JUE

The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography

Volume 12 Issue 1

ISSN 2369-8721

EDITORIAL board

Cover Photography: Stills from an Instagram video from @paint.officiel of Sarah, a queer Muslim woman. Captions read "I am queer and Muslim" and "You can be both." Image courtesy of Trinidad Lara, used with permission from Sarah.

Designer: Inlet Communications,
NS, Canada, 2017

The JUE is hosted at Dalhousie University Libraries through the Open Journal Systems platform.

Dalhousie University sits on unceded Mi'kmaq territory.

TABLE of contents

TABLE of contents

The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography

The Duty of Love: Kinship and Identity in the Face of Disability in Madrid

Marina Mateo

University of Cambridge—mm2343@cam.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Life with a disability in Spain implies a constant struggle not just for the person with disabilities but also for their family, who must mobilise enough care resources to compensate for the lack of social support they receive. This paper focuses on the ways in which having a family member with a cognitive disability shapes kinship relations, and how the impact related to having a family member with a disability shapes the construction of the family unit as well as the identity of the able-bodied family members. I argue that the narrative of "unconditional love" within the family unit is what enables many families to naturalise the extra work involved in caring for a person with disabilities as part of what it means to be a family – and not as a chore. Care becomes the idiom of their love as it acts as a relational activity through which personhood is created. By humanising the child with disabilities in this way, care is accepted as a "natural" part of their kinship relations.

Keywords: kinship; disability; care; moral values

Life with a disability in Spain, despite its recognition as one of the most inclusive European countries by the International Disability Rights Monitor (IDRM 2017, i), still carries troublesome implications not just for the person with disabilities themselves but also for their family. While Spain has ratified practically all international protections available to safeguard people with disabilities (IDRM 2007, 444), the dissimilarities between regional governments, the aggressive and long-lasting effects of the economic crisis that overwhelmed Spain during the last decade (CERMI 2017, 9), and the difficulties involved in accessing bureaucratised social aid in Western states (Rapp and Ginsburg 2001) have created a situation where, beyond mere legislation, the responsibility of assuring the welfare of people with disabilities falls onto the family unit. This mostly encompasses the mothers, fathers, and siblings of children with disabilities. The Spanish family, despite its changing nature during the past few decades towards smaller and more diverse models (Fundación Adecco 2019, 8), has maintained its role as the main place where social and moral values are shaped and shared. Familial relations, when faced with disability, face particularly difficult demands since the great majority of them do not receive enough state support to normalise their life.

Having to rely on their own efforts to ensure the care of their relatives with disabilities, families often experience emotional, social, professional and economic challenges (Fundación Adecco 2019, 8-9). Having a family member with a disability not only reduces the family's standard of living but contributes to feelings of despair and failure. In this sense, the families of children with disabilities constitute a unique social group with their own distinctive problems, needs, and experiences. These come from having to carry what I, following my informants, term the "extra weight" of disability. The situation of these families has been overlooked in favour of an isolating focus on the person with disabilities themselves, not just in academic literature but also in the legislation itself, where there is a notorious lack of consideration for the families of children with disabilities (Alvarez Ramirez 2015, 11).

This paper focuses on how cognitive disability (McKearney and Zoanni 2018, 6) can affect family relations, and how the impact related to having a family member who has disabilities shapes the construction of the family unit as well as the identities of the individual able-bodied family members. Commonly referred to as "special families" (*familias especiales*) in Spain, it is common to hear the families of people with disabilities and their friends say that disability deeply transforms the lives of all touched by it, making them "better" people (*mejores personas*). I began my fieldwork curious to see how disability transforms kinship relations in practice.

My fieldwork took place during July and August of 2020 in a predominantly middle-class area in Western Madrid, Spain, amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Having grown up in Madrid, I was able to get in touch with six different families by asking friends and teachers if they knew anyone who had a relative with a disability. The four families I selected had the "typical" family structure in the area: heterosexual parents with at least two children and white-collar jobs. However, the fact that they also have a child with a disability differentiates them. An exploration of these families offers a comparative perspective among people from the same social stratus. I demonstrate that, despite not having identical lives, they ended up having very similar experiences due to one of their children having a disability. I introduce the families during the text according to the topics covered in interviews to compare the ways they encountered a shared set of challenges.

To respect their wishes for anonymity, I changed my informants' names and limited the number of details provided about their lives outside of their kinship relationships. I did not conduct interviews with people with disabilities or minors due to their inability to obtain informed consent. While I was only able to interview the family members online at first, the alleviation of the Covid-19 measures by the middle of the summer meant that I was able to meet two of the families in person and carry out participant observation within the family home on those occasions.

The Álvarez family (Figure 1) is comprised of Diana and Daniel, the parents, and five children. I mainly talk about Dada, who has a cognitive disability, and Lorena, the eldest sister. The Benito family (Figure 2) consists of the mother and widow Laura and her children: Lucía and her twin Adri, who has disabilities. The Cortés family (Figure 3) is made up of Alicia and her husband, and their three daughters: Greta, who has disabilities, a middle sister, and Alejandra. The Diaz's (Figure 4) parents are divorced. I was able to meet the father, Alonso, whose eldest daughter, Sol, has disabilities. Their youngest daughter is a minor.

I had not anticipated the deep transformation that disability provoked in the families, going beyond just their kinship relations to encompass the whole of their identity, both as a family and as individuals. The term "unconditional love" has been used by Landsman (1999) to describe how families relate to their children with disabilities. I was surprised to find my informants using the equivalent phrase in Spanish (*amor incondicional*) to refer to the devotion they experience for their relative with disabilities. I make understanding this idea of "unconditional love" for one's family central to the paper. I argue that its importance within the family unit is that it enables the families to naturalise the extra weight of disability care as part of what it means to be a family—and not as a chore.

Dealing with grief

Greta's mother, Alicia Diaz, told me that before her daughter was born, she wrote a poem for her. The first verse said "*Te tenemos preparada una cuna de paja y un mundo major*" (we have a straw cot and a better world ready for you). Greta's complicated birth was initially thought to have caused her disability, but it was later discovered to be genetic. Her mother remembers giving birth as the moment where both her and her daughter were irreparably "broken," and so the better world that she had wanted for her daughter did not have a place for "someone like her." Instead, only the warm cot that was her loving family was waiting for her. Her cognitive disability not only destroyed all the dreams and hopes that Greta's family had for her, but it also tied Greta to them in an unusual way, as she became an obligation that no one had expected. Greta's mother recalls how accepting her family's new situation was a long process.

In this section I will explore how parents narrated to me their initial reaction when they found out their child had a cognitive disability, which I understand to be marked by grief. This grief, I will argue, originates from a sense of failure to comply to normative models of the family and from the fear linked to the lifelong difficulty of caring for a child with special needs. Parents often exchange their normative ideals of parenthood for their own unique model of what successful parenting means when you have a child with disabilities. For my informants, this means maintaining the happiness and wellbeing of their child despite their disability.

Rapp and Ginsburg's (2001, 537) account of parents whose children have a cognitive disability in the United States highlights the lack

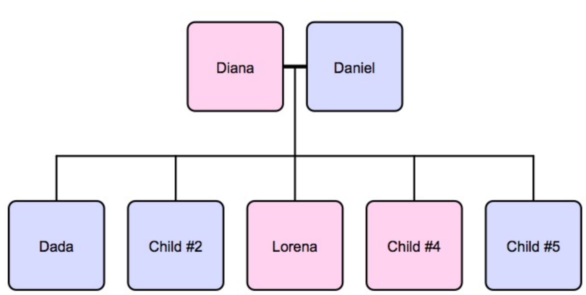
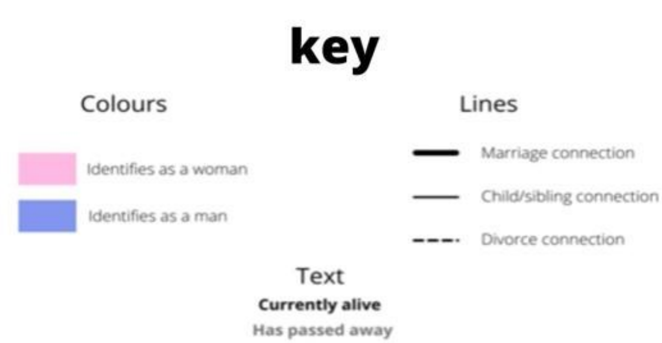


Figure 1: Alvarez Family Tree



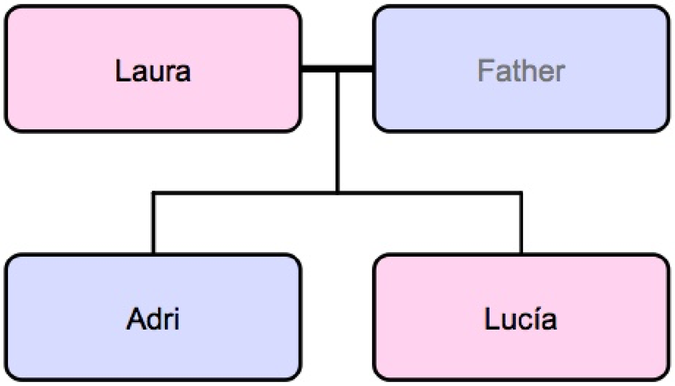


Figure 2: Benito Family Tree

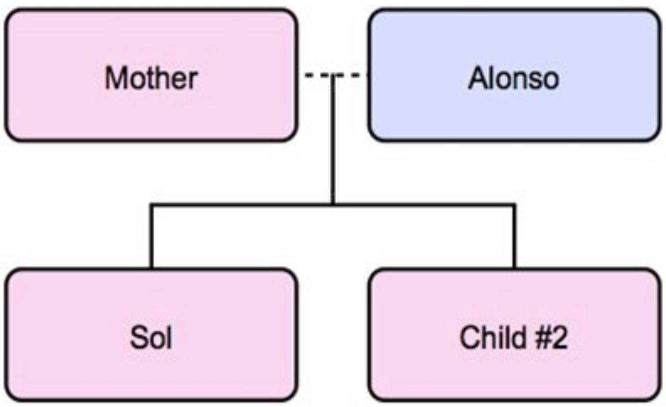


Figure 3: Cortes Family Tree

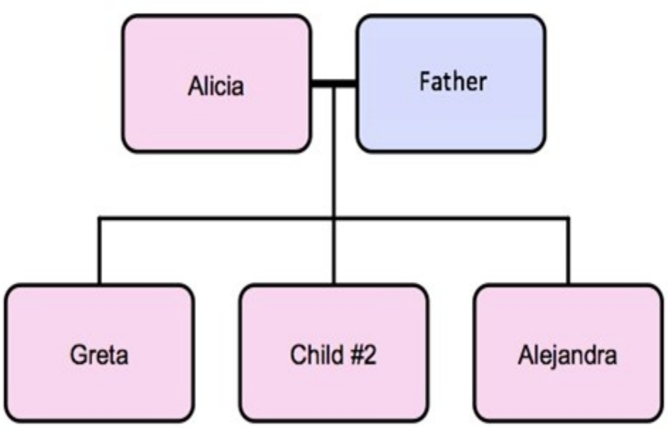


Figure 4: Diaz Family Tree

of attention that people with disabilities receive from the state. The care of people with disabilities, they argue, falls onto their families in a disproportioned manner when compared to able-bodied children. The difficulties involved in mobilising not just medical (Mattingly 2010, 55), therapeutic and social support, but also constant supervision and care for a child with disabilities is feared by most families, since it is identified as an added obligation that overwhelms many families financially and psychologically. A cognitive disability diagnosis, I argue, carries with it the destruction of all the expectations that the family had for their new child and marks them as an unwanted responsibility. Furthermore, the stigmatisation of dependent persons in liberal societies who place a high value on independent and self-reliant individuals (Kittay 2019, 147; McKearney 2020, 2), means that families must come to terms with the lifelong lack of social recognition endured by their relatives with disabilities (Taylor 2010, 42).

Alicia: Replacing grief with the success of a strong support network

Alicia explained in our first meeting that Greta's diagnosis "broke" her. In Spanish, it is usual to define traumatic experiences as capable of "breaking" (*romper*) a person, in the sense that their emotional wellbeing is severely damaged, like a "broken heart" that encompasses the whole of one's life. For many years, she blamed her own inexperience as a mother and her choice to give birth abroad for her daughter's disability. Alicia's narrative of Greta's first few years was marked by her deep sense of failure to produce a child "like everyone else's." She linked that grief to her difficulty to find pride and satisfaction in a child that developed atypically. Despite loving her fiercely, she admits that her daughter's disability created a feeling of rejection for her daughter that manifested as a parental breakdown. However, she slowly started to learn to "live with it" by finding pride in Greta's slow development, seeing her daughter's undying happiness as proof of her hard work as a mother. Alicia told me that knowing she had been able to secure a dignified life for her daughter, through what she sees as long-lasting safety, protection, and happiness, gives her an immense sense of victory.

Alicia's initial feeling of defeat is linked to a social failure to fully include people with disabilities into a community (Rapp and Ginsburg 2001, 541), which is evidenced in the difficulties families go through to assure their children have access to the resources needed to guarantee their ability to live an autonomous life beyond the care of their parents. Alicia expressed feeling guilty for bringing a child into a world "not made for her."

I met Alicia's youngest daughter, Alejandra, who told me she used to compare herself to a "test-tube baby" that is born to save her sibling from a genetic illness. However, on this occasion, she was meant to save Greta from the social abandonment that surrounds people with disabilities whose families are not able to care for them. Both Biehl (2005) and Taylor (2010, 36) have described how institutionalisation can not only entail social isolation, but also "social death." Alicia and Alejandra feared this fate for Greta. They both regularly volunteer at a shelter for disabled elderly women, and they fear that Greta could end up alone and defenceless in a shelter due to her inability to express and defend herself. Alejandra refuses to "abandon" Greta in a place she doesn't know, so she has planned her future around her eldest sister.

Once Alicia felt confident in Alejandra's guarantees to care and support Greta after her parents die, she was able to come to terms with the fact that her daughter's life is not "tragic, just a bit harder." Being able to keep Greta in an environment where she is comfortable and loved has been Alicia's main goal since her daughter was born. Succeeding despite the added difficulty makes her feel accomplished in her role as a mother.

Diana and Alonso: Overcoming physical illness and turning grief into hope

The sense of success at seeing one's child develop happily in a safe environment is shared by the parents of two of my informant families: Diana and her husband Daniel, and Alonso. They each have a child with disabilities. I met both through my former schoolteacher and was surprised by the similarities of their experiences despite the difference in age of their children with disabilities. Therefore, their situations are better understood when presented together. Diana's son Dada and Alonso's daughter Sol were both born with considerable health complications. Despite not knowing each other, they both told me how at first their life as parents was marked by going to doctors and worrying about a child whose future was not certain. They both emphasised how the physical side of their children's difficulties was the most terrifying part.

Twenty years ago, Sol was born with birth defects that complicated her chances at survival, making her first two years of life full of hospital visits and medical scares. Alonso narrated to me his previous experience as a parent of an ill child as more disturbing and frightening than the time he had a physically healthy yet disabled daughter. Once Sol's health stabilised, Alonso and his ex-wife discovered she had a cognitive disability as well. But Alonso recalls that they were able to accept this reality quite quickly because this was not a life-threatening condition for their daughter. "This was secondary, if she's already overcome the other [health complications], well... maybe she can keep improving." Sol's disability was therefore met as any other complication that may make a child's life slightly more difficult, but not as something disastrous. His testimony is similar to Landsman's (2009, 157) concept of hope for mothers of children with disabilities, as the sentiment that makes them see beyond their children's diagnosis to consider that development and progress are a viable option. The fact that Sol had the opportunity to live and "keep improving" and developing was appreciated by her parents, who gladly took the added responsibility of having a child with disabilities whose body had already showed the potential of being "fixable" (Mattingly 2010, 60) to some extent. The grief provoked by her previous health problems was replaced by a sense of hope that was too strong to be weakened by her new diagnosis. Sol's chance at life and her potential for improvement was enough to maintain this hope, regardless of how different that life would be compared to the "perfect babies" (Landsman 1999, 139) most people have.

On the other hand, Diana and Daniel's son's health problems were related to his disability from the very beginning. Diana and Daniel were inexperienced parents and felt overwhelmed by the difficulties of their son's health. Once Dada started at his "special education" school and combined his frequent doctor's appointments with motor and social stimulation, his parents were able to see him improve not just medically but also psychologically and physically. Being able to provide enough care for Dada, coming both from themselves and from health professionals, therapists, and teachers, contributed to a sense of achievement felt by Dada's parents, who experienced his improvement as a familial accomplishment. Even though Dada's disability is still completely life-changing for the family in terms of the care it requires, the fact that they can now do many family activities that they could not do before, such as going to a restaurant, consolidates the family's efforts to make Dada's life as normal and happy as possible.

The three families I introduced in this section narrate their experience of parenthood as a journey that took them from an initial reaction of grief and a sense of failure as a family (linked not just to the inability to produce a "normal" child, but also to the struggle involved in mobilising the resources that are crucial to guarantee a dignified life for a person with disabilities and are rarely provided by the state) to a process of acceptance of the disability and mending of the parents' sense of self. This involves not only a shift in their sense of what chances their child has of a meaningful life, but also a redefinition of what a "meaningful life" (*vida digna*) is in the first place. This leads to a change in what "success" in their parenting endeavours mean. Furthermore, the shift they describe has not simply affected their child's life but also their understanding of the meaning of parenthood.

The extra weight

By using the term "extra weight," families refer to the time, resources and emotional burden that goes into raising and ensuring the happiness of a child with disabilities. These responsibilities are usually not present when raising able-bodied children. Families try to manage the extra weight by framing their care as "unconditional love" to justify happily taking on this extra weight while "humanising" (Aulino 2016, 92) their child.

Madrilenian ideas about what humanises the subject of care focus on what my informant Alicia called "vida digna," which can be most accurately translated as a life that, by being meaningful and dignified, is worth living. While my informants expressed how unconditional love, for the child and for the whole family, manifest as an obligation to care for everyone, it is important to emphasise that this care is intended as the tool to create the dignity that they believe everyone should experience despite their cognitive abilities.

After she started to notice that something was "wrong" with Greta, Alicia and her husband took the baby to numerous doctors who, unable to fully diagnose her, told her parents there was no chance of improvement, leaving them with the whole burden of Greta's care. The family narrates the struggle of raising Greta as a weight that exclusively fell on their own efforts. Still, these narrations should not be seen exclusively as a representation of the facts, but as a "scene" (Mattingly 2010, 44) that is morally weighted, and in a sense, agentive. Alicia's "storytelling narrative" (Mattingly 2010, 49) strongly influences both how the present is lived and how future action is anticipated. Her focus on her family's social hardship and their exceptional willingness to fight for Greta represent not just her present experience but also the reality that will perpetually shape her life: "It's like I have to do everything twice. I always carry around an extra weight, but I do it gladly because it is not her fault, and someone has to do it." Her identification of her care responsibilities with the physical experience of carrying weight can be compared with Aulino's account of long-term care as an embodied practice that is habituated through a ritualistic performance of acts of care (Aulino 2016, 81).

Laura, the mother of Adri, and member of the fourth and final family that I present, agreed with Alicia. She indicated that every decision she makes must take her son Adri into consideration, especially since her husband passed away. "Even when I want to meet with my friends," she complained, "I have to think about who is going to stay with Adri." Keeping their children with disabilities entertained, busy, and safe is always in the background of Alicia's and Laura's thoughts. Therefore, balancing family life becomes harder, due to the necessity of giving up certain aspects of it to ensure the proper care of the child with disabilities.

Adri's twin sister Lucía expressed that she has always had a hard time accepting his condition. This is because the extra attention her parents paid to Adri took away from the attention they paid to her. Her mother recalls seeing a video of their seventh birthday where everyone was singing happy birthday to Adri and Lucía was just standing alone at the side. Although Laura feels guilty about Lucía's occasional feelings of abandonment and is actively trying to balance her attention to the twins now that she doesn't have the help of her husband, she believes focusing on Adri and not Lucía was inevitable due to the level of exhaustion that comes with having twins. The twins are now twenty years old, and the conflict still arises occasionally. When I talked to Laura the first time, she still felt guilty about the last conflict between Adri and Lucía, where she noticed Lucía ended up crying due to her brother ruining her end-of-exams dinner, because he insisted on picking up their mother from her painting class and got lost on the way. Had Laura told Adri not to come, Laura confessed, they would have been able to enjoy dinner together.

However, Laura argued that convincing Adri would have been exhausting and she chose to let him walk to her class, despite knowing it would make them a bit late. However, she said that she did not expect Adri to get lost and 'ruin the dinner' altogether. While her children were not present in this interview, I noticed that she still felt like she needed to defend her role as a good mother, not just to me but also to herself. The difficulties that she experiences to hold the "extra weight," therefore, often become too much to handle when they are combined with the rest of her familial obligations. Situations such as this one test Laura's ability to act as her idea of a "good mother," producing the guilt that marks her narrations.

Lucía's narration of the event follows similar lines: while she says she recognises her mother often gets exhausted when dealing with Adri, she resents that her brother made it so difficult for her mother to manage that situation. Despite her conflictive relationship with her brother, Lucía said she knows that he cannot help needing extra care. Therefore, she tries to be patient with him and find other spaces outside of her family where the focus is on her. The twins went to the same school, where Lucía says she became "Adri's sister" for everyone, instead of being regarded individually. This shaped her identity at school, where Lucía believes she was her brother's "shadow." Nevertheless, she eventually found a group of friends outside of school that noticed her individuality. Laura and Lucía both believe this friendship is what shaped her daughter and allowed her to fully express herself outside of an environment where she was just another caretaker for her brother.

Similarly, Dada's sister, Lorena, describes her bond with him as a "love-hate" relationship. Her childhood and teenage years were full of things she could not do because either her or her parents had to take care of her brother and couldn't afford the distraction. Her mother, Diana, told me that waiting to get attention until Dada was settled and satisfied was a very frequent event for their able-bodied children. "If they had a headache or were hungry, they had to wait until we were done taking care of Dada to let us know."

However, as Lorena grew up, she realised her relationship with Dada had made her patient and loving, qualities that shape how she acts beyond her family. She told me she has come to appreciate Dada's affectionate nature and instead of blaming him for his occasional violent outbursts, she learned that they are part of who he is: someone worthy of her love despite needing a different kind of it. Diana believes the experience of living with a sibling who has disabilities made her younger children more independent, avoiding a heavy reliance on her and her husband and forcing them to do things by themselves, which has developed their ability to be self-sufficient and creative when dealing with difficulties. Diana said that despite them getting slightly less individualised attention than what she believes other children get, her children have always had their needs and wants covered. She told me how her husband and her always made sure to take them to extracurricular activities and sports.

Diana's perspective, however, needs to be understood as an effort to rationalise the impossibility of being the perfect mother for her able-bodied children even when she did her best. Her daughter Lorena lived the situation quite differently. She remembers feeling very frustrated when she was a kid since there were many things they could not do as a family, such as going out for a meal or visiting her friends' families. She resented both her brother and her parents, but she told me that as she grew up, she began to agree that her parents did their best in a hard situation.

As well as changing the dynamics of the relationship between parents and their able-bodied children, a disability also creates a distinctive relationship between the person with disabilities and their family members. Alicia told me that an able-bodied child offers parents care, company, support, and social status linked to their success in life. This, in turn, is understood as a result of their parents' efforts in raising them. Their relationship is thus shaped by a reciprocity that is understood as originating from "familial love," which includes the children's obligations to give back to their parents in both companionship and social and financial backing. While this is an unspoken expectation, most Spanish children would agree that if one *loves* their parents, they must return the care they received in childhood as their parents get older. It is very normal to hear parents joking and asking their children not to be "sent to a care home" once they are old since they were "good to them" when they were little. Spanish people tend to pity care home residents. They are perceived to have been "abandoned" by their children, who "didn't love them enough" (*no les quieren lo suficiente*) to care for them. While it is commonly known that there are many other reasons for an elder to end up in a care home, even my own Spanish parents have jokingly made me promise to never send them to a care home regardless of the situation. My "job" as their daughter is to reciprocate the care I have received, even if this is not stated explicitly.

However, the relationship a parent has with a child with disabilities is completely different: "a[n able bodied child] steals a few years of your life, and then develops, becomes free and flies away," Alicia described, "but this is a child that doesn't fly, you're always dealing with the level of dependence of a baby." Therefore, a child with a disability does not offer the opportunity to rely on them as one gets older, which is something Alicia misses from her eldest daughter. Specifically, Alicia believes Greta would have become an emotional support for her mother. Alejandra, the family's youngest daughter, also misses that from Greta. The relationship she has with Greta resembles the asymmetrical one Greta has with her mother, instead of what she understands to be a usual relationship between sisters: a reciprocal "friendship" based on mutual understanding. Therefore, while Alicia and Alejandra are "sacrificing" their time and energy caring for Greta, Greta cannot give this back.

Therefore, caring for a child with disabilities, as my informants frame it, acts as a true sacrifice that is not desired, yet performed anyway (Mattingly 2010, 63) out of what my informants call "love" for their child. In this relationship of care receiving care back stops mattering. Thus, my informants frame the extra weight as a sacrifice, narrating the resource of "unconditional love" as something absolute: even when parents don't expect to get anything in return for their enormous efforts, they do not feel any hesitation to perform it. In other words, their narration of love portrays it as an unconditional reality because it is maintained even through a lack of reciprocity.

The situation of the siblings is very similar. While it is true that their moral and legal obligations towards the child with disabilities are not as strong as their parents' for most of their lives, it is worth noting that they also feel the extra weight falling on them, both as current secondary carers and as future primary carers when their parents get old. While they complained about missing out on the experience of having a sibling who relates to their own experience and can offer advice and friendship, the siblings I interviewed take on the duty to support not just their sibling, but also to help their parents. In other words, the reciprocity they offer their parents also includes taking the weight of the responsibility for the child with disabilities off their shoulders. The siblings' narrations explicitly mention that this is mostly done out of love for their sibling, towards whom they feel an enormous sense of obligation and protection. However, in my few visits I observed how my informants' interactions with their parents suggest that siblings take care of their parents, in part, by relieving them of responsibility. Often, the children openly offered to help when their parents seemed overwhelmed. The fact that they add this consideration to the usual reciprocal relationship Spanish people have with their parents is felt as an imbalance in the relationship since they also receive less attention. The feelings of frustration, resentment and anger that some of my informants experience towards their parents also are best understood in relation to this. Children are aware that by replacing their parent in a situation of care, they lower their extra weight. And while they see this as the "right" thing to do, it also creates an imbalance that can either be justified through the narrative of unconditional love or lead to anger. It is worth noticing how the unconditional love narrative therefore affects the whole of their familial relationships, not just those that include the child with disabilities.

The relationship among the family members of a child with disabilities is therefore narrated in terms of what I term the 'extra weight' of their care. The distribution of this weight, and how it is lifted from some members, shapes their relations of reciprocity. While the parents sacrifice considerable time and energy caring for the child with disabilities singlehandedly, trying to offer their other children a chance at a 'normal' life, their able-bodied children use the lifting of the weight off their parents' shoulders to give back for these efforts. The fact that their childhoods were often lived as constrained despite their parents' best efforts can be a source of frustration. Furthermore, the true sacrifice that families offer to their child with disabilities is often justified in terms of the love they feel for them. Thus, this use of unconditional love as a resource to manage their situation means that that they are willing to redirect their lives and change their own model of the family to assure a full integration of the child with disabilities into family relations and to cope with their unwanted situation by naturalising it. I will explore both issues in the next two sections.

A holistic family unit

Dada's father, Daniel, emphasised their family's distinction from the members of a usual Madrilenian family who independently forge their own futures. Normally, he argued, Madrilenian middle-class parents like him raise their children to be able to live independently from their care once they grow up. A big part of his experience as a parent has been shaped by being able to adapt to this difference. Alicia's testimony conforms to this concept. She defined raising able-bodied children as a process of sacrificing a few years of your life so that your children can ultimately "separate from you and fly away." Both Alicia and Daniel imagine their family's situation as different from the regular Madrilenian family because their children with disabilities "never fly away."

Robbins' (2013) study of social ideologies as shaped by a "paramount value" (Dumont 1977) that encompasses other less central values, helps articulate how the families I interviewed are so cohesive and inter-reliant. I argue that typical, able-bodied Madrilenian families follow a moral code based on self-sufficiency and independence where they each work for their own personal good. Parents achieve their goals when their child is independent because that makes them personally a good parent. Children, equally, succeed in their role as sons and daughters once they are able to leave the parental home and form a new family unit sustained by their own career, since it shows that they have grown up to take a "proper" place in society instead of becoming a 'failure' (*un fracasado*). While it is true that the "soft" individualism present in Madrid does not create totally independent people, familial relationships are based on individualistic yet reciprocal roles where parents try to teach their children to do well in life without their guidance or help.

Families with a member who has disabilities, however, work in a distinctive way. My informants raise their able-bodied children to be somewhat independent by getting a job and moving out, but they do not expect nor want them to "fly away." Instead, they try to raise children who will fly alongside them and their sibling who has disabilities, contributing to their care and wellbeing until they finally become their primary carers. Independence is only useful for their families to the point where it contributes to the overall maintenance of the family. For example, getting a job would be beneficial for the family as it would help with the financial aspects of care. Moving out, similarly, would allow parents to reduce their housework through the reduction in the size of their household. In Madrid, it is typical to move to a different town or neighbourhood within the province to start a separate life from one's family. However, all of my informants want to keep living very close to each other so that the person with disabilities can travel between households, to ensure the responsibility of their care keeps is distributed among the family members. Thus, while it is true that my informants strive towards their individual success, this value can conflict with the more cohesive and holistic set of values that the family unit is working towards. They never fully dissolve the family unit, and they always keep contributing towards the care of the child with disabilities. Once the parents grow old and are unable to keep up with their care responsibilities, their able-bodied children become the guardians and primary carers of the sibling who has disabilities. In my interactions with the families, I noted that their level of commitment to the child with disabilities creates a cohesive family unit that collaborates to ensure the wellbeing of that sibling. I observed the families to be completely in sync in their care, working together through their kinship roles for what I clearly noted was the family's main duty: the care of the child with disabilities. They organize their family schedule, outings, individual social events, and even the layout of their house, in a way that ensures that the child with disabilities can live the best life possible. They exhibit some features of Dumont's (1977) holism, since they are using their roles collaboratively to work towards the family's overall benefit. In Lorena's words, their "whole life revolves around Dada." Looking at my experiences with the other families, I am certain that this is shared by all.

Thus, my informants' family unit has distanced itself from the typical Madrilenian individualistic stance towards a more holistic position in life due to their care responsibilities, which forces them to work collaboratively and cohesively to prevent their family unit from collapsing. Thus, their family life becomes an integrated whole. The life of my informants is not just oriented but ultimately devoted to the care of the family member who has disabilities in a way that maximises the wellbeing of the entire family. The families of children with disabilities become holistic to the point where they live as a unit that plan every aspect of their lives around the capacities of the member who has disabilities, oftentimes forgetting their own wants and needs for the benefit of the member who has disabilities and the family as a whole.

The shaping of the self

Despite the added responsibilities and worries that come with caring for a child with disabilities, I was surprised to see how all the families I interviewed did not narrate the extra weight of care as a burden but as a moral duty. They discussed how care has become something natural for their relationship as kin, and how that relationship has changed who they are as a person. The duty of care that my informants feel towards their child with disabilities not only changes the obligations that are naturalised in a certain kinship relations, but also redefines and shapes the selfhood of those involved. This is caused by a change in the concept of love that shapes kinship relations, going from what both my informants and I considered to be the usual reciprocal love of regular Spanish kinship relations during our conversations, to the unconditional love they described. Through unconditional love, my informants make care a relational activity by establishing it as a part of the duty of love that is included in kinship relations, and thus humanise their children with disabilities as relational people.

Other anthropologists have explored how the use of the resource of "unconditional love" to manage relationships between mothers and their children with disabilities can influence familial relationships. Landsman's (1999) work in the United States covers the transformation that American mothers undergo due to having to care for a child with disabilities, becoming what she describes as "special." Rejecting the idea that children with disabilities are born into "special" families that are destined to care for them, Landsman (1999) explores how the "specialness" held by her informants is not something that happens a priori, but rather it develops gradually as the family learns to care for the child. Mothers say that children with disabilities offer them the gift of the knowledge of unconditional love in exchange for their care, and generally make them better people who can love without expectations and who have put things in perspective, reassessing their own moral values (Landsman 1999, 146). Similarly, Mattingly (2010, 63) describes this process as a transformative journey that the families of children with disabilities undergo as they get older. Following the logic of a "quest" (Frank in Mattingly 2010, 63), the transformative journey entails a transformation of the person, the family, and sometimes the larger community.

This transformative journey allows families to recognise their children with disabilities as people who relate in a *different* way, rather than people who primarily *do not* relate in a reciprocal way. My informants live in a social world where the obligation to care for their child is exclusively theirs—like it is for all families. But their child with disabilities requires more care. Thus, they imagine this added struggle as an "extra weight," to recognise the difficulty and the difference, instead of pretending to be the same as other able-bodied families. However, to imagine the weight as a tragedy and a burden risks dehumanising their child with disabilities—thus, making them feel worse about the obligation they have, and their difference from other families. Through their transformative moral journey, they create ideas about the "specialness" of the person with disabilities, changing them from a burden into a blessing, and from someone who is outside of the community to someone who relates. The families see their child with disabilities' agency as originating from the emotional and sensitive, rather than the rational, which makes their relationship feel actively genuine and truthful. Caring for their children with disabilities has changed the way they conceptualise family relations, as well as the way they understand love and ethics to work. Their own identity both as a family member and as an individual has been affected by having a disability present in their family.

Greta's sister Alejandra told me that loving someone means accepting who they are, which includes "their strengths and weaknesses." The fact that Greta is a "special person," she argued, means that she needs special care that they have had to adapt to daily life. However, she does not see this as an obligation, but as the expression of her love for Greta. Greta is often described as being "full of pure love" for everyone around her, which she proves through the few words she knows and through her emotional behaviour. Greta has "taught them to love her unconditionally," and to express this through the care they provide to her. "Caring for her is also loving her." Alejandra compares the situation to her parents adapting their lifestyles to adapt to their other sister and Alejandra when they were born. Because every child introduces a change into the family's life and each needs a certain type of care, she told me, part of their role as kin is to care for each other in the way they need. The fact that Greta's care "weighs" more on their shoulders expands their kinship relations to include her care as a relational activity inherent to them. Greta's mother Alicia has seen the unconditional love that her daughter has taught her permeate most areas of her social life, to the point where being a carer has become part of her identity. Not only does she care for Greta full time, but she also volunteers at a local residence for disabled women, assists her elderly mother, and helps many other people financially. When talking to her, I noticed that her attitude was very affectionate, involved and maternal with everyone present, including me. This led me to think that Alicia places such great value in giving unconditional love to her daughter Greta that she has internalised it to the point where it permeates her whole identity.

Anthropological approaches to moral self-fashioning, understood as the way people create and recreate their selves during their life, can help us understand my informants' narration of identity modification throughout their experience. In Foucault's genealogy of ethics, he argues that rather than being dominated by strict moral rules that disallow any individuality, people self-fashion themselves as moral beings. This process, also known as subjectivation, is done with freedom within the resources of the particular contexts in which one finds oneself (Foucault, 2000). While Butler's (1999) well-known notion of performativity is useful to understand subjectivation as something that happens through repeated performance, Mahmood (2005) adds that performativity must be understood as having a cumulative character, slowly building until the virtue is naturalised. While the care rituals described by Aulino (2016, 81) limit the habituation of care to bodily practices, I have observed how care is naturalised into the morality of my informants as well as into their practices, permeating all aspects of their selves.

My informants' kinship experiences correlate with Mahmood's notion of cumulative self-fashioning. Since the moral self is "learned and negotiated" (Mattingly 2014, 64) in life's most important domains, it is understandable that kinship relations in Spain, where the family unit is the foundation of social life, can influence my informants' self to such an extent. Thus, Lorena's account of her love-hate relationship with Dada shows how it slowly turned into a completely loving relationship as she grew older and realised how important everything he taught her was for her identity. Despite the difficulties her family had to secure Dada's care while caring for their four other children, Lorena said she would not change her upbringing. Through the example set by her parents and her older brother, Lorena has cumulatively internalised a sense of doing things because "it is what is right" or "it is what you have to/are supposed to do." "I must have heard those two sentences a thousand times," she told me, "and truthfully, they're right." Her parents uttered those same sentences when referring to her moral responsibilities as a sister when she was growing up, which included helping her siblings, both Dada and her younger siblings. Therefore, she sees caring for Dada as equivalent to caring for any of her siblings, because he is "a member of our family like any other."

Nevertheless, Lorena acknowledged that this was not always the case, the extra weight involved in raising Dada used to be something that bothered her as she felt like she was being robbed of some experiences that her classmates enjoyed. However, she thinks that "whether we wanted it or not," the desire to care for Dada has slowly but surely grown inside of her and her other able-bodied siblings. In other words, their continued relationship with Dada has stopped feeling like a chore or duty and started feeling natural as they become habituated to values that have not only changed the way they understand their role as a sibling but also their identity as a whole, as their values permeate all aspects of their social life. The naturalisation of unconditional love to their kinship roles enables the families to incorporate care into the relational activities that are inherent to being a sibling or a parent, which humanises Dada by making him a relational member of the family like any other. Lorena argued that her family is tied together by a bond that justifies their responsibilities. Without that bond, none of the value learning and internalisation would have been required. When asked about the bond's exact meaning, my informants emphasised that what makes this bond remarkable is the fact that they are *family*. Kinship for them, therefore, comes with certain expectations tied to that bond. Lorena's family did not just teach her the usual Madrilenian values, she believes, but they also included the teaching of values needed to both care for her brother and appreciate his agency as valuable. Both things shaped her subjectivation. Thus, the unconditional love Dada's disability created did not just influence the behaviour of his family members, but it ultimately became so habituated into their moral selves by the cumulative repetition of his care that it became as naturalised as any other kinship duty underlying their roles as parents and siblings. Thus, caring for Dada is experienced as a natural part of the family's kinship relationships, instead of feeling like a chore.

In both Lorena's and Lucía's case, I noticed that they understand caring for their disabled brothers as something taken for granted that they "have to do" because they love their siblings, and it is this bond of love and kinship that justifies their sacrifice and dedication as a family member and makes their duty towards their sibling unnegotiable and unbreakable. In the same way that the naturalisation of unconditional love helps Dada be humanised, it also shapes the extra weight as normal, pushing away the painful notion that the family has had to compromise or lose certain things. Their moral understanding of love as whatever the other person needs is what erases the feeling of burden from the act of care, humanising the sibling who has disabilities rather than seeing him as a burden. The latter would ultimately worsen both of their lives. They are giving love unconditionally and as something that they owe their sibling due to both their relationship duties and all they have learned from them.

Thus, the subjectivation of the family members of children with disabilities is shaped by their experience with disability and care. Learning unconditional love from the child with disabilities provides them with the necessary tools to identify care as the type of love their sibling or child needs. Because loving your family is included in the typical Madrilenian model of kinship, it makes sense that families of children with disabilities not only learn to naturalise the extra weight as something natural to their relationship, but also that the change to their identity is linked to concepts of love. Family members internalise this love, and this process not only shapes their relationship with their family, marked by infinite dedication and patience, but it also shapes how they perceive social relations as a whole, and how they position their self in social spheres. I therefore argue that the subjectivation of their selves based on unconditional love and its values undoubtedly makes families of children with disabilities different beyond the care of their child, since they reorient their whole way of operating towards these values.

Conclusion

The motivation behind the moral transformation originated in my informants' narratives about the enormous sense of moral duty that they feel towards their family. Going back to the quote that introduces the paper, the promise Alicia made to her yet unborn daughter, "we have a straw cot and a better world ready for you," I argue that the families I worked with have felt bound to ensure that they could provide a better world for their children by creating a "cot" (understood as family) so strong that it could compensate for all of the deficiencies of an outside world that they can't change. Seeing their children confined to their family life and rejected by Spanish society, they decided to create that 'better world' in themselves. Lastly, the answer to why these families decided to completely alter their moral world to fit their child with disabilities in it goes beyond their legal obligations as guardians of the child with disabilities and back to the necessity of adopting unconditional love as a mechanism to deal with the extra weight of disability without dehumanising their child. Landsman's (2009) piece quotes the mother of a child with disabilities who, when he was born, wished she "didn't love him" so she would not feel so compelled to make the efforts that raising a child with disabilities involves. Love, for my informants, means accepting the other person for who they are. Thus, when a child with disabilities was born in my informants' families, they had to learn a new way of including someone who exists in a completely different way in their family life. Through this transformative journey, the families overcame the grief that originates from feelings of being different from other families. Care became the idiom of their love as it acts as a relational activity through which personhood is created. By humanising the child with disabilities, care was accepted as a way of loving someone like any other.

Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to my informants for opening their lives to me and sharing their experiences so enthusiastically. The completion of this paper would not have been able without the help of Patrick McKearney. Thank you for supervising my research and supporting me during a crazy year. A debt of gratitude is also owed to my friends and family for listening to my endless worries and cheering along the way. Gracias, de todo corazón.

References

Álvarez Ramírez, Gloria. 2015. *Estudio Sobre Las Necesidades De Las Familias De Personas Con Discapacidad*. Madrid: Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad.

Aulino, Felicity 2016. "Rituals of Care for the Elderly in northern Thailand: Merit, Morality, and the Everyday of Long-term Care." *American Ethnologist* 43(1): 91–102.

Biehl, Joao 2005. *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Butler, Judith 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Comité Español de Representantes de Personas con Discapacidad (CERMI). 2017. *Spain Report 2017: Human Rights And Disability*. Comité Español de Representantes de Personas con Discapacidad.

Dumont, Louis. 1977. *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, Michel. 2000. *Essential works of Foucault, 1954-1984. Vol. 1, Ethics: subjectivity and truth*. Edited by Rabinow, P. Translated by Hurley, R. London: Penguin.

Fundación Adecco. 2019. *Discapacidad Y Familia*. Madrid: Informes Fundación Adecco.

International Disability Rights Monitor. 2007. *Regional Report of Europe*. Chicago: International Disability Network.

Kittay, Eva. 2019. *Learning from My Daughter: The Value and Care of Disabled Minds*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Landsman, Gail Heidi. 2009. *Reconstructing Motherhood and Disability in the Age of "Perfect" Babies*. New York: Routledge.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mattingly, Cheryl. 2014. *Moral Laboratories*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mattingly, Cheryl. 2010. *The Paradox of Hope: Journeys Through a Clinical Borderland*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

McKearney, Patrick. 2020. "What Escapes Persuasion: Why Intellectual Disability Troubles "Dependence" in Liberal Societies." *Medical Anthropology* 40 (2): 155-168.

McKearney, Patrick. and Zoanni, Tyler. 2018. "Introduction: For an Anthropology of Cognitive Disability." *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 36 (1): 1–22.

McKearney, Patrick, 2018. "Receiving the Gift of Cognitive Disability." *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 36(1): 40-60.

Rapp, Rayna, and Ginsburg, Faye D. 2001. "Enabling disability: Rewriting kinship, reimagining citizenship." *Public Culture* 13(3): 533-556.

Robbins, Joel. 2013. "Monism, pluralism, and the structure of value relations." *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3(1): 99–115.

