
Rethinking Digital Spaces through Feminism: Instagram as an Educational Environment

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ABSTRACT: *Some studies refer to the so-called fourth wave of feminism, characterized by the use of social media as a space for claims of gender-related political instances. This can contribute to transform platforms into pedagogical environments to learn to challenge forms of daily discrimination. A further element that characterizes the spread of digital feminism is the possibility of transforming, through the use of social media, 'being a feminist' into something desirable among the younger generations. This proposal tries to analyse Instagram as a sociomaterial space of sharing in order to question the learning processes with/in social networks. Learning processes are enacted by the interaction with Instagram profiles and Instagram pages that create feminist complaint contents, thus rethinking the way of seeing and experiencing genderized bodies and social relations. Online spaces shape, constrain and perform the emergence of a feminist sensibility situated in daily practices of activism whereby 'difference' becomes a functional category to make visible the social and material experience of marginalised bodies. This is an ongoing research, that starts with an initial empirical inquiry carried out to analyse whether some Instagram pages (collective and individual) dealing with feminist issues can become an educational and/or informal learning space to share and shape new forms of feminist experiences aimed at questioning assumptions, and gender stereotypes and constrains often taken for granted in everyday life.*

KEYWORDS: *Digital feminism, educational space, Instagram activism*

1. Introduction

During the last decade, social platforms have become a fruitful space for feminism movements. Looking back over the history of feminism, four waves can be identified. The first wave coincides with the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, with the struggles for political rights: in particular the right to vote. The second wave corresponds to the great season of feminism that begins in the early 1960s and ends in the 1980s. It focused on all those aspects of a woman's personal life about great social and political impact, such as sexuality, pregnancy, and motherhood. In this period groups of «self-consciousness» tried to build a collective consciousness that had been denied for too long. Women discovered and defined themselves as

'political subjects', starting to organize themselves politically and making the personal political. The third wave dates back to 1990 and sees the emergence of the concepts of intersectionality and ecofeminism and a more individualistic drive to address gender diversity. Finally, the fourth wave emerges around 2010. It is characterized by the massive use of social networks as allies of the feminist struggle and as a space for claims of gender-related political instances, by a sensitivity towards the concept of intersectionality and «by an online continuation of both the individual empowerment rhetoric of the third wave [...], alongside a renewed interest in collective feminism» (Pruchniewska, 2019, 1366).

The fourth wave contribute to see platforms as pedagogical environments in which talk about gender equality and put in question the daily forms of discrimination related to the patriarchal culture (Retallack et al., 2016). A further element that characterizes the spread of digital feminism is the possibility of transforming, through the use of social media, being a feminist into something desirable among the younger generations (Gill, 2016). The Internet becomes a space in which empowerment messages can reach many women around the world, developing the so-called 'pop feminism'. Today, many feminists are women who dress fashionably, wear make-up and heels and go clubbing. The fact that feminism has reached the masses is a good thing, but it also hides some negative aspects. Today's feminism has sidelined collective issues in favour of individual ones. Many women have found in feminism an opportunity for personal redemption and the freedom to do what they want (Arruzza, Cirillo, 2017).

However, feminism is also a collective struggle. Another side-effect of pop feminism is to be able to develop a socially acceptable feminism in which it is possible to identify women who do not hate men, but also women who are thin, white and perhaps straight. A model that has been listened to and simplified by companies. But feminism is not just that, and it does not have to be socially acceptable, therefore meeting standards of non-binary bodies. It is male dominance that feminism tries to combat, even if we often end up adapting it to our needs.

As we have seen, therefore, social networks are a distinctive element of pop feminism and represent a powerful means of communication and activism. It is interesting to ask, however, if they cannot take on additional functions, specifically turning into an educational space. The relationship between educational processes and social networks has been examined taking into account different levels: educate to social networks and therefore take into account all the technical, cognitive, ethical skills needed to use social networks; learn with social or see social networks as tools that possess certain affordances; finally training in social that recalls the dimension of informal learning that social allow as a space of sharing, exchange and continuous connection between users (Ranieri, Manca, 2014). Precisely this last aspect – the possibility of social platforms to become informal spaces of learning among users- is relevant to analyse and reflect on contemporary feminism. At the same time, it is important

to take into account the specific characteristics of the platform. The platform shapes its affordances that is fueled by user practices, in this case feminist activists.

For its characteristics Instagram is the most interesting social site to analyse this phenomenon. Only in Italy, Instagram counts 28 million users, becoming a very effective and powerful tool in the number of people reached and in the way these contents are conveyed. Instagram can be seen as a space in which individualism is nurtured and even encouraged through the creation of digital content ranging from selfies to infographics oriented to build a narrative of the Self: the narration of the Self is carried out through an iconographic language, putting one's own image and body into play through a coherent vision, deleting shadow areas and ambivalences that we all experience. This performs a space where it is possible to create a collective discourse and collective practices.

