatized representation by casting a gaze on everyday representations of female life in Malawi. Through a document review and production interviews with Malawian female YouTubers, Malikwa illustrates how these women both act within their identities as well as challenge longstanding cultural norms in a highly patriarchal society. Yet, Malikwa demonstrates that YouTube is not a panacea for these women's' empowerment. These YouTubers still face power struggles in their immediate socio-cultural context as well as through the platform itself, which creates challenges for monetizing the YouTubers' labors of love. Malikwa's thesis broadens our understanding of the opportunities and limits of digital platforms as sites of resistance outside of the West.

I began this introduction with a critique of AI, which has received much attention for its ability to synthesize and parrot information. Yet, the ability to synthesize and parrot information is far from the hallmark of intelligence. This why Artificial Intelligence is a perfect term: because drawing an equivalence between automated information synthesis and intelligence is an artifice.

Information synthesis is a necessary but insufficient condition for intelligence, which requires understanding. Understanding, in turn, requires self-awareness and the capacity to actively position oneself within the broader arc of time, space, and knowledge. The capacity to understand is uniquely human and collectively, humans will always outperform machines in the ability to reflect and generate understanding in a way that benefits our societies. The theses in this volume are a testament to that assertion.

Lund, December 2023

Building intimate relations: Queer male fan engagement with representation in the camp podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno*

L. Leão Alves

Introduction

> 'Labels are for gifts under the tree,
> never for those who are sexually free.'
> Rocky Flintstone, *It's a Blinking Christmas*

The British podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno* (further identified as *MDWaP*) is a significant case of LGBTQ+ representation and fan engagement. The show began in 2015 when Jamie Morton discovered his father had been writing erotic novellas, called *Belinda Blinked*, and self-publishing them on Amazon. Morton then invited his friends Alice Levine and James Cooper to a "table read" of such novellas, and each episode of the podcast consists of the trio reading out loud and reacting to the absurdities and bad writing presented by Morton's father, identified only by his pen name, Rocky Flintstone. The podcast became a worldwide success with over 430 million downloads.[1]

One of the podcast's hosts, Cooper, is openly gay and eventually discusses or references his sexuality on the show. However, when it comes to the books, only

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[1] Source: <https://www.mydadwroteaporno.com/#intro1>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

queer women are present. As the story progresses, Cooper, his co-hosts, and engaged fans point out that glaring absence, apparently to no avail: after six books read out on the show, no same-sex relationship has been depicted between men. Nearly to the same degree as they are absent from the books, queer men are a staple of the *MDWaP* fandom: according to the website *Subreddit Stats*, a member of the community *MDWaP* is over 92 times more likely to engage with the community *Gay Bros* when compared to other Reddit users – and, amongst the ten communities with more overlap, a total of six are of gay interest.[2]

The most telling portion of that statistic is not the number of queer men that listen to the podcast, but how vocal these men are about their love for the show. (Those numbers, after all, don't reflect listenership, but active participation in a fan community.) Podcasts are a source of representation for minorities: shows with fictional stories offer a high variety of LGBTQ+ characters and personalities (Ferreyra 2022). Why, then, are gay and bisexual men choosing to listen to a podcast focused on a pornographic series that does not represent them? Undoubtedly, there is some representation to be had from Cooper's presence, but engaging with *MDWaP* is engaging with the books, and if the host's sexuality was enough representation, then why did both he and fans keep expecting (or hoping) that Rocky Flintstone would incorporate queer males into the story?

This thesis uses the term "queer" in its umbrella conception, 'as an all-encompassing word for LGBT and other people who feel a part of this community due to their gender, sex, or expression of sexuality' (Siebler 2016:1). The investigation is focused on the section of *MDWaP* fandom that is not represented in the *Belinda Blinked* narrative and, while the podcast hosts sometimes discuss the absence of gay or bisexual men, the only male sexuality expressed in the books is heterosexuality.

Queer male engagement with representation: Why is it needed?

At the time of writing, it is still illegal to be gay in at least 67 countries; in seven of them, the death penalty can be imposed on men who have sex with other men.[3]

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[2] Source: <https://subredditstats.com/subreddit-user-overlaps/mydadwroteaporno>.
   Accessed on 1 May 2023.

[3] Source: <https://internap.hrw.org/features/features/lgbt_laws/>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

Meanwhile, gay marriage is legal in only 32 countries, and that is counting specific cases like the U.S.A. and Mexico, where gay marriage is performed in only certain states or areas.[4] Even in countries where some rights are secured, legislation that targets the LGBTQ+ community is still being created today: the American state of Tennessee has approved, in March 2023, a law restricting drag queen performances, and about a dozen of other states in the U.S. have similar laws in different stages of discussion.[5] While the matter of drag shows might seem innocuous in comparison to places where being gay can literally get you killed, the queer community has been outspoken about the danger of letting such legislation slide, arguing that such laws are the first step in a larger effort to roll back the rights of LGBTQ+ people.[6] But how is the display of queer people related to their rights?

On a macro level, representation is an important step in the fight for equality and safety. The representation of LGBTQ+ people relates to their struggles and rights, specifically as entertainment media becomes a vehicle to 'cultivate our culture's shared values and ideas' (Billard & Gross 2020:1). Intimately, however, the impact of representation is no less important, as the presence of queer people in media can be traced to the audience's self-acceptance (Pullen 2009:194). While there is still much to be said about the influence that representation of queer people in media – or its absence – has in society and legislation, this study is more concerned with that intimate aspect of media representation: the importance it has on queer people every day as we go through our daily lives in societies that may expose, ridicule, and threaten us. This study explores the themes of representation and underrepresentation of queer males in media through a space where queer male fans have created a community, despite seemingly not being included in the fictional story with which they are engaging.

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[4] Source: <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/same-sex-marriage-country-count>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

[5] Source: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/02/politics/tennessee-ban-drag-show-performances-governor/index.html>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

[6] Source: <https://www.thepinknews.com/2023/03/28/madonna-drag-ban-tennessee-nashville/>. Accessed on 1 May 2023.

Aims and research questions

This research is based on a qualitative study of fans who self-identify as queer men, investigating what feelings engaging with *MDWaP* elicits in terms of acceptance and comfort. To do that, it goes beyond the brief meaning of representation as 'the production of meaning through language' (Hall 1997:16), considering the complex definition of giving 'meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things' (ibid.:19). It is also aware that the representation of marginalized groups of society is contested, as there is never one true meaning for what things represent (ibid).

To find out how fans engage with representation in this complex sense, I needed to hear from these men and investigate their practices within the fandom, trying to understand how this relates to their concerns towards representation in media and to their practices in finding and creating safe spaces for the expression of their sexualities and identities. The main goal was to give voices to those audience members from marginalized groups, understanding how representation can be perceived not only by seeing yourself reflected on a media product, but by a feeling of belonging and freedom to express oneself (Billard & Gross 2020). Therefore, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno* attract and retain the engagement of male queer fans?

2. How does male queer fans' engagement with *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and *Belinda Blinked* reflect their feelings towards representation in popular fictional media?

Literature Review

This section lays the theoretical foundation used to approach *MDWaP* and the queer male fan engagement with the podcast and the source material, the *Belinda Blinked* books. After an introduction on the matter of porn as it relates to *MDWaP*, we focus on matters relating to fan engagement: fandom, intimacy, and especially the uniqueness in queer engagement. We then investigate existing literature on queer representation in media, before exploring the concept of

distance in representation as a possible element in the queer male fan community of *MDWaP*.

A note on *Porno*

While *MDWaP* was always envisioned as a comedy podcast, the *Belinda Blinked* books were originally meant to be set in the genre of pornography; however, that reception was not met by the audience. Therefore, in this thesis, the podcast and its sourcebooks are not being treated as being firmly set in the pornography genre. In the media product analyzed, the terms "pornography" or "porno" and "erotic" or "erotica" are used as synonyms; this will be the case for this section, as well.

The consumption of pornographic material has been the focus of many scholars. For the scope of this thesis, "pornography" is considered as an expression of sexuality, rather than as a theme that positions it in the field of porn studies. As such, this definition of the term for social scientists seems apt: 'Pornography: material deemed sexual, given the context, that has the primary intention of sexually arousing the consumer, and is produced and distributed with the consent of all persons involved' (Ashton, McDonald & Kirkman 2018:163).

That definition might firmly bring the *Belinda Blinked* books to be considered pornography (at least by design of its writer). Simultaneously, it distances *MDWaP* from pornography, since the podcast is not made with the intent to sexually arouse. The presence of pornography cannot be ignored, either: after all, it is in the title of the podcast and prior knowledge of the genre is an integral part of the experience. But, while pornography is a starting point for the creation of *Belinda Blinked*, audiences have not engaged with it nor with *MDWaP* as such. This being an audience study into fans, their experiences with the material must be taken into consideration.

Fandoms

This thesis is situated in the third wave of fan studies (Gray et al. 2007), which comes about as digital media becomes entangled in our daily lives. Those studies attempt to approach fandoms not as a "separate" group, but as groups that people engage with to varying degrees, due to the present context of digital networks and media consumption. As such, this study seeks to explore 'the *intra*personal

pleasures and motivations among fans' (ibid.:8) by interviewing them and analyzing their relationship to the podcast. Similarly, by investigating the weight of representation and their experiences as LGBTQ+ fans, the goal is for this thesis to elucidate 'cultural, and economic transformations of our time, thereby offering new answers to the question of why we should study fans' (ibid).

Fandom, as an intense form of engagement, illuminates and feeds back into social practices, habits, cultural preferences, and world views (ibid). It can be personally or socially motivated, and it can have impacts and reverberations both on an individual and on a societal level.

Studies around fan practices and fandom commonly use selected case studies as examples of how the act of being a fan impacts one personally and the society around them. Fan studies are a useful framework for understanding the importance that queer representation has for queer communities and individuals. This thesis is positioned in that field of studies, valuing fans' personal experiences and engagement with the theme, while simultaneously hoping to expand the potential for social change that comes from fan engagement and media representation.

Intimacy in comedy and podcasts

The relationship between intimacy and comedy predates the use of audio media. In the last century, comedians' personal lives became part of the routine and the jokes, thus bringing people in on their intimate lives (Brodie 2008).

In *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, the intimacy is apparent from the title. Not only from the word "Porno", but mainly from "My Dad": the comedy, in many instances, arises from the fact that it is "weird" to think about the sexuality of an older man who happens to be the interlocutor's father. The juxtaposition of something funny to the world with the embarrassment Morton supposedly feels in relation to his father's work situates the podcast in the subgenre of "cringe comedy", in which the audience is invited to participate in the speaker's shame. Cringe comedy is related to social movements, particularly feminism, as the presence of an embarrassing element breaks down barriers for audiences and makes them confront their passive position towards the status quo of the patriarchal society – and, by extension, the heteronormative one (Marso 2019).

Even beyond the confinement of "cringe", comedy has been described by audiences as instrumental in dealing with real-life issues and making them more manageable. Within those issues, gender is cited as a huge aspect of comedy, interwoven with the depiction and performance of femininity and masculinity. Sexuality, especially homosexuality, plays a role in humor in the media. A historic view of comedy films and the presence or absence of homosexuality in their text or subtext concludes that, at least up until the start of the 2010s decade, depictions would play into the status quo (Mundy & White 2017:199).

In comedy, lesbianism is doubly erased by the patriarchal society as it is focused on women and affection towards women (ibid). In this way, representation of lesbian and bisexual women in media can be fetishized and impersonal, leading to a larger number of female queer representation in some media spaces, while simultaneously excluding them from the conversation by placing them in an objectified position (Annati & Ramsey 2022).

In audio media, especially radio, comedy exists in a medium that lacks the visual component and is mostly reduced to listening by oneself. That might be perceived as being a disadvantage for humor. Those shortcomings are compensated by the intimacy that radio elicits, as the process of imagination and co-creation fosters a closer relationship between listeners and hosts (Mundy & White 2017:81).

The intimacy in comedy is further strengthened by intimacy in podcasts, which are not only as a medium but as a genre, where intimacy is a key factor (Berry 2018) that allows podcasts to bridge distances between audience and producers (Swiatek 2018). Intimacy and the presence of "normal people" as podcast hosts were building blocks for comedy podcasts to be amongst the most successful of the medium (Collins 2018). One way in which established media personalities retain intimacy in their podcasts is by the construction of a different, more intimate persona (Berry 2018). Building intimacy is not merely a commercial strategy, but a requirement of the podcast genre, and one in which its strongest attributes are found.

Intimacy in comedy podcasts has been explored even further by studying *MDWaP* (Euritt & Korfmacher 2022). Those authors list elements that help build intimacy, including the recurring mention of the kitchen table setting, disgust towards the source material, personal anecdotes, and inside jokes. Other elements are the parasocial relationships formed between hosts and listeners, the temporal

and geographical presence, and the mention of beloved products and media that the audience can relate with (Euritt 2023).

A strong sense of intimacy becomes even more relevant when speaking about representation for LGBTQ+ audiences. The construction of a queer identity in the digital age is made mainly through conversations and interactions with other members of the community and, in the absence of such members in immediate families and friends, queer people today turn to the internet (Siebler 2016). With that in mind, podcasts, as a native digital media format, offer a place for those interactions to happen in an intimate setting.

Helping to build this sense of intimacy for queer people is the use of languages and aesthetics that resonate with that audience. Amongst them are the absurdity found in camp pieces of media. Camp is 'an aesthetic style (…) appealing because of its ironic, over-the-top challenging of the norms of "good behavior" and "good taste"' (Rosenberg 2020:94), which 'encourages an affectionate involvement' (Babuscio 1999:122). Camp is also:

> (…) a form of self-defence. Particularly in the past, the fact that gay men could so sharply and brightly make fun of themselves meant that the real awfulness of their situation could be kept at bay - they need not take things too seriously, need not let it get them down. Camp kept, and keeps, a lot of gay men going.
>
> (Dyer 1999:110)

Dyer's definition is linked to queer identities and to their engagement with media, particularly with comedy. Camp works as an antidote to the reality of oppression and violence that is present in everyday life. But the adoption of camp by the queer community goes beyond that: even as rights begin to increase in several areas, the camp aesthetic continues to be embraced. The presence of camp in a piece of media has been an attractive factor for queer media audiences in the past, with country music being a researched example (Hussain 2022). Understanding camp is therefore important to understand what builds intimacy for queer male fans with *Belinda Blinked*, and what gives them a sense of representation when engaging with the books and the podcast.

Queer male engagement

Queer studies may focus on diverse members under the LGBTQ+ acronym, aiming for intersectionality, or focus on a subcommunity. That can be done either by observing the interaction with other forms of oppression (such as patriarchal society) or by attempting to further study groups that are underrepresented in both media and academia. Queer males are not understudied in academia; authors have contributed to making sure male queer audiences and readings are not discarded from queer theory, even if they agree with the attempts to make it not the sole academic focus for the whole community (Thomas 2008).

Gay males are not underrepresented in the media, either; rather, according to GLAAD, gay males are the second most represented members of the LGBTQ+ community.[7] That relative "abundance" of representation makes the case of *MDWaP* and the engagement from queer males (the one community not represented in *Belinda Blinked*) all the more illustrative of how fan engagement can help us broaden our understanding of what representation in popular culture means for that portion of the audience.

Queer fandoms have been organizing around the digital sphere, creating new spaces where they feel safe in expressing their sexuality and gender expression (McInroy et al. 2021). Those spaces are used to enhance their sense of self, create communities with like-minded individuals, fight against systemic oppression, and mentally escape from the difficulties in their realities (Craig & McInroy 2014). Where representation is not present in the original piece of work, queer fans sometimes insert themselves, either through fanfiction (Jenkins et al. 2016), or through a reinterpretation of the work, making it queer – or, as it is sometimes referred to in queer theory, "queerizing" the work.

Queer males have been observed to present a unique type of engagement. Engagement with products or personalities that do not directly represent them is not uncommon: from Judy Garland to Madonna and Lady Gaga, the creation of "gay icons" in popular culture has not been necessarily connected to the sexual identity or orientation of the producers or characters (Hari 2002). By studying the case of *MDWaP*, however, this thesis presents this engagement in an even more unique piece of media: one that is concerned with sexuality, and that openly

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[7] Source: <https://www.glaad.org/blog/glaads-2021-2022-where-we-are-tv-report-lgbtq-representation-reaches-new-record-highs>. Accessed on 6 May 2023.

displays other marginalized sexualities, but constantly side-stepping that of queer males.

Queer representation

Queer representation in popular media has been investigated by discussing stereotypes, their presence in the cultural subconscious, and the pushback from the queer community. One such pushback happens by queer individuals climbing the ranks of the media industry and becoming producers themselves to counter harmful narratives (Lee 2019). Applying that logic to the podcasting industry, the facility of producing and distributing material facilitates the work for queer content creators to spread their realities and views across audiences.

In the digital age, the creation of such content comes with its own challenges. The interaction between queer people on the internet and their possible audiences has changed, as there is a broader audience to reach and new personalities from which to draw inspiration. Simultaneously, the spread of hate is facilitated by the anonymity social media provides, endangering individuals who engage in those communities as producers or fans (Siebler 2016:97ff).

Challenges for queer representation in the digital age are not limited to content creators. For example, LGBTQ+ youth are still being neglected in terms of their mental health, despite the online tools that promise to help them (Cohen, Feinstein & Fox 2022). This imbalance is indicative of a suggested tendency: that, as the amount of digital content increases, the content specifically tailored for queer people becomes even more niched and restricted to those communities. This creates a paradox: while media representation of LGBTQ+ people has been improving in the last few decades (Gillig & Murphy 2016), their resonance with a general audience seems to lessen due to the more saturated media landscape.

Whereas this scenario might be undesirable for the societal consequences of representation, it might prove positive for the personal, intimate engagement that queer representation elicits. The general absence of queer representation and the stereotyping of gay males in media can perpetuate higher rates of suicide amongst queer youth (Cover 2013); however, media personalities can positively influence queer people in their journeys of coming out and forging their own identities (Gomillion & Giuliano 2011).

Fictional stories revolving around gay characters and/or written by gay authors can impact gay audiences and their identities. One such impact is the "becoming" of a story, which happens when that story is deemed more relevant than one personal experience, unbound by the identity of the audience, but relatable because of its universal themes that are experienced beyond common struggles (Pullen 2009). Through "becoming", a queer narrative has the potential of being universal. In this thesis, the object of study is a "universal" text – *Belinda Blinked*, universal in the sense of displaying heteronormativity – "becoming" in reverse, being appropriated and queerized beyond the author's intentions.

Distance: Representation in absence

There is an academic gap in addressing the intersection of representation in distance: audiences' consumption of representation *near* to them, but not *of* them. For example, Brazilian immigrants who consume media focused on Spanish-speaking Latino communities in other countries; or, as is the case of this study, queer males consuming media that represents queer females.

Some scholars have contributed to bridging that gap, such as a study about the representation across different forms of media of European asylum seekers and its reception in Israel (Aharoni & Lissitsa 2022). Their findings point to social media and digital networks bringing the discourse of the "others" (asylum seekers) closer to home, while traditional media, especially newspapers, would keep them at a distance. The consumption of traditional media was therefore linked to less empathy and connection between the Israelis and those seeking refuge in Europe, while the opposite was true for those who consumed digital media. That helps understand how new media in the digital context creates a different type of discourse that may bring people closer to issues they are not personally experiencing.

In other words, studies about understanding representation, media positioning, and its consequences support the following possibility: Because podcast is a digital-born format, it can raise awareness and empathy towards diverse issues to an audience that would perhaps not be interested or empathetic to those questions by engaging with them in traditional media. The case of *Finding Cleo*, a true crime podcast about the disappearance of a Saskatchewan girl in Canada, illustrates that potential and its developments. Producers of the podcast specifically caution

indigenous communities about how sensible the show might be for them, therefore making their show more suited for an audience that is not represented in the story being told. The massive consumption and success of *Finding Cleo* has led to changes in the conversation around colonialism in Canada, being incorporated into school curriculums (Price 2022:365).

Summarizing the literature review

This thesis acknowledges the importance of the field of porn studies but understands the fan engagement with *MDWaP* as separate from engagement with pornography. Therefore, it highlights the importance of intimacy in the genres of *MDWaP*: comedy and podcast, with characteristics of camp, cringe, and absurd comedy that resonate with the intimacy offered to fans.

As a study in fan engagement, this thesis also understands fandoms as spaces where fans come together to discuss and appreciate the object of their engagement, displaying an intense engagement with the material. Unique amongst those fandoms is the queer male engagement, due to its intensity and its appropriation of material that is not always meant to represent them. That leads to a larger understanding of representation, one that comes from the feeling of comfort within a media universe, rather than the presence of a character with similar characteristics as the fan who is engaging with it.

Methods

This research seeks to identify the current situation of media representation of queer males, where it is leading, how it benefits (or not) the people involved, and what changes (if any) need to be made for that development to be satisfactory, through the choice of a concrete social situation (Flyvbjerg 2001:145) that illustrates the larger issues of queer representation in media and how it influences societal and personal perception of their existence and rights. The specific method chosen for that was qualitative semi-structured interviews (Bruhn Jensen 2012) to interview fans and give value to their experiences as crucial to the reflections on the importance of representation in media.

Recruiting and piloting

The recruiting started with a post on the podcast's subreddit in the visual style of the podcast, asking for fans who identified as queer males to volunteer through my email or social media contacts. That post was also shared on Twitter, where it was kindly retweeted by Rocky Flintstone himself, and on Instagram. In total, more than thirty applicants reached out in less than a week.

Figure 1. Recruiting post shared on social media

Because recruiting started early and many fans reached out, I had the opportunity to conduct four pilot interviews. The themes and the order of questions were refined throughout them. I also informally spoke to women and straight men, assessing their feelings towards the themes raised by this research. While their insights and feelings are relevant in their own context, those conversations proved how queer men's engagement with the podcast form a unique relationship that warranted investigation, thus narrowing the sample to self-identified queer men who are fans of *MDWaP*.

All interviewees were from English-speaking countries (United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada, Ireland, and Australia). Outside of English-speaking countries, the podcast has also enjoyed success in listenership and sold-out shows in the Nordic countries, in Germany, and in the Netherlands; however, no fan from those countries has reached out to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted online through Zoom, and recorded using the built-in feature, which records the video and audio of the call. The video files were promptly deleted after the interviews, in an additional effort to preserve the interviewees' anonymity, and only the audio files were used for the transcriptions. The interviews covered three major themes: engagement with the podcast and the books, views of representation in media, and feelings towards representation in *MDWaP* and *Belinda Blinked*.

After the established minimum of 10 (post-pilot) interviews was reached, a lot of the themes were saturated; however, considering the abundance of volunteers, two more interviews were conducted to ensure more coverage of feelings and viewpoints. Those additional interviews brought the important participation of one person assigned male at birth who is in the process of reflecting on their own gender identity, which allowed for a better understanding of how the queer experience was broad even in a small subset of this fandom. In total, the overall number of interviews was ideal for having both a saturation of themes while still being able to observe and value people's identities and personal experiences.

Refining the interview guide

The initial interview guide considered the five parameters of engagement, with an extensive focus on the genre of pornography. That element proved to be less relevant for the focus of this study and had a reduced importance in the final interview guide. New questions were included, pertaining to the interviewees' engagement with the genre of podcast, exploring their taste in media and a more focused questioning on the matters of representation. As the interview guide evolved, so did the study and its guiding research questions.

Participants

All interviewees were anonymized to preserve their identities. Each one of them was given an alias, based on the most popular names for their country and year of birth. There was one exception: Cian O'Mahony, a super-fan who has created a website explaining the timeline of events in the *Belinda Blinked* books and later was invited into one of the *Footnotes* episodes of the podcast. Cian graciously volunteered to participate in this research and, due to his unique involvement, anonymizing him without losing the data proved challenging. He then agreed to be identified in this thesis and is the only interviewee who is referred to by his real name. Accordingly, he had access to the full transcript of his interview and was allowed to redact any information that he decided to share publicly no longer. Cian and all other interviewees have had access to the thesis and a summary of the findings.

Table 1. Overview of interviewees

ALIAS	AGE	NATIONALITY	GENDER	SEXUALITY
DAVID	39	British/Australian	Man	Gay
JACOB	21	American	Masculine-presenting, AMAB	Queer
CHRISTOPHER	34	British	Male	Gay
THOMAS	32	British	Cis male	Gay
MICHAEL	24	American	Male	Gay
BRANDON	30	American	Male	Gay
CIAN	36	Irish	Male	Gay
JASON	32	American	Male cisgender	Gay
NICHOLAS	30	American	Cis male	Gay
DANIEL	27	British	Trans man	Bisexual
QUINN	43	Canadian	Non-binary, AMAB	Gay
MATTHEW	33	American	Trans man	Gay/Queer

All volunteers live in countries where *MDWaP* is equally available as a podcast and where the live tours have visited, meaning their opportunity to engage was equal even in an international context. Not having age as a requirement for the sample allowed the research to find generational differences. Table 1 details each

interviewee, their aliases, ages, nationality, and self-identification towards gender and sexual orientation.

Coding and analyzing

The interviews were approached using Abductive Coding (Vila-Henninger et. al. 2022), which allowed me to perceive bigger themes arising from their comments. Those were related to their engagement with the podcast and its related media, both in a personal and in a social landscape; their sexuality, their identities, and how their choices in entertainment media related to those characteristics; their personal reflections on the theme of representation in popular media; and their views on the matters of the podcast genre as it related to their engagement with *MDWaP*.

The transcripts were coded in three steps. The first step was descriptive coding, noticing the core elements of the fans' talks and the repetitions that appeared in them. Those codes were then grouped into analytical codes, in an initial attempt to cluster those terms and sentences into bigger feelings and meanings. Finally, the third step was grouping those analytical codes into themes. That last step was the basis for the analysis, in themes: good representation, bad representation, queerness, consumption, fandom, view of the books, view of the podcast, sexuality, and identity.
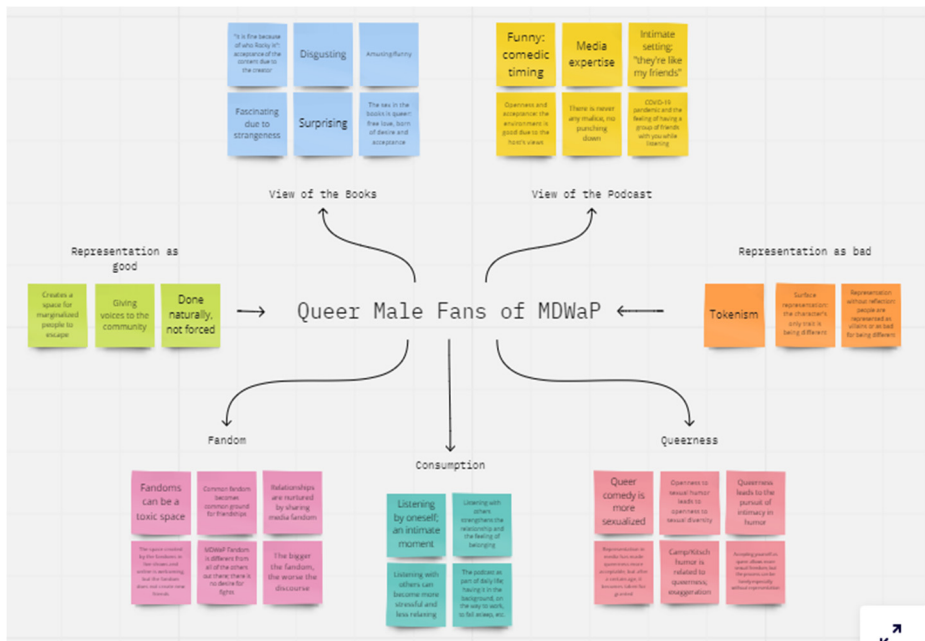
Figure 2. Mind Map with Themes and Codes

Analyzing the queer male fan engagement with representation in *My Dad Wrote a Porno*

The findings of this study are presented with quotes from the interviews and their relation to the theoretical framework presented in the literature review. The first section presents a contextualization of the media product in focus – both the podcast and the books. The analysis then presents the five Parameters of Engagement (Dahlgren & Hill 2023), offering an overview of how queer male fans engage with *MDWaP* and *Belinda Blinked*. The main themes of representation are then explored through an analysis of what representation matters to those fans, how the absence of representation in the books appeals to them, and the importance of the intimacy and openness the podcast offers. This section then ends with a contextualization of what representation means for these fans.

Contextualizing *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and *Belinda Blinked*

The media products *MDWaP* and *Belinda Blinked* can easily get mixed up. Sensing the same might happen with the analysis of those interviews, let us first set up the podcast and the books, attempting to clarify what is mentioned in the upcoming sections.

Belinda Blinked is a series of books written by Rocky Flintstone, which started being self-published on Amazon in 2015. The story follows the character Belinda Blumenthal, sales director at Steele's Pots & Pans. Belinda forms a close friendship with coworkers Giselle and Bella; together, they are referred to as "the Glee Team". Supporting characters include other employees of Steele's Pots & Pans and their clients. The books are marketed as erotic literature. In every chapter, Belinda and her co-workers engage in sexual activity either amongst themselves or with their clients. The sex, although always consensual, is described by fans as "bizarre", constantly including descriptions that do not make physical sense and terms considered to not be arousing.

At the time of writing, six books in the main series have been published, all of which are named *Belinda Blinked* (1 through 6). Flintstone has also published a collection of short stories (*Belinda Blinked – The Naughty Bits*), which includes Christmas tales and additional material that is not included in the main plot; *Lockdown 69*, a spin-off written during the COVID-19 pandemic; *The Belinda Blinked Character Rankings*, a compendium ranking all of the characters in the series; *Sweet Treats*, a dessert cookbook inspired by the story; and *The Rocky Flintstone Bottle of Wine a Day Diet*, a jokingly-written diet book that references the characters.

Rocky Flintstone is the pen name of Jamie Morton's father, who sent the manuscript to his son shortly before publishing it online. Morton and his friends, Alice Levine and James Cooper, then started the podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, in which each episode is comprised of Morton reading a chapter of the book while Levine and Cooper react to it in a comedic manner, usually pointing out contradictions and expressing disgust at the sexual scenes.

The podcast is composed of six seasons, each of them encompassing one of the books in the main series. In between each main episode, there is a bonus episode, referred to as *Footnotes*. Those included additional material sent to the trio by Rocky, celebrity guests that are fans of the podcast, talks with fans, etc. After the

end of the podcast was announced, there was a batch of send-off episodes, including a two-part "Finale".

MDWaP spawned other media products: a self-titled book, published in 2016, which includes the full text of *Belinda Blinked 1* with annotations by Morton, Levine, and Cooper. There were also two world tours of live shows, each featuring an exclusive text that was never read on the podcast. The first tour was recorded as a special event by the American cable channel HBO and can now be watched on the streaming service Max across the world. The tale from the second tour remains unpublished and unavailable for those who did not attend the live shows.

The most recent media product related to *MDWaP* came just as this study was in its early stages. After the last episode of the podcast revealed Rocky Flintstone's voice, the author launched his own podcast. *Rocky Flintstone Unleashed* continues to explore the universe of *Belinda Blinked*. Flintstone's program started being distributed on 1 January 2023 with daily episodes, amateurly produced by the author himself.

Talking about *MDWaP* can become confusing due to its dissociability from *Belinda Blinked*. Unlike most pieces of reaction media (Anderson 2011), the podcast deals with a book that was not previously known to audiences, and therefore fans experience both the podcast and the book at the same time. This research deals with the fan engagement with *MDWaP* and its absence of queer male representation; that absence, however, comes mainly from how much the podcast revolves around *Belinda Blinked*. I have done my best to make it clear which mode of engagement is referred to but, with this being a fan study, it is reflective of the fans' experiences that sometimes both products become entangled. That is a core characteristic of the podcast, as a transmedia story (Jenkins 2008:21).

Parameters of engagement

Within the framework of Parameters of Engagement we can observe five parameters that compose the fans' engagement with a media product (Dahlgren & Hill 2023). As they describe it:

> Our engagement with media involves various relations, bonds and ties, as well as resources (…) The issues and conflicts we find personally relevant and politically compelling are to a great extent a result of the social and cultural resources we have at hand – most of which are media-related in various ways. (ibid.:8)

That explanation points to the fact that analyzing engagement through their proposed parameters will consider and respect fan engagement as a unique and personal experience, while still relating it to larger issues. Their model allows for the understanding of engagement as an ever-changing phenomenon that is interconnected and continuously evolving.

Context

The context in which queer male fans consume *MDWaP* tell us about their habits of listening and with what they associate the podcast. Considering that podcast is a media that was born in the digital sphere, engagement with it always happened through the internet, be it through podcast-listening apps or in the engagement between fans in the Reddit community. Fans have become engaged with the podcast at different points in its 8-year history. Some, like Christopher, started listening when the show only had three episodes out; others (Thomas, Brandon, Jacob) began listening during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even for listeners like Christopher, the pandemic represents a special point in their history with the show, as it was a point in time when their engagement with the podcast was heightened. Listening to *MDWaP* during lockdown represented solace for Thomas, who needed something light-hearted to unwind from working with the National Health Service in the United Kingdom. Podcast consumption in general is considered an intimate and lonely act – in perfect synchrony with these isolating times. Fans would often engage with the podcast using headphones, making the context even more intimate, creating a "bubble" of content where only the fan was immersed.

All interviewees agree on the lone experience of listening for the first time: while Thomas and Brandon mention listening to the podcast with friends and partners, that happens only in relistens. The first contact with new episodes – either as the episodes were being released or as new listeners would be catching up on the back catalog – was made by the fans when they were alone.

MDWaP has over 170 episodes, most of them around one-hour long, spawning eight years of production. It would then be reasonable to expect that most listeners would only listen to each episode once. That is not the case: all of them have listened to the whole series at least twice and chose select episodes to listen to a few more times, as is the case for Jason.

Many fans also relate their working life to the podcast. Michael explains his first listen-through of all episodes happened between breaks in his laboratory work. Jacob tells me he thinks about the past in terms of the job he's held and, similarly, can tell me about the progress of his listening of *MDWaP* by relating it to each place of work. When asked if he had read the *Belinda Blinked* books on their own, without the podcast, he says: 'I think I read the first few books after… What job? I don't know, I measure time by the jobs that I've had'. By linking his consumption of the podcast and the books to his experience at work, Jacob shows me how *MDWaP* is a part of the personal construction of his story.

The context of engagement of the podcast reinforces the intimate engagement that is observed in that type of media. As the listening becomes solitary, the intimacy fosters a para-social relationship with the podcast hosts, as expressed by Nicholas. He compares it to an image he's seen on the internet of 'three girls having a sleepover, giggling or whatever, and there's an awkward person on the side pretending to be a part of that picture – that's kind of my relationship with *MDWaP*'.

That type of intimacy expands to fans' relationships with other fans. Most of the interviewees who have engaged with online fan communities around *MDWaP* describe a similar pattern of behavior: watching and sometimes reacting, but rarely adding to the conversation. Or even sharing what they see there in intimate circles: Matthew describes that he comments on the subreddit 'sometimes, but not very often. I'll share with my friends if there's art or if there was a podcast update, or if there was a crazy fan theory'. In continuing to treat the podcast as a personal matter, reserved to themselves or their inner circles, the interviewed fans reinforce the intimate context in which *MDWaP* is experienced by them.

Motivations

'I needed something funny', exclaims Thomas, echoing the sentiment of other interviewees who were first attracted to *MDWaP* because of its comedy. But comedy is constantly ranked amongst the most popular genres for podcasts in

English-speaking countries, with 22% of the American[8] and 30% of the British[9] public choosing it as their favorite. So, what makes *MDWaP* stand out for the queer male public?

Popularity plays a part in it, with a few interviewees such as Michael claiming their choice to listen to *MDWaP* came from suggestions on Spotify; others, such as Jason, followed family and friends' recommendations. But that does not account for the retention of interest: after years following Morton, Levine & Cooper, Daniel shared that *MDWaP* is still the only podcast he listens to: 'I actually don't like listening to podcasts, I just don't find them very engaging'.

When relistening to the podcast, the motivations are linked to a sense of comfort and freedom, sometimes from having to pay attention while doing something else, as Brandon puts it: 'I play a lot of mobile games, where it's almost like a chore… I would often put [the podcast] on and just listen to it… For stuff like that, you can't have something on that's a new show that you actually want to pay attention to'.

But it could also be related to something deeper. David and Nicholas both describe *Belinda Blinked* and Rocky Flintstone as being very 'camp', an aesthetic that is associated with gay men's way of engaging with a society that is unkind to them. Matthew looks for not only the reactivity, but for the comfort that campness brings: 'It becomes almost like a meditation podcast for me (…) it really does lower my blood pressure and help me feel much more comforted', he says, recounting a time when he felt uncomfortable for being in the more close-minded American state of Texas, and turned to the podcast for reassurance. Matthew mentions not feeling comfortable in Texas due to the state's stereotype as a conservative, anti-LGBTQ+ territory. By turning to *MDWaP* to find the comfort he could not find in his surroundings, Matthew manifests the escape that so many queer people look for in media.

Queer men's motivations for engaging with *MDWaP* is not directly linked to representation, but circles around issues that are related to their experiences as part of a marginalized group. Even though the podcast does not fulfill the need for representation of men who are interested in men, it offers other sources of

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[8] Source: <https://truelist.co/blog/podcast-statistics/>. Accessed on 6 May 2023.

[9] Source: <https://cybercrew.uk/blog/podcast-statistics-uk/>. Accessed on 6 May 2023.

comfort, mainly through the escapism offered by the intimate and camp comedy, which induces nostalgia. 'I feel like growing up, a lot of my ideology was escapism', says Jacob, when explaining what attracts him to engage with media. Thomas claims that the podcast reminds him of his time as a teen: 'When I was growing up, between 18 to 24 years, it was that kind of comedy' that he would engage with.

Modalities

All interviewees described themselves as being intense fans but, perhaps paradoxically, the modality of engagement with *MDWaP* is not always as intense. Matthew explains that, in his day-to-day life, he will have the podcast playing 'in the background', using it as white noise to any other activities that might be happening. That is not unexpected, considering how many times these fans listen to the podcast. Over the course of years of listening, cognitive modalities might appear, and it is important to notice that listening is not the only modality to engage with the podcast: other than reading the books, fans also had the opportunity to watch it live through two world tours.

Jason relates an affective modality of engaging with the live shows, in which he felt so comfortable around unknown fans, he decided to go to twice by himself. 'You have to be fairly open-minded to be into *Belinda Blinked* even slightly… It's so deviant from the get-go'. In the U.K., Quinn also went solo and does not regret the choice: 'It was hilarious, just amazing… You know, you're among your own people. They're obviously open-minded people, for starters, because you can't be close minded and enjoy *Belinda Blinked* and/or *MDWaP*, that just doesn't work'.

The idea of the affective environment that a live show can offer was not appealing to all fans. David tells me he chose not to watch *MDWaP* live after watching the special broadcast on HBO: 'I think that one of the bonuses of the podcast is that it's personal and it feels intimate, whereas the live show… I think it'd be very different… Because it would be a rehearsed, produced show, whereas the podcast feels very off the cuff'. With that comment, David offers a particularly different view on affect; in comparison, for a music artist, a live show offers affect by the environment and the opportunity to interact with other fans. Whereas, for David, it would be the opposite experience: sharing the experience would feel less intimate and, therefore, less authentic.

The modalities of engagement circle back to the already explored feelings of intimacy, authenticity, and comfort with the podcast, strengthening the conclusion that engagement with *MDWaP* elicits, for the queer male audience, a sense of representation that extends beyond seeing queer male characters retracted in the fictional prose of *Belinda Blinked*. That comes both from a cognitive point of view – of seeing queer characters, albeit not male, represented in the story – and from an affective one, as the openness around sexual discourse in the podcast allows them to feel that their sexualities would not be judged. The modalities of engagement tell us the intimacy expected from podcasts is even more present in *MDWaP*, due to the deconstruction of pornography that creates conversations that are not meant to arouse but are open about sexuality.

Intensities

Although engagement with the podcast spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic[10], resorting to media for comfort was nothing new for the queer male fans interviewed for this thesis. Nicholas mentions his consumption of the sitcom *Will & Grace* as a means of finding a 'chosen family' in fiction, in contrast to his own family, who was less supportive of his sexual orientation. Nicholas even chose to go to university in the same building where the comedy show was recorded, to feel closer to those characters he considered family. His engagement with *MDWaP* is no less intense: 'I was devastated when I found out it was ending, because I was just like, there's going to be a hole. And I still feel that way'.

Some fans measure their intensity in numbers, with Daniel telling me he has 'a silly amount of hours on Spotify' spent listening to the podcast. Others measure it by time: Jacob, the youngest interviewee, started listening to the podcast when he was only 17 years old and remains listening five years later, while Thomas relates listening to the podcast on repeat since 2015.

Perhaps the most emblematic case of an intense fan is Cian, who has dedicated his time and labor to creating the website BelindaBlumenthal.business. In it, we can find a complete timeline of the *Belinda Blinked* books and special excerpts that are read on the podcast. Cian has read the novellas and extra material several times, creating a summary so impressive that it earned him an invitation to join an episode of the podcast (*Footnotes: Understanding the "Timeline"*). Even though

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[10] Source: <https://subredditstats.com/r/mydadwroteaporno>. Accessed on: 6 May 2023.

he is a longtime podcast listener, *MDWaP* features in his 'top three' personal favorites. His engagement with the source material even extends to a defense of some of the criticism the hosts and the audience direct at Rocky Flintstone: '[the books] are far more thought out than people give them credit for'.