Taylor, Janelle. 2010. "On Recognition, Caring, and Dementia." In A. Mol, I. Moser, & J. Pols (Eds.) *Care in Practice: On Tinkering in Clinics, Homes and Farms*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography

“I have to think for four people”: Belgian Mothers’ Mental Labour during the Coronavirus Lockdowns

Charlotte Reding, Laura Smith

University College Maastricht
c.reding@student.maastrichtuniversity.nl
lm.smith@student.maastrichtuniversity.nl

ABSTRACT

This semester-long study explores the under-researched topic of mental labour among middle-aged Belgian mothers in the context of the coronavirus crisis’ lockdowns. Mental labour refers to the presence of a cognitive burden induced by familial responsibilities, and it is often more prevalent in women than in men. By means of one focus group and six in-depth individual interviews, this research uncovers the different mechanisms that Belgian mothers developed during the first two coronavirus crisis lockdowns to better cope with their mental labour. Through this research, we hope to raise awareness of the mental labour experienced by mothers and highlight the different ways in which gender inequalities are perpetuated in the household, as well as envision how a better balance of tasks performed by men and women can be achieved.

Keywords: mental labour; gender inequality; mothers and family; coronavirus lockdown

"I have to think for four people, including my husband, my children and myself," disclosed Marion, one of our focus group participants. If mothers in a heterosexual family already had to take on most of the organizational management of the household before the coronavirus crisis hit, the consequent lockdowns did not improve their family-related workload. Before the lockdowns, most household chores and organisational tasks in families were performed by mothers, largely because women are expected to take on the caregiver role at home (Daminger 2019). During the lockdown, we anticipated a shift in these set roles and a more equal distribution of tasks could have been expected, since the father and the mother were, in many cases, both spending more time at home. Household labour in the family consists of domestic chores such as doing the laundry, cleaning, and cooking. However, it also includes cognitive tasks that are often overlooked: the invisible work of planning, thinking and anticipating household chores, family activities and needs (Daminger 2019). These cognitive tasks are referred to as mental labour for those who experience it (Daminger 2019). During the lockdown, even when the mother and the father had similar job-related workloads, most of the familial organization was still carried out by the mother (Emma, 2020). The unequal distribution of mental labour in the family was reinforced and highlighted by the fact that even when both parents are at home and have a similar workload for their employment, the mother performs a greater mount of familial labour compared to the father. The unequal distribution of these tasks is unfair; mental labour damages mothers' well-being, life satisfaction, relationship with their partner and their overall experience of motherhood (Luthar & Ciciolla 2015). Because of all of the negative impacts mental labour can have on mothers, investigating this under-researched topic becomes urgent (Robertson et al. 2019). Making it less of an "invisible" phenomenon will help mothers feel supported in their experience of mental labour. Moreover, research on this topic can help advocate for a more equal division of cognitive tasks in the family since mental labour is a form of invisible gender inequality (Daminger 2019). Lastly, raising awareness about mental labour could enable educators and policymakers to be more informed when making policies regarding family life.

Since the interviews were conducted during the second Belgian lockdown (November 2020 to January 2021), the context of this study must be considered. During the interviews, our participants were referring to the first lockdown in Belgium (March to May 2020), as well as the second lockdown which they were experiencing at the time of the interviews. During the lockdowns, mothers had to deal with their employment responsibilities, as well as their familial responsibilities, sometimes without being able to disentangle these tasks. To explore this phenomenon, our research asks how middle-aged Belgian mothers coped with their familial mental labour during the first two coronavirus lockdowns. This research aims to uncover the coping mechanisms mothers developed to deal with their mental labour. To explore these issues, we conducted one focus group and six in-depth individual interviews. This paper first discusses the research methodology, then provides a literature review of existing academic research on the topic before highlighting our different findings: first comes an exploration of how mothers experienced mental labour during the lockdown, second is an analysis of the different coping mechanisms that they developed. Lastly, the conclusion suggests future implications about making the issue of mental labour visible.

Methodology

Our qualitative research is both exploratory and idiographic because we want to explore individual experiences without generalizing. Additionally, we take an interpretive stance because we consider mothers' experiences of mental labour and their daily lives as subjective:

each experience is unique and has its own context.

We chose to interview mothers in heterosexual partnerships as our research explores gender inequality in the division of mental labour in the traditional nuclear family. Our research targeted middle-aged mothers, so we only selected participants between thirty and sixty-five years old. We conducted interviews in French to enable our participants to share their everyday experiences in their native language. As we both have French as our native language, we were also able to better grasp the nuances of their discourse. We gathered participants through convenience sampling by posting a message on Facebook and sending emails to acquaintances. We also used snowball sampling as one of our participants suggested that we interview one of her younger friends. To provide a better understanding of our findings to the reader, here is a brief description of the nine mothers we interviewed:

Helena (52): Helena has four teenagers. Her mental labour has significantly decreased since her divorce. She has a new partner who is more involved in the household.

Natalie (48): Natalie has three teenagers and one adopted child. She does most of the house chores by herself and is the main organiser of the family. Her partner only does the tasks he enjoys and helps with the finances of the family.

Marion (46): Marion has two teenagers. The house chores are quite equally distributed with her partner and her children but she is responsible for the planning of the familial agenda. She is very anxious about all the things she has to think about.

Pauline (30): Pauline has a five-month-old baby. She used to strongly experience mental labour. Lately, she read a comic about mothers' mental labour which made her realise what she was experiencing. She showed the comic to her partner and, since then, he has made conscious efforts to help her more with the family's organisation.

Yaëlle (38): Yaëlle has two small children. Her experience of mental labour improved since the lockdown was established in Belgium. Since then, her partner helps her more with childcare because he does not spend time travelling to work anymore and, therefore, is more present at home.

Gaëlle (63): Gaëlle has five children and three grandchildren. Her experience of mental labour has worsened since she became a grandmother because she feels responsible for taking care of both her children and her grandchildren.

Véronique (54): Véronique has three late teenagers. Before her divorce, she had to take care of everything by herself because her partner was often absent. After her divorce, she struggled because she had to deal with her children on her own for four years. She suffers a lot from the lack of recognition of her children.

Fabienne (58): Fabienne has three children who do not live at home anymore. Since they left the house, her experience of mental labour has improved.

Candice (31): Candice has two small children. Her partner helps her often but she is still in charge of the familial organization. She does not experience mental labour adversely and is very optimistic about life in general.

We conducted one focus group interview with three participants: Helena, Marion and Natalie. The focus group was conducted online due to the Covid-19 restrictions. This focus group provided us with an initial insight into the topic of mental labour. Furthermore, it provided our interviewees with a safe space to discuss key issues together, and to possibly relate to each other's experiences. The sharing and contrast of experiences is a unique aspect of focus groups, and they often fill the void that individual online interviews can leave (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). Moreover, the different topics discussed in the focus group enabled us to develop an interview guide for the next six in-depth individual interviews. These interviews were semi-structured as we were open to new insights from our interviewees and were keen on adapting our interview questions. Before the focus group interview and the individual interviews, we asked our participants to sign a consent form stating the purpose of our research. Additionally, to respect the privacy of our interviewees, we attributed pseudonyms to each of them.

We transcribed the interviews and coded them using a thematic analysis on Atlas T.I. We came up with fifty-two codes, which illustrated aspects of the experience of mental labour. We then contextualized our data by comparing it with existing literature. In the report, quotes were translated into English from French to meet university linguistic requirements.

While this study provides a focused understanding of mothers' experiences of mental labour, it suffered from some limitations. As we conducted our interviews in French and wrote our report in English, some linguistic nuances may have been lost in translation. Furthermore, mothers may have felt limited in expressing some aspects of their lives because of the age gap between us, young researchers, and them. We tried our best to reduce this limitation by creating a safe space at the beginning of the interviews. Furthermore, as we also identify as women, there was no gender barrier between us and our participants.

Gender, Motherhood, and Well-being

Many studies have investigated gender roles in the family and the unequal division of chores in the household, but mental labour specifically and its effects on mothers' well-being have more rarely been subjects of research. It is important to highlight the differences and the relationship between the concepts of mental and emotional labour. Hochschild (1983) was the first academic to coin the term "emotional labour" to refer to the regulation and management of one's emotions in the workplace. It can be defined as the suppression or expression of feelings in work settings (Beck 2016). Examples of emotional labour include flight attendants or waitresses who are expected to smile and be friendly in all situations. In the familial environment, emotional labour can be defined as skillfully reacting to different situations which demand emotional support (James 1992). Since women are ideologically associated with family care and men with the workplace, women are thought to be "the best people to deal with others' emotions" (James 1992, 501). Hochschild explains that emotional labour can be part of mental labour, for instance if a woman experiences anxiety from remembering all the house chores she must do, it can be considered emotional labour (Beck 2016). However, the thinking, planning and management of household chores themselves are forms of mental labour. In this paper, we adopt this definition of mental labour, but also include emotional labour as a component of it.

Hochschild (1983, 33) explains that there exist different ways to cope with emotional labour; she identified "surface acting" and "deep acting" as two possible strategies. "Surface acting" consists of hiding felt emotions or pretending to experience unfelt emotions to adjust to a situation. The second strategy is "deep acting" and consists of changing internal feelings by shifting one's attention to the positive aspects of a situation. "Positive reappraisal," as discussed by Williams (2016, 16), is a type of deep acting, as one reappraises a situation as positive to protect oneself from the negative aspect of a situation. Lazarus (1993) explains that coping mechanisms enable mothers to address different aspects of a problem when feeling stressed (quoted in Williams 2016). A study by Williams (2016) found that single mothers experience more stress than married mothers. However, their coping strategies are the same, and included "confronting coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem-solving, and positive reappraisal" (Williams 2016, 54). Seeking social support, for example, is a major coping mechanism of mental labour. The efficiency of social support is confirmed by Luthar and Ciciolla (2015), who found that emotional support, such as being comforted and fulfilled in relationships, is linked to lower levels of distress in mothers. Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi (2005) also found that leisure activities are essential for mothers' well-being as they enable women to take their mind off their familial obligations.

Many academics appropriated Hochschild's work, by exploring how mental and/or emotional labour affects mothers' well-being. Senior (2014) underlined that most parental guides and books expect mothers to feel happy when they succeed in fulfilling their maternal role (quoted in Luthar and Ciciolla 2015). However, reality can be different as being a mother can be stressful, especially because of the "role overload" arising from the multiple responsibilities mothers must adopt in the domestic sphere (Luthar and Ciciolla 2015, 1818). Other negative feelings can impact mothers' well-being, such as "parental guilt" (Luthar and Ciciolla 2015, 1818), which refers to the culpability mothers experience when they perceive that they are not spending enough time with their families. This disagreeable feeling leads to an inability to enjoy leisure time as they may feel guilty about their absence from the family. Additionally, mothers are not always able to enjoy their free time because they are constantly performing cognitive tasks to ensure the smooth-running of the family (Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi, 2005). Ultimately, the negative consequences of mental labour are relevant to our research as they may help us understand how they can be overcome.

Various academics have explored the involvement of the father in family life. As Pleck (1997) explains, the division of childcare is still unequal, and mothers take on more demands at home. Today, traditional roles have evolved, and it is common for women to have a job and achieve financial independence. However, this societal evolution was not accompanied by an equal distribution of family responsibilities in the domestic sphere and women still have to perform more domestic tasks than men. This lack of involvement of the father in the domestic sphere is referred to as "male absenteeism" by Rincón and Martínez (2020, 2). Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi (2005) observed that fathers allow themselves to have more free time compared to mothers. Additionally, when the father is willing to help the mother with the familial organisation, he often has the role of an executor whilst the mother has the role of a manager (Daminger 2019). In this executor-manager dynamic, the mother is responsible for the organisation, planning and management of the family whilst the father is not as involved in the familial management. Implementing an extended parental leave for fathers has proven to alter the unequal division of household tasks, both physical and cognitive, as well as society's perception of gender roles (Unterhofer and Wrohlich 2017). Indeed, paternal leave allows the father to be as present as the mother during the first months of the new-born and enables the father to settle solid habits of childcare. Since the involvement of the father is an important factor in the perpetuation of mental labour, exploring how mothers deal with male absenteeism at home, even when the father is always present due to the lockdown, is relevant to answer our research question.

Work/family conflicts can also arise because of mental labour. While the rate of employed women has increased, they are still considered the primary caregivers of the family (Traustadottir 1991). Therefore, mothers often experience a work-family conflict because of their responsibilities both at home and in the workplace. Vercruyssen and Van de Putte (2013, 352) introduced the term "role combination stress" to describe the stress that can arise from the combination of their job-related responsibilities and their family-related responsibilities. Furthermore, since house-related responsibilities are unpaid, they are often underestimated. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018) reported that Mexican women perform unpaid work three times as much as men. In these circumstances, a stable work-family balance can be difficult to achieve. Consequently, mothers sometimes question their priorities. When a family-related event requires one of the two parents to stop working, the mother is expected to put aside her professional aspirations to take care of family matters (Traustadottir 1991). Women are therefore also expected to take on low-waged part-time jobs and restrain their career opportunities to assume their maternal role (Rincón and Martínez 2020). This phenomenon is called the "sticky floor" (Rincón and Martínez 2020, 2). It describes the barriers imposed by social expectations on mothers, which prevent them from fully devoting themselves to their professional life. Therefore, societal expectations can encourage mothers to fulfil their caregiver role and put aside their professional goals, as combining both roles in the family and at work can become overwhelming. With the lockdown, mothers may have struggled to dissociate their job from their familial responsibilities, as both took place in the same domestic environment. Exploring how they managed to deal with this special situation will give insight into mothers' coping techniques during the lockdown.

Finally, academics have also explored the different origins of mental labour. Cunningham (2001) found that parents' division of house chores tends to influence their children's gender role ideals. Therefore, children are likely to reproduce the parental scheme they were exposed to during their childhood when they become adults themselves. Most of the time, the repeated parental scheme is one in which the father is not as present as the mother. However, in Pedersen and Kilzer's study (2014), fathers declared that they would want to spend more time caring for their family. The researchers looked at this incongruity and found that mothers may put barriers to the involvement of the father in the family. This behaviour is called "gatekeeping" and refers to the attempt to control the interaction between the child and the father (Pedersen and Kilzer 2014). The study found that mothers reported a higher work-to-family conflict for their spouses than for themselves, which means they have the impression that the father's job is more demanding than their job. Consequently, women may voluntarily take on additional control and childcare to reduce the father's burden and affirm their maternal identity. Buzzanell et al. (2005, 266) further explore the topic of maternal identity, suggesting that mothers seek to maintain a "good mother image" by combining their professional aspirations and their maternal role. The maintenance of this status allows them to prove the success of a "working motherhood" (Buzzanell et al. 2005, 265) to their family and friends, which means they want to show others they are able to handle their job and their familial responsibilities. During the lockdown, mothers were always at home, in an environment in which their caregiver role was likely to be triggered by the constant presence of children. Therefore, gatekeeping behaviours might increase. The question of how mothers dealt with an increased gatekeeping behaviour during the lockdown is therefore relevant to explore.

Findings

Before diving into the mechanisms that mothers developed to better cope with, or overcome mental labour, it is important to gain some insight into their experiences of mental labour and how it impacted their daily life during the lockdown. Understanding the causes and the mechanisms behind the phenomenon of mental labour is necessary to justify and understand the coping mechanisms mothers developed over time. Therefore, the findings section first sketches out how these Belgian mothers perceive and describe their mental labour, and then outlines how mental labour evolved and impacted their life. Finally, we describe the coping mechanisms mothers developed, which are supported by literature.

Mothers' Day-to-day Experiences of Mental Labour

Most of the time, we observed that mothers have the role of thinkers in the family, which means they are in charge of the whole familial organisation and agenda. Marion disclosed the following: "I have to think for four people, including my husband, my children and myself." In this discourse, she stresses that she performs the mental work for all the members of the family; she tells her husband he should not forget to pick up the children, she reminds her children of an appointment at the doctor and, on top of this, she has to think about her own agenda. Moreover, burdensome thoughts seem to be present at any time: "It's a mental flow that never stops." This anxiety, derived from planning everything for the family, can be considered as emotional labour. Marion's example illustrates a mental labour that most of our interviewees experienced. More precisely, the word "anticipation" was used by many of our participants or was implied through examples of their daily life. In this context, to anticipate means planning events in advance to ensure a smooth and timely continuity of family life. According to Robertson et al.'s (2019) definition of mental labour, the anticipation of the needs of the family is included in the mental tasks mothers perform. Véronique illustrates this point with a metaphor: "It means I have to anticipate a lot, it is like managing a small business, actually. In the fridge, I have to deal with the supply, its management; I have to make sure that it runs without any problems." In this metaphor, she portrays herself as the boss of her small enterprise, therefore implying that she has the responsibility of orchestrating the whole functioning of the family. Additionally, we observed that some interviewees felt responsible for maintaining a positive atmosphere in the family and consequently felt responsible for regulating their own and others' feelings. James (1992) referred to this as a form of emotional labour in the familial context. This was illustrated by Natalie who mentioned that she often puts her anger and stress aside to ensure a good atmosphere at dinner time. Furthermore, many of our interviewees explained that questioning how to raise their children well was part of their mental labour. Fabienne's narrative illustrates this point: "This is a significant load I think … Is what I am doing good? Did I react well when he came to me when he was sad or when he has a particular behaviour, do I react well? Am I being coherent? …A lot of questions, always when you educate a child."

Fabienne's worries are reflected in the concept of "metaparenting," a component of Robertson et al.'s (2019) definition of mental labour. In their study, they explain that "metaparenting" occurs when mothers reflect on the education they want to give to their children. Luthar and Ciciolla (2015, 1818) found that the general "role overload" arising from being the main person in charge of the smooth organisation of the family life can lead to high levels of stress and anxiety in mothers. Because they are constantly thinking about what they should be doing, many mothers are not able to enjoy the present moment with their children. As Yaëlle disclosed: "I have the impression that I am not fully enjoying the moment with them because I am always thinking that I should do this and this." Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi (2005) similarly observed that mothers enjoy moments of leisure less than fathers because they constantly perform cognitive tasks. Moreover, many interviewees disclosed that they experience culpability when they allow themselves to have some leisure time because they assume that the family should be the priority. As Véronique explained: "on Sundays, I had tennis tournaments and for me, it was terrible because I had the feeling that I was abandoning my family." Luthar and Ciciolla (2015) use the term "parental guilt" to describe this tendency. This refers to when parents feel guilty for not spending enough time with their family, which can lead to high levels of stress. Lastly, for some participants, like Fabienne, mental labour can lead to physical and health consequences like a lack of sleep because of the constant distress. All in all, mothers' daily experience of mental labour consists of many intertwined negative feelings, which can negatively impact their mental and physical health.

Possible Causes of Mental Labour

The presence of mental labour in one's life can have different causes. The degree of involvement of the father in family life influences the amount of cognitive work a mother will have to perform. Most of our interviewees wished their husbands would be more involved in familial management because the mothers had the impression to carry this mental burden on their own. As Pauline explained: "All the things related to the housework were my responsibility more than his, the washing up, the laundry, the groceries, I had to do the majority of the chores.'' Pleck (1997) suggests that childcare and housework are still unequally divided between parents as mothers are significantly more involved in the family. According to Yaëlle, women notice more easily the housework that needs to be performed:

> I always see what needs to be done, and he does not. When I come home, I see that the children's bags need to be emptied, that we have to clean their lunch box, that there is some laundry left to do…my husband comes back from work and just reads the newspaper for half an hour without noticing it. I think it's a women's thing to be overwhelmed with all these tasks.

In this context, the husband does not seem to share the mother's mental load. Yaelle's story illustrates Rincón and Martínez's (2020, 2) concept of "male absenteeism" in the domestic sphere. Sometimes, however, a husband is willing to help with practical tasks. Candice gave an example: “I organise in advance what we are going to do and how we will do it; he helps me by for example driving the kids to school. So, I anticipate the organisation and he usually helps me with practical tasks, but he does not help me with the planning of everything.

In this example, the mother has the role of organiser and manager while the father executes what she is asking without participating in the planning of the familial agenda. This phenomenon was recurrent in our interviews. Daminger (2019) suggested that in the family, the husband adopts the role of an executor and not a planner, which is often the role of the mother. As explained previously, the organisation of the family therefore lies entirely on the shoulders of the mother because the father withdraws from the management of the family. Some of the interviewees explained this withdrawal of the father by mentioning the fact that men allow themselves to put their own needs first. On the other hand, mothers often feel the need to prioritize the family before their own needs. Even regarding leisure time, mothers often had less free time than fathers because of this prioritisation. Fabienne highlighted this idea by stating that, “I would also like to take some time to read. My husband allows himself to do so but I always have obligations related to the well-being of my family.” Moreover, some of our interviewees complained about an important lack of recognition for all that they do. While we were discussing this lack of gratitude from the family, Véronique started to cry, expressing her emotional fatigue. She disclosed the following: “So, you have to do everything, but you don’t have any gratitude, may it be from the children or the husband, it is a problem…it is very hard, and I suffer from it.” Thus, the father seems to play an important role in the perpetuation of mothers’ mental labour. If the couple does not work as a team to perform family-related tasks, familial responsibilities often lie on the mothers’ shoulders, namely because of the historical evolution of women’s professional lives.

Next to the lack of involvement of the father, the gender expectations regarding the dual role of breadwinner and caregiver can also be a factor playing a role in the perpetuation of mental labour in mothers. Véronique explained that she is part of a generation that has to take on both responsibilities of being a mother and a breadwinner. According to her, this problem was different in the past and will be different in the future: “My mother was a housewife. In the future, family responsibilities will be more equally distributed. I am part of a transitional generation.” This quotation illustrates Rincón and Martínez’s (2020) point about the evolution of women’s professional lives and the perpetuation of an unequal division of work in the domestic sphere. If we include the unpaid housework in the total number of their working hours, mothers are working more than fathers because the housework is not always fairly distributed between the couple.

A work-family balance is, therefore, difficult to achieve and mothers may experience heightened levels of stress. Vercruyssen and Van de Putte (2013) use the term “role combination stress” to underline mothers’ stress that can arise from having to deal with their breadwinner role and their mother role. Almost all of our interviewees decided to reduce their working hours at one point in their life because they could not combine a full-time job with family obligations. Candice said: “No no, I can’t have a full-time job with all the things that need to be done.” Both Traustadottir (1991) and Rincón and Martínez (2020) suggested that since mothers are expected to complete their maternal role by taking care of the family, they often reduce their working hours and limit their career opportunities. However, our participants all said it was a choice they made with their husband and that they are satisfied with this decision. For some of our interviewees, the lockdown was an opportunity to reduce this role-combination stress because the father spent more time at home and started to help more. However, this is not what the French blogger Emma (2020) found. According to the author, mental labour for mothers actually increased because they had to deal with both their job and their family at the same time. In conclusion, the stronger the pressure from gender role expectations, the bigger the struggle for mothers to handle their work and family life. The work-family conflict therefore tends to inflate the negative experience of mothers’ mental labour.

Mental labour also arises from gender expectations regarding the role of the mother in the family. Since society expects them to be the primary caregiver of the family, they might want to live up to these expectations and take this role to heart. Yaëlle explained that mental labour stems from the mothers' control over the family's organization: "I think we put all the blame on men, even though if women take on this mental burden, it's because, one way or another, they gain something from it, maybe a certain recognition." Pedersen and Kilzer (2014) describe this behaviour as "gatekeeping," which is characterized by additional control and childcare from the mother. Buzzanell et al. (2005) suggest that it is used by mothers to preserve their image of a "good mother" and therefore serves to protect their maternal identity. This desire to maintain a good image is illustrated by Fabienne's words: "I give the impression to my family that I am a strong mother, so a mother that takes on her responsibilities, who does everything, it would feel strange to stop." The phenomenon of gatekeeping was also highlighted by Natalie who explained that, despite feeling overwhelmed by her mental load and the house chores, "[she] do[es] realise that [she is] totally responsible for this functioning of the family." However, she explained that it was hard for her to change these patterns of behaviour:

> I do try to challenge myself and change things, meaning I would need to just stop doing everything and tell them to figure things out themselves...but I tend to still do it, because I find that I do things better, I do them more quickly, and at least when I do tasks myself, I know they are completed. Because sometimes asking others for help takes forever, and that irritates me because I like it when things are done.

Although it is not necessarily the case, mothers may have the impression that their partner has more demands from work (Pedersen and Kilzer 2014). Therefore, they may wish to reduce the father's burden by taking on more chores and tasks in the family. Although mothers may not be self-aware of this phenomenon, this belief might be an underlying reason for their gatekeeping.

Additionally, Yaëlle explained in the following quotation that taking on so much for the family also comes from her maternal instinct: "Maternal mental labour might just be something innate, because when a woman gives birth, she already gives so much of herself, and she may carry on this prioritization and care for others after the birth of her child." Here, Yaëlle explains that her maternal instinct requires her to continuously make sacrifices to ensure the well-being of her children.

Another cause of mental labour which was mentioned by interviewees is the perpetuation of observed schema. Yaëlle believes that individuals tend to copy their parents' behaviour regarding the distribution of tasks. She explained that "I know my mom was at the service of her five children, and my father not at all, and for my husband the situation was similar, so in many ways I think we repeat what we have known." Here, we can observe patterns of "male absenteeism" (Rincón and Martinez, 2020, 2) that tend to be repeated over generations. Indeed, Cunningham (2001) also found in his study that children tend to repeat the behaviour of their own parents once they are adults.

Lastly, a divorce can also be the cause of an increase in mental labour. Véronique disclosed that her mental labour increased after her divorce because she was left alone with her children and had to deal with the household chores on her own. She mentioned that "for the 8 years I have been divorced, I stayed 4 years all alone assuming all the responsibilities, it was very very hard." Marital status also has an impact on how women experience mental labour. Baxter and Alexander's (2008) study found that single mothers have even more difficulties dealing with work and family since they do not have the support of a partner for children and house-related tasks. On the other hand, in our focus group, Helena explained that after her divorce, she experienced less mental labour. She explained: "Since he is gone, I have one child less!" This suggests that her husband was comparable to an additional burden and that she felt relieved after her divorce.

Mental labour, cultivated by existing gender expectations, gatekeeping, the protection of maternal identity, parental scheme reproduction, or a divorce can be an overwhelming experience for mothers. Therefore, mothers tend to develop different coping techniques to manage this mental labour.

Techniques to Cope with Mental Labour and Overcome it

Mental labour seems to be anchored in the functioning of some families; however, mothers develop different techniques to cope with it and better manage the familial duties. Firstly, many of our interviewees mentioned that they write lists to keep track of what needs to be done. For instance, Natalie elaborated on her use of lists: "I manage through lists, I make a lot of lists, grocery lists, lists of house chores, lists of my worries, lists of projects, that I'm afraid to forget…so my strategy is to use lists."

Another way to cope with mental labour is by engaging in leisure activities. Many participants mentioned sport as a way to clear their mind: running, swimming and practicing yoga. Marion explained she needs leisure time to solve her problems: "To really think about my problems…I need to have taken some time, done some sport or rested, and then all of a sudden, it's like crystal clear water and answers to my problems become clearer."

Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi (2005) explain in their study that leisure activities are essential for the psychological and physical well-being of parents. Furthermore, after mentioning negative aspects of their partners' behaviour, many of our participants were looking for positive ones. This coping technique is called "cognitive reappraisal" (Williams 2016), which refers to the re-evaluation of a situation as positive. For example, Fabienne explained that when she is tired of cooking all the time, her partner "takes the initiative of ordering food." She added that "at least he didn't force me to do the dinner, he is not someone who would force me you know, that's already a good thing." This quotation indicates that she is looking for a positive point in a negative situation.

Furthermore, some of our interviewees engage in self-control to change how they feel about a situation or pretend that they experience different emotions to deal with emotional labour. For instance, Natalie explained that: "When I feel exhausted from doing all the house chores, I sometimes start screaming or get angry, but I tend to avoid doing it because I don't like when there is a bad ambiance." In this example she hides angry emotions to preserve a positive ambiance in the family. Hochschild (1983, 33) coined the term "surface acting" to define this behaviour, which refers to pretending to experience a different emotion. This emotional accommodation is a technique to cope with emotional labour, as the mother feels responsible for the family's well-being as well as for the surrounding domestic ambiance.

Additionally, many mothers share their worries and talk with friends, siblings, and colleagues to alleviate their mental labour. It enables them to realise they are not the only ones experiencing mental labour, to relate to each other, and support each other. For example, Véronique said that support among mothers is "our strength, for us women, it makes us realise that we are unfortunately all going through the same struggle." In the focus group, when one of the participants was describing her experience of mental labour, the other interviewees often nodded in understanding, or explicitly said they could relate. Indeed, Luthar and Ciciolla (2015) found that social support, and especially emotional support, are significantly successful in lowering feelings of distress.

When mothers feel distressed because of their mental labour, they can find different ways to cope with it, including planning ahead through lists, relaxing with leisure activities, cognitive reappraisal, self-control and social support. However, while these techniques help reduce the negative impact of mental labour on their well-being, they do not help mothers overcome mental labour completely. To overcome mental labour, different mechanisms can be put into place. For example, Pauline became aware of her mental labour a few years ago. By telling her partner about it, the family dynamic changed, and her mental labour decreased significantly. Pauline read a comic book entitled 'Fallait demander' from the French blogger Emma, which translates into 'You should have asked.' It explains how mothers experience mental labour. As Pauline explained: “it enabled me to put a word on what I was experiencing and made me realise that what I was experiencing at home was real and that it could be changed.” She asked her partner to read the comic and he realized for the first time that a particular division of labour, and pattern of thinking and planning had been developed in the family. Since that day, her husband makes more effort and participates increasingly in the family work and organisation. Similarly, Candice explained that communicating with her partner was key to having a fair division of the familial tasks.

Furthermore, many mothers decided to take a step back to delegate their work to other members of the family. For example, Helena once left the clean laundry in front of her children's door until they understood that she was not going to tidy it up for them. Similarly, Yaëlle said that “If I take a step back, he will take a step forward,” talking about her husband. Yaëlle shows that renunciation can be a successful way to install change and have one’s partner be more present in managing the family.

Finally, many of our interviewees had the impression that things were improving for women and that women's cognitive burden is decreasing with time. This societal change may help more women overcome their mental labour. Pauline explained that compared to her own parents, divisions of chores in her own family are more equal. She said that “today there is more awareness” and that “even though it is not always equal between men and women, there is a feminist movement which pushes for change to happen.” Similarly, Yaëlle said in her interview that “my husband helps me way more than my dad used to help my mom; I feel like men assume their responsibilities nowadays.” A cross-national study by Scott (2006) similarly found that traditional gender roles were challenged over time with increasing education and secularization. These examples give hope that overcoming mental labour is possible and that mothers may be able to experience it less over time with better communication and increasing awareness about the issue.

Conclusion

The mental labour mothers experienced might have been present for a while but as Emma (2020) highlighted, for most women, the mental labour of mothers increased during the lockdown. Therefore, the issues they have discussed in the interviews were as much relevant for the situation before the coronavirus crisis as for the context of the lockdown.

We found that the six Belgian mothers we interviewed individually as well as the three Belgian mothers from the focus group experienced a cognitive burden continuously in their everyday life. Several causes for the perpetuation of mental labour were found: the lack of involvement of the father, the conflict between work and family life, the reproduction of parental schemes and the protective behaviour of “gatekeeping.” We observed that variables such as one’s marital status, professional status, number of children and age has a significant influence on mothers’ experience of mental labour. These different experiences and causes lead each of our participants to find ways of dealing with this burdensome mental labour.

This study answers the research question at hand by exploring the different coping mechanisms adopted by mothers, including cognitive reappraisal, surface acting, engaging in leisure activities as well as communicating with one’s partner and friends about this phenomenon. We also uncovered how mental labour can be overcome through increasing awareness, education, and communication about this phenomenon. These elements seemed to help women go through a less burdensome experience of mental labour in their family. However, we found that although fathers contribute by helping with household chores, they do not seem to feel responsible for the cognitive work that comes with it.

Even though our data adds knowledge to the academic field of family dynamics, further research on how to tackle the unequal division of mental labour in couples is necessary. One area of research which would be relevant to explore is the maternity period as it is a critical period where the dynamics of the couple are defined and where caregiving responsibilities are distributed for the first time (Rincón and

Martínez 2020). To avoid an unequal division of household work from the beginning of the parental journey, Norway, for example, introduced an extended and paid parental leave to give fathers the opportunity to be more involved in childcare (Brandth and Kvande 2002). In this country, familial responsibilities are now more equally shared between the couple because men have a chance and the time to take on their paternal role. Researching the influence of policies related to the implementation of a longer parental leave for the father in other countries could shed light on a way to reduce the perpetuation of traditional gender roles in future generations. Moreover, giving more importance to the issue of gender inequality through a tailored curriculum at school could perhaps help children develop a more egalitarian attitude towards gender roles. A study by Whittaker, Adler-Baeder and Garneau (2014) found that boys and girls following a class about relationship dynamics and management at school are more likely to have a progressive attitude towards gender roles in the family, meaning their gender ideals would move away from traditional gender roles. Furthermore, interviewing fathers and exploring whether they perceive their partner's mental labour could help find new ways to raise awareness or communicate about the issue. Daminger (2019) interviewed fathers in her study but more research is needed to have a better grasp of how they perceive mothers' mental labour. Lastly, it can be useful to investigate whether homosexual couples experience mental labour and adopt dynamics similar to heterosexual couples. Ultimately, giving more visibility to mental labour could help raise awareness amongst mothers and make them feel supported by a wider community. The term mental labour has already been made more accessible to the general population thanks to authors such as the French blogger Emma Clit who published a comic book on this phenomenon called "Il fallait demander [You Should have Asked]" (Emma 2017). For one of our interviewees, this comic enabled her to understand and put a name on her experience. This example shows that progress is possible through education and visibility.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our nine participants for their time. We are extremely grateful for your trust and willingness to share your personal experiences of mental labour with us. We would also like to thank our course coordinator Ulrike Mueller for her enthusiasm towards our undergraduate research project and for encouraging its publication. Finally, we would like to thank Karen McGarry and the editors of the JUE for their support, feedback, and for making this publication an enriching experience.

References

Baxter, Jennifer, and Michael Alexander. 2008. “Mothers' Work–to–Family Strain in Single and Couple Parent Families: The Role of Job Characteristics and Supports.” *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 43 (2): 195-214.

Beck, Julie. 2018. “The Concept Creep of Emotional Labour.” *The Atlantic*. November 26, 2018. https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/11/arlie-hochschild-housework-isnt-emotional-labor/576637/.

Brandth, Berit, and Elin Kvande. 2002. “Reflexive Fathers: Negotiating Parental Leave and Working Life.” *Gender, Work & Organization* 9 (2): 186-203.

Buzzanell, Patrice, Rebecca Meisenbach, Robyn Remke, Meina Liu, Venessa Bowers, and Cindy Conn. 2005. “The Good Working Mother: Managerial Women’s Sensemaking and Feelings About Work–Family Issues.” *Communication Studies* 56 (3): 261-285.

Cunningham, Mick. 2001. “Parental Influences on the Gendered Division of Housework.” *American Sociological Review* 66 (2): 184-203.

Daminger, Allison. 2019. “The Cognitive Dimension of Household Labor.” *American Sociological Review* 84 (4): 609-633.

Emma. 2017. “Fallait demander [You Should Have Asked].” *Emmaclit [blog].* May 9, 2017. https://emmaclit.com/2017/05/09/repartition-des-taches-hommes-femmes/.

Emma. 2020. “Il suffira d’une crise [A crisis is all it takes].” *Emmaclit [blog].* July 20, 2020. https://emmaclit.com/2020/07/20/il-suffira-dune-crise/.

Hesse-Biber, Sharlene Nagy, and Patricia Leavy. 2006. *The Practice of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ipsos. 2018. “Charge Mentale: 8 femmes sur 10 seraient concernées [Mental Labour: 8 women out of 10 are concerned].” Last modified February 27, 2018. https://www.ipsos.com/fr-fr/charge-mentale-8-femmes-sur-10-seraient-concernees.

James, Nicky. 1992. “Care = organisation + physical labour + mental labour.” *Sociology of Health and Illness* 14 (4): 488-509.

Luthar, Suniya S., and Lucia Ciciolla. 2015. “Who Mothers Mommy? Factors That Contribute to Mothers’ Well-being.” *Developmental Psychology* 51 (12): 1812-1823.

Nomaguchi, Kei M., Melissa A. Milkie, and Suzanne M. Bianchi. 2005. “Time Strains and Psychological Well-being: Do Dual-Earner Mothers and Fathers Differ?” *Journal of Family Issues* 26 (6): 756-792.

OECD. 2018. Gender data Portal. Place of publication not identified: OECD.

Pedersen, Daphne E., and Gabe Kilzer. 2014. “Work-to-Family Conflict and the Maternal Gatekeeping of Dual-Earner Mothers with Young Children.” *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* (35): 251–262.

Pleck, Joseph H. 1997. *Paternal Involvement: Levels, Sources, and Consequences*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Rincón, Guillermina Benavides, and Yolanda Montes Martínez. 2020. “Work/family life by 2040: Between a Gig Economy and Traditional Roles.” *Futures* (119): 1-9.

Robertson, Lindsey G., Tamara L. Anderson, M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, and Christina Lee Kim. 2019. “Mothers and Mental Labor: Phenomenological Focus Group Study of Family-Related Thinking Work.” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 43 (2): 184-200.

Scott, Jacqueline. 2006. “Family and Gender Roles: How Attitudes Are Changing.” *Arxius de Ciències Socials* (15): 143-154.

Traustadottir, Rannveig. 1991. “Mothers Who Care: Gender, Disability, and Family Life.” *Journal of Family Issues* 12 (2): 211-228.

Unterhofer, Ulrike, and Katharina Wrohlich. 2017. “Fathers, Parental Leave and Gender Norms.” DIW Berlin Discussion Paper (1657): 1-27.

Vercruyssen, Anina, and Bart Van de Putte. 2013. “Work–Family Conflict and Stress: Indications of the Distinctiveness of Role Combination Stress for Belgian Working Mothers.” *Community, Work & Family* 16 (4): 351-371.

Whittaker, Angela, Francesca Adler-Baeder, and Chelsea Garneau. 2014. "The Effects of Relationship Education on Adolescent Traditional Gender Role Attitudes and Dating Violence Acceptance." *Journal of Human Sciences & Extension* 2(3): 59-69.

Williams, Nikitra Yvette. 2016. "The Relationship Between Stress, Coping Strategies, and Social Support Among Single Mothers." PhD dissertation, Walden University.

The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography

Queer, Muslim, and Maghrebi: An Intersectional Analysis of Immigrant Identities in Contemporary France

Trinidad Lara

George Mason University—trinidad.lara@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the complex ways in which queer Muslim women with origins from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) negotiate belonging and selfhood in France. Drawing on a three-month long digital ethnography, I employ an intersectional approach to explore the juxtaposition of "Muslim" and "lesbian/ bisexual" identities and to answer the question, "How do queer Muslim immigrant women negotiate and conceptualize their identities in contemporary France?" As a marginalized group within a marginalized minority of immigrants from the MENA region, queer Muslim immigrant women have been overlooked in scholarship, public discourses, politics, LGBTQ+ spaces, and religious spaces. This research addresses this gap by exploring the identity-related struggles of queer Muslim immigrant women in France and contributes to studies on Muslim subjectivities, immigration, and gender. Based on my findings, I argue that queer Muslim immigrant women in France negotiate their identities through reconfiguring "secular" and "Muslim" identities and queering religious texts. This negotiation takes place, in part, by using social media to connect with others who share a similar conceptualization of their identities within digital spaces.

Keywords: identity; gender; immigration; Muslim subjectivities; queerness

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it... How does it feel to be a problem? (Du Bois 1904, 1)

Through the prism of the question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" a formulation that lies at the heart of discriminatory thinking, the prominent twentieth-century African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois examines how discrimination, racism, exclusion, and negative perceptions of Black Americans affect their identities and understandings of selfhood. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1904), he argues that being perceived as "a problem" creates a state of double-consciousness, a psychological split in which the oppressed individual's identity divides into two as they come to see themselves through the eyes of the oppressor (Du Bois 1904, 3). Rather than embodying a unified being, they are fragmented into "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" that ultimately conflict with each other in a single body (Du Bois 1904, 3). Ultimately for Du Bois, a vital stepping-stone towards self-liberation is to merge the fragmented self to become a "truer and better self" (Du Bois 1904, 4) emancipated from the inner and outer perceptions that divide Black identity and ultimately American society.

W.E.B. Du Bois's contributions to our understanding of the effects of oppression on the minds of Black Americans serve as a useful lens through which to understand the identity negotiation processes of queer Muslim Maghrebi women within the French context. Maghrebi specifically refers to individuals with origins from the "Maghreb" (derived from "west" in Arabic), a region of North Africa which includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, territories that were colonized by France. Queer Muslim Maghrebi women's experiences of multiple exclusions within contemporary France are characterized by being considered "a problem" vis-à-vis their intersectional identities. As queer Muslims, they are perceived as "a problem" by their religious communities for defying traditional understandings of what is permissible behavior within the Islamic framework. As Muslim women, some of whom wear the veil, they are labeled as "a problem" by politicians and secular feminists who see veiling as a symbol of oppression and submission. As Muslim immigrants, they are perceived to be "a problem" by individuals who claim they pose a threat to French identity and French secularism (*laïcité*), which privileges the religious neutrality of the public sphere (this concept will be further discussed later). As a result, queer Muslim Maghrebi women experience "double" or even "triple" consciousness (Keaton 2005, 5) as their multiple identities, each with their own layers of discrimination, lead to fragmentations of the self. The problematization of queer, Muslim, and immigrant identities leads in turn to the marginalization of women who embody them. Given these multiple contexts of exclusion and the underlying assumptions about the mutual exclusivity of Muslim and queer categories, how do queer Muslim immigrant women negotiate and conceptualize their identities in contemporary France? How do they experience belonging in a country and in communities that continuously define them as a problem?

This research explores the ways in which queer Muslim immigrant cisgender women with origins from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) negotiate notions of belonging and selfhood in France. I intentionally use the phrase "this" research as opposed to "my" research because I believe that this research is not mine to possess or claim, especially since I am neither Maghrebi/French, do not originally come from a Muslim background, and am writing about communities that are not my own. I acknowledge how my identity categories (queer white Latina) as well as how my academic background as an undergraduate student in the United States frame the observations as well as the questions that I ask. I propose that positionality does not imply claiming ownership of the research. Rather, if the research were to "belong" to anyone, I suggest re-locating ownership to those who are being written about and studied, whose representations are being shaped by my perceptions. In my aim to understand processes of identity negotiation, I hope that I have respectfully brought some visibility to a largely underrepresented queer community in France. As a marginalized group within a marginalized minority of immigrants from the MENA region, lesbian/bisexual Muslim immigrant women have been largely overlooked in academic scholarship, public discourses, politics, LGBTQ+ spaces, and religious spaces, creating a gap in our understanding of how these women experience and navigate their lives while embodying their intersectional identities. The oversight is partially due to taboo attitudes toward homosexuality, but also to underlying assumptions about the exclusivity of queerness to secular spaces and communities, rendering homosexual relationships among Muslim cisgender women invisible and seemingly non-existent.

