Caring about queer-feminist artists on social media. Thinking with critical friendship

Sophie Lingg

Art Education Department, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Vienna, Austria.

s.lingg@akbild.ac.at (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0934-9415)

ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the challenging working conditions of queer-feminist artists on the social media platforms Instagram and Facebook, with a focus on gender-based violence, harassment, as well as automated discrimination carried out by the platforms and their algorithms. Based on interviews with five artists – Anahita Neghabat, Julischka Stengele, Natalie Assmann, Sophia Süßmilch, and Stefanie Sargnagel (based in Austria and Germany) – I analyse the platforms' categorisation and classification of content as "undesired", their opaque algorithmic rulings, and their practice of gaslighting users. Taking the artists' experiences seriously and linking them to (social) media studies and feminist theory on public space, epistemology, and friendship, I reflect on methodology and knowledge production: I explore how the various forms and impacts of gender-based violence and automated discrimination against queer-feminist artists on social media can, on the one hand, be made visible and be discussed without reproducing violence, and, on the other hand, be transferred into academic discourse using a caring approach to epistemology.

Keywords: queer-feminist, art, social media, gender-based violence, friendship, knowledge production.

Dates:
Received: 2025-04-08
Accepted: 2025-08-20
Published: 2025-10-17

Published by

SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2025/n39a16

Introduction

On social media, individuals assume the role of "followers".[1] They also become "friends"[2] at the push of a button – which may feel paradoxical given that much of the content and many accounts prioritise profit over genuine connection. In the realm of the arts, social media functions as a multipurpose tool: at times, it is a portfolio (in addition to or instead of a website), an experimental studio, a communication channel, an exhibition space, or an advertising platform. For artists, maintaining an active social media presence has become essential, and, as I argue in this text, it is queer-feminist artists and their content who often experience forced invisibility and targeted harassment. Yet even when aware of and personally affected by the various forms of discrimination, harassment and exclusion that are happening on the platforms, people continue to use them. This article addresses social media as a workspace – with a specific focus on Instagram and Facebook – and the ways in which the working conditions of queer-feminist artists in this medium, where boundaries between private and public, professional and friendship are blurred, can be critically analysed. My research questions are as follows: how can working conditions of queer-feminist artists on social media, which are characterised by invisible, unspoken, and non-transparent work and also affected by gender-based violence, be studied? As a researcher, how do I balance the study of queer-feminist artists' experiences on social media as a work sphere when I am not only friends with them on social media, but in real life, too?

Starting off from a long-term observation of artists' accounts I have followed, their content and their shared troubles with the platform regulations and other users became the starting point of my doctoral research at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, supervised by Elke Krasny. To investigate how queer-feminist artists make use of, work with and on social media, and are facing difficult conditions doing so, I conducted interviews with affected individuals – experts through experience. I talked to five artists based in Austria and Germany: Anahita Neghabat (@ibiza_austrian_memes), Julischka Stengele (@studio.stengele), Natalie Assmann (@natalie.assmann), Sophia Süßmilch (@sophia_suessmilch), Stefanie Sargnagel (@sargnagelstefe). These artists work across various media, including painting, photography, video, performance, writing, cartoons, and memes. Even if my interview partners are people from my personal "social bubble" and some of them have relatively "small" accounts,[3] their experiences represent collective problems that, beyond individualisation, belong to the realm of structural gender-based violence and have far-reaching effects on queer-feminist art and on the general public on social media. Because I know my interview partners personally and I am friends with them, I occupy a double position of researcher and friend. I encountered ethical questions in the course of this research (also regarding the methodological approach): it was necessary to find a balance

between scientific inquiry and standards on the one hand, and personal relationships on the other – I write in solidarity and think in critical friendship.[4]

For the artist interviews, I aimed to create an environment conducive to open and comfortable discussions about serious topics such as online harassment and discrimination. While topics varied per participant, each interview focused on three areas: discrimination linked to platform policies and guidelines, user-driven discrimination (e.g., direct messages, shitstorms, reporting), and the impact of these experiences on their individual platform use and observed changes in platform structure or users' behaviour over time. The audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews[5] were analysed with grounded theory as practiced in the social sciences and cultural studies (Clarke 2007:345). Grounded theory is used as a method for analysing qualitative research by coding the interviews to identify parallels and for more abstract forms of interpretation. Through repeated observation, the interview codes are combined into categories to further map variation within the content (Clarke 2007:346).

Social media as patriarchal sphere

When working on the platforms, artists 'socialise and get to know new art, do research, share their portfolios, perform, and of course promote projects' (Lingg 2023:84). Experience shows that their postings and their accounts can lead to criticism directed at queer-feminist artists due to aesthetics that are allegedly too 'revealing' and disturbing as well as threats of violence when they reach a big audience and/or when (often right-wing populist) media or politics address (rant about) their works (Lingg 2021:51).[6] Violence in the digital sphere 'is an integral part of the chain of violence from intimate violence to violent societal structures' (Saresma, Karkulehto & Varis 2021:222). Although platforms give users a voice, they are also the ones that give opportunities for harassing, insulting, and silencing (Are 2020:741). Harassment policies affect online behaviour and 'may have a chilling effect on women's participation in the public sphere both on and offline' (Marvick 2021:2). I describe social media as a patriarchal sphere.[7] I substantiate this claim with reference to the work of Argentinian-Brazilian anthropologist Rita Segato (2018:202) who studies the everyday nature of patriarchal violence that produces what she calls the 'pedagogy of cruelty' and has enormous consequences. She describes the effects of the normalisation of violence combined with a decrease of empathy; such forms of desensitisation promote the isolation of fellow human beings (Segato 2018:202).[8] This normalisation of misogynistic and sexistic behaviours happens in private relationships, at work, in public institutions, through films, music, in art and education and more, but also in public spheres. Segato's pedagogy of cruelty also manifests itself, in altered shapes, in digital spheres which perpetuate centuries of colonial, patriarchal, gender-

