

Creating Content for Instagram: Digital Feminist Activism and the Politics of Class

Creando contenidos para *Instagram*: activismo feminista digital y política de clase

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Fecha de envío: 16 de noviembre de 2022. Fecha de dictamen: 23 de abril de 2023. Fecha de aceptación: 31 de mayo de 2023.

Abstract

This article explores some of the classed dynamics of doing digital feminist activism. Based on 30 qualitative in-depth interviews with feminist activists, who are based in Germany and the UK, the article examines the ways in which class background and class inequalities shape feminists' experiences of being politically active on Instagram. Taking Instagram's visual focus as a starting point for analysis, the article demonstrates the know-how and editorial skills required to produce visually appealing content. Access to this form of expertise is not equally available, however, and class background affects —though does not determine— who feels confident and at ease in producing visually engaging content. Shifting to a different set of knowledges, the second part of the article homes in on a widely shared sense amongst the activists that they had to know and say the “right” things when taking part in activism online. Self-education was deemed an important feature of doing digital feminist activism, and this article critically explores the classed, but also racialised politics of digital “learning cultures”, and the ways in which the apparent requirement “to know” may have exclusionary effects.

Resumen

El artículo explora algunas dinámicas de clase en la práctica del activismo digital feminista. Basado en 30 entrevistas en profundidad con activistas feministas que residen en Alemania y Reino Unido, examina las formas en las que el origen y las desigualdades de clase modulan las experiencias feministas de *ser* políticamente activas en *Instagram*. Tomando el marco visual de *Instagram* como punto de partida para el análisis, muestra los conocimientos técnicos y las habilidades editoriales requeridos para producir contenidos visualmente atractivos. Por otra parte, haciendo foco en otro conjunto de saberes, la segunda parte se centra en la sensación, ampliamente compartida entre los activistas, de que tienen que saber y decir las cosas “correctas” cuando participan en el activismo en línea. El *ser autodidacta* se consideró una característica importante en la práctica del activismo feminista digital, y este artículo explora críticamente la política clasista, pero también racializada, de las “culturas de aprendizaje” digitales, y las formas en que ese aparente requisito de “saber” puede tener efectos excluyentes.

Keywords: Digital feminism; Instagram; class; self; self-education.

Palabras clave: Feminismo digital; Instagram; clase; sí mismo; autoeducación.

Feminism has experienced a wave of unprecedented popularity in the western world in recent years (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Rottenberg, 2018). Messages about feminism are frequently circulated online and feminist activism increasingly, though by no means exclusively, takes place in digital spaces. As Hester Baer (2016: 18) has pointed out, “digital activism constitutes a paradigm shift within feminist protest culture” and there is now a sizable body of research in feminist media studies, which highlights the benefits and pitfalls of such activism (García González, 2021 and 2023; Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles, 2020; Kanai, 2020 and 2021; Laudano, 2019; Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2019; Rovetto, 2019; Steele, 2021). For instance, in terms of access, researchers have highlighted exclusions around age and class due to a lack of media literacy (Fotopoulou, 2016; Latina and Docherty, 2014) while others have demonstrated that certain sites provide a platform for hitherto marginalised groups, such as Black women and trans communities (Jackson and Banaszczyk, 2016; Jackson *et al.*, 2020;

Steele, 2021). In addition, research into digital feminist activism has shown that social media's affordances can be exploited to reach a large audience across different localities, facilitate open engagement with feminist ideas, raise consciousness, and re-frame dominant cultural narratives (Clark, 2016; Mendes *et al.*, 2019). Researchers have also demonstrated that digital feminist activism can have tangible effects (Clark, 2016). According to Jackson *et al.* (2020: XXXII), "such hashtags as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo have had far-reaching influence, moving debates about identity politics, inequality, violence, and citizenship from the margins to the center and into places as crucial as presidential agendas". Existing research has, thus, provided a range of perspectives on the ways in which digital feminism operates. By focusing on digital feminist activism in Germany and the UK, and exploring how class background shapes feminist activists' participation and practice in online spaces, this article contributes to scholarship on the emancipatory, but also exclusionary, potential of contemporary feminist movements.

In relation to class, social media, and feminist activism, Jackson *et al.* (2020: XXX) have argued that "Twitter has low financial and technological barriers to entry. Using relatively inexpensive equipment, and with limited technical knowledge, ordinary people can engage in public speech and actions without mediation by the mainstream media or other traditional sources of power". Jackson *et al.* statement rightly draws attention to the comparatively low barriers to joining social media platforms and resonates with Julianne Guillard's (2016) finding that certain sites, such as Tumblr, have provided a platform for young, working-class women. However, other research on the ways in which class background affects participation in digital feminist movements has highlighted class-based exclusions. Studying China's #MeToo movement, Siyuan Yin and Yu Sun (2021: 1188) have demonstrated that "underprivileged women in China, such as working-class and rural women, are largely marginalised or even excluded in feminist online deliberations". Likewise, Paromita Pain's (2021: 3140) analysis of tweets and interviews with participants and activists of the resurgent #MeToo India movement has shown that poor women remain "critically marginalised" (Sehgal, 2021). Also analysing tweets and exploring the hashtag "#BeingFemaleinNigeria", Simidele Dosekun (2022: 2) has highlighted the predominance of "the voice, experiences, and concerns of a heterosexual, educated, and capacious urban career woman belonging to Nigeria's higher socio-economic classes". These studies, thus, draw attention to the ways in which class inequalities

shape digital feminist activism.

