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Facebook as a public arena for women:
infringing on democratic ideals and a cause of worry
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FACEBOOK AS A PUBLIC ARENA FOR WOMEN: INFRINGING ON DEMOCRATIC IDEALS AND A CAUSE OF WORRY

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ABSTRACT

Facebook allows users to engage in public discourse. However, debates on social network sites are criticised for damaging democracy by adding to polarisation, limiting perspectives, and promoting a derogatory tone driven by emotion and personal conviction rather than facts. Research has thus far mainly focused on visible participation on Facebook, while the experience of this public space remains under-theorised. This study provides insights into women's user experience of Facebook as an arena for public discourse by conducting qualitative interviews with 30 female users of Facebook (aged 19-74) in Norway. The findings revealed interpretive repertoires based on deliberative ideals and negativity toward activities that do not adhere to such ideals. However, the results also indicated that worry was a key factor in negotiating these ideals and sometimes unintentionally replacing them with behaviours that may be harmful to public discussion.

Keywords: social network sites ▪ public discourse ▪ participation ▪ non-participation ▪ women ▪ democratic ideals ▪ Facebook

1.   INTRODUCTION

Social network sites (SNS) and Facebook are often discussed and referred to as public arenas in popular discourse by politicians and the news media. The research literature also frequently theorises them as such. While SNS have structures that allow users the same access and possibilities to take part, which might provide egalitarian arenas for public discourse, most researchers no longer believe they will revolutionise it (Neuman et al., 2011; Papacharissi, 2002; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Schäfer, 2015; Van Dijck, 2012). However, the general user experience of such spaces as potential public arenas is thus far under-theorised.

In their definition of public, Coleman and Ross (2010) make the distinction between visible as opposed to hidden. Most users of Facebook are not visibly active

in public discourse (Kushner, 2016; Malinen, 2015; Sun, Rau, & Ma, 2014). Visibility in this setting refers to activities such as posting or taking part in public discourse that others can observe and not hidden activities such as paying attention or discussing public issues in private chats. There is reason to believe that gender-based discrimination and privilege influence public participation on Facebook and that women's activity is flying under the radar. Research suggests that on SNS, women participate more in private acts of political participation (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2014). Additionally, they post fewer political statuses (Miller et al., 2015, 384-387) and strategically choose to engage in political behaviours that are "less visible or less-likely-to-offend" (Bode, 2017).

This study departs from everyday experiences of Facebook as an arena for public discourse. It aims to examine three main aspects: (1) what kind of 'public' arena Facebook represents for these Norwegian women, (2) how they experience others' communicative practices and participation on Facebook, and (3) considerations they have when participating in this public arena, including the effort or choices to not participate in a visible way.

The term public arena used in this study stems from Nancy Fraser (1992). Her criticism of Habermas claimed that the 'sphere' excluded many people, including women. For example, Iris Young (1989) argues that while the public realm is paraded as universal values and norms, it derives from specifically masculine experiences that excluded women due to its separation from the private sphere and the focus on dispassionate rationality and independence. Additionally, the focus on rational deliberation and agreement excluded struggle and contention to be part of the 'sphere'. Instead of one unified sphere, she argued that there are several competing public arenas (Fraser, 1992), and this study looks at Facebook as such an arena.

Public discourse is considered to include various dimensions of public life, such as political discussions, public exchanges of opinion, debates of societal relevance, civic engagement, and other non-labelled activities. The term 'public' has been said to 'connote ideas of citizenship, commonality, and things not private, but accessible and observable by all' (Papacharissi, 2002: 10). A broad interpretation of Facebook as a public arena is beneficial in this study since women are socially committed in ways not necessarily picked up in conventional understandings of public or political participation (Norris, 1991).

Since women's public commitment is often undetected, this study focused on their experience as users of Facebook. User *experience* has been described as 'a person's perceptions and responses resulting from the use or anticipated use of a product, system or service' and 'encompasses all the user's 'emotions, beliefs, preferences, perceptions, (…) behaviours and accomplishments that occur before, during and after use' (Mirnig et al., 2015).

As the literature review will demonstrate, research on social media tends to focus on visible activity, such as posting or sharing, and not on experience, cognitive effort, or considerations of users who participate in a way that cannot be observed. This

study employs an audience-centric perspective departing from these women's actual everyday experiences with Facebook as an arena for public discourse. The value of exploring user experience goes beyond examining visible participation. It addresses vague or non-labelled user activity and dispenses with the dichotomy of participation and non-participation, which visible and non-visible activity on SNS is often reduced to (Crawford, 2009).

