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## Our boy Whitey

### Middle-aged women's happy object on TikTok

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# Our Boy Whitey: Middle-Aged Women's Happy Object on TikTok

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Gabriella Nilsson

## Abstract

This article provides an example of how middle-aged women rediscover and express emotions in digital media, mainly sexual desire but also the joy they feel among like-minded women of the same age. The ethnographic case is a community of European and North American women aged around 40 to 60 years who sexually desire 20-year-old TikTok celebrity William White. White went viral when he began lip-syncing to 1980s hits, particularly Barry Manilow's "Mandy" while performing his flirtatious signature moves: the smile, the wink, and the eye roll. This study is based on 6 months of daily lurking in a digital community the women call Whiteyynation, structured around White's accounts on various digital platforms. In trying to understand the meaning and function of a young male TikTok'er in the lives of middle-aged women, with Sara Ahmed's theory of emotions, I describe how happy objects align individuals in a social community toward happiness. Specifically, I analyze how White, through a playful capitalization of 1980s music combined with a certain flirtatious look, functions as a happy object that is multiplied, magnified, and circulated in Whiteyynation. I explore the circumstances and conditions surrounding Whiteyynation as an affective space and affective economy, such as the production and distribution of self-produced content, gifting as a strategy for increased reciprocity, and the various currencies at play.

## Keywords

TikTok, sexual desire, middle age, aging, fandom, happy object, gifting, live streaming, emotion, affect, community, digital economy

## Finding "Our Boy Whitey"

In 2021, thousands of middle-aged women discovered 20-year-old Canadian William White (@Whiteyy18) on TikTok. One year later, he had over 2 million followers and 45 million likes, almost all from the same age group. White who started creating content during the pandemic first went viral when he started lip-syncing to 1980s hits, particularly Barry Manilow's song "Mandy." His "anchor material" (Abidin, 2017), the content for which he is known, consists of flirty videos where he mimes to music while posing, smiling and winking. When he gazes directly into the camera, the viewer is the recipient of his declaration of love. "Goodness sir, I'm gonna play like you're singing directly to me" is one of 67,000 similar comments on the original "Mandy" lip-sync posted on 28 May 2021. The proportion of flames among their emoji indicates that he is above all "hot." White's style is youthful and sporty—he often wears hoodies with a cap or hat, giving him an innocent look despite his obvious sex appeal. Early on, the "verdict" on the internet was that White is capitalizing on being "cougar bait," a young man who attracts older women. His opening

line, "Hello, hello, it's your boy Whitey," has prompted his middle-aged female fans to use the hashtag #OBW (Our Boy Whitey).

White's "filler material" (Abidin, 2017), secondary content that provides snapshots of everyday life, consists of broadcasting live on TikTok and, until 2023, posting daily on Twitter (now X). During the live broadcasts, White displays intimacy by mixing flirting and dancing with everyday chit-chat, brushing his teeth, and drinking coffee, all accompanied by a steady stream of virtual gifts and sexualizing comments in the chat. Sometimes his parents and siblings appear in the content. On Twitter, White's tweets keep the conversation going between live broadcasts. Altogether, an affective community is formed, which the women call "Whiteyynation."

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White himself is the hub of Whiteyynation, as the digital community structure is based on his accounts on various platforms. The interactions between White and the women mainly consist of his verbal communication during the live broadcast on TikTok, followed by the women's responses in the chat, as well as their written communication on Twitter. Transactions include White publishing content on TikTok and Instagram, the women giving virtual gifts during live broadcasts, and the exchange of self-produced content. Some transactions take the form of women sending physical gifts to White's home. Whiteyynation is in constant flux due to changes in the functionality of the platforms, but more importantly due to White's emotional whims, manifested by suddenly closing his account on a platform or ceasing a particular form of interaction.

White's followers appear to be almost exclusively European and North American white women aged 40 to 60 years. There is a growing trend among younger men on TikTok to create content aimed at this audience, mainly through live broadcasts. Some men have silent lives, where the content consists of them smiling and looking dreamily into the camera to the tune of romantic music. Other creators claim to be more explicitly aimed at empowering middle-aged women's sexuality. This trend in combination with a growing number of popular culture portrayals of white, affluent "cougars" in the last decades suggests a new acceptance of middle-aged women engaging in relationships with younger men (Alarie & Carmichael, 2015). In reality, according to De Vuyste (2022), when middle-aged women are open about their sexual desires, their environment still responds with feelings of unease. Critical comments on TikTok suggest that White is secretly disgusted by his middle-aged fans. De Vuyste uses the concept of the "unruly" to describe the view of women who challenge the construction of certain desires as inappropriate, who rebel against the normative boundaries of sexuality, and stubbornly go against the grain. White's fans are unruly in several ways: As middle-aged women, they should not be sexually explicit, indulge in parasocial attachments, or even be on TikTok.

Using Whiteyynation as an empirical example, this article contributes to research on the affects surrounding unruly women and the complex intersections of gender, age, and sexuality that influence these affects. TikTok, and digital media in general, is considered here as both an arena where emotions can be studied and an arena where emotions are felt. In this sense, Whiteyynation is both an empirical material and a lived circumstance, an affective community.