By drawing on interviews with digital feminist activists in Germany and the UK, this article adds to the burgeoning literature on digital feminist activism more broadly, and issues around class, access, and exclusion more specifically. Informed by feminist and Bourdieusian approaches to studying class (Bull, 2018 and 2019; Reay, 1997; Skeggs, 1997, 2003 and 2010), the article seeks to grasp how economic inequality shapes participation in digital feminist activism and is reproduced. My attention to the classed dimensions of participation in digital feminist activism means that my “point of departure” (Butler, 1993: 19) in this article is class, though I also highlight intersections with race at various stages in my analysis. In focusing on the dimension of class, I do not seek to indicate that this is the most salient axis of difference in the context of digital feminist activism and that other forms of inequality, such as racism, heteronormativity, and ageism matter less. Butler’s expression “point of departure” figures as a reminder of her wider argument about the impossibility of thinking through “contemporary power in its complexity”. My analysis, *pace* Butler, is thus necessarily incomplete. As such, I invite readers to place the arguments presented here in the context of wider research about the emancipatory potential of digital feminist activism. In shedding light on classed exclusions, I regard my contribution as adding one facet to a much broader debate on the gendered, racialised, and classed dynamics of doing feminism online.

I develop the arguments presented in this article in the following manner: first, I introduce the research methods underpinning the empirical study that this article is based on. Second, I analyse my qualitative data by highlighting the know-how that is involved in producing feminist content online. As I show, many of my research participants had relevant professional expertise and training, which enabled them to produce content that was visually appealing. Resonating with Fotopoulou’s (2016: 999) argument that “the exclusions created are not plainly a matter of access and being online or offline”, but that they are more “sophisticated”, my analysis draws attention to the ways in which relevant know-how, but also cultural and social capital mediate participation in digital feminist activism. Class background matters in terms of facilitating, though by no means determining, ease and confidence in communicating online. As the subsequent empirical section demonstrates, being knowledgeable was also relevant in terms of a widely shared perception that digital feminist activists had to self-educate and “possess” the “right” knowledge. However, knowledge acquisition as

well as related confidence in knowing and saying the “right” things were classed and racialised. The “obligation to «know»” (Kanai, 2020: 35), and the ways in which it intersects with notions of the “feminist «perfect»” can (re-)produce classed and racialised hierarchies (Kanai, 2020: 32). As I argue in my concluding reflections, the interplay between class and digital feminist activism is thus not only about issues of production (who has the know-how and expertise to confidently take part?), as well as representation and consumption (whose voices are represented and who engages with the content?), but also about the classed selves (Skeggs, 1997; 2003 and 2010) this type of activism calls forth. Arguably, middle-class subjects may be better placed to accrue value through their activism, raising complex questions about class and identity politics in the context of doing feminism online.

The Empirical Study: Research Methods and Sample

The qualitative data analysed in this article stems from 30 in-depth interviews with feminist activists who were politically active online and based in Germany (15) and the UK (15). Interviews were conducted in early 2022 and I used Instagram as a recruitment tool. As such, most of the activists I spoke to were mainly active on Instagram, though many also had accounts with other social media platforms, and some had run or were running personal blogs and websites. I spoke to feminist activists who were campaigning in the field of care work, and more specifically, mothering/parenting. The focus on activists working in the field of care was due to the theoretical orientation of my study, including an interest in the parallels between digital and reproductive labour (Jarrett, 2016). The emphasis on care work was also timely during the Covid-19 pandemic and in a wider context where women perform the vast work of care, which continues to be devalued (The Care Collective, 2020). The focus on what I call “care activists” thus made sense, theoretically, politically, but also methodologically: digital feminist activism is a vast and varied field; by speaking to care activists, I was able to home in on a particular sub-group of feminist activists.

After I obtained research ethics approval, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw, I recruited research participants on Instagram and conducted interviews online (Zoom), which lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. Interviews were held in German or English and subsequently transcribed for data analysis. All statements discussed in this article that were originally in German were translated by the author. To protect the research participants’ anonymity, I use

pseudonyms and remain vague about the campaigns that individual activists were involved in. I provide information about the research participants' racial and class backgrounds, but not their age, location, sexuality, nationality, or other markers of their identities. As such, the analysis presented here does not delve into the specificities of "care activism" that the participants pursued, and also does not explore the role of national context (notably Germany and the UK) in the dynamics described here. This is not to suggest that these specificities do not matter; in relation to national context, for example, there are national differences in the ways in which class politics are lived out and how they intersect with race (for a discussion of the German context in relation to debates about intersectionality, see for example Knapp, 2005). As outlined in my preceding discussion of Butler's (1993) reflections on points of departure, my analysis of the classed politics of content production for Instagram is necessarily incomplete. Further research is required to explore in more detail the ways in which national context affects the dynamics described here, and how, for example, these dynamics may or may not differ in the Latin American context.

The areas of care activism that the research participants were engaged in ranged from raising awareness about pregnancy and baby loss amongst Black women and women of colour, providing financial and legal advice to single mothers/parents, supporting Black and ethnically diverse parents in raising neuro-diverse children, to educating about feminist parenting and parenting for social change, advocating for recognition of the importance of care work, offering advice on raising bi-racial children as well as living in multicultural families, and using art and other creative outputs to highlight the central, but devalued role of care work. As this overview of the activists' areas of engagement illustrates, this was a markedly political space, and the activists were mindful of a range of intersecting power-dynamics.

The research aimed to recruit women and non-binary people, who identified as a feminist and activist; were 18 or above; and currently based in Germany or the UK. The sample that I arrived at was composed as follows: five research participants were Black, three Asian, two mixed-race (Asian and East African, as well as Black Caribbean/white respectively), and 20 white. Of those research participants who were white, three —all based in Germany— had "*Migrationshintergrund*" (migratory background) and had migrated to Germany from Central and Eastern Europe in their childhood. Perhaps unsurprisingly —given the study's focus on feminist activism around care and mothering/parenting— almost all (28) research participants had

children (between one to three). The research participants were evenly divided between metropolitan and rural areas; the youngest was 31 and the oldest 62, with most research participants being in their late thirties/early forties. Six research participants identified as LGBTQ+, and all as women. None of the research participants stated they had a disability, but several identified with other, marginalised groups, such as —and using the words of the research participants: being a single mother/parent, having a chronic illness, living with a mental health issue, and being a mother of an autistic child. The activists were differently positioned in relation to making a living from their activism. A small minority generated income from their activism, most did not, but many contemplated monetising their activist work.

