“This is something we live through every day”

negotiating the cultural memory of the Decembrist revolt in Russian historical film Union of Salvation

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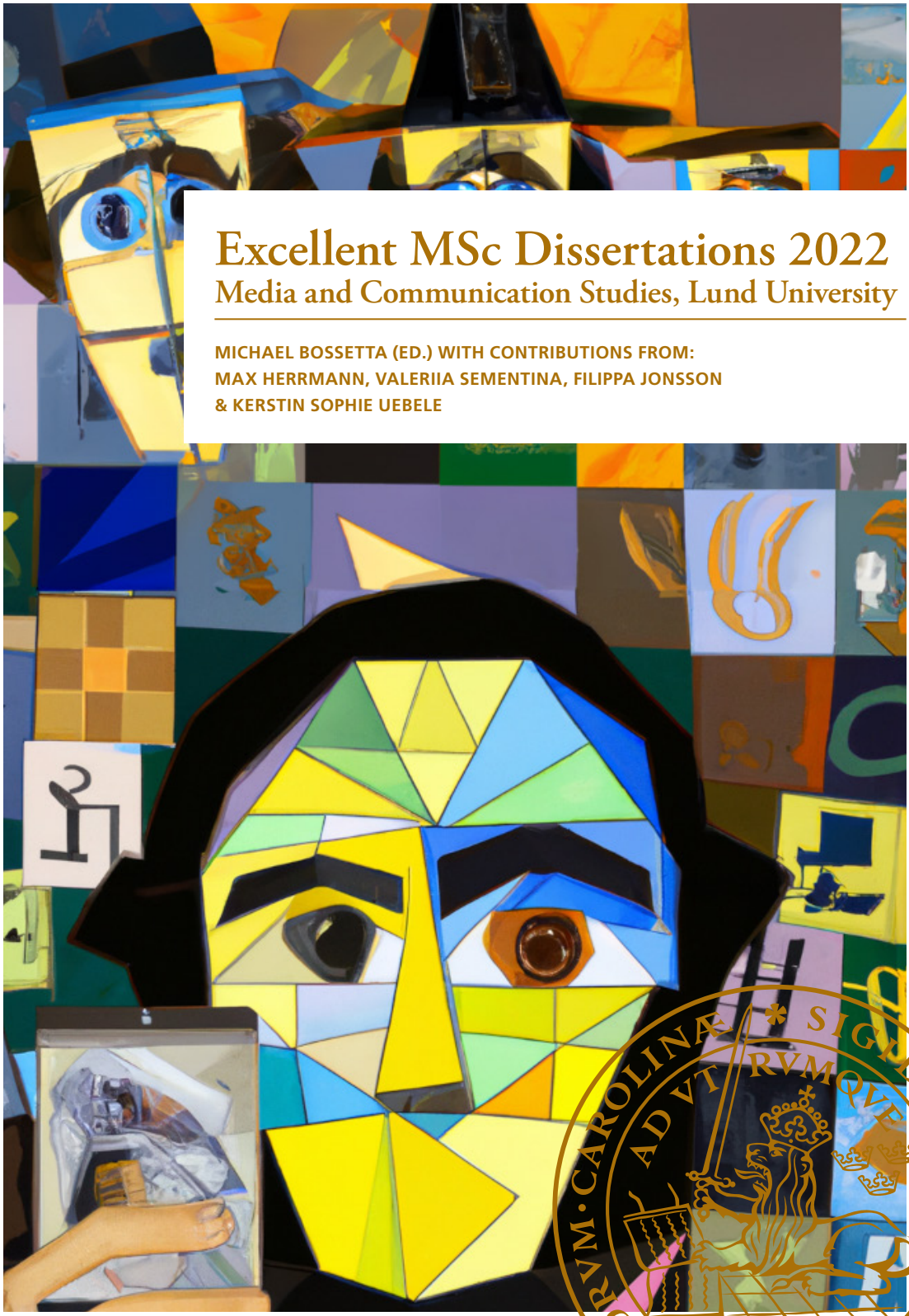

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Introduction

Michael Bossetta

2022 may be defined as a year of flux. On the one hand, the long-awaited 'return to normal' following a global pandemic marked a flux from extreme to routine. On the other, armed conflict on Europe's eastern flank marked a flux in territorial borders and longstanding geopolitical alliances. Media and communication scholars understand the world is constantly in flux – and that media is a flux in-itself. A key objective of our field is therefore to understand the role of media as a both a medium and mechanism of flux, a task which is accomplished by each contribution to this volume.