Drawing on a three-month long critical media analysis, virtual ethnography, and discursive analysis of social media, this research focuses on the ways queer Muslim women are marginalized on the basis of several fronts: their religious, lesbian/bisexual, and immigrant identifications. I explore some of the dominant Muslim discourses surrounding homosexuality as well as an attempt by a progressive Algerian French imam, Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, to challenge these dominant positions in France. Subsequently, I examine how LGBTQ+ individuals are perceived in broader French society as well as the ways in which queer Muslim Maghrebi women are overlooked within LGBTQ+ spaces and in certain feminist organizations. Through a brief discussion on immigration and Islamophobia, I also look at the ways in which multiple exclusionary forces influence queer Muslim immigrant women's sense of belonging in France.

Despite being situated in multiple exclusionary contexts, queer Muslim immigrant women exhibit agency in the ways in which they choose to embody their complex identities. Based on the findings, I argue that queer Muslim immigrant women in France negotiate their identities through reconfiguring "secular" and "Muslim" categories and through queering religious texts. The negotiation takes place, in part, by using social media to connect with others who share a similar conceptualization of their identities within the digital space. Although the COVID-19 pandemic restricted in-person fieldwork for the research, the existence of online communities of Queer Muslim individuals in France provided a space to explore digital interactions and exchanges between social media users who identify as Muslim, queer, and immigrant. Employing virtual ethnographic methods to examine online encounters of queer Muslim immigrant women, I find that social networks are being used to (1) bridge the gap between "queer" and "Muslim" identities and (2) connect with others who share similar identities, thereby reinforcing their sense of "self." The discussion then shifts toward exploring efforts to commensurate and reconcile both "Muslim" and "queer" identity categories within these digital spaces. However, some women do not seek to reconfigure their identities and choose to embody one identity over the other (Queer or Muslim), while others embody both at the same time, maintaining traditional understandings of queerness within Islam. The ensuing findings contribute to studies on gender, Muslim subjectivities, and immigration by examining the lived realities of queer Muslim immigrant women in France and their understandings of selfhood.

Muslim and Queer: Spaces of Exclusion and Inclusion within Muslim Communities

Within contemporary historical, political, and religious contexts in France, queer Muslim immigrant women are excluded for their religious affiliation, immigrant backgrounds, gender identities, and sexual orientations, posing a challenge to the ways they experience feelings of acceptance and belonging. An overwhelming majority of Muslims in France consider same-sex acts and relationships to be strictly forbidden (Eidhamar 2014; Siraj 2016, 187). Although Islamic law considers sex to be a natural phenomenon, traditional religious interpretations indicate that it must take place within the framework of officially recognized heterosexual relationships (Siraj 2016, 186). Furthermore, some Muslims conceptualize homosexuality as a "test from Allah," wherein it is acting on same-sex attraction that is regarded as a sin rather than the attraction itself (Eidhamar 2014). Passing the "test" thus consists of abstaining from same-sex acts/ relationships during the individual's lifetime, a feat that is believed to be met with rewards in the afterlife (Eidhamar 2014). Queer Muslim women are also judged for transgressing traditional understandings of gender roles within Islam, especially since homosexuality undermines the heterosexual institution of marriage and the traditional roles associated with raising a family. In France, disapproval of same-sex relationships is prevalent within Muslim communities. A 2019 survey on homophobia conducted by the French Institute of Public Opinion (Institut français d'opinion publique) finds that 63% of respondents who identified as Muslim consider homosexuality to be a "sickness" or "sexual perversion" (IFOP 2019). Although there have been some efforts to make Muslim communities more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals, dominant Islamic authorities in France have met these initiatives with disapproval. For instance, Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, a gay and feminist Algerian French imam, caused considerable controversy within the French Muslim community when he launched Europe's first LGBT-inclusive mosque in in Paris in 2012 (Doezema 2014). Officials from the Great Mosque of Paris, one of the primary Islamic authorities in France, considered the initiative to be "outside the Islamic community" and not in compliance with the Qur'an, ultimately rejecting the mosque's legitimacy and its pro-LGBT stance (Di Caro 2019).

The discourses that condemn homosexuality render it challenging for queer Muslims to affirm their gender identities publicly. In a podcast by Deutsche Welle entitled "Homosexuality in France," a reporter interviews several Muslim men who gather for Friday prayers in the gardens of the Great Mosque of Paris to gage their opinions on Islam and homosexuality (Laurenson 2016). One interlocutor stresses the incompatibility between the two categories: "No, it's not coherent, Islam and homosexuality can't go together, that's how it is, it's written" (00:31), while another claims it is forbidden: "It's in the Qur'an in black in white… they have to be stopped, it mustn't be allowed" (1:28). Another informant expresses the difficulties in making the two categories compatible: "Everyone should live their life the way they see fit, but if they want to live according to the principles of Islam, it isn't easy to reconcile the two" (01:10). These views reflect narratives of mutual exclusion between the Muslim and homosexual categories through references to the Qur'an and to principles that are considered to be Islamic. Although these discourses are omnipresent within Muslim communities in France, it is important to note that DW's podcast omits Zahed's' public efforts to challenge these anti-homosexual narratives, rendering an essentialized representation of Muslims as quintessentially homophobic. These depictions, in turn, inform the public's perception of Muslim individuals who also come to render Muslim and queer categories as mutually exclusive.

Some queer Muslims, like Zahed, uphold that homosexuality is compatible with Muslim identity. As the founder of the pro-LGBTQ French Muslim association Homosexuel(le)s Musulman(e)s de France — Lesbian & Gay Muslims of France (HM2F) and the creator of the HM2F Facebook group, Zahed aims to connect those who share his perspective or who would like to get to know how queer and Muslim identities can be compatible. In the following analysis, I observe the ways in which the HM2F Facebook group serves as a space of inclusion and belonging for queer Muslim individuals in France.

Regarding the ethics of social media research, I justify using Facebook posts from the HM2F group on the basis that the data are textual, anonymized (I have only included first names and have blocked out profile photos), and involve the observation of subjects in a semi-public space. Since informed consent can arguably be waived while conducting observational research within physical public and semi-public space, the same ethics can be applied to digital public and semi-public space (Willis 2019, 3). Furthermore, although HM2F is considered to be a "private group" on Facebook in that one must apply to join, the divide between private and public is often blurred within online environments (Willis 2019, 4). For instance, the "About" section of the HM2F group offers a statement that it is "open to everyone," and my ability to gain access without any connections to members of the group indicates the semi-public nature of HM2F.

That said, the data I analyze here only come from a specific subset of queer Muslims. Although digital spaces provide platforms for individuals to explore questions of religion and sexuality, there are generational differences with regards to who posts about these topics online. The children of Maghrebi immigrants navigate and frame their religious practices in ways that reflect their embeddedness within the French context (Beaman 2018, 42). Growing up in France can play a significant role in how they understand and experience their religion relative to their first-generation immigrant parents. Though Beaman's research specifically looks at how middle-class second-generation immigrants reframe their Muslim vis-à-vis their French identities in non-online environments, it provides insight into how processes of reconfiguration are tied to generation-specific experiences, which may, in turn, shape the types of issues they deal with online. Additionally, individuals who use social media platforms to post about queerness and Islam must be familiar with the technology, have access to the internet, and possess a working knowledge of the mediums and communities available to them for exploring these topics. They must also feel comfortable sharing information publicly. Even though there are methods of maintaining an anonymous presence online, the risk of being recognized may deter some from engaging in personal conversations about their queer and Muslim identities out in the "open." Lastly, the Instagram and Twitter accounts that I analyze tend to be managed by individuals younger than the members of Facebook groups such as "Musulmane et lesbienne c'est possible!" and HM2F, reflecting generational differences in the ways specific social media sites are being used to foster queer-Muslim friendly spaces online.

The HM2F's Facebook community includes over 2,400 members and serves LGBTQ Muslims who seek to connect to resources and people who can support them in their journey to reconcile their identities. For instance, Figure 1 shows a post on HM2F made by a member of the group, a queer woman, who expresses her desire to reconcile her religion and her homosexuality but is experiencing feelings of inner conflict. She asks the members of the group for advice on how to reconcile the two.

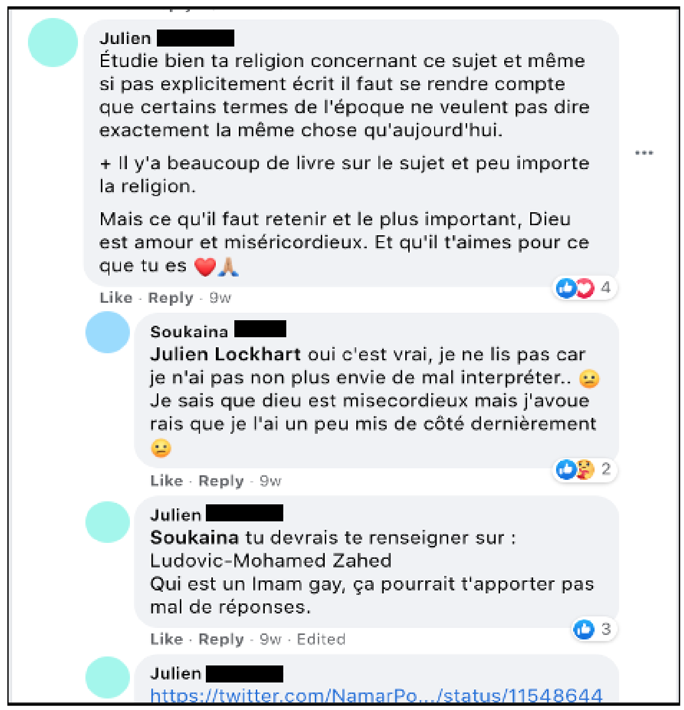


Figure 1 (top): A post, and Figure 2 (bottom): responses to it on the Facebook group HM2F | Homosexuel(le)s Musulman(e)s – Lesbian & Gay Muslims.

Soukaina's post, receiving 32 comments, shows significant engagement, with each comment encouraging and supporting her. Some members direct her to specific resources through links as well as suggestions in the comment section. The first comment, in Figure 2, posted by a fellow member reads: "Study what your religion says about this subject well and even if it's not explicitly written, you'll have to realize that certain old terms don't mean exactly the same thing as today." This demonstrates how recasting Islamic texts with new interpretations and meanings and applying them to contemporary contexts serves as a method for reconciliation. Furthermore, the commenter refers the woman to Zahed, who, he claims, could "give you a lot of answers" and provides a link to the Twitter account of a pro-LGBT Maghrebi Muslim online activist. Connecting users to others who share similar experiences or to resources which may facilitate the reconciliation process, therefore, serves as powerful means through which the "queer Muslim" identity is asserted, negotiated, and constructed.

Members of HM2F, both administrators and followers of the group, also regularly share resources such as videos, images, articles, and educational pamphlets on the group's feed. These materials serve as useful tools for bridging the gap between Muslim and queer identities. One member's' upload of a queer-positive pamphlet on Islam and homosexuality on the HM2F Facebook group (see Figure 3), for instance, is a stark contrast to DW's podcast "Islam and Homosexuality" (Laurenson 2016), which paints a portrait of Islam as a quintessentially homophobic religion. With

Figure 3: Positive responses to a file uploaded to the Facebook group HM2F | Homosexuel(le)s Musulman(e)s – Lesbian & Gay Muslims

titles such as "No Explicit Condemnation," "A Benevolent Prophet," "What the Hadiths Say/ The Condemnation of the People of Lot," and "Homosexuality is also a work of God" (see Figure 4, clockwise from top left) the pamphlet aims to re-configure narratives of condemnation to construct an Islamic framework that is inclusive, accepting, and ultimately friendly towards queer Muslims.

Yet negative perceptions of homosexuality within Muslim communities can make it difficult for LGBTQ Muslim individuals to come out to their families and to publicly assume their queer identities. Farhad Khosrokhavar, a professor of sociology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), explains that coming out as homosexual within some Muslim households can make one *najis* or impure (Laurenson 2016). As a result, those who publicly assume their LGBT identities can face disapproval from and rejection by their families (Laurenson 2016; Amari 2012, 60). Furthermore, he claims that homosexuality is a taboo that among religious Muslims is "much stronger than among secular people" (2:30) and that many Muslims in Europe feel as if secular society is imposing dominant values on them. Non-queer Muslims, therefore, could perceive queer Muslims as morally corrupt individuals, and also as traitors to their own religion, family, and cultural traditions. (Amari 2012, 60; Yip 2008, 105). French sociologist Salima Amari's anthropological study (2012) focuses on the decision-making processes behind coming out or staying in the closet for Maghrebi lesbian women. Amari finds that queer women of North African descent keep their identities hidden from their families out of "filial loyalty," compartmentalizing their identities by revealing certain parts to some and hiding them to others (Amari 2012, 55). The desire to stay loyal to their families, therefore, is one of the many factors that may drive queer Muslim women away from embodying both identities in public and in private (Amari 2012, 73).

LGBTQ and Muslim: Secularism's Multiple Exclusions

Within broader French society, a 2019 Pew Research study found that 86% of French citizens believe that homosexuality should be

Aucune condamnation explicite

Ni le Coran, ni aucun hadith ne parle d'homosexualité pour une raison très simple. C'est un concept qui est né au 19ème siècle, inventé par des psychiatres. Il n'existait pas en tant que tel dans la culture arabo-islamique. Il a été intégré tardivement sous l'effet de l'influence occidentale et de la modernité. Le Coran fait référence à des actes sexuels dans un contexte immoral (viol ou atteinte à la pudeur dans un espace public), alors que l'homosexualité, c'est avant tout une attirance consentie entre deux personnes du même sexe. Un hadith témoigne par ailleurs d'une absence de réglementation morale. Il rapporte une discussion entre Abou Hureïra et le prophète. [Ce compagnon est venu voir le Messager de Dieu pour lui dire qu'il n'avait pas de désir envers les femmes. Mohamed (Paix et salut soient sur lui) est resté silencieux alors qu'Abou Hureïra l'avait interpellé trois fois à ce sujet. À la quatrième tentative, il lui répondit ceci :
« *O Abou Hureïra, la plume est sèche en ce qui concerne ce qui peut être convenable pour ceux d'entre vous. Alors, accepte ton sort ou abandonne* ». Bukhari LXII-8.]

Ce Hadith témoigne de l'absence de règles à ce sujet et expliquerait la tolérance qui aurait existé au premier temps de l'Islam envers les minorités sexuelles. Et pour ce qui est des rapports charnels entre femmes, on ne trouve aucune référence, ni dans le Coran, ni dans aucun Hadith.

Un prophète bienveillant

Personne, aux premiers temps de l'islam, n'aurait jamais été condamné en raison de son orientation sexuelle ou de genre. Bien au contraire, il semblerait que les « Mukhanahtun », ces hommes efféminés, avaient toute leur place dans la société. Certain d'entre eux servaient les épouses du Prophète. Ces dernières ne se voilaient pas devant ces hommes qui n'avaient pas, les attributs de la masculinité. (Sourate Ennour 24-V31). Par ailleurs, le Prophète a interdit que l'on s'en prenne à ces individus. En effet, Abu Dawud (Sunan, Livre 41-4910) rapporte à propos d'un « mukhannath » qui avait teint ses mains et ses pieds avec du henné (pratique exclusivement réservée aux femmes dans l'Arabie du 7ème siècle de notre ère).

[Le Prophète a demandé :
- « *Quel est le problème avec cet homme ?* »
On lui a dit :
- « *Apôtre d'Allah ! Il affecte la communauté des femmes (…).*
Ne devrions-nous pas le tuer ? ».
L'envoyé de Dieu répondit alors :
- « *J'ai interdit que l'on tue ceux qui prient* »].

Le Prophète a non seulement défendu la vie de cet individu, que l'on considérerait aujourd'hui comme appartenant à une minorité sexuelle, mais il a utilisé en plus le symbole de la prière, symbole de l'égalité entre tous les musulmans.

L'homosexualité est aussi l'œuvre de Dieu

Si Dieu est sans conteste à l'origine de toute chose sur terre, l'être humain est également le fruit de sa création. Les homosexuels savent pertinemment que l'on ne choisit pas sa sexualité. Elle s'impose à nous, elle est naturelle, et est donc également la volonté de Dieu. Certains diront qu'il s'agit d'une perversion humaine, une épreuve voulue par Dieu.

Et pourtant, cette sexualité particulière fait partie intégrante de la création divine. Plusieurs études répertorient des centaines d'espèces animales ayant des comportements homosexuels.

Et pour aller plus loin dans les mystères de la création, Dieu a attribué à certains individus les deux sexes, mâle et femelle à la fois. Il s'agit des hermaphrodites.

Ce que disent les Hadiths

(Les hadiths sont un ensemble de textes qui rapportent des témoignages sur la vie du prophète).

Un seul hadith condamne ouvertement les rapports sexuels entre hommes pratiqués en public : « *Si vous trouvez quiconque en train de répéter les pratiques du peuple de Loth, tuez-les, que ce soit celui qui commet l'acte ou celui qui le subit.* » Tirmidhi ; Abou Daoud ; Ibn Majah.

Ce hadith a une origine douteuse. Comme bien d'autres, en matière de sexualité, d'égalité des sexes et de diversité des genres, il a été ajouté après la mort du Prophète à la tradition islamique. Il rappelle également l'interdiction de se livrer à des actes sexuels en public (homosexuels ou hétérosexuels) qui iraient à l'encontre des bonnes mœurs.

La condamnation du peuple de Loth

(Loût en arabe)

Les seuls passages du Coran sur lesquels se basent les juristes pour condamner l'homosexualité, renvoient tous à des versets qui décrivent les pratiques du peuple de Loth. Loth était le prophète d'une ville où les habitants avaient un comportement qu'ils désavouaient. Ces gens étaient réputés pour leurs mauvaises mœurs, leurs brigandages, leurs viols. Ils vénéraient des dieux païens. Ils considéraient l'appropriation de l'autre comme une dévotion. D'ailleurs, le prophète Loth dénonce dans un passage du Coran le comportement d'individus venus violer ses invités (y compris des hommes), comme il était courant de le faire dans cette cité qu'il habitait. Ainsi, ces versets du Coran ne désigneraient pas l'homosexualité en tant que relation consentie entre deux adultes de même sexe.

Figure 4: Headings in a leaflet uploaded to the Facebook group HM2F | Homosexuel(le)s Musulman(e)s – Lesbian & Gay Muslims.

accepted (Poushter et al. 2020). However, individuals who identify as LGBTQ in France still experience widespread discrimination and harassment (OECD 2019). Queer Muslims are particularly vulnerable to acts of aggression: a recent survey found that 37% of queer Muslims experienced harassment in 2018-2019, as opposed to 15% of queer respondents who identified as Catholic and 14% who consider themselves non-religious (IFOP 2019). Furthermore, SOS Homophobie reported a 42% increase in harassment and discrimination complaints by lesbian women in 2019 since the previous year (SOS Homophobie 2019). These statistics are significant. As the French version of the #MeToo movement, #BalanceTonPorc (#ExposeYourPig), gained ground in 2017–2018, it created a shift in attitudes toward exposing harassment and violence against women and LBT individuals. SOS Homophobie claims that by reporting assaults, lesbian and bisexual women are pushing back against invisibilization and acts of violence that, until then, were denied and trivialized (SOS Homophobie 2019).

However, immigrant queer Muslim women are often rendered invisible by the same organizations that fight to make LGBTQ struggles visible. For instance, SOS Homophobie's 2020 biennial report of homophobia in France presents one testimony of a gay Muslim man, but does not include any testimonies or statistics of discrimination against queer Muslim women (SOS Homophobie 2020, 118). Official reports from the OECD, IFOP, and SOS Homophobie measure discrimination against LGBT individuals, immigrants, women, LGBTQ Muslims, and lesbians but none specifically focus on the intersection of lesbian/bisexual, Muslim, and immigrant categories, making it difficult to discern how this particular group of women experiences discrimination. Although gaining access to lesbian/bisexual Maghrebi Muslim informants can be challenging, as a result of cultural and religious taboos associated with queerness (Siraj 2016, 186), these wide gaps in knowledge and data surrounding the struggles and lived experiences of queer Muslim women indicate wider forces of exclusion within the French LGBTQ community.

For instance, there were few accounts of pro-LGBTQ Muslim associations being present at Gay Pride celebrations across the country before 2020, even though increasing numbers of queer Muslims participate in Pride events. Yet the experiences of lesbian/bisexual Muslims at Pride celebrations in Britain demonstrate how interactions between mainstream events of the LGBTQ community and intersectional identities can shape experiences of exclusion and inclusion for queer Muslims across these landscapes. As Pride's narratives of diversity and inclusion exist within the framework of secular understandings of queerness, transgressing these norms can lead to experiences of discrimination as well as harassment. At a Pride event in Britain, Tamsila Tauqir, founder of the LGBTQI Muslim lesbian support group *The Safra Project*, claims that several queer Muslim women were confronted at the march for wearing the *hijab*: "We were harassed and assaulted by some gay men with Islamophobic, racist and misogynistic abuse as well as having beer thrown at us. No one from the march intervened; in fact, others stood by and encouraged the abusers in their actions" (Tauqir 2020, n.p.). These violent reactions against Muslim lesbians at the event point to the ways in which expressing Muslim identity can hinder access to queer spaces and render them exclusionary and even dangerous. Despite claims of inclusivity, discourses of gay-friendliness and inclusivity are ultimately "laden with a value structure" and "informed by gender, class and religion" (Mousawwi 2018, 175). Although Amari finds that Maghrebi lesbians in France consider Pride to be an important stepping stone in their processes of self-construction (2018, 183), their experiences of belonging within mainstream LGBTQ communities are ultimately shaped by the ways in which their various identities interact with hegemonic structures that impose secular cultural supremacy under the disguise of inclusivity for all.

In non-intersectional mainstream secular French feminist spheres, Muslim women, especially those who wear the veil, are often perceived as oppressed individuals in need of saving from controlling patriarchal figures. Through the lens of this framework, the veil is understood to be a male imposition that aims to control women's sexualities. As a symbol of oppression, it is perceived as incompatible with feminism (Abu-Lughod 2002, 786; Diallo 2018). Holding these assumptions, feminist organizations such as Osez le Féminisme (Dare Feminism) and Ni Putes Ni Soumises (Neither Whores Nor Submissive) have publicly supported or remained silent on policies that prohibit veiling in schools and full-face veils in public spaces (Diallo 2018; The University of Chicago 2013; "Saphir News" 2015). In the process, critics, namely veiled Muslim women, have argued that these organizations have used their political platforms as well as narratives of male oppression and victimhood to alienate veiled Muslim women through discourses that are racist and Islamophobic ("Saphir News" 2015). Although there have been efforts to push back against exclusion through the establishment of feminist collectives such as "Femmes en Lutte 93" ("Women in the Fight 93"), an initiative that is inclusive of veiled Muslim women and queer Muslim immigrant women ("Femmes en Lutte 93" 2011), the disproval of the veil within French feminist circles reflects broader debates and controversies surrounding the perception of the veil in France.

From a political and secular standpoint, Muslim women who wear the veil are depicted as a threat to *laïcité* (secularism). *Laïcité* refers to a specifically French brand of secularism, a principle that not only advocates for the separation between public institutions and religion, but also envisions a public sphere that is "neutral" and free from religious influence. As a product of historical tensions between the church and state throughout the centuries, *laïcité* is deeply intertwined with the development of the nation and remains an integral pillar of secular republican identity (Colissimo 2018). However, the discourse of *laïcité* has been used to prohibit the physical expressions of religious belief in public schools since 2004 as well as to ban veils that cover the face from all public spheres since 2010. Both these initiatives have primarily targeted and affected Muslim women and girls. As Lila-Abu-

Lughod argues in her article "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" (2002), discourses of salvation and unveiling not only undermine women's agency and capacity to make free choices but reflect oppressive colonial attitudes towards those who are considered to be the "Other." Furthermore, Western narratives of oppression aim to suppress cultural difference rather than bring about constructive change in women's lives (Abu-Lughod 2002, 789). Although France is part of the larger "West," the historical development of *laïcité* as well as French ideas about sexuality, ethnicity, and feminism have played a significant role in shaping the intensity of the debates surrounding the Muslim veil in a way that is distinct from other Western countries. The controversy over the head-covering ultimately diverts attention away from the broader structural inequalities and failures surrounding immigrant inclusion within French society, increasing feelings of marginalization within not only veiled Muslim populations but also French Muslim communities at large.

Muslim and Immigrant: Discrimination and Islamophobia

The perception of immigrants in France further complicates the ways queer Muslim Maghrebi women experience belonging within society. Since the arrival of immigrant laborers from countries in North Africa to France, starting in the mid 1940s, followed by their families arriving through "family reunification" policies in the 1970s (De Wenden 2003, 70), immigrants have been socially and geographically excluded and tend to occupy the bottom rungs of the socio-economic ladder (Keaton 2006, 4). They often live in disadvantaged districts and housing projects in the suburbs of cities, known as the *banlieues*, which limit opportunities for upward mobility. As statistics from the OECD Biennial report from 2019 demonstrate, social mobility in France is low, and at the current rate, "it would take an average of six generations for children in a family in the poorest 10% of the income distribution to reach the average income in France" (OECD 2019). These structured exclusions impact the way Queer Maghrebi Women are perceived within French society; as immigrants and the descendants of immigrants, they are considered to be a "social problem," "others," "not French" even though they are French citizens (Keaton 2006, 4). As inhabitants of the *banlieue*, they are portrayed as victims of poverty through the mainstream media, with men represented as "criminals" and women as "victims" (Keaton 2006). The label of *beurette* (feminine form of *beur* meaning "Arab" in *verlan*, French slang that originated in the *banlieues*) has also taken on the meaning of "sexually loose," designating women who are "not respected" (Sabrina 2019). Although the use of verlan can be liberating in certain contexts, negative representations of immigrants in France have influenced the use and meanings of terms such as *beur* and specifically *beurette*, a word which now carries the weight of gender and ethno-racial specific stereotypes for European-born women of Maghrebi origin (Hamdi 2017). Classifications such as these can have severe impacts on the ways Maghrebi women perceive themselves within French society, as they may come to measure themselves through the perceptions of others (Keaton 2006, 5). For Muslims, this is especially problematic in a country where they are seen as the antithesis of French secular identity (Keaton 2006, 4). As the historical transformation of the perception of immigrants shifted from *travailleurs immigrés* (immigrant workers) to *Arabes* (Arabs) to eventually *Musulman(e)s* (Muslims), keeping in mind that not all immigrant workers in France were Arabs and not Arabs are Muslim, these changing perceptions of the category of Other and the problematic representations of people from these communities have led to real-life consequences and experiences of discrimination and Islamophobia.

Islamophobic discourses prompted in part by the Syrian refugee crisis, the rise of nationalism, and radical Islamic terrorist attacks have created further tensions between Muslim communities and those who perceive Muslims in France as a threat to republican values. Surveys conducted in 2015 demonstrate that the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis correlated with the rise of Islamophobia in Europe as a whole (Osiewicz 2017). Furthermore, the Syrian refugee crisis is linked with the rise of nationalism, as anti-immigration sentiments were leveraged by centrist as well as right-wing populist parties who used Syrian refugees as well as immigrants as scapegoats for social problems (Osiewicz 2017; Keaton 2006, 193). For instance, in the 2017 French presidential elections, far-right candidate Marine Le Pen built her campaign around anti-immigration rhetoric vowing to support policies that would render France "more French" (Nossiter 2017). Islamist attacks in France at the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters, the Bataclan concert hall in 2015, and in Nice in 2016 and 2020, and more recently, the killing of schoolteacher Samuel Paty in Conflans-Saint-Honorine in 2020 have increased the expression of apprehension towards Muslims in France. They have also led individuals to equate terror with Islam, even though members of Muslim communities have continuously condemned such acts and consider them to violate the fundamental principles of their religion (Al Jazeera 2020; DW 2020). Yet following the event at Conflans-Saint-Honorine, French President Emmanuel Macron delivered a speech in which he controversially stated that "Islam is a religion that is in crisis all over the world today, we are not just seeing this in our country," sparking backlash from Muslim activists and protesters across the Muslim world (Al Jazeera 2020).

By framing immigrants and Islam as "a problem" in a country that houses the largest Muslim population in Europe, the French government has constructed a category of Other that has served to reinforce French secular identity and create a common enemy. Orientalist discourses have marginalized immigrants and Muslim populations in France, creating a split between the West, "us," and the East, "them," a conceptualization that in Said's words "created and… served the two worlds thus conceived" (Said 1979, 43-44). Edward Said and W.E.B Du Bois's "two worlds" are made manifest through the juxtaposition between the wealthy cities and the disadvantaged *banlieues*, and the conceptualization of the liberated secular woman vis-à-vis the oppressed veiled Muslim woman. The categories of "queer" and "Muslim" are rendered mutually exclusive both within Muslim circles and in LGBTQ and feminist spheres. Given these multiple forces of exclusion, how do queer Muslim women negotiate and reconfigure their "queer" and "Muslim" identities in contemporary France? How do they bridge the gap between these two worlds to become, in the words of Du Bois (1904, 4) a "truer and better self?"

Queering the Qur'an

The categories of "Muslim" and "queer" can be perceived to be incommensurable in both Muslim and secular communities. Boellstorff argued in his study of Muslim gay men in Indonesia that the categories of "Muslim" and "gay" are "ungrammatical" within the Indonesian public sphere (2008, 575). Because Muslim life lays the foundations for Indonesian cultural life, Boellstorff found that Western understandings of desire and identity categories such as "gay" were untranslatable within Indonesian cultural contexts. Conversely, being Muslim in queer communities is fraught with difficulties as well, as there are certain value structures that inform what it means to be queer (Mousawwi 2018, 175). Although some individuals do not seek to reconfigure both identity categories, others use very specific methods to reconcile their "Muslim" and "queer" identities through the framework of the religion itself.

As mentioned earlier, an overwhelming majority of Muslims argue that Islam and homosexuality are not compatible (Siraj 2016, 187), claiming that the justification for the condemnation of same-sex acts or relationships can be found in the Qur'an (Laurenson 2016). Yet the understanding of homosexuality as a "sin" is not based on an individual experiencing same-sex attraction; rather, it is a judgment imposed upon the individual for acting on the attraction of same-sex acts or relationships, thereby defying the heteronormative structures established by the Qur'an. The Arabic terms for lesbian (*sahiqa, sahhaqa, musahiqa*) and lesbianism (*sahq, sihaq, sihaqa*) reflect this distinction as they refer to action and behavior rather than an identity category as constructed in Western languages (Siraj, 2016, 187).

Queer readings of how the Qur'an frames homosexual acts or relationships have reconfigured traditional interpretations. All major schools of Islamic jurisprudence refer to the Story of the people of Lot to condemn homosexuality (El-Rouayheb 2005). However, this story specifically focuses on male homosexual behavior rather than female same-sex acts or relationships, and queer Muslims aiming to reconcile their identities point out that its condemnation is found within a Hadith rather than the Qur'an. Hadiths are reports about Prophet Mohammad and his companions that are used to complement understandings of, but are seen as secondary to the Qur'an (Siraj 2016, 188; Cragg 2020). Anwar (2000) finds that although there are passages in the Islamic holy book that explicitly forbid male homosexual behavior, there is only one excerpt that could be understood as a direct condemnation of female homosexuality in the Qur'an.

> Chapter 4 Sūrat l-nisāa (The Women):
>
> وَٱلَّـٰتِى يَأْتِينَ ٱلْفَـٰحِشَةَ مِن نِّسَآئِكُمْ فَٱسْتَشْهِدُوا۟ عَلَيْهِنَّ **أَرْبَعَةً مِّنكُمْ** ۖ فَإِن شَهِدُوا۟ فَأَمْسِكُوهُنَّ فِى ٱلْبُيُوتِ حَتَّىٰ يَتَوَفَّىٰهُنَّ ٱلْمَوْتُ أَوْ يَجْعَلَ ٱللَّهُ لَهُنَّ سَبِيلًا
>
> And as for those who are **guilty of an indecency** from among your women, call to witnesses against them four (witnesses) from among you; then if they bear witness confine them to the houses until death takes them away or Allah opens some way for them. (Qur'an 4:15)

In this passage, Egyptian judge Mohammed Habib Shakir (2009) translates **يَأْتِينَ ٱلْفَـٰحِشَةَ** (commit [the] immorality) from Classical Arabic to "guilty of indecency" in English. Yet various translations have interpreted this section of the passage differently, to mean "unlawful sexual intercourse" (Sahih International), "illegal sexual intercourse" (Mohsin Khan), as well as "guilty of lewdness" (Pickthall) ("Verse 4:15 - English Translation"). Yet what constitutes as "illegal" or "lewd" may be contested, as Islamic law traditionally defines *zina* (transgression or illegitimate sexual intercourse) as vaginal intercourse between a man and a woman, leaving a grey area and scope for debate of the degree to which same-sex acts between women could be considered a transgression (Siraj 2016, 187). Although female same-sex acts or relationships are also considered forbidden, on the basis that they defy the gender norms and notions of femininity established through the Qur'an, the overall omission of references to female same-sex acts or relationships in the Qur'an allows queer Muslim women to validate their lesbian/bisexual identities through the authority of the text.

Furthermore, most of the punishments that are ascribed to homosexuality are derived from the Hadiths, which complement understandings of the Qur'an (Siraj 2016, 188). Since the Hadiths ultimately come second to the authority of the Qur'an (Cragg 2020), progressive Islamic scholars such as Habib (2010) and Kugle (2010) have proposed rejections of unauthenticated Hadiths that denounce homosexuality while bringing attention to passages in the Qur'an that encourage the acceptance of difference instead (Siraj 2016, 188). Kugle (2010) offers a reinterpretation of the "story of the Lot" as a condemnation of violence and rape rather than a justification for the prohibition of homosexuality within Islamic schools of thought.

By focusing on social justice, activism, and acceptance of diversity, as well as the equal worth of all individuals regardless of gender and class, LGBTQ Muslims challenge the heteronormative perspectives that dominate within their religion. By reconfiguring understandings of passages from the Qur'an, reinterpreting stories (such as the story of the Lot) that are used to condemn homosexuality, and rejecting unauthenticated Hadiths, as well as emphasizing passages that promote inclusivity, they highlight the ways Islam has been a source of liberation for the marginalized, excluded, and oppressed (Siraj 2016, 189; Kugle 2010, 8).

Reconfiguration Through Secular Conceptualizations of Freedom and Agency

As immigrant Muslims living in France, queer Maghrebi immigrant women reconfigure their "queer" and "Muslim" identities through secular epistemologies and ontologies that they acquire through their embeddedness in the French context. Their personal understandings of autonomy, freedom, and agency inform the ways they come to embody and reconfigure notions of selfhood. I explore the ways in which authentic interpretive authority is attributed to personal experience rather than institutional authority by drawing on three discussions: (1) anthropologist Mayanthi Fernando's (2010) informants' conceptualizations of secular notions of autonomy, self-realization, and self-liberation vis-à-vis their religious obligation or personal decision to wear the veil, (2) Siraj's study (2016) of lesbian Muslim religious identity, and (3) Yip's discussions (2005) on religious approaches organized around reflexivity. When religion is understood in a more individualistic rather than collectivist fashion, reconfigurations are rendered legitimate and possible.

Fernando's (2010) exploration of how veiled Muslim women in France negotiate freedom is a useful framework through which to understand how queer Maghrebi Muslim women use secular understandings of freedom, religion, and agency to reconfigure their religious and gender identities. In "Reconfiguring Freedom" (2010), the author unpacks the processes by which veiled women reconcile secular notions of autonomy with Islamic understandings of piety and submission through the act of veiling. Rather than conceptualizing liberty in opposition to religious authority as in the secular republican models of autonomy, veiled women reconfigure notions of freedom through the negotiation of self in relation to Islamic tradition. Fernando finds that Muslim immigrant women merge their understandings of self-realization and self-liberation (rooted in the Islamic concept of *fitra*) with secular understandings of personal freedom and agency that the informants acquired through their lifelong engagements with secular theories of knowledge (Fernando 2010, 20). Conceptualizing self-realization as an internal process by which one comes to re-discover and know God, they reconfigure their desire for autonomy with the willful submission to God in order to achieve self-liberation (Fernando 2010, 25). For born-again Muslims who grow up in France, the imperative to veil "must emerge from the internal desires of the practitioner and cannot be imposed by an outside authority" (Fernando 2010, 22). In other words, the choice to wear the veil is deeply connected to a truth perceived from within, a truth that, according to the informants' understandings of self-realization, is a reflection of God's will.

> By conceptualizing self-realization as the realization of the transcendent will – the enactment of which requires submission to certain religious obligations – these Muslim French women fundamentally reimagine the relationship between norms and the self-such as the "true self" is cultivated and realized not against social and religious authority but, rather, through it. (Fernando 2010, 23-24)

The notion of the "true self" as a manifestation of God's intent is reflected in the underlying assumptions that formed the basis for religious reconfiguration for Siraj's lesbian Muslim informants in Britain (2016). They maintained that sexuality was an "innate quality" that God had predisposed them with, therefore, God would not reject them (Siraj 2016, 194-195). This idea is what ultimately led Siraj's informants to construct the "Muslim lesbian" identity and to see both categories as compatible. Yet in contrast to veiled Muslim women who reconfigure secular understandings of freedom with their Muslim identities by conforming to Islamic tradition, queer Muslim women use individualistic approaches to religion to challenge traditional norms and to reform the religion itself.

As Yip (2005) argues, secular individualism has rendered religious approaches to be more experience-based, prioritizing human subjectivity and reflexivity over reliance on institutionalized religious authority (61). Through secular understandings of freedom and agency, individuals have rendered their personal experiences, interpretations, and approaches towards religion as legitimate by "[relocating] interpretive authority to the 'self'" (Yip 2005, 61). This "relocation" can be seen in Fernando's (2010) informants'claims that wearing a veil must be a personal choice coming from the "self," rather than imposed by an outside authority (22), as well by Siraj's informants (2016) who come to construct a "Queer Muslim" category through their personal understandings of their relationships with God. The declining influence of religious institutions' claims to moral authority, therefore, is deeply connected to the emergence of LGBTQ Muslim identities in contemporary secular societies. Individual reconfigurations are rendered legitimate, possible, and are ultimately cultivated through spaces of acceptance and inclusion.

Social Media Platforms as Spaces of Inclusion and Belonging

Pro-LGBTQ+ Muslim social media accounts and groups on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter serve as useful tools for connecting immigrant Muslim lesbians/bisexuals and other members of the Muslim LGBTQ community to resources that might be helpful in bridging the gap between their faith and their sexualities. They also provide digital spaces for individuals with similar experiences to share and voice their thoughts and organize events and gatherings both offline and in the digital world, creating a space of validation, assertion, and belonging. As with the HM2F Group, I justify using social media posts from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in the following analysis on the basis that the data are textual/video-graphic, individuals are anonymized (I only include first names and block profile photos), and the research involves the observation of subjects in openly public digital spaces.

One of the earliest efforts to establish a digital community for queer Muslim women in France was the creation of a public Facebook group entitled "Muslim and lesbian, it's possible, LGBT too, long live homosexual Islam" (@Musulmaneliberee). The group was originally established in 2013 and features quotes that affirm compatibility between homosexual and queer identities, opportunities for group discussions (see Figure 5), and photographs of Muslim women kissing (both hijabi and non-hijabi). Although the group brings visibility to Muslim lesbian relationships, it does not focus on the intricacies of reconfiguration as HM2F does in its Facebook group. The initiative received overwhelming negative attention between 2013-2014, as the comment sections reflected homophobia as well as an overall disdain for the group's message. Yet between December 2020 and June 2021, the group deleted some of its older posts from that time period, revamped its online presence (the page now says that it was created in 2018), and currently still brings visibility to queer Muslim women on Facebook. Although I conducted my digital ethnography from October 2020 until December 2020, I witnessed the evolution of this group in the process of revising this article until June 2021. The comment sections on the posts between 2018 until 2021 show much more acceptance of queer Muslim posts than in 2013-2014, demonstrating how the general public's perception of lesbian/bisexual Muslim women might be gradually shifting.

More recently, in October 2020, the Facebook/Instagram initiative PAINT (not an acronym) published one of its first interviews of a Queer Muslim woman. PAINT aims to bring visibility to French LGBTQ+ individuals of diverse backgrounds and life experiences. In the video, Sarah, a queer Muslim woman of Algerian descent proudly asserts "I am queer and Muslim," (See Figure 6) and "you can be both," (See Figure 7). She recounts her difficult experiences coming out to her family and declares that being Muslim and lesbian is "totally compatible," because it does not affect her relationship to God (Instagram:

Figure 5: Facebook group Musulmane et lesbienne c'est possible ! vive l'islam homosexuel ! (@Musulmaneliberee) The writing on the photo reads: "It's possible!!! Long live homosexual Islam! Kisses, my babies... Anissa" The caption above the link reads: "Darlings, join us on our group discussions."

Figure 6: Instagram (@paint.officiel). The caption reads: "I am queer and Muslim"

Figure 7: Instagram (@paint.officiel). The caption reads: "You can be both"

@paint.officiel). By publicly asserting her religious and queer identities, Sarah makes the identity that she embodies visible.

Twitter is employed by some queer Muslim Maghrebi individuals as a medium for identity assertion and activism. They utilize the platform as a space to denounce homophobia and Islamophobia, to share their experiences and thoughts, and to confront those who might challenge them. For instance, a queer Muslim young woman of North African origin tweets: "Today, I still don't know who I am exactly. I will probably never know. Today, I am surrounded more and more by people who look like me. Bis, lesbians, transgender people, queer Muslims. And it feels good" (see Figure 8). She is also especially vocal about her experiences as a queer Maghrebi Muslim woman and conceptualizes her identity as a struggle against prejudice. She tweets: "…I fight every day against racism that I experience as a **Maghrebi woman**, against the homophobia that I experience as a **queer woman**, against the islamophobia that I experience as a **Muslim woman**…" (see Figure 9).

The tweet was originally a reply to a comment made by anther Twitter user who asked her what she "does" (in terms of activist work). By bringing attention to her situatedness in the nexus between the three identities — immigrant, queer, Muslim — and highlighting the multiple forces of exclusion that she experiences as she embodies the three, she positions her identity against these forces, ultimately rendering the assertion of her identity as an activist stance in and of itself.

Non-Reconciliation

In October 2020, Amina Daas, a Maghrebi queer Muslim woman, published a novel that

Figure 8: Anonymized Twitter post.

garnered some attention in the French media. The text, *La Petite Dernière* (2020), recounts the author's experiences living as an immigrant, lesbian, and Muslim woman in Clichy-sous-Bois, a *banlieue* near Paris, bringing up discussions surrounding queer and Muslim identities to the attention of the public. She also garnered some visibility because she openly considers homosexuality to be a "sin" as a Muslim while still identifying as a lesbian, a contradiction that was rendered unintelligible in public discourses (Mahrane 2020). Daas claims that she embodies both identities without reconciling them, and she does not seek to reform Islam.