This study was conducted in Norway, a society characterised by equal rights and freedom of speech (Freedom-House, 2018; Reporters-without-borders, 2019), and where 83 % of the adult population are users of Facebook (Statista, 2020), and 44 % report to use Facebook for news (Moe & Bjorgan, 2021). Nonetheless, Norwegians, in general, are not particularly active in online debates (Reuters, 2017), and even if women have equal rights and are represented in politics, online public participation is still found to be gendered (Enjolras, 2014).

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

This study aims to explore women's everyday experiences of Facebook as an arena for public discourse, comprising experiences of the arena itself, the experience of others' participation, and the experience of participating both visibly and not. Three aspects of the research literature are particularly relevant for this study, 1. the conceptualisation of Facebook as a public arena, 2. the conceptualisation of participation on Facebook, and 3. gendered communication differences in public participation.

2.1.   Facebook as a particular Public Arena

Facebook is frequently discussed as a public arena as users can come together and exchange ideas which include a plurality of voices and interests. According to boyd (2010), SNS are networked publics that 'are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice' (39). Conversely, both the social dynamics and the technical design of Facebook impact the conditions for taking part in this public arena, which in turn conditions the experience of Facebook as a place for public discourse. For example, users on Facebook have an unknown audience, and contexts may collapse into each other (boyd and Ellison, 2007), which is likely to trigger uncertainty and impact participation (Baym and boyd, 2012).

Discussing Facebook as a public arena is particularly challenging, as SNS enable users to move back and forth between unevenly distributed levels of personal and public topics (Burkell et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2015), and private spheres where users engage in public conversations privately – not behind closed doors, nor in full view of the public (Papacharissi, 2015). Wahl-Jorgensen provides a further distinction when she describes that SNS "challenges conventional divides between the private and the public, the individual and the collective, and the personal and the

political" (2019, p. 151). As such, Facebook can be described as an arena that can 'formalise and inscribe a heretofore informal discourse that was already part of the public sphere' (Van Dijck, 2012, p. 165).

Facebook is mostly seen as an arena for personal and social discourse rather than an arena for public debate (Sakariassen, 2020). Still, instances of deliberative exchange may occur, as these generally are embedded in non-deliberative forms of discourse (Wessler, 2019: 109).

Facebook may not be understood exclusively as a public arena, but it is an instrument for communication and may function as an arena for public discourse from time to time. However, recent research has questioned whether civil online public participation is attainable (Schäfer, 2015: 322), with public and academic attention focused on the derogatory tone of public discourse (Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017; Rost et al., 2016). Moreover, fragmentation (Bruns & Highfield, 2015), limited non-egalitarian active participation, and the unclear impact of such participation (Dahlgren, 2013) have also brought the question of whether SNS are meaningful as public arenas.

2.2. Participation and Non-participation on Facebook

There is an underlying tendency to consider public participation on Facebook necessary, as public participation is framed as a distinctly beneficial phenomenon in political literature (Jenkins, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Additionally, Facebook relies on user-created content where norms for participation, through posting or sharing, are built into the platform (Nonnecke et al., 2006). Non-participation is viewed as a lack of desired citizen activity in political literature (Jenkins, 2006; Putnam, 2000) and lurking on SNS (Crawford, 2009). However, non-visible activity should be counted as participation. The literature describes users who actively log in and engage online, contributing to the community by paying attention and providing a gathered audience, labelled as *listening in* (Crawford, 2009; Sun et al., 2014). Listening in involves considerable cognitive and emotional effort (Ewing, 2008) and may result from an active choice (Casemajor et al., 2015). Additionally, researchers have argued that having a voice is only meaningful when these voices are being listened to by others (Couldry, 2006).