The intensity of engagement was originally a part of the study design, as I intended to speak only with *produsers* like Cian: fans who who dedicate their time to creating parts of the broad universe that is *Belinda Blinked*. However, it was through piloting that I noticed the intensity of engagement was a constant among the queer male fans; and, as touched upon before, it is that intensity that sets that subgroup apart from the other fans of *MDWaP*.

Consequences

Amongst the interviewees, Cian was in the minority who had read the books without the podcast: most fans avoided it, being content in engaging with the content exclusively through the hosts' reading of it. That is the case of Matthew and Thomas, who claim the main appeal of the podcast is not in the books themselves, but in Morton, Levine, and Cooper. Some, like Jason, argue that this was proven by Rocky Flintstone's spin-off podcast not being as appealing as the original, even though it comes from the "source" of the story. Jason is correct in the lack of appeal of the most recent podcast: although many of the interviewees had given it a chance, none of them had been up to date with Rocky's show, nor considered themselves fans of it.

Despite fans' protests that their interest was higher in the hosts than in the story, their actions might betray those words. There was one constant in the interviews: the fans, in general, did not follow up with Morton, Levine, or Cooper's other work in media. (Morton and Cooper are producing a musical together, which was only mentioned in interviews once; Levine is a radio and TV presenter whose other work was mentioned by only two interviewees.) Even when fans would flock to Reddit for recommendations of other podcasts to listen to in between the release of seasons of *MDWaP*, those recommendations would not include Alice Levine's other podcast, *British Scandal*, or episodes of podcasts like *Drunk Women Solving Crime*, where Morton was a guest. Remarkably, while *MDWaP* has had several hosts of other podcasts as guests in their show, none of my interviewees has mentioned engaging with those "related" podcasts. Rather, the queer male fans of *MDWaP* mentioned listening to *Help I Sexted My Boss*, another British

comedy podcast featuring at least one out gay man, and *Beach Too Sandy, Water Too Wet*, presented by two American siblings reading nonsensical reviews of establishments on the Internet. It is worth noting that both of those shows offer similar experiences when it comes to open discussions around sex, sexuality, and gender expressions, although their brands of comedy are vastly different.

It seems, therefore, that when it comes to engagement with the podcast, fans would extend their podcast habits with similar genres, while not engaging with the people behind it beyond the confinement of *MDWaP*. Meanwhile, without exception, every interviewee has said they would read the next book in the *Belinda Blinked* saga once it is published, even without the podcast. So, while I must believe my interviewees when they say that they are more interested in the trio of hosts, I cannot help but notice their larger support of Rocky Flintstone and the *Belinda Blinked* story.

Another consequence of the engagement with *MDWaP* could be felt in its fandom. I asked fans about their experiences with the subreddit dedicated to the podcast and about their relationships with other fans, and the responses pointed to a unique environment in the world of social media fandoms. 'Loads of fandoms are toxic', Christopher says, 'and I think Rocky's created a world, James, Alice, and James have created this area where it doesn't matter what you were, who you are. It's a place where everyone can come and enjoy something that's been written'.

Christopher attributes this to the silliness of the source material, as does Cian: 'If you like the podcast and you have that sense of humor, I think… there's not much to be divisive about'. But even with seemingly innocent and friendly material, fandoms can become quite divisive and violent online. Brandon relates being a part of the communities dedicated to the Nintendo videogames *Animal Crossing* and *Mario Kart*. He observes that discussions in those subreddits can become heated in a way that is never present in the *MDWaP* community: 'I don't think I've ever seen a fight in the *MDWaP* subreddit… It's a severely, like, hippie community. Everyone is just having a good time talking about dad porn'.

One possible explanation for this unique fandom atmosphere is the feeling of being included in the conversation with the three hosts. Brandon explains: 'Partially because the podcast is built around a really strong friendship that feels genuine, and I think that just sort of rubs off. Everyone knows that we're here to

just have a good time'. He also offers another theory, one that connects the intimacy of podcasts with the intimacy around sexuality: 'I heard this theory that sex can be sort of a relationship lubricant, so maybe to an extent that extends even to porn, even if you are not getting off to it. You know, supposedly societies that are very sexually open, there's a lot less conflict in them'.

His assumption is backed up by research: a study on *Sexual Behavior in Modern Societies* has concluded that openness around sex leads to better social interaction, which would mean fewer conflicts (Grinde 2021). This might mean that, by discussing sex in an open and honest way where there are no judgments, *MDWaP* and *Belinda Blinked* have managed to avoid the toxicity that is inherent to so many fandoms online.

The overwhelming consequence of engaging with *MDWaP* is clear for the section of the audience I have studied: comfort and fun. While describing the podcast as 'silly' and 'light-hearted', it is clear the interviewees consider that as its strength – the possibility of having something to rely on that is light and offers solace from real-world problems. That is especially true of the parts in Rocky Flintstone's work that – albeit probably unintentionally – reflect a sexually-liberated utopia, with a strong woman at its forefront. It is that representation that leads the analysis from the discussion of engagement to a discussion of queer male representation in fictional media.

No representation: When absence is enough

I have previously mentioned Nicholas, whose love for the TV show *Will & Grace* was so intense he chose to go to college to be in the building where the program was recorded. Later in life, his consumption of *MDWaP* bore some resemblance to those difficult coming-out years, in that the same comfort would be felt. But there was a key difference in that media product: the absence of queer male characters who resembled himself in the *Belinda Blinked* story. For this fan, seeing himself on the screen was of the utmost importance in his teenage years; what had changed in his adulthood?

'When you are younger, or whenever your queer experience is, you do need access to gay characters', said Thomas, adding: 'So I think it's important when you are "finding yourself"'. Still, he does believe in the importance of representation, not just for younger people looking to feel better about their places in society, but for

himself. The sentiment is echoed by Quinn, who is currently in a process of self-discovering and questioning gender identities: 'Do I personally feel represented now? Not quite'. Quinn continues, justifying why it might be harder to find representation of that stage of life: 'As much as I hate to almost dehumanize it, it's that law of numbers, you know? Like, if you have 1000 people, there's what, 20 who are gay, and how many of them are non-binary and, you know… Masculine-presenting, but who are doing this mashup like what I'm doing? So, it's kind of the law of numbers thing, but I think it's also just… Society is still playing catch up.'

Of course, that is when representation becomes even more important – as Cian says, 'I think it's important to normalize queer characters in pop culture, because I am old enough that I remember there being absolutely nothing. And when a queer character or queer show would come around, I can remember there being outrage, "it's not suitable", and… that only makes you feel more abnormal.'

But for the interviewees, representation for the sake of it can be even worse than no representation at all. Quinn explains: 'Sometimes when they try to do representation, where various media formats fail, they try to make it a big hullabaloo… But unfortunately, a lot of the time that gay character, they're either only there for a brief bit, they're a stereotype… For the longest period of time, the only way that you would see a gay male character would have been he's flamboyantly flaming or something like that'. What Quinn describes is the dehumanizing feeling that comes from stereotypical images (Ross & Lester 2011) which impacts the psychological and social engagement of people in underrepresented groups.

Belinda Blinked avoids reinforcing stereotypes around queer men by avoiding queer men altogether. While that may not be the best way of representation, it is something that prevents alienating those audiences. As the interviewees pointed out, having a gay male sex scene would have felt "forced" and out of place, and might disconnect them from the material.

That is not to say that gay male interaction in the books is completely undesired. Michael tells me that the only time he has ever contacted the hosts of the podcast was when he felt they had ignored the single confirmation of a male bisexual character in the books. In the first chapter of *Belinda Blinked 6* (Flintstone 2022), a state funeral is held for state agent James Spooner. In a display of the absurdity

that is the trademark of the author, the spy has left a will specifying that the line of people following the procession should be in the order of people he last had sex with. Second in line was a prince – a man! That was the first and only time a male character was confirmed to not be straight, but the hosts read the chapter without bringing attention to it. That prompted Michael to send them an email regarding that omission. As a researcher, it was interesting to notice that this consequence of engagement had only happened in a matter related to queer male representation: did that mean Michael missed it so much in the plot, and was now excited to have it?

He dismisses that idea: 'It was just referencing something that happened with a character that was already dead, so it wasn't really going to go anywhere'. He also points out that, in the same email, he corrects the hosts on getting a character's first name wrong and explains away his interaction by saying that he only felt compelled to write to the hosts because that was the only season he heard 'in real time', as the episodes were being released weekly, rather than listening to episodes from years prior.

So, it seems Michael was excited about being in the conversation personally, not so much by feeling represented. He is not alone in this: 'In terms of man-on-man action, I am quite glad that it doesn't exist, because I do not want that reaction when I'm listening to my favorite podcast', said Thomas. As one of my first interviewees, Thomas surprised me with that sentence: I went into this research expecting to hear how fans were on tenterhooks expecting a gay sex scene. But the other interviewees would echo that feeling – there was a consensus that, although they might find it funny to see how Flintstone would handle a male gay relationship, most were glad to not be included. Cian believes that, if the author had included it, it might've been either 'boring and pedestrian' to avoid hurting anyone's feelings, or it would be 'so over-the-top', it would be unbelievable – even more so than usual.

Finally, there is one more silver lining that interviewees have identified in the absence of gay male sex in the books. 'If there's shows that are gay themed, and then it's just super oversexualized… I can sometimes end up rolling my eyes at it', says Michael, hinting at another common theme for the interviewees: that representation of sexual orientation matters, as long as it is not limited to the sexual aspects of one's life. Interviewees look for representation in characters that

they can relate to in many aspects, not just – or at least, not exclusively – to their sexual orientation.

Belinda Blumenthal: An accidental gay male icon?

In the Christmas special story, *It's a Blinking Christmas*, present in *The Naughty Bits* (Flintstone 2021), we have the only open discussion about sexual orientation in the *Belinda Blinked* series. That happens after Belinda has sex with the character Gertrude:

> "I can't remember the last time I was touched like that. But I'm confused, does that make me a lesbian?"
>
> "Oh, Gertrude", Belinda replied, "labels are for gifts under the tree, never for those who are sexually free."
>
> (ibid.:6)

That is a prime example of how sexual orientations are (not) discussed in the *Belinda Blinked* books: characters will do what they want, when they want, with whoever is willing. 'It's very *gay*, in that it's just something to do, everyone's consenting and it's just something people do for fun. It's not... It's not straight porn', describes David when asked about how he feels about the way that Rocky Flintstone portrays sex in the books. It might be tempting to argue David is drawing on stereotypes here, but that is one of the advantages of doing a study that focuses on people's personal experiences: rather than speaking for the community, David speaks for his life story and the way that he relates with the characters.

Not everyone agrees that the characters in *Belinda Blinked* represent them: as Matthew says, 'I don't need to be in every single thing'. He, like a lot of the other interviewees, argues that what attracts him to *MDWaP* is not that he can see himself, but rather that it does not exclude him. 'It inherently feels like an inclusive book series and podcast as well, so I never felt excluded by not being included', echoes Cian. That is where identification comes from for most fans, from the sexual liberation the characters experience in the story: 'It made me happy how kind of casually they were discussing these topics, and no one was judging any of the acts, really', Nicholas says.

In that sense, Belinda does represent something for those fans that they wish they could see more of in the real world: a strong character who does not justify herself and, more importantly, who is never *expected* to justify anything. Labels are never before or again discussed in the *Belinda Blinked* universe: as Cian points out, certain plot points allude to the fact that the characters understand that other sexual orientations exist, but they never need to be spoken out, as long as everyone is happy with what they are doing.

'They're very open about sexuality… The whole female empowerment thing is a very strong component of it', says Quinn, noticing how the presence of strong female characters adds to the feeling of identification with the podcast, even though Quinn doesn't identify as female. Matthew also adds that the treatment of characters who don't adhere to certain gender norms or expectations heightens the sense of belonging with the series, when speaking of the character The Duchess. 'They made her seem like… Probably exaggerated masculine, and I wasn't sure if it was gonna be, like, "surprise!"', he explains, referring to a possible revelation that The Duchess might be a trans woman. Thankfully, that is not the case: 'But no, I just like that… It's just a masculine woman. There doesn't need to be anything more than that'.

Matthew finishes this thought with a feeling that is very dear to the interviewees, and which reflects their relationship with the matter of representation: 'A lot of the people who want to include me cannot write me, and they really don't need to'. Through this absence, the transmedia story created by the books and the podcast nurtures a space for a unique fan engagement. One where, although queer male fans are not included in the narrative, they are still able to feel they are not judged and, therefore, sense their own space in an environment of openness and acceptance.

Understanding representation for today's queer male audience

What becomes clear from my conversations with queer male fans of *My Dad Wrote a Porno* is that the usual concept of representation in media does not encompass their feelings and experiences. On representation:

> One common-sense usage of the term is as follows: "Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people." You may well ask, "Is that all?" Well, yes and

> no. Representation *is* an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It *does* involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things. But this is a far from simple or straightforward process (Hall 1997:15)

Stuart Hall, one of the most recognized experts on the matter, struggles to provide a simple, straightforward definition of the term and its usage in media right at the start of the work, precisely because it is a complex concept. Representation is to represent and to bring a piece of the world to people, and it is part of the production of culture, but it is more than that. Add to that sentiment two and a half decades of technological change that has brought societal change, and a precise definition becomes even more complex.

It is telling that for Jacob, the youngest interviewee, representation in media bears a different weight, while the majority of the interviewees, who are in their thirties, describe how representation used to be a more meaningful aspect for them when they were younger. The obvious inference from those comments would be that, as queer men get older, representation becomes less important to them; however, that would ignore the context of generational experiences. Of course, different generations live in different contexts; and, with the quick advance of the digital age, the differences between generations have been heightened (Gravett & Throckmorton 2007). That was one of the advantages of having a sample not predetermined in terms of age: by having most of my interviewees in the Millennial generation, with a couple of older and younger outliers, I could find differences in their experiences according to age.

In the queer male community, we are still experiencing a formational, collective generational trauma: the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. In the aftermath of the worst decades of the AIDS epidemic, the male homosexual experience has been defined by it and, to an extent, still is[11]. In recent memory, one case of representation in media of a gay male's experience with AIDS has sparked controversy. The Netflix show *13 Reasons Why* (2017, creator Brian Yorkey) features bisexual character Justin Foley, who dies after complications of contracting the HIV virus and never being tested. The fact that this storyline takes

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[11] Source: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/aids-epidemic-lasting-impact-gay-men/?from=homepage>. Accessed on 12 May 2023.

place in present-time drew controversy and outrage from queer groups.[12] After all, testing for sexually transmittable infections is a common reality in the U.S.A. (where the show is set), and medication now exists that allows for HIV-positive persons to live long and healthy lives.

What the pushback to that narrative from the queer community shows is that, with the advancement of the medical treatment of HIV, the LGBTQ+ community expects a similar advance in the media treatment of such a delicate matter. Cian mentions how, in his early years, gay male representation was confined to characters who would invariably die of AIDS. In comparison, less than 30 years later, a character's death from the disease in the present day is viewed as a disservice to the community.

Age-group outliers Quinn and Matthew both use the term 'punchline' to express the type of representation they are not interested in seeing, especially when that representation does not give the queer characters other personality traits. So, what is the representation that queer male fans crave, and what representation are they flocking towards?

When asked to define what 'representation in media' means, Nicholas strays away from the idea that representation is seeing yourself. He says: 'Representation is seeing not yourself, but a symbol or an icon of yourself projected towards you, so that you can kind of imagine yourself as being a part of a certain community or an area'. Some interviewees do not hesitate to include the characteristics of *good* representation in their definitions. Quinn defined it as 'the inclusion of characters that aren't the stereotypical normal for the environment (…) and doing so in ways that aren't using them as a punchline or as some kind of stereotype of themselves'.

That is where the concept of camp as an aesthetic resonates with queer males: rather than using their experiences and existence as a punchline, camp uses exaggeration as a form of humor, avoiding the punchline from being based simply on sexual orientation. As queer communities seek a way for feeling, if not included, at least *not excluded*, they learn to relate to things even if they are not outright represented in them. From the queer male engagement from Quinn's (and the others) with *Belinda Blinked*, we can see that is where the story strongly resonates with that group: by treating people of different expressions, different

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[12] Source: <https://www.them.us/story/13-reasons-why-hiv-aids-backlash>. Accessed on 11 May 2023.

characteristics, and different backgrounds as normal people, rather than stereotypes. When phrased like that, representation seems like a simple threshold for most media products to cross – and yet, underrepresented communities still are not being represented enough.

Conclusion

'Bring it back. I want it back, I don't care in what way or form… Either a stage show, or a TV show… Do not disappoint me, bring it all back', pleaded Christopher after I asked for his parting thoughts during our interview. It struck me that Christopher would use this space between a fan and a researcher to voice a desire to the producers of the podcast. It was a perfect illustration of a fan trying to get his voice heard, to change the fate of their favored piece of media.

Fans have a history of feeling ignored by media producers and going to great lengths to have their feelings validated. From the massive letter-writing campaign to save the original run of *Star Trek* in the 1960s[13], to the recent release of *Zack Snyder's Justice League*[14], fans have been vocal in demanding that their experience counts for those in charge of making them. I hope that this study has allowed them to feel like they were heard. My intention was to understand what attracted queer men to engage with a media product focused on sex that ignored their sexual orientation and, by doing so, to propose a broader understanding of what representation in media is and how people can feel comfortable in media spaces that they are not expected to occupy. The dedicated Belinkers who have agreed to participate in this research have helped me find those answers.

Firstly, the matter of seeing yourself represented in media seems to be of the utmost importance for queer men while they are still trying to find themselves, be it through accepting their identity, coming out, or looking for like-minded individuals who can help them navigate their realities in the face of oppression in society. As that section of the audience ages, the quality of that representation

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[13] Source: <https://intl.startrek.com/news/living-star-trek-how-two-women-breathed-new-life-into-the-franchise>. Accessed on 13 May 2023.

[14] Source: <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/movies/how-unprecedented-fan-campaign-powered-zack-snyder-s-cut-justice-n1261216>. Accessed on 12 May 2023.

becomes more and more important. Interviewees have shared that, once they feel secure in themselves, they would rather avoid any representation that reduces their experiences to a stereotype or to the punchline of a joke; in those cases, it was preferable to engage with media that does not attempt to represent them at all.

The particular case of *MDWaP* offers queer male audiences a respectful absence, but also supplies them with a sense of comfort in the possibility of being open and expressing themselves. Through the fans' ability to relate to the characters in the novellas and with the hosts of the podcast, they felt an embracing community where, although they were not explicitly mentioned, they could feel that their existence and their characteristics would not be questioned or judged.

That safe environment in media extended to the fandom around it: fans related feeling safe in the Reddit community dedicated to *MDWaP* precisely because knowing how the humor is appealing to like-minded individuals, they would not be ostracized as they would in other media fandoms.

Does this mean that, in the absence of careful representation, no representation is the best option? Not in all cases. Even though the more experienced interviewees relayed looking for representation less as they felt more secure in their identities, they also attributed it to the growing number of characters they can relate to in media now, while looking fondly at the new generations who can see them as they grow up.

Additionally, it is important to reinforce that queer male fans of *MDWaP* are not "settling" for the absence of representation in the *Belinda Blinked* books. They have all mentioned consuming other media that do represent them, while linking the intensity of their engagement with *MDWaP* to a feeling of not being excluded. Therefore, rather than seeing the lack of straightforward representation in *Belinda Blinked* books as a characteristic that queer male fans overlook, my interpretation of these results is that *MDWaP* offers a more subtle, nuanced feeling of representation for the queer male fans it has attracted and retained.

This thesis positions *MDWaP* as another example of podcasts' possibilities to transform conversations around social issues, be it through the importance it has for its queer audience or through the societal impact of a broader and better representation in media. In doing so, the study has understood the meaning of representation as complex and ever-changing (Hall 1997), which meant showing that representation for the queer male fans of *MDWaP* comes not only from

seeing characters for their characteristics, but as part of the creation of a media space where marginalized groups can feel safe without the fear of being judged or ostracized.

Answering the research questions proposed in the introduction, we can say that *My Dad Wrote a Porno* and *Belinda Blinked* attract and retain the engagement of male queer fans in the following ways:

1. Queer male audiences show interest in the podcast, at first, because of a perceived appeal in the camp aesthetic of discussing pornography in a humoristic way.

2. Once engaged with the podcast, queer male fans find the hosts and the writer to be open to discussing sexuality openly and without judgment, which makes them feel safe and without fear of being judged.

3. The absence of queer male representation in the story avoids the possibility of stereotyping or oversexualizing queer male identities, making queer male fans feel even safer knowing they will not be exposed to disappointing representations of themselves.

For the second research question, we can say that queer male fans engage with the podcast and the books in ways that reflect their feelings towards representation, as follows:

1. Through embracing the open discussion around sexuality as a sign that the community of fans around the podcast, as well as the producers themselves, are accepting of all gender identities and sexual orientations.

2. By incorporating the podcast into their daily lives in an intimate way, allowing their own identities to be defined by that broad sense of representation that stems from the openness.

3. Creating fan communities (online, with personal friends, and on live shows) that embody this openness by being free of judgment and without any toxicity towards gender identities and sexualities.

The findings have shown that a media product with camp aesthetics has an initial draw to a queer male community. In that case, being open and unjudging about sexualities makes straightforward representation unnecessary – and, for some fans, even unwanted. That openness and lack of judgment are enough for queer male

fans to feel the comfort that many productions that do *attempt* representation end up not achieving. Meanwhile, the absence of queer male characters avoids any association with possible "bad" representation, characterized by being stereotyped and oversexualized.

After hearing the fans, their experiences, and their pleas to bring the podcast back to life, I can say that, for them, there will never be another *My Dad Wrote a Porno*. But there are, and there will continue to be, other pieces of media like it. Products that fulfill the media's responsibility to ensure safe spaces and communities for people who are marginalized and persecuted, where they can find the support and the acceptance some people insist on denying them. I hope that, if and when the media landscape fails to fulfill that role, the queer male community can still find solace in each other and in the spaces that might not include them, but actively work to not exclude them.

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'Pardon me if I don't weep for your victimhood': Influential far-right activists' framing and alliance-building on Telegram in the aftermath of deplatformization

Klara Avsec

Introduction

Over the past two decades, mainstream social media platforms have provided a seemingly endless avenue for the far-right extremes to spread their intolerant ideas. They have empowered the fringes of the political spectrum to engage disaffected youth under the ambiguous pretence of humour, paint an image more appealing than that of white robes, inject intolerant ideas into the cultural and political mainstream, and ultimately take their messages to the streets (York 2021). However, since 2016, as the pressure grew from the public, terrorism experts, politicians, and advertisers, mainstream platforms have made a series of moves toward detoxifying the platform ecosystem of extremist activity and digital hate (Van Dijck 2021). Big Tech and Twitter retooled their moderation to systematically push virtual far-right activity to the fringes of the mainstream ecosystem. As the tide turned, these shifts provoke a question of what unfolds within the affected far-right communities as their welcome on mainstream platforms ultimately comes to an end.

Contextual background

Platforms began systematically removing self-identifying Nazi individuals following the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, where the alt-rightists, till then thought to be confined to their online crusades, demonstrated powerful offline influence. However, it was not until the tragic livestreamed terrorist attack in New Zealand on March 15, 2019, that deplatforming became platforms' primary tool against the right-wing extremists. The sweeps did away with prominent far-right opinion leaders and organisations, the likes of Alex Jones and Milo Yiannopoulos, the Proud Boys in the United States, the fascist political party Britain First in the United Kingdom, as well as a myriad of other actors. Subsequent measures intensified after the January 2021 attacks on the US Capitol. Beyond deplatforming individuals, most notably the sitting US President, companies began systematically disconnecting alt-tech apps used for coordinating the siege from app stores and cloud hosting services (Bromell 2022).

In tandem, this series of shifts represents the core contextual background for this thesis. Throughout the thesis, I adopt the term 'deplatformization' to encompass both the widespread adoption of *deplatforming*, i.e., the permanent suspension of one's account from a social media platform (Rogers 2020) and *deplatformization*, i.e., the disconnection of alt-tech from infrastructural services (Van Dijck et al. 2021). In tandem, the deplatformization of the far right constitutes an unprecedented set of interventions aimed at one community of practice *and* its infrastructure across the mainstream ecosystem.

Research aims and theoretical framework

As a clear-cut solution to a complex social problem, the altered moderation landscape ensued a cascade of trade-offs unfolding beyond the mainstream platforms. Researchers have mapped out the collective migration of abusive user communities toward alternative spaces such as Telegram (Rogers 2020), where they quantitatively documented increased levels of activity and toxicity (Ali et al. 2021). Yet, the question of how such tectonic shifts in the digital media landscape shape the complex web of social practice and symbolic meaning in affected counter-hegemonic communities has yet to be systematically addressed beyond anecdotal and US-focused inquiries.

The lack of systematic attention echoes a much broader and deep-rooted issue with contemporary research and theorising of moderation. Social media platform moderation is often understood as a set of governance mechanisms that 'structure' participation, ignoring the reflexivity of social agents (Giddens 1984). This constructs a positivistic understanding, deducing the operational dynamics of moderation to universal laws. This thesis aims to illuminate an alternative, more holistic approach to examining the aftermath of moderation interventions.

Bringing the fundamental notions of the late modern social theory back into the academic inquiry into moderation, the theoretical framework bridges platform (Van Dijck 2018) and moderation studies (Gillespie 2018) to Couldry & Hepp's (2017) account of the interdependencies between media and social actors under deep mediatisation. Moderation is approached at the intersection of social order, stabilities, and change. The digital far-right networks are examined through the lens of cultural sociology of social movements, spotlighting influential far-right Telegram channels as core movement leaders/activists. The framing perspective based on Benford & Snow's work (2000) is adopted as a comprehensive analytical framework to identify symbolic responses, trajectory shifts, mobilisation attempts, and alliance-building practices in the context of deplatformization.

Research questions and objectives

The study conducts a qualitative, multi-case frame analysis on four prominent far-right activists and their content on Telegram. The empirical material represents four complete narratives on the issues of platforms, moderation, and deplatformization that unfolded in a critical period between the 2019 mass migration to Telegram and the end of 2022, when Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter provoked new uncertainty about the relationship between mainstream platforms and the far right.

The analysis follows a two-fold approach. First, the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing is examined with the objective of identifying the developing ideas, orientations, and repertoires of action and examining to what extent they differ across contexts. Second, collective identity is incorporated as a central analytical tenet to examine activists' community- and alliance-building surrounding deplatformization. Here, the objective is to identify how the

produced symbolic renderings of deplatformization, particularly the in- and out-group identity constructs, are employed to facilitate feelings of community or build solidarity links with other deplatformed actors.

1. How do the deplatformed influential far-right activists frame issues of moderation, platforms, and deplatformization for their followers?

2. What role do these activists' constructions of deplatformization play in their community- and alliance-building practices?

Literature review

Deplatformization, moderation, and social order

In what Couldry and Hepp (2017:214) propose is the era of 'deep mediatization,' media – in both the material and symbolic sense – lay the foundations of social and political life. The social order no longer depends merely on the interdependencies between individuals, groups, and institutions (ibid.). With the 'platformization' of Western societies, it also hinges on stabilities afforded by the infrastructural and symbolic resources of platforms (Van Dijck et al. 2018:24). Specifically, a handful of 'Big Tech' corporations known as GAFAM (Google-Alpha, Facebook-Meta, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft) have amassed 'oligopolistic control' (Bromell 2022:90) over online socialities and key symbolic resources of visibility, legitimacy, and validation (York 2021). For social actors, being platformed hence acts as a multifold source of social stability.

Under this novel social order, moderation can be understood as a fundamental structuring force. Decisions made by human and algorithmic moderating agents not only regulate access to material and symbolic resources but profoundly shape social value regimes. Despite lacking democratic legitimacy to act as courts (Bromell 2022), being vexed with algorithmic bias and human error, moderation defines the contours of acceptable political participation (Gillespie 2018). Although smaller, this is why Twitter is often grouped with GAFAM due to its perceived influence on public discourse (Van Dijck et al. 2018).

The deplatformization of the far-right extremes importantly shifted the entrenched value regimes and was unprecedented in its extent. The way

moderation reconciles value regimes is not through guidelines, but rather their enforcement. Prior to deplatformization, hate speech guidelines were merely a 'discursive performance' (Gillespie 2018:47) as their inconsistent enforcement allowed problematic speech to flourish (York 2021). The lax approach – a consequence of the unique detection challenges of extreme and hate speech, and strategic profit-driven compromises – rendered the participation of problematic users legitimate, validating hateful rhetoric and intolerant ideas (Bromell 2022; York 2021). Deplatformization, as a set of systematic interventions aimed at one community of practice (in the broadest sense) and its infrastructure across the mainstream platform ecosystem, profoundly disrupted this continuity of symbolic resources and value systems upon which the far-right actors had come to orient themselves.

Mapping out the aftermath

Scholarship tracing the impact of these interventions on the removed actors points to three patterns: (1) collective migration to alternative platforms, (2) hindering of affected collectivities' operational abilities, and (3) a decrease in toxicity within the mainstream ecosystem and an increase in toxicity on alternative platforms.

First, in moves largely coordinated by influential far-right users, removed actors collectively migrated to alternative platforms, namely Telegram, where they re-established networks (Rogers 2020; Urman & Katz 2020). Particularly in the United States, the right wing has also made a series of moves toward building an alternative platform ecosystem for free speech proponents ('alt-tech'). Second, in the platform society, a sizable portion of all traffic converges on mainstream platforms and losing access hindered the operational goals of affected groups. Specifically, lowering the reach of disinformation and extreme speech (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser 2021), decreasing audience numbers and hence visibility, which effectively hindered recruitment and cut revenue streams of fringe celebrities (Rogers 2020). Third, regarding deplatformization's impact on curbing problematic behaviour, within-platform studies illustrate a significant decrease in levels of activity and extreme speech on the platforms that removed communities (Jhaver et al. 2021). Yet, toxicity and radicalisation in turn increase on alternative platforms (Ali et al. 2021) and communities' own websites (Horta Ribeiro et al. 2021).

These studies provide initial evidence that the broader societal effects of deplatformization come with a trade-off; the movement of abusive users toward alternative platforms decreases their reach but leads to increased toxicity. However, these analyses tend to exclusively adopt quantitative linguistic analyses, limited by algorithmically derived 'toxicity scores' (Ali et al. 2021). They do not account for how the collective, 'lived' experience of deplatformization may shape the orientation, action, and other key aspects of participation across extremist communities.

Opening the black box: Moderation as a lived experience

Existing studies indicate two key dimensions of moderation as a lived experience: the emotional factors and alternative theories. When banned or temporarily removed, frustration has been found to define the experience of nearly all removed users – regardless of their political orientation (West, 2018). This underscores the extent to which the disrupted continuity of symbolic resources threatens the 'ontological security' of affected actors (Giddens 1984:66). Particularly for collectivities on the social margins, moderation strips away their visibility, which functions as a social, political, and often also economic currency (Gillespie 2018).

Further, in the absence of transparency, affected users tend to develop alternative folk theories about why their account was suspended (West, 2018). This points to the reflexivity of the late modern social agent (Giddens 1984), further 'intensified' under deep mediatization (Couldry and Hepp 2017:218), which affords unprecedented freedom to construct one's own sense of self and the world. The constructed narratives draw on personal beliefs but also overlap with broader 'algorithmic' (Bucher 2017) and 'platform imaginaries' through which individuals understand platform aspects and user practices (Poell et al. 2021). Moreover, moderation has also been documented to influence users' actions by provoking political action and new solidarity links between affected actors (Gillespie 2018).

Research gap

The interplay between moderation and affected collectivities, particularly for extreme interventions like deplatformization, remains under-researched despite its demonstrated impact. This critical gap arises from the limitations of quantitative analyses, which fail to capture intricate shifts in belief systems, and qualitative inquiries that focus predominantly on small-scale interventions.

As long as moderation remains the primary approach for addressing encroaching societal concerns such as digital hate and extremism, it is essential to gain a more holistic understanding of its social unfolding, particularly potential societal trade-offs. The examination of an 'extreme case' (Flyvbjerg 2001:78) of the biggest systematic intervention in the contemporary history of platform governance aimed at one community of practice offers a rich opportunity to address the identified gap, as well as reintegrate social theory into moderation research. Afterall, as a structuring force, moderation is best approached as 'both medium and outcome of the practices,' as Giddens (1984:25) suggested. While an intervention may profoundly shape the participation of social agents, it is only through that that it possesses any power. In other words, to comprehensively examine its aftermath, we must consider how changes in web architecture and governance interact with the complex fabric of existing social practice and meaning. The next section explores these factors in the context of the contemporary virtual far right.

Digital hate networks

In approaching the communities at the heart of this thesis, I adopt the 'far right' as an umbrella definition for a diverse plethora of beliefs on the extreme and radical right (Mudde 2019). In a similar vein, the notion of 'collectivities' accounts for both networked and community-like groups, bound by shared orientations and action (Couldry & Hepp 2017:168).

Adopting these broad concepts aims to highlight what some understand as 'the unfolding of a new phase [of convergence] in nativist politics' (Pirro 2023:109). Under the 'digital hate culture,' swarm-like networks of users form 'contingent alliances' to contest liberal political cultures (Ganesh 2018:31), exhibiting a high degree of 'ideological pragmatism' (Davey & Ebner 2017:29). Two underlying processes gave rise to these converged networks that emerged across anglophone Western corners of social media. Throughout the last decade, 'online culture wars' have continuously churned cultural and political events into new identities and behaviours as 'a response to a response to a response, each one responding angrily to the existence of the other' (Nagle 2017:7). This created a shared culture of grievances 'against liberalism, political correctness, and the like,' among diverse groups of the far right (Ganesh 2018:31). At the same time, virtual spaces have facilitated a significant cross-pollination of beliefs between previously separate

strains (Davey & Ebner 2017), and recently conspiratorial movements such as QAnon (Snow et al. 2022).

Leaderless networks? Dynamics of activism and influence in digital hate culture

In approaching these networks, this thesis foregrounds social movement studies, specifically the cultural perspective developed upon Melucci's (1995) work. While any episode of grassroots engagement is likely to exhibit both movement and subculture coordination, this thesis focuses on movement-related processes that involve the creation of 'conflictual orientations' to opponents, the formation of informal networks, and the cultivation of collective identities (della Porta & Diani 2020:21).

Blee & Latif (2021) urge researchers adopting this rarely invoked perspective to rethink the traditional notions of activism to better reflect participation and belonging within digital far-right networks. Within the digital hate culture, the core actions centre around the production and proliferation of material that shapes others' societal perceptions. Taking up the concept of metapolitics, their philosophical roots build on the Gramscian idea that culture needs to be changed first to realise long-term political transformation (Miller-Idriss 2020). Digital hate actors commonly pursue two key objectives integral to their 'symbolic crusade' (Williams 2022): injecting memes, propaganda, and educational material into the mainstream culture (Hawley 2017; Maly 2020) and fostering social cohesion within their own spaces (Lewis 2018).

Research on the formation and dissemination of far-right discourse online sometimes suggests a 'leaderless' dynamic (Nagle 2017, p.10). However, in contrast to left-wing activism, which has found success through such horizontal connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2013), right-wing activism has mastered a top-down pathway to its target audience (Freelon et al. 2020). While 'much of the ecology of hate online is self-organised,' (Miller-Idriss 2020:139), the importance of influential leaders in shaping the rhetoric, identities, and orientations of encircling collectivities cannot be overlooked. High-profile right-wing content creators, forming what resembles an 'alternative influence network,' generate ideas that challenge progressive cultural landscapes and offer alternative worldviews (Lewis 2018). By supplying commentary promoting a range of extremist political positions (ibid), they contribute toward core goals of the movement – the production and spread of new ideas, which positions them as

core movement leaders. These leaders can be anonymous individuals, traditional organisations, or emerging influencers (Lewis 2018, Maly 2020), many explicitly linked to the 'ever-expanding intellectual ecosystem' of far-right knowledge and media production (Miller-Idriss 2020:128). Anonymous or not, understanding the strategies of influential users is crucial for comprehending the orientation and mobilisation of broader collectivities.

Beyond the civic: Of imitated public spheres and counter-publics

Ultimately, the examined spectrum of contemporary political engagement fails to meet the minimal shared commitments to the norms of liberal democracy, what Dahlgren (2013) discusses as 'civic' engagement. These collectivities fulfil neither the functions nor the potential of the late modern democratic engagement. This presents a two-fold challenge: models capturing the relationship between digital media and normatively positive forms of political engagement do not readily apply, while the specific dynamics of illiberal movements remain under-researched (Toscano 2019).

To understand the objectives of the analysed communication, this thesis nevertheless draws on the rich conceptual architecture of theories biased toward normatively positive forms of engagement – by incorporating the lens of imitation (Jasser 2021). Digital hate networks, much like online political communication more broadly (Freelon 2010), can encompass both imitated deliberative (public sphere) and communitarian (counter-publics) aspects. The objective of fostering a cross-cutting debate to persuade 'normies' with compelling arguments resembles deliberative ideals (Dahlgren 2013). Simultaneously, the emphasis on fostering social cohesion, often observed in closed-off discursive spaces like Telegram (Lewis 2018), is better reflected in the communitarian understanding of political expression (Fraser 1990). Ultimately, both forms are merely imitated as extremists may wish to engage in the debate while actively undermining its foundations or claim countercultural victimisation while seeking to reinforce social domination.

Frames, mobilisation and collective identity

The previous sections established that core movement activists and the ideas they produce are key to understanding how the events of deplatformization may shape social practice and meaning in affected far-right collectivities. This section adopts the framing perspective to underscore how opinion leaders use language to shape

the orientation, trajectory, and mobilisation within their collectivities, as well as facilitate community- and alliance-building.

Framing as reflexive control

Drawing on a Goffmanian perspective, this thesis adopts the framing perspective developed in the field of social movement studies by Benford and Snow (2000:613). With theoretical foundations in symbolic interactionism and social constructionism, adopting this perspective emphasises the meaning-making *process* of framing as 'mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas.'[15] Particularly in times of instability, 'interpretative frames' act as a schema guiding individuals' perceptions and once again endowing 'social order with predictability' (Misztal 2000:314). Discourse hence constitutes a form of action in constructing politically useful realities and achieving political goals (Edelman 1988; Fairclough 2003).

At its core, activists construct interpretative frames through three core framing tasks that Benford and Snow (2000) discuss as diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements. First, in what is seen as the moral boundary or diagnostic framing, activists establish problematic conditions and attribute blame, constructing related imaginaries of perpetrators and victims. Often, injustice frames are invoked to amplify the victimisation of the in-group (Miller-Idriss 2020). Second, prognostic framing lays out solutions, suggesting how the sympathisers should respond to the problem. Lastly, motivational framing calls for concrete action, support, or solidarity (Benford and Snow 2000).

However, framing isn't always mobilisation-oriented but is reflexively produced in pursuit of diverse movement objectives. As deplatformization forcefully diminishes the visibility enjoyed by the virtual far right, literature suggests this can force the movement into a subsequent latent phase, when activities related to creating new orientations and forging alliances become paramount for the movement to sustain itself (della Porta & Diani 2020). The orientations developed during latent periods eventually fuel new waves of visible mobilisation, making it crucial to study these shifts as they unfold (Melucci, 1995). And frame analysis offers a powerful analytical prism to capture this process of meaning-

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[15] While a rich strain of framing research has been developed to capture news frames (Entman, 1993), the interest of the present study lies in framing in relation to various movement outcomes.

making and alliance-building behind the conflict between the tech giants and the far right (della Porta & Diani 2020).

Framing as a community and alliance-building practice

Beyond meaning-making, framing also discursively produces collective identities by delineating in- and out-group boundaries (Benford & Snow 2000). In the context of deplatformization, identity can serve two functions – motivating the in-group, and strategically expanding the in-group to facilitate alliance-building.

As a notoriously slippery concept, collective identity is fraught with problems of definition and ambiguity in its application (Fominaya, 2010). Following Melucci (1995), I approach collective identity as a dynamic process through which activists ascribe meaning to their experience and constitute a feeling of belonging for their followers (della Porta & Diani 2020). Foregrounding identity as a reflexive project (Giddens 1984) recognises the multiplicity of collective identities at play and the inherent tensions arising from inclusion and exclusion. Nearly all contemporary far-right discourse hinges on an exclusionary defined in-group – usually a victimised 'native' group – facing internal and external threats related to race, nation, and sociocultural order (Mudde 2019). Both threats and victims are always products of symbolic construction, even when deemed 'morally justifiable' (Alexander 2004:9). The threats are constructed through various antagonisms: Othering is commonly invoked for social groups, most recently Muslims, while anti-elitism (populism) is used as a resonant dialectic to delineate internal threats along the anti-establishment, authoritarian, and welfare-chauvinist lines (Mudde 2019).

Social movement literature acknowledges two strategic functions of collective identity: community- and alliance-building (della Porta & Diani 2020). Firstly, the framing process connects individuals and groups through the shared frame and the shared enemy, fostering a sense of belonging and serving as a powerful community-building tactic (Benford & Snow 2000). Victimhood identity, in particular, has been found to serve as a strong community glue, creating a sense of collective rebellion and underdog identity (Lewis 2018; Oaten 2014). Particularly under what Campbell & Manning (2018) argue is the rise of the moral 'victimhood culture' in the West, victimhood has become a powerful orientation category for diverse movements.