Some queer Muslim women like Daas retain both Muslim and queer identities while sustaining the presumption of mutual exclusivity between the two. As Amari's research on Maghrebi lesbian women in France (2012; 2018) demonstrates, the identity negotiation process varies from person to person as some women conceptualize their identities from a framework of division rather than unification. This division is highlighted in the ways individuals reveal certain parts of their identity to some and not to others through processes of compartmentalization (Amari 2012). Siraj's study of Muslim lesbians in Britain (2011) demonstrates how some women choose between their Muslim or queer identities, neither reconfiguring nor embodying both "opposing" identities at the same time. In France, a country where religious affiliation in the public space is often viewed with suspicion due to its associations with "obscuritanism" and the complex history of separation of church and state, choosing between the religious and queer identities might make sense for individuals who come from religious backgrounds. France's specific historical relationship to religion and the underlying cultural importance of *laïcité* may ultimately play important roles in the choices queer Muslim women make regarding their identities: from abandoning religion and embodying a secular "queer" identity, to embodying both identities separately, to forging an understanding of Islam that encompasses some of these culture-specific values while also challenging the exclusions of secularism. These processes of negotiation emphasize the complexity in how queer Muslim immigrant women shape their identities and how they come to interact with structures that undermine their understandings of selfhood.

Figure 9: Anonymized Twitter post.

Conclusion

"In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself, — darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another." (W.E.B. Du Bois 1904, 8)

The year 2020 was a turning point for discussions surrounding queer Muslim Maghrebi identities in France as more women came forward to talk publicly about their experiences. Although they have been problematized and excluded on multiple fronts within dominant religious, political, and feminist discourses, many queer Muslim immigrants take it upon themselves to embody an identity or identities that reflect their understandings of self in relation to their situatedness within current historical, political, and religious contexts. Muslim lesbian and bisexual Maghrebi women reconcile seemingly juxtapositioned categories of "Muslim" and "queer" through methods such as queering the Qur'an and by utilizing secular understandings of freedom and agency to locate religious authority in the "self" rather than in religious authorities. For some, claiming all three categories is a political stance, a form of activism that opposes and challenges the dominant narratives that render them incompatible. Others do not reconfigure their identities and retain their "queer" and "Muslim" identities separately or choose to embody one or the other. Social media has served as an invaluable medium for individuals with similar conceptions of selfhood to connect, as well as to gain access to resources that help in the reconfiguration process. The findings and discussions of this research aim to make visible a group that has been largely overlooked within academic disciplines and rendered invisible to the public eye. In a globalized world where intersectional identities are becoming increasingly relevant, a critical analysis of how these identities operate remains essential for understanding how apparent cultural incommensurabilities are negotiated and then made commensurable through the framework of the "self." Ultimately, by bridging the gap between "queer" and "Muslim" identities and connecting with others who share similar understandings of self, queer Muslim Maghrebi women find ways to negotiate and conceptualize their notions of "selfhood" in ways that challenge traditional notions of what it means to be queer, Muslim, and an immigrant in contemporary France.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Yasemin Ipek for her incessant encouragement and for supporting my anthropological aspirations, the Office of Student Scholarship, Creative Activities, and Research (OSCAR) at George Mason University, Dr. Karen Lee, Dr. Anthony Hoefer, Dr. Stephan Wheelock, Dr. Jennifer Ashley, Catalina Lara, Loïse Tachon, Karen Therrien, Sharon Jose, Benjamin Counts, Leah Kanzer, Kimberly Anthony, Manuel Lara as well as family members and friends who have lifted me up throughout my time as an undergraduate student. You have helped me grow. You have inspired me to follow the paths that align most strongly with my values and have stood beside me, cheered me on through the thick and thin. Words cannot express how privileged I feel to have been surrounded by such incredible mentors, teachers, friends, and networks of support. Finally, I would like to thank *The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography* and Dr. Martha Radice for finding value in my research and for providing a space for Maghrebi lesbian/bisexual Muslim identities in France to be brought into the spotlight.

References

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others.” *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 783–790.

Amari, Salima. 2012. “Des lesbiennes en devenir: Coming-out, loyauté filiale et hétéronormativité chez des descendant-e-s d’immigrant-e-s maghrébin-e-s.” *Cahiers du genre* 53 (2012): 55–75.

Amari, Salima. 2018. *Lesbiennes de l’immigration: Construction de soi et relations familiales*. Vulaines sur Seine: Éditions du Croquant.

Anwar, Ghazala. 2000. “Islam.” In *Lesbian Histories and Cultures*, edited by Bonnie Zimmerman, 403–5. New York: Garland.

Beaman, Jean. 2016. “As French as Anyone Else: Islam and the North African Second Generation in France.” *International Migration Review* 50(1): 41–69.

Boellstorff, Tom. 2005. “Between Religion and Desire: Being Muslim and *Gay* in Indonesia.” *American Anthropologist* 107(4): 575-585.

Colosimo, Anastasia. 2017. “Laïcité: Why French Secularism Is So Hard to Grasp.” *Institut Montaigne*, December 11, 2017. https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/laicite-why-french-secularism-so-hard-grasp.

Cragg, Albert Kenneth. 2020. “Hadith.” In *Encyclopedia Brittanica*. August 5. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hadith.

Daas, Fatima. 2020. *La Petite Dernière*. Paris: Les Éditions Noir sur Blanc.

De Wenden, Catherine Wihtol. 2003. “Assimilation and Struggle: Maghrebi Immigration and French Political Culture.” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 4(2): 69-74.

Diallo, Rokhaya. 2018. “Le voile n’est pas incompatible avec le féminisme.” Slate.fr, March 13. http://www.slate.fr/story/158851/voile-et-feminisme.

Di Caro, Beatrice. 2019. “A gay imam’s story: ‘The dialogue is open in Islam – 10 years ago it wasn’t’.” World Economic Forum, June 28. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/06/gay-imam-islam-paris-france-mosque/.

Doezema, Marie. 2014. “Two years after Paris’ first LGBT-friendly mosque opened, attitudes are mixed.” *The World from PRX*, 16 May. https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-05-16/two-years-after-paris-first-lgbt-friendly-mosque-opened-attitudes-are-mixed.

Du Bois, W.E.B. 1904. *The Souls of Black Folk*. United States: Blue Heron Press.

DW. 2020. “Islamism: How terror attacks have shocked France.” *DW.COM*, November 12. https://www.dw.com/en/islamism-how-terror-attacks-have-shocked-france/a-55566704.

El-Rouayheb, Khaled. 2005. *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Femmes en Lutte 93. Blog Website. Accessed December 5, 2020. http://femmesenlutte93.over-blog.com/.

Fernando, Mayanthi L. 2010. “Reconfiguring Freedom: Muslim Piety and the Limits of Secular Law and Public Discourse in France.” *American Ethnologist* 37(1): 19-35. https://fcc.uchicago.edu/neither-whores-nor-submissive-the-burqa-ban-in-france/.

Habib, Samar, ed. 2010. *Islam and Homosexuality, Volumes I & II*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

Hamdi, Zaïneb. 2017. “‘Beurette’: L’histoire d’un mot et d’une Figure.” *Konbini*, August 15. https://www.konbini.com/fr/tendances-2/beurette-histoire-mot-et-figure/.

IFOP. 2019. “Observatoire des LGBTphobies: État des lieux 2019.” *IFOP*, May 13. https://www.ifop.com/publication/observatoire-des-lgbtphobies-etat-des-lieux-2019/.

Keaton, Tricia Danielle. 2006. *Muslim Girls and the Other France: Race, Identity Politics, and Social Exclusion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kugle, Scott Siraj Al-Haqq. 2010. *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*. Oxford: Oneworld.

Laurenson, John. 2016. “Inside Europe: Islam and homosexuality in France.” *Deutsche Welle*, September 8, 2016. Video. https://www.dw.com/en/inside-europe-islam-and-homosexuality-in-france/av-19537115.

Mahrane, Saïd. 2020. “Le livre de Fatima Daas vaut mieux qu’une polémique.” *Le Point*, September 10. https://www.lepoint.fr/debats/le-livre-de-fatima-daas-vaut-mieux-qu-une-polemique-10-09-2020-2391301_2.php.

Miller, Daniel. 2018. “Digital Anthropology.” In *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by Felix Stein, Sian Lazar, Matei Candea, Hildegard Diemberger, Joel Robbins, Andrew Sanchez and Rupert Stasch. https://doi.org/http://doi.org/10.29164/18digital. Cambridge: Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology.

Moussawi, Ghassan. 2018. “Queer Exceptionalism and Exclusion: Cosmopolitanism and Inequalities in ‘gay-Friendly’ Beirut.” *The Sociological Review* 66(1): 174–190.

MPF/HM2F. 2016. *Musulman.e et Homosexuel.le*. France, 2016.

Murugkar, Lata. 1994. “Beurs and Beurettes of France: Crisis of Identity.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 29 (38): 2476-478.

OECD. 2019. “Society at a Glance 2019.” *OECD Social Indicators*. OECD Publishing, doi.org/10.1787/soc_glance-2019-en.

Osiewicz, Przemyslaw. 2017. “Europe’s Islamophobia and the Refugee Crisis.” *Middle East Institute*, September 19. https://www.mei.edu/publications/europes-islamophobia-and-refugee-crisis.

Poushter, Jacob, and Kent, Nicholas. 2020. “The Global Divide on Homosexuality Persists.” *Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project*, Pew Research Center, October 27. www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists/.

Sabrina, Soraya. 2019. “#Ballade Sonore 1: «Beurette» & « Lesbienne» Sur Internet? What’s up?” YouTube, October 6, 2019. https://youtu.be/4xXE9fPAAYo .

Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Saphir News. 2015. “Islamophobie: des militantes de Osez le féminisme ! se rebiffent.” *Saphir News*, June 1. https://www.saphirnews.com/Islamophobie-des-militantes-de-Osez-le-feminisme--se-rebiffent_a20858.html.

Shakir, M. 2009. *Al-Qur’ān Al-ḥakīm = Holy Qur’an*. Qum: Ansariyan Publications.

Siraj, Asifa. 2016. “British Muslim lesbians: Reclaiming Islam and reconfiguring religious identity.” *Contemporary Islam* 10(2): 185-200.

Siraj, Asifa. 2011. “Isolated, Invisible, and in the Closet: The Life Story of a Scottish Muslim Lesbian.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 15(1): 99 -121. https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2010.490503.

SOS Homophobie. 2019. “Rapport Sur L’homophobie 2019” *SOS Homophobie*. https://www.sos-homophobie.org/informer/rapport-annuel-lgbtiphobies/ra-2019

SOS Homophobie. 2020. “Rapport Sur Les LGBTIphobies 2020.” *SOS homophobie*. October 12. https://www.sos-homophobie.org/rapport-sur-les-lgbtiphobies-2020.

Tauqir, Tamsila. 2020. “Gender, Sexuality, & Islam.” *IMOW Muslima*. http://muslima.globalfundforwomen.org/content/gender-sexuality-islam.

The University of Chicago. 2013. “Fadela Amara, speaking on "The Burqa Ban in France.” *YouTube*, Jun 17, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jkz1LFPgZDY

“Verse (4:15) - English Translation.” The Quranic Arabic Corpus - Translation. Accessed December 10, 2020. https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=4.

Willis, Roxana. 2019. “Observations Online: Finding the Ethical Boundaries of Facebook Research.” *Research Ethics* 15(1): 1–17.

Yip, Andrew Kam-Tuck. 2008. “The Quest for Intimate/sexual Citizenship: Lived Experiences of Lesbian and Bisexual Muslim Women.” *Contemporary Islam* 2(2): 99–117.

Yip, Andrew Kam-Tuck. 2005. “Queering Religious Texts: An Exploration of British Non-Heterosexual Christians’ and Muslims’ Strategy of Constructing Sexuality-Affirming Hermeneutics.” *Sociology* 39(1): 47–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038505049000.

The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography

Post-Lesbian Tensions: A Qualitative Inquiry of Lesbian Identity

Anastasja Giacomuzzi, Hadas Tal

University College Maastricht

anastasja.giacomuzzi@gmail.com, hadas.tal73@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how lesbians aged 18 to 25 negotiate their sexual identity in relation to post-lesbian discourse. Post-lesbian discourse refers to the postmodern conceptualisation of lesbian identity as irrelevant, unnecessary, and minor because of increased acceptance of homosexuality and the popularity of queer theory and its deconstruction of identity categories. In three small focus groups with a total of 10 participants, we explored the themes of word usage, meanings, and associations, as well as exclusion, boundaries, and stigma. We found that our participants' disdain and discomfort with the word "lesbian" does not result, as post-lesbian discourse would suggest, from its irrelevance but rather due to the old yet persisting stigmas towards lesbian sexuality. To mitigate these stigmas, most of our participants use gender-neutral terms, most notably the word "gay," to describe themselves. Using relevant literature, we contextualise the usage of gender-neutral terms and analyse their often-overlooked negative impact on female and lesbian visibility. Moreover, we found that while participants wished to avoid the exclusion and specificity of lesbian spaces, they desired these spaces all the same, which had a positive effect on their identity formation, confidence, and sense of community.

Keywords: Lesbian identities; queer identities; post-lesbian identities; sexuality

The issue of lesbian identity has long been contested and controversial (Farquhar 2000), and in many regards, this was well-reflected in the conversations we facilitated in our focus groups. Yet, there was one striking similarity, at times almost an exact repetition, that occurred throughout the research: despite recognising themselves as lesbians, most of our participants expressed dislike or hatred towards the word "lesbian." Moreover, almost all expressed difficulty or reluctance to use that word in reference to themselves. Initially, we assumed the unpopularity of the word "lesbian" to be directly tied to the rise of queer theory and queer identification, as documented in academic literature (Farkuhar 2000; Swenson 2013; Morris 2016). Indeed, queer theory has contributed to challenging identity categories and identity politics, thus playing a role in the decline of the term "lesbian" and its corollary communities and spaces (Swenson 2013).

However, our focus groups led us to reposition this specific tension between "lesbian" and "queer" in sexual identity politics as part of both a wide and specific discourse of "post-lesbianism" (Forstie, 2020). Post-lesbian discourse emerged because of queer theories' challenge of identity categories and the increasing acceptance and normalisation of homosexuality. In its essence, post-lesbian discourse encompasses two central attitudes towards lesbian identity: firstly, its demotion as a primary aspect of personal identity to a minor one; secondly, its deconstruction and abandonment as necessary in a broader fight for sexual liberation. Consequently, the term lesbian and exclusively lesbian spaces and communities have been disavowed as outmoded, unnecessary, and unwanted (Forstie 2018; Forstie 2020). However, some scholars have criticised that while the discourse has changed, the realities of lesbians have not changed at the same pace (Farquhar 2000; Swenson 2013; Morris 2016). Motivated by these concerns, we explore the following question: How do lesbians aged 18-25 negotiate their sexual identity in relation to post-lesbian discourse?

To do so, we first outline the historical and theoretical background of the relations between lesbian identity, queer theory and identification, and post-lesbian discourse. Secondly, we discuss our methodology and research process as well as the ethical concerns and limitations to our project. Thirdly, we provide our findings and data analysis, which we discuss considering the literature. Lastly, we summarise our findings and give an outlook to possible future research.

Literature and Theoretical Framework: Lesbian, queer, or post-lesbian?

> For us, the process of naming and defining is not an intellectual game, but a grasping of our experience and a key to action. The word lesbian must be affirmed because to discard it is to collaborate with silence and lying about our very existence; with the closet-game, the creation of the unspeakable. (Rich 1976, cited in Guess 1995, 19)

In the 1970s, lesbian feminists such as Adrienne Rich emphasised the necessity of identity politics. Rich argued that using the word "lesbian" is vital for political mobilisation and lesbian liberation from the institution of compulsory heterosexuality that deems lesbians non-existent (Guess 1995). Collective identity, as expressed with the term "lesbian," is often essential for successful collective action. After all, when people rise and demand liberation, they must first ask who they are and what differentiates them from their oppressors (Gamson 1995). Hence, a distinct and gendered lesbian identity has historically been emphasised because lesbian-specific issues were neglected (Samek 2016). For instance, the *Lesbian Feminist Liberation* advocacy group was formed by lesbian members of the *Gay*

Activists Alliance in response to the disregard gay men in this group showed towards lesbian and feminist issues and the sexism they faced as women in a male-dominated movement (Samek 2016). Lesbian members of the *Gay Activists Alliance* were marginalised to traditionally female positions as secretaries and bookkeepers, and concerns that were specific to them, like child custody and lesbian visibility, were scorned as unimportant (Samek 2012, 23-26). Thus, lesbians since the dawn of LGBT+ activism have had to stand their ground and demand visibility in light of disregard and discrimination based on their sexual and gender identity.

A similar discontent with mainstream gay activism led to the rise of theories, movements, and identifications associated with the term "queer" (Guess 1995). Queer politics emerged as a response to assimilationist gay and lesbian politics that stressed the appearance of normality as essential to gaining societal acceptance (Guess 1995). Instead of arguing that being lesbian and gay is normal, queer politics rejects the category of normality altogether (Walters 1996). On the more conceptual and academic level, queer theory follows post-constructivist thought and opposes identity politics by rejecting the notion of fixed identities. Queer politics sees liberation in the subversion and deconstruction of identity categories, rather than their reinforcement and visibility (Walters 1996).

Using "queer" as a sexual identity category is, therefore, quite paradoxical. Nonetheless, one United States survey-study finds "queer" to be a distinct sexual identity - overwhelmingly popular among young women who feel attraction towards "all gender identities" (Goldber et al. 2019). A similar study finds that participants often use queer identification to avoid explaining or defending their sexual orientation (Kolker, Taylor, and Galupo, 2019). It is particularly used by people who also identify as bisexual or who want to connect to a like-minded community without having to specify their sexual and gendered identity. This leads Walters (1996) to question whether queer identification truly subverts identity categories. She argues that by trying to subvert the binaries of masculinity and femininity and homosexuality and heterosexuality, queerness might be creating yet another binary of queer and non-queer, which reinforces rather than deconstructs the category of "the normal" (Walters 1996). This notion is supported by the fact that "queer" has, in recent years, also become an umbrella and even an alternative term for the LGBT+ community (Kolker, Taylor, and Galupo 2019). This calls into question the very foundations of "the community," including who is and is not included in it and on what basis.

Queer theory and identification create difficult implications for lesbians specifically, whose struggle for visibility has been more challenging compared to gay men and who have a less established and accepted public identity as both female and homosexual (Gamson 1995). As Swenson (2013) details, the historical discourse about lesbianism is defined by its absence and its presumption that lesbian sexuality does not exist at all. This lack of recognition has made visibility especially important in lesbian politics. Hence, lesbian politics are in tension with queer politics, which undermine lesbian visibility by demanding that the "lesbian" category should be deconstructed because—like all categories—it is deemed restrictive (Gamson 1995).

Ironically, while queer identification aims to highlight non-normativity, it seems that in the case of lesbians, it highlights the possibility of normativity by making exclusive female homosexuality invisible (Swenson 2013). Thus, queer identification suggests that lesbians may not be exclusively attracted to women, and thus, possibly attracted to men. In this way, the gender neutrality embedded in the term "queer" contributes to lesbian invisibility. In Swenson's (2013) study, the term "lesbian" was found to be highly stigmatised among participants, "softened" by its replacement with gender-neutral terms. In contrast, Prado-Castro and Graham (2017) find that their focus-group participants use the term "queer" as an addition to "lesbian" to denote the fluidity of their sexual and gender identification and not as a replacement. Thus, the conceptions of "queerness" appear to be varied and conflicting in their theoretical, political, and personal meanings, and we take this into consideration in our study when exploring the identification and understanding of the term among lesbians.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that gender-neutral terms may serve to mask the exclusion and invisibility of lesbians. This invisibilisation of lesbians is shown, for instance, in Swenson's (2013) analysis of two major newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Times*, over a 12-week period. While gender-neutral terms imply gender inclusiveness and equality, her analysis shows about 40% of them are made in reference exclusively to men coupled with a general exclusion of lesbians. She concludes that gender-neutral language does not create de-facto gender neutrality but rather serves to reinforce the idea of maleness as the norm and hide persisting female exclusion.

Similarly, lesbian invisibility in the media, including LGBT+ media, has been increasing (Morris 2016). This increasing invisibility was recently quantified by a statistical review showing a sharp decline in the use of the word "lesbian" by five major LGBT+ publications in the past decade (Biggs 2019), highlighting the extent of female and lesbian marginalisation. As lesbian filmmaker Céline Sciamma explains in an interview, when she uses the word "lesbian" during promotions, it sometimes gets omitted in editing (Aguilar 2020). "Gay" is seen as a "softer" term, as said by a focus group participant in Farkuhar's (2000) study: "if you say you're a lesbian, then you're definitely saying you're a lesbian, whereas if you say you're gay, I don't know, just for me, it's a bit more softer, it's a bit, people can interpret it differently" (226).

Simultaneous to the emergence of queer theory and identification, the at times overlapping notion of a "post-lesbian" era emerged in the 1990s (Forstie 2020). In response to a restrictive and archetypal image of lesbian identity, as well as the increased acceptance of homosexuality, the boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality have been blurred (Foeken and Roberts 2019). Distinct lesbian identity and, by extension, lesbian communities and culture have seen a decline and incorporation into mainstream society or broader groups (Foeken and Roberts 2019). An effect of this is, for instance, the decline of lesbian spaces like bars and pubs, of which only 21 remain in the United States, according to Hastings (2021). Stein (2010) sees this development as the end of the construction of sexual identity as a *primary* identity and stresses the difference between lesbian existence and lesbian identity. The post-lesbian era does not denote a decline in women loving women but of said women recognising themselves to be of a distinct identity category (Stein 2010). Forstie (2020) identifies these attitudes and conversations about lesbian identity as a distinct "post-lesbian discourse." At its core, the tension between identity politics and post-lesbian discourse is the tension between identity as both a product of oppression and a tool against it (Gamson 1995).

This debate regarding identity categories is not unique to sexuality and resembles debates regarding the "post-racial" society. The latter has been criticised because "to relinquish the notion of race—even though it's a cruel hoax—at this particular time is to relinquish our fortress against the powers and principalities that still try to undermine us" (Spencer, as cited in Gamson 1995, 402). Similarly, the post-lesbian debate is the manifestation of a tension between identity categories as both "a cruel hoax" and "a fortress" (Gamson 1995). As with other identity categories, the desire to deconstruct identity categories and their boundaries, in lesbian identities, interferes with the power these categories hold as a "fortress" from which lesbians can define their positions and fight oppression. This tension is exemplified in a study by Forstie (2018), in which participants expressed what she defines as an "ambivalently post-lesbian" relationship towards the notion of exclusively lesbian communities and spaces, which are both desired and disavowed as too exclusionary and unnecessary.

Moreover, identifying post-lesbian discourse as distinct from post-gay discourse highlights its gendered position. Morris (2016) laments the "post-lesbian" era and argues that there is a modern disdain towards an exclusive focus on women which excludes men. She argues that this has been causing the decline of lesbian events and spaces, women's studies and history (which have been rebranded as "gender" or "queer" studies), and even the very idea of lesbian and female self-identification. The terms that replace "lesbian" "embrace masculine possibilities, or relationships with men, in ways that 'lesbian' of course does not" (Morris 2016, 15). Enszer (2016) adds that lesbian separatism, an idea and theory encompassing hundreds of projects by lesbians and for lesbians, goes unrecognised and mocked in modern feminist discourses. Despite its rich history and diverse intellectual roots, lesbian separatism has often been described and misrepresented as rigid, unrealistic, and elitist (Enszer 2016). Furthermore, Morris (2016) argues that academia ignores lesbians and lesbian history and views them as archaic, irrelevant, and discriminatory. To her, despite the effort for inclusivity and the dismantlement of the gender binary, male bias remains intact. In that spirit, we hope to contribute research and scholarship that unapologetically focuses on lesbians.

Research Design and Data Collection

We conducted three small focus groups, two with three participants and one with four, resulting in a total of ten participants. We used a semi-structured approach to the focus groups with an interview guide that contained specific questions and topics that we adapted depending on the conversation (see Appendix I). Our interview guide addressed a variety of topics relating to lesbian identity and community, which we grouped into three categories: personal identification process, word associations and uses, and community and spaces. In order to get a comprehensive understanding of the participants' relationship towards lesbian identities, we asked guiding questions such as "what connotations did you have with being a lesbian growing up?" and "how did you feel about the word lesbian in the past and how do you feel about it now?" Starting from these questions, we kept the conversations open and added questions depending on the answers.

Following our literature review and considering our focus on post-lesbian discourse, we expected ambivalences and difficulties in lesbian identification and therefore decided to define our target group as women who identified with the meaning of the word lesbian, but not necessarily proudly and openly used the term. Our call for participants explicitly mentioned that we were looking for lesbian participants. Thus, we assumed that respondents identified with the term. Simultaneously, we were inclusive of women who responded to our recruitment messages saying that they identify as lesbian but prefer other words to describe their sexual identity. Moreover, we avoided recruiting participants through lesbian or LGBT+ networks, groups, and associations in order to sample a group with diverse relationships to lesbian, LGBT+, and queer identity and to avoid sampling bias. We restricted our target group by age, with the youngest participant being 18 and the oldest 23. All participants were citizens and/or residents of a similar region, namely the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, and Belgium (see figure 1). Moreover, our participants had a fairly similar level of education and socio-economic background, and they all were at least mostly "out of the closet." These common features made our sample homogeneous enough to be able to draw apt, albeit limited, conclusions.

To find our participants, we first made posts in Facebook groups for students and residents of Maastricht. Unfortunately, we only found two participants through these posts. Hence, we opted to make a Tinder profile through which we found the rest. The profile contained plain text explaining that we are conducting research about lesbian identity and are looking for participants who are lesbians between the age of 18 and 25. The advantage of using this tool was that we were able to find some participants who had no connections to lesbian or LGBT+ communities. Moreover, most participants had no connection to each other. Interestingly, we were approached by multiple bisexual women who assumed we were using the word lesbian as "an umbrella term" or "in the inclusive sense."

Each focus group lasted about one-and-a-half hours. Prior to the focus groups, all participants filled out consent forms agreeing to the recording, transcription, and subsequent use of the data. We conducted the focus groups during November and December 2020.

Therefore, we met the participants via Zoom due to the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time, which did not allow us to meet in person. Despite our initial concerns, the online setting did not seem to have a negative effect on the conversations' quality. Participants seemed comfortable with the online format, possibly because it allowed them to retain more anonymity and speak from the safe spaces of their own homes. Moreover, in contrast to our initial concern that the online format would inhibit organic interaction between the participants, we were pleasantly surprised. Indeed, the participants responded to each other's accounts and asked each other questions in an informal manner. Our primary goal was to allow the participants to share and discuss their experiences and ideas with each other. In that sense, we tried to interrupt as little as possible and only guide the conversations.

We used both audio and video recordings of the conversations and transcribed them verbatim using the online transcription software Otter.ai. Following the focus groups, we identified the recurring themes using a thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2012). Thematic analysis is a search for patterns across data that respond and are meaningful to a guiding research question. We chose this approach for its flexibility and because it allowed us to explore specific aspects of the data in more depth. Thus, in an iterative process we alternated between the transcripts and literature and eventually integrated our findings with theories. The themes we found are related to word associations and meanings, boundaries and stigma, and communities and spaces.

Pseudonym	Age	Country and Residence
Anna	18	Germany, high school student in Germany
Carolina	18	Belgium, studies in Maastricht
Johanna	19	Germany
Paula	19	Germany
Michelle	20	The Netherlands
Maria	21	Germany, studies in Germany
Olivia	21	Poland, studies in Maastricht
Alice	22	Germany, studies in Maastricht
Emma	22	Germany, studies in Maastricht
Lianne	23	The Netherlands, works in the Netherlands

Table 1: Participant overview

Ethical Concerns and Limitations

Since the topic of our study is very personal, we tried to ensure that our participants felt as comfortable as possible. We explained the process of the focus groups and asked for their consent for participating, recording, and processing the information, which they could withdraw at any time during the data collection. Moreover, our team consists of one lesbian woman and one heterosexual woman. We hope to have used that to our advantage by having both in-group and out-group perspectives. Having the in-group perspective was useful for making a safe space where participants felt comfortable to open up and trust to be represented fairly. The outsider perspective contributed to the position of someone who could ask "naive questions" that reveal taken-for-granted assumptions (Hayfield and Huxley 2015). Nonetheless, the data interpretation reflects our perceptions and serves as a first step towards a deeper inquiry, which could be achieved through a bigger and more varied sample. Moreover, since our analysis heavily relies on the use of language, it is also affected by the use of the English language during the focus groups, which is not the native language of any of our participants. This paper, thus, does not aim to represent a generalisable truth but to inquire about, reflect on, and open up for discussion the conception and negotiation of lesbian identity.

Findings and Data Analysis

1. Words and meaning: Proud to be gay, ashamed to be lesbian

While participants expressed pride and comfort in being gay, their relationship with the word "lesbian" revealed persisting internalised negative attitudes towards themselves. Most participants spoke passionately about their discomfort and hatred of the word, describing it as "sounding puked out," "horrible," "dirty," and "aggressive." Several said they "absolutely hate the word" and that they "cannot use this word for myself." Interestingly, there seemed to be a consensus that the term "lesbian" sounds even worse in German and Dutch, the native languages of the majority of our participants. As Emma said: "It's just a really disgusting word. So like (laughs), I don't know, it's just not something you want to be."

The participants overwhelmingly preferred to describe themselves as "gay" or simply saying that they "like women." This use of alternative words for "lesbian" could be explained by both the positive connotations of male homosexuality and the more common use of the word "gay" in general discourse, which has also been noted by Swenson (2013). Most participants recounted not knowing or barely knowing about the existence of lesbianism as they grew up or having negative or neutral connotations of it. While quite a few recalled the presence of gay men in their lives, both personally and in different forms of media representation, few could say the same for lesbians. Consequently, they had more positive connotations of gay men and the word "gay," describing them as friendlier and more "fun." Additionally, the participants explained that the word "gay" is simply used more, and it is also more comfortable for other people to hear compared to "lesbian."

In relation to media representation, most participants indicated movies and television as important reference points for their process of lesbian identification. Some recall constantly scrambling for any form of representation, even watching foreign language movies they could only partly understand, as Emma narrates: "I would go through like all the shitty YouTube movies that were (...) in Spanish, and you could also see them with subtitles, and the subtitles were (...) in French but you were like: okay, I'm taking it, whatever it is." This finding is consistent with Swenson's (2013) theme of lesbian invisibility in media, whose interviewees also recall the difficulty of finding representation as well as the urge and necessity to make the effort to find it. Similar to Swenson's interviewees, our participants had difficulties with developing confidence in their identification as lesbian during their adolescence, and in some cases, they still do. This difficulty in identification seemed to be enforced through the lack of representation they were confronted with.

At the same time, participants were painfully aware of the deficiencies of lesbian representation in mainstream media. They mentioned that in movies and series, lesbians were often either overly attractive and "sexy" or lesbian couples were most often portrayed with one partner being more "masculine" and the other more "feminine." Furthermore, they noticed that movies with lesbians often had many sex scenes, and lesbian women were portrayed as hypersexual. These motifs reminded some of our participants of "lesbian" pornography that is geared towards the desires of heterosexual men. As Swenson (2013, 16) argues, these misrepresentations—that also surfaced as a major issue for her interviewees—not only take away roles that young lesbians could identify with and could help them develop their sense of self, but also they could even lead to "abjection through the non-identification they engender." Thus, these misrepresentations can promote a harmful sense of disidentification in young lesbians. Furthermore, they also encourage stereotypes that affect how other people view and engage with lesbian women.

Participants also shared their experiences using the word "lesbian" in their daily life. Lianne shared that using the word, specifically around heterosexual men, has made her feel fetishised by them. Johanne shared a similar discomfort with the word "lesbian," feeling fetishised because of its usage in pornography, which reinforces the homophobic view that lesbianism is but mere entertainment for men: "Because like lesbian porn is such a big thing for straight guys, and I sometimes (...) I think they think that lesbians are only for their pleasure. And I think because of the term 'lesbian porn,' I don't feel comfortable saying I'm a lesbian sometimes." This fetishised conception of lesbianism was also experienced in dating apps by several participants. Examples ranged from men creating fake profiles in order to send them inappropriate images to heterosexual couples assuming they would be interested in threesomes with them.

Emma shared that she was only comfortable using the word "lesbian" among other lesbians. She explained her hesitance to label herself as "lesbian" when meeting new people so that "just in case they're like, not comfortable with it, that you can be like, yeah but you know (...) it's not like lesbian you know, it's like, I like women," implying that the word "lesbian" holds a more uncomfortable and socially unacceptable meaning than female same-sex attraction. Our participants appeared to struggle with separating the word "lesbian" from the stigma attached to it, and they mitigated this stigma by using language that distances themselves from it. Olivia shared her process with using and reclaiming the word "lesbian" against this backdrop:

> It used to be like that for me as well, but then I read a lot of like, gay theory and all of those like feminist books that kind of explained why it is that way. I'm not saying it's the same for everyone, but I know that for me, it was because of like, the negative connotations I had with the experience that I just associated them with the word as well. And honestly, like in Polish, there's no other word to describe [female same-sex attraction] (...) in English I kind of taught myself to call myself a lesbian and get rid of this stigma that existed in my mind around the word lesbian (...) It's definitely a process. So I'm not trying to like shame anyone for saying they don't like the word just like, I know, I was there as well. And I had to actively work against it so that I could get used to it.

For Paula, watching "lesbian TikTok" and simply using the word more has made her feel more comfortable and confident to identify as a lesbian.

Our findings were consistent with Swenson's (2013) in that "lesbian" persists to be a highly stigmatised word whose stigma is mitigated through the use of gender-neutral terms. The word "gay" is clearly a relational term when used by women, with its positive meanings directly countering the negative connotations of the word "lesbian." Aggressiveness is substituted for friendliness and exclusiveness for gender neutrality. Moreover, the sexualised and fetishised connotations of the word "lesbian" are tied to it being an exclusively female term. Gender-neutral terms lack these connotations and enable lesbians to distance themselves from stigma that is specific to female sexuality (Swenson 2013).

Two highly gendered aspects of this stigma were repeated throughout the focus groups: gender non-conformity and the image of the "butch lesbian" as negative and "stereotypical," as well as the idea of lesbianism as radical, political, and man-hating. For several participants, describing what they associated with lesbians while growing up entailed the description of butch, masculine, short-haired, and fat lesbians. They viewed those characteristics as negative and "unfitting" for themselves and their gender presentation, thus wanting to distance themselves from this image. Moreover, and related to this image, was the perception of lesbianism as radical and man-hating, as phrased by Carolina: "I think that many women who are actually lesbian identify as bi first, because they don't want to be seen as really radical (...) When you identify as a lesbian, you will always be put in this category of hating men." Strikingly, it appears that the decline of the word "lesbian" is not motivated, like post-lesbian discourse suggests, by the acceptance of lesbianism, which in turn makes it a minor part of identity (Forstie 2020), but rather by the exact opposite. It is the old yet persisting stigmas towards lesbianism that prevented our participants from proud lesbian identification. The declining usage of the word "lesbian" in wider discourse thus appears to perpetuate the stigmas against lesbian sexuality.

In contrast, participants' opinions of the word "queer" were varied and diverging. Many used it as an umbrella term for LGBT+ people and as interchangeable with the word "gay." Alice and Paula used it as their main identification and preferred it to lesbian, and others disliked it. While recognising that the word "lesbian" describes her, Alice disliked it for reinforcing the gender binary. In contrast, Paula was unsure whether the word "lesbian" fit her, and the word "queer" appealed to her because of its broadness and inclusion of both homosexuality and bisexuality. Several other participants disliked the word "queer" because of its broadness and lack of specificity. Lianne said, "I think it's too broad. If somebody tells me that he or she is queer, I don't know what you mean. (...) It doesn't tell me anything about you. And if you say I'm gay, bi, or pan, it makes it more clear to me." Similarly, Olivia raised concern over the corruption of the term. "There's a lot of people who are not gay and not bi, they're just fully straight, and they use that as like this micro-identity (...) I don't know, I find it uncomfortable in a way."

While gender-neutral terms lack lesbian and female specificity, most participants favoured specificity over vague terminology. This was especially apparent with the popularity of using the phrases "I like women" and "I don't like men" to communicate their sexuality. For Maria, telling her gynaecologist that she is not attracted to men was easier than using the word "lesbian," implying a need to communicate lesbian specificity without the use of the stigmatised "lesbian" term itself.

2. Boundaries and stigma: Between exclusion and inclusivity

Participants' difficult relationship with the word "lesbian" was also reflected in their experiences of not being attracted to men. For most participants, coming to terms with their lack of attraction to men encompassed difficulties different than accepting their attraction to women. Several participants recounted hoping to be bisexual and thinking that as women, they "had to be with a man." These ideas were also exerted by their families and surroundings, with many participants being told that they "have just not found the right man yet." For this reason, some participants avoided telling their parents that they are not attracted to men when coming out to them. Some recounted dating men and identifying as bisexual before accepting that they are only attracted to women. Lianne only realised and accepted that she was a lesbian several months before the focus group after a three-and-a-half-year relationship with a man. Another participant, Maria, questioned whether she was asexual before suspecting that she was a lesbian.

Believing they were attracted to men appeared to normalise their attraction to women because it meant they "could always end up with a man." The difficulties in identifying with the word "lesbian" thus appear to not only just be about the invisibility and stigma related to women loving women, but also, perhaps even more so, the invisibility and stigma related to women not loving men. As Paula shared: "I remember telling my best friend, like, I'm scared that I'm a lesbian (...) and she was like, oh no don't worry, you'll find a guy, you'll find a boyfriend." Hence, even though fluidity in attraction is expected with regards to men, the opposite is true with regards to women.

The stigma of lesbianism as male-excluding (Morris 2016) was highlighted repeatedly by many participants when they interacted with men. Some recounted that men disregarded their sexual identity, crossed their boundaries, and made them feel uncomfortable. Some recounted men sexualising and disrespecting them when being in public with their partners. Due to experiences of being met with sexual and derogatory remarks about their sexuality, others also agreed that they no longer reject men by telling them they are lesbian. Some participants recalled that they and others had blamed their lack of attraction to men on trauma or lack of a father figure.

As Morris (2016) argues, post-lesbian discourse fails to address the lesbian experience and its difficult relationship with heteronormativity by embracing heterosexual possibilities in the name of "fluidity" and "inclusivity." This failure to recognize lesbian specificity and exclusivity is expressed in the resemblance between traditional heteronormative discourses and queer discourses. They both, albeit for different reasons, describe lesbian identity as restrictive and conceptualise it as potentially subject to change. While post-lesbian discourse does this more implicitly, conceptualisation of lesbian identity as unstable and fluid undermines the existence of a stable lesbian sexuality that never "flows" towards men.

Participants' discussion of lesbian spaces reflected a similar tension between simultaneously desiring and disavowing exclusivity. Overwhelmingly, the participants expressed interest and curiosity towards lesbian spaces, but most could not recount any and saw them as hypothetical and non-existent. As one participant said: "[It] would be nice to have them, but I don't think they exist." While most participants had limited experience with lesbian-only spaces, they shared a similar comfort in being with and talking to other lesbians and expressed hesitation to be open and comfortable with heterosexual female friends for fear of being perceived as predatory. As Anna explained:

> I always think twice. I mean, when I say that I'm dating a girl, or when I'm telling a story or something... I'm always thinking, what if they think I'm like a predator to them or something like that. And that's why I normally don't like talking about my dating life, or about my sex life or something like that. And I normally just talk about that with my really, really close friends, and even then I'm still always evaluating in my head if it's safe, or if I should talk about it or not.

In one focus group, there were also negative or hesitant views towards exclusively lesbian spaces. One concern was that lesbians are a minority among the minority of LGBT+ and comprise too small of a group. Another concern was whether lesbian identity was a strong enough commonality for forming groups or events, as sexual identity has become less important due to the acceptance of homosexuality in the Netherlands and Germany. These concerns regarding lesbian exclusivity resonate with Stein's (2010) conception of post-lesbianism as the end of sexual identity's primacy due to the normalisation of homosexuality. Moreover, exclusion was seen by some participants as especially important to avoid:

> Emma: I think I would, like, like a lesbian environment in that sense, because it's just more like you can be more free I mean, like, it's, it's still a different, it's always a different vibe...I mean, doesn't need to be like okay, only people that identify as, but I don't know, I think it's a really different perspective when you just hang out with like a bunch of lesbians.
>
> Alice: That's true...but then I don't think you should exclude other, especially queer people, from joining. But of course, like, it could be a majority lesbian bar that's really fine. But then yeah, I kind of, just like, want to avoid the exclusion, I guess.
>
> Emma: Yeah, of course, of course.

Hence, post-lesbian ambivalence (Forstie 2018) was expressed in the above conversation as well: participants at once desired exclusively lesbian spaces but rejected them as too exclusionary. Interestingly, participants recognised the disparity between the representation of gay men and lesbian women. In terms of "queer spaces," participants recognised there to be two kinds—one for everyone and one just for gay men. In one focus group, participants also mentioned transgender and non-binary exclusive groups, but they did not seem to be critical of their exclusiveness. This reveals an internalised rejection not of exclusivity in general but of specifically lesbian exclusivity. This rejection of lesbian exclusivity resonates with Morris's (2016) analysis of post-lesbianism as highly gendered, which explains the decline of women-specific and lesbian-specific terminology and spaces while male and gay male exclusive terminology and spaces persist.

Nonetheless, lesbian spaces in different forms appeared to have an important positive impact on participants. For instance, Lianne, who only came out a few months prior to the focus group, reads others' coming out stories and experiences on Reddit, especially of those who are "late bloomers" like her. These online spaces provide an alternative source of support and community that she lacks in her offline environment. Similarly, for Paula, the community of "lesbian TikTok" videos has made her feel more comfortable using and identifying with the word "lesbian." Carolina first became aware that being a lesbian was "an option" when she joined a football club with a majority of lesbian members. This goes to show that, contrary to the externally imposed and internally reinforced post-lesbian discourse, forming a distinct sexual identity mattered to the personal development of our participants, and a lesbian community helped strengthen the confidence of those who had access to one.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed the relationship of ten participants to their lesbian identity. More precisely, we have investigated *how lesbians aged 18-25 negotiate their sexual identity in relation to post-lesbian discourse*. We have found that our participants have an ambivalent relationship to post-lesbian discourse. We divided our analysis of this relationship into two themes: one connected to words and how language is used and perceived in relation to identity; the other connected to spaces and boundaries and how they interact with the former.

Overall, our findings suggest that "lesbian" persists as a highly stigmatised word, reflecting a broader prevailing stigma of lesbian sexuality. Most of our participants mitigated this stigma by avoiding the word "lesbian" and replacing it with gender-neutral terms. While post-lesbian discourse suggests that the decline in the use of the word "lesbian" is due to the acceptance of homosexuality, our analysis suggests the contrary. Moreover, this use of gender-neutral terms, as shown by Swenson (2013), Morris (2016), and Forstie (2020), contributes to lesbian invisibility and a loss of a gendered lens into the homosexual experience that keeps male bias intact.

Furthermore, we explored how the tension between identity politics and post-lesbianism manifested in participants' relationship to boundaries of spaces and relations, which were at once desired and rejected. Additionally, we criticised post-lesbian discourse's gendered manifestation for potentially contributing to both heteronormativity and male bias. Despite their limitation and rarity, we found that lesbian spaces and visibility were still important and beneficial to our participants, and the so-called "post-lesbian era" has not absolved them of their relevance.