The aim is to analyze phenomenologically the various interactions and transactions between White and the women to understand the significance and function that he and similar content creators on TikTok have in the lives of middle-aged women. The analysis is based on philosopher Sara Ahmed's arguments about orientation, emotions, affective spaces and economies, and the stickiness of happy objects. I ask questions such as how women experience and explain

the feelings they feel and express in Whiteyynation, what they think is the strength of White's content that creates such an attraction, and how they relate to the power structures at play, such as the age gap and the digital economy on TikTok.

The article is based on an ethnographic content analysis of digital material identified and analyzed during 6 months of daily lurking in Whiteyynation, from January to July 2022, with additional sampling in 2023. The material consists of White's live broadcasts, TikTok videos created by White, as well as video and audio edits, still images, gifs, and artwork created and posted by his followers on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. I captured the voices of followers in the form of their written contributions to chats during live broadcasts, as well as their many comments on White's TikTok videos and in Twitter threads. The material in its entirety forms the basis of the article; however, the quotes are mainly from written interaction on TikTok and Twitter. Although all digital material is publicly available, for ethical reasons, I have chosen not to include references to the women's accounts to make identification more difficult.

## Situating Whiteyynation

This study touches on a variety of research areas, including celebrity cultures, audiences, parasocial relationships, online sexuality, and fandom. A growing celebrity culture in recent decades has prompted researchers to examine the importance of celebrities in the lives of their fans, particularly the importance of parasocial relationships (Lamerichs, 2018; Stever, 2017). Much literature has focused on whether parasocial relationships are good or bad. The word "fan," an abbreviation of "fanatic," highlights the traditionally negative view of the psychological factors involved in "celebrity worship" (Kowert & Daniel, 2021; McCutcheon, 2002). In often sexist and ageist studies, this "irrational" behavior has been seen as something reserved for teenage girls (Allen & Ingram, 2015; Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). Parasocial relationships have been seen as something you grow out of, and research on parasocial relationships among other genders and age groups has been scarce (Karhulahti & Välisalo, 2021). However, an increasing number of researchers have come to see parasocial relationships as an extension of, and a complement to, other everyday social interaction (Brooks, 2018).

In the past, parasocial relationships have been perceived as imaginary and one-sided, but as social media platforms have expanded the ways in which interactions take place, the possibility of a new dynamic has been created (Brooks, 2018; Ruberg & Brewer, 2022; Yan & Yang, 2021). The fact that a potential for mutual exchange has been built into the structure of the platforms, not least on TikTok, has led researchers to problematize the view of parasocial relationships as one-sided (Hopkins, 2019). The presence of live broadcasts where interaction takes place in real time means that parasocial relationships, as Kowert and Daniel (2021) suggest, should be seen, not as one-sided, but as "one-and-a-half-sided." The

rapid technological development of reciprocity possibilities highlights the lack of qualitative research on how parasocial relationships are shaped socially, emotionally, sexually, and economically.

There has long been an interest in exploring what happens to sexuality when it materializes on digital platforms (Adams-Santos, 2020). In particular, sexual “others” are considered to have new opportunities to collectively explore and “create” their sexuality online (Hightower, 2015). The term “techno-sexuality” (Waskul, 2014) captures the use of technology to express sexual desires, experience sexual pleasure, and explore sexual fantasies.

Pickard (2022) argues that no norms have a greater impact on women and women’s lives than those related to their sexuality. Expressions of sexual desire are usually accepted only when associated with heterosexuality and reproduction. Even then, acceptable sexuality is limited to private, monogamous sex between people of the same generation (Gott, 2005; Katz & Marshall, 2004; Rubin, 1984). There are strong normative beliefs about whether middle-aged and older women can, should, and will still have sex (De Vuyst, 2022; Ayalon & Gewirtz-Meydan, 2017). Women’s aging is seen as a linear, irreversible process that leads to unhappiness, physical decay, and loss of sexual desire (De Vuyst, 2022). Specifically, for women, aging means a gradual sexual disqualification and invisibility to the male gaze, while older women with younger partners are ridiculed (Pickard, 2022). This article highlights less-visible aspects of aging women’s sexuality, such as how sexuality interacts with agency, humor, and female community, aspects that seem to exist alongside the dominant narrative of decline.

I hope to contribute to these fields of research from a phenomenological perspective on emotions and affect. The premise of Ahmed’s theory of emotion is that emotions do not exist within the individual but are embodied experiences of social relations. She challenges an “inside out” model for understanding emotions and instead advocates an “outside in” model where affects “pass between bodies, affecting bodily surfaces or even how bodies surface” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 36). I will focus on how emotions are passing between the women in the digital community structure of Whiteyynation and how these emotions work to align them as White becomes their “happy object.” In her essay *Happy objects*, Ahmed argues that objects acquire their affective value as good insofar as they point toward a happiness that come after. “If objects provide a means for making us happy, then in directing ourselves toward this or that object, we are aiming somewhere else: toward a happiness that is presumed to follow.” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 34) In this sense, objects can become “happiness means,” “happiness pointers,” or “happy objects.” In this article, I analyze how White functions as a happiness pointer and a happy object. Happiness, Ahmed continues, “might play a crucial role in shaping our near sphere, the world that takes shape around us, as a world of familiar things. Objects that give us pleasure take up

residence within our bodily horizon” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 32). I explore how the women’s experience of happiness in the form of sexual desire and joy when they encounter White shapes the world around them and how White affects their orientation in the world.