based violence, through behaviours such as hate messages, non-consensual "dick pics", threats from individuals or orchestrated groups, and rape fantasies,[9] as well as on the level of the technology itself – technology can never be viewed in isolation from the conditions of its establishment (Sollfrank 2020:12). These conditions manifest themselves at the level of code, development, use and maintenance, where discrimination and violence are programmed (Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018).[10] Starting from the technical side, Associate Professor of African American Studies Ruha Benjamin analyses how digital technology does not counter or eliminate racist prejudices and inequality, but on the contrary, reinforces and amplifies existing conditions of structural racism (Benjamin 2019:5). Using Twitter (now X) as an example, Benjamin (2019:23) states that the design of these platforms facilitates the 'gamification of hate' by shifting the responsibility onto individual users to report harassment, and describes how Twitter's largely passive stance towards the violent, hate-driven content of white supremacists in fact benefits the company's financial interests since 'more traffic equals more profit'. Benjamin's (2019:23) concept of 'gamification of hate' applies to Instagram as well: it is the companies behind the platforms – those who govern and make money from what is shared – their algorithms, automated tools and workers who – according to fixed criteria which in detail often remain unclear to the public – determine what content is considered compliant, non-harmful, and which kind of online expression and presentation is still acceptable or already hateful. Besides the phenomenon of users harming other users and the platform encouraging it, Segato's pedagogy of cruelty manifests itself also in the way the platforms treat their users. One of the key aspects of this is "shadowbanning": a form of content moderation that is used to prevent post(s) from being widely visible for followers and also non-followers (Cotter 2021:2). Influencers describe shadowbans as a mechanism that renders their accounts less visible, 'filtered out of Instagram's main feed, explore page, hashtags, reels and searches without notice' (Cotter 2021:6). Cotter (2021:9) discusses this phenomenon in regard to the experiences of influencers who are constantly at risk of being shadowbanned because they produce so-called borderline content – content that, as defined by Gillett, Stardust and Burgess (2022:7), 'does not technically breach platform terms of service or community guidelines, but which platforms consider, through covert and subjective decision-making, to be otherwise undesirable'. Cotter (2021:5) introduces the concept of 'epistemic authority' – exclusive access to data and functionality of algorithms – that enables, in the context of countering the shadowban phenomenon, what is termed as 'platform gaslighting, rooted in the opacity of algorithms' ('black box gaslighting'). Cotter (2021:9) shows how influencers are gaslighted in such a way that they themselves, against their knowledge of algorithms and their practical experience, accept the platform's claim that shadowbanning is merely an 'urban myth'. They adopt the narrative that it is their own responsibility when their content is less visible (Cotter 2021:12-13); although Facebook and Instagram have pursued an algorithm-driven strategy of reducing undesired content (Cotter 2021:9). In

addition, as shown by Gillett *et al* (2022:9), the platforms actively aim to maintain 'a persistent focus on individual "bad actors" as the cause of harms'. This corresponds to the isolation of fellow human beings described by Segato (2018:202): the platforms as 'consumerist form of enjoyment' isolate the individual and normalise the limitation of freedom of expression.

Social media as workspace: Forced invisibility and strategies

Queer-feminist art and artists' social media content is often classified as borderline content. As such, queer-feminist artistic works that, for example, engage with naked bodies, nudity and sexual expression, are affected by 'algorithmic overcapture' (Gillett *et al* 2022:7). To put it more precisely, queer-feminist artists working on social media face different forms of forced invisibility because the platforms' rules constrain artistic expression that features certain aesthetics, topics, body parts or actions – in the following paragraph I give two examples.[11] These invisibilities are imposed by the very structure of the platforms: the automated censorship as well as the community-based forms of censorship, which are introduced later in this text. While in the first case, it is automation, algorithms, and, additionally, human employees, that determine whether content goes against the platform's community guidelines, any individual user, too, can report content as not permitted and thus initiate a review process which may result in the content's deletion.