In this seventh edition of the *Excellent MSc Dissertation* series, four students present condensed versions of their Master's theses, completed for the MSc degree in Media and Communication Studies at Lund University. These students presented their dissertations in May 2022 and earned the highest mark. During the Fall of 2022, the dissertations were revised to a shorter length of 14,000 words for publication in the series *Förtjänstfulla examensarbeten i medie- och kommunikationsvetenskap* (FEA). The series was launched by Media and Communication Studies at Lund University in 2008 to increase the visibility and reward high quality student research.

Each of the four chapters in this volume explores a flux through an analysis of media. In Chapter 1, Max Herrmann investigates the cultural, social, and political **resonance** of *Hamilton* as it reverberates across social media platforms. Through a semiotic and qualitative text analysis of social media posts from both official *Hamilton* accounts and user-generated content, Herrmann shows how individual-level interpretations of the musical continue to resonate with audiences in ways that are democratically meaningful for citizens' personal worldviews as well as their collective political behaviors. Although a scripted performance that is seven years old, the musical continues to resonate with audiences based on fluctuations

that occurred in the world since its original writing. Thus, the chapter demonstrates how social media users, through digital platforms, can interpret and reinterpret a performance through various media modalities in ways that inextricably bridge fluxes across social, cultural, and political arenas.

In Chapter 2, Valeriia Sementina similarly focuses on a key historical interpretation through popular culture, namely the Russian state-funded film *Union of Salvation*. Through an in-depth film narrative analysis complimented with audience interviews, Sementina shows how the film attempts to reframe the Decembrist revolt as well as how audiences negatively perceived this reframing. Sementina's analysis reminds us that **cultural memory** is in flux not only through reinterpretation – as illustrated by Chapter 1 – but also through omission and absence. Moreover, the case of *Union of Salvation* demonstrates how overt attempts to manipulate cultural memory may backfire, while also highlighting the crucial ways that citizens strive to protect the past through their careful and agential monitoring of the present.

In Chapter 3, Filippa Jonsson shows how the present can also give new life to rituals of the past, specifically through an ethnographic study of Instagram witches in contemporary Sweden. Conducting interviews with individuals practicing different traditions of witchcraft, Jonsson investigates the mediatization of witchcraft through the Instagram platform as a form of **ritual transfer**. Jonsson's analysis connects the platform's norms of aesthetics to the modern practices of witchcraft, such that the visual portrayals of witchcraft on Instagram work as an extension of spirituality itself. Yet, Jonsson also highlights the commercial logics of modern digital witchcraft, a notion that stands in stark contradiction to its longstanding rejection of modernity. Clearly practices of spirituality, and the gateways to them, are also in flux.

In Chapter 4, Kerstin Sophie Uebele shows how similar dynamics apply in the realm of sexuality and sex education. Analyzing modern practices of **sexual knowledge production**, Uebele investigates the *Pornhub Sexual Wellness Center* in order to reveal the norms and knowledge systems used by the world's largest pornography aggregator to communicate sexual education. Through a qualitative content analysis of articles on the website, Uebele uncovers a hetero-normative and male-oriented bias in the website's content, despite its stated aim of promoting sexual inclusivity and deviancy. In addition, Uebele examines the profiles of various site contributors in order to draw a distinction between sex

education and sex advice that becomes blurred through this unique medium. Like with Chapter 2, Uebele's analysis draws attention to the need to critically approach media producers' motives, as well cast our attention to perspectives that are absent as much as we analyze those that are present.

Separately and together, the four contributions in this book exemplify what staff at the Department of Communication and Media consider to comprise an excellent dissertation at the Master's level. Our aim in publishing this book is to inspire future students to be inquisitive, innovative, and rigorous in their research projects. The social world is constantly in flux, and novel perspectives and cases are needed to truly comprehend our world as it fluctuates. This volume is one small, yet important part of that endeavor.

Lund, December 2022

Not a Moment but a Movement: The cultural, social, and political resonance surrounding the musical *Hamilton*

Max Herrmann

Introduction

'The musical Hamilton had an uncanny resonance that spread widely.'

Anne Bogart

Hamilton is a historical fiction musical about one of the founding fathers of the United States. The genre-bending dramatization of Alexander Hamilton's life story combines various musical styles like soul, pop, R&B and hip-hop. Starting off in 2015 as an Off-Broadway- and Broadway-musical, in 2020 the film version of the play was released on Disney+, further manifesting its position in today's popular culture. *Hamilton's* status as a popular culture product is undisputed and scholars do not shy away from pointing out the musical's 'frame-breaking' (Meyer 2018:375) and revolutionary aspects (Lodge & Laird 2021) that allow its consideration as "a powerful cultural phenomenon" (Harbert 2018:412).

