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Editors:
Stacey Scriver and Carol Ballantine

Editorial Assistant:
Chloe Legaspi-Cavin

NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Editorial

Stacey Scriver & Carol Ballantine
Centre for Global Women's Studies
School of Political Science and Sociology
National University of Ireland, Galway

Introducing *Dearcadh*: A tradition in feminist academics and publishing

Thirty years ago this year, the Centre for Women's Studies was established at the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI Galway).[1] Ireland, in 1990, was a very different place than today: the constitutional ban on abortion, then just 7 years old, was seemingly unshakeable; divorce was constitutionally prohibited and would remain so for another five years; and homosexuality was illegal. Yet change was imminent: Mary Robinson was elected Ireland's first female President in 1990, not only a woman but a feminist activist, and women's studies programmes were emerging across Ireland from 1990 onwards (Byrne, 1992), contributing to a sea-change in social attitudes towards women's rights and gender roles that have resulted in significant legislative amendments in recent years. An interdisciplinary, collaborative initiative, the Centre for Women's Studies at NUI Galway, formally became an academic discipline in 1991, through the provision of a variety of third level teaching programmes that built on pre-1990s teaching and activism on women and gender at NUI Galway. The Women's Studies Building was officially opened that year by Mary Robinson. Members of Women's Studies at NUI Galway continued to engage in political and social reform through the Centre, and operated a publishing house, perhaps best known for the journal *UCG Women's Studies Centre Review (1989-2004)* and, latterly, *Irish Feminist Review (2004-2007)* (Clancy, 2009). A key feature of Women's Studies was the diversity of members enabling Women's Studies to draw from across social sciences, humanities and arts for women and gender focused research and teaching. As co-founder/chair of the Centre, Anne Byrne, describes,

> *'a collective community of multi-disciplinary and activist scholars focussed on putting gender on the academic agenda for teaching and research was a truly transformative act. I can claim with some pride that we were among the first generation of Irish academic feminist scholars who were working in all of the higher education institutions to bring about change - inside and outside the university.'* (Anne Byrne, Personal communication, April 29, 2020).

Much has changed since then. The number of Women's Studies undergraduate programmes have contracted across much of Europe and North America, while new variations of old programmes, now focussed more broadly on gender and sexuality, and a wide range of gender-focused modules delivered

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[1] The University was called University College Galway (UCG) between 1908 and 1997, whereupon it was renamed NUI Galway. In this article, for the sake of simplicity, we use 'NUI Galway' throughout.

through other disciplines, have also emerged (Marchbank, 2009; Dayton and Levenstein, 2012). At NUI Galway, Women's Studies has similarly evolved: the discipline of Women's Studies, under its current guise as Global Women's Studies and soon to be renamed as Gender and Women's Studies, was relocated to the School of Political Science and Sociology in 2008. The range of academic programmes has also contracted to now focus on the MA Gender, Globalisation and Rights, while staff continue to deliver gender and women-focused modules across the School and University. The publishing house came to an end in 2007 and the *Irish Feminist Review* was retired.

Nevertheless, women's and gender studies is as relevant as ever. *Dearcadh: Graduate Journal of Gender, Globalisation and Rights* carries on the tradition of gender-focused academic publishing at NUI Galway. The articles in this volume reflect the importance of gender research, across disciplinary divides, which interrogates cultural, social and political inequalities and gender dynamics. The articles reflect developments within Feminist theory more broadly, recognising the intersecting inequalities that shape women's experiences in various spheres of life (Parris, Geoghegan) while also engaging with classic Feminist approaches, including radical (Ruf) and psychoanalytic feminism (O'Shea, Geoghegan, Parris).

This journal also represents new and diverse voices in an academic media – the seven authors, former students of the MA Gender, Globalisation and Rights, represent six different countries of origin, across four continents, and are all new to academic publishing. The journal thus creates space for voices and viewpoints from those who may otherwise find academic publishing spaces difficult to access. Indeed, 'Dearcadh' is a particularly apt title for the collection of articles in this volume: an Irish word depicting a point of view, a way of seeing or perspective, an attitude, or a standpoint.

We write this introduction in extraordinary times. Physically separated due to social distancing and a broad 'lock down' in Ireland resulting from the COVID 19 crisis, uncertain of the future, the impacts of gender as they intersect with race and class are as evident as ever. Increases in domestic violence, disproportionately affecting women (Taub, 2020), illness and deaths of frontline workers, also disproportionately women and particularly women of colour (Schnall, 2020), and the juggling of multiple caring and work roles within the home (Garijo, 2020) all pay heed to the gender inequalities that persist across the world. As this crisis evolves and more is learned about vulnerability to the virus and the impact of the measures taken, bringing a gender-lens to analysis will be of critical importance. This crisis, like others before it, acts as an acute reminder of the ongoing need for women's and gender studies to contribute to knowledge and solutions that account for difference and are just and equitable.

The demand for equality and the need to identify inequalities in overlooked spaces (social, cultural, technological) are over-riding themes in the works presented in this volume; written 'before' COVID 19, relevant 'during' this crisis, and with much to offer to understand the gender dynamics of what emerges 'after'. Authors, in most cases drawing from their MA research, have engaged with a range of contemporary gender issues, analysed through various feminist lenses, to identify the processes through which inequalities and patriarchal structures persist. The works account for a plethora of human, gendered, experiences, from labour and care-work practices (Sheridan, Mutariswa), to the racialized and gendered impacts of new forms of media with a focus on Instagram (O'Shea, Geoghegan, Parris), to the cultural reproduction of gendered inequality in Game of Thrones, one of the most popular television shows of the last decade (Ruf, Trejo Morales). The viewpoints they contribute provide important inputs to understanding the function and practice of gender inequality today and into the, rather uncertain, future.

The Cultural Reproduction of Patriarchy: A focus on 'Game of Thrones'

Television programmes as a form of cultural output both reflect social attitudes and produce them (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983). The television programme *Game of Thrones* emerged as one of the most significant cultural products of the decade between 2009 and 2019, particularly in Western culture.

Clothing and hair styles popularised through the programme have been reproduced in general society and the television show has created numerous cultural reference points. Such impacts are not neutral; they are also implicated in the (re)production of gendered norms and have the potential of challenging or reinforcing patriarchal gender norms and structures.

Trejo Morales investigates the reproduction of femininity through the male gaze by focusing on non-gender-conforming characters, Brienne of Tarth and Arya Stark. Despite the inclusion of such characters, on the surface, challenging patriarchal gender norms, Trejo Morales instead finds that these characters act as a warning of the negative consequences of gender non-conformity. The author identifies that while such characters enjoy some liberties associated with masculinity due to their refusal to identify fully with the gender construction of femininity, such as increased personal freedoms compared to gender-conforming female characters, they are nevertheless subject to the discipline of the male gaze. Both characters are forced to choose between expressing their femininity (for instance to be in a romantic relationship) and wielding power, which is solely associated with their masculine attributes.

Ruf's article similarly identifies a punitive gender apparatus at work within *Game of Thrones*. While Trejo Morales focused analysis on gender-non-conforming characters, Ruf instead examined one of the strongest gender tropes – the Mother. Using the character Cersei as the unit of analysis, Ruf deploys radical feminist works by Rich (1976) and Oakley (1984) to examine the ideological function of motherhood within the television programme. Ruf's assessment of Cersei identifies complexity within the construction of motherhood, recognising that power may be granted to such female characters, but also demonstrating that such power comes with constraints. Where mothers do not meet the ideal of motherhood, they are subject to sanctions and punishments. Consequently, the character of Cersei, as a woman and mother, reinforces patriarchal constructions of good and bad mothers that are founded on gender norms and serve to promote male power as they constrain the possibilities of 'acceptable' women's behaviour.

Gender, Representation, Agency, and Gaze: Dis/Empowerment Online

The feminist analysis that three authors bring to bear on the uses of Instagram proves unexpectedly prescient in this time of lockdown, when so much social interaction has shifted to the digital space. Classic concerns of feminist thought, such as the male gaze (Mulvey, 197) and fat and body image (eg Orbach 1978), have taken on a new relevance in our digital – and more recently hyper-online – age. In particular, Mulvey's insights into the power and effects of the male gaze in mainstream Hollywood cinema inspired reflection across many separate domains examined by authors in this volume, including the tourist gaze (Urry 2011) which Geoghegan cites; the imperial gaze (hooks 1992) cited by Parris; and the girlfriend gaze (Winch 2013) cited by O'Shea. An emerging field of study, interpreting female representation in social media, thus draws the attention of three of our authors, from rather different perspectives.

In Parris' visual content analysis of the uses of the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag on Instagram, the author celebrates the potential of the platform for the reclaiming of Black women's representation in the public sphere. Yet she notes the ongoing existence of a digital divide, rendering Instagram an available tool for empowerment only to those with ready access to internet-enabled devices. Parris' analysis demonstrates the ways in which some users appropriate the Instagram platform and subvert its normalisation of Western beauty standards. In this manner, Instagram is presented as a potential platform for social change.

For the individually motivated leisure travellers who form the subject of Geoghegan's research, Instagram is both a blessing and a curse. The platform enables the development of a like-minded and supportive community for women in new and potentially threatening locations; but it places the influential Instagrammer at the mercy of that community and its desire for content. Geoghegan

describes, from interviews with four diverse female Instagrammer travellers, the ways in which they bring an intersectional perspective to their travel and influencing through Instagram. Similar to the users of the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag, there is a sense of empowerment in appropriating the platform to actively reset the discourse related to minority women's leisure travel. Through deliberate acts such as photographing their own West African dress, or providing political context in their Instagram posts, Geoghegan's participants strive to engage in a literal mapping of the margins (Crenshaw, 1990).

The three articles demonstrate that while Instagram is ripe for visual analysis, the perspectives of its users are also important and revealing: both Geoghegan and O'Shea interviewed Instagrammers and revealed nuanced understandings of how the platform is positioned within contemporary capitalism. There is a telling contrast between the messages of empowerment found in Parris' visual analysis, juxtaposed against the harms of Instagram use described by O'Shea's research participants. The eight women interviewed for O'Shea's study on diet culture and Instagram expressed ambivalence about supposedly empowering concepts such as body positivity, and noted that the uses of Instagram for the sale of dieting products undermined their trust in the accounts they encountered there. She shows that diet culture is a staple of contemporary governmentality which long precedes the Instagram platform, but which is 'embedded into the very fabric of Instagram'.

O'Shea notes another divide, that found in the high cost of dieting products which exclude many women from participating in the diet culture promoted on Instagram. Indeed, ambiguity is a dominant theme of the research here on Instagram, with the potentialities of the platform often placed in direct contrast to the risks. Where social media is often conceived as the ultimate panopticon, is true agency or empowerment possible? Our authors engage with this question and come to very different conclusions.

Care and the Lifecourse: Gender Roles and Policy Gaps

Addressing the subject of care at different points in the life course, Sheridan and Mutariswa's articles share key concerns. Both authors make use of their own positionality in relation to their research topics: in Sheridan's case, of transition to post-caregiving in Ireland; in Mutariswa's, of work-life balance in the lives of professional NGO staff in Harare, Zimbabwe. From these positions, they each identify gaps in public policy, and provide new information to improve policy. In the Irish case, Sheridan describes what happens when an individual transitions out of eligibility for the official Carer's Allowance, outlining how the experience of care-giving over a number of years inflects the possibilities that come after. In the absence of support to engage in work or education while in receipt of the allowance, it becomes extremely difficult to establish an independent income even when eligibility got the allowance has ended, and ex-carers may subsequently struggle to access the state pension owing to their years outside of the contributory pension system. In Zimbabwe, Mutariswa finds that in the NGO sector, the demands of motherhood are recognised by employers only insofar as leave is permitted for birth and breastfeeding (up to one year of age). She outlines the challenges of staying in work when the requirements of home life are absent from either national or corporate policy. For the women interviewed by Mutariswa, this gap is addressed in the creation of a care chain (Hochschild 2000): poorer women working as maids in the households of NGO staff. This arrangement may resolve the overwhelming demands of domestic labour and paid work, but it fails to bring about any change in gender or class relations, a situation documented in other contexts (eg Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002), but not previously in Zimbabwe.

Gender and Women's Studies: Contributions towards an uncertain future

When the Centre for Women's Studies was founded at NUI Galway in 1990, critical concerns were the representation of women in historical, social, cultural, economic and political spaces, substantive equality, and freedom from violence. Gender-focused research and feminist theorising were key activities of the Centre and the Discipline. Despite the many changes to academic women's studies at NUI Galway in the intervening years, these issues remain among the key foci of the work of graduates

of the MA Gender, Globalisation and Rights. Demands on women to conform to gender roles as women, mothers, wives and carers are identified and confronted in the works in this volume, be they presented in the form of cultural or ideological products as in Game of Thrones (Trejo Morales, Ruf), within the structures and policies for care-work allowance and pensions in Ireland (Sheridan), or within maternity policies in the NGO sector in Zimbabwe (Mutariswa). Articles interrogate the pressures to conform to representations of woman that are reinforced through new technologies, such as Instagram (Geoghegan, O'Shea, Parris). The works, however, also find reason for optimism: they identify that even within these technologies, policies and cultural products, there are spaces to challenge inequitable gender roles and norms and find new opportunities for justice and freedom.

These articles form the inaugural volume of *Dearcadh: Graduate Journal of Gender, Globalisation and Rights*. They represent the outstanding work of students of the MA Gender, Globalisation and Rights and exemplify the necessity and possibilities for continued engagement by graduates of women's and gender studies students in the academic sphere. While we currently confront an uncertain future and labour through personally, socially and economically challenging times, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, this volume is a hopeful one. Reinvigorating the publishing tradition of Women's Studies at NUI Galway and highlighting the capacity for important contributions to the field of knowledge by MA students, *Dearcadh* acts as a point from which to view and understand the reproduction of gender inequality, engage with academic debate through the production of feminist and gendered research and analysis, and contribute to the shaping of a more equitable future.

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About the editors:

Stacey Scriver, PhD, is a Lecturer in the School of Political Science and Sociology and Director of the MA Gender, Globalisation and Rights at NUI Galway. She is committed to feminist and gender-focused research and teaching. Her recent work has focussed on the Social and Economic Costs of Violence against Women and Girls.

Carol Ballantine completed her PhD in the Centre for Global Women's Studies in NUI Galway in April 2020. Her research explored narratives of violence in the lives of African migrant women in Ireland, and the impacts of stigma and shame. She continues to research, teach and write on the topics of gender, migration and violence in Ireland and internationally

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Non-Conforming Femininity in Game of Thrones: An Analysis of Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth

Trejo Morales, Cristina
M.A. Gender, Globalisation, and Rights
National University of Ireland, Galway

Abstract   The male gaze is a theory that was developed by Laura Mulvey (1975), addressing the objectification of women in classic Hollywood films. While the male gaze is highly criticized, it is still applicable today and is presented in the representation of women in current media, like the television show *Game of Thrones*. The power of the male gaze can be seen in the female character's nudity, the sexual violence directed towards female characters, and how women access political power through sexuality and fertility (Ferreday, 2015; Genz, 2016; Frankel, 2014). While women in *Game of Thrones* are not powerless, their access to power is through conforming to typical forms of femininity, which means that their access to power is restrained and controlled. However, not all female characters conform to gender ideals, like Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth. The objective of this paper is to examine how the male gaze can account for the treatment of non-gender-conforming female characters in *Game of Thrones*, using feminist qualitative content analysis. Looking at non-gender-conforming characters is critical to understanding the diverse ways the male gaze is used to punish female characters, coercing them into femininity. Based on the analysis undertaken as part of a MA thesis, this paper found that although non-gender-conforming female characters were given more liberties than female characters in *Game of Thrones*, they were still subjected to the control, coercion, and discipline of the male gaze, even if in non-sexual ways.

Introduction

In 1975, Laura Mulvey developed the theory of the male gaze. Drawing on psychoanalysis, Mulvey (1975) states that women are objectified in classic Hollywood films. While the male gaze is highly criticized, it is still applicable today and is presented in the representation of women in current media, like the treatment of women in *Game of Thrones*.

Game of Thrones is a television show adapted from the bestselling fantasy series *A Song of Fire & Ice* by George R.R. Martin, by David Benioff and Daniel Brett Weiss (Tkale, Zilic & Recher, 2017). The cultural phenomenon of *Game of Thrones* started in 2011 when HBO released the first season, and it came to an end in May of 2019. The story of *Game of Thrones* takes place in Westeros and Essos with elements of neo-medievalism; the fantasy world created assimilates the medieval culture with contemporary features (Marques, 2019). The plot of the show revolves around the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms and the constant fighting between noble families to sit on the throne. It specifically focuses on Daenerys, who believes she is the rightful heir to the Iron Throne. Alongside her journey to return to Westeros, other battles and enemies arise.

The male gaze is a prevalent influence in the representation of women in *Game of Thrones.* The impact of the male gaze can be seen in the female character's nudity and sexual violence directed towards them (Frankel, 2014). The male gaze is also present in the way women in the show gain political power; women access the same power given to men, through marriage and by procreation (Genz, 2016; Frankel, 2014). While women in *Game of Thrones* are not powerless, their access to power is through conforming to typical forms of femininity, which means that their access to power is restrained and controlled.

As the cultural phenomenon of *Game of Thrones* comes to an end, it is essential to look at the cultural effect it had on the last eight years by examining characters from the show. This article will look at two female characters that do not conform to gender ideals, Arya Stark and Brienne of Tarth. The current study will explore the question, how can the male gaze account for the treatment of non-gender-conforming characters in *Game of Thrones*? Looking at non-gender-conforming characters is critical to understanding the diverse ways the male gaze is used to punish female characters and coerce them into femininity.

Literature Review

The Male Gaze and its Characteristics

The feminist analysis of media is fueled by the need 'to understand how images and cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality, domination, and oppression' (Gill, 2007: 7). When talking about women's representations in media, the male gaze is a critical theory because it describes women's objectification in classic Hollywood films. The male gaze was developed by Laura Mulvey in 1975 and states that women's depictions are designed by men, portraying a male point of view, for male pleasure (Mulvey, 1975). Classical Hollywood cinema is a style connected with fiction films produced under the

Hollywood studio system between 1916 and 1960 (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012). According to Mulvey (1975), classical Hollywood cinema is also characterized by female characters being used as a display and audiences' identification with the male protagonist. Mulvey developed her account of the male gaze through an analysis of classical Hollywood cinema, but it is still relevant to contemporary media. While the cinematic world has changed – there are now more female protagonists, directors and writers – in *Game of Thrones* the camera still lingers over women's bodies, and 'places viewers in the mind of the male character and emphasize a woman as love or lust interest' (Frankel, 2014: 17).

The power of the male gaze is also used to discipline women characters to gender-conforming images and activities. An example of this is the treatment of Daenerys Targaryen and Cersei Lannister. Both women have political power, yet Cersei is depicted as evil, and Daenerys becomes power crazy. These representations are reminiscent of femme fatale in film noir (Cerny, Friedman & Smith, 2014). Femme fatale is a representation of non-conforming femininity - independent, unmarried, portrayed as evil, and punished or killed because of the threatened male subjects (Cerny, Friedman & Smith, 2014). Femme fatale are strong characters; however, they are not a result of feminism but rather a 'symptom of male fears about feminism' (Doane, 1991: 3).

Mulvey (1975) uses psychoanalysis to construct the male gaze. Scopophilia is the pleasure of looking (Mulvey, 1975) and films provide pleasure for audiences. Usually, these voyeuristic phantasies are related to the women; thus, the female body is traditionally represented in ways that visually pleasure men. Films can also develop scopophilia into narcissistic features (Mulvey, 1975). In films, audiences identify with the images that they see, and through this identification, the development of the ego occurs (Mulvey, 1975). However, the mirror-images in media intended for women are images desired by women, which leads to women's self-image dominated by discontent because images of women are imagined and constructed by men, for men (Coward, 2001).

Psychoanalysis and feminism have a complicated relationship. In the 1960s, feminists regarded psychoanalysis as their worst enemy, as some feminists thought Freud was responsible for the emergence of an anti-feminist movement (Chaudhuri, 2006). The critiques toward Freud's work extends to Mulvey's work. Studlar (1985), believes that the binary and oppositional nature of Freudian theory translates into a psychoanalytic analysis of cinematic pleasures. One of the limitations of this perspective is the heterosexual nature of the male gaze (Albertson, 2018). However, Mitchell (1990) proposes that Freud is relevant to feminism as he suggests that the unconscious is timeless. Mitchell (1990, cited in Chaudhuri, 2006: 18) suggests that 'psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society but an analysis of one'.

Mulvey's (1975) theory has been criticized for its heavy emphasis on the male audience. Mulvey (1981: 123) expands on the issue of the female audience in her 1981 essay, which focuses on female spectators and the protagonist that are 'unable to achieve a stable sexual identity,' which means that spectators and protagonists are torn between passive femininity and regressive masculinity. For women, trans-sex identification is a habit, and they do this when they want to be, or feel, active and in control. The female audience and the female characters get pleasure from identifying with the male characters and all the freedoms they have. Further, Mulvey (1981) suggests that women can only accomplish this by regressing before their phallic phase, where women succumb to repressing masculinity. The male gaze remains

compelling and valuable for the analysis of women in cinema, and in the case of the current paper, of television shows.

Femininity

There are different ways of defining femininity. Simeone De Beauvoir (1949) believed that femininity has no psychological, biological, or intellectual basis, but that instead, femininity and gender are produced by culture and society. Judith Butler (1988) agrees with de Beauvoir; however, she takes a post-structuralist approach towards gender. This means that Butler (1988), like Foucault (1978, cited in Butler, 1988), believes that there is conflict and power in the creation of meaning. Butler (1988: 520) defines gender identity as 'a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo'.

Butler (1988) states that performance and performativity are two different things. While performing has individual freedoms to pick and choose when to act, performativity is the repetition of repressive and harmful gender norms that create a meaning for such norms. Further, Butler (1992) states that when a woman classifies herself as a woman, the identification is forced, cultivated, and patrolled. Whenever someone acts in a way that is inconsistent with their identified label, there is a punishment, which is usually linked with shame. Based on Butler's definition of femininity, non-gender-conformity is when someone refuses to 'do gender' or gender performativity, despite the pain and punishment that is involved in breaking away from social, gendered expectations.

Gender and Game of Thrones

Television shows like *Game of Thrones* might seem trivial to study; shows are forgotten as their popularity decreases. Nevertheless, television shows, like films, are not ideologically neutral, but rather a 'signifying system with its own representational legacies, established ropes, industrial constraints, and political baggage' (Columpar, 2002: 26). Films and television shows have meaning, and this meaning is created by the cinematic world, which is controlled mostly by men. *Game of Thrones* is based on a book series written by a male author and adapted by two male writers and directors, who ultimately decided how women were represented in the show.

Game of Thrones has given rise to several debates concerning feminist discourse. One of the controversies is whether *Game of Thrones* is feminist or not. Some people believe that the show cannot be feminist, as female characters are subjected to sex, nudity, and violence in a way male characters are not (Ferreday, 2015; Frankel, 2014). Nevertheless, some fans state that the show is feminist, as female characters in *Game of Thrones* are more than sex objects, 'they're subjects of their own narrative' (Morrissey, 2013, cited in Ferreday, 2015: 24). Women are strong characters that participate in political power, like Cersei and Daenerys, and yet, the representations of women exercising political power do not always challenge gender hierarchies (Clapton & Shepherd, 2017). In *Game of Thrones*, the male gender is represented as dominant, and women are portrayed as receiving their power from marrying men, having men's children, or allying with men (Genz, 2016; Frankel, 2014).

Cersei and Daenerys are women with immense power in the show. However, both characters are represented as spiraling into madness with power (Cerny, Friedman & Smith, 2014). These representations

are reminiscent of femme fatale. Both characters are characterized as independent and powerful women, yet, their power is their downfall, and both characters die because of this in the last season (Cerny, Friedman & Smith, 2014).

Moreover, Genz (2016: 243) states that female characters having sex appears to take a 'male supremacist meaning'. For women, sex becomes a survival or negotiation tool. Cersei tells Sansa that a woman's best weapon is 'between her legs'. According to Genz (2012: 245), 'this "gotta fuck" agenda is defused and masked by being channeled through a hetero-constructive script of romance, marriage, and patriarchal kinship'. *Game of Thrones* tends to follow well-defined and traditional gender identity scripts, wherein the women are elevated for their reproductive function, and the men are celebrated as fighters (Genz, 2016).

In *Game of Thrones*, female characters have the power of their sexuality, but it is also a weakness as female characters are raped and threatened with sexual violence (Ferreday, 2015). Sexual violence in *Game of Thrones* is another source of controversy. People believe that the scenes depicted in *Game of Thrones* where women are raped and silenced resonates with the current rape-culture, where victims are too often silenced and ignored. Specific rape scenes, like when Ramsay rapes Sansa, are often criticized. Part of the controversy is that this scene does not happen to Sansa in the book series; it happens to another character. The directors argued that they decided to give Sansa that storyline because she needed more narrative in that season (Phillips, 2016).

There has been previous research on non-conforming characters in *Game of Thrones*. Hartinger (2012) states that there is a surprising number of protagonists who are non-conforming characters labeled 'social rejects', like Bran Stark who is disabled, like Samwell who is overweight, and like Jon Snow who is a 'bastard'. Additionally, Hartigner (2012: 155) asserts Arya and Brienne are fascinating because they are considered outsiders; they do not behave like 'ladies' even though they are women, and women are 'considered outsiders by mere virtue of their gender'. Further, Marques (2019) focuses her analysis on female non-gender-conforming characters such as, Brienne, Arya, and Yara. Marques's (2019) study does not address the treatment of non-gender-conforming characters with the use of the male gaze like the following paper will.

Methodology

Research Design

This research was conducted through feminist qualitative content analysis, the 'systematic study of texts and other cultural products' through a feminist lens (Hesser-Biber & Leavy, 2007: 227). Feminist qualitative content analysis was chosen because it allowed the study of cultural artifacts and the use of theoretical frameworks through a deductive approach. Using a feminist perspective is an advantage because feminist research can have a significant role in how culture is studied and comprehended. Cultural artifacts are part of the process by which ideas are produced, spread, and consumed; they are part of the process by which women and men are perceived (Hesser-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

While research is considered 'orderly, coherent, and clean,' the process of investigation is ideological as the researchers cannot detach themselves from their values and opinions (Letherby, 2003: 5). A way to

address the researcher's positionality is through a brief statement of why the research topic was selected (Leavy, 2000). This research emerged from watching the show as a fan and rooting for the strong women in the show. However, it became harder to cast aside the critical evaluations of the show. Though there are several strong women to look at, female non-gender-conforming characters were of interest for the researcher because their treatment was different.

Another limitation of the methods is that qualitative research is known to be subjective (Bryman, 2012). To be able to minimize a biased engagement with the data, a coding system was developed for the data to be observed and treated systematically. Finally, the findings of qualitative research are not generalizable because of the role the researcher plays in the study. However, research findings can be valued by placing the results of the research in a specific context, without claiming the findings tackle universal truths.

Data Sampling and Data Analysis Procedure

For the current study, the cultural artifacts sampled were episodes from the HBO series, *Game of Thrones*. *Game of Thrones* was chosen because the cultural phenomenon was coming to an end, and the fate of all the characters was decided. While other characters are not gender-conforming, Arya and Brienne, have an intriguing relationship with their femininity.