Secondly, framing along the adversarial 'us versus them' line redefines the boundaries of collective identity. When conflicts provoke the emergence of new enemy constructs, group boundaries become more heavily defined through opposition to these new out-groups (Mudde 2019). Since the belief systems in question rely on a strict us-versus-them dynamic, expanding the notion of threatening 'Others' also expands the collective identity of the opposing in-group (ibid.). To facilitate alliances, diverse identities are merged into a highly elastic opposition to the enemy construct at the centre of the conflict (della Porta & Diani 2020). In this way, historically, successful far-right alliances have formed in opposition to global policies, social groups, or exogenous structural shocks (Durham & Power 2010).

Resonance, distrust, and affect in the age of 'epistemic instability'

Forefronting the framing theory does not preclude other perspectives in social movement research nor the more recent digital media shifts to emotional mobilisation (Castells 2012) and 'affective publics' (Papacharissi 2015). A commonly invoked critique of framing is that neglecting these dimensions leads to 'ad hoc explanations,' reducing the notions of power to communication (della Porta & Diani 2020:99). Rather than ignoring it, this thesis treats these dimensions as both resources and limitations in the process of framing (ibid.). Specifically, in the process of establishing a resonant relationship with the audience, a key aspect of framing, particularly as destabilising events such as deplatformization rip into previous ties (Rosa 2019).

Early framing scholars asserted that the resonance of a frame depends on its salience and credibility. They argued the credibility of framing depends on its consistency, accompanying evidence, and the credibility of the source (Benford & Snow 2000; Johnston & Noakes 2005). However, in the contemporary age of 'epistemic instability,' deep-rooted frictions over knowledge and Truth(s) have opened new pathways for yielding resonance (Harambam 2020).

Charting a contemporary resonance theory, Rosa (2019:28) argues that resonant relationships are a 'dynamic interaction' between the individual and their cultural, social, and political contexts. For the contemporary far-right, what defines their relationships to much of the broader social and political fabric, is distrust. Not the passive notion of *the lack* of trust, but rather a Rosanvallonian conceptualisation of distrust as an *active* form of 'social attentiveness' and political engagement

(Rosanvallon 2008:53). Capitalising on manifestations of distrust is often the underlying mechanism through which contemporary far-right activists establish resonance. To exemplify, a countercultural sense of rebellion relies on broader distrust towards the mainstream (Lewis 2018). Similarly, establishing trust in their own alternative media or knowledge-production institutions capitalises on the broader delegitimization of established media or scientific institutions (Dahlgren & Hill 2023).

This is also how framing capitalises on, as well as calls into being 'affective publics' (Papacharissi 2015). Contemporary far-right frames work by distracting from the complexity of the issue, and appealing instead to softer structures of distrust as the sentiment around which 'networked public formations' mobilise (ibid.:125). By reproducing the affect that resonates with their sympathisers, framing can sustain the feeling of community, act as a precursor for mobilisation, and drive the movement forward (ibid.).

Researching extremism on Telegram

The previous sections established that influential activists and the frames they produce play a key role in how deplatformization plays out on the ground. They shape new orientations, identities, and solidarity links within their respective collectivities. Since the 2019 waves of deplatforming, opinion leaders established themselves on Telegram, making it one of the most prominent far-right social spaces online and a prominent site for international alliance-building.[16] This section provides an overview of Telegram's digital architecture and its leadership's unique stances, which shape the dynamics of extremist activity.

Founded in 2013 by the Russian billionaire brothers Durov, Telegram Messenger is a globally accessible instant messaging provider. Surpassing 700 million monthly active users, the platform is among the top 10 most-used social networking sites globally (Statista, 2023). Telegram is defined by a hybrid digital architecture that leads with private chats and follows with the social (Rogers 2020). On the social side, it allows for the creation of channels (one-sided communication) and groups (participatory). Both can be either public

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[16] In a contrasting vein, other alt-tech platforms such as Gab or Parler mainly attracted a US-based audience (SimilarWeb, 2023).

(searchable) or private (accessible only via link). While groups are comparable to those on other platforms, channels are made to broadcast the content to an unlimited number of subscribers in a top-down fashion – only the administrators can send messages and often choose to disable the comments.

The key factors that prompted extremist migration to Telegram are the same reasons the platform is widely used among activists in authoritarian regimes (ibid.). Loose moderation policies, a reputation for strict operational security, and the commitment to user privacy and free speech make Telegram attractive for those in need of publicity and mobilisation opportunities while preserving anonymity (Marechal 2018). At the same time, the platform's financial model guarantees its independence from advertiser pressure and Silicon Valley's financial and infrastructural mechanisms. This affords Durov the sole power to shape the platform in accordance with his pro-free speech, anti-state, anti-Big Tech, and anti-censorship beliefs (ibid.).

Influential channels that produce and broadcast content represent central nodes in the extremist ecosystem (Rogers 2020; Urman & Katz 2022). They can be understood as core movement activists, much like influential users elsewhere in the digital hate culture. Prominent far-right channels, whether anonymous or publicly known opinion leaders, are the origin nodes in the top-down pathway of reaching a target audience (Freelon et al. 2020). While extremist activity on Telegram also encompasses participatory group discussions, it is the influential channels that shape the orientation and action within these networks and are key to understanding community responses post-deplatformization. They often serve as repositories of knowledge and ideas that are then distributed to private chats, groups, and smaller Telegram channels (Guhl et al. 2020). While many are image-based, the interest of the present study lies in 'news channels' (Mazzoni 2019) that provide textual commentary on current events such as deplatformization.

Beyond shaping the orientation within these networks, influential channels are also the key to understanding alliance-building on Telegram. Telegram's digital architecture influences the organisational dynamics of problematic communities in a way that promotes the establishment of new solidarity links, reflecting Bossetta's (2018) argument that platform architecture inherently shapes the dynamics of user participation. Because Telegram lacks a discovery mechanism and algorithmic filtering, 'manual' dissemination (forwarding) of content to other channels is the primary way for users to discover new channels and hence increase

the reach of a channel. Due to the one-sided communicative nature of channels, channels cannot simply distribute their own content elsewhere. Rather, other channel owners need to actively repost the content into their own spaces. In other words, Telegram's architectural constraints create the need to establish collaborative communication practices to strategically leverage each other's networks to expand reach. This results in far-right channels being clustered (Urman & Katz 2022) and serving as gateways into other communities, bridging diverse actors across digital, ideological, and geographical borders.

To summarise, Telegram's architecture and ownership offer a conducive social space for extremist activity in the aftermath of mainstream deplatformization. Post-deplatformization, prominent Telegram channels constitute core movement activists. As digital opinion leaders, their owners produce ideas in ways that shape the collective orientation and action of users within these networks, as well as establish new solidarity links across collectivities. Thus, the content disseminated by these channels offers a glimpse into a well-spring of extremist ideologies and, in particular, how they are shaped by broader tectonic shifts in the digital media landscape. In the following section, I detail my approach to studying this confluence of factors on Telegram.

Methodology and Methods

Constructionism, interactionism, and methodological agnosticism

This study is broadly rooted in epistemological assumptions of social constructionism and symbolic interactionism. In the process of framing, the constructionist macro-level focus on making sense of the larger social fabric is intertwined with the interactionist micro-level collective identity focus. Put simply, it is through the framing of broader sociopolitical shifts that far-right activists attempt to reorient encircling collectivities.

At its core, the present study is not concerned with the ontological reality of these actors' claims. Instead, I adopt the position of 'methodological agnosticism' throughout the analysis (Harambam 2020:227). Under this central feature of the cultural sociological approach, the focus shifts from questions of verifiable facts to

the framing processes, i.e. the symbolic and social construction, examining instead the conditions and the results of the claims made (Alexander 2004).

Frame analysis

A framing perspective offers no set methodology and can be translated into widely diverse methodological approaches (Johnston & Noakes 2005). To empirically anchor frame analysis, this thesis turns to text analysis. When direct access is limited, texts produced by the leading activists constitute the approach of the highest validity in social movement frame analysis because they shape trajectories of larger collectivities (ibid.).

My analytical toolbox combines the systematic qualitative text analysis as laid out by Kuckartz (2014) with a three-part analytical framework developed within the framing perspective: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing (Benford and Snow 2000). The analysis also draws upon discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003), but without adopting it formally. Due to the nature of the ideas studied, social functions and ideological implications of the text are key to understanding how it is used to challenge or reinforce entrenched power structures.

The method was applied in a directed, but not rigid or deductive fashion. The codes were inductively developed within the three-part framing framework, while also allowing codes to emerge independently. This flexible approach allowed me to treat the emerging categories as the basis for the reconstruction of the framing process (Johnston & Noakes 2005), while also capturing the complexity and dynamism of the meaning-making process.

Multiple-case study design

The present study builds upon four distinct cases for three reasons. First, to capture the dynamic process of meaning-making despite working with static textual snapshots (Johnston & Noakes 2005). Second, to highlight patterns and variations across cases, deepening our understanding of activity connected to deplatformization (Patton 2015). While analysing movements on the basis of a single case basis may produce illuminating findings (Flyvbjerg 2001), it could also impoverish the explanatory potential as movement activity typically occurs in temporal clusters rather than isolated incidents (della Porta & Diani 2020). Third,

the multi-case approach was crucial to transcend the localness of any single case, particularly the current one-dimensional approach spotlighting predominantly US-based actors (e.g., Jasser et al. 2021; Simeone & Walker 2022). In addition, this study analyses a comprehensive set of longitudinal data, allowing for – but not reducing the analysis to – the detection of possible temporal patterns in how orientations change with concrete events of deplatformization.

Case selection

Building on the logic of purposeful sampling, the multi-case selection criteria for opinion leaders on Telegram included both similarity criteria with respect to deplatformization, as well as diversity criteria in order for comparison to have any meaning (Patton 2015). The following criteria were formulated: the channels had to be (1) public, (2) far-right, (3) have more than 6000 subscribers (prominence), (4) be created amid the initial 2019 waves of migration to Telegram and (5) provide original interpretations of current events. Due to previous inquiries privileging US-centric angles, geographical diversity was introduced by opting for one US-based channel, and three non-US anglophone ones (Australia, United Kingdom, and Canada).

To select the four cases, I employed a combination of a third-party search engine (*tgstat.com*) and snowball sampling during a pre-pilot exploration, as Telegram offers no comprehensive search mechanism. This resulted in an initial dataset of 195 channels that were then further filtered out based on the above criteria. Lastly, the most prominent one for each context was selected based on the number of followers:

Table 1. Selected cases and their channel's creation date, subscriber count (in March 2023), and location.

Channel	Creation	Subscribers	Location
Nicholas J. Fuentes (@nickjfuentes)	June 2019	53.024	United States
HATE FACTS (@HateFacts)	September 2019	10.199	Canada
Mark Collett (@markacollett)	May 2019	16.253	United Kingdom
Blair Cottrell (@realblaircottrell)	September 2019	16.523	Australia

All four selected leaders self-identify with the big tent 'dissident' right movement, a label used in an attempt to make white supremacist ideas appear less extreme within mainstream politics (Hawley 2017).

Nicholas Fuentes is a young (24 at the time of writing) right-wing activist and the host of the online programme 'America First.' With the goal of offering a nationalist alternative to the mainstream US conservative party, he leads and coordinates an informally organised activist collective known as the 'Groyper Army,' a remnant of the fading alt-right. He also organises offline events and conferences. (Anti-Defamation League 2021; Hawley 2021)

Hate Facts is a Canadian channel led by an anonymous individual identifying as 'Rick the Guy.' They publish a podcast affiliated with 'Murder the Media' video collective (Hsu & Weiner 2022), founded by prominent members of the Proud Boys, a neo-fascist organisation known for its active digital community and political violence in North America (Lybrand 2022).

Mark Collett is a British far-right political commentator and activist, often described as a neo-Nazi, white nationalist, anti-semite, and fascist (Anti-Defamation League 2018). Collett founded and currently runs a prominent white nationalist group 'Patriotic Alternative.' The group's influence stems from their success in mobilising online creators within traditional far-right organisations (Murdoch 2020).

Blair Cottrell is an Australian far-right extremist, loosely defined as a neo-Nazi and white nationalist. He is the founding member of two prominent Australian extremist groups: the nationalist United Patriots Front and a male-only white nationalist Lads Society. Both are known for a strong digital presence as well as offline activities. (Campion 2019)

Data collection, sampling and scope

Since the analytical toolbox consisted of diverse strategies previously untested on the chosen units of analysis, a pilot was performed on one of the selected cases (Hate Facts), and included in the final dataset because the data was continuously coded in a recursive fashion (Bazeley 2013).

Based on the piloting round insights, data collection was performed manually and combined with the process of sampling. The search was based on the keyword set specified during piloting: 'Twitter', 'Facebook', 'Meta,' 'Instagram', 'YouTube', 'Amazon', 'Google', 'Apple', 'Microsoft,' 'Telegram,' 'tech,' 'deplatform,' 'ban,' 'censor,' 'social media.' To account for possible temporal patterns in framing, all

relevant posts between the channel's creation (2019) and December 2022 were collected. For each unit of analysis, information on the text, date, origin (for forwarded content) and context (e.g., accompanying visuals) was collected, ensuring the material is coded in its context. Through a round of close reading on the search results, all posts were collected unless they met any of the exclusion criteria: (1) content not referring to platforms (e.g., irrelevant discussions, misspellings), and (2) content mentioning platforms but not entailing any ideas, imaginaries, or sentiments regarding platforms or deplatformization (i.e., casual mentions).

This resulted in 876 posts across the four datasets, one for each channel (Table 2). Telegram allows up to 4,096 characters per post, which was reflected in the length of the collected posts being longer than the typical social media format.

Table 2. The scope of total available and analysed empirical material between 2019 and 2022.

Channel (country)	Total available content	Collected (analysed) content
Nicholas J. Fuentes (US)	9294	427
Hate Facts (CA)	5033	132
Mark Collett (UK)	6928	179
Blair Cottrell (AU)	2741	138[17]

Data analysis

In qualitative inquiry, coding is an integral activity throughout the analytical process rather than a discrete phase. The process of manual data collection already allowed me to 'build a contextualised and holistic understanding' of the data prior to coding (Bazeley 2013:101). Then, I turned to NVivo, a qualitative analysis software, where the analytical process continued in a circular manner with open coding, by compressing passages to codes, both within and outside the three-part (diagnostic, prognostic, motivational) framework. I also noted 'in-vivo codes' (Kuckartz 2014:62) to reveal common signifiers and metaphors used by the studied leaders. Beyond the themes and terminology, attention was also paid to framing validation techniques, the challenging of narratives (counterframing),

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[17] While a rich strain of framing research has been developed to capture news frames (Entman, 1993), the interest of the present study lies in framing in relation to various movement outcomes.

affect and emotions, as well as linguistic elements such as verb voice and modality. In addition, I noted down my developing understandings in extensive analytical memos, produced through all analytical stages.

Subsequently, throughout this iterative process, descriptive codes were grouped and transformed into thematic categories, and eventually integrated into emerging analytical ones. Due to the objectives of the present study, the developed categories largely reflected the perspective of the activists, rather than of the researcher. Upon reaching 'theoretical saturation' (Bazeley 2013:50), mind maps were produced to visualise the relationship between categories within each of the framing tasks in order to develop broader analytical themes. Because the goal was not merely to account for the shared interpretations among a homogeneous group, the categories were then compared in a cross-unit analysis to identify potential overlaps and divergences. Visual hierarchy charts, analytical memos and the context of each case aided this process of comparison.

Ethics and the role of the researcher

As highlighted at the beginning of this section, the agnostic stance on the truth of the narratives in question was adopted as a productive sociological strategy (Alexander 2004). Yet, what works methodologically cannot necessarily be maintained in the socio-political reality against which the produced knowledge is situated (Toscano 2019). The most common critique faced by researchers studying the far right is that they – consciously or not – echo and legitimise the studied perspectives. Fringe actors often acknowledge researchers' presence (Askanius 2021) and interpret neutrality as support (Harambam 2020). Thus, when spotlighting actors whose ideas are seen as distasteful at best, but often actively subvert the health of Western democracies, researchers tend to adopt a normative stance against it, as do I. Further, the knowledge produced in the scope of the analysis is critically situated when discussing the results.

Analysis

This section begins with an overview of the framing analysis, before forefronting the analysis of community- and alliance-building practices in the context of deplatformization.

Diagnostic framing: Deplatformization as techno-social dehumanisation

The analysis of diagnostic framing (problem construction) reveals an emerging frame of accelerated techno-social oppression, shared across the four cases. Activists establish it through two themes: the familiar far-right theme of oppression of the in-group, extended to the techno-social context, and the theme of social acceleration.

The theme of the techno-social oppression of the in-group presents an essential context for the rest of the analysis. It fundamentally veins through the commentary on platforms, moderation, and deplatformization, and is concretely reflected in three central categories: control of information, speech, and thought; systematic bias; and dehumanisation. Under control, contemporary information, speech, and beliefs are constructed as actively policed and controlled. The notions of anti-conservative and anti-white bias further fuel this narrative by establishing that expression is controlled in an explicitly biased way that holds the in-group to stricter standards: 'Social media companies don't have any standards, they just have one rule – if you are against the anti-white establishment, you are banned, if you are with anti-white establishment you can say whatever you want' (Collett). Thirdly, activists invoke the lens of dehumanisation to construct deplatformization as a strategic destructive process in which the in-group is being denied full humanness. They discuss strategies of targeted discreditation, persecution, physical violence, and sociocultural replacement. In this way, the discussed impact of moderation interventions exceeds issues of freedom of expression, as previous studies have indicated (West 2018). Instead, leaders emphasise the cruelty and personal losses that accompany this process. To exemplify, the 2019 Facebook's moderation policy update that circled out certain far-right leaders as 'dangerous individuals,' is reinterpreted as the platform actively promoting violence against them:

> In a shocking update to its Community Standards, Facebook has said that calls for "high-severity violence" and "threats that could lead to death" are acceptable if they're aimed at people who it deems to be "dangerous individuals.
> (Hate Facts, forwarded from Laura Loomer)

The emerging frame of techno-social oppression is further accentuated by the theme of social accelerationism. Manufacturing a strong fear of exacerbation, the activists contextualise deplatformization as the start of extreme 'non-democratic' attempts to prevent 'dissidents' from maintaining power (Cottrell). Such accelerationist discourse is exemplified by Cottrell, bridging moderation to genocidal intent:

> You should be worrying about how you're going to survive the next few years. [...] People who hate you and want to kill you are writing your nation's laws, controlling the information you can access [...] Apple will ban Parler & Telegram, ISP's will block Gab and bitchute [...] Expect concentration camps of some kind, but if you're arrested you'll be lucky to make it to one, they're more likely to take you out into the woods somewhere and shoot you. [...] Social media will swiftly censor any information…

The heavy emphasis on the acceleration of dehumanisation contextualises deplatformization as a part of resonant dystopian conspiracies defining the contemporary far right. Nearly universally, activists extend the ideas of 'great replacement' and 'white genocide' to deplatformization to serve as powerful mobilisation devices (Miller-Idriss 2020:9). Personal accounts of moderation are redefined as a free-floating signifier of trauma for the broader social group, namely white people. This illustrates the opinion leaders' attempts to transform their individual suffering into a broadly resonant collective cultural trauma (Alexander 2004), reflected in the often-invoked notion of 'the anti-white agenda' being pushed by the leadership of mainstream platforms as a form of techno-social power.

The identified frame of the acceleration of techno-social oppression is a novel frame, providing new orientations for the community. Despite being established through a frame extension of other conspiracies surrounding the fate of the white race, the focus shifts from demographic threats (Muslims, immigrants) to the threat of an interconnected techno-social system. In other words, whiteness now needs to be defended against techno-social power.

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The heavy emphasis on acceleration also suggests that rather than merely deplatformization itself, the temporal structure of abjection– its suddenness and speed– unsettles the social stability that stems from being platformed. Social acceleration has destabilising implications for the social order (Rosa 2013), even more so under deep mediatization, which also entails the changing temporalities of society (Couldry & Hepp 2017). In the case of the deplatformization of the far right, the technological acceleration provoked by the platformization of our societies leads to the acceleration of social abjection of unwanted actors at an unprecedented speed – 'the bursting of a cultural bubble,' to adopt Gillespie's (2018:204) analogy.

Discourses of techno-social victimhood

Besides establishing grievances, diagnostic framing constructs related notions of victim and perpetrators, assigning blame. Under the singular theme of an interconnected techno-social system, activists identify three key culprits: elites, platforms, and controlled opposition. The in-group identity activists construct for themselves and their followers opposes these culprits.

The main antagonism focuses on anti-elitism, invoking entities like Jewish, media, state, political left-wing, and economic elites. This techno-social oppression frame provides a flexible canvas for diverse identity constructions, shaped by the activists' 'brand' and sociopolitical context. Regarding the out-group, for example, Cottrell places the blame on Australian state elites, while Collett, emphasising antisemitism, points to Jewish platform ownership and the influence of organisations like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). On the in-group side, if the discourse of enemies is one of persecution, the discourse of the self is one of victimisation. Their in-group identities, reflective of their white nationalist beliefs, emphasise nationalism and whiteness as the ultimate victims. Meanwhile, Fuentes – who steers away from white nationalism in order to achieve broader appeal (Hawley 2021) – reserves the victim identity for nationalism and Christianity. In summary, the allocation of blame varies among cases. Enemies are strategically chosen to align with activists' existing beliefs and goals, resulting in an inconsistent, opportunistic, and hence often contradictory allocation of blame.

Unsurprisingly, platforms take the central stage as the antagonists in the context of deplatformization. This section examines two contrasting post-deplatformization platform imaginaries articulated by the four leaders, while also unpacking the signifier of 'Big Tech.'

In the first imaginary, platforms are attributed agency, and play an active part in the oppression. For instance, Collett alleges that Google 'hates white people and wants to see them erased,' and actively 'dictates what you can and can't see.' The second imaginary renders platforms as perverted social worlds, influenced either externally by above-delineated elites or 'internally' by platform users and staff. Those contributing to what activists perceive as a perversion of the shared social space are labelled as pathetic, manipulative, and intelligence-lacking proxies for elite interests. For example, far-right activists often depict 'shame mobs' as intermediaries for the LGBTQ community's interests. Similarly, 'pathetic bloggers,' 'mentally ill sodomites,' 'faceless Marxist terrorists,' and 'all those [...] with pronouns in their bio' receive blame for deplatformization. To discredit them, activists reinforce established lines of inferiority according to gender, race, and political orientation, or invoke dehumanising discourse through metaphors of infestation (Miller-Idriss 2020). Speaking of Twitter, Collett asserts that the company is 'infested with liberals.' Sharing a video of a female Twitter moderator, he also comments that 'this is the kind of weirdo who was in charge of moderating the political landscape on Twitter [...] No wonder Twitter became a hell-scape of madness and degeneracy!'

Though platforms are more often viewed as social spaces rather than active entities, activists employ both perspectives, creating deliberate frame ambiguity (Johnston & Noakes 2005). Such ambiguity is rarely a random occurrence, but rather a tactic of broadening their support base by avoiding specific enemy delineation (Edelman, 1988). This approach allows 'Big Tech' to serve as an empty signifier, a symbolic node upon which diverse contentions are linguistically linked (Papacharissi 2015). The emptiness here doesn't signify a lack of the signified but rather its equivocality. Invoking a reference to the phantasm of 'Big Tech' is bound to provoke a set of latent associations resonant with the respective audience – whether long-standing socioeconomic and ethnic grievances, or contemporary moral crusades against gender, LGBTQ, and the like. It allows the

activists to capitalise on the pervasive 'myth of a neutral platform' (Gillespie 2018:24). While the activists slice through the myth that platforms are neutral conduits, it is more beneficial that they remain seen as mere conduits. In constructing and repeating 'Big Tech' as a potent empty signifier, framing not only reduces the complexity of deplatformization but gives rise to affective rhythms that sustain a feeling of community and drive the movement forward (Papacharissi 2015).

Prognostic framing: The future of the virtual far-right community

Through prognostic framing, activists outline the course of action they see most fit in the aftermath of deplatformization, offering a glimpse into how changes in web governance may affect the trajectories of studied communities. The four opinion leaders thread a common theme of strengthening the movement, but propose different solutions, highlighting the diversity of concerns provoked by deplatformization (Edelman 1988). Analysing these divergences is essential, as they could lead to conflicts and movement fragmentation (della Porta & Diani 2020).

As the first out of three fundamental categories under prognostic framing, all four activists call for solidarity despite differences. They emphasise collective suffering under 'Big Tech' as a unifying force across a diverse far-right spectrum, overshadowing past disagreements over beliefs or methods. The rhetoric of solidarity is employed strategically, especially in content calling for concrete action, as exemplified by a post shared by Hate Facts:

> I know some of you hate me for reasons but remember THEY view all of us the exact same way. [...] You know I'd do it for you...and I'll probably have to one day soon. I won't forget your solidarity when it INEVITABLY happens to you.

'They can't deplatform us from the streets' – Between online and offline

The two other prognostic categories represent contrasting views on what the broader extremist community should focus on. One suggests an offline turn, while the other seeks to restore the movement's online success. In outlining their own proposals, activists often 'counterframe' and refute solutions laid out by other

factions (Benford & Snow 2000:617), undermining any previous notion of solidarity.

The preferred direction aligns with each faction's existing strategic goals. Fuentes and Collett, whose success relied strongly on mainstream platforms, prioritise online strategies. In contrast, Cottrell and Hate Facts argue that the movement must shift attention to the offline realm in order to survive. They advocate reducing social media usage and nurturing offline communities and physical strength. They criticise heavy mainstream social media users as 'serotonin chasers' lacking discipline and masculinity, positioning themselves as the true 'nation-builders' (Cottrell) who 'put [their] race first above all other meaningless garbage' (Hate Facts). Framing ideals of masculinity and discipline as essential to whiteness reinforces the notion of superiority (Miller-Idriss 2020) in relation to rival factions. These nuances are expressed by Hate Facts, as they counterframe Fuentes and his supporters:

> Who do you want to be in this world, the guy that sends Nick Fuentes lemons on D-live, tweets that Charlie Kirk's a ██, then lays back in bed and goes "well my work to reclaim America from the corruption holding it is done, time to jerk off to porn of 18 yo runnaways getting fucked by Jews while I eat a cheesburger" or the guy who's building his community, organizing with his people, and training his body to protect and provide…

'I would rather be active on Twitter and dead irl' – The restoration fantasy of a deliberative past

Despite certain activists advocating for an offline shift, all four leaders voice solutions for the future of the digital far-right. In a constant fluctuating tension between the two, they construct two possible paths: returning to the mainstream platforms or embracing alternative infrastructure.

The first solution underscores the need to push back, retaliate, and ultimately regain a foothold on mainstream social media platforms, signalling their continued symbolic significance. For example, Fuentes 'would rather be active on Twitter and dead irl than be banned from Twitter and alive,' a sentiment continuously reflected in his numerous attempts to return under alternative names. These narratives place value in social spaces that foster cross-cutting debate, reflecting the central goal of the contemporary far-right movement – awakening the 'normies.' Collett often echoes this restoration fantasy through a

faux version of the past where extremists were 'happy to share a space with political opponents.' The discourse of restoration suggests that in the aftermath of destabilising deplatformization, strategies are not driven solely by simple emotional responses such as frustration but also by more 'complex yearnings' for past order, belonging, and purpose (Miller-Idriss 2020:168), nuances central to the appeal of many contemporary far-right narratives.

At the same time, activists stress the need for change to enable a return, both externally and within the movement. Externally, they discuss financial (boycott), legal, and regulatory tools to curb Big Tech's influence. Internally, they express frustration related to the optics debate, a divisive issue among diverse far-right groups, with some opposing incivility for the sake of mainstream acceptance of the broader movement (Miller-Idriss 2020):

> Sometimes a guy will post in a group [...] and they'll have immediately opened with something like "hey you ▬▬▬, why are you afraid to talk about jews" I'd ban your ass too [...] I'd ban you for the same reason I don't allow untrained dogs [...] if you behave like an animal don't be surprised to be treated like one. (Hate Facts)

'Telegram is superior because it's less democratic' – Embracing a communitarian future?

Emerging on the other hand is a narrative embracing traditional communitarian ideals (Fraser 1990). Attempts to return to mainstream platforms are viewed as futile, compared to 'being upset that someone won't let you watch them fuck your wife,' as Hate Facts puts it when urging followers to reclaim their agency. Instead, actors emphasise the collective abandonment of Big Tech and establishing a self-sufficient platform ecosystem - especially through embracing platforms such as Telegram or various alt-tech.

Connected to this prognostic narrative is a platform imaginary of Telegram as a political shelter, thought to offer the most conducive environment for the movement's goal of spreading ideas. Hate Facts and Fuentes, in particular, discuss Telegram's digital architecture, including one-sided communication in channels, as superior to mainstream platforms because it minimises dissent. To exemplify, Hate Facts reposts that Telegram is superior because 'it's less democratic. No I don't feel like spelling it out. No I don't want to do research for you. And no, I dgaf what you think.' In doing so, these actors – implicitly and explicitly – echo

(imitated) communitarian ideals, where the absence of debate is considered essential for building a thriving community (Fraser 1990).

Regarding temporal framing patterns, individual deplatforming events appear to have only a temporary impact on envisioned prognoses, suggesting that the favoured direction is more a reflection of strategic factors than transpired events.

Motivational framing: 'Do your part to destroy Big Tech'

Similarly to the analysis of prognostic frames, calls to action reflect the concrete needs provoked by deplatformization. A rather small subset of analysed posts included 'action frames,' as the focus was often on fostering shared sentiment and in-group identity.

As outlined under the analysis of diagnostic framing, the activists frame deplatformization as a crisis, a strategy to accentuate instability and reinforce a sense of urgency. This justifies sacrifice for the common welfare (Edelman 1988) and motivates their followers to act upon the cause. In addition, most calls to action invoked the potent 'Big Tech' signifier to provoke a chain of associations linked to it throughout diagnostic framing. This is exemplified in Fuentes' call to action in the context of the proposed Big Tech regulation bill in the state of Florida:

> '📹 WAKE UP PATRIOTS 📹TIME TO CALL THE OFFICE OF GOVERNOR DESANTIS AGAIN. DO YOUR PART TO DESTROY BIG TECH.'

Both online and offline actions were proposed. Calls to online action largely relate to improving the reach of activists' networks on alternative platforms. Because post-deplatformization, visibility is a scarce resource, supporters are urged to use alt-tech, follow other accounts on Telegram and across alt-tech, and share content links across their networks. For example, Fuentes urges his supporters by forwarding the following: 'If you really want to put a dent in Big Tech censorship: stop using their platforms and making them money. Get on Gab.' Conversely, calls to offline action were rare, unsurprisingly given the nature of the problem at hand.

In tandem, the advocated actions reflect that rather than concrete (visible) mobilisation, the loss of visibility elicits support, solidarity, reach, and visibility as

fundamental symbolic commodities post-deplatformization. More importantly, new seemingly minor individual actions are redefined as activism in the fight against 'Big Tech.' This lowers the threshold for participation by redefining what is deemed a meaningful 'contribution' to the cause. This matters because participation in episodes of mobilisation can strengthen participants' feelings of belonging, recursively fuelling future mobilisation waves (della Porta & Diani 2020).

Affect and resonance: The dialectic of trust and distrust

The analysis also considered affective devices and resonance criteria, i.e., the devices opinion leaders use to connect framing to the values, beliefs, and experiences of their encircling collectivities (Rosa 2019). Two key resonance devices are identified: epistemological pluralism and distrust.

First, the activists triangulate different knowledge sources, a strategy discussed by conspiracy scholars as 'epistemological pluralism' (Harambam 2020:125). Namely, they rely on four distinct methods of epistemic validation: factual events, insider knowledge, personal stories and beliefs, and future predictions. The narratives weave elements from real-world events, moderation policy updates, and insider information with personal experiences and platform imaginaries, blurring the lines between fact and fiction. Such epistemological pluralism resonates culturally in the West under the post-truth society, which creates a 'culture wary of dominant epistemic institutions' and strict reliance on any one single knowledge system (ibid.:126).

Second, the four far-right activists actively employ sowing distrust as a central resonance tool. As outlined in the literature review, I use the Rosanvallonian notion of distrust as an active form of engagement to resist institutional power by means of epistemic doubt and delegitimization (Rosanvallon 2008). In the context of this study, distrust acts both as a counterframing and an affective device.

On one hand, distrust is key to counterframing. Activists need not only develop diagnoses and prognoses, but actively undermine trust in the existing narratives by refuting their logic, efficacy, and credibility (Benford & Snow 2000). This extends beyond countering the solutions proposed by other factions, because at its core, any commentary on deplatformization can be seen as an act of counterframing. Their discourse aims to challenge the versions of reality presented

by social media platforms, media, academia, and other epistemic institutions that portray them as 'dangerous individuals' by seeding epistemic doubt in these major institutions shaping contemporary socialities. Again, this aligns with the broader epistemic context, as contemporary far-right beliefs are rooted in the conspiratorial assumption that the stories told by epistemic institutions are merely a 'symbolic facade to deceive the public' (Harambam 2020:207).

In addition, approaching distrust as an affective device, this shared context of distrust explains why expressions of frustration, fear, and anger are less pronounced than previous moderation impact studies suggest (West 2018; Gillespie 2017). Distrust serves as the primary affective device, tapping into the broader societal distrust of technology and (platform) corporations, as well as their followers' distrust in institutional power, intensifying the impact of their statements (Papacharissi 2015). Because their framing seeds epistemic doubt in a directed and repeated manner, they further perpetuate this distrust.

Whether serving an affective or counter-framing purpose, distrust is embedded in framing. Hence, these frames serve a dual purpose: they foster trust in the activists' own narratives and establish social trust within the community, while simultaneously sowing distrust in others. The interplay of distrust and trust gives rise to what Rosa (2019:184) sees as 'a dialectic of resonance and alienation,' which hence becomes the central instrument in the wake of deplatformization.

Deplatformization and competitive victimhood

The second part of the analysis aims to uncover the role the produced symbolic re-elaborations of deplatformization play in activists' community and alliance-building practices. Building upon the findings from frame analysis, it examines collective identities constructed by Collett, Cottrell, Hate Facts, and Fuentes, especially boundary work related to the in-group or other right-wing actors.

Collective techno-social victimhood – A novel axis of orientation

In the context of deplatformization, much like under any conflict, group boundaries become heavily defined through differentiation from the adversarial out-group at the heart of the conflict (Mudde 2019), in this case, the techno-social system of oppression. Activists construct an identity for themselves and their

supporters based on a victim-threat duality, with the collectivity portrayed as both a victim of the system and a threat to it.

In such opposition-based identities, the identification of the enemies in certain terms is the same process as the identification of the self in those terms (Edelman 1988). The constructed in-group identity specifically centres around techno-social victimhood, overshadowing well-established identities like whiteness or nationalism. Hence, techno-social victimhood is a novel identity as it aligns with the emerging techno-social axis of oppression but continues the tradition of victimology.

The discourse of victimisation, personified in the opinion leaders, but broadened to the collective level, serves multiple functions. It functions as a rhetorical tool that feeds into white replacement conspiracies and acts as an emotional appeal to urge supporters to act (Miller-Idriss 2020; Oaten 2014). Moreover, in the context of deplatformization, imitated victimhood strategically aims to foster an alternative social identity by portraying the in-group as social underdogs, thereby transforming the common feeling of techno-social abjection into a cohesive force and countercultural attraction for followers, much like previous research has indicated (Lewis 2018). While limited qualitative studies are available on fringe communities post-deplatformization, Jasser et al. (2021) similarly highlight techno-social victim identity as an important new axis of orientation for the far-right community on Gab.

Ban as a social currency – The moral economy of the victimhood culture

The emerging techno-social victimhood serves as a social currency. Being banned, censored, or otherwise victimised by the system is not only worn as a badge of honour as observed on Gab (Jasser et al. 2021), but is also considered evidence of the quality of one's ideas. This means that the two sides of the threat-victimhood duality are not antithetical; a higher threat status reflects a stronger victimhood status, as exemplified by Hate Facts' statement: 'If you haven't been banned from any of that gay silicon valley tech shit you're doing conservatism wrong, and if you've been banned from all of it you're probably doing it better than anyone.'

Ideas, information, or individuals qualifying for censorship and deplatforming are taken as evidence of three characteristics: the idea's legitimacy and substance (truth), its impact (popularity), and its threat level (potential for awakening). This

reflects their Gramscian-inspired roots, where the cultural production of ideas paves the way for political change, as articulated by Cottrell when discussing 'censorship criteria':

> 1. Does this idea/information/person seriously threaten the present-day establishment and its systemic propaganda [...]
> 2. Is this idea/information/person sound and truthful; are they based on legitimate evidence [...]
> 3. Is the idea/information/person popular [...]

These mechanisms broadly echo the moral framework of the contemporary 'victimhood culture' identified by Campbell & Manning (2018:22), where victimhood elevates one's social status, 'regardless of whether one has done anything praiseworthy.' While collective victimhood has long been a powerful orientation for extremist groups (Oaten 2014), the emphasis on victimisation is further heightened under the victimhood culture (Campbell & Manning 2018).

The imitation of victimhood can be viewed as a response to the moral ideals of victimhood culture, as argued by Campbell & Manning (2018). While censorship, whether academic or platform-related, is nothing new, the contemporary rationale often aligns with victimhood culture ideals, justifying speech limits based on the potential harm occurring as a result of giving the speaker a platform (Campbell & Manning 2018). Speech is no longer restricted *ex post* as punishment for a concrete transgression but *ex ante* as protection from possible future wrongdoing, reflecting guilt by association (Gillespie 2018; Grimmelman 2015). Despite right-wing commentators speaking out against this rationale, Campbell & Manning (2018) argue that the long-standing conflict between the ideals of free speech and safe spaces has led the right wing to adopt similar victimology tactics. After all, the more widespread a moral framework, the more beneficial its adoption (ibid.).

'More thoroughly cancelled than anyone' – Competitive victimhood and its implications for alliance-building

Adopting a similar victimhood identity within the analysed cases doesn't imply a homogenous movement identity, nor does it suggest novel alliances between affected collectivities. To understand the potential for alliance-building, boundary work concerning other right-wing and far-right factions must be examined.

While all four activists acknowledge a common source of victimisation and advocate solidarity despite differences, in practice they engage in a competition over the symbolic resource of techno-social victimhood. Claims of collective victimhood become a zero-sum game, where only the in-group can be the true victim (Oaten 2014).

The competition among similar groups affected by similar techno-social perpetrators gives rise to 'competitive victimhood,' a dynamic where all groups attempt to portray themselves as the ultimate victim (Campbell & Manning 2018:162).[18] In the context of deplatformization, other right-wing and extremist factions, and even alt-tech platforms, are seen as 'controlled opposition' rather than potential allies. Alongside elites and platforms, they constitute the third prominent enemy category under blame attribution. The competition for the symbolic resource of techno-social abjection demands that actors affected by the same 'Big Tech' adversary prove they have endured greater suffering than other extremist actors (Noor et al. 2012). They construct three exclusionary criteria to measure one's victimhood status within the context of deplatformization: the degree of abjection, the time of the ban, and previous expressions of solidarity, as shown in Figure 1.
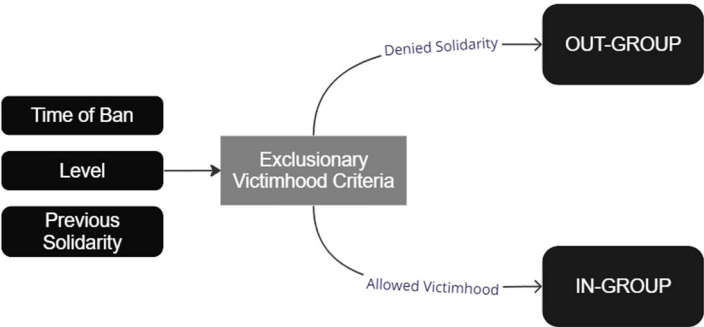

Figure 1. Exclusionary victimhood criteria

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[18] While the authors apply the concept the relationship between the 'victim' and the 'perpetrator', the concept stems from social psychology, specifically the field of violent conflicts, where the term is also applied to competing victimhood claims made by similar groups affected by the same perpetrator (Young & Sullivan 2016), which is how the notion is applied in the present study.

Failure to meet one or more of the criteria serves as evidence to counterframe other factions' victimhood claims. Being denied in-group victimhood defines them as the out-group. These actors are rendered hoax opposition, influenced to varying degrees by other adversarial entities, platforms, and elites. This counter-framing further sows distrust in other factions by conveying that "if [one's] beliefs aren't considered a threat by the system, they aren't worth having" (Hate Facts).

The first two criteria, time and level of ban, signify that by reappropriating platform moderation into a symbolic resource of victimhood, the activists incorporate fragments of the original 'structure' into their own social practice. The time of the ban is taken as the initial gauge, with all activists arguing that every 'truly right-wing or nationalist figure' was already banned years ago (Cottrell). Utilising the fact that deplatformization was gradually applied to less extreme factions, an earlier ban indicates a higher threat value of one's ideas. A similar rationale underlies the second criterion, the level (or number) of bans. Under the victimhood culture, those combining multiple victim identities are 'accorded greater moral status than those with only a few' (Campbell & Manning 2018:168). To exemplify, Fuentes consistently brands himself as 'the most censored man in America,' presenting himself as a target of brutal censorship and the far-right hero after the January 2021 events: 'I'm double censored, double blacklisted, more thoroughly cancelled than anyone because I am THE biggest threat to the system.'

