UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

University of Birmingham

Gender, Sexuality, and Embodiment in Digital Spheres

Geerts, Evelien; Rahbari, Ladan; De Vuyst, Sara

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND EMBODIMENT IN DIGITAL SPHERES: CONNECTING INTERSECTIONALITY AND DIGITALITY

Sara De Vuyst[a], Evelien Geerts[b] and Ladan Rahbari[c]

ABSTRACT

Gender, sexuality and embodiment in digital spheres have been increasingly studied from various critical perspectives: From research highlighting the articulation of intimacies, desires, and sexualities in and through digital spaces to theoretical explorations of materiality in the digital realm. With such a high level of (inter)disciplinarity, theories, methods, and analyses of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in relation to digital spheres have become highly diversified. Aiming to reflect this diversity, this special issue brings together innovative and newly developed theoretical, empirical, analytical, and critical approaches in the study of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital spheres. By connecting intersectionality and digitality to one another, it adopts an integrated approach that reflects the intricacy and interconnectedness of social categories and markers of difference, privilege, performance, and discrimination. The contributions explore a range of differently situated digital cultural practices, including intimate and sexual experiences with(in) digital media, online self-presentation, expressions of digital resistance, and forms of backlash and online attacks. What connects all these articles, is their critical approach to intersectional inequalities and privileges in relation to digitality, plus their nuanced perspective on gender, sexuality, and embodiment interferentially. The final article is based on a roundtable discussion and aims to encourage interdisciplinary connections and suggests ways of doing research that builds bridges between academia and activism.

Keywords: digitality; embodiment; intersectionality.

[a] Ghent University, Belgium
[b] University of Birmingham, United Kingdom
[c] University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

1   ENTANGLEMENTS WITH DIGITALITY

Bodies, expressions of affect and emotions, and intimate experiences are increasingly entangled with digital media, technologies, and various technoscientific objects. The digital realm has long been celebrated for offering endless possibilities to connect with others via social media, allowing subjects to experiment with various forms of digital self-representation and self-transformation and transgress the body's offline materiality. The ever-expanding digital realm has decreased the distance between digital creators and their audiences while also providing more and more people with the opportunity to become digital creators themselves (e.g., Jenkins, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2006; Boyd, 2014; Bruns, 2018).

The potential harbored by digital worlds to transcend differences and inequalities connected to embodiment and create online identities that are no longer constrained by real-life material surroundings (e.g., Turkle, 1996; Plant, 2020) thus seems enormous. Such radically optimistic debates regarding the liberating power of digital spaces – often underpinned by transhumanist viewpoints celebrating digital progress and various forms of human technological enhancement (see, e.g., Bostrom, 2005; More & Vita-More, 2013) – tend to be packed with conceptualizations of digital spaces as environments entirely separated from offline embodied lived experiences, conditions, and realities (e.g., Springer, 1991; Heim, 1994). Unlike early formulations of 'virtuality' and 'digitality', the body and its material conditions do not become irrelevant in digital spheres, engendering a need to recognize the materiality of everyday digital practices (van Doorn, 2011). In recent years, however, the materiality of the digital spaces, social media, and technoscientific objects we are almost constantly surrounded by has become increasingly less 'tangible,' thereby blurring the boundaries between our digital and offline lifeworlds: our lives are now more than ever before dominated by almost untraceable cloud environments, automated smart environments, algorithmic biases, racism, and predictive policing, sellable Big Data, even more, complex codes, and other types of bits and bytes (see Reichert & Richterich, 2015; Noble, 2018; Amrute, 2019; Nikunen, 2021).

Critical feminist, labor, postcolonial, and environmental viewpoints indicate how power inequalities, unequal labor divisions, and manual, emotional, and affective labor (see Terranova, 2004 for affective labor within the context of digital culture) have been made invisible in the ongoing digitalization of life. These perspectives, among others, zoom in on the intricate intersections between gender, sexuality, race, (often racialized) ethnicity, and class, and pinpoint how certain forms of labor have been further invisibilized through the digitization of everyday life. This has created a striking paradox: the digital has seemingly disconnected itself from the material lifeworld while at the same time also dominating the latter. We are now accustomed to effortlessly downloading digital airplane or concert tickets on our iPhones, automatically having workout data uploaded to self-

disciplining fitness trackers or storing pictures on the cloud without thinking through the complex processes behind these actions. Yet, this unmooring of digital processes still depends on concrete matter and materiality and, frequently, the latter's extractive exploitation. The digital, the cloud, and social media – none of these phenomena would exist if it were not for the material infrastructures such as data centers, server storage spaces, so-called data barns (see Portmess, & Tower, 2015 for this particular notion), geopolitically embedded power structures that obscure the destructive environmental impact of cloud computing, and vulnerable labor forces (e.g., the vast wage differences between Silicon Valley IT specialists, immigrant debuggers, and manual laborers working in an overseas data center) they depend upon.