## Inner Cougars Going Wild

The women first encountered White through his flirtatious TikTok videos. Many count White’s first “Mandy” lip-synch as the starting point of their interest. In the video, White wears a red hoodie and a gray cap over his 1980s haircut. Smiling and looking straight into the camera, he mimes the sad lyrics of Barry Manilow’s love song: “I never realized how happy you made me, oh Mandy. You came and you gave without taking, but I sent you away, oh Mandy.” He rolls his eyes in a way that convincingly shows that he is madly in love with Mandy/the viewer. The women joke among themselves that through the video, White released their “inner cougars into the wild.” “Dude, you’re gonna make me come out of menopause!”

Ahmed (2010) writes that affects involve perversion (p. 38). When the women discovered White, scrolling on TikTok was perverted. The feed stopped as they watched the same video over and over, infused with physical sensations that were jokingly revealed in the comments. They sweated, became short of breath, suffered cramps in their ovaries, their heart rates increased, they had heart attacks, their eyes hurt from not blinking, and they fell off their chairs and died. Old age was mocked as a risk factor: “Holy shit! I’m a senior citizen and I can’t reach my ‘Help! I’ve fallen and I can’t get up!’ button.” Some comments were even more explicit—White gave them “willgasms.” In Ahmed’s sense, the Mandy video can be analyzed as a conversion point that made visible a possible reorientation toward a life with sexual desire. In this respect, White was a happy object pointing to a sexuality beyond menopause—quite literally a “sex object.”

It is not a given, however, that middle-aged women, overwhelmed by a sudden sexual desire on TikTok, will act upon or even recognize these feelings. Norms for middle-aged women revolves around asexuality and undesirability rather than sexual liberation in digital media. The comments of other women, and the contagious potential of emotions, were likely to play an important role in defining and legitimizing these feelings. Ahmed (2010) writes that the atmosphere in a room we enter will affect the impressions we receive and in turn our emotions (p. 37). When the women baffled opened the comments, they were met by a room full of equally baffled middle-aged women. However, they were also met by a room full of joy and humor. From the start, the attraction to White was a collaborative women’s project seemingly aimed at normalizing their sexual desire through laughter. Together, they stuck affective value to White in the form of sex appeal through their excessive use of sexualizing emoji.



Objects are charged with the expectation that they will evoke certain emotions in those who come close to them (Ahmed, 2010, p. 41). The women clearly agreed on the affective value of White, and that his sex appeal could be expected to evoke sexual desire. Nevertheless, their comments were marked by their amazement that they themselves felt these feelings. “Oh good lord. I am old and married, how did I end up here?” A common experience seems to be that sexual desire was unusual or even brand new. White had reawakened feelings that they had not felt for many years and perhaps did not think they would experience again. Their amazement may therefore have to do with a stereotypical but expected de-sexualization as aging women. This makes the effect of a happy object all the more significant, and the women expressed gratitude to White for healing them. “You sir are definitely a healer. You radiate all sorts of happiness.” This reference to healing reveals how stereotypes of aging women as broken shape women’s lives. It also illustrates how a happy object works as a pointer by radiating happiness.

In research, the traditional notion that older people are asexual and sexually undesirable has been met by a counter-narrative that states that older people can and should have sex because sexuality is lifelong and health promoting (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008). However, as Sandberg (2011) points out in her study of older heterosexual men, the acceptance of older people’s sexuality still presupposes a normative sexuality. How, where and who older people should desire is not discussed because it is taken for granted that sexuality is practiced within a long-term, monogamous heterosexual relationship. In contrast, Sandberg highlights the “dirty old man” as a queer figure because he is sexual at the wrong time and in the wrong place. Similarly, the unruly women in White’s comments can be analyzed as female versions of sexual desire out of time and place. They are too old to think about sex, let alone express sexual desire on TikTok. Moreover, the object of their desire is too young.

To be affected by something, Ahmed (2010) writes, is to evaluate that thing as either good or bad (p. 31). When the women evaluate their sexual desire for White, they inevitably do so in relation to age norms. “If I were 20 years younger, lol . . . but my God you are so beautiful! Having such impure thoughts.” To that extent, their amazement can be analyzed in terms of disorientation. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed (2006) describes how disorientation happens when the ground no longer supports an action, when we lose ground (p. 170). The women’s disorientation is reflected in their inability to name their experience and evaluate whether their desire for White is good or bad. “I need to go repent! That eye roll just filled me with such bad but so good thoughts!!” They laughingly dwell on the unruly aspects of their seemingly uncontrollable behavior—being sexually attracted to a man the same age as their sons, being unfaithful to their husbands, spending far too much time on TikTok. “Damn!!! How many times can I watch this before it becomes stalking?”

When older women make what are considered to be inappropriate object choices for their own pleasure, De Vuyst (2022) shows, their environment often responds with feelings of unease and a disciplinary power that defines which desires are valid and acceptable. The women in White’s comments are sometimes met with this kind of disciplinary power, for example, by critics who imply pedophilia. “You all realize he’s a child, right?” “I bet he vomits right after hearing 50+ women talk about willgasms.” Ahmed (2010) uses the term “killjoy” to describe someone who appears to kill other people’s joy, for example, by pointing out sexism, but in fact only exposes the bad feelings hidden beneath public displays of joy (p. 38f). Those who criticize the unruly women on White’s TikTok could be seen as killjoys, but instead of having a politically liberating effect, killing joy forces the women to reorient themselves along straight lines.

