Gendered Dynamics of Social Media

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In September 2014, the *The Gaily Grind* (Garcia 2014) reported on an unfolding drama in San Francisco’s drag queen performing community. Facebook, the largest and most well-known social media site, deleted the profiles of hundreds of drag queens who were using their chosen stage names instead of their “real” or official names (names that are stated on official identification documents, such as a drivers’ license). The drag queen community petitioned against this action by Facebook, claiming that it was discriminatory against transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals. Facebook responded by temporarily reactivating the profiles, allotting a designated amount of time for individuals to change their profile names in order to be in accordance with Facebook’s “real name” policy. In response, the drag queen community protested, arguing that they should not be treated like anonymous trolls, but as people who identify by their stage names, which they regard as real names. Eventually, Chris Cox, Chief Product Manager at Facebook, apologized. Facebook promised to reactivate the profiles of people affected and to rethink its policy. Cox explained that they had not intended to offend anyone with the real name policy, though he argued that this policy differentiates Facebook by making it safer than other Internet spaces, where anonymity is the norm.

Facebook’s clash with the drag queen community was featured in international news, which demonstrates Facebook’s news value, as well as the relevance of social media within gender politics. Social media’s gender relevance also becomes evident when considering, for example, the way that societies worry about how girls and young women supposedly contribute to their own sexualization on social media by posting sexy pictures on their profiles (Thiel-Stern 2009).

*Social media* are digital communication technologies, built on Web 2.0 platforms and applications. (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram). Web 2.0 is not only a
collection of technologies, but a cultural move toward Internet sociality in which the Internet is seen as a space where people can share and interact with content (John 2012). Social media have become deeply embedded in everyday life. They are not neutral platforms and they shape our daily routines. Media such as Facebook have become a meaningful platform for a myriad of social practices, including those that give meanings to the most intimate aspects of our lives, such as dating and our gender and sexual identities (De Ridder and Van Bauwel 2013).

We can learn a number of things from the drag queen example in regard to the gendered dynamics of social media. First, we can learn that in our contemporary culture, social media have become important spaces where people perform *gendered practices and identities*. Social media are a stage for the performance of gendered identities. Second, social media audiences pass time on these platforms to entertain themselves through social voyeurism (Boyd 2007). Because people spend a lot of time on social media, it is an important space for interpreting the diverse manifestations of gender. A final lesson is that society interprets how people “live” their genders through everyday experiences, including representations of gender in social media.

The argument between Facebook and the drag queen community makes clear that social media are *gendered commercial technologies*. Social media should not be seen as a collection of “neutral” platforms, but rather, they should be seen as having the symbolic power to frame people’s identities in particular ways. Software-based platforms offer gendered options to represent identities, and their complex algorithms steer online behavior. Moreover, social media companies develop their marketing strategies and policies based on the way people should “do” online gendered identities “correctly.”

We argue in this chapter that the gendered dynamics of social media, the practices and
identities, interpretations and technologies, are by no means straightforward. They are dependent on particular socio-technological contexts, the way gender is interpreted, and also on the way a social media platform is designed within particular commercial contexts. While it is often assumed that social media are merely a neutral setting for performing gender, social media are a social and cultural form, which means that software platforms add particular meanings to the way people live their genders in relation to the use of social media in everyday life.

The gendered dynamics of social media allow for exciting opportunities for performing gender, yet at the same time, social media gender dynamics are contradictory and messy, and sometimes even abusive. It is clear that it does not make sense to either celebrate the democratic potential of social media, or to exaggerate fears through focusing on gendered risks. Rather, it is more important to understand how social and cultural orders are shaped by understanding how social media work. Social media have a certain logic; they have particular strategies, mechanisms, and economies underlying the platforms and applications they produce (van Dijck and Poell 2013).

**Gendered practices and identities on social media**

*Gendered practices on social media* are those practices performed on or related to social media that broadly give meaning to gendered identities. These practices can take many forms, from using the symbolic tools that social media provide -- such as the ability to post and send pictures, comment and direct message -- to the ability to discuss other people’s self-representations. For example, research has shown that young people’s pictures on social media are mainly structured by particular gender expressions found in popular media culture such as music videos, advertising and celebrity culture (Tortajada-Giménez Araùna-Baró and Martínez 2013). Moreover, social media allows users to comment on pictures,
which is equally structured around gendered dynamics among youths; girls are thought to typically comment on pictures of “sexy” boys, while boys comment on pictures of “sexy” girls (De Ridder and Van Bauwel 2013).