From the eight seasons and 73 episodes of *Game of Thrones*, six episodes were selected. Firstly, the show was observed from February to May 2019. By the end of May, HBO's Episode Guide (HBO, 2019) was used to take notes on all the episodes where Arya and Brienne appeared. Considering the theoretical framework selected, a coding system was developed. Coding is the process of 'identifying and recording' data items that 'exemplify the same theoretical or descriptive idea' (Gibbs, 2007: 38). The initial codes used to analyze the data were within the theoretical framework, meaning concept-driven coding. Therefore, the codes were developed from previous literature, in this case, from Mulvey (1975 & 1981) and Butler (1988). Then the episodes were re-watched, and notes were made with special attention to occurrences of Arya and Brienne being sexualized (male gaze), acting in non-gender-conforming ways (gender performativity), and whenever they appeared secondary to male characters (male gaze). However, new codes emerged as the data was analyzed, and the developing codes were connected to the theoretical framework. The new emerging codes look at Arya's and Brienne's rejection of their femininity (connected to gender conformity), men threatening characters because of their gender (male gaze), women's bodies as men's entertainment in a non-sexual way (male gaze), the characters stories serving as tales of caution (male gaze), and escape from the male gaze (female spectatorship theory). Once all the episodes were coded, episodes within the same thematic category were compared and contrasted to select the best representation of each code.

For the analysis of Arya, *Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things* (1.4) was chosen because Arya rejects her femininity, but Eddard expects Arya to eventually conform to classical femininity. *The Night Lands* (2.2) was selected as it demonstrates Arya escaping the male gaze by pretending to be a boy. *The Knight of the Seven Kingdoms* (8.2) was selected as Arya is subjected to the male gaze in a traditional, objectifying way.

For the analysis of Brienne, *The Walk of Punishment* (3.3) was selected as there were elements that signified the lack of Brienne's control over her own body. *The Bear and the Maiden Fair* (3.7) was also selected because it demonstrated the mockery of Brienne and her coercion into femininity by wearing a dress. *The*

Last of the Starks (8.4) was selected because there was an element of power as Jaime initiates sex with Brienne: there is an element of punishment on the other side of the camera as the writers and directors decided Brienne would not end up with Jaime.

After the six episodes were selected, they were re-watched once more. Then a deductive approach was applied to the data, which means that the episodes were analyzed, and the data gathered was connected and examined through Mulvey's work (1975 & 1981).

Findings

This section will provide a brief description of the episodes selected for the analysis. Following, a brief description of the episodes will be used as data and the findings gathered from each episode will be summarized. The findings will then be discussed in the subsequent section.

Arya Stark

Season 1 Episode 4: Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things
Eddard Stark (Arya's father) finds out that Arya has a sword and tells her that she can keep it only if she trains with Syrio Forel, a sword instructor. Arya asks her father if Bran (Arya's brother) will become a knight even though he is paralyzed. Eddard says that he will not be a knight, but instead could be a lord. Then Arya asks if she can be a lord too. Eddard laughs and tells her that she will marry a lord, rule his castle, and have children that will be knights, princesses, and lords. Arya responds that it will not happen as this is not her.

This is a short scene, but it is significant as it shows Eddard understands that Arya is very different from Sansa, Arya's older sister. However, Eddard expects Araya to eventually be a lady, like Sansa. So, Arya can 'play' around with masculinity and masculine things, like sword-fighting, but only while she is a child. Nevertheless, Arya is still expected to turn into a stereotypical woman, doing womanly things like marriage and birthing children.

Season 2 Episode 2: The Night Lands
Arya is traveling with a group of boys and men heading to 'The Wall', all the while, she is pretending to be a boy. Guards from King's Landing arrive at their camp, and Arya hides, telling Gendry (one of the boys) that they are looking for her. When the guards leave, Gendry asks Arya if they were looking for her because she is a girl. After making Gendry promise he will not disclose her secret to others, Arya finally confesses that she is Arya Stark. Gendry is very surprised, not because she is a girl, but because she is 'highborn'. Gendry starts calling Arya 'my lady', and Arya tries to explain that while her mother and sister are ladies, she is not. This episode shows how Arya uses masculinity as a protection mechanism. This episode also displays how at the beginning of their relationship, Gendry does not care that Arya is a girl.

Season 8 Episode 2: The Knight of the Seven Kingdoms
After some time, Gendry and Arya meet again. Gendry is in Winterfell building weapons for the fight against the Night King. Arya looks very impressed at Gendry's work and follows him with her gaze. Arya

proceeds to take a dagger, while talking with Gendry, throwing it into a wooden pole. Gendry is captivated by Arya's skills.

Later, everyone is getting ready for the battle. Arya is practicing archery, and Gendry walks in with her new weapon. They start talking, and Arya tells Gendry that they are probably going to die soon and that she wants to know what sex feels like. Arya kisses Gendry, and they start undressing each other. Gendry is lying, and the camera shows half of Arya's back as she takes her shirt off while Gendry is looking at her.

In this episode, the sexual side of Arya is displayed. Even when Arya is being sexualized for the first time, she is not passive about it. This sex scene is very true to Arya's character, where she is not the typical passive female character.

Brienne of Tarth

Season 3 Episode 3: Walk of Punishment
Brienne is tasked by Lady Catelyn Stark to escort Jaime Lannister to King's Landing in exchange for her daughters. After days of traveling, some men from House Bolton take them prisoners. Jaime argues that if he were not chained, he would have been able to fight and escape, yet Brienne does not agree.

Brienne tells Jamie that she was beating him in the fight even though she is a woman. Jaime gets mad and tells Brienne that when they make camp at nightfall, the Bolton men will rape her and she should let it happen. Jaime goes as far as to say, he would rather die than be a woman. As Jaime predicted, the men tried to rape Brienne. Nonetheless, Jaime convinces Locke, the head of the group, that Brienne's father would pay many sapphires to whoever returned his daughter. Brienne is shown to have no power at all to protect herself. Brienne's rape gets prevented by men negotiating; in this scene, all the men have the power over a woman's body.

Season 3 Episode 7: The Bear and the Maiden Fair
Jaime tells Brienne that she is to remain in Harrenhal as punishment for assisting treason, while Jaime will travel to King's Landing. Jaime finds out that Locke did not accept Lord Selwyn Tarth's offer for his daughter's safe return. Jaime goes back to Harrenhal and finds Brienne wearing a dress, fighting a bear with a wooden sword, while all of Locke's men are having fun watching. Jaime jumps into the pit and pulls her behind him. A man shoots an arrow at the bear, distracting him, allowing Brienne and Jaime to get out of the pit. While Brienne is depicted as independent and strong, she still needs Jaime to save her. Additionally, this episode demonstrates how, even if not in a conventional way, female bodies are used to entertain the male characters.

Season 8 Episode 4: The Last of the Starks
After the battle against the Night King and White Walkers, Jaime and Brienne are celebrating. Brienne and others were playing a drinking game, consisting of guessing things about people. Tyrion (Jaime's brother) guesses that Brienne is still a virgin. Brienne, rather than answer the question, stands up and leaves. Later that evening, Jaime knocks on Brienne's door, telling her she did not drink for the last statement. He walks in and pours her a drink. After talking, Jaime tries to take his shirt off, but Brienne must help him. Then Jaime kisses Brienne, and they have sex off-camera.

A few days after the battle against the Night King, Sansa tells Jaime that Cersei (Jaime's sister and lover) will not make it out alive. Jaime decided to try to save Cersei. Brienne begs Jaime to stay and tells him he is not like his sister. Jaime tells Brienne that he is as hateful as Cersei. Brienne is used to develop Jaime's characters as a 'good guy' throughout the show and then to prove how Jamie has not changed. It also demonstrates how Brienne can have her career, but not love.

Analysis and Discussion

Arya and Brienne are women in *Game of Thrones* that do not get their power from their sexuality, marriage, or by birthing children. Brienne and Arya are not the representation of ideal or 'normal' womanhood, but both characters are stereotypical as 'strong warrior women are coded masculine, while mothers and lovers are coded feminine' (Frankel, 2014: 39). This is aligned with Mulvey's (1981) theory regarding female spectatorship. Brienne and Arya are two non-gender-conforming female characters that are 'unable to achieve a stable sexual identity' (Mulvey, 1982: 123). This oscillation is the key to their power; their power comes from their interaction and access to masculinity.

Further, both stories are cautionary tales of the consequences of women, not following feminine scripts. While Arya is very good at 'exploiting power' whenever she can, Arya also carries an 'emotional toll' as she is focused on revenge (Spector, 2012: 178). Brienne is a romantic; however, she refuses to conform to female beauty and to accept that as a woman, her only role is to look beautiful. Brienne's rejection of the traditional ideals of feminine beauty comes with a price. In the last season, Brienne got to be a knight in the King's Guard but did not get to be with the man she loved.

Arya Stark

Arya is a character that stays true to herself. While Gendry asks her to marry him, she decides to travel west and explore. While it is impressive that Arya gets to be herself, as her dad gives her liberties, her representation is sometimes stereotypical. Arya is stereotypical because she must give up her femininity and is subjected to the male gaze in the last season.

Arya's escape from the male gaze might be, because she starts in the show as a young girl, and later on pretends to be a boy to protect herself. During the first season, Arya's character is consistently shown to ignore and reject what is considered her female identity, and this is a choice. However, the threat of rape is always present, and it is used to discipline female characters (Spector, 2012). The coercive act of rape towards female characters demonstrates how femininity is a liability. Like female characters in some Hollywood films, Arya must acquire a male persona to be able to wield power and actively protect herself (Mulvey, 1981). For Arya, the rejection of femininity is no longer an exploration of gender, but rather a tool for survival.

Moreover, the lack of objectification and sexualization might be explained by the oscillation between femininity and regressive masculinity (Mulvey, 1981). According to Freud, femininity develops from a period that is masculine, or phallic, for both sexes (Mulvey, 1981). After the Phallic period, where both girls and boys have access to masculinity and its freedoms, 'femininity sets in' (Freud, 1964, cited in

Mulvey, 1981). In Arya's case, this means that while she is young, she gets to access masculinity and explore gender without repercussions.

However, eventually she is required to suppress her masculine side. Eddard makes it clear that eventually, Arya will be expected to marry and have children, just like her sister. This is an accurate representation of how women are coerced into giving up their freedoms, expected to serve men. There is also a constant comparison between Arya and Sansa who is portrayed as the 'ideal women'. So, while Arya is represented as a new type of woman, she is still compared, highlighting how Arya's behavior and attitudes are not 'normal'.

While Arya escapes the gaze for most of the television show, she is subjected to objectification in the last season. When Arya is showing off her acquired skills by throwing daggers, Gendry looks at her. This shows that Arya is not like most female characters, but it also demonstrates that Arya is no longer a little girl, she is a woman. From this point on, Arya and Gendry exchange sexually-charged looks, and while Arya is not represented as powerless in their sex scene, she becomes like other female characters, where the male gaze is part of her representation.

In the sex scene between Arya and Gendry, there is a noteworthy power dynamic. Unlike other sex scenes on the show, this a consensual sex scene between young adults. Additionally, while at first Arya is being subjected to the power of the male gaze, she also takes control, showing a different female perspective. It could be argued that female spectators would identify with Arya as she initiates sex, and somewhat takes control by using the female gaze. Mulvey (1981) theorized that female audiences identify with oscillating characters as they have some of the power men have, and this happens with Arya.

Nevertheless, subjecting Arya to the male gaze is like giving up part of her childhood liberties and giving into femininity. While it is not a coercive act, Arya having sex with Gendry does conform to heteronormative rules. Butler (1988), states that gender and sex are controlled and policed through the institution of heterosexual marriage, as society constructs natural sex, from which gender is then based on, and later, natural attraction between opposing sex and gender is created, to maintain reproduction. The decision to make Arya heteronormative is attached to male spectators identifying with male characters. While the sex scene is different from others, it still follows the typical process of narcissism and ego ideals – involved in the male gaze – as the male audience can identify with Gendry (Mulvey, 1975). Further, it needs to be considered that Arya is given power and control over her body as a non-gender-conforming character that renounces her femininity. Her power still comes from masculinity.

Brienne of Tarth

Brienne is disciplined for her non-conforming nature much more than Arya. At the beginning of her relationship with Jaime, Jaime mocks Brienne's appearance, always targeting her gender or her lack of femininity. In the episode *Walk of Punishment*, Brienne insults Jaime's fencing skills. Jaime, with no 'comeback', tells Brienne that she is going to be raped at nightfall. This is a male character disciplining the female figure. Jaime goes as far as telling Brienne that she should let it happen, because she has so little power over her own body and protection. This retribution can be explained by comparing it to the treatment of femme fatale. While Brienne is not a femme fatale, she challenges the male gaze like one. Brienne's non-

gender-conformity makes people label her as a deviant; thus, she is threatened with rape. When Jamie is caught off guard by Brienne's emasculating remark, Jamie 'puts her in her place' by threatening rape as an act of punishment, reminding her of her place in the world.

The fact that Jaime must negotiate and stop the rape from happening, shows how the male gaze is applied to Brienne. This scene revolves around Brienne's body, yet two men negotiate what should happen to her. Brienne is shown as a secondary character to all the male ones; her wants, needs, and her own body do not belong to her. This makes Brienne the 'bearer of meaning', meanwhile Jaime, Locke, and Lord Tarth are the 'makers of meaning' (Mulvey, 1975: 6). The fact that Brienne does not display any nudity does not mean that the power of the male gaze is not present, instead, the near-rape scene 'focuses more on the emotional pain of the ordeal' (Frankel, 2014: 13).

Another example of Brienne's lack of control over her own body is when Locke chooses to use Brienne as entertainment. Even with the absence of nudity and sexual connotations, there is still power in the gaze of the male characters, making Brienne seem less than human. The fact that Brienne is wearing a dress in the scene is humiliating to her, it is a punishment because Brienne refuses to be referred to as a lady. Brienne wearing the dress is a representation of being forced into femininity.

Further, both scenes help the development of Jaime as a character more than Brienne's. While Jaime is used as a comparison to Brienne, and it highlights Brienne's loyalty and honor, it also points out Brienne's denial of femininity (Marques, 2019). Jaime emphasizes how Brienne defies all rules of gender. Additionally, Brienne is used to highlight Jaime's character arc. His interactions with Brienne serve as proof that Jaime is becoming a 'good guy'.

Unlike Arya, Brienne appears to have less power in her sex scene. However, Brienne is shown to have interest in men romantically and sexually very early in her character arc. The sex scene with Jaime can be interpreted as character development. Yet, all this scene does is provide more insight into Jaime than Brienne because it shows how Jaime has not changed at all.

Time and time again, Brienne is regarded as a secondary character in service to men. Brienne is not represented as servicing men by an advantageous marriage or by having children. Nevertheless, she supports Jaime's role by providing him with chances to develop his 'soft' side and become better, supporting him when nobody else believed in him, and eventually having sex with him.

Conclusion

The purpose of the research was to analyze the treatment of Arya and Brienne, non-gender-conforming female characters in *Game of Thrones*, through the male gaze. A feminist qualitative content analysis based on Mulvey's (1975 & 1981) and Butler's (1988) work was utilized to address the question of the article.

Both characters are not a conventional representation of womanhood as they do not get their power from their sexuality and fertility. However, they are stereotypical representations of warrior women, and they are coded masculine. The research found that both characters give up their femininity to access power not granted to female characters, meaning their power stems from their masculine traits and behavior. The study

also found that although non-gender-conforming female characters were given more liberties than female characters, they were still subjected to the control, coercion, and discipline of the male gaze, even if in non-sexual ways.

Arya manages to escape the male gaze when she is a young girl, and she oscillates between 'active masculinity' and 'passive femininity', as part of the phallic stage (Mulvey, 1981). However, she is still expected to eventually fit into the ideal feminine role of marrying a lord and having his children. While Arya manages to remain un-conforming to gender ideals, she is subjected to the objectifying nature of the male gaze as soon as she is no longer considered a girl and becomes a woman. In the last season, Arya has sex with Gendry, and she exhibits power in this scene. However, the scene conforms to heteronormative parameters as the male perspective is emphasized, and the male audience can identify with Gendry.

Brienne is granted fewer freedoms and gets disciplined more through the threat of rape, mockery and belittling. Brienne is subjected to the gaze, as she is constantly reminded that she is a woman who does not look like a woman and is continually punished for it. She is used for the entertainment of men, and while she is not sexualized or objectified, the gaze is present as there is still control and discipline behind the act of looking. Further, Brienne is used to advance Jaime's character arc, and she is secondary to Jaime.

The findings of the research demonstrate that Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and female spectatorship (1975 & 1981) are still relevant and applicable to the television show *Game of Thrones*. Further, the findings demonstrated that two non-gender-conforming female characters in *Game of Thrones* are still subjected to the power, control, and discipline of the gaze. While it is not accurate to say that both characters are powerless, their avenues to power are through masculinity, so they are limited. Arya's and Brienne's masculine access to power comes with a price, and the price is their femininity. There seems to be an incapacity for femininity and power to co-exist.

While the findings of the research are noteworthy, their application is limited to the television show *Game of Thrones*. Future research could focus on the treatment of non-gender-conforming characters in a variety of television shows and other types of media. Further, it would also be interesting to investigate why female characters have to give up their femininity to receive respect and power – why is it so hard for femininity and power to co-exist?

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About the Author:

Cristina Trejo Morales grew up in Mexico City. She moved to Canada to pursuit a BA in psychology with a minor in sociology at the University of British Columbia. In 2019 she graduated from the MA program in Global Women's Studies: Gender, Globalization, and Rights. Currently Cristina is pursuing work in an NGO that helps women.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Representation of Motherhood in Game of Thrones

Ann-Kathrin Ruf
M.A. Gender, Globalisation, and Rights
National University of Ireland, Galway

Abstract   The social and cultural construction of motherhood places countless rules and regulations upon women for both those who have children and those who do not. This article analyses how motherhood is portrayed in the popular TV series *Game of Thrones (GoT)* (HBO, 2011-2019). Using the radical feminist texts *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (Rich, 1986) and *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present* (Oakley, 1974), the article identifies three themes in the portrayal of motherhood: motherhood as duty, status, and ideal. *GoT* portrays motherhood as a duty that cannot, and should not, be evaded, but that simultaneously grants women unique power in the private sphere, all the while upholding the dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' mothers. Ultimately, the portrayal of motherhood in *GoT* is multifaceted and at times critical of its social and cultural construction. But by depicting the punitive consequences of resistance, the series does not go far enough to challenge the construction itself.

Introduction

Radical feminism strives to eradicate patriarchy: the unequal power structures in society that oppress women. The theory's main goal, thus, is to identify, understand, critique, and ultimately abolish the patriarchal social and cultural constructions designed to keep women submissive and men dominant. These structures are situated and operate in both the public and private sphere. Examples include rape culture (Brownmiller, 1975) and the beauty industry (Wolf, 1990), as well as the constructions of sexuality (MacKinnon, 1989) and motherhood (Oakley, 1974; Rich, 1986). The social construction of motherhood is the focus of this article.

Representation of Motherhood in Game of Thrones

At its core, social constructionism poses that knowledge, and many aspects of the world, are only real because they exist through social agreement (Burr, 1998). Any identity is linked to expected ways of behaviour, they are regularly reiterated and reinforced to maintain the identity's meaning. Actors involved in these processes are numerous, among them parents, teachers, peers, and mass media (Gonzalez-Mena, 2014). How motherhood is portrayed in fiction is an important contribution to the understanding of motherhood in reality,

> …not because such representations are an accurate reflection of reality but because they have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted familial relations, define sexual norms and provide 'common sense' understandings about motherhood and maternal behaviour for the contemporary audience. (Feasey, 2012: 9)

To examine the understanding of motherhood in reality, this paper will analyse how it is portrayed in the popular TV series *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019) by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss. I selected *Game of Thrones* for its iconic status in modern pop culture. The series has won 59 Emmys and countless other awards and drew in roughly 33 million viewers in its final season. Set on the fictional continents Westeros and Essos, the series follows several noble families as they struggle for power and influence in the world. One of these families is House Lannister, whose daughter Cersei is married to King Robert Baratheon. Together, they have three children—officially. In truth, the children are the result of Cersei's near life-long incestuous affair with her twin brother Jaime. Throughout the wars, other noble houses' schemes, and Cersei's own unwise acts, eventually claim her children's lives; she descends further and further into madness and ultimately dies alongside her life-long partner/brother.

Drawing from key radical feminist texts on the construction of motherhood, I will discuss how the portrayal of Cersei is reflective of, and possibly influences, the social construction of motherhood in Western cultures. Cersei is of course not the only mother figure in *GoT*; I focus on her because her narrative parallels preconceived ideas of biological motherhood most clearly. Although radical feminist theory has been used in the past to critically analyse works of fiction and contemporary popular culture[2] research on the representation of motherhood in fiction that utilizes a radical feminist lens is scarce. This article will therefore become a valuable contribution to the discourse surrounding the portrayal of motherhood in works of fiction and its implications for the understanding of motherhood in reality.

Research consisted of a qualitative approach in the form of a thematic content analysis, which facilitates the application of multiple theories across a range of epistemologies, and allows for broad themes and contexts to emerge (Saldana, 2009). Three themes were then developed through iterative engagement between tropes of motherhood identified within radical feminist theory and the data itself.

The article is divided into four parts. After this introduction, I will review motherhood in radical feminist theory, focusing on the texts *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (Rich, 1986) and *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present* (Oakley, 1974) and work out three key themes in the literature. In the following section, I will apply my findings to the portrayal of motherhood in *Game of Thrones* and discuss if and how Cersei Lannister is confined by patriarchal expectations

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[2] See Downing, 2013; Heldman & Wade, 2010

regarding her motherhood, and if and how her characterization embodies, challenges, or rejects this construction of motherhood. The last section will conclude.

Motherhood in radical feminist discourse

Of the numerous radical feminist writings on motherhood, this article will mainly draw from two sources. These are Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986) and Ann Oakley's *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present* (1974). *Of Woman Born's* impact on the debate surrounding motherhood cannot be overstated. Although over forty years old, the book is still debated and referenced in feminist discourse today, not least because 'Rich was the first feminist to articulate both the oppressive and potentially empowering components of maternity' (O'Brien Hallstein 2007: 269). In her book, Rich (1986: 13) argues that biological motherhood is divided in two, namely, 'the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control.'

Rich harshly criticises this institutionalised aspect of motherhood—and this aspect alone—throughout her book. She reasons that institutionalised biological motherhood is one of patriarchy's most successful methods for men to 'determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male' (1986: 57). According to Rich (1986: 276-277), institutionalised biological motherhood becomes apparent in numerous ways, such as:

> Marriage as economic dependence, as the guarantee to a man of 'his' children; the theft of childbirth from women; the concept of the 'illegitimacy' if a child if born out of wedlock; […] the denial that work done by women at home is a part of 'production'; the chaining of women in links of love and guilt; […] the solitary confinement of 'full-time motherhood'; the token nature of fatherhood, which gives a man rights and privileges over children toward whom he assumes minimal responsibility; the psychoanalytic castigation of the mother; the burden of emotional work borne by women in the family—all these are connecting fibres of this invisible institution, and they determine our relationships to our children whether we like it or not.

The inevitable outcome of institutionalised biological motherhood is that mothers are put on a metaphorical pedestal while simultaneously being under incessant scrutiny. Performing the unattainable role of selfless, fulfilled, full-time mother takes a toll on the mothers' personal well-being, which, Rich argues, is the desired effect of institutionalised motherhood: by keeping women confined to motherhood and domesticity and socialising them into believing motherhood is their calling; patriarchy can contain the perceived threat women's fertility poses. Institutionalised biological motherhood thus secures men's positions of power in society while at the same time ensuring their children's moral and emotional well-being.

Rich's suggested solution is to reject motherhood as an institution and embrace motherhood as an experience. Only by rearing children feminist-style, free of patriarchal rules and expectations, can women reshape and redefine motherhood: 'to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work.' (Rich, 1986: 280)

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Rich encourages mothers to see the relationship to their children as something unique that is theirs to shape and build however they think is best. This relationship can and should not be the all-defining aspect of a woman's life; her personality, her own needs and desires, and her life without her children deserve equal dedication and priority, because only a happy mother is a good mother.

Woman's Work (Oakley, 1974), albeit less present in contemporary feminist discourse, is a valuable second source in the context of this article. In her book, Ann Oakley makes no distinction between motherhood as an experience and an institution, instead she argues that biological motherhood in its entirety is a social and cultural construct. She explains that the myth of motherhood contains three popular assertions:

> The first is the most influential: that children need mothers. The second is the obverse of this: that mothers need their children. The third assertion is a generalization which holds that motherhood represents the greatest achievement of a woman's life: the sole true meaning of self-realization. Women, in other words, need to be mothers. (Oakley, 1974: 186)

These three beliefs are reinforced in both the public and private sphere and constrict women in much the same way as institutionalised biological motherhood according to Adrienne Rich. By reiterating the assertion that all children need their (biological) mothers, any mother who does not fully dedicate herself to raising her children within a confined 'one-to-one relationship' (Oakley 1974: 203) is easily branded a 'bad' mother. This assertion robs mothers of all independence enforcing the idea that all day, every day, their own needs must succumb to the needs of their children.

The second claim, that mothers need their children, is a necessary requirement to uphold the first assertion. Oakley explains under patriarchy, women are told that they all have a 'maternal instinct'. According to this myth, any 'real' woman and mother will desire to care for her children and prioritise their needs over her own. Oakley denies that a maternal instinct exists and instead argues that 'the desire for motherhood is culturally induced, and the ability to mother' is learned (1974: 201).

The third assertion, that all women need to be mothers, is more general, its symptoms are more widespread. Oakley poses that girls are socialised to desire becoming a mother from an early age: 'motherhood is the chief occupation for which females are reared' (1974: 190). Indeed, femininity under patriarchy is intricately interwoven with the desire to be a mother, and women who do not want children are seen as unfeminine. These three assertions, together, deny any woman personhood. A woman is reduced to a vessel that yearns to be filled, and every woman who does not desire motherhood is seen as abnormal, wicked, and just plain wrong.

Constructions of motherhood: duty, status, ideal

A synthesis of these key works reveals three themes. Firstly, that motherhood under patriarchy is duty. Rich's institutionalised biological motherhood and Oakley's three assertions all portray motherhood as every woman's highest calling. Women under the patriarchy are expected to want to become mothers.

This theme follows that mothers who adhere to their maternal duties under patriarchy have a higher status in society than childless women. Mothers, thus, hold maternal power. This theme features in several feminist writings, most notably Simone de Beauvoir's famous *The Second Sex* (2009: 630; first

published 1949), where she theorises that children satisfy each women's desire to hold as much power and influence as men.

This power, however, is not to be abused for 'selfish' reasons—mothers are expected to prioritise their children's needs over their own. This brings forth the third theme: that there is a maternal ideal after which all mothers should strive, lest they be branded a 'bad' mother.

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Motherhood under patriarchy: motherhood as duty

> When we think of the institution of motherhood, no symbolic architecture comes to mind, no visible embodiment of authority, power, or of potential or actual violence. […] We do not think of the laws which determine how we got [here], the penalties imposed on those of us who have tried to live our lives according to a different plan […], the experts—almost all male—who have told us how, as mothers, we should behave and feel. […] We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us, in the name of the institution of motherhood. (Rich 1986: 275)

Institutionalised motherhood, concludes Rich, ensures women's submission by imposing strict duties upon them. Oakley agrees with Rich; she calls motherhood 'the most persuasive and the least questionable' rationale 'offered for women's presence in the home' (1974: 186).