As Foucault and many since have shown, rather than being a response to external criticism, disciplining occurs mainly within the individual, as self-discipline. In fact, it is common for women to draw on ideas about the inappropriateness of sexual activity for older people when they relate to their sexuality. The women on White’s TikTok are well aware of the unruliness of their sexual desire. “God you are so gorgeous. I feel bad for watching you all the time because I’m 50 years old” “Please tell me you are over 18 . . .” However, this does not mean that they intend to stop watching White’s videos. This is not least evident from the number of laughing emoji in comments like these. Ahmed (2010) writes that to be affected in a good way involves an orientation toward something as being good (p. 32). If the emotions they feel while watching White are good, they seem to think that watching itself is good.

As the women seek an explanation for their feelings for White, some find it in nostalgia, in particular, White’s 1980s hairstyle and retro music choices. Together, the women recall the forgotten fantasies of their younger selves and travel back in time. “Wow I’m like seventeen again and that was thirty years ago.” By evoking feelings of nostalgia, White becomes a symbol, a placeholder, rather than a living man of their unruly desires. This allows them to downplay the age difference; the age difference becomes irrelevant since it is the 17-year-old versions of the women who feel sexual desire. While Pickard (2022) argues that nostalgia is part of an aging trope of despair that encompasses grief over midlife losses, including sexuality, for the women on TikTok, nostalgia serves to explain and legitimize their current sexual desire. Nostalgia becomes a way for them to keep sexuality alive while being less disoriented. It can be viewed as a positive thing that women maintain their sexual desire in this way. Simultaneously, this stance means accepting norms about older women as asexual. It is only in the memory of their youthful sexuality that middle-aged women can and should feel sexual desire.

However, nostalgia should not only be seen as a way to explain away feelings that do not follow a straight line.

With Ahmed, nostalgia might in fact be understood as a prerequisite for White's videos to function as conversion points for the women. Ahmed argues that emotional encounters are always mediated by the unconscious bodily memories. An object becomes a "feeling-cause" because we attribute it to something that we retrospectively recognize as creating happiness (Ahmed, 2010, p. 40). Put differently, the women's desire was not aroused by just any a 20-year-old on TikTok. It was White's deliberately calibrated play with 1980s nostalgia that got them hooked on him. A "young guy with an 1980s haircut" was an object they associated with happiness because they had felt happiness for such objects earlier in life. "I just love the song Mandy, and this young man just brings back memories for our older generations."

## A Space of Feels

Some women are not content to inhabit White's curated "public" surface—the TikTok videos and sexualized commentaries. White's 5,000 most devoted fans literally orient themselves toward White as a happy object, forming themselves as his #teamwhiteyy, #5kcrew, and #lovearmy. They hereby orient themselves toward a life where they prioritize their own happiness, joy, and pleasure. For these women, White appears to be "sticky" in Ahmed's (2010) sense, meaning that they have attributed their sexual desire to the happy (sex) object that is him (cf., p. 39). That he is actually sticky is a running joke: "Oops I'm here again . . . Now, how to get back to my life, took me 24hrs last time." That they want to stick themselves to him is reflected in their playful usernames such as Will's Wife, Will's Nurse, Will's bed, Will's gold chain, Will's sneeze or, bluntly, Willgasm. Since his breakthrough, a running joke has been that the women want to change their real names to Mandy, a joke commodified by the sale of "I am Mandy" shirts.

Their orientation means moving behind the scenes, where they participate in recurring live broadcasts, constant tweeting, and continuous sharing of self-produced content, hereby transitioning from being viewers or sexual voyeurs to being fans or lovers. Whiteyynation is the women's term for the "intimate" digital space they have dedicated to their deepening engagement with their happy object. It is a space where they "cohere around a shared orientation toward some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 35). Here, they reveal their parasocial romantic relationships with White. "I spend the night cuddling with my TikTok boyfriend." They jokingly act as if there were no "public" audience present: "Strictly between you & me (Oh yeah, and 5k Over-Heated, Aching, Yearning, Drooling, Wishing, Imagining Girls of yours)." Whiteyynation stands out as a space where they can comfortably orient themselves along new lines without being questioned or feeling disoriented, a space where the shared happy object naturally gives them "a place at the table"

(Ahmed, 2010, p. 38). Referring in this way to a "TikTok boyfriend" does not necessarily indicate that fiction and reality have been confused, but rather, argues Karhulahti and Välisalo (2021), that they are uninterested in contrasting fiction and reality.

The affective community of Whiteyynation must be considered as important as the happy object itself. Ahmed (2010) writes that

to experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object, but to "whatever" is around that object [. . .] If for instance, you receive something delightful in a certain place, then the place itself is invested with happiness (p. 33).

Furthermore, Kowert and Daniel (2021) show that the potential of live broadcasts for mutual communication—as a space for receiving something delightful—leads to increased identification and greater emotional investment. The happy object and the digital benefits on TikTok thus participate in the formation of the affective space of Whiteyynation. Whiteyynation consists of two types of relationships—a parasocial (romantic) relationship between the women and White and a friendship relationship between the women. The community satisfies very different needs—the need to be seen by a man and to experience sexual satisfaction, but also the need for friendship, exchange of experiences, and encouragement.