Some artists I interviewed recounted individual users or sometimes also groups going through their accounts to flag multiple posts to effect the removal of the artists' content and their accounts being sanctioned by the platform (this was stated by Neghabat (2024), Sargnagel (2023) and Süßmilch (2024)). Assmann experienced a severe case of sanctioning by the platform Instagram during her performance project *City of whores* (2021),[12] after the Austrian feminist print magazine an.schläge (issue VIII/2021) produced and published a cover that showed the project's artists nude. Already during the shoot for the cover photo and the layout process, the community guidelines of social media were taken into consideration so that the image could be shared safely by the magazine, the artists involved and the project participants.[13] With some delay, Assmann also shared the cover on her Instagram account and subsequently received a notification, informing her about the deletion of her account, which was executed shortly after. Two of Assmann's previously published posts had already been removed earlier, justified by a 'violation of the guidelines', which she believes impacted the deletion (Assmann 2023). She lost her account permanently, with all the followers and content from past years, meaning the loss of a broad network and documentation of various art- and activism-related individuals,

initiatives, and projects. On other Instagram accounts, however, said magazine cover is still visible. The artist Süßmilch has faced very similar issues concerning her visual content: although censoring vulvas with black bars, her post with two naked women, (one of them meeting contemporary western ideals of thinness, the other not) was the trigger for the notification saying her account could soon be blocked – the reason in this context was not nudity, but stated as 'because of initiating sexual contact' (Süßmilch 2024). Since her account has already been temporarily blocked once, such unclear procedures and arguments spark 'panic' (Süßmilch 2024). Panic is no exaggeration, as 'platformised visibility' is a very important part of artists' public visibility (Duffy 2020:104).

Another type of forced invisibility can be documented in the case of the artist Neghabat's practice. She describes everyday sexism and gender stereotypes in social and digital contexts. Since 2019, she has run the satirical Austrian meme account @ibiza_austrian_memes, critiquing right-wing populist politics (Neghabat 2021). Initially, the public assumed a 'team of boys' (Neghabat 2024) ran the account – since one woman could not be the host of a meme account, because 'Whiteness and maleness work as the default identities that define the culture of the Internet' (Noble & Tynes 2016:5). After revealing her identity in a TV interview, Neghabat noticed a rise in "mansplaining" and attempts to undermine the credibility of her work, with know-it-all comments, often alleging non-existent mistakes. Boosted by likes, these comments shifted focus from the meme's political educational content, undermining its credibility and her work. For instance, when she quoted the Austrian Parliament's website and adopted their wording in one of her captions, she was told by a male user – who was immediately backed by six other boys' "likes" on his comment – that she should refer to the national council not the parliament as the whole house as such (Neghabat 2024). In this and similar cases, she felt compelled to respond quickly, countering the (wrong) allegations with sources, regardless of length and time (Neghabat 2024).

Above experiences show that on top of the general tasks that queer-feminist artists need to carry out to maintain their account, there are many additional layers of work and care that are necessary in the patriarchal sphere of social media: a major one being the adaptation of one's content to the so-called community standards, for which – for instance on Instagram – nudity as such, including bare breasts or naked upper bodies that are considered as female, are inadmissible and therefore need to be censored through blurring, covering or changing poses (Süßmilch 2024). Similarly, explicit language has to be written with symbols, special characters, and changed punctuation in order to "censor" specific words (Assmann 2023; Neghabat 2024). On the other hand, there is also the necessary care for comment sections – as seen, for example, in the case of Neghabat's work. In general, feminism and queer-feminist art on social media is 'increasingly subjected to negotiations with the platform's conventions, aesthetics and

commercial logics' (Caldeira, Jorge & Kubrusly 2024:3). Consequently, many users adopt certain posting behaviours to enhance their visibility on the platform – one of these practices, "selfie-for-algorithm",[14] is mentioned as a strategy by some of the artists I interviewed (Sargnagel 2023; Süßmilch 2024). One artist describes working with this approach by using different poses that perpetuate hegemonic body aesthetics and sexualise bodies according to heteronormative standards and the male gaze in order to promote feminist gatherings or projects (Süßmilch 2024). The preventive measures for the uploaded content, comment-section-care, tedious communication with the platform, and the constant uncertainty about when another incident of discrimination from other users or another breach of "terms of use"[15] may occur enhances the mental load carried by queer-feminist artists.

Importantly, these issues result in an underrepresentation of content and forms of representation that are classified as unacceptable for various reasons on the platforms. Besides it potentially being a performance space, exhibition space, atelier, gallery, a shop, a social media account is also an archive: it stores information, on contemporary cultures as well as on art production. Because of – and by means of – the processes described in this section, social media exclude much queer-feminist art and expression. Not only queer-feminist artists themselves, but everyone – the social media "audience": the users and/or followers – is affected by the exclusion or the de-emphasising of queer-feminist content. It creates gaps, as it substantially decreases the representation of non-heteronormative perspectives in art, culture, participation, and knowledge. And this seems to be happening by default: not only did my interview partners (Assmann 2023; Sargnagel 2023; Stengele 2023; Süßmilch 2024) mention different kinds of discrimination practiced by the platform, the automated processes or the algorithm, also participants of other studies describe Instagram's algorithms as being 'racist, sexist and fat phobic' (Barbala 2024:5813). Art theorist and art educator Helena Schmidt (2024:126) outlines how images on social media are not neutral, but shaped by the platform itself with the help of prosumers,[16] a phenomenon she describes drawing upon art historian Irit Rogoff's (2002:25, cited by Schmidt 2024:105) term 'regime of specularity' describing 'who is privileged within the regime of specularity; which aspects of the historical past actually have circulating visual representations and which do not; whose fantasies of what are fed by which visual images?'. By disseminating images that fit into these regimes, 'visual dominances' are created that in turn influence representations and collective memories (Schmidt 2024:101). Applied to the problematic workspace of social media, it seems very clear that queer-feminist content is not privileged within the 'regime of specularity' regulated by excluding community guidelines and terms of use (Rogoff 2002:25, cited by Schmidt 2024:105), but rather being suppressed and forcibly made invisible by it.

