

Scripted Gender Practices: Young Adults' Social Media App Uses in Portugal

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Abstract

This research focuses on social media mobile applications as mediated interfaces of identity performances and interrogates to what extent everyday young adults' uses are remaking gender scripts. We analyze young adults' self-reported experiences on preferred social media apps and discourses of rejection of others, the technologies themselves, and how they favor certain behaviors. Theoretically, we resorted to feminist media studies and critical app research, focusing on users' perceptions of their engagement with mobile technology. Empirically, we turned to semi-structured interviews with female and male young adults aged between 18 and 30 years. Results show limited agency to reshape normative gender scripts embedded in apps' technological affordances and broad hegemonic discourses. We discuss these results and how they mirror normative gender expectations, recalling the impacts of contingent social formations in reproducing inequality.

Keywords

mobile app, young adults' digital practices, gender scripts, gendered affordances, critical thematic analysis

Introduction

Despite widespread access to the internet through mobile technology and the increasing popularity of mobile apps for staying connected, dating, gaming, and self-monitoring practices, our comprehension of how activity on these platforms reshapes social relations still needs to be improved. Critical social research has been paying attention to gender discrepancy in apps use (Bol et al., 2018; Schomakers et al., 2022). Studies have also been showing how platforms' affordances themselves contribute to guide self-identities, understood in Giddens' (1991) terms, as a constant reconstruction of the self, amid a plethora of choices which are themselves constrained by social, economic, and technological factors. For instance, online dating and digital relationship practices might constrain and shape user gender performances given that platform affordances enable and constrain people's agency (Das & Ytre-Arne, 2018). As a result, amid the relevance of user negotiation practices, app's affordances support gender scripts (Comunello et al., 2021) so that people tend to have the fewest options to act and be. How this complex dynamic occurs in young adults' ordinary and heavily connected lives is what concerns us here.

This research focuses on social media mobile apps as mediated interfaces of identity performances, questioning

how everyday uses reshape adult youthhood gender relations and challenge normative discourses and practices. Theoretically, we resorted to feminist media studies and app critical research. We draw on van Oost's (2003) concept of "gender script," which refers to the representations of gender relations and identities inscribed into technology by designers, which can be negotiated, adopted, challenged, or rejected by users through their performances. Gender script theory argues that gender roles and sexual behavior are learned from culturally shared norms.

How gender scripts are played out by media technology has been acknowledged by platform affordances theory. Relational connections between the affordances of fleshly human bodies, including sensory perceptions, emotional responsiveness, embodied expertise, and the actual properties of what people engage in, produce agential capacities (Lupton, 2019). Thus, affordances are forces that cast

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specific pursuits as expressions of being masculine and feminine amid the constant negotiation users can do in the permanent reconstruction of themselves. The concept of Schwartz and Neff (2019) of gendered affordances, although focused on the case of Craigslist, stresses precisely the interplay between the cultural repertoires available to technology designers and users and how they shape technologically mediated practices.

Empirically, we focused on young adults' self-reported perceptions of mobile apps' experiences and roles in daily life. We turned to semi-structured interviews with women and men aged between 18 and 30 years living in Portugal, where social media apps are the most popular category of mobile apps among young adults (Antunes et al., 2023). From May to October 2022, we conducted 25 interviews with 9 men and 16 women who were invited to talk about their mediated practices and experiences through a plethora of apps, including social media apps, the ones that concern us here. To acknowledge in what ways participants reproduce or defy normative roles through their app social practices, we apply to the interviews an analytical framework built from the articulation of the gender scripts and the gendered affordances with critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019).

Young Adults' Mediated Lives in Portugal

The use of mobile apps by young adults in Portugal has been hardly studied, although mobile phones proliferate, with more than 14 million mobile phones in 2021 to a 10-million-people country (PORDATA, 2022). Most studies focus on social media uses (Pinto et al., 2021) and, more recently, on health-related apps (Bento et al., 2018) and romantic and/or sexual encounters (Vieira & Sepúlveda, 2017). Considering the lack of in-depth research on the implications of mobile app use among Portuguese young adults, this article stems from a study in Portugal that strives to contribute to understanding the role of mobile apps in daily life and how they allow an understanding of how gender and sexual identities are negotiated and imagined in the mediated experiences of users. In that context, diverse outputs reveal widespread common use of mobile apps by young adults in Portugal, with more than 90% using them every day (Amaral et al., 2023), particularly social media platforms (Amaral et al., 2023; Flores & Antunes, 2023).

