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Fetishisation of the "offline" in feminist media research

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This article addresses the concern that, in feminist strains of Internet and Media Studies, offline interviews are consistently fetishized over more ethnographic forms of online data collection that offer the opportunity to capture and map the affordances, performances and experiences, of online platforms. Historically, feminist methodologies, namely interviews, have been criticized for being "soft." This softness is tantamount to ease, the ease of a female researcher having a "cup of tea" with a research participant and asking them about their experiences, which is often positioned as a binary opposite to the hard facts generated by quantitative methods. "Hard" both connotes the so-called factual numerical data and its apparently superior level of difficulty. Criticisms of softness are thus deployed to minimize the significance of the very fruitful method of feminist research, or dismiss an apparent lack of rigor. In other words "methodology is in itself gendered" (Ann Oakley 1998, 707). However, in my experiences as a researcher, it now appears that this traditional, and highly gendered, dichotomy has been re-ascribed within qualitative methodologies to apply the value-laden descriptor "soft" to online ethnographies and "hard" to the physicality of so-called real life. Offline might be considered hard because it is tangible, whereas online is soft because it is *there* in abundance, with few gatekeepers, rendering it apparently less valuable for research.

I admit that I have a dog in this particular fight: I am a PhD student looking at entrepreneurial, visible beauty vloggers on YouTube in the UK. Throughout my research journey I have been consistently asked if I am going to interview the vloggers; I recently had a journal article accepted for publication contingent on adding the notation that I plan to conduct data through interviews in the future. Here, I hope to briefly attend to why feminist researchers must understand the risks of privileging offline field work over the important work of content analysis and ethnographically informed online data collection.

Fetishisation of the “offline” interview

The argument goes that, in positivist research methods “the unequal power relationship between the knower and the known conflicts with the moral obligation at the heart of feminism to treat other women as you would yourself wish to be treated” (Oakley 1998, 711). In other words, in rationally informed methodologies, the inequality inherent within the relationship between researcher and subject often echoes structures of oppression. Feminist research methodology hopes to both redress this, by centering women’s voices and experiences, and by prioritizing the wellbeing of those who participate in this research. Of course, power flows through interview interactions in many ways; there are many more power hierarchies and inequalities than gender. At the most basic level, it is extremely difficult for anyone who is legitimized by a *higher* education institution to claim that there is no power hierarchy in the interview process. However, through producing and editing media content online, women can ruminate on diverse topics in ways that 30 minute interviews with (often) white academics with high degrees of cultural capital cannot afford. This is not to say that the infrastructure of online platforms do not shape the video and textual content that is made, and that becomes visible to researchers. I believe they do, significantly. However, the site of the interview (University office? Coffee shop? Participants’ home? God forbid, Skype?), the class and race of the interviewer (often white and middle class) and the technologies of prompting and questioning (are we really as good at interviewing empathetically as we believe?) all shape the data that we collect. Writing on her research regarding Dove’s user generated ad campaign, Brooke Erin Duffy describes her interviews:

It was only through listening to the experiences of participants in their *own voices* that I was able to tease out themes of creativity, authenticity, and professionalization in ways that broke down the binary between empowerment and exploitation... Methods of data collection that foreground women’s personal experiences also allow researchers to uncover sites of cultural resistance and contestation (Brooke Erin Duffy 2015, 712).

Such a statement causes me to wonder whether the content that women have made for the Dove campaign was not produced through the participants’ *own voices*? In other words, I ask what counts as a legible voice, and who is qualified to translate its significance?

I believe the key issue here is that some researchers can fall into the trap of not taking blogs, vlogs and social media outputs *seriously* as sites of women’s cultural production in their quest to towards the “real,” in search of capturing what we would define as *resistance*. Media and cultural studies tends to overwhelmingly focus on “sexy” sites of subculture, and pass over the “ordinary working people who have been coping and surviving... who are subjects formed in the complexities of everyday practice” (Valerie Walkerdine 1998, 21). Authoring a blog, or producing a YouTube video, or compiling a Tweet now forms huge swathes of the banal everyday, in which young women name their challenges, frustrations, problems and achievements. We should (ethically and critically) listen.

Gender and myths of access

There are clear divisions between those who will be hailed by researchers as participants, especially when the researcher is white, middle class and based in a wealthy media city. In my own call for participants, I have not yet yielded responses from vloggers with children, who are also less likely to attend conventions and meetups, especially if they are single

parents. It is a similar story for vloggers with multiple jobs or who are carers for parents or other dependents. I also have experienced more positive responses from many of the vloggers with higher or postgraduate education, this often includes statements such as “I speak to researchers because I had to do a dissertation too over the course of my degree.” If women with these temporal limitations are laboring to create content that captures and discusses their experience, should engaging with this work not be our first point of call when centering their wellbeing?

I am advocating for the recognition of the power and value in the self-representations of online video and text. Video and textual diaries have been historically used by feminist researchers to enable vulnerable people to tell their stories. Why then is online video content so quickly dismissed, unless it is accompanied and sanctioned by a researcher-led interview? One answer could lie in that this content is tinged by the dark matter of platform commerciality, falling into the well-worn trap of trying to disentangle the supposed binaries of “authenticity” from “commerciality,” when branded culture is both pervasive and ambivalent in late capitalism. I join Sarah Banet-Weiser in advocating for “an understanding of brand cultures as culture, complete with competing power relations and individual production and practice” (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2012, 13). Like everything else, our engagement with platforms is often ambivalent. Just as offline spaces are rarely untinged by commerciality, commercial platforms shape self-presentation and social interaction. To address this, we can critically engage with platform aims, affordances and algorithms, leading to an understanding of structures of visibility that gives depth to analyses of content produced by users.