Since our sample comprises a very small group from a specific region, we encourage more research with a focus on lesbians and lesbian identity within other contexts. Moreover, our focus group participants were all non-native English speakers, so further research into the possible changes in perception and conceptualisation of lesbian identity in different cultures and languages would be beneficial for a better understanding of lesbian identities at large and our research in particular.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants of this study for sharing their thoughts, feelings, and time with us. We are very grateful that they trusted us to represent their personal experiences in this research. Moreover, we would like to thank our peers who gave us feedback during the development of this study, and Dr. Ulrike Mueller as well as Christopher Klän, who supervised this work and helped us continuously through encouraging words and expert insights. Finally, we are very grateful towards Dr. Martha Radice, Dr. Karen McGarry, and other members of the JUE team who gave us the platform to publish this work, and for their time, effort and assistance throughout the editing process.

References

Aguilar, Carlos. 2020. "Love Dialogue: Céline Sciamma on Portrait of a Lady on Fire." *Roger Ebert* (blog). February 12. https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/love-dialogue-c%C3%A9line-sciamma-on-portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire.

Biggs, Michael. n.d. "LGBT facts and figures." Accessed July 16, 2020. http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/LGBT_figures.shtml?fbclid=IwAR1W6diTNPLXNj5Jb7eteQ7x0feYQa0UioqBO9cm-80M6ijcbKSyJ_CXaQU.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2012. "Thematic analysis." In *APA handbooks in psychology®. APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological*, edited by H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, and K. J. Sher, 57–71. American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004.

Enszer, Julie R. 2016. "'How to stop choking to death': Rethinking lesbian separatism as a vibrant political theory and feminist practice." *Journal of lesbian studies* 20 (2): 180-196. https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2015.1083815.

Farquhar, Clare. 2000. "'Lesbian' in a post-lesbian world? Policing identity, sex and image." *Sexualities* 3 (2): 219-236. https://doi.org/10.1177/136346000003002007.

Foeken, Elsie, and Steven Roberts. 2019. "Reifying difference: Examining the negotiation of internal diversity on a (post-) lesbian subreddit." *Sexualities* 22 (7-8): 1268-1287. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460718795119.

Forstie, Clare. 2018. "Ambivalently post-lesbian: LBQ friendships in the rural Midwest." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 22 (1): 54-66. https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2017.1309901.

Forstie, Clare. 2020. "Disappearing dykes? Post-lesbian discourse and shifting identities and communities." *Journal of homosexuality* 67 (12): 1760-1778. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1613857.

Gamson, Joshua. 1995. "Must identity movements self-destruct? A queer dilemma." *Social Problems* 42 (3): 390-407. https://doi.org/10.2307/3096854.

Goldberg, Shoshana K., Esther D. Rothblum, Stephen T. Russell, and Ilan H. Meyer. 2020. “Exploring the Q in LGBTQ: Demographic characteristic and sexuality of queer people in a US representative sample of sexual minorities.” *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* 7 (1): 101–112. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000359.

Guess, Carol. 1995. “Que(e)rying Lesbian Identity.” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 28 (1): 19-37. https://doi.org/10.2307/1315241.

Hastings, Dorothy. 2021. “21 lesbian bars remain in America. Owners share why they must be protected.” *PBS NewsHour*. June 10. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/21-lesbian-bars-remain-in-the-america-owners-share-why-they-must-be-protected.

Hayfield, Nikki, and Caroline Huxley. 2015. “Insider and outsider perspectives: Reflections on researcher identities in research with lesbian and bisexual women.” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 12 (2): 91-106. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2014.918224.

Hightower, Joy L. 2015. “Producing desirable bodies: Boundary work in a lesbian niche dating site.” *Sexualities* 18 (1-2): 20-36. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460714550900.

Kolker, Zoe M., Philip C. Taylor, and M. Paz Galupo. 2019. “‘As a Sort of Blanket Term’: Qualitative Analysis of Queer Sexual Identity Marking.” *Sexuality and Culture* 24: 1337–1357. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09686-4.

Morris, Bonnie J. 2016. *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture*. Albany (NY): State University of New York Press.

Prado-Castro, Daniela Maria, and T. M. Graham. 2017. “Constructing our identities: Identity expression amongst lesbian women attending university.” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 31 (4): 94-111. https://doi.org/10.20853/31-4-914.

Russell, Stephen T., Thomas J. Clarke, and Justin Clary. 2009. “Are teens ‘post-gay’? Contemporary adolescents’ sexual identity labels.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 38 (7): 884-890. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-008-9388-2.

Samek, Alyssa A. 2012. "Crafting Queer Identity, Building Coalitions, and Envisioning Liberation at the Intersections: A Rhetorical Analysis of 1970s Lesbian-Feminist Discourse." PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park. https://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/13607/Samek_umd_0117E_13752.pdf?isAllowed=yandsequence=1.

Samek, Alyssa A. 2016. "Violence and identity politics: 1970s lesbian-feminist discourse and Robin Morgan's 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference keynote address." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13 (3): 232-249. https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2015.1127400.

Stein, Arlene. 2010. "The incredible shrinking lesbian world and other queer conundra." *Sexualities* 13 (1): 21-32. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460709352724.

Swenson, Rebecca. 2013. "Assimilation or invisibility: Lesbian identity, representation and the use of gender-neutral terms." *Psychology of Women Section Review* 15 (2): 12-18.

Walters, Suzanna Danuta. 1996. "From here to queer: Radical feminism, postmodernism, and the lesbian menace (or, why can't a woman be more like a fag?)." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 21 (4): 830-869. https://doi.org/10.1086/49512.

Appendix I: Interview Guide

Topics:

1. Personal identification process
2. Word associations and uses
3. Community and spaces

Questions:

1. Introduction round
2. What was/is the process of realizing you are lesbian like for you?
3. What connotations did you have with being a lesbian growing up?
4. How did you feel about the word 'lesbian' in the past, and how do you feel about it now? Is there a difference?
5. Are there any other words you use to describe your sexual orientation? If so, which?
6. In which circumstances do you use these other words compared to 'lesbian'?
7. Do you feel like there is a lesbian community or lesbian spaces?
8. How do you feel in exclusively lesbian spaces, compared to non-exclusive spaces?
9. In which respects do/don't your friends' sexual orientations and gender matter to you?
10. How would you describe your relation to the LGBT+ community?

The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography

Nationalism in the Age of Brexit: The Attitudes and Identities of Young Voters

Emma Wolkenstein

Pace University—emma.l.wolkenstein@pace.edu

ABSTRACT

The 2016 Brexit referendum revealed a division between younger voters, a majority of whom voted *Remain*, and older voters, a majority of whom voted *Leave*. From virtual interviews with six British young adults, this article analyzes the effects of the Brexit referendum on their perceptions of belonging and national identity. My theoretical framework draws upon Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation and Michael Skey's and Craig Calhoun's critique that feelings of equality among members are unrealistic due to the power and identity hierarchies that exist within a nation. Interviews reveal a strong binary conception of identities created through politics and media that divide voters into distinct, distanced groups. Young voters use harsh, derogatory language to describe oppositional groups, such as Conservatives, Leave voters, and older voters, to separate themselves and reinforce their identities. However, because these oppositional groups hold the most power, continuous separation reinforces feelings of powerlessness in politics and reveals hierarchies of identities. These hierarchies can have long-lasting implications for the United Kingdom as these younger voters will eventually comprise the voting majority and strive to see their values and beliefs represented in positions of power.

Keywords: Brexit; identity; nationalism; Otherness; voting

the rural, the wealthy and the poor, the educated and the uneducated; however, the Brexit vote reveals a strong difference in values and beliefs between young voters and older voters, with older voters holding most of the power.

The Brexit referendum marked the first time in the United Kingdom when political lines were drawn along distinct generational lines. In 2016, 73% of young people, aged 18-24, and less than 40% of older voters, aged 65 and over, voted to Remain. In comparison, over 60% of older voters and only 27% of young voters voted to Leave (BBC News 2016; Figure 1). Voters aged 25 to 64 remained fairly split between two options, but the difference between older and younger generations is significant (Kelly 2016). Voter differences have historically been between socioeconomic classes, the urban and the rural, the wealthy and the poor, the educated and the uneducated; however, the Brexit vote reveals a strong difference in values and beliefs between young voters and older voters, with older voters holding most of the power.

On January 31, 2020, the United Kingdom left the European Union and entered a transitional period to determine the terms of their future relationship. For a year, they debated rules and regulations regarding a new trade deal and Brexit was finalized on January 1, 2021 (BBC News 2020). In the years after the referendum, two general elections took place, one in 2017 and another in 2019. In both elections, the Conservative party not only maintained their majority but gained additional seats. Similarly to the Brexit gap, over 60% of young voters supported the Labour party while 69% of older voters supported the Conservative party (Fitzpatrick 2019). Consequently, both the Brexit and Conservative wins reveal that the British majority tended towards a right-wing ideology

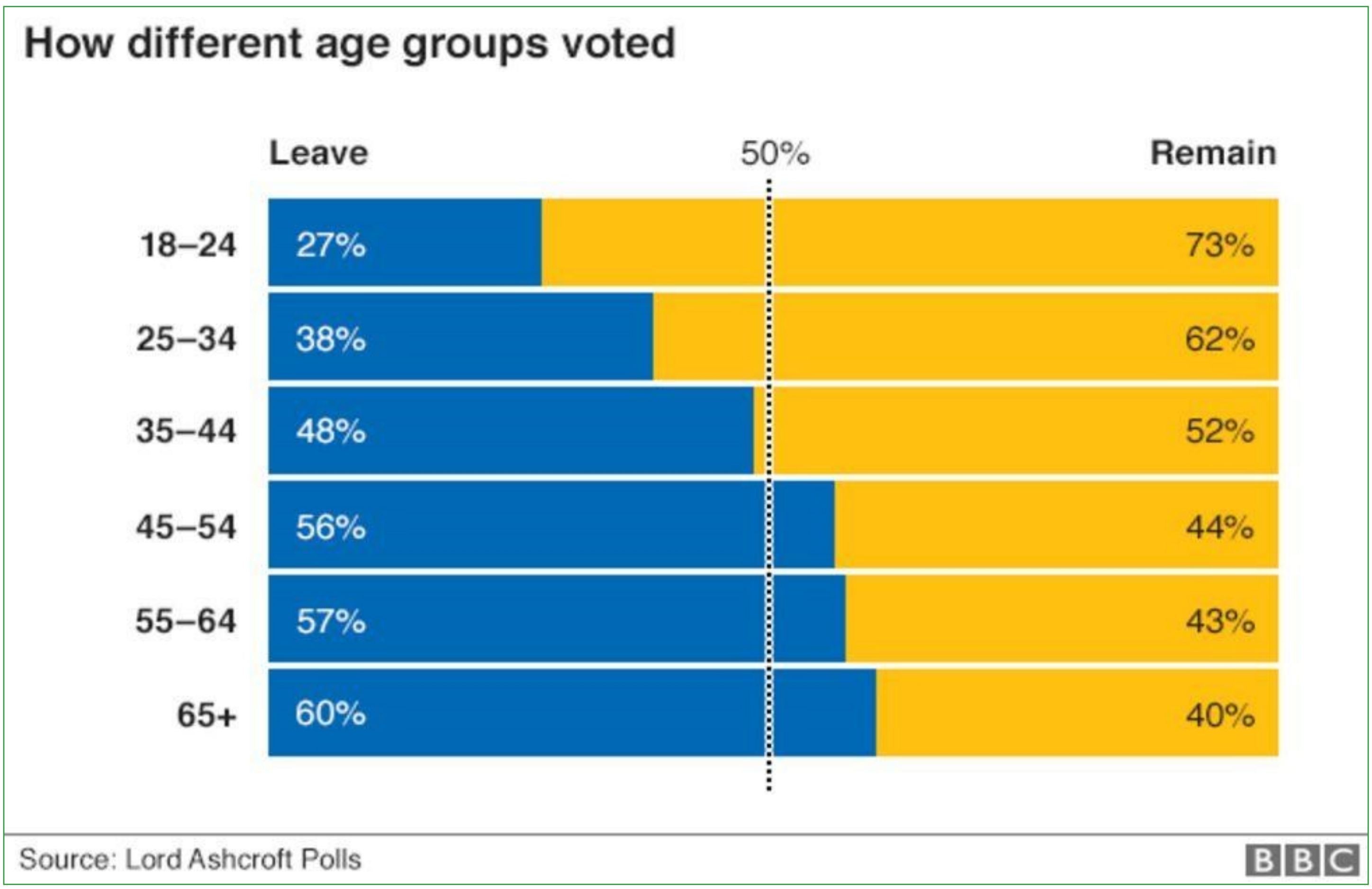


Figure 1: A breakdown of Leave and Remain vote percentages by age group. (Source: BBC News 2016).

regardless of young voters' political participation.

In this article, which draws upon qualitative research and interviews, I investigate how Brexit and conservative politics have affected young people's understanding of their place within the nation. Theories of the nation and belonging by the likes of Benedict Anderson, Craig Calhoun, and Michael Skey create a groundwork for analyzing the United Kingdom as an example of an imagined community and the implications this has on identities within it. I argue that identities are hierarchical and fluid, at the level of the individual and within a community, and people hold multiple identifications that contest with others'. Consequently, many people feel that they do not belong in this increasingly conservative version of the nation, a sentiment that is evident in how young voters feel frustrated and hostile towards the Brexit and Conservative parties in the United Kingdom (Harrison 2020). In response to their perceived feelings of separation from this increasingly conservative nation, young voters have developed strategies to distance themselves from those in positions of power. Taken together, these insights challenge Benedict Anderson's (1983) characteristic of community within a nation, namely that all members have a perceived equal right to the nation.

This project draws on an analysis of the language my interlocutors use to answer questions regarding voting, government, and identity and how their frames of reference construct their identities. From this analysis, I find that major political events, such as Brexit and the 2017 and 2019 general elections, and their media coverage have created a binary perception of identity around political association. Young voters seek to discursively separate themselves from groups they do not support, such as Leave voters and Conservatives, by describing them with antagonistic, negative traits. By doing so, they affirm to themselves and their like-minded community that they are not a part of those groups, the "Other." This research uses the framework of the Other to analyze participant's relationships to oppositional groups such as Leave voters, Conservatives, and older voters. The intent is not to homogenize these oppositional groups, but to reflect upon the process of Othering and how young voters actively distance themselves from those in power. This stance reveals that there is both the perception of powerlessness and agency in their decision to further separate themselves from the values held by the Other. Young voters additionally feel a responsibility to always defend their position with statistics and facts. This process of Othering reveals a hierarchy of identities within the United Kingdom where the Other (as defined by youth) holds power.

Imagined Communities and Nationalism

The study of the nation provides insight into not only what a nation is, but also who comprises and belongs to a nation and how nationalism is constructed. Anderson (1983, 6) defines the nation as "an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." The four major characteristics that determine the existence of a nation are that it is imagined, limited, sovereign, and a community. A nation is imagined because the members will never know or meet all their fellow members, yet they feel a connection purely because they reside in the same nation. This imagined characteristic of a nation is emphasized through a common history that reinforces memories and stories that members can connect through (De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak 1999, 154). Next, a nation is limited because it has distinct borders that separate it from other nations. No nation aims to include the entire world; it has finite boundaries that create a distinct territory and those within are considered members. Thirdly, a nation is sovereign because it does not operate under a God, or at least members are free under a God (Anderson 1983). Lastly, a nation requires a sense of community among its members. Anderson (1983) uses community to infer that members feel equal to one another and have equal rights to the nation. Billig (1995) highlights that this sense of community is what unifies the nation's physical space and members. It creates the sense that members have an equal right to live within the nation's borders.

The existence of the nation is reinforced by its members through nationalism. Nationalism is a manufactured sense of community based on the idea of shared geography, language, and culture. Anderson (1983, 5) explains that this definition of nationalism is recent and modern, universal and all-encompassing, and influences identity creation. This identity, however, is not set in stone. National identities are constructed and then "produced, reproduced, transformed, and destroyed … through reifying, figurative discourses continually launched by politicians, intellectuals and media people" (De Cillia et al.1999, 153). A member's sense of nationalism and national identity can be altered as their relationship to the nation shifts.

Nationalism is not inherently positive or negative. It is instead a consequence of a nation's defining binary of membership. The internalization of the nation's values and culture through nationalism creates a fundamental distinction between members and non-members. Non-members reside outside the boundaries of the nation and hence have internalized the values of a different nation. As the world is currently comprised of many nations, the binary of membership has evolved into citizenship and national identity (Anderson 1983, 156). De Cillia et al. (1999) analyze how national discourse can be used to foster feelings of both sameness and difference regarding national identity. They premise that the "construction of nations and national identities always [run] hand in hand with the construction of difference/distinctiveness and uniqueness" (De Cillia et al. 1999, 150). Part of constructing this difference and sameness in relation to the nation is the creation of the Other.

The Nation and the Other

Many factors determine who belongs within and who belongs outside a nation. Borders act as a means of physically separating groups of people but there are also cultural and ethnic differences that can be used to create feelings of separation. These differences are inherently binary and represent a means of creating "distinction between us (those who identify themselves as belonging to a given community) and them (those who are other than us)" (Manti 2019, 1). The construction of "us" versus "them" in linguistic discourse is a means of referencing one's belonging to in-groups, additionally applicable to national identity. "Them," or the Other, allows for people to directly compare themselves against something outside of their nation. Delanty (1995, 5 as quoted in Tekin 2010, 161) says that "the defining characteristic of the in-group 'is not what members have in common but in what separates them from other groups.'" People can create identity by defining the cultural, physical, and ethnic attributes that exist for the Other, hence applying the opposite characteristics to themselves. These differences, however, are always positive upon self-reflection and negative when applied to Others (Neumann & Welsh 1991). Beyza Tekin (2010, 161) explains that "Othering more than often involves the ascription of varying degrees of negativity to the out-groups" and positive, communal characteristics to strengthen identity within groups. Critical, negative language and descriptions are a means to both create the Other and define one's own positive characteristics.

Those in power can determine Others that exist outside of the nation as well as within the nation: those who threaten their ideal collective identity. Stuart Hall (1997) analyzed how racial Othering is created through media representation and stereotyping, a means to mark the Other in symbolic and cultural terms that maintain systemic power dynamics. Those in positions of power label those who do not belong and create difference as a means of supporting their own identity. In this manner, Othering is a tool that reinforces the current structures that give certain groups power over others. Within this article, however, I am analyzing the process of Othering by those not in positions of power. They utilize the same tactics of value creation and negative attributes but in a way that further distances them from sources of power within the nation.

Nationalism in the United Kingdom

The experiences of nationalism and Othering within the United Kingdom can be understood by first locating the United Kingdom as an example of a nation through Anderson's definition. Firstly, the United Kingdom is an imagined community with millions of members from various regions connected through stories and histories, which were “forged significantly overseas, in war and empire” (Calhoun 2017, 57). The mainstream British identity relates closely to an positive self-reflection and pride in the British Empire and the United Kingdom’s back-to-back world war victories. Secondly, the United Kingdom is limited by boundaries, namely the British Isles. The only nation they share a direct border with is Ireland. Thirdly, the United Kingdom operates sovereignly. After a long history of religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics, they now practice religious freedom (Colley 1992). Lastly, despite inequalities between London and the rest of the country, the United Kingdom has a strong sense of regional community and identity. William Wallace (2017, 198) explains that “Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham had their own industrial elites and local pride.” High taxation and redistribution limited the difference between the wealthiest and poorest, maintaining a feeling of equality within these regional communities.

There are various ways nationalism is recognized in the United Kingdom, largely because there are different ways members identify with the nation. Wallace (2017) explains that a person is capable of holding many identities because communities are imagined and, therefore, can be imagined in infinite ways. In the United Kingdom, identity is dependent on physical location and personal preference (Colley 1992). A person can simultaneously identify as a British citizen, an English citizen, and a Londoner. The United Kingdom is a “multi -national community” with four sub-nations of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (Wallace 2017, 198). In the last few decades, there has been an increase in identification and nationalism within the sub-nations. People increasingly identify as Welsh, Irish, or Scottish and this heavily influences both their scholarly work and their politics (Colley 1992). Divisions between the four sub-nations have deepened since the 2016 referendum due to increased English influence in politics.

Fluidity and Hierarchy of Belonging

Anderson’s abstract characteristics of the nation have been criticized in recent years for their applicability to modern nations, specifically his emphasis on community. Anderson argues that all members of the nation feel an equal right to the nation, whether that equality exists or not. Calhoun (2003) responds that this perspective denies the social reality that many groups experience (536). Within the nation, a member belongs to many social groups and cultures that also contribute to their identity. It is the individuals and their personal interests, not the national community, that should be studied and analyzed (Calhoun 2003, 536). Anderson’s idea that all members feel equal within the nation does not consider other identities and sub-communities. National belonging and identity do not hold the same level of meaning or importance for all social groups (Skey 2013, 82). Anderson assumes that national identity is stable and not affected by community identities.

There are ways to diminish members’ feelings of belonging to a nation by denying their claims of identity and reinforcing hierarchal power relations. Those who believe national identity is most important also hold the most power and “define the *conditions of belonging*” (Skey 2013, 89). To protect what they believe to be “their nation,” they argue that people who do not have similar characteristics or competencies, what Ghassan Hage (1998, as quoted in Skey 2013, 91) describes as national cultural capital, have less of a right to identification with the nation. Upon being marked by as the Other, those with less cultural capital tend to feel discomfort and uncertainty about their national identity. These power dynamics are reflected in ordinary life, affecting their “everyday nationhood” (Smith 2008, 564). Sensing that they do not belong, marked groups may prefer to identify with other communities or social groups.

Perceived inequality of belonging can alter how a person ranks their identities, effectively lowering the salience of a person’s national identity while increasing the salience of other identities. This shift is possible because identity is fluid and not fixed. Changes in the social or political world can affect which identities are most prominent or referenced. Calhoun (2003, 537) explains that “identities and solidarities… are neither simply fixed or simply fluid, but may be more fixed or more fluid under different circumstances… They provide networks of mutual support, capacities for communication, frameworks of meaning." This further emphasizes the limitations of Anderson's frameworks by highlighting that community is not only relevant on a national level. Identifying with various communities means that belonging is contextual, individual, and hierarchal.

Methodology and Limitations

Between August and October 2020 I conducted six virtual interviews with young adults, aged 22 -28, who grew up in the United Kingdom, hold British citizenship, and were eligible to vote during the 2016 Brexit referendum. These participants would have been aged 18-24 and categorized as a young voter when the Brexit referendum took place. Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Participants were from different regions within England and various socioeconomic and political backgrounds. Adam is from a low-income coastal county in the East. He has some university education and works as a teacher. Bianca lives in a city in the South where she is studying neuroscience for her undergraduate degree. Both Carmen and Diane currently live in London after graduating with their Bachelors. Carmen works in medical communications and plans on eventually continuing with her Masters while Diane works in IT for a computer company. Elle is in the process of moving from university outside London to a rural village and works in film. Felix is originally from a high-income conservative suburb of Manchester but now lives in the Netherlands. He recently completed his Bachelors and is now studying for his Masters in economics. Adam and Felix are both from conservative areas but Felix is the only participant who identifies with and votes for the Conservative party. Adam, Bianca, Carmen, Diane, and Elle all identify as liberal and most vote for the Labour or Lib-Dem parties. Elle, however, is the only participant who supported the Leave campaign. Adam, Bianca, Carmen, Diane, and Felix all voted to Remain while Elle would have voted Leave if she had not been abroad.

Participant selection was conducted through snowball sampling. Through direct messaging, I explained to potential participants the purpose of my study and what an interview would entail. If the potential participant agreed, I scheduled a time for us to virtually meet. Prior to the interview, participants signed the consent form that allowed me to audio record and use their responses in this article. Participants were interviewed through an online video conferencing app, such as Skype or Zoom. I interviewed participants with video, even though I only recorded audio, because it is important to see how participants react to certain questions and maintain rapport.

The interview style was semi-structured interviewing, in which I asked open-ended questions and directed the conversation to themes that are of particular interest to them. I had a list of points and questions that I asked and used to guide the interview. Semi-structured interviewing is useful for learning about how the participant understands topics in their own words and having them expand on their answers. With this style, I was able to ask more about their experiences and gain a more personal understanding of their beliefs. The questions I asked were divided into four sections, including background, voting, government, and identity. Background questions were simple and straightforward questions that the participants easily answered to get comfortable in an interview setting. The next category concerned voting experiences and beliefs. I asked participants about how they voted during the Brexit referendum, what memories they have from that time, and their opinions of the Leave and Remain parties. The third category concerned their opinions on the state of the Conservative majority government and their representation within government. The fourth category concerned their national identity and what assumptions they hold about other identities. I asked participants if they identify more as English, British, or European, and what differences there are between each. I also asked about times they felt pride in being British and if they considered applying for citizenship in an EU country after the referendum. The last question I asked participants was if they think Brexit will affect their future and if so, how.

Interviews concluded by giving participants the opportunity to ask me questions about the research project and my interview questions. I asked them to consider who else would be interested and told them how to contact me if they had potential participants or any further questions. The interviews were transcribed using GoTranscript, an online transcription service, and then stored and coded to protect the participant's identity and information. Using notes from the interviews and transcripts, I conducted textual and content analysis using the nationalism and Othering theories described in the literature review. Discourse analysis was used to interpret their language and to understand how participants framed their opinions both overtly and covertly. The article's methods and procedures have been approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, ethnographic research involving participant observation and in-person interviews needed to be creatively reimagined in a virtual manner. The obstacles I faced in pursuing this research project changed my methodologies greatly, but regardless, the findings will still be valuable in understanding young voters' sense of belonging and opinions of Brexit.

Context of Brexit

The Brexit Vote

The results of the Brexit referendum shocked the Western world, revealing deep divisions between all demographics within the United Kingdom. There were vast differences in voting depending on income, education, age, location, and party alliance (Wallace 2017). Those who voted to remain were typically well-educated, higher income, lived in an urban setting, younger than 45, and voted Labour. Those who voted to leave were typically low-skilled, lower-income, rural, older than 65, and voted Conservative. Of the four nations, England and Wales had a majority vote for Leave while Scotland and Ireland had a majority for Remain. As the Leave campaign won; England lead the Brexit negotiations and other sub-nations were unhappy with this increased power. As a result, Scottish nationalist parties gained attention, hinting towards "another referendum on its separation from the UK" (Calhoun 2017, 70). These results highlight the demographic differences between voters, but it is important to understand how the Leave campaign used notions of nationalism to mobilize voters to leave the European Union.

Nationalism and national identity were important parts of the conservative response to globalization and the movement of people. In an increasingly interconnected world, the government and big business embraced changes that drastically altered the structure of the United Kingdom as a nation. Older generations found that the nation no longer represented their core values. They witnessed changes through decreased sovereignty, increased immigration, and a forgotten mutual history with Europe. One of the Leave campaign's foci was that the European Union was taking advantage of the United Kingdom (Calhoun 2017). They promoted the idea that the European Union was unfairly distributing their money to still recovering Eastern European countries. Voting for Leave "[suggested] autonomy, the ability for the country to make its own decisions about its future, its relations with others, and who can cross its borders" (Calhoun 2017, 58).

Borders and immigrants were another major focus of the Leave campaign, resulting in largely racist and xenophobic discourse. One example, the "Breaking Point" advertisement, depicted a line of non-white immigrants, arguing that leaving the European Union would protect their borders from these groups (Elgot 2016). In another instance, cards reading "Leave the EU, no more Polish vermin" were found outside schools in a Cambridgeshire town (Channel 4 News 2016). Some believed that solidarity within their community was threatened by the increasing presence of immigrants, who had a different history to theirs of the Roman empire (Gardner 2017). The Leave campaign reinforced a version of history where the United Kingdom stood as the European savior. This version negated any common history between the United Kingdom and mainland Europe (Wallace 2017). All these changes created a culture of mistrust and anger towards anything that represented the United Kingdom post-globalization.

Young Voters in the United Kingdom

Both older and younger voters were motivated out of fear for the future and discontent with the current government, but ultimately it was easier for the Leave campaign to mobilize older voters. For older generations, they feared losing their national values to European intervention and decreasing solidarity (Calhoun 2017). Younger voters were upset by "high levels of distrust of political systems, institutions, and social elites, … a contemporary 'crisis of democracy' (Harrison 2018, 256). They were angered that their futures were put at risk by older generations and politicians with different values. Unlike older generations, younger voters "did not view Europe as one of the most pressing political issues" during the Brexit campaign (Sloam 2018, 4026). The difference of whether membership to the European Union was an issue is one of the key reasons the Remain campaign had a difficult time mobilizing voters. People are generally less likely to vote if they support the current state of the nation, and as a result, the Remain campaign could not create the same level of urgency as the Leave campaign (Sloam 2018). Despite losing the vote, the Remain campaign was able to mobilize more young voters than previously.

Young voters in the United Kingdom have been historically difficult to mobilize for elections, yet large turnouts in recent years indicate that many feel directly affected by the results. For the last 30 years until 2016, there was a continuous drop in young voter turnout for general elections in the United Kingdom. From 2001 to 2015, the number of young people, aged 18 to 24, voting averaged at 40% (Sloam 2018). In recent years, however, young voters have played an increasingly important role in British politics. For the 2016 Brexit vote, 64% of the young population voted, and then the following year 71% voted in the 2017 general election (Harrison 2018). The turnout could have been higher with a larger sense of urgency but the drastic increase in young voter participation has shown that "some people can be motivated to participate when the stakes are perceived to be high" (Harrison 2018, 258). After years of little to no representation, young people felt isolated from politics and began to mobilize when their futures were at risk.

Young voters also differ from older generations in how they identify in relation to the United Kingdom and Europe. Unlike older generations, young people are less likely to explicitly identify as British or English. They consider the explicit identification of English or British to infer "ethnic nationalist" and populist political views (Fenton 2018, 336). By rejecting a national identity, they consider themselves members of a larger community and believe themselves to be more inclusive than their older counterparts. According to Harrison (2018), young people are more likely to associate with a European identity and membership to the European Union. They embrace the multi-ethnicity of their communities and find solidarity with mainland Europe as well as the British Isles. Fenton (2018) adds that national identity is met with indifference or hostility and a European identity is preferred. According to my participants, however, this connection to the European Union is not as prevalent as Fenton and Harrison claim. Participant responses challenge both in that they prefer to identify as British over European, but align in that most participants disavow their English identity.

Findings and Analysis

In my interviews, several themes appeared relating to strong opposition against those who held different beliefs and identified with different political parties or Brexit campaigns. This binary frame of reference enforces an us vs them, right vs wrong mentality that results in negative feelings about these oppositional groups, referred to as the Other. The use of Other in this analysis differs from other theorists', however, in that those engaging with this process are not in positions of power. They are instead Othering the very groups that hold power. Participants attempted to separate themselves from the Other by describing them with harsh, derogatory language, such as that they are racist, liars, or elitist.

A Divisive Culture

In the United Kingdom, the years since the referendum have been marked by intense political conflict. From the moment the referendum became legitimate, people had to start choosing sides. With essentially only two options, in both the referendum and the government, feelings of divisiveness grew, and the mentality that one side was right/good while the other was wrong/bad developed. Switching sides was rare and people formed a strong identity with the group they supported. The dynamic of us vs them is seen throughout interviews and is particularly evident in participants' responses to questions about the Leave campaign, the current government, and the media.

Across all interviews, participants were quick to call the Leave campaign liars. Even Elle, who said that she would have voted Leave, noted that there were lies about where funding would go. Several participants explicitly mentioned a large red bus with "We send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our NHS instead" on its sides as an example of false or misleading information spread by the Leave campaign (BBC News 2018; Figure 2). Adam said this advertisement "was just an outright lie" and Felix called it "an absolute scandal… just fucking bullshit." Remain voters were deterred not only by what Leave would mean for their futures but also the lies and inconsistencies produced by the campaign. As such, a divide between Remain and Leave voters developed around both what effects leaving the European Union would have on the United Kingdom and whether or not people believed the information, or "lies" according to participants, spread by the Leave campaign.

Similar to the Brexit vote, a binary between political parties in England grew with the majority of voters choosing to support either the Conservative party or the Labour party in elections. While the United Kingdom technically has a multi-party government, the power and support of Conservative and Labour have fundamentally created a two-party system within England. Bianca would like to vote for a more leftist party such as the LibDem party, but it feels like "you vote Labour or you might as well just give a vote to the Conservatives." In 2017 and 2019, the Conservative party won a majority of Parliament seats, taking seats that Labour had held for years. As the Conservative

Figure 2: A Leave Campaign bus advertisement featuring the disputed slogan presented by Boris Johnson (Parsons 2016).

party gained more seats, participants felt less represented and agreed with less of the government's actions. A combination of the government's continued efforts towards Brexit and their response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in dissatisfaction for all participants. Participants felt that they had to vote for one of the two parties and dissatisfaction with the Conservative party emphasized their felt responsibility to vote Labour.

With the government and referendum conceived in popular consciousness as binary, the media aggressively reinforced the right vs wrong, us vs them narrative. As Hall (1997) noted, media has the ability to symbolically and culturally infer characteristics to groups that are Othered. Media owners within the United Kingdom advertised and supported their parties throughout the Brexit campaign. Diane believed it was "really important [that] Rupert Murdoch supported Brexit" because as "the head of [the Sun and the Times], he's supporting one thing, his business interests". Targeted ads and misinformation to support the Leave campaign left participants trying to determine what was real and what was fake. As a result, people in the UK were less likely to get their news from websites or television channels that didn't support their views. This is a criticism they had of older and Leave voters, but also of themselves. Participants were self-aware that they were a part of the biased media consumption problem. Adam pointed out that people "don't necessarily use the internet to find all the different bits of information ... because it's a lot of hassle." Carmen admitted that "the media that [she consumed was] all very of one opinion so it was quite demonizing of the opposing side, which did filter into [her] perception of it." Both the one-sidedness of the news and the participant's focus on one or two sources created a strong binary narrative. Their sources confirmed that they were right and other voters were wrong, which strongly affected how they perceive those with differing values or voting behaviors.

Identity: Construction of The Other

The binary frame produced by politics and media has been internalized by young voters with how they identify. Crucial to participants' identities was the intense separation and chastising of people that did not agree with them. As Tekin (2010) noted, the process of Othering involves attributing negative characteristics to those who are marked as different and this is evident in participants' descriptions. Across all political beliefs, participants described their opposed groups as strongly independent from them by describing their negative qualities. For participants who were more liberal and pro-Remain, they strongly differentiated themselves from the Conservative party and Leave voters. Elle, who was pro-Leave, strongly differentiated herself from Remain supporters, and Felix, who supports the Conservative party, strongly differentiated himself from the Labour party and other liberal groups. When talking about the left, he described them as "old-school, almost borderline Communist." The Other was defined differently for each participant yet the process of Othering was evident for all.

One common characteristic attributed to the Other was racism. Hatred of immigrants, English pride, xenophobia, and blatant racism were phrases thrown at various different groups. English identifying people were "big, old, football [hooligans] who [drink] all the time and stuff like that, or just being racist" according to Adam. Pride in the English flag, St. George's Cross, had "quite right-wing, a bit racist 'loving England as a country'" connotations for Diane. However, for Carmen, anyone voting Leave was "low-key racist" and held strong beliefs that immigrants were bad and hurting British values. Felix agreed, arguing that Leave voters hold xenophobic views and want England to return to its former segregated self. For Felix, xenophobia and racism were not just qualities of Leave voters, but also older people whose "selfish, bigoted, xenophobic views might have an impact on [his] future".

Other criticisms given to the Other include that they were money-driven, posh/elitist, and out of touch with what the United Kingdom is actually like. A stereotype of the political parties is that Conservatives are higher on the socioeconomic scale and Labour voters are lower. Bianca said that given a few outliers, this is "completely true." As such, the Conservative government "only cares about the rich" and was out of touch with the people of the country, according to both Adam and Carmen. Additionally, Elle felt that both older voters and people who identify as English gave the impression of being more posh; their personalities and attitudes have an essence of performativity related to an older English generation. Carmen explains they're "of the 'stiff upper lip' generation. They don't like to be open about how they feel." In addition to being less likely to show or explain their feelings, they tend towards patriarchal beliefs and are quick to blame Eastern European immigrants for any issues related to the economy. My participants' caustic language towards the Other illustrates that they did not agree with the general conservative, patriarchal values supported by the government and the nation. The values of those who prioritize national identity are opposite to my participants' who seek to highlight their personal and community values by disavowing the Other.

Construction of the Other was a way for participants to distinguish themselves from oppositional groups and affirm their identity with other communities. By calling the Other racist or elitist, they were both separating themselves from these groups as well as affirming that they did not share these characteristics of the Other. In doing so, participants simultaneously constructed their personal identities while demonstrating their in-group membership to other communities. Contrasting themselves with the Other allowed them to display other identities, such as regional or social identities. Geographical identity within England was important to every participant. Instead of focusing on national boundaries like the Other, participants spoke about smaller boundaries based on their physical location within the United Kingdom. Smaller geographical identities involve "whole debates about where the line is for North and South" England, according to Bianca, or being from "a poor area of Southeast London" like Carmen. Participants from London, where 60% voted Remain, felt that their location significantly influenced their understanding of politics because most of the people around them "were pretty aligned in [their] political direction", as Carmen explained (BBC News 2016).

Tekin (2010) explains that speaking about common characteristics and sameness is another way to strengthen identity within groups. Other identities, such as their political party, sexuality, or career choice were also displayed by participants. These identities contrast with the Other and participants sought to differentiate themselves through this critical language. They wanted to prove to their community that they disapprove of and denounce what the Other stands for. By criticizing them for being racist and elitist, they were distancing themselves from the Other and reaffirming that they themselves do not have these traits.

The Cycle of Powerlessness

With the Other in positions of power, participants in this study felt a sense of distance towards the government and a lack of representation. Every participant was unhappy with the government, whether it was a recent disenchantment or a continual disagreement. Even Elle, who would have voted Leave, was disappointed with the Brexit efforts and believed that "Boris Johnson [was] awful, but he [had] a stupid haircut to go with it." Similarly, Felix, a Conservative who voted Remain, believed that the current Conservative government "just comes across as incompetent." Both participants whose identities align with some form of power were discontent with their current state. The combination of separating themselves from the Other and disagreeing with the government's actions resulted in a feeling of perceived powerlessness.

The feelings of powerlessness and intense separation from the Other were mutually reinforcing, creating a cycle of reaffirming distance between participants and the Other/those in power. By separating themselves from the Other, they are separating themselves from those who are both in power and represented by those in power. Their perceived separation from power in the government means that their values and efforts are being blocked by the Other, increasing their perceived separation. Participants ultimately felt that the government is not meant for them and struggled to find hope that this will change. Carmen described her vote as "less powerful because the majority of the opposing side has just grown." Adam, living in a Conservative area, believed that the Conservative party will continue to win elections and as such his vote doesn't really matter. As Carmen pointed out, voting and efforts to be heard and represented "evoke moments of feeling powerless and despairing" because she knows that the Other will always win.

Distance from those in power affected participants' understanding of their place within the nation and their desire to remain a part of it. Constant news and affirmation that their values and selves were not represented in the government will result in participants feeling that they do not belong. They do not meet the conditions for belonging to the nation as set by the Other; they do not hold the same values and cultural capital as those in power. Young voters tried to find ways to hold onto their European rights through the application of EU and foreign passports. Every participant in this study answered that they considered paths to citizenship in other countries. Through their family members or romantic partners, all looked to see how they could qualify. While dual citizenship does not inherently mean that people don't feel like they belong, the context of applying or researching directly after Brexit highlights that young voters were not content with losing their rights by leaving the European Union and their perceived diminishing status of belonging.

Arsenal of Evidence

Participants had an abundance of facts and information ready to prove their stance and defend their use of caustic language in regard to the Other. Participants had many points on the economy, immigration, and cyber threats that were not personal in nature but information that they remembered to explain their language. In addition to Bianca's claim that Leave voters are motivated by xenophobia, she brought up how many of the jobs that immigrants hold are within the National Health Service (NHS). The jobs that they claimed to be taken away by immigrants were not being filled by British people, as she recalled "there were 10,000 applications and 200 people showed up for their interview." While Felix was studying abroad, a professor asked him to explain Brexit and the Leave campaign. After ten minutes, he said his professor was overwhelmed by all the information he had provided and that his reaction "was like a hair dryer blowing in his face." Participants had all this information on the Other stored and ready to use even in times when they were not being targeted for their views.

One reason for young voters to have all this information ready is because they felt a responsibility for being able to defend their positions with facts. As discussed, one criticism of the Leave campaign was that it consistently lied and shared misinformation. Othering "[tends] to be subsumed to fit a preconceived pattern of opposites" by which participants are able to directly compare themselves against the Other, in this case that they do not lie (Neumann & Welsh 1991, 331). By separating themselves from the Other's characteristic of lying, young voters attempted to prove that they themselves do not make emotionally based or ill-informed decisions. By having statistical or impersonal information, they were reaffirming to themselves and the listener that they have taken the time to research and find truths to back their statements. This sense of responsibility, however, can have negative effects on their sense of belonging. Elle described that she felt a constant pressure "to go above and beyond giving factual evidence" to defend her support of Leave, ultimately making her exhausted to the point where she "just stopped talking about it in general or sharing [her] views." If young voters are constantly on the defensive, constantly trying to prove that they are right and the Other is wrong, they will be constantly framing themselves in a way where society thinks they are wrong.

Discussion

Looking at young voters' need to separate themselves from groups such as Leave Voters and the Conservative Party through these various lenses highlights a hierarchy of identities at both the national and individual level. Within the United Kingdom, those who prioritize their national identity hold positions of power and are more represented. The rhetoric surrounding the Leave Campaign strongly portrayed pro-Britain/England sentiment through attacks on Europe and anti-immigrant sentiments. The Conservative Party has continued in this manner with their continued support of Brexit, adding to what Golec de Zavala et al. (2017, 3) describe as social dominance orientation, or the desire to compete and prove the superiority of their own nation. Leave voters and Conservatives have a higher need to protect their perception of the nation and its values from outsiders, such as the European Union, but also those within its borders. Participants explained the importance of national identity to the Other through British values and anti-immigrant comments they have heard. While these attributes are not true for every member of the Other, they emphasize that the Other personally prioritize their national identity and want to prove the superiority of the United Kingdom.

The Other believes political identity is the most important and those who feel differently do not have as much of a right to "their" nation as they do. Skey (2013) explains that those who hold the most power in a nation are the ones who set the conditions for belonging. Those who do not meet the conditions for belonging will feel uncertain or question their right to the nation. Within the United Kingdom, those who do not meet the conditions for belonging are largely young voters, who identify more with regional and social identities than national identity. Within the political sphere, young voters tend to associate with Remain and leftist parties such as Labour. Young voters do not see their interests represented in the national government and struggle to see how this can change in the future.

Other identities that young voters rank higher than their national identity are their social or local communities. Participants spoke highly about their identities within a regional frame, such as being from a specific city or region, as well as being members of social communities, such as being LGBTQ+. Examples include how Bianca believes that she is "definitely a Southerner" and Carmen has been educating herself by researching members of Parliament who "voted against gay marriage" and "adoption by gay couples." Young voters feel that these social identities, like being liberal or a Londoner, define them more than their national identity. In their personal hierarchy of identities, these identifications are ranked higher than their national identity, unlike the Other. These identities also connect them to members that reside outside of the nation and result in a higher sense of belonging to an international community. Because some of these identities do not align with the more conservative, English-based conditions of belonging, they feel that they must defend themselves. To protect and enforce these identities, young voters have developed the patterns of abrasive language and Othering. Speaking negatively about those who value their national identity is a way to affirm to their communities that their social identities are prioritized.