Maternal duties are abundant in *GoT's* medieval society, where young boys dream of being kings, lords, and priests, and young girls dream of being their wife, and mother of their children. One such young girl was Cersei Lannister. Growing up with her twin brother Jaime, Cersei soon observed a difference in the way the two children were reared:

> Cersei: Jaime was taught to fight with sword and lance and mace, and I was taught to smile and sing and please. He was heir to Casterly Rock, and I was sold to some stranger like a horse to be ridden whenever he desired. (GoT 2.09, 2012)

According to Oakley, this serves a clear purpose: to condition young girls with 'standards which insist that anything less than domestic perfection is a crime against their own natures' (1974: 274). While Jaime was taught to assert himself, Cersei was taught to adapt to her surroundings, please others, and 'be ridden whenever [her husband] desired', regardless of her own desires. Cersei's marriage to Robert Baratheon, the King, is an unhappy one; Robert's intercourse with Cersei serves a purpose besides lust fulfilment: 'The fathers have of course demanded sons, as heirs [and] images and extensions of themselves; their immorality' (Rich 1986: 195). Cersei's duty is to ensure the continuity of the Baratheon dynasty.

Over the course of their marriage, Cersei thus gives birth to four children, three boys and one girl. But unbeknownst to everyone, only one of her children was fathered by Robert: a boy who died in infancy. Throughout the series, Cersei only mentions him twice; the first time in conversation with another mother. While the royal family is visiting Lord and Lady Stark in their fiefdom and staying in their castle, 10-year-old Bran Stark falls off a tower and into a coma. Over the following weeks, his mother

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Catelyn refuses to leave his side, not even to bathe or sleep. One day, Cersei finds Catelyn in Bran's room to express her sympathy and share the story of her son:

> Cersei: I lost my first boy, a little black-haired beauty. He was a fighter, too; tried to beat the fever that took him… Forgive me. It's the last thing you need to hear right now.
> Catelyn: I never knew.
> Cersei: It was years ago. […] The boy looked just like [Robert]. Such a little thing. […] They came to take his body away and Robert held me. I screamed and I battled, but he held me. (GoT 1.02, 2011)

This scene holds immense symbolic value. Cersei enters the chambers as queen: dressed in beautiful clothes, her posture perfectly elegant. Catelyn, on the other hand, is wearing a simple dress that hangs loosely from her shoulders. The women are presented as opposites: Cersei graceful and regal, Catelyn haggard and worried. But Cersei appears to take no offence; she understands a mother's grief. She has not come to meet one of her royal subjects, but another mother. When Cersei begins talking, she does not take her eyes off the little boy fighting for his life. She tells the story more to herself than to Catelyn. Soon, Cersei catches herself and even apologises, knowing it might have upset Catelyn further. Only then does Cersei look at Catelyn and speak to her. Cersei's story is constructed as a catharsis. She ends by promising Catelyn to pray to the Mother, one of the seven gods, daily. "Perhaps this time she'll listen," she adds sharply.

Yet one twist remains: before his fall, Bran caught Cersei and Jaime having sex. To keep their incestuous affair secret, Jaime caused Bran's fall. Cersei's fear of Bran waking up and exposing her secret is thus juxtaposed against her genuine grief and anger at her brother for his actions. Her experiences as a mother, it seems, have altered her personality, complicated her emotions—unlike Jaime, who seemingly cares little for Ban's fate. The scene portrays Cersei as still sad and angry over her son's death. She clearly loved her black-haired boy—regardless of the man who fathered him, because: 'mother-love is supposed to be continuous, unconditional. Love and anger cannot coexist. Female anger threatens the institution of motherhood' (Rich 1986: 46).

But soon, Cersei's anger is revealed. Several episodes later, Cersei has just been confronted by Lord Stark, who has deducted that her three surviving children are not Robert's, but the product of a near life-long incestuous affair of Cersei and her twin brother, Jaime.

> Eddard: [Your children] are all Jaime's.
> Cersei: Thank the gods. In the rare event that Robert leaves his whores for long enough to stumble drunk into my bed, I finish him off in other ways. (GoT 1.07, 2011)

Cersei admits that she does not love her children because they are her children—but because they are her children *with Jaime.* She loves them *conditionally.* This contradicts the assertion that all mothers need (all) their children.

Between the death of her son and now, much has put a strain on Cersei's marriage to Robert, not least his excessive drinking and the open contempt he holds for his wife. Divorce is not an option in the medieval society: their marriage cements a crucial political alliance (*GoT* 1.05, 2011). Cersei is stuck in her domestic role, a role that expects women to 'abdicate their personhood for the sake of maternity'

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(Oakley 1974: 68). In this role, Cersei is expected to love all her children unconditionally, and 'to be ridden' whenever Robert desires. But after years of physical and emotional abuse, Cersei refuses to comply with her duty to have children with the 'right' man and instead chooses the father of her children herself, thus rebelling against her duty to be a 'good', loving mother to *all* children: Robert is 'finished off in other ways' to prevent a pregnancy while children from Jaime are loved. The black-haired boy seems to have faded in her memory because he was fathered by the wrong man. Even before the end of the first season, Cersei went from being a 'good' wife and mother to being vain, angry, and defying the institution of motherhood and the assertions that dictate women must love all their children unconditionally (Rich, 1986). Instead, Cersei has—as far as possible—embraced motherhood as an experience under her own terms. Nevertheless, her patriarchal surroundings force her to play the role of dutiful wife and mother to veil her secret.

Cersei's portrayal challenges the narrative that women have a 'maternal instinct' (Oakley, 1976) and illustrates that motherhood under patriarchy is an institution. Although Cersei quietly rebels against these enforced duties, she is not portrayed as a feminist heroine. *GoT* constructs maternal duties as just that: duties, not gladly-made choices. But by utilizing Cersei's lack of compliance to reflect her descent into evilness that is taking place over the course of the series, *GoT* ultimately conveys the message that motherhood includes duties that must not be evaded. As Cersei evolves into one of the main antagonists of the narrative, her failure to fulfil her maternal duties transforms her character from one that is sympathetic to one reviled. Cersei's character construction ultimately conveys one message: that any evil woman must be a bad mother, and any bad mother cannot be a good person.

Maternal power: motherhood as status

> The power of the mother has two aspects: the biological potential and the capacity to bear and nourish human life, and the magical power invested in women by men, whether in the form of Goddess-worship or the fear of being controlled and overwhelmed by women. (Rich 1986: 13)

This 'magical power' is the subject of this section. Rich argues that it can be given voluntarily, by worshipping women for their fertility, or involuntarily, by being afraid of it. Because of this fear, women's power is heavily regulated under patriarchy, and restricted to motherhood, 'the one aspect in which most women have felt their own power in the patriarchal sense—authority over and control of another' (Rich 1986: 67).

Cersei Lannister wields immense maternal power, first as queen (wife of King Robert) then after her husband's death, as queen regent (mother of King Joffrey). I include her status as wife in this analysis because:

> In the social image of a woman, the roles of wife and mother are not distinct from the role of a housewife. […] 'Housewife' can be an umbrella term for 'wife' and 'mother'. Women's expected role in society is to strive after perfection in all three roles. (Oakley, 1974: 9)

It is this reduction of wives and mothers to housewives that Cersei most disdains. She rejects the passivity associated with femininity (to 'smile and sing and please', *GoT* 2.09, 2012). In one episode, a battle is raging in the city. While the men are fighting the conqueror's army, Cersei and the other noble ladies are hiding in a safe location. Cersei is unhappy with this arrangement and laments, 'I should have

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been born a man. I'd rather face a thousand swords than be cooped up inside with this flock of frightened hens.' (GoT 2.09, 2012).

Cersei is clearly unfulfilled with her status as wife and mother; however, she does not criticise the construction of femininity as a whole—just that its rules apply to her as well. Cersei still associates femininity with weakness, but implies that she is 'better' than the other women. This internalised misogyny influences a lot of Cersei's decisions throughout the series. To prove her worth *despite her sex*, Cersei is continuously looking for ways to extend her power into the public, 'masculine' domain of politics: in season one, she is instrumental in orchestrating Robert's death and installing her son Joffrey as king. After Joffrey's murder, his brother Tommen succeeds him. As Tommen is only fourteen, Cersei is installed as queen regent, which grants her masculine, public power for the first time. Tommen soon marries Margaery Tyrell to ensure a political alliance, and his new wife proves very influential over the young man. To eliminate this threat to her power, Cersei kills her daughter-in-law and numerous other people who have wronged her. Her son Tommen, shocked by his mother's violence, then commits suicide, and Cersei seizes power by crowning herself queen.

Her regency, however, is characterized by war, rebellions, and invasions. Abandoned by all allies except one, Cersei is unable or unwilling to rule wisely as the country descends into chaos. Jaime, her lover, grows increasingly distant and eventually leaves Cersei just as she begins preparing the city for an invasion by a foreign queen. Although Cersei is pregnant with his child, his departure is not portrayed as cowardly or disloyal. On the contrary: Jaime walks away with his head held high, to triumphant music, and is then seen galloping away, conjuring up images of knighthood (*GoT* 7.07, 2017). It is made clear that Cersei is not to pity, instead, the scene frames Jaime as the hero finally emancipating himself from this mad woman. One season later, however, he returns to her, reasoning:

> Jaime: You think I'm a good man? I pushed a boy out of a tower window, crippled him for life. For Cersei. I strangled my cousin with my own hands just to get back to Cersei. I would have murdered every man, woman and child in Riverrun for Cersei. She's hateful. And so am I. (GoT 8.04, 2019)

The two reunite as the invader is destroying the city and they die in each other's arms, in the rubble of the castle collapsing around them. Cersei's arc demonstrates the punitive consequences for mothers striving for more than maternal power. Although Cersei loves her children very much, she longs for more than just fulfilment through motherhood. Adrienne Rich would applaud her for this desire to be herself and see motherhood as merely an extension, and not a definition, of her femininity. Cersei's push for individuality, however, is unsuccessful. Her desire to enter and dominate the masculine, public realm, cost her sanity, caused a cruel war in the realm, and claimed her and her family's lives.

> The doctrine that women belong in the home never carries more conviction than when it is allied with 'proof' that women's activities outside the home are detrimental to the health and welfare of themselves, their families, and their country as a whole. (Oakley, 1974: 47)

Maternal power in *GoT* is domestic power, power within the family, and within the rules of patriarchy. Cersei's arc upholds the divide between the feminine private domain and the masculine public domain, showing that any mother who longs to carve out an identity for herself beyond her motherhood, will hurt her children and face punishment. *GoT* enforces the belief that women's power should remain restricted to maternal power.

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Good mother, bad mother: motherhood as an ideal

> It is all too easy to accept unconsciously the guilt so readily thrust upon any woman who is seeking to broaden and deepen her own existence, on the grounds that this must somehow damage her children. That guilt is one of the most powerful forms of social control over women; none of us can be entirely immune to it. (Rich, 1986: 206)

Maternal duties are tied to high expectations for the mother. 'Female possibility has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood' (Rich, 1986: 13). Mothers who hold on to their individuality are quickly labelled as a 'bad' mother. *GoT* mostly follows this pattern: Cersei is set against another mother figure, Catelyn Tully Stark, the woman whose son fell off a tower in the first season. The consequences of their different mothering styles are revealed throughout the series.

Although Cersei considers everyone who is not herself, or her children, 'an enemy' (*GoT* 1.03, 2011) and has several feuds and animosities; her relationship to Catelyn is constructed in most detail and results in numerous actions that are crucial to the plot. Despite the two women only talking to each other in two short scenes in season one, the series constructs them as each other's main opposite until Catelyn's death in season three. As outlined above, Cersei Lannister is constructed as a vain mother who rejects the maternal duties placed upon her under institutionalised motherhood and instead tries to mother under her own terms, while also reaching for patriarchal power in the public sphere.

In this aspect, Catelyn is Cersei's polar opposite, which is ingrained in her character from the very beginning. In Westeros, each noble family has 'house words', which point out the house's characteristics and serve as a moral compass. The Lannister words are 'Hear me Roar', and Cersei is trying to achieve just that throughout the series – to be heard and have her power recognised outside her family. The words of House Tully, on the other hand, are 'Family, Duty, Honour'—in this order (*GoT* 1.05, 2011). Throughout the series, Catelyn lives by these words, putting her family above all other duties (such as the duty to her king) or her honour. No action of Catelyn's is not motivated by her desire to fulfil her maternal duty to her family: after her husband is beheaded by the king and her son goes to war to avenge him, Catelyn dutifully remains by his side throughout the war, giving him council and forging important alliances. Until her death, Catelyn is the 'good', heroic mother in *GoT*—with one exception. When he returned from the last war sixteen years prior, her husband Eddard brought with him his illegitimate child, fathered during the war. The boy, whose maternity was unknown, grew up with Catelyn and Eddard's legitimate children. Not wanting to live with a painful reminder of her husband's infidelity, Catelyn treated Jon coldly until he left the castle.

This is the only aspect in which Catelyn and Cersei are similar, whereas Cersei prevents having a baby from the 'wrong' father, Catelyn refuses to love a baby from the 'wrong' mother. Unlike Cersei however, Catelyn feels remorse for her actions later, going as far as calling herself a 'murderer' for praying the boy would die. In a dialogue with her daughter-in-law, Catelyn concludes: 'And everything that's happened since then, all this horror that's come to my family, it's all because I couldn't love a motherless child' (GoT 3.02, 2013).

It seems doubtful that the war could have been avoided if only Catelyn had more maternal feelings towards Jon, but the series does not explore this claim further and instead leaves it up to the viewer to

disagree with or blame Catelyn. In any case, Catelyn herself feels responsible for everything because, like Cersei, she loved children *conditionally*. Any reasons she might have had for this are not brought up in this scene. Her trouble embracing her husband's bastard is constructed as evil, and Catelyn is portrayed as an imperfect mother. She has denied Jon a mother figure—herself—and thus defied the assertion 'all children need their mothers'. The scene, however, serves as Catelyn's repentance. By blaming herself for literally *everything*, Catelyn again becomes the angelic mother saviour: she shoulders all the blame, exonerating her husband and sons for all their transgressions (which have caused the war much more directly than she did). She accepts the guilt thrust upon her for failing her maternal duties so her remaining family can be guilt-free. This restores Catelyn's heroic persona, despite her alleged imperfections.

Cersei, of course, does no such thing throughout the series; she never apologises for defying any motherly rules because she does not accept that the rules apply to her. By carving out her own identity beyond her motherhood, she has wreaked havoc in the kingdom, which ultimately led to the deaths of her family members. To forge wartime alliances, her son Joffrey agreed to marry Margaery Tyrell and was poisoned by his new in-laws during his wedding because his new wife wanted the status, but not the abusive husband (she married Joffrey's kinder brother Tommen instead, who succeeded Joffrey to the throne). Cersei's daughter Myrcella was fostered with an insubordinate noble family in the hopes this would make them more loyal to the crown, but was murdered by them to avenge an old death. Her son Tommen killed himself because of her violent acts, and her lover Jaime was unable to free himself of her toxic hold of him and chose to die with her. Cersei's actions are a much more direct cause of her family's deaths than Catelyn's are of 'everything', yet Cersei refuses to see this or accept responsibility. Cersei, until the end, remains a 'bad', selfish mother—and this becomes even more apparent when compared to the heroic, ideal Catelyn.

The portrayal of motherhood in *GoT* upholds and consequently enforces this dichotomy of good mother, bad mother: although neither mother is portrayed as purely good or bad; the narrative nevertheless constructs one as the villain, the other as the saint of the story. What ultimately makes Catelyn so heroic is not that she is always 'good', but that she accepts her maternal duties and does her best to fulfil them. This reinforces the message that a woman's character is tied to her performance as a mother: mothers fulfilling their maternal duties are loved, while mothers defying them are disparaged and lose their children's, and everyone else's, respect. This negates women's personhood beyond their maternal role.

Conclusion

The construction of motherhood continues to place rules and regulations upon women. This article has analysed how the TV series *Game of Thrones* shapes, reinforces, and conveys narratives associated with the construction of motherhood under patriarchy. The discussion addressed the portrayal of Cersei Lannister and examined if and how the series' patriarchal societies influence the construction of motherhood, and if and how Cersei accepts or defies the resulting expectations placed upon her.

The article used a radical feminist lens to interpret the role of motherhood within *GoT*, drawing from the texts *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (Rich, 1986) and *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present* (Oakley, 1974). Through iterative engagement between the texts and the series' raw data, I fleshed out three main themes that became the focus of the analysis: motherhood as duty, motherhood as status, and motherhood as an ideal.

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The section *Motherhood under patriarchy* addressed the first theme. It analysed how Cersei adapts to the maternal duties placed upon her under patriarchy. The section found that *GoT* depicts duties and obligations associated with motherhood, which are regularly portrayed as restricting. Within the series, maternal duties are constructed by patriarchal structures and enforced via patriarchal agents through education, peer pressure, societal expectations, and brute force, consequently conveying the message that motherhood comes with duties that cannot, and should not, be evaded.

The second section, *Maternal power*, explored the status Cersei holds because of her motherhood, and asked if she holds more, less, or different power than men. The analysis found that, while Cersei does have unique, maternal power, this power exists solely within the private, feminine sphere—and it operates whether Cersei wants it or not. Attempting to reach into the public realm herself has fatal consequences not just for Cersei, but for her family as well, which ultimately reinforces the notion that a woman's place is in the household.

The third section, *Good mother, bad mother*, explored motherhood as an ideal. It found that *GoT* embraces this idea and forces its mother figures Cersei and Catelyn into one of these strict roles, thus upholding the dichotomy.

The way *GoT* portrays each of the three themes reflects and contributes to the understanding of motherhood in society as a finely entangled web of obligations, restrictions, and privileges that follows women throughout their lives, whether they have children or not. Motherhood on screen is thus portrayed as what Adrienne Rich would call an institution (1986), and the expectations placed upon mothers are reinforced through generalised assertions (Oakley, 1974). Cersei is regularly portrayed as rebelling against this confining construct, shining a light on the challenging aspects of motherhood and casting doubt on the patriarchal beliefs that motherhood comes natural to all women, that all women enjoy being mothers full-time, and that motherhood is all any woman needs to find fulfilment and accomplishment (Oakley, 1974). Many of Cersei's challenges are a direct result of the patriarchal structures under which she lives, and a consequence of the social and cultural construction of motherhood prevalent within her social environment. *GoT's* portrayal of motherhood, and Cersei's struggles with the construction, therefore illustrates the negative effects of a patriarchal understanding of the construction of motherhood.

However, *GoT* does not reward mothers who rebel against this construction. Cersei faces punitive consequences for her failure to comply with the rules and regulations placed upon her by the construction of motherhood. By portraying these punishments, the series ultimately conveys the message that the construction of motherhood, albeit flawed, must not be defied. Ultimately, the portrayal of motherhood in *GoT* thus acts as a patriarchal tool to reinforce women's subordination as it is asserted via constructed motherhood by limiting their power and possibilities and keeping them restricted to a life dedicated to childrearing.

Thanks to courageous women such as Adrienne Rich, Ann Oakley, and many more—many of them mothers themselves—the 'chaining of women in links of love and guilt' (Rich, 1986: 276) and 'the most persuasive and the least questionable' rationale 'offered for women's presence in the home' (Oakley, 1974: 186) have been identified, addressed, and included in radical feminist theory. By critically portraying this oppressive construction in pop culture, the producers and writers of popular

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TV series can make a small, but important, contribution to highlighting the negative effects of institutionalised motherhood under patriarchy. Portraying feminist mothers on screen, thus, will be an important, and long overdue, contribution to feminism's efforts to dismantle oppressive patriarchal power structures influencing mothers and childfree women alike.

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About the author:

Ann-Kathrin (Anni) Ruf graduated with honours with an MA in Gender, Globalisation and Rights from NUI Galway in 2018, two years after graduating from Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany, with a degree in law. A passionate advocate for women's rights, she has worked and volunteered for women's and human rights organisations in Ireland, Georgia and Germany, where she currently lives with her two cats. Anni is involved in women's rights activism, has supported the Repeal the 8th movement in Ireland and is advocating for the decriminalisation of abortion under the German criminal code and the adoption of the "Nordic model" for sex trade legislation. She currently works as a research consultant in Mainz, Germany, and plans to pursue a PhD in the near future.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

'Optics of Intersectionality': Unpacking Women's Travel Experiences through Instagram

Molly Geoghegan
M.A. Gender, Globalisation, and Rights
National University of Ireland, Galway

Abstract   This research applies the feminist framework of intersectionality to female travel and the role that Instagram plays in those experiences. Using a qualitative approach and engaging in interviews with four travel Instagrammers, I will explore these individual experiences with an intersectional lens. Intersectionality helps to unpack the ambiguities of Instagram's role in travel—both its power to bolster community, as well as perpetuate systems of power.

To disrupt patriarchal, neo-colonial constructions in travel, it is vital to recognize the spaces that research has left untouched and to make aware the complex reality of female travel experiences. Intersectionality helps to illuminate the ambiguities of Instagram's role in travel, erode systemic barriers, and better understand how women navigate the world.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Instagram, Travel, Tourism, Colonialism, Feminism

Introduction

The popularization of portable cameras, phones and technology has amplified travel to widely accessible, public domains. Personal photographs can be published to a 'feed' in a matter of moments—travel experiences are now 'share-able'. While there is an abundance of writings about the uses and implications of social media, Instagram has a unique relationship with travel that has been less scrutinized.

Intersectionality, a feminist theory coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, presents a framework to pinpoint axes of oppression (1993). In examining female travel experiences, there are varying dynamics at play. Because of the entwined nature of Instagram and travel, it is vital to examine how they disrupt and frame each other within these experiences.

Women are accustomed to everyday risk in their mobility, but it can be intensified in travel where culture and customs are unfamiliar. These are patriarchal limitations on an individual experience that are both exacerbated and made easier to navigate through Instagram.

Travel also brings with it issues of colonialism. The ability to travel has historically rested with the group with the most power and money; 'the camera was used as an instrument of symbolic control' (2015: 102). John Urry names this perspective the 'tourist gaze,' which is 'largely pre-formed by and within existing mediascapes' (2011: 179); meaning that the context of a photograph is just as important as what is being photographed.

Being a free service available to anyone, Instagram has democratized travel photography and provided opportunities to expand the one-sided narrative of the 'tourist gaze'. To disrupt patriarchal, neo-colonial constructions in travel, it is vital to recognize the spaces that research has left untouched and to make aware the complex reality of female travel experiences. It is in addressing this gap that I arrive at my research question: How can intersectionality help to unpack the experiences of female[3] travel Instagrammers[4]?

As a feminist researcher in this emergent field, it is necessary to consider intersectionality to illuminate interweaving power dynamics such as race, gender and class—and how they are experienced through travel. For the purpose of this article, I will focus primarily on my participants' relationship with Instagram—both how it can be used as a tool and experienced as a hindrance. There are complex gendered dynamics, colonial implications, and lack of representation. These 'multiply-burdened' (Crenshaw, 1993: 140) realities will help to unpack female travel experiences and the baggage that comes with it. In doing so, this research strives to make the world of travel, and in a sense the world itself, more equal.

Defining 'Travel'

There are many different motivations and reasons for travel—forced migration, immigration and displacement—a few among an endless string of possibilities. The type of travel I engage with is individually motivated leisure travel. This does not necessarily denote a 'holiday' or 'vacation' as many research participants engage in 'long-form' travel, meaning travelling from place to place and making a living 'on the road'. Others have uprooted from the countries they were born in or split their time between different countries on a regular basis. Thus, 'travel', as I utilize it in this research, encapsulates those that willingly and positively participate in travel.

Literature Review

The following section will outline the main theories and themes used within the article through a consolidated literature review.

Theory of Intersectionality

Engaging in social research, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality resonates. Intersectionality illustrates 'that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot

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[3] I use 'female' here to embody any woman-identified persons, inclusive of trans, genderqueer or non-binary women. Though I use both 'women' and 'female', I consider an inclusive definition.
[4] Users of the social media, Instagram.

be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately,' (1993: 1244) something Crenshaw would later use and expand upon in cases of violence against women. She explains:

> Because women of colour experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of colour and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms. (Crenshaw, 1993: 1251)

Though intersectionality's inaugural use was to highlight a gap in policy, intersections of race, gender, or any societal 'label' can be extrapolated far beyond the realm of law. Because systems of power almost always overlap, intersectionality presents a useful outline to explain deeply complex issues. Of course, Crenshaw herself acknowledges that 'intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity' (1993: 1244). There is a myriad of factors that may contribute to individual experiences. Intersectionality is just one approach to begin the process of unraveling tangled power dynamics at play in travel, tourism media, photography, and understanding lived experiences.

Geography of Fear

When it comes to mobility and travel, one of the most starkly gendered implications is women's capacity to remain safe. Women do not move or have access to public space in the same way men do. This 'spatial expression of patriarchy' is termed by Gill Valentine as the 'Geography of Women's Fear' (1989: 389). Valentine writes:

> When a woman is in an area beyond her local environment, she makes judgements about her safety in public space based on preconceived images she holds about that area and its occupants, as well as from cues she receives about social behaviour from the actual physical surroundings. (Valentine, 1989: 388)

Careful selection and unconscious exclusion from spaces create 'mental maps' (Valentine, 1989: 386) that each woman carries during any form of travel, from the everyday errand to a trip abroad. Unfamiliarity with the area, local culture and even language barriers can add to this sense of fear. The theory does not assume that every woman is fearful when traveling, but that every individual accrues preconceived notions of places from a variety of sources.

Researchers Erica Wilson and Donna Little draw on Valentine's theory with a study of solo female travellers that reemphasizes the idea of constraint in female travel choices and experiences. Their interviewees' expressions of fear ranged from concern about actual violence, to feelings of self-doubt, all instilled through socially constructed messages and stories of what had happened to other women travellers. Moving through gendered tourism settings and spaces, these solo women travellers found it difficult to blend in and take the stance of 'objective sightseer' (Wilson & Little, 2008: 180). Rather, many women described a sense of constraint regarding the safety and appropriateness of their movement. In turn, they developed cognitive maps—whether culturally accurate or not—of which countries would be safe.

Applying Intersectionality: Lack of Representation in Travel

An intersectional analysis of travel asks us to interrogate not only what parts of travel experiences have been obscured but who has been barred from access to participating.

One such example of under-representation can be found in the 'study abroad' experience, a pillar of academia that many colleges and universities offer students as part of course credit. Of those studying abroad from the United States in 2015-2016, 71.6 percent were white students—an overwhelming majority (Open Doors Report, 2017). 'Because of this fact, organizations have tailored their programs to this demographic', writes Vanessa Doyle in her piece on African American experiences in studying abroad (Doyle, 2018: 1). She iterates that 'without conscious attempts to critically engage with race, study abroad programs have the strong potential to feed into American students' stereotypes about the foreign other' (2018: 9). One student interviewee is quoted: 'They thought I was from anywhere but the US which troubled me a little bit because there's this idea that Americans are just white people' (Doyle, 2018: 19). It is worth interrogating the absence of people of colour in these programmes because it is indicative of barriers for minorities to travel, and further perpetuates stereotypes.

