Article

The platformization of feminism: The tensions of domesticating Instagram for activist projects

⑤SAGE

Astri Moksnes Barbala [iD]

Nord University, Norway

Abstract

This article explores how contemporary feminism has become increasingly platformized, focusing on how Scandinavian feminist opinion leaders negotiate Instagram as an integral part of their everyday lives. Drawing on 3 years of digital observations and interviews with activists with over 12,000 followers each, the article investigates the meeting between Instagram's script and feminist users who might not utilize the technology in line with the platform's intentions. The analysis takes cues from domestication studies and underlines the morality and materiality involved in the appropriation of technology, pointing at the tensions arising when doing feminism and making culture is intertwined through the everyday use of social media platforms. Building on recent scholarship on the platformization of culture, the article offers novel contributions into how platformization affects non-profit countercultural projects.

Introduction

In the last decade, viral campaigns such as #MeToo have pointed at the intertwining of media production and "doing" feminism (Rentschler, 2019; Rentschler and Thrift, 2015), underlining the centrality of social media platforms for mobilizing, broadcasting, and performing present-day feminist activism (see, for example, Mendes et al., 2019). In

Corresponding author:
Astri Moksnes Barbala, Faculty of Social Sciences, Nord University, 7600 Levanger, Norway.
Email: astri.m.barbala@nord.no

order to be part of defining the feminist agenda, the appropriation of new media technologies is expected of the most profiled feminist "opinion leaders" (see Walter and Brüggemann, 2020): They share live broadcasts from their kitchens while cooking dinner; invite their followers to participate in Q&A sessions while riding the bus and post screenshots of news articles in Instagram Stories, the platform's option for posting material disappearing within 24 hours. Hence, these profiles' followers depend on their constant updates for commentary and guidance, and their frequent postings imply that a form of "platform dependence" (Nieborg et al., 2019: 85) is at play in order for them to ultimately "live feminist lives" (Ahmed, 2017). Platform affordances have accordingly become entangled in the cultural and political lives of contemporary feminists.

In Scandinavia, Instagram has been a central platform for feminist activism in the past few years, where first-person stories, shared as multimodal expressions of visuals and written text, have frequently been the root of soon-to-be major public debates and offline demonstrations. These stories include several of the most profiled #MeToo cases that first spurred the beginning of the Swedish #MeToo movement (see Uimonen, 2020) and the protests against the suggested restrictions of the Norwegian abortion laws.[1] However, with Instagram—a commercial platform with its own guidelines for "correct" use—so deeply integrated into their everyday lives, the online and offline actions of this user group are simultaneously subject to negotiations.

Drawing from recent scholarship on platformization (e.g. Helmond, 2015; Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2022), I here take as a point of departure that when doing feminism and making culture is intertwined through the everyday use of social media platforms, it presupposes a certain relationship with the technology in question. The article builds on digital observations and interviews with feminist opinion leaders in Scandinavia about their experiences with using Instagram between 2017 and 2020, and seeks to develop an understanding of the "platformized" nature of contemporary feminism.

In exploring the tensions arising in the meeting between Instagram's script (Akrich, 1992) and feminist users who might not utilize Instagram's features in line with the platform's intentions, the analysis employs the perspective of domestication, underlining the morality and materiality involved in the appropriation of technology. In order to pinpoint the complexities of platformized feminism and the affective dimensions of technology appropriation, I combine the domestication approach with cultural theorist Sara Ahmed's (e.g. 2010, 2012, 2014) notion of "willfulness." Ahmed (2014: 1) embeds this term within the feminist political and cultural landscape and defines willfulness as "a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given." Applying this to the study of platformized feminism, then, the following research questions are addressed in the article: How do contemporary feminists appropriate the Instagram technology? How is their way of producing media through the platform intertwined with their activist agenda?

In answering these questions, I seek to highlight Instagram's significance as a cultural institution fostering various user practices, expressions, and experiences. After first emerging as a locative media app in 2010, the platform has now surpassed 2 billion active monthly users worldwide[2] and can be said to have amplified into "an icon and avatar for understanding and mapping visual social media cultures" (Leaver et al., 2020:

2). Despite this, relatively little qualitative research has been conducted focusing on users' experiences with producing cultural content on the platform, and I thus seek to contribute with new insights here from a platformization framework.

Platformization and the production of feminist culture

The concept of platformization was first introduced by Anne Helmond (2015: 1) in her study of Facebook's historical development, and she defines it as "the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web and its consequences." To make use of platformization as an analytical framework, Poell et al. (2019: 9) argue that it is crucial to inquire into "the connections between the institutional and cultural dimensions of platformization" which entail both global platform infrastructures, the market and governing frameworks as well as "local and national practices and institutions."