There are several reasons why users do not visibly participate in the public environment of Facebook. One reason is the malicious tone in online discourse that generates the feeling of having less control and the need to shield oneself from potential attacks (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; boyd, 2008; Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Stroud et al., 2016). Online communication is frequently concerned with 'venting emotion and expressing hasty opinions' instead of rational debate (Papacharissi, 2002: 15), political discussions on Facebook are associated with rants and drama (Vraga et al., 2015), and numerous studies have observed comments that deny and disrespect opposing views (Hwang et al., 2018; Ruiz et al., 2010). Such behaviours are concerning, as they harm democratic values and favour polarisation (Anderson et al.,

2014). As expected, everyday political interaction on Facebook is defined by uncertainty, ambiguity, and a high level of variation in perceptions of what is appropriate (Thorson, 2014), and conversations mostly take place in private chats and less within the public spaces of Facebook (Sakariassen, 2020; Swart et al., 2018). In line with such findings, people are also less likely to voice a deviant opinion online (Neubaum & Krämer 2016).

2.3. Gendered Communication Differences in Political and Public Participation

Politics and public participation follow *societal structures of privilege and discrimination* and have traditionally been viewed as a masculine arena (Norris, 1991). Earlier research has, for example, found that women are less inclined to discuss political matters (Miller et al., 1999) and have fewer political discussions outside the privacy of their homes (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Such findings can partly be attributed to a gendered communication style (Burns et al., 2001; Cook et al., 2007; Suzuki, 2006). Additionally, research has found a gendered preference for certain types of communication, where women are found to prefer dialogue over debate (Costera Meijer, 2001). Dialogue is described as directed toward collaboration, problem-solving, and taking others seriously, while debate is the language of opposition, winning, and counterarguments. Many studies indicate the prevailing power of unequal structures, such as patriarchy, in the digital age (Yin & Yu, 2020). For example, a recent study suggests that there exists a gender gap in online public participation (Lilleker et al., 2021). While some have linked this to a hostile environment (Abendschön & García-Albacete, 2021), others argue that it is a product of women's political socialisation more so than the civility of the site (Peacock & Van Duyn, 2021)

Other researchers argued that women do not participate less but differently than men. Norris (1991) revealed how women were heavily involved in community associations, voluntary organisations, and protest groups. Women are, for example, found to participate more than men in civic participation and social activism (Verba et al., 1995; Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010). Moreover, research suggests that gendered dynamics involved in political participation or civic engagement are replicated on Facebook (Brandtzaeg, 2015). For instance, women are more likely to support humanitarian aid and environmental issues on Facebook than men but less likely to discuss institutionalised politics (Brandtzaeg, 2015). In addition, women are more likely to comment on or share personal topics, while men are more likely to post or comment on things of public interest (Wang et al., 2013). Recent research also suggests that women use private groups for support and discourse (Pruchniewska, 2019) or intentionally secret groups on Facebook to organise themselves (Van Duyn, 2020).

In order to understand women's experience of Facebook as an arena for public discourse, an encompassing concept of political, civic, and public participation is required. Furthermore, women's likely reluctance to participate in debate settings

must be considered. Therefore, Facebook should be considered an arena allowing both observable participation and participation through "listening in" (Crawford, 2009).

3.   MATERIALS AND METHODS

Thirty in-depth interviews with female Facebook users, which stemmed from two waves of data collection, formed the data for this study[1]. Appendix One contains an overview of the participants.

The first wave was a part of Media, Culture and Public Connection project (MeCIn). Participants were recruited through networks and snowballing to "mirror" the Norwegian population according to demographic criteria such as gender, age, and type of work (Hovden & Moe, 2017). Fifty participants were interviewed twice in the fall of 2017, but this analysis only includes a subsample of 20 women who were regular users of Facebook. The semi-structured interviews comprised a broad range of questions, starting with a day in a life method (del Rio Carral, 2014) and questions about social media use. Key tendencies from the reading of this material were built upon in the second wave of interviews, which focused exclusively on women's user experience of SNS and Facebook.

The second wave of data collection was in-depth interviews with ten additional women who used Facebook in their daily lives. Theoretical sampling was selected to discover variations and gaps within this group (Gubrium et al., 2012). Expecting that variations would influence experiences of public environments, 1. age diversity (Brandtzaeg et al., 2011; Gardner & Davis, 2013), 2. profession/work environment (Emler & Frazer, 1999), and 3. educational background (Bovens, 2017; Spruyt et al., 2018), were used as sampling criteria throughout the recruiting. The participants were recruited through networks and snowballing. The data reached sufficient saturation (Guest et al., 2006) after ten interviews, bearing in mind that these were an expansion of the twenty interviews from the first wave of data collection. Appendix Two shows the interview guide from both waves of data collection.