Another omission is uncovered by Elaine Chiao Lin Yang (ECL) *et al.* who studied Asian female travellers to challenge existing tourism research. They track the perceived risks for female Asian backpackers to create the only study of 'solo female travelers from a risk and power perspective, and from an Asian viewpoint' (2018: 43). Barriers that arise are specific to Asian women, such as the belief that travelling alone is not a culturally acceptable lifestyle for women (2018: 45). This kind of representation matters because we cannot know others' challenges if they are not explored, as shown by this kind of research. From their qualitative study, Wilson and Little acknowledge the limited scope of their interviewees:

> No Asian, Aboriginal or Islander women were represented in either sample despite searches for women of these ethnic backgrounds. As such, the study is limited to the experiences of predominantly white women, which reflects the somewhat privileged circumstance of Western women being able to access international solo travel. (Wilson & Little, 2008: 173)

Kristi Siegel asks the necessary question:

> Most importantly, *what* women are being warned and *what* kind of travel is being addressed? In privileging only certain women and certain travel experiences, the rhetoric of peril leveled at women journeying alone proves myopic in scope and riddled with issues of race and class. (Siegel, 2004: 69)

This brings us back to the importance of intersectionality and theorizing travel through this feminist lens. Certainly, every destination holds varying implications for different sets of people. So, what are the obstacles that women of colour face in travel? Non-cisgender[5] women?

Neo-colonial Implications

Holding an intersectional lens to *who* has access to travel also helps to unpack issues of neo-colonialism, modern manifestations of colonialism. Though formal colonialism is not as visibly present in the twenty-first century, neo-colonial issues arise in the form of systematic oppressions—much like exclusion from

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[5] Non-cisgender is to identify with a different gender identity than the one assigned at birth.

studying abroad. Especially in travel, Shannon Sullivan's theory of 'white ontological expansiveness' articulates this:

> As ontologically expansive, white people tend to act and think as if all spaces—whether geographical, physical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise—are or should be available for them to move in and out of as they wish. (Sullivan, 2006: 11)

White ontological expansiveness is one way of assuming entitlement or privilege. Another, surface-level way to recognize it is by looking at the bulk of popular travel writing from Rick Steeves, Lonely Planet, or Fodor's—mainstream travel guides written by predominantly white writers from the West. By claiming authority over other countries, this kind of writing can become an unconscious form of 'us versus them' narrative, further emphasizing white privilege. Just as the West colonized the East, the same homogenous voices now speak for their culture and, in effect, continue to exert *power over*.

Relationship of Travel, Photography and Instagram Behaviour

Instagram's photo-centric nature and emphasis on visually pleasing aesthetics makes it the ideal social media platform for people who document their travels, like travel bloggers who share inspiring snapshots of faraway places. Alice Marwick writes:

> A selfie at Machu Picchu is more effective than a clunky paragraph of text in conveying that one likes to travel. This situation is especially true on Instagram. Since the site consists primarily of photographs, it intensifies the importance of visual self-presentation. (Marwick, 2015: 143)

Being able to take or post a photo online holds just as much meaning as getting to the destination itself. Paris and Pietschnig write, 'Understanding this increasingly pervasive form of digital tourist photography is necessary to understand how tourism is experienced by and mediated through mobile technology' (2015: 5). Indeed, travel and the documentation of it are not mutually exclusive.

Feedback and decision-making online

An important aspect of how online communities interact is through the engagement, comments, and feedback on social posts. A recent examination on the behaviour of Online Travel Communities (OTC) details an investigation around the post engagement and feedback behaviour of OTCs— 'deemed as the key social dynamic of an OTC' (Fang *et al.*, 2018: 1). Social capital theory, as they define it, exemplifies the need for second, third and hundreds of opinions when it comes to making decisions about travel; 'a helpful post can satisfy an OC member's innate functional and/or hedonic needs and facilitate decision-making' (2018: 3). Again, this illustrates the power and presence of social media content that can influence users and potential travellers who are often the same audience.

In combating women's 'Geography of Fear' as previously discussed, this aspect of an OTC can be quite useful when making decisions around travel. Fang *et al.* also considers Instagram's role in the perceived risk of selecting destinations:

> Due to differences in cultures and the environments, compared to non-exotic destinations, prospective travellers perceive greater uncertainty (for example, economic risk and safety risk) as well as curiosity before they visit exotic destinations. (Fang *et al.*, 2018: 6)

In seeking validation of safety, users catalogue the places that are associated with specific issues of safety.

Significance of Research

While travel and its documentation have long been analysed, intersectionality unpacks female travel and the role that Instagram plays in those particular experiences. What is the significance for women taking up these spaces? Koskela writes, 'If women have the courage to go out, they make space more easily available for other women by their presence' (1999: 112). Indeed, there are significant trends in the rise of solo female travel. In a report released by 'Solo Traveler World', 72 percent of women from the United States will take a solo journey within the year (Solo Traveler World, 2018). Travel agency G Adventures has seen a 148 percent increase in solo travelers since 2008 and 65 percent of those are women (Sendecki, 2014). After being asked about why and how they go about their solo ventures, one respondent in Wilson and Little's study stated, 'We're not stupid…but we'll not stay home neither' (2005: 201); meaning, they know the risk and still see great value in traveling, regardless. This is an important statement because it overrides the power system in place, a phenomenon worth exploring.

Intersectionality reveals that women's voices and experiences have been less scrutinized in travel, and that Instagram is both a tool to protect systems of power, and publicly take up space against it. This research makes a single step in unpacking what intersectionality can reveal about travel, gender, colonialism, and how all these ideas collide.

Methodology

Research Design: Feminist Social Research Methods and Qualitative Interviews

This project draws on feminist social research methods, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data about female travel experiences. Feminist researcher Schulamit Reinharz expresses the significance of this:

> By listening to women speak, understanding women's membership in particular social systems, and establishing the distribution of phenomena accessible only through sensitive interviewing, feminist interview researchers have uncovered previously neglected or misunderstood worlds of experience. (Reinharz, 1991: 44)

In employing a qualitative, semi-structured interview strategy, this approach 'offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researchers' (Reinharz, 1991: 19). An 'interviewee-guided investigation of a lived experience that asks almost no prepared questions' was important in addressing my research question because no one can speak for other women's experiences. Engaging in this kind of research means revealing power structures and including women's perspectives.

Selection of Participants and Ethical Considerations

The subsequent selection of participants was given intensive consideration. In addition to being a woman-identifying person, it was also important to gather a sample that engaged with their own travel community through posts and comments, showing an interest and active role in their online presence.

Participants were first identified through Instagram and contacted via email. Originally, this approach was selected as the most appropriate to inform participants of the research. However, after the first interview, it was clear that participants' own Instagram networks had a wider audience than my own social media circles. After one participant put out a call for female travellers from Asia, South America, Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean on their Instagram, I received at least a dozen direct messages on Instagram with interest in partaking in the research. I had asked for travellers from these parts of the world specifically as it was important that I include perspectives not exclusively from the 'Global North[6]' or West, a limit I was conscious of within my own social network.

The resulting participants make up perspectives from different continents, carrying multiple passports. For the scope of this research, four total participants were selected—one identifies as a white woman and three as women of colour. Criteria for selection included a need to represent various ethnicities and backgrounds, having lived and travelled in a variety of diverse regions around the world, and an Instagram following of at least 5,000—an indication of influence and reach.

By grounding my research in a feminist approach, I apply the theoretical framework of intersectionality to qualitative interviews and allow participants to speak for themselves. Participants selected their own pseudonyms to represent themselves in the research and maintain anonymity. The remainder of this article will bring forth select findings from these interviews relevant to the research question examining women's travel and Instagram's role in those experiences.

Findings & Discussion

Ambiguities of Instagram

The following discussion will integrate intersectionality as an analytical lens, further illuminating the multifarious nature of female travel experiences, paying specific attention to the role of Instagram.

Finding community

In dealing with this norm of fear, Instagram creates a host of tools for minorities and niche groups to find community and navigate the world more safely. As discussed earlier, Instagram's Online Travel Communities (OTCs) can assist in locating like-minded travellers. These groups can be especially important for women in locating safe, welcoming spaces and well-reviewed recommendations. This is iterated here, by participant Anna:

> I really like felt for a long time like I was lacking in actual community and getting to know people and not just surface level scrolling through a pretty photo. And so once I did find that, and started to connect more with female travelers all over the world through the platform that I felt really matched my travel style and my interests and um, you know, my ethical values and all of that. Then it [Instagram] became a really important tool for travel, for meeting people, for choosing destinations, and just for having a community of other women to talk to about travel. (Anna)

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[6] A term often used in Development referring to developed countries in Europe and North America

Finding these communities is important because, as Anna continues, many hostels condone a 'party culture' which can often be a very male-dominated space. Locating a welcoming, safe space on Instagram can therefore be linked to debunking one's own mental map of fear. However, these communities, which can produce thousands of comments within seconds, have a lot of power. When community members respond negatively, effects are equally felt. Another participant, Kai, articulates the damaging capacity of an OTC:

> After experiencing my sexual assault in Morocco and being hammered by a community of women who blamed me for my own sexual assault, I realized the need for women's support groups and someone to be like, *I understand you, I've been there, I don't blame you, I'm here for you. I'm a woman and I support you.* Because I didn't get that—or I did get it but it was so minuscule compared to the hate and death threats that I got that I was like, *okay, I need to combat this by being a role model, I need to be an example.* Because the supportive voices that I did get meant the world to me. (Kai)

While positive reinforcement did occur—and assisted in the aftermath of a traumatic event—a feminist analysis pinpoints internalized misogyny manifested in the form of victim-blaming within this OTC. The balance of backlash versus support was disproportionate. Though a single destructive comment is not necessarily representative of an entire community, the weight of hundreds of similar voices can become a real hazard to the person on the receiving end. Thus, proving that while the real world is full of potential danger, so too is the online world.

Navigating mental maps

When introduced to the theory 'Women's Geography of Fear' (Valentine, 1989), each participant made clear their own established behaviours and practices to combat this socialized norm. When asked 'What role does safety and being secure play in your travel choices?', one of the participants revealed its prominence, Pam stated: 'It's a huge part as a single female traveling, most times that's the first thing I have to keep in mind.' This altered behaviour indicates that fear is the norm for most female travellers, 'not regarded as a serious constraint but rather a normal and accepted condition' (Koskela, 1999: 121). Here, navigating a 'mental map of fear' becomes a typical part of even day-to-day travel experiences. Anna battles this internalized consequence of patriarchy, she describes:

> I try as much as possible not to let it impact my travels and my travel decisions. You know, I always obviously want to make wise choices and stay safe, but I'm really big on not allowing the fact that we still live in a patriarchy and women are unsafe in pretty much the whole world—not allowing that to restrict me from getting the most that I can out of traveling. (Anna)

Participants also said that friends and strangers had described them as 'brave' or 'courageous' for traveling for so long, so far, or so remotely. It is clear that the world views women as more vulnerable, a more susceptible group in need of defending. Pam reasons: 'A lot of times I think people are afraid of change, it's different. But I think that's for me, a motivation to keep doing it because you know, why not?' This attitude to keep going, despite mental maps of fear, illustrates each participants' public presence travelling as a form of resistance against systems of oppression. Their unanimous motivation to keep journeying, irrespective of cautionary warnings, emphasizes the benefit of travel and perhaps the sense of solidarity in a growing travel 'Instagrammer' movement.

The High Cost of Social Capital for Influencers

Instagram's role in travel reveals that while it can aid in decision-making and finding community, its presence can also be a hindrance to Instagrammers' enjoyment of travel.

Especially for those with high-profile Instagram accounts with large followings, constant engagement with the platform can amount to a certain pressure. Each participant had between five thousand and fifty thousand followers – a number that indicates 'influence' – a significant factor in the world of social media, as discussed in my literature review. This heightened 'social capital' (Fang *et al*., 2018: 3) is met with hesitation from participant Nambi, who has a wide audience watching her journey around the world,

> I'm not enjoying travel the way that I used to because, you know, I'm constantly like, *oh my God, I need to get this on video. Oh my God, oh damn—I ate a bite of my food before taking a picture.* That caused a level of pressure that I was like, I can't—I completely collapsed. (Nambi)

From this, we see that while travel Instagrammers are given a responsibility to showcase the world, they may also make sacrifices to their own experiences. Nambi succinctly concludes: 'I think it's good in a way that I'm able to show people the world, but I think it's bad in that I find myself always looking at the world through [the] back-end of my phone.' The digital landscape of travel documentation is a double-edged sword.

Unpacking Colonial Baggage

Disrupting mainstream travel media

Despite these tensions with the platform, Instagrammers' presence alone counteracts mainstream travel media. In discussing Shannon Sullivan's 'White Ontological Expansiveness,'[7] Kai responds to the idea of mainstream travel and tourism being built for white people: 'White people have always had a dominating presence on what gets published.' As explored in the literature review regarding the bulk of travel literature from the Western world, the influence and representations of leisure travel have focused solely on white experiences.

Nambi has actually responded to what Kai refers to as 'overwhelming whiteness', with a company of her own, a boutique travel consultancy with the aim to showcase destinations in the African diaspora. This is a distinct effort to expand mainstream attention from traditional destinations defined by white Western travellers (and supporting white Western travellers) to places that can both benefit from tourism as well as create new perspectives.

Why are these destinations not included on most travel 'bucket lists' in the first place? Kai points to the media: 'Travel itself is a pretty neutral being, but media and travel is definitely based around the white population.' These findings suggest that media frames its content for particular audiences, thus granting media power to control travel narratives. In popularizing certain regions through tourism, white power exerts itself over parts of the world in the same way Said's 'Orientalism' exerts *power over*—a media-fueled neo-colonization.

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[7] See Sullivan, also discussed in the literature review.

Intersectionality of Fear

We know that women experience fear and there is risk both in travel and online. The extent to which fear alters behaviour depends on the individual, their identity, or where they are travelling. Thus, an 'intersectionality of fear' becomes a useful way in which to examine individual experiences. One such example is clear when Kai expresses feelings of vulnerability in traveling with groups of Asian women:

> As an Asian woman, I've felt like when I travel with other Asian women, I feel endangered more
> than when I traveled with any other race and um, it has a lot to do with being sexually fetishized on
> a worldwide scale and I actually try to avoid traveling with other Asians for safety reasons. (Kai)

This sexual fetishizing is both a product of male dominance and colonial power. They are overlapping elements that doubly impact her travel choices, a modern manifestation of Edward Said's 'Orientalism' (Said, 1978). In the exploration on solo Asian female backpackers, ECL Yang *et al*. write:

> While this liminal space emancipates women from the social expectations and responsibilities of
> their home society, this space is not entirely free from social constraints because women are still
> bound by the gender norms and power relations in the host society. (ECL Yang *et al.,* 2018: 33)

Their research supports Kai's entrenched perception of power, citing instances when 'Asian female backpackers had been mistaken as local sex workers when travelling in some Asian countries where sex tourism prevails' (ECL Yang *et al*., 2018: 34). Varying levels of risk are contingent on sex, race, gender identity, class and so on. This highlights a need to assess further, not only the female geography of fear, but also people of colour, the LGBTQ+[8] community, persons with disabilities, and those without traditional forms of citizenship. Pam states:

> Negotiating risk in decision-making is a daily activity, something that comes down to this question:
> 'Is it worth it? It's not worth the pictures or it's not worth the lights or it's not worth any of that if I
> can't see it first—I have to live to tell the story.' (Pam)

A woman's decision-making process during travel can quite realistically be a matter of life and death. Regardless of borders crossed and glass ceilings broken, deep-seated dynamics are upheld by industries and systems of power. Variant degrees of 'different' denote the amount of fear one is subject to when traveling, echoing intersectionality's examination of 'multiply-disadvantaged groups.' (Crenshaw, 1989: 145)

'I'm here, I deserve to be here.': Creating Space and De-colonizing Instagram

From this research, the idea of traveling and being able to exist in tourist spaces historically reserved for white people becomes a statement in of itself for women of colour. Pam wears traditional Liberian prints and head wraps and finds them to be an integral part of her travels. She states:

> I think for me it's very, very important that I carry my identity with me especially as an African
> woman…I think walking around in those prints are a way to educate people…it gives me an
> opportunity to talk about culture, to talk about places to make connections in that way.

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[8] Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Intersex Asexual. '+' indicates inclusivity of all identities.

In 'carrying [her] identity', Pam starts a conversation—the first step in breaking down barriers and, as she iterates, making connections. Similar to the study abroad experiences of students of colour from the United States, she breaks down preconceived notions of people entitled to travel to faraway places, thus making travel more accessible through representation. In this way, Instagram is a tool that reaches across borders to showcase any part of the world, from any point of view.

Pam's strong visual link with Liberia is also a method to combat colonial issues with travel photography. Liz Wells asserts that:

> The history of photography is integrally linked to colonial and economic exploitation. A sense of submission, exoticism and the 'primitive' were key feelings, which these photographers documented and catalogued (2015: 172).

Instagram is yet another platform where, in travel, people of colour may be used as a backdrop or prop, as the 'other.' Nambi explains that this type of touristic behaviour is appropriation and never a celebration of culture: 'You cannot negate the optics of your whiteness. Period.' In contrast, Pam harnesses the power of her own profile and unreservedly presents herself as a West-African woman. Nambi echoes this sentiment when she claims she will never 'tone things down': 'I will make sure to create space for myself and for other people who look like me and I will not cower in front of people, like, I'm here, I deserve to be here. I belong here' (Nambi).

Amid neo-colonial and patriarchal power dynamics, all participants have created space for themselves both in real life travel interactions and online. They carve a path that works within the system and allow others to follow it—whether in their actual footsteps or as followers on Instagram. This online community that has been created is a resource that, when used positively, has the capacity to influence people beyond face-to-face interactions.

Moving Forward

The Conscious 'Post-Tourist'

While an ignorant tourist further solidifies the divide between tourist and guest, the 'post-tourist', as named by Maxine Feifer, 'knows they are a tourist and tourism is a series of games with multiple tests and no single, authentic tourist experience…that the supposedly quaint and traditional fishing village could not survive without the income from tourism' (1985, cited in Urry, 2011: 114). The post-tourist knows they are a tourist, understands their place in a tourist exchange, and—as participants iterate—educates themselves on cultural and political country contexts.

This growing awareness is shown through Kai's Instagram posts, packed with localized information on specific current events, including Palestine, Gaza and indigenous rights in the United States. When asked why it is important to include current events or a country's political news in her social posts, Kai states:

> Politics and travel are impossible to separate because they literally—it dictates how a government is, how welcoming they are to travellers, how the economy works and who is allowed to travel, who's not allowed to travel. Like, how our cultures interact with each other. (Kai)

In the same way state-issued warnings can influence citizens' perceptions, governments can selectively utilize travel and tourism to control or stifle certain economies. This political consciousness is something that mainstream tourism ignores: 'Hospitality presupposed various kinds of economies, politics and ethics as the tourist gaze extends around the world and draws into its warm embrace countless social relations between hosts and guests' (Urry, 2011: 96). Indeed, hospitality as an 'industry' is profit-driven; indifferent to contextual implications of political or economic turmoil. Anna underscores this: 'Countries that rely on tourism for the economy to function—their culture is heavily shaped by how their country is marketed.' In contrast, socially, politically and culturally conscious 'post-tourist' is aware; they are simultaneously moving through the world and thinking critically about their surroundings, how they spend their 'tourist dollars', as Kai states, and what communities they are supporting. Can this kind of consciousness assist in eroding neo-colonial issues in tourism?

Privilege

While Instagram can certainly aid in the marketable exploits of tourism, these Instagrammers acknowledge and make others aware of the subtleties of privilege and power within travel—something that intersectionality helps demonstrate. Participants recognized their own privilege in being able to travel and live in the places they have. When discussing privilege, Nambi says:

> It takes an immense amount of privilege to be able to do what I'm doing now…So, I feel like in some ways I have some of that entitlement, and my friends will say that too. They're like, I act like a white woman when I move through the world…I think I just have to be very careful about how I talk about other people's privilege without acknowledging my own. (Nambi)

Nambi understands that her behaviour may not be deemed normal by other persons of colour, illustrating the uniquely layered experience of a woman of colour traveling through the world. Of course, travel can be a valuable tool for learning about oneself and becoming aware of other cultures. Understanding one's position as 'visitor' and the power and privilege associated with that is vital. Trends towards a more socially, politically and culturally conscious 'post-tourist' traveller will help to build travel spaces that are more inclusive, authentic, and welcoming—not just for white people, but for everyone.

Intersectionality: Illuminating Gaps and Overlaps

Intersectionality is not a perfect model for this subject. Much like Uma Narayan's 'dark side of the double vision' (1989: 370), the onus of representation indeed becomes a burden, relying too heavily on individual experience. Nambi emphasizes this by insisting that Instagram does not necessarily allow for variation of experience: 'I'm just telling you these are my experiences. And I think as travel influencers, we have a responsibility to let people know that this is what I experienced. Not everyone else has experienced that or whatever.' However, Instagram has also provided a platform to break down stereotypes and start conversations, something Pam uses through her representations of Liberian culture.

An intersectional analysis of the role of Instagram in travel highlights that perceptions of fear vary and become more complicated dependent on sex, race, background, gender identity, and physical abilities. It also illuminates issues of neo-colonialism, such as 'othering' and taking up space in formerly colonized locations.

If fear has worked its way into becoming such a norm for female travel experiences, is access to travel equally and equitably available to everyone? Beyond that, has freedom of movement been fully realized? An intersectional analysis points to a clear and resounding 'no.' There is much research that could be expanded upon for varying demographics, each bringing forward a unique set of dynamics.

There is a distinctly interrelated nature, illustrated within this research. We cannot discuss travel without including Instagram and its ambiguities both supporting and stifling travel. We cannot study Instagram without speaking to the forms of neo-colonialism it can carry and 'othering'. And we cannot examine these colonial stereotypes without acknowledging the impact they have on women's perceived safety—*all* women's safety, not only white, cis women. These overlaps are both magnified and complicated by the theory of intersectionality.

The research presented here only scratches the surface of work to be done in understanding the particular needs to represent, keep safe, and support woman-identifying persons, women of colour, and minority groups in travel.

Conclusion

Championing individual voices, intersectionality reveals the tangled relations between photography and tourism, media, women's perceived risk, and neo-colonialism. In addressing my research question, we arrive at a complex point. Travel and Instagram have a tightly wound relationship, both aiding and burdening female experiences and the interlinking nature of each finding emphasizes how multifarious travel is.

For female travel experiences, intersectionality helps dissect issues of representation and media, patriarchal norms and neo-colonial constraints. What can it do for different groups? In 2015, 48 percent of Southeast Asian women had already taken a solo holiday, an increase from 36 percent from the previous year (PATA, 2016). Targeted travel companies such as Travel Noire and Jet Black encourage tourism to the African diaspora. Studies on 'rainbow tourism' track destinations that have made themselves outwardly safe and accepting for LGBTQIA+ communities (Harju-Myllyaho, 2018). Participants' presence and popularity on Instagram is telling in the prevalence and demand for these narratives. All this is symptomatic of a broader movement that is being shaped; highlighting opportunities for more intersectional, inclusive research.

As a tool to find safe communities and create space for themselves, regardless of power dynamics at work, women and women of colour utilize Instagram to their advantage. Perceived fear manifests differently depending on sexuality, race, class and so on, creating an 'intersectionality of fear'. However, the burden of representation—both of destinations travelled to and of travellers themselves—falls heavily on their shoulders, particularly for high-profile Instagrammers. Finally, while neo-colonialism manifests in mainstream travel media, it is combated by women of colour's ability to create space for themselves—a crucial tool in disrupting barriers in travel.

Travel is central to human understanding, offering opportunities for cultural exchanges across borders and languages. In a world that continually seems more divided, examining the deep complexity of travel experiences can help illustrate the ways in which we understand culture, gain new experiences, and represent ourselves—all while breaking down systems of power and privilege.

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About the author:

Molly works in community development for the National Traveller Women's Forum in Dublin, and contributes to initiatives addressing the Traveller accommodation crisis. Hailing from Denver, Colorado, she graduated NUI Galway in 2018 with a MA in Gender, Globalisation and Rights. Molly strives to center intersectionality in every endeavor, and plans to continue lending her voice to create space for women and minorities in travel, nature, and elected office.

'Glowing up ain't easy'

How #BlackGirlMagic Created an Innovative Narrative for Black Beauty Through Instagram

Paulette Parris
M.A Gender, Globalisation and Rights
National University of Ireland, Galway

Abstract

Within a patriarchal and racist society, Western standards of beauty are detrimental to all women. However, in a society where the White male gaze has been able to determine what is beautiful, possessing features that are similar to White women has become the standard to embody. These beauty ideals are reinforced by family, peers, mainstream media, and can have adverse impacts on the lives of women. Black women are particularly impacted because their phenotypical features are often furthest from those of White women. As a result, a significant number of Black women suffer from self-hatred and internalised racism because they can never truly embody White women's standards of beauty. However, within our technologically driven era, social media provides a platform for self-expression and empowerment. Through social media applications such as Instagram, Black women are now provided with a platform to navigate the intersections of popular media and beauty standards. This paper focuses on the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic that contributed to the creation of an innovative narrative to Black beauty and counternarrative to White beauty standards within Instagram. The paper draws from the study that utilised a qualitative method, namely a content analysis of specific content from Instagram that used the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic. The content comprised of four themes: hair, complexion, body image, and self-affirmation. By highlighting the space that Black women have created for themselves, this study offers an analysis of images and captions that are intersectional, transnational, and non-hierarchical. The ultimate aim of the study is to join other Black feminist work that encourages Black women to dissect the convoluted images that do not match their image of Black femininity.

Keywords: **Intersectionality, Black Feminist Theory, Digital Activism, #BlackGirlMagic, Beauty Standards**

Introduction

For years mainstream media has constructed unrealistic beauty ideals by which all women's beauty is measured. Within this paradigm, various women of colour (WOC) have been excluded from mainstream media, especially Black women. When they have been present in the media, they have been subjected to negative stereotypes that are linked to slavery, colonialisation and the features that Black women possess.

Due to the silencing of the voices and the erasure of Black women for decades, they have had to pursue other outlets to become heard and visible on their terms. The research study this paper focuses on is the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic on Instagram and the avenue this platform provides by prefacing self-presentation and user-generated content, as opposed to the mainstream media depictions (Harvey, 2014, cited in Harris, 2015). #BlackGirlMagic reveals how Black women showcase positive images to uplift themselves while resisting the negativity that has been associated, for years, with their hair texture, complexion and body image.

The opportunity for self-presentation is perhaps pivotal in Black women's participation on the platform and their use of #BlackGirlMagic creates a tool of knowledge for gathering and sharing. It has been argued that #BlackGirlMagic has become:

> 'A tool that black women use globally to explain the ways in which recognition of black merit intersects with social justice, promotes positive acknowledgement and celebrates the physical beauty of black women in a world that otherwise objectify and invisibilise the black and brown female body and mind.' (Mahali, 2017: 30).

Two major themes employed were: (1) What are the impacts of Western standards of beauty on Black women? and (2) How has digital activism been used to create an innovative narrative to counter Western standards of beauty for Black women? The data was collected on Instagram within a seven-day period, totalling 80 images that used the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic. The themes selected examine the intersecting oppressions of gender, race, and beauty that Black women encounter within Western beauty standards that negatively impact their lives.

Whilst the Internet may be a new tool for social protest, the issues raised by online communities (OC) are not, and it is therefore beneficial to examine the outcomes of marginalised groups who utilised this method. One argument for the positive benefits is the idea that technology is socially constructed and it means that 'users construct the value and meaning of technology by how they use [it]' (Kirkpatrick 2008, cited in Sivitanides & Shah, 2011: 4) thereby allowing the user to share their alternative views in the hope of empowering change.