Although oftentimes focusing largely on the "computational back-end of platforms" (Nieborg and Poell, 2018: 4280) and the economic aspect thereof, the platformization framework simultaneously seeks to engage with how end-users and cultural producers are affected by these conditions, which is the focal point for analysis here. Nieborg et al. (2019) extend these ideas to focus on making media in the platform economy, arguing that media content has become a contingent commodity affecting the autonomy of content producers who must adhere to rules and regulations in order to participate. The way platform regulations are interpreted and acted upon, they argue, "frequently causes controversy, as platforms intervene deeply in the curation of culture and the organization of public communication" (Nieborg et al., 2019: 92). Poell et al. (2022) elaborate on these thoughts, exploring how platformization affects social media creation. Although focusing on for-profit culture workers and not including feminist efforts in their analyses, they also touch upon the implications of platformization for counter-movements. The authors take the Black Lives Matter campaigns of 2020 as an example of platforms' supposed "algorithmic suppression" (Poell et al., 2022: 99) of activists, referring to technological, systemic errors that arguably discriminate against certain users based on, for example, skin color or gender. Moving forward, the authors note, it is vital to not just celebrate platform activist efforts, but also to "critically assess whether [these efforts] effectively enable cultural workers to strengthen their position within the cultural industries and vis-à-vis platform companies" (Poell et al., 2022: 131). This article thus seeks to contribute to these assessments.

Studies that have incorporated the notion of platformization in investigations of countercultural production on social media platforms include Close and Wang's (2020) enquiry into online crafting subcultures, where they contend that the platformization of crafting neglect issues of race and ethnicity. In addition, Kneese and Palm (2020) have studied the platform labor involved in the selling of vintage goods, drawing on feminist critiques of post-Fordism to analyze the affective and interactive labor involved in the digital vintage economy.

A growing number of scholars are focusing on the production of contemporary feminist culture occurring on social media platforms. As Carrie Rentschler (2019) notes, however, apart from her own work and Mendes et al.'s (2019) seminal studies encompassing

interviews, Twitter and Tumblr observations, surveys and text analyses of digital feminist activism in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, little emphasis has been put on how feminism is *done* through platform practices. However, Rentschler (2019: 127) advocates for the practice approach in order to give a multifaceted picture of contemporary feminism, seeing it as "something one does and performs via practices of making."

Most studies of feminist activism on social media platforms to date are also textual media analyses, as highlighted by Mendes and Ringrose (2019). Hence, there is still ground to be covered in terms of empirical analyses of feminists' appropriation of platform technology that centralize users' own experiences. Exceptions here include Mendes et al. (2019), as noted above, as well as Jessalyn Keller's (2019) investigation of how girls do feminism across Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr. She draws on Rentschler and Thrift's (2015) assertion that "doing feminism in the network" entails attending to "both the *technological/material* and *social/creative* aspects" (Keller, 2019: 2, emphasis in original) in order to grasp the platform vernaculars developed in accordance with the available platform features. The chapters in the recent anthology "Networked Feminisms: Activist Assemblies and Digital Practices" (MacDonald et al., 2022) also contribute to this field of study.

Explorations of digital feminism from a platformization framework are still limited with the exception of Chelsea Peterson-Salahuddin's (2022) study of what she terms "platformed Black feminist communities" on Twitter, drawing on aforementioned Nieborg and Poell's (2018) study to understand the impact of social media affordances for Black feminist intellectual production.

Domesticating technology

The domestication perspective gained traction in the 1980s and 1990s in studies of how the uses of technology were integrated into people's everyday lives, and the concept can be defined as "a way of theorizing the cultural appropriation of technology with an emphasis on both practice and meaning-making" (Hartmann, 2020: 49). One clear strand of this tradition is found among researchers in the Nordic countries, where many studies emphasize the moral negotiations of domestication (see Levold and Spilker, 2007). For instance, in Thomas Berker and Nora Levold's (2007) analysis of heavy Internet use among migrant researchers and how this is integrated into their everyday lives, Berker and Levold underline the importance of both focusing on the actual use and the users' evaluations of that use in order to grasp the crucial relationship between moral and practice. This approach is adopted for this article.

However, another important aspect of the domestication perspective is the materiality intertwined with the use and the way the technology can be said to "afford" certain doings that are "influenced by choice as well as discipline, by enthusiasm as well as resistance" (Sørensen, 2005: 41). In addition, the domestication approach can shed light upon how technology appropriation is not an individual process but rather something that always is connected to other people's technological practices where "groups of individuals create assemblages or networks of artefacts, meaning and action in their everyday life" (Sørensen, 2005: 40).

The past few years have seen the domestication perspective utilized within new media studies in investigations of, for example, young adults' Facebook use (Sujon et al., 2019), WhatsApp use in Argentina (Matassi et al., 2019), and people's relation to smart speaker assistants (Brause and Blank, 2020). Looking into the collective aspects of domestication, Kristine Ask and Knut Sørensen (2019) have studied the interaction of *World of Warcraft* players, whose common goals of game advancements mean they develop strategies for enacting technology together. Another useful term for this study is *re-domestication* (Bertel, 2017), entailing how technology with a natural position in users' lives eventually occupies new functions and meets new needs as both people and technology evolve.

With social media and mobile phone apps arguably playing a much more intimate and complacent role in people's lives than a few decades ago (see Hjorth and Lim, 2012), contemporary domestication studies must adhere to an even more embodied and constringent relationship with information and communication technologies. Thus, the current study regards the role of Instagram use more *as* life than *in* life, taking into account the blurred distinctions between the online and the offline in present-day political activism.