Social media and knowledge: Questions of censorship, injustice and friendship

Systematic exclusion of *FLINTA**[17] artists is not a new phenomenon. The systematic exclusion of artists from art history has been analysed by feminist art historians since the 1970s, for instance by Linda Nochlin or Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat (Krasny 2020:89). The same system, historically, excluded artists from the Global South systematically (Gerschultz 2020:132). Until now, artistic work is exhibited in museums, galleries, and various exhibition spaces that are characterised by (also gendered and racialised) injustices and follow the logic of hetero-patriarchy. Also, the current art market is a system that only works when a few individuals benefit from the exclusion of an 'unsuccessful' majority (Sholette 2011:3). Similarly, access to a studio – as a hybrid space for work and showcase – is not equal for all: for many it is not affordable, or logistically not manageable to work away from home.[18] In this context, it needs to be taken into account how the field of the arts is characterised by a lot of "grey areas". Many problematic interactions, cases of gender-based discrimination, and sexual assaults take place in the liminal space between professional contact and informal meetings. Against this backdrop, in the last decade, social media has appeared as a new space of self-determination for artists and activists with easy accessibility, manageability, and apparent flexibility in terms of time and space. Accounts on social media appear as a necessary addition to being one's own curator, making one's work and process accessible to the public, and challenging the common exclusions.[19] But this allegedly autonomous space does not come without new forms of exploitation and injustices. The experiences of the interview partners led me to the analysis of new forms of censorship, they stimulated an engagement with questions of epistemology and injustice, as well as with the term "friendship" and how friendship could be connected to epistemology. Shadowbans and deletions and other forms of forced invisibility – of exclusion – of queer-feminist artistic works, queer-feminist forms of artistic expression, and queer-feminist subjects result in an overall underrepresentation across social media – they cause an epistemological gap.

In her book *Bildzensur* (*Image Censorship*) (2022), art historian Katja Müller-Helle, describes new forms of censorship on social media.[20] Moving away from 'classic' censorship executed by states or religions ('formal censorship'), (social) media companies and conglomerates practise 'informal censorship' that can be divided into 'top down censorship' – human and non-human actors moderate content – and 'censorship from the bottom', i.e. by users' reporting and community flagging (Müller-Helle 2022:21). The criteria for resulting deletions and suspensions of content or accounts are not being made transparent to the public (Müller-Helle 2022:16) – in order to maintain 'epistemic authority', as Cotter (2021:2) puts it. According to Müller-Helle (2022), the act of digitally removing content is

increasingly being used as a political tool, often without needing much justification in specific cases, and it can easily be misused. The at times discriminatory rules applied by social media platforms lead to the concealment of certain realities. Non-transparent processes of 'informal censorship' (Müller-Helle 2022:16) have hence become an instrument of epistemological power – making queer-feminist artists' work on these platforms important contributions to the struggle against exclusion of non-heteronormative, non-patriarchal knowledge production. Regarding LGBTQIA+ users and their content, posts are often being wrongly construed as pornography, which leads to the blocking and censorship of users, and consequently to people being cut off from their communities. To prevent this, artists (and others) adopt 'sophisticated practices of self-censorship' (Müller-Helle 2022:11). Photos and videos are given black bars (Stengele 2023; Süßmilch 2024) or 'Barbie Ken- and Barbie-style' (Süßmilch 2024) with skin-coloured areas of paint over nipples, genital areas or "butt cracks" (Stengele 2023; Süßmilch 2024). Furthermore, self-censorship occurs in photo sessions, when bodies are rotated so that certain body parts are not visible, especially if the image is used for advertising and must also be published and shared by institutional accounts, without jeopardising their social media (Süßmilch 2024). Linguistic censorship can be censoring with numbers and other special characters so that the content is still readable (Assmann 2023; Neghabat 2024).

To further comprehend the difficult conditions of social media as a (work)space for queer-feminist art(ists) – and the difficulty of speaking about and analysing them – it is useful to draw on the concepts of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice put forward by British philosopher Miranda Fricker (Toopeekoff 2020; Fricker 2007). According to Fricker (2007:1), injustice in knowledge transfers can occur due to prejudice and questioning someone's expertise; she defines this as 'testimonial injustice'. Injustice due to a lack of awareness for an unjust situation by the affected person themselves as well as inadequate vocabulary to address the issue, on the other hand, is what she defines as 'hermeneutical injustice' (Fricker 2007:1). Both cases, testimonial and hermeneutic injustice, can be observed in certain aspects of my research – the first one for example when Süßmilch (2024) describes how her surroundings, acquaintances and friends trivialise her experiences of online discrimination or how sometimes the artist's perspective on the topic is seen as an individual experience or sentiment rather than a knowledge based on years of practice. Here again, the focus is on individual bad actors (Gillett 2022:9). Artists' troubles are considered as an avoidable as well as individual problem rather than a structural one (Lingg 2021:54f). This testimonial injustice corresponds to Cotter's (2021:12) notion that platforms gaslighting influencers who are affected by shadowbans are manipulated until they themselves reinterpret and adapt their experiences and practical knowledge. On the other hand, all of the interviewed artists acknowledged in the interviews that they have rarely talked about or reflected on certain aspects of their experiences on social

media as workspace-related conditions – this corresponds to hermeneutical injustice: there is a lack of awareness, of a clear acknowledgment of social media as a workspace for artists. Instead, sharing and creating content as a queer-feminist artist is understood as voluntary, it is neglected as a space of artistic work, important interaction, and source of income.