The platform works following different logics, important in the creation of contents that are often linked to both the business side offered by the platform (e.g. adv) and technical constraints. The three main logics are: the monitoring of the interactions with the page through statistics available to the manager of the same; the creation of contents in the form of posts, IgTV, stories and reel; the monitoring of the number of followers of the page. Instagram, therefore, is configured in its ambivalences as a private platform.

Against this background Instagram can be comprehended as a digital space that activates a learning process. Learning processes are enacted by the interaction with Instagram profiles and Instagram pages that create feminist and gendered complaint contents, thus rethinking the way of seeing and experiencing bodies and social relations (Savolainen et al., 2020). Online spaces shape, constrain and perform the emergence of a feminist sensibility situated in daily practices of activism whereby 'difference' becomes a functional category to make visible the social and material experience of marginalised bodies (Braidotti, 2019; hooks, 2000).

2. Aims and methods

This proposal seeks to analyse Instagram as a sociomaterial space of sharing in order to question the learning processes with/within/in social platforms, in particular whether Instagram can become an educational and/or informal learning space to share and shape new forms of feminist experiences aimed at questioning assumptions, and gender stereotypes and constrains often taken for granted in everyday life.

But what happens when Instagram becomes a space for education to feminist claims? How does feminist thought shape both contents and languages? How does feminist thinking fit the logic of Instagram? How does feminist's engagement on Instagram take place?

TAB. 1. Instagram pages

<i>Page</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Post</i>	<i>Stories</i>
<i>Jennifer Guerra: _jenniferguerra_</i>	Jennifer Guerra Journalist We want to live up to a universe without answers.	27	11
<i>Carlotta Vagnoli: carlottavagnoli</i>	Carlotta Vagnoli Author She/Her I didn't want to break the Internet, I wanted to f**k with it.	15	51
<i>evastaizitta</i>	Giuli Author She/Her ~ 🌈 🍏 Adam blamed Eve for an apple #rebelliousbodies #feminisms #patriarchy	33	5
<i>l'hascrittounafem mina</i>	Carolina Capria Book This is where I talk about books. Written by females. scuoladilettaurajosephinemarch.com	11	3
<i>mammadimerda - francesca e sarah</i>	Mamma di merda Blogger Francesca e Sarah. Don't make it a lifestyle. We spread inadequacy and soothe your guilt.	12	6
<i>Freeda</i>	Freeda Behind every great woman there are other great women. it is they who read the messages before sending. #freeda	155	
<i>Non una di meno: nonunadi meno</i>	Non una di meno Political organization Against male violence against women and gender-based violence, we have a Plan! ##notoneless #wetogether #permanentunrest	23	
<i>Cheap: cheapfestival</i>	CHEAP street poster art public art, posters, contemporary activism, urban landscapes #CHEAPstreetposterart Bologna, Italy	48	
<i>Giusto mezzo: giustomezzo</i>	Giusto mezzo We are asking for 50% of the Recovery Fund on: 👶 care, from childhood to old age 👩 female employment 👥 gender pay gap	9	
<i>Lucha y Siesta: luchaysiesta</i>	Lucha y Siesta Women's House Lucha y Siesta (RM) self-organized feminist space since 2008	8	2
<i>Tot.</i>	10	341	78

Source: Our elaboration.

In an attempt to put in question these issues, it was decided to conduct a digital ethnography by analyzing ten Instagram pages that address issues

and ask for claims related to the fourth wave of feminism, which, as we have seen, is characterized by the use of digital space to perform political practices, by the attention to an intersectional sensibility and by a emphasis on both the collective action of feminism movement and individual empowerment of women (Pruchniewska, 2019). Starting from this definition, the choice fell on two types of pages – individual and collective – to represent as much as possible the heterogeneity of the phenomenon, its contradictions and potential and to remain faithful to the dual nature of the new feminisms.

The individual pages are represented by personal pages of women who, starting from their own subjective experience, their professional skills, their own experiences, have chosen to develop a reasoning and a space in which to talk about feminism starting from what they know best. Among the collective pages, on the other hand, were chosen pages linked to (trans)feminist movements (*Non Una di Meno* and *Lucha y Siesta*), a page linked to the campaign for the request for funds from the Recovery Plan (*Giusto mezzo*), a page made up of a collective of artists and choice precisely for the visual language used (*Cheap*) and finally a more controversial page and already the subject of investigation in numerous studies (*Freeda*) but interesting to include in the sample a subject that moves on different logics.