These findings challenge Anderson's definition of the nation as an imagined community because not all members feel that they have an equal right to the nation. His emphasis on community as a sense of equality between members, whether real or not, does not consider the fact that identities are both hierarchical and fluid. Identities within the United Kingdom are hierarchical in that those who prioritize their national identity hold positions of power and can make those who prioritize other identities feel that they do not belong. In this sense, young voters do not have a perceived equality to the nation as Anderson describes. Identities are additionally fluid and have fluctuating levels of importance. Identities become more prevalent when they are threatened, as seen by Brexit voters' response to perceived threats to the nation. The salience of identity varies between people and situation which reveals that people's perceived right to the nation can change depending on time and place. Community is not possible when a nation, such as the United Kingdom, is marked by an intense binary of belonging based on conservative values.

The process of Othering by participants reveals that there is a perception of powerlessness as well as agency in their stance. They do not hold power within the nation and their values and cultural capital are not supported by those who do hold power. The continual gains made by the Conservative and Leave campaigns make participants feel powerless and disconnected from the nation—

even participants with connections to the Other feel discontent and actively distance themselves. However, there is agency in their continued stance of Othering those with power and fighting for their personal values. Participants do not need to join the Other because they have some hope that future elections could return some power to their communities. Participants have voted in both general elections since the Brexit referendum, highlighting that there is mobilization among young people to vote and play an increasingly important role in politics. As they recognize that their lives are being directly impacted, there is an effort to find collective identity within their communities that also oppose the Other. If they manage to gain power back over the Other in coming years, they may be more willing to associate with the nation, as Dina Roginsky (2006, 241-242) points out that "a well-constructed national identity imposed from 'above' can be accepted, internalized and spread only if its ideas and practices fit people's sentiments and the symbolic meanings generated from 'below.'" A collective national identity within the United Kingdom will have to include the values held by young voters as they gain more political power.

Conclusion

With the resurgence of right-wing politics through Brexit and a Conservative government, older, Leave, and Conservative voters have gained significant control within the United Kingdom. In response to this resurgence, young voters have developed strategies to both separate themselves from these groups and reinforce their social identities. Their process of Othering differs from most in that they are not in positions of power, but instead distancing themselves from those in power. The binary of Other is a result of increased divisions within both politics and society. The Leave campaign, Conservative party, and media bias have heavily influenced young voters' perception of binary belonging. Consequently, young voters seek to explicitly separate themselves from groups that they perceive as opposite to them, the Other. Young voters construct the Other by attributing harsh and derogatory traits to them in an effort to both affirm their own identity and to reassure people in their community that they are not a part of the Other.

However, because the Other holds positions of power within the United Kingdom, young voters feel a sense of disconnection from the government. They perceive a lack of representation and feel their votes are powerless because of the size of the Other's majority. These feelings of powerlessness and separation between themselves and the Other are mutually reinforcing: because the Other has all the power, they cannot be represented, which emphasizes and increases their perceived divisions. Additionally, young voters feel required to have an arsenal of facts ready to defend their construction of the Other. This arsenal also frames their understanding of the world which can negatively affect their perception of belonging.

The conditions for belonging within the United Kingdom are determined by the Other as they hold political power. Their conservative beliefs and pro-Britain rhetoric highlight that a condition for belonging is the prioritization of national identity and pride. Young voters do not meet this condition as they identify more with social and local communities which results in them feeling that they do not belong and are not represented in government. They seek to protect and defend their identities by emphasizing them through this process of Othering those in power. This process highlights a hierarchy of identities in which, by not meeting the conditions for belonging, young voters feel that the nation belongs more to the Other. Their sense of powerlessness in regard to government representation and unwillingness to associate with those who hold positions of power challenge Anderson's characteristic of community within a nation. This hierarchy can have long lasting implications for the United Kingdom as a nation considering that these younger generations will make up the voting majority in coming decades. For young voters to feel a sense of belonging within the United Kingdom, they will need to see their values and beliefs represented within positions of power alongside those of the Other.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Claire Panetta, for her guidance and mentorship, Pace University’s Provost Office for their generous research award, and JUE for strengthening my arguments and giving my work an audience.

References

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.

BBC News. 2016. “EU Referendum: The Result in Maps and Charts.” June 24, 2016. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36616028.

---. 2018. “£350m Brexit claim was 'too low', says Boris Johnson.” January 16, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-42698981.

---. 2020. “Brexit: All you need to know about the UK leaving the EU”. December 30, 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-32810887.

Billig, Michael. 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.

Calhoun, Craig. 2003. “‘Belonging’ in the Cosmopolitan Imaginary.” *Ethnicities* 3 (4): 531-568.

---. 2017. “Populism, Nationalism, and Brexit.” In *Brexit: Sociological Responses*, edited by William Outhwaite. London: Anthem Press.

Channel 4 News. 2016. “Warsi Condemns ‘Divisive and Xenophobic’ Brexit Campaign.” June 26, 2016. https://www.channel4.com/news/warsi-condemns-divisive-and-xenophobic-brexit-campaign.

Colley, Linda. 1992. “Britishness and Otherness: An Argument.” *The Journal of British Studies* 31 (4): 309–29. https://doi.org/10.1086/386013.

De Cillia, Rudolf, Martin Reisigl, and Ruth Wodak. 1999. “The Discursive Construction of National Identities.” *Discourse & Society* 10 (2): 149–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926599010002002.

Delanty, Gerard. 1995. *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Elgot, Jessica. 2016. “Sayeeda Warsi Quits Leave Campaign Over 'Hateful, Xenophobic' Tactics” *The Guardian*, June 20, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/20/sayeeda-warsi-quits-leave-campaign-over-hateful-xenophobic-tactics.

Fenton, Steve. 2007. “Indifference towards National Identity: What Young Adults Think about Being English and British.” *Nations and Nationalism* 13 (2): 321–339.

FitzPatrick, Sam. 2019. “General Election: Who Will Win the Youth Vote?” YouGov, November 21, 2019. https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/11/22/general-election-who-will-win-youth-vote.

Gardner, Andrew. 2017. “Brexit, Boundaries and Imperial Identities: A Comparative View.” *Journal of Social Archaeology* 17 (1): 3–26.

Golec de Zavala, Agnieszka, Rita Guerra, and Cláudia Simão. 2017. “The Relationship between the Brexit Vote and Individual Predictors of Prejudice: Collective Narcissism, Right Wing Authoritarianism, Social Dominance Orientation.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2023): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02023.

Hage, Ghassan. 1998. *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multi-cultural Society*. Annadale: Pluto Press.

Hall, Stuart, ed. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.

Harrison, Sarah. 2018. “Young Voters.” In *Britain Votes 2017*, edited by Jonathan Tonge, Christina Leston-Bandeira, and Stuart Wilks-Heeg, 255–66. Oxford University Press.

---. 2020. “A Vote of Frustration? Young Voters in the UK General Election 2019.” In *Britain Vote: The 2019 General Election*, edited by Jonathan Tonge, Stuart Wilks-Heeg, and Louise Thompson, 259–71. Oxford University Press.

Kelly, Jon. 2016. “Brexit: How Much of a Generation Gap Is There?” *BBC News Magazine*, June 24, 2016. https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36619342.

Manti, Franco. 2019. “Diversity, Otherness and the Politics of Recognition” *Nordicum-Mediterraneum*. 14 (2): 1-21. https://doi.org/10.33112/nm.14.2.4.

Neumann, Iver B., and Jennifer M. Welsh. 1991. “The Other in European Self-Definition: An Addendum to the Literature on International Society.” *Review of International Studies* 17 (4): 327–48. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210500112045.

Parsons, Andrew. 2016. Photograph. *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Group Ltd., May 19, 2019. i-Images. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2019/05/16/350m-brexit-bus-slogan-lie-says-jean-claude-juncker/.

Roginsky, Dina. 2006. “Nationalism and Ambivalence: Ethnicity, Gender and Folklore as Categories of Otherness.” *Patterns of Prejudice* 40 (3): 237–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769505

Sloam, James. 2018. “#Votebecause: Youth Mobilisation for the Referendum on British Membership of the European Union.” *New Media & Society* 20 (11): 4017–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818766701.

Smith, Anthony. 2008. “The Limits of Everyday Nationhood.” *Ethnicities* 8 (4): 563–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796808008004 0102

Skey, Michael. 2013. “Why Do Nations Matter? The Struggle for Belonging and Security in an Uncertain World.” *The British Journal of Sociology* 64 (1): 81-98. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12007.

Tekin, Beyza C. 2010. *Representations and Othering in Discourse: The Construction of Turkey in the EU Context*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Wallace, William. 2017. “Losing the Narrative: the United Kingdom and the European Union as Imagined Communities.” *International Relations* 31 (2): 192–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117817707396.

The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography

The Social Life of High School Seniors: COVID Experiences

Clara Maxwell, Thomas van Rijckevorsel

University College Maastricht—claramaxwell@me.com, thomas.van.rijckevorsel@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 marks a time of social isolation and social change in the lives of many people. While previous literature has focused on the mental health consequences of isolation on young people, our qualitative research aims to explore the lived experiences of adolescents during the pandemic. Based on 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with senior year students at the John F. Kennedy School in Berlin, this study seeks to determine whether both the government and school-imposed COVID-measures have impacted the social lives of our participants and to understand how they experience these potential changes. Our research found that students report a significant change in social life, but, in contrast with the existing literature, their experience of this social change is perceived as positive. These positive changes included a reported improvement in social connections, a more conscious use of social media, and the potential for more alone time. By exploring these three themes, our participants' unexpected positivity can be placed into a larger context in which the pandemic is an opportunity to forge more meaningful connections while learning to be more conscious in spending time alone in an "always-on" culture.

Keywords: adolescents; COVID-19; social life; aloneness; social media

"Coronavirus social-contact curbs put adolescents at risk" (Roxby 2020, 1); "COVID-19 has affected mental health of 40% of teenagers" (Dupont 2020, 1); "Future of an entire generation at risk" (United Nations 2020, 1). Headlines such as these have been plaguing the media, warning us of the effects of the pandemic on the lives of young people. Adolescents are reported as being at risk for countless mental and physical health issues as a result of the lockdown restrictions. The area where these new rules arguably have the most impact is in the social aspects of life, but how exactly the pandemic has influenced this and in what way young people themselves experience these social changes remains largely unknown.

Our research poses the following research question: How do senior year students at the John F. Kennedy High School (JFKS) in Berlin shape and experience their social lives during the COVID-19 pandemic? The JFKS is a public German-American school situated in the district of Zehlendorf, one of the richest neighborhoods in Berlin, Germany. Albeit not a private school, JFKS is ranked as one of the best public schools in Berlin and is funded by both the German and American governments via the JFKS Trust Fund (John F. Kennedy School: Structure). Thus, many of its students come from international, mostly middle and upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds. Germany, like many other European countries, has implemented rules and regulations in order to prevent the COVID-19 virus from spreading further. These restrictions mainly focus on minimizing contact between people to prevent infection (Deutschland.de 2021). At the time of our interviews, the JFKS students attended most of their classes in person with certain COVID regulations in place, including the use of mandatory masks, social distancing in classrooms, and the separation of floors by grades.

Based on the reported experiences of students, our research aims to find out whether these COVID-measures have impacted the social lives of our participants and to understand how they experience these changes. Through our interviews, we found that the pandemic has caused a change in social life, but, in contrast with the existing literature, the students' experience of this social change is rather positive. Therefore, the data analysis mainly focuses on explaining this surprising outcome. Through an exploration of three themes: social connections, social media, and alone time, we delve deeper into our participants' unexpected positivity towards the pandemic. Finally, we summarize our main findings and address the limitations of this study and suggestions for further research.

Methodology

We took an exploratory and inductive approach to our research, meaning that we allowed our interviewees' experiences to lead our research questions (Gray 2014, 43-4, 62). Since the COVID-pandemic is a novel situation, there are a limited number of sources currently available that deal with its effects, especially on the specific population of high school students. As a result, our study focuses on the individual experiences of these students in an attempt to best understand their situation and attitudes towards the pandemic. Various authors have already shown the merits of ethnographic and qualitative methods for exploring and understanding the experiences of adolescents (eg. Marwick and Boyd 2014, 1055-56). Our decision to examine individual stories is justified through our constructivist epistemology. We take the subjective experiences of our participants to be socially constructed, but not completely separate from an objective reality (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006, 48). Without assuming that reality exists simply to be uncovered, we take a more phenomenological approach to answering our research question by examining how the world is perceived by our interviewees. Building on the same principles as Throuvala et al. (2018, 166) and Marwick and Boyd (2014, 1055), our research focuses on understanding individual experiences instead of aiming to make generalizations and is therefore idiographic in design. The specific method we apply throughout the research can be described as a grounded theory approach to thematic analysis as presented by Heydarian (2016, 2). Within this context, the different components of research, such as the literature review, data collection and data analysis, are developed simultaneously and in close relation to one another (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006, 348).

With this idea in mind, we conducted 10 one-on-one interviews with senior (grade 12) students at the John F. Kennedy school in Berlin., and pseudonyms are used in this study. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 30-45 minutes each. The purpose of the questions posed was threefold: to understand the current situations of the participants both in school and their personal lives, to chart the changes that they noticed in their social lives as a result of the pandemic and, most importantly, to explore how they experienced these changes. The specific questions differed from interview to interview as we continually reflected upon our focus and preliminary findings. Based on the answers we received from the students, we identified certain topics that were interesting or controversial and, in the following interviews, we delved deeper into those. Similarly, questions and subjects that did not yield results relevant for this research were focused upon less in subsequent interviews, and in some cases left out.

We specifically interviewed senior year students from the same high school using snowball sampling, which means that they are acquainted with one another to varying degrees (Gray 2014, 249-50). Their demographics are also quite similar: aged 17-18 years, middle to high socio-economic background, similar education level, and a general acknowledgement that the COVID-19 virus is a serious problem. Since social experiences may differ due to varying COVID-19 regulations, choosing participants from the same school and year ensures that an analysis of the experiences could still lead to comparable results within our specific sample. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, including repetitions, stuttering and other small utterances, as these can be meaningful on their own (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006, 345-6). We then read these transcriptions and started an open coding process, highlighting passages that were relevant for the research question, recurred throughout the interviews, and were in any other way significant. From these initial codes we wrote several larger analytical memos in a similar manner to the coding method used for grounded theory research as presented in Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006, 349–353). Following the development of our memos, we synthesized these findings into three distinct themes to create a coherent narrative and compared the results with those of previous research. This ensures that our findings are situated in an academic context and establish an appropriately contextualized understanding of the matter at hand.

Isolation, Loneliness, and Social Media Use in Adolescence

Although research on the effects of the novel COVID-19 pandemic is currently limited, previous studies have attempted to understand the social impacts of natural disasters. For example, in his research on the Chicago heat wave of 1995, Klinenberg (2001) attempts to understand the impact of social isolation on senior citizens. He concludes that many deaths were caused not by the heat wave itself, but by the social isolation and fear of possible health risks that resulted from the natural disaster (2001, 524). Thus, Klinenberg connects the impacts of natural disasters with psycho-social wellbeing, demonstrating the dangers of isolation. Although we acknowledge that the pandemic has consequences for all age groups, we chose to focus our research on high school seniors specifically since these are already in developmentally important phases of their lives. Therefore, as our study focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on young people, it is important to understand how a younger age group may be impacted by social isolation, since this may differ from the results of Klinenberg's research. An ethnographic study was recently conducted with Pakistani university students investigating their reflections on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Raza et. al. 2021). The researchers requested the participants to capture photos that reflect the impact of the pandemic on various aspects of their lives. By collecting 120 photographs with corresponding captions, the researchers were able to uncover various themes about the experiences of these students. Among these were feelings of isolation, fear of infection, and heightened anxiety and uncertainty (Raza et al. 2021, 118-119). Thus, their findings seem to fall in line with those of Klinenberg (2001) in that isolation can lead to added stress and feelings of loneliness. It is important to note, however, that Raza et al. (2021) conducted their study on a sample of university students, who also differ from high school students in certain aspects. The impacts on high schoolers, which is under scrutiny in this research, is therefore important to explore.

A letter to the editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* includes various possible implications that the COVID pandemic might have for high school students (Thakur 2020). These implications largely entail concerns about fear of infection and other mental health-related topics, especially due to the loss of social interaction as a result of COVID-19 restrictions (Thakur 2020, 1309). Specifically, Davis (2013, 2283) found that interpersonal relationships have a very large influence on identity formation in adolescents. Additionally, a review paper analyzing multiple articles about social isolation and loneliness in adolescents found that these factors increase the risk of depression and anxiety (Loades et al. 2020, 1218). As a result, adolescents, mainly those with existing mental health problems, low socioeconomic status and other disadvantages, can be considered a risk group for psychological problems (Fegert et al. 2020, 4). This is especially the case during the pandemic, since adolescents are in a time of life where there is an overall need for increased social interaction (Orben et al. 2020, 635).

When looking specifically at the potential effects the pandemic may have on adolescents, a common theme found in many recent studies is the heightened risk of feelings of loneliness. Pietrabissa and Simpson (2020, 1) define social isolation as an "objective lack of interactions with others" and acknowledge that prolonged periods of isolation can result in a plethora of mental health problems, including depression. According to Besser, Flett and Zeigler-Hill (2020, 2), these uncertain times create additional stress and anxiety for students. Since young people are forced to be socially isolated, the pandemic does not allow for many in-person social activities that would previously help relieve this stress. Rather, adolescents must spend an increased amount of time isolated at home (Besser et al. 2020, 2). A study conducted in Switzerland includes self-reported surveys with people of all ages claiming that social isolation causes an increase in physical and mental illness. Thus, the more socially isolated the participants are, the higher the risk for worse mental and physical health problems (Hämmig 2019, 14).

While many studies emphasize the risks of social isolation during the pandemic, we also found that the quality of social connections is an important factor to take into consideration. According to Besser, Flett and Zeigler-Hill (2020, 17), our sense of self is shaped by our feelings of belonging within our social circles. Thus, the more we feel that we belong to a social group and matter to others, the stronger our sense of self and the more resilient and adaptable we are in times of crisis, such as the current pandemic. This claim is supported by Pietrabissa and Simpson (2020, 3) who found that human resilience is closely linked to the depth and strength of our interpersonal connections. Although Besser et al. (2020, 1) specifically researched higher education students' ability to adapt to online learning during the COVID pandemic, they found that those who felt a strong feeling of social connectedness within their social circles had better moods. Therefore, to counter feelings of loneliness, feeling socially connected really matters (Banerjee & Rai 2020, 526-527). Thus, these studies create a very important link between the quality rather than the quantity of social connections and how these affect our ability to be resilient in times of great change while countering certain mental health risks.

Being isolated at home does not necessarily imply having no social interaction whatsoever. Social media plays an increasingly large role in our lives, especially for younger generations and can serve as a way to decrease the impact of the loss of face-to-face interactions (Orben et al. 2020, 637). As a result of the pandemic, therefore, time spent on social media can be expected to increase drastically, making this aspect of daily life extremely relevant for our research. In particular, the consequences of increased social media use are an important factor to take into account. Davis (2013, 2290) identifies the role social media platforms play in shaping ideas and identities for adolescents, and research by Ehrenreich et al. (2019, 534-35) concludes that simply texting already influences key developmental stages during adolescence, such as establishing autonomy from parents and developing self-identity and meaningful peer relations. This shows that seemingly mundane digital interactions can have a great impact on the identity and self-perception of high school students. Additionally, a study by Mazzoni and Iannone (2014, 310) found that the specific uses of social networking sites and the motivations behind them are influenced by whether the adolescents in question are high school or university students, as the former experience more pressure to participate. Throuvala et al. (2018, 168) identify the Fear of Missing Out (FoMo) as one of the prevalent issues in social media, meaning that students feel pressure to be active and present both on and offline. Next to generally feeling bad about being left out of social activities, this feeling may cause young people to feel pressure to join parties or bigger events at a time when COVID-19 regulations currently advise against these. This could contribute to the stress and anxiety which social media in general has been found to exacerbate (Throuvala et al. 2018, 172). Overall, the literature points at multiple social and psychological implications of increased social media use for adolescents during the pandemic.

Shaping Social Life and the Unforeseen Positive Impacts of COVID-19

As mentioned previously, our main points of inquiry throughout the student interviews revolved around three main topics: the loss of social connection with peers, how our interviewees experience this loss and deal with the time spent alone, and their relation to social media as an important aspect of social life during the pandemic. Much of the aforementioned literature suggests that we would encounter negative experiences, including reports of loneliness, lack of social interactions and an increase in potentially damaging social media use. Indeed, our interviewees do report significant social changes in their lives since the start of the pandemic. The biggest change seems to be a social downscaling, as Eric exemplifies: "... just hanging out with like, a bigger group of friends, especially, it's hard if you have like, a lot of mutual friends that used to hang out before COVID. And now you're trying to like split it down into smaller groups."

As the restrictions prohibit meeting in large groups outside or at home, the physical social interactions of our interviewees have been diminished to mostly one-on-one activities, such as going for walks or doing sports. The only place where large amounts of people come together is at school, but our interviewees tell us that even there the situation has changed profoundly. As Nicole describes: "it's kind of...so we don't really have like one place where everyone gathers, which is a change so it's kind of just smaller groups that are talking within the halls so I think, yeah, that's a change." The situation presented by our interviewees highlights a transformation of the social situation prior to the start of the pandemic. Our interviewees mention that the most noticeable difference is no longer being able to casually hang out with multiple friends and randomly meet people at parties and other larger social events. Now, both inside and outside of the context of school, social interactions are happening less and on a smaller scale.

These observations regarding social interactions seem to line up with our literature findings. Additionally, our interviewees report that their use of online social platforms has increased considerably since the start of the pandemic. However, the correspondence between our findings and the literature seem to only match to a certain degree. Although our participants all acknowledge that the pandemic has changed aspects of their social lives, their overall attitude towards the new developments is surprisingly positive rather than negative. Carla provides a clear example of this unexpected discovery by saying that "it [the pandemic] really impacted social life and, you know, not being able to meet up with a group of people, not being able to go to parties," while she at the same time claims the following: "Like, I can still do a lot of things that aren't restricted, like, the restrictions don't really take away like a lot of things that I want to be doing... I wouldn't say that the restrictions really impacted me in a negative way."

All of the other interviewees, to our initial surprise, share this opinion. Marie even went so far as to say that if she could go back in time and undo the pandemic, she would not necessarily do so. As this discovery does not fall in line with the literature we encountered, we decided to adapt the focus of our research to better understand this interesting contradiction. Taking this unexpected positivity as the central discovery of our research, in the remaining interviews, we set out to unpack our participants' experiences regarding the pandemic.

Quality of Friendships and Resilience in Times of Social Change

Our first theme delves deeper into the friendships the students maintained during the pandemic. As discussed above, our participants report that they are spending less time with big groups of friends and missing out on large-scale social activities. Consequently, this may affect adolescents the most since they find themselves in a stage of life where these frequent and large social interactions are a crucial component in their identity formation and mental health (Orben et al. 2020, 635; Davis 2013, 2283). However, rather than emphasizing this change as a negative consequence of the pandemic, every single interviewee reported that the COVID-19 restrictions allowed them to create a stronger 'inner circle' of friends that they interact with regularly. Marie, for instance, reported that:

> I actually got into more contact with some other people that I'm not as close with just because, you know... Stuff's happening, you text each other about something and then you end up meeting up when you can. So I actually probably gained a couple more friends than I lost friends during these times.

Not only did friendships change, the *quality* of these friendships and the inner circles greatly improved, which many participants, such as Carla, attribute directly to the pandemic:

> I think it [the pandemic] really brought out like, who, I don't wanna say cared about you, but to an extent kind of like, you would see who was reaching out and who you reached out to. And that really like, like, shined a light on like, who's important in your life and who like the really good true friends are.

Carla echoed the responses of many interviewees—that the pandemic actually brought to the surface who her 'good' and 'true' friends are, bringing her closer than ever before to the friends who care most about her. Thus, while the participants point out that their immediate circles of friends reduced in size and they are no longer able to go to large social events, their experience of this change is phrased in a positive way, since they emphasize that it brought them closer to their friends and helped them understand who is truly important to them.

Another interesting trend we uncovered in the reflections of our participants is their inability to recall specific changes in their social life and their apparent indifference towards these changes. When asked to describe what their social interactions were like prior to the pandemic, oftentimes our interviewees had a very difficult time recalling these. Many students struggled to remember when exactly these changes occurred and what differences these made in their daily social lives. When asked about when the COVID measurements were put into place, Anna struggled to remember exclaiming, "My god, it's so crazy I'm so used to the thing [wearing a mask] now that I can't even remember." Nicole echoed Anna's inability to recall what it was like before by stating "I really can't remember a time before this [the pandemic], actually." This inability to recall a time prior to the pandemic suggests that most of our interviewees display a certain ability to adapt to this social change and this new social "norm."

Since our participants were able to strengthen their friendships and create 'inner circles' of people they could share their grievances with and find solace in, this could explain why they were able to adapt so quickly to the new social changes and thus rapidly forget what the social situation was like prior to the pandemic. Our findings seem to support those of Pietrabissa and Simpson (2020, 3) and Besser et al. (2020, 17) who found that the more one feels connected to and finds a sense of belonging with others, the more resilient and able one is to adapt to new situations. Interestingly, Raza et al. (2021, 119) also found contradictory findings as they concluded that "[t]he lockdown has affected some relationships negatively but simultaneously it has also benefitted other relationships." Our interviewees echoed these findings in that they were able to grow closer to certain friends, whilst also letting go of relationships they cherished less. The strong social connections described by our participants may also explain why our findings counter those of several studies such as Hämmig (2019, 14) who claims that social isolation leads to more loneliness and mental health risks. Since our participants were all able to create meaningful social connections as a result of the pandemic, this strengthened their ability to adapt and find comfort in their friends during this time of change, hence avoiding the risks of mental health problems and other negative consequences of social isolation.

Using Social Media Consciously

During the pandemic, the creation of social connections largely takes place online. Due to the limited possibility of meeting people in real life and the increased time spent on electronic devices as a result of the pandemic, our participants all report an increase in time spent on social media, as previous literature suggested would occur (Orben et al. 2020, 637). Remarkably, the negative consequences that previous studies predict contradict the results of the interviews. To explain this observation, we noticed that the way the students interact with social media platforms has changed dramatically since the start of the pandemic, arguably for the better.

Firstly, instead of passively consuming the content presented to them, our interviewees explain that they are more actively using social media in beneficial ways, while simultaneously being mindful about the dangers of too much use. As an example, the majority of our participants agree that the content they see and post themselves consists of less personal pictures and "random" content and has become more "serious" and "important" with posts concerning news or politics. Marie explains this as follows: "You know, there are a lot of things happening in the world. So just to raise awareness and feel a little bit more active you use social media, and also kind of to see things going on in people's lives." The last sentence of this quote portrays how the students interact with social media more consciously instead of passively using the platforms to pass time, as they reported doing before the pandemic. Our interviewees are now very clear about the purpose of their time spent on social media. It is used as a tool for actively staying in contact with friends, sharing ideas and for more meaningful self-expression. Elizabeth provides a very clear example of this:

> Social media became kind of like a creative outlet because I would post on there a lot - the pictures that I took or the things that I was seeing or feeling. It was actually... I feel like social media can usually be pretty detrimental to my mental health, but it was really nice to have it around that time [during the lockdown].

Although she still recognizes the negative effects social media can have, Elizabeth describes using these platforms in a way that actually benefits her greatly. This contrasts the way she approached social media before the pandemic, namely more as a distraction. Both the realization of the influences and the different positive uses of social media indicate that Elizabeth, just like most other interviewees, no longer uses social media to meaninglessly scroll through her feed. Instead the students have adopted a more conscious interaction with these platforms, using them for their benefit, like enabling the user to stay connected and express themselves, while simultaneously being mindful of the possible negative effects.

The second discovery revolves around our participants' differing reactions to the content that they encounter on social media, mostly in regard to the previously mentioned Fear of Missing Out (FoMo) as presented by Throuvala et. al (2018, 168). When seeing social media content depicting groups meeting up or having parties, our participants do not report feeling bad or jealous about being left out, but rather criticize the people that are posting about these meet-ups. Additionally, most of our interviewees mention that seeing these posts made them feel better about themselves for adhering to the government restrictions. As Nicole stated:

> I would say personally, I think that people are posting less about that [hanging out in groups]. Because I think it also kind of plays into that, like people almost criticizing them then when they see 'Oh, these people are hanging out, they're not supposed to be hanging out'. It's not so much that 'oh, I wasn't invited', because then they'll play the card of 'Oh, but they're not allowed to be hanging out. So good on me for being the one who's following the rules.

The FoMo seems to have transformed into a type of social condemnation, generally causing a feeling of superiority rather than a feeling of exclusion. Our participants also agree that they and their peers are vocal about this, calling each other out for breaking the rules, as Eric describes: "[Y]ou probably do get like criticism, and there are people even within your friend group that like, rightfully so, are like, 'Okay, what are you doing? We're trying to socially distance, we're trying to get the numbers down, right?'" Mentioning the disobedience of others while stressing self-adherence to rules is something that Williams et al. (2020, 5) already discovered. However, the decrease in FoMo contradicts the research by Throuvala et al. (2018, 168), which identifies this as a prevalent issue in social media. Despite the increase in social media use, our findings suggest that FoMo has actually decreased as a result of the pandemic. This decrease in FoMo can be explained by our participants' more conscious interaction with social media, using it as a beneficial tool to check in with friends and share important news. This conscious use of online platforms seems to be a novel finding that some scholars, such as Davis (2013) and Mazzoni and Iannone (2014), do not address.

The social condemnation of peers for their actions shared on social media does however bring forth another issue regarding surveillance and sociotechnical systems, famously discussed in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Scholars generally view modern social media platforms as an inverted panopticon, one where the individual is constantly watched by an unknown number of peers who act as controlling guards. Due to the social expectations set by their peers, social media users adjust their behavior accordingly in order to appeal to the norms and values of those around them. At some point, these norms become so embodied by the individual that they no longer need any social forces to control their behavior. This could explain why many of our interviewees described using social media less to showcase their daily activities as they adapted to the social expectations that meeting up with others and sharing this online was no longer seen as desirable. Although social media is commonly understood to be 'panoptic' and thus a highly surveilled space, many users have not been found to adapt their behavior to these supposedly controlling forces (Romele et al. 2017, 205). When taking into consideration the examples mentioned by our interviewees, it seems as though there do exist certain individuals who are not bothered by the fact that everybody can see the illegal behavior they showcase online. However, as most of our interviewees mentioned, meeting in larger groups and thus violating government-imposed rules is indeed frowned upon by peers, not only indirectly. This criticism arguably discourages the illegal behavior or at least the act of sharing it online, making social media platforms a force that discourages young people to violate the COVID-19 regulations and influencing them to become those who in turn discipline others.

Countering Loneliness and Gaining Confidence from Aloneness

These online interactions also led our participants to realize the negative aspects of social media. This resulted in the conscious choice to lessen their time on social media by putting away their phones and spending time on their own. This is the third and final theme we explore. In general, spending time alone is something that our interviewees report doing a lot more since the start of the pandemic. However, rather than reporting feelings of loneliness and isolation as predicted by Hämmig (2019, 14), Pietrabissa and Simpson (2020, 13-14), and Raza et. al (2021, 114-116), students report that this time alone allows them to rediscover their old hobbies and make time for new ones, which they state would not have occurred had it not been for the pandemic. Nicole, for instance, suggests that:

> I think coming out of it, so being in a lockdown, I realized that I actually appreciated the time to myself and to just kind of calm down, like, focusing on things that I hadn't had time for, like just things like playing the piano or going for walks and taking pictures or… painting or something like that. Just activities that I never really had time for before? … So I think that I actually learned that yeah, I just need more time for myself.

Not only does Nicole appreciate the time she now has to herself, the pandemic also allowed her to *learn* that she *needs* more time for herself. The consequences of social isolation enable her to spend more time by herself, something that daily life in pre-COVID times did not allow. Thus, the pandemic taught her something she did not even know she needed.

Rather than focusing on feelings of loneliness due to social isolation, our participants speak of their increased alone time as an opportunity for positive self-discovery. Thus, they introduced us to a novel concept we had not taken into account coming into the study—the art of spending time alone in a positive and meaningful way. As defined by Danneel et al. (2018, 149), "aloneness is the objective state of being without company […] and must, therefore, be distinguished from the subjective feeling of loneliness." Therefore, we found that aloneness as described by our participants is drastically different from the loneliness the literature suggested our participants would report.

This aloneness also taught our participants more about themselves which led to the development of a more positive self-perception among the majority of our interviewees. Amanda, for instance, stated that, "…I also feel like I've just liked hanging out with myself a lot more than I did before the pandemic… Yeah, that's one of the things, yeah, being more like confident on my own, I guess." Amanda, like Nicole, also views the increased alone time during the pandemic as something positive, and she goes as far as to say that she actually has become more confident on her own and enjoys "hanging out with" herself. Interestingly, none of our participants counter this development. Rather, many agree that they have more positive feelings towards themselves and do not feel the need to see others. John even states the following:

> The most positive impact it [the pandemic] had was just like being able to be by yourself and learning how to, like, deal with that and not always having to be outside and being social, but learning that you can also be by yourself and stay sane, I guess…

For John, the most valuable lesson he learned during the pandemic is exactly what our participants bring up many times—learning to be with yourself and not having a constant need to socialize with other people. By saying this, John also draws on the idea that prior to the pandemic, he experienced a need to see others, thus avoiding spending time alone. Now that he has spent so much time on his own, he realizes that it is not necessary to have an overly busy social life.

Overall, when reflecting on the time spent alone, our participants seem to recall a positive time of self-reflection, discovery, and even a growth in confidence. These findings counter studies such as Hämmig's (2019, 14) which predicted higher risks of mental and physical health problems in times of social isolation and Loades et al.'s (2020, 1218) who identified adolescents as the group most at risk for these problems. This positive alone time did not resemble feelings of loneliness and thus presents a novel finding—that these adolescents found more positive experiences in this new social situation than they did negative ones.

Embracing Social Change in Times of COVID-19

Throughout our interviews the majority of our participants describe that their social life has changed significantly. Each interviewee reported immense downscaling of their social circles, emphasizing that social life during the pandemic is distinctly different to their life prior to COVID-19. Interestingly, the actual experience of these social changes is overwhelmingly positive. Our analysis showed that not only did our participants report higher quality friendships, they also seem to have found ways to forge meaningful connections with their friends online, using social media more consciously than before. Additionally, the pursuit of both forgotten and novel hobbies and the positive self-perception gained from this time spent alone reveals that rather than feeling lonely due to a lack of socializing with others, they have gained a newfound appreciation for time spent alone with themselves. These findings seem to contrast many previous studies, such as Klinenberg (2001, 514) who warned of the grave consequences of social isolation in the face of natural disasters. However, whilst Klinenberg focused on senior citizens, our interviewees are all young adults whose overall health risks differ from those of older populations. Also, a heat wave does not allow for people to leave the house due to the dangerous conditions, whilst many of our participants reported more time spent outdoors with an increased appreciation for nature. It is also important to note that technology has evolved immensely since 1995, and thus our participants have a means of social contact that Klinenberg's population did not—social media. All of these factors could explain why our study found such contrasting results.

These overwhelmingly positive experiences and perceptions of aloneness could be explained by the high-quality friendships our participants reported creating due to the pandemic. This falls in line with Banerjee and Rai (2020, 525-526) who found that feelings of loneliness can be countered if one has strong social connections. Raza et. al (2021, 123-124) also found that whilst loneliness and a feeling of being trapped inside was a common theme, many students also found solace and hope in nature, in their religion, and in their newly acquired free time. Some students reported that they were able to pass the time in creative and positive ways as the pandemic allowed them to have more time to themselves than before. Our interviewees were able to do so too by appreciating the time spent alone and using it to rediscover meaningful hobbies.

However, these findings do not directly explain why our participants found such comfort in spending time by themselves. Perhaps aloneness as an objective state of being alone does not suffice as a definition of what our participants experienced. Rather, as stated by Banerjee and Rai (2020, 526), "loneliness, which on the one hand is an emotion filled with terror and desolation, solitude, its cousin is full of peace and tranquility." According to this study, the true way to counter feelings of loneliness is being able to find peace in solitude (Banerjee & Rai 2020, 526-527). We as a society, however, have unlearned the ability to spend time with ourselves due to the rapid pace of our societies (Banerjee & Rai 2020, 526). As technology advances and both communication and travel have become faster and more accessible, these instantaneous distractions cause people to avoid spending time with themselves. Astonishingly, many of our participants actually displayed an ability to find comfort in spending time alone. Their aloneness is thus akin to solitude and an ability to find peace in spending time with themselves. Banerjee and Rai (2020, 526) emphasize that the pandemic is a perfect time to rediscover old hobbies, things that require time we previously did not have in a fast-paced world. Our participants display such positive attitudes towards the pandemic because they are able to discover new things, gain confidence in themselves, and create stronger bonds with their friends and loved ones. However, even more profoundly, they have experienced this social change positively because they are able to embrace their time spent alone in ways that our society often does not allow us to do.

Implications for Further Research: Aloneness as a Universal Lesson

Since our participants are a very specific sample of senior year students from the John F. Kennedy School in Berlin, we acknowledge that our findings are confined to them. As mentioned earlier, students attending the JFKS typically come from middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds which could explain why our interviewees were able to report certain positive experiences and may not have been affected by certain struggles, as identified by previous literature, that other students currently face who do not have close-knit social circles and access to technology. Interviewing students from different socio-economic backgrounds, schools, social circles, and even countries could lead to different results. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the majority of our interviewees identify as female, and thus gender could be an important factor affecting the results of our research. We as researchers also have certain biases that may influence how we interpret the interviews, adding to the limitations of our results. For instance, many of the themes discussed during the interviews resonated with us as individuals since the pandemic has also greatly affected our lives. On the other hand, the relatively small age gap between the interviewees and us researchers made for very easy communication, also aided by the fact that one of us attended the JFKS as well. Therefore, as there is a limited amount of research available on the recent pandemic, it is important that similar studies are conducted in different contexts to gather more insights on social changes in adolescent lives during the pandemic. Next to that, it would be interesting to conduct follow-up interviews with our participants to assess whether these significant changes such as the appreciation for time spent alone are short-or long-term changes. If life returns to the pre-pandemic norm, will our participants fall back into their old habits or are these realizations a permanent change in how they view their social lives? Lastly, although our findings are not generalizable to a larger population due to their qualitative nature and specific sample, we do believe that the implications of this study place it in a broader and more global context. As many of us are experiencing similar times of isolation, these lessons transcend beyond our participants' experiences. Perhaps we can learn from these young people and break away from our unlearned ability to be alone in our modern, 'always-on' society.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr. Ulrike Mueller for encouraging us to submit our work. Without her encouragement, we may not have found the courage to do so. We would also like to thank our enthusiastic participants for their willingness to contribute to this study.

References

Banerjee, Debanjan, and Mayank Rai. 2020. "Social isolation in Covid-19: The Impact of Loneliness." *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 66 (6): 525–527.

Besser, Avi, Gordon L. Flett, and Virgil Zeigler-Hill. 2020. "Adaptability to a sudden transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic: Understanding the challenges for students." *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*. Advance online publication: 1-22. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/stl0000198.

Danneel, Sofie, Marlies Maes, Janne Vanhalst, Patricia Bijttebier, and Luc Goossens. 2018. "Developmental change in loneliness and attitudes toward aloneness in adolescence." *Journal of Youth Adolescence* 47: 148–161.

Davis, Katie. 2013. "Young people's digital lives: the impact of interpersonal relationships and digital media use on adolescents' sense of identity." *Computers in Human Behavior* 29 (6): 2281-2293.

Deutschland.de. 2020. "The federal government informs about the corona crisis". Accessed January 15, 2021. https://www.deutschland.de/en/news/german-federal-government-informs-about-the-corona-crisis.

Dupont, Kyra. 2020. "Covid-19 has affected mental health of 40% of teenagers." *Heidi News*, July 28, 2020, https://www.heidi.news/geneva-solutions/covid-19-mentally-affect-40-of-teenagers.

Ehrenreich, Samuel E., Kurt J. Beron, Kaitlyn Burnell, Diana J. Meter, and Marion K. Underwood. 2020. "How Adolescents use Text Messaging through their High School Years." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 30 (2): 521-540.

Fegert, Jörg M., Benedetto Vitiello, Paul L. Plener, and Vera Clemens. 2020. "Challenges and burden of the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic for Child and Adolescent Mental Health: A Narrative Review to Highlight Clinical and Research Needs in the Acute Phase and the Long Return to Normality." *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 14 (20): 1-12.

Gray, David E. 2014. *Doing Research in the Real World*. London: SAGE Publications.

Hämmig, Oliver. 2019. "Health Risks associated with Aocial Isolation in General and in Young, Middle and Old Age." *PLoS ONE* 14 (8): 1-18.

Hesse-Biber, Sharlene N., and Patricia Leavy. 2006. *The Practice of Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE Publications.

Heydarian, Nazanin M. 2016. "Developing theory with the grounded-theory approach and thematic analysis." *Observer 29*, no. 4. https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/developing-theory-with-the-grounded-theory-approach-and-thematic-analysis.

John F. Kennedy School Berlin. n.d. "About JFKS: Structure." Accessed 18 May, 2021. https://jfks.de/about-jfks/structure/.

Klinenberg, Eric. 2001. "Dying alone: the social production of urban isolation." *Ethnography* 2 (4): 501–531.

Loades, Maria E., Eleanor Chatburn, Nina Higson-Sweeney, Shirley Reynolds, Roz Shafran, Amberly Brigden, Catherine Linney, Megan N. McManus, Catherine Borwick, and Esther Crawley. 2020. "Rapid Systematic Review: the impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19." *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 59 (11): 1218-1239.

Marwick, Alice E., and Danah Boyd. 2014. "Networked Privacy: How Teenagers Negotiate Context in Social Media." *New Media & Society* 16 (7): 1051–1067.

Mazzoni, Elvis, and Maria Iannone. 2014. "From High School to University: Impact of Social Networking Sites on Social Capital in the Transitions of Emerging Adults." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 45 (2): 303-315.

Orben, Amy, Livia Tomova, and Sarah-Jayne Blakemore. 2020. "The Effects of Social Deprivation on Adolescent Development and Mental Health." *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health* 4 (8): 634-640.

Pietrabissa, Giada, and Susan G. Simpson. 2020. "Psychological Consequences of Social Isolation during COVID-19 Outbreak." *Frontiers in Psychology* 11: 1-4.

Raza, Muhammad H., Neha Khatri, Sara Intikhab, and Rumaysa Iqbal. 2021. "The New Normal in Urban Pakistan: A Journey of Undergraduate Students through Photovoice." *Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography* 11(1): 108-131. https://doi.org/10.15273/jue.v11i1.10870.

Romele, Alberto, Francesco Gallino, Camilla Emmenegger, and Daniele Gorgone. 2017. "Panopticism is not enough: Social Media as Technologies of Voluntary Servitude." *Surveillance and Society* 15 (2): 204-221.

Roxby, Philippa. 2020. "Coronavirus Social-contact Curbs 'put adolescents at risk.'" *BBC News*, June 12, 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/health-53022369.

Thakur, Aditya. 2020. "Mental Health in High School Students at the Time of COVID-19: A Student's Perspective." *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 59 (12): 1309-1310.