The domestication approach has been criticized for, among other things, being "too mechanistic" (Latimer and López Gómez, 2019: 248) and not well equipped for grasping the emotional aspects of technology appropriation. In order to warrant for this in the present article, I employ Sara Ahmed's (2010, 2012, 2014) term "willfulness" as a heuristic tool. Feminists have historically received the label willful, Ahmed (2014: 134) argues, which has led them to incorporate it into their political projects and enabling parallels between "willfulness as audacity, willfulness as standing against, willfulness as creativity."

Ahmed (2014: 133) counters the common connotation of willfulness as something negative, pinpointing the close entanglements of will, politics and affect: "Willfulness could be thought of as political art, a practical craft that is acquired through involvement in political struggle [. . .]. Willfulness might be thought of as becoming crafty." In other words, for Ahmed, the term implies a strong sense of agency and a will to act both in terms of knowingly breaking rules and making use of creative practices in order to achieve one's goals.

Methodology, data, and analysis

This study draws from a digital ethnography of the loosely bound Instagram feminist communities in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. Non-participatory observations were conducted on the Instagram platform between September 2017 and September 2020, focusing on how feminist issues were presented and discussed by eight central profiles: one Danish, three Swedish, and four Norwegian. They all live in and originate from Scandinavia; they identify as women and are aged between 25 and 44 years. The study particularly attends to which Instagram features were used and how and when these were utilized on an everyday basis. Following the observations, interviews were conducted. Due to the COVID-19 situation and travel restrictions, four face-to-face interviews were conducted, while three were done via Zoom and one through email correspondence. The

focus in the analysis was on themes and issues that dominated both the observation and interview material to ensure as reliable data as possible.

The interview guide followed the themes as focalized during the observations and contained questions regarding the Instagram use and practices of the interviewees and their evaluations and reflections around these. Several questions were also personalized to each individual based on specific incidents or choices each of them had taken in their use of Instagram during the 3 years of the observation period. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and conducted in line with the guidelines of Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD), and all individuals are anonymized using pseudonyms.

The methodological design was inspired by Pink et al.'s (2016) guidelines for practice-led digital ethnography, underlining the relationship between everyday routines and digital media. Influenced by STS (science and technology studies) and social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michael de Certeau, ethnographic research of media practices "enables a focus on *doing*" (Pink et al., 2016: 45, emphasis in original), considering both the performance, demonstrations and reporting of these actions. The analysis and coding made use of a thematic approach inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2006) seminal work.

Feminist opinion leaders as platform users: Instagram in life, Instagram as life

The interviewees can all be classified as feminist opinion leaders in that they all have a large Instagram following (between 12,000 and 50,000 followers each) and are frequently also visible in broadcast media due to their feminist projects, such as through being interviewed as "feminist experts," writing op-eds in newspapers or fronting campaigns and demonstrations. They post regularly (at least every week, but most post every day) while utilizing multiple of Instagram's options for use (such as regular posts, Stories, commenting on own and others' posts, Q&As, and live streaming). Thus, they can be referred to as "heavy users" (Berker and Levold, 2007) of Instagram. Although the interviewees represent different *feminisms* in terms of differing viewpoints on issues such as sex work, gender identities and political governance, what unites them is a rejection of neo-liberal conceptions of feminism through commercialized and sloganized content. Despite their differences, the feminist opinion leaders interviewed here all underlined the importance of transparency and idealism for the feminist cause, and *putting in work* in order to see political change.

When asked to outline her Instagram use and in what ways it affects her non-digital everyday life, Swedish Sofi said, "If you mean life outside social media, I must joke and say, 'what life outside?.'" The other interviewees' answers were similar, with one proclaiming she is "on Instagram all the time," another laughingly saying she does not dare check the amount of time she spends in the app, being well aware that this is a feature available for Instagram users. Of the eight women I interviewed, seven said they without exception log on to Instagram at least once per day, with most of them calculating their time on the platform to exceed two active hours daily. However, this varied with how they were using Instagram that day; if they were posting something,

several hours could be spent daily just creating the written and visual content in the post—not necessarily on Instagram, but with photo apps, research and notes in order to be able to publish the best possible material and get their content "platform ready" (Helmond, 2015).

For instance, Danish May, the one interviewee who said she does not always open Instagram daily, still spends time thinking about or preparing her use, regardless of not opening the actual app every day. When questioned about how she typically prepared content before posting, she explained,

> If I do a [Instagram] Story, I'll spend two days preparing it. And if I'm talking about, you know, racial justice, I'll talk about it with some activists who are experts on that [topic] about how I phrase things and how I say what I say, to make sure that it's [right]. So for me, it's not a direct sort of communication that I just kind of, like, send out in the middle of day. I think a lot about how I communicate, I spend a lot of time thinking about it. So it comes out right.

Although they all spend a significant amount of time posting, reading, commenting and using the direct message (DM) function, they had varying techniques for how they use Instagram and which feature they spend the most time on. While May prefers the Stories function because it allows her to post without the possible disruption of followers' comments underneath ("As soon as you see the message, you also see all the people who think the person who's speaking is an idiot"), Marie from Sweden mainly uses the regular posting function, allowing image and text to be part of her permanent feed. She prefers seeing her use as an instant form of communication, insisting, in contrast to May, that she does not want her posts to feel "calculated,"

> I want to post straight away. [. . .] The latest was today when I was out for lunch, and saw something that made me angry. Then I said [to the others present] "just wait a minute." Then I wrote and posted it. And then we continued [lunching]. I want it to be spontaneous.

