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Post-feminist practices, subjectivities and intimacies in global context

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Post-feminist practices, subjectivities and intimacies in global context

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Editorial: Post-feminist practices, subjectivities and intimacies in global context

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Post-feminist practices, subjectivities and intimacies in global context

In recent decades, "post-feminism" has become a recurrent theme and a buzzword of sorts in a variety of settings, from academia and politics to media discourses and popular culture. After decades of scholarship and public debate on the matter, the task of delimiting the boundaries of what "post-feminism" means seems intellectually futile, particularly because the ambiguity of the term is what makes it intriguing and compelling as a frame of analysis.

In a particularly relevant interpretation, scholars of gender have taken post-feminism as promising conceptual lenses with which to interrogate the (un)doing of gendered subjectivities in our contemporary culture, where intersectional inequalities are (re)produced amidst the neoliberal celebration of individual agency and empowerment, as predicated on consumption and commodification of gender difference. Postfeminism extends understandings of the ways in which gender is performed, and highlights how neoliberal capitalism and market values intersect with identity, subjectivity and agency (Gill and Scharff, 2013).

This Research Topic intervenes in this ongoing debate by focusing on the practices, subjectivities and intimacies that are shaped by post-feminist cultural and political formations, whatever these may mean across the globe, and in diverse social, cultural, and political contexts. A significant body of scholarship interrogating the notion of post-feminism from the standpoint of the Global North already exists, even if they have been critiqued for their narrow focus on white middle class subjectivities (Butler, 2013). As important as those debates are, we were specifically interested in research that critically engages with the complexities of post-feminism from Global South perspectives, a work that is already being done (Dosekun, 2015). This collection of research articles succeeds in bringing together voices and arguments from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe: three regions where new attitudes to the complex intersection of gender with race, class, caste, religion, and more are forging new lived experiences (and therefore theoretical positions) on identity and subjectivity. As such it serves as an intervention combining elements of cultural studies, feminist critique and media analysis with methods and analytical frames from the social sciences. The collection centers transnational research in and around the Global South and offers a platform for extending our understandings of post-feminisms beyond existing western frameworks.

From this collaborative conversation, one key theme that has emerged is a remixing of the familiar argument of gender as performed and performative, and gender as fluid: with post-feminism being a useful theoretical tool for exploring how gender intersects with neoliberal power and material culture in specific ways. Performed gender relates directly to the intimate, the bodily, to relationships and senses of self, and how these are shaped by tangible practices embedded in everyday life, theorized as "self-fashioning" (Dosekun, 2020; Roy, 2022). Relating to these insights, a first set of articles examines practices of self-fashioning and claim-making in the context of diasporic communities in the UK, feminist activists in Eastern Europe, and bisexual women in South Africa.

Dutta looks at the aesthetic labor of bikini waxing, as practiced by South Asian women in London. Her ethnography presents the complexities of intimacy and disgust attendant to such personal body practices.

Myzelev examines the feminist politics of crafting and handwork, and argues that it can function as "a language of political and social struggle" in Ukraine and Belarus. Through "craftivism," women are able to articulate both a feminist and nationalist politics.

Khuzwayo writes about the politics of coming out for bisexual women. Divergent views on the necessity and personal value of coming our shows that some realms of sexuality remain in opaque and difficult-to-theorize realms of intimacy.

In a second set of articles, authors analyse how postfeminist formations shape practices, subjectivities and intimacies in the Global South, especially in the context of longstanding intersectional patterns of exclusion (including class, race, and caste) and in light of the neoliberal emphasis on inclusion through consumerism (Lazar, 2009). It is apt that the collection emphasizes the agentic subject—as an object of analysis alongside, and not separated from, the more structural dimensions of discourse, representation, transnational media culture and neoliberal governmentality (Tasker and Negra, 2007). Postfeminist sensibilities emerge through the politics of intimacy and gender-making in the everyday and prosaic moments of lived experience. The articles are invested in examining various cultural forms and media products, from music to social media and TV shows, by which postfeminist sensibilities and gendered imaginaries are mediated and circulated to broad publics.

Rens analyses popular Afrobeats music videos to parse the heteronormative dynamics of masculine and feminist characters. In the romances visually depicted alongside and in the songs, he argues that an ethic of "misogyrom" is in operation, which undermines the agency of the women characters in the videos.

Dunn and Falkof explore how young women who post self-portraits on social media work to create a sense of authenticity, which operates at both the level of feeling and appearance.

Ghosh analyses television shows about Indian matchmaking, and teases out the web of cultural politics regarding nationhood, conservatives, caste and class, while showing how postfeminist values shape the narratives.

Boshoff and Mlangeni examine South African tabloid newspaper writings about older well-off women who have romantic relationships with younger men. The authors show that though the women seem putatively empowered, their agency women should be placed in historical and global context.

The third set of articles examines how the current wave of right-wing politics and anti-feminist backlash sweeping the world poses critical and specific questions to post-feminist dynamics and imaginings in global south contexts. As scholars have showed elsewhere, the contemporary political climate has invited sexist revivals and reactionary understandings of gender and gender theory (Whelehan, 2000; Corredor, 2019; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). The articles in this issue address some of these questions from the point of view of NGO-led programmes and emerging digital cultures in India and Indonesia.

Chakraborty writes about the "interstitial intimacies" that emerge in labor in an NGO's community-based program to prevent violence against women and girls in Mumbai's urban poor neighborhoods.

Maryani et al. discuss the rise of anti-feminist discourse on social media in Indonesia. This is put into context of the religious and political complexities of Indonesian society.

Through these 10 articles, this Research Topic collection put the spotlight on transnational thinking about postfeminism, revealed the cracks, complexities, and contestations that characterize debates about the economic empowerment of women in contexts of inequality. This collection also gestures toward new directions in the critical analysis of postfeminism, and theory building from the south. It has given full attention to the ways in which postfeminist practices, identities and intimacies intersect with race, ethnicity, indigeneity, and caste, including practices of resistance to oppression organized along such lines. Future work must continue to develop fuller understandings of how neoliberal femininities explicitly matter in relation to racial identities and racialized experiences of life.

This special issue proposes that, in the global south, postfeminism demands an expansive and inclusive understanding of the feminine to include all femininities, in order to explore what the pre-fix "post" means in relation to this inherent diversity. While the articles have tackled these questions from various perspectives and locations, more work is required to integrate trans-femininities into the work of the study of global south postfeminism, as part of a broader politics of rejecting cis-feminist exceptionalism.

Author contributions

Both authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Women's Empowerment, Agency and Self-Determination in Afrobeats Music Videos: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

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Stemming from a broader PhD project, this article argues that neoliberal post-feminist cultural sensibilities–entrenched in contemporary popular culture–about empowered, agentic and self-determining women, are regressive for the feminist advancement of gender-relational equality in the African context. To arrive at this conclusion, the central aim was to elucidate whether the gender-performative representations prioritised in the multimodal discourses of Afrobeats music videos are implicated in post-feminist sensibilities and if so, in what ways and to what effect? Given the continent's richly diverse, yet largely heteropatriarchal, sociocultural formations, I argue that ideas about empowered, agentic and self-determining (black) African women are–based on the limited purview offered through the multimodal discourses of a small corpus of Afrobeats music videos–no more than sociocultural façades as opposed to gender-relational realities in our context. The article relied on a multimodal critical discourse analysis of a total of nine music videos drawn from the PhD project's larger corpus of 25 Afrobeats music videos, their accompanying song lyrics, as well as a selection of YouTube viewer comments extracted from the analysed music videos. In critically exploring the gender-relational depictions prioritised in the analysed music videos, I argue for the consideration of what I am coining "misogyrom"; a gender-relational cultural sensibility which, in tandem with a post-feminist sensibility partly undergirding the multimodal discourses of these music videos, effectively veil this popular musical genre's evidently sexist and misogynistic undertones that subvert potentialities of empowered, agentic and self-determining black African women.

Keywords: agency, empowerment, self-determination, post-feminism, misogyrom, afrobeats, midriff sensibility

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INTRODUCTION

Afrobeats–a globally popularising African musical genre–is widely consumed by transnational audiences. This sees the music videos produced by artists from this musical genre, reach YouTube viewership figures ranging in the hundreds of millions. As such, these Global South popular cultural texts are valuable conduits through which to critically examine contemporary social constructions and performances of gender and politically charged meanings of "womanhood" in relation to "manhood" as implicated as they are in heteropatriarchal collective African cultural worldviews. This article situates this musical genre's multimodal discourses, specifically as they relate to gender and sexuality, within a broader post-feminist discourse about women's (sexual) empowerment, agency and self-determination. The central aim, thus, is to elucidate whether the gender-performative

representations prioritised in the multimodal discourses of Afrobeats music videos are implicated in post-feminist sensibilities and if so, in what ways and to what effect? I follow Simidele Dosekun in my considerations of post-feminist sensibilities in that I, like Dosekun (2015), regard post-feminism as a transnational cultural sensibility. Thereby, also regarding it an analytically relevant and valuable scholarly lens in the context from which this current article emerges: an African popular cultural landscape. Relying on a multifaceted conceptual framework, the article argues that a close reading of this musical genre's multimodal discourses through a post-feminist lens exposes the ill-convincing nature–in African popular cultural texts–of neoliberal, post-feminist cultural sensibilities at pains with positioning (heterosexual) women as sexually empowered, agentic and self-determining as concerns their relations with men across variously heteropatriarchal African sociocultural formations.

Incorporated in this study's conceptual framework are feminist scholarly contributions about gender as performance (Butler, 1988; Butler, 1990), the (heteropatriarchal) male gazes and their implications on constructions of feminine subjectivities (Mulvey, 1975; Mulvey, 1989; Gill, 2007; Gill, 2008), as well as literature pertaining to the "midriff" post-feminist sensibility in popular media forms (Gill, 2008). These scholarly contributions aid this current article in articulating its arguments with respect to gender and sexuality as variously performed across the selection of Afrobeats music videos–stemming from a larger corpus from my PhD project–analysed in this study. By so doing, the article is able to demonstrate how a notable post-feminist sensibility–encouraging notions of women's empowerment, agency and self-determination as it relates to sex and sexuality–specifically undergirds the performances of femininities within these music videos. However, these readings of women's sexual empowerment, agency and self-determination, I will argue, are mere social façades that are effectively mediated and pseudo-legitimised through discourses of extreme (heteronormative) romanticism from diverse black African masculinities which–if taken at face value–may encourage the uncritical absolving of hetero-patriarchy from its deeply toxic nature toward black African women's actual sociocultural advancement and just treatment.

This article draws specifically on nine music videos selected from a larger corpus of 25 Afrobeats music videos (from my PhD project) with high viewership figures–as at November 2018, when said music videos were downloaded from YouTube. These nine music videos form the core corpus of data analysed in this research article. In addition, for each of the nine music videos sampled, a written transcript of the song's lyrics was also subjected to critical analysis. As secondary data, a textual corpus of YouTube viewer comments from each of the nine analysed music videos was also critically analysed. The article deployed a multimodal critical discourse analysis of the select Afrobeats music videos, their accompanying song lyrics, as well as the YouTube viewer comments so as to develop its arguments.

Structurally, this article consists of four main sections following this introductory section. The first part situates the study's empirical object of analysis within Judith-Butler-inspired scholarship about gender performativity, as well as scholarly literature on post-feminism. Thereafter, I offer a critical reading of performances of "manhood"/masculinities in the analysed texts in order to demonstrate dominant constructions of "manhood" in the hyperreal gender-relational contexts mediated in the analysed music videos. By so doing, I am able to briefly demonstrate three dominant forms of performative masculinities pervasive in the analysed multimodal discourses. It is in this section where I propose a new gender-relational cultural sensibility I call "misogyrom"—a cultural sensibility that I argue mediates performances of femininities that intersect with a salient post-feminist sensibility as evident in the analysed music videos.

In the third section, I engage a critical reading of performances of "womanhood"/femininities in the analysed music videos. My reliance on a multifaceted conceptual framework undergirded by post-feminist cultural sensibilities, aids me in highlighting possible readings of women's empowerment, agency and self-determination in the multimodal discourses of this musical genre. I achieve this by drawing on plot analyses from some randomly selected music videos from the nine analysed in this article. Lastly, in the section following this one, I advance an argument that readings of post-feminist notions of women's empowerment, agency and self-determination in Afrobeats music videos–as African popular cultural texts–are mere social façades. Façades that are mediated and pseudo-legitimised by discourses of extreme (heteronormative) romanticism, implicated in a misogyrom sensibility which–if taken at face value–may inspire the uncritical absolving of heteropatriarchy from its deeply toxic nature toward black African women's *actual* sociocultural advancement and just treatment, more especially in the domains of sexual expression.

GENDER, GENDER PERFORMATIVITY, AND A POST-FEMINIST SENSIBILITY IN AFROBEATS MUSIC VIDEOS

Gender performativity, as proposed by Judith Butler, purports that gender is a ritualised performance across diverse human societies. Butler (1988) argues broadly that gender identities are socially constructed notions that affect our self-perceptions about who we believe we are as subjectivities of a particular biological sex. For Butler (1988); Butler (1990), the distinction between biological sex and gender is crucial in demonstrating her argument that genders–unlike sex–are socioculturally constructed and performed as opposed to being physiobiological facts determined by the possession of particular reproductive genitalia (vagina or penis). Butler's constructionist view of gender identity underscores her argument in this regard. Essentially, this view argues that in accordance with political, historical and social values and ideas, gender is actively and, to an extent, unwittingly, constructed by human subjectivities who learn and cling to particular behavioral cues that are relied upon to craft what we come to widely accept as women's and men's behaviors (Butler, 1988).

These learnt behaviors, in turn, are inextricably linked to notions of femininity and masculinity as themselves co-

constructed along psychosocial influences of what it means to be born in possession of a particular external genital organ. With regard to gender, so argues Butler (1988: 524) argues:

> Because there is neither an"essence" that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis.

It is by acknowledging the distinction between gender and sex that we can observe the constructionist implications of gender in its performative guize. Gender identities are, thus, in constant flux and states of "becoming" as soon as one is born into this world. Commenting on how "real" or factual our gender identities are, (Butler 1988: 524) reminds us that "[g]ender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed. The influences of diverse societies' social, political, cultural and historical ideological regimes on the kinds of "acts" associated with "manhood" and "womanhood" in said societies, perpetuate certain kinds of acts that are widely interpreted as being expressive of a gender identity. These acts are normalised as inherently linked to biological sex, and conformity to said acts is implicitly celebrated as "natural".

What this does, is it enforces "sedimented expectations of gendered existence" (Butler, 1988: 524). Significantly inspired by parts of Simone de Beauvoir's theoretical contributions, Butler's influential body of work on gender performativity problematizes these sedimented expectations of gendered existence by exposing how the body becomes

> . . .its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. From a feminist point of view, one might try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic.

Genders, as socially constructed notions, Butler argues, can then be perceived as neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent; but ever-evolving performative regimes that variously compel us to "act" in certain ways depending on our possession of either a penis or vagina.

In this current article, I borrow from this body of work on gender as a performative social construction. The article closely links these theoretical insights to my critical approach to the corpus of Afrobeats music videos collected for this study. These music videos, as sites of gender representation, expose us to creatively crafted, active constructions and performances of gender (and sexuality). That is to say, the processes of gender identity construction are salient in these music videos due to how these texts deploy multimodal devices to establish, maintain, contest and/or problematize gender "norms". Creators of these music videos are actively involved in narrating and, thereby, idealizing particular gender performances to foreground various points of views about what it means to be a woman or a man across the richly diverse African and diasporic contexts captured in this musical genre's visual culture.

This study's analysis of the data in relation to gender performativity, reveals that a heteronormative worldview underscores the multimodal representations prevalent in these texts. On the part of the featured African women and men, gender performativity and gender relations in the music videos analyzed, are saliently heterosexual-oriented, considering the visual and lyrical contents of these music videos. Consider the visual depictions in **Figures 1**, **2** where an explicit heterosexual romantic orientation is sustained through the denotative depictions of romantic love and intimacy via non-verbal gestures such as kissing, romantic caressing and other forms of intimate physical touch. Evident here, is a striking visual trope wherein the predominant expressions of sexuality are overtly aligned along normative ideals that overtly celebrate heterosexuality. As such, African "womanhood" and "manhood", for instance, are exclusively imagined through this limited purview.

Let us closely consider Miles (2016b) music video for the song, "Where" (from which **Figure 1** is extracted). The entire plot revolves around a heterosexual couple in love, and this love is emphasised through several scenes such as the one depicted here. This brightly lit scene captures Tekno and his love interest sharing a kiss while in romantic embrace with one another. The kiss is shared in what appears to be a domestic setting of a kitchen (given typical kitchen furniture in clear view), suggesting that the couple happily live together. The brightness of this scene implies that the act depicted therein is something to be illuminated, foregrounded, and not hidden in the dark. In that vein, it is suggested that romantic heterosexual expressions of sexuality are to be celebrated, lauded, and aspired to; sustaining, thus, the normative hegemonic dominance that heteronormativity enjoys in contemporary (African) societies. In extension–when considered through a post-feminist lens–such depictions also affirm to women watching these music videos that heterosexual expressions of femininity and female sexuality are to be aspired to if such romantic "happiness" is to be achieved. That is, in order to be romantically pursued and mesmerised by attractive, sexually alluring men (as evidenced in **Figure 2**, for instance), a woman should knowingly (thus, agentically?) present a "shy", yet aesthetically enticing, version of herself in public spaces in order to "capture" the man of her interest. I will argue, then, that it is critical to expose the catalytic nature of masculine performative expressions in popular culture on performances and constructions of femininities. As such, in the next section, I will be offering a critical analysis of performances of masculinities in Afrobeats music videos, as they are implicated in encouraging particular "ways of seeing" (Berger, 1990) femininities in said music videos. But first, a conceptualization of post-feminism as undergirding this paper's critical analyses. Feminist plights–in their diverse iterations over time and context–toward the just treatment of women, have variously been implicated in rather contradictory principles that seem to situate feminism almost as something of the past; a plight/sensibility no longer required (McRobbie 2004). This discourse has had an influential role in the pervasiveness of a sensibility called "post-feminism" (McRobbie

FIGURE 1 | Visual display of heterosexual romantic relations in Tekno's "Where" music video [screenshot taken from *Where (Official Music Video):* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooFAF18L5wQ].

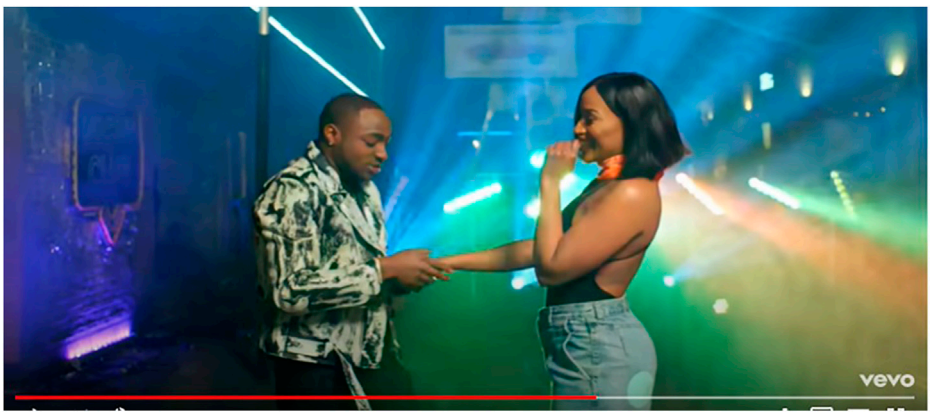

FIGURE 2 | Visual display of heterosexual romantic relations in Davido's "If" music video [screenshot taken from *If (Official Music Video):* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=helEv0kGHd4].

2004; Gill 2007; Gill 2008). What postfeminist-aligned "worldviews" do, in the context of popular culture, is that they variously undermine the feminist gains of the 1970's and 80's, argues Angela McRobbie (2004). McRobbie, as Storey (2018: 176) summarizes, makes no secret of her low optimism about the presumed 'success' of feminism:

> What has really happened, she argues, is that much contemporary popular culture actively undermines the feminist gains of the 1970's and 1980's. However, this should not be understood as a straightforward 'backlash' against feminism. Rather its undermining of feminism works by acknowledging feminism while at the same time suggesting that it is no longer necessary in a world where women have the freedom to shape their own individual life courses. In post-feminist popular culture feminism features as history: aged, uncool and redundant. The acknowledging of feminism, therefore, is only to demonstrate that it is no longer relevant.

It is through this advancement of a perception that feminism is no longer relevant, that in contemporary popular culture, we are bombarded with countless discourses (visual or otherwise) that actively position women as empowered, agentic, and self-determining among other things. A postfeminist sensibility is deeply entrenched in a neoliberal worldview that calls for the celebration of individuality and choice said to be unrestrictedly afforded to women globally (Gill, 2007, Gill, 2008; Dosekun, 2015). This sensibility "...is less contingent upon political or organized activism than the feminist of the past" (Cuklanz, 2016: 9), and in relation to expressions of sexuality, more specifically, women are believed–and increasingly represented in contemporary popular media forms–as enjoying sexual freedom and free expression of sexuality (Gill, 2007; Gill, 2008; Genz, 2009; Cuklanz, 2016).

From such discursive formations about women's sexual freedom and free expression of sexuality as indicative of a postfeminist consciousness, emerged critical womanist scholarship that have theorised women as "midriff" (Gill, 2007; 2008) to conceptualise women's witting use of their bodies, appearances, and sexualities to more insistently exercise their sexual agency. Midriff women are described as unapologetic about their sexual power and ability to (freely) use their bodies as means to socioculturally, and otherwise, advance or benefit themselves (Gill, 2007; Gill, 2008). It will be interesting, then, to trace existing inscriptions of the post-feminist sensibility in a Global South produced media text: the Afrobeats music video, as this is an area currently less explored.

TRACING "MISOGYROM": A CRITICAL READING OF PERFORMANCES OF MASCULINITIES IN AFROBEATS MUSIC VIDEOS

Anyone doing a surface-based random online search for music videos from the Afrobeats musical genre will witness that it is notably male-dominated. The leading artists and performers in this scene are predominantly black African men. As such, the music video storylines and song lyrics produced from this musical genre engender an unapologetic masculine aura that significantly shapes the multimodal discourses of this music, as they relate to gender relations. In this section, I outline three dominant forms of masculine performativities by the male artists in the corpus of music videos analysed in this article. I unpack performances of "breadwinner" masculinities (Groes-Green, 2009), misogynistically "sexualised" masculinities, as well as romance-oriented masculinities and their intersections with performances of femininities in the analysed music videos.

The protagonist men centralised in the analysed music videos, are depicted as unquestionably wealthy and ideal 'breadwinners' who assert their dominance over women by "parading" their wealth through crass consumerist depictions of themselves. In very pervasive fashions, the men featured in the music videos analysed for this paper, perform manhood through various materialistic, provision-driven foundations of spending largely as a means to emphasise powerful manhood. Let us consider the song "If" by Davido (2017b), for instance. A consumerist, breadwinner-underpinned, performance of manhood is sustained through the lyrical content wherein he pledges to his love interest in the song that he will take care of her financially by giving her money and adorning her body with expensive, luxurious clothing brands such as Versace and Gucci. Davido says:

> If I tell you say I love you o
> My money my body na your own o baby
> Thirty billion for the account o
> Versace and Gucci for your body o baby

Here, Davido expresses that, in declaring his love for this woman, she must know that his money and body are hers. He assures her of his wealth status by emphasising that his bank account will have as much as 30 billion, from which this woman should expect to be spoiled with luxury fashion brands such as Versace and Gucci. Here, an implicit suggestion is advanced which positions the woman, in the mind of the viewer, as being incapable of securing her own financial means to access the luxurious commodities she is lured with by the man. An incapability arguably brought on by many reasons, including but not limited to, a sexist heteronorm-conforming belief pertaining to gender roles: that women (in their limited capacities as "wives" and "homemakers") are not expected to partake in the active accrual of wealth as this role is reserved for the male figure who shall act as main provider/breadwinner. Herein, I argue, we can begin to see misogyny rearing its regressive head.

Thus, at play here, is the partial upkeep of misogynistically mediated gender relations that aid men in their preservation of cultural power over women through economic superiority (Mills and Ssewakiryanga 2005). Such gender relations–mediated by men-owned money and material commodities–perpetuate the patriarchal ideologies and structures responsible for the subordination of women across various sociocultural domains, including the domains of (heterosexual) sexuality/sexual expression, intimate and romantic relationships.

Further to that, men's dominance is also partly sustained through hyper-sexualized, partly misogynistic expressions of manhood in the analyzed music videos. These sexualized masculinities are socially constructed in ways that encourage men's authority and power (in relation to women) by anchoring powerful manhood on notions of sexual performance and perceived sexual prowess. Afrobeats musician, Tekno, engages in the promotion of a particularly sexualized masculine performartivity. The lyrical contents from his song "Pana" (Miles, 2016a) are largely about sex and love (The Biafran, 2016). We shall, nonetheless, just consider an excerpt from the song in the interest of space.

> [. . .]
> Baby, Pana
> Anywhere that you go
> I go follow you dey go
> Baby, Pana
> They say you like cassava
> I getti big cassava
> Baby, Pana
> My love for you will never die, will never die

Herein, Tekno deploys an infantilizing tone–pervasive in much of the lyrical content analyzed in this study–to endearingly address the woman he refers to as 'Pana' in the song. He goes on to assure the woman that anywhere she goes, he will follow her before he admits that it has come to his attention

that this woman enjoys consuming cassava (a cassava is an elongated, cone-shaped, brown root vegetable usually of notable length and girth). It is with this knowledge about her apparent like for cassava, that Tekno informs her that he is in possession of a big cassava, and then finally proclaims his undying love for this woman.

This musician engages in the promotion of a sexualized masculine expression that is sustained through lyrics portraying him as a man who is in state of loving and sexually satisfying his love interest. Here, Tekno deploys a food item as a metaphor to refer to the penis, particularly. Due to her said fondness for penis, Tekno makes it known to this woman that he has a large penis; seemingly attempting to convince her that he makes for an ideal sexual partner, as a result of this claim. Herewith, Tekno demonstrates a representational trope within the Afrobeats music videos analyzed, that emphasizes and maintains particularly sexualized masculinities expressed by men from socioculturally diverse African backgrounds in the service of male supremacy. Such pursuits, I suggest, uphold men's superiority and a misogynistic undermining of women as merely passive receivers of men's (sexual) provision and pleasure when considered through the domain of sexual expression and intimate relationships.

This kind of creative language use to indicate sexual prowess on the part of the men in the corpus of music videos analyzed in this paper, is not lost on consumers of this music. As evidenced in the corpus of YouTube comments analyzed alongside the music videos, viewers reproduce these discourses in the comments section; legitimizing and elevating the sexualized masculinities perpetuated in these music videos.

> "Looks like Tekno has given Cassava a whole new meaning. Lol. Loving this song so far." (username: "Maka Velli")
>
> "828 niggas who can't provide big cassava for their bebs ["babes"] dislike this life saving song ? Y'all should pana, Tekno gat big cassava for y'all bebs ["babes"]." (username: "RElindid Ayuk")
>
> "Only guys with big Cassava like this comment !" (username: "PassyPom Official")
>
> "am totally looking for someone with a big cassava not a carrot please help me out" (username: "Carol C")

Here, we can see how men are either superiorized or inferiorized based on perceptions of penis size–which is directly linked to sexual satisfaction. "Maka Velli"—who humorously (given the use of the acronym "LOL," meaning "laughing out loud") shares–that s/he loves this song, makes us aware that the artist has repurposed the meaning of the word cassava. As suggested above, Tekno"s use of the word in this song, has been sexualized; thus, dissociating it from its intended food-related, literal meaning.

Accepted, by viewers of this music video, as a symbol of a man's sexual organ, the cassava is used by "RElindid Ayuk" to ridicule men who are perceived to be unable to live up to the size expectations linked to the penis in relation to women (or "babes", as this viewer refers to them). According to this viewer, when they were writing this comment on YouTube, there were "828 niggas [in some black youth cultures, the term "nigga" is sometimes casually used to refer to men]" who disliked the music video because they are unable to present a large enough penis to their lovers/women, risking the chance of losing said women to the likes of men such as Tekno who claim to have large penises. It is through this kind of reasoning that hierarchized forms of masculinities are sustained in the minds of consumers of these music videos; perpetuating, as a result, divisive comments which celebrate a particular kind of superiority of some men over others. In this case, it is suggested that the most desirable man is ". . .someone with a big cassava [large penis] not a carrot [smaller penis]. . .", as "Carol C" expressly shares.

Further evidence of a sexualized, partly misogynistic, masculine expression on the part of the featured men over the featured women's bodies, can be observed in the lyrics excerpt below. The following lyrical contents are taken form Davido's second verse in the song, "Aye" (Davido, 2014):

> The baddest!
> Baby girl you the baddest
> Oya shakee your asset
> Make e man no go forget

Referring to her as "baby girl" in what is, yet again, evidence of an infantilising tone, Davido appeals to the woman to "shakee your asset"; using colloquial English to instruct the lady that she must gyrate her "assets". The word "asset", in this context, refers to the woman's posterior or buttocks. For doing what is asked of her, the woman is hailed as "the baddest". Her "badness" is emphasised in a positive manner, expressing warranted badness that is encouraged by Davido who claims that by being "the baddest", the woman will be unforgettable to men, specifically. She is unforgettably good in her expression of 'badness' to a point where, by shaking her buttocks as requested by a man, she will be able to "[m]ake e man no go forget"—this pidgin English phrase can be translated as an affirmation to the woman that her movement of her "assets" will render her memorable or unforgettable to a man—in this case, Davido. This woman's expression of her femininity is at once hypersexualised and controlled by a male other who, by getting her to oblige to his misogynistic instructions, exercises dominance over her. Relegating her to a position of servitude in her femininity. This is a position of servitude that unlocks several perks and benefits for the complying woman. Most significant of all, is social capital attached to mere proximity to the masculinities in these music videos, constructed as particularly wealthy, sexually potent, and emotionally transparent about their undying love for the women they pursue.

Very strikingly, however–and in notable dissent to existing literature on masculinities in popular (black) male-dominated musical genres such as rap and hip-hop–the multi-faceted expressions of masculinities evident in the music videos analyzed for this article, engender a very overt romanticism intricately implicated in notable counter-stereotypical work,

encouraging somewhat of a myth-debunking potential. This romanticism is mediated by a particularly gentle and non-violent overtone that renders these masculinities physically non-threatening to the femininities with which the screen is shared. Therefore, in spite of their implicit misogynistic behaviors, the observed masculinities appear to equally value genuine romantic love built on foundations of fidelity.

Acts of romantic love and commitment–in their very explicitly heteronorm-conforming iterations–are consistently depicted in the Afrobeats music videos analyzed in this paper. To exemplify this, let us consider the narrative progression of the song "Bank Alert" by P-Square (2016). The music video predominantly makes use of three modes of representation to communicate a romantic love story between a boyfriend (played by a member of P-Square) and his supposed girlfriend. These modes are visual, textual and oral.

Visually–in the opening scene of the music video–the couple are depicted as underprivileged Nigerian youngsters having a conversation against the backdrop of what appears to be a property that still requires renovation as the plastering on the walls appears to be patchy and unfinished (communicating financial/economic struggle). The filmic technique of a black-and-white visual filter adds to emphasize this sense of underprivilege or poverty. In this briefly mediated oral conversation, the man is informing the woman that he needs to go abroad for a year so as to go and better his life. He then makes a promise to the woman that he will be back in one year's time especially for her, and then reassures her of his love for her. The almost inaudible background music layered beneath the visuals in this scene, includes lyrics such as "I belong to you, you belong to me . . . And I'll be missing you, missing you yeah . . . ". The amalgamation of these various modes gives the scene a slight air of innocent love and romance.

To communicate a time lapse in the narrative, written text is used over the image-based visuals of what appears to be moving clouds to inform the viewer that about five years have passed since that conversation between the two young lovers had unfolded. This time, a colour-based visual filter is used by the editors of this music video to signify recency and, to an extent, a change in the narrative. What happens next in the narrative–supported by the lyrical content of the song–is indicative of a portrayal of a particularly romance-oriented masculine expression on the part of the protagonist man in the music video. Although not within the time range promised, the man eventually *does* return to Nigeria and is adamant to ask for his girlfriend's hand in marriage to demonstrate his undying love for her. He is now visibly affluent (denoted by scenes of him traveling back in a private jet). And thus, pledges his love for her while promising to financially take care of this woman (true to form to the kind of breadwinner-based masculinities prevalent in the music videos analyzed) should she say yes to his marriage proposal. Affluence, it seems, is deployed here as a tangible catalytic mode to express romanticism. Below, I closely consider the following excerpt of lyrics in Pidgin English from this song:

> Today na today eh,
>
> and when I finish you go no say na me
>
> As you dey they delay eh, to proof my love, you must to chop my money eeh

Across several of the richly diverse cultures in Nigeria, when a couple are set to get married, a date is set for when the fiancé–with his family and friends–are expected to conspicuously expend money and gifts to his parents-in-law-to-be while the bride-to-be watches on at a distance. Through the lyrics presented above, Paul (who portrays the protagonist) boasts about his excitement for that day where he will "proof" his love.

This, to an extent, communicates that the African men in these music videos possess an endearing regard for women as more than just objects of their sexual desires. The multimodal discourses evident in the Afrobeats music videos analyzed, socially construct and sustain such romance-oriented masculinities that thrive on manhood being expressed through grand romantic gestures toward women. The culturally and linguistically diverse African men depicted in these music videos are largely portrayed (especially through the song lyrics) as commitment-driven, family oriented, loyal and capable of offering infinite romantic love to the women they get romantically involved with, as long as these women successfully conform to conventional gender roles which allow men's dominance over them. Seemingly at play here, then, are striking forms of benevolently sexist and implicitly misogynistic advances of men's superiority that are partly veiled by, and mediated through, romanticism.

It is against this backdrop, that I argue for the consideration of a gender-relational cultural sensibility I am coining misogyrom. This term combines the concepts of "misogyny" and "romanticism" to argue for the reading of gender relations that present a notable masking of misogynistic expressions of "manhood" with overdramaticized forms of romanticism toward women. I thus also propose the term as a conceptual lens through which to consider men's (and by extension, women's) performativities that are at once implicated in the perpetuation of misogynistic imbalanced gender power relations and undeniable hyper-romanticism and compassion from (heterosexual) men toward women. Should we apply the concept of misogyrom in the context of the music video texts analyzed in this paper, it is apparent that idealized (heterosexual) expressions of "manhood" are sustained along inherently sexist and misogynistic expressions of men's superiority and dominance while (in)advertently encouraging the egalitarian treatment of women by valuing them as more than mere objects of men's sexual satisfaction, but romantic partners with value more than that which a patriarchal male gaze had historically often relegated to *just* physical appearance. This, I argue, presents the social construction of masculinities implicated in a misogyrom sensibility.

The misogyrom-aligning masculinities pervasive in the analyzed music videos, present a striking dialectic which, when closely analyzed, is much more regressive than beneficial to the feminist plight toward gender equality, in the domains of, but not limited to, sexuality and intimacy. The two sides to this dialectic involve extreme romanticism on the one hand, and notable

misogyny on the other. In their active visual and lyrics-based overdramatisations of romanticism through their endearing lyrics and storylines, symbolizing genuine emotional connectedness to women beyond superficial goals to score sexual favors, the masculinities in these music videos garner adulation from consumers of these texts. These comments of adulation, from YouTube viewers of these music videos, laud these men as the epitomes of exemplary (African) manhood while being oblivious to the ways in which these masculine expressions maintain patriarchy and misogyny.

> "You guys did our culture justice in this video! This should be a lesson to all the young men who make a success of their lives! Come back home and get your chocolate bride!!!!!!! LOVE YOU ALL FOR THIS VIDEO!!!!!!" (username: Kwini Souleimane)
>
> "While African singers are singing love and much more for the black woman, our bother and sis in the US OF A are denigrating black woman...." (username: PHONE master)

In their comment on the music video for the song "Bank Alert" by P-Square, "Kwini Souleimane," expresses what appears to be an appreciation toward P-Square for "doing justice" to their culture (presumably, Igbo culture–given the fact that the men making up the musical ensemble of P-Square are ethnically of Igbo descent). This viewer goes on to suggest that the contents of this music video capture a lesson that "all young men who make a success of their lives" should learn. The lesson being, that "all young men" who embark on greener pasture pursuits away from home, should return–once financially secure–and "get" their bride. While evidently heteropatriarchal and sexist in its suggestion that women are objects that men should "get" and lead into the heteronormative institution of marriage, this viewer's comment makes us aware that they find such kinds of gestures from men to be romantic. Such romantic gestures by the Igbo, or Yoruba, or African men in the music videos analyzed, are lauded because they show that "[w]hile African singers are singing love and much more for the black woman, our bother and sis in the US OF A are denigrating black woman", shares another viewer. Thus, placing black African men, in the minds of viewers of these Afrobeats music videos, in a favourable position as being non-violent toward women, romantic and full of love.

It is precisely the overdramatisations of romanticism in these music videos that conceal the dark side of the dialectic sensibility of misogyrom. As a result, what partly prevails is an effective distraction from the misogyny these masculinities equally embody which, when left unchallenged, may perpetuate the naive absolving of patriarchy from its toxic nature in relation to the just and empowering sociocultural treatment of women across various sociocultural domains, but most especially the domains of sexuality and intimate relations. Even so, are possibilities of women's empowerment non-existent within the multimodal discourses of the Afrobeats musical genre? Below, I discover–through a post-feminist lens–that the picture is perhaps not so bleak.

EMPOWERED, AGENTIC AND SELF-DETERMINING AFRICAN WOMEN? A POST-FEMINIST READING OF PERFORMATIVE FEMININITIES IN AFROBEATS MUSIC VIDEOS

In their capacities as "featured characters" across the music video texts analyzed for this paper, women's bodies depicted alongside the male musicians dominating this musical genre, are variously subjected to black African male gazes/"looks". Acts of looking have been theorized as powerful and value-laden. As such, the notion of "the gaze" is weaved into the conceptual framework of this article given the visual nature of the study's primary data. Gazing/looking is, in psychoanalytic terms, a key aspect involved in the construction of particular subjectivities and their sexual and gender identity formations. This gaze, to follow Mulvey (1975); Mulvey (1989), partly takes on power-related manifestations through fetishism and voyeurism. Fetishism, from a psychoanalytic perspective, refers to a process whereby a viewing subject displaces their (sexual) energy, "urges," and desires onto another object outside said viewing subject (Hall, 2013: 256). This is done as a means to (sub)consciously confront laden fantasies that the viewing subject may be "faced with" on a psychological level. Due to the intangible nature of desire-driven fantasy, an individual physicalizes their desires, curiosities, and urges, by using another physical object to represent those desires, curiosities and urges (Hall, 2013: 256).

The "object" that eventually becomes the replacement of the looker's unseen, intangible desires and fantasies, is gazed upon as a reassuring, non-threatening, passive object of display; strategically positioned as a spectacle "in an intimate relation to the spectator" (Rose, 2001: 111). In the context of film, as an example, creators deploy certain filmic techniques to encourage a fetishistic gaze. These include, among others, the use of camera angles: framing through close-up shots, medium-shots, wide-shots and deliberately timed shots that often exclude everything from the viewer's gaze except the body, or parts of the body (buttocks, bosom, thigs, face etc) of, more often, the female characters (Rose, 2001). The Afrobeats music videos analyzed in this paper–as themselves short, film-like narrative-driven texts–similarly deploy filmic techniques to spatially position women in ways that encourage notable fetishistic gazes over said women's bodies often by the domineering black African men pervasive in these texts. Thereby, fostering a sense of voyeurism on the part of said men featured in these music videos, as well as the viewers actively consuming these texts across various screens.

Voyeurism, as simplified by Rose (2001; drawing from Mulvey, 1989), refers to a way of actively looking at a distanced object that is objectified by the looker, at a distance ensuring that the viewed object is not aware of this gaze. This gaze possesses a certain control that may, at times, even be sadistic in its motif (Rose, 2001). In film, this is a look often exclusively given to (heterosexual) men, whether as characters in the film or as audience member viewing the film (Rose, 2001: 110). Mulvey's early postulations (1975; 1989) argued that voyeurism is

produced by the visio-spatial organization of a film, relying on particular tools of compositional interpretation (Rose, 2001: 110). Such tools of compositional interpretation include, and are not limited to, the placing of (physical) distance between the male and female protagonists of a film (or music video, in the context of this article); as well as placing (physical) distance between the female protagonist of a film/music video and the audience (Rose, 2001: 110).

Considering the three "kinds of look (ing)" that visual texts promote: 1) the look stemming from the camera to the event/scene; 2) the look existing between the characters portrayed through the action in, for the purpose of this study, the music videos; 3) as well as the look stemming from the spectator to the 'action' on screen (Nixon et al., 2013: 314), broader sociocultural implications that said (gendered) "kinds of looking" have on the social construction of particular expressions of 'femaleness' as a gender performance, may be interrogated (Butler, 1990).

Across the corpus of analyzed music videos, the camera persistently assumes the position of the gazer/spectator who is seemingly imagined to be a heterosexual man, able to derive visual and erotic pleasure from fetishizing parts of the women's bodies hypervisibilized in these music videos. By strategically focusing on, and directing viewer attention to focus predominantly on specific body parts of the women (instead of the women's bodies as a whole), Afrobeats music video directors and editors sustain this fetishizing culture because "[the] substitution of a *part* for the *whole,* of a thing–an object, an organ, a portion of the body–for a *subject*, is the effect of a very important representational practice–*fetishism*" (Hall, 2013: 256).

Women's buttocks, their lower body parts: hips, thighs/legs and inguinal/groin area and breast area are subjected to close-up shots that overtly drive viewer attention to these body parts that are socio-culturally understood and accepted as sexual body parts. By so doing, spectators of this visual simulacra are afforded the opportunity to take part in this fetishistic culture that (sexually) objectifies the woman's body for the satisfaction of (heterosexual) male gazes. This way, viewers may arguably be invited to glean erotic satisfaction, among other things, through their engagement with these Afrobeats music videos.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the conversational tones undergirding the analyzed viewer comments do not problematize this noted sexual objectification of black women's bodies in the analyzed music videos. Instead, viewers expressly celebrate the hypersexualized women's bodies in these texts. Consider comments contributed by viewers such as "d_won1" who comments on black women's physical appearance by posing the question, "Why are Black women just so gorgeous? #melaninpoppin." Other such comments include those by viewers such as "Lei Shay," "Daniel Shamu," and "Barwaago Aden" who, similarly, pass commentary that directly speak to the perceived beauty of black women:

> "omg, black girls are so beautiful" (username: "Lei Shay")
>
> "Black women are beautiful fam damn" (username: "Daniel Shamu")
>
> "too much beauty in one video ?❤?. black sisters are slaying ?." (username: "Barwaaqo Aden")."

These comments explicitly link these viewers' perceptions of beauty to the black women's bodies hypersexualized in these music videos. The sexually objectified black women in the music videos are described in ways that not only emphasize their physical appearance, but at times also places them on a symbolic pedestal that linguistically portrays them as the epitome of beauty to a point where they are described as magical and perfect "creations." See, for instance, the extracted comments from viewers below:

> "The girls in this video are all GOALS! Black women, we're a gift to the world!" (username: "Simply Shanice")
>
> "Black women are one of God's most perfect creations? #blackgirlmagic" (username: "being sashyka")

Viewers are expressive about their admiration for the featured black women and their perceived beauty. We can see, then, how a culture of sexualized fetishism by creators of these music videos is successfully internalized by viewers of these music videos.

This process of fetishistic objectification as an expression of internal (sexual) desires emerges dominantly in the Afrobeats music videos analyzed for this research paper. These fetishistic gazes bestowed particularly upon women's bodies are sustained through the encouragement of a voyeuristic way of looking at the women featured in these music videos. The Afrobeats music videos analyzed in this paper highlight particularly active black African male gazes that variously objectify women's bodies by actively distancing themselves from the bodies being look at.

Consider **Figure 3**, from the music video for the song "Fall" by Davido (2017b). The female character featured in the video–wearing only a black bodysuit and ankle socks–is subjected to a voyeuristic (male) gaze that actively situates Davido (the gazing subject) at a distance which allows him to enjoy a pleasure in seeing. That pleasure is derived, firstly, from being able to see and potentially fetishize what is being seen. Secondly, pleasure is derived from the fact that the person being gazed upon is unaware of this gaze and may not threaten the gazer by returning the gaze. In the video, Davido is physically distancing himself from the woman and in sheer voyeuristic fashion, he is 'hidden' in the darkness of the evening while the woman being looked at is illuminated by the light in the dance studio she is inside of.

Through these visio-spatial organisations of these Afrobeats music videos as short filmic narratives, particular relational ties between men (masculinities) and women (femininities) are constructed and sustained. One significant relational ideology sustained here, is that women's right to privacy is less valued, and thus exposes them to situations of being more prone to violation in their unjust position as ancillary sexual objects. Having grappled with these visual portrayals, it is apparent that the representational conventions in the visual culture captured by the analyzed Afrobeats music videos, sustain partly misogynistic gender relations that thrive on the hetero-erotic objectification of

FIGURE 3 | Afrobeats artist, Davido, depicted as voyeuristically watching a woman dancing in a well-lit dance studio [screenshot taken from *Fall (Official Music Video):* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lyuym-Gci0].

women's bodies specifically for a voyeuristic black African male gaze. These gender relations are implicated in particularly disempowering effects to women. It is disempowering to women in that, the depicted women's bodies are significantly positioned as lacking in terms of being multifaceted, culturally influential and able to embody leadership as opposed to servitude. This, as burgeoning feminist scholarships have theorized, disempowers women and strips them off their agency as it relates to their expressions of sexuality and femininity.

Considered through a post-feminist lens, however, notions of women's dis-empowerment as a result of powerful (heterosexual) desiring male gazes, are notably disrupted in how the diverse African women featured in the selection of analyzed music videos appear to actively use their sexualities and femininities in various scenes to exercise considerable power over the protagonist men co-featured in these music videos. These featured women engage in what may be read as an active claiming of their sociocultural power over restrictive patriarchal conditions, especially in the domains of (heterosexual) intimacy and romantic gender relations. As such, considerably pervasive in the corpus of analyzed music videos, are young, attractive, heterosexual African woman who are depicted as "knowingly and deliberately play [ing] with [their] sexual power" (Gill, 2008: 41) in ways that see them partly exercise control over the featured (domineering) men in the diverse hyperreal narratives characterized by the plot progressions in these music videos. These expressions of feminine sexuality and femininity are closely aligned with what Gill (2008) describes as a postfeminist-aligned 'midriff' sensibility, as discussed in the sub-section below.

Post-Feminist Media Cultures and the "Midriff" Sensibility

Theorized as knowingly using her body, appearance, and sexuality to exercise her (sexual) agency more assertively, the post-feminist-entangled "midriff" woman is described as unapologetic about her sexual power and ability to (freely) use her body as a means to socioculturally, and otherwise, advance or benefit herself. So notes Gill (2008: 41):

The midriffs might be thought of as a generation of girls and young women in their teens and 20's in the 1990's, but midriff also refers to a *sensibility* characterized by a specific constellation of attitudes toward the body, sexual expression and gender relations.

Tracing a midriff sensibility in advertising media, Gill (2008) notes four central themes characterizing this cultural sensibility. These four themes, Gill suggests, are "an emphasis upon the body, a shift from objectification to sexual subjectification, a pronounced discourse of choice and autonomy, and an emphasis upon empowerment" (2008: 41). With respect to its emphasis on the body, the midriff sensibility places considerable value on women's bodies as their key sociocultural capital. In contemporary media cultures, "it is now possession of a "sexy body" that is presented as women's key source of identity" (Gill, 2008: 42). Her success and attractiveness are deemed viable when she convincingly self-manages her body to maintain it in a suitably toned, waxed, scented and dressed (or perhaps under-dressed) condition (Bordo, 1993; Gill, 2008).

Secondly, the ways in which women's bodies are represented in (often semi-erotic texts) in popular media forms, had also experienced a notable shift. "Where once sexualized representations of women in the media presented them as passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze, today women are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their (implicitly "liberated") interests to do so" (Gill, 2008: 42). Crucial to these two cultural shifts as they relate to women and their bodies, is an explicit linkage thereof to notions of freedom and choice on the part of women. Herein, women in popular media forms are presented as knowingly negating men's approval and instead doing things to please and benefit themselves, "and, in so doing, they "just happen to win men's admiration"" (Gill, 2007: 42; Gill, 2008).

I briefly focus on the plot progression in one of the analyzed music videos to demonstrate traces of a midriff-aligned feminine expression by the protagonist woman character. The central plot around which the narrative in the music video for the song "Collabo" by P-Square (2015) and Don Jazzy develops, is that of

an infatuation-driven pursual–by three men (portraying the three protagonists)—of the same woman who appears to be their superior at their depicted workplace. This woman is portrayed in a multifaceted manner where she is depicted as a powerful professional, managing the company for which these men work. She is, for instance, depicted in boardroom scenes that indicate a sense of influence and superiority embodied through how she "leads" the meetings in said boardroom scenes. Even so, she is still sexually objectified through several camera shots that frame an explicit focus on her buttocks, thighs and cleavage area as the music video progresses.

The three protagonist men engage in several attempts at catching this woman's attention to their advances without any form of intimidating coercion. As such, she may be read as not directly undermined or stripped of her agency to actively reject these men's advances–communicating, implicitly, a sense of non-hostility from the men who are evidently behaving in ways that may be deemed emasculating depending on which lens of hegemonic masculinity you view it through. The woman remains in control of her sexuality and status of power, and eventually uses the very sexual advances made by all three men to lure them into doing some of her work-based tasks that seem to have piled up, given her presumed senior position in the portrayed company. She is depicted, then, as quite powerful and self-determining in her reliance on her physical and sexual attractiveness–regarded in post-feminist, midriff-aligned feminine performances as social capital (Gill, 2008)—to benefit her in her professional progression.

Additionally, also central to a midriff cultural sensibility–alongside notions of agentic choice and pleasing of the self on the part of women–is the discursive thematic of female/feminine empowerment. Gill (2008) demonstrates how a discourse of feminine empowerment prevails in how advertising targeted at women creatively "sell" the promise of self-esteem and confidence. Women are interpellated in contemporary advertising, aligned along a midriff sensibility, as powerful in their sexualized femininities. Power in their sexualized femininities means that women who internalize a midriff sensibility are encouraged to recognize their sexual power "to bring men to their knees" (Gill, 2008: 43). There is a particular "power femininity" that thrives within post-feminist cultural formations that reassures women that "feminist struggles have ended," and complete equality for all women is an achieved reality; therefore, women can "have it all", should they so choose (Lazar, 2006; Gill, 2007; Gill, 2008).

Quite similar to the storyline depicted in the "Collabo" music video analyzed earlier, the plot line for the "Chop My Money" music video by P-Square (2012), also partly revolves around several men's pursuits of the same woman. The artists featured on the song–Paul, Peter, Akon and May-D–portray the protagonist men in romantic pursuit of the same woman, although without their knowledge. In pursuit of this woman, the four men are portrayed as engaging in quite explicit forms of romanticism often mediated by various forms of "breadwinnerism" and wealth expending. I borrow the term "breadwinnerism" from sociological studies that have used it to capture the normative expectation on men–in a dominant patriarchal cultural formation–to be financial and material providers (Akanle et al., 2014; Alliyu and Adedeji 2016). The central female character–spotting a toned figure, flawless skin and cleavage close-ups in several scenes–is, as a result, the recipient of unrestricted luxurious material commodities (luxury cars, expensive shopping sprees and access to premium credit cards) from each of these men in their attempts at securing her romantic interest.

In a very self-determining fashion, this woman is depicted as agentic in her eventual decision to outright reject all four of the men pursuing her, without any hostile consequences that may expose her to any form of harm from any of the men involved. The men respectfully accept their fates because, upon finding out that this woman "played" all of them by not giving into any of their advances while enjoying all the materialistic "perks" and eventually choosing to be with a different man altogether, they collectively acknowledge their misfortune, and thus leave the woman be. At the end of this music video, many a viewer would agree that the protagonist woman in this music video manged to successfully ". . .bring [those] men to their knees" (Gill, 2008: 43). Her agency and control over her body, thus, are not threatened, one may argue. Thereby positioning her, in the minds of the viewer, as empowered and confident enough to use her sexual power as a means to 'have it all' (Gill, 2008).

Further "empowered femininity" can also be read in the narrative progression for the music video, 'No kissing', by Patoranking (2016) and Sarkodie. This music video's plot revolves around a young heterosexual couple in love. The protagonist man, played by Patoranking, and his romantic partner are quite evidently in what seems to be a loving relationship. Patoranking even goes as far as claiming to be fully appreciative of this love to such an extent that he behaves quite "gentleman-like" in that he exercises extreme self-restraint with regard to his sexual urges toward his love interest. He communicates this by assuring the woman that for as long as she refuses to engage in sexual activity with him, he will not force her into it. Consider this excerpt of lyrics from the song:

> If you no gimme [give me], I no go take
> Only your love I appreciate
> If you no gimme, I no go take
> Baby girl let's relate

Without actually saying it outright, Patoranking, with these lyrics, assures the woman that if she is not going to "give" him, he is not going to take. That is to say, he will practice self-control instead of forcefully 'taking' with regards to sexual intercourse. If it is only her love she has to offer now, that is fine with him–he appreciates her love. While implicitly quite misogynistic in its underlying insinuation that, as a man, he *should* be "given" what he wants from a woman and should thus be celebrated for not forcefully taking it from her; it is the superficial sentiment veiling the misogyny that may be read as romantic in that he may be seen as going against the grain of violent masculinities that would have typically *demanded* intimacy from the woman. It would seem, in this case, that the woman is rendered a very accommodating

space to agentically determine the rules/expectations in this relationship because she confidently dictates that, in this relationship, there shall be:

No kissing baby
No touching baby
No kissing baby
And don't call me baby

Here, it is apparent, that the woman is depicted as being in control of what happens to her body in the domains of sexuality and intimate relations. Thereby, arming her with "power femininity" (Gill, 2008: 43).

Having demonstrated how gender relations are depicted in the multimodal discourses of a select few Afrobeats music videos, I will now show how the dialectic gender-relational sensibility of misogyrom–that I propose underscores these gendered depictions in the analyzed music videos–offers an empowering potential as it relates to women through these hyperreal depictions. However, I wish to argue, these readings of women's empowerment, agency and self-determination, are more of a social façade effectively mediated and pseudo-legitimized by discourses of extreme romanticism in tandem with a post-feminist sensibility which–if taken at face value–may encourage the uncritical absolving of heteropatriarchy from its deeply toxic nature toward women's actual sociocultural advancement and just treatment in the domains of sexuality, intimacy and romantic relationships. Essentially, the *actual* power remains firmly in the hands of men.