If there is any, the common denominator between the studies focusing on young adults in Portugal is the relationship between young people and technology. Portuguese younger generations attribute greater importance to internet-based technologies and reveal higher uses of networked media repertoires (Vieira, 2018). Portuguese younger generations have revealed adaptability to apps and software for online and distance learning (Flores et al., 2022). However,

students see value in surpassing pure digital forms of studying (Vieira & Ribeiro, 2022). Mobile apps, in specific, play an essential role in surpassing daily activities like traveling/commuting (Oliveira, 2015). The uses of apps by Portuguese young adults are highly massified and significantly mediate social interactions. However, scholars generally warn about the way such uses tend to represent traditional and heteronormative gender roles or to be shaped by their gender and sexual identities (Amaral et al., 2022; Antunes et al., 2023). In fact, such may be the case in evidence particularly regarding dating apps, with around 1 in every 3 Portuguese young adults affirming they have ever used such a category of mobile apps and higher proportions of usages between men and non-heterosexual inquired young adults (Amaral et al., 2022). Gender and sex disparities are also recorded in Portugal, as in the rest of Europe, sometimes with better indicators. For example, in 2021, the percentage of working-age women who were inactive due to "caring responsibilities" was higher in the average of European countries (30.2%) than in Portugal (23.9%). This is still a country with a wage gap between men and women of more than €200, in a context of low overall wages (Comissão para a Cidadania e a Igualdade de Género, 2022). Digital media, in its comprehensive mode, can be understood as perpetuating spaces of symbolic asymmetries, such as the one based on gender (Cerqueira & Magalhães, 2017), by (re)producing different types of social structures and hierarchies.

Mobile Apps' Uses Through a Gender Lens

International research on incorporating mobile apps into young adults' daily lives is entwined with information and communication technologies in a broad perspective. Scholars have examined the relevance of the smartphone (Castells et al., 2009) and young adults' dependency on mobile apps (Heimlich, 2010) within a context of media hybridity (Chadwick, 2017), permanent connectivity, and persistent, searchable, and replicable information (boyd, 2011). This landscape has expanded with the popularization of access to more powerful smartphones, faster connection to the internet, and the profusion of new apps available in online shops. Mobile app downloads worldwide have steadily increased since 2016, reaching over 255 billion in 2022 (Statista, 2023).

Mobile technologies have become an indispensable part of life as an extension of the self (Zhang et al., 2018). How young people engage with these technologies has stimulated much research interest. Several studies drawing from the uses and gratifications theory have examined young adults' appropriations of specific platforms such as social networks (Khadir et al., 2021), social media (Song et al., 2021), news media apps (Antunovic et al., 2018), and home banking (Prom Tep et al., 2020). From socializing to gaming and

shopping, dating to health and nutrition, and fitness to self-monitoring, mobile apps illustrate the technology's tendency to strengthen the capacity for individualized uses (Livingstone et al., 2007) in tandem with favoring specific ways of sociability (Amaral, 2012, 2016) and, overall, reconfiguring sociotechnical practices (boyd, 2015).

However, research has also shown that dominant regimes concerning patriarchy, heteronormativity, and other identity politics were not radically reconfigured or overcome but reproduced through the uses of the internet and more or less popular social media platforms (Simões et al., 2021, 2022; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014). Former categories of social differentiation continue to comprise the broader structural contexts of people's life amid the technology potential to challenge discriminatory norms that help produce hierarchies and oppression. The emphasis on technology derived from cultural and ideological terrains reflects, in particular, social systems anchored to power relations that create gendered social spaces. Studies focusing on apps designed for people in general, with no identity group in mind, show that apps invite users to produce the meaning of their practices according to normative concepts of masculinity and femininity (Simões & Amaral, 2022). Men's higher interest in technology has led to higher adoption of mobile health apps (Nacinovich, 2011) than women (Zhang et al., 2014). Women tend to use more self-care and digital well-being apps, particularly highly qualified women (Bol et al., 2018; Schomakers et al., 2022).