Feminist tending and applied epistemological care

Art historian Jessica Gerschultz (2020:143) reflects on feminist methodologies and 'feminist tending' by acknowledging the importance of 'tending to personal touches, cultivating relationships of trust and caring for what is vulnerable or fragile'. Since the artist interviews in my research were partly shaped by our being friends with one another, I want to bring the concept of friendship to this discussion. According to political scientist María do Mar Castro Varela and sociologist Bahar Oghalai, friendships can be understood as political, often taking place in what they call 'small spaces' (*kleine Räume*) – not public spheres in the classical sense, like streets and squares, but more private or semi-private spaces, like cafes or park benches, but also living rooms, kitchens, or bedrooms (Castro Varela & Oghalai 2023:16). These small spaces enable conversation settings in which political outrage may be channelled or fostered (Castro Varela & Oghalai 2023:16) – and often it is friends who use these small spaces to imagine a world in which all forms of fragile relationships between individuals and the surroundings are taken seriously (Castro Varela & Oghalai 2023:17): one could argue that friendship, with its critical and political potential, gives epistemological relevance to the fragile. The approach of primarily listening to their experiences and embedding them within queer feminist discourse on art and education, curating, and art history resonates a lot with the notion of taking seriously fragile relationships and surroundings (Castro Varela & Oghalai 2023:17). On the level of a queer-feminist artist's account, social media with all its (inter)actions and relationships could itself be called a fragile sphere – there is a constant risk of harassment, violence, discrimination and injustice.

With this in mind, I want to give more insight into the interview situations and the specific challenges and questions that became apparent. To this end, I would like to introduce Elke Krasny's (2023:143) concept of 'epistemology of care' and discuss how it is shaped both by method and its outcome. Krasny (2023:143) understands epistemology of care as a means to overcome the 'epistemology of thought', which is 'the primacy of individual consciousness'. Epistemology of care, in contrast, 'starts from the primacy of interdependency in life-making needs'; it is thus a form of knowledge generation and knowledge gain that, drawing on care feminism,[21] operates beyond theoretical individual

concepts and thinking, and centres on caring for communal needs (Krasny 2023:143). Krasny (2023:142) refers to curating; in the curatorial context, epistemology of care means a switch of roles: curators are no longer in the role of mere authors but engage with the role of carers who understand curating as a form of care feminism and a mode to work together – in the exhibition and museum with visitors – to collectively uncover systemic effects. Applying this to my research setting, I replace 'curator' (Krasny 2023:142) with "researcher", 'museum and exhibitions' (Krasny 2023:142) with "research, analysis, writing and education" and 'visitors' (Krasny 2023:142) with "artists, interview partners, friends, followers". Thus, for an epistemology of care in the realm of art on social media, the research process, including the interview settings as well as the editing of the raw material, is a way of working together with interview partners to overcome the role of the researcher as sole analyser. The research process is understood as an opportunity for participation – as opposed to mere extraction of information.

In my research, epistemology of care means, in a first step, providing a lot of information on the research topic, a questionnaire, and offering directories for the interviews in advance. Because I intend to continue working with the interview transcripts for my PhD thesis as well as in my teaching – meaning they will eventually be published – they need to be treated with appropriate care. When I started working on them, I noticed that due to the amicable atmosphere, all of us spoke and shared very openly and in much detail. Therefore, after the first transcription, the participants received their transcribed statements for approval. This gave them the opportunity to review whether they wanted to make any adjustments to the statements or language – statements that might have been made too straightforwardly, or too detailed or personal for a transfer into knowledge production. Some of the artists shared very emotional experiences or names of colleagues, key figures, or other persons in their networks;[22] everyone, including myself, shared violent experiences, too, and sometimes coarse language was used. The interviews showed that regarding the matter of discrimination and gender-based violence in all its aspects in daily work on social media, working with friends can provide important insights into otherwise less observed forced invisibilities: with friends, it is possible to create a setting resembling Castro Varela's and Oghalai's (2023:16) 'small space', cultivating trust and 'caring for what is vulnerable' in Gerschultz's (2020:143) sense. Concerning the topic of violence, applying epistemology of care is especially important – in relation to the artists as interview partners, but also in educational processes that involve working with groups of people on this topic. Because my aim is to not reproduce the violence inherent in the artists' experiences, I want to refrain from merely retelling individual experiences of violence in a lurid manner, and instead emphasise the systematic dimension of hate messages, stalking incidents, and sexualised violence online. In some cases, I noticed that my interview partners had not yet for themselves fully established this perception and understanding of social media as a workspace that perpetuates different forms of

discrimination. The testimonial and hermeneutic injustice had to be overcome – we used the interview to unfold the complexity of these issues together.