THE FAÇADE OF THE EMPOWERED, AGENTIC AND SELF-DETERMINING WOMAN IN AFROBEATS MUSIC VIDEOS: THE INTERSECTION OF POST-FEMINISM AND MISOGYROM

Misogyrom as a gender-relational sensibility pervasive in the corpus of Afrobeats music videos analyzed in this research paper, variously mediates the constructions of femininities in these texts; as it does masculinities per my arguments earlier in the paper. As an underlying sensibility across the diverse gender relations depicted in the analyzed music videos, a misogyrom sensibility is effective in fostering flexible ground for the expression of what may appear to be post-feminist aligned, self-determining femininities. Due to its cultivation of romantic and compassionate gender-relational atmospheres (while still inherently misogynistic in its cultural superiorizing of men), misogyrom allows room for the pushback against the rigidity of patriarchy in its largely denigratory treatment of women compared to men, even in the context of intimate heterosexual relationships and expression of sexuality.

Sustained through active, and perhaps inadvertent, performances of ideal "manhood" that conceal misogyny and sexism with overtly courteous acts of romanticism that, on the surface, appear to be void of violence and hostility, a misogyrom sensibility appears to render women a "safe space" to assert their agency, across the domains of intimacy and sexual expression. The femininities featured in the analyzed texts assert their perceived agency by, for instance, being depicted as confidently assessing, rejecting and generally being critical of the courtship attempts from the "parading" masculinities who, as chauvinistic patriarchal norms would dictate, would typically resort to exercising dominance by forcefully convincing women into accepting their courtship advances.

Here, interestingly, despite the arrogant visual and lyrics-based emphasis on their wealth, physical "sexiness" and strength, as well as their self-proclaimed sexual prowess, the diverse masculinities pervasive in the corpus of music videos analyzed, are constructed as particularly *not* demanding control over the attention and affection of the women to which they are pleading romantic love. They come across, especially through their lyrical content, as not expressing entitlement over women's bodies. This is an observation that may be appreciated by several pockets of feminist scholars (Sommers-Flanagan et al., 1993; McRobbie, 2004; Bretthauer et al., 2007; Mowatt et al., 2013; Ligaga, 2014; Ligaga, 2020 etc) who have partly spoken truth to power as it relates to heteropatriarchal men and their relationships with women's bodies.

Being variously implicated in misogyrom, the masculinities centralized in the analyzed music videos, are saliently depicted as exerting overt emotional labor in pursuit of romantic relations with the women they wish to court. This emotional labor is partly also manifesting as "peacocking" behavior that these men engage in. Peacocking, as some relationship "experts" explain through circular and popular discourse, is something men do so as to emphasize what they perceive are their strong attributes in order to stand out from their 'competition' in their pursuits to attract women (Hayes, 2019). In so doing, the peacocking man invests significant emotional labor while trying to convince his love interest as to why he is the best choice of romantic partner.

It is in this egotistical parading of themselves as "ideal" lovers and "providers," that these masculinities portrayed in the analyzed music videos, appear to engage in symbolic forms of self-auctioning which may come across as though the critical and sexualized gaze and its inherent power is shifted from masculine subjectivities to feminine subjectivities. This is so in that the (powerful?) feminine subjectivities, in such instances of men's peacocking, are invited to temporarily bear the active gaze as targets of the self-auctionineering done by the men. In the context of the visual data, the female characters actively pursued and serenaded by the peacocking male characters in the analyzed music videos, may appear as if temporarily empowered in that they are seemingly rendered an examinatory gaze to counter-objectify these men. The counter-objectification could be perceived to exist in moments when the courted woman actively "assesses" her peacocking pursuer to make a decision on whether or not he is worthy of her attention and affection. Once having "decided" on a suitable suitor, the women featured in many of the music videos analyzed, are overtly assured of their value as partners through romantic discourses of infinite love, affection and fidelity, communicated by the protagonist men in

these videos through their song lyrics, especially. The women are showered with romanticism and are made to feel they can, for instance, confidently dictate that there shall be "no kissing" and "no touching" (or sexual activity) until such a time when *they* are ready. This relates to post-feminist sensibilities which appear to afford women the freedom to be assertive in their sexualities. Just by this sheer sense of agency afforded them in regard their bodies, they may be seen as somewhat empowered in the domains of sexuality and intimate relations involving their bodies.

What, then, does one make of this complex dialectic of misogyrom intersecting with post-feminist sensibilities, at play in the visual culture of the Afrobeats music videos analyzed, where women are quite evidently treated with respect, adoration and an atmosphere for sexual agency on the one hand; while equally denigrated to disempowering positions of oversexualized object of men's erotic pleasure? A useful pursuit, I'm convinced, is to seek out where the power *actually* lies in these misogyrom sociocultural relations–variously implicated in post-feminist sensibilities–among men and women as depicted in the analyzed selection of music videos. That way, a more reflexive observation can be made about potentially how far the multiplicity of feminist agendas toward equal power division among men and women in the domains of sexuality and intimate relationships, among others, have come, and how effective have feminist discourses been in inspiring the young, cosmopolitan youths participating in the production of these popular cultural texts in contemporary Africa, to promote gender-relational equality and the just treatment of women in the domains of sexuality, intimacy and romantic relationships. In that vein, I argue that, regardless of the evident alignment with post-feminist formations about empowered women, the power still firmly lies in the hands of the men featured in these music videos in their capacities as cultural chaperones of heteropatriarchy.

This is most evident in two ways. Firstly, it is the featured men who remain in positions of dominance over women and their sexual expressions by non-coercively encouraging the sexualization of women in how they sing about these women's "assets" (buttocks), for instance. For Davido (2014) to, for example, "romantically" instruct his love interest to gyrate her buttocks for his pleasure, and she obliging to the request; he wields power over her. This is a level of power that may go unnoticed because of how effectively Davido veils it with overly romanticized expressions of love, fidelity and adoration toward the woman.

Secondly, we have seen that the analyzed masculinities thrive on asserting their dominance and superiority by overtly parading their wealth, social status and positions as ideal breadwinners. It is in these narcissistic expressions of masculinities that these featured men co-construct femininities that are shown as voluntarily taking on gender roles of (sexual) servitude and willing beneficiaries of men's provision, rescue out of economic constraint, and sexual satisfaction. The sub-text of such gender-relational depictions then, once again, places sociocultural power squarely in the hands of men.

To help sum up my argument, I briefly draw on a study undertaken by Dunu and Ugbo (2015) in Nigeria, focusing on the music lyrics of Afrobeats artist, Flavor, as they relate to women and their bodies. In a focus group discussion about the nature of Flavor's musical lyrics in regard to women, a female respondent alluded to an interesting observation which captures particularly what my theorization of misogyrom partly proposes. As Dunu and Ugbo (2015: 46) aptly summarise:

The women pointed out that although most of Flavor's songs tend to adore, praise and make women prominent; it only creates false pretence of empowerment that only serves to secure the woman for the man's satisfaction and fulfilment.

It is such observations that help us see the toxic nature of romanticism in its attempt to guize misogyny and thereby re-assert heteropatriarchal, sexist social cues to debase women through a "false pretence of empowerment" in the domains of sexuality and intimate relationships.

CONCLUSION

This article has placed focus on Afrobeats; a globally popularizing musical genre of African origin. This musical genre is widely consumed by transnational audiences; resulting in the music videos produced by artists from this scene, reaching YouTube viewership figures ranging in the hundreds of millions. As such, this article considered these Global South popular cultural texts as valuable conduits through which to critically examine contemporary social constructions and performances of gender and politically charged meanings of "womanhood" in relation to "manhood" as implicated as they are in heteropatriarchal collective African cultural worldviews. The paper situated this musical genre's multimodal discourses, specifically as they relate to gender and sexuality, within a broader post-feminist discourse about women's (sexual) empowerment, agency and self-determination.

By first offering a critical reading of performances of masculinities in the corpus of nine music videos, the article was able to demonstrate the catalytic nature of masculine performativities on performances of "womanhood"/ femininities in these music video texts. Masculine performativities, I have argued, are implicated in a misogyrom sensibility which fosters gender-relational expressions that are at once implicated in the perpetuation of misogynistic imbalanced gender power relations and undeniable hyper-romanticism and compassion from (heterosexual) men toward women. As such, expressions of "manhood" in the analyzed music videos are sustained along inherently sexist and misogynistic atmospheres of men's superiority and dominance while (in)advertently encouraging the egalitarian treatment of women by lyrically valuing them as more than mere objects of men's sexual satisfaction, but romantic partners with value more than that which a patriarchal male gaze had historically often relegated to *just* physical appearance. What this does, also, is allow a post-feminist sensibility to appear valuable and actively at-work in how the women are partly depicted.

In that vein, I argue that, regardless of the evident alignment with post-feminist formations about empowered women, the sociocultural power still firmly lies in the hands of the men featured in these music videos in their capacities as cultural

chaperones of heteropatriarchy. It is the featured men who–through consistent misogyrom–remain in positions of dominance over women and their sexual expressions by non-coercively encouraging the hypersexualization of women in how these men sing about these women's bodies. Additionally, the featured men assert their dominance and superiority by overtly parading their wealth, social status and positions as ideal breadwinners in the analyzed music videos. It is in these narcissistic expressions of masculinities that these featured men co-construct femininities that are shown as voluntarily taking on gender roles of (sexual) servitude and willing beneficiaries of men's provision, rescue out of economic constraint, and sexual satisfaction. The sub-text of such gender-relational depictions then, once again, places sociocultural power squarely in the hands of men. By veiling these sexist advances with hyper-romanticism, the featured men implicitly debase women through a "false pretence of empowerment" (Dunu and Ugbo 2015) in the domains of sexuality and intimate relationships, as mediated in the corpus of music videos analyzed in this study.

I argue, then, that traces of post-feminist cultural sensibilities in tandem with a misogyrom sensibility–encouraging a reading of women as empowered and agentic in the analyzed music videos–are regressive for the feminist advancement of gender-relational equality. This is so because these sensibilities implicitly encourage misogyny to prevail through the iteration of regressive patterns of behavior that uphold (hetero)patriarchy in these popular cultural texts. Therefore, readings of empowered black African women–as positive progress in the plight toward equal gender power relations in a notably heteropatriarchal African popular cultural imaginary–should be celebrated with caution, as they may derail the feminist plight toward women's *actual* (sexual) empowerment across their diverse African contexts in and beyond popular media texts.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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You've Got to Be Real: Authenticity, Performativity and Micro-Celebrity in South Africa

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For many young black South African women, the competitive arena of social media offers access to significant social and cultural capital, which can be invaluable in the unequal context in which they live. In order to succeed in this high stakes environment young women carefully construct the identities and idealised selves that they present on platforms like Instagram. They display a lifestyle of glamorous consumption, showcasing exclusive brands and fashionable items and modifying and modelling themselves to fit a beauty ideal that emphasises youth, light skin, slender bodies and straight hair. As well as these physical features, young women on Instagram are also hyper-aware of the need to appear "authentic": to have their online lives and selves appear natural, easy and free of artifice in order to further enhance their status as role models to other women. This article draws from in-depth interviews with 10 black South African "micro-celebrities." It reveals the central role of authenticity in these young women's online performances of self, and considers the contradictory impulses that require them to both "feel" and "appear" real. Within the framework of existing hegemonic structures, these women appear to be exercising their freedom as neoliberal citizens within a post-feminist setting. Despite the promises of freedom, however, this article reveals the way in which their performances of selfhood are powerfully constrained by normative ideas about aspiration and success.

Keywords: Instagram, post-feminism, South Africa, social media, micro-celebrities

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For many young black South African women the competitive arena of social media offers access to social and cultural capital that can be difficult to come by in a context of deep inequality, with poverty, economic uncertainty and stagnating class mobility as persistent features of the post-apartheid racial order. In order to acquire a large number of followers, thus making themselves attractive to high status romantic partners and to brands and marketing companies who will help them to monetise their personas, these "micro-celebrities" carefully construct idealised selves that they present on platforms like Instagram. They engage in particular beauty practises, presenting a version of selfhood that is aspirational/inspirational and, at the same time, appears "authentic": genuine, relatable, unvarnished and honest. In order to succeed in the high stakes environment of Instagram, these young women must appear both unattainably glamorous and approachably real. Their personas emphasise freedom and agency, but their freedom and agency are constrained by normative expectations about character, appearance and even morality.

This article is focused on 10 black South African micro-celebrities, each aged between 18 and 25, each with over 10,000 followers. Marwick defines micro-celebrity 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" (2015, p. 139). Micro-celebrities are an increasingly visible phenomenon in South Africa, sometimes leveraging their digital personas to access significant social and economic capital (see Iqani, 2019). They also straddle the gap between ordinary social media users and "legitimate" celebrities, relying on both the authenticity of the everyday and the glamour of the exceptional to create their public profiles.

All of the women in this study subscribe to a particular look, characterised by slender bodies, long well-groomed hair (weaves), light skin, immaculate clothing and desirable accessories. They pride themselves on paying close attention to their physical appearances. We discuss in-depth interviews with all 10 in order to examine how the idea of authenticity impacts on their online and offline lives and the way in which they construct their digital personas.[1] We argue that their definition of "real" is not real in itself; rather it is a performance of realness and authenticity that is carefully constructed within the constraints of societal norms and expectations, and then displayed as another commodity in an arsenal of appealing and aspirational traits.

Social media allow people to express themselves, define and re-define who they are, and curate who they would like to be within the online space (Schau and Gilly, 2003). By participating in social media platforms, black South African women, like other users, "adventurously [harness] them as vehicles for identity and identification" (De Bruijn and Nyamnjoh, 2009, p. 14). Particularly because of its photo-based format, Instagram allows users to "develop their self-concept and affiliated identities to create their image, and to produce their own spotlight through the experience" (Pugh, 2010, p. 1). The aesthetics involved in this aspirational performance provide an opportunity "to create a desirable image of life where every experience is visualized" (Lindahl and Öhlund, 2013, p. 6). In the case of these South African micro-celebrities, an aesthetics of aspiration is supplemented by a visual and verbal discourse of authenticity.

In its most common use, authenticity is connected to the idea of expressing one's individuality through personalised traits and acting in accordance with one's own genuine beliefs and desires. This view of authenticity can extend to "the idea that some things are in some sense really you, or express what you are, and others aren't" (Williams, 2002, p. 277). Authenticity emphasises the humanness of the individual, a humanness that is "innate, essence-like (deep-seated and fundamental), cross-culturally universal, and typical of the human population" (Haslam et al., 2011, p. 207). Additionally, to be authentic "is to be clear about one's own most basic feelings, desires and convictions, and to openly express one's stance the public arena" (Guignon, 2008, p. 288). These technical definitions of authenticity do not, however, account for its status as a cultural commodity, which in turn means that authenticity can be claimed, performed, adopted or exaggerated for social capital. As emphasised by Salisbury and Pooley (2017, p. 2), "authentic is always relative to something else, and is therefore susceptible to the charge of phoniness, especially if strategy or calculation can be identified." In contrast to utopian notions of authenticity, which suggest that there is an unmediated "real" self that can be accessed and shared, these perspectives suggest that the self is always to some extent socially and culturally constructed, whether online or offline. Such an understanding is valuable when considering young women whose everyday bodily aesthetics are often subject to, or formed in resistance to, prevailing social (and social media) norms. Rather than asking whether such performances are "genuinely" authentic, we need to consider what the *idea* of authenticity means, how it is marketised and how it is used to maintain a sense of identity under conditions of networked performativity.

Establishing a style and sustaining it on social media is one of the ways in which people display their "real" versions of self in the public arena (Varga, 2011). Appearing authentic in public involves being confident or open enough to speak in a personal way, using an informal understandable tone and sharing personal content and details about one's life. This approach gives observers and followers the sense that one is truthful about what one stands for, because of the consistency in sharing the "real" aspects of who one is in a visible way, as people are given some degree of access to the "real" person (Gaden and Dumitrica, 2015).

Part of the appeal of social media is the idea that sharing intimate information about one's life leads to the development of stronger social bonds (John, 2013). This apparent intimacy can be considered in terms of what Dean (2002) calls the "ideology of publicity," in which individuals have identified what others want to see and act accordingly. This representation of the self is not a rigid construct that develops in isolation, but is instead the result of the interactions of a variety of "social and cultural categories and identifications" (Harris, 2004, p. 3). Thus, the process that people go through to be acknowledged by others involves the identification and endorsement of the "authentic" individual by the audience in the public-private arena that is facilitated by social media (Papacharissi, 2010).

A POST-FEMINIST PARADOX

It is useful to consider these complexities in terms of post-feminism, which can be summarised as a set of popular discourses claiming that feminism is no longer necessary as women can now become empowered through shopping, bodily enhancement and modification, career success and assuming a prominent position in a male-dominated society (McRobbie, 2007). The connotations and expectations that

[1]This article is drawn from a longer study that combined interviews with visual discourse analysis of Instagram posts to consider the linked themes of authenticity, celebrity and beauty within these young women's Instagram identities (Dunn, 2017).

surround women in a post-feminist era are defined around "capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility and participation" (Giddens, 1991, p. 46).

Much of the most influential scholarship on post-feminism focuses on its relations to consumption, beauty and the body. Post-feminist bodies are observed, disciplined and trained into "appropriate" modes of being that are seen to quite literally embody the individual's freedom, agency and empowerment. Because the female body "possesses power, and is in constant need of monitoring, surveillance and re-modelling" (Gill, 2007b, p. 441), the post-feminist subject views the "self as a project" (Tasker and Negra, 2007, p. 21). Indeed, post-feminism "promises women that their "capital" lies especially in beauty" (Dosekun, 2017, p. 179). The disciplined body is also a consumerist body, one that purchases and displays clothing, products and consumer items that are posited as desirable or even essential. According to McRobbie (2009, p. 27), the domain of "leisure and consumer culture is dominated by the vocabulary of personal choice, and is a primary site for hedonism, fantasy, personal gratification and entertainment." This means that post-feminist performance is a function of class, as only women with the necessary means are able to access this type of consumerism. In South Africa, a hugely unequal country where economic consequences of the racialised system of apartheid still persist, upwardly mobile young black women must often find creative ways to enter into consumer culture. These may include what Masango calls "compensated relationships" (Masango, 2019, p. 8), as well as the kind of social media self-branding that characterises the micro-influencers in this study.

Post-feminism is also intimately related to neo-liberalism, a mode of thought that emphasises choice and individuality, often co-opted from the language of progressive politics (McRobbie, 2009). According to Gill, "Neoliberalism is increasingly understood as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating" (Gill, 2008, p. 443). The neo-liberal woman is imagined as autonomous and self-analysing, and has the freedom of choice and agency to self-modify (Gill, 2007a).

This emphasis on individuality, agency and autonomy is part of the paradox of post-feminism: a relation to femininity that rejects collective politics in favour of the choice and personal success of the individual, but with this choice and personal success framed in ways that require enthusiastic consumption and bodily management. The post-feminist and neo-liberal valorisation of the idea of the individual and her empowered agency feeds directly in to the inflated valuation of the notion of authenticity. Post-feminism involves "an emphasis on empowerment and individualism" (Gill, 2007b). In order to be a successful post-feminist subject, and a successful Instagram personality, one must display *authentic* individuality. One must be seen to remain "true to oneself" even while engaging in a performance of femininity that is coherent with normative ideas about attractiveness, style, behavior and morality. Authenticity thus becomes another pole of post-feminist praxis, one that is as intimately related to the self as the body is.

Drawing on the psychoanalytic theory of Joan Riviere, we can think of this as a kind of masquerade. Like femininity itself, authenticity is "not natural, but an adopted surface, a defence mechanism" (Riviere, 1929, p. 306). For women whose digital personae are formed within a post-feminist milieu, their self-portrayal is not as straightforward as it seems, which again highlights the underlying political/patriarchal power that instructs this apparently autonomous behavior (McRobbie, 2007). Through this masquerade, which encompasses both physical work and the social-emotional labour of performing authenticity, women can achieve a sense of acceptance through "mimicry, accommodation, adjustment and modification" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 71). Literature on post-feminism reveals that these modes of self-display are not about what a woman "naturally is," or about her freedom from social constraint, but rather about how women replicate specific ideas about femininity.

While much of the canonical literature on post-feminism is located in the global north, important scholarship from Dosekun highlights the "transnational" qualities of post-feminism Dosekun (2015), the way it is "broadcast and sold across borders [and] interpellates subject-consumers that have the material, discursive and imaginative capital to buy into it, their diverse locations and histories notwithstanding" (2017, p. 169). The young women in our study illustrate the globalised power of certain displays of femininity which transcend borders and boundaries and settle comfortably within the African context. Rather than discussing themselves in terms of South Africa or Africa, they look to global and African-American celebrities like Beyonce and Rihanna for their inspiration and aspiration. They also, however, present a particular case study of how post-feminist ideas manifest in Africa. Their online gender performances, and the motivations behind them, are inflected by South African aesthetics as well as ideas about race, status, society and female acceptability.

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

This project adopts a qualitative approach involving a "detailed examinations of cases that arise in the natural flow of social life" (Neuman, 2006, p. 14). It is concerned with "developing explanations of social phenomena, and aims to help us understand the social world in which we live and why things are the way they are" (Hancock et al., 2009, p. 7). This approach allows room for interpretations of the world and a more flexible acquisition of knowledge (Stokes, 2003).

During an initial period of digital research we observed a number of active Instagrammers who fitted our profile, whose images were readily observable within the public domain and not hampered by restrictions, except for an active Instagram account. We approached some of them via the direct message feature and used snowball sampling to recruit other participants. This method allowed us to "take advantage of the social networks of identified respondents to provide a researcher with an ever-expanding set of potential contacts" (Atkinson and Flint, 2001, p. 1). After receiving appropriate ethics clearance from our institution, we scheduled interviews with each willing participant. Each was approximately one and a half hours in length, and took the form of either a Skype or Facetime call. These semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in 2016. Semi-structured interviews recognise common themes, which

contribute toward the development of the research as a whole (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). They assist in the examination of certain topics as a result of the communication that moves beyond the verbal, and enables the researcher to draw links between various parts of people's lives, both seen and unseen (Edwards and Holland, 2013). The answers that were given were open-ended, creating more room for the participants to elaborate on certain areas, or points that were raised, which were of particular interest (Roberts et al., 2003). Interviews were transcribed and underwent a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is frequently used in qualitative research as it examines classifications and existing patterns that relate to the data. In other words, it seeks to provide meaning, precision and intricacy to various aspects of the study at hand (Alhojailan, 2012). It is a valuable research tool as it provides a rich and comprehensive, yet multifaceted interpretation of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The participants in this study are young (18–25) black South African women, who each had, at the time of undertaking the research, over 10,000 Instagram followers (in most cases this has since increased). All had similar online profiles, featuring inspirational quotes alongside images of them wearing fashionable clothing and accessories and posing in attractive ways and desirable locations. All of these women also periodically posted material that seemed more personal and intimate. All appear very well-groomed and pride themselves on paying careful attention to their image. From head-to-toe, they suggest a certain understanding of success. They are engaged in the kind of "aesthetic vigilance" that involves "a calculative and self- governmental labour of risk-managing one's attachments to beauty and its technologies" (Dosekun, 2017, p. 169). During the interviews it became apparent that all of these women are ambitious, believe they are capable of achieving much, and claim that they want to "make something" of themselves, constantly asserting their independence, in line with theoretical ideas about post-feminist practise (Tasker and Negra, 2007).

According to McRobbie, "Black women co-inhabit the space of attention with their white counterparts, but it is always understood that they are exceptional and act as role models for their less successful peers" (2009, p. 132). This speaks to the societal shift that is played out on Instagram, where certain women see their function as not just being beautiful, but also about evaluating every area of their lives and managing how meaningful and impactful they are to other women, in this case their Instagram followers. Authenticity thus becomes an imperative for these young women, not only in gaining attention and status but also in behaving in a way that is inspiring for their following. Performances of authenticity are thus inherently moralised, part of a social imperative by which "exceptional" black women are expected to hold themselves to particular standards.

There are necessarily limits to a study such as this one, which is concerned with a small pool of interviewees who share traits that are relevant to the interviewers' concerns. We do not claim that these women's viewpoints are generalizable to all young black South Africans, to all Instagrammers or even to all local micro-celebrities. Nonetheless, their viewpoints offer us an important entry point to considering some of the ways in which social media intimacy intersects with aspiration and identity in the South African context. Future research could consider how authenticity is perceived and valued among a larger or more varied group of Instagram users in order to enrich these perspectives with comparative discussion. Researchers could also delve more deeply into the histories and inner lives of micro-influencers to see how their personal social experiences impact on their digital selves, or consider the digital experiences of more traditional celebrities.

LIVING AN AUTHENTIC LIFE ONLINE

According to Tasker and Negra, the "imaginary self," the self that is performatively constructed, "must not only be discovered, but experienced, paradoxically, as more authentic than the previous one, which comes to be regarded as inauthentic. It is thus through technological shifts that it is believed that one can discover their more authentic true self" (2007, p. 237). These "technological shifts" include the introduction of social media, which facilitate the creation of an online self that is as much a product of imagination, desire and socio-cultural cues as of individuality. While this authenticity may be performative, it seems to be necessary that is *experienced* as legitimate, even while it is intentionally undertaken. During the interviews the participants constantly emphasised their own realness and normality. As Participant I explained, "I am an everyday person"[2].

These women perform their online identities through the pictures, captions and quotes they post and the overall image they portray, which comes to be "understood as evidence of backstage behavior and a "true" personality [in the] seemingly authentic and socially connected context of online social media" (Ellcessor, 2012, p. 60). Followers' apparently free access to this true personality mirrors the "parasocial interaction" (Marwick, 2015, p. 139) that is common within more traditional celebrity. Followers' comments, and the participants' own evaluations of their brands and desirability, confirm that this kind of realness is a valuable commodity in creating communities and identifications. In a sense, "the authentic has been colonised by calculated self-promotion" (Salisbury and Pooley, 2017, p. 6). Participant F explained, "I'm human, I am allowed to post specific real things." Participant H said, "The more real I am, the easier it makes it for people to want to know who I am," a point that was repeated by Participant I, "If I post relevant things, I attract more women that want to feel normal." Despite the carefully curated glamour of their online aesthetic, they insist that their relatable normality is a significant part of their appeal. In explaining decisions about her online persona, Participant B said, "People caught onto me being real and being myself, so I decided I'm just going to try and be more of that." The word "try" suggests that there is a conscious effort involved in the way she authenticates her self-display, a claimed normality that makes her more accessible to the average audience member (Wood, 2013). Participant A stated,

[2]Interview participants have been anonymised and assigned letters from A to J in order to differentiate them in the discussion that follows.

> It's just showing people I am ordinary. I get a lot of girls inboxing me, and we talk about these sorts of normal things. It's not only about empowering women, it's also about showing people I'm ordinary, I'm living my life to the best of my ability, and basically this is a process of my life. I go to school, I have heartbreaks, and I have bad days and good days. I'm not perfect, I'm Christian, I'm a believer.

Similarly, Participant C explained, "I am a normal person just like everyone else. I'm still as humble as possible, so I think that's what makes me different." Her claim here centralises authenticity as a primary part of her appeal: she is *still* humble, she remains a "normal" person despite her extraordinary qualities. This version of realness was echoed by Participant D, who explained what she wanted people to say about her: "Wow, she's actually a really nice person, she's just as normal as we are."

Participants feel there is an expectation for them to be "real" with the people who follow them, and that this realness is as much a part of their role as fostering "empowerment" by modelling their own post-feminist success online. Authenticity is part of a toolkit of strategies that facilitates success on Instagram, that is carefully designed to imply the intersection of achievable normality with aspirational glamour. Indeed, claimed authenticity may be the key to the success of these kinds of micro-celebrities: their lives seem both intensely desirable and actively achievable, notwithstanding how out of reach that level of consumption remains for many of the young black South African women who make up their audience.

The contradiction of performed authenticity again recalls the figure of the neoliberal woman. This understanding of selfhood encourages people to be self-reliant by viewing themselves as autonomous subjects endowed with choices (Brown, 2006), and to "see themselves as individualized and active subjects, responsible for enhancing their own well-being" (Larner, 2000, p. 3). Within a neoliberal social order, individuals are expected to be "entrepreneurs of themselves or… investors in themselves, as human capital that wishes to appreciate" (Feher, 2009, p. 30, 31). This investment can be clearly seen in the way in which Participant F envisioned the rewards of authenticity: "How you reflect yourself from your soul, your personality, the way you present and carry yourself, your morals and your integrity makes you a beautiful woman." Notwithstanding their emphasis on idealised notions of naturalness and realness, this account makes clear the way in which desirable forms of femininity are archetypal and must be consciously adopted rather than being inherent. As well as using their online self-displays to tell their stories and gain social media capital, these women also suggest that online performance gives them an opportunity to become the "best version" of themselves. Participant D explained, "I try my best to be the best woman I can be all-round, but I make sure not to lose myself in all of that." This idea ties into neoliberal notions in which women are expected to engage in "self-government, self-discipline and self-management" to better themselves (Gill, 2007b, p. 163, 164), and also highlights the contradiction that becoming one's best online self is not necessarily coherent with being authentic. According to Participant G, "I realised people follow me, and are waiting for my next move." She is aware of her audience and monitors her activity and actions, positively filtering what she posts and how she portrays herself. Participant B explained, "I know I need to watch what I post. So now I am more cautious about how I conduct my Instagram page." Even as the appearance of authenticity is prized, the participants engage in constant self-monitoring and self-discipline to ensure that nothing that makes its way into their Instagram feeds will threaten the illusion of unvarnished reality.

Traits that the participants defined as authentic emerged at numerous points in our interactions, and were not always what we would think of as positive. Many admitted that they make mistakes, have regrets and deal with the consequences of their choices, yet they say their followers still refer to them as "inspirational." These admissions of failure, fault or weakness ranged from acknowledging that they are still carrying post-baby weight or admitting that having a baby was never a part of their plan to the reality that they still use public transport or have days when they do not feel beautiful, regardless of what the outside world may see or say. Participant D said, "As young as I am and as much as I have made mistakes, I am human, and I inspire a lot of people because I am wise, and because of my integrity." Here she defines her mistakes as part of rather than a threat to her status: her integrity in acknowledging and dealing with these errors adds to rather than undermines her status. Participant F explained, "Having a baby was hard because it was not planned, and I think I surprised a lot of people, as many questioned how a smart girl like me could have fallen pregnant. When I found out, the first thing I said was what are people going to say?" According to her understanding, "smart" women do not get pregnant by accident (Barnett, 2004). This is an experience that is likely to be relatable within the context of South Africa where younger, premarital and single parenthood are relatively common (Kaufman et al., 2001).

Participant F continued,

> I could have terminated the baby, and continued being the "it" girl, and probably suffered in the future from the consequences of terminating, just because I was afraid of society. But in the end, it was my decision, I decided to keep it, and I decided that I am going to turn this mistake into a blessing.

Here the participant actively defines her response to this mistake as a positive and inspirational feature, showcasing her authentic individuality in choosing to keep her baby rather than bend to social pressure. She further explained, "I believe I gave people the liberty to feel that even if you have made a mistake, and you are a mom, you can still live, be beautiful and take charge of your body and become a better person through your own choices." The accidental pregnancy becomes part of her personal myth, allowing her to present herself as an empowering force for the women who look up to her. Once publically admitted in the appropriate tone, these participants' "failures" become part of their success.

INDIVIDUALITY AND UNIQUENESS

The women in this study have identified Instagram as one of those significant sites "where power is made at various intervals within everyday life" (Butler et al., 2000, p. 14), and have found ways to construct their online identities that allow them to benefit from that power in the form of status and social capital. Words like "inspirational" and "role model," which appear frequently in their Instagram comments, emphasise their role in shaping identity and ideological building. As Participant H explains, "I always have girls sending me DMs telling me how much they look up to me and how much I inspire them." They use their ideas of authenticity both to define the kinds of practises they undertake online and to convince their audiences to believe in them.

McRobbie (2009, p. 19) suggests that, under conditions of post-feminism, women are "called to invent their own structures." These structures are, however, unlikely to be entirely original or entirely free. As suggested above, the women in this study are entangled in a postfeminist paradox: their effective and agential use of the empowering space of Instagram is constrained by structural conditions. In order to succeed on Instagram they monitor themselves and their behavior, and consequently construct themselves and their identities to ally with a commonly understood notion of authenticity. Being "successful on your own terms," an achievement that is prized by these micro-celebrities, implies being successful in ways that are prescribed by a consumer, capitalist and patriarchal society. The discourses that these women use make a point of highlighting their unique individuality while also suggesting that only a very specific mode of (visible, public, performed) authenticity is legitimate.

During the interviews participants frequently restated the importance of emphasising their individual interests, skills and styles. Many of the participants had active strategies for managing their individuality: "Continuity is key. Pick something and stick to it" (Participant C); "If I love dogs, I will showcase that, and you can get an informed perception about me" (Participant H); "Don't be all over the place. Find something, stay true to it, run with it" (Participant G). There is a potential contradiction lurking here: one must find something that will appeal to an audience, which suggests a degree of artifice, but then must stay true to it, which defines the interest as genuine. The fact that the participants did not experience this as contradictory suggests a convergence between their online and offline identities, an internalisation of their ideas of authenticity.

The participants emphasise the importance of their individuality by mentioning that a successful Instagram personality must "find their own trade and stick to it" (Participant C). However, their profiles all bear strong resemblances to each other in terms of style, design, poses, fashion, clothing, accessories, brands and other aesthetic features. In a neoliberal society, "people are increasingly individualised. They are required to invent themselves, and they are repeatedly called upon to shape themselves so as to be flexible to fit within new circumstances which makes them aspirational" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 130). This need for the appearance of individualisation can help to explain why the participants are so focused on their own uniqueness, even when they often admit—albeit obliquely—the calculations that go into their Instagram success. When asked about her aesthetic similarity to other micro-celebrities, Participant A explained, "They are not me and I am not them. Whatever I post is authentically me." The participants identify themselves as individuals, comfortable in who they are and secure in their own individuality, determined to be themselves "the best way I can" (Participant B). Looking at their pages it becomes clear that, far from emphasising uniqueness, this form of micro-celebrity depends on one's ability to successfully embody a pre-existing archetype.

The participants also emphasised the fact that Instagram is not really a true depiction: it is only a fragment of reality, and followers only see what they choose to post. The versions of their lives and selves that are available online are heavily mediated (Matic, 2011). Participant B explained, "Instagram is Instagram, and people take Instagram too literally." They were also aware of the ways in which performances of realness and authenticity actively contribute to their online brands and shield them from certain types of criticism. Participant B continued, "You don't want to walk down the road and for people to say she's such a dream-seller, and in the meantime, you know you are just an ordinary person. So, I try by all means to take photos of what is really happening." These interviews suggest that, rather than a deeply held sense of subjecthood, being "true to yourself" requires you to be consistent with your portrayed image, the self that people have come to know. It is important that the online and offline selves remains coherent and that one's digital identity appears seamless and genuine, regardless of how much labour goes into it. Participant D explained, "My posts are not superficial. Whenever I post it is what is happening. I can never be questioned about the lifestyle I lead, because it is really the lifestyle I lead, not some façade." Again, this approach suggests a classed dimension to these postfeminist performances. These women are wary of appearing like frauds or imposters. They continually emphasise that the glamorous lives they display online are legitimate.

The participants' investment in the idea of authenticity extends to the belief that their offline personas match their online display, as Participant E said, "I'm pretty much always the same, online and offline." This statement suggests that her offline persona is also monitored, and that there is a degree of intentional and performative self-construction at every level of daily life. If we accept their claims about the cohesion between their Instagram profiles and their offline selves, the lives of the participants could be seen as a performance of authentic living, as "performance engulfs a radically constructionist notion, suggesting that personal narrative performance is a site in which social meaning – including that of a narrator's identity – is fervently negotiated and constructed" (Noy, 2004, p. 167). The kind of display that leads to success and micro-celebrity on Instagram must be, at least to some extent, carried through into daily life in order to assure that both identities remain workable. Participant B explained the importance of the online image by mentioning that she does not want people seeing someone different when she is in public: "Aren't you the girl from Insta? Every time I'm going out to a place where there are a lot of people,

I make sure I look good so they can't say oh she's a catfish." In order to match her online identity she makes a conscious effort to always dress well and look good so as to avoid possible dissonance from fans and followers, to the extent of being accused of catfishing: of pretending to be someone entirely different, and completely inauthentic, in order to fool, trap, manipulate and humiliate others. These kinds of claims would be counter to the affect of her authenticity, the desire to be seen as real, normal and "nice."

The participants also felt that they have a duty to share personal information with their followers. Participant I said, "I try my best to display the actual person I am, my thoughts and the things I go through, because that is what people want. Sometimes I even talk about my mom on my posts. How I act or talk to people is really the same." Participant E explained, "I just try to keep it real and welcoming by actually displaying the person I am, even outside Instagram." The humanness and vulnerability these women choose to show, like the personal details they provide, are tools that they use to create their online selves. Participant H said, "I just want my page clean, showing that's me in my normal life. I don't pretend to be someone and something I am not so that I can be accepted." Participant J explained, "I'm just a normal person 90% of the time. If a person sees me, they will say this is the same person." What is essential in these accounts is that these women place so much value on being authentic not just for themselves and their own consciences, but for their followers. They are deeply conscious of the opinion of their followers and this has weight in shaping their identities.

THE PRESSURES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The participants generally feel that they are empowered and liberated from societal pressures. Participant G stated, "I don't feel the need to do things just because society says so." At the same time, however, all confessed to conforming to the norms of Instagram at different times and in different ways, and many offered meaningful insights about how the structures of social media affected their behavior. They explained that "social media really does make you lose your focus" (Participant I) as "you feel the pressure to conform to what others are doing" (Participant A). These norms included going to certain places just to post that they were there and wearing certain things just so they could post a picture for their followers to like. Participant C explained, "You do things without actually realising you're doing it for your followers, you're not doing it for yourself. You will literally buy an outfit and you just want to post wearing it, and then you realise your life is Instagram now. You're no longer living a normal life." Participant A said, "You begin doing things you do not really want to do just to impress, be loved and recognised." This tendency has been termed "doing things for the 'Gram" (Participant F). As much as post-feminist discourse suggests that femininity is associated with choice, and as much as these women display genuine agency in making their decisions, the kinds of choices they make are rooted in existing structures. According to Gill (2007b, p. 157), "Women are presented as entirely free agents, but this avoids all the important questions about the relationship between representations and subjectivity, the difficult but crucial questions about how socially constructed, mass mediated ideals of beauty are internalised and made our own." Participant J described her behavior as coming from a place of enlightenment regarding the choice she feels she has: "It's just another social media platform. Everything I do is for myself, but it is important to be the person I am and show people that. If they don't see it that way, that's their own thing." This emphasis on genuine, honest choice that is true to each individual's deep desires is complicated by these women's admissions of the body work, surveillance and self-discipline required for Instagram success.

Tasker and Negra (2007, p. 237) argue that "the new self must be liberated, rather than being imposed from the outside. The more authentic self bears the hallmark of post-feminism." Many of the participants stated that as they grew and matured they began to see what they call the "superficiality" of Instagram, which led them to develop online personas that valued authenticity. Participant G said, "I am who I put out there, I'm not living a lie." All of the participants made it clear that one can only achieve this liberation from societal expectation when one is confident and has a solid understanding and acceptance of oneself as an individual. Participant D explained, "Your likes don't determine who you are. I got to understand that, and people need to understand that." Participant I stated, "I'm the type of person that can leave social media." She defines her sense of self, of the kind of person that she is, by her (untested) freedom to walk away from her online life.

Although the participants' engagement with Instagram and with their followers seems independent and driven by personal choice, the form of their freedom is challenged by the fact that they are expected to "improve" themselves by continually investing in self-maintenance practises. This also brings into question their definition of authenticity: if the self must be constantly disciplined and improved, how can it also be authentically real as it is? This suggests that what is to be considered as authentic is in need of constant monitoring, which disqualifies the common understanding of authentic and again points to authenticity as a performance.

CONCLUSION

The young women interviewed for this project make it clear that ideas of authenticity and realness influence their self-display and sense of self-worth on Instagram and in real life. However, the way in which the participants define, understand and live out their authenticity or realness appears different to the commonly held understanding of what it means to be real and authentic. Certain habits, such as the adoption of constant self-modification techniques, have come to be a part of their daily practise. The authenticity that is prized by these micro-celebrities and their followers seems akin to a performance in which apparent realness must be displayed and highlighted, in contradiction to understandings of realness that locate it within individual humanness.

This aspirational interpretation of authenticity requires that these women emphasise their normality and relatability while at the same time maintaining stringent standards in terms of the aesthetics of their bodies, appearances, clothing and Instagram personas. The interviews revealed the importance of Instagram in allowing them to display their individuality, their mistakes, their personal struggles and their life events in order to represent themselves as normal, everyday individuals. This highlighted the way that they go about constructing every aspect of their identities in the attempt to become who they aspire to be and who they feel they are expected to be, and as a result of this, emerge as being inspiring to others. Authenticity, while highly valued, is treated as part of a larger toolkit that allows for success on Instagram and consequently in offline life, as these micro-celebrities' aspirational status and cultural capital impacts on their social worlds.

In acknowledging the bodily and psychic self-discipline needed to succeed in the competitive world of Instagram alongside the more affective requirement of appearing authentic, these women illustrate some of the paucities of post-feminist praxis, which promises freedom, agency, power and selfhood – but only if one does the right sort of work first.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The dataset presented in this article is not readily available. Interview recordings and transcripts were anonymised and stored by the researcher and will be destroyed after a certain time period, in line with University ethics committee norms. Requests to access the dataset should be directed to Nicky Falkof, nicky.falkof@wits.ac.za.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by Postgraduate Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand. The participants provided written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The article is based on graduate work undertaken by CD, under the supervision of NF. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Rethinking NGOization as Postfeminist Practice: Interstitial Intimacies and Negotiations of Neoliberal Subjectivity in Violence Prevention

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The decade of the 1990s marked the rise of postfeminism, a series of discursive, mediatized and intellectual interventions that furthered, but also broke away from, past forms of feminist theory and practice. This period also witnessed the global proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the "NGOization" of feminism, referring to the cooption and erasure of critical social movements. Beyond their temporal instantiation in the 1990s, postfeminism and NGOization converge and entangle in everyday practices of women's NGOs and organizations. In this article, I examine such convergences and entanglements as they unfold in an NGO's community-based program to prevent violence against women and girls in Mumbai's urban poor neighborhoods. Such programs create new forms of femininity and womanhood among women who participate in interventions as frontline workers. These women navigate complex pressures of communitarian gender norms, disciplinary regimes of professionalization and quantification, and the vicarious harm of supporting survivors. Their affective caring labor, thus, is facilitated by and produces what I describe as *interstitial intimacies*, which problematize and embody key postfeminist claims, while engendering political actions and contestations under neoliberalism.

Keywords: interstitial intimacy, NGOization, postfeminism, frontline workers, gender-based violence, India, urban poor neighbourhoods

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last 3 decades, the term "postfeminism" has signified theories and practices that have moved away from the radical or critical promise of prior feminist interventions, a turn that has emphasized mediatization, performativity, and identity and agency (Brooks 1997; Gamble 2006; Genz and Brabon 2009). Around the same time, feminist practices and mobilizations, especially on issues like gender-based violence (GBV), have been deeply implicated in regimes of transnational neoliberal governmentality (Merry 2006; Merry 2016). This development—which has unfolded across global and local settings—has most prominently been referred to as the "NGOization" of feminism, or the depoliticization and cooption of critical feminist movements under neoliberalism (Alvarez 2009; Bernal and Grewal 2014a; Roy 2015).

Entanglements between postfeminism and NGOization are not simply temporal; these have produced a global proliferation of actors and institutions, like non-governmental organizations

(NGOs), that have emerged as key mediators in feminist contestations (and collaborations) with states under neoliberalism. Such entanglements have led to the expansion and deterritorialization of sites of feminist struggles, and have shifted focus toward embodied, affective and performative aspects of feminist practices. These entanglements have had contradictory or paradoxical effects in contexts such as Global South cities. On the one hand, they have led to women's increased participation in the burgeoning social sector workforce, but on the other, they have also made their lives more precarious and even deepened other forms of social marginalization and precarity (Baillie Smith and Jenkins 2012; Jakimow 2010; Roy 2019; also, Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006; Sharma 2006). And insofar as these developments have led to the "NGOization" and depoliticization of feminisms, they also signal newer and unanticipated forms of postfeminist practices, engendering unique forms of politics that exceed the logics of neoliberal subjectivation and reassert commitment to foundational feminist values and ethics, like care, relationality, and critique of patriarchal power (Roy 2011; Bernal and Grewal 2014b; Roy 2017), as well as intimacy, affect, and desire (Wiegman 2010; Roychowdhury 2016; Freeman 2020).

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with women frontline workers engaged in an NGO's violence prevention program in Mumbai's urban poor neighborhoods, I explore how NGOization constitutes a form of postfeminist practice—particularly in how it unfolds, and is resisted, subverted and repurposed by frontline workers. It is a practice that not only embodies but also moves beyond the apparent contradictions in postfeminist theory and discourse, namely a reassessment of culturally-defined notions of femininity and gender relations. Inasmuch as both postfeminism and NGOization signify depoliticization and individuation (for which they are also critiqued), this article explores how their mutual entanglement signposts newer and unanticipated practices.

I use the heuristic "interstitial intimacy" to refer to such postfeminist NGOized practices and negotiations. Interstitial intimacy points toward ways that feminist activists and agents—women frontline workers, in this case—are implicated in modes of neoliberal governmentality involving NGOs and the Indian state, as well as how they draw on their socially and culturally-inscribed positions of womanhood to resist and subvert such governmentality, and engender forms of collaboration and support. Interstitiality indexes the malleable, open-ended, and overlapping socialities and materialities within which NGOized interventions operate, especially concerning the importance of women and girls' socially reproductive care work. Intimacy refers to the microsocial and microspatial nature of such socialities, especially in spaces like urban poor neighborhoods or slums—the site were many NGOized interventions are often located. Intimacy also critically evaluates how global and transnational flows of governance shape local encounters between NGOs, local communities, and women. It also challenges the normativity of globalized idioms, concepts and logics which privilege standardized and quantified indicators (Merry 2016).

This article is based on ethnographic research that I conducted with a local NGO that works toward preventing violence against women and girls across urban poor neighborhoods in Mumbai, India. I call this NGO Vinamrata. Vinamrata's programs emerged in Dharavi, one of the largest urban poor neighborhoods in India and Asia, in the late-1990s—a decade which saw both, the global proliferation of NGOs and the wide-spread adoption of neoliberal and market-driven policies in India's public healthcare and social sectors (Gupta and Sharma 2006; Rao 2010; Gupta 2012). However, Vinamrata's role in this framework was somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, they played an important role in Mumbai's civic healthcare system precisely as they became part of various state schemes on maternal and child health and nutrition. Their women's groups augmented the city's precarious and feminized healthcare infrastructure, while their violence prevention program was recognized as a service provider under India's Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005. On the other hand, much of Vinamrata's initiatives, which were led by women in both positions of leadership and on the ground, were a form of feminized intervention into the state's bureaucratic-rational practices.

Thus, Vinamrata's interventions foregrounded wellbeing, reciprocity, and care—responsibilities that are disproportionately borne by women as a form of socially reproductive labor. As I have argued elsewhere, frontline workers appraise such mobilizations of care in critiquing violence and gendered inequality in their communities (Chakraborty 2021a), and at times even question how NGOs are embedded in state and neoliberal structures that privilege abstraction and quantification over connection and concern (Chakraborty 2021b). In other words, we can perhaps frame Vinamrata's work as situated at the interstices of neoliberal governmentality, feminist social work, and the state's bureaucratic-rational practices. In such conditions, I use the heuristic interstitial intimacy to foreground frontline workers' everyday negotiations that draw on, push against, and rework these overlapping and at-times contradictory logics.

I devoted a substantial part of my fieldwork with Vinamrata's women frontline workers. These frontline workers include both, staff members who are paid employees, and volunteers who are known as "sakhis" (the feminine word in Hindi for "friend"). Frontline workers live and work in the very communities and neighborhoods—or *bastis* as they are colloquially known—where Vinamrata's programs are based. They identify and support survivors of violence in their neighborhoods and communities, work with Vinamrata's crisis counsellors and police stations, and engage in local politics of urban commons[1].

As they are situated within such postfeminist and NGOized convergences and entanglements, frontline workers' everyday practices are predicated on the self-fashioning and assertion of gendered and feminized logics of care and intimacies, which also frame patriarchy and patriarchal power as deeply entrenched and unequal social structures that produce conditions of violence

[1]In addition to using pseudonyms for my research participants, I also use "Vinamrata" and "sakhi" to pseudonymize the NGO and their frontline workers. Although my collaborative research is available in the public domain, I have used pseudonyms as this article presents my anthropological interpretations.

(Ortner 2014; also, Chakraborty 2021a). Insofar as they draw on the language of care, feminine values, and heterosexual conjugality and domesticity, frontline workers navigate the complex divisions between femininity and feminism (Mahadevan 2014). I focus on NGOization as a particular form of postfeminist practice, and examine how women's NGOs both re-signify and engender newer forms of femininity and womanhood. My ethnographic materials show how frontline workers navigate complex pressures of communitarian gender norms, disciplinary regimes of professionalization and quantification (Merry 2016; Roychowdhury 2016; Roy 2019), and the vicarious harm of supporting survivors (Haldane 2017).

The rest of this article is structured as follows. In the next section, I provide a historical and conceptual background to postfeminism and NGOization, particularly their convergences and entanglements. I then provide a brief overview of the heuristic interstitial intimacy, and then discuss my ethnographic fieldwork with Vinamrata's frontline workers. Following this, I present four ethnographic accounts. The first two are drawn from my work with sakhis, Vinamrata's voluntary frontline workers. These accounts describe how two groups of sakhis, living in two different neighborhoods, presented expressedly divergent perspectives on their gendered and feminized social locations and dispositions. Next, I synthesize these accounts to further develop the idea of interstitial intimacy, stressing how it reflects convergences and divergences in NGOized interventions, and attends to wider social, material and historical processes.

The two ethnographic accounts that follow are drawn from my work with Vinamrata's community workers who, like the sakhis, are also urban poor women, but are part of an increasingly professionalized workforce. In particular, these accounts describe pressures of quantification and professionalization that these women deal with. I show that, despite Vinamrata's intervention program incorporating diverse institutional and community actors, the underlying logics of NGOization produce further divergences in their instantiations of interstitial intimacy. Yet, having shown how postfeminism and NGOization converge and entangle, I argue that frontline intervention work is deeply inflected with care, which materializes as a form of emotional and caring labor. In so doing, frontline workers' interventions go beyond restrictive critiques of NGOization; instead, they assert the importance of the semantic instability between languages of "projects" and "movements," and underscore the importance of adopting hybrid forms of engagement that go beyond conventional political strategies.

POSTFEMINISM AND NGOIZATION: CONVERGENCES AND ENTANGLEMENTS

While hard to define, scholars generally agree that postfeminism emerged in the late-1980s and 1990s as a departure from past forms of radical and socialist feminisms of the 1960s and 1970s. This departure, in part, has been understood as a "backlash" against feminist politics, as well as a generational divide between older and younger feminists (Brooks 1997; Gamble 2006; Genz and Brabon 2009; Ortner 2014). Postfeminist representations and articulations are manifest across mass mediatized forms of feminine expression that assert selfhood, autonomy, choice, and independence (Gamble 2006). Thus, postfeminism is a contested term, imbricated as it is in politics of liberation, choice and agency, on the one hand, and discussions over cooption and depoliticization, on the other (Brooks 1997; Gamble 2006; Ortner 2014).

As Genz and Brabon (2009) discuss in their volume on "postfeminism," the term, among other things, has been understood as signaling either a radical break and departure from past iterations of feminist theories and movements—a "genealogy that entails revision or strong family resemblance," or a "precarious middle ground typified by a contradictory dependence on and independence from (past forms of feminism)." Cautioning against any original or authentic definition, they instead locate postfeminism's emergence in complex and overlapping public domains at the "intersections and hybridization of mainstream media, consumer culture, neo-liberal politics, postmodern theory and, significantly, feminism" (4–5). Similarly, Gamble (2006) traces its origins in 1980s United States and North American mass media, paying particular attention to blurred boundaries between how postfeminism was represented, and what it entailed as a form of critical practice and discourse. Crucially, Gamble differentiates between "postfeminism" and "third wave feminism"—terms that are often used interchangeably. She draws on rich theoretical and activist interventions, particularly from Black and Third World women scholars (such as bell hooks), to show third wave feminism has links with political activism, and is "more than just a theory, but an approach that will actively work against the social injustices which still form part of the everyday experience of many women" (43–44).

In contrast, Brooks (1997) views postfeminism as a critical theoretical movement that aligns with other anti-foundationalist movements, such as post-modernism, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism, especially as it challenged dominant understandings of structure, agency, and epistemology (34). She further differentiates popular forms of "post-feminism" in mass media discourses from the analytic and political project of postfeminism, which is crucially "not a depoliticization of feminism but a political shift in feminism's conceptual and theoretical agenda," and "represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks" (4). Similarly, Hall and Rodriguez (2003) use public opinion data in the United States to examine public support for postfeminist perspectives. They identify four postfeminist claims: 1) overall support for the women's movement has dramatically eroded 2) because some women are antifeminist, and 3) believe that the movement is irrelevant, and 4) have adopted a "no, but . . . " version of feminism. Their analysis of public opinion data throughout the 1990s finds little support for these claims, and instead showed that not only has support from the women's movement "increased or remained stable" (888) but that women—and particularly younger and African American

women—supported women's movements and saw it as beneficial (891–96).

While these scholarly interventions are generally situated in the North American cultural and political context, Sherry Ortner (2014) further explores the global genealogies of feminism and postfeminism. She observes that feminist movements and theories—especially as they emerged in Global North institutions—had been challenged by postcolonial feminist, political and anthropological scholarship. For instance, Mohanty (1988) critiques Western feminist scholarship for discursively producing the singular and reified representation of the "Third World Woman," which erases the complicity of Western feminism in discourses and practices of colonialism. Similarly, anthropologists like Ong (1988), Mahmood (2001) and Abu-Lughod (2002) critique the ways in which non-Western women are often configured as the "other" of Western feminism, and are seen as lacking agency, saturated with cultural difference, and in need of rescue—which thus legitimate neo-colonial forms of violence. In particular, Ortner (2014) draws attention to how critical questions on the evolving and changing nature of "patriarchy" under neoliberalism have somewhat escaped both, postfeminist discussions and discussions on/around postfeminism. She argues that patriarchy and patriarchal power are manifest in subtle, changing ways in intimate spaces and encounters, whilst being intertwined with other structures of power, like colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, and so forth (533–34).

Around the time that debates on postfeminism emerged in the Global North, issues like gender justice, women's rights, and prevention of gender-based violence—especially in the Global South—were steadily becoming a global agenda in the decades between the 1970s and 1990s. During this time, the United Nations' World Conferences on Women culminated with the Beijing Conference in 1995, which widely recognized the importance and legitimacy of institutions like non-government organizations (NGOs) in global gender justice movements (Merry 2006). Yet, such developments signified complex macro- and micro-social and political shifts, where institutional and mediatized interventions transformed feminism from a political movement to a programmatic approach that could address issues of gender inequality and gender-based violence. Importantly, the 1990s also marked the apogee of global neoliberal governmentality and substantial restructuring of state power and capacities in countries like India (Gupta and Sharma 2006; Sharma 2006; Gupta 2012; Roy 2015). In such contexts, NGOs became part of the state's social welfare infrastructures, but were also responsive to, and drove, market- and global institution-led interventions. This is what critical scholars have described as the "NGOization" of feminism and women's movements (Alvarez 2009; Bernal and Grewal 2014a).