Gender differences have also been identified in motives for engagement and sharing on social media results of physical activity (Klenk et al., 2017; Lauderdale et al., 2015). Also, while women are more likely to use social media to maintain existing relationships, men tend to use it to look for new ones (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012).

Research on how people engage with the technicality and the imaginaries of apps, incorporating them into their daily lives, has also shown that mobile application grammars and platform politics can limit users' identity performances. Digital technologies regulate and control the appropriations that are made of them (Correa et al., 2010). As technology produces meaning, subjectivity, and agency, digital practices are linked to the technicity and imaginary of the social environments in which they are used, impacting everyday practices (boyd, 2015).

Social media platforms' role in constructing gender has been studied (Schwartz & Neff, 2019; Semenzin & Bainotti, 2020). Platform affordances are said to be essential in shaping users' behaviors in that they enable or constrain certain actions structurally embedded in gender power relations. In their analyses of sex-for-rent schemes that have emerged on online sites as rental options and interviews with women who were or had been in these arrangements, Schwartz and Neff (2019, p. 2417) contend that platform affordances, like in the case of Craigslist, "allow relationships to incubate in low-risk anonymous settings before progressing toward

higher risk in offline contexts for negotiation." They contend that it is thanks to affordances that the intentions, the identity, the heteronormativity, and the authenticity of the posters are tested before the real encounter occurs. Also offering a focus on how gender interacts with technological design, Semenzin and Bainotti (2020) explain how technology features act in Telegram's role in the non-consensual diffusion of intimate images. The sense of anonymity, the weak regulation, and the possibility of creating "large male communities" are seen as gendered affordances that orient male participants' harassment behaviors and contribute to the reinstatement of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, digital objects are considered sociocultural artifacts shaped by power relations (Lupton, 2019), just as, a few decades ago, the design of material objects was seen as shaped by the gender of the envisioning user (van Oost, 2003).

Gender Scripts

The study of the importance of gender in people's lives contributes to an understanding of its socially constructed nature. When the word "gender" is enunciated, there is an implicit reference to a set of components such as gender identity, that is, one's own sense of their gender, sexual orientation, or gender roles, meaning, expected behaviors based on assigned gender, which intersect with issues of race, sex, class, ethnicity, and religion of discursively constructed identities and which legitimate themselves as a system of social relations of domination and subordination (Simões & Amaral, 2022).

Interested in questioning how gender and sexuality are constructed in practices of media production and consumption, feminist scholarship has been highlighting the importance of identifying dominant ideas and discourses and how those symbolic materials are outcomes of social arrangements that legitimate an essential division of society (Silveirinha et al., 2019; Simões, 2018; Simões & Silveirinha, 2019). As digitization took place, concerns have also been directed to the gendered dimension of human embodiment and humans' relational practices with technology.

From a feminist new materialist perspective, the dynamics of people's engagement with other people and objects are profoundly productive (Bennett, 2010; Haraway, 2016; Lupton, 2019). The idea is that when people use digital technologies, they are not just consuming prevailing ways of thinking. They are also sensing, feeling, and embodying affective assemblages of matter, thought, and language (Lupton, 2019) and generating agential capacities and rationales to make sense of what it means to be and behave like a man and a woman. From this approach, far from being given, gender is a recurring accomplishment interconnected with specific social arrangements and the power relations they enact. Seeing gender as a situated doing (West & Zimmerman, 1987) has long ago shifted the attention from individual internal properties to interactional and institutional arenas. A feminist new materialist perspective has the potential to

direct concerns for more-than-human interactions, allowing us to understand the role of the affordances of both human bodies and technologies in the wider sociocultural and technological context.

Early feminist discussions on the emergence of new communication and information technologies have highlighted the importance of issues of identity and agency to point out to ICTs' potential to transform patriarchal scripts and masculinist bias (Haraway, 1991; Plant, 1997). After the turn of the century, as the internet provided unparalleled opportunities for new forms of politics and new drawbacks and struggles, more cautious views contested this liberatory promise of new technologies. Wajcman's (2004) technofeminism put forward how technology is simultaneously a source and effect of gender relations, reinforcing the need for a continuous deconstruction of patriarchy in technologically mediated interactions.