**Social media: empowering or oppressive?**

Though social media websites have only been popular since the early 2000s, with Facebook arriving on the market in 2005 (Baym 2010), gendered practices on the Internet have a longer history, dating back to the early 1990s. Guided by the works of Sherry Turkle (1995), *Life On The Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* and Sadie Plant (1997), *Zeroes and Ones: Digital Woman and the New Techno Culture*, the Internet was first seen as a “feminist cyber utopia” (van Zoonen 2011). These authors argued that due to the absence of material, biological bodies in cyberspace, the Internet was ideal for experimenting with gender and there was the potential to become liberated from sex and gender binaries of male/female and man/woman (see also Haraway 1991). Turkle introduced the notion of “gender swapping,” arguing that the anonymity of online gaming allowed people to potentially switch and experiment with genders and sexual orientations. Plant saw the Internet as a truly feminine space because of women’s use of the Internet in empowering ways. For example, Plant argued how woman intensively use the Internet to transcend everyday life spaces such as the home by using the global communication networks the Internet provides.

However, in the 2000s, empirical research exposed the Internet as a space in which people do not necessarily experiment and transgress gender norms; rather, it seemed to be an ordinary space that reflected (rather than challenged) gendered social norms and practices of everyday life. It became clear that Internet use could not be separated from its material and domesticated contexts (van Zoonen 2011: 134-135). In other words, gender is still a primary organizing principle in which the material, biological body has significance on social
media. For example, the computer and the Internet have a place in the home and are often used for practices that are seen as typically feminine (e.g. looking for cooking recipes online), or masculine (e.g. looking for sport news online).

More recent research on social media suggests that gendered stereotypes and heterosexual norms are not only reproduced, but that gender and sexual ideologies are reinforced online (Magnuson and Dundes 2008; Tortajada-Giménez et al. 2013). For example, when considering the popular social media genre of “selfies,” we can see how people make creative and playful reproductions of poses that are typically feminine (e.g. “soft” and “sweet” facial expressions) or masculine (e.g. a “tough” look that gazes directly into the camera lens). A “sexy selfie” can generate a certain status within peer groups. Because of these peer group pressures, gender and sexual ideologies are reinforced. “Sexy selfies” are therefore very repetitive, highly erotized and stereotyped pictures of mainly heterosexual girls that have become fairly mainstream in youth cultures.

**Gender and socio-technical contexts**

Gendered practices on social media take on many contradictory and messy forms, depending on their socio-technological contexts. Gendered social media practices depend on the media platform or application (app) used, and in turn, specific gender norms greatly differ depending on the media platform. As we can see from Facebook’s deletion of “fake” (or stage) named drag queen profiles, gender practices on Facebook need to appear more “authentic,” as the site has a more “serious” look and feel to it. In contrast, popular dating applications such as Tinder allow for more flirtatious representations of masculinity and femininity. For example, people often use Tinder to find dates and therefore they communicate with people they do not know. This anonymity often allows them to be more open and playful, while Facebook is aimed at connecting people who you already know from daily offline life (e.g. work, school, family, etc.).
Additionally, it is necessary to recognize and respect differences between socio-technological contexts of different social media platforms (e.g., representing the self on Facebook is different than on Tinder) in order to avoid the risk of damaging one’s online reputation. Gender identity is signaled in many different ways, but the role of pictures is of primary importance here. By controlling visual aspects such as dress, gaze, and proximity to the camera, gender expression is carefully regulated (Huffaker and Calvert 2005). Young girls in particular are often harshly judged for being “too slutty” or “too public” when representing themselves online. Girls need to continuously negotiate between social status rewards and romantic successes and the gendered risk of being brutally judged (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell and Regan 2013: 108). For example, a social status reward can be won by a girl posting an attractive picture that gets a lot of “likes” and positive comments while at the same time, there are also commentators harshly judging the picture by posting brutal or hateful comments. There are numerous examples of so called “slut pages” on Facebook, where people collect pictures of girls on Facebook who they see as “too slutty”.