Like postfeminism, NGOization too is a contested term. While some critics like Fraser (2009) have argued that the ideals of second-wave feminism converged with modes of neoliberal governmentality in the 1990s, others have made more nuanced assessments, particularly regarding the co-option of feminism (Roy 2015, 2017; also, Eschle and Maiguashca 2018; Wiegman 2010). For instance, Roy and Grewal's discussion on co-option also focuses on the generational divide between "older" and "younger" generations of feminists, and underscores the inherently pluralistic—though at times fractured—nature of feminism and feminist activism (Roy 2017). Whereas others like Eschle and Maiguashca (2018) have found that contemporary feminist discussions tend to frame co-option and resistance as dichotomous terms. They build on critiques that point to the limited ways in which both feminism and neoliberalism are understood, and indeed how these critiques exert disciplinary power on feminists themselves. Wiegman (2010) also critiques the charges of co-option, arguing instead that feminism is a social movement and theory that is continually reinterpreted and reused in struggles precisely because it is motivated by a desire to fulfill its political potentials.

Thus, the convergence and entanglement between postfeminism and NGOization not only underscore how feminist practices and theories have transformed over the last 30 years, but also point toward emergent modes of practice that unsettle prior assumptions as well as engender new forms of engagement. From this vantage point, it is necessary to both historicize neoliberalism, which is itself an unruly and ambivalent concept (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008), and foreground how it acquires salience in the everyday workings of NGOized interventions. For one, as Chhabria (2019) has recently shown, capitalism and neoliberalism have profoundly disruptive histories in postcolonial cities like Mumbai, where these have shaped the very fabric of urban space and subjectivity—especially in areas that become classified as "slums."

Still, as Chant and McIlwaine (2016) have shown, women and girls' socially reproductive care in cities remains both central and marginalized under contemporary neoliberal conditions as it was under industrial modes of capitalism. In such conditions, the political economy of women's NGOs and organizations were an extension of feminist practice emerging from women's movements, which nevertheless became complicit in neoliberal state and market-driven power (Roy 2015; Roy 2017). As mentioned above, the former included NGOs becoming proxies or providers of state services, whereas the latter included philanthropic funding, donations, and corporate social responsibility programs—indeed, both trajectories have framed Vinamrata's work in the last 2 decades.

Critical feminist and anthropological research, however, have problematized these trajectories by exploring how local NGO worlds and practices are marked by complexity and diversity (Roy 2017). While others have shown how local communities resist feminist and NGOized interventions, often to the detriment of survivors of violence (Datta 2012), collaborative research among scholars and activists have drawn on reflexive methods to problematize both, the intersections of caste, class, gender, religion, and sociospatial location, and the hierarchies of donor-driven women's empowerment (Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006). My previous writings on Vinamrata's frontline workers have contributed to this discussion by showing how their work involves intersections of care and critique wherein they mobilize their socially inscribed role as carers to critique gendered inequalities and forms of violence (Chakraborty 2021a). Their

affective and embodied labor aligns the processes and outcomes of programs with the lived realities and experiences of communities and overcome disjunctures produced by urban and NGOized precarity (Chakraborty 2021b).

INTERSTITIAL INTIMACIES

I use the heuristic "interstitial intimacies" to refer to how frontline workers are, at once, part of complex, overlapping social structures, and how they draw on these multiple, refracted social identities and logics to negotiate violence. As I have discussed elsewhere, frontline workers' performance of care is a form of interstitial labor which aligns Vinamrata's organizational processes and outcomes with the needs and expectations of communities, and overcomes disjunctures in the form of precarity produced by pressures of professionalization and sociomaterial vulnerability in urban poor neighborhoods (Chakraborty 2021b). My use of interstitial intimacy in this article, however, is more grounded, in that it reflects and corresponds to how frontline workers conceptualize their relationships with each other, and with their families and communities, through a notion of intimacy that articulates and engenders collective desires and affects.

My use of "intimacy" draws on feminist and anthropological discussions that move away from reducing intimacy to relations of sexuality and conjugality, and instead focuses on how globalization both shapes existing, and produces new, intimate spaces and encounters (Sehlikoglu and Zengin 2015), and how intimacy brings together and crosses the lines between private and public spheres and relations (Wilson 2012). Feminist theorists and anthropologists have also situated intimacy within historical and cultural frameworks that shape desire, affect, and emotions, while also recognizing these as deeply political questions (Ahmed 2004; Wiegman 2010; Freeman 2020).

At the same time, my use of the word "interstitial" is inspired by urban studies and the anthropology of emotion and affect. In urban spaces, interstices go beyond dichotomous social and material formations, like core–periphery or center–margin. In his introduction to an edited volume on urban interstices, Brighenti (2013, xvi–vii) argues against the dominant tendency of viewing interstices as empty or gaps; instead, interstices are an active component of the urban fabric, emerging through complex processes of urbanization. My use of interstitial intimacy also draws on the work of Sara Ahmed (2004). Ahmed argues that emotions do not reside in subjects or objects, but "align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments," binding subjects together to create the effect of a collective or "coherence" (119). In this way, interstices correspond to how Wies and Haldane (2011, 1) draw on Sally Merry's work to define front-lines as "small spaces of interactions"—which I take to mean conditions of intensification, density, and congealing of social relations (Simone 2004).

Interstices, however, are not simply in-between spaces; nor are frontline workers simply in-between or liminal actors (Turner 1991), shifting between foregrounds and backgrounds of their social worlds as it were (Goffman 1956). Instead, interstitial intimacy signifies an intricate reworking of frontline workers' socially-inscribed and feminized roles as carers and their neoliberal subjectivation as a class of precarious workers; it reflects both, the proliferation of NGOs and NGOized programs, and how these challenge, rework and reconstitute everyday intimate relationships and values in urban poor neighborhoods—from conjugal, neighborly and communitarian relationships, to relationships between urban inhabitants and local and global institutions, like states, police, courts, and funding agencies. In other words, as the following ethnographic accounts would show, interstitial intimacies refer to how women frontline workers' draw on their multiple, refracted identities in everyday interventions to prevent violence: they are wives and mothers; but also friends and neighbors, as well as activists and professionals—often simultaneously and in ways that these identities are inseparable yet distinct.

ETHNOGRAPHIC GROUNDINGS

Between 2014 and 2019, I conducted over 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork with Vinamrata's frontline workers. During this time, I was associated with their violence prevention program in Dharavi, one of the largest urban poor neighborhoods India and Mumbai. I collaborated with them as an independent research consultant and applied anthropologist, conducting several formative and evaluative studies on their frontline workers and various community groups.

My fieldwork encounters with Vinamrata's program were deeply informed by my training in and commitment to ethnographic research, where the participant-observation ethos often entailed following the rhythms of everyday life. As a field-based research method and genre of writing and analysis, ethnography relies on sustained participant-observation with social groups and is used alongside *contextual* and *comparative* analysis to generate anthropological theories (Sanjek 2014). Among other things, this meant that apart from the time I spent in meetings and discussions with my researcher colleagues at Vinamrata's main offices, I tried to mirror my everyday work routines during fieldwork to that of my colleagues and collaborators in the violence prevention program's community team.

My fieldwork experiences also raise important ethical issues of conducting ethnographic research while being embedded in organizational settings. Vinamrata's frontline workers were, at once, my colleagues and research participants. My interactions with them required a complex form of "impression management" (Berreman 2007), where I had to navigate between—but also creatively integrate—my roles as a consultant and ethnographer. For instance, as an ethnographer I spent time with my colleagues and collaborators, participating in everyday interactions beyond "data collection," like shared lunches, trainings, meetings, and long walks between the community center and various bastis in Dharavi. The conversations and interactions that took place in these moments profoundly influenced my understanding of

frontline work and shaped my ability to collect relevant evidence through interviews and focus-group discussions.

While collecting such data, my researcher colleagues and I would use standardized protocols during interviews and FGDs to ensure we followed the ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. Yet, in my everyday ethnographic encounters, I had to make my participants conscious of the fact that I would like to collect notes about particular interactions; obtaining consent thus involved conversations and discussions regarding the importance of these seemingly mundane interactions, where I often impressed upon my participants why and how their experiences and insights were relevant to our research. This also included crucial conversations regarding which parts of our interactions we did not record, such as critical comments or personal stories.

My fieldwork interactions also involved negotiating my privileged position as an upper-caste, upper-class *cis*-gendered man in ways that did not foreclose the possibility of doing "cross-sex" research (Gregory 1984; Berliner 2008; Thomas 2017). For instance, in interactions with basti women and sakhis, I would take more of a passive role—being reflexively aware of my privileged position as a man in a space that was feminized. In such instances, I would inhabit the role of someone who "belonged" with the organization, whilst also making my "outsider" identity more apparent by visibly displaying markers like my backpack and notebook. This also underscored my role as someone whose work was often about documenting evidence which would ultimately be useful to "show" their work (conversely, this also meant that I knew when to not use my notebook). In such cases, I took down fieldnotes as freely and as often as I could, usually to document meetings or group sessions with community workers or group members. Most quotes or exchanges were taken verbatim in the original language (usually Hindi or Marathi), in order to document the exact and precise words and phrases participants used. I also made distinctions between directly observed exchanges and my immediate reflections, which I often scribbled on the margins. I coded my fieldnotes and interview transcripts manually (i.e., without the use of qualitative data analysis software) to generate empirical themes and rubrics (e.g., interstitial intimacy) which were further conceptualized and streamlined while writing up ethnographic accounts.

This model of fieldwork gave social legitimacy to my presence in spaces where strangers, and especially strange and unfamiliar men, are not usually welcome—and, in many cases, for good reason[2]. As part of conventional ethical responsibilities, then, I have assigned pseudonyms to my colleagues and respondents; and in sections where I discuss my collaborative work with Vinamrata colleagues I emphasize so by shifting from "I" to "we." However, given how experiences and biographies of many community workers' and sakhis' are common knowledge within Vinamrata's organization context and even across several communities in the basti, the ethical principles of confidentiality may not be entirely successful in anonymizing them in the text. Many such stories circulate in meetings and conversations, and are also important pedagogical moments for the team. Despite this, there were numerous conversations that were critical and sensitive which I have not included in the text because my participants requested so. I nevertheless carry these insights as part of my ethnographic knowledge and their concerns and critiques certainly inform my writings and arguments, as well.

ON THE FRONTLINES OF VIOLENCE PREVENTION: ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS

Affective Encounters, Intimate Collectives

Niharika held up a poster that she and her group had drawn on a chartpaper moments ago as part of a training workshop, while her companions recounted how they experienced *badlaav* (change) over the years they were involved with Vinamrata. One woman described herself as a "*saheli*" (friend), whereas another said she felt like a "social worker." Another woman added, "First, I would think about only my family, but now there has been *sudhar* (improvement)." She continued, "Earlier, life was boring, but now it is *haribhari* (colorful)!"

Niharika was a sakhi with Vinamrata's violence prevention program, one among the 150 voluntary frontline workers that they had trained over the years. The audience, largely comprised of other sakhis like her, cheered on encouragingly as they awaited their turn to present posters they had made. We were all seated in small groups on the floor of an auditorium at the municipal hospital in Dharavi, where Vinamrata's offices and crisis counseling centers were located. This was in July 2015. Niharika, the other sakhis and Vinamrata's community workers all lived and worked in Dharavi's various bastis.

At this particular moment, the pace of the workshop had somewhat quietened and taken a contemplative turn, as the sakhis were asked to present their individual and collective experiences of change. The workshop began with about an hour of physical activities and games, something that these sakhis, as middle-aged women living in bastis, had hardly ever engaged with in decades. While nervous at first, the sakhis had enthusiastically come forward to play games like *phugri* (where they held hands and spun around in a circle) and *langdi* (a game of tag, but played whilst hopping on one leg).

When Niharika and her group concluded their presented, she narrated her own story of change, and how she had managed to educate her daughters with Vinamrata's help. She thanked them and the community workers, but used the plural pronoun "*hum*" ("we/us"). At this point, the trainer who was facilitating the workshop, softly interrupted Niharika. "Why are you saying

[2]With all but one instance—where I left a training session after a group of conservative, elderly Muslim women appeared rather inhibited with my presence—most women and sakhis found my presence rather unremarkable; and being present in such spaces and being viewed as part of Vinamrata also helped me interview sakhis for the study.

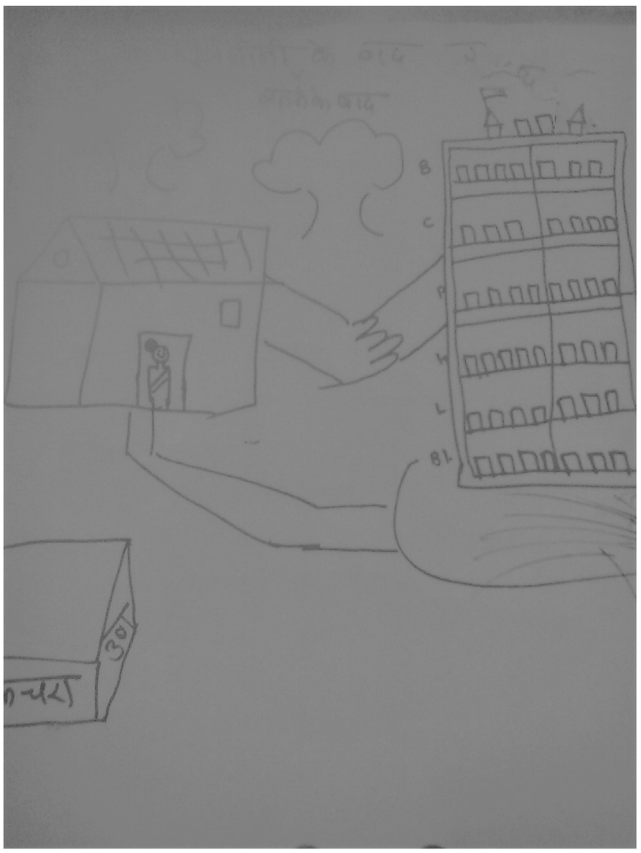

FIGURE 1 | Noori's poster which shows the organization's hand meeting with the community. Photograph by author. Note: the photograph has been altered to preserve participant confidentiality.

hum?" she asked, and then instructed Niharika and the other sakhis, "Don't say *hum* . . . say *mujhe*!" *Mujhe* being the singular pronoun, "I"—which I felt was her way of encouraging the sakhis to assert their individuality. Niharika smiled and awkwardly agreed, after which the other groups took their turn to present their posters.

Neerja said that before she was a sakhi she lived a "half *zindagi*" (half a life), as though she was "living in another's hand" (*kisi aur ke haath mein*). But now she said that she could "give *nyay*" (justice) to others," and had her rights and happiness. Leela characterized her transformation thusly, "At first I was a *murgi* (chicken), but now I am a *tota* (parrot)!" Surbhi spoke of how she now possessed *himmat aur hausla* (courage and resolve) to intervene in conflicts by being *bindaas* (without any inhibitions).

Finally, Noori, a transwoman sakhi, spoke. She had not known about Vinamrata at first but said that she was here today after sakhis and community workers told her about the program and the work they did. "Abuse against women is wrong," she continued, and having witnessed incidents like domestic violence and burnings, she "had to do something." She then presented her poster (**Figure 1**). A building-like structure stood on one side, and a house on the other. A hand extended from the building and met another extended hand from the house in the middle. She explained, "This is the *sanstha's* (organization's) hand reaching out to our homes."

Reasserting Domestic Intimacies

In December 2018, I was at one of Vinamrata's field offices in Shivaji Nagar, a large basti located in Mumbai's M-East ward in the eastern suburbs. Vinamrata's violence prevention program has been active in this area for the last 4 years. Their office was a small mezzanine room located in the premises of the local police station, which served as both a crisis counseling and community center. I had tagged along with some colleagues who were about to conduct a training workshop with a group of sakhis. At the time, I was developing training material for Vinamrata's work with community men who were part of their intervention as allies. Having heard about this group of sakhis, who had been involved in several community actions, I wanted to conduct a short workshop with them to gain insights to incorporate into their work with male allies.

About eight sakhis, some with small children, were seated on the floor of the mezzanine room, with some Vinamrata project workers. After their training concluded, I joined them on the floor, and greeted them—some of whom I had met in a previous event in this neighborhood. The purpose of my workshop was to discuss their vision of an "ideal community" (*aadarsh samuday*), which we could then use to engender accountability among male allies[3]. And having heard about the exemplary work many of these sakhis had engaged in, I was hoping to hear their critical insights regarding the nature of patriarchy, resistance, and solidarity.

To my surprise, however, the discussion veered away from how I had anticipated it would unfold. Instead, what I heard from these sakhis was their version of an ideal conjugality. From the very beginning, the sakhis were hesitant at assigning blame—or even responsibility—of gender inequity and violence to men in their community. One sakhi tried to establish some sort of parity between women and men. "Men are concerned (for their wives) when we are ill (*bimaar*)," she reasoned. For her, this underscored that men do engage in care work, even if under constrained situations. Troublingly, another sakhi added, "Men should see women as (their) sisters or mother."

A young sakhi, who had attended the workshop with her son, intervened. She emphasized "*soch*"—thoughts, ideas or beliefs—as a particular problem. She reasoned that it was men's *soch*, as well as that of the entire neighborhood, that was at fault. "This is the source of conflict and jealousy," she said. She then referred to the notion of an "ideal" community that I had mentioned and said that this vision was not possible in their community, as residents were always concerned about the affairs of others. This social structure, which was also interpolated into the metaphor of *soch*, was something experienced sakhis like her were entangled and complicit in. She referred to it as "*humari soch*"—"our beliefs."

After a brief minute of silence, an elderly Muslim sakhi spoke. "Men and women are equal," she asserted, but then added that as

[3]This activity was adapted from International Rescue Committee's (2014) training manual, *Engaging Men in Accountable Practices*.

women—and wives, at that—"We have to talk to (our) husbands respectfully (*izzat se*) . . . (They) come home after a long day at work." She then critiqued the young men in the neighborhood, many of whom are involved in petty crimes and hooliganism (*dadagiri*). Rather than resisting or challenging them, she said, "We should speak nicely to them . . . refer to them as *aap*," a pronoun signifying rank or respect. "Then other men and boys would [realize] . . . they will tell others, "Speak to them with respect!" Another Hindu, middle-aged sakhi, agreed with this, and said that they have some faith in younger men in their neighborhood—many of whom participated in Vinamrata's program. She reasoned that they have the potential to change, even more so than older men who appeared to have been set about in their ways.

Interstitial Intimacies, Intimate Affects: Discussion

These ethnographic accounts appeared to be diametrically opposed in their emotional and political orientation. The first workshop was marked by a sense of conviviality, exuberance, and critical reflection. These sakhis emphasized the change and transformation they experienced in being part of Vinamrata, and the power of building relationships—with each other and with the organization. As my Vinamrata colleagues and I have argued elsewhere, such affective encounters between NGOs, community workers, and community women engender change and transformation, which are further facilitated through reciprocal relationships (Chakraborty et al. 2017). The Shivaji Nagar sakhis, in contrast, appeared to look inward, *within* domestic spaces and conjugal relationships, and asserted a view that ostensibly sought to preserve the patriarchal status quo. While some of them pointed out the lack of social cohesion and marginalization in their neighborhood, others reasserted some amount of faith in them, especially young men.

In a crucial sense, these divergent accounts exemplify certain postfeminist contradictions discussed above, namely the continuities and discontinuities between modes of feminist and feminized solidarities and changing matrices of heterosexual and, in this case, conjugal relationships. One could assume—as I initially did at the moment—that the latter sakhis' beliefs were a form of "benevolent sexism." According to Glick and Fisk (1997, 121), benevolent sexism is opposed to more hostile forms of sexism, as it "relies on kinder and gentler justifications of male dominance and prescribed gender roles; it recognizes men's dependence on women (i.e., women's dyadic power) and embraces a romanticized view of sexual relationships with women." At the same time, these sakhis' strategic emphasis on maintaining conjugal relations could also be viewed as what Kandiyoti (1988, 285) termed as "patriarchal bargain," which refer to strategies adopted by women in male-dominated societies to submit to patriarchal norms in exchange for security and material wellbeing.

Yet, upon further reflection and conversation with Vinamrata's community workers over the years, I do not think benevolent sexism or patriarchal bargain explain these sakhis' interventions. Despite the unanticipated turn of our encounter, the community workers and sakhis who lived and worked in Shivaji Nagar had extensively documented multiple interventions they had done to prevent violence, support survivors, and even involve local elected officials and the police. Furthermore, as we saw in the ethnographic account, these sakhis spoke about the wider socioeconomic conditions of precarity and poverty, a mode of urban subjecthood which collapsed distinctions between social, material, and cognitive structures, exemplified in their deployment of the notion of *soch*.

Following Bourdieu (1990, 53), we can interpret *soch* as not just cognitive structures or beliefs, but as a form of *habitus*, that is, "systems of durable, transposable dispositions," which are structured by and generate the "practical world." Bourdieu's rendering of *habitus* signifies material and representational structures (which, in his words, are "objective") and forms of social action available to actors, who nevertheless have the potential to act in ways that subvert these schemas. Moreover, given the prevalence of gendered violence and the sakhis' everyday forms of actions to prevent violence, it is also important to draw attention to how gendered subjectivities and social structures are entangled in such Bourdieuian dispositions, what he referred to as "symbolic violence."

Symbolic violence is the "*violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity*" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004, 272, emphasis in original). Symbolic violence is a form of *misrecognition*, an inability to perceive violence as violence. It draws attention to both, the social constructivist aspect of gender (the worldview of two biological sexes), as well as how this itself is inculcated and embodied (273). The practices of institutions and individuals, to a great extent, naturalize and embody such violence. Contrary to its semantic formulation, symbolic violence "is exerted not in the pure logic of knowing consciousness but through the schemes of perception, appreciation and action that are constitutive of habitus" (Bourdieu 2004, 339–40). According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence can only be resisted through embodied means that bring about "a radical transformation of the social conditions of production of the dispositions," rather than purely discursive acts (342).

The affective, embodied, and convivial nature of the workshop in Dharavi was, in many ways, exemplary of the way that Vinamrata's interventions engaged frontline workers (Chakraborty 2021a). Crucially, this account illustrated how their interventions produced a form of intimacy within the space of the workshop, but one that also transcended it. This was evinced in both, how Niharika referred to herself with the plural pronoun "*hum*" (for which she was corrected by the facilitator, showing how at times even NGO representatives overlook the subtle effects of their work), and how Noori's visual representation quite literally signified the intimate act of holding hands. In contrast, while the Shivaji Nagar sakhis' interventions illustrate the problem of how such intimacies are imbricated in precarious lifeworlds, their allusions to and mobilizations of a different register of intimacy—marital conjugality—showed how NGO interventions nevertheless inflect these intimacies with critical notions of equality (e.g., "Men and women are equal"). At the same time, they also

refracted domestic intimacy, along with attendant notions of mutual respect and responsibility, onto the public as a means of holding their community members (especially young men) accountable.

These two divergent but related forms of intimacy become interstitial precisely as they foreground connection; not only of drawing closer, but also pushing against. For one, both accounts underscore the material basis of urban poor women's centrality in managing—and transcending—public and private dichotomies (Chakraborty 2021a). Indeed, as Roy (2003) shows in her ethnography with women in Calcutta's urban poor neighborhoods, "domestic"—and public—spaces are inherently unstable social formations that develop from particular histories of migration and political economy. She terms this organization of private, intimate spaces as *domestication*, "a polyvalent, organizing concept to detail the logic of double gendering," which "operates within fields of power" (86). This process of domestication entails a feminization of poverty, where women's work and wages are undervalued, and they are further discursively placed in a bounded home (which pivots on the public–private binary). In her ethnography, the discourses of working women disrupt these domestic imperatives, and thus, she argues domesticity is something that is negotiated "inside and outside the domus" (87). These negotiations, furthermore, undermine the "false binaries of work and household, production and social reproduction, public and private" (88).

Yet, when urban poor women are part of interventions which explicitly foreground and mobilize affective modes of engagement, we see how negotiations of domestication also articulate desires of conviviality (among sakhis themselves), as well as intimacy and conjugality (in their relationships). This articulation of intimacy counters how urban scholars like Datta (2016) have framed women's "right to intimacy" in contexts of intimate and domestic violence, where survivors reject outside interventions and instead "absorb" violence that sometimes leads to harm, injury, or even death (Datta 2012). And neither do these desires of intimacy reduce sakhis' sense of empowerment or agency as purely mental or cognitive, which we see in Roychowdhury's (2016) work with NGOs that transform women's mind-sets or save their souls instead of providing material support.

Evidently, this is not the case with sakhis in either of the ethnographic accounts. For one, their interstitial intimacy problematizes insider-outsider dichotomies, as they try helping survivors by being both, caring friends and neighbors and also frontline workers—which we saw in the first account. For another, both groups of sakhis were cognizant of the respective collectives they were part of. For instance, Niharika's instinctive use of "*hum*" instead of "*mujhe*"—for which she was gently corrected by the workshop coordinator—reflected how the singularity of her experience was rather part of multiple, collective trajectories of other sakhis like her, who were all discussing and celebrating the entanglements of personal and collective experiences of change (*badlaav*). Similarly, the Shivaji Nagar sakhis' emphasis on both, their conjugal and wider communitarian relationships, underscored the inherently social and suffused nature of their positionality as frontline workers. In order to work efficaciously to prevent violence—which we saw in their well-documented past actions—they re-signified the desire of intimate conjugality in opposition to erosion of social and communitarian respect, expressed in the notion of *soch* discussed above. Even as domestic intimacies were inflected with notions of equality, these were consciously framed and deployed to foreground (and possibly critique) their complicity in these structures (*humari soch*). This also indexed the collectives they were part of, albeit marked by specific communitarian experiences of marginalization,[4] even as these affective intimacies expressed optimism and possibilities of change (Freeman 2020, 84–85).

Fractured Intimacies, Navigating Boundaries

On a humid and cloudy July morning in 2015, I arrived at Vinamrata's community center around 10:30 AM, the usual start of our workday. As usual, the team and I caught up while drinking hot *chai*. The daily team briefing had already started, when Nusrat, a community worker in her late 30s, arrived at the center. Dinesh, the team supervisor, reproached her for arriving late. Nusrat apologized, but her demeanor was calm and cheerful. As she took her place along the large circle in which we were all seated on the floor, she said she was late because there was a delay in the water supply that morning. "Usually water (flow) stops at 9:30," she explained. Besides, she was also making arrangements for Ramzan Eid, which was only a few days away at the time. At one point she said, in her usual cheerful and calm disposition, "Don't we (women) also have work (*kaam*) left at home?" And, in a move to placate Dinesh's slight reprimand, she mentioned how she mobilized some basti women for that afternoon's session along the way—a form of multitasking that other community workers, many of whom also lived in nearby bastis, engaged in.

As Nusrat settled in, the meeting resumed. Dinesh brought up the issue of assigning smartphones to the sakhis as part of Vinamrata's efforts of using technology to map and monitor instances of domestic violence. However, he noted that despite giving smartphones to over a 100 women, there was not a commensurate rise in the number of expected case registrations—that is, when the sakhis identify survivors of abuse and violence and inform the community workers and counsellors. Dinesh said, "If sakhis aren't being active . . . if they are not being vigilant, you (community team) have to work (harder) on cases!"

[4]Such marginalization is particularly salient as the Shivaji Nagar sakhis' experiences are part of the historical and social worlds of the M-East Ward, an area that has long been subject to political and economic marginalization, in large part due to its Muslim- and North India migrant-majority population (see, Björkman 2015; Björkman 2020). In contrast, the first ethnographic account had taken place Dharavi, which had a different historical trajectory. Even though Dharavi residents had contended with structural violence and communal violence, the neighborhood has long been home to various secular and rights-based social and political movements (Chatterji and Mehta 2007).

A few community workers responded that many sakhis informed them of problems over using smartphones, and that many did not understand their role within this restructured intervention. Bhavana, an experienced community worker and team supervisor, said that even though many sakhis were not filling the form on the smartphone application, cases of violence were still being reported offline. She said, "We need to take action (about this)." Dinesh added that supervisors need to stay abreast about the changes that occur with the smartphone application. We ate lunch around noon, after which each community worker proceeded to their respective areas to conduct sessions with sakhis and other women.

That afternoon, I joined Kalpana and Nazreen for the group activity they were about to facilitate. Kalpana was a team supervisor, and Nazreen was a community worker who had recently joined the team. By the time we reached the neighborhood, it had started raining heavily. We took shelter at a large open-air community space that had a high overhead roof. Nazreen was supposed to facilitate a session with a relatively new women's group in the *chawl* (working class neighborhood), but when a few residents heard we were from Vinamrata they refused to let us use the space (and we could not have the session in the open due to the rains, either).

One senior resident, a retired army man, was especially vocal in his opposition. He cited a previous instance where Vinamrata's health and nutrition program—a different "vertical" at the organization—had held an event in this very space but had invited Muslim women from nearby *jhopad-pattis* (slums), and had distributed food to them without giving any to the local residents. Kalpana was at pains explaining the difference between the programs, but the residents did not relent, and we had to eventually cancel the session.

Fragmented Interventions and Vicarious Harm

As I noted above, sakhis, community workers, and crisis counsellors are part of the interlinked ecology of services and support that Vinamrata offers to survivors of violence. After sakhis or community workers identify and refer survivors to the counseling center, it is counsellors who work closely with them, providing psychosocial, therapeutic and legal support, particularly when working alongside institutions like courts. In crucial regards, counsellors too share and embody the critical consciousness of their community counterparts; many of them are trained in social work, and usually start their careers with grassroots work. I had the chance to interview some counsellors at the program during fieldwork in 2015, where our conversations covered their motivations, personal and professional trajectories, and experiences with the legal system.

The counsellors—who worked in offices located at different urban poor communities across the city—had just finished a day-long training workshop. I sat with them across a large, round table located in the hallway, for a group interview. In our conversation, the counsellors conceptualized gendered violence as relational and structural. One of them said, violence was having "control over another's life," like placing someone in "custody," and not letting them "live like a human being." They also linked violence to power relations, social systems, and everyday norms and behaviors which normalized injustice and "socialize a woman to violence." Similarly, one of the counsellors who worked with the court systems presented a complex picture of the legal landscape, acknowledging that laws "can hurt … women." Some of the main challenges she mentioned included inaccessibility of legal resources for urban poor women, delays in the judicial system, lack of non-legal supportive structures, economic dependency on abusive partners, and burdening survivors with the onus of responsibility.

Frontline workers and counsellors share these affective and critical understandings of inequality and violence. But in everyday life of the intervention they come to be positioned differently, as frontline workers also face pressures to meet their monthly case targets—something we observed in the previous ethnographic account, as well. In countless morning meetings I observed during fieldwork, questions like "Why aren't cases visible?" or "Why is (the) work not showing?" were commonplace. In one meeting, for instance, community workers spoke of "high pressure cases"—those which involve serious self-harm or risk to survivors—and how sometimes there are gaps between their work and that of counsellors. Common refrains they heard from community women included "We come and go (but nothing happens)!" At times counsellors were also unable to undertake home visits, often due to high volume of cases (an issue that eventually gets resolved with several coordination meetings).

"This makes me feel that there is something lacking or wanting in me," one community worker had said, explaining her dissatisfaction with such pressures of quantification. Another community worker shared an instance of a case-sharing meeting where a sakhi had asked "If there's less violence, isn't it a good thing?" The community worker continued, "We don't give people anything (benefits), so we have to compete with other NGOs (who give material benefits)." Despite this, everyday work in the community extracts as much energy, if not more. During one particular meeting, for instance, a community worker tried to lighten the mood by remarking how it now appeared that they would have to instigate quarrels among couples to meet their targets—commenting on the stereotype held by men towards women's organizations. Despite this, experienced workers like Bhavana reasoned that even though they witnessed partial stories and that someone "would be unhappy," their work had to continue.

Interstitial Intimacies, Caring Labor, and Navigating NGOization: A Discussion

The two ethnographic accounts discussed in this section outline the work that Vinamrata's community workers were engaged in. Although they share social and gendered locations similar with that of sakhis—as urban poor women—community workers are also part of the social sector workforce. This workforce is highly feminized and, over the last 2 decades, has steadily experienced increased pressures of professionalization, quantification and precarity (Merry 2016; Roy 2019). We saw this most clearly in

Nusrat's case, which is in fact a common, mundane and unremarkable occurrence for millions of urban poor working women. At the same time, when the *chawl* residents confronted Kalpana and Nazreen over what they perceived to be infractions by members of another program, their critique actually marked out differences between them and the "other women"—signified by their religion and status—thus effectively drawing social boundaries.

Like the previous section, these accounts also show the salience of domestic intimacies in professionalized frontline work, signifying how women's socially reproductive care transcends public–domestic dichotomies and ties together with neighborly socialities. As Snell-Rood (2015) shows in her ethnography with poor women in a Delhi slum, such socialities often serve as forms of "informal support" for survivors of violence. Frontline workers, too, are imbricated in such regimes of informal support; indeed, many of them are involved in providing care and support to survivors prior to becoming frontline workers (Chakraborty et al. 2017; Chakraborty 2021a). In this context, interstitial intimacies materialize through everyday rhythms of frontline work, where women like Nusrat navigate their domestic responsibilities whilst also meeting professional obligations, like mobilizing women and fostering collectives like women's groups.

Still, these neighborly socialities are not a priori; as we saw in the *chawl* where Kalpana and Nazreen faced opposition, neighborly intimacies can often be fractured along lines of religion and community. The residents' objections were inflected with both, majoritarian anxieties and biases (in opposing "Muslim slum dwellers"), and urban socialities and political networks, such as patronage or reciprocity ("We did not receive any benefits") (see, respectively, Chatterji and Mehta (2007) and de Wit and Berner (2009)). Here, inasmuch as NGO interventions play an important role in creating solidarities, their status as outside actors—especially those that can provide benefits (*suvidha*)—problematize the very intimacies they facilitate in the first place.

Challenges to engendering interstitial intimacies also emanate from within organizational structures of NGOs, as we saw in both ethnographic accounts, though more explicitly in the second one. Even though community workers, sakhis and counsellors are part of a largely integrated and holistic response, such interventions come to diverge along organizational hierarchies. These observations raise important questions regarding the efficacy and legitimacy of NGOized interventions. How can we understand the scale and depth of the problem of violence against women when those entrusted with caring for and supporting survivors face such pressures? How do such pressures coexist with—or constrain and contract—the arduous, painstaking emotional and affective labor of building relationships with women?

Anthropologists writing on global paradigms of neoliberalism, quantification and NGOization, particularly in the domain of gender violence, focus their critiques on the following fronts. First, as Sally Engle Merry (2016) has shown, the proliferation of data-generation and quantification have resulted from universalization of norms and standards of measurement from the Global North and their circulation in the rest of the world as standardized indicators. Second, as Sharma (2006) and Mindry (2001) argue, the epistemic politics and organizational hierarchies of women's NGOs—marked with the use of buzzwords like "development" or "empowerment"—are often premised on ethnocentric and imperial categories. Such terms and practices define beneficiaries as marginalized, feminized, oppressed and needing (western) development and aid. Third, as Roy (2019) shows in her recent ethnography of empowerment workers, NGOization, development and empowerment are implemented through disciplinary regimes of professionalization. Finally, as Haldane (2017) notes, such pressures often lead to decoupling of "agency care," which is provided by individuals, from "structural care," which refers to support provided to carers by institutions.

Conversations and dialogue with the team showed that such pressures were deeply felt in gender justice activism in India, especially after the neoliberal reforms of the Indian state in the 1990s. As political anthropologists like Ferguson (1996) and Gupta (2012) have observed, one of the unintended consequences of development discourse is the entrenchment of state power and burgeoning forms of inequity, even under neoliberal deregulation of healthcare and the social sector (Rao 2010). Feminist anthropologists, however, advocate for more nuanced and grounded explanations.

Writing on the theme of NGOization, for instance, Roy (2011, 590) suggests that we need to "argue against purist and dichotomized understandings of feminist activism and identities, and move, instead, towards points of convergence and hybridity." In her ethnographic work with a large government organized NGO, Mahila Samakhya, Sharma (2006, 70–71) shows how these NGO workers wear "two hats"—using the vocabulary of the state to negotiate *authority*, and the rhetoric of the NGO, or social organization, to negotiate *legitimacy* in the rural communities. Similarly, Bernal and Grewal (2014b, 11, 14) recognize the adverse effects neoliberalism has had on feminist movements. Yet, NGO interventions continue to proliferate through what they call the "NGO form" which has become "a well-established element of the political landscape that itself is shaping the conditions of feminist struggles," observing how changing relations between NGOs, states, and neoliberalism "produce changing feminist and female subjects."

Within the wider landscape of neoliberalism and NGOization outlined so far, the import of interstitial intimacy lies in the fact that it engenders, and is engendered through, care. Frontline workers' care and support to survivors of violence is a deeply intimate form of "caring labor," a term I borrow from Susan Himmelweit (1999). Caring labor takes place in relationships where there is mutuality between carers and those they care for. As Himmelweit argues, the motivation "to care" and the reciprocity or recognition in "being cared for" is crucial in such affective encounters. Such skills are difficult to codify, and are "picked up in the course of developing a particular caring relationship" (34). Furthermore, Himmelweit's use of caring labor draws on the concept of emotional labor or emotional work, a term coined by Arlie Hochschild (1983), which she defined as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display." Emotional labor,

Hochschild further writes, draws "on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality" (for a wider discussion on care, see Tronto 1993; Mol 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Mahadevan 2014).

Indeed, the centrality of care in frontline workers' interventions keeps open possibilities of affective and ethical engagement. In a focus-group discussion I held with the team toward the end of fieldwork in 2015, Dinesh, who was also an experienced social activist, explained that as a result of neoliberalism many women's organizations were accused of being "communist." Turning a critical lens on organizational practices he was embedded in himself, he acknowledged that NGOs were able to benefit many people owing to structural limitations of the state—which was exemplary in urban poor neighborhoods, as such organizations and collectives maintained harmony after the 1992–93 anti-Muslim riots (Chatterji and Mehta 2007) and resisted dispossession and displacement of redevelopment projects (Weinstein 2014; Björkman 2020). Despite this, he noted, more and more organizations sought to implement projects or deliver material benefits to populations rather than engage in sustained movements.

The depoliticizing effects of NGOization and neoliberalism, ironically, can work toward making frontline work and gendered logics of care possible in the first place. Indeed, the language of projects can also be framed in gendered metaphors. For instance, across several conversations I have had with Bhavana and Kalpana, they observed that the very form and structure of NGOs meant that they were viewed as relatively neutral providers of services (and were thus often subject to claims of entitlements). Similarly, even though the segmented structure of interventions produced divergences between frontline workers and counsellors, community workers like Bhavana believe that such structures nevertheless enable certain forms of surveillance and vigilance. This was important so as to not let women's groups go astray and work for the harm of the communities—which happened a few times in the past when former sakhis had started "settling" cases for sums of money (Chakraborty 2021b).

This illustrates a deep and reflexive understanding that frontline workers have toward the contexts they are a part of. But they also highlight the excesses of the same, for instance, which prevent them from operating (in) these contradictions, or undercut the metaphors and shorthands they use in everyday interventions. Kalpana, for instance, frames her NGOized work as beyond or ahead of electoral politics. Accordingly, if she "joins politics," she will "have only one way (to work)." In contrast, she sees her present work as working "with everyone" (*sabke saath*). But she also recognizes that "Vinamrata won't be there forever," so building alliances with political classes and accruing social capital through NGOs is crucial, since it becomes a means towards an end, which always remains "working together with and helping people" (*logon ke saath mein madad karna*).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have drawn on ethnographic fieldwork with frontline workers involved in an NGOized program to prevent violence against women and girls to highlight convergences and entanglements between postfeminist practices and the NGOization of feminism and women's movements. While the scholarship on postfeminism remains varied and contested, feminist interventions generally suggest that rather than marking a total departure from past feminist discourses and practices, postfeminism indexes complex—and at times contradictory—movements that assert particular forms of gendered and feminine subjecthood. For instance, such claims assert women's agency within the contexts (and confines) of heterosexual relations, and the expression of expressedly feminine virtues and affectations.

I have used the heuristic interstitial intimacy to illustrate how the NGOization of feminist social work is a particular form of postfeminist practice that mobilizes frontline workers' multiple, refracted and socially-inscribed and feminized identities. Interstitial intimacies enfold their domestic, affective and embodied intimacies with their neighborly, activist and professional engagements that are predicated on fostering collectives through intimate encounters, like training workshops and supporting survivors of violence. However, such intimacies are also affected by violence and marginalization—which not only necessitates interventions but also poses challenges to frontline work. NGOized work, with its pressures of professionalization and quantification, also constrains the ways that such intimacies engender open-ended and affective collectives.

Yet, as the ethnographic accounts presented in this article have shown, and as the convergences and entanglements between postfeminism and NGOization also demonstrate, frontline workers tend to appraise such overlapping and malleable ties between femininity and feminism (Mahadevan 2014) as crucial to their individual and collective subjectivation in mobilizations against violence. Even as they experience marginalization in material and structural terms, interstitial intimacies mark out emergent and relational forms of negotiation that are engendered in urban poor communities.

For instance, we see postfeminist inflections most clearly among the sakhis at Shivaji Nagar. Rather than articulate critical insights, like their peers in Dharavi, these sakhis asserted the importance of conjugality and domesticity. Yet, when we contextualize their articulations in wider social and biographical narratives and contexts, we see more nuanced logics emerge. The importance of conjugality and domesticity, for instance, have more complex histories in urban poor neighborhoods, relating as they do with the feminization of poverty and social and political marginalization (Roy 2003). The experiences of Dharavi sakhis, in contrast, drew on affective engagements with each other and with the organization. And although this workshop was generally more critical and reflexive, the sort of socialities they spoke of—forming connections, building relationships—bear a critical link with feminized logics seen in the Shivaji Nagar sakhis' interventions: they were about care, specifically forms of care that were deeply related to the performance of emotional and affective labor, the disproportionate burden of which is borne by women (Chakraborty 2021a).

At the same time, sakhis' and community workers' close involvement with crisis counsellors embedded them within complex therapeutic regimes, as well as disciplinary practices of professionalization and quantification. Not only do these pressures lead to vicarious harm, but they profoundly unsettle the intimacies frontline workers share with community women and survivors of violence. Nevertheless, despite being part of a precarious workforce, frontline workers mobilize existing forms of socially reproductive care, wherein the at-times contradictory conjunction of care and professional social work lead to new forms of local practices. These practices have engendered unique forms of politics that exceed logics of neoliberal subjectivation, and reassert commitment to foundational feminist values and ethics, like care, relationality, and critique of patriarchal power.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the ethnographic data on which this article is based are sensitive in nature and cannot be made public. The data were obtained with informed oral consent and are presented anonymously/pseudonymized. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to proshant.chakraborty@gu.se.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements. Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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"I Like it Clean": Brazilian Waxing and Postfeminist Subjectivity Among South Asian Beauticians in London

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Postfeminism is a neoliberal sensibility that locates femininity in the body, thereby imploring women to constantly labor on, monitor and discipline their bodies. This aesthetic labor is presented to women as freely chosen and empowering. Brazilian waxing is exemplary aesthetic labor directed at the self. Academic literature on aesthetic labor in general, and Brazilian waxing in particular, looks at white and middle-class women, as this category of women is considered the putative subject of postfeminism. Little attention is paid to racialized women from the global south who perform aesthetic labor on other women's bodies in the global north. In this paper, I draw on my ethnographic study of two beauty salons in London run by South Asian women to argue that these South Asian beauticians are postfeminist subjects as well. The aim of challenging the putative subject of postfeminism, using the example of Brazilian waxing, is not merely to include South Asian women in the discourse, but to advance a transnational theorization of postfeminism. Such theorization, I demonstrate, leads to a better understanding of how postfeminism is implicated in global structures of power as well as the affective qualities of postfeminism including intimacy and disgust.

Keywords: postfeminism, aesthetic labor, South Asia, Brazilian waxing, intimacy, beauty salon

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INTRODUCTION

Body hair removal is considered an essential trait of femininity in many societies around the world. In countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, the obsession with removal of body hair also extends to the female pubic area, with mass media presenting it as desirable and sexy, and beauty salons offering different styles of fashioning pubic hair. Most of the studies conducted with women on pubic hair removal have been quantitative in nature, providing empirical data which sheds light on the prevalence of the phenomenon. In a study conducted with 235 white undergraduate students in Australia, it was found that at least 60% of them removed some of their pubic hair with 48% removing most or all of it, waxing being the most popular method of hair removal (Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008). A survey of 678 majority-white British women concluded that over 80% removed hair from their pubic area, with shaving being the most used method (Toerien et al., 2005). Similarly, in a survey of 660 predominantly white women in British Columbia, it was found that 50% of the participants removed hair from the bikini line and 30% from the whole pubic area, with shaving, salon waxing and trimming emerging as popular methods (Riddell et al., 2010). While most studies have been conducted with convenient samples of white women in the global north, in a survey of 400 women in Saudi Arabia, all the women reported removing pubic hair as well, shaving being the most commonly used method (Rouzi et al., 2017).

In all these studies, women identified femininity, attractiveness and personal hygiene as the main reasons for pubic hair removal. What makes pubic hair removal different from hair removal from other parts of the body is that the pubic area, unlike arms and legs, is not normally visible to others. Therefore, the decision to remove pubic hair is orientated more toward the self and/or a sexual partner. In the survey with Australian undergraduates, "it makes me feel cleaner" was the most-cited reason for the removal of pubic hair (Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008, 891). Cleanliness also emerged as an important theme in two qualitative studies conducted with ethnically diverse women in New Zealand and the United States, locating pubic hair as a potential site for sweat, dirt and odor (see Braun et al., 2013; Fahs 2014). Similarly, in a study conducted with Turkish-Cypriot women, the main reason for pubic hair removal was cited as comfort and prevention of odor (Muallaaziz et al., 2014). Although women acknowledge the role of societal norms, they are unwilling to attribute their behavior to beauty standards alone, framing body hair removal as a personal choice (Tiggemann and Kenyon, 1998; Li and Braun, 2016). Tiggemann and Hodgson (2008) argue that associating lack of pubic hair with cleanliness and better personal hygiene is precisely the kind of rationale that keeps women chained to a neoliberal logic of periodic consumption of products and services that stave off body hair.

The literature on pubic hair removal maps neatly on to recent literature on postfeminism and its offshoot, aesthetic labor. Although the term originated as a critique of media culture, postfeminism was soon consolidated as a cultural "sensibility" defined by certain characteristics (Gill 2007, 148). Broadly, some of the characteristics that comprise a postfeminist sensibility are the notion that femininity is located in the body and requires constant self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a shift from objectification to subjectification; a renewal of the idea of natural sexual difference; and an emphasis on consumerism and the commodification of difference (Gill, 2007). Thus, a postfeminist sensibility is constituted through neoliberal ideas of choice, individualism and empowerment in the service of consumerism. Both postfeminism and neoliberalism are predicated on the mobilization of an autonomous, freely choosing and agentic female subject who is required to constantly labor on and transform herself through the consumption of products and services (Gill and Scharff, 2011). Aesthetic labor or aesthetic entrepreneurship requires us all to be entrepreneurs, constantly working on our appearance—with agency and creativity—so that the project of maintaining and beautifying our bodies appears self-directed and self-managed, seemingly free of societal constraints and pressures (Gill, 2007; Winch, 2013; Elias et al., 2018).

Thus, postfeminism is a set of ideas around femininity that can be studied (Riley et al., 2017). Women strive to be rendered intelligible through these ideas, therefore aspiring to postfeminist subjecthood. The normative subject of postfeminist discourse has been posited as young, white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied and conventionally attractive (Butler, 2013). Postfeminism centers an "affluent elite," one who can access the pleasures and lifestyles associated with it, thereby occupying a white and middle-class subject position by default (Tasker and Negra, 2007, 2). Therefore, most scholars working on postfeminism have assumed white, middle class, heterosexual women as the sole subjects of postfeminist discourse.

In this paper, using the example of Brazilian waxing, I aim to complicate the understanding of the putative subject of postfeminism. More specifically, drawing on my ethnography of two beauty salons run by South Asian migrant women in London, I illustrate that the racialized women performing aesthetic labor on other women's bodies are postfeminist subjects as well. In doing so, I demonstrate what theorizing postfeminism as transnational might look like. I also argue that focusing on the experiences of those who perform aesthetic labor on other women for a living leads to a better understanding of the affective qualities of postfeminism. I use postfeminism as a sensibility or a discourse throughout rather than an analytic perspective.

I use the example of Brazilian waxing as it is exemplary postfeminist behavior or aesthetic labor directed at the self. In discussing postfeminism, Rosalind Gill (2007, 153) writes about "phenomena such as the dramatic increase in the number of women having Brazilian waxes" and Simidele Dosekun (2015, 966) mentions "Brazilian waxes" as a kind of postfeminism that sells internationally alongside "Beyonce" and "boob jobs". It is one of the many methods available to women for pubic hair removal. Being hairless in the pubic area as an adult woman requires work, time and money; and waxing as a method of hair removal is especially time-consuming, painful and expensive as compared to do-it-yourself methods such as shaving and trimming. What makes waxing a popular method of hair removal is that it can be performed by a professional in a beauty salon and ensures hair-free skin for a longer period, reducing or thinning hair growth with continued usage. There is, however, a mind-boggling array of styles when it comes to pubic hair waxing. The nomenclature is often confusing and used interchangeably depending on the local context. Three well-known styles of pubic hair waxing are Bikini wax, Brazilian wax and Hollywood wax. Bikini wax, as the name suggests, removes any hair that can be seen while wearing a bikini or a swimsuit. Brazilian wax takes off all the pubic hair from the front and back, leaving a small strip on the mons pubis in a shape of one's choice. Hollywood wax, on the other hand, removes all hair completely from the pubic area. For the purpose of this paper, I will use the generic term Brazilian waxing to denote full pubic hair waxing, although "full bikini waxing" is commonly used by the South Asian participants in my research in London.

THE TRANSNATIONALITY OF AESTHETIC LABOR

Writing ten years since she first conceptualized postfeminism as a sensibility, Gill (2017, 609) claims that postfeminism is now so "hegemonic" that it operates "as a kind of gendered neoliberalism" that is "difficult to recognize as a novel and distinctive sensibility." This hegemonic form of gendered neoliberalism, however, is not a culturally or geographically

specific phenomenon but is simultaneously "discursive, ideological, affective and psychosocial" (Elias et al., 2018, 25). As a cultural sensibility or discourse, "postfeminism can travel through complex social terrains, deftly adapting to cultural, economic, and political shifts while maintaining its core characteristics" (Butler, 2013, 45).

In that sense, it would be a mistake to treat postfeminism as an exclusively "Western" phenomenon (Gwynne, 2013). Although the central figure imbricated in a postfeminist discourse is white and middle-class, this does not mean that non-white and non-middle-class women are unaffected by postfeminism, but that their relationship to the pervasive cultural phenomenon remains undertheorized (Butler, 2013). One of the most important developments in literature on postfeminism in the last ten years has been an attempt to advance an intersectional analysis of the concept by incorporating race, class, sexuality and transnationality (Gill, 2017). Dosekun (2015, 966) argues for taking a transnational approach to postfeminism by acknowledging that the culture affects not only women in the West but also elsewhere. She posits that irrespective of their geographical location, a postfeminist subjectivity is available to feminine subjects with the "material, discursive and imaginative capital to access and to buy into it." In other words, it is class and not race or geographical location that determines who gets interpellated as a suitable subject of postfeminism. Dosekun bases her argument on her research with well-educated and upper-class women in Lagos, Nigeria who engage in highly laborious and sometimes painful aesthetic labor, justifying it as self-pleasing, autonomous and empowering, thereby fashioning themselves as postfeminist subjects.

Even when class is taken into account, what gets elided in the discourse on aesthetic labor is that most women who are considered to be performing aesthetic labor are actually aesthetic consumers. These aesthetic consumers normally pay other women to perform aesthetic labor on their bodies. The beautician or therapist who performs this labor often comes from a working class, migrant and ethnic minority background. In academic literature, she is often constructed in opposition to the white, middle-class postfeminist subject. While consumers seek personal and professional advancement through the performance of aesthetic labor on their bodies, the beauticians doing this labor "work in abject conditions themselves" (Orbach, 2017, viii). As a result, although we know that beauticians work hard in low-paid jobs, sometimes under exploitative conditions, we do not know if they too reap the purported benefits of postfeminism. Aesthetic laborers are conspicuously absent from the literature on postfeminism.

What does it mean, then, to take an intersectional and transnational approach to postfeminism? A transnational approach to postfeminism must involve decentering the discourse from the global north by not thinking of it as uniquely or authentically Western culture, such that we already see it as impossible or imitative elsewhere (Dosekun, 2015). To me, however, the bigger question is that to what end do we seek to "include" women from the global south in a discourse that seemingly excludes them when the discourse itself is an object of feminist critique? The end cannot be inclusion in and of itself. The aim of an intersectional and transnational approach should not be to provide an evidence of postfeminist sensibility in non-Western cultures and countries, thereby "reinstating their otherness" but to produce an analysis of complex interconnections and power asymmetries that affect the global flow of postfeminism (Riley et al., 2017, 8).

Many women working as aesthetic laborers in the global north are racialized migrants from poorer countries in the global south (Wolkowitz, 2002). Thus, aesthetic labor is always already situated in the processes of globalization, or "the global circulation of goods, ideas and peoples" (Boris and Parreñas, 2010, 9). Although women performing labor on other women's bodies are transnationally mobile subjects, due to lack of research in this area we have little idea if they have access to the same postfeminist discourse as their customers. What has also been overlooked by researchers in this context is that as workers trained in beauty practices and treatments, aesthetic laborers are very likely to perform aesthetic labor on their own bodies. That only middle and upper-class women buy into a discourse of wanting to be beautiful and hairless is a rather simplistic view to take. However, researchers have hitherto not focused on whether a non-middle-class, non-white beautician can be interpellated as a postfeminist subject, through her performance of aesthetic labor (on herself and others) as well as through the intimacy she shares with her customers who are putatively postfeminist subjects.

By focusing on aesthetic laborers, we can also enhance our understanding of the affective qualities of postfeminism. So far, the affective qualities of postfeminism have been understood as the affects that accompany the ideas endorsed by postfeminist culture—the disavowal of unpleasant emotions such as insecurity, anger and complaint in favor of feelings such as positivity and confidence (Gill, 2017). There is a whole gamut of emotions, however, that can only be understood as belonging to the postfeminist repertoire by extending its subjecthood to women who perform aesthetic labor on other women's bodies. This kind of labor involves embodied and affective interactions (Boris and Parreñas, 2010). Scholars researching the sociology of the body and work have variously theorized this kind of labor as affective labor (Hardt, 1999), bodywork (Wolkowitz, 2002) and intimate labor (Boris and Parreñas, 2010). To use Carol Wolkowitz's (2002, 497) definition of bodywork, this kind of labor "takes the body as its immediate site of labor involving intimate, messy contact with the (frequently supine or naked body), its orifices or products through touch or close proximity." It involves touch, bodily and emotional closeness, and knowledge of personal information. It is stigmatized by the presence of bodies and dirt, and often entails the management of emotions. It involves pleasure and emotional intimacy, but it also evokes disgust.