While maintaining the fluidity of gender, the gender script approach helps highlight how technological systems are gendered in binary masculine/feminine ways, often reflecting prevailing notions of gender identity and stereotypes (van Oost, 2003). Research has shown how hegemonic gender scripts guide individuals to recognize situations and behave appropriately (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). The gender script is embedded in representations of gender relations and identities inscribed into technology by designers. Users can negotiate, adopt, challenge, or reject it through their performances (van Oost, 2003). However, gender scripts function on an individual, symbolic, and structural level, constraining the possibilities for action to certain scripts.

Focusing on romantic and sexual connections, the concept of the "heterosexual script" (Kim et al., 2007) comprehends the sexual double standard, meaning that men tend to want sex while women are more willing to establish sexual limits. It also includes unequal courtship strategies: While men attract women with power, women attract men through beauty and sexiness. Different commitment strategies are also in the package, consisting of men avoiding and women prioritizing commitment. Different app appropriations may lead to conforming or defying these scripts and to different ways of (re)negotiating sexual and gender identities. From this framework, apps may or may not favor new conditions of engagement in gender politics according to how people use apps, engage with their technicality, and interact with other users (Simões & Amaral, 2022). Either way, a critical perspective on apps' cultural meanings concerning gender directs attention toward the body as a site of regulation inscribed in broader cultural, social, and political structures.

Some studies show that the negotiations and renegotiations that young adults experience and make of gender and sexual identities in apps directly meddle with their cultures of intimacy and sexuality from a technological intrusion into people's everyday lives (Gillespie, 2014; Mollen & Dhaenens, 2018). Our study aims to deepen the understanding of how users' behaviors are guided and shaped by the

array of technological and sociocultural contexts through the interplay between their agency, the affordances, and the broader social structures.

Methodology

Following the tradition of using qualitative research in youth studies to explore young people's subjective experiences and negotiations of everyday lives (e.g., Bennett et al., 2003), we adopted semi-structured interviewing to examine the meanings ascribed to daily individual practices and experiences with mobile apps. We aimed to identify the identity negotiations with technological affordances and broader social structures. In pursuing it, we explored the following research questions:

RQ1: How are gender identities produced through user experiences of mobile apps?

RQ2: To what extent do they reproduce, defy, or negotiate normative gender scripts?

From May to October 2022, we conducted 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews with young adults living in Portugal, aged between 18 and 30 years, who auto-defined as heavier users of mobile apps. The conceptualization of such an age group opposes most studies focused on people of those ages, which are either part of an aggregated idea of youth (with adolescence and even children) or of adulthood as a whole. Their sociodemographic characterization is presented in Table 1. Sixteen women and nine men were recruited primarily through a public call for voluntary participation in a 3-year research project on "mediated young adults practices: advancing gender justice in and across mobile apps," under which this study was conducted. Due to the difficulty in finding participants, we also used other strategies, namely invitation and snowballing techniques, which proved to have considerable limitations in accessing people with different social backgrounds. The sample comprises some diversity regarding age and occupation. Still, participants are mainly urban, educated, middle-class young people attending undergraduate and graduate program studies or having their first employment experience and identifying themselves as either male or female. They were located in different cities in Portugal and were given a choice of communication methods for the interviews, resulting in interviews being conducted electronically through Skype or Zoom. Online interviews conducted through platforms like Skype or Zoom facilitate real-time co-presence and interactivity between the interviewee and the interviewer (Lupton, 2020), allowing more reliable interview recordings, both in audio and video formats, with the interviewees expressing consent. Our research strategy relied on youth's self-reported experiences and practices on preferred apps and discourses on rejection of others, not solely on the uses per se.

Table 1. Summary of Interview Participants and Their Characteristics.