Throuvala, Melina A., Mark D. Griffiths, Mike Rennoldson, and Daria J. Kuss. 2018. "Motivational Processes and Dysfunctional Mechanisms of Social Media Use among Adolescents: A Qualitative Focus Group Study." *Computers in Human Behavior* 93: 164-175.

United Nations. 2020. "Future of an Entire Generation at Risk, as COVID-19 Pandemic Drags On." *UN News*, November 19, 2020. https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1078022.

Williams, Simon N., Christopher J. Armitage, Tova Tampe, and Kimberly Dienes. 2020. "Public Perceptions and Experiences of Social Distancing and Social Isolation during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A UK-based Focus Group Study." *British Medical Journal Open* 10 (7): 1-8.

The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography

Swimming Through Ambivalence: The Paradox of Vigilant Coping in Female College Athletes

Elizabeth Shen

University of Chicago—elizabethshen@uchicago.edu

ABSTRACT

Three decades of research into disordered eating in sports have revealed contradictory results, with athletes considered both at risk but also protected from eating problems. To contribute insight into the complexities of existing literature, this study examines how female college swimmers in the US experience food and their bodies in athletic, non-athletic, and digital media contexts. Drawing on 16 in-depth interviews, this study finds that these athletes experience contradictory ideals, especially in the domains of health and online self-presentation. When faced with such tensions, they often seek resolution through heightened discipline and attention towards controlling the body, a phenomenon that I call vigilant coping. While vigilant coping can provide some satisfaction and respite, it often exacerbates confusion and reproduces anxieties. As a result, a predominant strategy for resolving ambivalence becomes a source of additional distress around food and body. The women in this study show how athletic contexts contribute to the paradox of vigilant coping but also reveal creative ways of coping that go beyond vigilance. These findings are particularly important given the low success of disordered eating treatments and urgency towards improving preventative efforts.

Keywords: eating disorders; athletics; vigilance; coping; ambivalence

Body dissatisfaction, a whirlwind of depreciation and shame, is an increasingly common phenomena experienced by many women in the United States (Galmiche et al. 2019; Tantleff-Dunn et al. 2011). In its most crystallized form, it manifests as eating disorders (ED) and subclinical disordered eating, which encompass body practices like diets, cosmetics, and fitness. Media is commonly cited as a primary cause for eating problems among young women (Huang et al. 2020). However, to say that conformity to the media-driven thin ideal produces disordered eating is a reductive understanding of eating problems. Rather than adhering to a unidimensional desire for thinness, women are well-attuned to the abundant pressures of contemporary realities and work hard to resolve competing ideals related to their bodies. Their behaviors and ideologies, including those deemed "disordered," reflect a contentious negotiation process within a world containing contradictory norms of health, beauty, athleticism and femininity.

Athletes may provide a productive lens to understand the logics of disordered eating as well as the pressures that produce it at ever-increasing rates. Current literature contains contradictory findings about this population, showing that they are both at further risk but also protected from eating problems (Smolak et al. 2000; Thompson and Sherman 2014). Swimmers seem to transcend the binary of norm and pathology, demonstrating behaviors and ideologies that may be interpreted as pathological in one context and successful in another (Thompson and Sherman 1999). By examining how female college swimmers perceive and relate to their bodies in athletic, non-athletic, and digital media contexts, this study provides a new perspective on disordered eating and why it remains a difficult syndrome to treat.

Participants revealed that health and online self-presentation were two domains that entangle competing discourses and values, thus producing contradictory forces that lead to experiences of ambivalence regarding their body. Faced with states of in-between-ness, participants commonly engage in vigilant coping, where they seek knowledge and strategies to improve their capacity to control their body. However, in a paradoxical twist, vigilant coping reproduces new contradictions that perpetuate a cycle of anxieties. This intriguing phenomenon is present in other contemporary contexts and behavioral disorders, where remedies for destructive behaviors become complicit in the circuits they were meant to treat. The women in this study show how athletic contexts contribute to the paradox of vigilant coping but also reveal creative ways of coping that go beyond vigilance. The term "vigilant coping" appears in literature to describe a psychophysiological state of alertness and preparation, typically with regards to the anticipation racial discrimination, and it has been adapted for the purposes of this paper (Hines et al. 2018).

This study also shows the productive value of ambivalence in understanding how women relate to their bodies. Ambivalence complicates dualistic binaries, revealing how oppositions often coexist and produce anxieties. For the women in this study, ambivalence describes a questioning state: Am I good? Am I healthy? Who do I want to be? Why do I want what I want? What are the best choices I can make in my situation? The answers to these questions reveal dissonant imperatives. The way these women cope with such contradictions can inform our grasp of the cultural pressures and discourses that produce disordered eating at ever-increasing rates. These findings are particularly important given the low success of disordered eating treatments and urgency towards improving preventative efforts (Berg et al. 2019; Linardon 2018).

The Contemporary Body

In a post-industrial capitalistic society, the body becomes the site for the naturalization of power. The formation of "docile bodies," which are passive, subjugated, and productive individuals capable of carrying out tasks of modern economic and social life, is not a disciplinary process enacted through violence. Rather, as Foucault (1977) describes, discipline operates through a dynamic network that embeds power within habitual discourses and norms. Individuals are shaped to carry out the tasks of modern economic and social life, sustaining existing power structures through self-discipline and self-surveillance (Pylypa 1998). Due to the immediate observability of the body and the necessity of the body for meaningful self-presentation in intersubjective contexts, the body is a potent site for social control to operate.

Since power is internalized and performed by the body, the body becomes laden with meaning. One particularly salient force is the ideal of biomedical health. Dumit (2012) describes how the rise of medicalization, biotechnology, and direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical marketing has crafted a feeling of inherent illness. Individuals are compelled to pursue the elusive goal of health; however, the health-seeker must coordinate different streams of information and negotiate resolutions when facts disagree. Thus, "health" itself takes on a contradictory nature: it is an unstable, socially produced concept but is also perceived as quantifiable and morally objective. Layered atop "health" are other norms of femininity and fitness, which coalesce and become integral to the shape and perception of bodies.

We cannot understand the way bodies are created in the contemporary age without considering the rise of Web 2.0 applications, or digital technologies like social media that allow for large numbers of users to create, manipulate, and share content (McFarland and Ployhart 2015). By centering user-generated content, applications such as Instagram and Facebook provide new affordances that give rise to prosumption, a mode of being that enmeshes production and consumption (Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010). Prosumption posits that certain bodies and lifestyles are attainable ideals with agency and capital, and it is driven by predominantly young female influencers who set a "cultural script" for everyday digital media users to take up (Abidin 2016). Since the social media economy favors certain aesthetics, prosumers who embody heteronormative, Eurocentric attractiveness and particular ideals of femininity gain more attention and success (Duffy 2017).

The Ambivalence and Contradiction of Disordered Eating

Disordered eating, an intensifying modern phenomenon recognized as both a psychiatric and culturally constituted syndrome, is shaped by the context outlined above. Existing meta-analytic reviews of interventions for anorexia, bulimia, and binge-eating disorder show either poor treatment efficacy or insufficient evidence for efficacy (Berg et al. 2019; Linardon 2018). This may be due to the contradictions inherent in treatment plans that utilize a linear approach (Saukko 2009). By setting up dichotomous absolutes (i.e., healthy/sick), treatment reinforces logics of control and autonomy that underlie the production of eating problems (Gremillion 2003). Because such logics are normalized and institutionally embedded, practitioners who seek to remedy disordered eating can unwittingly employ the very notions that prompted disordered eating behaviors in the first place.

Going beyond understandings of disordered eating as striving for thinness, critical feminist scholars suggest that the syndrome is an extreme expression of internalized socio-cultural norms (Gremillion 2003). Lavis (2018) analyzes anorexia as a self-care strategy: the disorder becomes valuable to young women, not as a secondary effect of achieving thinness, but as a central method of making it through an otherwise unbearable moment. Because participants related to anorexia in a protective and even friendly manner, they actively triggered their illness and sought out the numbness of starvation to help themselves get on in the world. Although anorexia constricts agency, it is necessary to recognize the disorder as a method for emotional regulation and for managing existential well-being (Lavis 2018). In this view, disordered eating is not an extreme pathology but a crystallization of cultural anxieties revolving around bodily control.

Bordo (2013) also takes seriously the socio-cultural causes of disordered eating, claiming that it is a means of acquiring personal agency and cultivating a docile body through hyper-accurate understandings of social attitudes and biological realities. Those with disordered eating do not misperceive reality but perceive it too well, becoming overly attuned to dominant cultural standards and following unspoken, intuitive practices that rely on socially shared knowledge (Eli and Warin 2018). To improve treatment outlooks for disordered eating, researchers have called for practitioners to be more sensitive to the many dimensions and politics around women's relationships with their bodies and selves (Saukko 2009). This is especially pertinent for athletes, who may show symptoms of disordered eating but remain untreated because the symptoms are interpreted as adaptive or positive in the athletic context (Thompson and Sherman 1999).

This study centers the concept of ambivalence to take up this effort and go beyond dualistic understandings of how women relate to their bodies. Ambivalence occurs when one feels an inclination for opposing ideals and behaviors at the same time and is described by Smelser (1998) as a powerful, persistent, and anxiety-provoking feature of the human condition. As a sociological concept, ambivalence is increasingly salient in the analysis of postmodern predicaments, where anxiety and security coexist, risk is assumed, and uncertainty proliferates (Smart 1998; Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips 2011). Ambivalence has long been present as a central concept in psychodynamic psychotherapy and psychological anthropology as well (Holder 1975; Throop 2003).

Scholars have not only described how people feel under conditions of ambivalence but have also situated ambivalence within the contemporary political economy, demonstrating that it is structurally shaped and socially produced by consumer capitalism. In her ethnography of compulsive gamblers, cultural anthropologist Natasha Schüll (2006) shows that technologies of consumption and technologies of care are interlinked in Las Vegas. For her interlocutors, machine play and therapeutic assemblages (i.e. medication, therapy, exercise, message boards, 12 step programs, etc.) are mutually reinforcing self-modulation techniques. For example, prescription drugs meant to counteract anxiety are incorporated into machine play instead of replacing it. This shows how remedies for destruction can become complicit in the circuits they were meant to treat. Technologies that create harm and interventions that people draw on for care may use the same kind of logic and keep people caught in the cycles, without a clean break away from the former. The result is a perpetual state of ambivalence, where it is impossible to seek remedy without encountering poison. Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism also describes how efforts to cope with and resolve ambivalence can reinforce the very conditions that produce ambivalence. When certain desires become an obstacle to flourishing, striving to satisfy those desires puts people in a cruel bind.

Schüll (2006) and Berlant (2011) direct our attention to the productive potential of uncovering ambivalent logics, which may provide insight into why current literature simultaneously shows that athletes are at a higher risk for eating problems but also that they are more protected compared to non-athletes (Smolak 2000; Thompson and Sherman 2014). Swimmers are an interesting sub-population of athletes that embody these contradictions. Historically, studies have shown increased risk among swimmers for eating problems because they participate in a leanness-demanding endurance sport that requires revealing sportswear (Melin et al. 2014). However, Smolak et al. (2000) performed a meta-analysis that indicated no significant difference between swimmers and non-athletes with regards to risk for eating problems. After over two decades of work, researchers in this field acknowledge that quantitative research focusing on prevalence and putative risk-factors is falling short of grasping the phenomenon at hand (Papathomas and Lavallee 2010). The contextual details provided by qualitative, ethnographic data are needed to reach alternative insights into eating problems among athletes. By centering the lived experiences of female college swimmers, this study attempts to bring such insights to the fore. The following sections will examine how and when ambivalence around the body arises and what strategies participants use to resolve such feelings. This is followed by a discussion of how strategies like vigilant coping can either reinscribe or go beyond original anxieties.

Methods

Participants in this study included 16 undergraduate females, aged 18-22, from 12 American universities. All participants were collegiate swimmers at the time of participation, competing for university teams governed by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA); eight belonged to Division I programs and eight belonged to Division III programs. All self-reported as active users of Instagram, defined as opening and engaging with the application every day. Four participants were international students, three were racial minorities but not international students, and the remaining eight were white.

Participants completed 45-minute semi-structured interviews over Zoom for which they were compensated $25. The interview protocol included questions about participants' background and questions about athletics, eating, body image, and Instagram use. After each interview, field notes and memos were written regarding interview content and interactional dynamics. Using a grounded theory approach, interviews were coded iteratively. Each round of coding prompted new theoretical questions and called upon different categories of literature, with ambivalence, vigilance, and resistance emerging as the most salient themes.

Data analysis was informed by my positionality as a female collegiate swimmer and my experiences with disordered eating in athletic contexts. I was motivated to pursue this work because I observed complex contradictions in my own and my teammates' behaviors. My experiences facilitated participant recruitment and built trust during interviews and afforded me a deep understanding of participants' contexts and the pressures, stresses, hopes, and desires that they face on a daily basis.

Findings

For participants, ambivalence is a state of in-between-ness and an actively felt condition of contradictory tension. There is a sense of un-belonging as they experience normalizing pressures which are often at odds and never fully realizable. Two major themes, health and online self-presentation, are entryways to explore participants' bodily ambivalences.

Ambivalence with Health

As Dumit (2012) describes, modern biomedicine and pharmaceutical companies have created a perception of health as an insecure state that requires constant maintenance. As disease categories, medications, prices, and insecurities increase, health becomes a moving target that changes with new research and market practices. Given such precarity, it is reasonable that participants frequently invoked the concept of health and were highly preoccupied with being rational and responsible health-seekers. However, ambivalences arose as they grappled with an environment where health claims are posited as objective and certain yet are often changing or subject to contradiction. The topic of diets prompted participants to address how such complexities localized around their relationship with food. They explained that diets can be "good as long as you do your research" and "dieticians recommend it as being healthy" but can also become "really detrimental" and turn into "a bad process" if one seeks out incorrect information or becomes overly obsessive.

Additionally, many spoke of "maintaining" their "system," a process that required proper "fuel" and a good "balance" of inputs (food) and outputs (work/exercise). Sienna answered that she had never intentionally tried to lose weight but had done "cleanses":

> My body was really unhealthy and I just needed to, like kind of reset the way that I was putting food into my body…nothing that was set out to lose weight. Just things to kind of clear up my body and restart.

Another instance of "input" control that mirrored Sienna's "cleansing" rhetoric was Sasha's decision to stop eating red meat to make herself "feel better." Similarly, Kristin committed to a vegan diet after doing "a lot of research with health" and coming to the realization that her body "shouldn't and probably can't process animal proteins and animal fats."

However, narratives of the body as a system requiring close maintenance were complicated by simultaneous recognition of the body's uncontrollable nature. Too many factors were at play, from "metabolism" to "DNA" to the way muscle and fat arrange differently on different bodies. This constellation of variables forms the concept of "body type," which participants thought of as genetically determined. Multiple participants mentioned that it was unrealistic to compare themselves to someone else with a different body type, and Molly emphasized the importance of being cognizant of this truth:

> I think people don't realize that body type plays a huge role… If I stop swimming and only work on lean muscle, my body will still be bigger…I will gain weight. Somebody won't exercise and won't gain weight just because of their body type.

Because it was perceived as unchangeable, body type constrained the desire to control the body's machinery and worked against the idea of bodies as endlessly malleable. Thus, ambivalence arises because participants see the body as unchangeable in many regards, while simultaneously encountering health and science technologies that render the body as infinitely alterable.

Beyond the general directive to be responsible health-seekers, participants have also adopted an acute awareness of bodily health due to their involvement in athletics. Participants operate at a different standard of "health," directing marked attention towards their body and scrutinizing their proprioception, muscle tension, and fatigue. This is demonstrated by the concept of being in or out of "shape," a subjective state of athletic ability that goes beyond typical understandings of health (i.e. a swimmer can identify as healthy but "out of shape"). Participants must also make connections between behavior outside the pool and swimming performance, since even subtle changes in weight and muscularity alter how athletes feel doing their sport. Participants were highly aware of how certain foods made their bodies look and feel, and thus modified their eating behaviors to make targeted changes. For example, Tammy faced performance pressures in college that led her to question her food choices and body shape. Faced with similar questions about her body, Emma began meeting with a nutritionist "to nix foods that were not good for my body for training." In a more extreme case, Ruby describes a college coach that mandated weight loss and restricted her diet, intending to improve her health and performance. Because these women's bodies are integral to their achievement in the pool, they and their coaches are motivated to engage with their bodies in ways that will craft the most successful athlete.

Ambivalence emerges in several ways in relation to health-related norms and practices. Participants are compelled to know and to act on that knowledge in service of the healthiest body; however, this project of health-seeking becomes ambivalent since knowledge and facts about/around health are contestable. Swimmers normalize their bodies to a rigid standard of health and athletic shape but simultaneously believe that many types of bodies can become successful at the sport. Additionally, participants have keen awareness of their bodies and operate around a standard of "athletic shape" that goes beyond standard fitness. Swimmers become ambivalent about the athletic standard of health they have come to adhere to, both valuing it and finding empowerment through it but also feeling pressured by its high demands and long-term unsustainability.

Ambivalence with Online Self-Presentation

As digital natives growing up alongside the rise of Web 2.0 technologies, participants demonstrated astute understandings of social media, the attention economy, and prosumerism. Amanda provides context on the online reality of young adults:

> On social media, everyone posts the pictures that they look the best in… you're not going to pick the picture where you look bad. So when everyone is just seeing people at their best, and

> you think that's what they always look like, I feel like that creates a really toxic environment. That is the nature of social media: posting the picture where you're posed in a certain way, you look really skinny, or your hair looks really good. On top of that, a lot of people do or have used editing, which just creates a fake person. I think that's really toxic to see a lot because you feel like you need to live up to these standards or do these really cool things to make your Instagram look good.

This comment brings to light the unending, cyclical nature of consuming in order to produce oneself, and producing oneself in order to consume more. In this way, the social media user is never enough as she is. Not only can she "look better" and "be cooler," but standards and trends constantly change, so she also must keep up with a moving target.

As research in this area becomes popularized, there is increased awareness about how media affects young women's body image. Given this knowledge of media effects, participants often push back against the pressures of the prosumer attention economy. Amanda, who enjoys watching fitness videos, explained that she is "refocusing" the way she perceives those videos to reduce upward comparisons. She chooses to engage with "body positive and healthy, positive people" on social media who have helped think more about strength rather than aesthetic appearance. Others like Amelia and Tammy noted an increase in "ads being no longer just the social standard of pretty." Rather, plus sized models or "normal, regular looking people" are making appearances on billboards, magazines, and online shopping sites. These shifts are buoyed by the entry of feminism, self-love/care, and body positivity into the popular imagination. While these movements are often co-opted from marginalized groups to support mainstream normativity, they nevertheless expand ideas of what is normal and beautiful, catalyzing not only more inclusivity in corporate advertisements but also an evolution in user-generated content to prioritize perceptions of "realness" and "authenticity."

However, in mediated contexts, the discourse of "realness" is laden with ideology related to commercial success and traditional feminine perfection. Content and content-makers who purport "authenticity" convey an aesthetic that is defined against high fashion magazines or mainstream fashion models; however, their claims about being "ordinary" or "relatable" to their audience veil hierarchies and inequalities. For example, many fashion bloggers who brand themselves as aesthetically and financially accessible are only able to make fashion their career due to financial assistance from family, and their "effortless" or "everyday" looks require substantial time, capital, and skill (Duffy 2017). Sasha described a new trend on her social media feeds, where "some people will post a video standing up straight in the mirror and also kind of sucking in, and then eventually they'll transition to what they actually like—not actually, but like a different perspective of it." She said content like this brings her "back down"—"down" in the sense of being down-to-earth and unpretentious. Sasha's example of "down-to-earth" content represents an effort at resisting normative beauty standards on social media, but may remain "harnessed to neoliberal and post-feminist expressions of self-branding, entrepreneurship and feminine agency" (Genz 2014). Online self-promotion that requires significant labor and self-discipline is now masquerading as easygoing self-expression and casual reality.

The slippery discourse of "realness" has created new pressures that overlay traditional pressures to achieve normative beauty. Now, women must not only look beautiful by popular standards, they must also remain unaffected by those standards. Makeup, hairdos, and poses should embody effortless, candid ease, and enhanced photos cannot appear to be heavily edited at all. Online guides instructing women on how to achieve outward nonchalance admit that "often the most 'effortless' looking styles take the most work to create" (Turner 2021). The pressure women face to police their body and self-presentation as well as their motives and intentions is heightened by the virtual sphere. Tammy stated that seeing pictures of other women on social media led her to want to work out harder, but that this meant her "motivation to work out was probably not always the best, cause it was like I need to lose weight or you know, I feel fat." Her desire to work out in response to "feeling fat" is antithetical to the discourse of an empowered, authentic woman, which causes newfound ambivalences. Not only is her body too large, but she is also not "feminist" enough to be beyond caring. When asked to reflect on her motivations to post on Instagram, Amanda also explains these competing pressures. On the one hand, Amanda is compelled to post pictures that will be received well. To do so, she must consider the thoughts and preferences of her online audience and portray her body to be appealing in an influencer-driven attention economy. On the other hand, she is also compelled to act from a place of confidence. The impossibility of resolving both pressures creates ambivalent tension. Be perfect but real, effortless but seamless. Monitor not only the norms and your self-presentation in relation to the norm, but also your intentions. Take care of your looks but take care to be properly empowered too. Additionally, ensure that you fulfill these norms in a manner that is visible and well-displayed on your online profile.

The finding that women are in a bind of contradictions is not new, but this section shows how health and online self-presentation specifically entangle desires for control and self-surveillance to place participants in ambivalent binds. The idealization of certain body shapes operates alongside the understanding that one's genetically determined "body type" is constrained. Scientific and technological tools seem to enable infinite improvements to the body, but the actual potentiality of one's body for change remains ambiguous. Furthermore, idealized body shapes are contradictory in and of themselves, producing confusion since strength and thinness drive different behaviors. There is the taken-for-granted goodness of pursuing health alongside the precarity of health as an unstable concept. The possibility of overdoing health to the point of toxicity and poor mental health looms large, with no clear line on when things become "an issue." Lastly, there is the desire to be beautiful and validated by normative standards alongside the desire to transcend gendered norms considering feminist self-love and body positivity movements.

Vigilance: A Coping Mechanism

To manage the uncomfortable ambivalences described in previous sections, participants applied vigilant effort towards their bodies. Participants spoke of being "cognizant," "super aware," "conscious," and "careful" about food behavior, weight, and physical appearance. "Being more careful" meant different things for different people. Sasha meant "strict eating" without "cheat meals;" Kristin meant "getting smaller" by doing cardio; Ruby meant going on a "water diet," or sipping water between every bite of food; Amanda meant eating fewer carbs; Jo meant getting "enough exercise" and being in a "calorie deficit"; Sienna meant cutting out sugar from her diet; Tammy meant eating in a "balanced and conscious" manner. Vigilance evokes a sense of constant calibration: once a desirable physiological state is achieved, it must be continually maintained or improved upon.

A crucial component of vigilant self-surveillance is daily structure, which was eliminated for most participants during the Covid-19 pandemic. This caused Amelia to "freak out" for a few weeks during quarantine. Before the pandemic, she "would bring lunch to campus" or "have like a premade meal at home," enforcing a comfortable and sensible schedule. As life shifted to virtual spaces, she found herself at home on the computer, distressed by the loss of familiar structure. Amelia reached out to her nutritionist for help:

> I got back on a schedule and like, surprise, surprise, I was able to, like, get healthier, and stop breaking out again. So it was kind of like, you know, I kind of let myself go for a little bit because I lost that structure, which is really frustrating at first, but especially being at home, you know, I wasn't used to being home for that long.

Amelia's ironic use of "surprise, surprise" indicates that she perceives an obvious connection between a vigilant calendar and an embodied sense of well-being. It is not surprising for her at all that the loss of a set schedule would cause her multiple problems, including weight gain, break outs, and psychological distress. Amelia loosened her grip and it seemed like all hell broke loose. Her solution was to place new constraints on time and behaviors and to tighten with vigilance once again.

Bodily vigilance allows participants to inhabit an ideal state of "looking good" and "feeling good." Participants described not just satisfaction from looking at their mirror image but also improved mood and energy levels, more confidence, and a sense of self-efficacy. For Amanda, vigilance (like making sure to eat healthily and exercise) directly impacted her self-perception the next day, as if her physical body image held the memory of previous behaviors. Amanda admits the physical manifestation of vigilance was indirect and, in her head, but the imagined impact was real nonetheless since it shaped her self-perception. Additionally, vigilance works against the fear of slipping and "letting go of everything." "Letting go," similar to "being careful," meant different things to different participants. It often referred to an embodied state, like the "freshman 15" or Ruby's exaggerated fear of "gaining 60 pounds after swimming ends." However, "letting go" also seemed to connect with more existential fears of unbelonging. For many participants, to be safe, wanted, employable, and financially secure were precarious states. Vigilance could often enhance participants' belief that they were doing their best as student-professionals, becoming closer to flourishing and taking charge of their lives and futures.

Athletic Vigilance

The participants in this study may be particularly attracted to vigilant coping due to their background as competitive swimmers. All describe the sport as a defining aspect of their lives, having dedicated substantial time, energy, and resources to athletics from a young age. The sport of swimming is particularly effective in teaching vigilance because of how it embeds the individual within a team environment that maintains and encourages discipline. Malika explained that the "60-ish people" on the team are "always kind of in my life...you're just kind of around them a lot." Echoing this sentiment, Kristin said the team is "really involved" like a family, and "kind of consumes your whole life with recruits and all the little obligations that you have." With this proximity, the individual swimmer becomes subsumed within a larger unit guided by coaches, who control and shape her through observation, planning, and disciplining. By internalizing team norms and conforming to them, the athlete benefits physically and psychologically; for instance, she may feel comfort from belonging to a team and satisfaction from swimming faster. Thus, this group of participants has learned to valorize vigilance and associate it with achievement.

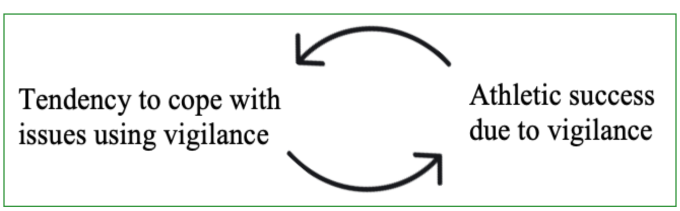


Figure 1: Athletics can serve as both an outlet and reinforcer of vigilance.

The necessity of vigilance for athletic success may create a tendency for participants to be more likely to cope with other aspects of life in the same manner. This results in a cyclical phenomenon that drives participants towards vigilance (Figure 1).

Vigilance thus becomes increasingly integrated in how participants handle things like eating. For example, Alice and Siena both connected dessert with subpar athletic performance and tried to reduce sugar intake before important meets. By "toning down desserts" to swim faster, both women explicitly connected bodily vigilance outside of the pool with enhanced performance in the pool. Besides dessert and sugar, there were many other domains where participants calibrated towards maximum athletic performance by being "super aware," "conscious," and "careful" about their bodies. In this way, swimming provides an *outlet* for vigilance and serves as a *reinforcer* of vigilance.

Reproducing Ambivalence

In many ways, vigilant efforts were protective of participant's well-being by providing horizons to organize their lives. At the same time, there were critical contradictions within vigilant coping that kept participants in a bind. To understand why vigilant coping can lead to looping anxieties for these women, we must connect vigilance to the ambivalent moments they arise out of.

First, let's examine contradictions from health-related ambivalences. Molly began tracking her diet through My Fitness Pal over the summer. She said it was "cool" to know exact nutrition information from the app and used the data to stay under a calorie limit. However, she eventually quit the app because performing data-driven vigilance around her food choices became taxing: her mood soured and she felt "quicker to anger and frustrated" because she wasn't eating sufficiently. Similarly, Tammy began a food log during the Covid-19 pandemic to "take control." However, she also stopped after data-driven food vigilance made her feel stressed. In these instances, vigilant coping through self-monitoring of food tracking produced undesired distress, reproducing the contradictions that necessitated coping in the first place.

The same pattern occurred with other efforts of discipline around food. Amelia, for example, felt pressured to cook healthier recipes by a roommate in college. At the same time, she described having close friends with eating disorders and is thus "cognizant about eating" to ensure "I don't get to that position because it really makes your life miserable." For Amelia, vigilance around healthy eating is complicated because it holds the potential to slide into pathological eating behaviors. A different participant, Emma, was also pressured by a swimmer roommate who would "go on dieting trends" and do "juice cleanses":

> It was really hard for me to room with her when she was going on those [diets] because we do the same sport. Why are you dieting? Do I need to do that? No, no, I don't. But then I'd be like, do I? I got in this bad habit of checking my weight all the time.

In this case, a peer's vigilant efforts at healthy eating produced anxiety, self-doubt, and maladaptive behaviors, what Emma calls "bad habits," regarding food and body image. Emma's situation confirms Amelia's concern about over-vigilant coping leading to new kinds of distress and disorder.

Next, we can examine online self-presentation and its related ambivalences. Young women interested in gaining socio-cultural capital on Instagram face pressure to present themselves as a "natural," "real," and "authentic" individuals who nevertheless adhere to normative expectations for beauty and femininity. Dalia felt these pressures acutely due to her desire to become an influencer and make money from Instagram. She was particularly struck by the reception of one post where she was wearing a bikini, which received substantial attention. Dalia wasn't sure why people liked, sent, or saved her picture, but she wanted "to be talked about" and felt that the numbers gave her confidence. She explains her feelings clearly:

> I mean, 178 people send this to others. They care, you know? And I- and I care. I think the more that people care, I care more. I think that's how I get affected…when I see this many people have something to say…people have opinions. I'm going to pay attention, I'm going to be careful. I'm going to do this the best way. It might be silly, but yeah.

Her status on Instagram and her experience that "bikini pictures definitely have a huge power" led her to become increasingly "careful" with her posts. To improve her success in a digital economy where attention is measured and serves as capital, Dalia monitors her feed closely and is vigilant with selecting, editing, and posting photos of her body. This goes to include posts or stories that Dalia is tagged in: "I care about how I look, I'm not gonna lie. I wouldn't cry about it if I look really bad, but…sometimes I'm like, 'Hey, can you delete that? I look horrible.'" Her vigilance makes sense given her goals and the fact that content on social media "just stays forever." Impression management in a complex, digital world with ever-changing rules and a collapsed audience requires substantial work.

However, coping through vigilance reproduces anxieties in this scenario. Dalia knows that other women edit their photos to produce "unreal bodies" and participates in similar editing techniques to compete on Instagram. This has led her to also edit pictures of herself that she doesn't post because she prefers to see herself that way. Thus, the vigilance Dalia used to cope with prosumer culture on Instagram has become an integral part of her self-perception, leading to what Dalia calls "a little bit of body dysmorphia." She also admits that Instagram has made her "really conscious" of her weight, and that her struggles with weight and food "go hand in hand with Instagram." In this way, coping with online self-presentation pressures through vigilance exacerbates new anxieties, perpetuating a sense of ambivalence and requiring further vigilance in an unending cycle.

Interestingly, ambivalences are also created in the realm of swimming, which was described earlier as both an outlet and reinforcer of vigilance. For participants, this occurred when the practice of competitive swimming became impossible (due to injury, off-season, the Covid-19 pandemic, and/or graduation). Sometimes ambivalence was short-lived, resolved by the prospect of physical swimming resuming, but in the case of a career-ending injury or graduation, the conditions producing ambivalence are more permanent and generate lasting concerns about eating behaviors and body abilities. Mabel states that after college, "I definitely want to stay fit. I don't want to become overweight." During the Covid-19 pandemic, she took a break from working out and found that she was still content. This makes her nervous, "like oh god I might not work out after swimming." It is telling that Mabel's self-reported contentment turns around to make her nervous. We can understand this paradoxical twist by considering Mabel's valorization of vigilance, built over a decade in athletic contexts. The elite athletic standard of discipline remains present in how participants relate to food and their bodies, even when they are no longer inside the athletic context. Mabel feels as though she must continue to cultivate discipline and redirect it towards "being better about calories" and "actually caring" about eating healthy food.

Others also indicated ambivalence regarding the end of swimming, especially in the context of food and the body. Kristin noted that in season, "it's hard to like, let your body go," since there are "goals and expectations for performance." The pandemic caused her to think more about not being an athlete anymore, which is "weird" and makes her concern for "letting go" of her body increasingly acute. This fear was shared by multiple others, including Ruby who half-jokingly said that she's worried she'll "gain 60 pounds a year after swimming." Jo also said that the end of swimming will make her "a little more body conscious," and planned on resolving this concern by finding a new form of exercise. These comments show how athletic vigilance, which results in a sense of belonging, empowerment, and meaning, can also result in the (re)production of ambivalent anxieties.

These findings undercut any clear or easy distinctions between norm and pathology or between adaptive and maladaptive coping. Vigilant coping as self-care easily slides between the two dualities. Alice, for example, claimed that she eats when she's hungry and does not have a bad relationship with food. However, if she were "going out" and "gonna wear a bikini," she would skip a meal and not eat despite being hungry. She perceives herself as someone who "can't speak to a bad relationship with food," and her behavior does not warrant a diagnosis or intense medical attention; however, is it true that her behavior is adaptive and supportive of her flourishing? Eve's experiences with weighing herself provide another example. She grew up in an all-female household with two sisters and a single mother whose values "definitely aligned with female empowerment." However, little dialogue occurred around food and weight, which were "quiet elephants in the room." For a time, Eve would sneakily and obsessively weigh herself at home. Eve said she had never been diagnosed with anything, partitioning herself and her experiences with food from the pathological. Like Alice, Eve's lack of diagnosable pathology does not necessarily indicate the presence of healthy and adaptive behaviors. On the contrary, Alice and Eve's vigilance towards their bodies reproduces contradictions that may run counter to their well-being.

Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism becomes useful here. A relation of cruel optimism arises when participants exert vigilance to resolve ambivalence, but then become newly anxious and must commit to further vigilance. In many cases, participants understood that a vigilant response to ambivalence produced warped perceptions. They believed that their vigilant behaviors could be "pathetic," "sad," "unmeaningful," and "toxic," recognizing that their own desires and normative frameworks could serve as obstacles to their own empowerment. They problematized the ideal of thinness but hoped to be thin nonetheless; they recognized that diets are rarely effective but participated in them nonetheless; and they agreed that there must be more discussion around these issues but admitted my interview with them was one of the first times they had spoken about their own body image. Contradictions produced ambivalence, and contradictions remain in the new norms emerging in efforts to resolve ambivalence.

Resisting Vigilance with Awareness, Acceptance, and Pleasure

While vigilant coping and its paradoxical reproduction of ambivalence are major findings, this study also finds that participants demonstrate creative coping strategies that go beyond vigilance and in some cases, actively resist vigilance. Weitz (2001, 670) defines resistance as "actions that not only reject subordination but do so by challenging the ideologies that support that subordination." The "ideology" in this study's context is the belief that vigilance directed towards the body can resolve various ambivalences. The "subordination" is how vigilance reproduces ambivalence, binding participants in situations of anxiety. By rejecting and challenging the impetus to control the body and materialize power through bodily appearance, participants find viable alternatives to vigilance through awareness, acceptance, and pleasure.

Mabel, for example, demonstrated an acute awareness of her peer's distress from vigilant coping. Mabel saw how behaviors like strict eating habits reflected deeper, existential anxieties that cannot be resolved through further vigilance. Mabel was also attuned to the gendered nature of the issues in this study, expressing concern that men are increasingly facing the same pressures and distress. She observed that both men and women around her are "watching what they eat and they're very aware, very careful… Just so controlled, so self-disciplined." By becoming conscious of these patterns around her, Mabel saw the futility of vigilant coping and did not fall into similar patterns.

Participants were also able to resolve ambivalence and neutralize the pressure to exert vigilant control by "accepting" their bodies. Concepts like body type, genetics, and metabolism were often used to make acceptance possible. Amanda says she has "kind of let go of the certain body type ideal" because "not everyone is going to look that way. Like, just biologically it's not really possible." Mabel described a similar belief, leading her to adopt a relaxed attitude about her bodily appearance:

> However I look is gonna be how I look. That's not gonna change from me editing my photo on Instagram or wearing a bunch of makeup. People know how I look, you know? I'm not gonna change anybody's thought of it, not that I want to either- so kind of, 'it is what it is' sort of mindset.

She recognizes that she can modify her body and its presentation (both online and offline) through certain means but concedes that her body "is what it is." The "it is what it is" mindset was embodied by Emma and Malika as well, neither of whom edits the photos they post on Instagram. Both claimed that editing was unnecessary, since they accept the way photos look and don't feel like they ought to be modified.

Participants' involvement in swimming helped reinforce acceptance of their bodies. Michelle explained that there is less pressure for swimmers to look a certain way, "because you can be short and be really fast and be tall like me and be pretty fast too." Thus, athletic spaces provided new norms with which to perceive the body that were typically more forgiving than the norms of feminine beauty. Through the lens of athletics, Emma could see each part of her body as beneficial for her success. She expressed gratitude for her body and perceived her body in a generally positive manner. Jo had a similar sentiment: "I would like slimmer thighs, but I also understand that I'm an athlete, and I need my muscles to perform well." Interestingly then, swimming is both a method for enacting vigilance but also a method for loosening ideals and recognizing individual differences.

Pleasure and self-love were other strategies that countered the control-oriented rhetoric of vigilant coping. Rather than focusing on maximizing well-being and mitigating risk, participants focused on behaviors that brought comfort and joy. For example, Amelia, Tammy, and Ruby found pride in lifting achievements, reveling in the functional capacity of their muscles. Emma found enjoyment in wearing comfortable clothes, which helped her navigate pressure to dress in a normative manner. Emma moved away from vigilance by centering her attention on bodily comfort:

> I really try to visualize myself as a whole person. And I'm not the biggest fan of the area, right above my hips, just because it's…a little fattier. But then again, it's okay, because I love the rest of me…It's a part of me and I love me, so gotta love that too.

Emma integrated self-love with awareness and acceptance, demonstrating remarkable resilience as a result.

Other participants who adopted an inward-turning focus paid attention to "feeling good" and "having fun," which prompted them to avoid triggers such as the scale, two-piece swimsuits, or certain social media accounts that made them feel insecure. They also actively included inputs that made them feel supported and uplifted, such as family members, peers, and positive social media accounts. By prioritizing their needs, valuing their abilities, and putting themselves in spaces with minimal judgment and comparison, some women found new, more enjoyable strategies of resolving their ambivalence. These strategies correlated with less anxiety, self-objectification, and obsession. "Consciousness" and "care" about the body, indicators of vigilant coping, decreased when participants focused their efforts on resistant coping. Mabel summed up her feelings succinctly: "Yeah, once you just jump off the train of caring about that, it's just so much better." At their best, awareness, acceptance, and self-love produced confidence, positivity, and appreciation and helped participants derive a sense of agentic empowerment, steering them away from the anxieties of bodily vigilance.

Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest that female college swimmers reside in a context that encourages coping through vigilance. When faced with contradictory ideals that pull their bodies in different directions, this group of women resolve ambivalent tensions by seeking control. Although vigilance can provide some resolution, it often exacerbates confusion, heightens ambivalence, and reproduces anxieties. As a result, a predominant strategy for resolving ambivalence becomes a source of additional ambivalence. This study shows how athletic contexts contribute to the paradox of vigilant coping, serving as both an outlet and reinforcer of vigilance.

The paradox of vigilant coping becomes acutely problematic when applied to the context of disordered eating, which is an increasingly common experience among women/athletes (Thompson and Sherman 2014). Due to the nature of the health discourse and the risk-based biomedical model, practitioner's treatment and advice are often interpreted as additional prescriptions of vigilance. However, because disordered eating is an extreme form of vigilance itself, treatments for disordered eating unwittingly reinforce the cultural and ideological norms that constitute the syndrome in the first place. Importantly, the women in this study show how awareness, acceptance, and pleasure are productive ways to go beyond vigilant coping. These concepts may be useful to explore further with regards to coping and disordered eating treatment.

Additionally, this study reinforces the productive potential of ambivalence in the social sciences. By looking outside of the normal/pathological with female college athletes, we can reach new insights about the pressures that produce disordered eating and body dissatisfaction at ever-increasing rates. If we are to account for the complex politics around women's relationships with their bodies, we must incorporate concepts like ambivalence to make space for nonbinary experiences and uncategorizable affects.

While offering insight into the dilemmas young women face with regards to their bodies, this study is limited. The women included in this study represent a unique constellation of contexts and identities. More research is needed to understand if and to what extent their experiences with ambivalence, vigilance, and resistance are generalizable beyond the population of female college swimmers. Additionally, there were no examinations of male athletes or race or class-based analyses. Future research should include other populations and pay attention to different forms of ambivalence and coping in an intersectional manner.

Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful for Natalie Dowling, Kelsey Robbins, Eugene Raikhel and Lara Janson, each brilliant and kind in their mentorship. Thanks also to the women who participated in this study, as well as every teacher, coach, and friend who made my work possible, especially Eleanor Cambron and Michelle Cho.

References

Abidin, Crystal. 2016. "Visibility Labour: Engaging with Influencers' Fashion Brands and #OOTD Advertorial Campaigns on Instagram." *Media International Australia* 161 (1): 86–100.

Berg, Elske van den, Laura Houtzager, Jasmijn de Vos, Inge Daemen, Georgia Katsaragaki, Eirini Karyotaki, Pim Cuijpers, and Jack Dekker. 2019. "Meta-Analysis on the Efficacy of Psychological Treatments for Anorexia Nervosa." *European Eating Disorders Review* 27 (4): 331–51.

Berlant, Lauren Gail. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bordo, Susan. 2013. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press.

Duffy, Brooke Erin. 2017. *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*. Yale University Press.

Dumit, Joseph. 2012. *Drugs for Life: How Pharmaceutical Companies Define Our Health*. Duke University Press.

Eli, Karin, and Megan Warin. 2018. "Anthropological Perspectives on Eating Disorders: Deciphering Cultural Logics." *Transcultural Psychiatry* 55 (4): 443–53.

Foucault, Michel. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 2nd Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books.

Galmiche, Marie, Pierre Déchelotte, Grégory Lambert, and Marie Pierre Tavolacci. 2019. "Prevalence of Eating Disorders over the 2000–2018 Period: A Systematic Literature Review." *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 109 (5): 1402–13.

Genz, Stéphanie. 2014. "My Job Is Me." *Feminist Media Studies* 15 (4): 545–61.

Gremillion, Helen. 2003. *Feeding Anorexia: Gender and Power at a Treatment Center*. Duke University Press Books.

Hines, Anika L., Craig E. Pollack, Thomas A LaVeist, and Roland J. Thorpe. 2018. "Race, Vigilant Coping Strategy, and Hypertension in an Integrated Community." *American Journal of Hypertension* 31 (2): 197–204.

Hillcoat-Nallétamby, Sarah, and Judith E. Phillips. 2011. “Sociological Ambivalence Revisited.” *Sociology* 45 (2): 202–17.

Holder, Alex. 1975. “Theoretical and Clinical Aspects of Ambivalence.” *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 30 (1): 197–220.

Huang, Qian, Wei Peng, and Soyeon Ahn. 2020. “When Media Become the Mirror: A Meta-Analysis on Media and Body Image.” *Media Psychology* 24 (3): 1–53.