Just over half (16) described their class background as middle-class, though several research participants emphasised the precarity of this status; as one put it, she had high cultural, but low economic capital. Ten research participants described their class background as working-class, three as lower middle-class, and one stated that her background was working-class, but that she was now middle-class. This rather broad-brush overview demonstrates that it is difficult to operate with a “dichotomy between «working» and «middle class»” (Reay, 1997: 225). I asked research participants how they would describe their class background and use the wording they preferred. However, I am aware of the shortfalls of proceeding in this manner and do not want to suggest that class positions are static. They are, instead, more usefully thought of as dynamic (Reay, 1997; Skeggs, 1997), which is an insight that I shall revisit in the following section.

The Visual Focus of Instagram: Feminist Activism and Professionalism

When discussing the production of feminist content on Instagram, many research participants said that editorial skills were involved, especially in the context of producing visually appealing posts. As Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin (2020: 1) have argued in relation to Instagram, “the *visual* focus is particularly important in the success and relevance of the platform”. Feminists who are active on Instagram navigate an image-centric culture (Sehgal, 2021), which means that know-how is involved in creating content. Referring to accounts of activists who attempt to make a living from their activism, Vera (white, working-class) observed:

“I am aware that the Stories of many content creators, who also make a living from

it, are becoming ever more aesthetic. They are very pretty, and the font is pretty, and the background is pretty. And they add filters and it's never too florid. I work in journalism and that means I evaluate it and think to myself: «Wow, it's really edited, nicely presented»”.

Resonating with Vera's observation, Silvia (white, middle-class) argued that professionalism is involved in feminist content production: “It's professional when it comes to the writing, the thought that goes into it, the research, and the networking. And the publication, the dissemination, and the interaction. It's highly professional”.

Notably, the research participants did not only comment on the professionalism involved in other activists' content creation, but also in relation to their own activist work. Sara (white, lower middle-class), for example, informed me that her activist group used two different logos, one for feminist networks, and one for more official contexts, such as policymaking:

“The briefing for the graphic designer was that our work has to look serious when it lands on Söder's [German politician] desk, so that it does not get brushed off as «women's stuff». So, it's almost the same logo, but the colours are different. And we use the more serious looking one in political contexts”.

Earlier in the interview, Sara had told me that she worked in communications and had taken on the role of social media manager for the feminist campaign she was involved in. She thus approached her voluntary activism with the professionalism of her paid work. Olga (white, lower middle-class) also referred to the professionalism of the feminist campaign she worked on. She was collaborating with an activist who had a background in events management and explained:

“We have PDFs, where we introduce ourselves using professional photographs. It looks like an application for a company or something like that. So, it really is super professional, because we are simply positioned in this way, in terms of our careers. And it has been like that from the beginning, as it were, also in relation to the layout [of the posts]”.

These statements illustrate that activists draw on their own and colleagues' professional skills to produce content that does not get “brushed off” and that is “super professional”. None of these research participants made a living from their activism.

Interestingly, many research participants commented on their own, relevant professional backgrounds, such as journalism (Vera), communications (Sara), photography (Olga), events management (in relation to Olga's colleague), or digital

marketing, graphic design, picture editing, and writing:

“My background is in digital marketing anyway, so I’m definitely using SEO [search engine optimisation] and marketing strategies and things like that in order to attempt to reach more people”. (Hannah, white, middle-class)

“For Instagram and Facebook, when I do posts, most often I also do graphics for them as I am a graphic designer. So, I’ll also do images. For Instagram, and particularly if it’s an Instagram Reel, then I will make sure the images altogether are edited properly as a Reel. Finely research what song would go with this particular thing that I’m talking about, and then I put it out”. (Sonali, Asian, middle-class)

“I’m a picture editor, my job is [...] Actually, it’s practically impossible to show me a picture that I’m happy with [...] One of the things about my Instagram is I try not to have anything on there that I’m not really, really happy with, and I try to have a theme”. (Anna, white, middle-class)

“I am an actress and writer in the creative field, which I find is very handy for doing this type of thing on social media. And I probably feel that’s why I gravitate towards Instagram a bit more”. (Uchenna, Black, working-class)

These statements show that many research participants had professional backgrounds which equipped them with the relevant know-how. Interestingly, and as transpires through some of the quotes provided here, research participants often mentioned their professional expertise in passing. Arguably, in discussing the professional standards of doing feminism online, the research participants did not only observe that a certain degree of professionalism was involved, but also normalised it. Olga’s statement, for example, that her and her colleague “are simply positioned in this way” brushes over the know-how required to produce visually appealing campaigns. This know-how involves access to relevant education and training, as well as to industries, such as the cultural and creative industries, which, in the UK at least, have attracted working-class and lower middle-class women (McRobbie, 2016), but where workers from middle-class backgrounds are overrepresented (Brook, O’Brien and Taylor, 2018). This raises questions about the kinds of people that can easily set up digital feminist campaigns, even when access to platforms is free of charge and widely available through a range of devices. Equally important, producing well-designed content requires cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973). Arguably, a feel for visually appealing content does not only involve familiarity with contemporary visual and digital culture on Instagram, but also being confident in one’s own taste, which is acquired and often classed (Bourdieu, 1984). This form of knowledge may be more difficult to obtain than professional skills and

expertise. Likewise, it appears that several of the activists I spoke to were able to mobilise their own networks to get help. Sara, for example, worked with a graphic designer to achieve the desired logos. The “strength” of social networks is also classed, however (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012); not everybody has access to graphic designers who, presumably, offer their work for free. A focus on the high standards apparently required to produce content on Instagram brings to the fore classed dynamics in terms of activists’ educational and professional backgrounds, but also cultural and social capital.