Focusing on embodied lived experiences and embodiment, the critical scholarship sketched out above has gone beyond the question of gender and has extended to the realms of queer studies, disability studies, security and terrorism studies, critical race studies, and citizenship studies, among others. To illustrate, authors have explored digital gender(ed) and sexual(ized) performativity, resistance, defiance, and digital representations of embodied diversity and difference (e.g., Abidin, 2016; Mondé, 2018, Rahbari, 2019, Caldeira et al., 2020, and Araüna et al., 2021). Similar studies were conducted on articulating intimacies, desires, and sexualities in and through digital spaces and normative assumptions about (older) age, sexuality, and gender (e.g., Sandberg, 2013; Duguay, 2018, Tiidenberg, 2018; De Graeve, 2019; Korkmazer, De Ridder and Van Bauwel, 2021). A significant part of these inquiries focuses specifically on LGBTQIA+ issues and identities in digital spheres (e.g., Lovelock, 2017; Ridder and Dhaenens, 2019; O'Riordan, 2020). Furthermore, expressions of collective protest and feminist, queer, anti-racist, anti-ageist, anti-fatphobic, anti-ableist digital activism have been explored in a rising number of publications (e.g., Afful and Ricciardelli, 2015; Williams, 2016; Scharff et al., 2016; Sadowski, 2016; Matich et al., 2019; Schmitz et al., 2020). Overall, these studies resulted in nuanced findings highlighting how digital cultures both challenge and reproduce unequal power structures and are thus very much connected to the offline material realms. Overly optimistic beliefs about the self-emancipatory capacities of the digital are put into perspective by scholars that take the '(non-)mattering of bodies' question seriously. This is a question propelling many critical new materialists (see Geerts, 2021 for the notion of critical new materialisms), critical posthumanist, and affect theoretical scholarship (see Puar, 2007; Cooper, 2008; Gregg, & Seighworth, 2010; Chen, 2012; Braidotti, 2013; Ferrando, 2013; and Jackson, 2020), as well as other scholars of digital media. And these preceding and other theorists invested in critical scholarship demonstrate that digital spaces accommodate some bodies more than others. To give but a few examples: women and minority groups are apparently increasingly facing online harassment that targets identity markers such as gender, sexuality, age, race/ethnicity (e.g., Binns, 2012; Jane, 2014; Lewis et al., 2016; De Vuyst, 2020), algorithms and data used for machine learning contain different forms of sexist,

racist, ageist bias (Noble, 2018; Criado-Perez, 2021), and AI and voice-assistants have been shown to promote gender stereotypes (Chin and Robison, 2020).

With such a high level of (inter)disciplinarity, theories, methods, and analyses of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in relation to digital spheres have become highly diversified. Aiming to reflect this diversity, this special issue has two goals: First, we aim to bring together innovative and newly developed theoretical, empirical, analytical, and critical approaches in the study of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in digital spheres. Second, by connecting intersectionality and digitality to one another, we aim to adopt an integrated approach that reflects the intricacy and interconnectedness of social categories and markers of difference, privilege, performance, and discrimination. Therefore, this issue's contributions explore a range of differently situated digital cultural practices, including intimate and sexual experiences with(in) digital media, online self-presentation, expressions of digital resistance, and forms of backlash and online attacks. What connects all these articles is their critical approach to intersectional inequalities and privileges in relation to digitality, plus their nuanced perspective on gender, sexuality, and embodiment interferentially (see Geerts & van der Tuin, 2013). Differently put, this special issue's articles engage dynamically with other social markers, such as sexuality, ethnicity/race, class, and able-bodiedness, to name but a few.