Resonating in the digital world

Despite being set in the late 1700s, Hamilton hits the zeitgeist of today. Next to its story elements this is achieved by mediating meanings and messages through additional media outlets. Trevor Boffone even argues that Hamilton broke the previously existing boundaries of Broadway musicals as the creators constructed a dramaturgical world outside of the musical itself (2021:100). This study argues that this dramaturgical world is mediated in various ways from social media posts or trending musical sound snippets to exclusive performances by the actors or creators. The analysis of Hamilton's digital media presence further demonstrates how the musical not only resonates on the cultural but also the social and political level.

Resonances are reverberations that can have an impact on an individual's action in the world or the world at large (Bogart 2021:6). As this thesis considers Hamilton's real-world impact as much as individual comments or user-generated content creations, the concept of resonance is significant both on the personal level and the wider range of 'collective resonance' (Rosa 2019, as cited in Bogart 2021:15). Considering the cultural, social, and political aspects of resonance helps framing the thesis into the relevant contexts of the research while still enabling an insight into the wider socio-cultural, cultural-political, and socio-political impact of the musical Hamilton. This is where the interconnectivity of the three resonance levels becomes apparent. A characteristic which will be described and visualized later on in the thesis with help of a model called the 'triangle of resonance'.

A provider of cultural citizenship

> 'Popular culture at its best disrupts rigid societal ideals and hierarchical structures, whilst at times reflecting them, by subtly challenging audiences to confront hegemony and by opening up broader social dialogue on critical issues, such as race, class, gender, sex and power.' (McCollum 2019:5)

Being a musical of almost exclusively non-white actors portraying a time in American history in which slavery and white exclusivity was still very much prevalent, *Hamilton* actively counters the domain of whiteness that Broadway musicals have been for over a century (Hoffman 2014:211). As the upcoming

analysis will show, *Hamilton* resonates with immigrants and people of color as well as nonconservatives and liberals, offering a sense of belonging and empowerment to groups of people who feel underrepresented and misunderstood in their society. These resonances transcend the musical's original performance and are still apparent in today's digital media output of *Hamilton* – still realizing its democratic potential as a provider of cultural citizenship (Hermes 2005:4). The creators of *Hamilton* do not hesitate opening up social dialogues or speaking up on social or political issues on their social media profiles on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter or TikTok – using their platform to raise awareness for issues that they feel need more representation and lending cultural citizenship to people who feel excluded from other definitions of citizenship (Williams 2018:502), e.g., in the context of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement.

An inter-generic musical

Though analytically focusing on the digital presence of *Hamilton*, the wider dramaturgical world outside of the musical's theatre stage must be considered which is why the concept of inter-generic spaces by Annette Hill (2019) is employed. In the context of *Hamilton*, three inter-generic spaces are identified with the mediated space of social media platforms and the real-world space of recontextualizations or street protests complementing the musical's original dramatical space of the theatre performance. The analysis of the musical line 'Immigrants: We get the job done' (Miranda 2016) showcases the applicability of the concept towards *Hamilton.*

Social media platforms have different characteristics than traditional public spaces that can be understood as affordances in how they create new opportunities and challenges (boyd 2014:10f). Amongst other things, these platforms allow the reappropriation, remixing, or transformation of existing content (Phillips & Murphy 2016:133) and due to its noticeable popularity amongst younger audiences, *Hamilton* has been subject to creative adaptations through user-generated content. Fans of the musical participate in the mediated space of *Hamilton*, taking part in social media-trends, creating memetic images, or finding other ways to express their way of culturally resonating with the play. An outcome of this phenomenon is a unique dynamic between fact and fiction where historical actualities get bended and fictional musical stories get re-texted and re-imagined in current real-world contexts.

Aims and research questions

This thesis aims to explore the creation and re-creation of Hamilton-related social media content from a transmedia perspective. In that context, the apparent dynamic between factual historical information and fictional story adaptions will be of specific interest. Further, this thesis aims to find ways to critically analyze the cultural, social, and political resonance surrounding Hamilton. Lastly, this research aims to point out how popular culture products like Hamilton utilize their platform and reach in an effort to raise awareness for issues that seemingly surpass the thematical realm of the original creation, critically investigating the community reactions this entails.

The following three research questions are guiding the quest for critically analyzing the musical Hamilton through its digital media presence:

1. In which ways is the dynamic between historical actualities and fictional adaptations apparent in the inter-generic spaces of Hamilton?
2. In what ways can we critically analyze the cultural, social, and political resonance surrounding the musical Hamilton?
3. How is the musical Hamilton a resource for cultural citizenship, specifically in the context of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement?