Like the others, Marie did not appear embarrassed or bothered by the fact that her Instagram use consumes a considerable amount of her life, and a central part of her content is commenting on current affairs. Despite their "heavy" Instagram use, all the interviewees seem to view their Instagram activity as a "given" in their lives, which sums up these users' relationship with the technology: It is always there, woven into their everyday life patterns. This was also obvious when they were asked to explain their posting practices: They all hesitated, seeming to not have reflected on it before, as Instagram use had been ingrained in their everyday routines. In other words, their Instagram practices appeared to have become "tacit knowledge" (Polanyi, 2009)—or rather *tacit practices*: habitual, embodied enactments that they had been accustomed to through years of being active as both feminists and Instagram users.

However, a few of the interviewees still told me they had previously had to employ certain techniques in order to "tame" (Sørensen, 1996) the technology for it to fit seamlessly into their daily lives. For instance, for Norwegian Sandra, Instagram had earlier been a form of "technoference" (McDaniel and Coyne, 2016) in her relationship. She elaborated:

[I] got clear feedback from my boyfriend that "you have to live more *IRL* [in-real-life] and not sit on Instagram all the time." Because it got to my head so much that in the end it actually became a problem in the relationship. I can almost be provoked that he is not as angry as I am. [. . .] I got a proper eye opener, and now I have saved Instagram in a separate folder on my mobile called "entertainment." So now it's like an entertainment app in the same way that CandyCrush is a piece of entertainment on mobile. And that's just to limit myself.

This technique for limiting her use had simultaneously tamed her *excitement* for Instagram and the heightened emotions involved with its use. Although the other interviewees had not experienced the technology taking over their lives the same way, they all had similar stories with regard to the excitement they felt when their Instagram use intertwined with their feminist conscience. What was at stake for all users to various extents was how Instagram had been re-domesticated (Bertel, 2017) into their lives when they became more involved with feminist activism.

Some had slowly but surely employed Instagram differently from earlier using their account in a "regular" way (entailing following friends and family and posting pictures of highlights in their lives), while four of them had stopped using their old accounts and started a new one with the purpose of using it for solely posting and discussing feminist content. These new accounts were then started under a profile name indicating their devotion to the feminist cause rather than their actual names.[3] When asked why she rejected her old account under her own name in favor of a new one under a feminist-sounding moniker, Marie answered,

I was in a bad relationship where I experienced . . . a guy who said we had the same values, he said he was a feminist and such things, but he definitely wasn't. And that awoke so much frustration in me. That . . . he wasn't at all. I couldn't talk to him about [feminism] at all. I wanted to find a forum to air all my thoughts. It took a while before I showed myself [in pictures on Instagram], for a long time it was just my texts. But then it grew on me. That I can also be part of this.

For Marie, the profile name thus functioned as an identity-marker to attract others wanting to discuss and share feminist opinions, and indicated that she used Instagram *in a feminist way* by actively posting political content in order to inform followers about relevant news, backing other feminists and supporting feminist art and culture through reposting others' content. Her explanation also highlights a vital part of what *drives* this user group and their practices: feeling part of a community of like-minded peers, all "charged with willfulness" (Ahmed, 2014: 142).

Techniques and aesthetics: enacting willfulness through Instagram

Norwegian Heidi described the excitement she had felt when beginning "feminist Instagramming," where especially the idea of joining a community of body and fat activists (see, for example, Hynnä and Kyrölä, 2019) appealed to her,

[I]t took some time before I was ready to create this [new] account. And then a friend, or my best friend, said "just do it, you've talked so much about it! You'll be good at it and I can take

pictures of you. Start that account." And then somehow it just becomes automatic that it is my opinions in everyday life and what I experience, and what I think is, well, unfair and difficult and what challenges we have in society. And I did [post] a little more of that before. Just because I thought the app was super exciting. I could have these rants for days on a topic. I don't have the energy for that in the same way now. [Earlier] it kind of *gave life* to everyday life, in a way.

Thus, what earlier "gave life" to Heidi's everyday life was not an enthusiasm that fit into her life on a long-term basis, and although still being active on Instagram daily, she now finds it instead to be a good way to fill her otherwise free moments. Heidi's quotation exemplifies Mike Pantzar's (1997: 52) argument that in order for technology to be domesticated, it changes its role in people's lives from waking "sensational feelings" to becoming "routine use" and being a taken-for-granted part in the user's everyday doings.

Making something a routine also requires to find techniques for limiting the impressions gained when "being in" the Instagram app, and several of the interviewees mentioned how they are actively attempting to construct their feed by restricting who they follow. As Sofi explained, "You have to put your glasses on and sort out what you want in your feed and choose accounts that help educate you." Swedish Anna, who works in the creative industries, said,

I just want a delightful feed that is inspiring. I'm not interested in looking at influencers. The only ones I follow are close friends, artists, creatives. [. . .] As I have a type of account where I lift certain issues, I have a general responsibility to be updated on more than my own little echo chamber. But as a private account [on Instagram], you do not need to include something [in your feed] that upsets, bores or tires you out. Then I'd rather have the type of account where you only see sunsets and cute children.