The analysed contents were published in the period of March-May 2021 and have a total of 341 and 78 stories in evidence (see Table 1). The digital ethnography allowed us to identify a series of themes that many pages have dealt with in a transversal way and that we can group in: gender-based violence; gender stereotypes; gender disparities; inclusive language.

The next paragraph proposes an analysis of these macro-themes, used by the pages analysed with the aim to engage users in feminist issues, while promoting books, news and events, contributing to the activation of a learning process with social networks (Ranieri, Manca, 2014).

3. How to talk about feminism on Instagram

Every page analysed builds an image of struggle against patriarchy that emerges in the attention to the performative power of language. The affordance of the platform allows to identify two ways to interact with its users: on the one hand we find mostly individual pages that use their own experience to nominate sexist and patriarchal practices, on the other we have collective pages that use the platform to convey a gender vision through advertising strategies (*Freeda*), and to make visible initiatives organized by feminist struggle movements (*Lucha y Siesta*, *Giusto Mezzo*, *Non Una di Meno*, *Cheap*).

3.1. Recognising and naming gender-based violence

This first macro-theme is treated mostly by personal pages that start from personal experience to talk about sexism practices that all women have experienced at least once in their lives. Here are three examples that seem to us to be representative of the heterogeneity of the phenomenon, in terms of linguistic styles and registers. The first example is taken from the profile of Jennifer Guerra, who uses a language often academic and expert.

Jennifer Guerra is a journalist who collaborates with *The Vision* and now with *Espresso*. She hosts a podcast on Spotify 'Antibodies' on feminism. She uses a journalistic approach in addressing several issues that are connected directly with the social construction of gender. She wrote two feminist books. Her work seeks to make transfeminist academic language accessible that may be difficult to understand the most, especially the youngest who maybe are approaching feminism for study or curiosity. On her Instagram page we find featured stories in which she builds a feminist bibliography. In this regard it is interesting to report a post in which she clarifies the meaning of the term 'sexism':

There is a widespread idea that you can no longer say anything without someone being offended. Racism, sexism and homophobia are told as little stories, for which we generation of whiners are offended, we are mortified, we put our hands over our mouths waving our parasols and saying «Madam, where are we going to end up?». According to the Treccani dictionary, offence is «moral damage caused to the dignity of a person (or an institution) by acts or words». Here is, moral is the magic word. The marginalised categories would not be marginalised if their very existence were contemplated by the dominant morality. Instead, they stay outside it, when they are not trampled on by it. Social justice has nothing to do with the pursuit of right behaviour, but with the possibilities to do, be and become what we desire without anyone choosing for us – morally determining – our place in society. When we are discriminated, we are not offended. We are oppressed. We are reminded for the umpteenth time that our possibility of existence is outside what is morally accepted because, surprise!, what is normalised on TV, in the newspapers, in the movies is only what is morally accepted. I think it is important, even as activists, to remember to make this distinction. Prejudices, caricatures and jokes may offend us personally (and this is coming from someone who is notoriously touchy), but at a systemic level the damage is not moral, it is material.

The interesting aspect is the use of concepts that refer to a well-constructed bibliography, such as the reference to the 'material', then certainly to Braidotti. The post analysed seem to secularize a theory and a highly technical language making it accessible and recognizable to a wide audience like that of Ig.

Another page that tries to deconstruct sexist attitudes and practices is that of Carlotta Vagnoli. Carlotta Vagnoli is an activist who uses

Instagram to sponsor her work as a writer. Her Instagram page becomes her feminist showcase. She claims her femininity by also participating in advertising campaigns such as the one promoted by Zalando (aimed at normalizing sizes and bodies by adopting an intersectional approach). Her Instagram page is a sharing space where to learn about terms and to recognize experiences of abuse or gender discrimination, dissimulating the patriarchal culture that is often conveyed through news reports. The particularity lies in the complaint of some contents mainly informative, television and journalistic, that reproduce stereotypes and gender discrimination dictated by patriarchal culture and for this reason hardly visible precisely because it is often taken for granted that they are 'normal' behavior to adopt. In this regard it is useful to report a post in which she tries to give a definition of victim blaming starting from the story Beppe Grillo:

About Grillo, victim blaming and the right time. I put today's stories in a post. Could I have done it directly? Of course, I could have. But you already know: I like to complicate my life. (Slideshow: Rape culture is Beppe Grillo yelling in defence of his son and his friends accused of gang rape of a 19-year-old girl, saying they are just boys «with their dicks in their hands» – a quote reminiscent of the old adage «boys will be boys», don't you think? – and that they are «assholes» – another quote of his – but innocent.) Innocent would come from the fact that the victim reported after eight days. Where do we start to say that this pathetic little show is all wrong? From after the inevitable initial blasphemy, of course. Eight days is the right amount of time because that was all it took for the girl to be able to realise it. This is the only yardstick to be protected. I suffered physical violence and afterwards I went to work, as if nothing had happened, smiling at the customers. There are women who contribute to live the same life as always and after years, suddenly realise the fact. Others only realise it when they read about it in the news or hear stories of survivors similar to their own. Some people have shock removal and reconstruct their history with years and years of psychological work. Time is not decided by the rapist, it is not decided by a code, it is not decided by morality, certainly not Beppe Grillo. To scream that the time between the fact and the denunciation is an indication of girl's lack of credibility is a clear example of the language of rape culture. The process should be done behind closed doors, with decorum such a serious fact. Justice should be served and until then one should at least have the decency to think humanely. Especially if one has such powers. Because if the court is responsible for the application of the presumption of innocence, it is up to the civil society to know how to welcome and protect people who denounce violence. And to discredit them is not the right way, not even to designate victims of series A and victims of series B questioning on how much is the correct time to realise having suffered a rape. This is not a debate, there are not 'options on the matter'. Using this bullshit rhetoric discourages reporting in similar cases, blames the victim, and makes the story yet another sideshow for politicians, journalists, and long tongues. The violent tones in which everything is exposed are then

perfect to decorate this amazing, umpteenth, devastating shit cake that occurs every time a case of gender violence becomes media. For all the people who instead 'sympathise' with Grillo, chapeau: this time too you have made a mistake on which side to show solidarity.

In this post it is appropriate to point out how the activist uses a news story to signal the patriarchal character of a system (including political). She uses her visibility to define these practices as sexist practices that need to be named, contributing to a learning process.

Another interesting page is that of Mammadimerda that tries to deconstruct a stereotypical idea of motherhood. It does so with irony and through the branding of the slogan «you can NOT do it». Behind Mammadimerda there are two women with children who started with a blog and then specialized in communication on Instagram through which they talk about parenthood and the right to work. An example is this post:

BITTER POST. NO LAUGHTER.

«But do you want to go back to work when you can be at home with your children?»

Yes.

«Enjoy them now, then they grow up».

That would be the aim. If not, buy yourself a Polly Pocket.

And the most beautiful of all:

«What are you doing with them?».

So we can all see the effect it has.

Talking about the need to work because of that habit of eating three times a day seems trivial to us. There is another aspect, which is a little too underestimated. Besides being a right, WE LIKE WORK. We don't want to be ashamed to say it, or even risk incurring the immeasurable pain in the ass that is hearing one of these phrases.

Working makes us autonomous, completes us, makes us satisfied people and therefore better mothers. Working is a necessity, not a pastime. Continuing to have to choose between children and work is like saying: «Do you love Mum or Dad more?».

We have always written that this blog is there to soothe your guilt feelings. But what are guilt feelings good for? To eat on the couch at night. And to keep women in their place, which apparently is that of take care. If you don't feel like a fully realised woman just because you've procreated, do you have to go to therapy? Do you need to eat more on the couch? No, maybe you just need to change jobs or look for one.

Women's employment has plummeted in the last year because the crisis has hit the sectors employing the most women the hardest, and care work has fallen to us all with schools closed. The work of 52% of the country, which is not a hobby, is nailed to the mast, at the bottom of Europe for women's employment (watch the @azzurrarinaldi explanation of Saturday).

In the draft of the so-called Recovery (PNRR) the money allocated to areas related to the revival of our work has even decreased compared to the first prospectus. Insufficient money on kindergartens, which we know how much they affect our return to work after childbirth. Full time: THOUSAND more canteens in primary school. We will continue to work part time. For women's businesses, which are the ones that grow best and fastest in Italy, crumbs. I told you it wasn't funny.

It is a polemical post that brings attention back to women who feel they are workers and not just mothers. It is every woman's right to be able to work, but this is only possible if we invest in nursery schools, and in building up an idea of parenthood, maybe even talking about parental leave.

3.2. Feminist struggle movements on social media

The collective pages try to use Instagram essentially to make public their events and initiatives, in order to involve the widest number of people. Often, they collaborate, through tags and mentions, even with the individual pages analysed.

Among the pages analysed *Freeda* is a hybrid because it is not a movement but a company that uses feminism and brands that claim a place in feminist culture to speak of patriarchy. For these reasons it is often criticized, and its language is not perfectly consistent and in line with the practices of feminist fighting.