It is clear that White's sex appeal accounts for the majority of the conversations in this affective space. The women's main motivation for residing in Whiteyynation is still the physical sensations they claim to experience there and nowhere else. It is sexual desire that is the cause of their uncontrolled behavior, against their better judgment.

My gawd he is so stunning!! I have never been one to be intimidated by a gorgeous guy but let me tell you William absolutely does, lol. He is a whole other level, a level that makes me act a fool all embarrassing and stuff. I love it.

It is clear that White, as a happy object, is attributed a different affective value and function than other "gorgeous guys"—he and no one else has the ability to point to happiness in such a powerful way that women choose to orient themselves along non-normative lines, to "act a fool." Perhaps because of the norm-breaking nature of middle-aged women expressing their sexual desires online, there is always a sense of humor and self-awareness in their communication. A tweet from White about struggling to get the sunroof off his car is immediately met with hundreds of comments packed with a mix of sexualizing and laughing emoji that are directed at both White and the other women, cheering him on to "get his top off":

Pretty sure you're a pro at removing tops. Right? He just looks at me and mine comes off.

Oh ffs, I'm not sure we can handle full stud William White with the top off.

I can handle it! I CAN, Promise, Goddess!!! Not only that, I wanna handle him, OH, I meant to say handle it. Nah, I'm lying, Want so badly to handle HIM!

Sexual desire, joy, and laughter seem to go hand in hand in Whiteyynation. Age as well as the age difference between them and White are always present in the women's jokes. As one woman comments on a sexy TikTok video, "Are you trying to kill us 'dinosaurs'?" White joins in the age jokes by asking the women to send his regards to their grandchildren. In Ahmed's (2017) words, the unruly space of Whiteyynation can be described as a playful and fun wiggle room of rebellion. In this community of middle-aged women, where sexual desire and sexual jokes are a common form of socialization, they defy age norms and enhance their value as sexual beings. While everything seems to be about sex, sexual acts and practices, however, are completely absent. The community is entirely an affective community, not a community where they actually explore their "techno-sexuality" (Waskul, 2014). Rather, they seem content with the idea that they have a sexuality.

## Labors of Love

Whiteyynation is an affective community where happiness and sexual desire are recognized, explained, and expanded. In particular, it is "a shared horizon in which happy objects circulate, accumulating positive affective value" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 38). Ahmed argues that it is through circulation that the affective value of a happy object increases as it becomes stickier. "Happiness is attributed to certain objects that circulate as social goods" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 37). This explains the women's constant chatting and tweeting about White, but especially their ongoing creating and sharing of self-produced content on and between digital platforms. The self-produced content consists mainly of video edits and still images, but also of audio sequences, gifs, and physical objects. The content can be analyzed as a way to multiply the happy object, something the women themselves call a labor of love. For them, multiplying is a way of repaying White for the changes he has made possible in their lives. "I want to support him with all my heart. The least I can do is make edits. I'm so grateful to him & I can't thank him enough."

Digital media in particular offer many opportunities for the circulation of happy objects. Whiteyynation can be seen as a network of affective flows in digital form, where White himself is the hub, but the spread is far greater than he can monitor and control. In this respect, Whiteyynation is reminiscent of other digital fandoms (Lamerichs, 2018), although the number of women who follow White is relatively small.

White's affective value has clearly increased as Whiteyynation has grown. Not only is the happy object multiplied, it is magnified. The women recall a time when White

was only on TikTok, and the women had to spend their time in the comments section of his videos waiting for the next live broadcast. Now they can move between TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, sharing content on White's accounts as well as their own. Ahmed (2010) writes that "when we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way" (p. 37). In this way, the sharing of content becomes a community-building practice that aligns the women toward the same potential happiness. Ahmed emphasizes that

when happy objects are passed around, it is not necessarily the feeling that passes. To share such objects (or have a share in such objects) would simply mean you would share an orientation toward those objects as being good (Ahmed, 2010, p. 37).

Some fan practices in particular benefit the entire community, such as collecting White's TikTok videos before he suddenly decides to remove them from his account or to record his live broadcasts. Some women claim to have a complete collection of White-produced content. On websites and YouTube channels, they create archives filled with source material for other women to work with. In fact, White's own material, particularly the live broadcasts, functions more as source material than as finished content. After each live broadcast, Whiteyynation completely explodes in the sharing of self-produced content. This adds to the happiness they already feel about him broadcasting live. "I have to give props to all the edit queens. How do you guys find the time to do all these edits and still keep up with the rest of us on Twitter and TikTok? Do you ever sleep? You guys are phenomenal." Many women are far more professional than White when it comes to photo and video editing, which further adds value to the happy object.