In other words, Anna wants spending time on Instagram to feel worthwhile, using it to be inspired, updated on feminist—and other political—issues and support likeminded peers. Some interviewees noted that the feminist cause had made them stop following profiles that either were just pointless "time thieves" or in some way made them feel bad about themselves in order to focus their time on Instagram accounts that felt politically or creatively constructive.

With the re-domestication of Instagram also came a new excitement about Instagram's features for the interviewees. Although they viewed it as necessary to take certain measures to ensure that Instagram did not negatively affect other parts of their life, the *positive affects* surrounding their use permeated the explanations when asked to detail what their practices consisted of. The following quotation from Heidi is an example of the enjoyment experienced during the process of posting on her account:

Yesterday I probably spent an hour editing an image and just thinking about what to write. Altogether, because I was on the beach. I also took a picture and edited it a little as I wanted a little more white, and less shadow on my face. And while I'm in the app editing, I'm thinking about what to write. I write maybe five different suggestions. And then the hours go by very fast. Even though I'm on the beach, I'm enjoying [the posting process]. So it's like . . . It's just kind of fun.

This enjoyment is not purely connected to being part of a community but also to experimenting with the aesthetic aspects of the posting practices. That *nothing is random* in the interviewees' posts is also clear from my observation data; pictures are never blurry and always well positioned, all texts are usually displayed in a color different to the background using an easy-to-read font, and the text and image choices for the posts seem well thought through to capture the reader's attention. Elaborating on the importance of aesthetics, Heidi continued,

> [It] means a lot, the visual expression you choose, you know? On some of the [other feminist profiles] I have followed for a long time, even if I don't see their name up in the corner, I know who it is because they have such a specific, cool profile. So I always choose the same font, for instance. And I almost always go for the same three or four colors. Trying to make it as good-looking as possible. I try to include the "tap here" button to read the post [in Stories], to make things easy.

I interpret this as further speaking to the argument that Instagram is domesticated by this user group. By making colors and fonts the same for all posts, less time and effort is spent pondering each post because the techniques become habitual and repetitive. Simultaneously, this eliminates the nuisance of "mess" in the feed for both the profile owner and the profile's followers—consisting largely of other feminist users—arguably making the Instagram experience more pleasant.

Some of the interviewees even highlighted how Instagram's script constraints were inspiring them. Anna told me, "Sometimes it's fun to have some restrictions. Having to fit a message, with image and text, into a certain format is exciting." Working within the creative industries, Anna says her work has been directly influenced and changed because of Instagram, to make it easier to post on the platform for her followers to see. Anna and Marie were both involved with a loose network of feminist artists on Instagram, with Marie becoming involved after "re-joining" Instagram with her new feminist account. In addition to sharing and selling their art and photography through Instagram, the art collectives share tips and tricks through DMs as well as meet at feminist art fairs outside of the platform.

The technology, then, must be "encultured" (Sørensen, 1996) in order to function for feminist projects, which highlights another aspect of how these practices are explicitly feminist in nature: Posted content is often synchronized, hence appearing more powerful. For instance, the effects of #MeToo and other hashtag campaigns are largely dependent on their synchroneity, which was also visible during the 2020 #BlackLivesMatter campaigns when White opinion leaders' collective efforts to provide spaces for Black activists, such as by lending their profiles to more "marginalized" users, appeared as collective acts of solidarity.

These collective culture-making practices also apply to teaching others about Instagram use. Heidi explained that she had learned most of her knowledge about the possibilities of the various design functions from other feminist users, who she had contacted directly. For instance, she learned how to position text in Stories to make it more aesthetically appealing to her and easier for her followers to read. She explained,

> I just wrote "sorry, but how do you do it . . . I don't understand . . ." And she was like "yes, I have spent so much time on it. But if you sort of take the full stop and then . . . ." Stuff like that. Then I sent and shared that [knowledge] with people who I see have these texts [gesturing something long with her hands], and say kind of "hey, I learned something new. If you also do this, you can split the text."

This demonstrates how the use of Instagram is a collective process, and it can be argued that these ways of both learning from each other, sharing "tricks of the trade" and developing similar posting patterns and aesthetics show an example of collective domestication (Ask and Sørensen, 2019), which I will elaborate on underneath.

Ethics and emotions: evaluating platformized feminism

Although it is clear that the feminists I interviewed find a great deal of enjoyment in creating posts and networking with other users on Instagram, the complex emotions involved in these practices were obvious both through observations and in the interviews. Marie's quotation above, in which she said she saw something that "made her angry" and thus had to interrupt her lunch in order to post about it on her account, illustrates this: Instagram is where these feminists take their anger to *put it into action*, making it constructive and collective. To quote Sara Ahmed (2010: 87), "there can even be joy in killing joy."

The constructiveness of anger (see, for example, Ahmed, 2014) was also striking when the interviewees discussed the two issues that seemed the most prominent for speaking *against* the domestication of Instagram by this user group, namely sexual harassment in DMs and content moderation. From the observation data, I noticed that a central part of both the regular posts and the Instagram Stories regarded negative experiences of Instagram use. For instance, the feminists repost harassing messages they receive in their DMs from predominantly male users, including "dick pics," rape threats, and even death threats with their own added text—often ironic GIFs or emojis—on top. All of the interviewees had received such messages to various degrees, usually several times per week, but many even every day. Despite frequently posting about this, they seemed rather unfazed about it in the interviews and discussed it as if it was an obvious part of the task of being a publicly recognized feminist active on Instagram and in media generally. When asked how she copes with this, Danish May, who said she frequently receives both death threats, rape threats, and harassing messages, answered, "I don't [cope with it]. I cry, I guess." Norwegian Eva, however, has another tactic. She sees it as her task to bring such opinions to daylight:

> Now I have started to just delete, to just . . . Ignore. But if I get [messages] where I think "hmm, this can be good content," I will answer something "sassy" so I can post it [on my profile] for my followers' entertainment or inspiration. And every time people say "don't give a sh*t about the trolls, don't give them attention," it's like, it's not *them* I give attention, I give the *topic* attention.

