



GENDER AND MEDIA MATTERS

WIDENING THE HORIZONS OF THE FIELD OF STUDY

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

October 15-16, 2021

Sapienza, University of Rome (online and in-person)
Department of Communication and Social Research

PANEL 2

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE MEDIA

Chairs:

Cosimo Marco Scarcelli (University of Padua, Italy)

Speakers:

- Elisabetta Locatelli (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy)
- Gaia Peruzzi, Angelica Spampinato (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy)
- Aleka Stamatadi (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece)
- Irida Ntalla (Middlesex University, UK)
- Danielle Hipkins (University of Exeter, UK), Romana Andò (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy)



Telling the taboo: Instagram as a resource for new imaginaries and visibilities of the female body

Elisabetta Locatelli (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy)

Abstract

Within the gender-media dyad, the female body and its representations have extensively been analyzed. They are, actually, at the center of power dynamics between hetero- and self-determination (Gill & Orgad, 2015) and of debates about neoliberalism and subjectivity (Gill & Scharf, 2011). An emergent field of research is devoted to the investigation into the social media representations and performances of the female body. Social media have been studied as technologies of the self (Tiidenberg, 2014) and as spaces for both stereotyped (Tiidenberg, 2015) and self-determined representations (Lopez, 2009). Studies concentrated on several topics, like the fit body (Camacho-Miñano, Maclsaac & Rich, 2019; Kavasoğlu & Koca, 2021), pregnancy and maternity (Das, 2017, 2018; Lopez, 2009; San Cornelio, 2018; Tiidenberg, 2015; Zappavigna & Zhao, 2017), focusing also on topics traditionally perceived as taboos, like birth (Tyler & Baraitser, 2013). Instagram is a rich field of investigation under this point of view because it offers users tools for textual and multimedia self-presentations (through pictures, video, graphics). Researches focused on the self-telling strategies, that are certainly important, but there are at least two more aspects worth noticing: the visual dimension, at the core of feminist visual media studies and always more crucial also into social media studies (Capecchi, 2018; Carson & Pajaczkowska, 2000; Gemini, 2015), and the affordances and logics of platforms that channel users' contents into specific formats and ways of distribution (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

The objective of this paper is, thus, to problematize the role of Instagram in building alternative imaginaries and representations of the female body through the lens of visual sociology, feminist visual media studies, and platform studies. Object of investigation, through a qualitative content analysis, will be a sample of Instagram posts aimed at telling aspects of the female body traditionally considered very personal or taboo (like menstruations or infertility) published by individuals or professionals, such as midwives also within informative projects. The discussion will problematize the visibility opportunities of such self-determined presentations in relation to Instagram affordances and their logics of contents organization and distribution (Duguay, 2016).



Beyond politically correct: gender representations and definitions of consensus in the pornosphere. A research on Pornhub and XNXX in Italy

Gaia Peruzzi, Angelica Spampinato (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy)

Abstract

Among the twenty most visited platforms in the world, to date, three are those that refer to pornographic content. By encouraging the production and sharing of content, but above all by freeing access to materials from the need for physical intermediaries, digital technologies have made pornography an easily accessible and popular practice.

On a scientific level, the marriage between pornography and the digital sphere has cleared the former from the label of a social problem to recognize it as a cultural practice. Today pornography, understood as the media representation of erotic and obscene relationships (McNair, 2013), is a still largely unexplored field of study, with a great heuristic value “for revealing shifts in the patterns of media and technology use, in regulation and governance, and in the significance of sexual representation and practice” (Attwood, 2011). In this proposal, pornography is assumed as an observatory on the media-gender dyad: a consciously marginal point of view compared to traditional fields of study, in the awareness that a decentralized perspective can sometimes open up new paths of analysis.

The occasion for the contribution is given by a research conducted by the authors between 2020 and 2021 and concerning the contents of the two most visited pornographic platforms in Italy, XNXX and Pornhub. The hypothesis is that, in a historical period in which the relations between genders are deeply changing, in some cases even on the political level, online pornography, a landscape of forbidden sexual imaginaries, can function as a black box, that is as a revealer – from an oblique and partly distorting, however original point of view – of the heaviest conceptions and stereotypes on gender, resistant to political correctness, as well as the evolution of some gender identities.

The survey was conducted by integrating various content analysis actions, concerning: the categories in which the media offer is organized; the lexicon that presents violent practices, on the border between licit and illicit; some images deemed particularly significant of the most recent trends in online porn.

In particular, the presentation of the results will focus on: the categorization of gender identities proposed by the porn platforms, as a detector of the ever-changing acceptable-deviant boundary; the definition and recognition of consent in violent sexual practices.