The women's self-production of content involves a form of appropriation when they borrow and repurpose existing materials to produce something new (Lamerichs, 2018). White sometimes appears as a kind of paper doll, allowing the women to shape the object of their shared sexual desire more clearly than in reality. White's self-produced explicitly sexual content is limited, but out of context, short passages from his live broadcasts can be edited to appear more sexually charged than they really were. "Use headphones!!!" listeners were warned after a woman created an edit that made it sound like White was having sex. The happy object is clearly not fixed but changeable material—it can be disassembled and reorganized as desired. According to Lamerichs, it is not uncommon for fans to subvert original content in this way by producing fiction that evokes their desired emotions (Lamerichs, 2018). This further emphasizes that White is primarily a happy object for the women, not a real person. There is an ongoing debate in Whiteyynation, however, about how far they should go in producing explicit sexual content. So as not to damage White's modeling career in the real world, they agree to stay within the bounds of what is



considered “classy”: “Very classy!!! He’s a model and wants to look sexy just not trashy . . . you’re good girl!!!”

## The “Willconomy” of Whiteynation

The financial potential of parasocial relationships is well known. That Whiteynation is a transactional space, a digital economy—or “willconomy,” as the women joke—is clear to everyone involved. What is conveyed in this economy is emotion, but it is conveyed through the sale and purchase of need-satisfying services using different tradable currencies. With his content, White sells sex appeal, nostalgia, the illusion of the male gaze, and a potential reciprocity. Through the consumption of this content, the women feel sexual satisfaction, joy, love, pride, empowerment, visibility, attention, and appreciation. They repay him with gratitude, loyalty, time, physical products, and money.

Investing time means being present during White’s live broadcasts, thereby contributing to the engagement rate and thus satisfying the algorithm that controls White’s visibility and dissemination on the platform. Yan and Yang note that fans skillfully use the internet to generate large volumes of social media traffic and pursue long-term strategic plans for their idols (Yan & Yang, 2021). In this way, Lamerichs (2018) writes, fans are “not only producers or consumers but increasingly function as stakeholders, investors, and brand advocates” (p. 233). For the women of Whiteynation, supporting White by being present at every live broadcast, however, is not easy. Often, White announces an upcoming live broadcast at short notice. For those living in different time zones, it can mean making major sacrifices in their daily lives: “We are hardcore. I was up at 2 am for the first live and 5 am for the second live. It was a long work day but ready for tonight again regardless.” Some are anxious when they cannot contribute enough to White’s numbers: “Numbers make a difference to him and I don’t ever want him disappointed.” Others reveal their strategies to make it appear that they are present during live broadcasts: “If I can’t watch, I join the live, turn off the volume and pop Will in a drawer or my purse. That way his numbers stay up.”

In return, the women crave reciprocity more than anything else. As digital platforms such as TikTok become increasingly interactive, with the introduction of live broadcasting, the potential for reciprocity in the form of two-way interaction increases. I agree with Kowert and Daniel (2021) who argue that the very possibility of two-way communication is at least as important to the relationship as the few times it actually occurs. Similarly, Yan and Yang (2021) show that the opportunity for two-way communication, no matter how infrequently it occurs, increases fans’ devotion. On those occasions when White responds to one of the women’s comments or rewards someone with a “follow,” the entire Whiteynation is encouraged to keep trying to be recognized, to be seen, by White.

However, many women are not satisfied with this level of engagement. They want to make themselves more visible or even enter White’s physical existence. “I’m glad to be a fan and hope that one day I will meet him too. If I can buy him a drink or dinner, better yet! I might even use my granddaughter as bait.” One strategy many women use to try to break the one-way nature of the parasocial relationship is to send physical gifts to White’s home. His handling of these gifts during the live broadcasts on TikTok, as he opens the packages and evaluates their contents, becomes a longed-for interface between online and offline (cf. Ruberg & Lark, 2021). A physical gift makes the women feel closer to White than is possible on digital platforms. They can even reach into his home. There is an assumption that everything Will owns, especially the many clothes he wears, has been gifted by one of them.

What’s funny is that none of us even think he bought his own hoodie. It’s just automatic to think . . . who bought this for Will? I can’t imagine all the clothes he has received.

In a sense, this funding model resembles the way women patrons have played a crucial role in the emergence of other media industries, such as film (Tukachinsky Forster, 2021). According to the gift theory of cultural anthropologist Marcel Mauss, however, their giving can be seen as strategic, as it creates a situation of compulsory reciprocity, involving both a duty to receive and a duty to repay the gift. This means that if a woman sends White a gift, there is a high probability that he will receive it, open the package, and touch the item. He may also repay it by acknowledging the giver’s existence by mentioning her name and reading any accompanying card. A hat or a cap is always immediately reciprocated by White putting it on. The gratitude and pride the women express after he receives their gifts reveals the importance of reciprocity. “Thank you so much Will for wearing the hat I sent you on today’s live. You really warmed my heart.” Sending gifts, however, involves taking a risk. While some gifts are likely to be appreciated by White, such as designer clothes, others are not. In particular, “personal” gifts—such as a framed photograph of the woman or food from her country—run the risk of being misunderstood or rejected. In these cases, the opportunity for intimacy is lost and replaced by a sense of rejection that is witnessed by the entire Whiteynation.

Chen (2021) identifies a new community-driven gifting model on social media due to the triadic relationships enabled there, especially during live broadcasts. This gifting model means that the gift exchange is not only a concern for the giver and receiver but also for all participants who witness the exchange. If the gift is appreciated by their shared idol, all participants praise the giver in real time. If not, there is an awkward silence.

