

# Young People, Feminism and Self-representation on Instagram: challenges and recommendations

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### Abstract

*This paper taps the gender perspective to unpack the creation of content on Instagram by young women to compare the way they see and experience feminism and how they self-represent on this social media site. It draws on virtual ethnography, content analysis of Instagram posts and six in-depth interviews to shed light on how the everyday practice of feminism is made trickier by the impact of social media. It also sets out several challenges and recommendations for working on creating content based on digital skills.*

### Keywords

*Young People, Post-feminism, Instagram, Self-representations, Gender.*

### Resum

*Aquest article investiga, des de la perspectiva de gènere, la creació de contingut a Instagram per part de dones joves amb l'objectiu de contraposar la manera com entenen i viuen el feminisme i com s'autorepresenten en aquesta xarxa social. A través d'una etnografia virtual, una anàlisi de contingut de publicacions a Instagram i sis entrevistes en profunditat, es posa de relleu com la pràctica quotidiana del feminisme esdevé complexa amb l'impacte de les xarxes socials. S'hi proposen un seguit de reptes i recomanacions per treballar la creació de contingut aplicant les competències digitals*

### Paraules clau

*Joves, postfeminisme, Instagram, autorepresentacions, gènere.*

## 1. Introduction

The first feminist general strike in Spain was called in 2018. Since then, every March there have been fresh feminist demonstrations and demands involving both organised women's groups and individual women. The 'Manada' court ruling and the various gang rape cases which have hit the media coupled with femicide rates around the world and the emergence of online protest movements such as #MeToo and #Cuéntalo have made visible a pent-up rage shared by many women and helped to raise collective feminist awareness.

The existence of diverse feminist discourses in everyday life seems to be at odds with the images displayed on social media sites, especially on Instagram, featuring posts by young women in which they objectify and sexualise themselves and in which the body becomes the protagonist over and above the

message and takes on a meaning of its own when it comes to communicating. The conversation about the use of women's bodies on social media and their interpretation (objectification versus empowerment) is not only happening in academia in gender studies but is also at the core of lively discussions between feminist currents. Following the advent of the pandemic and the enhancement of communication via social media, this conversation has burgeoned with young people as the key players in the discussion (Al-Ali, 2020; Hurley, 2020).

This paper sets out the case study of the self-representations of young adult women aged 18-25 through the content they generate on Instagram. Specifically, it addresses one particular aspect: the correspondence between the manner in which these young women see and experience feminism and the way they depict themselves on Instagram. The aim is thus to see how the young women studied tailor and represent their

feminist discourse in a virtual setting. The findings are used to pinpoint a number of challenges and make recommendations for working with young people on creating content on social media by leveraging their digital skills.

The methodology used in this study, in particular its qualitative approach and the tool employed for content analysis, was designed on the basis of the literature review. This means it can be harnessed not only in this study but also in future research to explore the contrasting online and offline feminist narratives and scrutinise the stances generated by young women through analysing manifest, contextual and latent variables.

This study starts from two premises which influence the configuration of young women's self-representations: firstly, that social media have an identity dimension (Fernández-Planells, Masanet & Figueras, 2016) which furnishes young women with a space to build part of their own individuality; and secondly, that feminism is a fashionable identity among young women and, as with all fashions, media culture is inherently tied to and drives a new feminist visibility (Gill, 2016).

### **Young people, social media and building identity**

Today's young people have grown up with information and communication technology (ICT). The sway of new technology is increasing and it is essential in order to grasp how young people are growing up and developing as individuals in the ubiquity of these devices (Stoilova, Livingstone & Khazbak, 2021). Aside from leveraging ICT to communicate, make contact and build relationships, their use of interfaces and social media has a bearing on the shaping of their personal identity (Fernández-Planells, Masanet & Figueras, 2016). Through these interfaces and screens, young people can decide how they want to show and define themselves. Hence the identities represented by these images built by young people are constantly shifting, i.e. they are reviewed and adjusted to match an ideal self (Caldeira, 2016; Caldeira et al., 2020), and this affords young people a role and an intentionality in building their identity.

boyd (2014) sees identity as a continuum between offline and online spaces. In other words, people do not change their identity from one space to another but instead they adapt to the social context they are in on the basis of their own interests. Besides, bearing in mind that we are embedded in a communication system anchored in representation, appearance and public approval (Guardiola, 2018) and that young people's daily lives and privacy are intertwined with networks (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015), it is only to be expected that the boundaries between these spaces should become blurred.