Feelings connected to exercising the will and *making feminist points* hence seemed to overpower the negative feelings experienced in this regard. In addition, Instagram has

introduced new features in the past few years, making it easier to ignore or avoid harassing messages altogether. While telling me about her experiences with online abuse, Heidi explained how these options had made it more livable,

> In the beginning, I blocked all men. Or everyone who seemed like creeps, you know. I just didn't want them there to . . . Oh, and this is a great thing they [Instagram] introduced. This filter for comments where you can write in all words you don't want in your comments, then the comment will be deleted. And after that I've had no "hate." Or [harassing] comments. So now life is much easier, in a way. Now I no longer have to go in [to the DMs] if, like, "PerHarald69" comments, to block him. [. . .] With the new filters, I think "OK, whatever." And I don't care if "PerHarald69" follows me, because he can't write any sh*t now anyway. So he might as well follow me and learn, too.

However, that the platform introduced changes deemed positive was never mentioned in the posted content observed and was only brought up by coincidence in the interviews. Although the interviewees did not attempt to hide this information, it appeared that a positive attitude toward Instagram did not fit with the willful image that was otherwise striking among these users.

With regard to content moderation, almost daily one of the users would post their own or others' messages from Instagram stating they had "violated community guidelines" along with the image or text that had supposedly triggered either or both human and mechanical elements comprising the platform's moderation assemblages (see Gerrard and Thornham, 2020). The interviewees seem to see themselves as willful partly due to the communication from Instagram, where the automated warnings from the platform are used as emblems of willfulness in their content creation. In addition, the group interviewed frequently referred to the Instagram algorithm as racist, sexist and fat phobic, hinting at a kind of feminist "algorithmic folk theory" (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021). For instance, Sofi, who refers to herself as a fat activist, said,

> I think fat women are a target for this kind of moderation from Instagram. Because we live in a fat phobic world. It could be more people reporting fat bodies but it could also be Instagram's algorithms that are programmed this way. I know [*named feminist*] had a meeting with Instagram on this topic and they explained how it works but at the end of the day it doesn't work like they say. Fat women's bodies are more often deleted from the platform.

Emma echoed this, stating, "It feels like [feminist activists] are more, maybe paid attention to, because we trigger something in those algorithms. Or the moderation stuff." Although they did not admit to deliberately testing the technology to see what triggers moderation, several of the users interviewed, particularly those focusing on body positivity and visual content, seemed to know quite well what kind of pictures Instagram would flag and yet still kept posting them. Heidi, who mainly posts body positive and partly nude selfies in order to participate in normalizing fat bodies, explained,

> [One of my pictures] has been taken down many times, and it makes me so angry that it gets removed. I just put it up again, put it up again, put it up again. But then they come with this message that "your profile will be deleted if you post this again," you know. So I don't do

that, but I put a flower in front or something. I just get so . . . [Sighs]. I should just be allowed to be here.

Heidi and others creating similar content have consequently learned to be creative with their self-censorship. Posts are often altered just enough to not break any rules but also make it obvious that it appears the way it does due to what are—in their eyes—Instagram's unfair and unethical rules. In addition to placing emojis in front of intimate body parts, this also includes rewriting words or using a star as a substitute for certain letters (e.g. writing "r*pe" instead of "rape"). Some of the interviewees also told me about other activist users changing the gender option on their profile from female to male in order to avoid censorship.

One might think the negative affects connected to the technology's supposed refusal to allow these users to express themselves freely without fear of online abuse or moderation policies would result in decreased Instagram use. But on the contrary, these negative affects seem to also "stick" (Ahmed, 2014) users with similar experiences together, ultimately even making their willingness to use Instagram stronger. The platform not only provides fuel to the fire for their feminist conscience, but is also where they can share and discuss such experiences with likeminded people. As such, these negative emotions toward Instagram create the conditions for a collective domestication to occur. As Carrie Rentschler (2019: 133) states, "[C]raft work can create binding practices that link structures of feeling to embodied ideologies and affective affinities."

Simultaneously, the interviewees indicated that it was not necessarily the experience of *using* the technology that spurred negative affects but rather Instagram as a value system, which this user group perceives as part of the wider patriarchal structures of society as a whole. Nevertheless, most of the feminists underlined that the harassment and threats of censorship would occur no matter which medium they used to voice their opinions and that Instagram or Facebook was hence no worse than any other option in that respect. Heidi summarized this, saying,

> [Instagram and Facebook] represent a super sexist, racist system, you know. But it's just . . . I'm good at saying "I can't do anything about that." I can't be here [on Instagram], if I don't play after those stupid rules. But it's super frustrating. That if you want to challenge the patriarchy . . . You have to follow their rules to be part of that. And that's basically how the rest of the world is, too.