Though much of White’s clothing is gifted by the women, the digital economy consists primarily of monetary transactions integrated into the TikTok app in the form of virtual



animations. Animations are paid for in dollars on the app by the donor and later converted back into dollars by the recipient (after TikTok takes a 50% commission). There are endless animations to choose from—roses, sunglasses, hats, cars, hearts, and shooting stars—each with a different monetary value. When gifted during live broadcasts, they appear on screen briefly as visual stimuli for the creator and the viewers.

The women give virtual gifts to fund White's continued work as a content creator. It is a form of tipping. However, the gifts are also an attempt to be noticed by him and the other women, to create a social presence during the live broadcasts (Lin, 2021). Lin writes that streamers who rely financially on virtual gifts, as White does, acknowledge the donor, who, in turn, is motivated to donate more. In practice, however, it is impossible for White to acknowledge every virtual gift—the inflow of animations is too fast. Consequently, only the most expensive animations are recognized, and women who want to attract his attention must outspend other women (cf. Abidin, 2018). As a result, Whiteyynation is inevitably a class society. Although White repeatedly assures the women that they do not have to gift him, he is dependent on gifts for his livelihood. One of the most expensive gifts is the roaring lion, worth 400 US dollars in 2022. For a couple of seconds, the spectacular and valuable lion blocks the entire screen, making it impossible to miss. One woman in particular has made a name for herself in Whiteyynation by giving at least one lion every live broadcast. When this happens, White shouts out her name in gratitude, and the other women shower her with praise in the chat.

During the live broadcasts, the women literally attach affective value to White's body through their virtual gifts. They compare their spending to the way others spend money on restaurants and expensive wines, but the gift giving during live broadcasts is reminiscent of the way money is attached to women's bodies during striptease performances. Where to draw the line on financial support is an ongoing debate in Whiteyynation. "We support William with gifts, PayPal, edits, liking, tapping, joining lives, supporting others in this community. I think a line is crossed when you pay \$ to meet him in person. It feels completely wrong to me. Unsavoury."

## Regaining the Spark of Life

White clearly functions as a happy object in the lives of the women. They describe him as a shining diamond, a gift sent from above, or a magical unicorn as he has reawakened their sexual feelings and inspired them to make changes in their lives. "William has lit a Red Hot Fire in us!!!!" With renewed energy, many women are able to make profound changes in their lives: getting divorced, quitting their jobs, or starting the education of their dreams.

It's amazing with this phenomenon (Will of course) has created. I too, made some risky yet brave choices this year because Will totally changed my mindset. After 32 years of nursing, I retired

earlier than planned and am living my life on my terms, and have new friends bc of this man!

The functioning of a happy object like White can be analyzed from a life course perspective. I have argued above that it was important for the women's sexual desire to enter into a space in which other women were sharing a similar experience. As Ahmed (2010) points out, however, while we feel the atmosphere as we walk in a room, "what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival" (p. 37). Seemingly, most women arrived in Whiteyynation from an angle of being long married with children who were about to move out, an angle where their previous happy objects were disrupted. They discovered White at a time in life when they began to question their previous roles as mothers and wives, as well as their identity and desirability as women.

Central to Ahmed's view on orientation is that we tend to orient ourselves along straight lines, as a good life and happiness is promised for those who reach certain morally recognized points along the life course, such as marriage and children. Thus, happiness directs life in some ways rather than others (Ahmed, 2010, p. 41). As the normative points of anticipated happiness are gradually passed, I would argue that the way forward becomes less clear, and eventually the direction of life may need to be reconsidered. White's videos became a conversion point in the lives of the women, and Whiteyynation a space where this conversion was used as the basis for a reorientation, such as processing the transition to a new place in the gender order where their value was no longer linked to sexuality (cf. Pickard, 2022).

I think he inspired us to live our dreams and seek our happiness. To know our worth and seek value with the courage to act upon whatever it takes to get us where we want to go. So grateful!

One way of analyzing how the happy object works, how the red-hot fire is lit, is in terms of the male gaze. With the concept, Laura Mulvey (1975) described how the male gaze structures women's lives as women construct themselves in relation to an omnipresent to-be-looked-at-ness. Since women's value is in being seen, not in seeing, it is in women's interest to control how they are seen. Aging as a woman means gradually becoming invisible to the male gaze, which in turn reduces the value and scope for action. The feeling of being "seen" by White and other young men on TikTok who looks directly into the camera in their videos or during live broadcasts seems to counteract this process of devaluation.

The gratitude the women feel for White brings with it a desire to give something back, which manifests itself in loyalty, availability, and dedication. In their biographies on TikTok and Twitter, many explain that the sole purpose of their presence there is to support White: "Here to Love & Support William White & Follow his Journey to Stardom."

This pledging of loyalty to White recalls how celebrity worship has often been defined as an intense psychological attachment involving the investment of both time and financial resources (Brooks, 2018).

Pickard (2022) writes that the “last love” narrative implies that strong feelings of freedom, similar to those expressed in Whiteyynation, can be accessed through a sexual relationship “one last time.” The women’s descriptions of White’s importance to them recall the function of the last love. Through the love for White and their reawakened sexuality, the women seem to have liberated themselves from gender norms and taken control of their lives. While this can be seen as positive, it also means that they are approaching another set of norms, namely those that prescribe “successful aging” (Katz, 2001). Successful ageing implies an individual responsibility and moral duty to be happy, healthy, and free from limitations. In relation to sexuality, this involves a “fight ageing through sex” attitude (Hincliff & Gott, 2008). Paradoxically, then, Whiteyynation needs to be seen not only as a community for unruly sexuality but also as a moral community for successfully aging women.