A central theme is how emotions and affect, labor, and embodiment are intertwined in multiple ways in digital environments. Boundaries between labor and leisure have become increasingly blurred in the digital. Following this line of investigation, Locatelli's 'Rewiring the Concept of 'Sex Robots': Gender, Desire, and Embodiment in Posthuman Sextech' applies a posthumanist perspective to disrupt the monolithic categorization of sex robots. Based on a content analysis of promotional material of several sex tech companies, Locatelli shows how the design of digital technologies is not neutral but in fact, created for an ideal user, who is typically considered male and heterosexual. Locatelli's analysis indicates that sex tech is designed to satisfy the sexual needs of this type of user and has to fulfill a wide variety of emotional needs, including providing aid with domestic tasks while engaging in caregiving and emotional attentiveness. In the market of sex tech, feminine-looking robots are thus expected to take care of emotional and domestic labor, underlining how much digital and material lifeworlds overlap.

The next two articles in this special issue further explore how platforms create opportunities and structures for intimate expressions and connecting with others, while at the same time benefiting from the interactions taking place on their platforms. With social life increasingly taking place in the environments created by digital networks, intimate data find their way into commercial circuits and turn into exchangeable, profitable assets. Furthermore, while companies typically promote values of openness and inclusivity, misogyny and other harmful discourses and practices are often widespread on their digital platforms. Since any form of engagement or interaction on said digital platforms creates revenue, even violent attacks and abuse are monetized and thus form an important part of their business

model. The intricate ways these platforms are shaped and what design decisions propel these shaping processes often remain hidden. Szita's and Contente and Gomes da Costa's articles both aim to open this black box by offering insight into how discrimination is inscribed into various platforms' infrastructures and how this sustains inequalities related to gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity.

Szita's article – 'Virtual Safe Space: An Approach of Intersectionality and Social Identity to Online Behavior in Virtual Environments' – sheds light on social virtual reality. The presented analysis shows how platforms develop options to customize avatars in online virtual social spheres that are limited and linked to rigid ideas about body shapes, gender, and age. Like Locatelli's article, this paper shows that even though more diverse digital expression options of bodies would be technologically possible, material inequalities tend to be replicated in online social spaces, while racist and sexist offline harassment continues in online spaces towards avatars with certain identity characteristics.

In digital spaces, where metrics, followers, reviews, and higher traffic define visibility, people increasingly tend to perceive themselves as and perform as if they were digital entrepreneurs. Contente and Gomes da Costa's 'Towards Entrepreneurial Ethics of Desire: LGBTQ Location-based Dating Apps and the New Configurations of Affective and Sexual Relationships among Gay Men in Brazil' shows how platforms contribute to the market of male homoerotic desire and have a direct influence on how gay men in Brazil present themselves. Describing how users construct a portfolio of representations makes them look attractive in line with normative Brazilian prescriptions of beauty, such as being muscular, fit, and white. Gay male desirability involves excessive labor to meet hegemonic standards of attractiveness. The article concludes with a reflection on the possibility of queer ethics of desire with more subversive potential based on an analysis of several individual strategies for resistance by users of the app.

The final article of this special issue draws on a roundtable discussion among Evelien Geerts, Ladan Rahbari, Sara De Vuyst, Shiva Zarabadi, and Giulia Evolvi. This paper brings together different perspectives on embodiment, gender, and sexuality. These critical theoretical scholars discuss how to move forward with future studies on digitality, gender, sexuality, embodiment, and their intersections while investigating these topics from different perspectives, taken from disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology, and feminist media studies. This roundtable discussion aims to encourage interdisciplinary connections and suggest ways of doing research that builds bridges between academia and activism.

FUNDING STATEMENT AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Abidin, C. (2016) '"Aren't These Just Young, Rich Women Doing Vain Things Online?": Influencer Selfies as Subversive Frivolity,' Social Media + Society, 2(2), pp. 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641342.

Afful, A. A., & Ricciardelli, R. (2015) 'Shaping the online fat acceptance movement: talking about body image and beauty standards,' Journal of Gender Studies, 24(4), pp. 453-472. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2015.1028523.

Amrute, S. (2019) 'Of techno-ethics and techno-affects,' Feminist Review, 123 (1), pp. 56-73.

Araüna, N., Tortajada, I., & Willem, C. (2021) 'Feminist YouTubers in Spain,' In: Scarcelli M, Chronaki D, De Vuyst S, et al. (eds) Gender and Sexuality in the European Media. London: Routledge, pp. 11-23.