A short history of women's sexuality in Greece through the lens of popular television series

Aleka Stamatiadi (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece)

Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore how portrayals of women in popular television series reflect aspects of Greek society regarding women's social role.

As television fiction offers a fruitful field for societal values and roles to be expressed, the article refers to the most watched television series of the Greek television station "Mega channel" from the early '90s to 2017. Greek society's juncture and media landscape provoked a delay for the commercial television but when it happened, in 1989, Greek television fiction found a remarkable success, showing the popularity of domestic productions in Greece. As the television series that were produced in Greece were the most popular, it is possible to derive consumptions on Greek societal norms. By acknowledging the context of Greek society these years and using textual analysis of the television texts, the analysis highlights the potential of media and in particular television fiction to express, reinforce or challenge systems of social hierarchies based on differences of gender. Women' roles in television fiction conceal and reveal their sexual preferences and desires, play both victims and villains, housewives, nice mothers and funny girls, or passionate "drama queens". Regardless the genre, comedies or drama series, the basic elements are similar: the importance of Greek family, strict ethical codes, the romantic wedding, motherhood or vice versa the dangerous woman sexuality are found in the discourses about femininities. Furthermore, watching women's roles from one television series to another, from year to year, and focusing on the representations of sexualities, it is they can constitute a "top-down" version of history of the Greek sexual culture. The most popular Greek television series of "Mega channel" television station show that social context of television production frames and negotiated with television fiction.



Single motherhood, sexuality and mediated intimacies on dating apps and digital sphere.

Irida Ntalla (Middlesex University, UK)

Abstract

Apps, platforms and devices evidently impact ways of meeting partners, engaging and sustaining intimate relationships. Dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble, Hinge and so on are popular, increasingly socially acceptable and necessary. Although these 'hookup apps' are often seen as restricted to casual interactions often marked by 'negative bonds' (Illouz 2019), they disturb and challenge traditional intimacies introducing new forms of connectivity, practices, expectations and relationships. This paper seeks to extend existing research on these mediated, screen and mobile intimacies, exploring experiences of single mothers within these applications. Single motherhood is far from a unified entity with experiences varying from the single mother by choice, stigmatised young single mother, lone mother, just to name a few. While the myth of the mothers as asexual beings is being questioned with discussions through the lenses of milfs and 'yummy mummies', focused research on single mothers can unpack and extend the complicated relationship of motherhood and sexuality. Through semi-structured interviews and digital ethnography, the paper discusses self-representation, constructions of sexuality, sexual agency and experiences of mediated intimacies. What type of intimacies exists in this context and how the tension of single motherhood, single womanhood and sexuality impact subjectivities and self-representations? The paper aims to provide an initial exploratory analysis of such experiences extending the work around motherhood, sexuality and intimacies in the online dating era.



‘Chiara is a bit like any girl - she is flawed and makes mistakes’: Negotiating adolescent female sexuality through the Netflix series *Baby* (2018-20) in Italy and the UK

Danielle Hipkins (University of Exeter, UK), Romana Andò (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy)

Abstract

As it extends its global reach, Netflix pays increasing attention to the national, attempting to address concerns about its control over local markets through the production of local content. Such content must endeavour to keep the Netflix series brand and transnational appeal alive, whilst addressing national issues. Since Netflix products are known for a strong teen address, female leads, and racial diversity, they bring new elements and challenges to some national markets. In Italy, for instance, Netflix original products have brought, for the first time, female teen protagonists and ethnically diverse casting to popular television (*Baby*, *Summertime*, *Zero*). How are these series perceived at the level of national and transnational audiences? In this paper we examine the significance of one of these TV series for transnational audiences. The Italian-made Netflix series *Baby* (2018-), popular in Italy and transnationally, presents an ideal opportunity to understand how female adolescent sexuality is narrated in everyday media content – at a transnational and local level- and how that is in turn negotiated by its audiences. *Baby* represents a real life news story of two wealthy Roman schoolgirls who were paid for underage sex in 2013, the so-called ‘baby prostitutes’ that give the series its title. Despite the show’s apparent consonance with the themes of many other transnational teen TV shows, the sensationalist quality of its theme provoked an immediate controversy with accusations that it was glamourizing prostitution, and endangering its target audience. Despite a proliferation of transnational teen high-school TV shows, this was the first one to be made and set in Italy, and so potentially opened up a question of ‘cultural proximity’ for Italian viewers. At the same time, its world-wide distribution allows us to examine the interaction between regional, national and transnational through the dramatization of a particularly site-specific news story. Through ethnographic audience research we compare and contrast what female teen (fan) audiences made of the series in both Italian and English contexts.