Brooks (2018) argues that parasocial attachment is one way of re-entering the world of relationships in a safer and less vulnerable way (cf. Karhulahti & Välisalo, 2021). Nevertheless, the women’s presence in Whiteyynation is characterized by a pervasive fear that White will leave them. White hates “drama,” internal disagreements between the women, and every time there is too much drama, he threatens to close his accounts. Many women do extensive work in Whiteyynation to block critics and cool down heated conversations, all to get White to stay with them. At one point, White “breaks up” with them, posting a short message on Twitter announcing that he is closing all his accounts and would no longer produce digital content. Some tried to maintain a facade of humor. “I told my work friends today that Will broke up with all 5,000 of his girlfriends.” Many felt betrayed. “I felt like I got dumped. He was supposed to be my safe ‘boyfriend.’” Ahmed (2010) uses the term affect alien to describe the individual in such moments where the object that is “supposed” to make her happy is attributed as the cause of disappointment (p. 37). Their grief was particularly severe because losing White also implied a loss of community with the other women. Without White, there is no Whiteyynation. “I will miss you so much. This whole situation sucks. We lost him and we are losing WN and beautiful friends. This is mourning that is taking its toll on all of us.” When White shuts down his accounts, they lose their happy object, but they also lose their orientation, become disoriented, and are forced to face the possibility of returning to life as it was before. A few weeks later, White is back and everything returned to normal.

The women are aware that they violate age norms when they act out their sexual feelings in Whiteyynation; however, some are open with their reorientation in life. They keep

coffee mugs and mouse pads with White’s photo on their desks as work. Others maintain clear boundaries between these two worlds, keeping their Twitter accounts dedicated to White a secret. “Yesterday I set up a second account as I don’t want friends and fam to read all my declarations of undying love to Will lol.” For them, it is only in Whiteyynation that they feel safe to move along queer lines. Partly in jest, partly in earnest, the women describe how they live a double life. Based on Ahmed, their double life could be described as orienting themselves along straight lines and queer lines at the same time.

In a study on perceptions of infidelity, Adam (2019) shows that parasocial relationships are perceived as an equal betrayal to pornography use, and some women are forced to deal with their husband’s jealousy. Others face acceptance, which they explain by the fact that being in a relationship with White is also of benefit to the husbands. “My hubby is really amazing about it all. He loves how much happier I am and we are happier as a couple since I started reconnecting with myself.” Here, it becomes clear that White is a happy object and not a real man: He points to happiness and sexual fulfillment, not to a real, queer relationship. Perhaps it can be argued that the sexual feelings stuck to White are transferred to the husband, thus recharging the husband as a happy object.

## Residual Meanings of Whiteyynation

With a theoretical basis in Sara Ahmed’s theory of emotions, this article has provided an example of how middle-aged women rediscover and express emotions in digital media. Their emotions were mainly about sexual desire, but also about the joy they felt in the community of like-minded women of the same age. In trying to understand the meaning and function of a young male TikTok’er in the lives of middle-aged women, I have described how happy objects align individuals in a social community toward happiness. Specifically, I analyzed how the 20-year-old Canadian William White, through a playful capitalization of 1980s music combined with a certain flirtatious look, functioned as a happy object that was multiplied, magnified, and circulated in the unruly community of Whiteyynation. I explored the circumstances and conditions surrounding Whiteyynation as an affective space and an affective economy, such as the production and distribution of self-produced content, gifting as a strategy for increased reciprocity, and the various currencies at play.

In line with Ahmed, I emphasized how the women arrived in Whiteyynation—where they came from in terms of their life histories as long married women with children about to leave home, and the atmosphere of heated amazement they encountered when they entered. The women were not looking for sexual pleasure on TikTok. Instead, White’s content was something that happened to them as they scrolled, a conversion point that is unlikely to have had this effect without

the 1980s nostalgia. When they encountered White, they were amazed that they could (still) feel sexual desire.

The main contribution of this article is what happened next: How the women came to relate to this newfound sexual desire and to interpret everything that happened afterwards as a consequence of it. In their view, White literally acted as a happy object, pointing them toward the happiness of sexual desire and giving them agency. Their gratitude toward White knows no bounds. At the same time, the community in Whiteyynation is reminiscent of how women's issues have always been identified through consciousness-raising, with women talking to each other about their shared experiences. Their joy and laughter are important tools in revealing the sexual regime that has limited their lives. Through their newfound sexual desire, the women experience an increased status as individuals, having halted their loss of (sexual) value. Equally important, their descriptions of their sexual desire are a catalyst for their ability to make radical changes in their lives, such as changing jobs, getting divorced, or simply prioritizing themselves and their new community of friends over family. This highlights the importance of sexual value to women's (perceived) agency.

Although some aspects of Whiteyynation are problematic, such as the gifting model on TikTok, the possibilities created in this affective space must be seen as constructive for the individual woman. From a societal perspective, however, it is questionable why women still need a man pointing them to happiness in order for them to have agency in their lives.


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