The third exclusionary victimhood criterion relates to previous solidarity. Under competitive victimhood, any (faux) sentiments of solidarity are negated if the other right-wing faction is seen as contributing to the group's suffering by not speaking out against perceived oppression (Young & Sullivan 2016). To exemplify, North American channels, Hate Facts and Fuentes, mainly point to the lack of solidarity from the mainstream conservative parties. Commenting on the prospect of Biden's win in the 2020 US presidential election, Hate Facts forwards the following post: 'I don't feel any sympathy [...] Where was Trump when Milo Yiannopoulos got de-platformed and hounded by the media? Where were any of the mainstream conservatives for that matter?'

In addition to contention stemming from the exclusionary victimhood criteria, leaders also express opposing views on whether the common Big Tech enemy is enough to set aside other disagreements when discussing concrete alliances. For example, Hate Facts and Fuentes both disagree with Laura Loomer's support for

the Israeli state, but construct opposing issue hierarchies when it comes to deplatformization:

> …Pardon the hell out of me if I don't weep for your victimhood. [...] If you're against internet censorship, do you advocate for the rights of white nationalists [...] to openly preach their philosophies and criticize Israel, Zionism, and Jews in general; without being kicked off Facebook and Twitter? (Hate Facts)

> We disagree on this, but we agree on issues like big tech censorship [...] We can work together on the areas where we agree and we can be open and discuss areas where we disagree. (Fuentes)

These findings contrast those of Jasser et al. (2021) on Gab, where the shared deplatformization experiences united individuals espousing diverse far-right beliefs. One reason for this discrepancy may be that Gab's user base is more homogeneous than Telegram's – a key argument for choosing Telegram as a research site given the present study's focus on alliance-building. The results also deviate from past literature indicating that shared grievances facilitate alliance-building between far-right factions (Durham & Power 2010). In essence, these findings indicate that while activists may abstractly emphasise the need to overcome differences and build alliances against Big Tech, competitive victimhood claims hinder intergroup relations among similar deplatformed factions in the broader 'dissident' right movement, leading instead to reduced solidarity.

Discussion and conclusion

From the outset, this thesis project set out to underscore how moderation shapes the fabric of social practice and symbolic meaning in affected communities. Through frame analysis spotlighting four high-profile far-right activists' Telegram channels and their statements on platforms and moderation between 2019 and 2022, it addressed two objectives. First, to understand the ways in which these leaders attempted to (re)shape orientations, trajectories, and mobilisation of their collectivities. And second, to determine whether actors built new alliance links in the aftermath of deplatformization.

How do the deplatformed influential far-right activists frame issues of moderation, platforms, and deplatformization for their followers?

The findings underscore the emergence of a novel frame of techno-social oppression, an extension of the familiar white genocide frame, through which the activists reappropriate the experience of deplatformization into a powerful symbolic resource of victimhood.

Diagnostic framing illustrates that despite this shared frame, Big Tech animosity does not constitute a coherent shared grievance. Instead, 'Big Tech' serves as an overflowing empty signifier and an affective device linking a cascade of grievances. Activists leverage their personal experiences, ideas culturally resonant with their followers, and the broader societal distrust in Big Tech to intensify the affect permeating their narratives.

Contra anecdotal accounts, the emphasis shifts from concerns of freedom of expression to broader issues of dehumanisation and social acceleration. Individual techno-social abjection is redefined as a signifier of collective trauma affecting the broader social group with which their agenda aligns (Alexander 2004), namely white people, and specifically, whites espousing far-right beliefs. Through the signifier and against the general backdrop of framing problems as crises, activists herald instability to justify concrete actions and motivate their followers to act upon them.

Prognostic framing indicates that deplatformization prompts fractured visions for the trajectory of the umbrella movement. Activists signal three possible trajectory changes: (1) an offline turn; (2) abstention from incivility to better resemble the deliberative ideals needed to return to Twitter as a key symbolic place for propaganda and mobilisation; and (3) abandoning Big Tech and embracing the alternative ecosystem. Despite calls for unity, deplatformization provokes contention between similarly affected far-right factions, suggesting potential further dispersion of the broader movement (della Porta & Diani 2020).

Motivational framing reveals that post-deplatformization, new micro-level individual actions become defined as activism, lowering the threshold of meaningful participation. This matters because participating in action strengthens participants' feelings of belonging, which then recursively serves as further fuel in future mobilisation waves (ibid.).

What role do these activists' constructions of deplatformization play in their community- and alliance-building practices?

The study finds that activists adopt victimhood as a symbolic resource to facilitate an in-group sense of community. This provokes competing victimhood claims between affected actors, diminishing the potential for inter-group alliances in the context of deplatformization.

Regarding community-building, the key findings underline that adjoining 'white victimhood' (Oaten 2014) is a novel techno-social sentiment of persecution constructed as a community bond to manufacture a countercultural appeal for their followers, similar to Jasser's (2021) findings on the alt-tech platform Gab. The findings also highlight that bans serve as a social currency, meaning that the experience of techno-social abjection is not appropriated merely into a community-building practice, but becomes interwoven in the concrete social practice and meaning in the collectivity. In other words, the symbolic renderings of deplatformization are not just an added layer to their social world but are constitutive of it (Couldry & Hepp 2017).

In regard to inter-group relations, deplatformization provokes competitive victimhood, which inhibits alliance-building between affected far-right factions. While activists attempt to use the commonalities of deplatformization as a shared grievance to bridge previous disagreements and facilitate solidarity, in practice they engage in competition over the symbolic resource of victimhood. The reappropriated resource of techno-social victimhood becomes an active tool in establishing novel lines of superiority and inferiority between affected factions. The findings contrast those of Jasser et al. (2021) on Gab, where the shared experience with platform suspension and collective frustration with Big Tech united diverse far-right beliefs. They also contradict a myriad of literature indicating that shared grievances facilitate strong alliance-building between far-right factions (Durham & Power 2010).

One possible reason may be that Big Tech animosity strategically links diverse grievances rather than constitutes a coherent shared grievance itself. Another potential explanation is that in reappropriating the experience of moderation into a resource, being a victim is not merely a commonality, but foremost a resource – its value depends on scarcity and exclusivity. As deplatformization strips away other symbolic resources such as visibility, these novel resources become even

more important. Another factor playing into competitive victimhood may be the gradual administration of deplatforming, as evidenced by the timing of the ban as one of the exclusionary victimhood criteria. This suggests that a gradual approach might be more effective in curbing digital hate than outright removals.

In the context of limiting problematic user communities, the finding of competitive victimhood presents a normatively positive development that importantly adds to academic inquiry on deplatformization. The coalescence of right-wing extremism within the loosely moderated oxygen-giving alternative spaces (Jasser et al. 2021) has been raised as a concerning potential societal trade-off. Yet, in tandem, the results of the present study paint a contrasting possibility: competitive victimhood claims, the diminished inter-group solidarity, and the overall highly divisive nature of the issue suggest potential further dispersion of the broader 'dissident' right.

Looking back, thinking ahead

Beyond the limits of the case, the findings highlight that much like any structure under the conditions of deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp 2017), moderation operates in a nonlinear way — and should be researched accordingly. Shifts in value regimes imprint themselves on the complex ground of social practice and meaning, impacting belief systems, identities, and trajectories of affected collectivities, leaving them changed as a result. The developed orientations are not merely added layers to their sets of beliefs, but become constitutive elements, actively (re)shaping their social practices and action. Not just at the moment of the intervention, but as lasting nuances shaping their identity and the ways they perceive and interact with others.

Despite its limitations, this thesis shows that in reinterpreting and challenging platform moderation, hate actors (1) strengthen the conspiratorial narratives of oppression and provide further countercultural appeal, and (2) display contention rather than solidarity toward other targeted extremist actors. Further studies could explore the implications of competitive victimhood to understand how best to administer bans to inhibit potential alliance-building between problematic actors. Afterall, when tectonic shifts underlying the digital media landscape shape arguably one of the most encroaching social phenomena pestering political communication and our society at large, the aftermath matters – for all of us.

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'Oh Villanelle, My Baby…': The serial engagement of *Killing Eve* digital queer female fans

Yunshan Jiang

Introduction

LGBTQ+/Queer Fandom and Dislike

As a complex TV drama, Killing Eve is genre-bending. The series involves two women who form a romantic relationship through their mutual adventure (Kling 2022) in a storyworld of thriller, drama, and dark humor. The writer and showrunner of the first season Phoebe Waller-Bridge once said, 'Every moment in this show exists so that these two women can end up alone in a room together' (n.d., as cited in Variety 2018:n.p.). Since its debut, Killing Eve has been critically acclaimed (Gilbert 2018). However, the ending of Killing Eve disappointed and was disliked by many fans, especially queer fans from digital spaces (Balial 2022; Framke 2022), as it killed off a main queer female character – Villanelle (Willingham 2022:n.p.). Waggoner's (2018) study on the 'bury your gays' trope indicates that this trope can lead to self-harm and suicidal thoughts among LGBTQ+ fans. Studying queer fans of Killing Eve can raise awareness of how recent examples of the 'bury your gays' trope are being used and how queer fans engage with contemporary queer television series.

This thesis focuses on digital queer fans' engagement with Killing Eve because it can provide a space for the marginalized queer fans to voice their experiences with

the series. It is from the standpoint of marginalized groups that we can achieve a certain freedom from the dominant understanding (Harding 2008). Therefore, this thesis aims to raise the awareness of heteronormative hegemony on screen through queer fans' understanding of and engagement with this complex TV series.

With that in mind, the first objective of the thesis is to provide knowledge of Killing Eve as a complex TV series. The second and main objective of this thesis is to investigate Killing Eve's digital queer fans, with a focus on the fans' engagement and/or disengagement with the show through their understandings of identities and queer representation in Killing Eve. The present research thus answers the following questions:

1. How does Killing Eve represent key characters, tropes, and narrative kernels?

2. In what ways do queer fans of Killing Eve understand identities and queer relations represented in the series?

3. How and why do queer fans of the television spy drama Killing Eve (dis)engage with the series?

The first question asks how the storyworld, events, characters, genres, and tropes are constructed in the poetics of Killing Eve. It is answered with a poetic analysis of Killing Eve's storytelling (Mittell 2015). It aims to provide a full contextualization for queer fans' engagement with the series and how to understand that engagement and dislike because this context is what fans are reacting against, and what they are relating to and relating against.

The second question asks about Killing Eve digital queer fans' understanding of the series' representation, with a focus on its female and queer representation. It aims to explore why queer fans like Killing Eve with concepts of transgression and emotional authenticity. The third question asks how and why Killing Eve queer fans engage and/or disengage with the series, which aims to investigate these fans' engagement, fan activities, and dislike. These two questions also address fandom for intersectional characters, identities, and intersectionality, and are answered with the method of one-on-one semi-structured interview, and the thematic analysis of the interview data.

Literature Review

This thesis bridges three main areas of research in complex TV studies, LGBTQ/queer studies and representation, and digital fandom. Connecting these fields, this paper aims to raise the awareness of heteronormative hegemony on screen through digital queer fans' understanding of and engagement with Killing Eve as a complex TV series.

Complex TV Drama

There has been a major shift in American television–the emergence of its complex storytelling–along with the shifts in technology, industry, and viewing practices of audiences since the late 1990s (Mittell 2015). Killing Eve is one such complex drama. Within the context of complex TV, various elements of TV dramas, including the use of storytelling techniques, characters, etc. are addressed through a poetic approach to storytelling (ibid.). Mittell's work is influential (Robinson 2022) and concerns the circulation of culture that the media text is deeply connected with its surrounding contexts. Thus, it is necessary to first provide an analytical overview of the series and its mixed genre.

Killing Eve is a spy thriller and black comedy drama series (Nicholson 2018) produced by the Sid Gentle Films company for BBC America (Palmer 2021). The series concerns two women who form a romantic relationship through shared adventures (Kling 2022). There are four seasons with 32 episodes in total (IMDb 2023a). The overall rating of the series on IMDb is 8.1, with a decrease in popularity among the most popular TV shows (IMDb 2023b). Each season is executed by a different female showrunner or head writer (IMDb 2023c), who makes the decision of the final cut with the director (Mittell 2015:90).

Looking closely at poetic storytelling, there are four main elements of serial narratives: 'storyworld, characters, events, and temporality' (Mittell 2015:22). For Mittell, serialized drama is less about the persistent storyworld and characters, but more about the 'ongoing accumulation of narrative events' which can be divided into major and minor events, or 'kernels' and 'satellites' (ibid.:22f). The kernels are the main plot of the series, subjecting to cause-and-effect relations, whereas the satellites are used to enrich the characters, texture, and tone of the series. Further, events can function as 'narrative statements' that raise the question of

'what next' and 'narrative enigmas' that raise the question of 'what happened' (ibid.:24).

In Killing Eve, the factors of events, storyworld, and especially characters are important. Characters of the series are active agents that shape the event and the storyworld. There are five main character archetypes in film and television storytelling: Protagonist, Nemesis, Attractor, Mentor, and Trickster which function differently in the narrative (Myers 2022:132). The protagonist is the central figure of the show who aims to reach a certain goal; the nemesis is the figure who stops the protagonist from reaching the goal; the attractor is the ally who emotionally engages with the protagonist; the mentor connects with the protagonist's intellectual growth; and lastly, the trickster is the one who moves back and forth between being the protagonist's ally and enemy. In television serial storytelling, character archetypes are changeable across seasons and episodes.

Mittell (2015) also considered audiences' engagement by emphasizing the role of the beginning and the ending of a complex TV drama. On the one hand, a good pilot episode can introduce characters, relationships, and backstories, plant seeds for the story arcs, and establish the genre and tone (ibid.:68). It frames the audiences' expectations of how the story will be told (ibid.:85). Finales, on the other hand, satisfies and/or disappoints the audiences. It is important for this thesis to focus on the finale of Killing Eve, as it is a major factor that affects fan audiences' engagement with Killing Eve (Popbuzz 2022).

Finale

Finales or endings refer to 'the final part of something' and 'a goal or result that one seeks to achieve' and are more defined by its surrounding discourse than itself (Mittell 2015:319). Thus, disappointment and backlash often ensue when they fail to please everyone (ibid.). Unfortunately, Killing Eve's shocking twist in the finale left fan audiences disappointed (Willingham 2022). This connection between the finale and fan audiences' expectations motivates and positions the study to consider the finale of Killing Eve as one of the major elements in exploring Killing Eve fans' engagement with the series. Further, since the ending of Killing Eve belongs to the 'bury your gays' trope (ibid.), it is important to also look at the tropes portrayed in Killing Eve.

Tropes

The 'bury your gays' trope has a deep history in American and British society. Originally, the trope was coined by queer fiction authors to protect themselves, their publishers, and their readers from legal and social imperatives against pro-gay advocates (Hulan 2017). Today, this trope is primarily used for shock value (Waggoner 2018), such as Killing Eve's twist at the end where the main queer female character is killed off.

Another trope that Killing Eve used in relation to queer relations is the 'lipstick lesbian' trope, in which a hyper-feminine woman performs excessive femininity as a rejection of conventional norms (Wolthuis 2022:108). 'She dresses and acts in a manner that is considered conventionally feminine, likes "feminine" things such as wearing lipstick and/or "girly" interests such as ballet and pink — and likes women' (TV Tropes 2023:n.p.). From the tropes Killing Eve used, we can see how the show relates to LGBTQ+ and queer representation, which further motivates the present study to look at LGBTQ+/queer studies, representation, and queer fans.

While the 'bury your gays' trope is a persistent representational issue for LGBTQ+ people, there is little recent research on complex TV drama in relation to queer fans. The issues of queerbaiting and queer representation on TV screens, however, were much discussed in recent studies. Woods and Hardman (2022) explored queerbaiting practices, including consumer queerbaiting, cultural queerbaiting, and social queerbaiting, emphasizing queerbaiting as a type of exploitation. McDermott (2021) investigated queerbaiting in terms of its broken promise through a set of queer theories of affect. Although this is a fan study on the important issues of queerbaiting on TV shows in general, McDermott did not address queer fans' engagement with a specific TV drama that contains tropes or representations other than queerbaiting. Thus, the present thesis strives to address the likes and dislikes of queer fans in relation to multiple tropes in Killing Eve to raise awareness of tropes in relation to queer representation issues beyond queerbaiting.

LGBTQ+/Queer Studies and Representation

Due to the tropes used in the show, we need to pay attention to LGBTQ+/queer studies and representation. It is essential to first address the use of terms before

diving into the discussion of relevant studies. The term 'LGBTQ' was an umbrella term that describes an imagined community of sexually and gender diverse people, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (McCann & Monaghan 2020:10). The meaning of each term has been shifting (Hennessy 2000:21) and expanding (Gaycenter 2023), signifying a struggling site of sexual identity. It is worth noting, however, that the term 'queer' has become an umbrella term for non-normative sexuality since the 1980s (McCann & Monaghan 2020:2). Further, the term 'queer' has gained popularity in the 21st century as it captures a wide range of gender and sexual identities (Worthen 2023:1f). Thus, the present study uses the terms 'LGBTQ+' and 'queer' interchangeably to refer to non-heterosexual and non-cisgender persons and studies.

However, the term 'queer' theory, rather than 'LGBTQ+' theory, will be used since queer theory has its unique significance and history (Amin 2020). Queer studies are institutionalized through theory instead of objects (ibid.:19). The fundamental idea of queer theory aimed at resisting fixed categorisations, emphasizing a *transgression* of categories and boundaries (McCann & Monaghan 2020:2ff). Because queer theory, queer studies, and transgression are closely related, and because this thesis focuses on queer fans of Killing Eve, the thesis design is thus guided by the concept of transgression. Therefore, this study examines how the concept of transgression related to the tropes used in Killing Eve and the subversive powers of the series in relation to gender and sexuality, in particular, the female power and the queerness represented in the show, and how queer fans of Killing Eve engage with this transgressiveness.

Transgression

A classical understanding of transgression connected the concept to issues of subjectivity (Dollimore 1986:53). For Dollimore (1986), transgression is a type of escape from the repression in reality that turned into an affirmation of one's true self. In this study, the repression, in reality, refers to the discourse Hall (1996) claims to construct identity, which is a process of 'becoming' instead of 'being'. Dollimore (1986:54) discussed identity in a similar way, 'human identity is more constituted than constitutive; constituted by…the preexisting structures of language and ideology, and by the material conditions of human existence'. Thus, identity is 'the subject decentered', and subjectivity is 'revealed as a kind of

subjection—not the antithesis of social process but its focus' (ibid.). Transgression is therefore a type of reimagining of reality.

The theme of transgression is often covered in recent queer studies, especially in relation to the reimagining of reality. Llewellyn (2022:2349) argued that online fanfiction spaces are heterotopic digital spaces that 'enable forms of resistance to power and discourse that are not currently possible in the normative physical world'. According to Llewellyn (2022), online fanfiction spaces are normalized heterotopias for queer women to feel more comfortable in their sexuality and in doing so explore, express, and disrupt established norms. Like the fundamental idea of queer theory, heterotopias also emphasize disrupting the established orders and norms, which echoes well with the concept of transgression.

Transgression is a key theme in Killing Eve (Miller et al. 2021). The series transgressed sexuality, gender, and genre through its queer characters, femme fatale, and complex storytelling. As noted by O'Neill and Seal (2012:42):

> The criminal woman occupies an anomalous cultural position. Not only does she transgress society's legal codes, she also transgresses its norms of gender as the active flouting of rule and convention that criminality entails is perceived as at odds with feminine passivity.

There are few recent studies relating to transgression in this sense. Lorenzana (2022) explored Miss Universe reaction videos made by Filipino queer fans on YouTube, which was regarded as a challenge to oppressive ideologies (ibid.:428). Magrath's (2022) study pointed out that social media is not a place of transgression for LGBTQ+ fans to challenge the established norm but a place of discrimination for them. It can be observed from these studies that there are no studies on queer audiences of TV dramas in recent times. This further motivates the present study to fill this knowledge gap by investigating the digital queer fans of Killing Eve through the concept of transgression.

Asian Representation

Asian people and culture have been underrepresented in American media (Riggs et al. 2023). Sandra Oh attempted to show her character's ethnic background in Killing Eve:

> I've been trying to infuse more pieces of my character's ethnicity and cultural background. Like at the very top of Season 3 in 'Killing Eve,'...I wanted to bring the flavor of that because we carry our culture, we carry our history. And typically, white Hollywood does not write it. Does not write our culture, does not write the depth of our culture (n.d., as cited in Howe 2020:n.p.).

With Sandra's efforts, Killing Eve inserted several Asian representations into the show. Reading Highmore (2015), Asian culture as a way of life is deeply embedded within Sandra's identity, prompting her to act on the status quo of Asian representatives in the American media. The infusion of Asian ethnicity and culture in the show demonstrates the importance of minority representation to minorities.

As an international complex TV drama series, Killing Eve has attracted fans of different racial and ethnic identities around the world (Facebook 2023a). The casting of Killing Eve is also diverse and is beyond Asian representation (IMDb 2023d). The reason to focus on its Asian representation is that Sandra Oh is cast as the main character Eve in the show. The queer relationship between Eve and Villanelle is also a type of interracial and intercultural (romantic) relationship, which speaks to audiences from different parts of the world. In this sense, the intersectionality of identities should be taken into consideration in this study, especially during data collection and analysis. As this study investigates queer fans of Killing Eve, this study is a fan study. Thus, it is important to discuss fandom studies in relation to today's context and fandom practices.

Digital Fandom

Fandom refers to a type of organized social activity which 'involves fans specifically seeking out those who share their tastes, thereby becoming involved in a range of social, cultural, and media activities' (Encyclopedia 2023). Thus, fandom is made up of fans, and it is essential to understand fan studies. Sandvoss et al. (2017) identified three waves of fan studies. The first-wave research focused on the beauty of fandom when fan communities were belittled and ridiculed by mainstream media (ibid.). Led by Pierre Bourdieu (1984, as cited in Sandvoss et al. 2017), the second-wave research highlighted the social and cultural hierarchies reflected in fans' cultural tastes at the time. The third-wave research aimed at investigating individual fan's motivation, enjoyment, and pleasure (ibid.).

Thus, fandom can be viewed as a whole, and the individual fans studied reflect the characteristics of the fandom to which they belong. In addition, it also can be said that the importance of fan studies lies in raising awareness of social inequalities of identity and cultural recognition through researching disempowered and marginalized fans. Thus, this thesis explores minority fans, in particular, queer fans through their experiences with Killing Eve. However, investigating experiences cannot operate without considering the context in which it is embedded.

Participatory Culture

Jenkins (1992) regarded fandom as a participatory culture and framed fans as active meaning-makers and appropriators of texts instead of mindless consumers. However, the advent of digital technologies and social media platforms like Facebook has transformed the participatory culture primarily by taking fan-producer relations beyond the gift culture (Hellekson 2018). While digital participation looks promising, shared activities in online fan communities are shaped by the affordances of social media platforms (Lynch 2022). In a Facebook Killing Eve fan group, for example, whether a member can post is decided by the group admins whether it can be posted in the group (Facebook 2023b). In this way, fan activity and participation are limited by its setting. Further, toxic behaviors such as quarrelling and trash-talking on social media demonstrate the negative aspects of participating in digital spaces (Reski 2022). Thus, digital fandom can be said to be both promising and toxic.

For example, Matthews (2018) investigated online fans' discourse and critique about Game of Thrones on Tumblr regarding the different interpretations of its pseudo-history. Hermes and Stoete (2019) investigated the 'hating Skyler White' audience engagement through the online subReddit '/r/breakingbad' and demonstrated the multifaceted likes and dislikes of the audiences on the digital platform Reddit. Such fandom online practices demonstrate the activeness of digital fandom and their deep and active engagement with media texts within the participatory culture. Katner (2016), however, examined the 'Team Walt' and 'Skyler-haters' of Breaking Bad, which revealed the misogynist characteristics of the real-life world and the digital world through bad fandom.

While these studies show how participating in digital spaces can be both normatively positive and negative, it can also be observed that Facebook seems a neglected social media platform in fandom research despite there being quite a few active fandom communities on Facebook (2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d). This study thus fills this gap by focusing on Facebook fan communities. The positive side is that Killing Eve fan communities on Facebook have collected many fans and are mature in terms of in-group interactions as some were founded as early as 2018 (Facebook 2023b; Facebook 2023c). They are also active digital fan bases for Killing Eve. However, as Facebook's platform affordances allow group admins to filter posts, posts in the groups are limited, and thus affecting and shaping interactions within the group.

Since the tropes used in Killing Eve relate to LGBTQ+ fans and representation, and since the representation of queer relations and minorities in Killing Eve relates to the issues of identity, this thesis explores identity, cultural recognition, and dislike through LGBTQ+ digital fans' engagement with Killing Eve and its queer representation. Relating to previous sections on transgression, Asian representation relates to minority identity and identity politics. Thus, identity is a core concept through which we understand queer fans' engagement with the series and its representations.

Identity

Identities are multiply 'produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies' (Hall 1996:4). This highlights the importance of context, and the way discourse is formed. It is through the specific historical and institutional sites and the discourse we hear, read, or watch that our identities are constructed. Complex TV drama is a type of discourse with varied storytelling strategies that construct the audiences' identities. Therefore, the present research should not only explore social inequalities of identity and cultural recognition through minority fans and their identities only, but also take the discourse into account to see from where fans' identities are constructed and how fans understand the place where they construct their identities.

Recent studies on digital fandom explored identities through different types of discourse. Chinese youth CP fandom satisfied their imaginations of the CP idols

through fan art and fanfiction (Zhou et al. 2022). Bisexual soccer fans experience discrimination and abuse through anti-LGBTQ+ discourse on social media platforms (Magrath 2022). Moreover, Botorić (2022) investigated peripheral fandom through the adult fandom of LEGO, taking the identity formation site to a toy brand. Notably, no recent studies explore digital fandoms associated with complex TV dramas. Thus, with a focus on identity, this study fills in this recent knowledge gap by exploring the digital LGBTQ+ fandom of complex TV dramas, in particular, queer fans' engagement with the complex TV series Killing Eve. To explore identities through LGBTQ+ fandom, we should also consider the specific discourse and strategies it uses to communicate the text, in this case, the complex storytelling of Killing Eve. As I refer to earlier in the discussion of complex storytelling, Mittell (2015) talks about the importance of endings. It links to this section of fandom, where the ending, as well as the 'bury your gays' trope Killing Eve used in its ending, are causing dislike-minded engagement by the fans.

Dislike-minded

Gray (2021) explored the dislike-mindedness of fans and audiences engaged with media texts. He emphasized that dislike is complicated and developed an analysis of dislike through 'the multiplicity of identity' to address why people like or dislike media texts. In the case of Killing Eve, it is important to consider fans' intersectionality of identities, because the intersectional identities of fans produce intersectional performances of dislike through layers of reasons (ibid.). His approach to like and dislike is effective for exploring the media engagement of fans, anti-fans, and their identities. Thus, the present study approaches identity through LGBTQ+ fans' (dis)engagement with and (dis)like of Killing Eve.

Engagement

While Mittell (2015) considered audiences' engagement with complex TV dramas, he did not use empirical data to support his claims on television audiences. It is thus unsure whether his claims are from data or assumptions. When it comes to studying people, we should 'assume less and investigate more' (Corner 2011:87). Using empirical data, Hill (2019:61f) created the spectrum of engagement that effectively captures fan audiences' (dis)engagement across 'affective, emotional and critical modes'. Therefore, this study draws on the

spectrum of engagement to understand queer fans' engagement with the series. Engagement is defined as an 'energising internal force' that is rooted in affect and identity (Dahlgren & Hill 2023:5). From this, we can see that identity is not only the key to understanding fans, but also their engagement with media texts.

It is worth noting that none of the recent studies mentioned above link complex TV drama, LGBTQ+/queer studies and representation, and digital fandom. One example is a macro study on the perception of representation among online LGBTQ youth fandom (McInroy et al. 2022). Although it bridged the three frameworks, the method used was a survey-based approach that cannot achieve a level of depth and sophistication (Byrne 2012:210). Drawing on multiplicities of dislike (Gray 2021) and the spectrum of engagement (Hill 2019), this paper explores transgression and identity through digital fandom, queer studies, and TV drama at a micro level and in-depth.

Methodology and Methods

This study is explanatory and theoretical in nature. Thus, it adopts qualitative methodology and qualitative methods (Brennen 2007:4).

Case Study

Qualitative thinking is 'fundamentally case oriented' (Bazeley 2013:5). As Rorty claimed, '[t]he way to re-enchant the world…is to stick to the concrete' (as cited in Flyvbjerg 2001:129). Focusing on a case is crucial for qualitative research. Therefore, this thesis focuses on a concrete case rather than unspecific samples. As a 'bold subversion of all stereotypes' (Emmett 2022:120), Killing Eve made itself an 'extreme case' (Flyvbjerg 2001:79) for queer presentation on TV when it fell into a cliché trope at the end. Queer female fans of Killing Eve seek progressive queer female shows, only to be disappointed by the ending. Studying Killing Eve fans thus can provide a picture of female and queer representation issues in contemporary society.

Methods and Samples

To achieve the objectives of this study, three qualitative methods are used: a poetic analysis of Killing Eve's complex storytelling (Mittell 2015); one-on-one semi-structured interviews (Brennen 2007; Byrne 2012); and qualitative text analysis applied to the interview data (Bazeley 2013; Rivas 2012). The mix of different methods enables rigorous analysis and an in-depth understanding of Killing Eve queer fans' experiences (Brennen 2007:5).

First, it is essential to begin by providing a full contextualization for queer fans' engagement with the series because this context is what fans are reacting against, and what they are relating to and relating against. Thus, Mittell's (2015) poetic approach to complex TV storytelling is applied to examine Killing Eve's major storyworld, characters, events, genres, and tropes. As the analysis of the four seasons of Killing Eve would be too lengthy to be suitable for this thesis project, it is thus necessary to look at the broader trends and strategies used in the show and to sample selected scenes in achieving the research aim as Mittell (2015) suggested. Since the main focus of this study in relation to complex TV drama is queer representation, sampling choices focus on the main queer characters Eve and Villanelle's characteristics, the relationship between them, the pattern of their behaviors, the usages of narrative enigmas, kernels, satellites, and other characters that shape the development of their relationship. With these in mind, 22 scenes and moments across four seasons are chosen for analysis.

The second and third methods for this research are qualitative interviewing (Byrne 2012) and thematic text analysis (Rivas 2012). The strength of the qualitative interviewing method for this study is that it allows me to access the fans' own voices, providing a deep understanding of their experiences from their own point of view (Byrne 2012). More specifically, the study uses one-on-one semi-structured interviews to study fans' engagement with Killing Eve (Brennen 2007:29). A set of pre-established questions in the form of an interview guide was shaped after 2 pilot interviews and was used as a guideline for all interviews (ibid.).

Fan studies is a field where reflexivity and self-awareness have long been part of the research culture, with the notion of 'acafan' being a core part (Deller 2018). Researchers need to be aware of our relationships with those we are studying (ibid.). On that note, I am an acafan of Killing Eve. Although being a fan of Killing Eve gives me strength and value because I have the knowledge of the series

and the fans' engagement patterns on Facebook fan groups, particularly the dislike patterns, it is also a potential barrier because I have to stay open to learning things from the fans that I might not see as a fan. This is another important reason why I use the interview method rather than other methods used in academic fan writing that entail the researcher's subjective thinking process such as ethnography (Bernard 2011). Thus, I draw on the storytelling knowledge as a fan but with a combination of different methods that give me more distance and objectivity to the fan interviews.

In terms of interviewee sampling, this study focuses on Killing Eve fans who identify themselves as queer or belong to the LGBTQ+ community as they are the 'relevant range of people' (Mason 1996:91f, as cited in Byrne 2012:216). All interviewees are recruited from Facebook fan groups of Killing Eve only (Facebook 2023b; Facebook 2023c; Facebook 2023d; Facebook 2023e) to ensure one single type of social media architecture and affordances.

A total of 10 interviews were conducted, including 5 people aged 20-40 and 5 people aged 40+. All participants are self-identified females and claim that they belong to the LGBTQ+ community. All interviews were conducted via Messenger or Zoom. The strength of using these platforms is that the interviews can take place at any time at any place for both the researcher and the participants. The weaknesses are that I could not fully read the body language of the participants while they were talking and that sometimes they were distracted by their surrounding environment. The interview data were collected from March 1, 2023, to March 18, 2020. The voice of all interviews was recorded during the interviews by my phone and was later fully transcribed into text for analysis.

This study uses thematic text analysis to analyze the interview data, where the data was initially coded as descriptive codes before analytical codes were developed (Bazeley 2013). Beyond the inductive and deductive approaches, this research uses the 'abductive logic' (ibid.:336) to code data, in which the developed codes are iteratively checked against the original data and are further developed as the analysis proceeds. In this way, existing theoretical understandings are contextualized through empirical data, leading to revised interpretations of existing theoretical understandings (ibid.). The language used for both interviews and text analysis is in English.

NVivo was used throughout the coding process. One transcript was used as a pilot. Each transcript was coded comprehensively during the first 'open coding' stage and was summarized into a particular story. The main findings can then be seen across the 10 interviews. After that, the open codes were organized and clustered into core themes by referring back to the original data. In addition, mind maps were applied to see connections between main codes and subcodes. Using NVivo, I counted all references with more than 5 to see what the most common findings were, then looked at the highest and lowest references. After cross-referencing the codes from two mind maps and the core concepts outlined in theory, I decided on four final topics, which are 'dislike', 'female and queer representation', 'identification', and 'serial engagement'.

Ethics

There are ethical considerations in conducting this research. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to each interview to ensure the participants were aware of the study and its use of data, a process that was conducted in accordance with social research ethics (Ali & Kelly 2018). Moreover, identifying details of individuals within a particular community should remain undisclosed as they might be recognized even with adjusting ages and disguised identities (Bazeley, 2013). This is to ensure that participants' privacy and confidentiality are protected (Brennen 2007:16). Therefore, numbers are used to describe each respondent without revealing their names and any other information that might identify them. In addition, all recruiting posts on Facebook groups were deleted after all interviews were completed, minimizing the risk that participants are being traced.

Analysis

The analysis is written in four subsections. The first subsection analyses the poetic storytelling of Killing Eve in terms of the series' storyworld, events, characters, genres, and tropes. The second subsection addresses the interviewees' understanding of the female representation, queer representation, the emotional authenticity represented in Killing Eve, and these fans' identifications with the series' representation. The third subsection considers the interviewees'

engagement with the seasons and their attempts of re-imagining the ending. The last subsection concerns fans' dislike and their understanding of the inauthenticity represented in the series.

The Poetic Storytelling of Killing Eve

Characters, Character Growth and Discontinuity

Eve is the central focus of this subsection's opening because, as the protagonist, she is the starting point and primary focus of all the 'kernels' and 'satellites' (Chatman n.d., as cited in Mittell 2015:23) in the Killing Eve storyworld. She was introduced as an Asian-origin MI5 officer and a crime enthusiast in the pilot episode. Of note, it was not revealed until season 2 that she is of Korean descent. Her enthusiasm for crime drove her to know more about assassins and serial killers. When MI6 Russian desk Carolyn described how a killer managed to sever a politician's femoral artery without him and his girlfriend's noticing in Vienna, Eve said, 'cool' ('Nice Face' 2018). As a hobby, she spent her free time assembling a large collection of records about international assassinations and casually remarked to Carolyn, 'I'm just a fan' ('I'll Deal with Him Later' 2018).

Her fascination with killers is also fuelled by her own dark impulses, as evidenced by her act of stabbing herself in the thigh while sitting in front of a stack of Vienna assassin files ('Nice Face' 2018). As time passed, her fixation on Villanelle intensified, bringing her closer to Villanelle – the female assassin operating internationally. Therefore, Eve is an obsessed fan of Villanelle. In contrast to Villanelle, Eve was initially an ordinary woman who attempted to adhere to societal norms, with a husband, a job, and a flat. However, these things left her feeling unfulfilled. It was not until she encountered Villanelle that her passion for adventure was sparked.

Villanelle was depicted as a pure psychopath in the pilot episode. With Psychotic Beats by Killer Shangri-Lah as the background music, she killed an Italian mafia with a hairpin in an elegant dress and watched him die with pleasure ('Nice Face' 2018). She was presented as a smart and manipulative female assassin. Upon discovering that an MI5 officer was on her trail, Villanelle was filled with a mixture of apprehension and excitement.

The first thing she was drawn to was Eve's hair, 'wear it down,' she told Eve in the hospital's bathroom, unaware that Eve was the MI5 officer on her trail (ibid.). As Eve's pursuit of Villanelle continued, Villanelle found herself increasingly intrigued by Eve. She began to think about Eve often, stalking her and even sending her gifts after killing Bill, one of Eve's close friends and colleagues. Over time, Villanelle also developed a fandom for Eve, creating a situation where they were fans of each other. However, Eve's emotions towards Villanelle are complicated, as they are mixed with both attraction and anger.

Carolyn and Villanelle's handler Konstantin were frequently used to bring Eve and Villanelle together as well as separate them. They are 'trickster[s]' (Myers 2022:132), moving between being a mentor and nemesis for both Eve and Villanelle. After Eve is dismissed from MI5, Carolyn hires her to investigate Villanelle, as it serves Carolyn's interest in gathering information about The Twelve – an anarchist organization comprising of 12 individuals that contracts assassins to eliminate prominent figures in politics and business. During the investigation, when Villanelle is no longer Carolyn's focus, she prevents Eve from getting in contact with Villanelle. Nevertheless, Eve remained resolute in her pursuit of the assassin. It can be seen from the fact that Eve obtained Villanelle's location by lying to Carolyn ('The Hungry Caterpillar' 2019). These events demonstrate how Carolyn and Konstantin were used to manipulating Eve and Villanelle's physical proximity through their hidden agendas. At this point in the series, it is already hard to tell whether the major event is to find 'The Twelve' or to see where Eve and Villanelle's relationship is heading (Mittell 2015:23). Arguably, Killing Eve is a story between the protagonist (Eve) and the villain (Villanelle), and the story of 'The Twelve' is a background that is embedded in the storyworld.

Villanelle can be regarded both as Eve's 'nemesis' as well as 'attract' (Myers 2022:132). In the first season, Villanelle killed Eve's good friend and colleague Bill ('Don't I Know You?' 2018), which makes her Eve's nemesis. However, across the first two seasons, Eve had been finding excuses to focus the investigation on Villanelle. Despite being shot by Villanelle at the end of season 2 ('You're Mine' 2019), Eve still wants to help her escape from 'The Twelve' in season 3. In the final episode of season 3, Eve and Villanelle dance in a dancing room with the Music for Anglo Saxes by Alan Bristow and a delicate tone ('Are You Leading or Am I?' 2020). This protagonist-and-villain dance reveals their complex emotions

towards each other. At this point, Villanelle begins to regret her life as an assassin and yearns for a more ordinary life with Eve. In the final scene of season 3, They are both reluctant to leave each other. Thus, it becomes evident that they both hold affection for each other and desire to be a part of each other's lives. So far, it is evident that Eve went from a timid MI5 office clerk to an intelligent detective and embraced her delicate relationship with Villanelle. Villanelle went from a cold-blooded serial killer to someone with romantic and regretful feelings.

However, at the beginning of season 4, Eve is angry with Villanelle for no obvious reason. She slapped Villanelle in the first episode of season 4 ('Just Dunk Me' 2022) and had her arrested after Villanelle kidnapped a psychiatrist for therapy in episode 3 ('A Rainbow in Beige Boots' 2022). The change in Eve's behavior and the unexpected turns in the plot highlight the disjointedness of her character development, especially in light of her statement to Villanelle on the bridge in season 3's ending: 'When I try and think of my future, I just see your face over and over again' ('Are You Leading or Am I?' 2020). 'The major kernels are central to the cause-and-effect chain of a plot' (Mittell 2015:p.23). The inconsistency in Eve's character development affects her relationship with Villanelle, disrupting the continuity of a significant kernel.

In the finale, Carolyn turned out to be the greatest nemesis of both Eve and Villanelle, as she killed Villanelle to reclaim her position in MI6 ('Hello, Losers' 2022), which angered fans and was accused of falling into the 'bury your gays' trope (Smith 2022). This plot twist at the ending counteracted the representation of a powerful female and LGBTQ+ character and ended the queer relationship between Eve and Villanelle.

Genre and the Transgression of the Genre

Killing Eve is usually described as a spy thriller, or a black comedy drama series (Nicholson 2018). In the interviews, fans often described it as 'a psychological thriller', 'comedy', 'romance', 'dark', or 'drama'. Notably, Killing Eve has mixed genres. Genre is used as a symbolic action, shaping the way people understand the world (Frow 2014:2). Therefore, media texts do not necessarily belong to any genre, but use genre instead. Killing Eve is such an example. It can be described as a mixed genre–a combination of spy thriller, detective story, comedy, and love story. However, the series in fact utilized these genres and achieved a transgression across genres (Dollimore 1986).

Under the guise of a spy thriller drama, Killing Eve tells a love story between Eve and Villanelle. Thus, the relationship of Eve and Villanelle can be said to be one main kernel event of the series, functioning as narrative statements that pose the question of what their relationship will be. Another major kernel of Killing Eve is 'The Twelve' – a 'narrative enigma' that asks 'who are they' as well as 'narrative statements' that raise the question of whether these individuals would be exposed and sanctioned (Mittell 2015:23). The pursuit and dismantling of 'The Twelve' is what gives the series its identity as a spy thriller and a dark conspiracy drama. However, events surrounding the relationship between Eve and Villanelle infuse the series with a queer romance. These two major kernels thus demonstrate how Killing Eve transgresses the boundaries between genres, blending elements of a spy drama thriller with a queer romance. Arguably, the queer romance kernel dominances over the spy thriller kernel in the heart of the interviewed fans.