Social media furnish a very specific and different context and young people adapt to create and publish the content which interests them most. As Guardiola (2018) argues, when we align the intimate with the displayed, intimacy sheds all its private aspect and we consequently become subject-images. At the same time as we represent ourselves in a tangible way,

we are looking for the other to identify what we are most keen to emphasise so as to be a cut above the rest. This view is closely bound to the individualism and neoliberalism prevailing in contemporary society, where what is sought is personal recognition in order to be viewed favourably – and in the case of social media in the form of a “like” – by others (Guardiola, 2018).

Content creation tied to identity leads to greater pressure to build and maintain self-image, especially in the case of young women and their relationships (Tortajada & Araña, 2014). Tortajada and Araña contend that young women are aware of the self-representations and the rules of the game which are triggered on social media, yet this does not spare them from bearing the consequences and having their own self-image conditioned.

### **Postfeminism: representations in the social media age**

When we bring the gendered gaze into the representation of identity, we find ourselves in a situation where feminism has shifted from being an identity which is ridiculed to one that is fashionable among young women (Gill, 2016). Thus, a new feminist visibility and representation is generated in media culture which in turn presents a new way of addressing the multidimensionality of gender representations and discourses in the media. In postfeminism (Gill, 2007), contradictions are constantly made visible; for example, young women are empowered through ‘Girl Power’ discourses, yet their bodies are presented as sexual objects. Postfeminism accordingly seeks to explore the changes in media representations of new femininities (Figueras, Tortajada & Willem, 2017).

These new patterns of media representation of women are closely related to two factors: feminism and neoliberalism (Gill, 2007). Gill maintains that this concept dovetails extremely well with everything entailed by neoliberalism as an ideology which constructs individuals as rational, calculating and self-regulating entrepreneurs whereby the individual should take responsibility for their own life story. This is what Ana de Miguel (2015) calls “sexual neoliberalism”, a social and symbolic structure which notwithstanding progress in gender equality continues to shape people's lives according to whether they are men or women.

When postfeminism is harnessed as a critical concept, this reveals a number of contradictions in the changes which have taken place in the media representations of this new feminist visibility (Caballero-Gálvez, Tortajada & Willem, 2017). It is crucial to note that postfeminism informs this research as an object of critical analysis to capture empirical irregularities and not as part of the identity or values of the subjects examined (Gill, 2016).

With this in mind, Rosalind Gill (2007) contends that postfeminism ought to be viewed as a sensibility which seeks to unpack the distinctive features of gender articulations in contemporary media (and by extension on social media) and thus call attention to the contradictions of postfeminist

discourses. Here Gill defines nine traits in postfeminist media discourses, five of which are set out below as they underpin this study:

i) Femininity as a bodily property: one of the most striking aspects of postfeminist discourses in media culture is their obsessive preoccupation with the body. In current representations of women, femininity is about bodies, about visible appearance. In reference to what is feminine, De Miguel (2015) asserts that it can be summed up in what makes women feel attractive and sexy, and a sexy body is tied to the main source of feminine identity.

ii) From sex object to desiring sexual subject: women are no longer depicted as passive as before but rather as active desiring sexual subjects, although paradoxically it is they who choose to present themselves in an objectified way (Gill, 2007). This is the representation of the woman who appears in the perfume advertisements: heterosexual, sexually autonomous and young, who plays with her sexual power and embraces a sexual agency of her own. The critique of these media discourses and the implicit danger of these representations is that sexual objectification is construed as a choice and not as an internalisation of the male gaze (Figueras, Tortajada & Willem, 2017).

iii) Individualism, choice and empowerment: this particular trait fits in perfectly with the neoliberal and consumerist individualism to which young women are connected. Accordingly, freedom of choice can paradoxically be bound to objectification without entailing a contradiction for women (Caballero-Gálvez, Tortajada & Willem, 2017). The problem is that “women continue to interpret coercion as free choice both with stiletto heels or the cult of the body and also in the choice of non-technological studies” (De Miguel, 2015, p. 37).