Åsberg, C., & Lykke, N. (2010) 'Feminist technoscience studies,' European Journal of Women's Studies, 17(4), pp. 299-305.

Binns, A. (2012) 'DON'T FEED THE TROLLS!,' Journalism Practice, 6(4), pp. 547-562. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2011.648988.

Boler, M., & Davis, E. (eds.) (2020) Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means. New York – London: Routledge.

Boyd, D. (2014) It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Bostrom, N. (2005) 'A History of Transhumanist Thought,' Journal of Evolution and Technology, 14(1), pp. 1-25. http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.98.7951&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

Braidotti, R. (2013) The Posthuman. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bruns, A. (2018) Gatewatching and News Curation: Journalism, Social Media, and the Public Sphere. New York: Lang.

Butler, J. (1993) Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex.' London: Routledge.

Caldeira, S. P., De Ridder, S., & Van Bauwel, S. (2020) 'Between the Mundane and the Political: Women's Self-Representations on Instagram,' Social Media + Society, 6(3), pp. 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120940802.

Chen, M. Y. (2012) Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Chin, C., & Robison, M. (2020) How AI bots and voice assistants reinforce gender bias. Retrieved on 11 November 2021 from: https://www.brookings.edu/research/how-ai-bots-and-voice-assistants-reinforce-gender-bias/

Cooper, M. (2008) Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Criado Perez, C. (2021) Invisible women: data bias in a world designed for men. London: Random House.

De Graeve, K. (2019) "No expectations": straight men's sexual and moral identity-making in non-monogamous dating. Sexualities, 22(5–6), pp. 844–859. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460718779946

De Vuyst, S. (2020) Hacking Gender in Technology and Journalism. New York: Routledge.

D'Ignazio, C., & Klein, L. F. (2020) Data Feminism. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Duguay, S. (2018) 'The more I look like Justin Bieber in the pictures, the better": Queer women's self-representation on Instagram,' In: Papacharissi Z (ed) A Networked Self: Platforms, Stories, Connections. New York: Routledge, pp.9 4-110.

Elwood, S., & Leszczynski, A. (2018) 'Feminist Digital Geographies,' Gender, Place & Culture, 25 (5), pp. 629-644.

Ferrando, F. (2013) 'Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations,' Existenz, 8(2), pp. 26-32. https://existenz.us/volumes/Vol.8-2Ferrando.pdf.

Geerts, E., & van der Tuin, I. (2013) 'From Intersectionality to Interference: Feminist Onto-epistemological Reflections on the Politics of Representation,' Women's Studies International Forum, 41(3), pp. 171-78.

Geerts, E. (2021) 'Nieuw Materialisme: Een Cartografie [New Materialism: A Cartography]', Wijsgerig Perspectief 61(2), pp. 34-41.

Haraway, D. J. (1997) Modest_Witness@Second_Millenium: FemaleMan©_Meets_Oncomouse™. Feminism and Technoscience. New York: Routledge.

Haraway, D. J. 1985. 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s.' Socialist Review, 20, pp. 65-107.

Heim, M. (1994) The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jane, E. A. (2014) '"Your a Ugly, Whorish, Slut: Understanding E-bile",' Feminist Media Studies, 14(4), pp. 531-546.

Jackson, Z. I. (2020) Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World. New York: NYU Press.

Jenkins, H. (2006) Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide. New York: New York University Press.

Korkmazer, B., De Ridder, S., & Van Bauwel, S. (2021) The Visual Digital Self: A discourse theoretical analysis of young people's negotiations on gender, reputation and sexual morality online. DIGEST. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, 8(1), pp. 22–40. https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.v8i1.17608

Lewis, R., Rowe, M., & Wiper, C. (2016) 'Online Abuse of Feminists as An Emerging form of Violence Against Women and Girls,' British Journal of Criminology, 57(6), pp. 1462-1481. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azw073.

Lovelock, M. (2017) '"My coming out story": Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Identities on YouTube,' International Journal of Cultural Studies, 22(1), pp. 70-85. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877917720237.

Lupton, D. (2019) Data Selves: More-than-Human Perspectives. Cambridge: Polity.

Matich, M., Ashman, R., & Parsons, E. (2019) '#Freethenipple – Digital Activism and Embodiment in the Contemporary Feminist Movement,' Consumption Markets & Culture, 22(4), pp. 337-362. https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2018.1512240.