Literature Review

The literature review for this thesis is structured in six parts. The first part surveys the existing academic research around Hamilton. Section two deals with concepts surrounding transmedia creation and re-creation and how they evolved over time. The overarching theme of this thesis is the concept of resonance which will be reviewed in the third section by considering an artistic take on the term by Anne Bogart in contrast to the sociological perspective of Hartmut Rosa. Moreover, popular culture is a continuous theme of this research which is reviewed in the fourth section. *Hamilton's* role as a provider of cultural citizenship with the 'Black Lives Matter' movement is one of the themes of this study, which is why social movement literature is taken into account for this review as much as critical race

theory in the fifth and sixth section of the chapter before a consideration of the political power of popular culture closes out the literature review.

'Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?' – Hamilton in academic research

Premiering in 2015, *Hamilton* is anything but a novelty for the academic world of today – scholars all around the world have approached the musical through specific fields of expertise. In the journal *American Music* there was a musical and artistic angle taken towards *Hamilton* while, next to the cultural aspects, identifying and investigating the social and political debates sparked by the musical through various methodological approaches ranging from theater studies and the critical analysis of recordings to ethnography and studies of dance and movement (Garrett 2018:407). Due to its innovative generic mixture, *Hamilton* was able to attract audiences with differing musical tastes while fitting into American mainstream culture through its hip hop style (Kajikawa 2018:468). According to Kajikawa, '*Hamilton* sounds national identity through the racialized matrix of American popular music' (2018:482) – the musical styles are conveying associated values and meanings from the stage production to the outside world for people to identify themselves with. As a historical fiction musical drama, *Hamilton* fits into the modern ubiquity of 'generic mixing and niche segmentation' (Mittell 2004:xiii) and through musical expressions the emotionality of the historical story is mediated to the audience (Harbert 2018:423). Elissa Harbert goes as far as to position *Hamilton* 'at the pinnacle of history musicals up to this point' (2018:426) which she attributes to the musical's popularity, critical acclaim and balance of realism and theatricality (ibid.).

The representational and historical aspects of *Hamilton* have been addressed by Lodge and Laird's anthology (2021), where *Hamilton* is scrutinized from several different angles, acknowledging the 'conflicting notions of music, drama, history, ethnicity, gender, and class' (ibid.:1). While the key topics of the anthology include history, representation, staging and music from diverse interdisciplinary perspectives ranging from economics and history to ethnomusicology and women's studies (ibid.:4), the authors recognize the internet as 'a liminal space *Hamilton* could engage with' (ibid.:7). As mentioned in the introduction, Trevor Boffone talks about a dramaturgical world existing outside of the musical itself (2021:100) – one way in which this world is created is through the mediation of

Hamilton-related content into the internet through posts on social networks like Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter which are analyzed in the further course of this study. In that sense, social media platforms act as the liminal spaces between the musical's dramatical narrative and the real world where cultural, social, and political resonances become visible.

Sissi Liu sees the appeal of *Hamilton* in the contrast between a young musical style and the historical and political theme (2021:120) – an ambivalence that certainly can also act as a friction point - especially when the modern musical comes together with contemporary politics which sometimes still struggle to connect to younger generations and 'became more polarized by and over race' (Tesler 2016, as cited in Craft 2018:429) in recent years. Elizabeth Craft argues that 'few musicals or artistic works have achieved *Hamilton*'s prevalent place in US cultural and political discourse' (2018:442) while also mentioning the musical's claim of cultural citizenship (ibid.:430) which will be elaborated later on. Recognitions like these reinforce the objectives of this research to dig deeper into the resonant aspects of the musical through analyzing visual and textual digital media material surrounding *Hamilton*.

This study aims to expand the research field surrounding the musical by bringing a digital-media-focused perspective into the mix. Analyzing the symbolic meanings of social media posts detectable through semiotics and scrutinizing user comments and captions utilizing the qualitative text analysis, this thesis adds to the existing academic literature by considering the musical as an ongoing popular culture product under the concept of resonance.