iv) Self-surveillance and discipline: the body, and by extension the person in the postfeminist media context, is subject to monitoring, labour, surveillance and transformation by women themselves in order to depict successful femininity (Gill, 2007). In Gill's view, what marks out the present day as distinctive in terms of self-surveillance are three features: firstly, the dramatically augmented intensity of self-surveillance (alongside the disavowal of this regulation); secondly, the expansion of self-surveillance beyond the body into even the most intimate spheres of women's lives such as sexual practice, career, home, finances, etc.; and finally, the need to remodel one's own psychology and inner life.

v) Irony and knowingness: irony in postfeminist discourses has a twofold role; it is used to express sexist and homophobic sentiments while also claiming that what was said was not actually meant (Gill, 2007).

## 2. Methodology

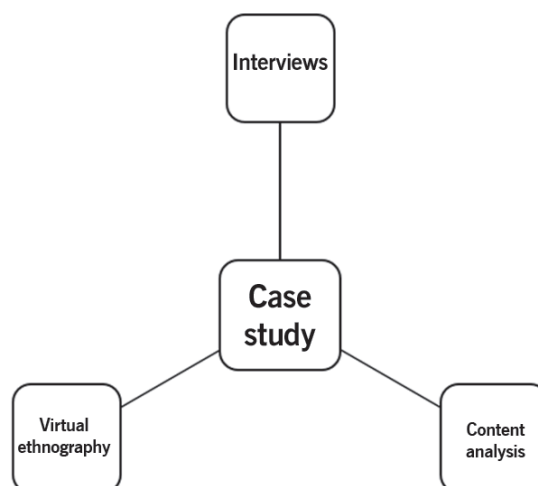
In order to unpack the self-representations of young women on social media and whether they tally with a feminist discourse in

physical space, a case study was conducted with young women aged 18 to 25 from cultural groups in Catalonia (Spain) with no specific feminist leaning or motivation and in which both men and women participated.

This case study's methodological triangulation (Figure 1) taps a number of research techniques to address this research's purpose. Firstly, in-depth interviews were conducted with six young women taking part in mixed cultural groups in Catalonia with no specific feminist leaning or motivation. Although this study does not purport to be representative of all Catalan young people but rather is a specific case study, efforts were nonetheless made to diversify the profile of the participants. To this end, groups were selected from a number of towns with different socio-economic contexts; the project was presented to the young women in the groups; they were asked to participate, and finally the young women participants were selected on the basis of several intersectional variables such as social class, sexual orientation, academic background or religion. In total, six interviewees between 18 and 25 years old were chosen: two were lower class, two lower-middle class and two upper-middle class. Five of the young women were studying or had studied at university and one had done vocational training. The interviews were designed to ascertain the feminist stances of the study subjects in order to compare them with their self-representation on social media.

Secondly, a virtual ethnography study was conducted alongside qualitative content analysis of the profiles of the young women interviewed on Instagram. Seven Instagram profiles were reviewed over the course of a year as one of the six young women interviewed had two completely separate profiles. A total of 135 posts were analysed (not reels, IGTV or other types of content owing to their fleeting nature) from the seven profiles surveyed throughout 2019, the year in which feminist protests surged in Spain as a result of the 'Manada' court ruling, the rise in femicides and the mass demonstrations on

**Figure 1. The study's methodological triangulation**



Source: Authors.

International Women’s Day on 8 March. The selection criterion was to examine all the posts in which the young women took centre stage in the images. This enabled us to see what image of themselves they conveyed on Instagram and restrict our analysis to their self-representation.

Consequently, qualitative content analysis was chosen to deepen the richness of the data (Izcarra-Palacios, 2014), which not only interprets manifest content, i.e. what can be seen, but also takes the interpretation further and analyses the hidden content, i.e. what cannot be seen with the naked eye. This means that the research can start from a number of categories tailored to its purposes while it can also be tweaked and is open to review and adding new relevant analytical categories which emerge from the analysis of the documents (Bryman, 2012). It is in this respect that Andreu-Abela (2002) draws a distinction between manifest and latent content, defining the former as what the creator wishes to communicate and the latter as what they intend to convey. All this becomes meaningful within a context in which the data are developed. Accordingly, three types of variables were identified to analyse the images (Figure 2):

i) **Contextual:** they provide context. In this case, they help to frame the data and allow for the creation of meanings (Krippendorff, 2004). Specifically, we sought to understand young women’s perceptions of feminism through the six in-depth interviews we conducted. To this end, two categories were considered: feminist self-perception, i.e. whether the young women consider themselves feminists or not, and

feminist attitude, i.e. whether they are active or passive in terms of issues such as protests, actions and studies.