Interview transcripts were analysed using interpretive repertoire analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), which looks at the social function of language, including implicit use and context (Wertz, 2011:60-63; Wetherell, 2001). Interpretive repertoires identify descriptions, routine arguments, and evaluations considered the 'building blocks' (Wetherell, 1998: 173) speakers use to make sense of everyday life. This study aims to examine how people talk and make use of language to construct their understanding of Facebook as an arena for public discourse.

4.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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1   Both studies were assessed by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and all participants gave their written, informed consent to participate in the study. Participant information is kept anonymous, using pseudonyms for reference.

The results were divided thematically into five repertoires. First, the *behind the curtains but pays attention repertoire* revealed how these women discuss their internal conflict of not participating in debates yet feeling like they should participate. Second, the *deliberative ideals repertoire* referred to patterns in discourse displaying a negotiation of ideals for public discussion. Third, *it feels like total exposure repertoire* describes Facebook as several different spaces, with some considered more precarious than others and the wish - or need - to stay hidden. Fourth, *the expectation of adverse reactions repertoire* is used by women who characterise participating in debates on Facebook as high risk due to potential hostile responses, even though this characterisation rarely is based on direct personal experiences. Fifth, *the hit and run repertoire* involves an unwillingness to listen to people's responses due to fear of adverse reactions and, as such, illustrates behaviour related to such worry.

Although the participants were women, they were different in terms of age and background. There is a danger in talking about women as a single group, as we cannot assume that they share common experiences based on gender (Young, 1989). This material shows differences in what Facebook was used for and how integrated the platform was in the participants' everyday lives. However, when it came to Facebook as a public arena, the participants in this study had surprisingly similar accounts.

4.1.   The behind the curtains but pays attention repertoire

The use and role of Facebook in everyday life formed a backdrop for the repertoires these women employed in dealing with this arena for public discussion. The participants were mostly daily users of Facebook as their preferred SNS, often combined with other platforms. Daily use of Facebook included social functions and was considered essential for keeping up with the latest information. All participants were also daily consumers of mainstream news published outside social media; however, Facebook often appeared to be an integrated part of navigating news and other types of information.

> *I often come across news stories that interest me, especially relating to the environment and feminism through social media, because of what people in my network share. But I am mostly someone who 'just hides behind the curtains and pays attention' rather than being particularly active myself...*
>
> Eva, HR advisor, 40

Eva's description of being fairly invisible is far from unique. This repertoire was used to describe preferring the role of an observer over 'active' sharing or posting in debates on Facebook. Such discourse displayed a common understanding that this is not how one is 'supposed to' behave on this platform, as one should participate. Participation or being active were used as synonyms for being visible. On the other

hand, 'listening in' (Crawford, 2009) was derogatorily described by interviewees as 'lurking' or being just a spectator with the emphasis on 'just'.

> *- Would you post anything on Facebook?*
> *- I am not really 'political'.*
> *- It sounds like you are.*
> *- Only in politics related to substance abuse (…). I see a lot of politics (party politics on Facebook), but I avoid it, I do not go into it, I will not 'put my thumb up' ('like'), because then you take a stand, and I would rather not do that.*
> Rachel, Retired / leader of a volunteer organisation, in her 70s

The answers to a general question about posting on Facebook indicate a shared collective awareness of Facebook as a public environment evoking ideals of active citizen participation. Rachel also implies that one would have to be particularly interested in institutionalised politics to post something, which can be seen as a redefinition of what is political that align with her decision to engage in some instances online and not in others. Nonetheless, this repertoire involved the choice to mostly abstain from being visible in this online public arena while paying attention, which made the participants conflicted about their actual activity. This repertoire displays a cognitive dissonance between what these women do and what they think they should do. Such a notion differs from earlier research that found that general users considered expressing political views on Facebook inappropriate and not the 'right place for politics in everyday life (Gustafsson, 2012). The result in both cases is limited posting on Facebook. However, the current study suggests that the participants consider Facebook an appropriate place for public discourse, even if they are hesitant to participate visibly.

4.2.   The deliberative ideals repertoire

The deliberative ideals repertoire is linked to discourse about the ideals and potential of debates on Facebook, revealing that Facebook as an arena for public discussion breaches certain democratic conventions.