'The room where it happens' – transmedia creation and re-creation

When looking at *Hamilton* in this thesis project, there is no limitation to either only the original Broadway musical, the Disney+ movie or just the social media presence. *Hamilton* happened and still happens on a transmedia scale, transcending generic boundaries and being performed and re-interpreted in the mediated space of social media platforms. Before taking a closer look at the concepts of transmedia and inter-generic spaces it is worth considering the concept of convergence. Henry Jenkins predicted a 'paradigm shift […] toward the increased interdependence of communications systems' (2006:243) which came into full effect. He points out the increased importance of active

participation of media consumers in the new-found participatory culture (ibid.:3): 'Audiences, empowered by these new technologies, occupying a new space at the intersection between old and new media, are demanding the right to participate within the culture' (Jenkins 2006:24).

Jenkins' assessment of media audiences wanting to participate is further underlined by the concept of 'produsing' by Rebecca Lind (2020) where audiences and producers coexist, and content is not just produced and used but rather created and re-created in the digital world. The result can be described by the term 'user-generated content' as a "special form of content which is produced independently by a user with the help of the internet" (Arnhold 2010:27). Through the interactive opportunities that digital media platforms offer, participatory culture has become a crucial element of popular culture studies.

Contemporary creators of popular culture products have to adapt to this situation, one way in which this is done is 'transmedia storytelling' (Jenkins 2006:20) as a means of enabling audiences to experience fictional worlds across different media channels (ibid.:21). Elizabeth Evans expands this notion, arguing that the concept of transmedia involves more than the accessibility in more than one format, bringing authorship and temporalities into the mix, complementing the existing key feature of narrative (2011:27ff). Evans acknowledged the emergence of modern transmedia practices and transmedia storytelling as a new domestic access point to audio-visual entertainment (2011:173) and more than ten years later, the accelerated ascension of the internet strengthened the presence and possibilities of transmedia operations even more.

The fluent nature of contemporary popular culture can further be considered through the concept of inter-generic spaces as a way the mediation of a popular culture product connects 'with both the production of entertainment […] and life politics of people in everyday life' (Hill 2019:140). While Hill distinguished reality television shows into the entertainment space and real-world space (ibid.), for the musical *Hamilton,* the conveyance of its meanings and messages is consequently seen threefold. In that sense, 'the room where it happens' (Miranda 2016) is not just singular or limited to a theatre stage or movie screen, but rather split up into spaces like the dramatic, mediated, and real-world space. While dramatic spaces were generally the center piece of popular culture products, their mediation and adaption to the real world is facilitated through digital media affordances. For social media platforms, boyd identifies four particular affordances

in form of persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability (2014:11) – all of which influence the way *Hamilton* moves around the digital sphere.

Graham Meikle describes social media as a way in which 'the public space of the media industries and the personal space of the individual response can now occupy the same space' (2016:7), facilitating the emergence of amateur media content. One way in which this form of content is visible in the digital world is through memetic media as a form of user-generated content. The emergence of memes as well as their role in today's digital culture has been assessed by several scholars (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016) Moreover, Meikle himself acknowledges internet memes as a creative strategy that was once considered as too radical but evolved into a basic cultural practice of contemporary social media interactions (2016:49f). Memes are created through mimicry, repackaging, and remixing of previously existing content (Shifman 2014:22). Ryan M. Milner assessed that 'it's hard to imagine a major pop cultural or political moment that doesn't inspire its own constellation of mediated remix, play and commentary' (2015:1) referring to user-generated memetic adaptions brought into the digital sphere and *Hamilton* is no exception.

The participatory culture in which we find ourselves in the 21st century media landscape faces scholars with new challenges. Popular culture products need to be considered from several different angles and analyzed as ongoing transmedia projects rather than enclosed acts that end as soon as the professional production is published. New media are an environment of affordances (Madianou & Miller 2012:170) and what happens outside of the dramatic space can be just as relevant as what happens inside of it.

'The world turned upside down' – resonance and affect

The concept of resonance is a key element of this thesis as it brings a new angle to the existing literature surrounding *Hamilton*. Anne Bogart's 2021 book *The Art of Resonance* gives an insight into the intentions and secrets of successfully resonating theatre performances. Furthermore, Bogart's assessment of these performances as "a collaborative venture between performer and audience" (2021:36) connects to the points made in the previous section where producers and audiences coexist and co-create content surrounding the original popular

culture product. 'Resonance is what ripples and radiates; one energetic being influences the vibrations of another' (Bogart 2021:4).

According to German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, subjects are driven towards resonant experiences, either seeking them out or hoping to encounter situations that cause them to resonate (2019). Rosa sees resonance as a primary human motivation, ascribing resonance theory with the task to identify the social conditions that promote or hinder resonant experiences (ibid.). Despite resonant relationships being 'a dynamic interaction between subject and world' (Rosa 2019:26), they are not purely individual but rather socially, culturally, and historically mediated (Rosa 2016, as cited in Gros 2019:26).