Thus, by bringing racialized women from the global south into the fold of postfeminism, this article seeks to underline the global structures of power that aesthetic labor is implicated in as well as the affective qualities that enable this labor.

METHODS

As part of my doctoral study, I am conducting ethnographic research in two salons between 2020 and 2022: Noor's Hair &

Beauty and Maya Hair & Beauty. All the names used in this article including the names of the salons are pseudonyms. The overall aims of the study are to investigate what kinds of intimacies are formed in a beauty salon, and how does intimacy deal with differences such as ethnic, religious, class-based and sexual?

The two salons in my study are located in neighbourhoods populated by British-South Asian communities. Using business review aggregators such as Google and Treatwell, I compiled a list of salons that cater to South Asian women in different neighbourhoods in London and approached them. Noor was the first to grant me access. Since Noor's Hair and Beauty was owned, staffed and frequented by Muslim women of Pakistani origin, I made a conscious attempt to look for a second salon that would differ in attributes so as to provide a useful point of comparison. Noor's Hair & Beauty is a mid-range salon, owned and run by Noor (42), who came to the United Kingdom from Pakistan twenty years ago. At the time of writing this paper, she was assisted in the salon by Sara (40) who shared her migration trajectory. Noor's customers are Muslim women of Pakistani origin, white women and a small number of black women, from both middle-class and working-class backgrounds. Maya Hair & Beauty, on the other hand, offers more affordable rates. It is owned by Anita (38), who came to the United Kingdom from Nepal twelve years ago. At the time of writing this paper, she was assisted by Rekha (40), Bharti (40) and Jaya (45) from India who had all been in the United Kingdom for less than five years. Their customers are recent migrants from India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, many of them working-class.

The methods used in my research are participant-observation and longitudinal interviews. I conduct participant-observation at the beauty salons by working as an assistant. My job largely entails sweeping the floor, making tea and apprising customers of Covid regulations. While I made sure at the outset that the salon owners and assistant beauticians understood what my research was about, I also continually remind them of my researcher role. In terms of my positionality, I believe that insider or outsider are not fixed but unstable and ever-shifting positions, differentially experienced and expressed in the field (Naples, 1996). The participants in my study and I share the same gender and race. Like them, I am also a first-generation migrant in the United Kingdom from a South Asian country and therefore share their unique vantage point of being "in-between" two cultures and societies. I can speak or follow the languages that they speak in (Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati and Punjabi). Therefore, while I have developed friendly relations with most of the participants, I am also aware that the social and cultural capital I have accrued through my education and work over the years is visible in my comportment, accent and clothes, marking me as an outsider, in addition to my marital status (or lack thereof) which is unusual for an Indian woman of my age.

My research follows an "inductive-iterative" approach wherein ethnography moves back and forth between theory and analysis, data and interpretation (O'Reilly, 2009, 104). I went to the field with an open mind and relied on my field notes for themes to emerge. I was compelled to write this paper after recording the affective reactions of both the beauticians and the customers to Brazilian waxing and feeling highly inquisitive about it as I have never done it myself and am held back by a feeling of shame. In the first part of the next section, I present two vignettes from participant observation at Maya Hair & Beauty. The two vignettes have been chosen to demonstrate the range of feelings that beauticians might experience while providing a Brazilian wax to their customers and the kinds of relations those feelings can lead to. In the second part, I draw on semi-structured interviews with beauticians at both the salons where I asked them questions about Brazilian waxing such as when did they first learn about the service, their experience with customers and their own hair removal habits.

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD

Vignette 1

Maya Hair & Beauty is located on a busy high street in London dotted with a temple, Indian grocery shops and eateries. The salon itself is quite small and cramped. It consists of a low-ceilinged room with mirrors, three salon chairs and two benches for customers. The walls are covered in cheap blue wallpaper and the room does not have a separate reception area. There is a massage bed in one corner of the room, partitioned off with a curtain, where a customer can lie down for a private treatment such as massage, facial or body hair waxing. Despite the lack of space, the salon is always clean and organized. There is a small temple with Hindu deities affixed to the wall close to the entrance. On one of the shelves in the wall stands a small transistor radio that is always set to Sunrise, a South Asian FM channel. The latest Bollywood hits can be heard in the background while getting a beauty treatment at Maya Hair & Beauty.

Bharti, who works at the salon two days a week, has just finished giving a full-body massage to a customer. Late afternoon, Joanna, a young Public Relations professional from India walks in. It is her first time at Maya Hair & Beauty. She asks for a hair spa and a Hollywood wax and is assigned to Bharti. Joanna begins conversing with the staff in English. "You don't like Hindi?" Bharti, a native Gujarati speaker asks her while massaging her head, encouraging her to speak in Hindi. Once Joanna starts speaking in Hindi, Bharti and she do not stop chatting for the next 3 h. Bharti massages Joanna's hair with oil, applies a protein mask, steams it and then washes it. In the time this takes, they discover that they had both arrived in the United Kingdom from India two years ago following their husbands, had a rough first year when they both wanted to leave, and finally got acclimatized to London. Bharti asks Joanna about her job. When she answers with "Public Relations," Bharti does not understand. Joanna simplifies it for her by saying that she writes for corporate clients. Bharti tells her that she left behind her two children (who are being looked after by her mother and mother-in-law) and her beauty salon in India because her husband believed that the United Kingdom had better job opportunities.

After all this is done, Bharti asks Joanna to lie down on the massage table in the curtained enclosure. The sound of their chatter and giggles travels out of the curtain to the main area of the salon where I am seated. Three hours go by. Finally, when they come out into the main area of the salon, Bharti offers

Joanna some fresh orange juice she had got from home that morning. Joanna advises her to "train" her husband to cook and do household chores the way she has trained hers, and Bharti asks her if she can have her phone number for more advice.

I ask Joanna if I can interview her. The following day, she and I meet over a video call. I ask her why she got a Hollywood wax. Although she insists that it was on account of personal hygiene, she also mentions "feeling sexy" after hair removal. When I ask her to describe her experience with Bharti, she says: She didn't judge me for anything. For anything. In fact, whatever I shared with her, she seemed to reciprocate the same. Like she would tell me an experience of hers. . . something that matched that part [. . .] you know after the waxing she was like, "Come on then, off you go." And I was like, "So are you going to give me a tissue or anything" because they generally give you a tissue. She was like, "No, you are clean, that's fine." She generally mentioned that a lot of people who come here, their hygiene is quite poor. And then I asked her, you know, "Do you feel a bit grossed out when you do things like these" and she said, "Do you think doctors feel grossed out when they help a woman give birth to a baby?" I said, "Not really but they are doctors." And she said, "We do the same thing. We don't help you have a baby but we make you pretty down there."

When I mention to Bharti later that I noticed that she and her customer were having a full-fledged conversation and that she was letting her in on her personal life, she says: ". . .the customer should feel that she is sharing her story with me as well as listening to mine. When it's a friendship, there is no such thing as "professional"! She is talking to me because she considers me a friend. If she thought of me as a professional, why would she talk to me like that?"

Vignette 2

A middle-aged Indian woman comes in for her scheduled appointment at Maya Hair & Beauty. Rekha and Jaya take turns to service her as she has booked a long list of treatments. She is taken to the tiny enclosure for a Brazilian wax first. Rekha volunteers to do it as Jaya joined the salon only a week ago. About half an hour later, she comes out retching. She gestures with her fingers at the other beauticians and I to show how long the customer's pubic hair were—about two inches long is what I comprehend from the distance between her thumb and her index finger. She complains about the customer's poor hygiene and vaginal odor. What seems to have disgusted her even more is that the woman asked her to take a picture of her shaved pubic area on her phone to send her boyfriend. Rekha does not want to service the customer any longer, so Jaya goes in. She is much more sympathetic to the customer and pampers her including taking videos of her for her boyfriend. On leaving the curtained enclosure, the customer announces to everyone present in the salon that she got her pubic area waxed in preparation for a rendezvous with her boyfriend. The announcement is met with awkward silence and purposeful glances.

Jaya proceeds with the customer with extraordinary patience, alternating between humouring her and scolding her like a child to sit still and keep her phone aside. She goes on to thread her face and then gives her a pedicure. Toward the end of their session, the customer opens a packet of crisps and feeds Jaya with her own hands while Jaya is working on her toenails. They even give each other nicknames. Before leaving, the customer tips both Rekha and Jaya generously. Apparently, she did not catch wind of Rekha's aversion and disgust toward her. She also takes Jaya's number after asking if she would be open to giving her a body massage at home.

INTERVIEWS

When talking about Brazilian waxing, all the participants in my study used the cut-and-dried language of professionalism. They resorted to clinical language about Brazilian waxing, some comparing themselves to doctors, as seen above, displaying a matter-of-fact attitude about work that must be done without letting feelings of discomfort or embarrassment get in the way. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of wearing gloves while doing it. As Anita said: "We have to protect ourselves first." Here, the "protection" is against customers with poor levels of hygiene and vaginal odor, demonstrating that despite the employment of a professional attitude and clinical language, disgust is a major factor in Brazilian waxing. As Rekha said: "[I wear] gloves and mask. This mask thing has started now but we used to wear it even before. Some people (lowers voice) it smells bad. . ."

For Noor, gloves are non-negotiable. She said: "It's compulsory for me to wear gloves. I cannot do it with bare hands [. . .] it is someone's private part. I do not know how it is, whether it is clean or not, why should I touch it? It's a matter of hygiene."

Bharti said that she did not wear gloves while doing bikini wax in India, but she learnt about it in the United Kingdom. She said: "It's better for the customer and for me. But in India they do not teach this. I am telling you the truth. When I go back, I will tell everyone that you must wear gloves."

With respect to themselves, all but one of the beauticians said that they regularly removed pubic hair with "bikini wax" being their preferred method of hair removal. The one beautician that did not use this hair-removal method claimed that she naturally did not have any pubic hair but certainly would have waxed if she did. Nearly all of them made a reference to cleanliness and hygiene while describing why they choose to get a Brazilian wax. Although all of them are in heterosexual marriages, none mentioned their partner playing a role in their decision. This contrasted with what they believed to be the reason why their customers got a Brazilian wax.

Bharti was clear in making this distinction when she said: "The girls here get it done for husbands or boyfriends. In India also, women get it done on their wedding. They want that area to be clean. . . you know? (giggling) And if I speak about myself, I get it done because I like it clean."

Noor mentioned religion as a factor, in addition to cleanliness. She said: "We Muslims have to do a clean-up every month. . . after period, before prayers. . . we have to. We have to take off hair from arm pits and the pubic area."

Bharti, who ran her own beauty salon in India for five years before coming to London in 2018, also described how she was

reluctant to do Brazilian waxing at the start of her career. What marked the transition for her is when she tried it for herself and was amazed at the results. "When I did it for myself, then I realized that it feels clean, so I must give this experience to others. Initially I did not do it for one year. I did not do it myself and I did not do it for customers [. . .] Then the woman I learnt from, my aunty, she asked me to try it. She said it is nice and feels very clean. There will not be any growth for two months. Then I tried it and I liked it. So, I felt I should tell the customers also that this is nice. Now I tell everyone how nice it is," she said.

Rekha, who worked in a beauty salon in a small town in India before moving to London in 2016, started doing Brazilian wax for customers in the United Kingdom. It was not common in the Indian region she lived and worked in, except for brides. When she started going to a beauty school in London, she learnt about the benefits of Brazilian waxing. "One must keep the bikini area clean. Now I am studying [. . .] and it figures in that as well. . . the cleaner you keep that part, the more hygienic it is for you," she said.

She, too, tried it on herself before she started doing it for her customers: "I did not use to do it for myself. I used to shave. Then one time I tried it and oh my god, the pain..! I was dancing with pain. But that was because it was my first time. Now I do it on myself [. . .] I thought all these women who get it waxed, it must hurt them? Let me see for myself how much it hurts [. . .] Whatever you are doing as a beautician, you must have experienced it on yourself, especially when it is painful."

All the participants dismissed my suggestion that Hollywood waxing (complete hair removal from the pubic area), for which they use the term "full bikini waxing," was a relatively new trend in beauty. They were particularly keen to emphasize how it was not something that was only sought after in London but was a common "treatment" in parts of South Asia they came from. As Bharti said: "Even people from the villages [get it done]. The difference is that people know the language here. They call it Hollywood here and bikini waxing there. But everybody knows what it means."

Anita, who started as a beautician in her sister-in-law's salon in Nepal about twenty-one years ago, said that she knew about bikini waxing since the beginning of her career. Comparing the trend in Nepal to India, she said: "[Girls] are more advanced there. Even young ones come for bikini waxing. Saying they have boyfriends."

Noor, who forayed into beauty about twenty-five years ago in her aunt's salon in rural Pakistan, said: "[. . .] even in Pakistan, in the posh areas, this was done since a long time. But people like us. . . we are from the middle class...we did not know about it. But my aunty had a salon, so I knew. I had seen customers who came for this. Brides came in and we did bikini waxing for them. But the trend is not new, I think it is old [. . .] at least since I have been in business [. . .] twenty-five years."

DISCUSSION

Postfeminism as Transnational

The Postfeminist Narrative

From the vignettes and the beauticians' narratives above, two reasons emerge for why women get a Brazilian wax: personal hygiene/cleanliness and sexual attractiveness. The beauticians often lay claim to the former while attributing the latter to their customers, using it as a device to articulate themselves as more independent and autonomous subjects who wax their pubic hair to please themselves rather than their sexual partners. This sentiment is best captured when Bharti said: [. . .] "And if I speak about myself, I get it done because I like it clean." As I mentioned before, although all the beauticians are married, none of them mention their partners and their preferences while discussing why they opt for a Brazilian wax. Instead, they accept and perpetuate the idea of a hairless vagina as hygienic. As Rekha, who learnt about the benefits of Brazilian waxing in a beauty school in London said: "With the bikini area, the cleaner you keep it the better. Then there is less risk of infection."

The rationale of hygiene, however, is as much steeped in a neoliberal and postfeminist sensibility as sexual attractiveness. It is also a rationale that helps women uphold Brazilian waxing as an autonomous "choice." Pubic hair removal as a form of bodily modification originated in a specific cultural moment in history but has now become so commonplace that its relation to hygiene, even though not supported by any medical evidence, seems to have common sense appeal. In fact, medical evidence suggests the contrary: pubic hair serves its own hygienic purpose by trapping bacteria and other pathogens and preventing them from entering the vaginal opening (Hoffman, 2016; Craig and Gray, 2019). Hygiene, when pertaining to the vagina, often refers to subjective feelings of cleanliness rather than objective indicators of women's health. Hygiene as socially constructed is also evidenced by the growing market of vaginal hygiene products for women vis-à-vis the lack of hygiene products geared toward men (Jenkins et al., 2018).

The second reason, i.e., sexual attractiveness, is much easier to deconstruct. Postfeminism dictates that women take responsibility for producing themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects as well as pleasing men sexually (Gill, 2007). In this psycho-sexual regime, getting a Brazilian wax can be framed in terms of taking ownership of one's sexuality, a project that will also lead to a better sexual experience for the male partner. In tracing the psychic life of postfeminism, Gill illustrates the "psychological complexity" of how power works "by structuring our sense of self, by constructing particular kinds of subjectivity so that socially constructed ideals of beauty or sexiness are internalized and made our own" (Gill, 2007, 76).

Now this is not to dismiss that women may actually feel cleaner and/or sexually attractive after getting a Brazilian wax. This is also not to imply that women are subservient to cultural norms and media-messaging to such an extent that they blindly internalize the messages that are passed on to them. But since the agency vs. structure debate falls outside the remit of this paper and has been discussed in academic literature widely anyway, what I am interested in and fascinated by is women's adoption of a highly painful and expensive method of pubic hair removal and the homogeneity of the narrative supplied in its favor across cultures. In different societies where women have been asked about why they get a Brazilian wax, they have mentioned personal hygiene and sexual attractiveness, presenting it as a free, autonomous and informed choice. It is imperative to a

postfeminist sensibility that one's practices, no matter how painful or harmful, be presented as freely chosen, even as indulgence (Gill, 2008). This elucidates how postfeminist narratives travel in a globalized world, especially as it relates to the participants in my study who are migrant women from South Asia working as aesthetic laborers in the United Kingdom. However, I expound in the next section why some amount of caution must be exercised in taking personal hygiene and sexual attractiveness as indicators of a postfeminist sensibility across cultures.

The Pitfalls of Assuming Postfeminist Homogeneity

As most of the studies on pubic hair removal (quantitative or otherwise) have been conducted with women from the global north, it creates a false impression of Brazilian waxing being an exclusively Western phenomenon. A transnational theorization of postfeminism, however, must also caution us to the dangers of homogenization of women in the non-Western world. For example, pubic hair removal has been widely practised in Muslim cultures around the world, in a context that cannot be easily attributed to postfeminism. The rules of ritual purity in Islam specify removal of pubic hair at least once every forty days since the onset of menarche (Rouzi et al., 2017). Women in non-Western cultures draw upon discourses other than postfeminism with similar modalities and results. In a systematic, cross-cultural analysis of academic literature on pubic hair removal practices in non-Western cultures, it was found that women cited hygiene as the primary motivator, corresponding with findings in Western cultures (Craig and Gray, 2019). In an ethnographic study of Muslim women in lower-income neighborhoods of Cairo, the researchers found that women remove pubic hair using a homemade paste of lime, sugar and water and consider it essential to the production of married femininity and cleanliness (Malmström, 2015). They consider body hair, especially pubic hair to be dirty and its depilation necessary in order to pray.

It is also noteworthy that among the two studies previously mentioned in this article that were conducted with Muslim women, only 5.5% of the women surveyed in Saudi Arabia mentioned Islam as a reason for pubic hair removal (Rouzi et al., 2017). Similarly, only 8% of the Turkish-Cypriot women attributed public hair removal to Islam (Muallaaziz et al., 2014). The majority of women in both these studies cited reasons such as hygiene, appearance and prevention of odor. Thus, it is clear that Muslim women living in the non-Western world put in considerable aesthetic labor into maintaining a hairless pubic area in the service of hygiene and femininity. However, to ascertain whether these practices can be theorized as postfeminist or not needs a careful analysis that is attuned to cultural and contextual specificities such as class, age, generation and the method of hair removal. For example, the hair removal practice of working-class middle-aged women from lower-income neighborhoods of Cairo using homemade wax might not be amenable to the same analytic framework as the hair-removal practice of middle-class young women in Jeddah who opt for a Brazilian wax in a beauty salon. Although the discourse of postfeminism suffers from a homogenizing imperative that erases the differential experiences of women, scholars researching postfeminism must steer clear of it in the interest of a nuanced and context-specific analysis.

As for the two Muslim participants in my study, while pubic hair removal in and of itself was constructed as a religious mandate, Brazilian waxing was articulated as a postfeminist choice. The participants seamlessly combined religious obligations with their knowledge of beauty work illustrating how postfeminism might build upon other discourses without conflict. Noor emphasized that girls must start getting a Brazilian wax at the onset of puberty. When I asked her why one must choose Brazilian waxing over other hair removal methods, she said: "The benefit it is that it stops your hair growth. You skin is clean. It does not get dark. The hair becomes very light gradually. Even my clients, ones who started Brazilian waxing with me, ten years ago, their hair is almost non-existent now. It also comes off easily . . . And it is good, no? You feel nice and clean."

Affective Qualities of Postfeminism

Unpleasant Feelings: Disgust

A distinct affective register forms an integral part of postfeminist sensibility. Postfeminism offers individual solutions to structural problems couched in the language of empowerment, choice and self-responsibility. Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2017) have written about the pervasive "confidence culture" wherein the source of women's problems is located in lack of confidence and self-assuredness. Thus, women are told that by changing their behavior, they can overcome their problems and transform their lives. As part of this culture, confidence is depicted as the "new sexy" while insecurity or lack of confidence as "undoubtedly the new ugly" (Gill and Orgad, 2017: 27).

As a corollary to "confidence culture," studies have shown how women attach the feelings of self-consciousness and shame to the presence of pubic hair (Jenkins et al., 2018). Thus, getting a Brazilian wax helps them to overcome bodily shame and insecurity and feel confident and attractive. Postfeminism plots a rather simple trajectory of feelings for its subjects with the capacity to buy "confidence" through the labor of other women. But what about the feelings of aesthetic laborers? What unpleasant feelings do they experience and more importantly, manage in order to enable their customers to overcome those unpleasant feelings repudiated by postfeminism?

This quote by Noor sums up the emotions experienced by women performing the aesthetic labor of Brazilian waxing on other women succinctly: "When they not clean, Oh my god, I feel angry—why did I agree to it? What should I do? Should I just leave it halfway? You know. . . They will come in all decked up . . . hair straightened, makeup on, perfume on. . . and then they are dirty down there."

The feeling of disgust is related to the degree of intimacy between people; the less intimate people are, the more intense the level of disgust elicited by certain factors such as body products that are seen as possible sources of contamination (Buzekova and Isova, 2010). In the case of intimate contact necessitated by Brazilian waxing, disgust is evoked by vaginal discharge and fecal residues, as told to me by the participants in my research. In addition to what is deemed as poor hygiene, disgust can also be

evoked by "inappropriate" sexuality (Buzekova and Isova, 2010). In the second vignette, Rekha is disgusted not just by the customer's lack of hygiene but also her unflinching admission of non-marital sexuality and playfulness. This feeling of disgust disrupts both physical and emotional intimacy, as Rekha finds herself unable to service the customer and leaves the enclosure. Jaya, on the other hand, succeeds in overcoming disgust and establishes both physical and emotional intimacy with the same customer.

Disgust is a common emotion experienced by beauticians toward customers who are deemed unclean and unhygienic. A common thread that runs through the narratives of the participants in my study is how they did not want to perform Brazilian wax as soon as they entered the profession but took some time to prepare themselves for it. Even in the second vignette, Rekha volunteers to do Brazilian waxing in order to spare Jaya the trouble because she is new to the salon. Beauticians rely on a medical discourse and distancing techniques such as gloves to overcome the negative feelings associated with intimate waxing. This is also evident in the first vignette where Bharti switches between contradictory frameworks to make meaning of her interaction with Joanna: while she views their overall interaction as a "friendship" marked by reciprocity, she resorts to medical language when referring to Brazilian waxing where her job is analogous to that of a doctor. Besides acting as a barrier against disgust, distancing techniques have a symbolic meaning that goes beyond the rationale of hygiene. They signify a shift in the way pubic hair removal is perceived: from low status, gendered and sexualized labor to a professional service provided by a trained expert. The few customers I interviewed emphasized how the beautician wearing gloves puts them at ease as well. Distancing, then, is necessary in order to get close. Disgust and intimacy are not dichotomous affective qualities; overcoming disgust is a prerequisite for building intimacy.

Therefore, the affective register of postfeminism must include not just the feelings that a proper postfeminist subject ought to have, but also the ones that she must manage in order to get there. By emphasizing the experiences of aesthetic laborers, we become attuned to the visceral feelings around privacy, touch, odor and disgust which do not make it to the glossy magazine pages announcing the latest trend in pubic hair waxing. It also alerts us to the presence of unpleasant feelings of aesthetic labourers such as disgust and anger, in addition to the insecurity of aesthetic consumers, that must be managed in the process of making "confident" postfeminist subjects.

Pleasant Feelings: Postfeminist Sisterhood or Intimacy

In what might seem paradoxical to the individualism peddled by postfeminism, Alison Winch and Akane Kanai trace the affective modes of belonging to a postfeminist sisterhood in popular culture and blogs (Winch, 2013; Kanai, 2017a; Kanai, 2017b). It is, however, not contradictory because this affective relatability does not displace the focus on individualism but fosters a sense of belonging based on postfeminist sameness (Kanai, 2017b). Postfeminist sisterhood draws on assumptions of normative feminine homogeneity. Here, feminine sociality becomes a way of reinforcing gender normativity in terms of beauty standards and consumption patterns. Girlfriends share similar feminine consumption patterns and beauty standards whereby the role of girlfriends is also to discipline each other in terms of bodily normativity (Winch, 2013). This sisterhood, however, is not without its affective pleasures or a "collective fantasy of togetherness" that sidelines differences of class and race (Kanai, 2017a). Postfeminism dictates that one can gain membership to a sisterhood based on postfeminist practices irrespective of the race and class they belong to.

A beauty salon is an intimate space based on a similar kind of postfeminist sisterhood predicated on normative feminine bodily and aesthetic practices. Since the customers at Maya Hair & Beauty are mostly the same race as the beauticians, I will restrict my comments here to class and affect. Existing literature reproduces a linear narrative about class with respect to postfeminist subjectivity. Because the putative subject of postfeminism is middle-class, the working-class woman is presumed to be an aspirational subject who wants to transform herself with the help of class-privileged experts in order to acquire social and cultural capital (McRobbie, 2008). The beauticians in my research, then, complicate the narrative of class and postfeminism as "working-class experts." With regards to their class-privileged clients, the beauticians harbor a sense of identification and sameness by focusing on their common experiences. As seen in the vignette about Bharti and Joanna, the two women, despite the difference in their educational attainment and income, bonded over their shared migration trajectory to the United Kingdom and common experiences including, but not limited to, their pubic hair removal practices. Relatability with clients is also visible in both Bharti and Rekha's framing of Brazilian waxing as something they started doing for customers once they realized its benefits for themselves.

Positioning themselves as experts in their field and as friends to their customers also helps beauticians to alleviate the difference in social status between themselves and their clients (Gimlin, 1996). Thus, in the case of working-class aesthetic laborers, class is not an impediment in claiming postfeminist subjectivity. Beauticians lay claim to postfeminist sisterhood alongside their customers by leveraging their specialized knowledge, professionalism and their understanding of the pain of procedures such as Brazilian waxing. It is worth reiterating, however, that overcoming disgust and aversion is a prerequisite for the beauticians to build intimacy and sisterhood with their customers.

CONCLUSION

While I agree with Dosekun that postfeminism in the global south is available to class-privileged women, I have argued in this article that it is not exclusively available to class-privileged women only. When thinking of postfeminism together with transnationality, we tend to assume that the imagination for transnational mobility and access to it is the preserve of class-privileged people only. In reality, it is both the rich and the poor who migrate from the

global south to the global north in search of better incomes and lifestyles. A transnational approach to postfeminism, then, must take into account the bigger picture: how care deficit in the global north leads to migration of women from the global south who take up low-paid jobs including aesthetic labor. Aesthetic laborers also emerge as a special category of workers who can compensate for their class position by foregrounding their professional knowledge and sameness of experiences with their class-privileged customers.

The aim of showing that the South Asian women working as beauticians in London are postfeminist subjects as well is not merely to claim inclusion for them in the postfeminist project but to situate their postfeminist narratives in a larger socio-political context. All the beauticians in my research migrated to the United Kingdom in search of better incomes for their families. All of them had worked in beauty salons in the countries they came from and started working in beauty salons run by other South Asian women upon arriving in London. This is because jobs in the beauty industry have low entry barrier as they are considered low-skilled and are low-paid. As a result, part-time beauticians such as Bharti and Jaya have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. When her shifts at Maya Hair & Beauty were reduced to two days a week following the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bharti took up a job that entailed caring for an old Indian couple with Parkinson's for five days a week. Jaya, who arrived in London amid the pandemic started cooking in an Indian fast-food outlet after failing to find a full-time job in a beauty salon.

In this paper, I have shown that the South Asian women working as beauticians in London who participated in my study subscribe to postfeminist narratives of individual agency, empowerment and hygiene vis-à-vis Brazilian waxing. While foregrounding the similarity of their experiences with their customers, they also rely on distancing techniques such as use of medical discourse and gloves in order to manage the unpleasant feelings arising from intimate encounters with their bodies. A transnational approach to postfeminism, then, also contributes to our understanding of the affective qualities of postfeminism. By focusing on the experiences of beauticians, we understand disgust as an emotion that needs to be managed in the process of esthetic labor. Once disgust is effectively managed, an intimacy or sisterhood based on normative femininity can be fostered between the beautician and the customer. Therefore, looking at transnational aesthetic laborers as postfeminist subjects is crucial to expanding our understanding of postfeminism.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Research Ethics Committee, UCL Institute of Education. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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@Indonesiatanpafeminis.id as a Challenge of Feminist Movement in Virtual Space

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The fast-growing social media in Indonesia has opened up opportunities for spreading feminist ideas to a wider and more diverse audience. Various social media accounts especially Instagram that focus on gender advocacy and feminism such as @indonesiafeminis, @lawanpatriarki, and @feminismanis have developed in Indonesia. However, the development of the social media platform also presents groups that oppose feminists. One of the accounts of women's groups that oppose feminists is @indonesiatanpafeminis.id (@indonesiawithoutfeminist.id). The research objectives are namely to analyze the diversity of issues and reveal the discourse contestation that developed in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id, and dynamic relationships on the online and offline spaces between groups of feminists and anti-feminists or the other interest. This research employed the digital ethnography method that utilized observation, interview, and literature study as data collection techniques. This study found that the online conversations at @indonesiatanpafeminis.id revealed misconceptions on feminism from a group of women with a religious identity. Furthermore, the conversation also tends to strengthen patriarchal values with religious arguments that are gender-biased. However, the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id serves as a public space for open debates and education on feminist issues. The anti-feminist group behind the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id are women who identify themselves in a certain Muslim circle that has political, cultural, and religious agendas. One of the agendas is to influence the public to reject the Sexual Violence Eradication Bill. This study also noted the Muslim supporters of anti-feminism in Indonesia are less popular compared to progressive religious-based Muslim women organizations such as Aisyiyah (Muhammadiyah), Muslimat NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), and Rahima (Center for Education and Information on Islam and Women's Rights). The study also evokes discussion on how the feminist and anti-feminist discourses can be utilized to criticize and develop the women's movement or feminism in a multicultural context.

Keywords: feminist, anti-feminist, Instagram, virtual space, digital ethnography

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INTRODUCTION

The presence of the women's movement on social media attracts attention, especially when the movement is actually against feminism that is trying to fight for women's interests. This article will discuss social media and the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id (@indonesiawithoutfeminist.id) account that is managed by women but questions the existence of feminists in Indonesia.

Various studies have proven that new media has a tremendous influence on people's lives in general and in particular for today's young generation (Balya, Pratiwi, and Prabudi, 2018). Digital media as interactive media allows a reciprocal flow of information that enables users to participate and modify the content of the information at once (Suri, 2019). Therefore, digital media currently has the potential to be used as a means of activism, including gender-based activism or the women's movement. According to the data from We Are Social, the use of digital media in Indonesia is increasing, reaching 160 million users. Meanwhile, there were 175.4 million internet users in January 2020, an increase of 17% compared to the previous year (Kepp, 2020).

When viewed by gender, a survey conducted by the Indonesian Internet Service Provider Association (APJII) in 2017 noted that female internet users reached 48.57%, while male users amounted to 51.43% (Liputan6.com, 2019). Research conducted by Google Indonesia shows that the number of Indonesian women who can access the internet and digital media in their daily lives is lower than that of men. The reason is because that women have fewer jobs, education, and income (Marboen, 2017; Suwana and Lily, 2017); therefore, women have less space, are underestimated, and are confined to their inability to use technology (Stephani and Kurniawan, 2018). In general, women are very reluctant to participate in digital media, especially social media, especially regarding public issues. They have doubts about their abilities and level of knowledge. Women are reluctant to post on "networked publics" due to their perceptions of emotionally unsafe places (Jackson, 2018).

Consequently, the emergence of social media accounts related to feminist issues from various women groups and organizations is interesting. The mainstream media, such as print, television, and radio, have not accommodated feminist issues (Beck, 1998). This has to do with the perception of media workers who are responsible for producing content. Studies related to news produced by newsrooms found that journalists have negative views on feminists and feminism (North, 2009). Feminists are considered a group of people who have psychological problems, are too emotional, get angry easily, and tend to act extremely (North, 2009). Additionally, one opinion stated that the feminist movement is no longer needed because the work of feminism has been completed (Anderson, 2015). From this point of view, women, regardless of their race, social class, sexual orientation, or their geography, have gained equality in a respectful manner (Anderson, 2015). This view is also developing in Indonesia but it is irrelevant because women's rights at work are still unprotected and the level of violence against women is still relatively high. Indonesia's National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) noted for 12 years (2006–2019) there was an increase of violence against women around 792%, and many customs in several regions in Indonesia have a high risk for an act of violence against women (Catahu Komnas Perempuan, 2020; Cipta Kerja Law, 2020). Furthermore, the Sexual Violence Eradication Bill has not been passed by the legislative.

The digital feminism movement globally especially came to the foreground after the emergence of the #MeToo movement on Twitter which began in 2017 as a response to acts of sexual violence that occurred in the entertainment industry in the United States. Then within 24 hour, as many as 53,000 people have commented and/or shared the sexual violence they experienced (Kaufman, Dey, Crainiceanu, and Dredze, 2019). The #MeToo movement demonstrates the potential for using Twitter to raise awareness about sexual violence, while providing a space for users to share similar experiences and provide support (Bogen, Bleiweiss, Leach, and Orchowski, 2019).

Meanwhile, in the Indonesian context, the women's movement has also become increasingly popular, especially since the momentum of the Women's March Jakarta, which was first held in 2017. Also, some movements respond to sexual violence against children, namely #NyalaUntukYuyun (LightforYuyun) and #YuyunAdalahKita (YuyunisUs) in 2016. These hashtags spread on Twitter as a form of solidarity over the case of the rape and murder of Yuyun, a girl in Bengkulu in April 2016. Owing to a large number of tweets using this hashtag, the hashtag #NyalaUntukYuyun was included in the list of trending topics on Twitter in May 2016 (Supriadi, 2016). Even though it started with Twitter, this hashtag was also used on Instagram for the same act of solidarity. Apart from the solidarity action, the hashtag is also used to advocate for the ratification of legal products, namely the Sexual Violence Eradication Bill.

Apart from Twitter there are some Instagram accounts that support feminism such as @indonesiafeminis, @lawanpatriarki, and @dearcatcallers.id. The emergence of these accounts is important for the continuity of the movement, especially as an effort to provide more space for online discussion. The reason is that the use of hashtags alone is not enough to amplify activism, especially if you want to carry out a revolution (Gerbaudo, 2012). Digital activism through social media accounts such as Instagram can increase the visibility of the women's movement. Thus, various content uploaded on Instagram can also reach the general public who do not understand the basic concepts of feminism and feminists and their application in everyday life. So, Instagram can act as a means of public education related to gender equality and feminism (Parahita, 2019).

Even though on one hand digital media can be used to expand and develop feminist movements, on the other hand, the platform can also be used by anti-feminist and misogynist groups to resist feminist ideology. Anti-feminists can be understood as a response to gender political values that do not only involve women (Ging and Siapera, 2019). Anti-feminist groups seek to reaffirm control over social and biological reproduction by reducing women to the extent of their reproductive organs and their role as mothers. This movement is in opposition to activist groups fighting for women's rights (Marshall, 2013). Anti-feminism can be seen as a response to social change and a new pattern of politics in the postindustrial era. Walby (in Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020) sees anti-feminist as a more resistant movement to reaffirm, maintain, and increase the subordination of women by patriarchal forces. The anti-feminist group enters the international area because that is where the threat of patriarchal values, status, identity, and power was coming from now. The transnational anti-feminist mobilization has been particularly well coordinated in Europe.

In Southeast Asia, the anti-feminist movement has been politically strategic because they often positioned human rights are unethical to Asian values (Bong, 2016). The lived realities between men and women in Southeast Asia, in particular their sexual and reproductive health rights, remain greatly influenced by cultures and religions. In Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, these realities are influenced by Islamic cultures. In terms of Muslim women's/feminist activism in Southeast Asia to politicize spirituality is what Rinaldo (2013) terms as "pious critical agency" or the interpretation of texts and "pious activating agency" which deploys religious texts to make claims for political and social change.

One of the frequently mentioned complicating factors in feminism discussion in Indonesia is the assumption that feminist ideas, thoughts, and movements do not have social and cultural roots in Indonesia's society, or in other words, those ideas and thoughts originated from the West or are seen as having Western connotation (Arifia and Subono, 2017). The term feminism is considered by Islamic woman activists in Malaysia and scholars in China to be "something" from outside "themselves." They rather changed the term to "womanist" and "feminology." It is not easy to accept new ideas, especially when the term "feminism" and the concept of gender originally come from the West (Nurmila, 2011). Indonesia, as the home for the largest Muslim population in the world, may have a different view about how to see and accept feminism as one of the concepts of gender and it is led to the rise of anti-feminist groups in Indonesia, especially in social media.

The most prominent Instagram account that promotes anti-feminist content is @indonesiatanpafeminis.id and @lawanfeminisme. Their contents are mostly based on the idea that feminism and feminists are ideas and groups that threaten women's existence in society instead of fighting for women's rights. They not only use idealized concepts that come from patriarchy but also relate them to their religious understanding, in this case, Islam as the religion of the majority of Indonesians.

In general, Indonesian Muslims can be divided into two categories, those who accept and adopt Muslim feminism, and those who reject and counter Muslim feminist publications (Nurmila, 2011). This condition has also contributed to the development of Muslim feminists in Indonesia which began in the 1990s. They argue against the use of religion to justify the subordination of women by reinterpreting the Qur'an from a gender equality perspective. One of Indonesia's Muslim feminist figures is Lies Marcos. Lies, together with other Muslim feminists from NU (Nahdlatul Ulama—the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia) such as Kyai Hussein Muhammad (the Muslim opinion leader), founded Rahima (Center for Education and Information on Islam and Women's Rights) a nongovernmental organization that supports women's rights in Islam (Nurmila, 2011). In addition to facing the East and the West, conflicts that are more global, the feminist movement, including Muslim feminists in Indonesia, also experience challenges from politics at the national level. Some Muslims in Indonesia who accept the idea of feminism were the products of western ideology and thought; therefore, those Muslim groups are rejecting or reluctant to support feminism in Islam (Nurmila, 2011).

The authoritarian regime of the New Order with the leadership of Soeharto from its inception took many victims related to political feuds and also used violence as a central strategy to maintain political control and legitimacy of violence on behalf of the state (Ghoshal, 1979; Douglas Wilson, 2006). Apart from suppressing groups with different views, the New Order regime also had very high suspicion of Muslim groups so that the pressure on them was also quite strong and silenced them. After the 1998 reformation, Indonesia experienced a lot of turmoil and presented various groups that were previously silenced who then began to speak out, including the so-called political Islamic group (Abdullah, 2014). As a country that has a majority Muslim population, even though the founders of the Indonesian nation have determined that Indonesia is a republic and not an Islamic state, but religious-based political efforts cannot be avoided which enriched politics in Indonesia (Douglas Wilson, 2006). In addition, with the legacy of ethnic-religious violence, economic depression, and bureaucratic corruption left after Soeharto's fall from power in 1998, Islam is increasingly attracting many Indonesians as a source of moral stability (Stein, 2007).

Thus, feminist challenges from Islamic groups that were initially silenced are also now developing. The anti-feminist attitudes, which have their roots in male domination both culturally and religiously, are adopted by Muslim women's groups. These women's groups not only perpetuate patriarchal values but also ignore the struggles of Muslim women's groups that support the feminist movement, either known as Muslim feminist groups or Muslim women's groups based on Islamic organizations in Indonesia. There are two groups of Muslim women based on the largest religious organization in Indonesia, namely Muslimat NU that is part of Nahdlatul Ulama which is known as a traditional Islamic group, and another group named Aisyiyah from Muhammadiyah that represents a moderate Islamic group.

While other studies focused on the digital feminism movement (Nurmila, 2011; Parahita, 2019) and the offline feminism and anti-feminism movement in Indonesia (Djoeffan, 2001; Olviana, 2017), this study observes the opposing group that is @indonesiatanpafeminis.id and specifically investigates its online–offline discourses. The study of @indonesiatanpafeminis.id is the first attempting to understand the discourse of counter, or anti-feminism, on social media voiced by women in Indonesia with the majority of its citizens identified as Muslims. Therefore, this study can raise the potential of social media being a platform in building marginalized discourse in media about feminism. Also, this research serves as a challenge for researchers of gender media studies to acknowledge the women's presence and listen to their arguments and disagreements.

This article examines the discourse contestation in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id (@indonesiawithoutfeminist.id) contents and conversations analyze the diversity of issues of the contents and conversations, as well as the dynamic relationships on the online and offline spaces between the feminist and anti-feminist groups. This study also analyzes the

development of anti-feminist women's groups in the public space and the relationship between their online content and offline political discourses in Indonesia.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with the digital ethnography method to reveal the various elements that represent real-life culture through the unification of characters from the digital media (Underberg and Zorn, 2013). Digital ethnography invites researchers to consider how we live and conduct research in a digital environment and the consequences of the presence of digital media in shaping our techniques and processes in conducting ethnography (Pink, 2017). Through ethnography, researchers try to understand patterns of relationships, behaviors, and sequences in the digital environment (Kaur-Gill and Dutta, 2017). To achieve this goal, this study will focus on self-identity, social relations, and the structure of the digital environment related to the reality being studied (Pink, 2017). This research focuses on activities in the digital space of @indonesiatanpafeminis.id (@indonesiawithoutfeminist.id) and various texts that are produced in the digital space from their activities or other digital activities linked to it.

The Instagram account @indonesiatanpafeminis.id is an Instagram account that opposes the existence of feminism in Indonesia. This account is important to research because it openly and firmly expresses its opposition to feminists compared to other similar accounts such as @ailaindonesia (family love alliance) whose contents also attack feminists. This account also gave birth to other accounts with names that identify big cities in Indonesia where they operate, such as @jakartatanpafeminis2, @padangtanpafeminis_, and @bandungtanpafeminis. The @indonesiatanpafeminis account has 5,082 followers and has been uploaded 119 post (Azmi and Bachri, 2019) before the account disappeared and was replaced by the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account. The @indonesiatanpafeminis.id (@indonesiawithoutfeminist.id) sent their first post on October 31, 2019. As of December 2020, the account had 1,075 followers and sent 33 posts. The account also follows 18 other accounts, nine of which are affiliated with the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id.

Data in this study were collected through observing activities in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id, and then examining the virtual interactions of these activities as a virtual space community. Researchers also conducted interviews with practitioners, feminist movement figures, feminist studies experts, political observers, and digital media observers to understand the context and the differences in values, beliefs, and behaviors that appear online. We interviewed a feminist studies expert from Nation Islamic University, a feminist movement figure from Indonesia National Commission on Violence Against Woman (Komnas Perempuan), and a political observer. We explored their points of view toward the anti-feminist movement and its connection with a political interest in Indonesia, through interviews. Furthermore, we interviewed a digital media observer to understand the potential of digital media as a public space. We interviewed three netizens who support and oppose feminism in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account to know their opinion about @indonesiatanpafeminis.id.

RESULT

Recently, new directions in feminism have emerged due to new technologies, particularly social media that have been recognized as the "fourth wave" feminism (Munro, 2013). Research conducted by Swank and Fahs (2017) identifies factors that can contribute to women's involvement in politics, or more specifically in changing women from feminist sympathizers to feminist activists (Parahita, 2019).

@indonesiatanpafeminis.id (@indonesiawithoutfeminist.id), as an anti-feminist movement in the digital space, produces contestation between pro-feminist and pro-antifeminist groups in the comment section of the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id Instagram account. In addition, this article will also reveal the relationship between the anti-feminist activities in the offline and online spaces through the presence of @indonesiatanpafeminis.id.

The Presence of @indonesiatanpafeminis.id (@indonesiawithoutfeminist) in the Virtual Space

Social media users have more open space in expressing their opinions that can be accessed by many people from numerous social groups with various views and targets related to their activities on social media. Based on observations toward @indonesiatanpafeminis.id (@indonesiawithoutfeminist.id) Instagram account, the images of the anti-feminist group were obtained. The first image relates to the identity of women's groups who play a role in various @indonesiatanpafeminis.id activities. Second, we found diverse issues online on feminist and anti-feminist which developed offline in the Indonesian society.

The identity of the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account raises questions. The @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account has been a frequent topic since the issue on the Sexual Violence Eradication Bill (Penghapusan Kekerasan Seksual—PKS—Bill) supporting LGBTQ coming out. They opposed the ratification of the PKS Bill and introduced the hashtag #UninstallFeminism in March 2019. This campaign movement was quite massive on Instagram, their goal was to reject feminism developing in Indonesia while simultaneously campaigning for the hashtags (Azmi and Bachri, 2019). According to Azmi and Bachri (2019), the @indonesiatanpafeminis account has 5,082 followers and uploaded 119 posts before the account disappeared and was replaced by the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account. Various posts uploaded by the @indonesiatanpafeminis account rejected the existence of feminism in Indonesia which is considered inconsistent with religious norms and rules,

especially in Islam. They also introduced the hashtags #IndonesiaTanpaFeminis, #antifeminist, and #antifeminism.

Although the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account does not directly state that their rejection of feminism comes from the teachings of the Islamic religion, some of their posts often link issues on feminism with Islamic teachings. The administrators appear to be a group of Muslim women, this was derived by the garment they wear (the hijab) and by their texts quoting verses from the Quran as well as how they explain issues in the content they uploaded. As a Muslim group, they seem to cover up their identity or what kind of group or organization they are from.

The most viewed upload is the first post to feature animation from one of the administrators. The animation shows a hijab woman speaking in her real voice. She teased feminism as those who could not restrain their lust. It is also supported by the caption, which said, "After this, the feminist who has no clue will start ranting in this comment column. Hahaha." This upload was viewed more than 12,789 times and became the most popular upload from the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account.

On the contrary, some accounts from Islamic groups that support the feminist or women's movement have made their identity open to the public. One of them is the @aisyiyahpusat account that consists of a group of Muslim women who are part of Muhammadiyah. Muhammadiyah is the second-largest Islamic organization in Indonesia after Nadhatul Ulama (NU). The @aisyiyahpusat account is the official account of Aisyiyah which is managed by the Central Leadership Media Team of Aisyiyah. This account is one of several accounts that support women's equality and has developed a friendlier Islamic approach to women's equality. They provide various information about families, children, as well as women's issues. As of December 2020, @aisyiyahpusat has about 27.800 followers and has uploaded 1,538 posts.

In addition to discovering how the identity of the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account administrator is disguised, this research also produces data on various issues that arise in the contents that were uploaded by the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id before February 2021. Issues in the contents can be interpreted as misunderstandings of various concepts in feminism and feminists, their interpretation of Islam that is gender-biased, and references to patriarchal cultural values in society that are gender-biased or subordinated women.

The actors that appear in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account consist of three main categories, namely female heroes, feminist figures, and Muslim women. Emerging female heroes such as RA Kartini and Rahma El Yunusyyiyah are portrayed as women who fight for women's rights, but they do not agree with female figures being categorized as feminists. Other actors are feminists whose existence they accuse and even harass. They also said that some of the existing feminists were hard-line feminists, although they did not explain what that means. They also seem to think that Muslim women or as they are called Muslimah (the term for female Muslim) must always agree with them. Finally, the last actor who appears is a man, a social media influencer, showing up in a video that accuses, questions, and harasses feminists and even the very position of women. The male actor is shown with several women—not in an animated form—holding a paper with the words "Indonesia is peaceful without feminists."

The issues that both feminists and @indonesiatanpafeminis.id raised in their content include issues that fight for women's rights and equality in various fields, especially education. But their posts are contradictory to one another as if what the feminist movement is doing is unneeded or goes against eastern religions and cultures (Indonesian society). The issue of religion was raised by the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account that linked various feminist views with Islamic views based on their interpretation of women in Islam. These contents say that feminism was born in the West and is not in accordance with the Islamic perspective on women. According to them, in Islam, women have always been glorified so feminism is not needed. In addition, they also interpreted that women have certain limitations, rights, and obligations that they must obey which differentiate them from men. This contradicts the feminist idea that women are equal to men. This view is expressed in posts questioning equality for women and ridiculed the idea by displaying photos of men wearing women's underwear (**Figure 1**).

Add **Figure 1**; There is a text that said "my body is mine, but . . ." (**Figure 2**) and it also contains a statement about body shaming toward women that use hijab or veil. They considered this action as feminist inconsistency which is seen from the statement "my body is mine." Based on this statement, feminists should not be questioning or mocking the hijab because it is Muslim women's right.

Add **Figure 2**; The content regarding violence against women uploaded by @indonesiatanpafeminis.id is contradictory to the context of violence against women and is based on presumption. They stated that women who are the victims of sexual violence could be women who are hurt by their partners so they play victim even though they already give their consent. This opinion could be seen as an effort made by @indonesiatanpafeminis.id to defend sexual violence toward women perpetrators by attacking the victims. They think that when women become a victim of sexual violence, it happens because of their own mistakes. They also ignore the possibility of coercion that happens in sexual violence.

The meanings of the contents promoted by @indonesiatanpafeminis.id about feminists are contradictory and are based on a presumption about feminists in Indonesia. They interpreted feminism as a form of women's refusal to have a family, refusal to take care of a household and children, as well as women's hatred and bad treatments toward men (in **Figure 3**).

Add **Figure 3**: The @indonesiatanpafeminis.id also stated that there were inconsistencies in the feminist community where women still chose to marry men, this is considered inconsistent with women's hatred toward men and their families. Another meaning given to feminism that often appears in these accounts is that feminism hates religion because it limits women's freedom and feminism hates women because feminism idolizes the role of men so much

FIGURE 1 | The mockery toward the idea of equality (Posted by @indonesiatanpafeminis.id on July 06, 2020).

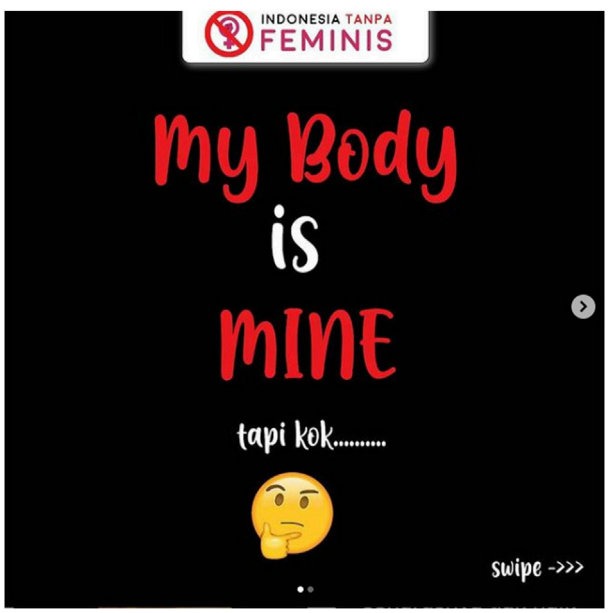

FIGURE 2 | The ownership of women's bodies issue and inconsistency of feminism (Posted by @indonesiatanpafeminis.id on June 17, 2020).

FIGURE 3 | The issue of feminist hatred toward men (Posted by @indonesiatanpafeminis.id on July 29, 2020).

that it forces women to do the same things regardless of women's physical limitations.

Then regarding the role of a wife, they are contrasting the positions of wives with prostitutes. They asked the public to choose a side between team wife or with team prostitute, gamification of identity in social media. In connection with the meaning of feminism that hates family, the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id stated that feminism hates the family because feminism does not feel the function of the family itself. After all, feminists lack affection and reject the role of men in the family so that they hate the family and therefore oppose patriarchy.

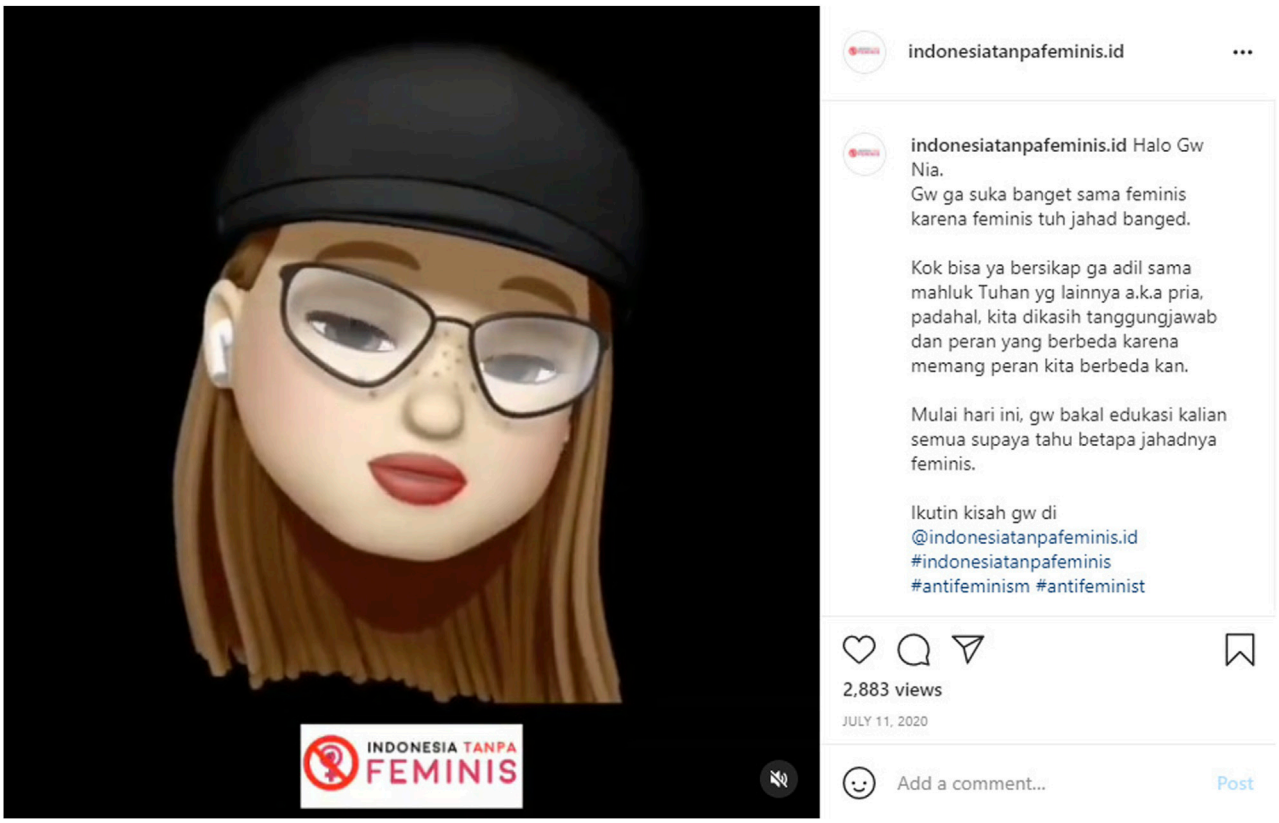

FIGURE 4 | The admin's profile who does not use hijab (Posted by @indonesiatanpafeminis.id on July 11, 2020).