Literature review

By investigating the intersections of race, gender, beauty, and media, the goal was to examine the ways that Black feminist theory, intersectionality, and social constructionism present an avenue to explore popular media representations and their relationship to Black women.

Western Standards of Beauty

In the context of western countries, often referred to as Europe, the Americas and Canada, this article will focus solely on the United States. In Western cultures, appearance is crucial to self-definition, especially for many young girls and women (Akram & Borland, 2007, cited in Loeto, 2014). This emphasis on

appearance has evolved over time, and virtually by consensus, has cultivated the standard of beauty to be white, young, slim, straight-haired, slender-nosed and able-bodied (Patton, 2006). These hegemonically defined Western beauty standards reject women of different races, classes, ages and those who are differently abled. Western beauty standards are also reiterated in the high cost of maintaining this preconceived notion of beauty that consists of cosmetics, plastic surgery, hair perms, and expensive clothes, disproportionately marginalising poor women who often tend to be WOC (Patton, 2006). It is also problematic that the images of beauty portrayed are flawless women who have been digitally altered to present the notion of 'perfection'. This is extremely damaging to all women because the notion of 'perfection' is unattainable, and instead puts women on a lifelong unobtainable, damaging quest for a façade that is presented to make women feel inadequate, in addition to maximising the profitability of the associated industries that promote this quest for perfection.

Patriarchy, Gender and the Body

bell hooks describes patriarchy as:

> 'A political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence' (Hooks, 2004: 1).

The patriarchal system has a significant influence on how women view themselves because men determine what is beautiful and inherently reward and punish women based on the standards they have created (Jackson-Lowman, 2014). This results in most women subconsciously adhering to a male voice that constantly places them in the gaze of men and under their judgment, with the notion that every beauty regime is for the purpose of male acceptance (Bartky, 2013). Furthermore, in a patriarchal and capitalist society, physical beauty and the objectification of women are promoted as a vital form of social capital for women (Hunter, 2005, cited in Jackson-Lowman, 2014).

Women's bodies are gendered through gestures, posture, and movement, restricting women's bodies in comparison to men (Bartky, 2013). Black women must not only conform to gendered movements but also racial ones, in which they are cornered into a tedious psychological process entitled 'shifting' (West, 2017). Shifting describes when Black women 'change or alter various parts of themselves such as their speech or dress, in order to placate both mainstream society and their own communities of colour' (Johnson, et al., 2016: 15).

Women's Representation in the Media

Laura Mulvey (1975) coined the term 'male gaze' and argued that women were viewed from the perspective of a heterosexual male. Mulvey states, 'the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly' (Mulvey, 1999: 837) rendering women to the status of 'object' in which men narrate how women should be seen. hooks also argues that when Black women were finally present in film 'our bodies and being were there to serve—to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallocentric gaze' (hooks, 1992: 119).

The notion of the male gaze can be carried out in various forms of media, and with the introduction of social networks and online forums, advertisers can now spread their idea of beauty even further. The idea that only specific women are beautiful enough to be used for these products creates what Lorde describes as 'an

institutionalised rejection of difference' (Lorde, 2004: 845). This practice cultivates a need for outsiders to imitate the dominant representation of beauty, which is continuously showcased, and ultimately economically beneficial for those who create the products and advertisements.

Representation of Black women

Due to the negative portrayal of Black women in mainstream media, it is crucial for Black feminist thought to challenge these images in order for Black women to create their own narrative. Throughout history, images of Black women in the media have been associated with negative stereotypes, such as mammies, oversexed jezebels, tragic mulattos, hot mammies and welfare recipients (Collins, 2000). Stereotypes such as Mammies[11], Sapphires[12] and Jezebels[13] would have originated during the American slavery era and continued to be used against Black women in the postmodern era (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Over the years these images have not changed, some have even manifested into the Strong Black Woman, the Angry Black Woman and the Video Vixen (West, 2017). The images represented intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality and class that Black women have to endure (Collins, 2000).

Within mainstream media, the curvy physique of the Black female body tends to be objectified and hypersexualised, thereby resulting in the portrayal of Black women as overly sexual beings, ultimately defining Black women culture. Crenshaw has classified this depiction as 'representational intersectionality' as these images are created through the dominant narratives of race and gender, and how modern critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalised WOC (Crenshaw, 1991). Additionally, within Bartky's analysis, Black women defy the dominant emphasis on thinness by possessing curvy bodies that grant them admiration from Black men. However, Black men's praise still reduces their body parts to a physical object for their sexual desire.

Black women who are visible in the media often face the burden of being 'whitewashed', because they are portrayed with lighter skin, thinner figures or straighter hair to resemble Western features. Black actresses and models are regularly shown with chemically straightened hair, wigs or flat-ironed hair, which presents the idea of 'natural hair' as unnatural (Kuo, 2018). Only by removing or altering their phenotypical features can they be considered "beautiful". Despite this, there is growing acceptance of Black women's features on White women. For instance, many White women alter their lips, their 'bottom' or hairstyles to emulate Black women's features yet they are still depicted in mainstream media. This means Black women are often eschewed in the media for the very attributes that are 'trendy' on White women. The 'whitewashing' of Black women has resulted in what hooks described as the 'imperial gaze', which seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonise (hooks, 1992).

Impacts on Black women

Black women run the risk of severe health complications in the quest to achieve Western standards of beauty. This pursuit may involve lightening their skin, using coloured contacts, damaging their hair, wearing weaves, or having cosmetic surgery to achieve Western features.

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[11] Mammy: 'used to describe a role and a person within the plantation household who served as a baby nurse, cook, and general domestic worker.' (Park, 2010, cited in West, 2017: 141)

[12] Sapphire: 'this is the image of Black women as stubborn, bitchy, bossy and hateful.' (Ladson-Billings, 2009: 89)

[13] Jezebel: 'is synonymous with promiscuity, an insatiable sexual appetite, and someone who uses sex to manipulate men' (Ladson-Billings, 2009: 89)

These beauty standards also influence the outcomes of Black women in education, occupation, income, romantic relationships, and mental and physical health (Jackson-Lowman, 2014). The assimilation of Western beauty standards is often a more reliable way to be accepted into society than professional status or higher education (Wallace, 1979, cited in Patton, 2006). Therefore, in a world that conflates worth with beauty and only embraces a particular standard, Black women who then conform to these beauty standards have access to more upwardly mobile careers and ultimately make more money (Pierre-Louis, 2017).

Many Black women can also experience long-term mental health issues, such as depression, distorted body image and eating disorders (Hall, 1995, cited in Bryant, 2013). Negative portrayals indicate that Black women 'have been reduced to their butts, historically and in the media, they are frequently the targets of harassment, sexual assault, degrading comments and general sexual objectification' (Watson *et al*., 2012 cited in West, 2017: 152). This has cultivated a world in which many Black women possess great self-hatred of their appearance throughout their lives (hooks, 1992).

Colourism

Alice Walker first coined the term colourism in 1982, and it is defined as the 'prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their colour' (Norwood, 2015: 586). Colourism within the African community can be associated with the value and privilege placed on people that possess Caucasian features. As a result, lighter-skin Black women were better represented within mainstream media, and the lack of dark-skinned Black women perpetuated the notion that dark skin was not beautiful.

Digital Activism

Digital activism is described as

> 'activities or practices that are both in-depth and exclusive. In-depth in that it encompasses all social and political campaigning practice[s] that use digital network infrastructure; and it excludes practices that are not examples of this type of practice.' (Joyce, 2010 cited in Sivitanides & Shah, 2011: 2).

As technology advances, digital media invites beauty standards into our computers, tablets and phones, resulting in digital and social media becoming significant areas for engaging in sexual, racial, and gender ideologies (Lindsey, 2012). Baer (2016) explains how digital activism is particularly beneficial for feminism 'to make visible the global scale of gender oppression and to link feminist protest movements across national borders' (Baer, 2016: 18). Therefore, in the digital realm by showcasing self-love and creating self-definitions of Black beauty, this new digital activism can aid in resisting the negative controlling images of Black women.

The hash symbol is one method of digital activism utilised to share the necessary imagery and information. A hashtag is a collection of words or a keyword assigned to information or topic designated by a 'hash' symbol (#) (Small, 2011). The role of a hashtag is to 'organize discussion around specific topics or events' (Fitton *et al.* 2009: 127, cited in Small 2011). The hashtag #BlackGirlMagic can be seen as a form of hashtag feminism. This type of digital activism is perceived as a useful tool for fighting gender inequities around the world, by utilising personal expressions to create a space in an area previously ignored (Clark, 2016).

In a world where women's issues and stories are often told by others, within social media Black women can activate audience participation that can lead to tangible change in communities instead of passive consumption (Kreiss *et al* 2014, cited in Clark ,2016).

Despite the benefits of empowerment and support that hashtag feminism provides, it is also important to acknowledge the risks and limitations associated with such a new form of activism. For example, the Internet is public domain and invites not only support, but also invites hate speech and threats from 'misogynist trolls' (Cole, 2015, cited in Clark, 2016). For Black women, this hate does not only originate from males, but can also come from White women who believe that they are not able to objectively relate to Black women by way of living different experiences due to race.

#BlackGirlMagic

CaShawn Thompson is credited with having coined the phrase in 2013 when she first began to use the hashtag #BlackGirlsAreMagic (Thomas, 2015). Thompson described the hashtag saying, 'Black Girl Magic tries to counteract the negativity that we sometimes hold within ourselves and is sometimes placed on us by the outside world.' (BBC, 2016). The key themes of #BlackGirlMagic are identified as 'sisterhood, self-love and positive affirmation from the voices of and about Black women and girls' (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017: 464). The hashtag has been used on numerous social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest and Facebook to celebrate and showcase the beauty or accomplishments of Black women. Often shortened to #BlackGirlMagic the hashtag can be seen as a grassroots movement that utilises social media to have a positive impact on this generation and future generations.

An Innovative Narrative

Hashtag activism such as #BlackGirlMagic has a distinctly narrative character. In the digital realm, when numerous comments, images or retweets appear in response to a hashtagged word, phrase, or sentence, they are complemented by several personal stories, ultimately assuming a narrative form (Yang, 2016). Personal stories and broader social issues can then be shared with the public, opening space for a critical discussion and cultivating a communal and collective perspective of hashtag activism (Yang, 2016). Clark (2016) argues that the most influential cases of hashtag activism possess a recognisable narrative form that include a creation, a conflict, and a conclusion. The creation of #BlackGirlMagic has been addressed above; the conflict is the disrespect and disregard for Black women and the end would result in a world where previously constructed damaging ideas of Black beauty no longer existed.

The hashtag celebrates all women of African descent showcasing the diversity of ethnicity, class, and religion, revealing the truth that Black women are not a monolithic group and that beauty comes in all shapes, sizes, and shades (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017). This new narrative is a journey towards empowerment for all Black women and girls who promote Black beauty that is not often seen in mainstream media, leading and daring Black women to love themselves in a world that tells them otherwise.

Significance of the Study

Within societies that are structured by gender, there is clear inequality and heterosexism (Craig, 2006). The racist and sexist beauty regime that has been constructed disciplines and grades women, and for Black women, positions them at the bottom (Craig, 2006). And so Black women created a space in which they could boldly express Black beauty. This is because:

'These stereotypes and the culture that sustains them exist to define the social position of black women as subordinate, on the basis of gender, to all men, regardless of color[14], and on the basis of race to all other women. These negative images also are indispensable to the maintenance of an interlocking system of oppression based on race and gender that operates to the detriment of all women and all blacks.' (Caldwell, 2000: 280 cited in Patton, 2006: 45-46)

As the 'Black is Beautiful' movement provided a space for Black women to combat the dominant Western standards of beauty, so too can this OC. Even if this was not the intention of #BlackGirlMagic, it could be used to aid in the Black beauty campaign by highlighting the beauty issues that affect Black women, such as their hair, complexion and body image. As Instagram showcases real people with beautiful diversity, it provides a platform to resist the baggage of perfection associated with Western standards of beauty (Harris, 2015). Also, Black women can use Instagram to convey the 'narrative imagery of our sometimes silenced, or ignored voices' (Harris, 2015: 141).

This study was also useful because there is limited research that presents a different narrative wherein Black women and girls challenge mainstream media representation and resist stereotypes that do not match their lived reality of Black femininity.

Methodology

Black Feminist Epistemology

Black feminist epistemology 'decentres the Eurocentric discourse of the rationalist, masculinist subject of modernist philosophy' (Brah, 2001: 5492). Black feminist thought is a crucial framework for analysing the lived experiences of Black women as it primarily relies on the framework of those who have similar experiences and not on interpretations from those in power or educated middle-class white women. Collins argues 'because elite white males control Western structures of knowledge validation, their interest pervades the themes, paradigms and epistemologies of traditional scholarship' (Collins, 2000: 251). This dynamic has resulted in the experiences of Black women from the United States (US) and women of African descent transnationally being discredited within or excluded from what counts as knowledge (Collins, 2000), ultimately promoting Black women's subordination. Black feminist thought does not only provide subordinate groups with new knowledge about their experiences, but reveals new ways of knowing, allowing these very groups to define their reality, thereby rejecting the subordination (Collins, 1990).

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw introduced the term intersectionality when she explained that the struggles of WOC were grossly ignored within feminist and antiracist theories and politics (Carbado, *et al*., 2013). Intersectionality is 'the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations' (McCall, 2005: 1771). Intersectionality is useful because within systems of oppression, race, gender, and beauty interlock under one overarching structure of domination. As noted, Black women are impacted differently because of these intersections. Intersectionality acknowledges that social relations

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[14] Quotations from American authors use American English.

are complex, multifaceted, and intersected. It is therefore also beneficial to examine how race, gender, and beauty have been socially constructed to bring the lived experience to the research.

Social Constructionism

This research involved an ontological position of constructionism, which 'assumes that reality is the product of social process' (Neuman, 2003, cited in Tuli, 2010: 101). A social constructionist framework is necessary to investigate the idea 'that people construct and negotiate identities for themselves and others through their everyday social interactions with each other' (Burr, 2015: 222). Therefore, what have been cultivated as everyday standards have been created by society, particularly those in power. A fundamental principle of social constructionism is that 'our knowledge of the world, including our understanding of human beings, is a product of human thought rather than grounded in an observable, external reality' (Burr, 2015: 222). Social constructionism challenges rigidly defined categories such as race, gender and beauty standards that have been classified as the 'norm'. For example, race is 'a social creation—a fiction that divides and categorizes individuals by phenotypic markers, such as skin color, that supposedly signify underlying differences' (Glenn, 2000: 6).

Data Sources and Collection

The content analysis explored a limited amount of content from Instagram that used the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic. This content comprised of images that have been tagged with the hashtag and examined how Black beauty is expressed and associated with #BlackGirlMagic. A content analysis ensures that all units of study receive equal treatment 'whether they are entered at the beginning or the end of analysis but also that the process is objective in that it does not matter who performs the analysis or where and when' (Krippendorff, 1989: 404).

Instagram is a social networking application launched in 2010, with an age demographic between 18-29 years of which 50.7 % being female and 49.3% being male (Lee *et al*., 2015). Within the United States amongst the 18-29 age group, 53% of persons use the app, and of the 300 million monthly active users, the majority of them are outside of the United States (Lee *et al*., 2015). Instagram permits users to upload photos and videos, which can be edited with filters, organised hashtags, and location information. The content uploaded can also be captioned or hashtagged. A user can create an account to be shared publicly or privately and can browse the public content of others by hashtags and locations and can then 'like' or comment on the photos. Hashtags help categorise photos and video content, which aids in the process of content discovery and connection of users. In 2017, Instagram introduced the ability to follow hashtags just like following a friend, as the user will see top posts from the hashtag in their feed. Many of these hashtags are 'community hashtags' which connect like-minded users to a particular subject.

To adequately collect data, every day at 9 p.m. from Tuesday, 12th June 2018 to Tuesday, 19th June 2018, the researcher examined the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic on Instagram. During this time, the researcher was a participant observer as a personal account was utilised. The first twenty images from the 'Top' category and 'Recent' category were collected; however, videos and promotional content were excluded. Of the total of 280 images collected, only the first five images from both categories were analysed for this research, providing the researcher with a total of 80 images. As the researcher accessed Instagram through a personal account, during this period no photos were liked or comments made on photos as the goal was only for qualitative data collection.

Hashtags are broken down into two categories: 'Top' and 'Recent'. Top posts show the most popular images that were tagged with the hashtag. In this section, everyone is seeing the same 'Top' posts rather than material based on a user's interests. The images that have reached the 'Top' post section is chosen by an algorithm that identifies images, based on a high count likes and comments, and based on how quickly the posts have received that engagement. Whereas the 'Recent' section is a time feature in which users have recently uploaded an image and once their accounts are set to public, then any user can view the image tagged with the hashtag. The data collected was examined through a content analysis to answer the main research question.

Findings and Discussion

Four major themes emerged when analysing the data collected from Instagram: hair texture, complexion, body image, and self-affirmation. The themes selected explored the intersecting oppressions of gender, race, and beauty that Black women encounter within Western beauty standards.

What are the impacts of Western standards of beauty on Black women?

Hair Texture

Many of the images collected showcased the diverse ways in which Black women style their hair ranging from braids, to weaves, to natural hairstyles. Twenty-three images utilised the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic to showcase hair, fifteen images showcased the different curl patterns of Black women's natural hair, five showed the different styles and colours of braided hair, and two showed the different styles and colours of weaves. Many of the images used similar hashtags such as #naturalhair, #naturallycurly, #braids, or #afro, to describe the style of hair and to link the image with others that used the same hashtags.

Numerous images that showed natural hair utilised hashtags such as #naturalhair, #afrohairdontcare, #teamnatural or #afrocurly. However, it should be noted that the most frequent curl pattern was 3C[15] which is generally associated with Black women who possess a lighter complexion. Black women who possess a dark complexion and produce 4C or 4B[16] curl patterns were less visible. This is mainly exhibited within the Instagram pages that collected images associated with hair and #BlackGirlMagic.

Black women have encountered years of oppressive ideas, laws, and customs that regulated how they could wear or adorn[17] their hair. Society has now cultivated unwritten rules about 'grooming' that perpetuate beauty standards. These rules have regulated how Black women and girls are meant to style their hair for school or work.

This particular relationship of hair to beauty intersects with race and gender, positioning a unique burden on Black women whose natural hair textures fall low on the beauty totem pole (Robinson, 2011). This combination of 'hair as race with hair as beauty is an example of how intersectionality is essential to understand[ing] subject matters specific to Black females' (Robinson, 2011: 361). Hair is biologically determined and has been used as a racial identifier.

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[15] Curl pattern in appendix.

[16] Curl pattern in appendix.

[17] For instance, the Tignon Laws which forced Creole women of color 'to wear a tignon (scarf or handkerchief) over their hair to show that they belonged to the slave class, whether they were enslaved or not.' (Nasheed, 2018)

The data collected from Instagram revealed diverse hairstyles, where many of the images that received the most likes were for a looser curl pattern, revealing that while the OC is accepting of different hair types, it lacks representation of *all* types.

This social media era has also given Black women and girls more access to natural hair bloggers who utilise the digital world to show how to style and take care of natural hair. The increase in bloggers not only encourages Black women to wear their hair naturally, but it also suggests new standards and negotiations of beauty which are more accessible to Black women (Sobze, 2013).

Complexion

Twenty-six images fell under this category, nineteen of which were self-portraits or 'selfies.' When analysing skin colour within the hashtag, many of the images of women who were dark-skinned not only used an additional hashtag that focused on their melanin but highlighted the positive in their skin colour. Five images were of groups of Black women and girls showcasing the different shades of Blackness, but all utilised hashtags or captions that emphasised the melanin in their skin. There were also Instagram pages that were dedicated to showcasing the various shades of Black women with positive messages regarding their complexion. Pages such as 'melanin.touch' and 'themelaninshadesroom' all take publicly posted images to share on their pages that utilised any hashtags affiliated with melanin.

Within Western culture, complexion has always been a focal point for discrimination and valuation. The various shades of Blackness are placed in a hierarchy; shades closest to white have more significant value. The unattractive stereotypes of dark-skinned women such as the 'sexless Black mammy' have been constant and harmful to the self-esteem of Black women. More importantly, this 'association of dark skin and ugliness transcends geographical boundaries, nationalities and ethnicities' (Norwood, 2017: 5).

Colourism is not limited to a particular race, nor geographical location, and the digital realm is another area in which these damaging ideas are expressed. Within social media colourism has been recycled. Black women of various complexions generally used harmful hashtags such as, #TeamLightSkin or #TeamDarkSkin, to reinforce the divide, which exposed the pain and judgment Black women inflict on one another. Nevertheless, the data collected revealed the use of other hashtags that were focused on countering this narrative and uplifting the different shades of Black women.

Body image

Body image is defined as 'one's perception of, affective reaction to, and cognitive appraisal of one's body' (Smolak & Murnen, 2007: 236). Even if some Black women do not fall prey to the idea of a 'perfect' body image, they are still ostracised for their body type, but in the digital realm many display their bodies however they wish.

Six of the images collected fell into the 'body image' category. These images showed various body types modelling, in stylish wear, activewear and even partial nudity. Many of the images were captioned with body-positive messages or hashtags such as #curvy, #effyourbodystandards and #selflove. The content illustrated a diverse set of body types which are primarily 'othered' from mainstream media. Even though these women are proudly displaying their bodies how they wish, the users are somewhat aware of the risks associated with showcasing their bodies to be judged by the public.

Within Black culture there was more of an emphasis on being shapely and curvaceous. Regardless of the cultural aspect of body image, the negative portrayal, or stereotypes attached to Black women's bodies, has had adverse implications on how the world views them and ultimately how they view themselves. Despite the harsh scrutiny that Black women's bodies are subjected to, they have still tried to claim beauty where others only see sexuality. Additionally, the digital realm was still able to create room for the exhibition of new feminine sexualities that are not merely responses to male desires, but rather self-definition of what is beautiful (White, 2013).

How has digital activism been used to create an innovative narrative?

Self-affirmation

The Oxford online dictionary defines self-affirmation as 'the recognition and assertion of the existence and value of one's individual self' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018).

Twenty-six images fell under the category of 'self-affirmation'. Here, a greater number of the images came from the 'Recent' section where more personal accounts were used rather than Instagram pages that collected images that used #BlackGirlMagic. Many of the images were self-portraits and assigned captions such as 'Goddess', 'Pretty' or hashtags such as #blackbeauties, #selflove, and #feelingmyself or even longer captions that emphasised self-love. Many, if not all of the women in this category wore makeup, had their hair done, and were dressed to present the best physically appealing version of themselves.

For decades Black women have found ways to express themselves, however small, and this has been crucial for Black women's resistance. Arguably, #BlackGirlMagic has become another 'safe' space for Black women to not only examine issues that concern them, but to express themselves honestly. #BlackGirlMagic grants Black women and girls a unified space within the digital realm to fight against mainstream media's representation of beauty by uplifting and empowering themselves. Even if it is not evident, by sharing their individual struggles about the rejection of Black beauty and linking them to #BlackGirlMagic, Black women have proven they can control and ultimately change their representation.

The movement attached to #BlackGirlMagic has reached millions of people around the globe through all social communities promoting the various hairstyles, complexions and body types of Black women. However, not everyone has access to digital technologies, and this is the most significant limitation to the idea of #BlackGirlMagic being an innovative narrative for all. A researcher needs to be aware of the classism and ableism associated with access to digital media devices, and this is an evident shortcoming within the digital realm.

Additionally, despite the hashtag originating in the U.S., Western standards of beauty impact Black women all over the world. The hashtag assisted towards creating a space to promote Black women and girls who are not often seen in mainstream media and to promote images that Black women want to see on social media globally. Finally, it allows Black women to define beauty on their terms rather than living out someone else's narrative.

Conclusion

This research has been an exploration of Western standards of beauty, the impacts on Black women and #BlackGirlMagic. This study aims to be added to Black feminist bodies of work that investigate the intersections of gender, race, and beauty in the lives of Black women. This study focused exclusively on

the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic on the social media app Instagram. It highlighted how Black women connect all over the world, exposing their shared experience in a society that disparages women of African descent irrespective of differences such as social class or sexual orientation.

This analysis primarily involved a Black feminist framework, and a crucial aspect of Black feminism is to identify Black women as collaborators in their empowerment, and to honestly believe that they are capable of enacting agency in their own lives on their terms. This is precisely what #BlackGirlMagic can be argued as doing for Black women. Although social media may not appear to be of significance or represent progress, for women who do not generally see images that reflect their own, having that space can still be ground-breaking. For it is those that are misrepresented and marginalised that have turned to digital activism to allow their voices and stories to be heard. Social media can, therefore, be a powerful tool for voices, stories, and images which have been left behind, forgotten, or removed from mainstream media.

As a researcher, it is evident that a hashtag cannot remove centuries of oppressive ideas about Black women and their beauty. However, with the creation of a space for Black women by Black women, they are representing themselves when and where no one else will. #BlackGirlMagic offers a platform for a meaningful conversation and for Black women to freely express themselves and connect with other Black women globally. Ultimately this can provide exposure and promote discussions which can be useful steps towards empowerment and combating inequalities. Hopefully this will also contribute to creating a future that has a new meaning for Black beauty.

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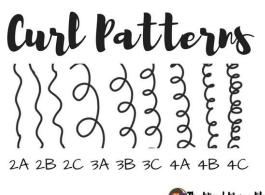
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Appendix 1: Hair texture:

About the author:

I was born in Barbados in 1989, and have lived here my entire life. From 2007 to 2011 I attended the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, Barbados to study History and Literature. After leaving UWI, I pursued further education at the National University of Ireland, Galway, where I graduated with MA Gender, Globalisation and Rights, 2018.

Since then, I have returned to Barbados where I intend to take the valuable knowledge learned abroad and work with organisations that aim to improve the lives of women and girls. I am currently a member of the National Organisation of Women (NOW) and have had the opportunity to sit in on board meetings and marches that strive to progress the lives of marginalised persons. My principal current research projects focus on digital activism, Black Feminist theory and beauty standards.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Diet Culture and Instagram:

A Feminist Exploration of Perceptions and Experiences Among Young Women in the Midwest of Ireland

Laura O'Shea
M.A. Gender, Globalisation, and Rights
National University of Ireland, Galway

Abstract   This article provides a feminist exploration of the perceptions and experiences of diet culture on Instagram among young women in the Midwest of Ireland. It discusses why young women continue to engage with diet culture and how it has translated to Instagram. This research was conducted through qualitative semi-structured interviews. Eight women between the ages of 18-30 living in the Midwest of Ireland were interviewed in this study. Through engaging with feminist research methods and utilising a feminist lens, this research prioritises the female voice in social research. It is revealed that the women interviewed perceive and experience diet culture on Instagram in various ways but overall it has a negative influence on their wellbeing. This article highlights this issue as a gendered side effect of social media that is inherently harmful to women. It generates new knowledge of this issue in the Irish context and identifies further areas of research.