Typically, a spy thriller drama disguises itself with plot twists and characters changing faces (Shrivastva & Vats 2023). The generic thriller parts are evident in Killing Eve. They are present even in non-killing scenes. A good illustration is the scene in which Eve applies the lipstick gifted by Villanelle ('The Hungry Caterpillar' 2019). Despite the seemingly secure surroundings of this scene, the presence of a blade concealed within a small lipstick tube suggests otherwise. With the skilled use of sound and color, this scene delivers a shocking plot twist that is characteristic of the drama thriller genre.

Furthermore, the inclusion of humorous and comedic elements in the series, such as the language used, pushes the boundaries of its genre, expanding it to encompass comedy. As a part of Killing Eve's poetic storytelling, the language used in Killing Eve is a symbol of its subversive power (Emmett 2022). Semiotics disrupt the 'intelligible rule-governed speech' (Kristeva 1984:n.p., as cited in Emmett 2022:126). When Carolyn met with her superior Helen, who was furious about Carolyn's work, Helen said, '...you know what they say, one cock-up is an accident, two cock-ups starts to look like carelessness' ('Desperate Times' 2019).

Helen's playful words demonstrate the poetic use of language in Killing Eve. This use of semiotics not only reveals its subversive and transgressive power in its humor (Emmett 2022:127), but also disrupts the social norm and expectation of politeness when it comes from the upper echelons of MI6. Further, Helen's playful language also serves as a testament to the widespread presence of female rage throughout the series, so much so that it is even apparent in a female character

who only appears once. Another instance can be found in the language employed during Eve and Hugo's dinner at a fast-food restaurant when Eve says, 'I don't care if that's true. Seriously, if it tastes this good, grind up an orphan and fry it in crack' ('Desperate Times' 2019). Eve's inhibited words again demonstrate the scandalous semiotics Kristeva defined, displaying an immoral and uncaring female rage. The use of playful and disruptive language serves to mirror the inner workings of the characters' personalities and their histories.

The narrative kernels, comedy, and playful language used in Killing Eve's storytelling contribute to the series' overall poetic quality, giving novelty to the genre, making it genre-bending, and elevating its storytelling. However, several tropes are used in the series which are not genre-bending.

The Tropes

There are several tropes used in Killing Eve. First, the 'lipstick lesbian' trope stands out, especially in Villanelle's character (Wolthuis 2022:108). Rather than being depicted as a butch queer character, she wears extremely feminine clothes just to mock conventional femininity (ibid.). This use of the 'lipstick lesbian' trope in the series demonstrates a transgression of femininity and sexuality. Because the use of transgression in media productions is a 'progressive counter-hegemonic strategy that furnishes followers of the satirists with caricatures of neoliberal tropes' (Hermes & Hill 2021:9), Killing Eve's transgression is also a trope. Interviewed fans like these tropes, according to the data.

Another trope used in Killing Eve is the 'bury your gays' trope as presented in the finale of the series–the death of Villanelle. This trope not only ruined the possibility of a romantic relationship between Eve and Villanelle but also undermined the parasocial connection between fans and Villanelle (Rojek 2016). As a result, it elicits intense dislike from the fans in this study.

'[I]t was never kind of a butch fem thing'

Representation and Emotional Authenticity

Based on the interview data, two distinct types of representation can be identified in Killing Eve: female representation and queer representation. In terms of female representation, the series' portrayal of strong female leads, including the

charismatic assassin Villanelle, MI5 detective Eve, and Russian desk officer Carolyn, particularly stands out for fans in this study. The following interviewees have a strong preference for TV series that prominently feature female characters and prioritize their representation.

> I also love that as an assassin, Villanelle was very pretty, and could be wearing the most amazing dresses, but also could wear a very masculine suit. And it was…always for the roles she was playing because she was wearing what she liked. And again it was never kind of a butch fem thing (interviewee 8, 50-year-old fanatical fan).

Villanelle's character is authentic and true to herself. She is unapologetic for her dress, body, and sexuality, and never appears to be either 'butch' or 'femme'. This ties in with the 'lipstick lesbian' trope and the transgression trope, which transcend the categories of feminine and butch lesbian, making the portrayal of gay women on screen unique. Based on the quotes, it is evident that these fans appreciate the portrayal of female characters in Killing Eve under these specific tropes, and this character authenticity.

Moreover, Villanelle's vulnerability depicted in the series gained empathy from the interviewees.

> Oh Villanelle, my baby…I think I can't help…but feel very caring feeling towards her because…she doesn't have anybody to really like take care of her when she needed, and anytime she has needed it, she has been let down (interviewee 2, 22-year-old fan).

Villanelle's authenticity as a character is further highlighted by the fact that she is not portrayed as an ideal strong woman, but rather as a complex individual with both strong and vulnerable aspects to her personality. In this sense, she is more like a real person than an unrealistic superwoman on screen. This is 'Realism 1' (Corner 1992:98f) – a presentation on screen being like the real. In Killing Eve, this takes the form of emotional realism, whereby the emotions portrayed on screen closely resemble real-life emotions. This emotional realism is authentic, and it drives the fans' emotional attachment to Villanelle, resulting in positive affective and cognitive engagement (Hill 2019). Therefore, it can be characterized as a type of emotional authenticity.

Eve was not recognized for her Korean origin and appearance among interviewees. Instead, her intelligence was recognized by those who like to watch complex female characters on screen.

> I like you know all her theories pretty much were correct, but she was treated like it wasn't because they were so far-fetched, but she was…spot on, so…she was extremely intelligent, and she could really put things together (interviewee 2).

Positive engagement includes 'emotional identification, inviting sympathy and empathy' for the character (Hill 2019:11f). Interviewee 2 saw Eve's capability because she emotionally identified with Eve in a positive way. As a result, she felt empathy towards Eve as Eve was not recognized by her surroundings. Linking to intersectionality, this fan is also both queer and an Asian living in an English-speaking country just like Eve. Although she does not identify with Eve in the same nationality, she has empathy for Eve for being both 'foreign' and queer at the same time.

The interviewees highlight the importance of female rage as a standout feature of female representation in Killing Eve. The interviewees attribute the quality of female rage to Villanelle, making her a symbol of female rage in Killing Eve. This female rage is a type of transgression that crosses the boundary of cisgenders and subverts the power dynamic between the male and the female. A fan demonstrated this point well with the Villanelle's Amsterdam red-district killing scene in season 2 ('Desperate Times' 2019).

> I love to see…female rage which is you know showed a lot, and it feels just very sort of real and vulnerable and genuine and yeah I really love that…like the Amsterdam one, I think you know we could all sort of relate to being a woman with a child having a husband that's…cheating on you and goes to like the red light district. And to see him be disrespected in the way he disrespected women…she just sort of switched the power dynamic completely (interviewee 3, a self-identified Villanelle stan).

Fans in this study like the female rage presented in Killing Eve–the transgression trope. As mentioned, transgression is a type of reimagining of reality (Dollimore 1986) – a reality disliked by the female fans in this study in this case. Killing Eve imagined a world where women have higher power than men (interviewee 8, 50-year-old fanatical fan). The female rage portrayed in Killing Eve is part of its poetic

storytelling (Mittell 2015), which fans in this study positively engage with because it resonates with social barriers, exclusion, and inequalities in terms of gender entitlements. The series reimagines gender rights, breaking free female characters from their limited rights in real life and subversing gendered entitlements. As interviewee 3 said, this female rage is 'real'. This further demonstrates the character authenticity of Villanelle and the emotional authenticity depicted in Killing Eve.

Arguably, this transgression of gender rights and gender roles, and the emotional authenticity of female rage play a major role in fans granting Villanelle the get-out-of-jail card and unconditional love as all interviewees perceive that despite Villanelle being a killer, she has a justified cause for her killing actions. Therefore, despite appreciating the female representation in Killing Eve, the interviewees' strongest attachment is to Villanelle among the three female leads. This indicates that they emotionally engage with Villanelle the most positively (Hill 2019).

In terms of queer representation, fans appreciated the writing of Eve and Villanelle's relationship in that it was light-focused and realistic.

> I like how they didn't focus on the relationship between Eve and Villanelle...and by that I mean...it wasn't concentrated on making them meet or doing this to them or doing that to them, they were both living their lives and intertwining and meeting up, which is how normal people work (interviewee 2).

The portrayal of the relationship between Eve and Villanelle in the series can be seen as an example of 'Realism 1' (Corner 1992:98f), in that it is similar to how relationships develop in real life. Also, the show can be seen as an example of 'Realism 2' (ibid.), in that it presents a relatable depiction of the real world on screen. In this case, both kinds of realism add to the emotional authenticity of the queer representation in Killing Eve. These types of realism provide emotional weight to the series' queer romantic story, serving as a type of queer emotional realism (Mittell 2015).

Another aspect of queer representation is that Killing Eve is unapologetic in this regard.

> I love there was no apology from Villanelle being Villanelle. You know, she was having threesomes...She was in love with women. And there was no...big kind of reveal about that. There was no big discussion about it. It was just always there (interviewee 8).

Killing Eve transgressed the norm of labelling queer characters as a queer romance. It presents queer characters in a normalized setting. What is extraordinary is the spy part or death, rather than the relations. This re-writing illustrates a type of 'heterotopias' (Llewellyn 2022:2349) where there is no label on anyone, and everyone is who they are with no further discussions. In this way, Killing Eve transgresses the sexuality norm on screen (Dollimore 1986), providing a fresh look of a queer character for fans in this study through Villanelle's character. Villanelle thus can be said to be a symbol of authentic queerness as Llewellyn meant it, highlighting the emotional authenticity in terms of Killing Eve's queer representation.

To conclude, Killing Eve's female and queer representation have emotional authenticity that appeals to fans in this study. For its female representation, the series' female rage highlights its use of transgression as a trope and female emotional realism. For its queer representation, the series' authentic portrayal of Eve and Villanelle's relationship and its unapologetic queerness demonstrate its relational emotional authenticity.

Identification

Fans' engagement, including affective and emotional feelings toward a series or a character, comes from their identities (Dahlgren & Hill 2023). Interviewees perform their identities during interviews – they were actually talking about themselves while talking about Killing Eve (Hill 2019). According to Hall (1996), identities work as points of identification because of their 'capacity to exclude' (Hall 1996:5) and ability to foster recognition of 'shared characteristics' (ibid.:2).

Thus, the interviewed fans recognized and are emotionally attached to the emotional authenticity of Killing Eve's female and queer representation because they belong to the LGBTQ+ community and they are female. Moreover, due to identification and attachment's capacity to exclude, the interviewed fans formed an allegiance to the queerness and female rage of Killing Eve, based on which identified themselves as die-hard fans (interviewee 5), obsessed fans (interviewee 7), or Villanelle stan (interviewee 3).

Fans in this study identify with Killing Eve's female leads as being female because they are drawn to female-centered series. Because of this identification of gender, the interviewees formed an emotional attachment to Villanelle, Eve, and Carolyn and regarded them in a positive way, as mentioned in the previous section. Arguably, it is such identification that fans in this study felt empowered to watch these strong female leads. As a Villanelle stan said:

> If you like sports or...the team wins, does a goal or something, like you get excited because, especially with Villanelle, I think I often felt like I wanted her to do this...and she does that...I did feel a bit more empowered watching it, you know (interviewee 3).

Importantly, interviewees' identification with other aspects of the series' female leads is an absent presence in the interview data. What was significant in terms of identification from the interviewees was with Eve in terms of her identity struggles and sexuality journey, 'I definitely relate to Eve...because she did kind of struggle to let herself love Villanelle. I think I identify with that a lot' (interviewee 9). Linking Eve's sexuality journey to her growth, interviewee 2, a 24-year-old queer female, said:

> You see her grow and grow and grow...that was nice to see [because] you see her grow in many ways, you know in her professional life, from her personal life and her sexuality, you see her develop so much...that's really really good to see.

Linking to engagement theory (Dahlgren & Hill 2023:5), interviewees identified with Eve's identity struggles and her sexuality because the presentation was real and authentic. When fans saw Eve's identity and sexuality growth, they were engaging with Eve as well as their real lives, where their own sexuality journeys like Eve's. Therefore, when interviewee 2 saw Eve's growth in her identity and sexuality, she was happy that things for Eve worked out on screen. Thus, the interviewees' positive engagement (Hill 2019) with Eve's growth comes from their identity as queer females, as well as their effect on queer characters.

The interviewees also relate to Villanelle in terms of the way she copes with the world. A 50-year-old fan who was recently diagnosed with autism expressed her identification with Villanelle in the interview:

> I really identified with Villanelle's character right from the first episode…with her in an ice-cream café, and not knowing how to make contact with this child, until she learns to copy what the man behind the…counter's doing…That's really relevant to me because that's how I react in the world (interviewee 8).

Moreover, Villanelle's relationship with her family is also relatable to a fan who had a complex relationship with her mother.

> I think I relate to Villanelle's relationship with her mother, not that I would kill my mother, but it was very complicated…I had a very…difficult childhood and difficult to connect with her, and yet we were very very close, so that's interesting (interviewee 7).

Linking back to Hall's (1996) theorization of identification, interviewee 8's recognition of the common autistic traits between her and Villanelle constructed her identification with Villanelle, bringing her closer to the character and forming an allegiance with the character. Further, the interviewees also formed an allegiance with the queer relations between Eve and Villanelle, considering they are queer females. From the way fans identify with these two queer female characters, we can see how deeply relational they are to Eve and Villanelle in terms of their identities and personal experiences.

Falling from Grace

Fan Engagement with the Seasons

Regardless of how they discovered Killing Eve, interviewees were hooked when they started watching the series. The first two seasons, especially the first season, were described by fans as exciting and unpredictable. Fans watched and rewatched Killing Eve, read related articles, listened to related podcasts, watched related videos in between seasons, and participated in Facebook groups they belong to. They wore Killing Eve T-shirts and tattoos. They bond online through the series while extending themselves by getting people they know in real life to watch the series. 'I have rewatched it, I think, 3 or 4 times…I made my mom watch it, and made a few of my friends watch it, so then I wanted to watch it at the same time…so we can discuss it' (interviewee 3).

Despite a few interviewees finding season 3 to be somewhat 'dragging' (interviewee 1) and 'confusing' (interviewee 9), most interviewees remained engaged and interested until the end of the season. Overall, interviewees considered the first three seasons to be well-written. Good writing can be considered the primary reason why interviewees are drawn to and emotionally invested in Killing Eve.

> So storyline from season 1 to season 3 I think made sense...given you know the nature of the show and the nature of Villanelle, so that all made very much sense…it was unpredictable for me as a normal person…It was really well-blended (interviewee 2).

From the quote, we can see this fan enjoyed that the first three seasons were unpredictable while they were presented in a reasonable and authentic way. The enjoyment comes from Villanelle's actions that transgressed the boundaries of realistic expectations.

In addition, location matters. The use of real locations in Killing Eve was seen by interviewee 3 as authentic. This location realism (Corner 1992) also gave interviewees excitement when they saw Villanelle breaking into places where she should not enter.

> That's one of the things…about Killing Eve that is so authentic...it really sort of makes you feel like you are in the environment.

However, according to the interviewees, the writing of the fourth season lowered the production of the series overall. In particular, the ending, when Villanelle was shot dead in the Thames River, was especially disappointing for these fans.

> I was so happy when they got together...and that was why I was so crushed at the very end (interviewee 6, 42-year-old queer female fan).

> I hated it, I absolutely hated it, I thought it was terrible, you know I did think it was 'bury your gays' ending (interviewee 10, 65-year-old queer female fan).

Interviewee 8 who dislikes the ending also shared her familiarity with the 'bury your gays' trope, 'it's just such a familiar trope that when there's a lesbian couple, one of them has to die'. As a result, the head writer of season 4 Laura Neal was reviewed badly. 'I thought Laura Neal's...just a horrific writer…the things she

wrote were cliche…the characters were inconsistent…the plots were inconsistent'
(interviewee 10).

Thus, it was clear that respondents preferred the first three seasons to the fourth, and that Killing Eve experienced a fall from grace. Arguably, the finale apologized for its previous transgression by killing off Villanelle and bringing the series itself back to the 'normal' realm of both gender and sexuality 'correctness' and boundaries. The death of Villanelle in Killing Eve symbolizes the death of female power and female rage that made Villanelle a deviant woman. Additionally, it symbolizes the end of an important queer relationship in the show. It signals a return to the normal order, where female rage and queer relationships are not present or accepted. Also, it signals a loss of emotional authenticity in the series. As a result, the likes from fans in this study were morphed into dislike.

Fanfiction, Re-imagining, and Facebook Digital Fandom

Due to the interviewees' dislike of the ending, they counteract the ending by reading alternative stories from fanfiction for happy endings, which is a phenomenon that happens often to digital fandom today (Coppa 2017).

> I've actually never been a fanfiction person but I remember after that finale
> came out, I was like ok I might have to get into fanfiction to actually
> see…some sort of happy ending between them (interviewee 5).

Fanfiction brought the fans back to the transgressive realm through alternative readings of the series (ibid.). Inside the world of fanfiction, the interviewees satisfied their imaginations with a happy ending. Disliking season 4, some interviewees who are unhappy about the ending also wrote Killing Eve fanfiction to imagine their own heterotopias. Whether fans in this study chose to write or read fanfiction, it demonstrates a type of participatory culture (Jenkins 2018) in digital space where these fans share alternative stories and endings of season 4 within a place they created for themselves, transgressing between the imaginative spaces of Killing Eve and the imaginative spaces of heterotopias across media (Hill 2019).

In addition, fanfiction can be said to bring comfort to fans in this study (Llewellyn 2022). The digital fandom from Facebook in this study can be said to be more intense, more loyal, and more likely to find Killing Eve resonates with their lives than other fans due to their female and queer identities, despite they are fans of

many different races and ethnic identities around the world (Facebook 2023a). While this transnationalism adds to the complexity of Killing Eve fandom, it remains that fans that are queer and female are the most hard-core fans. Therefore, they are more susceptible to the ending. Reading or writing fanfiction helps heal the emotional damage done by the ending.

> It's like...having a virtual home. It's just you know you feel at home because you know that you have, for some reason or another you have connected all to this one show (interviewee 2)

Llewellyn (2022) claimed that the online world is becoming more crucial for queer people who might face marginalization in the physical world and therefore look for alternative avenues to explore their identity or find support. The Killing Eve online fan community serves as a virtual home for the interviewees, allowing them to connect with like-minded fans and deepen their connection to the show they love.

'I find her very unlikable'

Dislike and Inauthenticity

Interviewees' engagement with Carolyn, who killed Villanelle, demonstrates the multiplicities of dislike, where like and dislike of certain characters are mixed with complex reasons (Gray 2021). The 'intersectional performances' (ibid.:194) from fans in this study demonstrate their intersectional identities.

> At one point, I had this theory that…she manipulated them falling in love…so that she could get closer to Villanelle, and I think that's a very evil thing to do…and I think Carolyn Martens was psychopathic, I find her very unlikable (interviewee 7).

From the quotes, Carolyn was described as psychopathic by the interviewee. She was also commented on as 'brutal' (interviewee 2) and 'unnecessarily cruel' (interviewee 10) by fans who love Villanelle. This strong dislike for Carolyn from these fans showed how strong their emotional attachment to Villanelle is rooted from their female and queer identities (Hall, 1996).

When a Villanelle stan commented on Carolyn, she said, 'I mean I really did love her until like season 4 the finale to be honest' (interviewee 3). This fan liked

Carolyn because she was one strong female lead in the series. She stopped liking Carolyn because Carolyn ordered the hit on Villanelle and successfully killed Villanelle. As a queer female fan, interviewee 3 likes Villanelle who embodies both queerness and female rage, and dislikes Carolyn who has female rage but kills off the symbol of queerness in the series.

Linking to Hall's (1996) identity theory, the interviewees identified with the queerness and female rage in the series symbolized by Villanelle and formed emotional attachments with Villanelle. As a result, when Carolyn killed Villanelle, the interviewees took Villanelle's side and excluded Carolyn with mixed reviews even though she was also a strong female lead who was loved by these fans.

Another example of a disliked character is Eve. What was mentioned the most by the interviewees was how Eve treated Villanelle differently from season 3 to season 4.

> I think in season 4 to see...Eve be so cruel towards Villanelle...just cold, kind of just shutting her out, I didn't like that...I also didn't think that was in line with what she was feeling internally...and if it was, they didn't show how did we get from A to B (interviewee 2).

For interviewee 2, Eve's character is inconsistent, which is another source of intense fan dislike. In addition, this inconsistency demonstrates character inauthenticity and emotional inauthenticity of the series.

From the interviewees' dislike of Carolyn and Eve, we can see that they drew boundaries with characters who were harmful to Villanelle and stated that they did not like them. In this way, fans performed their identities and their alliances with Villanelle, the queerness, and the female rage of the series through dislike. All in all, we can see that fans in this study switched from like to dislike (Gray 2021) through their serial engagement with Killing Eve from season 1 to season 4 due to their intersectionality of identities.

Conclusion

This thesis aims to raise the awareness of heteronormative hegemony on screen through queer female fans' understanding of and engagement with the complex TV series Killing Eve. Utilizing poetic analysis, one-on-one semi-structured

interviews, and thematic text analysis, the present study explored Killing Eve's poetic storytelling, the ways queer female fans understand identity and queer relations represented in Killing Eve, and the ways the fans (dis)engage with the series.

How does Killing Eve represent key characters, tropes, and narrative kernels?

The analysis of Killing Eve's poetic storytelling is mainly through its storyworld, events, characters, genres, and tropes with selected scenes and moments from Killing Eve. As an MI5 officer, Eve was a fan of the charismatic assassin Villanelle, who later became a fan of Eve. Villanelle grew from a psychopathic serial killer to a person with feelings, while Eve grew from a timid woman to a fearless woman who is brave enough to accept Villanelle as her lover and to hunt down 'The Twelve'. Killing Eve's use of supporting characters such as Carolyn and Konstantin interfered with Eve and Villanelle's character growth and relationship development, which make these supporting characters 'trickster' (Myers 2022:132) that moves between being a mentor and nemesis for Eve and Villanelle, highlighting the generic attribute of a thriller that disguises itself with plot twists and characters changing face (Shrivastva & Vats 2023).

Killing Eve is a genre-bending series. This can be seen through its main kernels, which consist of the relationship between Eve and Villanelle, as well as the overarching plotline involving 'The Twelve'. The events relating to Eve and Villanelle's relationship are the narrative statements, which set the tone of queer romance for Killing Eve. The events relating to 'The Twelve' are both the narrative enigmas and narrative statements of the series, which set the tone of spy thriller, darkness, and conspiracy and make the series a thriller drama. In addition, Killing Eve's poetic use of playful language not only highlights the transgressive inner drive and uncaring female rage of the characters, but also adds comedy elements to the series. The narrative kernels, humorous comedy element, and playful language used in Killing Eve make the series transgress across genres, giving novelness to the series, and making the series genre-bending.

However, Killing Eve also has several tropes, which are not genre-bending. The 'lipstick lesbian' trope demonstrates the series' use of transgression on femininity and sexuality. This is also what Hermes and Hill (2021) called the transgression

trope. These two tropes are appreciated by the fans in this study. However, the ending of Killing Eve indicates the 'bury your gays' trope, which resulted in dislike from the interviewed fans.

In what ways do queer fans of Killing Eve understand identities and queer relations represented in the series?

This thesis explored Killing Eve's female and queer representation through queer female fans' understanding. The female representation of the series, presented with the lipstick lesbian trope and the transgression trope, is understood by interviewees as unapologetic through the female characters' dress, body, and sexuality. According to the interviewees, the character of Villanelle exhibited both character authenticity and emotional authenticity, which ultimately led to their emotional attachment and positive affective and cognitive engagement with her (Hill 2019). Additionally, interviewees perceived female characters such as Eve, who is of Korean descent, as intelligent. This highlights the interviewees' emotional connection to Eve and their empathy towards Eve as a character who had intersectional identities.

The interviewees emphasized the significance of female rage as a distinctive aspect of the female representation in Killing Eve. Exemplified by the way Villanelle kills, the female rage represented in the series is a part of its poetic storytelling. Fans in this study positively engage with it because it resonates with social barriers, exclusion, and inequalities in terms of gender entitlements. It reimagines the reality where men have more entitlement than women. This reimagination transgressed and subverted gender rights and gendered entitlements in reality. Further, interviewees viewed the female rage portrayed in the series as real and authentic, highlighting the character authenticity of Villanelle and the emotional authenticity in Killing Eve. Arguably, this transgression of gender rights and gender roles, and the emotional authenticity of female rage result in fans' strong emotional attachment to Villanelle, engaging with Villanelle the most positively (Hill 2019).

Interviewees described the queer representation in Killing Eve as realistic. Fans in this study positively engaged with Eve and Villanelle's relationship for its authenticity, which is in line with 'Realism 1' and 'Realism 2' (Corner 1992:98f). This authenticity provides emotional depth to the series' queer romantic story,

serving as a type of queer emotional realism. In addition, interviewees like the unapologetic portrayal of queerness in the series because, unlike other queer series, it avoids labelling queer characters and presents queer relationships in a normalized way. This re-writing of queer characters illustrates a form of 'heterotopias' (Llewellyn 2022:2349), demonstrating Killing Eve's transgression of sexuality norms on screen. In this case, Villanelle can be said to be a symbol of authentic queerness as Llewellyn means it, highlighting the emotional authenticity in Killing Eve's queer representation.

Thus, Killing Eve's female and queer representation have emotional authenticity that appeals to fans in this study. The series' female rage in female representation highlights its use of transgression trope and its female emotional realism. The authentic portrayal of Eve and Villanelle's relationship and unapologetic queerness demonstrate its relational emotional authenticity. Both representations highlight the character authenticity of Villanelle. For interviewees, the female and queer representation of Killing Eve is affective and emotional, resulting in their positive engagement with them (Hill 2019).

Fans in this study formed emotional attachments to Killing Eve's emotional authenticity in its female and queer representation due to their own identities as females and members of the LGBTQ+ community. In addition, they formed an allegiance to the queerness and female rage of Killing Eve, based on which identified themselves as different types of fans. Interviewees identified with the series' female leads as being female, who in turn empowered them as females. However, their identification with other aspects of the series' female leads is an absent presence in the interview data. Interviewees also identified with Eve's identity struggles and sexuality journey on a personal level.

The findings also showed that interviewees had a particular affection for the assassin character Villanelle, identifying with her vulnerable sides. Arguably, this is because Villanelle is the symbol of female rage and queerness in the series. In this case, identities functioned as points of identification and attachment for their capacity to exclude (Hall 1996). Fans in this study formed an allegiance to Villanelle by emotionally excluding other characters.

How and why do queer fans of the television spy drama Killing Eve (dis)engage with the series?

The interviewees' engagement with the first three seasons of Killing Eve, as demonstrated by their multiple rewatching, reading related articles, buying peripheral products, and recommending the show to others indicates their positive affective modes of engagement (Hill 2019). Their emotional investment in Killing Eve can be attributed to the first three seasons' exceptional writing, which brought them excitement. They enjoyed the first three seasons' poetics and its disruptive yet reasonable storylines. Additionally, Killing Eve's use of real locations as a part of its poetics was seen by interviewees as authentic, achieving a type of location authenticity.

However, the last season's writing lowered the overall production of the series, according to the interviewees. In particular, the season finale killed off Villanelle – the symbolic character fans in this study love the most–and brought the series into the 'bury your gays' trope. It can be said that this trope brought the series' previous transgression back to the 'normal' realm of both gender and sexuality 'correctness' and boundaries by killing off the symbol of female rage and queerness of Killing Eve. To interviewees, season 4 was more predictable than the first three seasons, in which the ending was awful, disappointing, disrespectful, and to some extent expected. Because of season 4's writing and Villanelle's death, in the end, the likes from fans in this study were morphed into dislike. This shift also demonstrates that these fans had shifted from positive engagement to negative engagement with Killing Eve.

The interviewees turned to fanfiction for alternative endings due to their dissatisfaction with the series' finale. Some interviewees rewrote the fourth season or the ending. Their reimagination of the ending is mainly for Villanelle to live and to live a happy life with Eve, demonstrating the importance of Villanelle to these queer female fans. In this study, the queer female digital fandom from Facebook was arguably more intense, more loyal than other types of fans, and more likely to find Killing Eve resonates with their lives because of who they are. For interviewees, the online fan community is like a virtual home, where they connect with like-minded fans and deepen their connection to the shows they love.

This study offers a unique and comprehensive framework by combining three areas of research: complex TV, LGBTQ+/queer studies, and digital fandom. The poetic analysis of Killing Eve's storytelling contributes to the knowledge of complex TV, in relation to female and queer representation, and queer female digital fandom. The analysis of queer female fans' understanding and engagement with Killing Eve contributes to studies of digital queer female fans of complex TV dramas, providing knowledge about the fans' engagement with female and queer representation and poetic storytelling. Future studies can explore the queer fans' engagement with another queer complex TV or investigate the role of fanfiction or other fan works in shaping fans' relationship with complex TV dramas.

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The TikTok Trial: Negotiating believability through engagement with the Depp v. Heard trial

Anna Ledro

Introduction

> 'I think there just happens to be a culture around not believing women'
> (Lily, a 22-year-old Canadian student)

On October 15, 2017, American actor Alyssa Milano tweeted: 'If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet'. Borrowing a phrase coined by American activist Tarana Burke in 2006 for Black women to share their stories of sexual abuse, her tweet sparked what came to be known as the #MeToo movement. This movement challenged the common notion of women being less believable than men by transforming social media into a space for believing women and their stories about sexual harassment and abuse. While this was widely appraised within feminist communities, it also led to different pushbacks.

One example for a recent pushback in the form of contesting women's believability through social media is the 2022 defamation trial between Hollywood actors and ex-spouses Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. The Depp v. Heard trial was livestreamed from its U.S. courtroom and developed into a global social media event, with snippets of the livestream turned into short videos published widely on TikTok and other social media platforms (Rothschild & Fischer 2022). Especially on TikTok the trial gained unprecedented virality

(Winter 2022), which is why it was also called "a trial by TikTok" (Watercutter 2022).

Depp and Heard married in 2015. In 2016, Heard filed for divorce and requested a restraining order, claiming domestic violence (Grady 2022). In the course of the #MeToo movement, Heard wrote an op-ed for the Washington Post in which she called herself "a public figure representing domestic abuse" (Heard 2018: n.p.). Although she did not explicitly name Depp in the article, he sued her for 50 million dollars, citing defamation. She responded with a countersuit. Depp's civil defamation lawsuit went to trial from 11 April 2022 to 1 June 2022 in the U.S. (Fairfax County, Virginia). The trial revealed many details of the relationship between Depp and Heard, including domestic violence committed by both actors. While Depp's violence had already been proved during a defamation trial between Depp and the British tabloid newspaper *The Sun* in 2020 (Grady 2022), his accusations of violence exercised by Heard were a new development. At the end of the Depp v. Heard trial, the jury sided primarily with Depp: Heard was ordered to pay Depp 10.35 million dollars in damages and Depp was ordered to pay Heard 2 million dollars in damages regarding her countersuit (DW 2022).

However, Heard was not only sentenced by the trial's jury: On social media, a bias in favour of Depp and against Heard could be observed. For example, content with the hashtag #JusticeForJohnnyDepp significantly outnumbered the hashtag #JusticeForAmberHeard on TikTok (Rothschild & Fischer 2022). The same pattern could also be observed on other social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. This narrative of the Depp v. Heard trial coincides with a widespread feeling shared by the majority of Gen Z members and millennials that 'women's rights have gone too far' (Corless 2023: n.p.) as reported by a recent study from the UK. It summarizes a current zeitgeist across many Western patriarchal societies in relation to gender equality.

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to a growing body of research within the realm of feminist media studies about the mediated negotiations of women's believability in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement. A feminist approach is useful for the purpose of this thesis because 'unlike approaches that hide their politics, feminist theorizing is explicitly political. It addresses power' (Steiner 2014:359). The studies that have been carried out so far on women's believability in the wake of #MeToo focus on the representation of women who are struggling to be believed in popular culture texts (Banet-Weiser & Higgins 2022), and on

social media content and comments surrounding such cases (Banet-Weiser & Higgins 2023). However, they do not take into consideration how the audience engages with this content and reaches their interpretations of it. I argue that to gain a multifaceted understanding of the dynamics shaping and eventually determining a person's believability, it is not sufficient to look only at how this person is represented and discussed on social media. Rather, it is necessary to analyse social media content in combination with the audience's meaning-making processes. This is pivotal since 'believability, unlike truth, highlights the dependency of women on the judgment of others' (Banet-Weiser & Higgins 2022:142).

Concretely, I aim to push the research frontier on the publicly mediated contestations of women's believability in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement through an analysis of media engagement with TikTok content about the Depp v. Heard trial and the ways this content constructed meanings around believability. Thus, this thesis utilizes 'the power of the good example' (Flyvbjerg 2001:77) to gain a more in-depth understanding of a case that connects to a broader social phenomenon of questioning women's believability.

Furthermore, this understanding will be provided by focusing on the perspective of the female online audience of the Depp v. Heard trial. Not only are the majority of TikTok users Gen Z women (Wallaroo 2023), which underlines the role they played in shaping and engaging with the narrative of the Depp v. Heard trial on TikTok, but also is this a relevant group to consider in relation to the current contestations of women's believability. Young women are at the receiving end of mediated negotiations of women's believability as these struggles shape the wider social context for their (un)believability. Furthermore, feminist scholars have been stressing for decades the importance to 'explain the central puzzle – woman's participation in the construction of the system that subordinates her' (Lerner 1986:36). Therefore, considering the female perspective in relation to the Depp v. Heard trial brings in a unique angle to the realm of feminist media studies and aims to contribute to this intellectual field.

The research in this thesis is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does TikTok content about the Depp v. Heard trial construct meanings around believability?

2. In what ways do Gen Z women negotiate believability through their engagement with TikTok content about the trial?

3. RWhat is the role of affect and identity in shaping Gen Z women's negotiations of believability in the trial?

Literature Review

Believability: A man's world?

The topic of believability has been widely covered in in feminist literature and scholarship. However, the focus of this thesis is to find out how it is negotiated through social media, specifically on TikTok in relation to the Depp v. Heard trial. Therefore, Banet-Weiser and Higgins' (2023:4f) recent work on what they define as an economy of believability serves as a crucial starting point:

> The economy of believability designates a terrain of political struggle where one's capacity to 'speak truthfully' – that is, to speak in a way that can be culturally recognized as truthful – is publicly negotiated through a combination of subjective resources (i.e., who one is) and performative labors (i.e., what one does).

They identify digital media as the main site of this contemporary economy of believability (Banet-Weiser & Higgins 2023). One of their case studies is also the Depp v. Heard trial, of which they analyse social media content, such as short video clips, and users' comments on this content. With my thesis, I address a gap in their analysis of the Depp v. Heard trial in relation to believability, which is an in-depth understanding of the audience perspective. My contribution lies in uncovering the meaning-making processes sparked by TikTok content about the trial among its female audience members, and the role of affect and identity in shaping these processes.

According to Banet-Weiser (2021a:218), within the current '"economy of believability", [...] women are seen to be liars and untrustworthy by nature'. This recurrence to 'the conventional association of women with lying' (Gilmore 2017:2) can be seen as a pushback against the recent #MeToo movement, which gained widespread attention and appraisal for positioning women as believable subjects.

Within this social and cultural context, women have to earn their believability: 'Believability is a commodity to be worked for, paid for, secured – and a commodity of unstable value' (Banet-Weiser & Higgins 2023:29). It is important to bear in mind that the resources for being believed are distributed unequally. Historically, certain people – usually white, wealthy, straight men – have occupied the position of being most believable. This shows that the economy of believability is intersectional.

Believability is not the only concept emerging from feminist scholarship that tries to encapsulate why women are less believed than men. For example, Manne (2018) coined the term himpathy, which refers to how we are more likely to believe male abusers than female victims because that is necessary to uphold patriarchal power structures.

Thus, negotiating believability involves othering women in relation to men, which is a common practice in patriarchal societies. For example, in an analysis of the media representation of crimes involving violence, Jewkes (2004:109) found out that there is a focus on violent women as these are more uncommon and thus stand for 'otherness' As a result, they are portrayed as mad, sad, and bad, while 'violence is viewed as one of the many possible behaviour patterns for men; it is not strikingly unusual' (Jewkes 2004:133). Despite being a trial about defamation, the Depp v. Heard trial intensely discussed acts of domestic violence committed by both actors. Therefore, it is useful to bear in mind what are the stereotypical ways in which men and women are represented in media in relation to violence.

The spectacle of celebrity trials: When justice becomes entertainment

An important aspect of the Depp v. Heard trial is that it concerned two highly famous Hollywood celebrities. In literature about female celebrities, it is often underscored how they become 'a cultural placeholder' (Fisher 2011:311) for bigger 'gendered social issues' (Miller 2011:63). For example, female celebrities

involved in litigation often spark broader discussions about the current state of women's rights within a society and how these might have contributed to the female celebrity's deviancy (Miller 2011).

Kellner (2016:115) points out that 'publics seem to have an insatiable appetite for inside information and gossip about their idols'. The media are thus incited to provide this sort of content, leading to an 'increasing amount of celebrity news, images and spectacle' (Kellner 2016:115). The concept of spectacle here is crucial, as several scholars are arguing that we are living in an age of spectacles and that this is changing the media representation of legal trials as the central value in such an age 'is given to entertainment' (Lowe 2018:xvii).

Nowadays, 'spectacles are often visual mediated representations circulating within popular culture' (Lowe 2018:8). This understanding of spectacle connects to recent concepts and theories in the realm of criminology about the changing nature of legal trials. One of these recent concepts is spectacular justice, coined by the criminologist Smith (2022). She argues that 'we are living in a society saturated and defined by media spectacle and the criminal justice system, as well as criminal trials, are increasingly featuring in this visual world' (Smith 2022:3). Likewise, Bock (2021) argues that trials through media representation become shows for the public whose function is not only to entertain but to promote a certain ideology. It is important to mention that this 'spectacle of justice is highly uneven around the world' (Bock 2021:79) as it depends on a country's legislation whether cameras are allowed into a courtroom.

Live from the courtroom: Building a media event

Liveness plays a crucial role in turning a trial into a media event. In fact, the Depp v. Heard trial was livestreamed and reached record numbers in terms of online viewership (Rothschild & Fischer 2022). This thesis analyses a case where the online audience contributed significantly to the trial's narrative on social media thanks to its participatory features. The notion of an active audience in the digital age who has the capacity to contribute to the narrative of a media event is encapsulated by the recently developed concept of eventness, which refers to 'the shift to media events as distributed configurations rather than unified productions' (Frosh & Pinchevski 2018:137).

As the concept of eventness indicates, it is important to conceptualize the audience not only as passive viewers, but as active shapers of a media event. Thanks to social media, media audiences act as 'judge and jury' (Ashuri & Pinchevski 2009:140) and have the possibility to communicate their judgment of the matter to the entire world. For example, on TikTok the hashtag #JusticeForJohnnyDepp exceeded in relation to the amount of content produced and shared compared to the hashtag #JusticeForAmberHeard (Rothschild & Fischer 2022). This shows how the social media court of the Depp v. Heard trial contributed to the trial's eventness by shaping a narrative with a clear preference for Depp. Here, it is important to mention a criticism brought forward by Bock (2021) who claims that even though in the contemporary age people have a heightened amount of visual information, it does not automatically mean that they have more knowledge. Therefore, judgments made by audiences who witnessed a trial entirely through media content should be read through a critical lens.

Short videos on the rise: The success of TikTok

When analysing social media content, it is important to keep in mind that each platform has affordances that shape users' experiences and possibilities to act on a platform. While content from the Depp v. Heard trial was present across a wide range of social media platforms for its entire duration, this thesis focuses on the trial's representation on TikTok where it gained unprecedented visibility.

TikTok is a social media platform with a focus on short-video content. Currently, users can record and share videos that are between 15 seconds and 10 minutes long. TikTok is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance. It is the international version of the Chinese app Douyin, also owned by ByteDance. TikTok was launched to the international market in 2018 after it merged with another short video service owned by ByteDance called Musical.ly. Since this launch, TikTok has grown rapidly: Currently, it is used by over 1 billion people in more than 150 countries around the world (Wallaroo 2023). The average TikTok user is a Gen Z member[1] (Wallaroo 2023), which led scholars to labelling it as 'a generational social media platform' (Kaye, Zeng & Wikström 2022:195).

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[1] Gen Z refers to the generation of people born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock 2019).

TikTok's algorithm is fundamental to understand the platform's success. Algorithms are responsible for the content a user encounters on a platform and are crucial in shaping users' experiences of a social media platform. On TikTok, the algorithmic recommender system curates the landing page of the app, called the For You feed. With time, TikTok's algorithm improves increasingly in recommending personalized content to its users since it tracks and analyses the user's behaviour on the platform (Kaye, Zeng & Wikström 2022). Generally, TikTok's algorithm is purely based on personal preferences, not on what other people in the network share (Stokel-Walker 2021).