As is evident from the statements provided, not all the research participants identified as middle-class. Vera, for example, who had described her class background as working-class, had migrated to Germany from Eastern Europe as a child. Her parents were educated but struggled financially after they had moved to Germany, and subsequently received benefits. As a journalist, she was now working in a middle-class profession and was in stable employment. Her positioning in relation to class was thus complex, highlighting well-rehearsed feminist criticisms of social class categories (Reay, 1997), such as “working-class” and “middle-class”, as unable to grasp the multiplicity of women’s positionings. Instead of conceptualising class as a location and as somewhat static, class is more helpfully understood as a process (Skeggs, 2003). Bearing these insights in mind, I do not seek to posit a straightforward relationship between activists’ classed positioning(s) on the one hand, and their participation in digital feminism on the other. Activists such as Vera, who identified as working-class, but who had an Instagram account with over 30.000 followers, caution against arguments that position feminists from working-class backgrounds as always-already excluded from doing feminism on Instagram. By highlighting the skills involved in producing content on Instagram, and the ways in which middle-class activists may find it easier to have the relevant expertise, I seek to move beyond debates on the interplay between class and digital feminist activism that focus on exclusion, marginalisation, and media literacy. These are important dimensions, but perhaps not the only ones. The visual culture of Instagram begs questions about the skills required to produce “high-quality” content, and whether activists from middle-class backgrounds may find themselves more likely to possess (rather than acquire, see Skeggs, 2003) the necessary know-how.

Interestingly, research participants who did not have a background in the cultural and creative industries, such as Samantha (Black, middle-class), had signed

up for relevant training. Samantha had a medical qualification and had taken a Canva course on Instagram:

“It was a lady on Instagram, and she was providing a course, like a Canva workshop. Canva is this kind of app that people use, and I use it quite a lot for creating my content, my posts, for example. So, she was just providing a one-hour workshop on how to use Canva, how to use it to your advantage, different kinds of hints and tips, and it was really quite insightful”.

Like Samantha, Nina (Black, working-class) drew attention to the technical know-how and skills required to do feminism online:

“My husband works in IT, so he’s very self-taught in some aspects. The website I have now, he did that for me. When it comes to Instagram, creating videos, editing, things like that, I’ve learnt along the way. It will be a case of, I might have seen content created by another influencer that I have some sort of rapport with. Then I’ll put a DM «Oh, I saw that video, what did you use, how did you do it?» [...] It’s very much learning as I go along. It’s just acquired knowledge over the years. And, of course, apps are changing, new things are coming in, so it’s always constantly having to learn”.

As opposed to the activists who possess the relevant skills due to their professional backgrounds, Samantha and Nina must gain them, either through taking training courses, or constant learning and “acquired knowledge”. I find it noteworthy that Samantha and Nina, who are both Black, talked at length about how they had developed the necessary know-how to create content online. Samantha’s and Nina’s statements differed from the almost casual remarks of those research participants who, due to their professional backgrounds, already had the relevant expertise. Not all of these research participants were white —Sonali, for example, identified as Asian and Uchenna as Black— and not all of them identified as middle-class, as I have discussed. Likewise, there were some middle-class research participants who had professional backgrounds that were not related to content creation. Nevertheless, I argue that know-how is required to produce content, which is deemed of high quality, and that the relevant skills may be more readily available to those who are already privileged based on their positionings in relation to class and race.

Vera (white, working-class) was very aware of the skills involved in producing appealing content on social media, including the related, and potentially exclusionary, effects:

“You have to be able to do it. I take my hat off and really ask myself how people, who have had nothing to do with texts and storytelling and media or advertising, managed to become successful. I believe that it’s relatively, yes, that it’s really difficult. Because, it’s a bit like, as if I started something on the hoof, I don’t know, like mixing different chemical substances. And, somehow, I’d be successful and develop a cure for cancer. I’m exaggerating. But it doesn’t happen just like that”.

Reflecting on her feminist “bubble” —a term frequently employed by German-speaking participants to describe the online circles they engaged with—, Vera observed that it was “a privileged bubble, in the sense of, that many have something to do with texts in one way or another and know how to write”. Vera went on to say:

“The accounts of those who have fewer privileges, are smaller. Definitely. And, through that, they have less visibility and are less successful. And there is necessarily, suddenly, this correlation: «I didn’t go to university, I am not white, I am not from this journalistic, elitist bubble, therefore, I struggle more». Therefore, the accounts are smaller”.

Vera continued her reflections by drawing attention to the racist biases of algorithms (Noble, 2018), thus highlighting the ways in which classed and racialised inequalities shape minoritized activists’ visibility and follower numbers. Participation in digital feminist activism on Instagram, therefore, does not only seem to be classed in terms of access and media literacy, but also in terms of the specific textual and visual skills required to become visible. Visibility, of course, is gendered (Banet-Weiser, 2018), racialised (Benard, 2016), as well as classed (Casey and Littler, 2022) and can be problematic for minoritized groups, including sexual minorities and gender non-conforming people (Zhang, 2022). In relation to class, visibility can be “unstable, precarious, and often short-lived” (Casey and Littler, 2022: 14). In highlighting barriers to achieving visibility, I therefore do not seek to embrace it uncritically, but wish to add another layer to our understanding of how class inequalities may intersect with participation in digital feminist activism.