Keywords: Diet culture, Dieting, Social Media, Instagram, Feminist Exploration, Midwest of Ireland

Introduction

During the 1970s and 1980s, feminists began to draw attention to the gendered nature of weight loss and disordered eating. Orbach's (1978) foundational text *Fat is a Feminist Issue* is one of the most influential on this topic. She suggests that dieting is fundamentally rooted in the social constraints placed on women, especially their lack of autonomy. Other writers of that time discussed fat, and particularly fat bias, as being primarily a woman's issue. They argued that women experience diet culture more than men and are more likely to engage in 'corrective' measures such as dieting and to developing eating disorders. They proposed that women pay a higher price for occupying a plus-size body due to discrimination (Wooley et al., 1979). Many studies regarding dieting practices of women have drawn on feminist theorisations. Gailey (2014)

drew upon Foucault's theory of governmentality and found that women are expected to become 'docile bodies' through the disciplinary power of diet culture. The Theory of Governmentality applies to diet culture in several ways. Foucault (1977), argues that governmentality creates power and this power disseminates through scientific, medical, social and cultural narratives. These narratives produce knowledge that determines how women's bodies are perceived and regulated. Foucault theorises the docile body as one that can be surveyed, transformed and improved; he builds on Bentham's idea of the Panopticon. The idea of a prisoner under surveillance, changing their body to please the warden and wider society applies to the surveillant nature of diet culture, especially on a visual platform such as Instagram. Prominent feminist theorists Bartky (1993) and Bordo (1990) discuss dieting as a gendered issue and position women who diet as self-policing agents. They argue that women diet to achieve a standard of femininity that derives from patriarchal inequalities and internalised male standards of female beauty. This makes diet culture a feminist issue.

'Diet Culture' is used in this article as it is a popular term for a collection of activities and ideas regarding dieting among the generation of women interviewed for this research. Drawing upon its meaning and utilisation in popular culture and media, diet culture is defined, for the purpose of this research, as a system of societal or cultural beliefs, customs and behaviours that place an increased level of value and importance on visual appearance, specifically weight and body size rather than overall physical and mental wellbeing. It conflates a slender body as a healthy body without examining context. It emphasises behaviours such as calorie counting and dieting to lose weight as a lifelong body project. It places a higher moralistic value on people who fit the thin ideal (Harrison, 2018). The cultural and social obsession with women's body shape and the pursuit of the ideal female body has created a diet culture. In 2012, an Irish study found that 17% of girls reported trying to lose weight in comparison to 10% of boys (Kelly et al., 2012). In an increasingly technological world, diet culture has translated to Instagram. This is evident by accounts dedicated to dieting, 'thinspiration' accounts, 'fitspiration' accounts, marketing of weight loss products and weight management narratives.[18]

Instagram is a social networking site (SNS) founded in 2010. It enables users to upload photos, apply filters, and enhance images from any mobile device. It has one billion active monthly users (Instagram, 2019). Recently there has been an increase in the number of studies conducted examining links between internet use and negative body image. These studies found evidence of disturbances in body image perception directly correlated with increased internet use (Tiggeman & Miller, 2010; Tiggeman & Slater, 2013). Multiple studies have shown that spending more time on social media is associated with an increased drive for thinness, body dissatisfaction, internalisation of beauty ideals particularly the thin ideal, disordered eating, and comparison of appearance and dieting among women (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012; Fardouly et al., 2015).

The pursuit of the thin ideal as displayed on Instagram has correlations with postfeminist theories. Postfeminist Sensibility describes an emphasis on the body as an indication of femininity, a shift from objectification to subjectification, a refocus on self-regulation and self-surveillance and emphasis on transformation of the body through neo-liberal routes of empowerment (Gill, 2007). This theory resonates with the practices of diet culture, particularly how it displays on Instagram. These include, but are not confined to, weight loss journey accounts documenting transformations, 'fitspiration' accounts,

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[18] https://www.instagram.com/thinspirationstation/
https://www.instagram.com/_weightloss.motivation_/
https://www.instagram.com/skinnybunnytea/
https://www.instagram.com/thinteadetoxtea/
https://www.instagram.com/slim_with_mel/

documenting food diaries and exercise routines, weight loss 'before and after' pictures and the promotion and commercialisation of weight loss products and supplements. McRobbie (2008), emphasises that postfeminist sensibility is intensified though consumption and technologies of the self. Consumption of hyperfeminine products and practices such as supplements, weight loss surgery, weight loss exercise regimes and clothing such as shapewear, have become the norm of femininity. Instagram provides an instant portal to these images and therefore a pathway to comparison.

One of the most recent studies in this area looked specifically at Instagram use and its associations with body image concerns, comparison, and self-objectification among young women in the United States and Australia. Overall, the study concluded that Instagram usage may negatively affect body image and women's appearance-related concerns (Fardouly, Willburger & Varatainan, 2017).

Methodology

Design

This research emphasises women's voices in order to unpack the complexities of diet culture on Instagram and is guided by feminist standpoint methodologies. Feminist standpoint theory places women's voices at the centre of the research process and values their perceptions and experiences as transformative knowledge (Letherby, 2003). This research is qualitative and utilises semi-structured interviews comprising of five questions. Each participant was asked the same five questions.

1. How long have you been using Instagram?

2. What do you use Instagram for?

3. How do you think diet culture is communicated on Instagram?

4. Does Instagram influence how you view your body? How so?

5. Have you ever followed an exercise/weight loss plan or account on Instagram? How did you find it?

Piloting

The interview questions were piloted among two volunteers who did not participate in the formal study. The two women interviewed met the same criteria as the formal study participants. Both interviews took place in cafés. Piloting in this instance highlighted the importance of the setting when conducting interviews. It was determined that there were too many interruptions throughout the interview and the participants did not feel comfortable discussing sensitive subjects in this setting. During the formal study, the main priority when picking a location for the interview was ensuring that the interviewee felt comfortable and therefore could speak freely. Seven of the interviews took place in the participants home and one took place in a quiet café as per the participant's preference.

Recruitment of Participants

Participants were selected according to the following criteria: they identify as a woman, are aged between 18-30 as this age group of women are most active on Instagram (Grogan, 2018), they must use Instagram, and live in the Midwest of Ireland (Limerick, Clare, Tipperary). This geographical area was chosen as the study site as it encompasses a varied selection of settings including small rural villages, larger satellite towns, and the city of Limerick.

As this research is social-media based, recruitment of participants was through Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Eight women (n=8) were interviewed for this research. Participants were asked to read and sign two copies of the consent form. The participant retained one copy, and the researcher retained a copy that was stored securely in a locked cabinet to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Each participant chose their own pseudonym - Annie, Claire, Sophie, Erin, Maria, Caroline, Lorna and Maura. These were maintained throughout data collection, analysis and presentation of findings. As this is feminist research, the use of pseudonyms was particularly important. It maintained anonymity and contributed to the women's agency within the research process and cultivation of their own identities. Each interview was recorded on a digital audio recorder. The interviews were individually transcribed and matched with pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analysed through thematic analysis. The transcripts were analysed carefully and colour-coded to identify prominent statements across the eight interviews. These were organised under broader themes, consistent with the research questions and will be explored in the findings and discussion sections.

Findings

Perceptions and Experiences of Diet Culture on Instagram

What Women Use Instagram For

Seven of the eight participants cited using Instagram to follow friends. Four of the interviewees used Instagram to keep in contact with family members. Five of the participants followed celebrity accounts. Four of the participants used Instagram for their jobs. Six of the women used the platform to follow social media influencers. Three of the women used Instagram to specifically follow diet and fitness accounts.

How Women Feel Diet Culture Is Communicated on Instagram

All eight participants stated that diet culture is pervasive on Instagram. Six of the participants specifically referred to diet culture as 'everywhere on Instagram' while the remaining two stated that Instagram was 'heavily-loaded' with diet culture. All eight participants discussed celebrities on Instagram and positioned them as promoters of diet culture. They linked celebrities with the promotion of weight loss products such as detox teas, slimming shakes and capsules. The Kardashians were cited in half of the interviews as promoters of diet culture through their Instagram accounts.

The activities of social media influencers were discussed as examples of how diet culture has translated to Instagram by all eight participants. The consumerism of the diet industry on Instagram was discussed at length by all participants. Three of the women voiced concerns about the authenticity of social media influencers' testimonies of products when it is clear that they are paid to promote them on Instagram. Maura and Erin displayed concerns at the nutritional and exercise advice promoted on Instagram by social media influencers and celebrities, labelling it as 'dangerous'. The consumerism of diet culture also extends to 'targeted ads' on Instagram, mentioned by all participants. Four of the women discussed how the consumerism of diet culture on Instagram contributes to the pressure to conform to the ideal body image through weight management processes.

The eight participants discussed following friends on Instagram who are dieting or adhering to specific fitness regimes. Diet culture in this way is perceived through 'before and after pictures', 'transformation' pictures, food posts and videos of workouts in the gym. Lorna discussed people who set up 'slim with..' accounts to document their weight loss journey. She positioned this as 'fitspiration'

and 'thinspiration' accounts, terms used by four of the interviewees. Five of the participants perceived hashtags as elements of diet culture on Instagram. Marie, Erin and Sophie positioned the use of filters on Instagram as negative.

Why Women Engage With Diet Culture On Instagram

All eight women followed numerous weight loss and exercise plans on Instagram. Seven of the women followed these accounts because they wanted to lose weight. The remaining one participant, Erin, did not want to lose weight but wanted to 'tone up'. Seven of the participants repeatedly cited that as a woman, there is an expectation to diet, it is a central part of 'being a woman'. They linked this to societal notions of the ideal women and striving to attain the 'thin ideal'. Two participants felt dieting was expected of them because of assigned gender roles.

Instagram's Diet Culture and Its Influence On Women's Wellbeing

Three of the participants stated that following these accounts motivated them at first and this had a positive effect on their wellbeing. However, in the long term, all eight participants stated that these accounts produced negative effects on their wellbeing. Five of the women cited feeling guilty, ashamed and 'down about themselves' when they did not have the same weight loss as the person running the account. All participants constantly felt the need to 'check in' on Instagram. Lorna, Caroline and Sophie describe this practice as 'obsessional'.

Four of the participants reported skipping meals deliberately to lose weight while following these accounts. If they ate something not 'on plan' they would compare themselves to others on Instagram. All participants reported these accounts were unrealistic and difficult to follow. Four of the participants unfollowed certain diet culture related accounts because of their negative impact. However, it still affected them due to algorithms, targeted ads, and account suggestions.

All eight women positioned Instagram as having a negative influence on their body image by producing feelings of guilt, shame, low self-esteem and comparison. Five of the women directly linked comparing their bodies to other bodies on Instagram as leading to poorer mental wellbeing. Five of the interviewees felt ashamed of their bodies because of what they saw on Instagram. They also discussed judgement, or fear of judgement on Instagram. All participants felt that Instagram negatively influenced how they viewed their bodies. Four of the participants perceived Instagram to be female-driven and that this contributes to women judging other women. Four of the women interviewed discussed algorithms on Instagram as problematic and as a driving feature of diet culture on Instagram.

Seven of the women cited body positivity and seeing 'plus-size' women on Instagram as a positive thing. However, Erin and Caroline viewed body positivity as objectifying women in the same way as diet culture. They remarked how the central message is sometimes construed as promoting obesity and this leads to ambiguity regarding the movement.

Discussion

Diet Culture as a Significant Feature of Instagram

All participants perceived diet culture on Instagram through celebrity accounts, social media influencers, and peer accounts. All participants discussed advertisements for 'slimming aids' as an element of diet culture on Instagram. There is a large corpus of feminist literature on the regulation of female bodies through dieting and losing weight (Orbach, 1978; Bordo, 1993; Bartky, 1990). However, much of the focus of this literature is analysing and critiquing the mass media portrayal of the female body and perpetuation

of the 'thin ideal'. This research reveals Instagram as another platform in which female bodies are criticised and regulated. It is a platform that previous generations of women did not have to contend with. Diet culture exists on Instagram, not in a vacuum, but as an extension of an already pervasive culture that dominates in society; it is embedded into the very fabric of Instagram.

The variety of ways in which the women in this study perceive diet culture to be communicated on Instagram means that the likelihood of it appearing on your newsfeed is high. The nature of Instagram's algorithm means that previously visited websites or posts generate targeted advertisements. Two of the participants expressed concern at the algorithm and noted that they unwillingly had interaction with a lot of diet culture related accounts. For the participants of this study, it reduced their autonomy and agency when online and produced negative effects, for example, Annie stated, 'It (diet culture) is everywhere on Instagram….it makes you feel bad about yourself'. The participants consistently positioned Instagram as a female-driven platform. The gender dynamics of Instagram are of interest because they parallel the gender dynamics of diet culture in wider society. Previous studies have found that the characteristics of diet culture, for example dieting for weight loss, are disproportionately aimed at and undertaken by women as opposed to men (Gailey, 2014). This research indicates that diet culture both in society and on Instagram is gendered and female-orientated. Therefore the influence of diet culture on Instagram will be more significant to women, making it a feminist issue worthy of in-depth investigation.

The women in this study ranged in ages from 18-30 and had different occupations. Overall, their occupations did not significantly alter their perceptions or experiences of diet culture on Instagram. It also did not mediate the influence it had on their overall wellbeing. This is significant because it demonstrates the universality of this issue for women.

Diet Culture on Instagram in a Neoliberal Paradigm

The diet industry is estimated to be worth $70.3 billion (Rabasca Roepe, 2018). All eight participants discussed celebrity and social media influencer promotions and endorsements of food and slimming aids as central to diet culture on Instagram. As Claire explains:

> They are paid to sell whatever slimming aid, and they're constantly trying to plug it. They give discount codes all the time, trying to get you to buy those kinds of things….it's all about selling.
> (Claire)

When applying a feminist lens, it is clear that Instagram has entwined with neoliberalism and postfeminist ideals. This has contributed to a whole new generation of 'social media influencers'. The theory of postfeminism celebrates the rhetoric of the self-branded individual who employs modes of self-expression embedded in the consumer marketplace (Gill, 2007). While social media influencers have embraced the postfeminist ideals of individualism and autonomy by creating a following on Instagram, they must be mindful of what they promote. Banet-Weiser (2012), discusses postfeminism and the emergence of digital technologies such as Instagram, and positions their interaction as constitutive of a 'neoliberal moral framework'. Instagram has provided a platform to make money through commercialisation, ultimately contributing to women's agency; however, it is a double-edged sword. Are women conforming to the oppressive patriarchal assumptions of the ideal female body by promoting these products? Maura highlighted that this created pressure to be able to afford certain products and when unable to do so it had a negative influence on her overall wellbeing.

This research reveals that the commercialisation of dieting on Instagram is made possible by the mobilisation of gender norms around regulation of the female body. As previously discussed, Foucault's Theory of Governmentality (1977) can be applied to this research. Instagram acts as a mode of

governmentality through the promotion of dieting products and targeted advertisements, and in this way displays power. Instagram makes it easy to buy slimming products through 'swipe up' links that bring you directly to the merchant's website. In this way, Instagram works as a commercialised disciplinary power and urges women to undertake practices of diet culture such as buying slimming aids. Maura bought detox tea that made her feel unwell, 'I got so run down…I just felt really uncomfortable on it.' If this aspect of Instagram remains unregulated, there may be detrimental physical and psychological effects for women as consumers of these products.

Claire felt an increased pressure to attain the ideal because of her age, thirty. She discussed the notion of women 'having it all…husband, house, career, babies and the body' by the age of thirty and how this was reinforced by Instagram. This research positioned Instagram as a postfeminist environment wherein the notion of 'having it all' is encouraged. Gendered heteronormative expectations persist on Instagram. In a postfeminist environment women must also maintain independence through careers while also 'bouncing back' to the ideal body post-pregnancy as in Claire's case. Diet culture on Instagram proposes that female empowerment and autonomy is gained primarily through modification of the body. Maintaining the female body is construed as individualism and as an achievement. However, maintenance costs money. It is a sort of neoliberal governmentality and something McRobbie (2009) calls 'consumer citizenship', it involves constant and intense surveillance and this had negative influences on the wellbeing of the women in this study.

The Female Body as a Lifelong Project

All participants feel or have felt pressure to diet, simply because they are women. Butler (1990) positions gender as performative; she argues that people must *do* gender through various actions in order to *be* that gender. The women in this study utilised dieting as a way to *do* their gender. Gender as a concept is deeply entrenched within society and this makes it difficult for women to abandon the performative actions of gender. All of the women discussed the 'thin ideal' in their interviews. Annie highlighted that even as a young girl, the message she received from society portrayed women as thin 'We played with barbie dolls and were given this perfect image of a woman….tall and skinny'. They discussed the constant pressure to live up to the ideal female body. All eight participants felt that as a woman, their bodies needed to be continuously worked on or improved. The promotion of detoxes, slimming capsules, shakes and weight loss regimes on Instagram created a pressure on women in the study to 'always be doing something' to change their bodies.

Caroline discussed dieting as ongoing and highlighted Instagram's role: 'It's another extension of our role as women, to apparently be on a diet 24/7 or always looking for improvements….we're never enough and Instagram regulates it'. The participants also felt that because of Instagram, body expectations changed more rapidly, almost akin to fashion trends. Two participants spoke of how skinny was once portrayed as the ideal and this was due to the influence of high-end fashion models. However, now with the influence of celebrities such as the Kardashians, wider hips and small waists are 'on trend'. The women in this study felt pressure to continuously change their bodies. This is similar to previous work by Shilling (1993), which positions the body as something that needs to be worked on every day – 'the body project thesis'. This continuous dieting ultimately produced a negative influence on participants' wellbeing.

Comparison

The women in this research continually compare themselves to other women on Instagram. The participants discussed how they have compared themselves to images of friends and celebrities. Ultimately, all the participants discussed this as a negative experience. Five of the women stated that comparing themselves to other women on Instagram led to poor mental health. The visual nature of Instagram means that women

are consistently bombarded with images of the female body and generally it is 'the ideal female body'. As Caroline discussed, 'You can't look at Instagram without seeing a body…'. Previous research examined the influence of Instagram on body image and found comparison as a key process in producing negative perceptions of body image (Fardouly, Willberger & Varantanian, 2017). This research revealed similar findings. All participants of this study internalised the ideal body image and used it as a measure of comparison. From a feminist perspective, this can be discussed as self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The women in this study view themselves as only bodies, made up of body parts that require monitoring and comparison. This is unsurprising, but worrying nonetheless.

The participants spoke of the 'obsessional' nature of Instagram, specifically when following weight loss or exercise accounts. Monitoring daily posts of breakfast, lunch, and dinner was a frequent feature in the experiences of the interviewees. They compare what they had eaten in a day to the person who is running the account. If what they had eaten had a higher calorie content, or was considered "bad" in comparison, feelings of guilt and shame were triggered. This led to overall negative effects for the women interviewed. For four of the participants, comparing what they had eaten to someone on Instagram also led to disordered eating in the form of skipping meals to counteract feeling 'bad' or 'falling off the bandwagon'. Claire highlights this, 'I ate a breakfast roll…after looking on Instagram I felt so guilty…. I skipped lunch'.

Marie identified herself as a feminist in her interview. It was interesting to see if identifying as a feminist provided any buffering or protective factor when it came to internalisation of body ideals and comparison on Instagram. Feminism rejects cultural standards of body ideals and criticizes the objectification of the female body. However, when focusing particularly on Marie's interview, she spoke consistently of comparison and the internalisation of the 'thin ideal', just like the other participants. Overall, it was found that comparison was a key feature of diet culture on Instagram and age or occupation did not mediate the processes of self-objectification, surveillance, and comparison in this study. In all cases, comparison led to feelings of guilt and shame, which had negative influences on the women interviewed.

Judging and Being Judged

Five of the eight women interviewed discussed judgement and fear of judgement on Instagram in direct relation to diet culture. The proliferation of apps that slim your body and alter your appearance has increased self-surveillance among women. It has encouraged women to see themselves within a 'pedagogy of defect' (Bordo, 1993). The use of filters on Instagram by participants of this study is an extension of diet culture on the platform. Instagram is a tool of surveillance and has changed the politics of appearance. It is a technology that is focused on digital self-monitoring within a society structured by neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies. The findings of this study indicate that Instagram has produced a new form of regulatory gaze through our mobile phones. It is a gaze more dangerous than previously because it fits right into our pockets. As Claire puts it:

> Women put up everything, before and after pictures, I see a lot of that. I think the main reason women document this stuff is that you're waiting for comments and likes from other women to validate your achievement of losing weight. It's heavily loaded with judgement though. (Claire)

The women in the study who discussed competitiveness felt that, because of this, there was a pressure to keep up with weight loss or the diet or exercise plan . If they were 'not getting results' (losing weight), they could not put up photographs of themselves on Instagram as they assumed they would be judged. They also judge other women on Instagram, based on the size and shape of their bodies. Three of the participants

highlighted the danger of judging other women's bodies through comments on Instagram posts that were often offensive and hurtful.

Winch (2013) discusses *looking* between women as the 'girlfriend gaze'. It is socially constituted, regulatory and judgemental and is used by women to critically evaluate themselves and other women. It is a gaze that is powerful and produces the potential for recognition of successful femininity or failure. Winch (2013) discusses the value placed on a 'girlfriendship culture' in a postfeminist environment. This culture, she argues, places women's relationships with each other at the core of their feminine identities. The culture of 'girlfriendship' is exploited through media and marketing as a form of governance between women, for example, dieting to achieve the ideal body. Within the girlfriend gaze, male approval is no longer the priority. The pursuit of the ideal body through dieting, becomes a way of proving feminine worth to a circle of female friends. Mulvey (1975) discussed the male gaze within the cinematic environment in which the target audience is men. Women in film and media, she argues, are viewed from the heterosexual male perspective and primarily as passive objects for men's desire and pleasure. However, within the girlfriend gaze, women are framed as the target audience (Winch, 2013).Women are *doing* the looking and are *active* beings. However the results of this research reveal that the girlfriend gaze has produced negative influences on the wellbeing of the women and has preserved misogynistic discourse regarding the female body.

Women's Agency

Heyes (2006), argues that dieting can be a form of self-care for women. She argues that women choosing to diet demonstrate independence, and therefore, it is an act of rebellion against the oppressive ways of the patriarchy. This draws on ideas from Foucault's theory of technologies of the self. Technologies of the self, encourage self-discipline and allow people to produce desired versions of themselves, albeit these versions generally adhere to normative beauty ideals. It is in this context that Heyes theorised dieting as both constraining and enabling for women. This research has revealed that diet culture on Instagram is a 'technology of the self'. The women in this study use Instagram as a tool for weight loss to enable them to achieve their desired outcome, a smaller body; however, it raises questions which warrant further research. Did they enact agency by choosing to follow these plans on Instagram to lose weight or did they follow these plans because the societal pressure to fit the ideal was overwhelming? This produces interesting questions regarding how women use technologies such as social media - are they ultimately tools of the patriarchy or can women utilise them as a form of protest? The positioning of Instagram as a female-driven platform by the participants is particularly interesting when situated within wider feminist scholarship regarding technology. Haraway (1975) argues that women should be technology proficient and that the internet can be a place for women to create new identities and be free from patriarchal constraints of society. However, cyberfeminism scholars such as Wilding (1998) have challenged this perspective. She argues that the internet is not a utopian world that obliterates hierarchies. Technologies exist within a social framework that is essentially sexist. She proposes that technologies are not gender free spaces without regard to sex and assigned gender roles (Wilding, 1998). While women should make use of new technologies such as Instagram, power structures are embedded within these spaces and these must be critically analysed by the women that use them. This is particularly relevant for this research, as the results clearly reveal gendered effects of technology and point to the importance of continued feminist analysis of this topic.

The women interviewed for this study portrayed awareness of this issue and recognised that for them, diet culture on Instagram was problematic; it had negative effects on their overall wellbeing. They also had knowledge regarding the societal notions of the ideal female body and acknowledged that it is a gendered issue with many dynamics. Some of the women felt they enacted agency by unfollowing accounts which made them feel bad about their appearance. However, they also acknowledged that societal pressure to

conform to the thin ideal meant that they kept returning to these accounts. In this way diet culture on Instagram restricted their agency.

Conclusion

Women in this study engaged with diet culture on Instagram because they '*wanted* to lose weight'; however, they wanted to lose weight in a society that is dominated by a culture of the 'thin ideal' and places value on women who diet to fit this ideal. For the women interviewed in this study, weight management practices, like dieting, are lifelong occupations and are considered part of 'being a woman'. The pursuit and the attainment of the 'ideal body' are framed by periods of intense scrutiny, hard work, and financial expenditure. Social media sites, including Instagram, have become integral parts of our lives, and this research illuminated connections between society's 'addiction' to social media and women's body regulation through dieting. Instagram as a platform for diet culture, reinforces the cyclical nature of dieting in women's lives. The obsessive nature of Instagram means always returning to it and thereby always returning to diet culture. This research concludes that the social and cultural representation of the normative female body as slender and toned in Irish society has not gone away. It has become more dominant and pervasive with the establishment of Instagram which has acted as a platform for diet culture. This research revealed that diet culture on Instagram has a significant influence on the everyday lives of the women interviewed; overall, this influence is negative. The visual imagery on Instagram encouraged comparison and triggered feelings of guilt and shame. This had a negative effect on body image, self-esteem and overall mood and mental wellbeing. In some cases, experiences of diet culture on Instagram led to disordered eating in the form of skipping meals and prolonging periods of fasting in order to lose weight. This is particularly concerning in terms of the development of eating disorders and an area that urgently requires more research and resources in Ireland.

This study has revealed diet culture to be pervasive on Instagram. Overall, it has had a negative influence on the daily lives of interviewees. From a feminist perspective, it is essential to conduct larger-scale research on this issue in order to gain a deeper understanding of the topic and identify strategies to reduce the harm caused to women by diet culture on Instagram.

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About the author:

Laura O'Shea is a registered Midwife since 2015. She graduated from NUIG with a MA Gender, Globalisation and Rights in 2019. She has experience working with woman in complex social situations, advocating for women's rights and teaching students in a clinical setting.

Laura's areas of interest include societal perceptions of the female body, women's sexual and reproductive rights, gender based violence and gender and conflict. She has contributed to policy submissions in areas such as gender inequalities in the care economy, gender inequality in leadership, politics and gender responsive budgeting.

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exploring the intersection of motherhood and work for women working in the NGO sector in Harare, Zimbabwe

Runyararo Mutariswa
M.A. Gender, Globalisation, and Rights
National University of Ireland, Galway

Abstract   Gender equality, built on the principle of equal opportunities, maintains that women and men's equality is based on the availability of equal access to resources, funding and opportunities. Through this principle women have gained access to public life and form a good proportion of the world's working population. However, other social arrangements such as motherhood and associated care remain largely unchanged and may disrupt delivery of equality of outcomes between men and women participating in public life.

This paper details research that investigated how women working in the Zimbabwean NGO sector reconcile motherhood and work. The research illuminates the disadvantages that women in the stated category face at the intersection of motherhood and work. The research reveals there is a divergence between work and mothering demands, leaving women overstretched in both directions. Maids serve as a key support mechanism for working women, which the research reveals as problematic to achieving gender equality and the ideals of equity and justice.

Keywords: Work, Motherhood, Equity, Care Work

Introduction

Women's rights have come a long way since the United Nations Decade for Women, seeing a distinct increase in the number of women participating in public life (World Bank, 2018). However, contentions raised from the Decade, such as social arrangements that hinder equality of outcomes, remain relevant. While equality of opportunities is important, socio-economic arrangements are equally important as these determine the ability for women to access the available opportunities (Ghodsee, 2010).

Motherhood remains a large social institution, through which women are co-opted into associated care work. Previous research shows that motherhood is largely a social construct that is enmeshed in womanhood, to the extent that the full measure of womanhood is fulfilled in motherhood (Stearney, 1994;

Rich, 1995; Walker, 1995; Akujobi 2011). In this way, motherhood is seen as an extension of femaleness, not viewed as 'work', and seen through the perspective of emotional bonds.