Lavis, Anna. 2018. “Not Eating or Tasting Other Ways to Live: A Qualitative Analysis of ‘Living Through’ and Desiring to Maintain Anorexia.” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 55 (4): 454–74.

Linardon, Jake. 2018. “Rates of Abstinence Following Psychological or Behavioral Treatments for Binge-Eating Disorder: Meta-Analysis.” *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 51 (8): 785–97.

McFarland, Lynn A., and Robert E. Ployhart. 2015. “Social Media: A Contextual Framework to Guide Research and Practice.” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 100 (6): 1653–77.

Melin, Anna, Monica Klungland Torstveit, Louise Burke, Saul Marks, and Jorunn Sundgot-Borgen. 2014. “Disordered Eating and Eating Disorders in Aquatic Sports.” *International Journal of Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism* 24 (4): 450–59.

Papathomas, Anthony, and David Lavallee. 2010. “Athlete Experiences of Disordered Eating in Sport.” *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise* 2 (3): 354–70.

Pylypa, Jen. 1998. “Power and Bodily Practice: Applying the Work of Foucault to an Anthropology of the Body.” *Arizona Anthropologist* 13 (January): 21–36.

Ritzer, George, and Nathan Jurgenson. 2010. “Production, Consumption, Prosumption: The Nature of Capitalism in the Age of the Digital ‘Prosumer.’” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10 (1): 13–36.

Saukko, Paula. 2009. “A Critical Discussion of Normativity in Discourses on Eating Disorders.” In *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, edited by Helen Malson and Maree Burns. New York: Routledge.

Schüll, Natasha Dow. 2006. “Machines, Medication, Modulation: Circuits of Dependency and Self-Care In Las Vegas.” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 30 (2): 223–47.

Smart, Barry. 1998. *Facing Modernity: Ambivalence, Reflexivity and Morality*. SAGE.

Smelser, Neil J. 1998. "The Rational and the Ambivalent in the Social Sciences: 1997 Presidential Address." *American Sociological Review* 63 (1): 1–16.

Smolak, Linda, Sarah K. Murnen, and Anne E. Ruble. 2000. "Female Athletes and Eating Problems: A Meta-Analysis." *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 27 (4): 371–80.

Tantleff-Dunn, Stacey, Rachel D. Barnes, and Jessica Gokee Larose. 2011. "It's Not Just a 'Woman Thing': The Current State of Normative Discontent." *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment & Prevention* 19 (5): 392–402.

Thompson, Ron A., and Roberta Trattner Sherman. 1999. "'Good Athlete' Traits and Characteristics of Anorexia Nervosa: Are They Similar?" *Eating Disorders* 7 (3): 181–90.

Thompson, Ron A., and Roberta Sherman. 2014. "Reflections on Athletes and Eating Disorders." *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 15 (6): 729–34.

Throop, C. Jason. 2003. "On Crafting a Cultural Mind: A Comparative Assessment of Some Recent Theories of `Internalization' in Psychological Anthropology." *Transcultural Psychiatry* 40 (1): 109–39.

Turner, Elle. 2021. "The Lazy Girl's Guide to Nailing the Perfect Beach Wave with Minimal Effort." *Glamour*. June 8, 2021. https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/gallery/how-to-get-beach-waves.

Weitz, Rose. 2001. "Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power through Resistance and Accommodation." *Gender and Society* 15 (5): 667–86.

The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography

Committed Commenting and the Virtual Visage: Contextualizing Sorority Social Media Encounters

Jack Portman

Wake Forest University—jackportman@alumni.wfu.edu

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the ways in which collegiate sorority women deploy sorority-specific aesthetic cues to construct socially acceptable and recognizable presentations of themselves online. I suggest that sorority members initiate and invite social media interaction as a means of parlaying their own media posts into discursive sites, thereby participating in a complex and considerably stratified economy of display and recognition. Sorority members also exert social capital through public demonstrations of social network linkages—demonstrations which can only be performed successfully if one maintains legitimacy and good standing within the media economy. I probe the implications of theorizing social media posting (particularly to the digital media platform Instagram) as a communal art creation practice that strengthens group social linkages and reifies communally observed aesthetic guidelines. I also address the stylistic and discursive regimens that shape expectations of media presentation, contrasting these practices with the comparatively candid and informal presentation styles exemplified in Fake Instagram ("finsta") posting behaviors.

Keywords: social media; gift economies; Instagram; sororities

Anna, a 21 year-old collegiate sorority member, described the role of Instagram in mediating her first forays into sorority social life as such:

> The whole point of joining a sorority is really to make friends, that's really why everyone joins. But it's kind of awkward, it's like, ok, now we're supposed to be friends because we're in the same sorority. So you definitely try to comment on their photos probably, and interact with them.

Throughout the fall of 2020 I met regularly with Sarah, Anna, and Maria, members of the Alpha Beta sorority, to discuss their Instagram posting habits and experiences. In addition to several structured and unstructured interviews, informal conversations, and a focus group session, I conducted three "Instagram walkthroughs," during which each participant described the creative processes which led to their most recent Instagram posts. I also conducted activities in which participants sorted sample Instagram comments onto egocentric diagrams to better understand how relationship types and strengths become embodied in commenting behaviors.

These women, who have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities, are aged 20-21, and are in the same Alpha Beta (name also changed) pledge class, meaning they were initiated into the sorority simultaneously and completed the requisite initiation procedures together. They are all frequent users of Instagram, having collectively posted thirteen photos to their primary Instagram accounts throughout the research period. Their positions within Alpha Beta are relatively senior: Sarah and Maria are third-year university students and hold positions on the sorority's executive committee. Although in the same pledge class as Sarah and Maria, Anna is a fourth-year student and thus afforded a similar degree of seniority by virtue of her age classification (Anna transferred to the university as a second-year student and was consequently initiated a year later than usual). This is to say—the social media experiences and practices described in this paper are particular to collegiate sorority members. Although some of the principles which appear to underlie the posting behaviors hereafter described are likely generalizable, the posting criteria, aesthetic preferences, language use, and hierarchical nature of the social media encounters described in this article are particular to members of the Alpha Beta sorority.

Scholarship pertaining to digital environments, and particularly to social media practices and behaviors, have leveraged a variety of digital ethnographic methodologies and theoretical approaches to better understand media sharing behaviors and digital communications. Ross (2019) posits that Instagram users center a particular form of value within their social media practice—the like—and resultantly focus their content production on the accumulation of likes, such that posts successfully fulfill their function when they succeed in generating a satisfactory quantity of likes. This position accounts for both hierarchical and aesthetic considerations in content creation; posts that generate large quantities of likes could be understood to reflect a poster's prevalent social positionality and/or a communal acknowledgement of a poster's success in complying with the style guidelines of a particular community.

However, since 2019, Instagram has updated its interface such that the number of likes a post receives is only visible to the poster. My research participants affirmed that, while the receipt of large numbers of likes was once a dominant consideration in Instagram media sharing practices, the accumulation of great quantities of likes has become a lesser priority given that this metric is no longer visible to other users. Users may still reflect on the number of likes their posts receive and come to conclusions regarding a post's success based on their private knowledge of its accumulation of likes. However, without the pressure applied by this metric's public visibility, the generation of likes seems to have declined as a focus of content creation.

Given that the criteria for awarding likes have remained largely the same despite the invisibility of like-totals, it is doubtful that the production of Instagram posts has fundamentally changed because of the obsolescence of likes as a public-facing metric; posts are still created to observe certain aesthetic standards, still function as expressions of self-presentation, and still serve as platforms for affirmative discourses. Nonetheless, that periodic updates to social media interfaces might dramatically change research conditions seems to prescribe a digital ethnographic approach that is similarly adaptive. Caliandro (2017, 552) acknowledges that "ethnography is a flexible method that on the one hand can be effectively adapted to online environments, but on the other hand continuously needs to be reshaped according to the features and mutations of online environments." While virtual communities have long been studied ethnographically, social media platforms require a unique methodological approach given their diffuse nature and susceptibility to sudden transformation. Furthermore, functional and conditional changes experienced by other platforms within the media ecology, such as Snapchat, Twitter, and TikTok, may likewise impact the ideologies relevant to a particular social media platform and thus require flexibility in addressing users' notions of what each platform is "for" (Gershon 2014, 284). Caliandro (2018) suggests that ethnography of digital environments should thus account for both the ways in which a particular social media interface organizes communications, and the strategies, perceptions, and understandings held and employed by social media users. Such a framework provides for a reflexive and conversant approach to understanding the configurations of—and relationships between—users and social media platforms.

For example, Sarah observed that "the Instagram Story like, that wasn't around in high school, so I think that really changed [Instagram] because it was like, food and more casual posts." The advent of this form of posting on a platform with existing norms of acceptable usage changed how users understood the platform's purpose, illustrating the tendency of media ideologies to adapt to new circumstances as material constraints and affordances change. Within these shifting virtual confines, users develop innovative strategies for posting successfully to, as Ross (2019, 5) describes, "produce content to be liked."

Likewise, Marwick (2017) grapples with the strategies Instagram users employ to generate successful content within the platform's confines and limitations. Marwick (2015, 138) interprets "microcelebrity" as "a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation practices endemic in social media, in which users strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status." Microcelebrity, as described by Marwick, seems to capture a social media praxis oriented towards generating laudative interactions—likes and comments—in much the same way that Ross identifies likes as an implicit directive of content creation. Marwick (2015, 138) situates microcelebrity within an "attention economy," positing that a post's efficacy can be understood to consist in its unique capacity to attract attention. This analysis draws an explicit connection between the qualities of a particular Instagram post and its success in the marketplace. Ross's understanding of the "like" as a primary objective in posting behaviors succeeds in identifying a dominant (or, perhaps, once dominant) metric of success, while Marwick provides for an understanding of how community specific strategies are developed to generate the engagement Ross identifies.

Gift giving and gift economies have been documented extensively and, indeed, are one of the most heralded foci in anthropology. Following Bronislaw Malinowski, in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), Marcel Mauss, in *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925), Pierre Bourdieu's work on the Kabyle society, symbolic capital and gift exchange in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) and David Cheal's efforts in *The Gift Economy* (1988), I will attempt to demonstrate how social media commenting practices among sorority members proceed as gift exchanges, layered with meaning and expectation and connected intimately to the social capital invested in intra-sorority relationships and hierarchies. Particularly, I will focus on the ways in which deferred Instagram commenting practices, conceptualized as gift exchanges, serve to expand the temporality of intra-sorority social linkages through contractual reciprocity and debt creation. As Hjorth et al. observe, "the symbolic role of gift giving—as a practice of reciprocity, obligation and negotiating power relations—has long been attached to mobile media cultures" (Hjorth et al. 2020, 79). Embedded within a particular moral economy, Instagram commenting exchanges are used to sustain and protect important relationships and to cohere peer coalitions within the sorority. This system is shaped by the orientations and expectations of sorority members who, in dispensing Instagram comments, consider the "objective probabilities of profit" flowing from the likelihood that their gift will be reciprocated by its recipient (Bourdieu 1997, 232).

In this article, I will demonstrate that sorority members form coalitions of mutual respondents in social media environments that distribute responsibility for content engagement and ensure that coalition members' posts meet a threshold of interaction. I will likewise use sociogramatic data, as well as a discourse analysis of Instagram comments, to address how sorority social linkages are expressed in virtual settings.

Instagram Aesthetics and Presentations of the Self

"I don't have one filter I stick to, so my pictures don't go together, like, the way the Alpha Beta Instagram posts do, but I've never really felt the need to have one that looks like [the Alpha Beta Instagram account] …" explained Maria when asked whether the official Alpha Beta Instagram account, run by an executive member of the sorority, serves as a social media style guide for members. She continued:

> … and I don't know many people in Alpha Beta who have an entire "blue theme" for Instagram. But the way people portray themselves might be mimicked. So not at all, like, the artistic editing aspects or whatever, but like the way you look in your photos, so like your pose, definitely, can mimic the kinds of poses they show on the Alpha Beta Instagram.

It would seem that the Alpha Beta official Instagram feed is a highly curated stream of images—more so than the personal Instagram feeds of Alpha Beta members. The official Alpha Beta account's posts are selected from posted Instagram photos or images submitted by sorority members, and, according to Maria:

> To get on the Alpha Beta Instagram, you either have to post a picture that they like, which has, like, blue in it, or you can submit one. So a lot of these people are taking these pictures with the goal of it to be on the Alpha Beta Instagram. So it's very—I don't want to say artificial—but you really need to try to get that look.

The official Alpha Beta Instagram feed is almost uniformly blue—an effect achieved both by filtering posted images with blue tints and by strategically employing blue clothing, props, and backgrounds in the photos.

As Maria points out, this aesthetic isn't necessarily adopted by members of the sorority—neither Maria, Sarah, or Anna use unifying color themes in their personal Instagram posts. However, their posts that depict sorority life and sorority events, such as parties and initiations, almost always feature blue colors prominently. The participants' posts that are associated with sorority activities are almost immediately recognizable from their broader oeuvre of posted material given the distinctive and identifying blue accents. Because their feeds are not uniformly blue themed, the juxtaposition of blue and non-blue material on the participants' accounts creates an auspice of two worlds—that of grandparents, family vacations, and friends from home, and that of Alpha Beta sorority life and the aesthetics therein. When users deploy particular themes and aesthetics to stylize their sorority-related content, they effectively differentiate sorority activities from the rest of the sharable quotidian, emphasizing the stylistic rigor and formality necessary to convey the nature of sorority experiences. Alpha Beta's blue theme, and its instantiation in the Instagram posts made by Alpha Beta members, directs attention to the refinement, commitment, and attention to detail required by sorority life. Such attention-grabbing strategies are crucial in the social media attention economy (van Dijck and Poell 2013, 7).

The deliberation and attention to detail incorporated in the sorority content creation practice seems to reflect Goffman's (1956) analysis of self-presentation. Sorority social media materials are intricately cultivated and rely on a distinct stylistic grammar and presentation style to convey membership. Goffman asserts that the act of self-presentation is a performance: "it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited" (Goffman 1956, 244-5). The leveraging of recognizable and accepted aesthetic elements to convey sorority affiliation—and moreover to convey that one has bought-in, and so embodied the relevant ideologies of presentation—illustrates the extent to which media presentation styles constitute a performative mode of self-presentation (Miller 1995, 8). The extent of a sorority member's success in deploying relevant stylistic cues—that is, whether their post is "credited or discredited"—may be reflected in their post's acquisition of likes and comments, the currency animating the attention economy.

The value invested in sorority-wide commitments to acknowledged modes of presentation is a crucial component of the aesthetic strategy and is the context in which the deployment of such presentations should be understood. Goffman (1956) observes that individuals frequently recruit peer coalitions with whom to perform, relying on shared understandings of socially acceptable discourse methods and presentation styles to avoid behaviors that are inconsistent with certain standards of performance. It may be tempting to frame the sorority en masse as one such coalition, however Alpha Beta members frequently associate in far smaller groups and rarely, if ever, express a deep familiarity with all group members. Rather, members tend to congregate in smaller, more intimate groups, and the performative nature of these small-scale coalitions is captured both by their iterative content engagement strategies and the tacit yet highly regulated expectations regarding media practices.

Egocentric sociogram data gathered during participant interviews reflects that sorority members repeatedly interact with posts made by small peer coalitions: 62% of comments made by sorority affiliated peers on the participants' five most recent Instagram posts were produced by peers who had commented on multiple posts within that time span. Furthermore, the participants had recently commented on posts made by 51% of the sorority affiliated peers who had commented on their posts. This trend reflects the existence of virtual coalitions of interlocutors who repetitively engage with one another's material (See Figure 1).

Goffman's analysis of coalitional performance suggests that small peer groups of sorority members engage in practices of systematically repetitive interaction to demonstrate commitments to performance standards and successful instantiations of appropriate social discourse. Consistent within these coalitional bonds are expectations of reciprocity germane to media interaction: coalitional assemblages that promote reciprocated interaction enable members to parlay their future media posts into sites for further discourse and thereby benefit from the social capital invested in these forms of dialogue.

Given Alpha Beta Member	Total	Percentage
Are Younger	10	34%
Interacted Previously	15	51%
Multiple Interactions	18	62%

Figure 1: Egocentric sociogram data regarding Alpha Beta peers who commented on the participants' five most recent posts.

Likewise, this expectation of exchange can be understood as a system of gift giving that lends itself to servicing and demanding media interactions (Bergquist and Ljungberg 2001, 312). This exchange system organizes coalitional linkages among Alpha Beta members such that the act of commenting grants the commenter the power to demand reciprocation of their gift, allowing relationships to be maintained longitudinally and ensuring their continued mutual beneficence. Thayne (2012) poses that reciprocity in content engagement prefigures "potential future interaction," suggesting that Instagram commenting behaviors assist in sustaining virtual relationships. In this sense, the debts created through deferred commenting exchanges have the effect of expanding and extending the temporality of social linkages. As Taylor and Harper indicate, "teenagers' phone-mediated activities can be understood in terms of the obligations of exchange: to give, accept and reciprocate" (Taylor and Harper 2002, 439). These exchanges are "characterized by a strong set of social obligations to give, to accept gifts, and above all to reciprocate gifts," illustrating how reciprocity norms within coalitions structure gift exchanges and give rise to extended temporality (Elder-Vass 2015, 37). Animating deferred commenting exchanges is a particular moral economy, wherein the debts produced through commenting practices are backed by normative behavioral expectations shared by the sorority at large.

Group oriented posting behaviors are further displayed in the tendency of sorority members to engage in communal content creation processes in preparation for media posting. In reflecting on her own Instagram practice, Anna commented that:

> I think often you will narrow it down to a few [pictures] yourself, and you'll send your top two or three pictures to your friends, and then they'll tell you which one they like best. Sometimes there's also, like, collaborative editing. [Her friend] pays for an editing app, like she has a really nice editing app, so a lot of times I'll be like 'oh, can you edit it for me with your app?'

Anna's description of group participation in content production indicates that media posting behaviors are not only highly deliberate but also essentially collaborative in nature. Members value the perspectives of their peers and rely on their aesthetic judgments to gauge the credibility of certain media within the context of Alpha Beta stylistic norms. These collaborative practices function to strengthen social linkages among coalition members by embedding media posting within a framework of group reciprocity and service exchange—the tasks of critiquing a peer's photos, assisting with their editing, or helping to formulate a witty photo-caption can be understood as services rendered to maintain valuable relationships (Dutton, 1977). Additionally, collaborative posting practices formalize certain aesthetic systems that delineate group membership and identity—that is, communal content creation activities legitimize and empower Alpha Beta stylistic norms.

The normative styles that inform posting behaviors and content creation largely define users' Instagram presentations and experiences. These prevailing aesthetics exemplify how users enact a nuanced regime of ornamentation in order to purify and make credible one's presentation of self. Ross (2019) argues that this highly formalized environment is juxtaposed by users' interactions on Fake Instagram. 'Finsta' (Fake-Instagram) accounts are secondary Instagram accounts that serve as a comparatively more spontaneous and organic outlet for self-expression than 'real Instagram.' Finstas are unique in that they are typically far more private than their 'real Instagram' counterparts—Instagram users typically only allow their closest peers to follow their Finstas.

Finsta content is ostensibly less formal. Anna noted that "finstas are, like, unfiltered, both literally because you don't have to look good and don't usually edit the posts, and also metaphorically because you can, like, be yourself if that makes sense. Like, post stuff you wouldn't post on your main [Instagram account] that's like, kind of more you." Ross (2019, 14) characterizes Finstas as a "respite from the social expectations of Instagram, class and gendered pressure to impress with beautiful portraits and envious locations." Finsta accounts do indeed facilitate a distinct mode of content creation and posting behavior, however I do not necessarily view them as a foil to the highly formalized and regimented ideologies of 'real Instagram' as does Ross. Finsta content creation is still subject to aesthetic normativities—posts typically eschew the presentation styles of 'real Instagram' and embrace an alternative visual language akin to popularly self-deprecating internet memes.

It is seemingly expected that one not look presentable in Finsta posts, and that one make efforts to sabotage the meticulously constructed self-presentation crafted on the users' main account. There is certainly a polarity between the deliberate presentations of one's primary Instagram account and the ostensibly less rigorous presentations of the Finsta account, however one does not appear to be more reflective of the "true self" than the other. Rather, both are artifices, presentations of the self that complement one another. Although each are seemingly antithetical, the apparent self-sabotage affected by the Finsta may be considered a calculated means of bolstering one's most intimate social network. Finsta posts are often read by users as "unfiltered," "organic," "spontaneous," "candid" and indicative of the "real" self—an apparently stark departure from the media practices and ideologies endemic to other Instagram environments. Finstas, in this sense, may be understood as a curated album of scandalous and socially unacceptable material that can be entrusted to a close peer with the effect of signifying—and possibly enhancing—the strength of the social linkage. The act of presenting an unacceptable version of oneself to a peer is a performance of deep trust; we are attentive to around whom we let our guards down and to whom we let drop our masks—those who we allow in to this unpresentable presentation of selfhood must be knowledgeable enough of our person that the particular deliberateness familiar to primary Instagram media creation is unnecessary. The Finsta is in this sense a token of appreciation and an acknowledgement of intimacy. But this does not preclude a formal, unifying aesthetic grammar endemic to Finsta posts, nor does it guarantee that the material posted on Finsta accounts is necessarily as vulnerable and organic as it is understood as being.

Throughout the research process I was not granted—nor did I ask for—access to the participants' Finsta accounts. In fact, only Sarah and Maria had their own Finstas, and neither posted on their Finstas regularly. My interviewees discussed their past experiences producing Finsta content and their understandings of the particular media ideologies pertaining to "fake Instagram," however we did not conduct walkthroughs of the interviewee's Finstas. For this reason, I will refrain from further discussing the aesthetic particularities and expectations of Finstas for lack of available data. Nonetheless, it is evident that certain formalities dictate acceptable posting behaviors on Finstas, such that Finsta material may be read as vulnerable and candid by other users while still allowing posters to maintain control over self-presentation techniques.

Discourse Analysis in the Comments Section

Posting free-standing images to one's Instagram profile is a single component of an array of possible actions an Instagram user can take. Users can also choose to like or comment on posts made by other users; the participants liked and commented on others' posts regularly and frequently interacted with the comments made on their own posts as well. In my interviews and sociogram activities I primarily focused on commenting behaviors among sorority Instagram users, analyzing both quantitative patterns in commenting and general styles of discourse endemic to sorority members' comment sections. My discourse analysis led me to taxonomize Instagram comments by coding for implicit semantic meanings and referents. While I identified three prominent categories of discourse that seem to be predicated by the nature of the interlocutors' relationships with one another, I acknowledge that many other categorization possibilities are likely just as viable. The discourse taxonomy I will present is a relatively simple framework for understanding how commenting behaviors arise from certain typologies of social linkages; it seems likely that a more nuanced analysis of Instagram discourse could be gleaned by leveraging a more substantial data set.

The discourse analysis focused on the comments made by other sorority members on the participants' five most recent Instagram posts—the same sample used to generate sociogram data. I identified three primary modes of commenting that were ubiquitous throughout each post's comment section by coding for references to the post itself, references to the poster and/or persons portrayed in the post, and simple supportive remarks and/or symbols. I denoted "references to post" as those comments which specifically appeal to the non-personal, primarily aesthetic contents of the post, "personal references" as those that referred to the poster or persons portrayed in the post, and "vague applause" as supportive comments that do not substantively engage the post material.

Following Frege's (1948) observations regarding the relations between signs, senses, and referents, I examined how commenters engaged with posted material by appealing to a variety of referents, in so doing revealing the nature of their relationship with the poster and with the posted material itself. Figure 2 provides a selection of material posted to the participants' Instagram photos, categorized by each comment's referent (in the cases of references to post and personal references) and by the extent of their engagement with the post (with regard to vague applause).

References to the post and personal references each demonstrate a comparatively higher level of engagement with the posted material than vague applause. References to the post refer to certain of the post's aesthetic qualities or acknowledge the posted material as a self-contained object. Uses of the word "this" frequently indicated that a commenter was referring to the post itself and intended to articulate some response to its presentation. These comments may be an affirmation of the acceptability of the presentation style employed by the poster or an acknowledgment of the credibility displayed by the presentation. Maria reflected that "I feel like [comments on her posts] give me a sense of validation in a way, to know that at least a few people are like, yeah this looks good, or yeah this is a good picture or whatever." Maria's statement suggests that comments operate to affirm the credibility of particular presentations and acknowledge the poster's successful deployment of group-relevant aesthetics. Similarly, references to the post may also be understood as one of a variety of mechanisms by which aesthetic criteria are formalized by Alpha Beta members.

Commenters may also refer to the post if they were involved in its creation. Maria noted that "a lot of times you're like, with them when they post it, or like, she talked to you about it—"oh, should I post this picture"—so then you kind of want to, like, hype them up because you told them yes they should." Anna affirmed that involvement in the posting process often obligates peers to comment affirmatively about the quality of a given post: "like, you encouraged them to post it, so you also on Instagram want to be like, yes, this is a good post for sure." The obligation of peer consultants to affirm the quality of the posts they've helped see to fruition reflects how the collaborative practice of content production is succeeded by a similarly collaborative affirmative discourse. Comments to the post, in this sense, can be understood as strengthening collaborative relationships among Alpha Beta members while likewise formalizing the aesthetic standards that shape how members produce content.

Personal references enable commenters to publicize their social networks, thereby

References to Post	Personal References	Vague Applause
This is so cute	My people 🤩🤩	hot
Love this so much	i love my peeps	💕💕
Love this picture	love you to freaking much 🥰	pretty
That vintage view ✨	My cool mom	cutie

Figure 2: Taxonomy of Instagram comments made by Alpha Beta members on the participants' five most recent posts.

leveraging the social capital consistent within certain high-value social linkages During an activity focusing on the relationships between comment types and perceived levels of friendship between commenters and posters, Maria humorously reflected that, “there’s no reason to say ‘I love my peeps’ other than to show people who you know.” The value in “showing who you know” was expressed regularly throughout the research process: participants frequently alluded to the complexity and nuance of social networks within Alpha Beta. According to Maria, “there’s a lot of connections in Alpha Beta altogether, and it's kind of hard ... to like know really who knows who. That would be hard, to like, gauge completely without [Instagram].” According to Maria, cultivating public displays of one’s social network in comment sections allows members to record proof of—and thus reap benefits from—having “participat[ed] in the craziness” of intra-sorority sociality. The payout may not be immediate, however the capacity to demonstrate a robust intra-sorority social network can, in the long run, “open doors.”

Because so much social capital—understood as the “more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 119)—becomes embedded in the tangled and disorderly fabric of intra-sorority social linkages, efforts to publicize and accentuate one’s relationships through the use of public facing comments serves both to reinforce such relationships in the face of ever-shifting internal politics and to make them effectively canonical—that is, to embed close and important relationships within a corpus of common knowledge accessible to and recognizable by the rest of the sorority. This is a process through which relationships can become institutionalized, such that they exist beyond the linkages between private individuals and come to be known and accepted at large among sorority members. So, while “showing who you know” can be understood as a practice of leveraging social capital, wherein a valuable relationship is publicly demonstrated in order to make use of any prestige or power to be had as a result, it also can and should be understood as a means of institutionalizing such relationships. This is a necessarily iterative process which protects against the entropic invisibility—the natural difficulty of ever knowing who knows who within the confusing field of intra-sorority relationships—constantly threatening to undermine one’s capacity to make use of the social capital at one’s disposal. Such is partially why commenting practices reiterate constantly—one needs always to carefully tend both one’s relationships and the public representations of one’s relationships to stave off invisibility in the attention economy, a marketplace—only accessible to visible actors—where social capital can be put to use.

By producing a comment that expresses one’s familiarity with the poster, commenters publicly locate themselves within a complicated matrix of intra-sorority relationships. This type of comment likely reflects a relatively strong social tie between the commenter and poster—comments that emphasize “closeness of relationship” are seen as inappropriate when the commenter is perceived as being too hyperbolic about the strength of their relationship. When asked whether a comment reading “my favorite people” would be acceptable if the commenter were a distant acquaintance, Maria responded: “that would be weird because we’re not that close and it would seem like she’s trying to make it seem like we are.”

Personal references and, to a slightly lesser degree, references to the post, are seemingly indicative of intimate social ties between commenters and posters. Vague applause in large part enables peers with weaker ties to the poster to nonetheless maintain their familiarity through low-effort affirmative comments. These comments, which frequently consist of a single emoji or word, laud the poster’s appearance or vaguely express affection without designating or implying a close relationship to the poster. Weak ties, those that are peripheral to an individual's core network, are susceptible to untrustworthiness (Völker and Flap 2001, 401). Vague applause may be a means of maintaining relationships with those on one’s social periphery by occasionally re-establishing familiarity through simple, supportive remarks (Haythornthwaite 2002, 391). The value of these comparatively weak relationships is well documented—although they provide less support than strong ties, weak ties constitute crucial sources of information given that these peers frequently liaise between members of multiple groups (McPherson et al. 2006, 355). It is therefore advantageous to maintain weak ties and reciprocated social media encounters may be one way of doing so.

This economy of interaction illustrates how Alpha Beta Instagram users embody their social networks—and their social positionality—in their online encounters. The shape one's Instagram comment takes largely reflects the nature of the interlocutors' relationship. Instagram comments are an exercise of relations and relatedness; likewise, the act of commenting is an act of embodiment.

Hierarchy and Media Surveillance

Upon initiation into Alpha Beta, new members are required to enter their social media usernames into a spreadsheet accessible by all active members of the sorority, following which they usually experience a deluge of new Instagram followers. "I remember when I joined," Anna recalled, "all the older girls—not all of them, a lot of them—just followed me. I was like 'I don't know who this is but she's in Alpha Beta so okay.'" This exercise is partially a means of disseminating new members' social media information so that existing members can follow new members, but the activity also enables existing members to monitor the social media activities of new members who may be less trusted to observe the sorority's social media guidelines. Maria noted that "they ask you to put your Instagram, Snapchat, you have to put it into a Google Doc so that they can all follow you and monitor what you're saying and posting." This spreadsheet also equips the sorority's social media chair to follow the new members' accounts using an unofficial Alpha Beta Instagram account: "They have an Instagram separate from the Alpha Beta Instagram … and it doesn't have any posts, and it just follows active members, so I think, like, the social media chair can easily just scroll through and see what everyone's posting, like on a regular basis, so I guess there's kind of an element of fear."

There are Alpha Beta guidelines that shape what users can and cannot post on their social media profiles. Images depicting underage alcohol consumption, drug use, or violations of the university's COVID-19 protocols are prohibited. Likewise, depictions of certain illicit social events that have been formally banned by the university, but which the sorority continues to host in secret, violate the sorority's social media policy. The sorority has co-opted a particular emoji to convey when a user posts an illicit image—the emoji is an acronymized four letter word (the first words of which are "That Ain't" and the latter of which are the sorority's initials) and revealing it would likely compromise the identity of the research group. However, the formulation of the particular emoji's meaning within Alpha Beta discourse can be analogously conveyed with the greek letter Tau (τ). When an Alpha Beta member's post violates the sorority's posting guidelines, a senior member may simply comment "τ" in the offending post's comment section. τ in this context serves as an acronym for "That Ain't Us," and although innocuous to non-Alpha Beta Instagram users who may see the symbol in a comment section, the receipt of a τ on one's post is considered "super, like really, really embarrassing."

When a poster receives a τ they are required to remove their post, illustrating how senior members leverage their seniority to monitor social media behaviors and take action against content that belies the sorority's standards of discourse and presentation. Older members, therefore, have a hand in how younger members construct their self-presentations on Instagram—they delineate what content is suitable and litigiously address media that violates these boundaries of expression. The surveillance program enacted by senior members suggests a form of panopticism, and the "fear" of being monitored is apparently successful in affecting self-regulation among new members. "Getting tau-ed" is relatively uncommon, largely because the threat of being "tau-ed" is so severe that members post diligently to avoid this punishment.

Social media platforms are frequently conceptualized as public spaces that are constructed and contested by users (Poell and van Dijk 2015, 2). Institutional efforts to surveil and desocialize public spaces are one means by which discipline may be internalized by users of public space (Foucault 1975, 198). The surveillance strategy employed by Alpha Beta's senior membership exemplifies how monitored social media environments affect an internalization of media discipline in new sorority members.

Foucault's theorization of surveillance as permanent visibility illustrates the ways in which social media users navigate inclinations towards media prominence and the concomitant susceptibility to surveillance (Livingstone 2008, 12). Maria's previously referenced remark that Instagram comments made by other users on her posts "give me a sense of validation in a way, to know that at least a few people are like, yeah this looks good, or yeah this is a good picture or whatever," reflects Bucher's (2012) articulation of the "threat of invisibility," a reversal of Foucault's analysis of surveillance that suggests that possibilities of virtual obsolescence configure media orientations towards attention-seeking strategies. While Foucault describes panoptic surveillance methods as systems of perpetual visibility, Bucher (2012) suggests that social media users regularly work to sustain visibility in their online activities. The "attention economy" articulated by Marwick (2017) similarly incentivises strategies that support media visibility while exposing users to regimes of virtual surveillance. This tradeoff likely informs users' media switching behaviors—by toggling between primary Instagram accounts and "finstas," users can dictate the visibility or obscurity of their content (Ross 2019, 4).

Senior Alpha Beta members enjoy an overall more comfortable situation within the sorority and are consequently better able to engage in social media activities with a broad range of interlocutors. "For me personally," commented Sarah, "going into freshman year, the confidence you had in high school is not there really. I would not have been confident enough to post on these older girls' pictures. It's intimidating, and it's like, in high school you knew everyone. Now you don't know these girls, and I was like, oh, they're going to think I'm a weirdo … I felt like the girls I knew and their friend groups, that were older, were commenting on my stuff more than I was commenting on their stuff at first, because I was like, awkward." Sarah's experience is not unique; the other participants affirmed that following initiation, older members commented on newer members' posts more regularly than newer members commented on older members' posts.

The tendency of older members to comment extensively on newer members' posts reflects their comparatively more comfortable situation within the Alpha Beta hierarchy and might suggest that the initial surge of comments made by senior members is a largely pedagogical activity. Maria mentioned that "on my bid day photo, I was looking through the comments, I have a lot of older girls that I barely talked to, so I think there definitely is like that kind of welcoming stage where everyone kind of commented on any Alpha Beta bid day pictures." She described these initial interactions with older members as being informative about how to proceed socially: "they kind of showed me, like, the kinds of things you can say and the right tone and stuff. Like, I felt like I could kind of go from there in terms of reaching out to my PC [pledge class] and starting to get to know them." These initial interactions might be understood as a means of demonstrating acceptable discourse styles and a method for equipping new members to safely interact with their peers. This introductory deluge of comments from senior Alpha Beta members may constitute a passing on of a corpus of a unique sociolinguistic repertoire, a rite of passage whereby members are made familiar with the modes of discourse they will be required to employ throughout their membership.

Conclusion

Its material affordances and adaptable interface make Instagram a powerful means of projecting self-presentation and community membership. Ross (2019, 19) argues that "the various factors that go into the image-making and -sharing process can be traced back to the desire to have one's posts liked by others." This paper primarily explores the role of Instagram commenting as a crucial mediator of content creation and posting behavior, as well as the broader function of Instagram commenting in facilitating socialization among sorority members. Partially owing to the recent obsolescence of visible Instagram "like" metrics, “like” accumulation has seemingly declined as a directive of media activity.

Commenting behaviors provide for analysis not only of content creation practices but also of how particularized virtual discourse methods shape and maintain group membership. Whereas “likes” may be a means of gauging posting success and a principle for fine-tuning image production, Instagram comments reflect the situation of social media encounters within broader contexts of social relatedness, coalitional expectations, and intra-sorority dominance hierarchies. The discursive potentialities invited by commenting platforms underlays the sociality of social media. Baudrillard (1985, 577) dictates that truly “social” media most fundamentally serve as “reciprocal spaces of speech and response,” exemplifying the centrality of comment discourse as a powerful and pervasive media practice.

Alpha Beta affiliated Instagram users employ the platform to communicate their membership by mobilizing distinct, sorority-specific aesthetics. Style guidelines are formalized through intra-sorority power dynamics and iterative commenting processes that congratulate successful uses of group acknowledged aesthetics. Virtual and face-to-face collaborative practices also enabled sorority Instagram users to establish stylistic modes of content production that complement existing organizations of group relations (Yates et al. 1997, 3).

The implementation of acceptable content creation and discourse practices enables users to project their sorority identities and establish expectations of membership (Nisa 2018, 92). By interacting with media posted by sorority members and sorority affiliated accounts (particularly, the official Alpha Beta Instagram account), users learn to operationalize certain stylistic and discursive aesthetics in order to inform their own participation in and embodiment of sorority life.

Instagram comment forums and image feeds are largely palimpsestic in nature, owing to the capacity of new media content to overwrite existing material and the tendency of users to delete posted material entirely. Moreover, media posting behaviors are frequently hauntological, given frequent reappropriations of vintage and retro styles in reimagined and recontextualised environments. Ambiguities surrounding linearity and aesthetic recapitulations suggest a need for further scholarship concerning the situation of sorority media aesthetics within broader histories of image making and production. Moreover, attending to the ways in which sorority members contest existing aesthetic regiments could clarify the tensions between agency and conformity in online activities (Code 2013, 41; Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013, 7). Many of my interview conversations explored how sorority members adopt existing media ideologies to instantiate their membership and group-commitment, however participants frequently alluded to instances in which they departed from these norms, such as in portrayals of non-sorority activities. These cases reflect that, just as members toggle between primary and “fake” Instagram accounts, so do they toggle between presentation styles within single accounts. This code-switching behavior suggests that agency and coercion in media posting are context-dependent and contingent on the nature of the material being portrayed.

Furthermore, participants commented that restrictions on in-person gatherings implemented by the university in response to the COVID-19 pandemic expanded how social media was used as a tool for initiating new Alpha Beta members. Research regarding the changing role of social media as a result of the pandemic, and the extent to which these changes become formalized beyond the pandemic, could provide insight concerning the adaptability of media environments to changing conditions.

Adaptability is a primary component of media usage and is precisely what enables users to direct their content creation practices towards particular audiences. Posting with the sorority in mind necessitates attention to group power dynamics and stylistic cues, however these formalities may be circumscribed by leveraging alternative channels, such as “finstas.” Group-acknowledged aesthetic normativities shape how and what users post, and in so doing systematize a practice of communal content creation that affects perceptions and presentations of the self.

Acknowledgements

Thank you, Dr. Clark, for supporting my research, both within and without the classroom, and for connecting me to people, organizations, and ideas that enabled me to refine my research skills. Your mentoring, which began before I was your student and did not end when I was no longer your student, has shaped my trajectory as an anthropological thinker in a truly profound way. Thank you, as well, to the reviewer, who offered valuable suggestions which ultimately improved this article.

References

Baudrillard, Jean, and Marie Maclean. 1985. "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media." *New Literary History* 16 (3): 577–89.

Bergquist, Magnus, and Jan Ljungberg. 2001. "The Power of Gifts: Organizing Social Relationships in Open Source Communities." In *Who Is Not Developing Open Source Software 635*, 305–20.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre, and Loïc J. D. Wacquant. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Polity Press.

Bucher, Taina. 2012. "Want to Be on the Top? Algorithmic Power and the Threat of Invisibility on Facebook." *New Media & Society* 14 (7): 1164–80.

Bullingham, Liam, and Ana C. Vasconcelos. 2013. "'The Presentation of Self in the Online World': Goffman and the Study of Online Identities." *Journal of Information Science* 39 (1): 101–12.

Caliandro, Alessandro. 2018. "Digital Methods for Ethnography: Analytical Concepts for Ethnographers Exploring Social Media Environments." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 47 (5): 551–78.

Cheal, David. 2015. *The Gift Economy*. Routledge Library Editions: Social and Cultural Anthropology. New York: Routledge.

Code, Jillianne. 2013. "Agency and Identity in Social Media." In *Digital Identity and Social Media*. Hershey, Pennsylvania: Information Science Reference.

Dutton, Denis, Donald Brook, John K. Clegg, Seth D. Cudjoe, H. Alto Delaquis, Thomas A. Green, Elvin Hatch, et al. 1977. "Art, Behavior, and the Anthropologists [and Comments and Reply]." *Current Anthropology* 18 (3): 387–407.

Elder-Vass, Dave. 2015. "The Moral Economy of Digital Gifts." *The International Journal of Social Quality* 5 (1): 35–50.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Modern Prison System*. Pantheon.

Frege, Gottlob. 1948. "Sense and Reference." *The Philosophical Review* 57 (3): 209–30.

Gershon, Ilana. 2014. "Selling Your Self in the United States." *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 37 (2): 281–95.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor.

Haythornthwaite, Caroline. 2002. "Strong, Weak, and Latent Ties and the Impact of New Media." *The Information Society* 18 (5): 385–401. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972240290108195.

Hjorth, Larissa, Kana Ohashi, Jolynna Sinanan, Heather Horst, Sarah Pink, Fumitoshi Kato, and Baohua Zhou. 2020. "Digital Gifts and Rituals." In *Digital Media Practices in Households*, 79–92. Kinship through Data. Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1b0fvv6.8.

Khan, Shamus. 2020. "Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959)." *Public Culture* 32 (2 (91)): 397–404.

Livingstone, Sonia. 2008. "Taking Risky Opportunities in Youthful Content Creation: Teenagers' Use of Social Networking Sites for Intimacy, Privacy and Self-Expression." *New Media & Society* 10 (3): 393–411.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. 2013. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea, Enhanced Edition*. Waveland Press.

Marwick, Alice E. 2015. "Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy." *Public Culture* 27 (1 (75)): 137–60. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2798379.

Mauss, Marcel. 2002. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Routledge Classics. London: Routledge.

Miller, Hugh. 1995. "The Presentation of Self in Electronic Life: Goffman on the Internet." Paper presented at the Embodied Knowledge and Virtual Space Conference. Goldsmiths' College, University of London.

Nisa, Eva F. 2018. "Creative and Lucrative Daʿwa: The Visual Culture of Instagram amongst Female Muslim Youth in Indonesia." *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 5 (1–2): 68–99. https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-12340085.

Poell, Thomas, and Jose van Dijck. 2016. "Constructing Public Space: Global Perspectives on Social Media and Popular Contestation." *International Journal of Communication* 10: 226–34.

Ross, Scott. 2019. "Being Real on Fake Instagram: Likes, Images, and Media Ideologies of Value." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 29 (3): 359–74.

Taylor, Alex S, and Richard Harper. 2002. "Age-Old Practices in the 'New World': A Study of Gift-Giving between Teenage Mobile Phone Users." Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems 439–46. New York.

Thayne, M. 2012. "Friends Like Mine: The Production of Socialised Subjectivity in the Attention Economy." *Culture Machine* 13. / paper/FRIENDS-LIKE-MINE%3A-THE-PRODUCTION-OF-SOCIALISED-IN-Thayne/90d9bb846a3d836dfdc92f7bddbfb530421df867.

Völker, Beate, and Henk Flap. 2001. "Weak Ties as a Liability: The Case of East Germany." *Rationality and Society* 13 (4): 397–428. https://doi.org/10.1177/104346301013004001.

Yates, J., W.J. Orlikowski, and J. Rennecker. 1997. "Collaborative Genres for Collaboration: Genre Systems in Digital Media." In *Proceedings of the Thirtieth Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 6:50–59. Wailea, HI, USA: IEEE Comput. Soc. Press. https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.1997.665484.