Continuing with this line of argument, it is also interesting to reflect on the ways in which expertise and professional background may affect activists’ ability to take their activism into the “offline” world. Teresa (white, working-class) told me that she had been invited to speak to regional media following her involvement in online activism, including giving interviews to newspapers and having conversations with local politicians:

“And then it also really happened «in live», meaning I was invited to the townhall, and the press reported on it. And that’s always a bit [...] I would say it probably would not have gone so well if my professional background had not been in exactly this area and if they had not invited me, officially, as an expert in this area”.

Teresa refers to her professional background; as an academic, who researched topics related to her activism, she had become involved in a range of impact and engagement activities and was used to speaking to policymakers and the press. This, however, did not come to her easily, due to her working-class background:

“And class is an issue. I have a degree now, but my parents do not. Which I notice again and again. Especially, when you are active in very discursive contexts, because rhetoric is so important, and how you present, the self-confidence. When I’m face-to-face with politicians, I become very aware of it, again, how easily you get excluded from these circles. If you have a different, yes, a different mindset, a different —when you simply bring a different self-confidence to the table (it seems easier)”.

Thanks to her professional standing, Teresa is invited to “sit at the table”. However, her participation feels precarious; she senses how “easily you can get excluded from these circles”. Her reflections on self-confidence allude to the embodied aspects of living and navigating class differences (Bourdieu, 1980; Bull, 2019). Teresa is in the room, and yet she feels out of place. She implies that she does not feel confident, contrasting her experience with those who, presumably due to class privilege, “simply bring a different self-confidence to the table”. Similar to the preceding argument about acquired knowledges, participation in online and offline forms of activism is not determined by class background, but class inequalities nonetheless may affect who can join in more readily and feel more at ease in “these circles”. In the next section, I will continue my line of inquiry about the knowledge required to take part in digital feminist activism by shifting my focus to the politics of being, and being seen to be, a knowledgeable feminist.

On “saying the right things”: Class, Race, and the Need “to know”

In her pioneering research on digital feminist activism, Akane Kanai (2021: 519) uses the phrase “digital feminist «knowledge cultures»” to capture “the everyday practices of learning facilitated and incited through digital culture”. Kanai (2020: 35) observes that activists shared “a sense that one needed to continually keep up with new knowledges, and access to digital spaces and news feeds arguably extended this obligation to

«know» and to accordingly govern the feminist self in new ways”. Resonating with Kanai’s findings, many of my research participants suggested there was a requirement to be knowledgeable when taking part in online feminist activism. Olga (white, lower middle-class), for example, told me about the amount of work involved in doing digital feminism:

“It is definitely work. Just thinking about the time, how much time I spend on it, whether —regardless of whether I’m on my PC, how many books I’ve read on it, yes, how much I scroll on my phone to read posts from other mothers and so on. So, it is really, almost, yes, a journalistic endeavour, somehow. Because increasingly more is expected of us. And, I also have the feeling that it has to do with Instagram. That the expectations of us are high. And that we have to do our research. For example, when we are getting inquiries from mothers: who are they? What kind of background do they have? We have to be ever more careful”.

Olga expresses a sentiment that many research participants shared: doing activism is work (Mendes, 2022), and engaging in self-education is part of this work. In this context, Olga’s reference to journalism does not only bespeak the professional ethos that seems to underpin feminist activism on Instagram, but also highlights that activists are expected to learn (reading posts by other mothers; reading books), do their research (“we have to do our research”), and to vet those who may want to feature in their campaigns (exploring the backgrounds of mothers who get in touch).

As Olga’s statement suggests, these pressures seem to have intensified and relate to a wide range of competencies, including “platform literacy” (Latina and Docherty, 2014: 1104), which is required to find relevant activists, posts, and hashtags. For German-speaking research participants, an additional, useful competency was linguistic. Shruti (mixed-race, working-class) was a native speaker of English, but lived in Berlin at the time of interview. When I asked her whether she followed German and/or English-speaking activists, she responded:

“I think I’m about 50/50 German, English. But you know what? We’ve got far more Germans who tweet half in German, half in English. Whereas I think if I lived in an English-speaking country, I probably wouldn’t follow that many Germans, maybe”.

Shruti’s statement suggests that many German-speaking activists also post in English, which requires foreign language skills. As Daniela Latina and Stevie Docherty (2014) have observed, feminist vocabularies are rapidly changing in online discourse and literacy skills are required to keep up with conversations. We may add to this point

linguistic competencies; many terms used by my German-speaking research participants emanated from the English language; this requires acts of translation, but also some knowledge of English as a foreign language, which relies on access to relevant education and, arguably, constitutes a form of middle-class cultural capital.

Given the “obligation to «know»” (Kanai, 2020: 35), it is perhaps unsurprising that research participants spent “a lot of time on drafting content before posting it” (Petra, white, working-class). Towards the end of our conversation, Petra elaborated, stating:

“Sometimes, I find —and I say this as a person who is using it— online feminism [*Netzfeminismus*], very, very exclusive. That means, that I often wish that people who are outside of this bubble can join, or understand things, or take part. And I believe, even though I think that I’m at a relatively high level, I sometimes have feelings of anxiety at the thought of getting involved. Because I may not know enough about something”.

Petra concluded her reflections by talking about feminist online groups where the tone was “harsh” and claiming that “the gatekeeping is pretty hard”. Petra’s observations shed light on the exclusions that can emanate from the widely shared sense that activists need to be knowledgeable. As I have outlined in the preceding section, knowledge, know-how and expertise are not equally accessible to all.

Discussing the knowledge cultures of digital feminist activism, many research participants shared a fear of getting it wrong. Sonali (Asian, middle-class) told me that she was spending too much time (about two hours per day) on social media. When I asked her why she thought this was too much time, she responded:

“For me, it’s the anxiety and not saying the right things, and I’ve said something wrong, and somebody will then make a comment. That’s why sometimes I think it’s too much because I’m spending too much time worrying about what I’ve written. Have I written the right thing? Am I saying the right thing? It’s me more than anyone else”.