Ideals of democratic deliberation were revealed through implicit descriptions of public discussion and suggested that Facebook debates fall short of such ideals. Negative descriptions of 'uncivil participation', 'aggressiveness', 'irrational arguments', and debates and people that are 'too emotionally driven', implied comparison between debates on SNS and an implicit standard, which incidentally resembles deliberative ideals. Habermas´ (1991) concept of the public sphere is generally known to favour rational deliberation that allows for opposing views yet focuses on understanding each other and letting the best argument win. Fraser (1992) criticised the normativity in rational discourse that excludes contention and focuses on agreement. However, the democratic ideals that are part of this repertoire do not contest

such normativity. Instead, the participants were particularly critical of people who were not oriented toward a consensus, that strayed from the discussed topic, or used emotional language (Sakariassen, 2021).

As Facebook debates did not adhere to the implied standard, this repertoire involved worry about participating and not gaining anything from it. Thus, the feeling of obligation to participate collided with a breach of ideals of democratic deliberation. Earlier research uncovered complaints about political issues reduced to being a for/against dichotomy (Gustafsson, 2012), which is in line with these participants describing discourse on Facebook to only allow for extreme opinions and that it is difficult to participate on those terms.

> *Then I was suddenly a part of a very long discussion with extreme reactions. (...) I remember thinking that 'I am not that convinced by the view that I put forward here', and I ended up with more extreme arguments than my actual opinion. You feel a bit trapped then. So, there was this line of argument (...) that was less nuanced than my actual view.*
>
> Dagny, communication advisor, 40s

Behind the curtains but pays attention repertoire described that these participants mostly *listen in*. *The deliberative ideals repertoire* is part of the same overarching theme. However, it illustrates that taking part in a Facebook debate also was considered part of the general self-presentation. The concern was about 'losing' the debate itself and making oneself vulnerable to being seen in an unfavourable light. In such a setting, potential counterarguments and criticism interfere with self-realisation, producing a debate climate that hinders discussions. Similar sentiments in this repertoire included not wanting to 'appear political' or 'impose a view on other people'. Along these lines, a previous study of everyday talk argued that a political discussion is an opportunity for citizens to rationally exchange opinions and an act of self-expression (Conover & Searing, 2005). *The deliberative ideal repertoire* can, thus, be attached to the experience of evaluating the presence of democratic ideals in Facebook discourse and communicating their understanding of who they are.

4.3.   The it feels like total exposure repertoire

When asking about posting or sharing things outside of chats on Facebook, the question of 'where?' typically came up. The repertoire *of it feels like total exposure* distinguished between 'own Facebook', referring to posting a status update that will appear on one's own Facebook wall, and other places, such as large or public open groups or debate sections of news outlets. The different venues for participation within Facebook are described in terms of exposure. This narrative compared the security of being hidden and feeling more in control with venturing into the unknown, expecting danger, and not feeling safe to get involved.

> *It should have been anonymous (...) then I might have been more daring (in debate sections on Facebook). Out there is suddenly the whole wide world, or all of Norway ... people who don't know me (...) It feels like total exposure.*
>
> <div align="right">Maria, student, early 20s</div>

The repertoire involved experiencing that the debate sections on Facebook are too far-reaching. There is no camouflage and nowhere to hide, relating to potentially becoming a target of unwanted or hostile reactions. The quote also illustrates an implicit expectation of posts going viral. Another aspect of this repertoire is choosing certain settings for the Facebook profile, specifically not to take part in public discussion.

> *I have made quite a conscious decision to not comment on other people's posts or to post things in groups. If I wanted to start a debate (...) that would not work well, because I have a closed profile.*
>
> <div align="right">Dagny, communication advisor, 40s</div>

Such opinions indicated that this repertoire involved thinking about different spaces within Facebook and that privacy settings could be understood as a metaphorical curtain between being hidden or exposed. Choosing to stay behind the curtains is reminiscent of the more traditional divide between the private and public sphere, where within the structure of privilege, some people experience the "right" to be heard and others do not (Young, 1989).

The experience of what a debate on Facebook generally is appeared to be an inhibiting factor for voicing opinions, even in the more controlled setting of their own Facebook wall. Such inhibition can potentially be attributed to the affordances of SNS. Earlier research has found that SNS is a unique place to look at perceptions of risk and fear around expression and that persistence or the notion that a post would linger online reduces willingness to express an opinion (Fox & Holt, 2018).