ID	Age	Occupation	Gender identity
P1	20	Graduate student	Female
P2	26	Working student	Female
P3	22	Graduate student	Female
P4	28	Master's student	Female
P5	28	Researcher/PhD student	Female
P6	29	Unemployed/PhD student	Male
P7	26	Master's student	Female
P8	26	Master's student	Male
P9	21	Graduate student	Female
P10	26	Working Student	Female
P11	24	Master's student	Male
P12	18	Graduate student	Female
P13	21	Graduate student	Male
P14	21	Graduate student	Female
P15	23	Master's student	Female
P16	29	Master's student	Male
P17	27	Unemployed	Female
P18	20	Working student	Female
P19	22	Master's student	Female
P20	25	PhD student	Male
P21	26	Master's student	Male
P22	27	Project manager	Female
P23	19	Graduate student	Female
P24	30	Lawyer/PhD student	Female
P25	21	Master's student	Male

Source: Authors.

That is why in-depth qualitative interviews were chosen to collect the data, following an interview guide designed to leave adequate space and flexibility for participants to answer questions on their own terms, allowing us to explore individual experiences and pursue the topics that participants opened up to (Brinkmann, 2018). Two of the authors carried out most of the interviews.

The main themes covered in the interview guide included personal backgrounds, which was also used as an icebreaker strategy; individual practices, which include consumptions and uses of apps over time; production of content (as prosumers); and imaginaries, which means perceptions of the purpose and meanings of uses, types of social relations and impression management on social networks, and concerns with connectivity and monitoring practices. Although some interviewees were less willing to immerse themselves deeply in their experiences, all were encouraged to describe and make sense of their accounts.

All interviews followed institutional review board guidelines and were recorded with the participant's permission and then transcribed and anonymized. Misedits from the 25 interviews were imported into MAXQDA 2020 for analysis using a coding scheme.

To examine our qualitative, empirical data, we resorted to the proposal of critical thematic analysis by Lawless and Chen (2019), an approach suitable for understanding the influence of power in the social construction of shared realities. Guided by the authors' framework (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 96), we identified patterned modes of making sense of individual practices within social media mobile apps while shedding light on how they relate to power relations invested in app affordances, people's practices, and the broader sociocultural context.

The analytical process was unfolded in two steps (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 98). The first started with open coding of different emergent themes from the data using Owen's (1984) three criteria for analyzing communication: (a) recurrence, (b) repetition, and (c) forcefulness. We paid attention in this phase to the participant's understanding of their practices and how those phenomenological experiences reveal patterns of meaning-making. Emergent themes included "connection," "mobility," "time spent," "pleasures," "disconnection," "participation," "encounters," "affordances," "authenticity," "anxieties," and "threats." In the next phase of close coding, we related the ideologies that repeat, recur, and were forcefully introduced in participants' discourses and clustered the emergent themes into three sets of themes: gender, time, and commodification; "time, gender, and commodification," "content consumption and female guilty pleasures," and "dating, gender scripts, and stigma." In what follows, we discuss these themes and their ideological function.

Results and Discussion

Time, Gender, and Commodification

As expected, participants' practices include ordinary uses of different types of mobile apps. However, social media, namely, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, and messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp and Messenger, are mostly mentioned as essential to keep connected and managing various aspects of everyday life. Staying in contact with acquaintances, immediate or extended family, and close or past friends and colleagues is described as the main driver to carry out activities and spend lifeworld time with mobile social media. Carried out through the smartphone, these activities, especially actives on Instagram and Facebook, translate a constant embodied engagement that favors, in some social platforms, connection and interaction with authenticity, in contrast with early social interactions in digital spaces, when users were likely to connect with people they do not know and experiment with fictional identities (Papacharissi, 2002). Also, the connection between the always-on communication devices and the human body ensures a constant presence that facilitates aggregate and instantaneous access to interpersonal communication, which is no longer asynchronous and uncoordinated as in writing

letters or emails but happens with immediacy. More importantly, permanent connectedness is seen as a condition of participation in everyday life, with several interviewees mentioning feeling pressure from peers to participate and the difficulty of giving up their uses or opting for alternatives without compromising full integration. “If you’re not there, if you don’t post on social media, you don’t exist,” said, for instance, a 21-year-old male bachelor student (P13).