There are differences in the resonance experienced by distinct audiences as presence is an important ingredient of resonance (Bogart 2021:13). The theatre audience of a musical might resonate with the play more intensely than the screen audience of a movie or the social media audience of a popular culture product. But Bogart, just like Rosa, acknowledges the individual disposition that might be necessary to experience resonance to the full extent (2021:14): "Resonance is not only an intellectual idea, it is also an embodied experience, involving perception, sensation, cognitive function, imagination, and feeling" (ibid.).

Social media can be a place where similar interests and affective attitudes towards a topic lead to the collectivization of emotions. Adam Nash criticizes this situation as 'the collective is never individuated within a digital social network' (2016:19) and if so, it is individuated as an emotion rather than an actual person (ibid.). Both an individual and collective emotionality is detectable in *Hamilton*-related social media posts as the upcoming analysis will show.

'History has its eyes on you' – popular culture, resonance and cultural citizenship

Anne Bogart states that 'the great art experiences, generate *resonance* as well as memories' (2021:6) – these experiences can be transmitted through popular culture products. There is a persuasive power within popular culture (Sellnow 2010:6) which needs to be identified and assessed in order to look at the resonance that is surrounding it. One way in which this persuasive power can take shape is through cultural citizenship. Toby Miller claims that 'citizenship has always been cultural' (2007:51) and further points out the significance of media when

considering cultural citizenship (ibid.:73). Nick Stevenson also identified the media as a central institution of modern societies (2003, p.11) and predicted cultural citizenship through popular culture to be a driving factor in societies:

> 'The future will be governed not so much by a homogenous, mass produced culture repressing human diversity, but by a diversified popular culture where competitive advantage comes through product differentiation and audience segmentation.' (ibid.)

According to Joke Hermes, 'feelings of belonging often relate more easily and directly to (global) popular culture than to issues of national and local governance' (2005:1). So, by considering popular culture products in the sphere of contestation and belonging as providers of cultural citizenship their role 'as a domain of resistance against dominant power relations' (Hermes 2005:3) is an indicator of how they can resonate not only on a cultural but also a social and political level. Through its musical style of hip hop, which has a history of being used to voice cultural expressions (Rose 1994), *Hamilton* naturally grants belonging and a form of cultural citizenship (Williams 2018:490) as the Analysis section of this thesis will showcase.

Oscillating between belonging and contestation, the availability for streaming on Disney+ as well as the ongoing audience engagement on digital media platforms preserve and extend the public discourse surrounding *Hamilton* even years after its release, allowing it to take a place in 'the center of popular culture' (Kelly 2017:251). Erika Arivett goes as far as arguing that the musical 'altered the trajectory of theater and popular culture' (2020:137) becoming a tool for social change through its representational qualities (ibid.). Amongst other things, these representational qualities are scrutinized in this study, analyzing *Hamilton's* cultural resonance as evidenced in the digital sphere.

'I'd rather be divisive than indecisive' – social movements and social resonance

An implication of resonance is the evocation of a response (Bogart 2021:15) which in some cases can become detached from the source it originated from. Hartmut Rosa tackles resonance from a sociologist perspective and identifies social or cultural but also institutional or economical preconditions as "circumstances that

preclude the development of resonant relationships" (2019, as cited in Gros 2019:25). To achieve social resonance, it helps circumventing these excluding preconditions by creating points of identification or belonging for previously disadvantaged individuals. 'Questions of inclusion and exclusion […] are at the heart of cultural citizenship' (Stevenson 2003:18) which is why the quest for widespread participation (ibid.) and resonance allows the consideration of this concept.

A popular culture product can induce fan-based social movements (Hinck 2021) including amongst other things protest themes and signs inspired by the fictional world of the original pop-culture work (ibid.:191). The anthology *The Rhetoric of Social Movements* (Crick 2021), consists of several instances where popular culture or the new media impacted the emergence and progression of social movements. Crick defines social movements as a 'dynamic reorganization of relationships between human and nonhuman actors whose movement conflicts with the patterns of established societies' (2021:21). Drawing back on the key theme of this thesis, Brunner and DeLuca's assessment of how 'social movements reverberate across space and time to influence popular attitudes' (2021:157) hints at the potential of identifying resonances that come along with the consideration of social movements.