Although there is an awareness and articulation of the possibilities of discrimination against women due to the functions of motherhood (BPA, 1995; CEDAW, 1981), the balance of public and private life, in the face of motherhood, remains a significant challenge for the project of gender equality (Connell, 2005); women still retain the larger burden of unpaid care work (UN Women, 2016).

This paper is drawn from a thesis on the exploration of the intersection of work and motherhood for women working within the NGO sector in Harare, Zimbabwe (Mutariswa, 2019). The paper focuses on the challenges women encounter at the intersection of work and motherhood. Zimbabwe will first be explored as a site of study, with regard to work and gender equality. Then, literature on motherhood and work will be explored to set up the findings and discussion that will follow. A synopsis of the research procedure will be presented, followed by main findings presented and discussed in detail. The paper will close with recommended areas of further study.

Context

Zimbabwe is a country in Southern Africa. According to the country's Census report (2012), women compose 47% of the formally employed population, a significant proportion that amounts to almost half the category. Similarly, the Labour Force Survey (2011), recorded that women comprise 53% of those in informal employment, once again a significant proportion, hence the need to question the existence of policies and practices that help women to balance motherhood and work. Problematically, the Census report (2012) included a category on the economically inactive population; within that category, 'homemakers' were included (Census, 2012). Homemakers were defined as persons who '…engaged in household chores in their own household i.e. cooking and fetching water' (Census, 2012: 84) and 89% of this category were women. Such a classification does not assign economic value to domestic labour and so perpetuates the view that domestic labour is not only invisible, but undervalued.

In 2013, the Zimbabwean government adopted a new constitution which includes a Bill of Rights. Within the Bill of Rights, the Zimbabwean government offers a progressive definition of discrimination, describing when either a person is '…subjected directly or indirectly to a condition, restriction or disability to which other people are not subjected', or '…are accorded directly or indirectly a privilege or advantage which other people are not accorded' (Constitution, 2013: 33). These definitions of discrimination reflect a lack of tolerance for conditions that minimise room for participation and encourage fair treatment and access. The definitions present a perfect backdrop for the investigation into how motherhood and work are structured practically, to ensure that women do not indirectly face conditions that hinder them in the workplace and give men an unfair advantage.

Zimbabwe is state party to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and signatory to International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Additionally, Zimbabwean women actively participated in the Beijing Platform for Action which has led to some changes in policy and practice within the country.

Article 7 of the ICESCR articulates the rights to work and unpacks the responsibilities of governments to ensure work environments that promote wellbeing. Of particular importance are the sections under this article that refer to decent living for workers and their families, as well as access to rest, leisure, and reasonable working hours (ICESCR,1976).

CEDAW articulates the responsibilities of state parties to take all necessary measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women including those that may form barriers to the enjoyment of public life. The convention is alive to the role that women play in supporting family life and how this can be employed as a tool of discrimination against women (CEDAW, 1981). In the preamble, the convention articulates that the biological roles of women as mothers should not be deployed as a tool of discrimination. Zimbabwe as a state party to CEDAW, with no reservations, has obligations to translate the convention into local legislature and policy.

In the 2010 state party report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the government of Zimbabwe reported efforts to reduce discrimination against women in relation to pregnancy through the Public Service Regulations Statutory Instrument 2000. The instrument sets forth that maternity leave will not be viewed as a break in a woman's work service and that women are not passed up for promotion when on maternity leave of up to 98 days. Additionally, new mothers are granted one hour off work for the first six months after maternity leave to allow for breastfeeding. This progression safeguards women from being negatively affected by becoming pregnant and ensures full benefits during maternity leave. However, these measures secure women's critical availability in the early days of their new-born children's lives and is tied directly to mothers as biological carriers and carers of babies. It does not go beyond these roles tied to biology to those tied to social constructions of, and the ancillary work that accompanies motherhood.

In this way, there is a gap in policy and in practice around how work is structured to allow a balance between motherhood and work. This blind spot effectively makes mothering a private role that is somehow divorced from the public worker. The problem with this arrangement is that the public worker and private mother are the same individual who is likely to become overextended to the disadvantage of either work, mothering, or themselves. As discussed by Zilanawala (2016), women tend to be faced with a challenge of time poverty that affects their ability to form strong social relationships, thereby affecting their quality of life.

Motherhood and work: the literature

Douglas and Michaels (2006), provide insight into contemporary motherhood that is encased in the pressure of 'successful mothering' as portrayed in the media. They report that women find mothering more difficult in this age of constant media alerts and messaging that insinuate mothering is the most important thing a woman gets to do in her life. Douglas and Michaels (2006) seem to echo the sentiments of Rich (1995) that at some point there was a counter revolution that reinstated motherhood to eminence. This is to say women are now more able to step into public lives, but the pressure to be the 'best mum' has remained unchanged.

In the age of the working mother and mass media, there is increased availability of standards that women ought to live up to as mothers. And while women can work, motherhood is and should be their chief priority (Douglas and Michaels, 2006). This places pressure on women to juggle motherhood and work and to be essentially perfect at both. As a result, women find themselves pulled in two directions with the pressure to, 'be more doting and self-sacrificing at home than Bambi's mother, yet more achievement oriented at work than Madeleine Albright.' (Douglas and Michaels, 2006: 11)

The social role of motherhood and associated care-giving is still largely viewed as an extension of the biology of childbirth. In this way, it remains viewed as a natural role for women and not as work. Rich (1995: 4) summarizes this occurrence by saying of the 20th century woman, 'She had not found herself entering an evolving new society, a society in transformation. She had only been integrated into the same structures that had made the liberation movements necessary.'

As such, contemporary mothers find themselves able to work and participate in activities that reinforce their autonomy but are still tied heavily to the role of motherhood and associated caregiving. In this way they are pulled into two directions that are not necessarily easy to reconcile in terms of time and emotional labour demands. Over the past two decades, the pressures women face to juggle work while maintaining perfect motherhood has given rise to the work-life balance debates. Although proposed as gender neutral, work-life balance has been founded on what Eikhof, Warhurst, and Haunschild call: '…questionable assumptions and perceptions…that "life" can be equated with caring responsibilities, most particularly childcare, with the result that women are primary targets for work-life balance provisions.' (2007: 326)

Eikhof, Warhurst, and Haunschild (2007), further discuss how work-life balance has been implemented to guarantee that women continue to reproduce, fulfilling the obligations towards replenishment of human capital. At the same time, this implementation has been one that does not radically disrupt employment, ensuring profit security for the employer. This leaves women perfectly boxed into motherhood and care-giving that is fictitiously supported and separated from their working lives.

Leon (2009) discusses the European Employment Strategy, leaning towards the provision of childcare as a work-life balance measure. This is seen as a way of enabling young mothers to stay in paid work as a matter of necessity due to a sizeable aging population. In this research, Leon (2009) refers to fertility being low in countries that do not provide measures for women to balance work and family life. As such, efforts to reconcile work and family enable replenishment of the human population without upsetting market principles of profit-making or unsettling the social arrangements of motherhood and care. Hereby thrusting women into the world of work and providing commodified childcare, without investigating the burden of care still retained by women (Leon, 2009). While there are attempts at provisions of childcare and there is 'help' from fathers, women still retain a larger portion of domestic work in the forms of cooking, cleaning, and assisting children with homework (Connell, 2005).

The work-life balance debate, therefore, has reinforced the public/private divide which Connell (2005) describes as spheres of profit-making and gift relations respectively. This implies that the work of women in the public is what is counted as work by the profit-making nature of it, while unpaid care is seen as a gift, or the reasonable service of women as mothers (Pateman, 2005). Since women are left holding the short end of the stick, it becomes necessary to ask questions around equality of outcomes, fairness, and true equality.

Research on work-life balance in South Africa reveals an even sorrier state where there is no real policy initiative aimed at reconciling paid work and unpaid care work. Kotze and Whitehead (2003), record that women felt there was no real commitment from employers to support the fulfilment of the dual roles of motherhood and work. Moreover, they reported work cultures that normalised working late, and attending after-hours meetings, which made it even more difficult for women to reconcile their dual roles. Presence of a 'male base of performance' meant that women's performance was measured against that of their male counterparts and there was pressure to work harder and longer hours to measure up.

Due to lack of a systematic approach to work-life balance, women are left to their own devices in arranging child and family care. This support can take the form of part-time or full-time household help, private childcare, or in some cases, grand-parents and other family members (Kotze and Whitehead, 2003). Kotze and Whitehead (2003) report that women still felt over-extended and although they had ambitions to do other things outside of work, they became confined to doing their jobs and spending time with their children.

According to Serrano (2012), there is a distinctive lack of social protection services in Africa to support care activities such as childcare. As a result, women tend to step in to provide this care and at times must give up achievement of personal objectives. As shown by Kiaye and Singh (2013), employers' lack of support to dual roles of women result in women being unable to progress with their careers and take up promotions, especially those requiring relocation.

Here, lack of support for the dual roles of women results in implicit discrimination where there is a price to pay for choosing to become a mother, either in the way of sacrificing one's career or lack of time for the mothering role (Gallup & ILO, 2017). At the time of carrying out this research, there was no study on the reconciliation of motherhood and work in Zimbabwe.

Methodology

Research Procedure

As reflected by the literature review, perspectives already exist on the interactions of motherhood and work. There is a distinct lack of research on motherhood and work in Zimbabwe. An attempt was made through this research to create a representation of motherhood for women working in the NGO sector within Zimbabwe.

Therefore, a qualitative approach was chosen to conduct the research in order to draw objective conclusions from subjective realities (Johnston, 2010). The feminist epistemology approach was used in conducting the research, this entails valuing the lived experiences of women and treating them as valuable sources of information on their lived realities (Anderson, 2019).

Semi-structured interviews were used in conducting the research. As indicated by Reinharz, (1991), semi-structured interviews allow the research to access people's experiences in their own words.

Participants

A combination of convenience and snow-ball sampling techniques were utilised in selecting research participants. Research participants had to be located within Harare for accessibility, because the research was conducted in a short timeframe. Ten women were interviewed, seven of whom were known by the researcher through work networks, and three were referred by the identified participants.

Participants were between the ages of 27 and 49 with between one and four children. All participants were in heterosexual relationships, nine being married and one in partnership with her child's father. Seven of the participants were in middle level jobs, while three were in senior management and directorate level jobs.

Research participants were afforded an opportunity to choose names under which their contributions to this research would be recorded. As such, the direct quotes herein included are referred to according to the participants' own chosen names.

Data Analysis

In order to reduce the possibility of the data becoming too rich and to remain meaningful, the researcher identified a pathway of analysis (Bryman, 2016). The pathway of analysis selected was thematic analysis, with themes selected to show the relationship between motherhood and work in the view of the question of gender equality. As suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003, cited by Bryman, 2016) analysis was conducted

by repeatedly listening back to the interviews, thereby establishing repetitions, similarities, and differences in the words of the interviewees. These patterns were then used to flesh out the identified themes.

This research cannot be used to make generalisations of the experiences of women working in the Zimbabwean NGO sector. This is because of the small research sample and the limited timeline in which the research was completed. However, findings here can be used as indications of the phenomenon under study.

Results

The main findings from the research indicated that the sampled women working in the NGO sector in Harare, Zimbabwe face challenges balancing work and motherhood. Four out of the ten women went on to suggest that in balancing work and motherhood either work, mothering, or the mother as an individual had to suffer. This confirmed exploration in literature that show that women still retain the burden of unpaid care work (UN Women, 2016).

Balancing work and motherhood

Results indicated that work in the NGO sector is particularly challenging for the study informants due to associated travel. Travel in the context of NGO work is travel to communities, conferences and meetings, and such travel can last between two days and seven days. Six of the ten informants brought up the issue of travel as a challenge, stating that they were unable to bring along their children past the age of one year. Of interest here, is the disconnect between the age of supported travel and recommended length of breastfeeding. While NGOs only support travel of children up to one year of age, World Health Organisation recommends children breastfeed up to two years or beyond (WHO, 2018).

Three of the informants went further to interrogate how the issue of unsupported travel curtailed their ability to engage competitively in their work; as informant Yeukai describes:

> One of the things I really, really hate right now is when there is travel and I can't travel with my kids, I have to leave my kids behind. So, I always find myself, sometimes having to worm my way out of certain tasks and roles because I don't want to travel. …But then when you now look at it, you want to strike a balance where you are the most senior person within the department and so certain roles naturally fall on your desk but then you can't participate in them and you can't voice that. Because then it becomes more like you are um, it's almost like insubordination like you don't want to do your work. Yeah so, I think those are some of the struggles. (Yeukai)

Nine of the ten informants indicated there is no real balance between work and mothering, rather, it is a matter of choice. That is, women must make a choice about what is important to them, at which stage, and how to prioritise. One informant shed light on a particular challenge; the mid to late twenties is the time women want to have children, and it is also the time to make the most of career opportunities. Therefore, women were left with choices that were non-choices in that in choosing to have children in their twenties there was an unacknowledged risk of sacrificing their career or sacrificing their children in favour of their career growth.

Skills in scheduling duties and balancing time for work and home life surfaced as a key mechanism of balancing work and motherhood. These are skills dependent on individual abilities of time management and compartmentalisation of work and motherhood. Workplace policies and practices provide no support to safeguard women against being viewed as "slackers" when they require time to be with their children.

One informant Precious who is in a management role explains it is difficult for the workplace to maintain their view of a woman as a hard worker once she becomes a mother and starts to split her energy between work and being a mother.

> That's what makes it difficult for women to navigate, because, and at some point, when that happens (when one has a child), priorities shift hey. And the organisation or the workplace is not sort of also trying to sort of think through what is on your plate vis a vis these additional roles. So at the end of the day, you were a high performer or high achiever or whatever and you used to work extra until midnight or whatever, then now you are not operating at optimum performance because you have had to navigate some other roles. We are not sitting there; we are just sitting there thinking your performance has come down. But has it really, or it's just that you have less time available for you to do what you used to do when you were single, before you were a mother. Because obviously that why the guys stay, the X's they work, they could do Y until tomorrow morning. But do you think I can do Y until tomorrow? Think of all the guys will put hours and hours and hours, but you will be thinking it's not ok for me to not see my children before they go to bed. (Precious)

Thus, while one can schedule, there is the challenge of measuring standards for work, whereby men and women without children can dedicate more time to work than a woman who is a mother. This automatically gives men an unfair advantage due to their perceived ability to give more time to work duties. One informant Dominica explains:

> The workplace is a very competitive place, and mothers face a lot of challenges. And um, we might not be as competitive as the guys, men have enough time outside the family to pursue education, to um improve their education. But for a mother sometimes, you are held back and therefore at the workplace it becomes very difficult to compete, you are juggling too many activities. And it becomes very, very difficult for you to be that star worker, that star mum at the same time. (Dominica)

Support systems

Nine out of ten informants stated live-in help, in the form of maids, are a major support mechanism for women to balance work and mothering. Yeukai describes, 'I think my godsend is actually the nanny who is watching the kids. Um but you know that doesn't come without its own fair of challenges' (Yeukai).

Help comes in the form of less privileged women, some of whom are not educated but have children of their own to care for. This presents a challenge of care, because while these women provide care for the educated, modern women working in NGOs, their own children are left without care. Hence, raising the question of work and motherhood reconciliation for household workers. However, the role of live-in paid help cannot be understated, as described by Precious.

> I think it's a very key support system though. Like, I think a good maid makes everything, like work you know. Because then, you know like I was saying, like there are a lot of things, that are not necessarily like emotional support for your kids but are practical and take a lot of time. (Precious)

Participants revealed other support mechanisms aside from their live-in maids, such as sisters, mothers, aunts, and mothers-in-law. This is problematic as it relegates even secondary childcare to women, and

therefore replicates patriarchal tendencies that make childbearing and rearing, and the associated unpaid work, mainly female business.

The role of fathers

When it comes to care and domestic work, the role of fathers tends to be confined to 'helping' (Connell, 205; Lupton, 2001). This leaves men able to pursue their own lives without the pressures of the family curbing their pursuit of either career or personal pleasure goals.

Two out of the ten research informants considered themselves 'lucky' to have supportive partners who, in a way, have taken over childcare to allow their female counterparts to pursue their careers without worrying about childcare. The remaining eight informants reported that their partners were supportive and 'helped', although the desire to help did not come naturally, but instead, had to be continually negotiated.

Informant Yeukai described that as her children are growing older, there is a tendency in her partner to 'slacken'. Another informant,[19] S.M the Development Worker, reported that she must continually teach her husband about the importance of helping with childcare:

> I feel we need I don't know. My husband steps in, actually not fully, yes yes yes. Many of times its forcefully. Only when I am away you get to hear the good stories, "oh we have gone on a date", "he did not go out", "he has stayed with X". I am always impressed. But if I am there, I need to come to work, and need him to stay at home with our child and not necessarily have the maid there, it always becomes an issue. I feel like men don't necessarily jump onto the parenting wagon. (S.M the Development Worker)

While partners were reported to be willing to help, there were certain tasks that men were unwilling to do. Most of these tasks centred around what could be viewed as 'traditional female roles', such as toilet training and bathroom breaks for toddlers, which one informant Sally reported that her partner will not do. The seemingly small tasks are routine and there is a constant need for them to be done, so there is a sense of pressure and obligation to fulfil.

Women's ability to pursue social lives outside of motherhood is challenged by the need for constant care of children. This is more prominent for women with smaller children. While men as fathers can easily detangle themselves from care roles to do other things women find it more difficult. One informant Sydney explains:

> I would probably have to, to put in a lot more like, to compose my case, right; like I am a lawyer, and just be like you know, there is a. Because to someone it will be like ah, but then like why would you? But then the same person can easily say "you know what, Saturday I am not here, I'm going for golf." And it's not a permission thing, it's not a… they are just going. But I don't have the same luxury of saying "you know what I am going", I don't know, even to just sit in the grass somewhere and just stare at the sun and think about myself. Because then the other person is thinking "so what's going to happen with the baby?" (Sydney)

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[19] 'S.M the Development Worker' was a pseudonym one of the research participants chose to have their contributions recorded under.

While fatherhood affords men a measure of freedom to engage at their own pace and they sometimes need to be cajoled into doing things, women in this study are a consistent supply of emotional and physical labour in the role of parenting.

Three of the research participants referred to men's ability to negotiate their parental roles. One participant Debra referred to this as outsourcing fatherhood roles, this includes hiring a driver for school runs and hiring an after-school tutor to support homework. Precious went further to describe the socialisation of her husband as a man who views his role as that of material provision, while care could be provided by the woman as a mother.

Discussion

Douglas and Michaels (2006) aptly describe the pressure contemporary working mothers face, to always be emotionally available in the home and achievement-driven in the workplace. Research informants confirmed that they feel pulled in different directions, leaving women short-changed. It left women feeling like they either had to sacrifice their motherhood for their career, their career for their motherhood, or themselves to have both. Consequently, motherhood was viewed as conflicting with work.

Lack of work policies that speak to the reconciliation of motherhood and work further exacerbated the situation for women who had to come up with their own mechanisms to handle work and motherhood. Scheduling and time management was proffered as the tool deployed in managing motherhood and work. Questions arise however of the efficacy of this methodology, how practical is it for one to separate their lives (i.e. motherhood and work) by time, and physical presence or absence at the office? In the absence of policy approaches to the reconciliation of motherhood and work, women are left with a myriad of methods that award them a semblance of control for which they are solely responsible.

Kotze and Whitehead (2003) discuss the arrangements women have in place to help manage the demands of motherhood and work, one of these arrangements is household help. This was reaffirmed in this research where women referred to good household help as key to achieving the balance of work and motherhood. A good maid was cited as pivotal for woman's achievement of balance; one informant referred to her maids as 'household assistants'.

Household help as a solution to work-life balance is problematic when viewed from a gender equality perspective. This is due to the exploitation of poorer women for the benefit of more educated privileged women in that conditions of work are likely to include long hours, low pay, and limited time with one's own family. Household help as a solution to the reconciliation of motherhood and work creates an equality mirage that allows the latter group of more privileged women to access "equal opportunities" in the mainstream, and the former group access to "employment". According to Esplen (2009) home-based work (in this case household help) is largely unregulated, often low paid, and there is no access to sick or maternity leave. In this view while poor women can access "work" the conditions of work are questionable when placed alongside the ideals of equity and equality.

For the gender equality outcomes to be meaningful, private arrangements of care, such as household help, need to be interrogated and linked to public life. It is critical to show how the private arrangements of care in the household affect the paid caregivers as well as the women paying for this labour. In this way, it becomes clear what inequalities are perpetuated by these arrangements. Esplen (2009) discusses the invisibility of domestic work and the abuses that can exist within this invisibility. Research on global care chains explores displacement and missed familial care opportunities for women that are paid to provide care (Orozco, 2009). All this research provides a backdrop to the key issue of gender equality and the

exercise of equity, which also begs the question around the reinforcement of inequality within mechanisms for equality as care is relegated to poor women with limited access to education and 'prestigious career' paths.

Additionally, private arrangements of care as a mechanism for the reconciliation of motherhood and work, are problematic as they reinforce the public/private divide. This is because issues of care remained enmeshed in womanhood, and the private sphere of care arrangements are treated as gift relationships (Connell, 2005) that remain unacknowledged in the public. Private arrangements of care also make it possible for governments to escape the responsibility to create mechanisms that can support real equality, such as affordable care services (Esplen, 2009).

While maids are pivotal, husbands were revealed by research to be inconsistent sources of support for women in the reconciliation of motherhood and work. Connell (2005) discusses 'the really good husband', this can be described as the rare husband who "helps" with household and domestic tasks. Kabeer (2007) confirms that men, even in communities that believe in equality, only "help" with household work, meaning women retain longer working hours when paid and unpaid work is combined. In most of these communities, the business of care and associated ancillary roles such as cooking and cleaning is firmly carried out by women. The findings of this research confirm the arguments above, showing that in the research sample, men maintained a minimal share of the burden of care work. There is need for the research participants to remind, teach, and continually negotiate male participation in household work.

Furthermore, the research revealed a traditional mode of maleness whereby men viewed their contributions to be more linked with material provision for the family rather than emotional investment in care. As such men were willing to outsource their caring roles by paying for services that enabled them to retain their autonomy and minimize the demands on their time. This leaves the woman with the burden of providing emotional labour, limiting her pursuit of social pleasures. Thereby confirming the assertion that 'many of the fathers were continuing with their recreational pursuits…while the women found they had barely enough time to deal with childcare and housework' (Lupton, 2000: 59).

These arrangements are driven by social norms that defer provision to the men, care to the women, and place high demands of physical and emotional labour on women. Necessitating interventions that look at social norms that can challenge underlying social arrangements. Such arrangements create false equality where women have access to work opportunities but retain a larger burden of care and limited access to social life and recreation.

The preamble of CEDAW states that '… the role of women in procreation should not be a basis of discrimination…' (CEDAW, 1981: 2) This statement demonstrates that there is an awareness of challenges women face with the intersection of her biological role and the pursuit of own her life goals. The definition of discrimination provided in the Constitution of Zimbabwe was applied in this research and explored in the context above. This definition is progressive due to its enunciation of discrimination as conditions that subject one to restrictions that other people are exempt from, or where one is not afforded advantages others have (Zimbabwe Constitution, 2013). The lack of provisions to support motherhood and work leave women potentially competing for jobs with men who do not have the burden of care associated with motherhood. Furthermore, women can be left with little to no room for forming social relationships and access to leisure where their male partners can easily navigate the same needs.

Working long hours and travelling are incongruent with motherhood, so men excel in these areas and affirm commitment to their jobs. This is due to the work environment being structured around what Kiaye and

Singh (2013) refer to as the male base of performance in which excellent workers are those who work longer hours and are readily available for all assigned tasks. The performance model is completely ignorant of the social roles that women are burdened with. Similarly, assertions by Leon (2009) state that the '…equal opportunities at work approach…' is not enough to bring about a solution to the complex issue of gender equality; this suggests that gender blindness or gender neutrality will continue to leave in place solutions that create false equivalences (Connell 2005).

This research further confirms arguments made by Connell (2005) that the distinct challenge for gender equality remains to find an appropriate response for the reconciliation of motherhood and women's participation in public life. The research revealed that provisions to support the reconciliation of motherhood and work in the NGO sector in Zimbabwe mainly centre on maternity leave, breastfeeding and travel with infants in the first year of life. Such provisions only look at the unescapable biological functions associated with childbirth. There is no further insight into care arrangements such as school runs, cooking, cleaning and intangible emotional labour associated with motherhood.

Conclusion

While the results discussed here cannot be utilised to make generalised statements on discrimination against women, they point to the possibility of innate discrimination that results from a lack of deliberate efforts in awarding women opportunities and infrastructure to balance motherhood and work. Furthermore, these results reveal that the presence of women in the workplace is supported by the hiring of less privileged women to support care work. These are private arrangements women tend to make in order to manage the demands of work and home life; however, the question remains, where is the discussion of these private arrangements and negotiations within the gender equality discourse?

The research showed that women informants face substantive challenges at the intersections of motherhood and work. Lack of deliberate actions and provisions to help women balance motherhood and work becomes problematic when viewed in the context of gender equality. Women, as confirmed by this research, retain a large burden of unpaid care work, leaving them with little time to pursue leisure and rest, and leading many to forfeit opportunities in the workplace.

This research shows that while the project of equality has allowed some women to access opportunities in the public domain, arrangements made in the private domain have remained largely unchallenged. Thereby, women must contend with occupying both spaces as though these spaces are physically separate rather than fluid, feeding into and affecting each other.

Recommendations

This research revealed that women are largely dependent on private arrangements to support the reconciliation of motherhood and work in Zimbabwe. Household help was reported as a key support system for working women. This suggests that further research is critical, to investigate the connections between women working as maids and formally employed women, in order to clarify whether these arrangements result in equality for all women and whether "equality" is or should be the same thing for all women regardless of education levels and/or class.

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About the author:

Runyararo Mutariswa is self-identifying feminist who works in the Non-Governmental Organisation sector in Zimbabwe. She is currently employed as a Project Officer on a Sexual Gender Based Violence Project under the Spotlight Initiative.

Runyararo is passionate about equity and social justice, and takes her involvement with communities as an opportunity to influence shifts in gender dynamics. Being a mother to a one daughter, Runyararo takes every opportunity to discuss and push back against patriarchal tendencies and toxic masculinities. In her spare time, she writes poetry mostly on gender issues, particularly violence against women.

Runyararo holds a BA with Education degree from Africa University (2010) and a MA Gender, Globalisation and Human Rights from National University of Ireland Galway (2019).

Life after the Carer's Allowance: what do we know about the post-caregiving transition in Ireland?

Celia Sheridan

M.A. Gender, Globalisation, and Rights
National University of Ireland, Galway

Abstract There is much discourse around carers but less so around the post-caregiving transition and how carers navigate the pathway from carer to former carer. This article stems from a wider research project, which explored the role of the Carer's Allowance in Ireland and the economic independence of carers in receipt of the Allowance. However, the focus of this article is on the post-caregiving transition, which remains an under-researched area of caring, particularly the implications for recipients of the Carer's Allowance.

The article contextualises the Carer's Allowance policy and discusses some of the findings from the qualitative research noted above. It identifies a number of gaps, which act to constrain carers' ability to fully participate in the workforce, limiting them to part-time precarious employment, or to disengage entirely from the workforce. It also means that carers and former carers have differential access to state pensions due to interrupted employment during their life course. These limitations restrict former carers in their ability to reconstruct life after caring, and ultimately determines the outcomes of the post-caregiving transition.