Next to this For You feed, on which the users land first when they open the app, TikTok also has a livestreaming option. On TikTok, there is no feed dedicated exclusively to livestreams, but they need to be found either by going actively on the users' Following page or by encountering them randomly while scrolling through the For You feed (Kaye, Zeng & Wikström 2022).

Livestreams of the Depp v. Heard trial were broadcasted through TikTok as well. Nevertheless, on this platform the most popular content about the trial remained the short videos where parts of the livestreams were edited and cut together with other visual and aural elements (Watercutter 2022). In these short videos, Depp's and Heard's behaviour in court was heavily documented and interpreted by the online audience in relation to their believability.

Earning believability: The performance of victimhood

According to Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2022), believability must be worked for by performing it in a way that feels authentic. Especially for women and other marginalized groups this is crucial as its function is 'to overcome overlapping forms of (historical) doubt attached to womanhood at its different intersections with race, class, and other dimensions of identity and experience' (Banet-Weiser & Higgins 2022:128). The primary doubt that the Depp v. Heard trial is concerned with is who was the victim and who was the perpetrator in the actors' relationship characterised by domestic violence and abuse. Thus, the actors had to perform a victimhood that felt affectively convincing to the judging (online) audience (Banet-Weiser & Higgins 2023).

Banet-Weiser (2021b) argues that after the height of the #MeToo movement, privileged men in positions of power started engaging in narratives of victimhood

as a reaction to allegedly false accusations of abuse brought forward by women against them, coining this phenomenon mediated white male victimhood. In this way, 'the discourse of victimhood is appropriated not by those who have historically suffered but by those in positions of patriarchal power' (Banet-Weiser 2021b:60) to re-establish an old hegemonic order of gender relations.

When looking at performances, Goffman's (1959) writings on the presentation of self are a useful resource. He defines a performance as 'all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants' (Goffman 1959:26). According to him, we perform ourselves constantly. This performance activity comprises both verbal and non-verbal action, though the latter is considered as more difficult to control. Thus, evaluating someone's body language can be a check upon the participant's authenticity.

In the context of the Depp v. Heard trial, performing a victimhood that feels authentic is necessary to earn the believability of the court and the online audience. However, as Goffman's (1959) writing shows, for a performance to be perceived as convincing it is not only about what the performing person does, but also how this performance is interpreted by the audience. Thus, the role of the audience in relation to a person's believability is pivotal. Therefore, to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics surrounding believability in relation to the Depp v. Heard trial, it is crucial to consider who its audience is and how their engagement can be studied.

Engagement and identity: The audience speaks

This thesis follows Dahlgren and Hill's (2023:5) understanding of engagement as 'an energising internal force that propels citizens to participate in society'. Furthermore, they 'understand media engagement as a dynamic relational process, rooted in affect and identity' (Dahlgren & Hill 2023:5). Affect draws attention to the sensory, bodily experience that takes one into the state of an emotion. Dahlgren and Hill (2023:15) argue that 'affect brings in the collective side of emotions' such as 'shared social experience'. Therefore, it is a useful analytical concept to detect common patterns within different audience members' engagement with certain media content.

Gray (2021) argues against the common conception in academic research of engagement as an agential and purposeful process by suggesting instead that 'a great deal of viewing, listening, and use is begrudging, coerced and involuntary' (Gray 2021:30). For example, the pervasiveness of some media texts, such as viral content on social media, makes it almost impossible for people to escape them, thus forcing them to engage despite their dislike. Gray (2021) also suggests that identities can be performed through dislike.

Hall (1996:4) writes that identities are 'increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions'. Multiple identity markers play into one's overall construction of identity, for example gender. In relation to gender identities, Butler (1990) suggests that identities are closely interlinked with performances; in fact, the former are an effect of the latter. Over the course of history, discourse shaped our conventional understanding of men and women in a way that we take these categories for granted and natural. However, these understandings are socially constructed, and we perform them constantly through our actions. Thus, we can expect to witness performances of gender identity that are in line with hegemonic discourses about gender in society, for example in relation to believability.

Since the Depp v. Heard trial concerns two famous celebrities, fandom might play an important role in analysing audiences' online engagement with the trial. Similarly, fandom scholars argue that it is an increasingly important source of identity (Sandvoss, Gray & Harrington 2017) as fans can form para-social relationships with celebrities. Hence, an identity based on being a fan of a particular celebrity might play into who one decides to believe in the context of the Depp v. Heard trial.

To sum up, the key areas for carrying out the present research project range across feminist media studies, celebrity studies, criminology, media event studies, social media platform studies and audience studies. By drawing on this interdisciplinary theoretical framework, I aim to carry out a rigorous analysis of the case study. The findings of this analysis contribute to the emerging body of research into women's believability after the #MeToo movement with an in-depth understanding of the female audience perspective on TikTok content about the Depp v. Heard trial.

Methodology and Methods

Methodological approach

The present study aims to provide through a qualitative, case-focused approach an understanding of how Gen Z women negotiate meanings relating to believability by analysing their engagement with TikToks about the Depp v. Heard trial and how they construct these meanings. A multi-method approach that allows to investigate both the meaning-making of audience members and the visual site of this meaning-making was adopted. Using multiple methods in qualitative research is 'a general strategy for gaining several perspectives on the same phenomenon' (Jensen 2012:301), thus striving for the validity and reliability of the research.

Combining the analysis of visual content and the analysis of its audience is a common approach in visual methodologies (Rose 2016). Audiences negotiate the meaning of visuals by adding their own interpretation to it or even rejecting the communicated meaning, showing that a visual's meaning is not static, but it can be interpreted differently. Hence, to avoid imposing my personal biases and interpretations of TikTok content about the Depp v. Heard trial, a hierarchy of methods was established by which the analysis of audience engagement with this content became the focus and the sampling and critical analysis of the TikToks was informed by the audience's perspective.

Research design and sampling

To analyse audience engagement with TikTok content about the Depp v. Heard trial, qualitative semi-structured interviews are an appropriate method because they are useful to uncover the values and attitudes of interviewees (Byrne 2018). Thus, in the context of this research, they were a means to investigate people's meaning-making processes in relation to believability through engaging with TikToks about the Depp v. Heard trial. Since audience engagement with the Depp v. Heard trial happened primarily through its virality on TikTok, the interviewees were asked to bring two or more TikToks about the trial to bring the interviews to life.

The interview guide was written following broadly Dahlgren and Hill's (2023) parameters of engagement. It included questions about the representation of the Depp v. Heard trial on TikTok and the interviewees' experience and engagement with the ways this content constructs meanings around believability. No direct questions about who the interviewees believed were included as the research approach for the interviews was inductive. However, since the present thesis project follows a previously carried out study on a smaller scale in the form of five semi-structured interviews for the final essay of the MKVN08 Media Audiences course, I was aware that this topic is likely to naturally come up in the interviews and not leading the interviewees to it will allow them to present their own meaningful interpretations of it in an unforced way.

The interviewees for this study were recruited through a snowball sampling technique (Seale 2018). The entry point for finding them was to ask my friends if they have any contacts who fit the sampling criteria: The interviewees had to be women aged between 18 and 26 years who followed the Depp v. Heard trial on TikTok and they could be from any country. The sampling rationale is that Gen Z women statistically are the average TikTok user (Wallaroo 2023) and that the female perspective on mediated contestations and negotiations of women's believability and other forms of networked misogyny is understudied. This makes it a purposive sample (Jensen 2012) for the present research project. While Gen Z women comprise women and girls born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock 2019), it was decided to not include minors in the sample as this poses significant ethical issues and considerations that would be beyond the scope of this thesis project. Since the Depp v. Heard trial became a global social media event (Winter 2022), recruiting interviewees from different countries was considered relevant.

Before starting the interview process, a written consent form addressing 'questions of disclosure, consent and anonymity' (Byrne 2018:476) was sent to the interviewees. Furthermore, two pilot interviews were conducted. After each pilot interview, changes and additions were made to the interview's questions based on the flow of the questions during the pilot interviews and the interviewees' suggestions for modifications. The final interview guide consists of five themes that follow the timeline of the interviewees' engagement with TikTok content about the Depp v. Heard trial. This allowed them both to make reflections on the trial and its social media representation and to use it as a starting point for broader reflections on believability.

After the interview guide was finalised, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the aim to gain a 'thick description' (Flyvbjerg 2001:133) of the phenomenon. Two interviews were conducted in-person in Lund, Sweden, and the other 13 were conducted via Zoom. The interviews ranged between 1 hour and 8 minutes and 1 hour and 40 minutes in length and their audio was recorded. 10 of the 15 interviews were conducted in English. The remaining five were conducted in Italian, of which I am a native speaker, as five interviewees were from Italy and preferred to be interviewed in their mother tongue. While doing interviews in different languages bears the risk of under- or over-translation, it was still considered the best solution to allow the interviewees to speak in their native language as that gave them the possibility to express themselves freely without dealing with language barriers. All interviews were transcribed manually to gain a first close reading of the data.

The interviewees were asked to bring two or more TikToks which were discussed during the interviews and saved for later analysis. In total, 59 TikToks were brought. To sample the TikToks for the critical visual analysis, I watched all of them at least twice and made notes applying the basic principles of salience which help to 'identify what is the most central or most important element in a photograph or composition' and can also be applied to short video content (Hansen & Machin 2019:244). These notes were used to write a short description of each TikTok and then they were watched again to look for repetitions of moments of the trial and TikToks across the sample, which were marked through basic colour coding. Through this two-step process, the final sample for the critical visual analysis was reduced to 10 TikToks.

Analysing the data

To analyse the 15 interview transcripts, a process of thematic coding as outlined by Rivas (2018) was adopted. Thematic coding consists of two rounds of coding and Rivas (2018:882) suggests combining deductive and inductive coding when one has a general idea of what they are looking for 'and use broad, deductively determined codes to home in on the data, and then inductive coding to explore this in more detail'. Thus, after reading through the data several times to familiarize myself with it and identifying first broad deductive codes, a process of 'open coding' (Rivas 2018:881) was carried out in which descriptive codes are taken inductively from the data by underlining parts of the transcribed text. These

are 'in vivo codes' (Rivas 2018:883) as the language used is the same of the interviewees. For each transcript, similar descriptive codes were grouped together in the form of spider diagrams to see potential categories emerging. When all the spider diagrams were completed, I used them to compare the descriptive codes and establish analytical categories. These categories were then grouped together to create five larger themes which form the basic structure for the main analysis.

The main analysis is further enriched by the findings of the critical visual analysis of 10 TikToks about the Depp v. Heard trial. These TikToks were analysed using the method of iconology, which is 'an approach to the analysis of visual culture that concerns itself with the subject matter or content of visual texts' (Howells & Negreiros 2019:11). The analysis of the 10 TikToks followed the three levels of meaning by Panofsky (1982), which constitute iconology as a method. The primary level focuses on the 'natural' (Howells & Negreiros 2019:25) perception of what is shown in a visual text, which comes from one's everyday experiences and for which no inside knowledge is required. The secondary level is also called the 'conventional level' (Howells & Negreiros 2019:25) where the real work of iconology begins as knowledge of conventions must be applied to interpret a visual text. At the tertiary level, the 'intrinsic' meaning of the visual text is uncovered, which 'reveals the underlying basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion' (Howells & Negreiros 2019:25). During all three levels of analysis, attention was paid to both visual and aural components as 'in the case of analysing a video we must also take into account the way that what it represented visually relates to what we hear' (Hansen & Machin 2019:259).

Analysis

An unavoidable engagement

According to Gray (2021:40), 'much media consumption is not by choice' and it is not unusual that people are 'forced into being audiences'. Similarly, when I asked my interviewees about their first encounter with the Depp v. Heard trial on social media, they answered that one day it simply started appearing on their feed: 'It's showing up on my For You page and then I'd go into the rabbit hole' recalls

Marta[2] (19-year-old Latvian student). While TikTok was not the only social media platform where the interviewees saw content about the trial, most of them followed the trial primarily through TikTok as 'TikTok tends to get things first' according to Lily (22-year-old Canadian student).

Furthermore, TikTok is famous for its personalization algorithm which manages to pull its users in with constant new recommendations based on their previous engagement (TikTok 2020). The interviewees are aware of the power of this algorithm in shaping their engagement with the trial as described by Luna (25-year-old Italian legal consultant):

> Then this goddamn algorithm doesn't help in getting rid of an event once you start engaging with it so I guess you could say that my TikTok feed in particular kept suggesting and resuggesting content on the trial. So, for various weeks I didn't even have to look for it, I was just bombarded with updates every day.

In general, the interviewees describe that the algorithm entirely dictated the duration and intensity of their engagement: They followed the trial through TikTok when it was pushed to them by the algorithm, which was for 'at least a couple of weeks' according to Amelia (26-year-old American musician). Then, they disengaged when 'the algorithm of TikTok started suggesting other things and so I stopped following it' as described by Emilia (24-year-old Italian customer support representative).

Only one interviewee kept up with the livestreams regularly, the others either never watched them or only saw bits of them occasionally. The interviewees justify this lack of engagement with the livestreams of the trial with time difference, no time for the livestreams because they were working or studying, and keeping a certain distance from the trial as it was already omnipresent on their social media feeds. Thus, this trial was not primarily witnessed (Frosh & Pinchevski 2009) through livestreams but through edited portions of the livestreams circulated on TikTok and other social media platforms, for example Instagram and YouTube. As Bock (2021:80) points out, 'viewers do not see trials, but instead shows about trials'. For example, 'it felt like you're following a TV show' for Ava (21-year-old British student). Accordingly, the Depp v. Heard trial developed into spectacular

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[2] For reasons of anonymity, the names used for the interviewees are not their real names.

justice (Smith 2022) on TikTok and engagement with it followed primarily that representation of it.

After being initially pulled in by the TikTok algorithm, the interviewees developed various motivations for keeping up with the trial. Sociality is repeatedly mentioned as a motivation since the trial was often part of everyday conversations and not keeping up with it would have meant not being able to participate in these conversations and experiencing feelings of "FOMO" (= "fear of missing out") according to Emilia. Furthermore, the trial was about two famous Hollywood celebrities and 'I want to know what's going on in celebrities' lives' explains Charlotte (20-year-old American student). This is in line with scholars arguing that celebrity trials attract more media attention due to the fame of the involved people (Smith 2022). Furthermore, it is common that the public is especially interested in details and gossip about celebrities' personal lives (Kellner 2016) and this trial provided an intimate insight into the former relationship between Depp and Heard and its (unusual) violent dimensions.

The otherness of violent women and male victims

In her work on the media representation of women in relation to crimes involving violence, Jewkes (2004:109) argues that the media 'tap into, and magnify, deep-seated public fears about deviant women, while paying much less attention to equally serious male offenders whose profile does not meet the psychosocial criteria of "otherness"'. Despite the Depp v. Heard trial being a defamation trial, it intensely dealt with the topic of domestic violence exercised by both Depp and Heard during their relationship. One of the reasons why it gained widespread attention is that there seemed to be reversed gender roles regarding this topic: 'You expect violence on the woman by the man, then there was a plot twist' describes Isabella (25-year-old Italian legal intern). This is in line with Jewkes' (2004) claim that violence is one of the expected behaviours by men whereas it feels strange in relation to women.

Similarly, when asked about what made this trial so special, Olivia answers that 'it's unique in the fact that Amber seemed to be the one who did quite a bit more of the abuse'. While most interviewees acknowledge that Depp was probably violent too, they spend much more time reflecting on Heard being violent. This is in line with the novelty of violent women rendering them 'all the more

fascinating and diabolical as a result' (Jewkes 2004:109). This fascination is reflected in the unprecedented visibility of the Depp v. Heard trial.

By studying the public discourses around female celebrities involved in litigation, Miller (2011:63) noticed that 'the celebrity female offender became a foundational figure for debating issues of women's rights and the once-deemed "weaker sex's" propensity for acts of physical violence'. While Miller (2011) analysed a case from the 1920s, her findings can still be applied to the Depp v. Heard trial. Concretely, the trial was perceived as a 'continuation of #MeToo but differently' according to Luna since the focus shifted from female victims to a male victim of domestic violence. Similarly, Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023:3) situate the Depp v. Heard trial in the 'cultural aftermath' of the #MeToo movement. This aftermath is, among other things, characterised by the widespread feeling that 'women's rights have gone too far' (Corless 2023: n.p.). This attitude is also reflected in TikToks about the Depp v. Heard trial. One example is a TikTok where Heard's facial expressions are shown while an audio recording is presented as a piece of evidence in court where she, during a fight with Depp, said:

> Tell them, Johnny Depp. I, Johnny Depp, a man, I'm a victim too of domestic violence and I know it's a fair fight and see how many people believe or side with you.

In the TikTok, Heard is looking down while the recording plays, not showing any reaction, and at the end it cuts to a distressed-looking Depp who emphasizes that he is a victim of domestic violence. This TikTok conveys the impression that Heard was implying that no one will believe Depp because he is a man, and it is less common for men to be victims of domestic violence.
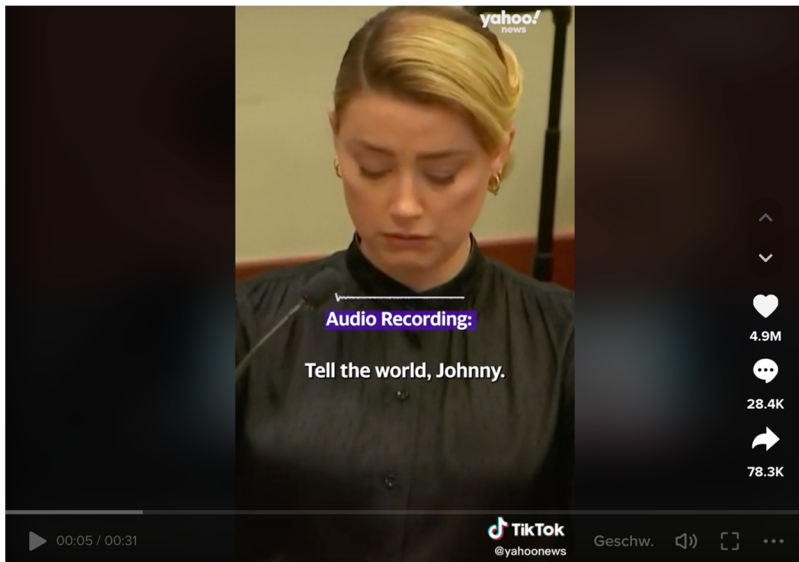
Figure 1: Screenshot of the TikTok where Heard is listening to the audio recording

Moreover, according to Olivia, Heard seems to draw on the aspect that 'there was a lot of social energy around believing women's stories' because of the #MeToo movement. This connects to a broader idea across Western societies that men are increasingly becoming the victims of false accusations by women (Banet-Weiser 2021b) who now are believed too easily due to #MeToo and who exploit this position. Heard becomes a 'cultural placeholder' (Fisher 2011:311) for women in this zeitgeist. In line with that, this was the most contributed TikTok by the interviewees. They describe feelings of shock when first seeing it as 'that's like a pretty evil thing to say' for Olivia. Charlotte thinks that 'that was a really big piece of evidence that helped seal the case for Johnny' and, concomitantly, Lily believes that it 'turned a lot of people away from Amber Heard'.

Furthermore, this TikTok addresses the topic of believability of men and women in situations of domestic violence. According to Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023:5), 'digital media are now the primary site for the negotiation of "believable" evidence and the performance of "believable" subjecthood'. Accordingly, TikToks about the Depp v. Heard trial served as a prompt for the interviewees to discuss the believability of the involved actors and of men and women in general.

A struggle over believability

Believability as an affective performance

Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2022:128) underscore that believability is an 'affective performance'. Writing about affect, Dahlgren and Hill (2023) highlight that media engagement is primarily an affective experience. In line with this, the interviewees' experience of and engagement with the Depp v. Heard trial on TikTok is closely linked to the trial's affective structure on that platform. This structure is shaped by the look and tone of the TikToks about the trial, which Emilia describes as 'funny because they added music and comments' and, overall, as 'very clickbaity' according to Olivia and as 'very dramatized' as reported by Lily. These were all factors that helped to pull the interviewees in as it led to feeling curious and intrigued.

The affective responses of the interviewees to the TikToks match the affective structure of that content. Videos showing Heard were mostly focused on ridiculing her and her behaviour in court, which was perceived as summed up by Zoey: 'It was so unbelievable to me that it was laughable'. In opposition to this, videos showing Depp were either edited in a sad way to evoke sympathy with him or to present him as funny and relatable. For example, when he was doing what Sofia (21-year-old Estonian student) describes as 'cracking jokes in court'. Overall, the TikToks about Heard 'made me resent her', says Lily, and the other ones 'made me believe that Depp is right more' explains Sofia.

This contrast between the representation of Depp and Heard on TikTok is exemplified by a TikTok where clips of the two in court are juxtaposed. Heard is represented as hectic, almost frantic, as she writes things down and discusses them with her legal team. This is underlined by texts and emojis accompanying her clips, for example 'panicking and writing essays☹', fast-paced background music and speeding up the clips. In contrast, Depp is represented as calm and careless while he is doodling something on a piece of paper and showing it to his lawyer. It is emphasized again by accompanying texts and emojis, for example 'casually drawing☺', and slower, almost romantic music and the clips being played at a normal speed. This TikTok conveys the impression that Heard is struggling in court, which makes her panic, and she needs to write down a lot of notes and share them with her legal team to keep her story straight. Most interviewees see this as one of the many indicators that 'she's lying and being deceptive' as reported

by Emma. Depp, by contrast, is very relaxed and seems like he has nothing to worry about. For many interviewees, this attitude of him is seen as a proof of his innocence: 'He didn't have to be so dramatic and formal about it because he knew that his story was correct anyway' explains Zoey. This is in line with Banet-Weiser and Higgins' (2023:36) claim that believability is 'first and foremost, affectively felt rather than empirically arbitrated by evidence'.

Figure 2: Screenshots of the TikTok portraying Heard as hectic and Depp as calm

Another example of a TikTok which added to Depp's believability, but which did not take any evidence into consideration, is a compilation of several moments from a day in court where Depp is on the stand and reacts in a joking way to the questions Heard's lawyer asks him. There are many moments where one thinks 'he said a good line there' as remembered by Ava. For example, at one point he answers, 'Yes, I looked at papers', pauses for a moment, and, with an ironic look on his face, adds 'maybe they're hearsay papers', which is accompanied by voices from the off laughing and the emoji '😂'. With this joke, Depp makes fun of the fact that during his cross-examination by Heard's lawyer he was interrupted repeatedly and told that what he is saying is hearsay. By acting in a humorous way in serious situation he connects to famous funny roles he played in various films, making him more familiar. Many interviewees reported liking him more after seeing this kind of funny TikToks about him and feeling generally more drawn to believing him.

Figure 3: Screenshot of the TikTok compiling funny moments of Depp in court

However, for Heard there are no funny TikToks in her favour, only those ridiculing her and depicting her as unlikable and unbelievable. This contrast between the representation of Depp and Heard and the concomitant perception of them by the interviewees is not limited to these few TikToks but runs as a red thread through all the interviews and the TikToks discussed in them. In fact, all interviewees mention that there was a clear bias on social media in favour of Depp and against Heard. For example, Sofia recalls that 'everybody is rooting for Depp' and, at the same time, 'everyone wanted to see Amber Heard's head on a stick' as reported by Amelia. While the interviewees have different thoughts about the possible reasons for this bias, they all agree that it was present and that they were all shown exclusively pro-Depp and anti-Heard content by their algorithm. Since this representation reflects the affective structure of the trial on TikTok and the interviewees' affective response to it, Dahlgren's and Hill's (2023) claim that affect can be understood as what is collectively felt by a particular group of people or in a particular society is confirmed. It also further illustrates that believability is primarily a matter of affect, not of factual evidence.

Dissecting the performances of believability

For the interviewees, analysing the actors' body language plays a crucial part in deciding who is behaving authentically and thus believable. This confirms Goffman's (1959:18) theory that people evaluate others' body language as a check

upon their authenticity. Overall, Depp is perceived by the interviewees as 'chill because he didn't do anything wrong' according to Mia (24-year-old Estonian student). This is exemplified in scenes of him doing casual things, for example when 'he was eating candy', as described by Alessia (24-year-old Italian criminology graduate) or when he was 'laughing with his lawyers' as recalled by Charlotte. About Heard, in contrast, Emma says that 'just the way she conducts herself, it doesn't seem natural, and it seems like her expressions are forced'. Consequently, many interviewees conclude that 'she's lying and acting', as reported by Sofia.

The notion of Heard acting in court is exemplified by a TikTok where Heard is blowing her nose and it looks like she was posing for the cameras in the courtroom. In the TikTok, Heard first looks to her left, then takes out a tissue and holds it to her nose, looks to her left again while remaining in the same position, then there is a reflection of a flashing light on her face, after which she puts the tissue away. There is a text on top of the video saying, 'Pausing for the media to take a photo'. 'I remember that I was wondering if she did it on purpose' recalls Alessia, 'but I am leaning towards the idea that she did'. In fact, the content of the TikTok together with the text suggest exactly this, thus guiding one's evaluation of the situation. In this way, the TikTok connects to a conventional association in patriarchal societies of women being deceptive and liars (Gilmore 2017).
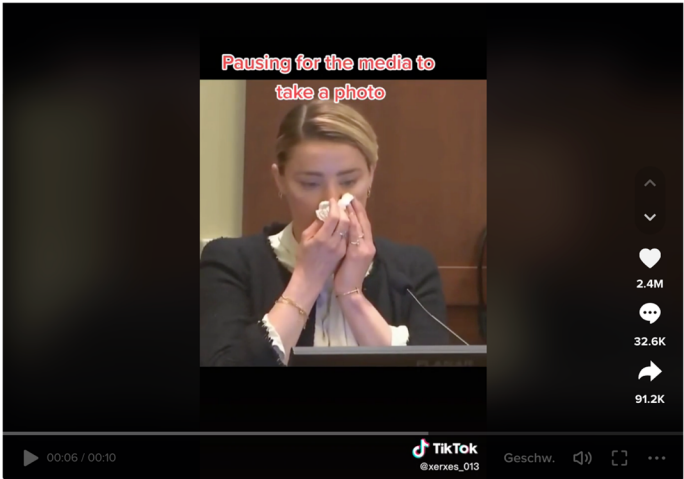
Figure 4: Screenshot of the TikTok where Heard is blowing her nose

In addition to evaluating the actors' body languages, their speech patterns are dissected as well. Again, Depp is represented and perceived in a positive light. For example, 'he is very, like, poetic when he speaks', as reported by Olivia, because he uses 'all these lovely adjectives' according to Lucia (25-year-old Italian educator and tutor). This is exemplified by a TikTok in which a close-up of Depp's face is shown while he is on the stand and describes what he liked about Heard in the beginning of their relationship, for instance 'she was sweet, funny, nice, [...] wonderful' but then things changed. While speaking, Depp stutters sometimes, pauses several times, and shakes his head in the end as if he couldn't believe what he is saying. There is sad and nostalgic piano music playing in the background, which sets the atmosphere for this TikTok. It makes one sympathise with Depp and connects again to the common notion of women being deceptive (Gilmore 2017), still exemplified by Heard, who is not shown in the video but spoken about by Depp.
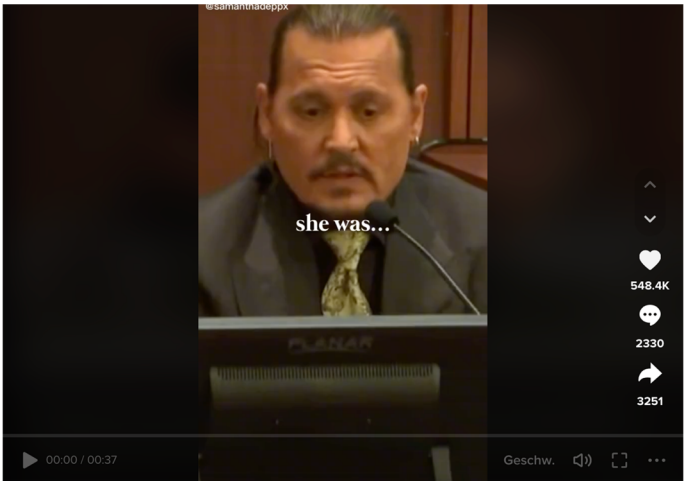
Figure 5: Screenshot of the TikTok where Depp describes what he liked about Heard

Regarding Heard's speech patterns, she is again perceived as the contrary of Depp: 'She was over emphasizing' recalls Amelia, and often she seemed to struggle while 'trying to pull her words together' according to Marta. This further adds to the interviewees' perception of Depp as likable and believable and Heard as unlikable and unbelievable, and it is in line with Banet-Weiser's and Higgins' (2023) claim that believability is a matter of performance.

However, these performances of believability are evaluated 'through the (gendered, racialized, and classed) lens of subjectivity' (Banet-Weiser & Higgins 2023:12). For example, when Heard is showing emotions, she is perceived as 'being very emotional and letting her own feelings and stress get in like the way' according to Sofia. When Depp is showing his emotions, he is perceived 'to show vulnerability' as reported by Emma and 'being sensitive' as described by Lucia. When Heard is not showing any particular reactions, she is perceived as 'stoic' and 'kind of unaffected' according to Olivia. When Depp is calm, he is perceived as being 'collected' remembers Isabella and 'so relaxed in court' as recalled by Mia. Thus, Heard's and Depp's body languages are not being analysed through the same lens but in line with gender stereotypes regarding performances (Butler 1990). Some interviewees reflect on this, for example Zoey presumes that 'everybody was saying how emotional she was and stuff, but I also think that's because she's a woman', showing awareness of how performances are dictated and read through a gendered lens.

The forensics of believability

The distribution of believability is further emphasized by examining pieces of evidence presented in court and looking for discrepancies. Isabella has the impression that 'in his story, there is always a logical line' while 'Heard can't keep her story straight' according to Sofia. Overall, by scrutinizing the pieces of evidence featured in the TikToks, they conclude that the 'evidence didn't side with her', as asserted by Emma, and that, in contrast, 'his story lined up with the evidence' according to Zoey. An example for a TikTok featuring pieces of evidence presented in court is one where Heard is cross-examined by Depp's lawyer Camille Vasquez.

The subject of the cross-examination is Heard's previous statement that Depp hit her in the face repeatedly during a fight, leading her to believe that he had broken her nose. Vasquez counters this claim by arguing that Depp always wears big rings on his fingers, thus him hitting Heard would have left visible marks on her face. She then presents pictures taken the day after the alleged fight, in which Heard's face does not appear visibly injured. Heard responds to this by claiming that she was wearing make-up and had used ice to reduce the swelling. Following Heard's explanation, a meme is cut in which shows the singer Rihanna widening her eyes in disbelief, implying that Heard's argument does not make sense, and that she must be lying. This is further emphasized by a text on top of the video saying,

'Amber Heard Lies Gets "CAUGHT" Badly by Johnny Depp Lawyer', a text in the middle saying, 'Ice will cover up swelling?!', and a text and emoji on the bottom saying, 'UNBELIEVABLE👀'.
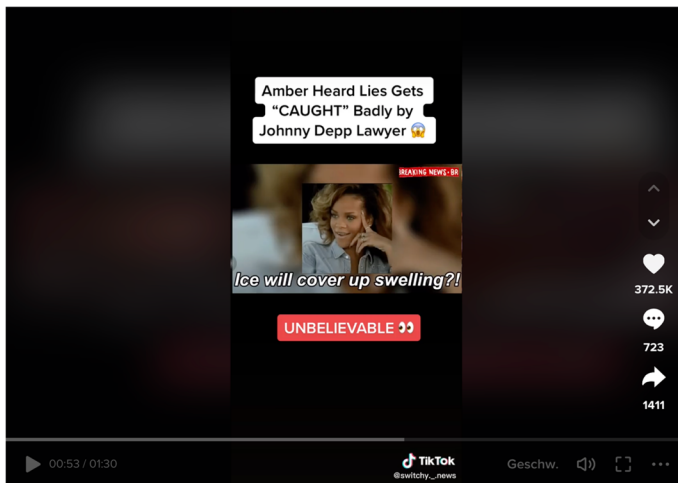

Figure 6: Screenshot of the TikTok where Vasquez cross-examines Heard about her lack of visible injuries

Overall, Vasquez is perceived as 'very well-spoken, very conventionally attractive, just a very good lawyer' who was 'destroying Amber' during the cross-examinations according to Mia. Accordingly, in several TikToks featuring Vasquez, her cross-examinations and interactions with Heard are framed as if this was a case of female rivalry. For example, one TikTok showing a cross-examination of Heard by Vasquez includes the text 'The one Amber Heard fears the most now' at the bottom of the screen. There is goofy music playing in the background, making the situation seem silly. This atmosphere is further emphasized by a clip of a laughing man sitting in the public gallery of the courtroom, which is cut in twice when Heard says something, making her look ridiculous and laughed about.

During the cross-examination, Vasquez often interrupts Heard with a harsh and annoyed-sounding tone, asserting repeatedly 'that's not my question' in reaction to Heard's statements. The subject of the cross-examination is that Heard promised in the past that she would donate the money she received in the context of her divorce settlement with Depp to charity, but she has not donated it yet.

Heard does not immediately admit to that during the cross-examination, but Vasquez brings it to light with her precise and relentless questioning.

As a consequence, Heard appears as untrustworthy through this TikTok because it conveys the impression that she was trying to talk herself out of the situation, connecting her again to the common trope in patriarchal societies of women as liars (Gilmore 2017). This aligns with how the interviewees perceive in general the cross-examinations by Vasquez: 'Her cross-examinations were meant to undermine Amber's character as a believable victim of abuse, and it did work very well' according to Mia.
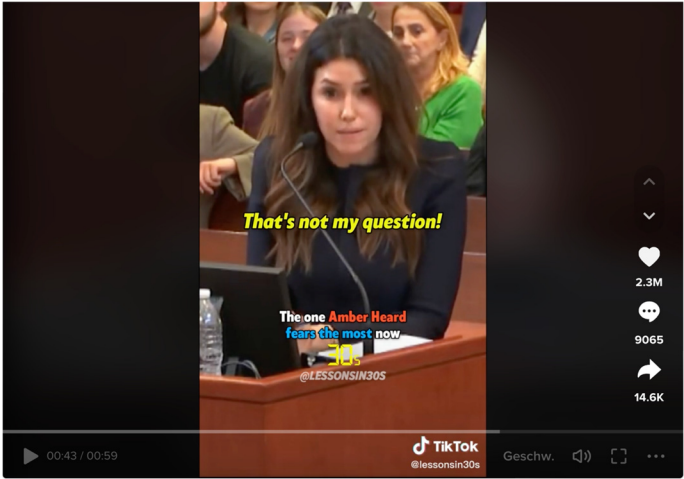
Figure 7: Screenshot of the TikTok where Vasquez cross-examines Heard about the missing charity donation

This connection of the Depp v. Heard trial to the notion of female rivalry is not only reflected in interactions between Heard and Vasquez but also in the role some witnesses played. There is an instance of the trial that became particularly viral where the British model Kate Moss, who is also Depp's ex-girlfriend, is called as a witness. In this TikTok, which cuts together clips from several days of the trial and combines them with a viral pop song, one can first see Heard on the stand saying, 'I just in my head instantly think of Kate Moss and the stairs and swung at him'. In the next clip, Depp's lawyer Ben Chew calls Moss as a witness, who is then shown testifying via videocall. In reply to the question 'During the course of your relationship, did he ever push you down any stairs?' she states, 'No,

he never pushed me, kicked me or threw me down any stairs' and slightly smirks at the end of the sentence. She was celebrated for this on social media, as the text on top of the TikTok 'Amber mentions ✦⃰KATE MOSS✦⃰ and after her two minute deposition JOHNNY WON!!' exemplifies. The reason for this euphoria is that Heard justified hitting Depp first with rumours that she heard about him pushing Moss down the stairs during a fight, and thus acted in self-defence. However, Moss denied that this ever happened and hence Heard is painted again as deceptive and unbelievable.
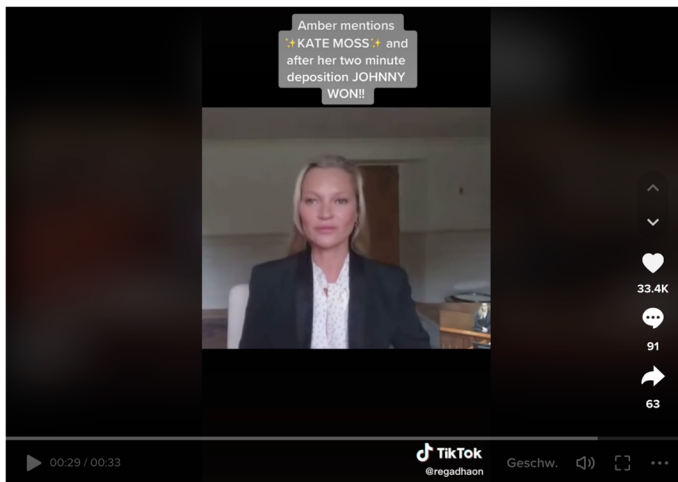
Figure 8: Screenshot of the TikTok where Moss is called as a witness

These TikToks where Heard is juxtaposed against Vasquez, a successful lawyer, and against Moss, a fashion icon, thus make a clear division between good women – Vasquez and Moss – and bad women – Heard. The good women tear the bad woman down, which is a classic pattern in the logic of misogyny (Manne 2018). The representation and perception of Heard as a bad woman, which is a common way of representing women in relation to violent crimes (Jewkes, 2004), played into the conclusion of most interviewees that Heard must have been the perpetrator in the relationship, and Depp must have been the victim.

Believability as determining victimhood
All interviewees mention that what they saw about the trial on TikTok 'made her look like she was the perpetrator', as described by Zoey, and most of them think

that 'he was the victim' as reported by Charlotte. This aligns with the overall pro-Depp and anti-Heard bias, which is also recognisable in the analysed TikToks. In and through these, Heard is seen as mad, sad, and bad, which are the three common ways women are represented in relation to being violent (Jewkes 2004), and she becomes a folk devil representing a current basic attitude across Western patriarchal societies that women are now believed too easily due to the #MeToo movement. Depp, on the other hand, represents the concomitant phenomenon of men arguing that they are increasingly becoming the victims of false allegations (Banet-Weiser 2021b).

For example, one TikTok shows Depp at the top of the screen while he is on the stand and describes both how the allegations against him pronounced by Heard are false and how these false allegations ruined his career. There is sad piano music playing in the background, which evokes sympathy for Depp. In contrast to that, Heard is shown at the bottom of the screen while she listens to Depp's claims and does not have any reaction, appearing thus as cold and indifferent. This victimhood that Depp is performing is in line with Banet-Weiser's (2021b) concept of mediated white male victimhood.
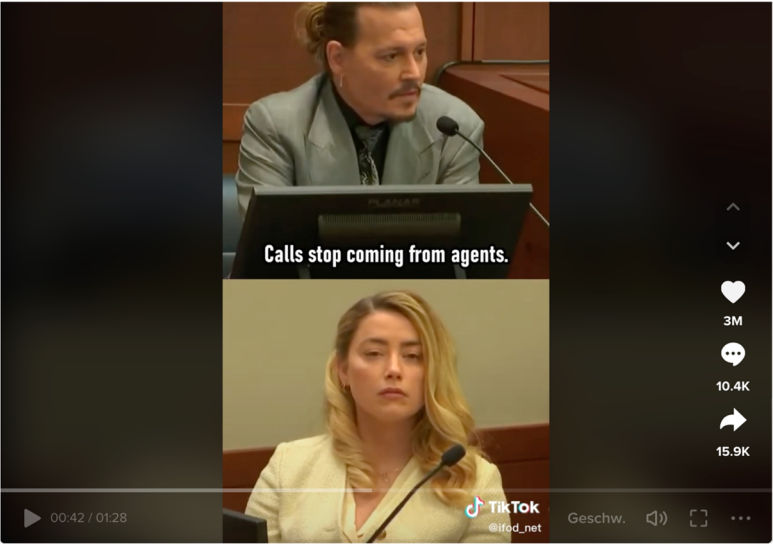

Figure 9: Screenshot of the TikTok where Depp describes the impact of Heard's allegations

Some interviewees think that 'in these stories both are usually at fault', as reported by Emilia, and that it was a situation of mutual abuse. A smaller number of interviewees believes that 'Johnny Depp did genuinely seem like an abuser' and that people nevertheless sided with him because 'she wasn't the perfect victim' as described my Marta. Similarly, Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2023:2) argue that Heard 'failed to perform a victimhood that was emotionally convincing'. As a result, Heard's victimhood is cancelled out completely in the public perception, while Depp's victimhood still holds up despite there being evidence also against him.

Overall, the believability of the two actors is the most discussed topic in the interviews. As Banet-Weiser and Higgins (2022:142) argue, what makes the notion of believability different from the notion of truth is that it is dependant 'on the judgment of others'. These others, in this case the online female audience of the Depp v. Heard trial, use various resources for their judgment, for example TikToks. However, it is important to remember that audience members do not passively absorb the communicated meaning of visual content, but they negotiate, and in some cases reject, this meaning (Rose 2016). In line with Dahlgren's and Hill's (2023) understanding of media engagement being rooted in affect and identity, I therefore argue that an important factor in the mediated meaning-making process over believability is the audience members' identity.

Performing identity through support

According to Hall (1996), identities are not singular, but constructed across multiple identity markers. In the context of the Depp v. Heard trial, which was entirely about taking sides and choosing who to believe according to the interviewees, expressing support for one of the two actors or for neither of them can be considered an identity marker. This is also in line with Gray's (2021) claim that identities can be performed through dislike. Consequently, choosing one of the two actors usually indicates the interviewees' dislike of the other. For example, Emma explains that 'I was rooting for him' because 'I just believe what he said and how she treated him was not right and I didn't like it'.