Rooted in exploiting user-generated content, namely by collecting member data for sale to third parties with economic interests in surveilling their audiences, the corporations’ imperatives of popular social media help explain the role of technicity in attracting users (Cohen & Shade, 2008). Many participants express their manifest disposition to be permanently connected and available for different types of interpersonal relationships and the opportunity for, as a female 19-year-old participant stated, catching what is going on, and there is always something going on (P23). At the same time, however, they also express concerns with the “networked time,” in Burchell’s terms (2015), which is experienced with ambivalence. As a male 21-year-old admitted:

I feel that social media do not bring, for the most part, anything good (. . .). I’m not saying that they don’t have advantages, that’s not what I’m saying, but anyway, they cause addiction problems also the consumption of social media increased with the pandemic. It’s something I’d like to get rid of was the mobile phone, but I know it’s something that will stay, that it will be a little utopian to think about it. (P25)

Despite their complex engagement with app technicity, participant accounts stress the non-productive time spent or “wasted” at home, school, work, or on the go in a sometimes-addictive scrolling oriented by the platforms’ algorithms. Notably, the constant negotiation between the so-called valuable time and the time considered wasted with passive, non-productive uses is crossed by power dynamics. Shaped by neoliberal discourses and logics, in which citizens are subjects of market rationalities (Scharff, 2016), these young adults’ accounts of managing time overlook the deep monetization of these environments despite echoing processes of individualization, acceleration, and fragmentation and assumptions about what the appropriate behavior should be. This is also particularly evident in how participants cope with the tensions regarding time. Their perceptions of the constant and repetitive embodied engagement with technologies and their perpetual availability seem to reverberate gender performances entrenched in hegemonic representations.

Social media apps were primarily described by male participants in practical terms as organizational and professional tools that made life easier and, sometimes, profitable while also more stressful. As one male participant stated, referring to Facebook and Instagram:

For many, [social media] represent a way of earning money. I do not take anything from them, not a penny, so, for me, it is not so

interesting [spending much time on social networks sites] (. . .) Nowadays, we live in a capitalist world; you have to make money. So, I think people are there [in social media] for money or other things. (P8)

Female participants described their preferred apps more often in terms of entertainment, even if they use them to carry out actions similar to those of men. These discourses seem to defy board patterns of gender differentiation in technology uses (de Almeida et al., 2015). Research has suggested that, in adulthood, women tend to use online environments for activities related to sustaining social and family connections and responsibilities. In contrast, men favor gaming and other entertainment activities (Ahrens, 2013). Female participants’ accounts thus suggest that when the boundaries between the “responsible” use and more playful one seem to blur, guilt emerge to re-establish what may be seen as the broader gender script, which invites women to play specific roles oriented toward concrete purposes and leaves open to men the possibilities of creative practices. Therefore, young adult women express the most frustration and regret for the time they consider wasted by giving in to the invitation of app affordances for continuous scrolling on the newsfeeds. One female interviewee, a young graduate student of 20 years old, stated:

I know it is more [time] than it should be. It has been for a really long time. Sometimes, I realise an hour has passed, and I am still scrolling, and I am not seeing anything interesting, and I’m there, watching. In trains, too, it happens. In transportation, in different places, much time of a lifetime is spent there [in social media]. (P1)

While most participants were unable to envision their daily lives without mobile apps, and social media was seen as mandatory to be included in social activities and peer groups, their accounts also reveal how apps have affected their social relations in ambiguous ways, allowing them to maintain and develop relationships while at the same time increasing anxiety with time-wasting and accountability. Most significantly, how users face this tension gave way to different gender performances entrenched in gender scripts.

Content Consumption and Female Guilty Pleasures

Female participants’ accounts seem also more entrenched in a broader culture of consumption, focusing on appearance, validation, and peer scrutiny. As already mentioned, apps are used by participants to perform everyday routines, such as arranging meetings and providing immediate replies, but also to navigate in more semi-premeditated ways, such as sneaky surveillance of others’ profiles, on Facebook and Instagram, or nurturing faith in so-called micro-celebrities (Khamis et al., 2017), for whom self-branding equate the promotion of expectations that can be

met with the consumption of goods and services. Many women said they felt compelled to use social network sites for these practices, in part seen as normalized ways of catching “what is going on in others’ lives” (P15, 23 years old), partly recognized as a somewhat complicated problem. Some feel resented for embracing these “guilty” pleasures, as Turkle (2012) named it, as these were time-consuming and stressful and ultimately created degrees of disruption in daily life.