The last theme raised by the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account is the theme of supporting feminism for the LGBTQ community. Their statement related to feminism and LGBTQ conveyed was that feminists who support LGBTQ should be LGBTQ. Therefore, if a feminist woman who supports LGBTQ is not a lesbian, it means she is a hypocrite because her sexual orientation betrays what she says. Contents posted in @indonesiatanpafeminis.id challenge the statement written from Jurnal Perempuan (The Indonesian Feminist Journal), issue 58, page 14, which contains the words "lesbian in western feminism ideology is the highest achievement of a feminist because women no longer depend on men for sexual satisfaction." The post received various comments and among them doubted the truth of the quote.

Related to the hijab, or also known as jilbab, issues in Indonesia, @indonesiatanpafeminis.id uploaded a post that stated "people's hijab is being taken care of" (posted by @indonesiatanpafeminis.id on February 17, 2021). It means that they accuse people who are making a fuss about the use of hijab, not people who do not use hijab. This statement is also in line with one of their posts that show Nia, one of the admins, who is not wearing hijab (**Figure 4**). This is interesting because the hijab is often used by them as their own identity.

Add **Figure 4**: Besides the animation video, this post has also contained a caption: Hi I am Nia. I hate feminist because feminist is evil. How can they be unfair toward other God's childlike men even though we have responsible and different roles? From now on, I will educate you guys to know how bad is feminists. Follow my story in @indonesiatanpafeminis.id #indonesiawithoutfeminist, #antifeminism, #antifeminist.

Discourse Contestation on @indonesiatanpafeminis.id

The increasing popularity of social media affects increasing social activism in social media (Shirky, 2011). In line with the development of the use of social media by various groups, social activism in Indonesia also involves various groups. Our observations toward @indonesiatanpafeminis.id (@indonesiawithoutfeminist.id) found the diversity of groups involved in feminist issues from an anti-feminist perspective. In addition, in every post on the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account, we can also find various hashtags of related issues and mentions to other groups, either with the same or with different views such as @indonesiaperlufeminis.

"Fight feminist thinking! And support @indonesiatanpafeminis. . . . In frame: women who want not to be exposed to the poison of feminism". This sentence is written on @indonesiatanpafeminis's Instagram account in 2019, accompanied by a photo showing dozens of women wearing hijabs in a room with their fists clenched. Based on the analysis of

the context in which it appeared, it is known that the @indonesiatanpafeminis account emerged after heated issues regarding the rejection of the Sexual Violence Eradication Bill (PKS Bill). However, this account did not last long, it disappeared in line with the postponement of the discussion of PKS Bill in the parliament. We consistently found that the existence of this account involved the political feud in the parliament related to the endorsement and rejection of the PKS Bill.

Equality: Men vs Women

The issue of gender equality is an issue that has been touched on in the debate triggered by a post from @indonesiatanpafeminis.id. Seven posts raised the issue of gender equality. The six of which received 2,547 comments and 1,091 likes and one post in the form of a video received 2,576 views. Related to gender equality, this resulted in various debates that raised issues about the role of men as head of the family, pregnancy, the roles of men and women, and education. One of the equality issues raised by @indonesiatanpafeminis.id is their disagreement about women's equality which is interpreted as rivaling men, against nature, or disproportionate. This is refuted by a statement containing the view that the issue of gender equality is an effort to fight for the rights that a person deserves, both men and women, not a matter of who is more powerful or against human nature. The issue of equality also presents a statement that Islam guarantees equality for women. This is precisely what is then stated by the other user that there are still so many women who get injustice, even the number on violence against women cases is still relatively high. The comments are very numerous and dominated by statements criticizing the statement about equality in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id posts.

Feminist Versus Family and Religion

The debate also occurred on the issues about family and feminists with five posts, 847 likes, and 1,357 comments. This issue emerged from an article written by an Indonesian female figure, Rahmah El Yunusiyyah, who said that women's emancipation was no longer needed in Islam because Islam guaranteed women's rights, especially in the family. One of the posts about family hatred is a video explaining the ideal family that functions as a comfortable and safe place. The post received 10,902 views and 700 comments. Most of the comments came from users who argued that not all families are comfortable and safe places because, in fact, many families are even the most dangerous places, especially for women. One of the comments from pro-feminist circles regarding this statement is "The meaning of feminism: feminism is a movement and ideology that fights for equality for women in politics, economics, cultures, privacies, and publics. Feminism is not an ideology where women hate men." Regarding the family issue, one of the issues raised was the polygamy case, stating that Kartini (1879–1904) as an Indonesian National Woman figure, who promoted gender equality, also underwent polygamy. This post then received a response that Kartini was a victim of culture which she opposed and hoped that Indonesian women would not suffer the same fate as her. Many comments questioned whether the admin of @indonesiatanpafeminis.id had done in-depth research on Kartini. The post about Kartini received 179 likes and 235 comments.

Violence Against Women: Victims Versus Perpetrators

There is a view that all feminists are considered to support free sex which is interpreted as sexual relations based on lust even though this issue is conveyed indirectly, namely in the form of satire. This is shown, for example, through a woman in an animated video stating that what distinguishes humans from animals is their control over lust. The parables taken and the innuendos made are related to hate speech in Indonesia, which calls people who live together without being married *as koempoel gebouw* (cohabitation). Another satirical post appears in the form of a question about the consent given when having sexual intercourse because women are considered too often to play victims when they are hurt, even though they initially gave their consent to have sex freely. This post, which received 190 likes and 250 comments, invited many pros and cons. In another post, there is an insinuation that feminists cannot contain their lust so they engage in casual sex. The post received 12,814 views and 399 comments.

The various debates that occurred in @indonesiatanpafeminis.id regarding the issues posted by admins between those who support and those who reject the admin's opinion or interpretation could be seen in **Table 1**.

DISCUSSION

The presence of @indonesiatanpafeminis.id (@indonesiawithoutfeminist.id) sheds light on an unpopular subject that may well be significant to observe through the lens of feminism discourse. The existence of digital space presents a platform for women from different groups with various interests throughout Indonesia. Some users provide important ideas on awareness toward various problems that women experience. On the other hand, the digital space could present various misconceptions about feminists and some content contend feminists' views related to the local context.

This discussion explains how the digital space has the potential to provide room for discussions on various issues rarely discussed openly by women groups in Indonesia that supports for or against feminism groups. Based on the findings, it is necessary to look at the issues in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account and the debates in this digital space. Based on the various topics that arise it could be understood that all the issues and debates are affected by the local context.

In addition, this discussion also reflects on virtual spaces and the relationship between online and offline activities regarding the issues and socio-politic contexts about the appearance of the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account. The strength of political fight in the parliament related to the ratification of the Sexual Violence Eradication Bill is assumed as the reason for the creation of the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account. This fact provides a lesson for the feminist movement that digital spaces could be a political tool to make women as subjects objectified by political interests.

The Potential of Social Media for Feminist Discourse

The research found that Instagram, as a social media, is utilized as a virtual space for the development of feminist issues, by both the pro-feminist and anti-feminist groups. Social media could

TABLE 1 | Discourse on interactionist between pro versus anti-feminist in @indonesiatanpafeminisa.

Main issue and content	Pro comment	Contra comment
Equality: Men vs Women		
"Equivalent? Equal in what way? When I become the leader of the household, do you want it too? When you get pregnant, should I get pregnant? When you give birth, do I have to give birth? (Posted on November 31, 2019)	"You want to be equal? Do you brave enough to do an MMA fight with men? It's already good enough that women are being glorified, still, you want to be equal. Weird."	"The goal of it is gender equality not change the roles of men and women. Equality doesn't mean that all men's roles should be women's and vice versa. What being fought for here is all people deserve to get their rights and no gender is above others."
Hijab-sexual Harassment		
Sexual harassment? Oh boy, what do you think? You all can't even value your bodies. Don't you see Islam respects women by having their bodies covered with hijab? (Posted on November 31, 2019)	"Dear admin of @indonesiatanpafeminis.i d, how could they demand respect with their scampy clothes, while those who wear hijabs and niqabs are judged as close-minded"	So you think that hiding our bodies will not make United States target of rape? Will not be catcalled? There are many stories about women in niqab that still became victims of cat- calls, many hijabi women are victims of rape. It's not about what we wear but it's about men's desire
Polygamy		
"In a book published by Abendanon, it explained that Kartini was against polygamy. While Kartini was the 4th wife and clearly, she was in polygamy. If she was a feminist why did she agree to be a polygamist?" (Published April 22, 2020)	"Hey admin, they see history as if they are hallucinating @indonesiatanpafeminis.i d . . . reject them. They run in circles with their 'oppression of women'"	"That is the reason why she (Kartini) was against it, she was a victim. The core of this topic is that polygamy practice makes women and children feel more miserable. In the Al- Qur'an the context of it is not from nothing to something, but from not controlled to controlled. Along with the times, if people think that polygamy practice is not a good thing, it is okay not to do it".
Rejection of Feminism		
"When a Muslimah is accused of being a feminist. Don't stay quiet sis. Indonesia is peaceful without feminists." (Posted on December 10, 2019)	I'M SO GLAD I FOUND THIS PAGE!! In the United States feminism is like poison, not right. We must educate women BUT NOT BY FEMINISM. How can women and men be equal, doesn't make any sense	"You have the right for expressing your own opinion, we are already independent, but do not manipulate historical facts and make your opinion as to the most correct fact. Even though you are bullied by others, your determination is too strong to think logically. If you think Indonesia does not need feminism, please give us more relevant reasons about it."
An animated video entitled: Hi. Did you miss me? I want to tell you that controlling your desires (lust) is what makes us humans apart from animals". This is only for those who can understand hahaha (Posted on June 06, 2020)	"After this, feminists who do not understand will leave angry comments hihi".	O you who believe (who are âmenû)! Let not one person mock (another) people. May be they (the mocked) are better than the others, and nor women (mock) at other women, may be they (the others) are better than themselves. And do not defame one another, nor call one another by nicknames. Evil is transgressed names after the Faith, and whoever does not repent, then such are indeed the wrong-doers. (QS. Al-Hujurat: 11)

facilitate various groups including women groups which can potentially provide a wider space. This phenomenon is one of the things that gave birth to the anti-feminist groups among pro-feminist groups. Moreover, the researched phenomenon has also revealed an interaction between these two opposing groups.

While many anti-feminist groups present themselves openly, there are also anti-feminist groups that decided to stay anonymous. The identities of the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account's admins are anonymous not revealing their data on the account. In their post, the admins have only appeared as animated images. There are also Muslim women groups that are relatively pro-feminist or raise feminist issues such as Aisyiyah Pusat, Muslimat NU, Rahima, and Perempuan KAMMI. These accounts are quite dominant and more popular among society than the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account that is relatively new and anonymous. All the accounts have been around longer and have more followers than the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id.

According to an informant from National Commission on Violence Against Woman or Komnas Perempuan, @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account's position as being anonymous confirms their focus on the issues, @indonesiatanpafeminis.id generally pay attention to the audiences' comments. This account is different from, for example, Komnas Perempuan's account who uses their media as a showcase to convey what they have done as an organization. It is the same with other accounts that use their organization's account to convey more about their activities. However, the accounts that focus on issues such as the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account target more general audiences to understand the issues based on their framework. In other words, in media that focus more on issues, the personal identity of the admins of their group or organization is not important (Interviewed on 25/5/21).

Referring to the issues raised by the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account it is not a dominant discourse among Muslim women or

Indonesian society. In general, Muslim groups such as Aisyiyah and Muslimat NU are part of the two biggest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Muhammadiyah. As a result, if we compare the comment in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account, generally more comments criticize their posts than comments that support them.

The ratification of the Law on the Elimination of Domestic Violence shows that the discourse related to the reality of domestic violence that befell women and kids has become an issue that is recognized by society and the government. The legitimation of this law is proof of the hard work done by the women's movement or Indonesian feminists related to the women's violence in domestic areas that still exist. Referring to the existence of the Law on the Elimination of Domestic Violence, women's movement and law are important to ensure the prevention of domestic violence in Indonesia.

Regardless of the identity of women groups that are being shown in social media, these findings support the idea that women could be involved in raising their views and attitudes toward important issues. Social media allows women to be a creator and take part in public spaces, non-anonymous or anonymous. This is also emphasized in the statement that women could use their social media to create and distribute their knowledge to the public (Davis, 2018). Culturally, social media could remove barriers for women to communicate in public spaces that previously pushed women to be in domestic areas. In other words, the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account as a social media could be presenting women from various groups in public spaces. Through social media, women could be presented in public spaces, to talk about their interests anonymously, without needing to leave their houses. They could even be triggering and be involved in the debates.

An interesting aspect about the communication activities in the virtual space of @indonesiatanpafeminis.id is that the admins are never involved in the debates between the pro and contra in their posts. Multi-study investigations conducted by Hall (2018) show that the use of social media is not equivalent to social interaction. When interaction happened through social media, the participants tend to chat or post on their walls. In this case, the participants are chatting in the comment section and it is an expression of their feelings. As if the admins have the role to raise the issues in their posts and let their audience debate whether they agree or disagree with the issues. Although we cannot deny that occasionally within the offending debates between the pro and contra emerge, we should also note that in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account there are also informative comments. The response explains the mistakes that the admins made in their posts, regarding both their concept in understanding, data accuracy, or their logic. Netizens gave their explanation about the issues posted by @indonesiatanpafeminis.id's admins. On a post that talked about feminism push women nowadays to have the same role as men that posted on April 22, 2020, some netizens commented on the meaning of feminism. They said that "Feminism is a choice. So, if you want to embrace the feminist side or masculine side in yourself, it is up to you as long as you are not feeling oppressed. If there is a woman who feels oppressed to stay in a domestic setting because her environment enforces this on her, it is wrong. But if there is a woman who likes to be in a domestic setting because of her own will, it is okay. Feminism is all about choices" (Posted in @indonesiatanpafeminis.id, April 22, 2020).

Some comments explained the meaning of feminism and they thought that the admins do not understand feminism. In the same post, the admins also questioned Kartini's title as a feminist because she practiced polygamy. Kartini is an Indonesian activist who advocated for women's rights in the colonial era. One netizen explained about Kartini, "the reason why she (Kartini) opposed it (the practice of polygamy) is that she had been through it and was also a victim of it. This topic is not easy but the point is polygamy practice will likely be more of a torment for women and children. In the Al-Qur'an, the context of polygamy itself is not recommended because the practice does not exist, but from not controlled to be controlled. Along with the times, I think it is okay to not practice polygamy." Another comment by netizen quoted Krisnina, the writer of Pikiran Kartini (Kartini's Thoughts), that said, "one of the reasons why Kartini finally accepted to be married to a man who has wives or be in polygamy, is because of her great respect and love for her father" (Posted in @indonesiatanpafeminis.id, April 22, 2020).

In other words, @indonesiatanpafeminis.id with their posts has opened a virtual space for everyone to get involved, either for individuals or groups that reject and do not understand feminism or for individuals or groups that do support and have a better understanding of feminism. A political observer stated that, quoted "there will be debates among public opinions that will make people rethink feminism, and unfortunately in Indonesia when controversial matters arise critical thinking is not deemed as common practice in our culture. When controversy arises the first thing we do is sharpen our identity and inevitably it comes to 'you do you, I do me' if you are not part of us then you are the enemy. As a result, the public opinion debates make people rethink feminism, and unfortunately in Indonesia, this critical thinking is not something that we always do when there is a controversial issue. When controversial issues arise, the first thing we do is to sharpen our identity and, in the end, if you are not a part of our group, then you are our enemies" (Interviewed on 31/5/21).

Regarding the debate that happened in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account, a commissioner of Komnas Perempuan stated that this is something that could not be avoided. As an account that focuses on the issues, @indonesiatanpafeminis.id focused on the issues and the comments from their audiences. They raised the simple issue of questioning feminism in general and even asked what is wrong with feminism. However, these issues are also attracting general audiences that have no previous knowledge about feminism and want to know about feminist issues from various views (Interviewed on 30/5/21).

One of @indonesiatanpafeminis.id's followers said that she was attracted to see the account because she thinks "that's good. We have optional choices. Why not? And sometimes what they said is true." In other words, feminist content in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account raised a negative way of thinking about the feminist movement and also ignored

various views about feminism. On the other hand, this is also a chance for feminists to explain and correct the wrong way of understanding feminism. However, how they communicate with others is just as important to determine whether the explanation from feminists might lead to a new understanding or only generate conflicts.

This opinion is in line with a follower's opinion that does not agree with a post in the account. She continued to say that "they sarcastically deliver their messages. Sometimes it does not make sense." Even though the informant does not agree with the statements or contents from @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account, she expressed her disagreement with the way their admins communicate in their account. She said, "some statements (comments) that I saw are not ethical. We should be able to share our opinion only, not personally attack anyone."

This opinion is understandable because the way they communicate appears as though they are attacking others, giving the impression that feminists always feel superior. One of the followers of this account commented, based on the content and dialogue, the interviewee feels that "feminist exudes superiority, not equality." This opinion needs to be acknowledged not only in Indonesia, for example, Baumeister (2007) thinks that early feminists tended to prefer gender equality but today's feminists tend to favor the superiority of women over men, feminism is mostly hijacked by male haters. In correlation to what happened in the virtual spaces of @indonesiatanpafeminis.id, then when communications in virtual spaces portray feminists as less appreciative toward others' opinions or degrade others' opinions, it strengthens the bad impression of feminists. This may mitigate the potential of virtual spaces to become public spaces for women to express their thoughts and views.

However, it is proven that the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account could raise the feminist discourse in social media. One of the followers in an interview said that she was attracted to the account after she saw one repost from a story and at that time, the content is popular among women's rights activists. This means that the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account succeeds in attracting people, both who are pro and those in contra with their contents. The existence of feminist discourse in public is needed and is one of the alternative ways from the marginalization of feminism issues in the media.

The Contextualization of the Offline–Online Feminist Movement

Based on the analysis of online and offline relations, it is found that the influence of socio-politic situation is related to the appearance of the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account, especially about public issues related to the Sexual Violence Eradication Bill.

The research found that the admins of @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account do not provide information as an organization, association, or having links with other organizations. However, the informant from Komnas Perempuan (National Commission on Violence Against Woman) said the unclear identity of the admins of this account shows a stronger work mechanism. Accounts such as @indonesiatanpafeminis.id are connected to a bigger ecosystem with a specific political agenda and ideology. The attacks on feminists related to the Sexual Violence Eradication Bill are connected to the first academic script of the same bill that contains feminist legal theory as the base. In the end, with some considerations, the bill uses the critical legal theory as the base. She added negotiations were conducted for the bill to be accepted and officialized to save more women from becoming victims (Interviewed on 30/5/21).

As a result, the same informant stated that the Sexual Violence Eradication Bill was already adjusted to various demands even though it still keeps substantial things such as rejecting adultery clauses to be included on the bill. The commissioner stated the reason for the rejection is because substantially, the adultery issues could not be categorized as sexual violence. Even though Indonesian society thinks of it as an issue, the truth is it is a different issue. The different opinions are relevant to the emergence of accusations about feminists as free-sex followers as shown on the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account. One of the posts shows an animation of a woman who analogized feminists as animals because they could not control their (sexual) desire as free-sex follower stigma (even though it is not expressed directly) (Posted in @indonesiatanpafeminis.id, October 28, 2020).

Opinions that view what @indonesiatanpafeminis.id has done as something premeditated and organized are in line with the political observer's opinion. He stated, "was it planned, yes because they are programmatic, they learned from previous experiences. Even if this was not conducted by the same people, at least it was conducted by people within the same political spectrum, so they learned and have a 'dog whistle,' where jargons they spread will quickly be identified by those that have the same understanding or ideology causing it to become massive spreading through the social media" (Interviewed on May 31, 2021). This is in line with the emergence of similar accounts but using the identity of big cities in Indonesia, such as @jakartatanpafeminis2, @padangtanpafeminis_ and @bandungtanpafeminis. These accounts repost content from @indonesiatanpafeminis.id or create new content with the same ideology.

Referring to the existence of various Muslim women accounts, the existence of the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account could be said that the account itself still contains and uses the understanding of women's position in patriarchy values. Their interpretation of feminist is related to women in Islam; in most cases, they raise issues about gender-biased matters and ignore the gender-friendly interpretation that forms the basis for Islamic women movements such as Aisyiyah, Muslimat NU, Perempuan KAMMI, and Rahima. Women's position is being constructed with the idea that women are more valuable in the domestic area. Women's existence in public areas is often interpreted as the cause or *raison d'etre* for sexual violence. This idea is in line with the assumption that when men raped women, the individuals tend to justify and rationalize their violence by maintaining the myth and ideology of blaming the victim and believe that the victim did something to attract the violence (Anderson, 2015). In an interview, the informant from Komnas Perempuan stated

there is a growing number of groups nowadays that are supporting or accepting of women in the public spaces as long as they are obedient and position themselves as a subordinate under men (Interviewed on 30/5/21). Based on that observation, the emergence of the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account is being understood as an effort to give women space to be present in public space but they also need to respect the patriarchal values. In the reformation era, opportunities for women to exist in public spaces appear more than before, not only as a government's "tool" but also as an individual agent for development. This is also supported by "Instruksi Presiden" (President's Instruction) no. 9 September 2000 about Mainstreaming Gender in National Development (Hasan, Anugrah, and Pratiwi, 2019).

The relation between offline and online activities could be understood from the emergence of the family issues in a few posts from @indonesiatanpafeminis.id. The existence of women in domestic spaces is being related to the issues about a family whose prosperity is being charged to women. In Indonesia, there is also a women's group called Aliansi Cinta Keluarga (the Family Love Alliance) in Indonesia (AILA) who is very against feminist because they think that feminist hates family. The @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account also shared the same statement. On June 13, 2020, they posted a short video that talks about how feminist hates the family concept because they could not get enough love from their own family. The existence of this group is related to the foundation of Sekolah Perempuan (School for Women) established in several cities in Indonesia. Based on the information from one informant, one of the reasons behind the foundation of Sekolah Perempuan is the increasing number of divorce cases. It means that women are considered to need special education to avoid divorce in their families.

The resistance toward feminism, based on various contents that have been collected and analyzed from the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account, is caused by several reasons such as the fear for things that come from the West, the lack of knowledge about feminism and feminism in the women's movement, patriarchy values, and matters related to the gender-biased interpretation in Islam. The fear for things that come from the West, overlook the idea of equality or human rights could not be said as West values. This claim ignores the fact that many women are not white and fighting for their rights, both in western countries or in other places (Bulbeck, 2002). In Indonesia, one of the most frequently mentioned fears is the assumption that feminist ideas, thoughts, and movements do not have social and cultural roots in Indonesia's society (Arifia and Subono, 2017).

Contents about feminism in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account present various negative perspectives. However, these perspectives are not new. Baumeister (2007) think that early feminist tends to like gender equality more but feminist nowadays tends to like the superiority of women over men, feminism is hijacked more by men haters. The feminist's beliefs often attack society's thoughts and practices that are considered normal or right. Therefore, the feminist is often seen as an identity that is being stigmatized by things that are considered contrary to the existing values or things that are bad (Dye, 2005). The diversity of feminist thoughts that evolved globally is being interpreted equally by @indonesiatanpafeminis.id. Although as stated by one of the Indonesian feminist experts "feminism is *glocal*, global but at the same time local. The meaning of global here is because patriarchal culture is global, this culture is strong everywhere. However, it is also local. Like in Indonesia, the problems that women face in Indonesia are different from the problems in America or Europe. In Indonesia, we face other Muslims as problems by how texts have been interpreted through every patriarchy lens. Therefore, patriarchal values exist. Feminism fights to counter or critique the interpretation of it" (Interviewed on 18/5/21). Indonesians are generally bound by religious rules in every aspect of their thought and activities throughout their life. In regards to religious interpretations, a political observer explained in an interview, "The diversity of feminist movements in Indonesia may well have been created by different interpretations (*tafsirs*) of feminist views and views on the *Syariah* or texts in the Al-Quran. The war of interpretations is interesting because inevitably it will create new discourse or even give birth to new thoughts on feminists in Indonesia" (Interviewed on 31/5/21).

Bad stigma is related to feminism that contradicts cultural traits related to the family such as how the ideal role as a wife is supposed to be, children's education in the family, and also abortion issues that are related to religion. This negative stigma is also portrayed in posts by @indonesiatanpafeminis.id which revealed their hatred or attempts to harass feminists. The attempt to harass each other happened to the point of using harsh words or statements full of hatred (to provoke feminists). That mockery was then responded by one of the pro-feminists with a quotation of a verse from the Al-Qur'an about the disrepute of someone who mocks others (QS Al-Hujurat:11). On June 6, 2020, a video post (in @indonesiatanpafeminis.id, June 06, 2020) by one of the admins stated the difference between humans and animals is how to manage their lust. She mocked feminists because she thinks that feminists could not control their lust. This comment is one method to fight the stigma about pro-feminists who are anti-family, anti-religion, and express deviant behaviors. The interpretation of feminist that specializes experience as a tool for "imagining justice" of text that produces gender inequality, Amina Wadud quoted the difference between the idea of Al-Qur'an and contemporary as social justice to show that "Muslim women create their voices when they experienced text" and so she is referred to as an "experience authorities" (Seedat, 2013).

The netizen's effort to fight the contradiction between feminist and religion also involves arguments taken from *surahs* in the Al-Qur'an and the histories of Islam. It means this debate could be interpreted as when the women's movement clashes with Islam, most of the conflicts that happened related to the meanings built by some believers with their ideologies. This is different from what was done by professional women that emphasize issues related to the reality happening within the society such as poverty that marginalizes women, women reproduction health issues, domestic violence, and supporting women to excel in the educational area, and also being involved in public areas. However, these efforts are not without critics because the political economy study also has suspicions toward efforts of women development in public areas, both through education or

employment, but in the end, it makes women turn into the consumer in consumerism culture (Genz, 2006; McRobbie, 2009).

The Muslim women in Indonesia are apparently more open to accepting different views in the practice of their religion such as whether or not female Muslims to wear hijab. This perspective is also portrayed in the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account when they posted one of their admins who do not use the hijab (Posted in @indonesiatanpafeminis.id, July 11, 2020). This woman is portrayed in an animation version as a young woman with long blonde hair wearing glasses and a hat. It means that several things could be agreed upon by Indonesian women groups and several things could not be agreed upon. As a result, this space also portrays the Indonesian women's movement that fights for women's rights yet also resists certain matters; therefore, negotiations are needed to resolve these issues.

The research found that the actors behind the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account emerge as individuals but carry the same political views as men's interest, with both religious argument and normative value (patriarchy). Women's groups exist as a subject that managed to break through from resistance issues but on the other hand unconsciously positioned themselves as an object. They become an object when their existence is only to fulfill men's desire for marriage. In other words, their existence is unconsciously being used as a tool to fight for men's interests, such as in polygamy issues, sexual violence, and related to the enmity of political parties in parliament. This is one of the issues that Simone De Beauvoir (2014) said about the relationship between women and men. The most important thing that women need to fight for is not their rights but the understanding of their clarity as women (De Beauvoir, 2014). On the contrary, when women have freedom, they will still be positioned as an object and place men as the subject. This happens with women's groups behind the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account. Through their understanding as a subject, women must have an intersubjective relation with men that see themselves as subjects and see others as a subject too (De Beauvoir, 2014). This view is a key to condemn the accusation from the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account about feminist as being a woman who hates men and carries a mission for equality.

Based on actual occurrence in society, equal opportunity between men and women has already been implemented in a few educational institutions. The number of students in undergraduate programs at Indonesian universities is relatively balanced between female students (3,154,179) and male students (3,417,142) (Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education, 2018). However, some women face the dilemma in regards to their roles as wives and mothers after they graduated. Culturally, women are required to be the ones who bear the great responsibility to do house chores and take care of their children. In Indonesia, many men are being well educated by their parents but are not given the responsibility to do any house chores. Some women in Indonesia who come from upper-middle-class families are pampered by having lower-middle-class women as housemaids or assistants. Others are helped by having female relatives, such as their mother, sisters, or other relatives, who take on the burden of some household chores. This condition is one of the reasons why @indonesiatanpafeminis.id still posts the issues about equality and family.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the researchers gather that the existence of social media plays an important role in creating a virtual discussion about feminism and anti-feminism, even for the users that are not familiar with these issues. Feminists, as well as anti-feminist, have access to use the platform and make content that represents their awareness as an individual, social movement as well as a political movement. As an account that focuses on many issues, @indonesiatanpafeminis.id (@indonesiawithoutfeminist.id) also provides space to have an open debate or discourse on several important issues among netizens from those who deeply understand feminism to those who outright reject feminists. It is proven that the @indonesiatanpafeminis.id account could raise the feminist discourse in social media.

In Indonesia ideas on anti-feminism of @indonesiatanpafeminis.id are less popular compared to feminist movements promoted by other Muslim women's movements. Those Muslim women's movements are Aisyiyah, an Islamic organization formed by Muhammadiyah, and Muslimat NU, another large organization by Nahdlatul Ulama, and also Rahima (Center for Education and Information on Islam and Women's Rights). These organizations are considered progressive women's organizations that have been collaborating with the National Commission on Violence Against Woman (Komnas Perempuan). Anti-feminist issues raised in the virtual space via Instagram by women's groups with Muslim identities (@indonesiatanpafeminis.id) in the end cannot ignore the movement of Muslim women in the offline space that has been developed and people's assumption toward their connection to certain political interests.

The existence of @indonesiatanpafeminis.id has the potential to strengthen anti-feminist issues related to political or patriarchal interests in society. This tendency can occur with the use of the identity of big cities in Indonesia in accounts that affirm their rejection of feminists, namely, @jakartatanpafeminis2, @padangtanpafeminis_ and @bandungtanpafeminis.

Thus, there is a need for further research to explore the links between anti-feminist groups and Islamic political group movements that may have emerged since the reform (1998). There is also a need to understand how far women politicians are aware of issues on women's interest and their struggles in the political arena. In addition, further studies are needed to explore how feminist groups and anti-feminist groups organize themselves in digital media. Furthermore, we have to elaborate more about the virtual debates between both sides as a digital feminist discourse that could be used to criticize and develop women's movement through online and offline dynamics and to interpret feminists in a country with multicultural contexts.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusion of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study consists of two main data sources, namely observations of Instagram accounts and interviews. The Instagram account used as the focus of analysis in this study is a public account (@indonesiatanpafeminis.id) that can be accessed by anyone. In addition, the uploaded content is not personal content or contains someone's personal identity. Meanwhile, for interviews, each interviewee knew that the data from the interviews were used for research purposes and for to be published. They also agreed to be identified as their expertise, position, or institution.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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Age is Nothing but a Number: Ben 10s, Sugar Mummies, and the South African Gender Order in the Daily Sun's Facebook Page

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Stories about "Ben10" relationships between older women and their younger male lovers appear regularly in the *Daily Sun*, South Africa's most popular tabloid newspaper. *Daily Sun* readers, who are typically township residents, engage vociferously over the rights and wrongs of such relationships on the tabloid's Facebook page, and alternatively berate or support the older, working class women who feature in them. These women could be understood as "postfeminist" insofar as they are financially independent and sexually autonomous. Their actions echo those of the independent township women in the mid 20th century who, resisting patriarchal apartheid social engineering, brewed beer and rented rooms in order to assert their financial and sexual independence. In both cases, these women's bold actions confront local hetero-patriarchal norms and call into question an ideal local patriarchal gender order. However, the meanings that are made by the readers of such women in Ben10 relationships today also reflect a social context characterised by a contestation over the meaning of rights, high rates of unemployment, gender-based violence and HIV, factors that curtail a premature diagnosis of postfeminist identity. Drawing on a textual analysis of several articles and their Facebook comments, we argue that any assessment of postfeminism in southern spaces must account for how historical and contextual factors such as these constrain the reach of global postfeminism.

Keywords: South Africa, sugar mummies, Ben 10, daily Sun, gender order, postfeminism

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INTRODUCTION

This article explores the meanings of "Ben 10" relationships constructed in reports by the popular South African tabloid, the *Daily Sun*, and in the lively conversations that take place about these stories on the paper's Facebook page. A township colloquialism, "Ben 10" refers to a man who enters into a sexual relationship with an older woman (a "sugar mummy") on whom he is financially dependent. *Daily Sun* readers, who are typically township residents, engage vociferously over the rights and wrongs of such relationships as reported in the tabloid. An affront to local hetero-patriarchal norms, they call into question an ideal local patriarchal gender order which understands men as supporting their households as breadwinners and women as compliant and chaste sexual partners and mothers. Readers attempt to understand how these relationships challenge local gender norms, and alternatively defend or loudly decry the choices that are made by both the men and women involved.

However, their evaluations transcend simplistic frames of praise or blame. Some who support such relationships draw on the discourse of rights, as articulated in South Africa's liberal constitution, to argue for sexual equality. But sexual equality, while undoubtedly an important facet of our post-transition milieu, cannot be taken for granted. Rights are themselves the subject of anxiety, and are not necessarily understood as providing an uncomplicated "freedom" for women to explore sex and sexuality, as endorsed by global postfeminist discourse - in this case, the "right" of older women to enjoy sex with younger men of their choice. This is because the right to freedom of sexuality is put into practice in a highly complex post-transition social milieu, characterised by the persistence of customary and Christian gender mores; high levels of gender-based violence; unemployment; and HIV prevalence. These factors emerge consistently within the Facebook discussions that comment on the *Daily Sun's* Ben10 reportage, and inform our analysis. Yet these factors are not in themselves a sufficient explanation for the extreme opprobrium Ben10 relationships evoke. They complement a long-standing patriarchal anxiety attached to the "uncontrolled" sexuality of financially independent and older working-class women in township spaces. It is this history of backlash to non-conforming financial and sexual independence that provides the basis for the argument of this article.

POSTFEMINISM AND THE OLDER WOMAN

This issue of *Frontiers of Sociology* asks us to situate postfeminism and critical responses to the discourse within our African context. We start by asserting that critical approaches to postfeminism can expand our scope of understanding by examining older women in working class social settings in our southern context. This context complicates the premises on which the discourse of postfeminism depends and make visible the limits of its reach. Four contextual factors in South Africa appear particularly pertinent when considering older and working-class women in relation to postfeminism. First, despite Constitutional rights, many South African women still struggle to reach parity with men and realise the liberal second-wave feminist gains that postfeminist discourse takes as axiomatic. Then, far from women being financially independent, a necessary precondition for postfeminist consumption, very high rates of unemployment have profound implications for gender relations as a whole, as well as for women's economic and social autonomy. Third, due to widely held customary and Christian mores, the overt display by women of sexuality and sexual desire which signals a postfeminist subjectivity is not always socially acceptable. Neither exposure to global media—including the digital sphere—where such identities are routinely celebrated, nor 2 decades of HIV politics and education which have forced sex and sexuality from the privacy of the bedroom into the public sphere, have been sufficient to dislodge this resistance entirely. Last but not least is the persistently high level of gender-based violence which curtails the personal freedom necessary for performing a postfeminist subjectivity.

These endemic issues are seemingly transcended by youthful and "modern" postfeminist performances online, such as women's self-representations on Instagram (Bosch 2011; Iqani 2019). Their glamorous and sexualised consumption practices mark them as ideal global postfeminist subjects, much in line with Dosekun's (2015) "hyper-feminine" elite women in Lagos, Nigeria. But older working-class women in South Africa cannot be equated with older working-class women who appear in northern postfeminist scholarship. This goes beyond their being outside the class position which allows the uptake of the discourse through global flows of media. Their experiences and social location are too different. For this reason, we cannot draw on northern scholarship that examines popular culture depictions of older women's sexuality in age-heterogenous relationships, such as the "cougar" women depicted in British tabloids (Hamid-Turksoy et al., 2014), celebrity tabloid news (Burema 2018) or Hollywood cinema (Whelehan 2013). Nor is the postfeminist critique of the makeover show (Tincknell 2011; McRobbie 2020) that scrutinises and reorders the older, working class woman's body to maximise her sexual attractiveness and employability, of much use to us here. This scholarship examines how postfeminist discourse is mediated through popular culture forms, how it monitors the sexuality of the older woman, and inscribes her aging body as she constructs a disciplined postfeminist subjectivity in line with neoliberal demands within the declining welfare state.

Instead, we argue that we must begin by looking carefully at the specific social context in which postfeminist discourse attempts to take root. Especially pertinent to this study is a longstanding tension in the South African social fabric: the struggle between women who have historically attempted to assert themselves as independent economic and sexual subjects, and the hetero-patriarchies that have sought to control them. This history of gendered struggle must be understood within the context of colonial and apartheid racialised spatial segregation and the laws that controlled the movement of black South Africans into peri-urban black working-class residential areas, or "townships."

We briefly set out this context below by drawing on anthropological and historical research into women's independence and township sociality during the colonial and apartheid eras. It reveals the opprobrium attached to unmarried women who, living illegally in township spaces, won economic and social independence from customary patriarchal authority through beer brewing. Then, more recent scholarship on women in township settings foregrounds the repercussions of women claiming "rights" in a context of profound economic uncertainty. Beer brewing and rights and the gender conflicts these incite, shed light on the *Daily Sun's* stories that deal with older, financially independent women and their relationships with Ben 10s in township settings.

BEER-BREWING, INDEPENDENT WOMEN AND MORAL PANIC

Colonial rule sought to harness black South African male labour for nascent local capitalism. To this end, men were allowed to live

(primarily as migrant labour) in peri-urban "townships," residential areas set aside for black residents adjacent to mines and urban industry. At the same time, black and white patriarchies colluded to exclude women from the formal economy (Delius and Glaser 2004; Freund 2007). While some women found work as semi-skilled labour in decentralised industries in the first half of the 20th century (Mager 1989; Minkley 1996) they more often found work as domestic labour (Cock 1980). Otherwise, women were expected to remain in rural areas under the authority of their fathers, or husbands and husbands' families: only some married women could get permission to join husbands who lived permanently in town.

Despite the laws that sought to confine them to rural homesteads, young and other marginalised women—single "mothers," "widows" and "deserted women" (Minkley 1996: 145)—moved to town when rural livelihoods became unsustainable, or the weight of patriarchal control unbearable (Minkley 1996; Freund 2007; Bank and Kamman 2011). These women survived in the informal economy by brewing beer, leasing living space and constructing households composed of women and children only (Minkley 1996; Hunter 2010; Bank 2011).

Beer brewing enabled unmarried women to assert an economic and sexual independence that was loudly decried by the (black and white) men who sought to control them (Freund 2007). Offering a vision of viable albeit ambiguous independence, beer-brewing profitably established "a class of independent women" who "succeeded their ambition to buy a wood and iron house" and became landladies "not under someone else's rule" (Minkley 1996: 150). Unsurprisingly perhaps, beer-brewing was villainised and became a "discursive site for different fears and definitions about 'the native family' and the position and behaviour of black women in an urban environment" (Minkley 1996: 137–138). As a "women's business" that made "real money" and enabled women to buy property, Minkley (1996: 151) describes how, in the city of East London, illicit home beer brewing by independent, unmarried women provoked a "moral panic" on the part of middle class black residents and white authorities, which appears to have centred on the women's uncontrolled sexuality: a "myriad of wantonness" was "associated with the 'presence of licentious and dangerously free females' selling 'illegal liquor.'" This included "'illicit sex', 'fly-by-night lovers,' 'venereal disease' and illegitimate children." Indeed, the whole social fabric appeared to be at stake, including "rioting, fighting, crime, and juvenile delinquency" (Minkley 1996: 153; Bank and Kamman 2011).

The relative independence of this class of "stubborn, spirited and fiercely independent" women (Bank and Kamman 2011: 270) waned after the 1950s as apartheid legislation intensified the supervision of black South Africans in urban areas, and state and customary patriarchal control tightened its grip on women's bid for independence: women were denied property rights, informal enterprises such as beer brewing were curtailed, and residence permits were given strictly to married women. Urbanised married couples were accommodated in formal state housing, constructed in keeping with the idea of a patriarchal, Christian and "modern" nuclear black family headed by a wage-earning husband (Hunter 2010). Women who wanted to stay in urban areas were thus entirely dependent on men: divorce, or the death of the husband, or father, could mean eviction and a return to rural homes.

UNEMPLOYMENT, RIGHTS AND HIV: THE SHIFTING GROUND OF GENDER RELATIONS

New constitutional rights in 1996 formally abolished men's control over women, who reclaimed their "urban citizenship as independent agents in the city" (Bank and Kamman 2011: 271). Legislative changes had granted women certain property rights and a large number of single women gained access to low cost RDP housing provided by the South African state (Hunter 2010: 142). Women who have access to an RDP house and an independent income (such as through beer brewing) have more power to navigate intimate relations with men. However, these positive changes have taken place within a context of significant social upheaval, including increasing unemployment, violence and the HIV epidemic.

Hunter's (2010) ethnographic work in a declining industrial township in KwaZulu-Natal explores the relationship between changing gender norms, unemployment, violence and HIV. He looks carefully at how the loss of male wages within the neoliberal economy reshaped customary ideals of masculinity; simultaneously, high unemployment and the discourse of rights encouraged women to forge new feminine identities. In neither case did these new masculinities and femininities escape the expectations of older, customary norms, as well as Christian ideals, with respect to gender relations. These reconfigured but still highly patriarchal gender relations are complexly connected to both gender-based violence and the high incidence of HIV (Hunter 2010; Jewkes et al., 2011; Morrell et al., 2012).

The effects of economic stagnation and chronic unemployment on gender relations cannot be overstated. Beginning in the mid-1970s, by 2019 unemployment measured 29,1%, an escalating crisis precipitated by South Africa's entry into the global neoliberal economy. Mass unemployment ended the "patriarchal bargain" enabled by waged male labour, and undermined the dominant narrative of masculine success through work. This tension between the ideal of the working male breadwinner and the reality of South Africa's poverty and unemployment within a wider context of rights has been referred to as a "crisis of masculinity" (Walker 2005). If waged labour had enabled customary marriage in which men provided for their wives and children, loss of income has meant that men find it difficult to fulfil the onerous financial obligations of *lobola* and the establishment and maintenance of a (polygamous) household. Instead, men with access to money support a number of sexual partners outside of marriage. Rather than "umnumzana" (in isiZulu, the head of a household), such men are described as "isoka," a man with many sexual partners, defended as men's custom. Notably, men without financial means are largely excluded from the sexual economy, as women, of whom far more are unemployed than men [43.5% of black women are unemployed in contrast to 35% of black men (Statistics South

Africa, 2020)], expect material support within a sexual relationship.

Simultaneously, women have deployed the new discourse of rights in strategic ways to promote their economic and social interests (Hunter 2010). This includes the "right" to sexual pleasure and the freedom to have multiple sexual partners, as do men. Women also use rights discourse to argue for their "right to consume" desirable consumer goods (Posel 2004), as well as to live alone with their children [in other words, to be mothers who live independently, without men's supervision, rather than be subordinated wives (Walker 1995)]. All these elements contribute to what in other spaces could be seen as a "postfeminist" identity, in which women define themselves as independent and sexually liberated, and signal a sexually attractive femininity through consumption (Gill 2007). However, reflecting on the ways in which the idea of the global postfeminist "It Girl" is taken up in township spaces, Hunter (2010: 131) reminds us that "(l)iberal rights can never be completely estranged from the wider, historically. . . constituted moral codes of 'rights and wrongs.'" Consequently, women with more than one sexual partner, or who live independently, risk social censure and being labelled "isifebe" (a "loose" woman, a prostitute; a woman with excessive sex-drive). Moreover, these choices provide a pretext for violence, as men may attempt to "straighten" non-conforming and "disrespectful" women by "disciplining" them (Hunter 2010: 173).

THE GENDER ORDER AND SEXUALITY

Women, in other words, must construct their postfeminist identities in relation to the local patriarchal gender order and its normative expectations (Boshoff 2021a). Drawing on Raewyn Connell's (2009) constructivist approach to gender, we argue that readers' evaluations of women's (postfeminist) sexual and material practices are rooted in and flow from local cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity. Importantly for our argument, Connell's model specifically considers the violent social re-ordering initiated by colonialism in southern spaces as it "smashed" (Connell 2009: 92) and reconstituted local gender orders for its own ends, as noted in the context section above. The model proposes a hierarchy of variously subordinated and complicit masculinities, and "emphasised" and non-conforming femininities, which are positioned in relation to hegemonic masculinity whose social ascendency is established within a balance of forces (Connell 1987: 183). Significantly, Connell (1987) insists on the historical and social specificity of any assessment of gender relations, for what "counts" as hegemonic masculinity or emphasized femininity depends on context and the forces at play. A key element of hegemonic masculinity in township spaces is the ability to provide in material ways for a partner and children; but it also includes a virile (hetero) sexuality, "toughness" and the capacity for violence (Ratele 2010). In contrast, "emphasised" femininity is characterised, *inter alia*, as sexually receptive but chaste, "respectful" and submissive to men's authority (Hunter 2010).

This has not always been the case, particularly in relation to women's sexuality; historical and ethnographic evidence suggests that before Christian morality became entrenched, women's sexuality was less controlled than today (Epprecht 2008). Colonial discourses, including Christianity, constructed African women's sexuality as hyper-sexual, primitive, dirty and morally corrupting–and thus in need of control (McFadden 2003; Tamale 2011). Women's sexuality and sexual expression consequently became "a key site through which women's subordination is maintained and enforced in postcolonial Africa" (Tamale 2005: 9). Yet, very little work has been done on African women's agency, in particular their sexual agency, and female sexuality, sexual desire and gratification are rarely the object of analysis (Arnfred 2004; Tamale 2011).

SAMPLE AND METHOD

An analysis is offered of three Ben 10 stories published in *Daily Sun* between 2015 and 2017. They are typical of the reportage on this topic, and are purposely selected for the wide range of Facebook comments they provoke. The number of comments on the three articles altogether is 3,338. The analysis is arranged under the themes of democracy, rights and sex; violence and unemployment, and HIV. HIV is not dealt with in any one article, but emerges obliquely in comments within a range of reports. Using multi-modal critical and visual discourse analysis methods, we examine how the paper constructs the Ben 10 relationships in these instances, paying particular attention to the composition of the images and lexicalisation. This serves to contextualise the analysis of the readers' Facebook comments, which follow the articles.

Democracy, Rights and Sex

"I LIVE WITH MY BEN 10 AND MY HUBBY!" Woman takes a second husband for sex! opens in typical *Daily Sun* style, by humorously setting up the narrative premise: "THE HUBBY has the money. The Ben 10 has the hot 4–5 (penis)." It is immediately followed by its antithesis: "AND PUSELETSO HAS TOO MUCH LOVE FOR JUST ONE MAN." This distinctive presentational mode of dramatic headlines and overt narrativisation should not be read as mere conformity to tabloid conventions; rather, it is a key strategy by means of which *Daily Sun* constructs and communicates the moral dimensions of the imagined community it forms together with its readership (Wasserman, 2010; Boshoff, 2017). In other words, it is designed to invite identification and debate. The introduction establishes the premise of the story, which concerns the conundrum Puseletso faces in maintaining a relationship with her two partners, her "customary" husband, and her "Ben10." A photograph shows them standing on either side of Puseletso, looking affectionately at her as she smiles at the reader. The direction of their gaze, and her frank engagement with the reader establishes her as the report's protagonist. The story sets out the grounds for her unusual decision: she explains that her husband of 15 years couldn't "satisfy" her in bed, on account of a "chronic disease." Pains are taken at the start of the report to construct

her resolution to bring her younger lover into "her RDP" home as one that was carefully made, for it "wasn't an easy decision." She declares that she "hated the idea of cheating" on her husband, whom she "(loves) as much as (she) ever did"; moreover, she "felt guilty" about her "boyfriend." For these reasons, she "decided to tell Petrus (her husband through customary marriage) about Kagiso."

She contrasts her bravery with the behaviour of other women: as "a shebeen queen" (a beer-brewer) (the kind of person who, the word implies, would be intimately aware of township social mores), she describes how she "doesn't like what she sees happening around her." "Most women I know in my kasi (township) cheat on their husbands," she explains. Moreover, "they do it in secret." She compares this reprehensible behaviour with her own honesty: "I decided to live with both of my men faithfully." However, her honesty has not earned her any favours with fellow township residents, who "told me it was a bad thing" and "called me names."

The report also establishes the relationship between the two men, who, the report reassures the reader, "have separate rooms." While Petrus the husband is "not completely happy with the situation" (he confides that he has "become the laughing stock of our kasi"), he has "accepted it," "for the sake of his children." For his part, Kagiso declares that Puseletso's married status does not affect him: he "isn't worried that his girlfriend is married," and he is "a happy man." A further comparison is set up between Kagiso and the husband, for Kagiso and Puseletso are trying to "raise money for our wedding," a direct contrast to the customary marriage that pertains between Puseletso and Petrus.

Noteworthy is that Petrus has a "disability grant" and works as a gardener; but Puseletso, a "Shebeen queen," is presumably financially independent of her husband and able to support Kagiso, who is described as "unemployed." Indeed, Kagiso's dependent position is signified in the photograph by the frilly, effeminate hat which is comically perched on his head; while he hugs Puseletso close to his body, the space that this creates between Petrus and Puseletso suggests the separation that now exists within their relationship, as one reader observes: "She loves the Ben 10 more, just look at the space between her and the husband."

Facebook Comments Discussion

Daily Sun's Facebook page can be understood as a public forum in which readers share opinions on the stories of the day. It complements the paper's daily letters page by means of which readers participate in constructing the moral and social dimensions of the imagined community of "SunLand," including its gender order (Smith and Adendorff 2014; Boshoff, 2021b). It is in this light that the online commentary must be assessed. Many comments posted in response to the story mockingly deride the appearance of the characters involved, especially the purported age of the younger lover. "Who is Ben 10 between the 2 because they all look like pensioners 2 me," captures the sentiment of such posts. However, the joking has its limits, as one reader irritably asserts, "this ain no joke its a seious matr (serious matter) so stop laughn mxm (expression of disapproval)." Woven between the dismissive laughter is a serious thread of concern about gender relations—"There is need to rethink the structure of relationships"—which acknowledges an underlying issue that demands attention. There are two strands to this thread: one is concerned with what happens when contemporary patriarchal gender relations, which endorse multiple partners for men, are overturned by women claiming the right to act as men do; the second is interested in sex as an ingredient within healthy relationships.

In the first strand, commentators compare Puseletso's contemporary arrangement with the local practice of polygamy, which is aligned with "custom." Some condemn, while others point out what appear to be the positive aspects of Puseletso's course of action. Those who applaud her decision to take a Ben 10 lover remark gleefully on the social norm that excuses multiple sexual partners for men, and assert that it's high time women did the same: "Yes mama, it's your time now. Men have been doing this since the beginning of time," says one. "Good for her!" exclaims another, "These men must feel how some of the women feel about polygamy." Angrily, one person calls out patriarchal double standards, observing that men "take 2 or even 4 wives and more but as soon as a woman does it she's called a hoe (whore) Mxm," and concluding that men are a "bunch of hypocrites."

This argument turns on the idea of "democracy" and its implicit rights, which are not always seen favourably: as one commentator sarcastically remarks, "yah neh its Democracy." Some quip caustically on the highly visible example set by the then South African President, Jacob Zuma, a polygamous husband: "i can see tha you are competing with Zuma!" and, "Good polygammy Zuma did t first now we are also doing t he is leading by example." The latter commentator also remarks that polygamy "is legal in SA," a point taken up by another who exclaims that all unions need to be treated equally: "Polygamy is favoured by our parliament; therefore polyandry must be favoured!" This commentator even offers to assist Puseletso: "I will be your Advocate Puseletso in registering both marriages legally," declaring that "this is the 21st century. Equality must prevail!!!"

However, this positive reception is countered by a more pessimistic reading. The idea of such "equality" is shocking to many, visible in comments that remark on it by means of the idiomatic expression "50 50." This phrase appears in Hunter's (2010: 132) ethnography, where he observes how women argue that "in a 50/50 world, they now have the right to have multiple partners, just like men." Thus, one commentator exclaims in amazement, "Yhoooo nahh (expression of disbelief) I've never seen this in my life, yhooo ke 50 50 str8 (it's 50 50 straight)"; while another remarks that "becoz its 50 50 thus y this lady manage to get two mens lyk (just as) men take two wifes huh." "This is taboo in our culture" continues the first. Male readers in particular feel that it is impossible for two men to live under one roof: "yoh how can I sleep knowing my wife is having sex with another man?" asks one, while another remarks "Poo pedi sakeng tlhe banna (two bulls in one sack; i.e., two men under one roof), this is too much." The use of the vernacular idiom, which constructs men as rivals who cannot share a space (unlike women who are expected to do so in polygamous unions) drives home this reader's point

about custom - for him, Puseletso's arrangement is simply immoral: "We are seriously losing our morals and values." Another similarly condemns the arrangement, sternly adhorting the husband to end the relationship: lomama isifebe (this woman is promiscuous), lobaba wokuqala akayeke lomama (the husband should leave her).

The use of the word "isifebe" is contentious. It can mean a promiscuous woman or a prostitute (Hunter 2010: 180). However, in some township communities the word can also refer to a woman with an "excessive" sex drive. Notably, the "isifebe" label is used colloquially as a policing tool to ensure that women do not express desire or engage actively in sexual encounters with men, but are rather passive sexual participants. Sex and sexual pleasure is still seen as a male domain and sexual appetite as a masculine trait; for this reason, women who dare to explore their sexuality are termed "isifebe" or "loose." The expression of sexual desire can thus be interpreted as the woman lacking "respect," as suggested in the comment "That old woman should be ashamed of herself, she clearly has no respect."

The discourse of "hlonipa" (respect) is a means of guiding customary social relations (Hunter 2010). However, the language of rights and new forms of sex talk have disturbed gendered and generational lines of authority denoted by the concept of "hlonipa" (Hunter 2010: 138; Posel 2004). By taking another husband, Puseletso flouts custom, and thereby disrespects her first (legitimate) husband, under whose authority she is expected to reside. Respect is linked to adherence to customary values, but also to what counts as moral behaviour.

Discourses of immorality also frame women's agency as alarming. Readers draw on Christian precepts to condemn the characters and their actions: "Ooooo!!! Lord wat have done to deserve this?" asks one amazed reader, while another exhorts "God" to "bring bck da ancient floods dat took place during da days of Aaron" for "we modern ppl (people) we r extremely sinning." Indeed, for several readers, the story—an "ABOMINATION"—signals the "End of the world!!!!" Significantly, however, two comments grounded in Christian scripture present arguments defending Puseletso, and endorsing, rather than censuring, her subversion of patriarchal norms. Her actions are compared to those of Abraham's "affair with his slave," which is implicitly excused for "Sarah the wife was aware of it." In this writer's opinion, "They are a happy family," and given their happiness, "who are we to judge them." Another commentator similarly attempts to divert censure by quoting from the new testament: "let anyone without sin cast the first stone."

A more pragmatic (but less visible) strand of argument puts aside morality in favour of a rational and "solutions" approach to the problem that is perceived in the couple's sex life. The husband's impotence is understood as an undoubted factor in Puseletso's decision: "No sex, no love," remarks a reader, while another agrees, "marriage without a good sex. . . doesn't succeed." Another goes as far as to indirectly blame the husband, for "this shows men that living an unhealthy life, leads our wifes to a unsatisfactory stage in our marriages." "Let this be a lesson," he warns. Lessons are indeed given, interestingly, in terms of biology, in which the "truth" about sexuality is pointed out: "nature is nature" remarks one. The phrase suggests that Puseletso has sexual needs which need to be met, an interesting inversion of the more common idea that it is men's sexual drive that needs to be satisfied at all costs (Jewkes et al., 2005; Hunter 2010).