Popular culture, or more precisely *Hamilton*, is hence seen as an intermediary inspiring and supporting such movements. In our contemporary media landscape, digital media affordances are leveraged in order to raise awareness for social issues (James & Lee 2017:120) – acting as a body of affect (Wetherell 2012:59), popular culture can kindle or reinforce existing beliefs, causing social resonance. Appel and Richter suggest that fictional narratives can even have a persistent implicit influence on people's worldview that may be stronger than explicit influencing attempts (2007:129) – as a historical fiction musical that stays relatively close to the truth, it is particularly interesting to assess if its dynamic between fact and fiction strengthens or weakens this phenomenon in the case of *Hamilton.*

'Rise up' – 'Black Lives Matter' and critical race theory

The 'Black Lives Matter' movement enjoyed and still enjoys the support by members of *Hamilton's* original cast (Lodge & Laird 2021:9) and creators. Christopher J. Lebron sees the roots of the movement in the American shame and

systemic racism that has been going on for centuries (2017). Ron Eyerman further brings forward the concepts of cultural trauma and collective memory (2019) which can be applied to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement as well. More precisely, the African American collective memory of slavery allows the formation of a collective identity (ibid.:28) which has an interesting dynamic in the realm of *Hamilton* as a diversely cast musical. Despite the progress towards race equality since the time of the Revolutionary War until today, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor calls the American culture 'a culture of racism' (2016:21) while assessing the 'Black Lives Matter' movement as an opportunity to shift these cultural and societal inequities (ibid.:25).

In that context it makes sense to take a step back and include critical race theory into the discussion. Critical race theory is in itself a form of a social movement in its quest for 'studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism and power' (Delgado & Stefancic 2001:2). The movement identifies the roots for inequalities based on race as socially constructed and acknowledges the difficulties of curing or addressing racism as a large part of the society has little incentive to eradicate the existing conditions (ibid.:7). Charles Mills sees white supremacy at the core of the 'political system that has made the modern world what it is today' (1997:1), identifying a racial contract that is a global reality (ibid.:20), making race a primary societal contradiction next to social class (Cole 2009:22).

The still apparent "white domination in the artistic sphere" (Martiniello 2015:1230) is one side-effect of the previously presented phenomena in the context of critical race theory. Racism and white supremacy are reaching deep into every part of society and are therefore also formative in the history of musicals on Broadway (Hoffman 2014). Not least by contrasting these obsolete patterns, *Hamilton* created a space of social resonance, having an ongoing relationship with its fans and expanding 'beyond the "betwixt and between" spaces into entirely new venues' (Fischer-Lichte 2008, as cited in Lodge & Laird 2021:7) – those venues being online platforms, forums and even the literal streets.

'Can we get back to politics please?' – popular culture and political resonance

'Political movements are successful only when they converge with an aspect of resonance' (Bogart 2021:12) and as 'the political arena is largely led by affect'

(ibid.:38), the emotionality that comes with popular culture products can lead to the generation of political resonances. While theatrical performances or movies are in most cases generally aiming for affective audience reactions, popular culture can carry a democratic potential (Hermes 2005:4) which makes it interesting for the use in the political sphere. John Street identifies an inextricable link of popular culture and politics (1997:3) that arguably got even stronger in contemporary times of populism and the hyper-performance of politics. One of the most recent examples of this phenomenon got picked up by Victoria McCollum as she connects popular culture's inherently political nature to Donald Trump's use thereof during his presidency (2019) while also bringing up the issues of white supremacy and racism (ibid.:2) as aspects of this political era.

As 'there is no fixed boundary between politics and popular culture' (Dahlgren 2013:140) the dynamic between the two is interchangeable. Political parties can use popular culture in order to emphasize their message, relate with the people and create a space of resonance between themselves and the popular culture product as much as popular culture products can mediate political messages (Street 1997). A form in which the relationship between popular culture and politics can grow into is the dependency of politicians on popular culture in order to perform their political role (ibid.:48) and find points of relatability with the citizens. As one example of the upcoming analysis will show, if detected, such dependency can result in forms of harsh backlash against those involved – both from the political and the pop-cultural perspective.

Elizabeth Craft assessed *Hamilton*'s political reception and detected a cross-ideological appeal (2018:436), also bringing up an example of how politicians used the musical "as an opportunity to humanize their work as public officials at a time when "politician" is treated as a dirty word" (ibid.:441). Official performances at congressional or White House events during the Obama and Biden administration as well as a performative speech directed at former Vice-President Mike Pence (Arivett 2020; Craft 2018) underline *Hamilton's* political stance and identity. Being in the public eye in the times of social media, this stance is repeatedly on trial, praised or criticized – resonating in digital spaces.