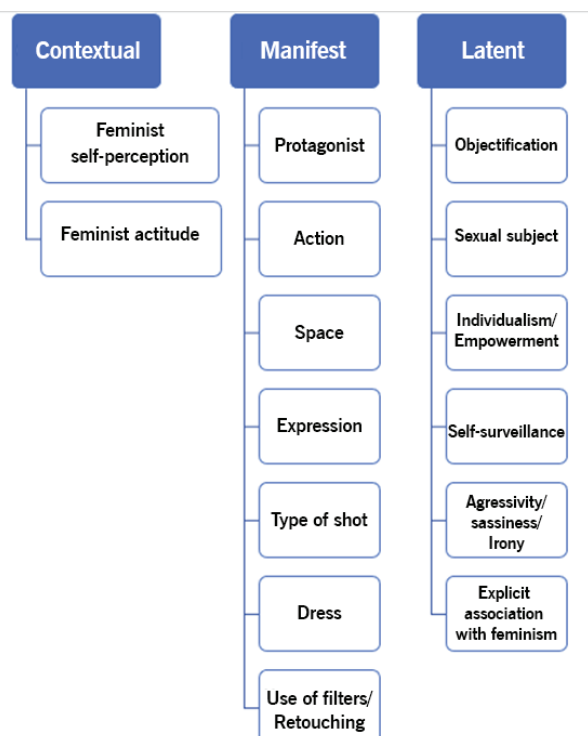
ii) **Manifest:** these variables address everything which can be seen in the image and provide information about what the creator is communicating (Andreu-Abela, 2002). The categories for this variable are: prominence of the image, the action of the protagonist, the place where the image is, the expression of the person, the type of shot shown in the image, the type of clothes worn by the subject, and lastly using filters or retouching the images. All these variables are designed to gather information about how the young women present themselves to their network of followers, what they prioritise when posting an image and what aspects they consider important when self-representing.

iii) **Latent:** the latent variables are used to reveal the hidden content of the images (Andreu-Abela, 2002). Six categories were used for this purpose, five of which come from Gill’s (2007) concept of postfeminist sensitivity described above in the theoretical framework while a final category was added afterwards to round off the project’s needs. The first category is the objectification of young women, i.e. whether femininity involves bodily ownership. The second is the sexualisation of the young women, seeking to find out whether they adopt the attitude of sexual subjects. The third drills down into whether these images are based on individualism and empowerment. The fourth looks at self-surveillance, about whether the young women are aware of the construction of the image and agree with it. The fifth category looks for aggressive, sassy or ironic attitudes in the young women. Finally, there is the category of explicit association with feminism which addresses whether there is any explicit reference in the image to feminism,

Instagram was chosen for analysing the young women’s posts because it is the social media site which has grown most in users in recent years (IAB Spain Research, 2022; IAB Spain Research, 2019) and 71% of its users are under 35 (Statista, 2022). Instagram is now an online venue which is part of the everyday life of young people and also another setting in which young people build and negotiate identity (Araña, Tortajada & Capdevila, 2014. p. 171).

The young women participating in the study signed a consent form to take part in the research and authorised the research team to examine and publish their photographs in academic publications. However, it was decided to apply a number of filters to the images included in this paper to preserve their anonymity.

Figure 2. Study variables classification



Source: Authors.

### 3. Results

Based on this study’s two initial premises, namely social media’s identity aspect (Fernández-Planells, Masanet & Figueras, 2016) and a new feminist visibility (Gill, 2016) driven by the upsurge of feminism, the results of this research make it possible to grasp how the feminist discourse of the young women taking part in the study is tailored and transferred to their representations of

themselves on Instagram as a virtual venue which is part of their daily lives.