Facebook was predominantly understood as a public environment, despite this repertoire involving the choice to only be active behind 'closed curtains' and not expose themselves. While the repertoire *it feels like total exposure* describes the choice to stay hidden, the previously described repertoire of *hiding behind closed curtains but paying attention* represents the cognitive dissonance in not being visibly active.

Facebook was experienced as a political space, and even small acts of engagement (Kleut et al., 2018), such as 'liking', required a political stance. In short, such repertoire involved denying oneself Facebook as a public platform due to worry about exposure.

4.4. The expectation of adverse reactions repertoire

A shared repertoire that all participants used referred to the hostile debate climate that only allowed for 'extreme opinions', 'debates that tended to derail', and the use

of 'personal attacks' and 'derogatory tone'. This repertoire involved the notion that voicing an opinion was risky and came with the expectation of hostile responses. More importantly, this notion stemmed primarily from observing online commentary fields and how the news media or society discussed SNS debates, yet rarely based on direct personal experiences.

> *You hear about it happening in the news, right? But I do not experience anything like that in my day-to-day life (on Facebook). So, it is hard for me to say something about the extent to which this happens.*
>
> Kristine, Architect, 30s

The expectation of adverse reactions, even if it contradicted real experiences of using Facebook, discouraged the participants from voicing their opinions. This expectation can be understood as a shared narrative of Facebook being hostile that seemed to stem mainly from popular views and folk theories (Palmer et al., 2020). Folk theories can be more or less explicit and based on second-hand sources (Palmer et al., 2020). Still, the perceived dangers and the discourse surrounding women's online participation (Lewis et al., 2016) seem so off-putting that these women are hesitant to participate. On a similar note, worry about other users' potential behaviour is the most common reason users generally experience inhibition when wanting to post (Sakariassen & Meijer, 2021). Furthermore, users of SNS are prone to hold back their opinion because they cannot control the reactions of others (Neubaum & Krämer, 2018).

4.5.   The hit and run repertoire

A recurring narrative in these interviews was about considerations and strategies developed explicitly for avoiding debate situations on Facebook, such as self-censoring (Hayes et al., 2006) or posting only for a limited audience to avoid audience collapse (boyd, 2010). Other strategies found when posting on Facebook are to phrase the message vaguely (Mor et al., 2015) or use emotional language (Sakariassen, 2021).

Most participants had posted at some point, particularly when they 'felt exasperated' that important arguments or angles were 'left out' and that 'something had to be said'. Posting in these cases was considered a form of responsibility.

> *If I share something on Facebook or if I post something, I feel something similar to anxiety afterward. Like, 'Oh shit, now I published something and here come the reactions'. (...) I feel like I am baring my soul in some ways... who I am and what I stand for.*
>
> Kristine, Architect, 30s

In situations where posting was involved, the previous repertoires have illustrated the feeling of exposure and expectation of hostility. Closing the Facebook tab directly

after posting or closing the entire laptop, illustrated the discomfort of feeling exposed and potentially attacked. Furthermore, the discomfort made these participants less open to other peoples' arguments due to worry rather than intent.

> *- I won't bother discussing, but I will leave a comment.*
> *- So, you comment once?*
> *- Yes, but no discussions. I just close the window. I don't really want to know what others think.*

<div align="right">Anna, beautician, 50s</div>

Above is an example of this repertoire used by Anna, who stands out from the other participants by posting on Facebook daily. After posting, she and others employed coping mechanisms that can be described as a hit and run repertoire. Earlier research found that citizens consciously applied reciprocity to discussions. However, they sometimes fail to practice it, particularly when shielded from face-to-face interactions (Conover & Searing, 2005). Similarly, the 'hit and run' repertoire indicates an unwillingness to listen to people's responses to their posts, particularly due to fear of adverse reactions.

In addition, the participants expressed SNS-specific worries, such as fear of the debate splitting into 'several different strands' that would require 'different types of arguments' or that debates happen spontaneously, and they had to come up with counterarguments 'on the spot'. Debates were also described as mainly about being right, 'convincing others', or 'winning the argument', indicating undemocratic sentiments. The participants also frequently described debates as conflicts they wanted to avoid.

Even in the rare cases where these participants did post and thus lived up to their active citizen ideal, they tended to fail to follow democratic standards, such as being open and listening.

5.   CONCLUSIONS

This paper provides insight into women's user experience of Facebook as a public arena, addressing a demographic that rarely visibly participates in Facebook debates.