In Western society, socio-technological contexts have become more complex as social media become mobile, which means that people can simultaneously move between different social contexts and spaces. “Simultaneous presence in a variety of spaces/places allows us to move between frames and perform gender differently in each, with sensitivity to that context” (Humphreys and Vered 2014: 5). Gendered social media practices are thus messy because of the complex socio-technological spaces in which they operate. With the increasing popularity of mobile technologies, the struggle in social media over gendered power dynamics becomes more intense.

An example of a gendered practice in which the socio-technological contexts of social media are characterized by power dynamics is sexting. Sexting is “the practice of sending sexually
explicit images or text through mobile phones or via internet applications.” Because of its mobile character, this form of sexual self-expression can quickly move between different places and thus become a dangerous form of self-exposure. In contexts where trust is missing, images of naked body parts (mostly of girls) have become “highly valued as commodities.” Research has shown that in contemporary youth cultures, boys use cell phones to trade revealing pictures like “currency,” which can threaten a girl’s sexual reputation (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill and Livingstone 2013: 319).

**Interpreting gender on social media**

Social media have become a primary source of interpreting how people “do gender” in societies. In response to societal panics on the “risks” posed by young people’s gender and sexual practices on social media (Pascoe 2011), academic research has focused primarily on how young people -- specifically heterosexual girls -- present their gender identities on social media. As social media allow young people to transgress the spatial boundaries of safe spaces such as the home or school, adults fear young people will lose control over their intimacies. These fears range from concerns over the possibility of young people meeting strangers and “predators” (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell & Ybarra 2010) to young girls damaging their sexual reputations.

Relatedly, academics have given a considerable amount of attention to young people’s *gendered subjectivities*—how young people become gendered subjects in or in relation to social media. This literature focuses on young people’s gendered practices in contexts framed by an ideology of gender inequality and institutionalized heterosexuality (Jackson 2005). The majority of this research concerns the way that young girls’ self-representations are subjected to the wider sexualization of culture (Attwood 2009), and how these self-representations operate in a post-feminist context. The post-feminist stance argues that
feminism has become obsolete; feminisms’ social and political goals (such as equality between men and women at work) have been met (McRobbie 2008). Thus, women are now represented (or represent themselves) as enjoying their feminine sexuality while they maintain neo-liberal values such as individualism, choice, empowerment, and consumerism, rather than focusing on political struggles that are still relevant today. Thus, girls’ sexual self-representations indicate that the cultural process of sexualization (the objectification of a person or thing as an object of sexual pleasure) has become internalized, meaning that girls sexually objectify themselves (Gill 2007).

Through the use of different methodologies such as online observation and interviewing, the “effects” of sexualization have been observed in a number of studies on girls’ self-representations in social media (Dobson 2014; Gómez 2010; Ringrose 2011; Siibak and Hernwall 2011; Sveningsson 2009; Tortajada-Giménez et al. 2013). For example, Canadian scholars interviewed girls about gender stereotypes on Facebook and found that heterosexual girls felt that in order to be socially successful, they needed to be attractive, have a boyfriend, and participate in the party scene. This, girls argued, relates to how femininity is represented in celebrity culture (e.g. just take a look at Kim Kardashian’s selfies on the popular smartphone application Instagram) (Bailey et al. 2013: 107). Young people on social media often use popular culture to shape their own self-representations (Willem, Araüna, Crescenzi and Tortajada 2012) such as when looking at pictures of celebrities as examples of how to pose for a selfie. In summary, as these academic studies show, popular culture is essential to interpret the gendered dynamics in social media. Similarly, gender on social media should be interpreted in relation to dominant heterosexual cultural norms and values (Siibak and Hernwall 2011).

However, not all scholars agree that girls are particularly at risk of internalization of sexualization. First, while the way that young boys construct their genders in relation to social
media is understudied, when under observation, it becomes clear that boys also attempt to represent themselves as “sexy” objects, posing in a way that it becomes pleasurable for the viewer (Manago 2013). Second, the notions of “self-objectification” and “internalization” are highly debated in feminist media studies (Duits and van Zoonen 2007). Some scholars question if we should see girls’ social media activities as proof of an internalization of sexualization represented in popular media culture. This is essentially a debate about agency—the interpretation of actions as deliberate or whether these actions are shaped by societal structures such as neo-liberalism, sexualization and so on (Giddens 1985). For example, girls’ self-representations on social media are often problematized because they are taken as proof of an internalized sexualization, while young people themselves see their actions as something that should not be taken so seriously. Young people view social media as a space for fun and for experimenting with idealized selves. They are able to reflect critically on the problematic aspects of sexualization related to social media, which suggests they have a sense of agency (Bailey et al. 2013; Livingstone 2008; Manago, Graham, Greenfield and Salimkhan 2008).