Another explains to other readers that "It's indeed true that women reach their sexual peak in their 40's," and compares women's sexuality to that of men who "lose their libido and sexual peak in that age, so it's a disaster." However, not everyone agrees with this gloomy conclusion; interesting here is a comment which points out that this is "normal human behaviour," which should be accepted as such: "I am glad that there are women who are exploring their sexual nature without worrying about the pressure society puts on such normal human behaviour." For this reader, and many others, Puseletso's bold action renders her heroic: "Good woman, see there should be more women like her," and "I want to be her," express readers' admiration. Her story also encourages other women who are not as bold or lucky: "I wish it could be me, she's my role model nami ngifuna ukuba nesthembu (I want to be polyandrous too)." What is especially attractive to these readers is Puseletso's authority: "I like her courage" declares one, while another admiringly asserts that "This lady is a straight up boss. I want to be like her."

Violence and Unemployment

EVIL BEN 10 KILLED OUR MUM! and BEN 10's REVENGE! are two stories, published a few days apart, which both deal with violent endings to Ben10 relationships. The graphic violence depicted in these stories is by no means unusual: it is typical of the "banality" of "ordinary" township crime and violence (Sandwith 2017) that is the tabloid's stock in trade. What is interesting is the treatment of the violence and trauma, which is overtly narrativised: plunged directly into the story-like form, the reader is invited to imagine "the subjective experience of (the) victims" (Sandwith 2017: 187). The concentrated structure of the stories emphasises the women's sudden reversal of fortune and the "radical disjuncture" (Sandwith 2017: 189) between their past pleasure and present misfortune.

"Ben 10's revenge" is prefaced by a dramatic image of a burned house - the blackened ruin dwarfs the figure of the woman who stands before it. The report describes how her "raging Ben 10" "destroyed her house" and "stole her possessions." The man's "revenge" is a response to being told by his fifty-six-year-old lover "to pack his things" and "get out." The report highlights the woman's sudden change in circumstances: she is now "living in the backyard" of her now derelict "10-roomed house"; pitifully, she "(doesn't) know what to do" and she "(needs) help" for she is "not working anymore."

The second story opens with a bald and shocking statement: "Cops are looking for a Ben 10 who allegedly killed his lover with an axe yesterday morning." In the accompanying image a young woman holds out a photograph of her mother who, like the daughter, looks directly at the reader. The composition of the women's direct and unsmiling gaze demands the reader's attention and response. Starkly, we are told that Nobengazi Matshoba, whose age is given as "50," was "found dead in front of her new RDP." The couple met when he lived in her

"backyard shack" - the implication is that she was his landlady. But the relationship soured: the couple "had been fighting for the whole week" because she had "dumped him" and "told him to leave her property." The description of the murder scene reveals the man's violence: she is found "lying in a pool of blood," there are "deep wounds on the back of her body" and an "axe was lodged in her head." These grisly details contrast the description of the "good mum," who "earned a monthly income" as a "domestic worker." Her "six kids" and "three grandkids" are not only "unemployed" but now "left behind." The "Ben 10," also termed a "boyfriend," is described as an "evil man" who "smoked drugs," and "ran away with her bag, containing her money and cellphone."

Facebook Comments Discussion

Both articles provoke strong reactions from readers, and the women involved are simultaneously pitied and blamed for the crimes that are committed. Compassionate comments construct older women as vulnerable to Ben 10s and warn them to "be careful" and "please stop dating Ben 10s," as they are "very cruel" "spoiled brats" who "don't want to work," and "very jealous" men who are "not mature enough to handle a break up." They are right to be concerned: intimate femicide is the leading cause of female murder South Africa (Mathews et al., 2014). In 2019 alone, South African Police Service (SAPS) crime statistics show that 38,656 cases of domestic abuse were reported, including GBH and murder (SAPS Crime Stats: 2019). These egregious statistics are linked to inequitable and patriarchal gender norms that validate the use of violence and the male control of women (Ratele 2008; DWYPD 2020).

Thus, the virulence of the *blame* directed at the women is noteworthy. Older women are vilified for being "desperate" and breaking social norms by taking younger lovers: "that is a taboo old lady" remarks one. The crimes against them are read as a satisfying warning: "Dats gud lesson to b learned by omagogo (old women) who dates young boyz" is a frequent sentiment. Such women are "disgusting" and can even "rape their grandsons." They are "old meat," and sex with them is "a sin" which "should b a crime."

The real crime appears to be the older woman's sexuality, which is constructed as predatory, as suggested in phrases such as "U wanted fresh young dick," "after finishing him in bed u brought this to yourself" and "You was greedy for strong 4 5 (penis) why you complaining now." For others, it is the combination of predatory sex and rejection that is offensive: "no one dumps a BEN10 and gets away with it after milking him out unless he say so." This sentiment is frequently repeated in combination with reference to the material support enjoyed by the man: "(What) did u expect giving him candy then while he is enjoying ur money n ur old cake (vagina) u want to take that away?" "You gave him a home. . . then you chase him out after finishing him in bed" and "So what do you expect after they dump them, when bread is taken out of their mouth?" reiterate this theme.

Access to income and shelter in addition to sex are thus acknowledged as important components of such relationships in which the man is understood as in want, and the removal of this security is accepted by many as a motivation for their violence against their older and financially independent lovers. This explanation is complemented by the suggestion that the violence is provoked by the inversion of age-appropriate roles: "Monna ke Hlogo ya lapa (the husband is the head of the household)" argues one man, and "we were born to lead." The problem arises when the older woman "shows her maturity over that man"; it is at this point that "he is going to behave bad." Reflecting on the violence of men who "are powerless in relation to other males but at the same time members of a powerful gender group in relation to females," Ratele (2008) foregrounds age (seniority) and occupation (the ability to earn an income) as central components of ideal "hegemonic" masculinity in Africa. Age is an important principle for the organization of gender relations in Africa, as it allows men to assume masculine authority (through initiation, work, marriage, becoming an elder, etc) (Ratele 2008: 534). However, it is employment that enables the realisation of these ideals, such as marriage. Linking violence to frustrated ideals of masculinity, Ratele (2008: 529) explicitly connects levels of male violence to "levels of unemployment, specifically unemployment in contexts of great income inequality," such as those in South Africa.

But readers struggle to make sense of the verbal and physical violence. Punitive opinions are noted with shock: "some comments!! Some people a cruel" exclaims one reader, "Hv some sympathy 4 diz woman." Another picks up the implicit logic of the comments and asks plaintively: "if I date a younger man than me, does he have a right to abuse or kill me?" This is no rhetorical question: "Please Mzansi, I'm waiting for your honest answers," she pleads. "Domestic abuse is real. Irrespective of age," agrees another, but cannot suggest a solution.

Interestingly, a remedy is given by a man who encourages older women to look for chivalrous younger lovers who won't abuse them. He begins with the premise that older people still desire sex but don't want sex with age-mates: "Gogos hv no choice" he argues, but to have younger lovers as they are no longer attracted to men their own age—and anyway older men are looking for "young girls." His advice then is that women "shud choose a well-mannered ben 10 to avoid da situation like this one." "Take yo time to search for those ben 10s," he reassures them, "There are gud ones out there."

HIV/Aids

The incidence of HIV decreased significantly between 2012 and 2017 due to the rollout of ARV treatment. However, sexually active women of all ages remain more vulnerable than men to infection; while men are less likely to know their status and be on treatment, and thus more likely to risk infecting their sexual partners (HSRC 2017). In addition, older women are far less likely than younger women to insist on condom use (HSRC 2017). There is also strong evidence that inequality within sexual relationships, which is also linked to intimate partner violence, enhances the risk of HIV infection (Jewkes and Morrell, 2010: 1). Given this scenario, it is perhaps surprising that safe sex is not mentioned in stories about sexual relationships—rather, it becomes conspicuous in its relative absence. It never appears in the articles themselves, but emerges obliquely in occasional

Facebook comments in which readers comment on the appearance and behaviour of the characters.

Thus, in response to Puseletso's story, a reader points out the couple's apparent ill health as interpreted from the photograph: "Bt i m worried about their health as dey all look weak." Another agrees with this interpretation, and on this account describes the couple as "mad": "this is pure madness, Puseletso wa teng a mme wa ipona gore o fedile Jang?" (Does she not see how thin and sick she looks?)." Amused, someone suggests that the couple look after their health better: "lol Mama looks very unhealthy. sum fruit + veggies Bco and A-Z might to the trick b4 being a sex slave." Many others disgustedly comment that the couple look "dirty." "Weak," "thin" and "dirty" bodies are taken as a sign of illness. In this way the couple's health is used as a means of censoring their sexual conduct. But a contrary opinion argues "If it works. . . Why NOT? This is a solution to the problems we face nowadays (pple killing for love, sti's,etc.). More woman should follow in her footsteps."

A similar conclusion is reached by a male reader of "MY BEN 10 IS A SUPERMAN", who suggests that the relationship is beneficial as it keeps the man safe from sexually transmitted infections: "i think it's much safer for this guy" he states. This is because "magogo is not sexually active any more he is her only lover which means less chance of getting std's". In other words, a younger woman with more than one lover would increase the risk of infection. In either case, the man is understood as being at risk from the woman.

Concern about safe sex is seen in comments on "I'M A BEN 10 TO MAKE MY LIFE BETTER, a letter to "Mizz B," the paper's advice column. A male reader begins a debate by joking that "using a condom is like standing outside a club but telling people you went in." In other words, condom users are lying to others—and to themselves—if they say sex with a condom is the same as sex without one. Metaphorically, the man remains outside the "club," and must imagine, rather than experience, what goes on inside. Several responses agree and laugh at the analogy: "Loooolz (laughter) responses one, while another comments several hours later that "I'm still laughing." However, one commentator explicitly calls out the laughter: "don't fool people," he scolds, "as long it gets u to de same destination as de flesh guy no diff." He emphasizes that safe sex using a condom still ensures sexual satisfaction, while agreeing that using one "may giv prblm." He then uses a metaphor to remind readers of the reality of HIV: "but wit dis of today (but with this situation today) shayis gubhu kuphumumsindo klaar (beat the drum to the sound, period)." In other words, let your actions suit the situation.

CONCLUSION

Older, financially independent, working class South African women who risk asserting their autonomy and sexuality by taking younger lovers in a patriarchal context where rights are not guaranteed face a range of significant obstacles. These differ substantially from the constraints encountered by older women in northern spaces. Global postfeminist discourse is generally understood as advocating that older women age "appropriately," re-inscribing them within patriarchal gender relations through physical makeovers, normative heterosexuality and consumption within neoliberalism. It demands that older women work hard to attain and conform to an ideal feminine appearance and sexuality, while taking a context of financial independence and "rights" for granted.

The *Daily Sun* Ben 10 narratives and Facebook comments point to a far more complex local gender terrain. By publishing Ben 10 stories, *Daily Sun* marks these relationships as intrinsically noteworthy, and the large number of Facebook comments they generate substantiate this interpretation. We suggest that this is because they call into question the fundamental premises of gender relations in our postcolonial space. Nor can women's rights be taken for granted: the stories suggest that older, independent and sexually active women in working class social spaces who dare to take younger lovers in a context of profound economic inequality risk social censure, violence and the possibility of HIV infection, significant constraints on their autonomy.

Daily Sun marks successful Ben10 relationships as sensational and slyly ridicules both the woman and the men involved, such as by emphasising their age difference and depicting them dressed inappropriately (for example, a frilly hat). However, they simultaneously represent successful relationships as positive for the women and refrain from condemning their choices, which are constructed as in keeping with modern mores. To this end, the presentation of the stories is designed to provoke discussion, in keeping with the paper's community-building objectives (Boshoff 2017). Contrastingly, reader's comments on such relationships range between wholehearted support and utter condemnation. In the first case, the older woman is held up as a role model for other women who would like to be sexually active and independent. Readers draw on a discourse of rights to justify her choice and to problematize customary gender relations which subordinate women. In the second, she is seen as a horrifying aberration, deemed mad and immoral, and shaming the husband. For such readers, the "rights and wrongs" of the woman's choice is more important than her "rights." More moderate and objective readers attempt to rationalise older women's choices as individual responses to changing life and physical circumstances, without reflecting on the systemic issues at play.

Reports of unsuccessful relationships that end violently are compassionate of the women even as they draw attention to the horror of their plight - the paper gives them or their families ample space to explain their predicament and garner sympathy and support from readers. Some readers do sympathise, linking the crime to the wider problem of gender-based violence. They condemn the man's actions while warning other women to take care of themselves and steer clear of such. Others, however, construe the man's violence as an understandable—even expected—response to his social subordination and the woman's predatory sexuality. The woman's death or loss of property is seen as her just deserts. At the same time, readers condemn the men, for their lack of employment and their dependence on women is read as a despicable failure of masculinity. Neither successful nor unsuccessful relationships address HIV and safe sex. The general guardedness of the

comments on the issue suggest that the topic is taboo in public fora such as the *Daily Sun* Facebook page. Most comments on the topic appear aimed at provoking laughter and ridicule. A few readers dare to suggest seriously that men protect themselves from infection by women. No comments are made to suggest that women protect themselves from infection by men.

Our analysis suggests that as researchers interested in understanding the purchase of postfeminist discourse in southern contexts we must pay close attention to three linked concerns. The first is history: postfeminist identities are advocated and adopted in contexts shaped by particular experiences of colonialism and liberation. This history includes an ongoing struggle to order patriarchal gender relations. The second regards how men and women respond to postfeminism given their disposition within this historical formation. As situated subjects they work with a range of competing and complementary discourses of which postfeminism is but one. Third, where do we look for evidence of postfeminism's reach? Local popular culture forms may offer new insights into how global discourses are translated for and received by local audiences. Postfeminist theory could be enriched by taking into account the ways in which postfeminist ideals of women's economic autonomy, sexuality and choice of partner emerge from and play out within particular historical and social contexts. South Africa's colonial and post-apartheid history of gender-relations, including rights, violence and HIV, and the suppression of sexually and financially independent women provides the wider context in which the discourse of postfeminism is encountered and understood within the *Daily Sun*. By paying attention to this history, which weighs so heavily on older, working class women, postfeminist theory can more carefully map both the "edges" of the discourse (Gill 2017: 609) and the means by which it entrenches itself and evolves within particular locales.

DAILY SUN ARTICLES

BEN 10's REVENGE! Daily Sun April 18, 2017
http://bit.ly/2pNJC6Z
EVIL BEN 10 KILLED OUR MUM! Daily Sun April 20, 2017
http://bit.ly/2oXtanq
'I'M A BEN 10 TO MAKE MY LIFE BETTER' Daily Sun September 10, 2016
http://bit.ly/2bz7sM8
'I LIVE WITH MY BEN 10 AND MY HUBBY!' Woman takes a second husband for sex! Daily Sun March 12, 2015
http://bit.ly/1HIP9PB
MY BEN 10 IS A SUPERMAN Daily Sun March 24, 2017
http://bit.ly/2nL3oTb

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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frontiers in Sociology

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"Why Do I Need to Come Out if Straight People Don't Have To?" Divergent Perspectives on the Necessity of Self-Disclosure Among Bisexual Women

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Coming out has historically been an important yet often very challenging process for LGBTQI + individuals to no longer conceal their sexual and/or gender identity. For those who identify as bisexual, the process of coming out has proven especially complicated. In the general knowledge field of sexual identity, bisexuality continues to be a misunderstood, under-researched sexual identity, and from that negative stigmas and discrimination (even within LGBTQI + spaces) have contributed to bisexuals not *coming out* even within the LGBTQI + community. However, the significance and necessity of *coming out* itself has come to be questioned, particularly by younger LGBTQI + people. From a PhD study conducted in Johannesburg with 23 self-identifying bisexual women, this paper critically considers the different perspectives on *coming out* of bisexual women. Using a narrative life-history approach through interviews with a sample of eight participants from the study, this paper looks at how bisexual women understand the significance of *coming out* and how this process has different meanings for different age groups. Findings show that there are vastly divergent perspectives, with some participants believing it remains essential, while others argue that the fluidity of their identities no longer requires the same sort of disclosure.

Keywords: bisexuality, coming out (or disclosure), narrative life history, global south, queer theory

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INTRODUCTION

In the Global North and in some former colonized countries, the disclosure and recognition of one's sexual identity for non-heterosexual individuals has historically been significant in shaping their identity (Brownfield et al., 2018). This process usually occurs through *coming out* (CO) whereby and individual claims their non-heterosexuality, politically or personally. Historically for bisexual individuals, the process of CO has been challenging as bisexuality continues to be under-researched and misunderstood, which has led to negative stigmas towards this identity and thus contributing to an apprehension to disclose (Barker and Landridge, 2008).

Studies on non-heterosexual studies have existed as early as the 20th century (Mead, 1970) and over the years there has been a growing body of research focused on non-heterosexual identities, which have challenged the dominant heterosexual understanding of sexual identities (Butler, 2006). This growth in research combined with activism from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender,

Intersex and other identities (LGBTQI+) movement has shifted attitudes about LGBTQI + individuals and their rights globally (Flores and Park, 2018). In some parts of the African continent this shifting of attitudes is met with challenging ideas that homosexuality is "unAfrican" and is a Western ideology and another form of colonialism (Epprecht, 2013). In the South African context, there is a history of activism of non-heterosexual rights, but even in these spaces bisexual identity does not always receive the same acknowledgement as lesbian and gay rights (Chan-Sam, 1994; Stobie, 2004; Lynch and Maree, 2013).

The emergence of queer studies in the 1980s and 1990s, which focuses on the socially constructed theories on gender, sexual practices, and sexual orientation (Carnes, 2019), has allowed for a fluid perspective when discussing sexual identity and a defiance against the heterosexual binary understanding of sexual identity (Butler, 2006). Transnational queer theory allows for individuals to be able to describe and define their sexual identity taking into consideration other issues of race, class, age, and geography that have not always featured in White Global North understandings of sexual identity (Currier and Migraine-George, 2016). For bisexual individuals living in the Global South, this has been significant as firstly it has allowed for issues such as race, age, gender, class, and the impact of colonialism to be discussed when trying to understand non-heteronormative sexualities. Second, it has brought into discussion different ways of describing and performing multiple identities that challenge heteronormativity, which is privileged in Global North and former colonial societies (Martin and Kazyak, 2009).

During this period of the 1970s and 1980s a neoliberal ideology was being adopted by states globally. Economically this ideology argues for a reduction of state interventions in economic and social activities and the deregulation of labour and financial markets (Clare, 2017). This ideology influenced feminist movements and brought about a post-feminist movement. This ideology argued that gender equality between the "traditional sexes" had been reached with the legal victories gained by the previous women's movements and that women were now "empowered" and therefore they should seek their new "freedom" in traditional understandings of women's roles and abandon feminist ideologies (McRobbie, 2004; Dosekun, 2015). This was exemplified in popular culture in music, tv, and film where women were asserting their sexual freedom, and in the workplace where women were occupying positions that were traditionally not held by them (Nash and Grant, 2015). Critical to both examples and the pillar of post-feminism is consumer culture and the idea of "individual choice" in relation to sexual freedom that women now have acquired, rendering feminist ideologies as outdated (Dosekun, 2015; Banet-Weiser and Portwood- Stacer, 2017).

In South Africa, the LGBTQI + movement has early roots in Johannesburg as the 1970s and 1980s homosexual-sub-culture was prominent in the city and from that, organisations such as the Lesbian and Gays Against Oppression (LAGO) and the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of Witwatersrand (GLOW) were formed to fight against the discrimination of LGBTQI + individuals (Cameron, 1994). Johannesburg continues to be an important space for LGBTQI + individuals to raise political awareness and socialize with other LGBTQI + individuals. There are safe spaces in the city for LGBTQI + individuals to be able to disclose their sexual identity without the threat of violence (Bagnol et al., 2010). In the South African context, the influence of neoliberalism in LGBTQI + spaces also occurred in the new democratic dispensation where the African National Congress (ANC) came into power and with it a neoliberal ideology (Oswin, 2007). This influenced the LGBTQI + movement in that it moved away from the radical feminist politics of freedom and equality, but rather towards the advancement of individual self-hood, an assimilation and social acceptance of heteronormative institutions (e.g., marriage), and a failure to recognize the intersectional identities (race, class, and gender) that affect LGBTQI + individuals in the country (Oswin, 2007). A reason for this is because South Africa had enshrined in its democratic constitution the legal recognition of LGBTQI + individuals, which was assumed to be the end of the fight against injustice and a discarding of feminist ideologies (Oswin, 2007).

HISTORY OF BISEXUALITY

In Global North studies the documented history of bisexuality can be traced back to the ancient period of the Greeks and Romans, where bisexuality was part of the culture and men and women were known to engage in opposite-sex relationships as well as same-sex relationships (Cantarella, 2002). According to MacDowall (2009), p. 4), bisexuality in the 19th century was defined as "forms of life that exhibit physical characteristics of both sexes." This created the idea of bisexuality being about individuals with both sexual organs. Sexual identities were not prescribed at the time and it was only in the early 20th century where concepts of homosexuality and heterosexuality were developed and discussed as studies on individual's sexual desires started to grow. Even though studies started to grow on homosexuality, bisexuality was never recognised and studied as a sexual identity even though individuals were engaging in bisexual relationships (Rust, 2002). Freud in his work acknowledged bisexuality as a sexual identity but viewed it as a transitory state and from which an individual will mature into either heterosexual or homosexual (Carey, 2005). Significant research by Alfred Kinsey with the introduction of the Kinsey scale has emphasized the fluidity of sexual identity, and the idea of bisexuality being the "middle ground" of multiple sexual identities (Hemmings, 2002). Critical work by Diamond (2008) has taken it a step further and looked at bisexual women and recognizing their sexual fluidity in terms of their love and desires. Both of this work is significant, but unfortunately not enough has been done looking at women in the Global South and how their bisexual identity is shaped by other factors such as race, class, age, and space.

Colonialism not only brought economic changes, but it also reinforced the existing patriarchal order between the sexes, hierarchy between the races, and most critical was that it brought a heteronormative belief on sexual orientation through Christian ideology (Amadiume, 1987). The belief of

heterosexuality being the only sexual identity has persisted on the continent as the significant influence of Christianity and other religions which believe in heterosexuality as the only sexual identity and the belief of non-heterosexuality as "UnAfrican" and a new form of colonialism (Wahab, 2016). There has been some progress on the continent with the enshrinement of rights of non-heteronormative individuals in some countries and research showing how non-heteronormative sexual identities have existed on the continent before and during colonialism (Epprecht, 2004); however, ideas of heteronormativity on sexual identity on the continent persist. It must be noted that the acceptance has mainly been of homosexual individuals and not enough on other sexual minority groups and from that a hetero/homo binary has been created when discussing sexual identities (Flores and Park, 2018).

With its refusal to fit into the binary understandings of sexual identity and being the "middle ground," bisexuality has faced de-legitimation as a sexual identity through a concept defined by Yoshino (2000) as "bisexual erasure" which shows the multiple ways in which bisexuality in society is erased and not recognised as a sexual identity in both heterosexual and homosexual spaces. Second, bisexual identity is constantly questioned as a valid identity as the influence of post-feminism has brought a discourse of female sexual empowerment that encourages women to "experiment" or be "curious" in their sexual practices with other women, but still through a heteronormative male gaze rendering a bisexual identity as "a phase" and not a legitimate sexual identity (Grant, 2018). Along with this, sexual identity studies continue to be mono-normative: understanding of sexual identity in binary terms where homosexuality and heterosexuality are rendered the only valid forms of identity, and it is assumed that a person is attracted to another person of either the same or a different ("opposite") gender (Hayfield et al., 2014). In recent years, there has been some international research that has explored this topic (e.g., Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014; Boyer and Galupo, 2015; Lahti 2015), but far less on the African continent.

Both of the above factors have meant that bisexuality continues to be an invisible and "silenced" sexual identity, which has meant that bisexual individuals have not always been willing to disclose their sexual identity as they fear the stigma and misunderstandings that come with it and, in some instances, this has caused mental health issues for bisexuals (Knous, 2006; Lynch and Maree, 2013; Hayfield et al., 2014). From the African continent critiques have been made on the act of CO and how it is not indigenous to the continent and a Western act for non-heterosexuals (Wa Tushabe, 2017; Miguel, 2021). This will be discussed further in the paper when looking at CO where the origin of the act is questioned.

BISEXUALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Historically in South Africa the LGBTQI + resistance can be traced to the beginnings of colonialism in 1652 with the arrival of the Dutch that included the introduction of Christianity to the indigenous people of the country (de Gruchy and de Gruchy, 2005). There were many attempts to evangelize the indigenous San & Khoi people, but this was sporadic and was not successful in the beginning until the introduction of missionary schools in the 19th century that were able to instil heterosexuality as the only sexual identity. Homosexual activities continued and individuals were not legally persecuted, but their activities were deemed socially unacceptable (Thompson, 1990).

It was the Immorality Act of 1957 that, among other things, prohibited same-sex relations that brought together gay organizations that mobilised against this legislation and restriction of movement, but these organisations were mainly made up of White men (Cameron, 1994). Historically Black LGBTQI + individuals were not able to legally create or access public spaces in which to discuss or explore their concerns related to their sexual identities. It was during the 1980s that LGBTQI + organizations outside of White urban areas and within anti-Apartheid structures were formed (Cameron, 1994). Organizations such as the Lesbians and Gays Against Oppression (LAGO), the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists (OLGA), and the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of Witwatersrand (GLOW) were established and advocated for the rights of all LGBTQI + individuals regardless of race (Cameron, 1994).

Bisexuality like other sexual labels has historically been defined from Global North countries, and these definitions have been used globally without taking into consideration local contexts outside of these spaces (Milani and Lazar, 2017). In South Africa, the word "stabane" has had multiple meanings. During the gold rush in the late 1800s the word was used by Zulu men in the mines, and it was associated with banditry and "sodomy" as men were stealing from each other or sleeping with each other in the hostels (Marwick, 1918). Another use of the word has been in a derogatory manner to refer to an individual who has both male and female sexual organs and they were considered to be "bisexual." Today it is used to refer to LGBTQI + individuals in an offensive manner (Swarr, 2009). As mentioned earlier the LGBTQI + movement in South Africa historically acknowledged bisexuality but did not give bisexuality the same attention as compared to lesbians and gay individuals and the prejudice and bigotry they face (Chan-Sam, 1994). For bisexuals there was an added layer of prejudice as bisexuals faced judgment within the LGBTQI + movement as bisexuality in some corners was not considered a valid identity (Chan-Sam, 1994). This then made bisexuals at the time unwilling to self-identity as bisexuals and rather say that they are sexually fluid or homosexual (Chan-Sam, 1994). The challenges of understanding and legitimizing bisexuality persist in present-day South Africa, and this makes it difficult for bisexuals to be open about their sexual identity.

UNDERSTANDING QUEER THEORY

Sexual identities, ideas, and practices stemming from Global North countries do not consider how sexual identities outside of the Global North are influenced by different economic and social contexts, especially for women (Salo et al., 2010). An example of this occurs in India where "kothi" is a term used

to describe individuals who are on the spectrum of gender identity and do not fit into Global North ideas of transgender individuals. This has led to this group being socially and economically marginalized as they are not seen as being "respectable," and they do not fit into disseminated Global North ideas of sexual identity, especially those who present as female (Dutta, 2013; Reddy, 2005). Historically ethnographic studies of the early 20th century looked at how multiple factors influenced sexual identities (Mead, 1970), but it was during the 1980s and 1990s that queer theory developed a perspective on understanding non-heterosexual identities as socially constructed and fluid in their performativity, and not a fixed identity (Butler, 1997). Examples of this are sexual practices (polygamy), ways of embodiment (sadomasochist) and desires (multi-partner sex) that have nothing to do with the sex or gender of the object choice but significantly shape an individual's sexual identity. Queer theory has evolved to include intersectional identities such as race, class, age, and geography and how these factors influence the sexual identity of an induvial (Dutta, 2013; Valocchi, 2005). This is critical for bisexuality as it complicates the binary understanding of sexual identity ("middle ground") and rather it argues for a contextual and fluid understanding of sexual identities. Scholars have associated queer theory with bisexuality because it transgresses the idea of single-sex attraction and rather a fluid understanding of sexual identity (Jagose, 2009).

In South Africa like in other global contexts the word "queer" was historically used in a negative manner to refer to non-heterosexual individuals (Matebeni and Msibi, 2015). It has only been since the democratic dispensation of 1994 that the word has referred to LGBTQI + individuals in a positive manner and has been used by scholars and activists to look at how different factors such as race, class, age, and space shape the lives of LGBTQI + individuals living in South Africa and the challenges they face in relation to their sexual identity (Livermon, 2012; Tucker, 2009). This is critical for bisexual women in the country as multiple factors have influenced how they sexually identify and what acts they perform to claim their identity. Critical to this paper is the practice of CO and how local contexts have shaped bisexual women's acceptance and refusal of this act for multiple reasons.

COMING OUT

CO has been viewed as a critical act in an individual's identity development. It signifies individuals claiming their non-heterosexuality in their public and private lives (Craig and McInroy, 2014). Historically, in Global North countries, it has been a political act in gaining legal recognition and equality and it has been a social act in an individual choosing to live authentically in their sexual lives (Brownfield et al., 2018). This act has been used by some former colonised countries such as South Africa where LGBTQI + individuals of different race, class, and age have used the act of CO combined with activism to gain legal recognition and rights for themselves (Gevisser, 1994). This act has also been found to be positive for some bisexual women as it allows them to gain social acceptance and integrate into their communities once they disclose their sexual identity (Baiocco et al., 2020).

As mentioned earlier the misunderstanding and under-researching of bisexuality has invisibilised the sexual identity and so therefore CO is sometimes accompanied with a stigma and biphobia, which makes bisexuals reluctant to disclose (Wandrey et al., 2015; Knous, 2006; Corrigan and Matthews, 2003). For bisexual women the stigma of bisexuality is exemplified by it being viewed as a "phase," not a legitimate identity, and being promiscuous which has historically made it difficult or unwilling of bisexuals to disclose their sexual identity (Flanders and Hatfield, 2014; Scherrer et al., 2015). Over the past decade scholars and young non-heterosexuals have argued that CO is a way of conforming to heteronormativity by seeking heterosexual acceptance, which creates a constant asserting of an individual's sexual identity which some non-heterosexuals refuse to engage with (Craig and McInroy, 2014).

The act of CO continues to allow for safe spaces for LGBTQI + individuals to share their experience, but in certain contexts issues of race and gender have influenced whether individuals choose to disclose their sexual identity. The influence of a neoliberal post-feminist perspective on CO does not take into consideration contextual factors that influence whether an individual will "come out." In the United States during the HIV/AIDS crisis LGBTQI + individuals of colour were reluctant to come out in fear of rejection when they needed family and community during the crisis (Drucker, 2015). Even though legal rights have been gained for non-heterosexuals in South Africa, harassment and violence continue, especially towards Black lesbian women (Matebeni, 2013). Non-heterosexual Black women living in South Africa have experienced homophobia through physical violence, which in a significant number of cases has resulted in death (Gqola, 2015; Gunkel, 2010). This has made it very difficult for non-heterosexual Black women to *come out* outside of LGBTQI + safe spaces in the fear of possibly facing violence. For bisexual women, the threat of violence is more nuanced as Black bisexual women engaging in same-sex relationships do face the threat of violence as they will be seen as homosexual, but if they engage in relationships that appear to be heterosexual (i.e., man and woman) they will "pass" as heterosexual and so therefore the threat of violence will not occur unless they decide to come out (Wandrey et al., 2015). All the above has put into focus the necessity of CO and finding alternative ways to disclose that will not be life-threatening, limiting in understanding multiple sexual identities and will be dependent on the individual to disclose if they deem necessary in their contexts.

This paper will look at how different bisexual women living in Johannesburg have divergent perspectives on CO, and how some have resisted the idea as a way of challenging the heteronormativity of understanding sexual identity.

DATA ANALYSES

Procedures

The data for this article were obtained from a PhD study titled "Bisexuality in Democratic South Africa: Experiences of Women

in Johannesburg." The study focuses on how bisexual women construct their sexual identity looking at multiple factors such as race, class, age, and how different spaces of Johannesburg shape how they perform their sexual identity. The criteria to select participants was that participants had to identify as bisexual women, were 18 years or older, and were currently living in Johannesburg. Initial conversations with participants involved explaining the research and providing examples of questions such as *How would you define bisexual identity? Do you disclose your bisexual identity to your romantic partners?* and *What does coming out mean to you?* in order for them to understand the study and some of the topics that would be discussed during the interview.

The methodology used for this research was a narrative life-history approach. This approach allows for a deeper level of data capturing to occur by gaining deeper insight into different contexts which have shaped the individual's experiences by relying heavily on individuals' subjective realities; however, the focus is not on objective facts and accuracy of people's stories, but instead on the meaning life events have on the participants. From these narratives, meanings can be produced, and substantive theories can be formulated based on interpretation of reality, rather than scientific explanation (Dhunpath, 2009; Bertaux and Kohli, 1984). Through in-depth interviews with the participants, data was gained to be able to understand how participants came to understand their sexual identity from an early age, how race, class, and space has shaped their sexual identity, and for this paper how they understand CO and whether they think it is still a necessary act to perform. Previous studies with LGBTQI + individuals that have used this approach recognize how this approach allows for participants to be reflective and thoughtful when discussing their sexual identity and for their voices to come through in the research (Webb, 2014; Quesada and Vidal-Ortiz, 2015).

To gain participants for the study, multiple sampling methods were used. The first method was through snowball sampling, which allowed me to obtain participants through other research participants by using social networks (friends, family, workplace, organizations, etc.). This sampling method allows access to participants easily who are willing to participate in research (Noy, 2008). Social media was the second tool used in the research and it was significant as it allowed for unasked questions in a less formal atmosphere to be discussed and for marginalized groups to be able to discuss issues in an open public format (Kirkup, 2010). This tool was critical as it allowed access to participants outside of known networks and a broader selection of participants. This type of sampling also allowed for access to participants who feared stigma, prejudice, or marginalization because of their bisexuality and were not easily accessible but wanted to participate in the research. Twitter and Facebook were used, and a brief note was posted on both platforms requesting to interview women over the age of 18 years old who identify as bisexual, who may or may not be "out of the closet" and were willing to participate in the research. The data was collected between 2019 and 2020 and the analysis of the data was done with Atlas. ti software.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-medical) of the University of Witwatersrand. A participant information sheet as well as a participant consent form was handed out to participants for them to understand the study as well as agree in signature to be a part of the study.

Participants

Using the criteria mentioned earlier, 23 participants were selected for the PhD study, and quotes from 8 of the participants were selected which reinforced the divergent perspectives. The average of all the participants was 28 years old, the predominant race was Black African (65%), half of the participants did not subscribe to any religion (52%), and most of the participants were single (57%). The sociodemographics of the participants is provided in **Table 1**.

All the participants identified as cis-female bisexuals except for one who identified as gender non-conforming (Tshepiso) and used the pronouns she/they.

RESULTS

A summary of the results is provided in **Table 2**.

Agency and Authenticity of Non-heterosexual Identities

Previous research has shown that the act of CO is important for bisexual women as it allows individuals to have choice in whether they self-disclose their sexuality and a way in which they can have their sexual identity accepted firstly by themselves and then by others (Baiocco et al., 2020; Knous, 2006). Out of the 23 participants selected, 10 of the participants highlighted the importance of CO to them and why it was a necessary action to perform. For these participants one of the primary reasons for CO is that it represents a claiming of their sexual identity and being truthful to their bisexual identity. Michelle, a 58-year-old White woman, commented that for her CO is about

> *Acknowledgement and authenticity about my bisexuality. I think to a very large extent, it's about authenticity, pride and casting off shame and owning my agency. I love who I love, and I will not apologise for that especially as a woman. (Michelle, 58)*

Another participant, Kgomotso, a 27-year-old Black African woman, commented that for her CO means

> *Speaking the truth about who you are confidently and not quietly because you own it. (Kgomotoso, 27)*

Both Kgomotso's and Michelle's statements highlight the idea of how CO is about being authentic to who they are and no longer having shame as a bisexual woman. Second, the statements highlight how CO represents agency in choosing their sexual identity and using their agency to love whomever they desire.

Validity of Bisexuality

As mentioned earlier, the binary understanding of sexual identity has resulted in the invisibility of sexualities that do not conform to the dualistic framework (Butler, 2006). CO allows for bisexuals to

TABLE 1 | Sociodemographics of participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Profession	Religious affiliation	Relationship status
Kgomotso	27	Black African	Spiritual healer	Christian	In a relationship
Michelle	58	White	Lecturer	Jewish	In a relationship
Beth	34	White	Lecturer	None	Single
Tshepiso	26	Black African	Teacher	Atheist	In a relationship
Nana	25	Black African	Intern Journalist	Muslim	Single
Kopano	22	Black African	Student	None	Single
Jennifer	28	White	Consultant	Christian	In a relationship
Babalwa	24	Black African	Debating Coach	Christian	In a relationship
Dineo	22	Black African	Student	None	Single
Ayanda	25	Black African	Journalist	None	In a relationship
Lindiwe	21	African Asian	Student	Muslim	Single
Karima	29	Black African	Freelance Editor	None	Single
Nomvula	21	Black African	Student	None	Single
Zinzi	29	Black African	Consultant	None	Single
Lauren	45	Coloured	Graphic Designer	None	In a relationship
Kimberly	33	White	Video Journalist	Christian	Single
Amanda	24	Black African	Self-Employed	None	Single
Lerato	21	Black African	Student	Christian	In a relationship
Pumla	26	Black African	Lawyer	Christian	Single
Mpho	35	Black African	Medical Doctor	Jehovah's Witness	Single
Rachel	35	White	Development Specialist	None	Single
Bokang	27	Black African	Lecturer/PhD Student	None	In a relationship
Rachel	28	White	Tattoo Artist	None	In a relationship

TABLE 2 | Summary of results.

Theme	Description	Quote
Agency and authenticity of non-heterosexual identities	CO is important as it allows bisexual women to gain agency over their sexuality and be authentic to themselves and others about their sexual identity	*Acknowledgement and authenticity about my bisexuality. I think to a very large extent, it's about authenticity, pride and casting off shame and owning my agency. I love who I love, and I will not apologise for that especially as a woman. (Michelle, 58)*
Validity of Bisexuality	CO is important as it allows for bisexual identity to be recognized as valid and legitimate for some participants	*Coming out is important for bisexual individuals because not only are you saying you are not straight, but you are bisexual which is different from being gay or straight. Bisexuality indicates that you are attracted to more than one gender or non-gender conforming individuals. It is important for people to understand that about bisexuality. (Beth, 34)*
Refusal to be Othered	CO is not important as it is a conforming to binary understanding of sexual identity and heteronormative understanding of sexuality which must be rejected	*I don't believe in it and I don't subscribe to it. It makes me feel othered like I am different not in a good way. (Simphiwe, 21)*

challenge this form of erasure and ensure delegitimization does not occur. For participants CO is an opportunity to make bisexuality more visible. Beth, a 34-year-old White woman, commented:

> *Coming out is important for bisexual individuals because not only are you saying you are not straight, but you are bisexual which is different from being gay or straight. Bisexuality indicates that you are attracted to more than one gender or non-gender conforming individuals. It is important for people to understand that about bisexuality. (Beth, 34).*

Michelle commented:

> *For me, bisexuality is a very specific and material sexuality. It's not a lapse. It's not a half-half. Bisexuality is about the capacity to feel desire for men and for women. (Michelle, 58).*

For these participants CO continues to be relevant as first it signifies individuals disclosing their non-heterosexuality and being truthful to who they are, which remains a challenge. Second and most critically, it signifies the recognition of bisexuality, which moves away from a binary lens of sexual identity and rather a fluid understanding of sexual identities.

Refusal to Be Othered

The act of CO can be understood as a way in which individuals still have to conform to heterosexual/homosexual understandings of sexual identity and not embracing a fluid understanding of sexual identities (Charania, 2005). This is influenced by a

neoliberal sexual politics that argues for an acceptance and assimilation into heteronormativity rather than a rejection of it completely (Grant, 2018). For 13 of the participants interviewed, they did not see the relevance and the need to come out. For these participants they felt that CO still indicates difference of non-heterosexuality in a negative manner, which they did not want to conform to. Simphiwe, a 21-year-old Black African woman, commented:

> *I don't believe in it and I don't subscribe to it. It makes me feel othered like I am different not in a good way. (Simphiwe, 21)*

Tshepiso, a 26-year-old Black African gender non-conforming individual, commented:

> *I hate the construct of coming out. Like I always think it means that we are always fighting for equality. Why do I need to come out if straight people don't have to? (Tshepiso, 26)*

Another participant, Nana, a 25-year-old Black African woman, felt that CO meant that she had to fit into limited understandings of sexual identity, which ultimately does not fully describe who she is. She commented:

> *It is not really important to me. I just am who I am. I feel like coming out breeds the ground for a person to then box and categorise me which I don't like so I don't tell people I am not straight. Also it is a very Western understanding of sexuality which I am currently thinking through and do not always agree with. (Nana, 25)*

Kopano, a 22-year-old Black African woman, just like Tshepiso felt that CO was a way of giving power to the idea of heterosexuality being the norm which she did not want. For her CO meant

> *Living in your truth and not expecting acceptance from people. Asking to be accepted gives straight people that power and I don't want that. I will live my life whether you accept me or not it doesn't change the fact that I am a bisexual woman. (Kopano, 22)*

Lastly Jennifer, a 28-year-old White woman, objects to the action of CO but rather "inviting in" as a way of claiming her sexual identity. She commented:

> *I don't believe in coming out, but rather "inviting in." Inviting in suggests that I don't owe you the right to tell you about my queerness, but rather I choose who to tell and when I do tell you I will not be held responsible for doing the work, but if you want to still be a part of my life, I invite you to do the work and accept me and my sexuality. (Jennifer, 28)*

For these participants CO is not only of no importance to them but also a refusal to allow others to have power of their sexual identity on whether it is acceptable or not. The refusal to conform and even a suggestion of a different way of disclosing your sexual identity indicates a refusal to conform to binary sexualities and a refusal to engage in traditional ways of disclosing, which tend to still favour heteronormative understanding of sexualities.

DISCUSSION

The Importance of CO in Legitimizing a Misunderstood Sexual Identity

For some of the bisexual women interviewed, CO is an important act. It represents the idea of ownership and acknowledgment of their sexual identity. Historically bisexual individuals were, and in some countries continue to be, a marginalized group who face criminal charges for their sexual identity, and CO is an act in which they use to fight for their legal rights. This is particularly true in South Africa where previously there were discriminatory laws as mentioned earlier. In the new dispensation discriminatory laws have been removed but biphobic beliefs persist, and CO is used to challenge these negative beliefs. It is evident that for the participants over the age of 25 CO is still influential as they grew up during a period where CO was used as a form of activism not only against the Apartheid system but also against stigma and prejudices that have existed against bisexuals in LGBTQI + spaces. CO can still be used as an act to challenge these negative ideas and show how bisexual individuals experience biphobia which is distinct from other forms of homophobia. CO is still relevant for these bisexual women as it represents an opportunity to clarify misconceptions and ideas on bisexuality and legitimize their sexual identity, which is critical for bisexual individuals (Barker and Landridge, 2008).

Participants still feel CO is important as it indicates the recognition of a bisexual identity and for it to be viewed as a valid sexual identity and not have it seen through a binary lens. This then emphasizes the importance of queer theory in how one understands bisexual identity as it allows for multiple sexual identities to be acknowledged and deemed legitimate and, most importantly, shifts away from the binary understanding of sexual identity and towards a fluid understanding. This is evident with the comments from Beth (34) and Michelle (58) who view CO as an important way to claim their sexual identity that is distinct from other non-heterosexual identities.

The significance of the ages of the participants who still view CO as important highlights a difference in generational perspective on CO. For these older bisexual women, they still view CO as important and a way in which to validate their sexual identity as compared to women under the age of 25 who do not see CO as an act to achieve this. This signifies a generational shift in attitudes towards CO and its relevance with younger bisexual women.

As mentioned earlier, CO is important as it allows individuals to gain self-acceptance as well as acceptance from others in their community (Knous, 2006). For the bisexual women interviewed it

has allowed them to be honest about their sexual identity and not have negative feelings surrounding their sexual identity. Research has shown bisexual individuals experience higher levels of poor mental health as compared to other non-heterosexuals, and reasons for this are the erasure of a bisexual identity and a lack of support that bisexuals have in their communities (Hayfield et al., 2014; Scherrer et al., 2015). This is evident with Kgomotso (27) and Michelle who view CO as a way for them to acknowledge their sexual identity and no longer have shame in claiming it personally and in public spaces. This act has allowed participants to legitimize their identity and to potentially educate others about a bisexual identity and not have it viewed in a negative manner.

The high levels of violence against same-sex relationships among women in South Africa can be viewed as a method to regulate women's bodies and force them into heteronormativity (Gqola, 2015). For the bisexual women interviewed, CO allows them an opportunity to have agency over who they choose to have a romantic relationship with, and a way in which to publicly challenge the regulation and marginalizing ideology on sexual identity. This is evident with Michelle who recognizes the importance of CO as a way to have agency over her body and her sexual identity by choosing to love whomever she desires as a bisexual woman.

Rejection of Heteronormativity

Some of the younger bisexual women interviewed do not agree with the act of CO. First, for these participants CO represents an act of constantly having to validate their sexual identity to heterosexual individuals, which they refuse to participate in. The act of CO can be seen to represent a form of heteronormativity that they challenge. An example of this can be seen with Kopano (22) who views CO as a form of acceptance from heterosexual individuals, which she is not looking for, neither does she want heterosexuals to think they have any influence as to how she chooses to identify as a bisexual woman. This then highlights the significant influence that heteronormativity still has in society, even in marginalized spaces, and how individuals must make a conscious effort to resist even with their sexual identity (Butler, 2006).

Second, some bisexual women rejected the act of CO because it represented the idea of seeking equality as non-heterosexual individuals. CO is an act that is only associated with LGBTQI + individuals and an act that they must perform in order to gain legal rights in certain countries. For the younger participants they reject CO because that means that they always have to be fighting for equality and heterosexuals do not have to perform this act at all in order to be viewed as equal in terms of the law. This is made clear with Tshepiso's (26) comment where they challenge the act of CO as a way of constantly fighting for equality and not just having equality like straight people. For younger bisexual women interviewed, CO is an outdated act to gain equality that they don't necessarily seek as it is under heteronormative understandings of sexual identity. The act of not CO can therefore be seen as not only a refusal but also a form of activism in a non-traditional manner where individuals are not engaging in spaces that require them to seek legitimacy, acceptance, or do some form of labour in order to be viewed as equal.

Third, the bisexual women interviewed who do not agree with the act of CO reject the act because it represents a binary understanding of sexual identity, which participants do not necessarily fit into particularly because they identify as bisexuals. CO still has heterosexual/homosexual connotations to it which does not adequately take into consideration the fluidity of multiple sexual identities which do not fit into this binary, and therefore participants reject this act (Craig and McInroy, 2014). This is illustrated in Nana's (25) comment where CO feels like a categorisation exercise that does not describe her sexual identity, and it makes it very difficult for her as a bisexual woman to engage with.

Lastly, the rejection of CO by the younger bisexual women interviewed indicates how this act does not resonate with bisexual women from the Global South. CO is a Global North idea that does not take into consideration the nuances of how sexual identity is understood in post-colonial countries (Wa Tushabe, 2017). Nana's comments indicate this as she questions the idea of CO as "a very Western understanding of sexuality," which is a foreign way of gaining acceptance and legitimacy as a bisexual individual and forces the individual to align with Global North ideas of LGBTQI + individuals, which she is thinking through, and hence she rejects the idea of CO. In South Africa, where race and class still have a significant role in shaping sexual identities, particularly for Black women, the threat of violence because of their sexual identity which does not conform to the heteronormativity is a possibility, hence the unwillingness to engage with an act that could pose a threat to their lives (Matebeni, 2013; Gqola, 2015). This could possibly be a reason why Nana rejects the act of CO as it does not take into consideration her context as a Black bisexual woman and the possible violent threat she faces if she *comes out*.

In this study younger bisexual women on average rejected the idea of CO. This could indicate how younger bisexual women are engaging in different forms of queer activism by refusing to engage in terms and languages that no longer serve who they are or their beliefs on their sexual identity. In all of the above rejections of CO, it is clear that there is a need for a queer theoretical approach which better understands how sexual identity is constructed in Global South contexts, how multiple factors need to be considered when discussing sexual identities, the recognition of the fluidity of bisexuality, and how it does not fit in a binary framework (Currier and Migraine-George, 2016).

Moving Towards Different Forms of Language and Ideas

The last comment by Jennifer (28) identifies a different way in which individuals can begin, if they choose, to claim their sexual identity publicly on their own terms. The idea of "inviting in" first suggests a choice on whether to perform the act of CO. Bisexual individuals do not have the obligation to "come out" as a way of being authentic in who they are but rather the agency lies with them and whether they choose to invite others in informing them on their sexual identity (Johns, 2020). Second, the idea suggests a selection that an individual makes in choosing who to include in how they identify sexually. This immediately puts the power in the individual's hands and not necessarily in others (family, friends, colleagues, etc.) to accept who they are.

The idea of "inviting in" does not seek the legitimacy from Global North heteronormative understandings of sexual identity, but rather suggests a journey into understanding who the individual is and how it is they perform their sexual identity (Moore, 2012). Last, the idea does not put the labour on the individual to constantly validate their sexual identity by constantly asserting who they are, but rather shifts that work to those who seek to be in community with the individual and asks these individuals to engage in reciprocal labour in order to be a part of the individual's community (Johns, 2020). Jennifer indicates this in her comment by making it clear that she does not owe anyone the right to inform them on her sexual identity, but rather she is using her agency to choose who she invites in informing them of her sexual identity.

This action can be viewed as a different type of activism which places power with the individual and does not seek legitimacy from Global North heteronormative understandings of sexual identity which can be limiting, but rather a recognition of fluidity and contextual differences when discussing sexual identity.

The present study contributes to the tension that women who identify as bisexual view the act of CO from a Global South context. For older bisexual women in the study CO is still a relevant act to perform in order to gain acknowledgment and legitimacy of bisexual identity which continues to be questioned as a valid sexual identity. This act is a significant opportunity for bisexual women to claim their sexual identity which may not always occur as assumptions will be made on their sexual identity depending on what type of romantic relationships they are presenting in public, which could present them as either being heterosexual or homosexual. In the South African context, acknowledgement and some social acceptance of LGBTQI + individuals has occurred, and this has informed how younger bisexual women no longer view the act of CO as necessary, but rather they reject the act and are using different methods of acknowledgement and legitimacy in relation their sexual identity. This informs the idea that CO is a Global North act which is not indigenous to Global South contexts in understanding sexual identities, in this case the bisexual identity of women, where multiple factors influence their sexual identity and their refusal to fit into Global North understandings of bisexual identity.

Future research aims to focus on how women who identify as bisexual living in rural areas outside of Johannesburg view CO. In South Africa most of the safe LGBTQI + spaces are in metropolitan urban cities and bisexual women living in rural areas may be reluctant to *come out* as safe LGBTQI + spaces are sparse in those areas. The idea of space (i.e., geography) could have a significant influence on whether bisexual women *come out* and whether they view the act as important.

Limitations of the Study

The study did have some limitations. The first limitation is the number of women who identified as bisexual was very few even though multiple methods to select participants were used. It could be that some bisexual women were not willing to participate in the research because they feared the stigma and discrimination that they could potentially face. The second limitation was that of the participants willing to participate in the study, most of them came from middle-class backgrounds and not from other classes, and this limited how class plays a role in how bisexual women view CO in Johannesburg. Lastly as mentioned previously the study was conducted in the urban city of Johannesburg and not in the rural areas outside of Johannesburg where bisexual women living in those spaces are affected by different factors which will influence how they view CO.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown the different perspectives on CO and how it varies for bisexual women from the Global South. CO remains an important political act for some of the bisexual women as it represents a way of claiming their sexual identity, while for others, especially those who are younger, it is no longer relevant as they view it as another way in which heteronormativity and Global North understandings of sexual identities persist, which they reject. For the bisexual women interviewed, the idea of legitimacy is important as bisexuality continues to be a marginalized and discriminated sexual identity, but there are differences in how they choose to validate that sexual identity especially in contexts where race, class, and age have influenced how individuals shape their sexual identity. Queer theory and activism offer a way in which bisexuality can be viewed and understood, and "inviting in" offers a new way in which non-heterosexuals can begin to claim legitimacy over their own sexual identity on their own terms without the burden of having to constantly do the labour of seeking acceptance and legitimacy.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University of Witwatersrand Ethics Committee. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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Craftivism Between Nationalism and Activism in Ukraine and Belarus

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This article outlines the history and significance of Craftivism in Eastern Europe. Using two case studies of artists it investigates the use of the craft language in Eastern Europe and its usability for activism. Do-It-Yourself culture, of which Craftivism is part, rejects the commercialism, gender norms and the conventional lifestyle in the Global North. Use of crafts as a language of political and social struggle allows to convey the message in a less confrontational but nevertheless very pertinent way. The craftivism is a successful language for the feminist political struggle in the Eastern Europe.

Keywords: craftivism, nationalism, Ukraine, Belarus, post-feminism, activism, activist art

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INTRODUCTION

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, a few friends (all Russian-speaking females in their 40s) decided to learn how to make masks. Connected through Zoom, we all found YouTube tutorial and bought or found attractive fabric. We expected to be done in one or two nights, after all, we all know how to sew. Making masks or making anything proved to be significantly more difficult than we expected. Two members of our small group decided to only provide support and not to try themselves after the first session. The rest of us persevered. About a week later, each of us had a mask. The masks that we made looked very "home-made": the line of the thread was wavy, the shapes were not precise, and the ties needed adjustments. Moderately happy with the results, we were nevertheless puzzled by our lack of experience. During our last "debriefing" session, several of us wondered how come our handicraft skills were so abysmal. One of us noted that, in many ways, it was because of industrialization and even feminism. The second-wave feminists in the West tried to get away from housework and assume positions alongside men outside of the home. In the Soviet Union, while the ideology was different and women were encouraged to do handiwork and supplement what they could find in the stores with home knitting or sewing, most women had no time since they worked full time. Even if they knew how to sew, purchasing a sewing machine was difficult and constructing clothing was too time-consuming for most of them. Therefore revival of craftmaking in the 1990s and early 2000s required from Post-Soviet generation acquiring new skills.

