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**Constructing a European culture of gender equality on social media:  
European and national (mis)alignments  
(Wytwarzanie europejskiej kultury równości płci w mediach społecznościowych:  
Europejskie i krajowe (nie)zgodności)**

*Project synopsis*

**Introduction**

The primary objective of this project is the identification of the most prominent narratives on gender equality at the European-level and at the Italian national-level as circulated by key institutions via their Twitter profiles and crowd-sourced by private users via Twitter hashtags. Once identified, these narratives are compared to assess the extent to which EU-level and national-level narratives match each other. In the dissertation, these narratives are scrutinized in light of their political relevance. By publicly speaking of gender issues, individuals, institutions, and collectivities contribute to defining 'gender equality' as a public issue that demands political solutions. In turn, institutional and public attention to gender issues contributes to the definition of 'Europe' as a political space where gender equality matters and of 'European-ness' as a socio-political identity that includes 'gender equality' among its values. Arguably, therefore, the study of narratives of gender equality is central to the study of broader political processes of Europeanization and European integration.

**Theory**

Since the late 1990s, constructivism has established itself as a key approach to the study of Europe and European integration in political sciences. Through the lens of postmodern constructivism, this project grounds its investigation in an understanding of the social world as produced in the reiteration of discursive and embodied practices. Drawing from similar ontological and epistemological premises, the same lens is applied to all of the three main concepts guiding the analysis, and namely 'Europe', 'social media', and 'gender equality'.

*Europe*

This project adopts a constructivist perspective on Europe and the process of European integration. After surveying other approaches to the study of Europe and the European Union (neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, institutionalism), discussion moves on to discuss the merits of different strands within the constructivist tradition. In particular, the case is made for the adoption of the lens of postmodern constructivism as outlined in the work of Diez (1999) as the most fruitful one for the purposes of this study. Coherently with this perspective, Europe is interpreted as an object of knowledge that is constructed in embodied and discursive performances at different levels. At the micro-level, private individuals reproduce or contest common sense knowledges of what 'Europe' is via their performances of the self. At the meso-level, subjects that are better positioned (e.g. politicians, collectivities) compete to assert the primacy of their preferred understanding of 'Europe'. At the macro-level, overarching discourses over the characteristics of 'Europe' constrain micro- and meso-level subject positions, but are also open to be reshaped through action at lower level.

#### *Gender and gender equality*

'Gender' is here understood as a process rather than as an attribute of personhood (Connell, 1987). That is to say, gender is something people *do* rather than something that people *are*. Gender performativity is outlined in the terms proposed in the ethnomethodology of West and Zimmerman (1987) and in the seminal work of Butler (1990). Gender is therefore presented as the stylized repetition of those embodied and discursive practices that produce the illusion of a natural order composed of 'men' and 'women', in turn producing individual men and women as gendered subjects. In light of the omnirelevance of gendered differentiation in the European socio-political context, gendered performances are to be understood as crucially political in character.

Gender is not a stock concept but, rather, a liquid one that is shaped by material and discursive performances (Butler, 1990). It follows necessarily that the meaning of 'gender equality' is equally liquid and subject to contestation and change. By circulating different narratives on 'gender equality' (on Twitter and elsewhere), individuals and collectivities contribute to shape the way in which gender equality is pursued in policy and in practice. In turn this contributes to define the meaning of 'gender' as a concept and of 'men' and 'women' as subject positions. In other words, individuals, institutions, and collectivities jointly participate in the process of *gendering* men and women as social subjects.

## *Social media*

The idea that media and politics depend on each other is obviously not new. Politicians and institutions depend on the media for the broadcasting of their decisions and activities. In turn, the media depends on access to information that is politically relevant to sustain its activities. The advent of social media has arguably increased the level of this interdependence, blurring the line between politics and entertainment in a process defined as ‘fictionalization of politics’ (Wodak, 2009). Furthermore, social media have provided the public with the possibility to instantly participate in the political spectacle and at least in theory have a space of visibility for their claims.

In light of the above and through key theories in individual performativity (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1990), this project argues that private users and public figures jointly participate in political commentary on social media as part of their daily performances of the self, and that by doing so they participate in the production of meaning around key political concepts, including concepts such as ‘Europe’ and ‘gender equality’. While this is more clearly the case for politicians and political institutions, it also applies to those performances enacted by private individuals and that might not explicitly appear to be political in character (Papacharissi, 2015). Via their individual performances of the self, social subjects reproduce or reverse socially accepted responses to a wide range of socio-political issues, thus expressing the political potential of their everyday lives.