### 3.1 The discourses: feminist consciousness

Analysis of the interviews using the contextual variables defined in our study (see Figure 2) shows that all the young women interviewed defined themselves as feminists regardless of their age, social class or cultural group to which they belonged. They also claimed to be aware of the feminist cause and said that they try to change male chauvinist attitudes in their immediate surroundings. In this respect, they even felt that they make themselves tiresome and bore their peer group when they point out macho attitudes:

*"I have some friends who are fed up with me because whenever they say something, I always tell them 'that comment is very sexist' and they say 'it's just a joke' and I say 'I don't care, it's a sexist comment full stop.'"*

[Emma, 22 years old, cultural group A]

Even so, some of the young women interviewed did think they have a more passive attitude in other areas such as protests or searching for theoretical knowledge to underpin their stances. Thus they said that while they define themselves as feminists, they still let slip attitudes or sentences associated with the patriarchal system:

*"I see myself as a feminist in everything, but I'm aware I let things slip, that sometimes some comments are not really feminist, but I realise, oops, I just said something stupid, it's so ingrained in us... but I think that realising this is a step forward in itself."*

[Figaro, 23 years old, cultural group A]

*"Everyone has their own feminism and there are some people who are pseudo-feminist but then their actions aren't feminist... I think that what happens is that humans contradict themselves."*

[Alba, 21 years old, cultural group B]

The young women contended that the patriarchal system they think surrounds them and in which they have been brought up influences them in their daily lives, including in the digital setting.

*"The fact you can't post nudes on Instagram, i.e. if you post a nude photo of yourself you have to cover your nipples, is a bit problematic for me (...) Why can't I show whatever part of my body I want to?"*

[Audrey, 20 years old, cultural group A]

*"If I go to Instagram, the first thing I'm going to find is probably some chick showing her arse to get more likes, and that's also a fact. If you're a woman and you want your profile to be noticed, strip off... that's another kind of machismo."*

[Olga, 23 years old, cultural group B]

Consequently they feel they need to analyse themselves first in order to confront the attitudes which they have internalised throughout their childhood and which they see as far removed from feminism. As they say, they view feminism as an identity under construction where they are learning, correcting and adapting based on their own experience.

### 3.2 Self-representations on Instagram: building identity

Shifting the focus from examination of their discourses during the interviews to analysis of their self-representations on Instagram reveals a mismatch between their feminist positioning and the treatment of their image as women on social media.

Looking at the variables displayed in the interviewees' posts over the course of a year shows that the young women not only appear in but also take centre stage in most of the images analysed. In fact, there are only 23 posts out of 135 where prominence is shared with friends or family (17%). Moreover, and in keeping with this finding, young women basically take on two action roles. Firstly, there is the role of action subjects in which they are the ones who perform the actions in the images in which they appear (Figure 3, left); and secondly the role of objects in which they appear as the desired, the object of their followers' gaze, as exemplified in Figure 3, right.

On the whole, the place and context in which the photographs are taken does not appear to be an especially significant variable in the analysis since the location is not specified in over half (79%) of the images examined. This adds to the idea that they are the protagonists in the foreground and what is significant is their self-representation.

The most common type of clothing in the images is casual, underlining the everyday aspect of the social media site. There are also some images where they are shown sexualised (Figure 4, left), wearing see-through garments, lingerie or clothes which enhance their figure, and even in some cases semi-nude (Figure 4, right). However, they never show all of their breasts because they know that Instagram censors this kind of images. The young women thus tailor their self-representation not only to conform to their own standards but also to Instagram's terms and conditions of service.

The majority (98%) of facial expressions in the self-representations analysed are positive (Figure 5, left) or neutral (Figure 5, right). Hence the social media site is associated on the one hand with happiness and good times and on the other with the young women's passivity and docility. There is no interest in the downbeat side and the problems of the world but rather the construction of representation and the famed "posing" prevail.

Continuing with the examination of the manifest variables, the bulk (60%) of the analysed posts show some kind of retouching or filtering which can easily be related to the fact that all the posts feature self-surveillance representations, made and designed on the basis of controlling self-representation (Figure 6).