This article deals with the use of DIY (Do-It-Yourself) culture in the political struggle of fourth-wave feminists in Ukraine and Belarus. For that purpose I use two case studies: Oksana Bruikhovetska's series of suit jackets and Rufina Bazlova' cross-stitch documentary series of Belarus protests. This article concentrates on the use of DIY culture in conjunction with the strategies of the third and fourth waves of feminism to understand how the aspects of textile art and craftivism assist in creating cultures of dissent. Both DIY culture and craftivism have direct and clear associations with needlework and craft. However, DIY culture, as will be explained further, acquired a much wider ramification throughout the 20th century to embrace alternative subcultures such as Situationist International or punk movement (Bennett and Guerra, 2018, 1–4). Craftivism, which appeared as a phenomenon significantly later, can be seen as one of the ways that DIY culture influences feminism, activism, and creativity. I argue that while DIY culture and craftivism in the

Western discourse in the early 21st century often function on the border between post-feminism and fourth-wave feminism, within the discourse of Eastern European countries such as Ukraine or Belarus, craftivism should be understood as part of the radical feminist movement of the fourth wave.

AFTER THE THIRD WAVE: POST-FEMINISM AND THE FOURTH WAVE

Perhaps nothing exemplifies post-feminism better than the emotional tribulations of Bridget Jones in *Bridget Jones Diary* (2001). Created on the cusp of the millennium, it demonstrates that while feminism helped women to achieve equality, it left them wanting a fulfilling relationship. The feminist scholar Angela McRobbie argues that "post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (McRobbie, 2009, 13). Rosalind Gill agrees with McRobbie but adds that "... postfeminism is a sensibility is not fixed or relation on a singular understanding of the term; instead it 'emphasizes the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist theme within them'" (Gill, 2007, 149). I see the period of post-feminism that spans the late 1990s and early 2000s as a point when the media and overall prevalent opinion among women turned toward the ideas that feminism had achieved at least partial equality and, therefore, using femininity to one's advantage was a matter of choice. Craftivists adapted the ideology of post-feminism and used elements of femininity to underscore the issue of post-feminist choice. I am arguing that craftivists in Eastern Europe are part of the fourth wave. The arrival of fourth-wave feminism roughly coincides with the increasing role of social media in spreading ideas. It predates the #MeToo movement, but the latter is definitely a part and in many ways a cataclysm of feminist revival. As Nicole Rivers notes, among all other waves, the fourth is complicated and multi-faceted. The main characteristics of this wave are the renewed pride in the term "feminism" along with extensive use of social and visual media in combination with in-person events. One of the main characteristics of contemporary fourth-wave feminism is its intersectionality and refusal to solely concentrate on issues that are traditionally considered feminine such as pay gap, child care, and media representations (Rivers, 2017, 134–35).

Finally, it is also important to note that while the metaphor of feminist waves is important for two metaphorical reasons: for underlying the presence of feminist movement from the 1840s to present and for practical discussions that allow for periodization, it is also fraught with contradictions. One of the main problems of the discussion of waves is the issue of what had happened in between upheaval. How the researchers think about ebbs of the feminist movement? Even more relevant to this discussion is the understanding that the feminist waves in the West are not universal and cannot be clearly mapped out to Eastern Europe, especially during the socialist regimes. One can even argue that while it is appropriate to talk about post-feminism and the fourth wave of feminism in Ukraine and Belarus, it is hard to argue that the second and third waves were comparable in the socialist countries (Zhurzhenko, 2001; Cerwonka, 2008; Zychowicz, 2011).

DIY Culture

The return to craft-making in the West coincided with an interest in the DIY movement and the desire to take oneself out of the capitalist system of production and consumption to the extent that it was possible. Broadly speaking, DIY culture had existed as early as the development of the Industrial Revolution when people attempted to adopt the lifestyle that would take them away from the mainstream industrialized society (Frost, 2014, 1–15). George McKay links the new revival and redevelopment of DIY culture to the 1980s and 1990s when activists started organizing small protest actions that would fit within the non-conformist lifestyle (McKay, 1996). He defined it as "a youth-centred cluster of interests and practices around green radicalism, direct action politics, and new musical sounds and experiences. . . a kind of 1990s counterculture" (McKay, 1998, 2).

By the end of the 1990s, DIY culture became a prevalent type of expressing dissatisfaction with the culture of neoliberalism. The DIY spread into gardening, building, architecture, craft, music, and agriculture. It ranged from those who chose to make their clothing and bake their bread to combat capitalism through small deeds to those who learned to make furniture to undermine the monopoly of Ikea. One of the most prominent examples of the DIY that should be considered here is Riot Grrrl. As Hanna (Hanna, 1991) noted in the manifesto of the group, the main objection was again the fact that "concepts, ideas, and bodies also gain exchange value within a cultural context" (Riordan, 2001, 280). The resistance to the commodification of the female bodies, clothing, and music was at the core Riot Grrrl performances and DIY culture that they developed. Their music and the lyrics opposed commodification. Their performance venues created safe spaces for enjoy music and participate in celebration of femininity. All of this made the group unique part of the punk rock feminist history (Huber, 2010, 65–68). The DIY aspect of the group was expressed in the zines that the group published. The zines were home-made and home-printed magazines that expressed the esthetics and ideas of Riot Grrrl and were distributed to their fan base. The main aspect of the culture was to get people to do it themselves for themselves: "BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates or DISRUPTs the status quo (Hanna, 1991)."

In the early 21st century, the DIY movement had branched out into a subculture that was mainly insisting on negating capitalism and creating their lifestyle from scratch. A different brand of DIY feminism turned to the culture that emphasized femininity not as a way for men to objectify women but as a choice of being feminist. The third-wave feminism is concerned about the choice of agency and lifestyle. Many feminists of the third wave expressed themselves through feminine or girlie cultures as an attempt to compensate for the second waver's refusal of femininity.

In the countries that comprised the Soviet Union, the feminist movement looked different. Feminism during the late Soviet period was expressed not as a desire for equality and ability to penetrate all aspects of the public sphere but in the need for the state to respect women's differences. The demands that were expressed through several Samizdat publications mainly revolved around giving women longer maternity leaves, allowing women to be feminine, and recognizing that women usually work two shifts: work during the day and housework at night (Pető et al., 2002; Kaneva, 2017). Following Perestroika and subsequent rise of the independent countries such as Ukraine and Belarus, crafts industries had seen a rise in sales because the structure of women's lives had changed. Women now seem to have choices of work although Marian Rubchak notes this seeming choice brought also further deterioration of the conditions of life and especially political disregard and inequality for women (Rubchak, 2009; Rubchak, 2012; Rubchak, 2019). Nevertheless, women had more access to making things themselves either to substitute for needed income or to practice what was of interest to them. During the 1990s and the early 2000s in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, women who were interested in needlecraft were not doing it as an expression of DIY but in a sense of opposing the capitalist system and the system supported by the governments. They were interested in crafts as hobbies and ways of self-expression.

Craftivism

The term "craftivism," a combination of two words: activism and craft, was coined by Betsy Greer (Greer, 2008). According to her 2003 definition, "craftivism is a way of looking at life where voicing opinions through creativity makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper & your quest for justice more infinite" (Finn, 2009).[1] Greer's version of craftivism leaned toward liberal agenda and essentially geared toward using craft to express the concern for social issues that are faced by both men and women (Greer and Safyan, 2014, 2–4). One of the most famous examples of the craftivist actions was the use of pink pussy hats during the women's march in 2016[2]. The craftivism project in the United States and Europe varied widely from small group projects that expressed the crafter's political standpoint through large-scale craft projects such as creating a pink cosy for a public monument of a tank to demonstrate the anti-war view (Myzelev, 2009). Craftivism was also expressed through what became known as yarn graffiti. These are usually smaller size actions where objects made of needlecraft are exhibited as installations in public. They usually featured prominently on trees, houses, or public monuments. The use of the term "graffiti" suggests that sometimes the placement of needlework is not sanctioned by the institutions of power. Graffiti along with other craftivist actions have one tremendous advantage in comparison with other art projects. They are more relatable and usually accepted by the audiences and institutions as an expression of "soft" protest. For instance, the use of pussy hats with their pink colors and simple square design that gave wearers a look reminding of ponytail hairstyle prominent in young girls gave the march a more child-like, humorous, and at the same time memorable and attention-grabbing look. A similar strategy of craftivism was used as part of the protests of the Russian group Pussy Riot during their performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 2012. Their colorful, child-like clothing and unpolished musical performance express the culture of girlishness. This femininity and infantilization played into the perception of the West that was used for third-wave feminism. In Russia, it allowed not to take their message seriously and denigrate them to children (Myzelev, forthcoming).

Most of the studies of craftivism and political textile art are situated within Western discourse. There are only a handful of research projects so far that engage with textile art in Eastern or Central Europe in a political context and use feminist methodologies as an analytical lens (Buchczyk, 2014, 328–30; Asavei, 2019, 248; Kowalewska et al., 2018). This article looks at craftivism as a strategy of engaging, and resistance in Ukraine and Belarus to analyze how craftivism could potentially help in understanding the mechanism of political dissent but mainly to argue that seeming relatability and familiarity of the technique bares an unprecedented promise of opposition. Needlecraft's associations of femininity and home-cultures seduce both the creators and the viewers. Fibers and textiles are among the most vulnerable materials that can deteriorate or be destroyed very easily, and therefore, they present no real danger in the physical sense. Thus, the combination of vulnerability and traditional association with felinity makes them much more relatable to the viewers and less threatening to the institutions of power. Used correctly, such ubiquitous objects as embroidered flowers or cross-stitched towels showing Belarus's opposition to President Alexander Lukashenko became powerful tools of empathy, affect, and relatability.

Within the Western discourse, craftivism also came under scrutiny and criticism mainly for two reasons. Several scholars noted that craftivism's practitioners are mainly women. The use of needlecraft by women for further political causes thus fits with the pre-existing stereotype of femininity lacking attributes of male protests such as violence, assertiveness, and critical oppositional stance (Groeneveld, 2010, 259; Pentney, 2008). The second line of critic comes from increasing commercialization of craft that especially gained speed since the 1990s in the West and also in Eastern Europe (as noted above). Craft theorists Bratich and Brush argue that, for crafts, to assume a significant position in and be practiced and recognized in academia is to be almost fully commodified (Bratich and Brush, 2011). Such an approach lies in the stress on the economic role of crafts and especially what the resurgence of craft means for larger Western business companies such as Hobby Lobby, Jo-Ann Stores, and others. However, one has to also take into consideration the human connection (Shiau, 2018) that craft provides for practitioners and customers. The gender and craft scholar Maria Elena Buszek along with the craft historian Glenn Adamson attempts in their respective publications to add theoretical grounding to the new revival of crafts as practice and especially to craftivism (Buszek, 2011, 5–8; Cronin and Robertson, 2011). They underscore craftivism's ability to attract and connect people through

[1]It is important to note that Greer's definition of feminism is somewhat simplified.
[2]"Pussyhat Project: Design Interventions for Social Change." n.d. https://www.pussyhatproject.com/our-story.

its relatability and performativity (Oliver et al., 2010). Other responses to craftivism come from those historians who look at craftivism through postmodernism theory insisting on the importance of change from the modernist mode of production of a single artist in the studio to more socially aware practices of contemporary craftivists (Simpson, 2012, 248).

RUFINA BAZLOVA'S CROSS-STITCH OF BELARUS PROTESTS

Another example of the political charged DIY movement is the cross-stitch art created by the Belarus–Czech artist Rufina Bazlova. Her work uses traditional craft of Eastern Europe technique of cross-stitch embroidery to express and represent recent, 2020, Belarus protests. Using white background and red thread, Bazlova's work repeats not only the traditional colors of embroidery but also the historical colors of the Belarus flag, black and white, which now is used as a symbol of anti-dictatorial protests.

In the late summer and early fall of 2020, Belarus people rose to protest fifth re-election of their president Alexander Lukashenko. The latter came to power in 1994 and had remained the President of Belarus then. Out of five elections, only the first one is considered to be fair by the international authorities, while the rest of the elections, including the latest that took place on August 4–8, 2020, are considered falsified (Wesolowsky, 2020). From May 2020 to the time of writing of this paper, the protests in Belarus continued. Interestingly, women play a very important role in the protests, heading women's marches in an attempt to minimize violence against the protestors. In response to the growing threat to Lukashenko's regime, the latter asked the Russian President Putin for military and police help. Thus, many of Bazlova's embroideries show the encounters between peaceful protestors and the members of Belarus (and/or Russian OMON). OMON is a Special Purpose Police Detachment trained to violently put down large national and local protests. In the embroideries, they are usually represented by the large faceless mass of marching or standing people. Bazlova's language of embroidery is abstract enough to make the viewer stop and try to understand what and who is depicted and easily understood due to the depictions of the instances that were discussed and portrayed in the news. For instance (**Figure 1**), she described the images as follows.

These are not abstract topics—this is what I see or read in the news . . .. I simply sit and watch translation or read about what is happening in Belarus . . . and simply depict these stories. There are so many of them, so many thoughts in my head about what to do, but I simply do not have time to realize all of them. Yet, while I have an opportunity, I want to do it. *Avtozak* (A type of truck), which hit a person during the demonstration; or how some members of OMON side with people—this is not from my head, this is reality. (Antsiperova, 2020)

Thus, Bazlova transfers what she sees on social media or news into her narration using traditional feminine craft. Especially notable is the fact that while a lot of her work is embroidered, some are printed. Recognizing that handmade embroidery is a long and labor-intensive process, the artists use cross-stitch as a symbol of abstract representation to convey the meaning. Thus, the technique of embroidery becomes less important than the visual appeal and recognition of the white and red cross-stitch that becomes the recognizable element of her visual language. In this case, craftivism and political art become intertwined as two mutually supporting elements that help to further Bazlova's political ideas. Interestingly, when asked, Bazlova notes that her art is not intended to move people to protest. Instead, she sees her art as an attempt to documenting and making sense of what is going in her homeland. Bazlova' art is part of the fourth wave of feminism because of her embrace of the traditional domestic and feminine use of embroidery for political purposes. In addition, similar to many feminist artists of the fourth wave, she mainly spreads her message and her imagery on social media. The Internet then becomes the main vehicle for Bazlova's art practice since she is physically removed from her homeland; she receives information online and disseminates her interpretation of that information also online. It is interesting, however, that she is still careful in her expression because of fear of retribution of Lukashenko's dictatorship. In the interview, she noted "It is hard to say if I am encouraging people to protest—for that, I would be threatened by the article of the Law in Belarus—for now, I just react retrospectively" (Barkalova, 2020). Her reaction demonstrates that along with the positive ways that she uses online forms of communication, there are also issues such as online visibility that makes her think about physical security. The

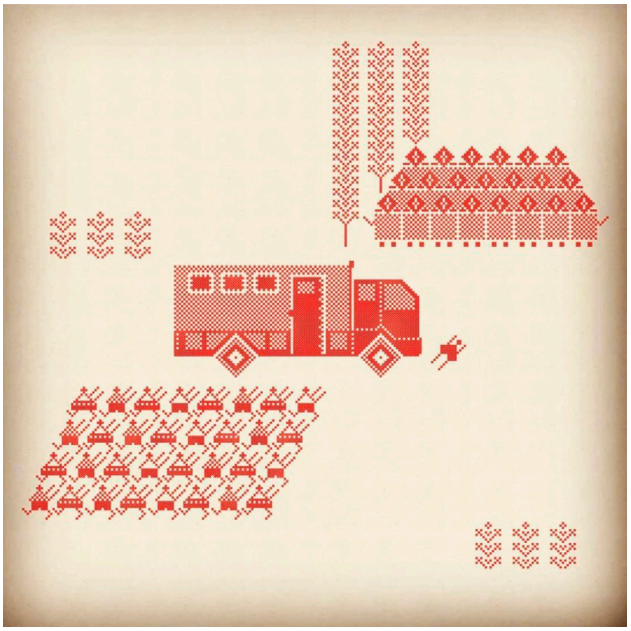

FIGURE 1 | Rufina Buzlova, Avtozak hit a person during the demonstration, 2020, Cross-Stitch embroidery.

FIGURE 2 | From Oksana Briukhovetska's series, "Suit Jackets."

comment also betrays Bazlova's understanding of her role in the process of Belarus protests. It betrays that her work of craftivism is conceived by her as "quiet activism" (Chuchvaha, 2020) as a reaction rather than a planned activist attack. In this case, there is a clear difference between an artist such as Bazlova and the feminist groups such as Femen or Pussy Riot whose protests are geared toward evoking strong responses.

Oksana Briukhovetska's gender blended fashion

For the 2017 exhibition "TEXTUS. Embroidery, Textile, Feminism," the Ukrainian artist and curator Oksana Briukhovetska created a series of man's jackets decorated with large appliqué pink, yellow, blue, and red flowers. She used traditional men's black- and gray-striped jackets that are usually associated with the business world and male power (**Figure 2**). Then, cut-out and attached large pink and red flowers are usually associated with feminine fashion and femininity in general. Thus through the jackets, she created hybridity that includes both masculinity and femininity. Worn for the exhibition by both men and women, the jackets seem to be equally suitable for both male and female fashion and wear. Briukovetska, who also curated this exhibition in Kyiv, notes that she wanted to challenge the norms that govern the lives and men and women in Ukraine (Zlobina, 2017).

As with much other craftivist work that comes from Eastern Europe in the last five or so years, the ideas or ways of execution are not necessarily new. Many, including Briukovetska's work, borrow from the language of feminist artists of the second wave, the 1970s, or craftivists of the 1990s and early 2000s. The *Suit Jacket* series, for instance, can be compared to both runway project and some gender-bending Western street fashion. Yet, the context of production and exhibition is very different. The fact that feminized men's wear is still an artistic novelty and a craftivist project in Ukraine demonstrates the importance of challenging gender norms and stereotypes in the country, especially seeing the radical turn toward conservative nationalism in the Eastern European countries.

On the conceptual level, *Suit Jacket* is interesting in the sense that it both creates a unisex style that could be worn by both men and women and does not reflect the boyish look that a lot of unisex clothing tends to have. In other words, instead, fashion does not make women boys or men by offering T-shirts or boyfriends' jeans but feminizes masculine fashion. At the same time, it also still functions with the heteronormative binary definitions of male/female or black/colorful. These works demonstrate the challenge of the norms but still retain the social normalization of feminine and masculine gender.

CONCLUSION

The case studies that I presented use the approach of the DIY movement and to an extent craftivism to express the various concepts that have to do with gender and democracy in their particular countries. By using intersectionality as a guiding principle of their practice, they protest using material culture and craft as recognizable ways to be understood. Rufina Bazlova's embroideries borrow from traditional national language of embroidery and remind the audiences about the traditionally feminine craft. Mainly mediated through the screens and deprived of the physicality of embroidery, her work becomes simplified, abstracted illustrations of the protests of Belarus. Her craft legacy makes her works much more effective than snapshots or naturalistic representations because of two factors. One, the embroidery pattern appeals to viewers and evokes the affective reactions. Second, abstracted cross-stitch prevents image saturation or desensitization that is often experienced by viewers. Bruikhovetska's *Suit Jacket* series challenge gender norms through the language that is most familiar to both men and women—language of clothing and fashion. Using DIY esthetics, she works with ready-made objects such as jackets. Yet, because of her manipulation, the jackets acquire different, feminized meaning and attract attention of the gendered Ukrainian society.

This article demonstrates the beginning of the influences of fourth-wave feminism on art and protest in Eastern Europe. At the same time, it also shows that feminism, political protest, and craftivism are essentially intertwined and inform each other. It

seems that, for Eastern Europe, at least the intersectionality of the fourth wave becomes the most important aspect since the feminist fight revolves not only around gender norms but also more importantly around survival or liberal (not neo-liberal) ideas and democracy.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the author, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

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The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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"You Don't Know Me so Don't Try to Judge Me": Gender and Identity Performance on Social Media Among Young Indian Users

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Social media is the preferred communication platform for today's youth, yet little is known of how online intergender communication is shaped by social identity norms. Drawing from the Social Identity and Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) approach, we argue that through depersonalization, online interactions are marked by the salience of social identities and identity performance conforming to perceived norms of behavior (traditional as well as developing). We specifically look at discursive terms and their meaning-making as a strategic performance of gender in uncontrolled social media interactions. We examined a corpus of 442 comments from selected public Indian Facebook pages in two phases over a span of 1 year (2020–2021). Thematic discourse analysis revealed established (#mansplaining, pseudofeminism) and emerging (choice feminism, MGTOW, #fuckboi etc.) discursive strategies within the major themes on feminism and antifeminism, men's rights, intersectional feminism, and sexual behavior. These meaningful terms are used to modulate identity performance in a heavily contested space, reflecting both consolidation as well as mobilization functions, as proposed by SIDE. The findings highlight that intergender communication on social media is both dependent on existing offline norms, while challenging the same to create new discourses of gender.

Keywords: social media, social identity, SIDE, CMC, gender, feminism

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INTRODUCTION

There is considerable social psychological work examining interpersonal and intergroup interactions and its consequences. Yet, the majority of this is concentrated on face-to-face interactions. Today, a large part of our interactions are online and social media has become the preferred medium for this globally (Johnson and Callahan, 2015; Bulut and Kesgin, 2016). Reports suggest that young adults are communicating and building relationships online, more than *via* face-to-face communication (Velten and Arif, 2016). Consequently, interactions on social media are now a significant source of contact as well as conflict.

While interacting on social media, users not only meet as individuals, but also as representatives of their larger social identities (Hogg et al., 2004). The absence of face-to-face (FTF) interactions in online spaces can facilitate anonymity (Ehrlich and Stoerger, 2014), but chosen identity markers reveal one's social identity, which allows them to be perceived in accordance with

offline social stereotypes and prejudices (Cirucci, 2017). Gender is a social structure and group-based identity that determines social relationships and behaviors at various levels of the social world (Goffman, 1976; Armentor-Cota, 2011). When such a social structure permeates into the online setting, gendered communication norms are formed (Armentor-Cota, 2011; Rose et al., 2012; Spears, 2017). In the absence of personal identity markers and the presence of gendered norms of communication, gender identity becomes salient in online interactions (Armentor-Cota, 2011; Rose et al., 2012; Spears, 2017). This creates a "continuous communication loop" where gender identities shape interactions online, which in turn create opportunities and norms that dictate gender relations and expectations of behavior (Rose et al., 2012).

This paper aims to examine cross-gender communication, which is the "communication about and between men and women" (Ray and Pani, 2019) on social media, drawing from the Social Identity and Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) approach (Spears, 2017). Specifically, we take a look at the dominant discourses on gender that are popular online and become persistent references in communication. We examine written text as indicators of identity performance which reinforce and reconstruct online gendered communication. Through this analysis we hope to present a case for how gender interactions on social media are symbolic of social identity representations that are shaping gender interactions and discourses in the virtual space. Here, we acknowledge the presence of multiple gender identities which is beyond the scope of this paper. We analyze traditional cross-gender communication between men and women only, given the larger presence of the same and the novel lens of analysis that we are using with respect to social media use in the Indian context.

Online Interactions and Gender

The focus on contact *via* computer mediated communication (CMC) has expanded over the last 2 decades. While initial research highlighted the equalizing nature of online spaces, others underscored the rising polarization on social media platforms (Amichai-Hamburger and Hasler, 2013; Cirucci, 2017). Work on gender and CMC reveals a similar 2-fold trend, where on one hand, the democratic nature of the virtual space is upheld for equalizing gender interactions and opening a space that disrupts established norms (Webb and Temple, 2015); there are significant gender differences in access to virtual spaces, and communication patterns online (Yates, 1997). Status and visibility differences between men and women can be seen on social media platforms like Twitter where individuals with disadvantaged intersectional identities, like women of color, receive less attention than white men (Messias et al., 2017). Referred to as the "Gender digital divide, the unequal access to, use and awareness of digital spaces" is a worldwide phenomenon, being particularly salient in the Global South (Antonio and Tuffley, 2014; Alozie and Akpan-Obong, 2016; Fatehkia et al., 2018; Joshi et al., 2020). In India, 67% men are Internet users, compared to only 33% women, with even fewer numbers in rural areas (Kala, 2019). Unlike Western social media usage which is becoming increasingly gender-equal (Greenwood et al., 2016; Tankovska, 2021), 78% Indian social media users are men.

There is also a complex manifestation of sexual behavior and norms on social media, where along with constructive experiences of gender construction, there are undesirable consequences of body shaming and exposure to sexual content (Davis, 2018). Research also suggests significant differences in how men and women present themselves as well as interact online (Hudson and Gore, 2017). According to Kivran-Swaine et al. (2012), men initiate more cross-gender friendships while women tend to express more positive emotions and use profile pictures more often. Analysis of Facebook profile pictures revealed that gender stereotypical traits that are dominant offline are represented online with pictures of men being rated higher on traits like active, dominant, and independent while women scoring higher on attractiveness and dependence (Rose et al., 2012). Armentor-Cota (2011) notes that while gender swapping and gender fluidity are often present; stereotypes exist widely and guide online communication to a large extent. For example, in how men and women resist or defend themselves online, distinct patterns emerged where men typically dominated and asserted their viewpoints as opposed to women who often justified or defended theirs. Cirucci (2017) found that women were more conscious and anxious about their posts and comments on social media sites. Through experimental findings, Spears et al. (2014) showed that men tended to dominate most online discussions where gender was salient.

Gender identity becomes particularly salient in online collective action for issues pertaining to gender itself, such as spreading awareness about feminism. With the advent of the fourth wave of feminism, there has been a growth in cyberfeminism on digital platforms where participants not only consume information but also actively participate in the movement through engagement (Jain, 2020). Language plays an important role in digital collective action, especially with the use of hashtags, which are effective tools to mobilize people for social change, raise awareness about important issues, and develop a sense of community (Storer and Rodriguez, 2020). The study of Yoder et al. (2010) on self-labeling found that self–categorization as a feminist predicts engagement in collective action online. Moreover, engaging in Twitter activism in response to sexism was found to promote an enactment of women's social identity, which led to further mobilization for collective action (Foster et al., 2020). Discussing the "Gender digital divide" in developing countries, Antonio and Tuffley (2014) note that one of the most significant benefits of the internet for women is the potential for forming social networks, self-expression, and a collective identity formation.

However, irrespective of the definitive work on gender and online interactions, there is limited literature examining cross-gender interactions from a social identity and intergroup relations perspective. We were interested in locating gender as a salient social identity category and exploring the influence of norms in shaping communication on social media. To do this, we borrowed from the Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects or SIDE framework which is useful in contextualizing and explaining CMC. This approach, rooted in social identity

and social categorization theories is particularly suited to explore social media interactions among members of historically contested groups, and examine how group identification and the presence of norms facilitate identity performance, assertion, and opposition to outgroups (Reicher et al., 1995; Perfumi, 2020). Thus we combined parallel but seldom overlapping approaches by examining online gender performance and its various strategies (underexplored in psychological literature beyond interpersonal approaches) from the lens of contested social identities, existing and emerging intergroup relations (Webb and Temple, 2015).

SIDE and Identity Performance: Theoretical Framework

According to social identity theory, interactions between individuals can be located on a continuum between social identity salience, to the dominance of individual identity where interactions are interpersonal and directed by personal motives and desires. Applying this to CMC, Reicher et al. (1995) propose that in visually anonymous communication, the invisibility of personal identity leads to the salience of social identities, resulting in behavior that is in-group normative, through the process of depersonalization. Individuals self-categorize and perform their social identities in ways that are perceived to be normative, as well as evaluate others in comparison to the prototypical members of the outgroup (Lea et al., 2001; Postmes et al., 2001). Interactions on the internet are marked by social identity cues and narratives that are dominant and guide these conversations (Rains et al., 2017). These dominant discourses also influence how identities are performed online.

Identity performance is the "purposeful expression (or suppression) of behaviors relevant to those norms conventionally associated with a salient social identity" (Klein et al., 2007). This performance goes beyond self-presentation as it is motivated by concerns for social identity. According to the "strategic aspect of SIDE," this serves both functions of identity consolidation (protecting, upholding, and defending the salient social identity) as well as identity mobilization (acting in pursuit of group goals which, for instance includes, antagonizing the outgroup to prove their illegitimacy). Mobilization is particularly important as it closely relates to collective action and how social categories can shape norms, expectations, and social realities. Thus, in interactions between men and women when gender is salient as a social identity, the communication is not only shaped by the awareness of this identity and its normative performance, but also driven by the need to uphold the in-group identity, defend against the "other" as well create opportunities and narratives that the group can strive toward. Online, identity mobilization includes discursive strategies that establish group norms, underscore resistance, and often result in outgroup denigration (Rains et al., 2017). Such interactions can create new rules of communication, new social realities of gender which move beyond online interactions to become larger gender discourses.

Research following the SIDE approach has revealed interesting processes that support its theoretical claims. For instance, Spears et al. (2002) showed that perceived social support in online interactions can facilitate collective in-group action and resistance to powerful outgroups. Rains et al. (2017) found that outgroup presence, previous hostility toward ingroup and intergroup bias were important predictors of online incivility. Applying the SIDE model specifically to the analysis of gender, Spears et al. (2014), confirmed how women and men managed their identities differently in gender salient online communication. However, most of these were lab based experimental studies that do not necessarily address how identity performance and its various strategies are employed in uncontrolled social media interactions. We expanded this lens to look at how individuals use discursive techniques as strategies to perform their identities. Klein et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of discursive strategies in creating, maintaining, consolidating, and mobilizing social identities in its performative function. Examining intergroup relations through the lens of discursive techniques aid in understanding how identity-based norms prevail and shape interactions and are co-constructed through these very social interactions (Durrheim et al., 2015).

In India, as social media use has expanded, so have conversations on gender norms and relations. More recently, social media have become increasingly politically polarized (Neyazi, 2017) and witnessed intense debates and discussions around themes of sexual harassment (Pain, 2020). Going online and participating on social media is often marked by anxiety and apprehension for Indian women. Women's online experiences can be unpleasant, with repeated encounters of sexually inappropriate or aggressive behavior (Karusala et al., 2019). Yet, the presence of women on social media has been viewed positively by many as a forum for feminist activism. Many women have participated in online campaigns on women's safety, harassment, menstruation, and hygiene (Mirani et al., 2014) and are using platforms like Twitter to actively engage in conversations around gender-based violence (Gurman et al., 2018). Social media becoming a significant space for gender performance, resistance, and reconstruction are a globally relevant phenomenon. Ogan and Baş (2020) showed how social media were used as a platform for solidarity, resistance, and emotional expression toward violence against women in Turkey, Sylwander and Gottzén (2020) study revealed the strategic implications and resistance to gendered terms in online communication in Sweden, and, Cook and Hasmath (2014) presented a cross-cultural analysis of participation in the online #Slutwalk campaign, indicating several discourses around feminism, intersectionality, and the construction of gender. Thus, examining social media discourses on gender is not only widely applicable but also presents relevant contemporary debates that will help shape shifting gender understandings. For example, discussing the Men's Rights Movement in India, Basu (2016) points out that the MRM and similar arguments from men often get represented in a typical anti-feminist discourse that is met with immediate retaliation or dismissal which can neglect underlying anxieties. The author notes that changing gender norms, resistance and laws are deeply embedded in a historical system of patriarchy that has consequences for men and women, and questions around contested feminism in a post-colonial society. This study adds to the relatively limited work on CMC and gender in the Global South

(Nova et al., 2019), diversifying this research, adding to the SIDE/CMC literature and its application in varied contexts and through multiple methods.

The Present Study

We explore online intergender communication among Indian social media users through a discursive lens. We approach this analysis from a social identity perspective rooted in social psychological theorization. We argue that in these discursive strategies, users actively perform their identities by reiterating existing and emerging gender norms that shape gender activism, resistance, and anxieties in online spaces. The analysis is informed by a three-step method (i) the context (existing gender norms in India), (ii) social identity (gender as the salient social identity), and (iii) identity performance (as proposed by the SIDE approach). The intersection of these three leads to the emergence of new norms of intergender communication, marked heavily by the use of meaningful terms and language, reshaping the larger context of gender relations (**Figure 1**).

"Discourses are conversations or talk with an agenda" that represent and govern the present nature of social relationships and how individuals make sense of them (Singer and Hunter, 1999). Rooting itself in discursive psychology, discourse analysis assists in providing an understanding of how social identity is constructed, as well as the effects of such identity construction (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004). Discursive studies of identity thus challenge many of the traditional assumptions of psychological research by showing how social resources construct individual identity (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Hence our aim was 3-fold (i) to identify and examine consistent language patterns in intergender communication on social media, (ii) to extract meaningful emerging discourses representing gender norms, and (iii) to analyze these themes according to the presented theoretical design: history of gender relations, salience of gender as a social identity category, use of gender normative language as performance of the salient identity, and the emergence of new norms for communication and behavior.

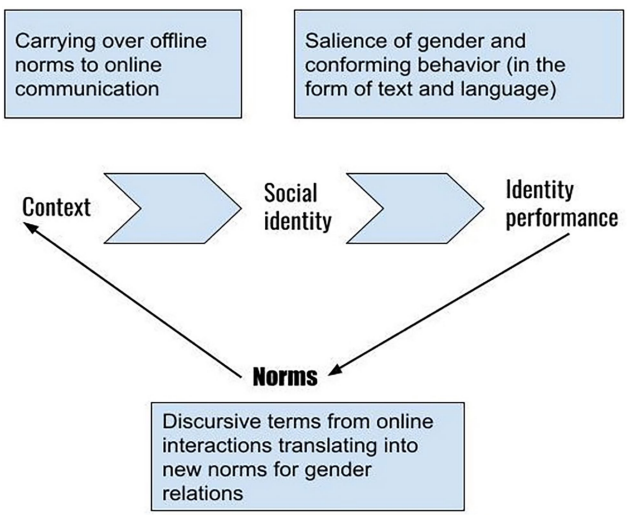

FIGURE 1 | Offline norms to online identity performance.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Selection Procedure

To explore discursive themes prominent in intergender social media interactions, we started out by scoping different social media forums to get a preliminary idea of the conversations. We chose to include comment threads on public pages on Facebook as our main data corpus. Webb and Temple (2015) identified Facebook as one of the leading online forums where gender performance can be studied given the presence of profile pictures, description and the interactive aspect of responding to posts and comments. Facebook is also the most used social media platform in India (except YouTube), which has public pages on a wide range of topics with a diverse socio-demographic participation (Chakravarti, 2021; Kemp, 2021). On Facebook, we were interested in looking at pages which included those where gender was explicitly relevant (ex: pages on feminism) as well as others which were more generic and news oriented (ex: political and entertainment news). This was done to map the landscape of gender discourses across a range of pages with the intent of understanding if the specific terms were only used in gender-polarized pages or regardless of the content of these pages. We selected three public open Indian Facebook pages that emphasized interactions around gender and gendered behavior—*Feminism in India*, *She The People*, and *Journal of an Indian Feminist*; and one page that showcases interactions between individuals of diverse socio-political views, *The Print*. Our data corpus timeline was particularly aimed at capturing the significant role that social media has played over the last year (2020–2021), in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown. While there was a global increase in social media use, the experience of the same was mixed (Coronavirus: 87% Increase, 2020; The two sides of social media during COVID-19, 2021). Specifically in the Indian context, conversations around online violence, gender trolling, and sexual harassment almost tripled during the COVID-19 period, with gender trolling having the largest share of 47% of such conversations (Quilt AI and ICRW, 2021).

A purposive sampling was done for posts in a two-phased manner—once in February–March 2020 and again during the same time in 2021—where we looked for words and expressions that were repeated and used as hashtags or specific meaningful terms (Libutti, 1999). The criteria for selection of the comments were such that we only used the "top" comments on each post that had Facebook users replying to each other. One can choose the order in which comments are displayed on Facebook; we used the "Top Comments" order, which means that the comments with the most "likes" and "replies" were displayed first (Mavoa et al., 2017). When comments were reported, usernames were removed, but the comments were copied unedited; as a result, any spelling errors, grammatical mistakes, spacing errors, or other typographic errors were reproduced to present the posts as precisely as possible (Rademacher, 2018).

TABLE 1 | Levels of a comment.

Comment levels	
Text	The content of a comment
Hashtags	The hashtags (if any) used in the comment
Terms	Gender-specific terms used in the comment
Interaction	Presence of inter-gender interaction

We used the manual extraction (copying and pasting data into a spreadsheet) method to collect our data (Abramson et al., 2014; Franz et al., 2019). In the first phase of data collection in 2020, 23 comment threads with a total of 72 comments from gender relevant pages and 14 threads of 37 comments from *The Print* were included in the sample. For the second phase, the sample consisted of 41 comment threads with a total of 110 comments, and 68 comment threads and a total 223 comments from *The Print*. In total, 442 comments ($n = 442$) were looked at four levels, as indicated in **Table 1**.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic discourse analysis. The combination of thematic analysis with discourse analysis has been used previously (Taylor and Ussher, 2001; Clarke, 2005) and is specifically recommended for analysis of internet-based discussions forums (Simoni et al., 2014; Botelle and Willott, 2020). This method identifies themes in a text within a constructionist framework, focusing both on the rhetorical design and on the ideological implications of the themes (Clarke, 2005). As part of social discursive psychology (Harré and Gillet, 1994; Edwards and Potter, 2005), the relevance of symbolic artifacts in a community (languages, rituals, and relations) is emphasized to better understand their cultures. These social and discursive dynamics are important in virtual communities as well as individual user profiles who express emotions, beliefs, and desires through their discursive engagement online (Scardigno and Mininni, 2020).

Subject matter, word function, and discursive characteristic were used to assign codes at the sentence or lexical item level (Mavoa et al., 2017). The code frame was built through a mixture of deductive and inductive coding. The deductive code development was partly adapted from the approach of Jones et al. (2019) to studying misogynistic online harassment. An inductive reading of the comments found that this failed to capture some of the forms of interactions that were present and thus further categories were added. The code frame was then refined inductively, drawing on observations and analysis from the close reading of comment threads. This combination of deductive and inductive coding provides a more comprehensive code frame that captures diverse forms of interactions. Such an approach was supported by Freelon (2013, p. 1186) who states that "researchers should feel free to appropriate and/or develop additional conversational measures" and "it may not always be necessary to measure all features as some will almost never be present in certain forums." An inter-coder reliability test was conducted with two trained coders on 10% of the sample ($n = 44$), using Krippendorff's alpha; the reliability scores were 0.944 and 0.956.

TABLE 2 | Themes and codes overview.

Theme	Code	Frequency
Feminism and antifeminism	Feminazi	27
	Pseudo-feminism	21
	Whataboutery	17
	Victim card	19
	Feminists should avoid marriage	15
	Gold Digger	12
	Motherhood seen as epitome of womanhood	11
	Feminists seen as selfish women	9
	Feminist Fascists	8
The Manosphere	Misogynist	35
	MGTOW	19
	Incel	19
	Male Bashing	17
	Mansplaining	17
	MCP	11
Intersectional identities	Urban Feminist	14
	Choice feminism	8
	Savarna Feminist	7
	Dalit Feminism	6
Threat, sex and violence	Slut	23
	Fuckboi	19
	Simp	18
	Small Cock	8
	Sissy	8
	Whore	7

We followed six step guide of Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyze the data. The research team consisted of three researchers working on the data simultaneously. First, we read through the data set several times to familiarize ourselves with the material and had discussions to note initial ideas. Repetitive, relevant and meaningful discursive terms were identified as initial codes. These were then grouped together and categorized to form coherent themes that represented a larger discourse. The interpretation of these themes was done by reading and re-reading the text, discussions among the researchers and reference to relevant literature. This was overall informed by the theoretical approach by considering relevant concepts at every step of the analysis (Taylor and Ussher, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006). As we collected data in two phases, we also reviewed the two datasets together to compare and define overarching themes. There was significant overlap and similarity between the codes generated from Phase I (2020) and Phase II (2021). Hence, we decided to combine the codes from both phases to form themes that represent discourses across the span of this one-year period, as shown in **Table 2**.

Researcher's Position and Ethical Consideration

We would like to acknowledge our positions as female researchers and social media users, and the influence of our gender identity and personal experiences on the research. However, we upheld the importance of a non-evaluative and non-judgmental stance, engaged reflexively with our social positions, and proceeded with utmost rigor at every step of this study. We had a team

of multiple researchers and had regular discussions with a larger group of male and female researchers for feedback on our analysis. This process facilitated a reflexive journey rooted in collaboration and collective critical consciousness (Mao et al., 2016). The study was approved as part of a larger project on online contact and intergroup attitudes by the Institutional Review Board of Ashoka University, India. We maintained complete data secrecy and confidentiality by anonymizing names and any potential identifiers. Facebook allows the use of data from public pages and since Facebook comments are publicly accessible, no consent was necessary or requested from either the page owners or users to evaluate the comments on their posts (Abramson et al., 2014). Therefore, we only included posts and comments from public open pages for our analysis.

DISCUSSION

After coding and organizing the data, four major themes emerged that have been discussed below. Within each we refer to language and terms that signify what these discourses represent and the new identity norms they facilitate in the process of interaction. The discussion is also supported by direct comments from participants presented in the following section.

Feminism and Antifeminism

One of the most common discourses of contestation was the idea of feminism—what it means and how it is practiced. Firstly, in line with social identity theory, the notable effort to create an exclusive and distinct in-group (feminist) and outgroup (antifeminist) was prominent (Durrheim et al., 2016). This was used both for the purpose of mobilization as well as consolidation, wherein group members willingly reiterated terms and meanings to ensure that their own identity is accepted as a valid ingroup member (Klein et al., 2007). Members asserted and clarified their understanding of the feminist ideology by emphasizing that women should have their individual freedom, wear clothes of their choice, not face any societal pressure, or that feminism did not equate to "men haters" as seen in comments like: "It's completely their own choice and no one can dictate a women what she should do!"; "If there were one article that ought to have convinced men that feminists aren't out to get them, this should be it." There were many instances of asserting the role of *feminism against patriarchy*, reflected in this comment:

> Patriarchy is not gone, gender equality is still an aspiration for most societies, so yes feminism is still fighting for freedoms and will continue to, whether male entitlement likes it or not. And no men will not tell us how to fight and which brand of feminism they like or prefer!

The larger antifeminist discourse in our data included three consistent patterns of thought—the first was the perceived lack of "feminists" to accept critique, second was the perception of feminists as hyper aggressive and reactionary; "Many of these feminist on this page will react very violently and aggressively if something will not match with their views." Lastly, there were assertions on female role stereotyping. The discursive connotations of female gender role stereotyping broadly reiterate that women should focus on their marriage, calling out female emancipation as being responsible for divorces, questioning their role as a mother and calling them a *"gold digger."* In our data, telling women to keep their emotions in check, asking if they were menstruating or if it was their *time of the month* and blaming their hormones for their behavior was common. Jones et al. (2019) have reported such presence of gender stereotypes in Twitter comments, where sexism encompassed references to "get back to the kitchen" and "make me a sandwich." One of the comments in our data also suggested something similar: "Apparently, a feminist has never experienced the joy of ironing a shirt and making a sandwich. No wonder they are chronically triggered." We also found the stereotype of the *female emotional brain*, allegedly clouding women's scope for logic. Women were often pronounced as too emotional to evaluate the status quo logically and rationally, to the point of being paralleled to children. Their inclination toward hyperemotionality was correlated to the lack of logic (Jones et al., 2019). Importantly what was observed repeatedly was the need to maintain and establish category distinctions with "you women or your kind."

(Re) Defining the "Feminist"

Within the feminist/antifeminist discourse, we identified the emergence of newer terms that represent specific definitions of these ideologies, for instance, *Feminazi*. The term originated in the 90s, when Rush Limbaugh described it as "a feminist to whom the most important thing in life is ensuring that as many abortions as possible occur." This discursive understanding of *feminazi* as an avoidance of motherhood and an act of "selfishness" was apparent in our data as participants posted comments like:

> If women like you and the feminazis here are incompetent to be a mother, abstain from that. Motherhood is a selfless act and most selfish women nowadays do not want to leave their comfort for their kids. That is postpartum depression in the majority of cases. Pure selfishness.

Carrying a strong weight with the "nazi" suffix, today the word is rather casually used such that in our corpus it was the most frequently appearing. Comments like "Leave these feminazis. These vultures always have problems in everything" and "Being a feminazi it's her birthright to be a hypocrite. So let her be" used the word almost as synonymous with radicalizing the "feminist" and "female."

A second term was *Pseudofeminist*; which has been defined as a person who claims to be a feminist but ignores the main point of feminism, i.e., equality. This was often seen in the form of male and female participants questioning the feminists and "correcting" it as per their own ideology; one commented that "Most of the feminists do speak hate against men and

then say they are just supporting women. So first decide the line of difference between Feminism and pseudo-feminism and then ask us to choose to be feminist or not."

We found the use of anti-feminist terms by women as well. Here, women dissociated from the so-called feminists or used the same kind of retaliation as by non-feminists (usually men). Most such female participants questioned the idea of feminism: "Pseudo feminism is not feminism. Get your fckin facts straight today. And the women you talk about doing crimes on men are criminals. Start seeing beyond gender if you ever wanna mature." Research has shown that women and groups of women who self-identify as "non-feminists" or "anti-feminist" often reiterate the discourses largely popularized by Men's Rights groups (DeKeseredy et al., 2015). Some women feel alienated by the dominant feminist discourse, especially if they are not directly affected by the arguments that shape the normative standards of the ideology, such as equal rights in the workplace (Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1991). Identity performance in front of an outgroup can be both threatening and intimidating. While this leads to some members upholding their norms, being defensive and vindictive toward the outgroup, other individuals may refrain from identifying with the ingroup (Klein et al., 2007).

A third prominent theme here included an assertion that women and feminists accrue power and sympathy through the escalation of "false rape claims" or by "*playing the victim*." This was visible in comments like: "Just another fragile feminist not happy she will not get away with self-victimization narrative!" *Playing the victim* has become an increasingly common discourse around women specific crimes in India in the recent past with many pointing out that the existing laws on domestic violence, rape and sexual assault are heavily biased toward women, who can easily manipulate and exploit the system at the cost of innocent men (Mishra, 2019; Navin and Jangid, n.d.). Within the discourse on feminism, "playing the victim card" has been used as strategies for counterattack, often by other women, since it positions those who voice their stories as weak (Donaghue, 2015). Issues of victimization brought up by women were met with a strong assertion of *whataboutery*, whereby members (mostly men) denied relevance of the female identity experience and rather questioned them about issues of 'importance'. Comments like "what about the guy who committed suicide because of the extreme harassment by his wife?" directly raise the "what about" question, while others like "media is busy with its agenda of gender discrimination even during a pandemic" indirectly deny the relevance of gender.

Along with instances of women resisting perceived notions of feminism, as well as men aligning with the same, there was a notable amount of solidarity. Women spoke in support of women and men supported men. The solidarity was also expressed by shaming the other and their lack of knowledge, comprehension, and compassion. These were instances of discursive activism on contested and volatile themes seen in comments like, "Stop femsplaining misandrist. We do not need women to tell what should a man do or how should he express his emotions. We know what is best for us." The scope of CMC to arouse collective emotions, perceptions of commonality, connection and disadvantage, and the ability to express opinions that are believed to be shared by the ingroup (Spears and Postmes, 2015) enhances in-group solidarity when categories are salient, and exchanges are particularly antagonistic.

The Manosphere

Closely connected, but distinct from the discourse on feminism, was the discussion around men's rights and their position in a transitioning society. This again involved two major threads—the first was a description of the "manosphere," primarily by women, and the second was the assertion of Men's rights, largely by men. The manosphere was referred to as a misogynistic space; an identity represented by *MCP (Male chauvinist Pigs)* with not only salient normative markers (misogynistic) but also associated with negative traits of being uneducated and violent; a few comments read:

> "Why do not you go drink with your loser MCP buddies, cry and complain that women are not "traditional" like before, dare to talk back to men, dare to wear eyeliner, cry and wail about it, then go home and beat up your wife to you know, put her in her place? THAT will make you feel like a man."

> "The fact is the inbuilt misogyny of our society. But to see that, one needs to be well-read, cultured and have a balanced mind. Too much to expect from an MCP!"

In these exchanges, we see a denunciation of outgroup values and traits which is also rooted in context, wherein the speakers are challenging traditional societal (patriarchal and sexist) norms defining gender roles. Thus discursively, using terms that describe the "manosphere," speakers are subverting established norms and performing their salient identities. This was often met by counter claims of Male *Bashing*, a term used to describe the unreasonable and unnecessary disregarding of men, complimenting the previously mentioned "hyper feminist" discourse, as seen in comments like—"Every toxic feminist on this page are just bashing men aggressively. It just shows huge double standards of these feminazis"; "Typical men hating bigot feminist playing victim card and bashing men. What u are doing to me is just mental harassment if a man say the same thing to u."

The internet has been key to the popularization of men's rights activism and discourse (Lily, 2016; Schmitz and Kazyak, 2016). While the manosphere includes a variety of groups, including Men's Rights Activisms (MRAs), men going their own way (MGOW), incels (involuntary celibates), and so on, they share a central belief that feminine values dominate society, which is a fact suppressed by feminists and men must fight back against an overreaching, *misandrist* culture to protect their very existence (Marwick and Lewis, 2017).

Men Going Their Own Way refers to the group of men who have vowed to not pursue romantic relationships with women to focus on their self-development and preservation (Jones et al., 2019). Comments like "Feminism is a disease, MGTOW is the cure" highlight how the discursive understanding of MGTOW is rooted in the anti-feminist rhetoric. This identity

is proudly flaunted as a marker of choice and superiority, even in conversations with unknown women online; one such comment was "I chose MGTOW because I prefer to keep all my life's earnings, avoid the cheating practices of women, and avoid unnecessary stress and drama." The core tenets of MGTOW are situated in the MRA discourse; this movement is characterized by the assertion that women hold unfair systemic and social advantages as a result of the feminist movement, which has "oppressed" men (O'Donnell, 2020). This assertion was seen in the comments like:

> Men's Rights Activism is for men that have dealt with the system up front and personal. It's for men that have dealt with abusive sisters, mothers and girlfriends. It's for men that have been chewed up and spit out by divorce courts and realize that marriage is not a good deal for men. It's for men that are tired of the double standards in society that hurt men.

By saying this, MRAs adopt a defensible position as the suffering victim, turning feminist activism on its head and re-framing it as oppressive (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). MRA and MGTOW, which until recently were used almost exclusively within the manosphere, functions as part of a common linguistic practice on social media. This creates a sense of community across divergent subgroups, builds ties between individuals, and helps to solidify the ideological commitment of MRAs to oppose feminism. It also exists as a tool to counter feminist language and ideas (Marwick and Caplan, 2018).

The *Incels* group is closely associated with the MRA; they are self-identified "involuntary celibates" harboring hostility toward women for denying them sex, which they believe they inherently deserve (Jones et al., 2019). However, this group of the manosphere did not assert their identity, but it was rather used by women as a way of trolling men. Any instances of anti-feminist comments by men were countered or challenged by terming it as "Incel" with a discursive implication of ridiculing and dismissing the other, as seen in a comment: "Ignore him. It's a faceless incel troll who posts here because this is the only way he will get any interaction with women. Otherwise rejected product in real life." The creation of fake IDs, abusing women online, keeping their identity anonymous and getting blocked were some of the behaviors that female participants called out in their use of the *Incel* discourse for any man online, whether they actually identified as such or not: "No one as useless as faceless incel trolls here who made dozens of fake IDs to spam, abuse women daily and post illogical nonsensical comments even after their IDs are restricted repeatedly." It is interesting to see how the word is used in interactions between ideologically competing groups, during which both MRAs and feminists negotiate the meaning of *Incel*. In such instances, each group defines and makes meaning of the word according to their own ideologies and beliefs (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). While Incel has a shared meaning, it is leveraged toward different ends. Thus, the use of the term is action- or -practice-oriented, serving to orient one group toward another: Incels against feminists, or feminists against Incels. Additionally, it is important to mention the emergence of the discourse on Manosphere in the Indian (and similar) context. MGTOW is not a familiar term in offline spaces yet, highlighting the influence of social media in creating and reframing gender discourses. These findings support claims made by the SIDE model, that minority influence and activism can help shift opinions toward itself in online settings (Perfumi, 2020).

We also noted the frequently occurring term *Mansplaining*. The origins of mansplaining can be traced back to a 2008 blog post titled "Men explain things to me" (Solnit, 2012). The term is generally used to refer to an explanation, usually offered by a man, which is patronizing, condescending, or ignores women's experience and knowledge (Rothman, 2012). In our data, mansplaining was often used by women as a counter to assertions of the perceived manosphere: "Women here know better than trolls and need no mansplaining on any side of any story"; "You learn cooking yourself before mansplaining and lecturing women." Using hashtags like #Mansplaining is a way to draw from dominant discourses on gender that heavily influence interactions online. It includes a performative aspect of social identity and what is believed to be prototypical in-group behavior (Postmes and Spears, 2013). This term is widely used and has become a common signifier of the feminist discourse (Lutzky and Lawson, 2019). Thus, women often used this term, irrespective of the comment by the outgroup, to uphold ingroup norms and assert their salient identity values that have become markers of the widely perceived feminist discourse, especially on social media.

Intersectional Identities

Intersectionality or the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group is a core element of feminist analysis (Aldoory et al., 2008). In the Indian context, this intersectionality is particularly salient between four facets of one's social identity—gender (male or female), caste (Upper and lower or Dalits), religion (Hindu or Muslim), and political ideology (Right wing or Left and Liberal). We noted several emerging themes that represent both the establishment of new identity norms (for feminism and gender identity) as well as challenge the power dynamics within existing narratives. Here, labels like *Savarna Liberal Feminism* and *Urban Feminism* were used to underline differences within this shared discourse. Speakers questioned the ideological intention of others by emphasizing their privilege and highlighting the elite nature of Indian feminism that has a liberal, usually urban and upper-caste or *Savarna* perspective. Comments like "Savarna liberal Feminism will never talk about a Dalit woman" and "Ever heard of Dalit Feminism? Please read more about it" point to this. Another term, Choice *Feminism* was used to indicate the selective and individualistic nature of feminism, with one participant commenting, "Fuck your liberal choice feminism. It's completely toothless against the patriarchy, as you only think about yourself. You liberals and your individualistic policies." Another comment read:

> These urban feminists will not fight the real fires faced by women in serious oppressive conditions, but will

> create a pseudo crisis, where there is none, so that you scream fire and do the bare minimum without getting your hands dirty in the real mess.

Interestingly, men used intersectionality as part of the antifeminist discourse, where the ideology of feminism was coupled with right wing extremism, to delegitimize the claim. One of the comments was, "Are you really a feminist? You sound more like a fascist andh bhakt. Control your emotions and stop telling men what to do or not to do." While the stereotype that feminists hate men is as old as feminism itself, adopting "facism" as a synonym for "feminism" allows men to appropriate the language of authoritarian identity politics and claim a victimized stance. In contemporary India, the Sanskrit term *bhakt* is used to denote supporters of the Hindu right wing, to equate their following with a devotee's blind faith in their deity (Khan, 2015). In this discursive exchange, we note a strategic identity performance where a separate but intersectional identity is used to underline authoritarianism and extremism in outgroup's stance, thereby demobilizing them (Klein et al., 2007). Interestingly, the *bhakt* or right-wing label is more popularly used for a masculine, militarized stance dominated by men (Grewal, 2020), but in these interactions, similar to the use of the term "Incel" we see the strategic use of a common term, in contrasting ways by men and women.