These practices can be traced back to social media technological affordances, which have been said to encourage profile-checking and voyeurism (Ito et al., 2010; Marwick, 2012). However, understanding how users act also requires paying attention to the patterns of social behaviors, which reveals a complex picture between participants’ understandings of social network sites as entrenched in appearances and withdrawn from reality and their feelings resulting in constant exposure to an environment centered on normative aesthetics and lifestyles. Furthermore, similar to what happens in mainstream media (Silveirinha et al., 2019; Simões & Silveirinha, 2019), in social media, the discourses are aligned with gender scripts, assigning limited roles for young women as agents. Reflecting on these tensions, P24 described how many of her friends fall into this trap:

The negative side is the social expectation that is created in relation to what people expose on social media, which, in reality, is a cut-out of their lives. I really try not to go that way; I don’t follow influencers; I am terrified of these things (. . .) It is a stimulus to unbridled consumption; it is a stimulus that may reverberate in a charge on a personal level to satisfy an expectation that the person thinks she has to meet because that starts to be placed for her as something to be achieved and desired. (P24)

These practices are overlooked in male participants’ descriptions of their experiences and perceptions. Within the same pragmatic logic mentioned previously, the men interviewed speak of Instagram, for example, as a valuable tool to quickly access certain pages of self-interest, such as “news pages” (P8) and “cultural and academic content” (P6) in more relaxed, albeit oriented, ways and to get the latest updates about events instantaneously, while keeping an eye on multiple and different contents and subjects.

Accounts of the types of consumption also illustrate gendered practices. In the discourses of young adult men, the content consumed is described as related to themes of “legitimate” value in contemporaneity, such as health, psychology, finance, art, and games, while young women more easily disqualify what they search and follow for its capacity to distract them from more, so-labeled, relevant themes. Some women speak of individual consumption with shame, especially when it seems related to femininity scripts regarding beauty, health, cooking, family, care, and relationships. A few female interviewees spoke about their guilty pleasures of

paying attention to what digital influencers they follow are wearing or the make-up they use and the videos with “cute things” (P1), with which they sometimes lost themselves and their focus. None speak lightheartedly, like P16, that consuming media content of “cute animals is always an easy way to produce endorphins in the middle of the day.” Just as with dealing with notions of time and time constraints in using apps, young adult women’s ways of coping with pleasures are impregnated with social patterns of behaviors. Facing it is described by young adult women in terms of control and self-discipline (Foucault, 1975) through practices that surface how gender interacts with people’s behaviors and expectations.

Interestingly, even when discussing uses that negotiate traditional world visions and challenge gender scripts, participants do it from assumptions around hegemonic values, including hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). This is the case of a male, 29 years old, explaining how he consumes much “life-hacking content” related to fatherhood. Social media is helping him to get knowledge oriented toward efficiency and productivity, previously constructed within a community of men whose authority in a traditional non-masculinity environment is normalized.

I am planning to have children in the next few years, so I am doing a preparation process, and I am looking at everything that fathers have already discovered and can be practical. (P16)

Dating, Gender Scripts, and Stigma

Dating app narratives exemplify how gender scripts influence the contemporary lives of the young adults interviewed. For most female participants, they do not allow themselves to be in these territories. Some describe platforms like Tinder or Bumble as “hook-up” spaces, where desperate, sexually awkward people turn to find fleeting encounters. Unlike men being more likely to engage in these activities, women embody the patriarch passive-submissive femininity, surfacing the “heterosexual script” (Kim et al., 2007), which comprehends the different but complementary behaviors women and men should follow in their romantic and sexual connections.