In academic discourse, interpretations of gender on social media have been contradictory. In society, media panics over the way young people behave on social media are ever-present. Social media have brought gendered dynamics in societies onto a stage on which “doing gender” has become very visible, which has led to new representations and interpretations of gender.

**Social media as a gendered commercial technology**

Social media are often—uncritically—viewed as a “neutral” space in which people have extensive control over their performances and participation. However, social media institutions have symbolic power over people’s gendered practices, as evidenced by
Facebook’s drag queen saga. This symbolic power is situated on many levels, such as the software platform that only allows limited menus for identity representation (e.g., specific choices from which to select a gender identity) and the imposition of certain models of online sociality that are based on authenticity, status, and reputation (van Dijck 2013).

Social media institutions have symbolic power as they co-construct people’s gendered practices, contributing to the way that gender becomes meaningful. Social media’s market powers rely on building a lucrative and popular platform, which often means that a team of product managers make certain choices about how to organize its sociality. The cultural power of social media thus relies on making marketing choices such as having a fixed organization of identities, rather than reflecting diversity and enabling the political flexibility that is found in everyday life (De Ridder 2013). The example of San Francisco’s drag queen community illustrates how Facebook’s specific organization of sociality (e.g., the rule that you must have a “real” name) came into conflict with the diverse appropriations by people using the platform. Facebook’s marketing strategy to differentiate the website from anonymous online platforms, and the corresponding cultural choice to install a “real name” identity policy was at the basis of the struggle between the drag queen community and the social media company.

How these gendered inequalities are built into technology is the subject of a feminist approach to Science and Technology Studies (STS) known as technofeminism (Wajcman 2010). The argument of this approach is that gender is part of the sociotechnical process when designing a technology. According to Wajcman “the materiality of technology affords or inhibits the doing of particular gender power relations” (p. 150). For example, technofeminist critiques often address how jobs in the technology industry (such as software design) are associated with men. Thus, the organization of work in technology companies -- as well as the products they design -- are built upon certain ideals of manliness that shape social
practices when using the technology (Eriksson-Zetterquist 2007).

Technofeminism’s focus is on the *mutual shaping* of gender and technology, which means that “technological innovation is itself shaped by the social circumstances within which it takes place” (Wajcman 2010: 149). The mutual shaping approach is different from a “technologically-determinist” approach, which assumes that all changes are caused by technological forces. Mutual shaping argues that technology does *not* directly influence the actions of people using the technology, but rather the negotiation between technology and its uses is continuous and complex. However, technological systems such as software platforms can reinforce certain social and cultural practices that are built into those systems and thus cause identity disputes with users (Van House 2011). For example, although Facebook’s real name policy has been disputed, it is still one of the most important features and ways in which the platform differentiates itself from competitors.

**Gender as media production on social media**

Social media are usually seen as part of new and participatory media that is radically different from the logic of old mass media (television, film, newspapers). However, we should understand that the workings of mass media and social media are mutually reinforcing (van Dijck and Poell 2013). For example, what people are doing with gender on social media is heavily entangled with how gender is represented in popular media culture, and with the commercial logic of big social media institutions. Therefore, it makes sense to understand gender on social media as a form of media production (Hasinoff 2013). Rethinking gender on social media as a form of media production is a way to understand the practices, identities, interpretations, and technologies of gender not as either democratic or problematic, but as situated contextually within the particular socio-technological, cultural, and commercial contexts of social media.
Making sense of the gendered dynamics of social media as forms of media production is a useful interpretative framework for three reasons. First, this framework can help us understand that when people “do” gender on social media, these self-representations should be seen as highly idealized selves. People produce content that follows the rules of particular digital media genres (e.g. “selfies” as a currently popular genre) to produce attractive content for audiences. Second, this means that this framework can teach us that gender representations on social media is not always a “proof” of how people (and mostly young people) live their genders and intimacies. Social media introduces different social contexts for more playful explorations of gender, which can be very different from how we think about our “core” and “authentic” gendered selves in everyday life. Finally, this interpretative framework should make us aware that these different social contexts are created by large media companies who do not produce neutral platforms and that these socio-technological contexts frame people’s gendered identities in particular ways.

References


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