Figure 3. Role of action subject (left) and role of object (right)



Figure 4. Sexualised clothing (left), semi-nude (right)

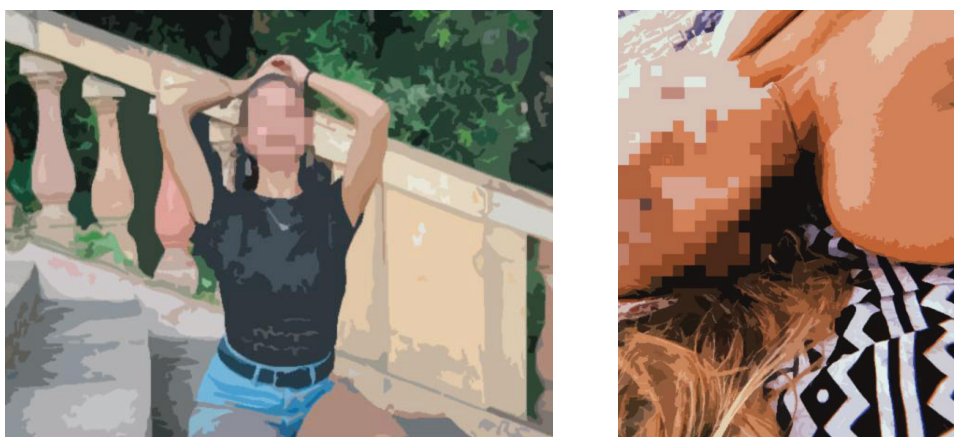


Figure 5. Positive expression (left), neutral expression (right)

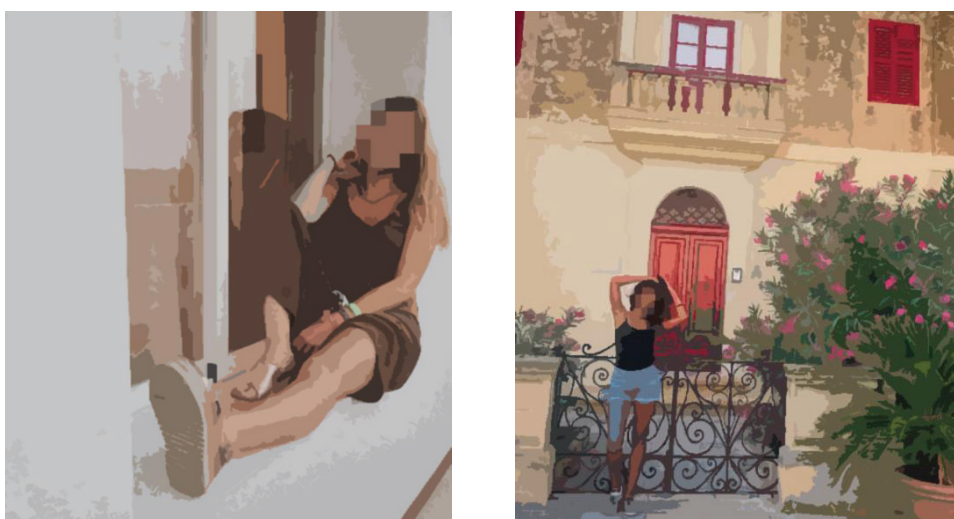


Figure 6. Use of filters and retouching



Figure 7. Empowered self-representation (left) and object role (right)

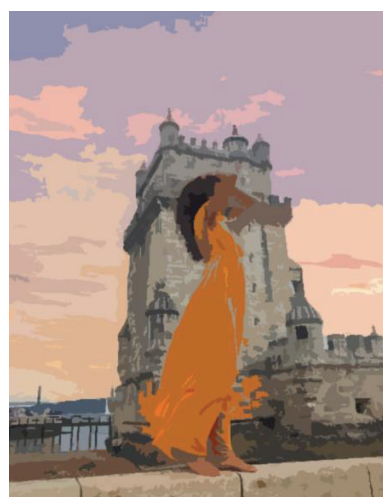


Figure 8. Femininity as a bodily property



Figure 9. Aggressive or brazen attitude



The latent variables show that the self-representations examined are anchored in the individualism and empowerment of the young women. In other words, the young women appear in the images mainly alone and with a confident attitude. They are shown not as sex objects but instead as sexual subjects (Gill, 2007) with their own sexual agency (Figure 5, left). Although the young women analysed see this way of representing themselves as an example of female liberation in a postfeminist rationale, this purported empowerment actually contributes to their own objectification. Indeed, in some (18%) of the self-representations analysed, the young women take on an actant role of object (Figure 7, right), representing themselves in passive and docile attitudes which are antithetical to a stance of empowerment.