Mondé, G. C. (2018) '#BlackDontCrack: A Content Analysis of the Aging Black Woman in Social Media,' Feminist Media Studies, 18(1): 47-60. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1409972.

More, M., & Vita-More, N. (eds.) (2013) The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Nikunen, K. (2021) 'Ghosts of white methods? The challenges of Big Data research in exploring racism in digital context,' Big Data & Society, 8 (2), pp. 1-17.

Noble, S. U. (2018) Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism. New York: New York University Press.

O'Riordan, K. (2020) 'Queer Digital Cultures,' In: Somerville SB (ed) The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 185-198.

Perbawani P. S., Rahayu R., & Anshari, I. N. (2018) Online Political Participation and Netizen Anonymity in Indonesia's Digital Democracy. PCD Journal 6: 185-212.

Pew Research Center (2006) The strength of internet ties. Retrieved on 11 November 2021 from: https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2006/01/25/the-strength-of-internet-ties/

Plant, S. (2020) 'Feministische Theorie und Kritische Medienkulturanalyse: Ausgangspunkte und Perspektiven,' In: Tanja, T., & Ulla W. (eds.) On the Matrix: Cyberfeminist simulations. Transcript Verlag, pp. 337-346.

Puar, J. K. (2007) Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Rahbari L. (2019a) In Her Shoes: Transnational Digital Solidarity with Muslim Women, or the Hijab? Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie, 112, pp. 107-120.

Rahbari, L. (2019b) 'Pushing Gender to its Limits: Iranian Women Bodybuilders on Instagram,' Journal of Gender Studies, 28(5), pp. 591-602. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2019.1597582.

Rahbari L. (2021) Biopolitics of Non-Motherhood: Childfree Women on a Persian-Language Digital Platform for Mothers. İstanbul University Journal of Sociology 41: 27-41.

Reichert, R., & Richterich, A. (2015) 'Introduction: Digital Materialism,' Digital Culture & Society, 1(1), pp. 5-18. https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/634

Ridder, S. D. & Dhaenens, F. (2019) 'Coming Out as Popular Media Practice: The Politics of Queer Youth Coming Out on YouTube,' DiGeSt. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, 6(2), pp. 43-60. https://doi.org/10.11116/digest.6.2.3.

Sadowski, H. (2016) 'From #Aufschrei to Hatr.org: Digital–Material Entanglements in the Context of German Digital Feminist Activisms,' Feminist Media Studies, 16(1), pp. 55-69. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1093090.

Sandberg, L. (2013) 'Affirmative Old Age: The Ageing Body and Feminist Theories on Difference. International Journal of Ageing and Later Life, 8(1), pp. 11-40. http://dx.doi.org/10.3384/ijal.1652-8670.1381.

Scharff, C., Smith-Prei, C., & Stehle, M. (2016) 'Digital Feminisms: Transnational Activism in German Protest Cultures,' Feminist Media Studies, 16(1), pp. 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1093069.

Schmitz, R. M., Coley, J. S., Thomas C., & Ramirez, A. (2020) 'The Cyber Power of Marginalized Identities: Intersectional Strategies of Online LGBTQ+ Latinx Activism,' Feminist Media Studies, pp. 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1786430.

Springer, C. (1991) 'The Pleasure of the Interface,' Screen, 32(3), pp. 303-323.

Terranova, T. (2004) Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age. London: Pluto.

Tiidenberg, K. (2018) 'Visibly Ageing Femininities: Women's Visual Discourses of Being Over-40 and Over-50 on Instagram,' Feminist Media Studies, 18(1), pp. 61-76. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1409988.

Turkle, S. (1996) Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. London: Weidenfeld.

Van Doorn, N. (2011) 'Digital Spaces, Material Traces: How Matter Comes to Matter in Online Performances of Gender, Sexuality and Embodiment,' Media, Culture & Society, 33(4), pp. 531-547. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443711398692.

Williams, S. (2016) '#SayHerName: Using Digital Activism to Document Violence against Black Women,' Feminist Media Studies, 16(5), pp. 922-925. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1213574.

Wynter, S. (1994) 'No Humans Involved: A Letter to My Colleagues,' Forum N. H. I: Knowledge for the 21st Century, 1, pp. 42-73. Originally published in 1992.