The backstage, the self-brand and gender

The privileging of offline interviews as affording an access to truth seems to support the idea that users have a fixed and stable backstage identity that can only be revealed by a researcher in an offline situation. This is symptomatic of a perhaps fruitless obsession with the pursuit of translating participants’ so-say real motivations or emotions in qualitative work. In fact, self-presentations in interviews are merely a different kind of identity work, and one that can be influenced by media training, for example in influencer culture, although this depends on your subject pool. For example, the UK vlogging and influencer industry now involves multi-layered structures of management by traditional celebrity agents, producers and media companies, including YouTube itself. Importantly, this kind of self-branding work is also highly gendered. Marketing literature often emphasizes the need for women to create a strong, confident and “empowered” self-brand, regularly pointing out to women that if they do not brand themselves “someone else will, and it probably won’t be the brand you had in mind” (Banet-Weiser 2012, 70). In addition to promoting themes of empowerment and entrepreneurialism, influencers, vloggers and bloggers are also invested in maintaining an authentic self-brand are also concerned in ensuring a stability and “consistency” amongst their self-presentations (Alice Marwick 2013, 120). At the most practical level, in interviews influencers are unlikely to diverge from the tightly controlled self-brand performed across their social media platform. To deviate from consistency is high risk, one comment can significantly harm a career.

A fruitful example of the dubious nature of interview findings is evidenced by media researchers Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, who spoke to Henry Jenkins in 2016 about their extensive research project on the media ecology of YouTube. They summarize their

interview with high profile gay beauty vlogger Ingrid Nilsen, saying “when Ingrid Nilsen came out, she jeopardized her multi-year relationship with Covergirl as a “glambassador.” She declared in our interview, she did not want to represent a brand that wouldn’t accept who she is” (Henry Jenkins 2016). The identity labors that Nilsen conducts here parallel the quotes she has given to mainstream magazines such as Women’s Health, telling them about Cover Girl: “If [brands] I was working with had a problem with me being gay, I didn’t want to work with them anyway” (Caitlin Abber 2015). These statements tell a story about Nilsen’s lucrative self-brand as authentic and non-commercial, in addition to reinforcing her ethical standpoint towards brand collaborators, a huge plus in an industry that hinges on convincing performances of “authenticity.” In other words, it is a fruitful example of identity construction, however it is problematic when used as *evidence* that users who have come out on YouTube “placed their self-owned-and-operated business in peril,” as stated by the researchers (Jenkins 2016). Indeed, it has been widely observed that, for women, success on YouTube involves a practicing savvy mix of marketing communications and hopeful consumption. In this light, the statement by Ingrid Nielsen could also be read as doing branding work *for* Cover Girl as she ultimately publicly praises the cosmetic brand for *not* dropping her, and for supporting her through the process of coming out. Although interesting as an account of a self-presentation strategy, I argue this interview answer tells us little about what it *really* means to be gay, an entrepreneur or a woman on YouTube.

What now?

Ultimately, interviews reveal to us the stories that people tell us about themselves, as do online videos, texts, tweets and posts. Each of these scraps of performance are temporally and structurally specific for an imagined audience. I argue that to stop fetishizing the offline necessitates “uncomfortable reflexivity” (Simidele Dosekun 2015). Rather than viewing reflexivity as “a methodological box to be ticked,” to be *uncomfortably* reflexive invites us to “resist disciplinary regimes of truth and try to continuously foreground the workings of power in one’s research and representations” (Dosekun 2015, 2). This means being honest about the power relations that flow through interviews and field work in ways that can, indeed, be incredibly uncomfortable. I would argue that this discomfort extends to being honest about the access that we are afforded, and to avoid misrepresenting *good access* as *good work*. Uncomfortable reflexivity refuses the hierarchy of interview over content analysis and online ethnographies, as it recognizes “power is not only an inexorable condition but a constitutive one” (Dosekun 2015, 2). We cannot claim to “reveal” back-stage truths as we are ourselves forming our subjects, and ultimately calling them into being. Interviews, of course, continue to be significantly useful to find out whats, whys and hows of culture. However, when we rush to dismiss the thousands of words, and hours of video, produced online, in favor of interviews, we not only miss the groups of people who will not or cannot speak to us, we risk minimizing the stories that people are trying to tell about themselves and their relationships to the world, which I argue are indeed “in their own voices.”

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The contradictions of "women's work" in digital capitalism: a "non-Western"/Chinese perspective

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The global digital economy has facilitated new trends towards the feminization of labor, increasing demands for versatile, flexible, mobile, and affectively invested labor outside the traditional workplace, beyond the dichotomies of global and local, production and reproduction or consumption, private and public, and work and leisure. Scholars studying gender and digital and cultural labor have been grappling with the implications that these transformations hold for feminist politics, asking whether they help mitigate or reinforce the gendered inequalities under capitalism (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2012; Kylie Jarrett 2016; Angela McRobbie 2016; Michele White 2015). However, the discussion in the English-speaking academic literature primarily focuses on Euro-American women's experiences. Non-Western and transnational dimensions are underrepresented. In this essay, I address this gap by focusing on Internet-based Chinese luxury resellers—transnationally mobile middle-class Chinese women who resell Western luxury products on social media and e-commerce sites. I argue that traditional, socialist, and emerging gendered ideals converge and interact in complex ways with the digitalized global capitalist system in shaping the subjectivities and lived realities of these women.

This essay is part of a larger project that I have been working on since 2013 on Chinese women entrepreneurs who rely on social media to run innovative micro-enterprises. Over the years, I have been conducting longitudinal online and offline ethnography following a