While the popularity they seem to have in the lives of young adult men, who speak with normality about their role in their past or current lives, including to surpass time and mobility constraints of meeting potential partners, women also recall how online matchmaking comes with several risks. Generally, for female interviewees, these apps are grounds for unsolicited sexual advances and harassment from strangers. For those with past experiences using Tinder, it is weird, superficial, and supports many disappointing experiences. First, because of the lack of authenticity, and second, in that “the purposes of both users are not the same,” as contended by a female, 22 years old, referring to how women are more likely to want to meet people, while men tend to seek frugal relationships of a sexual nature.

The few female participants that mentioned maintaining a profile on Tinder said they use it to establish first contact with new people, with whom they may exchange messages, but not on that app, where the danger of receiving non-solicited sexual images and suffering harassment is high, and, rather, on supposed more popular social media, like Facebook, where, also, they do not simply dismiss someone based on visual traits. As a female participant, 27 years old, stated:

It is a way of checking whether people are really who they say they are. In other words, Tinder is very volatile, it's only good for [knowing new people] and that's it. Then we only want to get the hell out of there. (P22)

This tactic of Tinder instrumentalization can be seen as a practice of power and resistance (Foucault, 1978). In other social media, users can more easily verify the person's authenticity and gain an impression before considering going on a date.

Dating apps combine technology with changing relationship cultures to provide easy-to-use experiences designed to keep users engaged with the application (Fansher & Eckinger, 2021). Once a user has their profile set up on Tinder, they are immediately shown photos of possible prospective matches. The user can "slide" to the right or to the left, depending on whether they are interested or not in the person. Sliding to the right, people form a match and can exchange messages. The very construction of identity in the app environment is contingent and strategic, used by the dating app algorithm to create groups of users and make matches more likely (MacLeod & McArthur, 2019). It is not surprising, then, that even more subversive practices and representations embody hegemonic reasoning. Referring to Tinder users, Comunello et al. (2021) say people adhere to and partially reframe traditional and stereotypical gender scripts. What they do not do is perform gender in alternative ways. Equally, data in the current study show how users' descriptions regarding dating apps, how they use them or why they do not, are especially entrenched in power and resistance tactics without challenging traditional patriarchal structures.

Conclusion

In this study, we were interested in shedding light on the power relations in which digital practices are embedded. Despite the performance of contra-hegemonic gender scripts, results show pervading depictions of gender-normative behaviors among the participants, who do not perceive their practices as embedded in power dynamics. Platform affordances encourage conformation with hegemonic scripts, and users' accounts of their experiences and behaviors, while not a product determined by technology, overlook the complexities of young adults' lives and their multiple subject positions. In performing normative gender scripts rather than

seizing the opportunities to rescript identity performances, participants are culturally reifying hegemonic relational behaviors. Our empirical study thus enlightens how the social context is reinforced by technicity, which itself is embedded in the social context, in a dialectical relationship inscribed in gendered power relations.

Social media and mobile apps have revolutionized how young adults interact, communicate, and express themselves. Social media platforms allow young adults to connect with peers, expand social networks, and maintain relationships. Issues like shallow connections, online disinhibition, and the tendency to seek validation through social media apps can impact the development of meaningful relationships. Furthermore, mobile apps offer young adults a space for self-expression and identity exploration. Nevertheless, findings indicate that young adults use mobile apps to curate their digital identities, constructing narratives about themselves through a culture of commodification and immediacy that leads to permanent connectedness. This screen time, also named "networked time" (Burchell, 2015), runs on a continuum that causes anguish and stress and is often identified as non-productive, wasted, and passive. However, results show ambivalence in understanding this temporality, which refers to the neoliberal logic of the platforms whose algorithms enhance individualization, acceleration, and fragmentation processes. Furthermore, the platforms potentiate an embodied engagement that generates tensions in how users decode the notion of time and (re)negotiate it.

The limitations of this study focus on the fact that the sample is predominantly urban and with high educational qualifications. Another limitation of the sample is not being able to include non-binary people, as all the volunteer interviewees identified their gender on traditional binary terms, as being a man or a woman. Future research should explore how young and gender-diverse adults in rural areas interact with mobile apps to challenge or constrain gender scripts, examine the genderization of technological affordances of platforms, and analyze counter-hegemonic gender scripts in collective narratives published in social media.

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