Lucha y Siesta is a house of women, they define themselves «material and symbolic place of self-determination of women against all gender discriminations». The house is the promoter of various activities ranging from the contrast to violence, with the listening desk, the refuge house and the semi-autonomous house, to the organization of cultural events (cineforum, presentation of books, reviews and debates) and workshops and courses (yoga, pilates, workshops). On Instagram they call themselves «self-managed feminist space». The topics covered on Instagram concern gender violence (rape culture, femicide) and the deconstruction of stereotypes; they also use the page to relaunch events aimed at developing a collective reflection on new feminisms and for the presentation of books. It is interesting to note several aspects that can lead to say that Instagram becomes a space of education on feminism and through feminism: the language is close to the most academic feminism (intersectional feminism, transfeminism) and is also very attentive to the question of inclusivity (use of Schwa); art becomes the vehicle of the message (poster on femicide, comics at the Venice Biennale). We can therefore see how the page becomes, on the one hand, a space to talk about feminism and sensitive issues such as gender violence, femicide; on the other, it represents an extension of the physical space of *Lucha y Siesta* and an organizational medium.

Non Una di Meno is a political movement transfeminist, intersectional, anti-racist, anti-fascist, anti-capitalist, autonomous from any party, which aims at the radical transformation of society starting from the fight against male and gender violence and against social hierarchies. The movement activity of *Non una di meno* is oriented to the square and the strike. In particular, the global feminist strike is the process by which they have asserted their autonomy, opening up the transnational space for the protagonism of anyone who wants to fight against sexist, racist and neoliberal policies implemented with increasing intensity at a global level. Their political basis is based on horizontality and assembly consensus. They are aware that the parties see them as a pool of possible votes, but they do not go into politics because they want to defend the autonomy of the movement born and raised from below.

In this context Instagram stands as a digital space through which to communicate the political struggle of street movement. It becomes an organizational space to remember the importance of the transnational strike. It also acts as a sounding board for some news of Italian news such as the death of the worker *Luana at work*, or the complaint of cat-calling or victim blaming.

Cheap is a public art project born in Bologna, but it becomes of all through the digital space of Ig. Cheap uses feminist and transfeminist art to imagine possible futures. For example, in March, posters of boobs invaded the city of Bologna with the intent of 'freeing the nipples' going against the same rules of Instagram that blocks content in which you can see nipples.

4. Instagram as an educational environment? Preliminary conclusions

The analysis of the content of the posts considered made it clear that behind these pages there are bloggers, journalists and authors who use Instagram as a performing and performative space. They use social media to re-interpret news and current events that take place in Italy, trying to unravel discrimination and stereotypes fueled by a patriarchal culture, often starting from the personal as in the case of the page *Mammadimerda* that attempts to deconstruct and resize the gender expectations related to parenthood. In other cases, it is the profession itself that becomes the tool that justifies the presence on this social and that gives value and strength to the words, posts, stories and direct actions on the pages, at the same time exploiting the role of influencers to promote collaboration with brands and companies and follower exchanges through the logic of shoutout. Shouting allows you to increase your visibility through tags or mentions between profiles that have a follower base with similar features. This allows to consolidate the affordance of users/ followers towards influencers that the platform elects such based on the numbers of followers they manage to reach. Therefore, they try to create content through communication strategies

aimed at keeping the page active. In this case, the affordance is established in a trust that the user decides to tune by pressing the 'follow' button of pages. Their influence is built on the posts, but especially on the stories and direct, which allow a more direct interaction. The stories allow users to interact with the influencer who manages the pages by sending direct messages (DM), while during the live the followers can comment and ask questions that are visible to everyone.

These are tools that allow to build an affordance based on a direct relationship with influencers, who speak directly to their community to discuss news referring to gender discrimination, to clarify some terms or comment on newspaper articles that take for granted sexist stereotypes and linked to a patriarchal culture. It is a deal between influencers and users based on a learning process that is never unique but is bidirectional: influencers create personalized content for their community, which often asks and interacts with the page. The effect is the construction of an informal learning space in which communication strategies and marketing strategies hybridize making feminism 'pop'.

Online spaces shape, constrain and perform the emergence of a feminist sensibility situated in daily practices of activism whereby 'difference' becomes a functional category to make visible the social and material experience of marginalised bodies. This is an ongoing research, that starts with an initial empirical inquiry carried out to analyse whether some Instagram pages (collective and individual) dealing with feminist issues can become an educational and/or informal learning space to share and shape new forms of feminist experiences aimed at questioning assumptions, and gender stereotypes and constrains often taken for granted in everyday life.

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