Analysis of political performativity goes beyond the individual dimension and encompasses collective performances. Drawing from a long-standing tradition of scholarship of social movement (Benford & Snow 2000) and their role within processes of Europeanization (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009), a growing corpus of studies has attempted to theorize new forms of social mobilization that include widespread use of social media (most famously, Bennett & Sageberg, 2012). Mindful of the above literature and through the lenses of performative theories of assembly (Gerbaudo, 2012; Butler, 2015), this project argues that networks of individuals can produce spaces of political visibility on social media and occupy them to perform their political claims.

## **Methodology**

### *The field*

This study is mostly based on data gathered on the micro-blogging platform Twitter. Owned by the for-profit corporation Twitter Inc., the platform Twitter offers to some 330 million users

worldwide the possibility of communicating short messages (140 characters, recently extended to 280 characters) to a semi-public audience of ‘followers’ or to a broader public audience via aggregated conversation on specific topics (the so-called ‘hashtags’). Twitter came to the attention of scholars in political communication especially in light of its extensive use during the US presidential campaign in 2008 (Wattal et al., 2010). Since then, a wide range of studies focused on political communication on Twitter. Crucially, Twitter is powerfully interconnected with other commercial social media (YouTube and Facebook in particular) as well as with traditional media (Chadwick, 2013). Thus, a seemingly strict focus on Twitter actually encompasses a much wider range of political and social phenomena.

### *The sample*

The empirical component of this study takes into consideration data gathered over the time span of a year (1 September 2016 – 31 August 2017) The sample comprises 15 key institutional profiles plus one ‘absent’ profile (8 for the European-level and 8 for the Italian-level) and 6 hashtag case studies (3 for each level). The dual focus on institutional profiles and aggregated conversation via ‘hashtags’ is due to an understanding of social media as highly stratified spaces where access to visibility is shaped by a wide range of inequalities (Fuchs, 2013). That is to say, subjects that have a vantage position in the analog realm tend to retain it in the virtual realm. Conversely, private individuals dwell in relative invisibility unless they aggregate their voices and collectively perform their political claims (Gerbaudo, 2012; Butler, 2015).

Profiles were selected via a theoretical sample that was designed to encompass different emanation of so-called ‘state feminism’ (Kantola & Squires, 2012) and ‘activist politics’ (women’s movement, LGBTI movement, pro-equality men’s movement). Hashtags were selected through convenience sampling on the basis of relevance to this study and comparability across the national-supranational divide. The final sample includes for each of the two level one anti-violence campaign, one bottom-up reaction to current events, and one anti-homophobia campaign. The sampling strategy to some extent borrows from the realm of comparative politics, insofar as it attempts to interpret ‘Europe’ as a political space that in parts resembles a national polity (Hix, 1998). While recognizing the theoretical shortcoming of this approach, the comparative nature of this project made such a choice a pragmatic necessity.

### *Methods*

The methods for this project are based on KhosraviNik (2017) *Social Media – Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS)*. While the main object of inquiry is multimodal text circulated via Twitter, the research includes an ethnographic component. The primary method of investigation is critical discourse analysis along the lines laid out by Van Leeuwen (2008) and Wodak (e.g. Wodak, 2009), including analysis of social media metadata whenever relevant. Analysis of information gathered online is complemented with contextual elements drawn from key informant interviews with 14 out of the 16 individuals managing the sampled Twitter profiles (two informants refused to partake in the study). Further contextual information is drawn from online direct observation (netnography), three further interview with relevant Brussels-based informants, and offline participant-observation in two specific cases making reference to the Italian case study, namely the first and second national assemblies of the *Non una di meno* feminist movement (respectively in Rome and Bologna in November 2016 and February 2017).

### **Results: User-based part of the sample**

Users coming from the realm of ‘state feminism’ at the European and at the Italian national level seem to offer highly overlapping visions of what gender equality is and what it would take to achieve it. Their narratives largely refer to ‘gender equality’ as being a core European value, in turn grounded in the commitment of the European Union to an overarching notion of ‘justice’. Gender equality is mostly defined in terms of ‘equality between women and men’. Its achievement is usually presented as a not-so-distant goal that could be reached through stronger equal opportunities measures and positive action measures in the labor market. Generally speaking, these users present a ‘neoliberalized’ vision of equality as a goal worth pursuing because of its contribution to the achievement of economic growth.

Users coming from the realm of women’s right advocacy show again overlapping narratives at the two levels. Most of their repertoire is drawn from the tradition of radical feminism. That is to say, they present equality as something achievable through the transformation of the social order for the recognition of the equal value of masculinity and femininity to the benefit of a collective ‘us’ made of ‘women’. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the claims advanced by the users at the Italian national level are somewhat more radical. In general, their claims tend to be value-based and clearly stress the political salience of gender equality.