The caring approach to epistemology and knowledge production may also be significant in order to reach people outside of academia, to find ways of talking about this kind of research outside of academic papers and conferences – to find strategies for sharing discussions and knowledge with broader communities.[23] The question of knowledge (in) accessibility is especially important when those communities which are the subject matter of the research could themselves benefit from it (Dickson 2021:211): bringing knowledge into direct connection to everyday thoughts, reflections, and lived realities can contribute to solidarity and collaborative understanding (Dickson 2021:211).

Conclusion

The case studies I conducted, contextualised with the theories discussed, generated knowledge about and awareness for the working conditions of queer-feminist artists on social media, and the forms of gender-based discrimination and even violence they face while working on Instagram and Facebook. The artists recounted problems with the platform and its automated forms of censorship, in reaction to which they work with new forms of self-censorship, in order to (attempt to) comply with the opaque algorithm-driven rules of the platforms. Voluntarily leaving the platforms is described by the artists as unrealistic for different reasons, as they are important for everyone to keep in touch with the world, in terms of publishing and promoting their own work, professional opportunities, as well as in relation to the work of others and as inspiration. Although the frameworks of platforms have become normalised as status-quo, it is crucial for all of us to reflect on these forms of discrimination, as they potentially could affect any queer-feminist, anti-patriarchal account at any time.

The issues surrounding queer-feminist artists' working conditions, harassment, and discrimination against must be made more visible and more accessible in order to become valuable to the queer-feminist community, support artists, and ideally draw the attention of art institutions to contribute to improving these working conditions. To explore them, it must be acknowledged that those directly affected have a lot of practical knowledge about it which is often unjustly neglected – in order to broaden this knowledge, I argue for the importance of an approach of epistemological care. Both the working conditions for queer-feminist artists on social media and my research on this topic open up epistemological questions concerned with knowledge production itself: when researchers are not positioned outside of the research but involved with its subjects and subject matter, they require caring means for gaining and transferring knowledge to try and avoid

extractivist, individualistic knowledge production. On this level, I aim to share my approach to research that is done in critical friendship and recurrent exchange. Consequently, I put forward the idea of an epistemology of care that connects to the notion of friendship as bearing political and critical potential – in the context of social media's ambivalent usage of "being friends" – and as a part of knowledge production and community-based research. Although the rulings of platforms have become normalised as the status-quo, it is crucial to reflect on them. Increasing awareness of the complexity of social media as a workplace in the field of art, and especially for queer-feminist perspectives, is a necessary first step in the discussion about diverse visual languages on the big platforms.

Notes

1. Social media platforms connect users either symmetrically (both users follow each other and see their content) or asymmetrically (one-way following) (Lee & Yuan 2020:1).
2. The term "friend", popularised by Facebook, is now used across platforms like TikTok ("friends only"-account setting), Snapchat (followers are "friends"), and Instagram ("close friends").
3. As of December 2024, follower counts range from 89,700 (Stefanie Sargnagel) to 1,354 (Natalie Assmann).
4. The research is in accordance with The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and approved by my PhD supervisor. All interview partners gave written consent to take part in the research, to the use in associated published outcomes and further teaching. I provided them with a consent form that detailed the interview situations and specified which use of data will be permitted.
5. Semi-structured interviews are based on interview guides with a set of questions that should be used with flexibility to give the interviewees space to share their experiences (Flick 2018:42).
6. Artist Süßmilch faces frequent harassment from conservative and anti-feminist groups and individuals while using social media as performance space, to show and promote works (Lingg 2021; Monopol Magazine 2024). Similarly, Austrian dramaturge and choreographer Florentina Holzinger's opera *Sancta* faced online and away-from-keyboard threats against the production and individual actors and performers after tabloids reported falsely about audience reactions (Krafeld 2024).
7. For more on social media as patriarchal sphere affecting queer-feminist artists, see Lingg (2024).
8. Segato (2022:20) further elaborates on this.
9. There were indications of forms of assault mentioned in the artists' interviews, but only Süßmilch elaborated in detail.
10. Professor of Gender Studies, African American Studies, and Information Studies, Safiya Umoja Noble in *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018) analyses Google Search and how its profit-driven algorithm reinforces racialised and sexualised bias and discrimination and calls for a re-evaluation (Noble 2018:5). The re-evaluation of the usage of such corporate platforms also includes governmental and general institutions like schools and libraries (Noble 2018:5).
11. Despite Meta's stated exemption for artworks, images of nudity in art are removed, even when aligned with the guidelines (Di Liscia 2021).

12. The show *City of whores* (F23 Vienna, directed by Natalie Assmann) accompanied the Vienna Sex Work Conference (http://www.natalieassmann.com/city-of-whores-red-rules-vienna). Assmann mentions using symbols and special characters on social media to avoid bans of explicit content.

13. Unauthorised body parts were not visible or covered with text (Assmann 2023).

14. "Selfie-for-algorithm" refers to posting selfies to boost one's visibility. How social media culture and its aesthetics enter the artworld is analysed in Sophie Bishop's (2023) study-based essay "Influencer creep: How artists strategically navigate the platformisation of art worlds".