Likewise, Vera (white, working-class) expressed relief that she had not yet been the subject of a “shitstorm”. “That hasn’t happened yet. Touch wood. I am also scared of it if it should happen”. Joanna (white, middle-class), too, voiced her fears. Reflecting on the differences between taking part in a closed Facebook group, and doing activism on Instagram, she said:

“I worry about putting stuff out there. I worry on Instagram. The group is a safe place for me to be a bad feminist and make mistakes. As soon as something goes out on Instagram, you’re opening yourself up to so much more criticism”.

Sonali, Vera, and Joanna’s statements all imply that it is possible to say the “right things”, even though, as feminist activists, they were dealing with complex issues which, arguably, involves the exploration of different viewpoints. I will return to this issue below; here, I wish to highlight the fear of getting it wrong. Interestingly, this fear has been reported in wider research on young women’s social media use (Gill, 2021: 25), where a “disturbing finding is the prevalence of severe anxiety among young women about «getting it wrong» on social media”. Arguably, the fear of getting it wrong, of being judged and criticised, is related to the surveillance politics of social media, but is also gendered and linked to “patterns of social surveillance and discipline that have been observed in cultures of femininity more broadly” (Kanai, 2020: 25). This fear may be particularly pronounced amongst the activists interviewed for this study, who not only identified as women, but also as mothers (28 out of 30) and given that mothering is often subjected to moral judgment. And while my comparatively small sample of thirty does not allow me to draw generalisable conclusions, it is noteworthy that it was mainly, though not exclusively, working-class and ethnically diverse research participants who voiced their fears of getting it wrong. For example, Sonali’s anxiety about not “saying the right things” contrasted with Karen’s (white, middle-class) statement. When I asked her whether she was afraid of being criticised for her content, she responded:

“Not very, I would say. Because I think about most of it in advance, because I try to only post things that I feel certain about. And if something happens later on, which means that I no longer feel certain, then it’s something where I would say, «I’ll delete it». But I have to say, I’ve been active on social media for a few years now and you learn a lot. And you also learn how to deal with things [...] And if somebody corrects me when I make a mistake, then I am totally, I mean, totally open and ready to learn from it and to change something or to delete something, or, I don’t know, add a trigger warning, or something like that. But I feel relatively certain about my content, but, on the other hand, I also don’t feel very scared of making a mistake”.

I cite Karen’s statement at length to communicate the confidence she conveyed. Her not feeling “very scared of making a mistake” contrasts with the time Sonali spends on “worrying about what I’ve written”. Race, class, and potentially also age —Karen was in her late thirties, and Sonali in her early sixties— seem to play a role in shaping who

feels confident about the knowledge they have, but also who feels able to make (and address) “mistakes” (Fotopoulou, 2016). Sonali’s fear of receiving critical comments contrasts with Karen’s faith in being able to address her “mistakes” (for further discussion of classed narratives around “getting it right” see also Bull, 2019, in the context of classical music practice).

The fear of getting it wrong did not only consume research participants, and especially those who were marginalised in multiple ways, but could also have a silencing effect. Ezichi (Black, working-class) told me that she now had over 2500 followers, and that, consequently, she had recently stopped posting. When I asked her why, she said:

“I’m simply afraid of making mistakes. And then I don’t do anything. And, obviously, that’s really stupid. Because people don’t follow me for nothing, because they apparently like what I say, or think it’s interesting, or whatever [...]. It’s this being judged and so on, that’s a bit difficult on Instagram”.

Ezichi emphasised that her feminist bubble was very welcoming and “very nice”. However, she went on to say:

“But maybe, one day, they are no longer very nice, when I say something stupid. And that can happen really quickly, I mean, that’s really dangerous on Instagram. If you put your foot in it once, I feel, then it’s hard to be forgiven”.

Ezichi’s reflections indicate that she perceives of Instagram as a “difficult”, even “dangerous” space, where everybody is judged and one can “really quickly” be seen to say “something stupid”, which may not be forgiven. Again, Ezichi’s anxieties, and her experience of Instagram as a dangerous place, contrast with Karen’s confidence, and I argue that Ezichi’s being Black and working-class are crucial factors. What I also want to highlight are the silencing effects of the fear of getting it wrong. Ezichi felt welcomed and had built a following over a relatively short period of time. And yet she had stopped posting at the time of interview. Her account illustrates that digital feminist knowledge cultures can have a silencing effect in some cases. Like Ezichi, Shruti (mixed-race, working-class) told me she was worried “about getting cancelled”: “I do feel scared, I do feel scared. But I think maybe that’s okay. Maybe that’s okay to think about what you’re saying and to think about if you’re going to offend people”. Shruti’s fear of getting “cancelled” did not seem to result in self-silencing, as it did in Ezichi’s case. It does, however, support my wider argument that the “obligation to «know»” (Kanai, 2020: 35)

is lived out differently, and that race and class play a role in how it is experienced.

In addition to generating fears of getting it wrong, the knowledge cultures described here also seem to hold individual feminists accountable for acquiring the “correct” knowledge. Moving on from her earlier statement which described Instagram as an “exclusive” space, Petra (white, working-class) went on to say:

“And then we are back to exactly a system of «It’s your fault if you don’t know». And this is being said to you very clearly: «You yourself are responsible and why did you not read this thing. Why did you not attend that workshop, why did you not check your privileges?». And, up to a certain point I’m totally with it, absolutely. But it’s also not for every person, because we are all socialised differently”.