Users coming from the realm of LGBTI rights advocacy also share similar narratives at the two levels, showing a negotiation between short-term political objectives and longer term visions of what 'equality' for LGBTI people would mean. Short-term objectives are articulated more clearly at the national level. Long term visions are substantially overlapping but somewhat differently framed. Overall, users at both levels seem to have adopted a strategic narrative that aims at expanding the boundaries of the mainstream to be ever more inclusive towards sexual minorities rather than aiming for a subversion of said mainstream. Crucially, these users seem to speak from the margins of the gender equality discourse, with most of their narratives making reference to an adjacent discourse of 'minority rights'.

Pro-equality men's movements are on the sidelines of the discussion over gender equality at both levels. This is in part because of their own focus on achieving micro-political change by influencing the private behavior of individual men. While this approach might have its advantages, it is argued that foregrounding men in some parts of the equality discourse might be necessary to overcome issues that demand men's direct involvement (e.g. the eradication of gender-based violence).

### **Results: Hashtag-based part of the sample**

While anti-violence campaigning at the national level is markedly bottom up, the only noteworthy anti-violence campaign at the European level during the sampled timespan happened to be orchestrated from the European Commission itself. Connectedly, therefore, levels of public engagement were remarkably higher at the national level. Narratives were also diverging. The European level presents a vision of violence against women as a phenomenon that is mostly detrimental because of its economic side-effects. The Italian level narrative shows a much more nuanced understanding of violence against women as a structural process that invests all areas, the eradication of which requires deep restructuring of the state system and other social apparatuses.

Anti-homophobia campaigns at both levels show pro-equality arguments that essentially mirror the official narrative of LGBTI activists. At both levels, the most common narratives make wide use of the language of human rights/minority rights, the language of progress, and the language of love. Interestingly, the national-level campaign against homophobia was not immune from incursions of anti-equality voices. These subjects argued that homophobia is a non-issue and that legislation regulating homophobic violence would be detrimental to freedom of speech.

Bottom-up reactions to unfolding political issues also shows similar trends, with public engagement being remarkably higher at the national level. The European case study makes reference to a decision of the ECJ that upholds the right of employers to ban the open display of religious symbols on the job place; a decision with obvious implications for hijab-wearing women. The Italian case study makes reference to a particularly prominent case of sexism on public television network RAI Uno. Both cases show elements of what has been defined by Kelsey and Bennett (2014) as ‘synoptic resistance’. That is to say, a resistance of ‘the many’ against the decisions of ‘the few’. However, the limited number of users involved in both cases as well as the clear prominence of somewhat institutionalized opinion leaders (e.g. the European Network Against Racism, the Italian feminist movement Non una di meno) question the extent to which they can be actually considered protests of ‘the many’.

## **Conclusions**

This project draws the following conclusions. Users occupying comparable positionalities at the two level seem to advance overlapping narratives regarding gender and gender equality. State feminist users emphasize equality in the labor market and promote a neoliberalized vision of gender equality as beneficial to economic growth. The salience of these arguments, however, is much higher for European-level users than it is for national-level ones. Women’s right groups tend to deploy a narrative that stresses the political salience of gender equality and aims at achieving it through large-scale social transformation. LGBTI advocates follow along comparable lines and advocate for the right of sexual minorities to enter the mainstream via a set of short-term legislative initiatives and long-term programmatic goals, mostly framed through the language of progress, freedom, and love. The presence of men is hardly detectable in the debate about gender equality in Europe, and the voice of pro-equality men’s groups is hardly audible.

Crowdsourced narratives of violence against women diverge between the supranational and the national level. Driven from the top-down, European-level anti-violence narratives tend to focus on the economic disadvantages of gendered violence. Driven from the bottom-up, national narratives are more radical and advocate for broad social transformation in all areas. Anti-homophobia campaigns are substantially overlapping in their framing of ‘equality’, discussing similar issues around the same time and adopting similar frames and topoi. Instances of spontaneous reactions

to unfolding political events also show similarities at the two levels, with low public engagement and prominence of institutionalized opinion leaders being the most remarkable characteristics.

Overall, Twitter was found to be a highly stratified space of political visibility. The voices of the institutional actors scrutinized were indeed dominant *within* discussions of gender equality, but remained pretty marginal in the broader economy of visibility on social media. Even in the context of crowdsourced narratives of equality, discussion was most often dominated by users that were to some extent institutionalized. The voices of private users were indeed present, but their relevance in terms of visibility and, in turn, political impact was debatable at best.

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