Overall, 12 interviewees mention that while the trial was ongoing and they were following it on TikTok, they felt more drawn to believe and support Depp, with few of them also identifying with him. The motivations for this are manifold.

Some of them, like Emma, decided to support him because they disliked Heard in the way she was represented and, as women, they did not want to be associated with her. For example, Luna shares the following anecdote:

> While the trial was happening, maybe this is like a fun fact that can be telling about something bigger, with my boyfriend we were joking and saying things like I'm the Johnny Depp and you're the Amber Heard of the couple like to say I'm the victim of the two. [...] So he, my boyfriend, took this opportunity to try and tell me I'm the crazy one and to portray himself as the victim like Johnny Depp but then it became an inside joke because I'm sorry but I'm not the crazy one, it's just Amber in this case.

This is in line with Hall's notion (1996) of constructing identities through exclusion and with Jewkes' (2004:110) claim that deviant women become 'the scapegoat other' in contrast to whom people construct their own identities by distancing themselves from how these women are represented, for instance as 'crazy' in Heard's case.

Another reason given by the interviewees for supporting Depp is that they knew him as an actor and describe having a para-social relationship with him. Mia summarizes this line of reasoning as follows:

> So, this also, I think, has to be taken into consideration as it's a lot easier to follow someone who you loved, you've seen Pirates of the Caribbean as a child, you're like oh this is this great wonderful actor, he's so funny, he's so cool, he's so quirky, he couldn't have possibly done this.

This comes up in most interviews as 'a lot of people grew up watching his films' as described by Emilia. In fact, all interviewees were familiar with Depp before the trial, while most of them never heard of Heard before. Four interviewees also describe themselves as fans of Depp, which often significantly influenced who they chose to believe as reported by Lucia: 'Since I am a fan of Johnny Depp it was important to me that he would win'. This shows how fandom can be an important source of identity (Sandvoss, Gray & Harrington 2017) and thus affected the actors' believability. However, also just being familiar with Depp led to the same result in several cases, as exemplified by Ava's reflection: 'I was more inclined to be sympathetic to him anyway just cause he was like more a figure to me'.

Furthermore, Isabella explains that 'I support him not so much due to empathy but because of the evidence presented'. This argument is often made by interviewees supporting him, and as the interviews were carried out after the trial was over and the jury sided primarily with Depp, they feel confirmed by this outcome: 'I guess just cause I always saw Johnny Depp in the positive light and Amber Heard in the negative light' explains Zoey, 'So, to see both of these truly verified and confirmed I was happy that I was on the good side'.

The three remaining interviewees preferred to not pick any side as they felt that they did not have enough information and they cannot know if what they saw reflected what truly happened or if they were fed a certain narrative by TikTok. What is striking is that none of the interviewees initially sided or identified with Heard, only three who first supported Depp describe having a shift in their perception and support when they started seeking out additional information on the trial outside TikTok, for example through news articles. In this case, it made them 'more pro-Amber because of the horribleness she received online', as reported by Ava, since they gained the impression that the representation on TikTok was too one-sided compared to the actual complexity of the trial and thus Heard was treated unfairly by the public.

Interestingly, when these three interviewees had this switch in their opinion, their TikTok content changed too, and they started getting TikToks in favour of Heard. This is in line with TikTok's personalization algorithm through which users only see content that confirms their already established opinions. An example for this change of content is a TikTok where Heard describes how Depp physically and sexually assaulted her during their relationship. While giving her testimony, she cries heavily, sometimes widening her eyes in fear. The tone of this TikTok is different compared to the other nine as there is no addition of emojis or background music, just a male voice from the off who narrates and gives context in the style of news reporting. Hence, it is not entertaining but more serious. Furthermore, this TikTok is the only one from the sample that conveys the impression that Heard was a victim of domestic violence. It features her graphic descriptions and shows images she took of the couple's messy apartment – with blood stains on the floor and in the bed – which were presented as evidence in court. Depp is shown a couple of times too while Heard describes the situations of him assaulting her, but he is looking down and does not show any particular

reaction. Thus, their roles seem to be inverted compared to the representation that was generally given of them in the analysed TikToks.
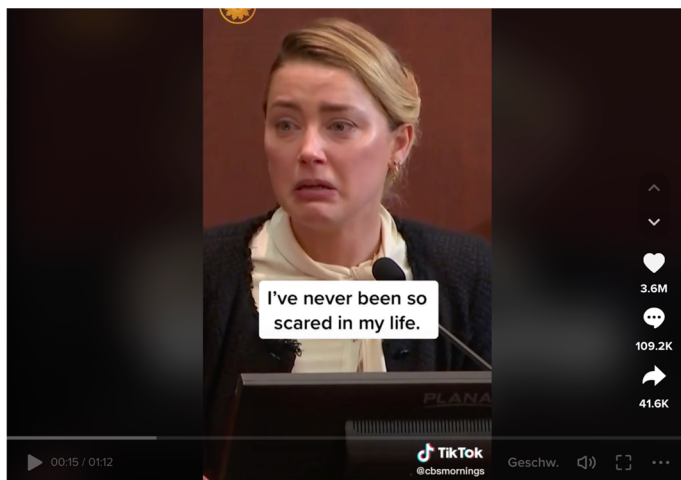

Figure 10: Screenshot of the TikTok where Heard describes how Depp assaulted her

It is important to mention that the interviewees who switched sides do not believe that Heard is guiltless. Contrarily, Depp supporters often find him innocent. Instead, the now pro-Heard interviewees believe that not siding with her in the beginning was less owed to factual evidence but more to the content they were fed about the trial and to internalised biases they have against believing women. This led to critical self-reflection as exemplified in this quote by Mia:

> It definitely showed me quite a lot about myself that at first I believed and wanted to believe Johnny, I think this is something that a lot of women who followed this trial will have to deal with is this kind of internalised misogyny when it comes to famous people you love or like famous musicians, actors, et cetera, that you want to desperately believe them.

In line with this reflection, most interviewees describe feeling uncomfortable with the fact that they, as women, were more drawn towards believing and siding with Depp. For example, Charlotte states that 'me being a female I hate saying this, but I didn't necessarily one hundred percent believe Amber'. This conflict between gender identity and evaluating the actors' believability is repeatedly

mentioned throughout the interviews and it contributed to general feelings of ambivalence in relation the trial.

Ambivalence regarding the trial and the future

According to Phillips and Milner (2017:10), ambivalence can be defined as 'implying tension, and often fraught tension, between opposites'. Similarly, the interviewees often describe feeling unsure about how to react to the TikToks: 'I didn't really know if I should be sorry for her or making fun of her' recalls Marta in relation to TikToks ridiculing Heard, and 'I don't know if I should laugh about it because it did seem like a very serious accusation and a very serious topic' explains Sofia. This tension between the seriousness of a defamation trial discussing domestic violence and its funny and light-hearted representation on TikTok made several interviewees feel uncomfortable. Nevertheless, they still think that it was interesting and entertaining to follow, and it did not lead them to stop engaging with it.

There were further aspects about the trial that added to feelings of ambivalence among the interviewees. For example, they discuss that there are limitations that prevent them from knowing the full story, including what really happened between Depp and Heard. While the entire trial was livestreamed and recirculated in the form of edits on TikTok and other social media platforms, most interviewees feel that they still do not have enough information about it. This is in line with Bock's (2021:xii) claim regarding the increased visibility of justice that 'while we have more information than ever, specifically more visual information than ever, we don't necessarily know much more'.

Another aspect that is perceived as a limitation to knowing the truth is that 'I don't have trustworthy sources' as reported by Alessia. This is because most interviewees primarily followed the trial through TikTok where 'there was more focus on the iconic moments' according to Luna, which were 'taken out of context' as described by Alessia. For example, several TikToks cut together different days from the trial but represent the situation as if it happened chronologically. In this way, TikTok creators provided 'a deformed version of the court case' according to Mia. Thus, the interviewees critically reflect upon the trial's eventness (Frosh & Pinchevski 2018), which indicates the contemporary bottom-up making of a media event. In the case of the analysed TikToks, eight

were created and shared by normal user accounts, while only two of them were published by the TikTok accounts of news outlets.

Furthermore, Depp and Heard being professional actors makes the interviewees feel unsure whether their behaviours, which are dissected intensely, were authentic. 'They're both on some level performers' states Amelia, thus 'they can easily make up an expression or lie and get away with it' believes Marta. Interestingly, Heard is often accused of acting by the interviewees, while only a handful of them reflect on that also in relation to Depp, who is the more seasoned professional actor of the two. This re-confirms Banet-Weiser and Higgins' (2023) claim that performances of believability are evaluated differently by the audience based on who is performing them.

Overall, the interviewees think that 'nobody will ever know the truth' as reported by Emilia. Several interviewees feel that on TikTok a lot of the information was manipulated or framed to convey a certain impression as exemplified in this quote by Olivia:

> I mean, I don't think it's fairly reported because I guess I have a preconceived notion that nothing in the media is fairly reported. I think there's always inherent biases and agendas. [...] I also still think there's lot of sexism baked into it, so I also question if I am kind of falling prey to a narrative. If I had to choose today which storyline I believe, like I guess I still do believe that she was lying about a lot of stuff but there's still something that doesn't sit right with me about how it was all communicated and displayed because it was just, it was like infotainment I guess. People were just chopping up clips and just trying to put together the most viral parts of it.

As Olivia hints at, most interviewees also reflect on Depp and Heard being treated differently by the public due to gendered biases. For example, Amelia asserts, 'a woman has never been given that kind of grace', while most people support Depp even though there is also evidence against him. This is in line with Manne's (2018) notion of himpathy. In relation to the discussions prompted by the trial regarding the fact that men can be victims of domestic violence too, Luna says, 'I agree on the fact that a man who says he suffered from domestic abuse is believed less, but sadly this doesn't mean women are believed sufficiently'. Therefore, most interviewees feel ambivalent about supporting Depp instead of Heard. They resolve this inner conflict by labelling Heard as what Olivia calls 'the exception to the rule' when it comes to the interviewees' general conviction and willingness to

believe women. In this way, Heard becomes again 'the scapegoat other' (Jewkes 2004:110) who is perceived and treated differently compared to how the interviewees state that they usually treat women in these situations.

Furthermore, the interviewees reflect on the wider social implications of the trial. While some of them discuss that in their opinion it had a positive impact because it 'sensitized us to violence against men' according to Lucia, most of them express concerns about how the trial might have influenced women's believability. For example, Lily discusses that this trial can be seen as 'almost proof to not believe women as like, well, Amber Heard lied in this, should we really believe all other allegations?'. She recalls having recently noticed how online people are referring to situations where a woman accuses a man of violence as 'an Amber Heard type of situation' to delegitimise the woman's claims. In this way, the trial 'sets a precedent that makes someone lose their believability who maybe truly is a victim' fears Isabella.

In general, several interviewees express feelings of fear regarding the future, which forms a contrast to the initial light-hearted engagement with the trial as described by Mia: 'It was interesting and basically it was something to fill the time at first and then [...] I was scared for the outcome, I was scared for the future cases'. Similarly, Amelia feels scared 'because I can see this happening again in the future' and Sofia is worried about potentially 'myself going to court about abuse and the entire world is judging you'. Thus, the Depp v. Heard trial seems to have managed to revive an old hegemonic order, strongly contested by the #MeToo movement, in which women are othered in relation to men and perceived as untrustworthy, lying, and unbelievable subjects. This is in line with Bock's (2021:79) claim that 'spectacular trials are not merely big news events' but 'they advance ideology'.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate the struggles over believability on social media in the cultural aftermath of the #MeToo movement through the case of the Depp v. Heard trial. Since TikTok content was the main way of retrieving information about the trial for my interviewees, it highlights the power social media platforms and their users have in shaping believability. The critical visual analysis of the TikToks uncovered a pro-Depp and anti-Heard bias. Depp was represented as

calm, charismatic and as someone who one should sympathise with. Heard, on the other hand, was represented as hectic, ridiculous, and irritable, becoming a folk devil standing for the current zeitgeist across Western patriarchal societies that 'women's rights have gone too far' (Corless 2023: n.p.). These meanings about the two actors' believability were constructed by adding background music, texts, emojis and Internet memes: For Depp, it was often slow and sad background music, texts and emojis cheering on him and his behaviour, while for Heard it was often silly background music and pejorative commentary.

Depp's and Heard's believability is strongly shaped by the interviewees' affective responses to TikToks about the trial as the TikToks convey a certain atmosphere which usually sticks with the interviewees' interpretation of the situation. These affective responses ranged from feeling entertained by Depp's humour and Heard's perceived ridiculousness in court to feeling empathy with Depp and resentment for Heard. In line with this, the majority of the interviewees performed their identity through supporting Depp and disliking Heard. However, they justify their support and who they decided to believe mostly with it being based on the evidence presented in court. Nevertheless, for the most time in the interviews the interviewees talk about their initial responses to the TikToks and the actors' body languages and speech patterns as indicators of their believability and (lack of) victimhood. This confirms that believability is primarily a matter of affective performance (Banet-Weiser & Higgins 2023).

It stands out how the interviewees' engagement with and judgment over Depp's and Heard's believability does not happen equally, but by resorting to age-old gender stereotypes. For example, Heard is often criticised for being too emotional and hysterical, which is a common trope for women in patriarchal societies (Jewkes 2004), while Depp is praised for showing emotions and vulnerability in public since that is uncommon for a man. Furthermore, Heard is constantly described as a liar and accused of acting, which is in line with the common notion of women being deceptive (Gilmore 2017), while Depp is perceived as rational and believable.

Overall, it seems that the interviewees were harsher when evaluating Heard's believability than when evaluating Depp's believability: While there is evidence against both of them in relation to being violent, and most interviewees acknowledge that, Heard's victimhood in relation to being a victim of domestic violence cancels out due to her acts of violence whereas Depp's victimhood stands

despite his acts of violence. This is probably in part owed to violence being an excepted behaviour by men, while it feels other in relation to women (Jewkes 2004). Furthermore, Depp's victimhood is not only perceived in relation to being a victim of domestic violence, but also in relation to being a victim of false accusations by a woman in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement – what Banet-Weiser (2021b) describes as mediated white male victimhood.

The different standards in evaluating the actors' believability are also owed to their differences in fame and celebrity status. All interviewees knew who Depp is before the trial, four of them described themselves as fans. This made it hard for them to believe that he committed serious acts of violence against Heard. Accordingly, they were inclined to believe him more because they were hoping that they can still have this positive image of him and not be in the position where they have to question their support. In contrast to this, most interviewees did not know who Heard was prior to the trial and the few who knew her did not think that she was a particularly good actress. This shows the importance of the audience's identity, in this case identity based on fandom (Sandvoss, Gray & Harrington 2017), in negotiating someone's believability.

Overall, analysing the interviewees' negotiations of believability through engagement with TikTok content about the Depp v. Heard trial uncovered how the interviewees' identity played a crucial role in their decision of who to believe and how to feel about this decision. Their identity influenced how they interpreted social media content about the trial – for example, fans of Depp tended to provide a more positive reading of his behaviour in these clips, while the interviewees who described themselves as supporters of believing women were often critical in relation to the pejorative ways in which Heard was represented. However, this is not a cause-effect relationship: The engagement analysis also revealed the importance of factors such as who the scrutinized person is (in terms of gender and fame), and what they do (in terms of performances of believability and victimhood) in shaping believability.

In conclusion, this study reveals that women's believability is strongly contested in the context of the Depp v. Heard trial, both by TikTok content and by Gen Z women engaging with this content. TikTok content about the trial constructs meanings around believability mainly by resorting to age-old tropes about women in patriarchal societies. Gen Z women's negotiations of believability vary based on gender stereotypes and the difference in celebrity status of Depp and Heard.

These negotiations are shaped both by Gen Z women's affective responses to TikTok content about the trial and by their identity. This interplay between social media content around believability and audience affect and identity provides a contribution to the growing body of research about believability. Multiple identity markers shape believability, and in the case of the studied audience they often bring about the complex entanglement of emotional attachment to familiar figures, like Depp, and the ambivalence surrounding the lack of support and solidarity between women in patriarchal societies. This second aspect contributes to and hopefully inspires future research in feminist media studies: It remains an understudied factor regarding mediated pushbacks against contemporary feminist efforts even though it plays, as this study has demonstrated, a crucial role in re-positioning women as unbelievable subjects.

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Resistance from within: The experiences and performances of female Malawian YouTubers

Mercy Malikwa

Introduction

> Of course, Africa is a continent full of catastrophes: There are immense ones, such as the horrific rapes in Congo and depressing ones, such as the fact that 5,000 people apply for one job vacancy in Nigeria. But there are other stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them.
> – Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2009

Negative representations of African countries in Western media have long been documented with scholars discussing how African experiences are reduced to negative stereotypes (Michira, 2002; Asante, 2013; Faloyin, 2022). The rise and access to digital media, however, has given an opportunity to Africans to showcase reality from their own perspective. This is particularly through such medium as YouTube where African vloggers lead in showcasing the everyday. This research was therefore founded on the need to explore the YouTube experiences and self-representation of Black Malawian women whose content is about their lives as lived in Malawi.

Research objective and questions

By choosing to focus on female Malawian YouTubers, the objective was to amplify female voices within academic research and shed light on their unique experiences within the YouTube digital space. Indeed, Mano and Milton (2021:4) have underscored the importance of generating knowledge about Africa as one approach of affirming African positions, experiences, contexts and subjectivities. Through production interviews with seven female Malawian YouTubers and a review of their vlogs, the thesis provides deeper insights into how female YouTubers use the platform to express themselves, exercise agency, shape own narratives and contribute to a more nuanced and balanced understanding of the Malawian life. The following two research questions undergird the research:

1. In what ways is everyday life in Malawi constructed and presented in videos by female Malawian YouTubers?

2. How can we understand digital content production and power dynamics for female Malawian YouTubers?

Context of Malawi and Internet usage

It is important to provide a contextual background of Malawi, particularly emphasizing internet access and usage practices. This context is essential for understanding Malawians' YouTube usage and situating female Malawian YouTubers within the broader spectrum of internet access that is fraught with various challenges.

Malawi, located in sub-Saharan Africa, had a population of approximately 20.6 million in 2022. The World Bank (2022) estimates that 51.4 percent of the population is female. In terms of age distribution, Malawi has a majorly youthful population. As a former British colony, a factor that would have an impact on accessibility of YouTube content for an outsider, Malawi has English as one of its official languages. Thus, most YouTubers frequently use English which also, in turn, offers opportunities to access a wider global audience.

Often ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world, Malawi has a historical background that's important for understanding its online communication. From 1964, when the country gained its independence, it was under a dictatorial leadership that restricted free expression. However, in 1993 Malawi adopted a

new constitution that paved the way for multiparty democracy and enshrined a bill of rights that, among others, grants Malawians the freedoms of expression, thought and belief. Nevertheless, laws criminalising free speech persists, and individuals often face arrest for expressing themselves (Kainja 2022).

The economic and development context of Malawi significantly impacts internet access, with only 2.8 percent of households in the country owning computers and 14.6 percent having internet access (National Statistical Office 2020). This can be attributed to several factors of which the economic constraints is one of such. Further, people lack the means to own a smartphone or a computer and there is also a lack of the know-how to operate technical gadgets such as smartphones (Kajoloweka 2022).

It would however be remiss to argue that internet access in Malawi is hampering internet usage. Trends have shown that there is an uptrend in internet usage in Malawi, particularly among the younger population (Kemp 2021). They utilize the internet for various purposes, including job searches, remote work, business, entertainment and social networking. Of particular importance to this study is the increasing usage of social networking sites such as Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and LinkedIn. As is the case globally, Facebook is the most commonly used social media platform in Malawi, accounting for nearly 54% of social media users, with Twitter following at 19.7%. YouTube ranks fifth with 4.94% of users (Kemp 2023). According to StatCounter (2023), approximately 60,000 Malawians use YouTube. The image below presents insights into social media redirections from the web in Malawi, illustrating the platforms' usage levels.

Figure 1: Social media usage in Malawi (Source: Simon Kemp)

The popularity of Facebook in Malawi has made it an interest to researchers on social media and internet communication in Malawi (see, for example, Mutsvairo and Harris 2016; Matidza, Ping and Nyasulu 2020), leaving a research gap in the context of YouTube usage. However, it's worth noting that YouTube is the fastest growing social media platform, as highlighted by Burgess and Green (2009). In Malawi, Kemp (2023) established that YouTube ranked among the top 20 Google search queries. My own observations support this trend, as YouTube has gained popularity among Malawians, transitioning from a platform predominantly used by musicians to distribute and promote their music to one embraced by content creators, particularly female YouTubers, who use it to share their everyday experiences.

Literature review

Women and media production

The subject of women in the media has been a topic of interest for scholars and non-scholars alike (e.g., see Tuchman 2000; Byerly and Ross 2008; and Macdonald 2009). Questions have been asked on media portrayal of women with most indicating the negative and stereotypical portrayals of women. Scholars highlight the role that the media has played in normalising the misogyny that women face as well as creating an environment in which discrimination thrives (see, for example, Buiten 2007 and Mantilla 2013). As a challenge to this portrayal of women, other scholars focus on the role that women play in media production arguing that if more women are involved in media production, then they will be able to change the ways that they are portrayed in the media (Emerson 2002). On the other hand, other scholars have been sceptical of this argument, holding that the key to changing the portrayal of women in the media is not just in focusing on women producers. It is challenging the structures of production in the media which remain patriarchal. The agency of women within the media is limited as long as the avenues and structures of production remain in the hands of men (Louw 2001).

Such a focus on the modes of production has often led to an interest in digital media. This is due to the affordances that such media offer in creating what are

called produsers, that is, producers as well as consumers of media products (Toffler, 1980; Jenkins, 2006). Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009) point at the unique affordances and dynamics of YouTube indicating that it is a site for participatory culture. In this participatory culture, the *ordinary citizens* (emphasis mine) create and share content as well as obtain feedback from others.

Similarly, Strangelove (2010) argues that digital media supports diversity. He argues that the structure of digital media is such that it has low barriers for engagement and participation. This, therefore, allows people who have been historically marginalised from media production – and even representation – to utilise digital media. However, the digital media has faced criticism. Particularly, in this thesis, the focus is on the criticism that YouTube has faced. A specific criticism that this thesis draws upon is that which has been highlighted by media scholar Henry Jenkins (2009). He expressed scepticism over the supposed advantages of digital media in offering a platform to marginalised voices reflecting that the forms of cultural production on YouTube means that there are voices that are pushed to the margins, based on "tastes of site visitors and the commercial interest of the site owners" (Jenkins 2009:124). He further highlighted that the platform's current mechanisms of user-moderation, which pushes up content based on the support it receives from other users, might seem democratic but they are not since they hide minority perspectives (Jenkins 2009).

Colonialism and media production

This thesis acknowledges and advances the argument that media production is a space of power. It brings back into focus what Louw (2001) argues is the 'encoding' process in the media which has been getting erased by a focus on audience studies and, equally, by a focus on other aspects of new media (Mansell 2004). However, as Louw reminds, it is important to situate the encoding practices and processes of media texts back in media studies. Thus, there is a need to understand that media production and circulation systems are a function of power and they produce and perpetuate power structures. To understand the intersection of race, gender and media production, it is important to situate power within the context of colonialism.

The media plays a significant part in creating identities (Louw 2001). Sharp (2008) understands identities as a result of differences, arguing that they are

mostly ascribed by the 'powerful' over the 'powerless' or, by the colonisers over the colonised. At the contestation of this play of power, the media becomes central in which the powerful have control over meaning and narratives (Louw 2001). As the scholar Joanne Sharp (2008) highlights, the processes of representation have been inspired by the histories of colonialism in which the 'white' core has always been highlighted as different from the 'coloured other' – or peripheral. These features have persevered to date, with media presentations faulted, generally, on the presentation of women and, specifically black women. As Kigundu-Touré (2020:6) argues, 'black African women, specifically, have been entirely invisible in representation spaces'. On the other hand, Emerson (2002), reports that it is not just in the representation spaces, it is also in the production spaces. This thesis reconciled both positions, researching with women producers to understand their experiences within presentation of narratives as well as production.

While the work of Emerson (2002) focuses on black African women in American music videos, it is the case that the women in mainland Africa would have different experiences. This is despite sharing a race with the aforementioned. As scholars have highlighted, the presentation of Africa in the global media is one that is riddled with negativity (see, for example, Michira 2002; Asante 2013; Oguh 2015). The presentation is often one that is not just about labelling black people, it is one that also labels the spaces that they occupy. It is a continuation of labels that colonialism started and a perpetuation of identities that colonialism established. In this, the black are not people, rather they are 'noble savages that occupy unexplored territories' (Sharp 2008:72). Producing media content in this space, one then takes on the role of producing against a narrative that expects from them images and narratives of destruction, war and suffering. If it is a woman, then, it is one in which they are expected to appear as victims since the tropes of gender injustices ignore the western context – taking it as developed – and focuses on the global South as backward spaces.

From victimhood to active agency: Black women in media production

This thesis rejects the portrayal of black women as victims. Rather, it seeks to embrace the fullness and diversity of experiences, situating them equally as victims of racism and patriarchy (as shaped by colonialism) but also as agents of change challenging the structures that seek to marginalize them. In history, scholars of colonialism and gender such as the Nigerian Oyeronke Oyěwùmí (1997) point to

the agency and roles of women. At the turn of the millennium, such scholars as Emerson (2002) and more recently, Kigundu-Touré (2020), remind of the agency of black women in media production. Particularly, Emerson (2002:124-125) points out that black women use the production as a space for 'contestation, resistance and assertion of their agency'.

Similarly, Kigundu-Touré (2020) highlights that black African women utilise the power of digital media to take control of the narratives that describe them. They have become the prosumers that Toffler (1980) discusses. In this, they are not just consuming work about, and for, them; they are also producing the work. They become narrators of their own story and push against societal expectations as well as stereotypes that are carried in the media against them (Kigundu-Touré 2020). As Wilson (2011:316) highlights, 'women in the global South are no longer invariably seen as passive victims; there is an increased focus on women's ability to make decisions and choices under given circumstances, allowing them to exercise "free will" within the material constraints imposed by patriarchal power'. This thesis interrogates such claims and arguments.

Black women in YouTube vlogs

Black women have made use of YouTube to open up spaces for "self-representation" by creating digital content and speaking through "amateur online videos" (Strangelove 2010:84); however, there is little scholarly attention to their representation or experiences on the platform (Sobande 2017). The literature is even sparser when the focus is on black women in Africa. The 'outsiders gaze' (Powers 1996) that fills global media coverage of African affairs persevere to date even in digital media productions that are expected to platform marginalized voices (Jenkins 2009). The observations by Wall (2009:393), that the everyday life representations of African countries on YouTube are 'more likely to come from westerners' still obtain to date.

This does not mean that there are no such experiences on YouTube. Kigundu-Touré (2020) explores the YouTube and Instagram online performances of Black women content creators living in South Africa. Her work highlights the political significance of Black women's representation and the important role played by their independent productions online in combating the oppression faced by women of colour. In addition to creating new representations of women and

beauty, Kigundu-Touré (2020:35) points out that the women are also 'forging economic affluence and recognition for themselves'.

In the forging of such economic affluence, it is also worthwhile to point out that a significant amount of the production is on what is called affective labour (Abidin 2015; Berryman and Kavka 2018; Raun 2018): 'the production of material for online circulation and consumption without any necessary financial compensation – though affective and social capital can be earned through the measurable attention received' (p. 107). In focusing on the affective, Abidin (2015:6) has for instance discussed the context of vloggers in Singapore citing a case of a participant who wanted to share a post about a breakup thinking that she 'would also genuinely be benefiting from emotional support from her followers'. Indeed, it is the making and becoming of what are called influencers that drives vloggers to produce even with less promises of financial gain (Raun 2018). However, vlogging is not just about the positive feelings. Berryman and Kavka (2018) discuss the use of the platform for self-therapy reporting that sometimes vloggers show negative emotions and gain views because in doing so 'they cement authenticity, offer (self) therapy and strengthen ties of intimacy between YouTubers and their followers' (p. 87).

The foregoing is pointed out to indicate that as much as the work of Kigundu-Touré (2020) is important, it is equally limited. Not only does it play within the frames of production for economic gains, but it also plays on the trope of beauty and hair as other research on YouTube and Black African women have done (see, for example, Childs 2022). This equally limits it to understanding the YouTube experiences of other Black African women who produce and distribute content in other African countries outside of South Africa.

To expand on this point, it should be highlighted that such studies – despite their relevance and necessity – limit the experiences of Black African women. It indeed plays into the narratives of women as the 'other' gender which patriarchy seeks to impose on a rich and diverse experience (Oyěwùmí 1997). This study, therefore, expanded on the research that such Black African feminist scholars as Kigundu-Touré (2020) have initiated. In expanding on this corpus of knowledge, the focus is not just on hair and beauty, rather it is on the representations of everyday life. Everyday life, in this context, is read as a site of contestation, challenging and even affirming – even in a subversive way, their identities and experiences (Goffman 1959).

Performance of everyday life in YouTube vlogs

Individuals are constantly performing and presenting themselves in different ways and situations to shape the way others perceive them (Goffman 1959). Advancing Goffman's work on impression management, Papacharissi (2015) highlights that although individuals do not often self-identify as performers in everyday acts of self-representation, 'the social roles associated with gender, race, and class as well as those involved in professional, family, and social circles are performed as repeated behaviours' (p. 96). Individuals, therefore, often behave in certain ways because of their identity and the social expectations that come with it. She further expands on this arguing that in today's society, the way people act and present themselves to the world can reveal a lot about their interest in gaining power. Building on that argument, the everyday within the YouTube vlogs should be understood as a space of power. However, as Karner (2007) elaborates, writing on ethnicity and everyday life, scholars should be keen to understand how the everyday functions, how it is perceived by social actors, how it evolves over time and how it intersects with structures of *power* and *inequality*.

De Certeau (1984) theorizes that everyday life is characterised by a set of practices that are both creative and resistant to dominant power structures. Thus, the everyday life is also about challenging power structures using practices which he refers to as 'tactics', meaning the ways in which people subvert dominant systems and create meaning in their lives (de Certeau ibid.:19). He points out that these tactics are often invisible and go unnoticed, and they involve the use of everyday practices such as 'talking...moving about, shopping' (p. 19). Indeed, for a YouTuber, they may show us their role as a bride, for example, yet the reading of such a text and act should disentangle the structures of meaning that it carries. In this way of thinking, the work of Margaret Thompson Drewal on the 'State of Research on Performance in Africa' (Drewal 1991) becomes important and crucial.

Drewal points at performance as an open-ended exercise, describing it as a 'praxis of everyday social life…the practical application of embodied skill and knowledge to the task of taking action' (Drewal 1991:1). However, she also reminds of the transgressive capabilities of performance, indicating that it offers a way for people to reflect on their present circumstances, as well as define or transform their own identities and the social structures around them. This should be read within the thinking of Emerson (2002), who looks at performances of the everyday as ways

of resisting or subverting prevailing norms. To contextualise the arguments then, it can be argued that the 'impression management' which was highlighted by Goffman (1959) is not just a re-enactment of social life, it is rather an enactment resisting stereotypes even while playing within them as is the case of the performance that Drewal (1991) discusses. Indeed, from Drewal what one reads is that a single enactment of the everyday can be ambiguous, potent with both subversive and legitimising effects.

The everyday life that equally plays on YouTube then is within these broader functions that it cannot just be labelled as transgressive or legitimising. The everyday life is indeed a site of creativity but is also a space in which people can be exploited, excluded and repressed (Silverstone 2013). In challenging that exclusion, the subversive characteristics of the everyday life manifest. These are indeed empowered by the random mundanity of the everyday that they can even pass unnoticed as acts of resistance, pushback and even rebellion (Karner 2007). An audience of a YouTuber who shows the everyday might indeed just see the everyday, however for a media researcher the role is to interrogate the everyday and analyse how power plays within or the ways in which it is challenged (Mansell 2004). This thesis utilised the lens of a media researcher, placing power back in the processes of media production or 'encoding' as Louw (2001) advanced.

Malawi women and the media (including media research)

It is important to highlight the context of media production for Malawian women. Media production in Malawi has often side-lined women often seeing them through the male gaze (Emerson 2002; Kigundu-Touré 2020). Women are mostly regarded as subjects of media portrayal through a set of parameters and consumers of media products. They are given less room to be producers of media content, let alone to shape the direction of focus. Therefore, research on media and women in Malawi has hardly focused on their role in production and has mostly focused on the media portrayal of the women (see, for example, Chilimampunga 1999; Chikaipa 2019). In this representation as well, the essence is to demean women and present them in a negative light. It is to play along the stereotypes of women as the media has done in other contexts (Emerson 2002).

Within the social dialogues of media research in Malawi, women are often left out or they are just the subjects for the gaze of male researchers (see, for example,

Chilimampunga 1999; Gunde 2015; Chikaipa 2019). The cited research, and others, do not situate the experiences of the women under focus. They are only read through the text of adverts, cartoons and social media posts. Thus, even if critical, such research still stereotypes the place of women in the Malawian society, and in the media which they criticise, where the women can be seen and heard, hardly platformed (Semu 2002). This victimisation, however, is what this thesis rejects. In this regard, Sandra Harding's standpoint theory is employed to explore the agency of the women as YouTubers. The theory argues for the need to centre the experiences of those on the margins of power as their position on the periphery gives them a unique perspective from which it is important to understand society and culture (Harding 2008). This margin position, as feminist scholar Joan Borsa reminds, is a place with the possibilities of exploring (Borsa 1990). Indeed, in reading this margin, the role of digital media – YouTube for this thesis – becomes important. Malawian women are seen as thriving in online platforms where they also are producers of their own reality, some takes the form of transgressive actions from the content they produce as well as the modes of production (Hermes and Hill 2021).

Malawi women online

Malawian women exist on the internet, although academic research and general interest on the same would create a wrong impression. From keeping lively what is called the Malawi Twitter space, influencing on TikTok, to making YouTube vlogs of the everyday, their imprint is significant. In YouTube vlogs, they assume the responsibility of not just showcasing their reality but having to also push against unfair narratives that have been driven by the global media (Mano and Milton 2021).

YouTubers producing content and identifying as Malawian are mostly assumed by outsiders (especially non-Africans) as operating and producing from a context of poverty and disease (Kigundu-Touré 2020). Such an assumption makes them carry the extra burden of being racially marginalised and profiled. As Naso (2018) points out, African societies are imagined as disorganised. Production, therefore, within this identity of being a black person and in Africa (more for a country that is often ranked as one of the poorest), the YouTubers take on them the burden of race and poverty. They might not be overtly seeking to challenge dominant narratives of African countries in the media (Oguh, 2015), however within the

understanding of the everyday life as sites of power and the acknowledgement of the dangers of a single narrative (Adichie, *The danger of a single story | TED* 2009), their role is already one of pushing against a narrative.

Thus, the participation of the female Malawian YouTubers in producing and distributing videos of routine everyday life in Malawi broadens views about life in Malawi. They present narratives that would be absent in global media whose interests on Africa and blackness emanates from a point of negativity that is shaped by colonialism (Oguh 2015). Even though they come from an African country that is faced with different challenges, these YouTubers show an everyday life that is not just about doom and gloom. Sometimes, they utilise some of the challenges to produce their content, building communities of care through YouTube in which they share what would be called survival tips (see, Huh *et al.* 2014, on using vlogs in building communities of care). The everyday life that they show, therefore, is the one that has been alluded to by de Certeau in which it is not just of managed impressions as Goffman (1959) would advance; it is rather one in which newer realities of transgression are created. The written and, indeed, the unwritten rules that are discussed by Hermes and Hill (2021) are violated in this space and new rules are created.

Methodology

Research design

In situating the experiences of the YouTubers, a qualitative design was used for the study. As Bryman (2016) posits, a qualitative research focus gives an in-depth understanding of human actions and the structures as well as processes that shape behaviour. Hammersley (2013) has been specific in highlighting that qualitative research is not only interested in understanding the human experiences, rather it situates them within scientific theories and conceptualisations, with the explicit purpose of achieving social justice. This indeed fits within the exploration of Harding's standpoint theory (Harding 2008). In this research, therefore, a qualitative approach was not just taken with the intention of inquiring about the subjective experience, rather it was also to explore the possibilities of other socially

just realities. Realities that, in the Malawian context, would push against the traditional roles of women and the patriarchal media portrayals of women.

Sampling

The study used a purposive and snowball sampling approach (Seale et al. 2006). One participant, Sandra, was identified and she helped with access to the other participants. Within the purposive function, the study targeted self-identifying female Malawian YouTubers aged 18 and above. From the snowballing exercise, the participants were in the age bracket of 20 to 30 and they are spread across Malawi's four major cities (namely Lilongwe, Blantyre, Mzuzu and Zomba). This means that the experiences that are recorded and highlighted in this research are particularly of urban women in Malawi whose experiences with rural women vary. Nevertheless, they are an important group to study as they have mostly been in the forefront of pushing for changes to gender relationships in Malawi. This is because they are at the centre of global and local cultures, as well as their educational levels (Chilimampunga 1999). Indeed, as the results ended up within this sample, all the seven participants are professionals working across different sectors while four of the participants are cosmopolitan having been educated in other countries with different experiences of gender relations. The table on the following page gives a snapshot of the relevant characteristics and identities of the YouTubers, as well as the areas of focus of their YouTube vlogs (in order of the interview dates).

Table 1. Overview of sample

Name	Channel name	Relevant identities and focus
Towera Kumwenda	Towiae	27-year-old journalist Channel established in 2021 to share about life in Malawi Sometimes focuses on her identities as a wife and student
Sandra Kalua	Sandra peachy mw	27-year-old digital marketer who created channel in 2013 but activated it in 2017 as a student in Costa Rica Started vlogging as therapy with focus changing across the years: feelings, studying abroad, life in Malawi Channel monetized under YouTube Partner Program
Alinafe Malitoni	Nafe's creations	24-year-old Economist who studied in South Africa Channel established in 2015 to share her paintings Focus changed to lifestyle in Malawi in 2020
Vanessa Rita Chimutu Kaima	Vanessa Sunshine 21	29-year-old development professional Channel started in 2021 with focus on the everyday life in Malawi as well as shopping hauls and perfume reviews. Also focuses on travel and documenting experiences Newly married and some videos have focused on wedding, marriage and husband
Mira German	Mirrorbelle	26-year-old whose channel was started in 2016 as a student in South Africa The focus has been changing across the years. Currently focuses on the everyday life in Malawi She also focuses on her motherhood journey (she has a son aged 5)
Alessandra Thunde	Ale's Spot	20-year-old whose channel was started in 2019 as a student in Kenya She focuses on everyday life in Malawi but avoids sharing the 'personal' Channel targets the experiences of young Malawians
Esther Louisa Msiska	Simply Louisa	26-year-old whose channel was created in 2019 but activated in 2023 Multi-media personality: blogger and avid user of social media Channel focuses on life as a young single mum with a career and the everyday life in Malawi

Data collection

Two approaches to data collection were used for the study to gain a full insight into the processes of video production as well as the position of the video producers within the Malawian society and the broader YouTube space. These methods are interviews, understood as production interviews in the context of the research (Gauntlett 2013; Morgan 2022), as well as document review in which select YouTube videos of the interviewed producers were reviewed as documents (see, Bowen 2009, on recorded videos as documents within qualitative research).

Document review

Document review is one of the ways through which data is collected in qualitative research. This, however, as Morgan (2022) points out, is a method that is less used within qualitative research despite its rich benefits. Such benefits that Morgan highlights include the stability of the data as well as the complementary qualities of such data to other methods; it is the latter point that was especially important for this research. In terms of understanding the documents that were reviewed, the study considered a definition put forward by Bowen (2009) in which documents suitable for reviews were identified as 'social facts which contain text and images that have been recorded without a researcher's intervention' (p. 27). The images can also be moving, in which category YouTube videos would be included. For this research, a minimum of 10 videos on each of the participant's YouTube channels were watched. These were used to inform a part of the questions that were used in the interviews.

Production interviews

Interviews were the other, and main, method of data collection. Gauntlett (2013) suggests interviews as an important way of collecting data within content production research arguing that they are a useful tool for gaining valuable insights into the creative process and the social and cultural contexts in which cultural products are produced. For this study, seven production interviews were conducted seeking to gain insight into the experiences of the producers as well as the political and governance processes ordering the production process (Bryman 2016). Interviews used within this research were in a semi-structured format allowing for flexibility in which probes were used to explore in detail the topic and responses (ibid.).

All the interviews were transcribed into text manually to allow for a proper immersion into the data. Seale (2018) points out how reading and re- reading data several times before formally coding it enhances a researcher's sensitivity to meanings. For this study, immersion was achieved through the listening and re-listening to the interviews during the transcribing process.

Data analysis

Discourse analysis

Rose's (2016) visual methodology of discourse analysis is useful when it comes to the examination of YouTube videos since it is more concerned with visual images, verbal texts, institutions and social practices together. Although the social theorist distinguishes the discourse analysis that is concerned with visual images and verbal text from the one that pays attention to issues of power, institutions and technologies surrounding their production (ibid. p. 192), the objectives of this research demanded that they should be considered together. In this study, YouTube videos were examined for their visual elements such as images, captions and symbols to identify how these were being used to convey meaning. Additionally, the language in the videos was also analysed to identify key ideas, concepts, topics and discursive practices used by the YouTubers. The aim of doing this was to find out patterns and recurring themes.