Petra’s statement highlights that well-intended calls on individuals to learn and educate themselves can become enmeshed with a neoliberal rationality and injunctions to work on the self. As Kanai (2020: 25) has argued in relation to digital feminist activism and “broader neoliberal governmental injunctions to continually work on one’s «character», authentic feminist identity becomes entangled with practices of perfecting and disciplining the self”. Indeed, Petra’s remark seems to suggest that it is feminists’ *individual* responsibility to know (“you yourself are responsible”), and that not being in the know is construed as an individual failure. In this context, learning is framed as an individual endeavour and responsibility, thereby leaving out questions about wider, structural conditions for knowing. Resonating with Kanai’s (2020) as well as Bull and Allen’s (2018) arguments, the “turn to character” in digital knowledge cultures may signal an “inward turn” in education. Provocatively put, learning and knowing, in these particular contexts, seem to be about individual feminists developing the “right” attitude and working towards possessing the “correct” knowledge; education is not perceived, at least not primarily, as laying the groundwork for wider, structural change.

In the feminist activist circles discussed here, the call on individuals to educate themselves seems to stem from a commitment that the onus of educating comparatively privileged women should not rest on those who are marginalised. For example, the fatigue, unpaid labour, and emotional burden of Black women “educating” white women about racism is well documented (see, for example, Lorde, 1984) and minoritized digital activists should not bear the brunt of doing this educational work. In shedding light on the “inward turn” in education, I therefore do not aim to critique the need to check one’s privileges. To the contrary, acknowledging privilege is key to paving the way for social change (Hastie and Rimmington, 2014). What I wish to

highlight by drawing on Kanai, Bull and Allen's work is that the framing of learning as an *individual* responsibility cannot be separated from the wider, neoliberal context that feminist activism takes place in (Baer, 2016). Learning and self-education, in these contexts, can easily be turned into an opportunity for self-optimisation, as Tasha's (white, middle-class) statement seems to suggest. Discussing intra-feminist debate, Tasha told me: "Whenever I've got involved in those tensions, I think I've ultimately used it as an inspiration for growth rather than [...] and I see it as useful in this regard". Similar to Karen's remarks discussed earlier, Tasha does not seem to be too afraid of making mistakes, perhaps due to her positioning as white and middle-class. Crucially too, Tasha constructs "tensions" as an "inspiration for growth" and as something "useful". Learning, in this context, provides the basis for self-transformation, rather than wider, social transformation.

As Gerrard (2014: 872) has noted, the "commitment to learning has been at the centre of both the reproduction of inequalities and at the centre of various campaigns for emancipation and empowerment". Subjecting the commitment to learning to sociological scrutiny, Gerrard (2014: 873) nonetheless argues that

"[...] learning and education can be pulled into the logic of capital, feeding projects of self-renewal, self-development for value accrual with little attention to the ways in which the moral assumptions based in these projects (hard work, resilience, self-development) relate to the broader demands of contemporary unequal labour relations".

As we know from Beverly Skeggs' (1997 and 2003) pioneering research on formations of class, the accrual of value is one of the key ways in which class differences are produced. Becoming a "valued" feminist activist on the basis of accruing the "right" knowledge is, arguably, not only embedded in neoliberal rationality due to the emphasis on self-optimisation and personal responsibility, but may also constitute a classed practice, that draws boundaries between "good" (read subjects of moral worth) and "bad" feminists. "The learning ethic, therefore, shapes the lines of social class distinction by affirming the moral worth of reflexive entrepreneurial selves, and creating spaces for intervention and judgement upon those who are deemed to be lacking" (Gerrard, 2014: 872). Gerrard and Skeggs' arguments highlight that the "need to know" may also figure as a boundary-drawing exercise between subjects who can accrue value by learning and those who may struggle to do so.

An interrogation of the learning ethic in digital feminist activism also involves

examining activists' investments in acquiring the "right" knowledge. To recall, Sonali referred to "saying the right things" and Joanna and Ezichi were afraid of "making mistakes". These statements suggest that there is such a thing as the "correct" knowledge. Kanai has attributed feminist activists' immersion in self-education to wider, feminised cultures of perfection, described by Angela McRobbie (2015 and 2020). Indeed, one research participant (Carola, white, middle-class) explicitly referred to an "aspiration towards perfection" when discussing digital feminist knowledge production. According to Kanai (2020: 31-32), the investment in being and acting as a "perfect" feminist is classed because it is "reliant on a potential capacity for perfection and thus implicated in continual practices of boundary-marking similar to the exclusionary middle-class cultures of self-making Skeggs has famously identified". As Angela McRobbie (2020: 43-43) reminds us, "the perfect is also a class category" whose function it is "to encourage women to succeed meritocratically, while simultaneously introducing heightened competition, constantly dedifferentiating and establishing division, resulting in a feminism that is infinitely divided and gradated [...]". To be sure, McRobbie discusses wider cultural trends and does not focus on digital feminist activism. Her description of how "the perfect" can function as a form of classed boundary-drawing does, however, lend itself to the analysis presented here by showing that investments in "the perfect" can be divisive. Crucially, Kanai (2020: 32) also highlights "connections between the notion of the feminist «perfect» and the ideals of white feminine «goodness» identified by critical whiteness scholars". According to Kanai, white feminist activists' investments in the feminist «perfect» can get channelled into performances of idealised, white femininity. Investments in the perfect, therefore, may have race and class-based exclusionary effects. Arguably, this insight highlights the need for alternative models of knowledge production in digital feminist activism, which move away from a focus on individual responsibility, correction, and ownership to subvert, rather than reproduce, existing classed and racialised power-relations.

Conclusion and Further Reflections

This article has drawn on original, qualitative data to shed light on some of the classed dynamics of doing feminist activism on Instagram. As I have shown, research participants spoke of the need to produce high-quality posts, both in terms of visual appeal and content. These high expectations were experienced and lived out differently; as I have demonstrated, class and racial background played a role in

affecting, though not determining, who has the skills and confidence to navigate these digital spaces with ease. The final section of the article built on Kanai's (2020) groundbreaking research on digital feminist knowledge cultures to scrutinise the ways in which the "learning ethic" and investments in "the perfect" may constitute practices of classed-boundary drawing, and figure as sites for classed and racialised productions of the self.