15. Vague community guidelines make it unclear how to avoid future violations (Assmann 2023; Stengele 2023; Süßmilch 2024).

16. Schmidt uses it as a fusion of the words 'producer' and 'consumer' (Schmidt 2024:126).

17. German abbreviation for women, lesbians, intersex, non-binary, trans and agender people.

18. For an analysis of the studio through the lenses of geography, gender, history, and politics, see Lenka Štěpánková's (2025) PhD on artists and their studios.

19. Social media is also important for online community organising and exposing injustices. Local initiatives like Vienna's @catcallllsof.vie, who collect and share stories of sexual harassment, together with @niunamenos.austria, obtained that the city government of Vienna removes a mural by a convicted sexual abuser (Pausackl 2024).

20. The vocabulary she shares helps conceptualise forms of censorship and the complexities on social media: 'pre-censorship', 'post-censorship' and 'anticipatory self-censorship' (Müller-Helle 2022:14), 'formal censorship' and 'informal censorship' (Müller-Helle 2022:16), 'top down censorship' and 'censorship from the bottom' (Müller-Helle 2022:21).

21. Care feminism, as defined by Krasny (2023:142), includes feminist practices and theories that build 'on care as consciousness, centre interdependency, interrelatedness, reciprocity, mutuality, and communality as they seek to decentre thinking of the human as the sole recipient or even the sole agent of care'.

22. For some feminist activism it is important to name and call-out perpetrators that take part in systemic violence. In this interview-setting, artists were not asked to name individuals, therefore names that were mentioned are not in the centre of attention.

23. Feminist media scholar Caroline Are (2020:742-743) ends her essay "How Instagram's algorithm is censoring women and vulnerable users but helping online abusers" with a list of suggestions for everyday solidarity actions by users and for changes in social media governance, including regular check-ins with accounts, or 'breaking-up monopolies of social media giants'.

References

Are, C. 2020. How Instagram's algorithm is censoring women and vulnerable users but helping online abusers. *Feminist Media Studies* 20(5):741-744. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1783805

Arkenbout, C, Wilson, J & De Zeeuw, D (eds). 2021. *Critical meme reader. Global mutations of the viral image*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.

Assmann, N, artist and theatre-maker. 2023. Interview by author. [Transcript]. 7 December. Vienna.

Barbala, AM. 2024. The platformization of feminism: The tensions of domesticating Instagram for activist projects. *New Media & Society* 26(10):5802-5818. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221141705

Benjamin, R. 2019. *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the New Jim Code.* Cambridge, Medford & MA: Polity.

Bishop, S. 2023. Influencer creep: How artists strategically navigate the platformisation of art worlds. *New Media & Society* 27(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231206090

Caldeira, SP, Jorge, A & Kubrusly, A. 2024. "How can you be a feminist if you're always online?" Online activisms, ambivalence, and dis/connection. *Television & New Media* 26(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764241281693

Castro Varela, M & Oghalai, B. 2023. *Freund*innenschaft: Dreiklang einer politischen Praxis.* Münster: Unrast.

Clarke, A. 2007. Feminism, grounded theory, and situational analysis revisited, in *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis,* edited by S Hesse-Biber. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE:345-370.

Cotter, K. 2021. "Shadowbanning is not a thing": Black box gaslighting and the power to independently know and credibly critique algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society* 26(6):1226-1243. https:doi:10.1080/1369118X.2021.1994624

Dickson, N. 2021. Seizing the means: Towards a trans epistemology, in *Transgender Marxism*, edited by JJ Gleeson & E O'Rourke. London: Pluto Press:204-218.

Di Liscia, V. 2021. All these artworks have been censored by Instagram. [O]. Available: https://hyperallergic.com/665722/artworks-censored-by-instagram/ Accessed 31 December 2024.

Duffy, BE. 2020. Algorithmic precarity in cultural work. *Communication and the Public* 5(3-4):103-107. https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047320959855

Feminist internet research network (FIRN). 2024. [O]. Available: https://firn.genderit.org Accessed 31 December 2024.

Flick, U. 2018. *Doing grounded theory*. London: SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529716658

Fricker, M. 2007. *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gerschultz, J. 2020. Notes on tending feminist methodologies, in *Under the skin: Feminist art and art histories from the Middle East and North Africa today,* edited by C Özpınar & M Kelly. Oxford: Oxford University Press:131-143.

Gillett, R, Stardust, Z & Burgess, J. 2022. Safety for whom? Investigating how platforms frame and perform safety and harm interventions. *Social Media + Society* 8(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221144315

Gleeson, JJ & O'Rourke, E (eds). 2021. *Transgender Marxism.* London: Pluto Press.

Güleç, A, Herring, C, Kolb, G, Sternfeld, N & Solba, J (eds). 2020. *Vermittlung vermitteln Fragen, Forderungen und Versuchsanordnungen von Kunstvermittlerinnen im 21. Jahrhundert.* Berlin: NGBK Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst.

Hesse-Biber, S (ed). 2007. *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis.* Thousand Oaks CA: SAGE.

Husso M & Karkulehto, S & Saresma, T & Laitila, A & Eilola, J & Siltala, H (eds). 2021. *Violence, gender and affect. Palgrave Studies in Victims and Victimology.* Switzerland: Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56930-3_11

Krafeld, M. 2024. Übel. [O]. Available: https://van-magazin.de/mag/sancta-berichterstattung-hassnachrichten-shitstorm/ Accessed 31 December 2024.