Threat, Sex, and Violence

In the themes discussed so far, we found many argumentative, defensive, and critical interactions between the speakers. However, there were a few recurring terms that were particularly and intentionally offensive and violent. Most of these related to sexual habits and choices and were used when describing behaviors perceived as threatening to accepted societal norms. These included *#Slut* for women and *#Fuckboi* and *Simp* for men. As identified by Peters (2017), the term "fuckboy" (alternatively spelled "fuckboi" or "fuccboi") is the first sexualized insult for men and most studies point to this character as a careless, misogynistic, and sex infatuated man with an absence of social skills. In our analysis, we saw the use of "#Fuckboi" by women when they were labeled as "sluts" or "whores" by men, through comments like, "Fuckbois act so fragile that even an article which has nothing to do with them hurts their glassy balls." Several comments included terms against men who supported women in the comment threads, with the use of terms like "Sissy," "Simp," and "Small Cock." The term *simp* refers to a male who overly desires female attention (Lomas, 2018-2019), thus seen as an outlier of the manosphere. One such comment was: "My anti feminism is not women hating. But I hate simps though." In another instance, a male participant questioned the number of likes a comment by a woman had received, by calling out the men who had liked it: "The saddest part is a few of the likes she got for that comment is from simping small cocks." As argued by Jones et al. (2019), the real tension for men is to prove their in-group membership by demonstrating a rejection of women. Such a rejection is more of a performance for their male peers, rather than a specific and deliberate attack on women. Demonstration of this masculinity also involves the rejection of non-masculine men. This corroborates findings that the presence of women on social media is seen as an ambitious threat to the notions of Indian masculinity (Halder and Jaishankar, 2016).

Using hateful and violent language or flaming has been a recurring area of enquiry in CMC research (Postmes et al., 2000; Moor, 2007; Hutchens et al., 2015). Identification with the ingroup and perceptions of offending by the outgroup, predicts why individuals flame in an online context. Beyond self-directed or individual factors, social identity plays an important role in online flaming. Our data support previous work, given the consistent presence of reactive aggression throughout the exchanges (Hutchens et al., 2015). Comments perceived as threatening to the ingroup social identity were met with particularly hostile responses (Moor, 2007; Perfumi, 2020). In the analyzed comments, where gender was salient due to the nature and themes of conversation as well as self-identification and categorization of speakers, the performance of identity was persistently aggressive, largely dismissive of the outgroup, as well as creative in its ability to use terms in ways that are self-serving to the in-group. When social identity cues are visible and relevant in an online context (as in these Facebook pages), participants are more likely to stereotype outgroup members. We noted the strong presence of gender stereotypes that ranged from traditional offline references to relatively novel terms indicating the emergence of new definitions of gender identity. Hutchens et al. (2015) found that online norms supporting flaming was an important determinant of flaming behavior and participants who used online platforms where political flaming was common, were more likely to do the same themselves. Most of our data included highly contested discussion on pages where flaming may be common. Thus, individuals interacting on these pages could perceive this as normative and use aggressive defenses more readily.

Due to the limited scope of our study, we were unable to examine a larger data corpus across a wider range of online pages, which may reveal differences in discursive content. Even though our data corpus picks on intersectionality, it does not completely reflect India's masculinities and femininities and its rather large offline space. Moreover, even in the online space, future research must investigate a wider corpus of online gender discourses to confirm the consistency of these themes and potentially reveal more cross-cultural discourses. While this analysis sheds light on how the internet has ushered in a new era of digital activism and identity performance, it falls short of elucidating the long-term implications of such discursive digital identities. For instance, our findings are in line with previous research highlighting online incivility and its potential for polarizing discourses among politically aligned groups by highlighting similar patterns of uncivil discourses among gender groups (Anderson et al., 2018). This underscores the need to focus on group-based interactions on social media and its long-term implications beyond political affiliation, to other contested identities. Studying online movements like MRA and Feminism leaves significant gaps in our knowledge of the specific emotions and justification of the speakers. We invite

researchers to look into these gaps in the hopes of shedding light on such complexities.

CONCLUSION

We examined social media interactions between men and women on public Facebook pages, around the contested themes of feminism and gender. In doing so our main aim was to explore these discursive strategies as social identity performances that are goal directed and normative. We analyzed the data with reference to the context which is marked by transforming gender understandings, and identified the emergence of new forms of discursive activism in online forums. We found that speakers conflicted over the discourse of feminism in various ways, by using traditional as well as novel terms that refer to descriptive meanings of gender categories. These included new discourses within feminism (pseudo feminism and choice feminism) and men's rights (Incels, MGTOW, etc.). There were also instances of flaming where the traditionally contested space of sex and sexual choice was used to challenge shifting gender roles. Lastly, interactions also highlighted several challenges to established meanings of feminism, by pointing toward intersectional identities. The findings add to the examination of digital influences on changing gender relations in the Global South, specifically from a social psychological perspective. They highlight how social identity and related norms are evolving through online interactions and shaping changing meanings and constructs of gender. As Perfumi (2020) suggests, these findings can contribute to an engaged understanding of normative influences on social media interactions and be particularly helpful in identifying both positive identity assertions by historically disadvantaged groups, as well as the negative consequences of online flaming and identity polarization. Moreover, the development of new discourses that are born out of digital spaces and interactions can extend beyond online communities to influence offline identification and gender relations. Thus, the findings reiterate a complicated and critical understanding of CMC that is both enabling gendered expressions and at the same time reinforcing gender-based anxieties that could result in unfulfilling and negative social media experiences.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ashoka University Institutional Review Board. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with national legislation and institutional requirements.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SM was the principal investigator and responsible for designing and undertaking the study overall, specially analysis and reporting. MT was the lead researcher and has worked on the method and design as well as data collection. DJ and KB were research assistants involved in data collation and supervised analysis, literature review and writing. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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A match made in heaven - "Indian matchmaking" in contemporary times

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The Indian subcontinent is ubiquitous with some social factors such as caste, gender (discrimination), poverty. One particular factor that has taken up the imaginations of the Netflix-watching audience of late is the practice of arranged marriages. A series called *Indian Matchmaking* catapulted the notion of arranged marriages into the drawing rooms of both people who are highly aware of the notion (probably having been through it themselves), as well as people who have a very vague idea about it. Nevertheless, it has become a highly talked about television show across the Anglophone world. A little before its release, another English-language reality show, *What the Love! with Karan Johar* was released by Netflix. This explores the world of romantic connections with a few chosen people from India. While placing itself on the opposite side of the spectrum when compared to *Indian Matchmaking,* in many ways, it lends itself to similar tropes, albeit under a progressive garb. This paper delves into the portrayal of people from India or of Indian origin in the reality shows *Indian Matchmaking* and *What the Love! with Karan Johar*. I examine the two shows through the lens of postfeminism and how, while raising several social issues that plague Indian society, both citizens and the diaspora, they inadvertently propagate a certain self-policing and conservatism that people, particularly women, are expected to adhere to.

KEYWORDS

postfeminism, feminism, subcontinent, diaspora, femininity, media, women, matchmaking

Introduction—Ever thine, ever mine, ever each other's[1] - Beethoven.

It was 2001. *Monsoon Wedding* came out in the cinemas in India, a primarily English-language movie by Nair (2001). It pushed multiple boundaries on issues that were seldom clubbed together in the same script—arranged marriages, broken hearts, child sexual abuse, incest, women utilizing their agency within the constructs of an Indian family. Primarily, though, it is a movie about an upper-middle class family based in New Delhi, planning an Indian wedding—from taking loans to make ends meet, making economies, balancing relatives, emotions, loyalties and betrayal, and ambitions of moving away from India.

1 Wallace, G. (2004). *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Beethoven's Letters 1790-1826, Vol. 1 of 2 by Lady Wallace, 1866 (Alpha ed.)*. Available online at: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/13065/13065-h/13065-h.htm#let15.

However, it wasn't a typical Bollywood song and dance movie. What made the movie truly stand out was the way it portrayed arranged marriages in India and how it challenged western prejudices against the practice. Perhaps, this was one of the first forays of bringing arranged marriages into the twenty-first century for the anglophone audience across the world. Still, when Nair made the film, she probably never thought that Indian weddings, particularly arranging love and marriage, would take over the small screen in the way it has today—that too as reality TV shows.

Online viewing platforms like Netflix have brought soaps, reality television, cinema from across the world onto one global platform. While many of these shows and cinemas are often in their vernacular languages, there is a plethora of English-language shows. While Indian matrimonial columns were brought into the digital age as early as 1997, for Indian matchmaking to become a part of international reality television, we had to wait for two more decades. *Indian Matchmaking* (Mundhra et al., 2020) and *What the Love! with Karan Johar* (Vagal, 2020)[2] are two reality shows (among others) that showcase Indian or Indian-origin people, and their tribulations in trying to get into relationships or dealing with their existing relationships. Neither of these shows is new in their genres, but as shows that are both in the English language and entirely portraying an Indian or Indian-origin cast, they are unique.

This paper aims at examining the presence of postfeminism in India that is showcased commercially, and how the shows spoken of above have contributed toward an image of middle-class cis-bodied Indian/Indian origin people without going into the intricacies of the complexities of Indian society, and sidelining how the population constantly live at the intersections of different social constructions.

I engage with both reality shows in detail, looking at how various characters have been treated, and how they have portrayed themselves. Then, looking at how and when the liberalization of India happened and affected changes, I use Rosalind Gill's (2007) understanding of postfeminism as a starting point—as a sensibility instead of a total shift or a historic moment. This framework is useful because the sensibility "emphasizes the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them" (2007, 149). Departing from this starting point, I then articulate my findings with the works of several theorists, including Angela McRobbie, Chandra Mohanty, Jesse Butler, and Simidele Dosekun to better situate the rise of postfeminism in the Indian context.[3] I conclude with a critique of both the shows.

Arranging love in the Indian context

In the Indian subcontinent, the term "love marriage" — a union based on romance—is often juxtaposed with the term "arranged marriage," where kinship structures and caste endogamy play parts in determining who marries whom. While marriages of both types coexist in the region, Western media discourses and popular imaginations tend to overrepresent the notion of the "universal" arranged marriage (Pande, 2014), meaning an arrangement where neither the bride nor the groom can exercise much or any agency, and the families set up the union as an alliance between the families.

A love marriage, the romantic liaising between two people, where it seems to be all about individuals connecting to each other is seen to be a westernized ideal in India that either people aspire to or else it is looked down upon by many as people who are disrespectful of their culture. This disrespect is not just accorded to people who marry without the consent of their families, but also to people who marry outside their caste, and outside their religion. Both these transgressions have been the cause of violence in India—with honor killings, revenge killings and this emerging idea of Love Jihad leading the way (Sharma, 2020). Indeed, much of commercial Indian cinema thrives on these tropes (Jha, 2018; Ezhilarasan, 2020; Nathan and Ramnath, 2021).

In 2005, the Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS)[4] (Desai et al., 2018) collected data to explore the spread and extent of mixed marriages in India (inter-caste, inter-class, and inter-religious). While it was noticed that there was a general growth in percentage for both interfaith and inter-caste marriages, in real numbers it is far lower than the number of endogamous marriages.

According to the Survey, the primary reasons attributed to mixed marriages are socio-economic status, bargaining power for women from better educated backgrounds, financial affluence. Also, there is an upward swing in the age-group of the women surveyed. Such mixed marriages are also urban-centric and were seen more among urban Christians than any other religious community. Both mixed marriages and Inter-caste marriages seemed to go up with more education.

The IHDS report also extrapolated that those Indian states that are considered to be more traditional had the lowest number of inter-faith marriages. Traditionality in India dictates that a marriage goes beyond two individuals. In the more traditional states, the parents deciding the spousal selection is highly

2 Throughout the paper I refer to these shows just as *Indian Matchmaking* and *What the Love!* without referring to their creators. Where necessary, I point out the episodes.

3 This paper focuses on only cis men and women, as they are the primary subjects in the two shows in question.

4 Indian Human Development (IHD) survey 2005.

common. The impact of westernized and western education and economic upward mobility has influenced the numbers of mixed marriages. It also acts as a critical measure of socio-economic upliftment.

India is fraught with different caste and religious identities, and a sense of superiority and "otherness" prevails among them. Thus, despite economic upliftment and educational exposure, caste and religious endogamy carries on undeterred, as seen in the report. There is a greater possibility of an inter-class marriage within the same caste and same religion due to upward mobility and higher education.

All this said, arranged marriages, of course, are not unique to the subcontinent. However, the way families get together to arrange the matches of two "suitable" people, and the industry it perpetuates is probably unmatched, as the wedding industry in India is a multi-billion-dollar industry. In India, as well as in Indian-origin communities across the world, arranged marriages are not limited to a particular religious, class, or caste group. A misplaced pride in the culture of families coming together, rather than individuals, often places people looking at getting into relationships under undue pressure.

The more traditional and conservative a community, higher the chance of people being persuaded to meet the local matchmaker. Because of the caste system still being prevalent among Indians everywhere (particularly Hindus), many people are expected to marry within their caste. In fact, all Indian newspapers carry matrimonial advertisements that are segregated along caste lines, religious lines and sects and sub-sects, depending on the region, as do the matrimonial websites.

The wedding industry's survival depends on a hegemonic structure that perpetuates gender stereotypes (given that same sex/same gender marriages are still neither a local nor a pan- global legal reality). In many parts of the world, there is a ceremonial giving away of the bride. Treating women as property, cattle, chattel is often made into a spiritual and emotional issue through rites and rituals, especially in Hinduism. Also, the practice of dowry/bride price/*mehr*/*lebola* (depending on the community) makes it a large financial transaction.

Indian Matchmaking catapulted the notion of arranged marriages into the drawing rooms of the Netflix watching audience. It became a highly talked about television show across the Anglophone world. Apparently on the opposite side of the spectrum is *What the Love!* is a show where Karan Johar—a renowned Bollywood filmmaker—takes it on himself to take a few individuals on a journey to find love. It is much like the shows that have been the makings of daytime television in many countries of the global north (for instance, McRobbie, 2004). What is ironic are the inadvertent similarities between the two shows in their treatment of people, and reifying stereotypes in femininities and masculinities.

Indian matchmaking

Many Netflix viewers had only heard about South Asian (read Indian) arranged marriages. *Indian Matchmaking* gave the non-South Asian viewer a glimpse into the first step of arranged marriages within Indian families both in India and abroad—that of the matchmaker. The potential brides and grooms on the show all came from middle to upper-middle class financial backgrounds, primarily Hindus—from lawyers to entrepreneurs to diamond merchants to high school counselors, it covered quite a wide spectrum. There is a certain farcicalness about the entire show. It seems to be more of a conversation starter about norms and traditions vs. an in-depth understanding of the custom of arranged marriages in India.

The show concentrates on middle and upper middle-class Indians in India and the United States. The matchmaker is a woman called Sima Taparia, who introduces herself to all her clients as "Sima from Mumbai." Sima's own adult life almost started with her own marriage—at the age of 19 and a half, in 1983. For her, it was inconceivable that she would go into a love marriage (Episode 2). She puts a lot of focus on the "biodatas" (a term used widely in India instead of résumé) of the candidates. "Everything we come to know by the biodata" (Episode 1).

Sima has a very particular take on marriage—she is a mix of superstitions and traditionality and believes that matches cannot happen without families being involved. At one point, she says that "matching horoscopes is like insurance in a marriage… even if horoscopes don't match, many people proceed, especially in the US" (Episode 5). There is a strong sense of trying to normalize arranged marriages through the show, and how successful they are. Many of the episodes open with vignettes from couples who have been together for many years. One couple, Suresh and Sunita Kabra, say that they have been together for 42 years, and they hadn't met till the day of their wedding (Episode 5). Another couple, Raj and Rashmi, met several years back through a newspaper, India Abroad, and they matched through the matrimonial columns. Rashmi jokes about being a "mail-order bride" (Episode 6).

The show operates transnationally between the Indians in India and the diaspora in the US. The potential candidates who have allowed themselves (and their closets, in some cases) to be scrutinized by Sima and the audience are Aparna Shewakramani, a 34-year-old attorney from Houston, Texas, Pradhyuman Maloo, a 30-year-old jeweler from Mumbai, Nadia Christina Jagessar, a 33-year-old event planner from New Jersey, Vyasar Ganesan, a 30-year old teacher and college counselor from Austin, Akshay Jakhete, a 25-year-old businessman from Mumbai, Ankita Bansal, a 30-year old businesswoman from New Delhi, and lastly, Rupam, a 36-year-old Sikh woman divorceé from Denver, who has a daughter from a previous marriage. Most of these people have tried dating and having relationships without any success. Hence, they decided to fall

back on the cultural "advantage" of being Indian (or of Indian origin) and going through a matchmaker.

Throughout the show, what becomes evident throughout the show is that some people have strangely high expectations from this matchmaking process. Although dating apps' algorithms have not worked for them, they expect a human being to anticipate all their shortcomings and flaws and get a perfect match for them. Sima does everything from going to face-readers to astrologers to see if her candidates are well-matched for each other. However, we find out after the show that not even one of her matches actually worked out.

The candidates come from very varied personal backgrounds. Aparna is quite fixed on what she wants, but despite the trials of matchmaking, she feels that she is still in the need for a matchmaker because what she is doing by herself is not working. Pradhyuman feels he is quite a catch and keeps rejecting proposals because he wants to find someone he feels attracted to immediately *via* their photographs. However, he is forced to confront his loneliness when among his married friends. Nadia, despite being very warm and open-minded, often gets rejected by Indian people because of her not being perceived as Indian enough. Vyasar, who is generally very easygoing, has what Sima calls a "complicated family history."

Akshay was educated in the US. However, despite this exposure, he seems to be quite tied to his mother's apron strings. He was surprised that he had to do his own laundry when living abroad. He barely has any say on his marriage—his mother actually makes it a point to mention this over dinner 1 day—"you get married this year [your brother and his wife], have a baby next year."

Ankita Bansal, a Delhi-based entrepreneur, is often called "*chalu*" (a Hindi word that means characterless or immoral). Rupam, with her divorce and her child from a previous marriage, makes her a difficult candidate to match—"Divorce carries stigma, especially with a kid." Sima tells her, "You will get less options" and "you will have to compromise." We also learn through the episodes that both Aparna's and Vyasar's parents are divorced, and that Vyasar's father is an ex-convict who was convicted for attempted murder.

With Aparna being an attorney, Sima shares with the audience that "if the females are lawyers in India, people are scared." Aparna's criteria for meeting potential matches, among many points, is primarily that the person must be a US citizen and that he be of North Indian descent as she herself is Sindhi.[5] However, Sima initially brushes aside the criteria laid out by Aparna, saying "many of these things are not important for a happy married life"—a relationship cannot be tailormade.

Sima also feels that "Aparna is the hardest type of candidate to match because she thinks finding a life partner is like ordering from a menu" and that "Aparna has to compromise" (Episode 1). When Aparna puts down an age criterion after a failed match Sima says that she is "not stable" (Episode 2). Yet, when we meet Pradhyuman, the Mumbai-based jeweler, we learn that he has rejected over a 150 proposals over a period of 18 months based on people's looks in their bio data photographs, and Sima doesn't have anything negative to say about him (Episode 1).

Sima shares with the audience that Pradhyuman "has very high expectations," that he "has to change his superficial nature," but the boy is "good." This "good" boy ignores several matches that Sima sends his way, and finally meets one of the matches, Snehal, a girl from Jalgaon. While they seemed to get along, from the very beginning of the meeting, Pradhyuman is dismissive of Snehal for being from a small town. He calls her "simple" and "homely[6]" (Episode 3).

The show opens with vignettes of people who say things like "the girl has to be a bit flexible," and different aspects of arranged marriages are brought to the forefront—caste, height, "slim, tall, beautiful, but with a good nature," and the importance of astrology is brought up. While the Indian constitution has abolished casteism, and discrimination on the basis of caste, it carries on unchecked throughout the Indian subcontinent and the diaspora.

What is also interesting is the euphemisms that people use when they don't want to refer to caste—similarly situated, similar cultural backgrounds, etc. While to the untrained eye, it might mean that a person who's Indian wants another Indian person to have more cultural connect, in actuality, there is pressure on marrying within the same community, the same strata and so on. It must be mentioned here that Sima does set people up with others who are from different regions in India, which means there may be cultural differences galore.

When Nadia's family discusses her Indian-Guyanese heritage, she mentions that, often, for other Indians, she is just not Indian enough—they date her but marry someone who is more Indian than her. She still prefers Indian men because she feels there is a larger cultural connect there. When Sima presents her with matches, Nadia's family asks Sima if the prospective grooms are aware of their family heritage, and her prompt reply is that "caste" is not a problem with anybody.

This aspect of Nadia's Guyanese heritage is particularly pertinent here because many people of Indian origin who hail from various African countries, or the Caribbean are descendants of many indentured laborers who were taken across by the British in order to get cheap labor for their plantations. This has a particular caste aspect associated with it as well, and it often creates a sense of superiority among other Indian diaspora who may have chosen to move to various countries out of choice.

5 A region of modern-day Pakistan, but people who refer to themselves as Sindhi are primarily those who moved to India on the partition of India in 1947.

6 Someone who likes being at home, and being a homemaker. Not to be confused with the meaning used in the United States of being less than average to look at.

Sima says that she is a "a good girl, but match is difficult," probably because of this very reason (Episode 1).

Being a "good girl" but difficult to match with prospective suitors is something that comes up with Rupam as well. However, when Sima does get her two prospective matches, her father rejects one of them on the basis of the fact that he was married to an "American" (read as white) woman previously (Episode 7).

For Ankita, Sima decides to team up with a fellow matchmaker, Geeta, who initially comes across as someone quite different from Sima. While Sima focuses more on bringing two families together, apparently Geeta focuses more on why the candidate wants to get married. While this seemed like a promising start, when Geeta meets Ankita to find out what she wants, she says that "it is our duty as a woman to understand that, in a marriage, the woman gives the emotional side of herself much more than the man does." Ankita shares with the audience that Geeta made women feel "like inferior objects." Despite this, she sets Ankita up on a date with Kshitij, who she gets along with quite well. Despite Ankita's misgivings about Geeta, she feels understood about the type of partner she wants (Episode 6).

Geeta had held back a vital piece of information—about Kshitij being a divorcee. On getting to know this, Sima makes light of it, despite her own reservations on Rupam's divorce. Also, the fact that it was hidden from Ankita is brushed aside by Sima (Episode 7). Sima recommends Ankita to the counselor, Varkha, where Ankita confronts many of her body image issues. However, her connecting with Varkha, the guidance counselor/life coach, also made her realize that she wanted to concentrate more on her entrepreneurial skills rather than running behind getting married (Episode 8).

Despite the double standards that we see in Sima's treatment of her male and female candidates, the show ends with a lot of possibilities for the future. Akshay gets engaged to Radhika in Udaipur, with his mother beaming with pride. Rupam finds someone a dating app, and Sima is really happy about the fact that she found someone. Yet, as mentioned earlier, nothing actually panned out.

What the love!

What the love! is a distinct departure from *Indian Matchmaking,* but as I show later on, there is a striking similarity between the two shows. In *What the love!,* Karan Johar plays the role of matchmaker and takes six candidates on a quick makeover journey [both emotional and physical, somewhat like the old *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Collins and Williams, 2003) rebooted later as the *Queer Eye* (Collins, 2018)] while Johar tries to talk them down from the romantic ideals that his films have set for many people across the subcontinent and the Indian diaspora. The six candidates are chosen based on how the hosts feel they can be fixed or elevated from their current situation.

The first episode is a party, albeit a bit contrived, where several people ostensibly looking for life partners have been gathered. Karan Johar, the host of the party, shares with the audience that the party is full of people who are "fashion disasters on display" who need a lot of help. For helping him on his savior journey, he is joined by stylist Maneka Harisinghani and make-up, hair, and grooming expert Shaan Muttathil.

The three co-hosts chat to the people they want to select, and touch upon many issues that affect people in Indian society. Issues that come up are the societal expectations of women needing to get married in their twenties, weight, the exhibitions put on for prospective suitors, the general assumption that people are heterosexual, and much more.

Beyond the one-on-one chats, the party also has two games, one being rolling the dice, and the other being spinning a wheel. These games allow Karan Johar to ask questions to random people, but also for him to share something about himself. Johar talks about having paid for sex with a man—something that is a reality that we all know exists, but seldom does anyone talk about it.

At various points of the episode, it seems that the party guests are keen on making the most of their screen time, and they carry out conversations that wouldn't have been out of place in one of Johar's romantic cinematic productions. Through all this, Johar selects the candidates, both men and women, who need "help," for their show—mostly straight, and one gay man: Aashi, a pathologist, who's thrust into the marriage market by her parents, where she is severely judged; Rabanne, a gay male model and graphics designer, who feels it is time for him to look more seriously into relationships; Geetika, a fashion designer, who survived a near-fatal accident that required her to undergo multiple stitches on her face, leaving her with a scar, and many insecurities; Rina, who's boyfriend of 2 years told her to her face that she isn't pretty and ghosted her,; Vaibhav, who has spent most of his adult life trying to build his career, and hiding behind his former-fat-boy image; Rameez, who seems to know what he wants but his hyper-planning is all about masking insecurities.

Certain aspects of the first episode allowed us a glimpse of what was to be expected. The first person they talk to, Aashi, mentions her caste almost immediately. While this wasn't a scripted show, some critics felt it could have been edited out (Shukla, 2020). However, given that the reality of the Indian marriage and love market is defined by these boundaries, it was a pertinent aspect to leave in. Secondly, during the games, Johar makes it a point to speak about equality for women, and women's empowerment, but it came across as more of a jibe against a person who said that men should pay on a date than a meaningful foray into understanding the mindsets of women within patriarchal and postfeminist constructions.

What the first episode doesn't tell us is that the overall makeover is all done within a day—emotional, mental, and physical—and that the specialists brought over to help with them (except the physical makeover aspect) are celebrities who may

have faced similar issues in their lives without necessarily having the expertise to deal with the issues presented to them.

Each episode starts with Johar, the host, chatting with the candidates before sending them off with a celebrity on a mock date that he observes and comments on. After that, the candidate is sent for her/his emotional/mental makeover, and lastly for a physical makeover—clothing, makeup, hairstyle. Then Johar sends the candidates on two actual dates (followed by a camera crew), after which the candidate must decide who she/he would like to meet again. The show's cliffhanger moment is whether the date chosen has also chosen the candidate. The dates, for the most part, are stereotypically romantic, and somewhat like Johar's film sequences.

The second episode starts with Aashi, the pathologist. She brings up her issues with size, her rejection in the marriage market—11 times in a row, her lowering of expectations from what she wants in a life partner, her sexual abuse at the hands of a relative as a child, and so on. She also mentions how she was made to stand on a weighing scale by a prospective groom's mother, and how they were astounded by the fact that she wasn't over 90 kilos in weight. Her caste aspect is no longer referred to. After this initial chat with Johar, she is sent on a mock date with an actor, Arjun Kapoor, a mental makeover by comedienne Mallika Dua, and then a physical makeover by the stylist, Maneka, and Shaan, and the grooming expert. Maneka wants to "jazz" her up and make her look "foxy." After her makeover, she is sent on two dates—one with a doctor, and another with a transportation entrepreneur.

While the show opens with the promise of bringing people up to their fullest potential, what it does is fall within the tropes that it had seemed to make promises against. It might be unfair to put the entire blame on the show. The candidates themselves seemed to be keen on fitting into existing tropes around masculinity and femininity, and certain aspects of heteronormativity. For instance, Rabanne, the sole gay candidate, makes no bones about wanting to be the "damsel" in a relationship, which comes dangerously close to subscribing heteronormative roles and patterns in gay relationships.[7] He even declares that he wants to be carried around (physically).

When Rabanne is sent on two dates, one with the epitome of masculinity and machismo, Karanbeer, he feels a bit too overpowered and pushed with the physical advances. On his second date, he meets with a makeup artist, Aadarsh, who he almost immediately asks him about his sexual position preference -whether he's a top, a bottom or versatile[8]—which takes Aadarsh aback a bit. While Aadarsh does not fit the typical notions of masculinity, it may be safe to assume that Rabanne did not ask Karanbeer the same questions because in many instances, aggressive masculinity is equated to being a top, and Aadarsh's general demeanor being typically masculine may have elicited the question from Rabanne's side.

The two heterosexual men who were brought on the show for makeovers, Vaibhav and Rameez, seem to be quite the opposites of each other. Vaibhav has concentrated on his career to a point where it has become synonymous with his identity, and Rameez is a former flight attendant whose claim to fame is that he has been to over 75 countries, but strangely, is poor in geography. When Vaibhav, who is somewhat shy and retiring, is sent on a prep date with Sunny Leone, a Bollywood actor and former porn actor, she is of the opinion that there is nothing better than a man who takes control, that "he's a boy, he needs to become a man." While she speaks of how Indian mothers mollycoddle their sons, and that in turn becomes emotional baggage (something that we see in *Indian Matchmaking*), Leone's idea of masculinity is borderline toxic.

Rameez, on the other hand, seems to have very fixed ideas of what he wants in life, with a laundry list of things that he wants from his partner. When he tells people that he has been to over 75 countries, his being a former flight attendant begs us to surmise that he has been there on work rather than to explore. He seems to want to give the impression of being more worldly wise than he actually is. He comes across as someone who has been pampered a lot, but is more shy than arrogant, and rather confused. He seems to have a very specific notion of masculinity and relationships, and for him, a relationship seems to be more about ticking boxes rather than actually experiencing a relationship. When he meets with Cyrus Sahukar, a Bollywood actor and former video jockey, for his mental makeover, Sahukar points out to him that it seems like he has a wedding dress ready, and whoever doesn't fit into it is unsuitable. Johar, too, pointed out that he seems to want a woman to blend herself into his life if only to tick his boxes.

Two more women come on the show—Geetika, a fashion designer, and Reena Kumari, who works in a corporate. Geetika went through a life-altering incident, where she was in a road accident and her face was severely affected and left behind a scar which makes her extremely conscious. Reena left behind a toxic relationship where her partner ghosted her after 2 years, and that too on their anniversary. When she is on a prep date with Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan, she is taken through various scenarios by Khan, and it turns out that she has a pattern for

7 Queer relationships often strive to break down stereotypes around one partner being dominant, another submissive, one being more masculine, another more feminine. At a supermarket in Johannesburg, a till lady asked me if my husband and I were friends as she had noticed that we always seemed to be together. On telling her that we were husbands, she cooed over it, and then asked who the husband was and who the wife was. While it wasn't surprising to get this sort of question, to have it being pushed forward from within the community makes it somewhat painful.

8 For the uninitiated, the top is considered to be more dominant or active, the bottom more submissive or passive, and a person is versatile when they can play both roles. This is a very rudimentary description of what may be sexually expected from a man who has sex with men, and is, by no means, exhaustive.

allowing people to take control of her. Even when she was sent for two dates, she was instantly attracted to the person who came across as more typically masculine and had the air of being more in control.

Geetika's car accident happened on her 21st birthday. Since then, she has always felt as if people are curious to know more about her facial scar as opposed to her as a person. While the scar was unnoticeable till it was pointed out, her focusing on it, despite being conventionally pretty, just goes to prove the point that the stereotypes of beauty that are fed into people, and how they are expected to portray themselves.

Of weddings, neoliberalism and postfeminism in the desi context

Indian Matchmaking and *What the Love!* are entertaining, and many of the characters are quite endearing as well. They have been the source of much enjoyment, cringe-fests, and a ton of discussions, both academic and non-academic. As dissimilar as Johar and Sima might seem, they are branches of the same tree. They both are acting as matchmakers—one traditional, one modern. In both shows, they, advertently or inadvertently, pointed out what the "faults" were with the people who were up for being matched. In one, there was giving into superstition, in another, in good western makeover show fashion, they were given life-skill advice by special guests. Yet, why shouldn't they be there? After all, reality shows such as these have been a part of day-time television internationally for a long, long time.

However, these shows bringing together Indians from across borders becoming a part of an international platform is because they are a manifestation of a much larger movement, both a part of the Bollywood culture industry, as we shall see below. Also, just the way they are part of something much bigger than small-screen entertainment, the discussion that has been brought about goes way beyond the shows.

India's (economic) liberalization came hand in hand with global neo-liberalization, at the end of the twentieth century. Various corporates wanted to be the vanguard of this movement. To signify the shift, the Miss World Pageant hosted in Bangalore (now known as Bengaluru) in 1996 was the ultimate "we are here" by the Indian corporate world and more. However, there were protests galore—protests from both the right wing as well as the left wing. One segment saying that it went against traditional Indian values (the ideal Indian woman) and the other as to how it was nothing but a display of capitalism and commodification.

The organizers saw it as a mode of going global, and as the perfect steppingstone onto the development bandwagon. Thus, this pageant becomes foundational for a rise in consumerist passions and aspirational behavior, toward getting into the modeling/beauty industry. Yet, at the same time, it became a site of contestation of values clashing on all sides. While not new, the pageant can also be seen as a catalyst for further enforcing the usage of usage femininity as strength, and consumerist behavior as a sign of success and social acknowledgment (Mazzarella, 2015).

The neo-liberalization, along with the movement toward a global village, contrasted with rising rightwing ideology and nationalism is creating new uncertainties for women to navigate these realms (Mitra-Kahn, 2012). These uncertainties have also fed the need for people to showcase what they are capable of financially—or at least show, even if they don't have the capacity. This is where the intersection of neoliberalism with postfeminism is all too present in Indian society transnationally. Women supposedly make life-defining choices out of their own free will but end up being acknowledged only by their consumerism. The uniqueness that they are apparently seeking through their consumerist choices is actually being driven by the market paradigm where they are all trying to fit into what is seen as appropriate. Gill (2007) speaks of postfeminism as sensibilities in which "the notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline, and the vilification of those who make the 'wrong' choices (become too fat, too thin, or have the audacity or bad judgment to grow older)" (2007, 163).

The neoliberal turn that India made fed into what can be eponymously termed as the Bollywood Wedding,[9] "a class-based, gendered response to India's turn to neoliberalism" (Kapur, 2014, 93). The big Bollywood wedding is born out of the notions of tradition, familial bonds and a glossy version of feel-good nationalism showcased in Bollywood cinema as well as several soaps across the multiple television channels in neo-liberal India. Weddings in India have always been socio-culturally meaningful along with a showcasing of economic might. Yet, with the new age, weddings have become sites of high levels of conspicuous consumption and materialism. The consumption is a head-nod to having arrived in society. Indeed, the same Bollywood culture that is promoted both by private individuals and the public body is all too present in the way Indian-ness is promoted outside India. With all the glamor and glitter of Bollywood, it becomes a reinvention of the same tropes that perhaps generations of people have tried to undo in post-independence India (Kapur, 2014).

The wedding scenario, particularly Hindu weddings, are shown as a celebration of two families coming together. Archaic rituals such as seeing the bride for the first time, celebrating the son-in-law, offering dowry by the bride's father (only to be refused by the groom's family), giving away of the bride, and caste endogamy are showcased *ad nauseum*. This is where there is a break between diasporic cinema and proper Bollywood productions. Diasporic cinema, such as *Monsoon Wedding* and

9 Bollywood being the nickname for the Hindi cinema industry, primarily based out of Mumbai, India.

Bride and Prejudice (Chaddha, 2004), is seen to exist outside the mainstream cinema productions, "independent or interstitial because of their supposed marginalized mode of production within the context of xenophobia, empire, nationalisms, and global capitalism" (Desai, 2013, 207).

Yet, for some, there is a conflation of diasporic productions within Bollywood. Movies like *Monsoon Wedding, Bride and Prejudice* are set in India, which helps it remain cloaked in Bollywood-ness, but meant for an external audience. Similarly, the reality shows spoken about in this paper are structured for a larger audience, beyond the subcontinent, beyond the diaspora. The platform lends itself to a global audience, not just relating to the North or the South (Desai, 2013).

Making marriages the site of conspicuous consumption, replicating archaic rituals, deconstructing feminist stances, etc. is a bastion of the middle class. Indeed, the middle class is particularly vicious in the way it practices gender discrimination—especially with poor people. The new middle class as a political construct in an amalgamation of being "a demographic category, a potential market, or an identity associated with consumerist lifestyles—quiet a shift from being the site of anti-colonial struggle. At the same time, it is juxtaposed with being the primary bastion of liberalism, being anti-caste, secular, despite having strong affiliations with the Hindu right (Bhatt et al., 2010).

Today, the ubiquitous Indian wedding is the posterchild of "an unabashed departure from an earlier Gandhian-Nehruvian embarrassment around conspicuous consumption in a predominantly poor nation" (Kapur, 2014, 98, 99). It is also a landscape of enacting and redesigning traditionality, of how people ought to conduct themselves within the confines of a culture. This is where several aspects of postfeminism come in. Some specific aspects of postfeminism that remain constant are: "femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice, and empowerment; the dominance of the makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture, and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference" (Gill, 2007, 149). The wedding is also a scene of portraying uniqueness while giving into hetero-patriarchic tradition.

The postfeminist woman's perceived empowerment is through acts of feminization. She is required to absorb various feminist ideals and simultaneously move themselves away from the political sphere. It rides on the assumption that the goals of the feminist movement have been achieved, thus ostensibly (un)doing feminism (McRobbie, 2009) into a more individualized narrative. This notion of "femininity as a bodily property" is to be used and weaponize it (Gill, 2007, 149). While within this framework, women are to make their own choices, it feeds into the trope of what is considered generically "womanly" and sexy. While some see these specific acts as daily acts of empowerment and political choices, others, particularly traditional feminists, view it as moving away from collective, political action toward individual consumerism.

This goes hand in hand with the idea of "self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline" (Gill, 2007), where women are expected to constantly school and align themselves with socio-cultural expectation. Oddly, this self-surveillance is seen to be a personal choice, and not something foisted on them. While this is not new, it has reached a new level of being extended into one's intimate spheres (155).

Media, contemporary culture and even the State has used feminism to signal the emancipation of women, to a point where gender equality (whether it is a ground level reality or not) is understood as common sense. Various successes of feminism are used to showcase why feminism has become irrelevant in today's era (McRobbie, 2009; Roy, 2012).

Postfeminism does not discount the existence of feminism. Instead, it posits itself as a replacement of feminism with an understanding that the previous battles of feminism are displaced by the postfeminist ideals of individualism, choice, and empowerment. Particularly, with the rise of neoliberalism and capitalism, as the neoliberal movements absorbed the left's discourse selectively, McRobbie argues that neoliberal capitalism has actively attacked and undermined feminism and feminist movements (2009).

Postfeminism works to conceal new modes of gender regulation and relies heavily on a "framework of capacity, freedom, change, and gender equality" (McRobbie, 2009, 51). The "new sexual contract" moves away from the previous limiting gender regimes and works through "incitements and enticements" toward "both progressive but also consummately and reassuringly feminine" but the "abandonment of critique of patriarchy is a requirement of the new sexual contract" (57).

However, McRobbie falls short of including women of color within her understanding of postfeminism, as something that reinforces racial divisions and reinstates whiteness as the racial standard. Butler (2013) challenges this assumption—is postfeminism for white girls only? The assumption that postfeminism excludes women of color, or that they do not appear in postfeminist pop culture, per Butler, seems to not consider the several women of color who are enacting postfeminism. With the number of Black and Latinx popstars and girl groups themselves, it is evident that there is a representation of postfeminism among women of color, who "clearly embody and enact postfeminism: they embrace femininity and the consumption of feminine goods; they espouse a vocabulary of independence, choice, empowerment, and sexual freedom; and they construct themselves (or are constructed by others) as heterosexual subjects" (48).

Thus, Butler wants an "Intersectional Approach to PostFeminism." It is certain that the representation of women of color in media is according to the standards of the heteronormative white woman of a particular class and

a stereotype—as long as the women of color fit into the "normative conceptions of race, class, gender, and sexuality" (2013, 49, 50). These women bring diversity into the media constructions for sure but are portrayed only in a particular light—the torchbearers of the exotic, the sultry (and in many ways, the primal) other (50, 51). Taking off from Butler, Dosekun (2015) feels that postfeminism itself is considered to be "Western," and the sensibility has been "deemed as 'white and middle class by default [because], anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self'" (Tasker and Negra, 2007, 2 in Dosekun, 2015, 961).

Hence, while the inclusion of women of color may be seen as an unsettling force within the otherwise white postfeminism, it comes at a cost. Dosekun expands the interrogation of feminism not just through an intersectional approach, but also through a transnational approach, "to designate that which exceeds and traverses such boundaries, as well as the analytic mode of thinking across them" (961). She questions the solidity of the constructions of the West/East (and in turn, Global North/Global South) divisions, and the limitations posted by scholars which has prevented a better engagement with postfeminism outside the west.

Much earlier, Chandra Mohanty had raised a similar critique of western scholars looking at the global south through a singular lens. Her critique of western scholars constructing the "'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject" (1988, 61) has aided in problematizing and evaluating the West/East, North/South narrative. Within this narrative, the West is seen as a site of progress, espousing the causes of postfeminism, and the East as a site of victimhood of women where feminism is yet to perform its magic to emancipate the oppressed (Dosekun, 2015, 962). This notion of "us" vs. "them" is similar to the white savior trope (Mutua, 2001) that has often been seen in different colonial and post-colonial narrative constructions. What is often ignored is that women from the global south live in plurality. Thus, treating them as a monolith is reductive to say the least (Mohanty, 2003). With the plurality comes the performance of local feminisms, which are also ignored.

Dosekun questions McRobbie's concept of the non-western "global girl" who is a "*tame, derivative copy of its putative Western original*" (2015, 963), who aspires toward a level of consumerism that helps her toward the goal of becoming the desirable Westernized woman. This "global girl," while aiding in creating at least one aspect of the subject, comes dangerously close to the monolithic third world woman (Mohanty, 1988). It conflates women of all classes and different levels of privilege and precarity together, which disallows an understanding of how postfeminism reaches particular classes of people, and how they perform it without necessarily trying to aspire to be western (Dosekun, 2015, 963).

By looking at class as a central criterion for inclusion in the said "post-feminist global sisterhood," Dosekun moves away from others (964), and suggests that we consider postfeminism from a transnational perspective. Doing this, Dosekun offers us a framework within which post-feminism fertilizes the imaginations of the "feminine subjects" who are able on all levels to buy into what postfeminism has to offer (966).

What Dosekun suggests in the global south context, given the tremendous inequalities, grassroot level feminism works parallel to middle-class women empowerment where feminism is performed by constructing the working professional woman and is further commodified through the consumption of the beauty and fashion industry. With the fact that grassroot level feminism, especially in a place like India, is more about ascertaining access to civil and political rights for women, higher class, educated, urban women possibly bypass feminism directly toward consumption-based postfeminism (967). The undoing of feminism by post-feminism is a transnational phenomenon—for those women who believe that they are empowered, they have it all, and they are exercising their choice through consumption, and they have little idea as to how they came to have it all.

As an example, Dosekun refers to Parameswaran's (2004) where she speaks of how global beauty pageants are producing beauty queens for India who are the new perfect example of performing an empowered Indian femininity which is, unsurprisingly, unavailable for most Indian women. This particular representation not only satisfies the middle-class consumer but also the nationalist sentiment of how India has become truly globalized (2015, 969). It also pushes forward a highly feminized femininity, that is also in many ways not just sexualized but heterosexualized.

Donner's (2013) work in India highlights how different feminisms and status are intertwined. Lower middle-class women do not consider going out for work in order to keep their status separate from the people they are socially closest to—the lower working class, often working as domestic help. The "us" and "them" are fenced off in this way. On the other hand, Donner's interactions with more westernized families had several women of the household working. This is a true juxtaposition of becoming part of the labor force for survival vs. emancipation. This goes parallel to the juxtaposition of uneven new developments with the old customs/traditions.

Similarly, Grover's (2011) work in the Delhi slums is very telling—she explored how lower caste men and women marry and remarry with far fewer restrictions visa vis their upper-caste counterparts (within the urban poor). Within Hinduism, there is a general lack of the acknowledgment of divorce. Although legally there are steps that can be taken, it is stigmatized to a great extent. This reflects within the diaspora as well. Grover laments how the Indian middle-class has become the self-appointed representative of global trends. The notion of divorce is studied mostly within the context of this middle class. However, her work in the Delhi slums is telling—about how the "husband" needs to be a good provider—with often this ideology that he should be the sole bread-earner. It is a bit of a fall from grace if the wife has to go out to work. Also, a failure to provide for

the home might induce a woman to look for another person as a protector and provider. The moralities affiliated here are around being hard-pressed, the need for protection, etc.

There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to exercising agency and feminism in a place like India, where different aspects of caste, class and religion constantly intersect. Having parallel feminisms has led to different stances when it comes to some women who have entered a formerly all-men's arena in India. Yet, despite this, many women do not like being termed as feminists. For instance, in Indian cinema, several women directors who have made ground-breaking cinema, showcasing the rage and the taking back of control and agency of the oppressed, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, do not like aligning themselves with the word "feminist." There is a tendency of thinking of the word "feminist" as ugly and loaded. When Bengali Actor-Director Aparna Sen was interviewed, she refused to be called a feminist despite having contributed to feminism with her work (Dutta, 2019, 16). Reema Kagti, a Bollywood film maker, has made films with strong women protagonists. She seems to believe that Bollywood has come of age where one doesn't need to differentiate between the genders of the directors. However, at the same time she has been called out for being too "aggressive" with behavior that is happily accepted of male directors (Dutta, 2019, 119, 133).

The aftermath—Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match!

Derné (2003) studied how a decade of globalization from the early 1990s created a burgeoning upwardly mobile consumerist middle class in India that tried to situate itself as global citizens while thwarting any influence of it on internal, traditional setups. He speaks of an Indian man, Amit, who watches everything that global media has to offer, who wants an arranged marriage, but fears that the new global media that was available for everyone's consumption was "distorting the desires of the younger generation" (12). Derné points out middle-class Indian men like Amit were absorbing only what fits into his socio-cultural understandings—valorization of masculinity in the form of violence because it feeds the local ideals of patriarchy but ignoring the challenges to traditionality.

Two decades later, we see the same replicating itself in both shows—with Sima in *Indian Matchmaking* saying that Aparna is too educated, and that in India, people are afraid of women lawyers, and with Aashi, the pathologist in *What the Love!* recounting the number of times she was made to parade in front of prospective grooms, and a time when she was actually made to stand on a weighing scale by a prospective groom's mother.

What the Love!, while trying to break boundaries and bringing to the forefront multiple issues that plague Indian society, doesn't move away from stereotypes where women are made to seem more feminine and fragile, men are made to seem more masculine and macho. Even when women are portrayed as powerful, it is within the constructs of what is deemed powerful by normative standards.

Makeover shows that give people makeovers to not become more presentable for a career, but to fit ideals for a relationship reifies these standards. For instance, Aashi, during her makeover, was made to look "foxy," as mentioned earlier. That is easily interpreted as giving in to heteronormative standards on what is sexy. While the physical makeover might be a boost for Aashi, who has been through the wringer with people judging her on her looks and weight, it cannot help but reinforce toxic social standards. The choice of words is extremely important here. Johar, while trying to set people up on prospective romantic adventures, tries to bring together way too many aspects of social reality than it can handle and lands up fitting into conventionalities that it initially seemed to want to walk away from.

While the candidates on *What the Love!* were not followed up on, the cast from *Indian Matchmaking* have been interviewed on different platforms. One of the first programs was an online interview with (Netflix India, 2020). She chats with all the contestants and found out that Akshay broke off the engagement in record time—what happened to the poor fiancée, we don't get to know. Also, Aparna says that she received a lot of support from women everywhere about her not giving into pressure to get married and being herself. Ankita said that she thought Sima had made a difference to her life by introducing her to a life coach and had made her more focused on her career. Almost everyone who was interviewed by Singh mentioned that they had people calling them up for re "*Sisterhood with Shaili*," a program hosted by Shaili Chopra on *SheThePeople TV*, interviewed some of the candidates. That is where Ankita said that "the word 'compromise' is very frivolously used in terms of marriage. Marriage, in itself, is quite an anti-woman construct. In India, especially in Hindu customs, the daughter is literally 'donated' at the wedding by the father, and the more anglophone western version has the giving away of the bride by the father. Irrespective of how they reach the altar, the mode remains the same. Bridehood turns out to be a parade of beauty standards and wifehood turns out to be about learning adjustment and compromise" (SheThePeople, 2020).

With *Indian Matchmaking*, Netflix normalizes and even dignifies traditional matchmaking, whether it is a matter of social pressure that makes the candidates come forth or whether it is just general loneliness. Some people who have broken away from typical marriages do not necessarily stay away from marriage, but rather, they marry on their own terms and not the terms that society dictates. Society validates marriage and married women. Unmarried women stand out because wifehood and motherhood are seen as the essence of womanhood.

As mentioned earlier, *Indian Matchmaking* opens with these vignettes of older people who got married through different sorts of arrangements—from advertisements to matchmakers. They

present a picture of heteronormative stability, dependability, and contentment. It feeds into the ethos of the show, as to why arranged marriages might be better after all.

Yet, while not saying a single word about it, the vignettes speak volumes about caste and religious endogamy. The Indian landscape itself veers toward high levels of caste and religious endogamy (or homogamy). Mixed marriages, inter-caste, inter-class marriages occur mostly where there is at least a semblance of autonomy when it comes to choosing partners (Goli et al., 2013). These marriages are often viewed as an exercising of power and feminism. In the context of religious, caste, class, and other social pressures, it is indeed a brave step. To be able to exercise any choice in the matter of a partner is almost radical in a country where child marriages and exchange of dowry are still prevalent despite being illegal (Mukherjee and Sekher, 2017).

Postfeminism in the Indian context is a complicated site. Replacing the white middle-class (and upwards) woman, we have the educated, brown, upper caste, middle class (and upwards) woman. For her, performing femininity within the bounds of culture and tradition is seen as a choice. As mentioned above, power comes from different places. However, to give up on power, while it might seem like a choice being exercised, is far from the actuality. Women who are well-placed and "choose" motherhood over a working life are encouraged to do so by social conservatism and a false valorization of childbearing. For many, to choose to stop working is a luxury that they cannot afford.

Both the series seem to fit the essence of postfeminism and most definitely seem to fit how the site of the production of postfeminism is not just in white cultures, but everywhere, even with the way heteronormativity is played out. For instance, when Rabanne (in *What the Love!*) expresses that he wants to be the damsel in a relationship, he feeds the notion of being the woman in a relationship—the damsel in distress waiting for her knight in shining armor.

While this reproduction of this stereotype of gay relationships needing someone to be masculine and someone to be feminine does no favors to the LGBT community trying hard to break out of these heteronormative standards, it also does not take into account the different pressures women are put into in a relationship or marriage where they are expected to compromise from the word "go." They are expected to take on their husbands' last name to putting their husbands' careers before their own, not to mention being expected to lessen their engaging with their birth family.

The candidates of the shows are easy to connect with. We have met these people in our own lives—from individuals scarred by abusive relationships to children of broken marriages, and much more. It is easy to empathize with many of them. Yet, at the same time, in both shows, the male candidates, barring a couple, exhibit a lot of entitlement. When the same entitlement is shown by the women (particularly in *Indian Matchmaking*), they are seen as difficult and are expected to compromise.

Both shows have different levels of handholding for the candidates. However, how much of this is actually helping them, or for that matter, the audience viewing the show? The celebrities who are brought in on *What the Love!,* not to take away from their own lives' challenges, can hardly be called qualified to advice people who they have just met on the show. An astrologer brought in to advise Aparna on *Indian Matchmaking*, the face-reader who doesn't get a single prediction right, feeds into an archaic vision of Indian people and their relationships. However, this vision is actually closer to day-to-day reality than not. Indian jewelers thrive on having a special astrology division. There, people consult with in-house astrologers, to be told that buying gems worth several thousand rupees is the way to their salvation—both material and spiritual. At times, people who can ill-afford them go into debt at times in order to buy these jewels. Indian television has several soaps already egging on superstition and patriarchal beliefs. The question here is—do we need to have the same enforced on a reality show?

By the time the season ends, Aparna's strong stance about who she wants as a life partner is suddenly relegated to the cosmic powers of an astrologer. Nadia's need to find approval of her ethnic identity drives her toward finding an Indian (or Indian origin) partner, while trying to navigate her not being Indian enough in the eyes of other types of Indian immigrants. They are showcased as independent choices by the women. However, the complexities of identity, caste, class and privilege keep intersecting in these matches—upholding some, and pushing down others.

For many people, particularly in India, as mentioned above, wifehood could mean to not have to work menial jobs and protection from unwanted advances. It is a form of feminist agency, which someone from a higher class may never identify with. It could also be akin to caste aspirations. For others, working outside the home is emancipation. However, where middle class (and upwards) people choose to give into the more hegemonic constructs of marriage (a parade of products and wealth and giving away of the bride) even there, the notion of an unmarried woman, or someone who isn't at least seeing someone or betrothed to someone, is seen to be incomplete and, at times, a threat. Divorce rates in India are one of the lowest in the world, with just 1% of married people opting for divorce. It is often perceived to be a Western construct, and the stigma around it is such that women are often socially invalidated. Particularly for women who don't have their own means of support, it is hardly a matter of choice, despite abysmal situations on the home front. Sometimes, they feel it is just better to be separated. The stigma of divorce is way too much to handle (Deccan Herald, 2022).

In a complex cultural entanglement like India's, where parallel feminisms and postfeminisms work together, it is important to produce more socially aware, less policed reality shows instead of reifying toxic normativities, patriarchy and superstitions. These two shows are some of the first forays

of Indian reality television in the English language. While they open the doors to some excruciatingly painful realities in India, they don't delve into serious conversations around it, nor do they try to break out of them much. However, whether they will learn from their mistakes and come back for further seasons with less to complain about remains to be seen.

Author's note

DG has aimed at looking at the construction of love and marriage in modern India through the lens of two popular Netflix reality shows and how this has inadvertently pushed forward a postfeminist perspective.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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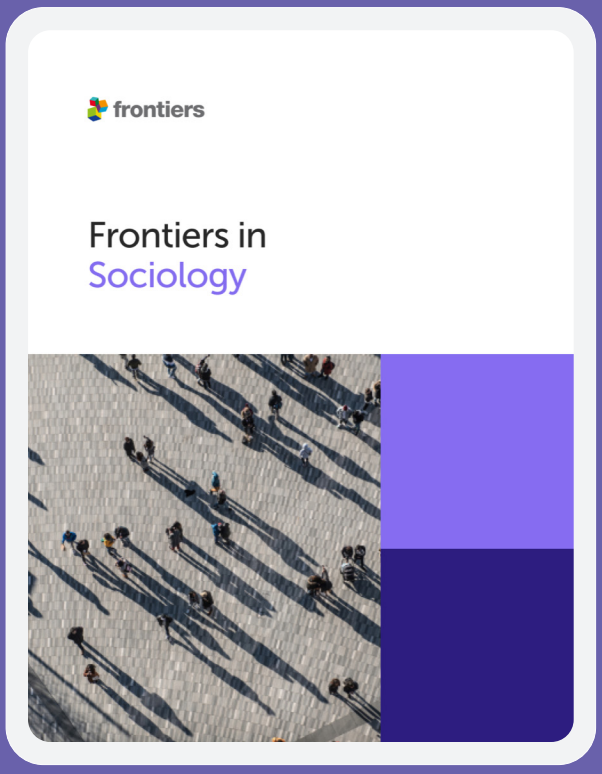

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