As most of the interviewees emphasized, there is simply no alternative to Instagram in the current media climate, which highlights the increasing platform dependence (Nieborg et al., 2019) of participants in contemporary feminism.

Concluding remarks

For the users studied here, Instagram simultaneously functions as an outlet for creativity, a networking sphere, an activist soap box and a source of entertainment. In addition to being well equipped for the facilitation of feminist culture and its digital artifacts, here comprising texts such as images, videos, writing, memes, and GIFs, the use of the

platform is in itself a crucial part of feminist culture for these Scandinavian opinion leaders and their followers. Instagram's affordances are hence embedded in how these women live and enact their feminist lives.

This article has revealed how these affordances also convenience both platformizing feminist content and domesticating the technology for this group, and as I have shown, these are inextricably linked. These users' habitual, consistent posting also directly or indirectly urges their followers to do the same in order to stay informed and be part of an agenda-setting feminist network. This results in a collective enactment of the technology in question. Although the interviewees frequently post content that will either be taken down or is in the gray zone with regard to what is allowed according to platform user manuals, even the counter practices of this user group can arguably be said to benefit Instagram because their testing of the technology helps the molding of the algorithm (see, for example, Bucher, 2017). In this way, despite their user identities resting on the moral foundation of willfulness, these individuals are also *useful subjects* for Instagram.

These users' feminist will being both facilitated for and determined by the features and rules of the platform means that digital feminist culture is always produced at the mercy of commercial technology companies. The mere term "platformized feminism" is hence to a certain extent paradoxical because it indicates a kind of feminism that is conform and unable to challenge existing structures. One can thus ask, "What are the uses of practicing feminism that is constrained by both the materialities and morals of Meta Platforms, Inc.?" Although merely seeing Instagram as an extension of other, non-digital institutions "IRL" and seeming to play down the influence of content moderation on their posts, the interviewees also voiced that they were terrified of losing their material and access to their accounts. The profiles of central opinion leaders often include thousands of carefully curated posts with text and visuals that altogether have taken even more thousands of hours to produce, and embedded in them they often include hundreds of comments and discussions of the topics in question by the profile's followers. These are thus valuable feminist artifacts and central "willfulness archives" (Ahmed, 2012) that can be used to observe present-day feminism and risk being eradicated completely if platform rules are broken too many times.

However, as Nieborg and Poell (2018: 4289) highlight, although different cultural industries and countercultural activist communities have different platformization trajectories, the very principle of platformization entails a reorganization of how culture is both produced and circulated. For non-profit feminist groupings, both producing and circulating content have become a great deal easier with the use of social media platforms such as Instagram, also entailing that their message can reach a wider audience than in the days of DIY zine distros and postal service dependence. Furthermore, by utilizing a domestication perspective with specific attention to the affective dimensions of technology appropriation, I have been able to highlight how this user group has arguably developed a strong emotional bond not just to their feminist peers through the technology but perhaps first and foremost *to the use of* the Instagram technology. Consequently, it can be contended that platformized feminism is a result of the co-constructions at play in the intertwining of platform affordances and enactments of feminism.

These lessons thus show that combining domestication theory and affect studies can be fruitful for developing a deeper understanding of people's "heavy" social media

use. This article has additionally provided a feminist outlook on the platformization framework, offering novel contributions in terms of how platformization affects countercultural activism, meaning communities that share specific practices, morals and interests with little or no interest in profiting off of their media production, which is still largely untheorized. However, there are still few qualitative studies that examine the experiences of non-Western, non-White feminists, and political activists in general using these approaches, and I thus close this article by urging other scholars to take up this challenge.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

ORCID iD

Astri Moksnes Barbala https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3087-3350

Notes

1. https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/g7JbX5/unge-jenter-skremmes-med-dramatiske-abort-bilder
2. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/14/instagram-surpasses-2-billion-monthly-users.html
3. This is common among feminist and body positivity communities. For instance, two of the largest accounts belonging in this segment are @bodyposipanda and @feministvoice.

References

Ahmed S (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*. London: Duke University Press.
Ahmed S (2012) A willfulness archive. *Theory & Event* 15(3). Available at: https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/484421
Ahmed S (2014) *Willful Subjects*. London: Duke University Press.
Ahmed S (2017) *Living a Feminist Life*. London: Duke University Press.
Akrich M (1992) The description of technical objects. In: Bijker WE and Law J (eds) *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 205–224.
Ask K and Sørensen KH (2019) Domesticating technology for shared success: collective enactments of World of Warcraft. *Information, Communication & Society* 22(1): 73–88.
Berker T and Levold N (2007) Moralske praksiser i forbindelse med tung internettbruk. In: Levold N and Spilker H (eds) *Kommunikasjonssamfunnet: Moral, praksis og digital teknologi*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 35–49.
Bertel TF (2017) Domesticating smartphones. In: Vincent J and Haddon J (eds) *Smartphone Cultures*. London: Routledge, pp. 83–94.
Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.

Brause SR and Blank G (2020) Externalized domestication: smart speaker assistants, networks and domestication theory. *Information, Communication & Society* 23(5): 751–763.

Bucher T (2017) The algorithmic imaginary: exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society* 20(1): 30–44.