My arguments about the different ways in which class mediates knowledge acquisition, production, and sharing in the context of digital feminist activism give rise to the question of whether and, if so, how class inequalities were discussed in my research participants' "bubbles". Nina (Black, working-class), told me:

"Instagram, if it's not the pretty side of life, then there may be the newspaper images related to a news article or whatever, but I've never actually seen anyone call out anything due to class. It's usually race or gender or, because of the content I follow or produce, it has a lot to do with light hair as well, hair patterns, hair types, that kind of stuff, but no, not to my knowledge is it about class".

Resonating with Nina's observation, Vera (white, working-class) stated:

"I believe that the issue of classism is one of the last isms, that —or not the last, but I'm thinking about it, or it features relatively little in my bubbles. And it's one of the isms that I only recently got to learn about".

Carola (white, middle-class) expressed a similar feeling:

"Ten years ago, intersectionality, you would think about race and gender and then maybe LGBTQ, and then disability was added and then class and social strata, or whatever you want to call it, is up and coming at the moment, that you say, money is simply, money really plays a role".

These statements suggest that class inequalities are less widely discussed than other, and of course intersecting, hierarchies of difference. Teresa referred to "class" as "one of the categories of discrimination that remain in the shadow", which does not get "named as a form of discrimination in the context of intersectional feminism" (Schindel, forthcoming). The research participants' observations highlight the need for a systematic exploration of how activists, and the content they produce, engage with class inequalities.

To be sure, digital activism is a fast-moving field and, much like the present study, such research will only capture a particular, cultural moment, and trends that are

subject to change. However, my analysis of the classed aspects of doing and participating in digital feminist activism raises questions about the links between production, representation, and arguably, also consumption. An exploration of the facilitating roles of having know-how, professional expertise, cultural capital, and the “right” knowledge does not only foreground classed dimensions of feminist activist content production, but also leads to further questions around whose views and voices get represented, and who may engage with and consume such content. Equally important, different content, tone and representational styles may speak to differently positioned audiences (in terms of class and race, for example), calling for analyses that are able to grasp the ways in which modes of communication may differ depending on the target audience. For example, some activists may not want to reach policy makers as described above, complicating the arguments presented in this article, and calling for future research, which is designed to explore potential links between classed modes of communication, and intended audiences.

Another aspect of the interplay between class and digital feminist activism relates to the space —namely the neoliberal digital economy— in which these debates and practices take place. To put it crudely, we may ask —as did some of my research participants— whether the observed lower visibility of class in feminist activist discourse is related to the capitalist platforms this activism takes place on. Vera (white, working-class), for example, argued that:

“It seems to be obvious, to a certain extent, that, on a platform, where follower numbers are almost always equated with wealth is an exaggeration, but financial success, it is probably weird for people who in one way or another are financially successful and have reach, that they talk about classism. And to voice criticism of classism, because they are exactly part of the system [...] I don’t know if one would be like: «I make money with it, but it’s all pretty shitty, all this Instagram and capitalism»”.

Indeed, numerous research participants critically discussed the capitalist underpinnings of platforms, such as Instagram, and the ways in which their activism was embedded in the neoliberal, digital economy. They did not suffer from “false consciousness” and were mindful of the contradictions associated with pursuing feminist activism on capitalist platforms. What I like to reflect on in these concluding paragraphs are the perhaps less obvious tensions involved in mobilising class as an identity category on a capitalist platform, such as Instagram. In her work on class, Skeggs (1997, 2003 and 2010) reflects on her white working-class research participants’ reluctance to identify

as, and claim the identity “working-class”, and what this means in relation to identity politics. She argues: “When dis-identification is made from the categorisation under which the working-class are expected to stand, they are left only excluded, disenfranchised from the current form of justice claims” (Skeggs, 2003: 95). Skeggs (2010: 356), drawing on Wendy Brown’s (1995) critique of American identity politics as involving a certain re-naturalisation of capitalism, states:

“If identity politics works through making «claims» on capitalism and the state for recognition, how can recognition be mobilised by those who are continually misrecognised and do not have access to circuits of symbolic value in order to socially adjust their value attribution [?]”.

While class identity is a complex issue (Friedman, O’Brien and McDonald, 2021), Skeggs’ arguments bring to the fore potential difficulties involved in mobilising around class differences, especially by those marginalised by class inequalities.

Crucially, Skeggs’ analysis also highlights the classed dimensions of the forms of narration needed to make justice claims. In her work on *Class, Self, Culture* (2003), Skeggs demonstrates that the middle-class individual is a “possessive individual”, that has access to valued and institutionally recognised forms of self-telling and narration in a way that working-class selves do not. As she (Skeggs, 2004: 118) states:

“Only from the position of, and with access to, the resources of the middle-class, can a presumption be made that there is a possibility first, to tell a story, second, to assume the power to re-define, and third, to assume a significance to the story”.

Skeggs’ analysis highlights the importance of scrutinising the classed dimensions of storytelling, including Instagram Stories. I do not read her work as suggesting that working-class activists are “simply” excluded from digital feminist activism; the participation of the working-class activists I spoke to would disprove this point. But I read her analysis as inviting a deeper exploration of the classed dimensions of digital, feminist activism, which pays attention to the kinds of selves that are shaped, formed, and produced in the context of platforms, such as Instagram. These selves, as I hope to have shown, are shaped by class differences and inequalities, and this may in part be related to the capitalist digital economy that this activism takes place in. As such, the link between capitalism, feminist activism, and platforms such as Instagram is not merely one of, say, activists doing free labour, which benefits the digital economy (Scholz, 2013). It is also about the classed selves that are visible, produced, and called

forth in these contexts, and the potentially exclusionary effects of subject-formation in these spaces.

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