Reflexive thematic analysis

The data gathered from the production interviews was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The method has been encouraged by Braun and Clarke (2006) as necessary for analysing qualitative data with aims of identifying themes and patterns in the data while also simultaneously engaging in a reflexive process of considering the researcher's role and positionality in the research process. This analytical method was chosen because of the main interest in identifying patterns and themes that would help to address the research questions and its objectives. Additionally, as one who shares experiences, pre-existing knowledge and social position (ethnicity, race, nationality, gender, age range) with the research subjects and the area of study, this method was necessary for me to engage in ongoing reflection regarding how these factors may be influencing the interpretation of the data and analysis.

Ethical considerations

Participants gave consent to participate after being informed of the essence and process of the research. They also agreed that I could use both their real names and the names of their YouTube channels in my study. Therefore, none of them has been anonymized and I will be referring to each one of them using their first

names hereafter. While anonymizing research subjects is always encouraged, Jensen (2021) points out that de-anonymization is unproblematic in instances where a research topic and the empirical materials reproduced are uncontroversial. This is how both the participants and I felt about the topic.

Findings and analysis

YouTube vlogging as affective labour

Currently, YouTube video production in Malawi has little economic benefits. Instead, people are driven by the affective benefits (Abidin 2015). These eventually are filtered through a performance of the everyday that is reflected in the vlogs. As Strangelove (2010) argues, this performance is not solely driven by the desire to showcase daily routines, it is also influenced by other interests, values and benefits. By focusing on vlogging as affective labour, the experiences of the participants are highlighted particularly in terms of using vlogs as emotional outlets and community-building tools. A discussion is also made on the economic benefits – or those anticipated – of vlogging

YouTube vlogging as therapy

Despite Berkeley (2020) assertion that YouTube vlogging primarily serves as an income source, some participants indicated that they embarked on vlogging as a therapeutic outlet (Berryman and Kavka 2018). For many, documenting daily life has evolved into a significant form of journaling, especially for people dealing with chronic illnesses, providing them with a platform to share their experience and find supporting communities (Huh *et al.* 2014). Furthermore, Berryman and Kavka (2018) note a growing trend among YouTubers to show the less glamorous aspects of life, departing from the platform's traditionally positive image. In this research context, participants who described vlogging as therapeutic did not necessarily have an illness or the intention to showcase life's less glamorous side. Instead, they perceived vlogging as a necessary form of therapy. For example, Sandra, who started vlogging while studying in Costa Rica, reported that it was on the recommendation of her therapist that she started making YouTube videos.

'I sought therapy because I was crying every day. And then the therapist said, "What is it you want to do Sandra?" I was like, I just want to make videos, and he told me to post them on YouTube. That's how it started. …I used to sit and just talk about how I feel, how my week was, and that would literally make me feel better.'

YouTube vlogging served as form of journaling for Sandra, who was in a foreign country, similar to another participant, Mira, who started her channel while in South Africa in 2016. In South Africa, Mira focused on beauty and makeup vlogging, inspired by local YouTubers that had inspired her. However, when Mira relocated to study in Kenya, her content shifted towards documenting her experiences of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic and life as an international student. This transition allowed her to create supportive communities, even though she did not receive explicit recommendations from a therapist or express such expectations from the Malawian and international audience. YouTubers often anticipate emotional support from their viewers when sharing some occurrences of their everyday lives, as Abidin (2015) observes in her analysis a vlogger in Singapore.

Community building

In critiquing an absolute focus on vlogging for monetary gain, the concept of video making as a *labour of love*, borrowed from Boxman-Shabtai (2019), was introduced. Participants indeed cited this as another reason for their venturing into vlogging. They emphasized their interest in building communities, as digital media has become a key tool for community building in the modern era (Jenkins, 2006). While previous research on vlogging has explored communities related to chronic illnesses or education (e.g., Huh *et al.* 2014), the participants identified a different type of community they aimed to build. For example, Vanessa shared her motivation for documenting her wedding in some of her videos. She expressed a desire to help brides by providing insights based on her own experiences, stating that, 'I know the nightmare of planning weddings, and I want other brides to learn from my journey'. This can be seen as a form of solidarity among women in a context where such spaces are increasingly getting limited due to the restructuring of society through colonialism and modernisation (Oyěwùmí 1997).

Similarly, for Louisa, it is her role as a single young mother that shapes her approach to vlogging. This appears in most of her videos and during the interview she shared that:

> 'I draw inspiration from a South African YouTuber named The Millennial Mom, her real name is Amanda. Her content as a young single mum resonated with me and inspired me to share my own journey because I know that it is not an easy one, especially in Malawi.'

From the above, Louisa did not just venture into vlogging as therapy or for the economic expectations from it. It was rather to build a community of other mothers who would be in a similar situation as hers. A scope through her channel reveals that despite focusing on the ordinariness of life in Malawi, her relationship with her child – through the eyes of a single mum – features predominantly. Such titles as *Playtime with Evan, A day in the life of a single working mum* as well as *If you are a single mum, make use of the victim support unit* are telling of the community she seeks to build. The last title, particularly, presents her as an influencer of sorts (Kigundu-Touré, 2020) for single women who are facing problems, signposting them to possible solutions in a way that a sister would to another sister.
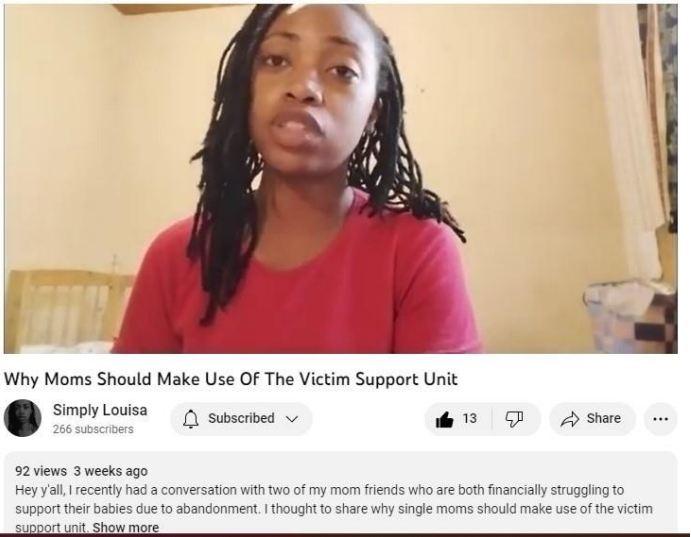
Figure 2: A screenshot of one of the videos mentioned above (May 2023)

Sandra acknowledged that vlogging involves community-building, highlighting authenticity as one of the ways through which that is achieved. She disclosed how prioritizing authenticity has allowed her to forge stronger connections with her subscribers and foster a sense of community among them. She said regarding one of her videos:

> 'I don't fake it. Everything you see on my channel is my actual life. If you see me on a motorbike going to town because I don't have money for a taxi, it's real. There was a time when I was going through a hard time, and I did a video about what I eat in a week when I don't have money. *People related* [emphasis mine] …to the point where others donated money for me to buy food for my family.'
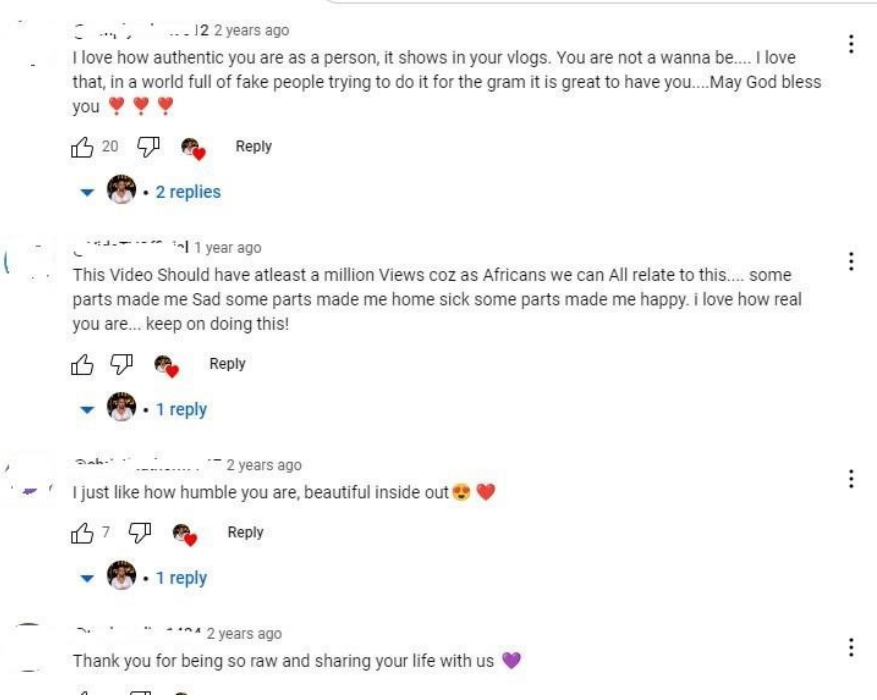
Figure 3: A screenshot of some of the comments on Sandra's video (May 2023)

Emphasis has been placed on relatability to indicate that a core value and benefit of YouTube vlogging is to build a community through which the YouTuber can relate with others. Sobande (2017:662) highlights the power of relatability on

YouTube, particularly for black women, arguing that 'images of Black women on YouTube still seem more authentic than those in mainstream mass-media'. Unlike traditional celebrities whose lives may seem unattainable, YouTube vloggers connect with their audience on a relatable level, making viewers see themselves in them. Abidin (2015:3) also notes that vloggers avoid referring to their communities built as 'fans' since 'it might come across as demeaning', highlighting the mutual sense of relatability between vloggers and their audience. In this context, relatability extends beyond creating engaging content; it serves as a cornerstone for community building.

Economic benefits of YouTube vlogging

Malawi's geographical location and its economic conditions that have an impact on access to the internet could challenge the economic viability of YouTube vlogging. Nonetheless, participants vlog for its economic potential, with prospects being the driving force. However, only a few of the participants generate income from their videos, largely influenced by their channel's establishment and their personal experiences. For example, Sandra earns through the YouTube Partners Program, made possible because she created her account in Costa Rica where Google payment services are available.

Another aspect closely related to earnings is personal branding, which positions the YouTubers for potential brand partnerships and payments. Apart from Sandra's mention of earning through brand collaborations, Mira also shared her experience, stating that:

> 'Sometimes small brands, companies and business owners in Malawi come to me so that I can sell their products on my channel. For instance, recently a company which makes hair products reached out to me so that I should market their products. They gave me their products and using my YouTube channel as a selling point, I produced a video showing how the products work.'

The other participants indicated that their expectations on financial earnings are at best hopes since, as Towera said, "the position of Malawi makes it hard to make earnings on YouTube". When such participants were asked about brand partnerships, they indicated a willingness to pursue that avenue with Vanessa reporting:

> 'If I can't make money through AdSense [a Google product that allows YouTube channel owners to make money by displaying ads during their videos] then at least I can collaborate with Malawian brands. After all, most of the people who watch my videos are Malawians.'

Nevertheless, this poses challenges as industries in Malawi are scaling down on advertising due to difficult economic conditions. Additionally, YouTube vlogging faces competition from fast rising platforms like TikTok or traditional mediums such as radio, which have a wider reach in Malawi. However, the opportunities YouTube vlogging offers continue to motivate the YouTubers. Louisa, for instance, shared that she finds fulfilment from 'sharing my experiences about being a young, single and career mum'. Their inspiration stems from the 'labour of love'.

It's important to clarify that this doesn't dismiss the potential for income from vlogging. Instead, it emphasizes that an absolute focus on content monetization, as Kigundu-Touré (2020:22) states, neglects 'the closer relationship or, even, a closer bond, between creators and viewers'. YouTube video creation in Malawi is driven by affective benefits, where YouTubers are part of a community sharing between them and their audience experiences, similar to YouTubers in other countries (see Abidin 2015).

Further, the relegation of the economic focus is to fit within this research which operates from a decolonial feminist perspective that challenges the colonial patriarchal way of relating with the world (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Solely prioritizing financial gains, even when content comes from a place of love would be a disservice. Berryman and Kavka (2018) argue that an exclusive focus on YouTube's economic aspects overlooks its richer experiences. Equally, Alessandra, one of the participants, commented that her motivations for vlogging primarily stems from affective benefits. She remarked:

> 'I enjoy sharing my life experiences as a young Malawian and found creative fulfillment making YouTube videos after my initial career plans in graphic designing were not viable in Malawi. I always have fun when making my videos and I am always happy when I share them on YouTube and my subscribers join in the fun through watching.'

Figure 4: An example of Alessandra's videos shared on her 20th birthday (May 2023)

Transgression through vlogging

The second part of the analysis delves into the participants' portrayal of their everyday lives in their videos. This concept of the everyday aligns with Goffman's definition, where it represents a carefully managed space characterized by "impression management" (1959: p. 146). In other words, it's a space where the self is carefully curated rather than presented in its raw form. Indeed, within this thinking, Alinafe, Alessandra and Vanessa disclosed that they choose what to share with the public through their vlogs. Vanessa, for instance, said:

> 'It can be scary to share things that are too personal on YouTube. For example, let's say my wedding and the events around it. But for me, those events are big milestones, and I wouldn't want them to be undocumented. Of course, it's not like I shared everything that happened, but I definitely shared enough for me to one day look at and be proud…'

However, the concept of the everyday should be understood more broadly, particularly on the considering the tensions within it. It's important to recognize that in the curation of narratives and the management of impression (Goffman,

1959), power dynamics come into play, leading to exploitation, exclusion and repression of both individuals and narratives (de Certeau, 1984; Karner, 2007). Within this context, the everyday becomes a space where established narratives are challenged, and alternative ones are created. Building on the argument presented by Hermes and Hill (2021:5), who view media space as a tool used by producers to 'counter good taste, …temporarily deny the legitimacy of political institutions and leaders by ridiculing them and take pleasure in rewriting social rules', vlogging can be seen as an act of transgression, involving the rewriting of the societal norms. This discussion of transgressive elements in the vlogs specifically examines how the YouTubers depict the Malawian woman and the role of the wife in their videos. There is also a discussion on those who are perceived as transgressors of the social order yet manage to build communities of support. All these are interlinked with the concepts discussed in the earlier section on affective labour and community building.

Being the Malawian woman, on video

Scholars have described the Malawian woman, as portrayed in media productions, as often subjected to misogyny and negative stereotypes (Chilimampunga 1999; Gunde 2015). It is not surprising that much of this media, rightly critiqued by these scholars, has been created by males. Chilimampunga (1999) discusses radio adverts produced by men during Malawi's transition from a conservative dictatorship. Similarly, Gunde (2015) examines online content primarily generated and shared by males. This research established that when Malawian women create content, it challenges the established male-dominated media patterns. This aligns with studies on vlogging and video production by black women in other parts of Africa (Kigundu-Touré 2020), as well as in the United States and Britain (Emerson 2002; Sobande, Fearfull and Brownlie 2020).

I however seek to explore the performance of Malawian women in everyday life by highlighting the limits that they face in their content creation. Despite their efforts to challenge patriarchal norms, which manifest in advertisements (Chilimampunga, 1999), these norms still find their way in the comments of their shared everyday experiences. Sandra, for instance, shares her life in Malawi through vlogs covering routine activities like grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, visiting her parents and attending events like weddings and musical shows. In an interview, she spoke about encountering comments that attempt to limit and label her daily life sharing. She shared her experience as follows:

> "…I have got people who say to me that, by posting videos of myself buying things [for my house], then I am showing off. Others actually say that I will get bewitched because I am showing off that I am doing well…"
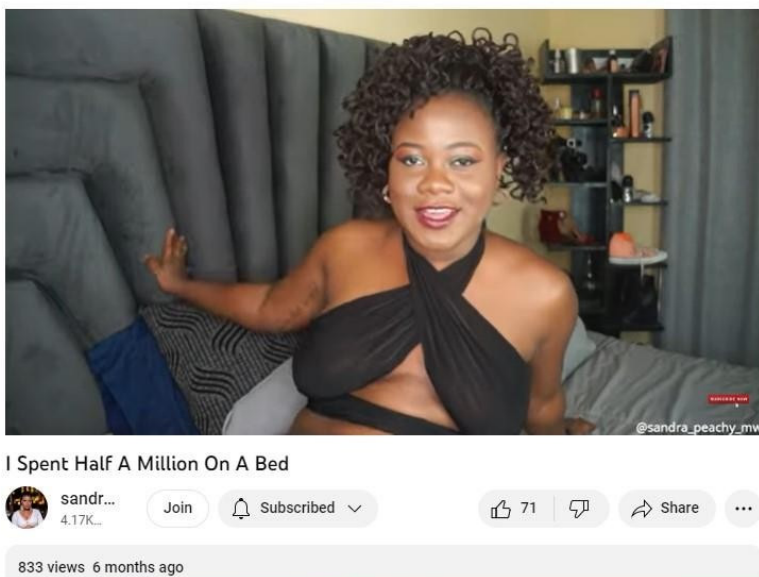

Figure 5: Sandra's video about her newly purchased bed (May 2023)

Tradition in this context, passing off as comments around witchcraft, should be viewed within Malawi's deeply embedded patriarchy. Anthropological research on witchcraft in Africa has shown that it is used as a form of social control (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). While broader discussions on witchcraft don't inherently reinforce patriarchy, it's important to highlight that in certain African contexts like Malawi and South Africa, patriarchy is framed as part of culture and tradition. As argued by Kigundu-Touré (2020), feminism is sometimes regarded as modernity and indeed a form of colonialism. Thus, the criticism directed at Sandra is tailored to conform to the Malawian cultural expectations of women as subjects under parental control (when young) and husbands when married (see Semu, 2002).

However, creating these videos itself is a radical act of pushing back against stereotypes. Smith and Hofmann (2016) argue that portraying everyday life is a form of contestation and an enactment of power processes. Even Sandra herself,

reflecting on the experience highlighted earlier, acknowledged that they do not deter her, saying:

> '…those people (who make comments) don't understand lifestyle content creation. So, it's fine. Those who are willing to listen, I teach and talk to them about it and tell them about what I do, that it's a serious thing. Like, "if you are on YouTube, you will see that I am not crazy, or I am not showing off.'

In the eyes of such people who criticise her, indeed, a woman is better off being private, and if her story is mediated through male-controlled media production processes, it's deemed acceptable. They prefer not to witness the vulnerabilities, anxieties and indeed the strength of women, particularly when these narratives are authored by a woman herself. An expressive woman is often seen as transgressive, as noted by Amir-Ebrahimi (2008). However, the act of vlogging, even if curated as Goffman (1965) suggests, aims to showcase the multidimensional nature of being a woman in a country such as Malawi. It inherently involves transgression using digital media (Hermes and Hill 2021).

Performing the wife

As Semu (2002) notes, the traditional role of women in Malawi is to be subservient, often treated as an appendage to their husbands or partners. This expectation, similar to situations in Nigeria described by Adichie (2017), is challenged by the YouTubers who feature their partners and marriages in their content. They transgress this norm by presenting their significant others as a part of them, rather than central figures to their existence. For example, in some of Sandra's videos, her partner makes cameo appearances but isn't the significant part of the vlogging experience.

Even when Towera reflected on her video where she travelled to visit her husband while they were living in different cities, she emphasized her identity as a wife. However, unlike the perspective of Adichie (2009) on the role of identities in media production, this vlogging doesn't aim to accentuate the identities. Instead, it seeks to alter them in a way. Thus, while the identity of being a wife is indeed central to her, the traditional roles associated with it, which she challenges, undergo alteration in the production, release and viewing of the video. Thus, apart from saying that the video was about:

'…my life. I had to leave everything just to go and see one person. The journey wasn't easier… but I was like, you know what, I have missed my husband. I hadn't seen him in four months…. It was really a long journey and the fact that he didn't know that I was travelling to visit him was even more scary.'

She added that: 'The whole vlog was just about being vulnerable and taking a risk as a woman'. She centralised her womanhood as it relates to being a wife, delving into emotions typically associated with an African woman but rarely expressed publicly by a wife. In a way, these YouTubers aim to redefine the concept of womanhood within the institution of marriage, particularly in Africa. This also challenges the norms of YouTube where, as noted by Berryman and Kavka (2018:87), videos are not expected to display negative emotion 'especially in the form of anxiety, distress and the performance of emotional vulnerability'.

Figure 6: A screenshot of Towera's video referenced in the section above (May 2023)

Similarly, Vanessa's wedding videos primarily centred around her as a woman. At least four videos on her channel were curated from the wedding experience, with a focus on her personal experiences rather than a couple's experience. Here, it is important to understand these vlogs as a representation of women's everyday lives,

often created by and for women (Abidin, 2015). In the Malawian context, women are frequently marginalized in media spaces and subjected to negative stereotypes (Gunde, 2015).

Trailblazing: Being a single mum

In discussing the motivation of vlogging, Louisa was used to drive the narrative, especially because of her identity as a single mother which plays a significant role. However, her story does not just collapse into community building. It also features in the identities that would be used to present the everyday life in Malawi. She acknowledged that her vlogging wouldn't exist without her identity as single mum. Her experiences and practices of performing the everyday are shaped by her role as a mother, straddling between traditional and modern contexts. For instance, when asked about curating a specific image for the everyday life, she reported that it had to align with her identity as a mother:

> 'Having a baby has made me more cautious about sharing, which is common in Malawi. A lot of Malawians are really conservative and private, especially when they become parents. They don't share much about themselves because of the fear that if something bad happens, it will not just affect them but their child as well. So even me, I don't want to share much because you never know what might happen.'

Louisa's portrayal presents elements of a traditional Malawian woman, whose online image is shaped by societal norms. However, her position of being a single mother contradicts the expected standards of a Malawian woman. This contrast is reflected not only in her online image but also in her vlog production. Importantly, by creating a platform for showcasing her everyday life, Louisa engages in a transgressive act of rebellion against a conservative society that expects her to hide in shame (Hermes and Hill, 2021). She resists these traditional expectations, and this defiance is evident in her videos.

In one particular video, for instance, Louisa becomes emotional while narrating how she wished for a daughter instead of a son. Sitting on her bed with her child in the background, Louisa shares about the societal value placed on male children in Malawi, where they carry on the father's name, while girls are expected to adopt their husband's names upon marriage. Because of this, she did not want her child to be loved by his father solely because of his gender. In this context, Louisa

challenges these expectations, rewriting gender and parenting norms (Hermes and Hill, 2021).

Mira, too, engages in similar acts in her vlogs. As a 26-year-old who became a mother at 21 while still in college, her channel has evolved, transitioning from her life as a student in South Africa and Kenya to her current focus on life as a Malawian woman and young mother. In an interview, she said that this shift was deliberate, aiming to showcase 'the various facets of Malawian young women'.

As argued, the personal experiences of the YouTubers shape their content and performance of everyday life. Mira's videos, beyond offering support and lessons to young mothers in Malawi, also challenge stereotypes about the country. Her channel showcases her roles as a mother, student and a woman in different situations, potentially by her experiences in other African countries. Additionally, her time in South Africa played a significant role, as Kigundu-Touré (2020) notes that vlogging among South African Black women emerged as a deliberate effort to counter Western narratives. Mira said about her videos:

> 'I aim to change perceptions of Malawi. Many associate it with poverty, poor infrastructure and diseases due to Western media narratives. Living here and having access to YouTube motivates me to show my non-Malawian subscribers a different side of the country. Despite the challenges, by sharing about my life, I show that there are also young women in Malawi who are thriving and living a similar lifestyle to their peers in other parts of the world.'

It is important to recognize the interplay of identities in vlog production. Thus, when analyzing vlogs and their producers, we must consider the intersection of these identities. Additionally, it is to acknowledge the challenges faced by Black women YouTubers who produce their content under the weight of a white gaze which marginalizes them based on their race and gender (Emerson 2002).

Existing on the local, performing for the global
In the preceding sections, a tension surrounding the fluid and transgressive nature of identity has been identified. This section delves into this tension further as it pertains to the everyday lives and performances of women. Specifically, it revolves around the struggle between local and global influences or the class between tradition and modernity. The study participants all embody what can be considered the modern Malawian woman, characterized by education,

employment, independence and control over their fertility, as described by Thornton and others (2014). Over the years, this image of the modern woman has evolved and is vividly portrayed in the vlogs.

However, as the participants reflected, they face cultural expectations while navigating roles as wives or single mothers, which adds to the diversity of womanhood presented in the vlogs. They balance societal expectations while simultaneously militating against them and redefining themselves, aligning with Drewal (1991) and Strangelove (2010) arguments about digital media and its role in both performing and challenging gender roles. For instance, in an interview with Louisa, she mentioned the importance of privacy in Malawian culture, a sentiment echoed by Alinafe and Alessandra.

Conforming to culture should not be read as the enforcement of cultural practices through digital media. Such an interpretation would diminish the transgressive potential of platforms like YouTube and align with Jenkins' (2009) skepticism. Towera viewed YouTube as empowering, acknowledging her influence in shaping how Malawi is portrayed on the platform. This empowerment, nevertheless, operates within cultural boundaries while simultaneously challenging them.

This position is inherently tense. The YouTubers straddle two realms: they belong to their society while also critiquing and transgressing against it. Thornton and others (2014) have placed these experiences of modernity outside of traditional Malawian culture, a common refrain directed at empowered women who are often seen as imitating other cultures. The 'other' in this context is not purely 'Western', as tradition suggests (as per Kigundu-Touré 2020), but rather a blend of local and global influences that encompass Western, local and Eastern values in daily life. Embracing this global perspective, Alinafe, for example, uses her vlogs to ignore Western media portrayals of life in Malawi.

> 'I am aware of the challenges in Malawi. But we often focus on the negatives and ignore the positives. While I may complain about electricity blackouts in my videos, I still appreciate where I am and what I have.'

Performing the Malawian

The discussion has already touched upon the performance of everyday life, particularly in relation to the YouTubers' identities. However, another important finding emerged during the research, which aligns with Karner's (2007)

perspective on the everyday. Prior to the interviews, I observed that in many of the videos I watched, the YouTubers discussed how prolonged power blackouts were impacting their content creation process. This challenge extends beyond socio-cultural and technological limitations which will be addressed separately in the next section. This unexpected finding underscores the broader context of YouTube vlogging in Malawi and underscores that female YouTubers not only perform gender identities and their subcategories but also embrace their Malawi identity and leverage its unique challenges to create content.

As Childs (2022) notes, depicting the everyday in digital media entails leveraging the circumstances at hand. The YouTubers embrace the opportunity to present Malawi authentically to the global audience. In a video, Vanessa focuses on the prolonged power blackouts which at the time would last over ten hours. In the video, she says:

> '… So today is Saturday. I am just in Zomba…. I am doing a couple of things. I wanted to do some work, and at the same time I wanted to vlog because it's been a minute since I actually did a proper vlog. Vlogging has been hard guys, and you know why it has been hard, ESCOM [Electricity Supply Corporation of Malawi]…. [Next day] Hi guys, good morning. I am currently at Kefi Hotel. Wedon't have electricity. I am always on the hunt for electricity nowadays…. I am just bored, because I feel like I have to always be on the hunt for electricity.'

The performance of the everyday Malawian experience extends beyond showcasing it primarily to an external audience, as Alinafe noted about her content. It is intertwined with one of the key values of vlogging: community building. Thus, in Vanessa's video mentioned earlier, there is a direct reference to 'surviving life in Malawi'. This is relevant to those in Malawi, who belong to her community and anyone seeking to be part of it. She discusses the situation and explores ways to navigate it, making herself authentic (Berryman and Kavka 2018).

It's worth noting that power outages in Malawi are frequently emphasized as a significant challenge to vlogging. Alinafe, for instance, reflected on the impact of these outages, stating that:

> 'Previously, I scheduled my videos for Fridays after editing. Now, due to power issues, I upload immediately when there is electricity, regardless of the

day. …The blackouts affect me a lot. I couldn't film an after-work video recently because there was no electricity for four consecutive days whenever I was arriving home from work. I just gave up.'

However, the participants are finding tactics to navigate around the constant and prolonged power outages. For example, Sandra creates ample footage during the days with electricity, scheduling videos on YouTube for specific release times. This approach ensures consistency in her content sharing on YouTube. The next section discusses such tactics in detail.

Tactics of doing YouTube

It is clear by now that female Malawian YouTubers face unique power dynamics and challenges due to socio-cultural factors. However, infrastructure issues on the platform also pose a significant barrier. This section explores their tactics for content production, visibility and global engagement. It underscores their agency in challenging local and global power dynamics. The discussion is structured along those lines, starting with the tactics for overcoming socio-cultural restrictions, some of which are physical, and then delves into tactics of navigating YouTube's technological power structures.

Beating the YouTube algorithms

Creating YouTube videos is a struggle for attention, driven by the potential financial rewards (Burgess and Green 2018; Raun 2018). However, Abidin (2015) argues that vlogging, from an affective labour perspective, entails similar commitment. While only one participant in this study has access to the YouTube Partner Program, all participants emphasized that the core purpose of vlogging is community building, not amassing fans as Abidin's research subjects described. This community serves as an appreciation for their 'labour of love' and plays a vital role in future monetization prospects. Even for YouTubers like Vanessa, who intend to collaborate with brands, building a large subscribers' base remains a vlogging goal. However, the platform's structure limits their engagement, compelling them to devise strategies for optimizing their vlogs.

Participants noted that using YouTube led them to depend on various social media for content promotion. This aligns with prior research (Papacharissi 2015:7) emphasizing the interconnectedness of social media platforms. The

participants utilize platforms like TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp to share video teasers, links and attract new subscribers. For example, Sandra mentioned in an interview:

> 'Sometimes I do a campaign on my social media accounts, letting people know that I have a YouTube channel and telling them to subscribe. Because it doesn't make sense that I have 11,000 followers on Instagram and not even 5,000 subscribers on YouTube.'

In addition to this tactic, some participants employ a strategy of creating content around trending topics. However, in my online ethnography, I observed a division in the Malawian digital space. Those discussing current affairs primarily focus on vlogging on Facebook, where video production demands are lower. Nevertheless, Mira mentioned that that she produces videos on trending issues, not necessarily current affairs, to build a large community for future optimization. She said:

> 'For instance, I made a video demonstrating my at-home hair makeover, featuring Inecto's new product which they were promoting at the time. This video garnered substantial views and even attracted new subscribers to my channel.'

Figure 7: A screenshot of Mira's video which she referred to in the quote above (May 2023)

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Vanessa adopts another tactic, emphasizing 'evergreen content' that remains relevant regardless of seasonal or societal trends. She creates content like perfume reviews and try-on hauls, which has a broader reach beyond Malawi. This aligns with the idea that YouTube content addressing universal topic, as observed Kigundu-Touré's research (2020), can transcend nationality. On this, Vanessa remarked:

> 'I noticed that my perfume review videos receive more views compared to my other videos, for instance my daily or weekend vlogs. This could be because these videos appear in searches when people are looking for perfume reviews on YouTube.'
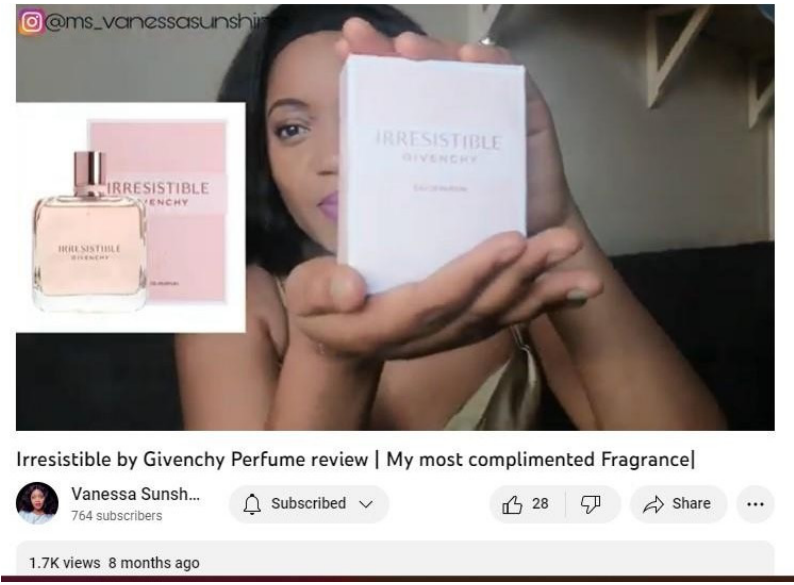
Figure 8: Vanessa's perfume review video with over 1,700 views (May 2023)

This tactic is also similar to how the participants employ search engine optimization techniques to boost their video rankings and visibility by optimizing titles, descriptions, tags and keywords. They leverage algorithm biases, particularly on the stereotypes around hair and beauty (Kigundu-Touré 2020). Sandra takes it further, occasionally resorting to click-baits, such as attention-grabbing video titles or thumbnails, to attract viewership (Abidin 2015). Sandra reflected on her use of click-baits:

'One of my recent videos performed quite well because the cover read, "Do not come back" and the title was "5 things I wish I knew before moving back to Malawi, Africa". It stirred strong emotions, even anger, in some viewers. And I was like, if you really watched the video, you would know that I fully support returning to Malawi or Africa, and these were just lessons I wished I had known. I intentionally crafted the title to attract clicks.'

A better description of vlogging was made by Louisa who described it as a continuous learning process involving others' techniques with titles, tags, artworks and keywords, hoping for success when implementing. This mirrors Burgess and Green (2009) view on the complexity of YouTube video creation in an age of platform marketisation. They noted that 'successful YouTubers have tended to be canny and unknowledgeable about YouTube's attention economy…and this knowledge is often performed playfully or humorously' (p. 74).

The YouTuber as the negotiator

In Malawi, the camera is seen as intrusive due to cultural beliefs concerning privacy and witchcraft, as discussed by Louisa. This complicates video recording, especially for women who are traditionally expected to be subservient and leave gadgets to men (Kigundu- Touré 2020). Alessandra echoed these challenges in her YouTube journey, noting in an interview:

'…you get a lot of side eyes and negative judgement. Sometimes, I try to ignore it, but other times it is difficult…'

Sandra recounted an incident at a local hotel where she was prohibited from filming and had to leave with an escort, essentially criminalising a modern-day practice of sharing daily life (Strangelove 2010). Despite her explanations and attempts to direct them to her YouTube channel, she couldn't resolve the situation.

This extends beyond public places or unfamiliar people and includes difficulties involving even some friends, limiting the portrayal of everyday life in their videos, as noted by Sandra and Louisa. It aligns with Goffman's (1959) theory on everyday life, emphasizing that curation isn't solely about self-presentation but also conforms to specific standards. These standards, as participants revealed, also adhered to ethical and legal boundaries in YouTube vlogging. Regarding vlogging ethics, this thesis did not delve into this topic explicitly. Interestingly, participants

mentioned learning to negotiate with the public when creating their videos. For instance, Alinafe reported that:

> 'In public, I prefer not to draw attention while filming. For instance, in stores or supermarkets, I discreetly hold my wallet and phone, using the phone to film without showing people's faces. At the gym, I find a quiet corner to place my phone for vlog content. I tend to avoid using my professional camera in public as it attracts too much notice and often garners disapproving looks from people.'

Living Alone Update | A day in my life in Malawi, Africa

Nafe's Creations
505 subscribers

Subscribed ⌄

👍 32   👎   ↱ Share   ··

416 views 8 months ago
Welcome Back ♡
Thank you for watching a day in my life in Malawi, Africa and a living alone update, many more videos coming

Figure 9: Alinafe's video in a thrift store blurring out people's faces

This highlights the intricacy of video production in a highly patriarchal society and underscores that the empowering aspects of digital media transcend the digital realm, affecting the production processes themselves. The act of negotiating with the public, and even their partners, when creating videos can be seen as an act of *reclaiming* the public space for the women, drawing inspiration from Oyěwùmí's work (1997) on colonialism's impact on the marginalisation of women in Africa. In Malawi's current media landscape, women occupy a subordinate position, with

their experiences often filtered through male-dominated media houses or studied by male researchers (Chilimampunga 1999; Chikaipa 2019).

Conclusions

This research had set out to explore the construction and presentation of everyday life in Malawi through videos created by female Malawian YouTubers as well as the content production and power dynamics for these creators. This was grounded in the understanding of YouTube as a platform which offers people a chance through which they can produce their own content, on their terms (Burgess and Green, 2009, 2018). This affordance of YouTube was regarded not withstanding its limits of operating within a technological structure favouring communities in the Global North. Women in Malawi were understood as historically marginalised out of media spaces in which their roles are stereotypical (Chilimampunga, 1999; Gunde, 2015). Thus, the interest was in understanding the ways through which they leverage YouTube to reclaim spaces in the media and representation of their own realities.

In order to arrive at that understanding, two methods were primarily used for data collection. These are document review and production interviews. Interviews were conducted with seven female YouTubers living in Malawi and the discourse of seven videos (one video for each of the YouTubers) were thoroughly analysed, this is on top of the numerous videos that were reviewed during the familiarization process. Goffman's (1959) performance of everyday life theory, as employed by Papacharissi (2015), was used to understand how the YouTubers' identities and the social expectations that come with them (the identities) influence their construction and representation of daily life in Malawi. The notion of everyday which was used in the research encompasses both normal and abnormal events and experiences in people's lives (Karner, 2007), while also being viewed as a space for creativity and resistance (de Certeau, 1984). Thus, YouTube was recognised as a form of media in which transgressive actions take place (Hermes and Hill, 2021). In the sections below, the research questions posed at the beginning of this thesis will be addressed, ending in suggestions for future research as well as a justification for the thesis' contribution to knowledge.

Answering the first research question, from the findings, it is clear that the daily life in Malawi that is portrayed and represented through the lens of the female Malawian YouTubers is one that is largely influenced by their different identities as well as the socio-cultural context of the country. In this context, the YouTubers embrace their identities and act within them. However, reading them as simple portrayals of identities would be misleading. The YouTubers use the presentation of the everyday as spaces for contest as well as transgression (Hermes and Hill, 2021). For example, YouTubers who are married or have partners do not just show the everyday as revolving around their partners as is expected of tradition, rather they show themselves existing as career women and indeed full individuals in their own right. The partners might be referred to in the videos, and sometimes appear, but they do not take the central position. This would be unlike in other representations within the traditional, and even digital, media where the women are presented in stereotypical positions and often as an extension of the male figures in their lives (Chilimampunga, 1999; Gunde, 2015).

In answering the second research question, media production processes were understood to be about power (Mano and Milton, 2021). This is similar for YouTube. In Malawi, female YouTubers at least face two levels of power that they struggle against. The first, which is related to the point on identities indicated above, is on having to negotiate with the power structures in the immediate socio-cultural context (Semu, 2002). Thus, the YouTubers face challenges in accessing physical spaces for production. At the same time, there are instances in which people within the communities that they build are overly critical of the content that they share with them. This would indeed be read within the limits that patriarchy seeks to impose on women where they are not expected to be heard.

The second level of power that the YouTubers have to militate against is embedded in the platform of YouTube. The structure of YouTube monetisation programme places such countries as Malawi outside of the list of beneficiaries. The production is mostly made as affective labour (Abidin, 2015). However, there are tactics that the YouTubers are developing to bypass these limitations. This includes using key words that would be quickly picked by the YouTube algorithms as well as using clickbait titles. The essence of this approach is for them to build bigger communities from which they can look at alternative means of marketisation (Burgess and Green, 2018).

This thesis and its findings are significant for several reasons. Firstly, the thesis addresses a research gap by exploring a topic (female Malawian YouTubers) that has not been extensively studied before, highlighting its novelty. Secondly, it adds to the broader body of knowledge by focusing on this specific group, shedding light on their unique experiences within the YouTube landscape, which contributes depth and nuance to existing literature on YouTube content creators. Furthermore, it expands on previous studies of black African women in YouTube by specifically investigating female Malawian YouTubers, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the African YouTube community.

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In this eighth edition of the Excellent MSc Dissertation series, five students present condensed versions of their Master's theses, completed for the MSc degree in Media and Communication Studies at Lund University. These students presented their dissertations in May 2023 and earned the highest mark. During the Fall of 2023, the dissertations were revised to a shorter length of 14,000 words for publication in the series Förtjänstfulla examensarbeten i medie- och kommunikationsvetenskap (FEA). The series was launched by Media and Communication Studies at Lund University in 2008 to increase the visibility and reward high quality student research.

Separately and together, the five contributions in this book exemplify what staff at the Department of Communication and Media consider to comprise an excellent dissertation at the Master's level. In Chapter 1, L. Leão Alves broadens our understanding of media representation through an analysis of male queer engagement with the popular podcast series My Dad Wrote a Porno. In Chapter 2, Klara Avsec explores the framing and alliance-building strategies of deplatformed far-right activists on Telegram. In Chapter 3, Yunshan Jiang dissects relationships between queer drama series characters and their LGBTQ+ fans through interviews and a poetic analysis of Killing Eve. In Chapter 4, Anna Ledro examines the concept of believability in the Depp v. Heard trial through a content analysis of TikToks and interviews with Gen Z women. In Chapter 5, Mercy Malikwa analyzes the everyday representations and power struggles of female Malawian YouTubers through a document review and production interviews with these content creators.

Our aim in publishing this book is to inspire future students to be inquisitive, innovative, and rigorous in their research projects. The ability to understand the social world is uniquely human, and novel perspectives and cases like the ones included here deftly illustrate our knowledge building capacity.