Close S and Wang C (2020) International platforms, international prejudice in the platformization of crafting. *Social Media + Society*. Epub ahead of print 23 August. DOI: 10.1177/2056305120940691.

Gerrard Y and Thornham H (2020) Content moderation: social media's sexist assemblages. *New Media & Society* 22(7): 1266–1286.

Hartmann M (2020) (The domestication of) Nordic domestication? *Nordic Journal of Media Studies* 2: 47–57.

Helmond A (2015) The platformization of the web: making web data platform ready. *Social Media + Society*. Epub ahead of print 30 September. DOI: 10.1177/2056305115603080.

Hjorth L and Lim S (2012) Mobile intimacy in an age of affective mobile media. *Feminist Media Studies* 124: 477–484.

Hynnä K and Kyrölä K (2019) "Feel in your body": fat activist affects in blogs. *Social Media + Society*. Epub ahead of print 21 November. DOI: 10.1177/2056305119879983.

Keller J (2019) "Oh, she's a Tumblr feminist": exploring the platform vernacular of girls' social media feminisms. *Social Media + Society*. Epub head of print 14 August. DOI: 10.1177/2056305119867442.

Kneese T and Palm M (2020) Brick-and-platform: listing labor in the digital vintage economy. *Social Media + Society*. Epub ahead of print 2 July. DOI: 10.1177/2056305120933299.

Latimer J and López Gómez D (2019) Intimate entanglements: affects, more-than-human intimacies and the politics of relations in science and technology. *The Sociological Review* 67(2): 247–263.

Leaver T, Highfield T and Abidin C (2020) *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Levold N and Spilker H (2007) *Kommunikasjonssamfunnet: Moral, praksis og digital teknologi*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

McDaniel BT and Coyne SM (2016) "Technoference": the interference of technology in couple relationships and implications for women's personal and relational well-being. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 5(1): 85–98.

MacDonald S, Wiens BI, Macarthur M, et al. (2022) *Networked Feminisms: Activist Assemblies and Digital Practices*. London: Lexington Books.

Matassi M, Boczkowski P and Mitchelstein E (2019) Domesticating WhatsApp: family, friends, work, and study in everyday communication. *New Media & Society* 21(10): 2183–2200.

Mendes K and Ringrose J (2019) Digital feminist activism: #MeToo and the everyday experiences of challenging rape culture. In: Fileborn B and Loney-Howes R (eds) *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 37–51.

Mendes K, Ringrose J and Keller J (2019) *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back against Rape Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nieborg DB and Poell T (2018) The platformization of cultural production: theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society* 20(11): 4275–4292.

Nieborg DB, Poell T and Deuze M (2019) The platformization of making media. In: Deuze M and Prenger M (eds) *Making Media: Production, Practices, and Professions*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 85–96.

Pantzar M (1997) Domestication of everyday life technology: dynamic views on the social histories of artifacts. *Design Issues* 13: 52–65.

Peterson-Salahuddin C (2022) Posting back: exploring platformed black feminist communities on Twitter and Instagram. *Social Media + Society*. Epub ahead of print 18 January. DOI: 10.1177/20563051211069051.

Pink S, Horst H, Postill J, et al. (2016) *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practices*. London: SAGE.

Poell T, Nieborg D and Duffy B (2022) *Platforms and Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Poell T, Nieborg D and van Dijck J (2019) Platformisation. *Internet Policy Review* 8(4): 1–13.

Polanyi M (2009) *The Tacit Dimension*. London: The University of Chicago Press.

Rentschler C (2019) Making culture and doing feminism. In: Oren T and Press A (eds) *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Feminism*. London: Routledge, pp. 127–147.

Rentschler C and Thrift S (2015) Doing feminism: event, archive, techné. *Feminist Theory* 16(3): 239–249.

Sørensen K (1996) *Learning technology, constructing culture: sociotechnical change as social learning*. STS working paper no. 18/96, Trondheim: NTNU.

Sørensen K (2005) Domestication: the enactment of technology. In: Berker T, Hartmann M, Punie Y, et al. (eds) *Domestication of Media and Technologies*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, pp. 40–61.

Sujon Z, Viney L and Toker-Turnalar E (2019) Domesticating Facebook: the shift from compulsive connection to personal service platform. *Social Media + Society*. Epub ahead of print 9 October. DOI: 10.1177/2056305118803895.

Uimonen P (2020) #MeToo in Sweden: museum collections, digital archiving and hashtag visuality. *Ethnos* 85(5): 920–937.

Walter S and Brüggemann M (2020) Opportunity makes opinion leaders: analyzing the role of first-hand information in opinion leadership in social media networks. *Information, Communication & Society* 23(2): 267–287.

Ytre-Arne B and Moe H (2021) Folk theories of algorithms: understanding digital irritation. *Media, Culture & Society* 43(5): 807–824.

Author biography

Astri Moksnes Barbala has recently finalized her PhD in Sociology. Her doctoral research focuses on the relationship between digitalization and countercultural activity, and is positioned at the intersection of STS (science and technology studies), platform studies and gender studies. Astri's PhD project investigated Scandinavian feminists' use of Instagram in the wake of #MeToo, focusing specifically on how this user group understands, appropriates and negotiates with platform technology, shaping various user practices.