It can also be seen how femininity becomes a bodily property. Put another way, through the bodies of the young women and the generally sensual postures they adopt in their self-representations, standards of femininity are used to reaffirm them as women in the self-representations analysed (Figure 8).

Only twelve (9%) images depict aggressive, defiant and sassy attitudes when represented (Figure 9), and even then there is no use of irony in the images as it is a feature more associated with discourse than image.

To conclude the analysis of the latent variables, only two posts explicitly associate their representations with feminism to mark International Women's Day on 8 March. In one of them the young woman is lifting up her jumper to display a T-shirt bearing the message "Proud to be a woman". Her attitude is upbeat and she is shown with her lips painted lilac and smiling. By contrast, the other self-representation is the only one to present a downbeat expression with a sad face and a falling tear. These two self-representations seek to engage with the feminist movement while still courting the gaze and approval of their followers.

#### 4. Discussion

The results of the methodological triangulation reveal contradictions and paradoxes in the feminist discourse of the young women analysed and their self-representations in the content they generate on Instagram. These contradictions are framed within the traits described by Rosalind Gill (2007) to define and characterise postfeminism.

Although the main limitation of this paper is precisely the difficulty of extrapolating these results to Spanish young people, its results nevertheless do furnish a specific snapshot (localised in time and space) of the relationship between young people, using social media and feminist identity. This case study points to a complex situation involving contextual factors in society such as the capitalist system and the patriarchal structure coupled with the personal positions and attitudes with respect to feminism of the young women taking part in the study. The interaction between these aspects brings to the table concepts

already put forward by other authors including postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007) and sexual neoliberalism (De Miguel, 2015). Hence the results derived in this case study enable us to pinpoint and characterise five features which define the complex interaction between feminist positioning via discourses and self-representation on social media:

1. **Internalisation of the male gaze.** The young women interviewed see feminism in terms of free choice and freedom of expression and thus their representations depict their choice to objectify themselves without viewing this in principle as contradictory but rather as a way of vindicating themselves as sexual subjects. Yet analysis from the critical postfeminist perspective of authors such as Angela McRobbie (2008) and Rosalind Gill (2007) shows that everything has to do with the mechanisms of coercion constructed by the patriarchy which make young women experience this "sexual freedom" as real when in fact they are still docile, passive and feminine (De Miguel, 2015). This is because Instagram is a social media site steeped in popular culture and as such it is intertextual, i.e. it draws on the images and conventions of a range of cultural industries (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015). As such, it is not surprising that the content analysed reinforces the ideals of femininity and feminine standards propagated through legacy media (Saiphoo & Vahedi, 2019) or platforms such as Instagram itself (Feltman & Szymanski, 2018). The young women internalise and reproduce the ideals to which they are exposed, in this case ideals of femininity which reinforce hegemonic standards of beauty. It is also evident from the interviews that they are not aware of their self-imposed surveillance when thinking about the position, creating the expression and building the representation of their photographs. This would suggest they are not acting out of choice but rather have internalised the male gaze (Figueras, Tortajada & Willem, 2017).
2. **Contradictions between image and narrative.** The fact that there are only two self-representations alluding to feminism leads to the conclusion that while in general, and as they said in the interviews, feminism is part of them and they factor it into their daily attitudes and actions (McRobbie, 2017), nonetheless they do not feel the need to include it in the construction of their identity through the content they post on social media. The young women surveyed do not have a need to expressly display a connection to feminism when they represent themselves on Instagram. The image and the figure of the young women as empowered and sexually liberated subjects prevails over the message of condemnation or criticism of the patriarchal system they are part of (Caldeira, 2021).
3. **Objectification and sexualisation as a means of female empowerment.** The interviews reveal that the young women do not shun feminist discourse as unnecessary, as was the case in the early versions of postfeminism (Gill,



2016), but rather they are well aware they do not live in an egalitarian society. In their daily lives they question both their own macho attitudes and those expressed around them and perceive feminism as the goal to be achieved in this society. It is therefore disconcerting that not only do they continue to focus on the body, appearance and the canons of beauty in their self-representations but also their way of challenging the established system is, somewhat startlingly, through their objectification and sexualisation. The context provided by image-based social media sites furthers this seeming contradiction as the pressure to get positive feedback in the form of “likes” and comments from their followers prompts young women to depict themselves in an attractive and desirable way (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). Even so, it is a fact that young women are unconsciously promoting gender stereotypes and inequalities and end up abiding by patriarchal rationales (McRobbie, 2008).