Keywords: Carer's Allowance, Post-caring Transition, Carers, Former Carers, Financial Security

Introduction

There is extensive research and discourse (e.g. Lynch & Lyons, 2008; Daly, 1998; Lynch & McLaughlin, 1995), around carers in general but less so on the experience of those in receipt of the Carer's Allowance (CA) in Ireland and even less attention has been given to the post-caregiving transition (PCT). This is the period when carers transition to life after caring, which encompasses emotional and financial difficulties. While PCT is a relatively new concept, it is nevertheless a neglected research topic, resulting in a paucity of literature on this important aspect of caring. Thus, this article is an important contribution to the wider academic literature as it highlights a research gap and it also provides a greater understanding of the challenges that former carers face in transitioning from the Allowance after their caring role ceases.

The CA is a gendered issue as the majority of recipients are women and this has been the case since its introduction in 1990. The most recent figures show that there were 79,914 recipients of the Allowance in 2018, with 61,107 female and 18,807 male recipients (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection [DEASP], 2019a). Moreover, the majority of these are within the working age group of 25-64 and indeed women outnumber men by almost four times as recipients of CA in this age group. As carers have to partially or wholly disengage from the workforce to be eligible for the CA, this has implications for the long-term financial security of carers (primarily women) during their life course. Many are unable to maintain a link to the workforce whilst caring and this has an impact on their ability to re-enter the workforce when their caring role ceases. This also has implications for their social insurance contributions and access to the state pension, with many experiencing unequal access to the State Pension (Contributory) (SPC). Therefore, it is important to explore how the CA policy impacts on the long-term financial security of recipients/former recipients of the Allowance.

This article will draw on qualitative primary data collected as part of a wider research study carried out by the author for a Master's Dissertation on *Carers and Economic Independence: Role of Carer's Allowance Policy in Ireland* (2019). This data was gathered from five key informants and these were selected for their work in the area of advocacy for carers and women, and for their work on social justice. For the purposes of this article, carers are specifically those who are in receipt of the CA in Ireland and former carers are those who are no longer entitled to the payment due to the cessation of their caring role.

In order to identify specific challenges that former carers might face and prior to exploring PCT in more detail, this article will first contextualise the CA. It will draw attention to the eligibility criteria of the policy and examine how these can impact on the long-term financial security of recipients/former recipients of the Allowance. The methodology will describe the research methods undertaken and the epistemological position of the author. Before the article's concluding remarks, the findings and discussion section will identify five key themes from the research, namely: cessation of care, support for former carers, returning to work, the complexities of the pension system and means-testing.

Contextualising the Carer's Allowance

Eligibility criteria

To qualify for the CA, a person has to satisfy a means-test and not be employed (or study) outside the home for more than 18.5 hours per week (increased from 15 hours in January 2020). While the disregards for the Allowance are generous when compared to other social welfare payments, it takes into consideration the household income and not the income of the individual person (the carer). This aspect of the policy has been widely criticised, and this will be discussed in the *Findings and discussion* section.

A further qualifying condition of the CA is that a person must be in a position to provide full-time care and attention, the definition of which is contentious as there is little clarity on what constitutes *full-time* in the Operational Guidelines: Carer's Allowance (DEASP, 2020). This raises questions about the actual number of hours a carer works within the home (reducing their capacity to participate in paid employment), with some arguing that the payment is exploitative as it does not meet the minimum wage (e.g. Penrose, 2018) and a comparison to the minimum wage is illustrated in the next section.

Economic security or economic exploitation?

As the CA guidelines do not stipulate the number of hours a carer has to provide care, the author assumes that a carer must provide at least 35 hours *full time care and attention* per week to qualify for the CA (this is in line with the CA in the UK). The minimum wage in Ireland is currently €10.10[20]. Therefore, a carer (aged under 66) caring for one person, and on the maximum weekly payment of €219.00 per week, earns approximately €6.25 per hour. This is €3.85 less than the minimum wage. However, a number of studies show that carers are providing care far more than 35 hours per week, for example, in a study carried out by O'Sullivan (2008: 3) ninety per cent of the respondents 'were providing at least 40 hours of care per week, with the majority of these providing more than 59 hours per week'. Lafferty et al., (2016: 45) conducted a study specifically on those in receipt of the CA and found over seventy-two per cent of respondents were providing care 'for more than 100 hours per week'.

As might be expected, the calculation above shows that the CA weekly payment does not meet the minimum wage requirements; however, as the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA) (1998: vi) points out, one of the objectives of the CA is 'to provide income support to full-time carers on low incomes' and is not a payment for caring. Arguably, the CA is a recognition of the work carers do; however, the weekly payment continues to receive criticism as being demonstrable of the 'lack of value attached to care work in the home…and gives little financial comfort to carers' (Lynch & Lyons, 2008: 176), making it difficult for carers to invest in their financial future (such as contributing to a private pension). While a carer is entitled to receive Child Benefit (if applicable), there may be other social welfare payments they are entitled to if they meet specific criteria; however, they are not entitled to receive Jobseeker's Allowance/Benefit.

Recent improvements to the CA policy

Despite the above criticisms, there are some aspects of the policy that can be lauded. Over the last number of years there have been some important improvements to the CA. For example, the recent announcement that the number of hours a carer can work outside the home increased from 15 to 18.5 hours in January 2020[21] and the period that the CA is paid following cessation of the caring role increased from six to twelve weeks a number of years ago. While the government recognises the economic uncertainty that carers can experience after their caring role ceases by continuing to pay the CA for 12 weeks, it continues to receive criticism for the lack of practical support available to former carers. After the 12-week period, carers will either transition to another social welfare payment and/or (re)enter the labour market after a period of absence. However, as is discussed below this transitory period can be very difficult, particularly for long term carers who may have little or no participation in the labour market during their life course due to their caring responsibilities.

PCT conceptual frameworks

Larkin (2009), one of the earlier and influential writers on PCT, recognised a gap in the literature and carried out a qualitative study with thirty-seven former carers in the UK. While it is not clear if any of the participants were in receipt of the CA in the UK, her study provides a useful framework for understanding

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[20] See -
https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/employment_rights_and_conditions/pay_and_employment/pay_inc_min_wage.html

[21] See - https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2f07a3-budget-2020/

the transition from carer to former carer. Larkin (2009: 1031) identified three phases of PCT: 'post-caring void', 'closing down the caring time', and the final phase, 'constructing life post-caring'. This led her to coin a new concept, the *post-care trajectory* which conceptualises post care as a gradual transition.

Larkin's framework has been criticised by McCarron et al. (2011: 17) for offering an optimistic view of how former carers experience the transition process; they are particularly critical of the assumption that all carers 'will eventually recover from post-caring'. Their study, which also offers a similar three phase transition, found that for some former carers the transition to a new post care world (the moving on phase) can be difficult as often they 'become stuck' between the first two phases (McCarron et al., 2011: 8). These first two phases involve a deep sense of loss and anger, some of this anger is directed at the State for its failure to provide services to 'enable former carers cope with the challenges' of transitioning (McCarron et al., 2011: 32). Many participants in the study felt they needed to be reintegrated into society after cessation of their caring role.

While Larkin's post-care trajectory may be somewhat optimistic, it nevertheless provides a framework for other studies, such as Dempsey et al., (2018) and Kelleher and O'Riordan (2017), both of which include former carers in Ireland. For example, Dempsey et al., (2018: 18) found that carers were 'forced to reinvent' themselves after their caring role ceases, particularly after the death of the person they cared for. The study recommends assistance is given to carers to facilitate their engagement in the process of 'constructing life post-caring…while still caring' and this involves 'undergoing education and training to develop skills' (Dempsey et al., 2018: 23). The government has recognised this need, and this is examined in more detail later.

The study by Kelleher and O'Riordan (2017) recognises the implications of PCT on those in receipt of the CA. They noted, for example, that 'the relatively abrupt ending of the Carer's Allowance in a very short period at the end of the caring role did not provide family carers with adequate time to think about how to financially support themselves' (Kelleher & O'Riordan, 2017: 32). Their study also found that 'former family carers…received little policy attention' (Kelleher & O'Riordan, 2017: 16) until they were recognised and included in the National Carer's Strategy (NCS).

National Carer's Strategy

In the NCS, the Department of Health (DoH) (2012: 2) commits the government to recognising and respecting carers as 'key care partners' whereby they 'will be empowered to participate as fully as possible in economic and social life'. However, it has received some criticism, for example Dukelow and Considine (2017: 331) criticise it for not committing 'any extra resources' to support carers. Social Justice Ireland (SJI) (2019: 1) is also critical of the government's 'unwillingness… to allocate sufficient resources to supporting' the care sector. However, perhaps in anticipation of such criticism, the DoH has identified the availability of financial resources as a key challenge to the commitments made in the strategy (DoH, 2012). This is against the backdrop of 'significant demographic changes to the Irish population structure' which 'will have major implications for publicly provided supports and services' (DoH, 2012: 4). Arguably, this lack of services has the potential to increase informal caring within the home, with a subsequent rise in the number of people in receipt of the CA, and it is likely that women will continue to represent the majority of recipients. Moreover, according to Lynch and Lyons (2008: 177) the 'absence of adequate public service supports for carers' negatively impacts 'on women financially'. However, despite the challenges noted above, in their assessment of the progress of the objectives contained within the strategy, Family Carers Ireland (FCI) (2017: 2) (a registered charity providing services and supports to family carers) noted 'an overall improvement in the progress reported for 2017'.

The strategy acknowledges that the 'transition to life after caring…can be difficult for some carers' and the expectation is that the implementation of the strategy 'will assist' in the 'transition process' (DoH, 2012: 6). Thus objective 4.2 of the strategy is to 'enable carers to remain in touch with the labour market to the greatest extent possible' (DoH, 2012: 25), and as the Fourth Progress Report (DoH, 2017: 43) indicates, the main labour market activation measure is to advise 'working age carers…that Intreo [Public Employment Service] case officers are available to support carers in developing a personal progression plan following the end of their full-time caring role'. However, as the findings will show these supports have received criticism.

The economic/instrumental approach to PCT adopted by the DoH is very much focused on working age carers with little or no attention given to support services for carers/former carers who are post-retirement age. Older former carers rely heavily on the state pension, but as will be discussed later, the complexities around eligibility mean that carers often face differential access to the SPC.

Methodology

This article presents original research, namely a critical policy analysis based on qualitative interviews, with five key themes identified. The qualitative semi-structured interviews were carried out between June and July 2019 with five key informants in Ireland, which as noted was part of a wider research project, and this article will draw on some of the data collected from those interviews. The key informants (listed below) were selected for their work in the area of advocacy for carers, women and older people, and for their work on social justice and social policy.

Name of key informant (used throughout this article)	Role in organisation	Name of organisation	Date Interviewed
NWCI	Officer	National Women's Council of Ireland	4 June 2019
Murphy	Research and Policy Analyst	Social Justice Ireland	18 June 2019
Hughes	Policy and Research Officer	Care Alliance Ireland	18 June 2019
Scully	Senior Information Officer	Worked in a national ageing organisation for 23 years	18 June 2019
Kane	Carer Supports Manager	Family Carers Ireland	15 July 2019

The data collected was analysed using a thematic analysis approach, and it was during the process of familiarisation with the data (and indeed during the interviews) that PCT started to emerge as an unanticipated theme of the overall research project (Nowell et al., 2017). The research drew on a socialist feminist framework and a life-course perspective to analyse and interpret the data. Socialist feminism, as Blackmore and Lauder (2005: 99) contend, seeks to 'identify the gendered silences and gaps in policy texts' and aims to 'unpack the…assumptions underpinning policy and consider the effects of policies on marginalized groups'. It is the author's argument that the underpinning assumption of the CA policy is that women are the primary caregivers, which serves to reinforce the already entrenched gender norms in Irish society, and this is consistent with the literature (Duvvury et al., 2012). By assuming that caring is a female role, the policy influences the social construction and maintenance of the gendered division of labour into productive and reproductive work. This partially explains why women 'take care of their sick relatives and

ageing parents' (Tong, 2016: 118) and ultimately leads to poorer economic outcomes for carers and former carers.

Epistemological position

At the time of carrying out the original piece of research, I was a recipient of the CA, and thus was aware of researcher positionality and the need for transparency, awareness and scrutiny throughout the process (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009; Charmaz, 2006). The epistemological position that underpinned the research was Feminist Standpoint theory, which 'tries to construct knowledge from the perspective of women's lives' (Harding, 1991: vii). As Haraway (2004: 92) contends, rather than making universal 'claims on people's lives' Feminist Standpoint theory recognises 'epistemologies of location…of situating'. Haraway (2004: 86) referred to this as 'situated knowledge'. Thus, instead of constructing the lived experience of carers and former carers from the 'outside', my situated knowledge of being a carer allowed for a more meaningful and engaging exploration of the CA. Indeed, it was this knowledge of the topic that I was able to ask more probing questions during the qualitative interviews and as Srivastava and Hopwood (2009: 77) argue 'themes…do not emerge on their own' but 'are driven by what the inquirer wants to know' and it was this inquisitiveness that PCT started to emerge as an unexpected theme, which necessitated a revision of the research aims and objectives of the wider research project. Thus, my research was informed by the experience, challenges and insights as it appeared from my standpoint.

Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings from the key informant interviews (KII) and identifies five main themes: cessation of care, support for former carers, returning to work, the complexities of the pension system, and means-testing.

Cessation of care - transitioning from carer to former carer

As already noted, Larkin (2009: 1026) identified three phases of the post caregiving transition, two of which have financial implications for the carer, namely, 'closing down the caring time' and 'constructing life post-caring'. The 'closing down' period occurs the 'first few months of post-caring life' (Larkin, 2009: 1033) where the carer has to deal with financial matters, and this includes loss of the CA. Thus, the cessation of care involves challenges for carers, both emotionally and financially, and due to the demands of caring, many may have 'not considered' (Kane, KII) the future beyond their caring role. Consequently, they are not necessarily fully prepared for the transition, which only serves to highlight the precarity of their situation as it can bring economic insecurity and uncertainty. Indeed, some carers may not be aware of their vulnerability to poor economic outcomes when their caring role ceases or in later life (for example, pension entitlements). As one interviewee stated, PCT can have a 'huge impact [and] the economic insecurity of the carer is obvious' (Hughes, KII). Indeed, the research by McCarron et al., (2011: 8) cites financial difficulties as a barrier to the transitional process (particularly to the final phase) and they associate these difficulties with 'loss of carer allowances' and problems around returning to the workforce.

While the emotional aspect of PCT is acknowledged, Larkin (2009: 1027) found that many former carers lamented lost employment opportunities, which negatively impacted on their 'financial situations'. Thus, constructing or reinventing life after caring can be a difficult phase of PCT, and Larkin (2009, p. 1035) found that 'paid employment' plays a key role in this phase. This re-emphasises the importance of maintaining a link to the labour market while caring. One key informant called for more 'flexible arrangements…to maintain that link with the workforce so that [carers] are not completely breaking away from it' (NWCI, KII), making the transitionary period less problematic. While Murphy (2007: 112) argues

that the policy recognises the 'long-term poverty trap associated with caring' by allowing carers 'to maintain attachment to the labour market' arguably, the policy does not necessarily recognise the limited options available to carers in a precarious labour market, where part-time work tends to be insecure, temporary and non-pensionable (Duvvury et al., 2012). At the time of the research, there were no statistics available from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) on the number of carers working part-time. However, the studies carried out by O'Sullivan (2008) and Lafferty et al. (2016) indicate that only a small percentage of carers engage in paid work outside the home. The reality is that many are unable to avail of the 18.5 hours because of the demanding nature of their caring role. Others may make the choice (perhaps reluctantly) not to be employed outside the home to avoid the 'triple burden of childcare, adult care and paid employment' (Murphy, 2007: 113). Further still, any income carers receive from paid employment is assessed as means, and I contend that this may discourage some from participating in the labour market.

After the 12-week period during which the CA continues to be paid, carers either transition to another social welfare payment (such as the Jobseeker's Allowance or the state pension) or (re)enter the labour market. As noted, while both the CA policy and the NCS recognise that PCT is an issue for carers, neither adequately reflect the reality that many carers experience in transitioning from the CA. As a key informant noted, some carers may have little or no work history due to the number of years spent caring, thus re/entering the labour market (particularly in later life), can be 'very difficult' (Kane, KII) and this is discussed later. While the author has been unable to find an official breakdown of the average number of years a person is in receipt of the CA, the *Review of the Carer's Allowance* (DSCFA, 1998) states that the average is three years, however this is disputed by the literature, and was also disputed by key informants for this study. For example, the study carried out by Lafferty et al. (2016: 12) indicates that the respondents to the survey 'had been caring for an average of 15 years', all of which were in receipt of the CA. In KIIs conducted for the current study, a similar duration of caring was estimated (Hughes, KII). A study by Dempsey et al. (2018: 25) indicates that the 'years spent caring ranged from 0 – 19 years', although it does not specify if the participants were in receipt of the CA. Scully (KII) summarised the reality of PCT for many carers:

> 'There's an awful lot of psychological issues post caring because there is a lot of anger, anger because your life is being put on hold, there's anger because you may never have gotten the support you needed while caring, you may have felt very isolated while you were caring. There's bereavement because you've lost the carer relationship with somebody. So, there are huge issues facing people who stop caring'. (Scully, KII)

Support for former carers

One of the actions of the *Pathways to Work 2016-2020* (DEASP, 2016: 44) is to 'consider options to allow recipients of Carer's Allowance to access activation services as they cease their caring role'. This is done through Intreo Centres, an employment service run by the DEASP. Intreo (DEASP, 2019b) 'offers practical, tailored employment services and supports for jobseekers and employers alike', and services include developing Personal Progression Plans. However, this service is not without criticism. As Murphy argued, based on their research and advocacy experience with Social Justice Ireland, the service is primarily 'designed for people who have lost jobs [and] are potentially a lot closer to the labour market than somebody who has finished a caring role' (Murphy, KII). Moreover, a basic search on the Intreo webpage makes no mention of former carers who may be looking to return to the labour market. Furthermore, the Citizen's Information Board (CIB) (2018: 3) highlights a number of issues with the service, for example, 'difficulties making contact with local Intreo offices and insufficient information around safety net payments'. The report further highlights that the 'transition from welfare to work continues to be challenging for many

people' (CIB, 2018: 3). Arguably, such a transition would be significantly more challenging for those carers who have little or no work history, or educational qualifications. These shortcomings highlighted by CIB are recognised and reflected by the government in *Pathways to Work 2016-2020* (DEASP, 2016: 16), noting 'the quality of engagement between individual case officers and clients…is not as effective, or as consistent, as it could be'. It is these Case Officers[22] who are responsible for developing the Personal Progressive Plans noted above.

Furthermore, the NCS (DoH, 2012: 25) also encourages carers and former carers to avail of 'opportunities to reskill and upskill' through programmes delivered by training centres and colleges. For example, in 2018 the Dormant Accounts Fund Action Plan initiative allocated funding to organisations to run structured training for delivery in 2019/20. However, while FCI (2017: 25) draws attention to the 15 hours per week rule as one of the 'greatest barriers' to carers engaging with these training programmes, it remains to be seen if the increase to 18.5 hours will facilitate increased participation. Non-participation in these courses can negatively impact on carers' ability to prepare for life after caring. Furthermore, the lack of practical support, such as home help and respite care, were identified as barriers to carers participating in activities outside the home. Moreover, the study by Dempsey et al., (2018: 8) highlights the 'difficulty and effort attributed to leaving the home', restricting the carer to choose activities outside the home that are 'worthwhile to entice them to go'. Moreover, as Key Informant Scully argues, the full-time care and attention criteria means that carers have to be 'in the house most of the time', which puts enormous 'strain…psychologically and physically' on them. This has implications for the health and wellbeing of carers, and while it is beyond the scope of this article to explore these implications, the studies cited provide some details.

Returning to work – "double whammy"

While the government's recognition of the financial impact of PCT is demonstrated by the fact that the carer continues to receive the CA for 12 weeks after care ceases, the transitionary period is more complex than recognised by the policy and the NCS. These policies make the assumption that carers will be able to find part-time employment while caring and also that the carer will wish to return to work after caring ceases (DSCFA, 1998). However, as the majority of carers are women, many will experience a 'double whammy' in their efforts to return to work. For example, Ní Léime and Street (2017: 477-478) point out that 'the intersection of sexism and ageism means that women are often regarded as 'older' earlier than men…and this may adversely affect their later life employment prospects'. This issue arose frequently in interviews. As Key Informant Hughes pointed out:

> 'If someone who cared maybe for 15 years, and all of a sudden their caring role ends but they have been out of the workforce for 15 years and they are 60 so they are automatically less employable…that is how it is for a lot of carers'. (Hughes, KII)

Moreover, it is likely that many carers will have 'to retrain in order to get back into the workforce' (Scully, KII) as often the only job opportunities open to them are caring roles. Indeed, many former carers do in fact 'often go into care work' because of the skills 'they developed as a family carer' (Hughes, KII). However, this brings its own difficulties due to the physicality of caring with many carers already physically (and emotionally) exhausted and may not be capable of returning to the workforce, or at least not capable of another physically demanding role (O'Sullivan, 2008). Furthermore, in order to return to the workforce (either through desire or necessity), carers may be "pushed" into care work despite the fact that they may

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[22] The role of case officers is outlined in detail here: http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Intreo---Frequently-Asked-Questions.aspx#q9

have 'had completely different expectations of themselves and would like to try something completely different' (Murphy, KII).

As most carers are women, and as women are at a higher risk of poverty in later life, they 'may be increasingly obliged to work past retirement age in order to secure an adequate income in old age' (Ní Léime and Ogg, 2019: 2). This means extending their working lives by (re)entering the labour market after their caring role ceases and delay their retirement in order to have better economic outcomes. However, even on retirement, the complexities of the pension system mean that many carers and former carers may not be entitled to a full state pension and this is discussed below.

Complexities of the pension system for carers

It is well documented (Ní Léime & Street, 2017; Duvvury et al., 2012) that women experience unequal access to pensions, and this is primarily due to the differentiated life-course of men and women, with the latter experiencing interrupted employment patterns due to their caring role. As key informants highlighted, the pension system in Ireland is complex for carers; they identified the lack of social insurance contributions for the SPC and the lack of a life course perspective as major gaps in the policy. For example:

> 'In terms of a person who is a long term carer…you still have to have 10 years paid contributions in order to qualify…for a contributory state pension so there may be many carers who have a child who grows into an adult who is going to require care. It doesn't take into account the different life experiences…for carers'. (NWCI, KII)

As Connolly (2015: 24) reminds us, the SPC is the 'most important source of income among older people in Ireland', keeping many of them 'out of poverty'. In order to qualify for the basic SPC a person must have a minimum of 520 <u>paid</u> social insurance contributions (i.e. 10 years of contributions) paid through employment. Carers may be awarded credited contributions for the number of years caring; however, if there is 'a gap of two years in the claimant's insurance record, credits are not valid until at least 26 PRSI contributions have been paid' (DEASP, 2015: 13), this means a person must work for a further 26 weeks before qualifying for credits. For example, if a carer left the workforce to take on caring responsibilities but was not eligible for the CA until after two years, they will not qualify for credits. In this instance, they 'may benefit from the Homemaker's Scheme' where 'the years spent caring may be disregarded' (DEASP, 2015: 13) when calculating their entitlement to the SPC. Furthermore, if carers do not qualify for the SPC, they may be entitled to the State Pension (Non-Contributory) (SPNC); however, like the CA, this is means-tested. Thus, carers could be subjected to means-testing throughout much of their adult life course to maintain a degree of financial security.

Means-testing – a question of citizenship

Interviewees were critical of the means-tested nature of the CA policy, which is described as 'very problematic' (NWCI, KII) and negates any economic independence that the CA might bestow on carers as 'they are not entitled to their own payment independently' (NWCI, KII). Furthermore, this non-individualisation of social welfare payments is heavily criticised in the literature and the consequences of assessing the income of a carer's spouse, partner or cohabitant means that they are 'financially dependent upon the resources of husbands, lovers' (Yeates, 1997: 145), or in the case of male carers, dependent upon their wives/partners. In many cases, the price of caring can often mean economic and social welfare dependency throughout a carer's life course (Coakley, 1997), with long-term carers (and indeed former carers) particularly vulnerable to dependency and to negative economic outcomes.

Many commentators argue that women (primarily) 'are not treated as individuals' within the Irish welfare system, and that this denies them 'their full citizenship rights' (Byrne and Leonard, 1997: 141). Indeed, Esping-Andersen (1990: 48) makes the same point and posits that means-tested benefits 'do not properly extend citizen rights' unlike benefits with their 'roots in the insurance tradition' - the CA is not rooted in this tradition. Carers can experience this 'marginal version of citizenship' (Carney, 2015: 33) through their life course, for example: (1) as recipients of the Allowance; (2) transitioning from the Allowance to another means-tested social welfare payment (if unable to return to the workforce); and as already noted, (3) lack of access to full pension entitlements (due to interrupted social insurance records).

The means-test assumes that household income is equally distributed within the household and does not recognise the heterogeneity or the complexities of caring. For example, the point was raised during the qualitative interviews that there may be instances where there are relationship breakdowns because of the caring situation, thus jeopardising household income distribution. However, by taking the household income into consideration for the means test, the policy assumes a harmonious household where sharing of resources occurs but as Hughes (KII) highlights 'there is no such thing as a typical situation'.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to highlight a research gap on the transition to life after caring for recipients of the CA in Ireland. A relatively new concept, Larkin's framework on PCT outlined three phases of the transition and this article drew attention to the financial difficulties that many carers were likely to experience as a result of the cessation of the Allowance. These financial difficulties highlighted the precariousness of PCT and documented the barriers that many former carers face when re-constructing life after their caring role ceases. The options available to carers were explored and primarily consisted of (re)entering the labour market, transitioning to the Jobseeker's Allowance or, for older carers, transitioning to the state pension.

However, a number of gaps in the CA policy were identified and the complexities of the pension system was exposed as particularly problematic for carers. The lack of social insurance contributions means many carers and former carers are likely to experience differential access to the state pension, resulting in negative economic outcomes. Furthermore, the lack of practical support (such as home help) means many carers are unable to engage with work or study outside of the home while caring, which would be beneficial to them in reconstructing life after care.

The paucity of literature on PCT offers researchers an opportunity for further research in a number of areas. Firstly, due to the criticism of the Intreo service identified in this research, an exploration into the level of support this service provides to former carers in supporting them to (re)engage with the labour market would better inform practice. For example, develop specific market activation measures for former carers to support them during PCT. Secondly, further research is needed to extend our understanding of the economic outcomes of former carers over their life course, and it is this author's opinion that this neglected area would benefit from a longitudinal research study.

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About the author:

Celia Sheridan graduated with an MA in Gender, Globalisation and Rights in 2019 and is currently undertaking a PhD programme with the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology at NUIG. Describing herself as a feminist, she has a strong interest in gender and her PhD research is an investigation of the gendered exclusion from social relations in later life and the implications of major life events. This is part of the GENDER-Net Plus funded cross-national research study entitled '*A life-course perspective on the GENdered PATHways of exclusion from social relations in later life, and its consequences for health and wellbeing'*. Prior to returning to education, Celia worked as an Executive Assistant, primarily in the UK and the Middle East. It was during her time in the Middle East that she studied for her BA in Humanities, through Dublin City University's distance education programme.