Krasny, E. 2020. Archive, care, and conversation: Suzanne Lacy's International Dinner Party in *Feminist Curatorial Thought*. Zurich: ONCURATING.org.

Krasny, E, Lingg, S, Fritsch, L, Bosold, B & Hofmann, V (eds). 2021. *Radicalizing care. Feminist and queer activism in curating*. London: Sternberg Press.

Krasny, E. 2023. Care, thought, being: Curating with a wounded planet, in *Curating with care*, edited by E Krasny & L Perry Oxon: Routledge:141-150. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003204923

Krasny, E & Perry, L (eds). 2023. *Curating with care.* Oxon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003204923

Lee, Y-H & Yuan, CW. 2020. The privacy calculus of "friending" across multiple social media platforms. *Social Media + Society* 6(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120928478

Lingg, S. 2021 (ed). Caring curatorial practice in digital times, in *Radicalizing care. Feminist and queer activism in curating*, edited by E Krasny, S Lingg, L Fritsch, B Bosold, & V Hofmann. London: Sternberg Press:48-57.

Lingg, S. 2023. Caring curating and social media, in *Curating with care*, edited by E Krasny & L Perry. Oxon: Routledge:83-93. https://doi.org.10.4324/9781003204923

Lingg, S. 2024. Das Patriarchat macht Probleme. Social-Media-Accounts als Arbeitsraum und Zuhause. [O]. Available: https://sfkp.ch/artikel/das-patriarchat-macht-probleme-social-media-accounts-als-arbeitsraum-und-zuhause Accessed 31 December 2024.

Marwick, AE. 2021. Morally motivated networked harassment as normative reinforcement. *Social Media + Society* 7(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211021378

Meta Transparency Centre, adult nudity and sexual activity. 2025. [O]. Available: https://transparency.meta.com/en-gb/policies/community-standards/adult-nudity-sexual-activity/
Accessed 31 December 2024.

Müller-Helle, K. 2022. *Bildzensur: Infrastrukturen der Löschung*. Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach.

Neghabat, A. 2021. Ibiza Austrian memes: Reflections on reclaiming political discourse through memes, in *Critical meme reader. Global mutations of the viral image*, edited by C Arkenbout, J Wilson & D De Zeeuw. INC Reader #15. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures:130-141.

Neghabat, A, artist and social anthropologist. 2024. Interview by author. [Transcript]. 26 February. Vienna.

Noble, SU. 2018. *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism.* New York: New York University Press.

Noble, SU & Tynes, BM. 2016. *The intersectional Internet. Race, sex, class, and culture online*. New York: Peter Lang.

Özpınar, C & Kelly, M (eds). 2020. *Under the skin: Feminist art and art histories from the Middle East and North Africa today.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pausackl C. 2024. Diese Kunst kann weg. [O]. Available: https://www.zeit.de/2024/49/helmut-kand-kunst-sexueller-missbrauch-wien-entfernung
Accessed 31 December 2024.

Saresma, T, Karkulehto, S & Varis, P. 2021. Gendered violence online: Hate speech as an intersection of misogyny and racism, in *Violence, gender and affect. Palgrave Studies in Victims and Victimology*, edited by M Husso, S Karkulehto, T Saresma, A Laitila, J Eilola & H Siltala. Switzerland: Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56930-3_11

Sargnagel, S, artist and writer. 2023. Interview by author. [Transcript]. 10 November. Vienna.

Schmidt, H. 2024. *«Poor images» – arme Bilder? Digitale Visualitäten in der Kunstdidaktik*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Segato, R & McGlazer, R. 2018. A manifesto in four themes. *Critical Times* 1(1):198-211. https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-1.1.198

Segato, R. 2022. *Femizid. Der Frauenkörper als Territorium des Krieges*. Münster: Unrast Verlag.

Sholette, G. 2011. *Dark matter. Art and politics in the age of enterprise culture.* New York: Pluto Press.

Sollfrank, C (ed). 2020. Preface, in *The beautiful warriors. Technofeminist praxis in the twenty-first century.* Colchester & Port Watson: Minor Compositions:1-17.

Stengele, J, artist. 2023. Interview by author. [Transcript]. 8 November. Zoom.

Štěpánková, L. 2025. The identity of the studio as portrait of artists – the artist studio from a gendered perspective. PhD thesis, Prague Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design, Czech Republic, Prague.

Süßmilch, S, artist. 2024. Interview by author. [Transcript]. 6 January. Berlin.

The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. 2023. [O]. Available: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/european-code-of-conduct-for-research-integrity_horizon_en.pdf Accessed 12 August 2025.

Toopeekoff, J. 2020. Kunstvermittlung, Wissen und Glaubwürdigkeit Jelena Toopeekoff im Gespräch mit Julia Stolba, in *Vermittlung vermitteln Fragen, Forderungen und Versuchsanordnungen von Kunstvermittlerinnen im 21. Jahrhundert,* edited by A Güleç, C Herring, G Kolb, N Sternfeld & J Stolba. Berlin: NGBK Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst:38-52.