4. **Event feminism and slacktivism.** Feminism is evident in the young women's discourses and in their self-representations, especially in the International Women's Day demonstrations. They all take to the streets to demonstrate, although in no case do they get involved in organising International Women's Day events and in only two cases do they explicitly tie their self-representations to the feminist identity by posting an image of themselves on the same day. By using image-based social media sites such as Instagram and most of all by creating content which is not targeted at activism, feminist claims can take on overtones of individualised celebration, draining them of political content. Following these patterns, there is a risk that activism via these kinds of posts may become associated directly with slacktivism, which consists of supporting political and social causes using social media.

This is often criticised because the ultimate goal is to look good, fit in with contemporary demands and elicit a positive response yet without needing to go into detail or address issues which have a real impact (Munro, 2014).

5. **Feminist identity under construction.** In the same way that the young women analysed see their feminist discourses as constantly evolving and being restructured, it might also be argued that their self-representations are also constantly evolving and being restructured. Instagram is a platform which allows us to use a range of strategies to identify ourselves in an online setting and also to define ourselves through the gaze of the other. Thus Caldeira (2016) argues that the current conception of identity is no longer based on notions of solidity and stability but rather on the idea of openness and constant change. With this in mind, it remains to be seen whether over time the young women analysed here end up identifying with patterns of representation which are further removed from postfeminism or, conversely, bolster this model of gender neoliberalism able to adapt and morph in relation to new ideas as they emerge (Gill, 2017).

Drawing on these five traits and the results derived from the case study, we can identify five challenges to be tackled by social actors engaged in helping Spanish young people to gain digital skills and make recommendations to address them (see Table 1).

Thus this paper not only makes it possible to (1) unpack the creation of content on Instagram by young women to compare the way they see and experience feminism and how they self-represent on this social media site but (2) it also provides a methodological tool which can be replicated in other case studies, allowing us to deepen the richness of the data (Izcarra-Palacios, 2014) by interpreting manifest content, i.e. what can

**Table 1. Challenges and recommendations for working with young people on social media content creation**

No.	Challenge	Recommendations
1	Young women are not aware of the work and effort involved in creating content based on their self-image. Moreover, this content is monitored by self-imposed surveillance.	Raising awareness of the process of professionalisation behind content creation as a paid job would help to make a distinction between profession and hobby.
2	Young people are constantly exposed to ideal bodies and ideal lives, which translates into an idealisation of the self that leads to posting only the best version of the person. This in turn brings a lot of pressure and shifts away from reality.	Promoting media education from a very early age fosters people's critical capacity. This helps them to distinguish between construction and reality.
3	In order to receive more positive feedback from their peers, young women adopt patterns of self-representation very close to those posited by postfeminist representation, including a tendency to objectify and sexualise themselves.	Empowering young women in all areas of their lives, not just their bodies and appearance.
4	The feminist activism we mostly find on Instagram is individualistic, i.e. it adopts neoliberal standards and is often devoid of critique or content.	Besides making event activism visible, activism founded on collectivity, encounters, mutual support and online sorority should also be stepped up.
5	Social media provide young people with a space for experimenting with, defining and consolidating their identity. Yet at the same time they are not neutral, free or safe spaces.	Acknowledging and supporting these transitions young people also make in the digital setting will furnish a solid foundation for building and defining identity.

Source: Authors.

be seen, and also latent content. Furthermore, (3) it pinpoints the challenges and provides recommendations for social actors working with young people on content creation on social media.

At a time when the conversation about the impact of feminist ideas on the attitudes of people in general and young people in particular is on the agenda, the findings of this qualitative study, albeit with some limitations, show that the prominence of social media, and specifically of Instagram, makes the self-representation of young women more complex and contradictory in relation to the everyday practice of feminism. This study can be carried over to other social content creation platforms such as TikTok or Twitch which emerged with a bang during the pandemic and are in even earlier stages of development. The conclusions help to open up the discussion on how the online identity creation young women are building on social media platforms such as Instagram connects, meets or clashes with the feminist identity which today's young people are building in other non-virtual venues and in their offline narratives.

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