Five repertoires were revealed in this analysis, and the same participants employed multiple repertoires as they are not mutually exclusive. These repertoires were based on moral dimensions of being a citizen and ideals regarding public discussion. Furthermore, a view of Facebook as an arena for public discussions that invokes worry and negativity toward activity and others that do not adhere to such ideals was detected. However, the results also indicated that worry was a key factor in negotiating these ideals and unintentionally replacing them with behaviours that may harm public discussion. As such, these repertoires represent conflicting social norms: being an active citizen taking part in deliberation and expressing one's

viewpoints versus being a responsible social media user shielding oneself from online hostility.

Facebook is, by these participants, experienced as a particular kind of public arena that involves exposure and worries, an arena, in its essence, where one fights, win or lose. Such findings are in line with earlier studies that have discussed online participation as uncivil or derogatory (Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017; Rost et al., 2016) and that this generates a need to shield oneself from potential attacks (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; boyd, 2008) or express a deviant opinion in an offline setting instead of online (Neubaum & Krämer 2016). Muddiman (2017) makes the distinction between personal-level incivility (impoliteness) and public-level incivility (lack of deliberativeness and reciprocity). However, in this study, such a distinction is not clear. What is clear is that there is a discrepancy between the narrative of hostility and the direct experience these women have, indicating that the narrative comes first and determines the experience.

In democratic theory, meaning is mostly discussed in normative terms, emphasising visible participation (Jenkins, 2006; Putnam, 2000). These women's use of Facebook may not be meaningful in those terms. Still, the participants experience the platform as a meaningful connection point as they use Facebook to connect to and explore public discourse and public issues, hidden and private. Although these participants might chat about issues, there was little evidence of them sharing experiences and building community in private Facebook groups, as found in earlier research (Pruchniewska, 2019). The experiences found in the current study can be described as a one-way connection to information but not a connection to other people. Baym and boyd (2012) discuss "socially-mediated publicness" as a way in which people assess their own presence on social media platforms and make decisions on how to engage. Concerning such description, the results indicate a "privately-mediated publicness" where Facebook provides a public arena for hidden or private participation. These participants describe hostile individuals and not an 'imagined collective' (boyd, 2010). Still, Facebook presents an important public arena for these women. The activity mostly happens without visible trails, yet being a citizen is also about connecting to issues, learning new information, and making up one's mind, even if that does not entail visible participation. As such, Facebook as a public arena may have more impact on women than it appears.

This study analysed how women experience communicative practices and participation on Facebook. The participants wish for dialogue but experience Facebook as a place for debate. In that way, these results indicate the experience of communicative practices on Facebook as gendered and add to earlier research that has established that women are less likely than men to enjoy debate as a type of communication (Meijer, 2001), political discussions (Verba et al., 1997) or post or comment on things of public interest on Facebook (Wang et al., 2013). However, to what degree the other findings in this study apply only to women is somewhat unclear.

The experience is that Facebook debates require a 'hit and run attitude', more than

a 'listen and discuss attitude'. Such a repertoire reveals behaviour that is problematic for public debate. In public debate, one becomes visible to the public (Schudson, 1997), and by participating in public discourse, one ideally commits to listening to and addressing criticism and counterarguments (Habermas, 1991). Avoiding others' response due to fear eliminates the possibility of discussion. Therefore, one could say that having an arena for debate that is experienced as hostile is damaging to the level of visible participation and to how such participation is carried out. A study of everyday talk has found that it can be at odds with the normative goals of democratic deliberation (Conover & Searing, 2005) and that citizens do not especially want to justify their own opinion (Conover et al., 2001). While the unwillingness to listen, justify, and deliberate is not new, Facebook seems to replicate social structures that make visible participation difficult (Young, 1989), yet also allows users an easier exit and, in that way, enable a hit and run attitude.

Some findings were surprising. Even if strategically choosing not to mention democratic ideals (or similar concepts) during the interviews, these ideals pop up as part of the discourse about Facebook. It was also unexpected that these ideals would resemble Habermas's and cause women to feel guilty about not visibly participating in Facebook debates and have such derogatory descriptions of their type of participation. Additionally, it was unexpected that none of the participants considered women particularly exposed to harassment when posting. Instead, they answered this question concerning worry about other social collectives (Young, 1989), such as immigrants.

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