‘Are you aware that we’re making history?’ – a new perspective on *Hamilton*

By approaching *Hamilton* under the concept of cultural, social, and political resonance, this thesis aims to expand the otherwise comprehensive academic scholarship surrounding the 2015 musical. Further, existing academic literature on the social and political aspects of popular culture will be complemented through the social-media-focused assessment of *Hamilton*-induced resonances in these areas. Especially the investigation of the musical’s role as a provider of cultural citizenship in the context of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement should bring a new perspective on the social and political potentials of *Hamilton.* In that context, the study aims to show how a musical can grow into a part of popular culture by lending feelings of belonging and points of identification to people seeking for it outside of the regular definition of citizenship through nationality.

Methodology and Methods

Methodological approach

This research project employs a qualitative methodology, therefore focusing on the observation, description, interpretation and analysis of people’s experiences and thoughts about themselves and the world surrounding them (Bazeley 2013:4). In line with searching for meanings and looking for convenient ways to talk about experiences (Brennen 2017:15), this thesis qualitatively approaches digital media material in the context of the musical *Hamilton*.

Performing qualitative research in the digital sphere is subject to a methodological debate (Caliandro & Gandini 2017:3). While quantitative research methods are suggested when dealing with big data in the digital media sphere, smaller sets of digital data can be qualitatively analyzed, for example focusing on their socio-cultural meanings (ibid.). As this is a qualitative research of social media texts surrounding the musical *Hamilton* that are interpreted towards concrete forms of resonance, the study’s samples have been carefully picked out in order to extract information and tendencies visible on respective digital media platforms to potentially derive findings that are relevant for the purpose of the research as described in the introduction. Reviewing existing methodological approaches

towards the case of *Hamilton* made clear that this study takes in a unique perspective through its choice of methods, hoping to expand existing academic research about the musical and its ongoing digital media output.

A qualitative multi-method study

This research project utilizes a multi-method approach by implementing a semiotic analysis as well as a qualitative text analysis where several *Hamilton*-related samples such as images, videos and their respective captions and comments from the digital sphere will be scrutinized. As this study aims to explore the meaning (Jensen 2012:10) of selected digital media images and videos, a visual research method in form of the semiotic analysis brought forward by Barthes (1977) and illustrated by Hansen and Machin (2013) was chosen to evaluate the posts on both the denotative and connotative level. While the denotation considers the first level of meaning (Barthes 1977, as cited in Hansen & Machin 2013:232), the connotation deals with the ideas and values communicated through the representation in the image (ibid.).

Figure 1 illustrates how the multi-method approach on *Hamilton* is put into practice for this research project. While the semiotic analysis captures the visual material from the posts like memes, videos or collages, the qualitative text analysis focuses on the textual content in the respective captions and comments while bringing it into the context of the visual sample analyzed. This is where background information about the musical or real-world situations comes into play as it helps understanding the context of specific posts and comments which is crucial for the correct analysis of the data.

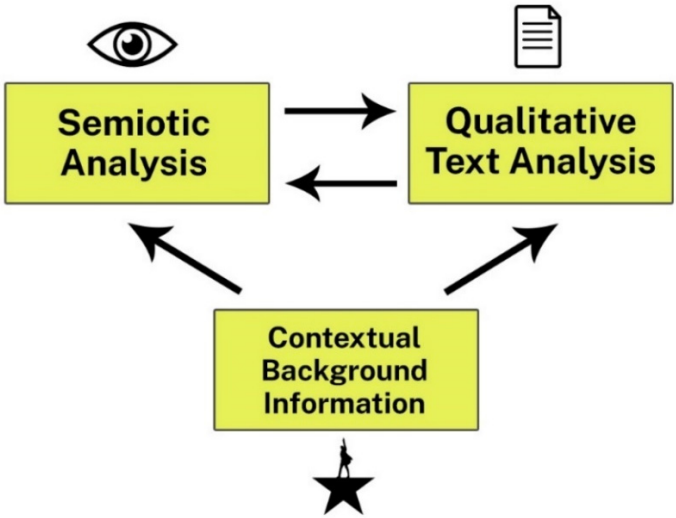

Figure 1: Multi-method visualization

Research design and sampling

Through this study's multi-method design combining semiotic analysis and qualitative text analysis, several *Hamilton*-related samples such as images, videos and their respective captions and comments are scrutinized. As qualitative sampling is driven by purpose (Jensen 2012:268), the sampling process was carried out accordingly with the research questions the result of which were five sample sets with a combined total of 39 samples. All of the samples are shared on digital media platforms, containing a caption including textual information given by the publisher as well as comments made by users of the respective platform. The captions help placing the visual data into its context while comments further demonstrate how the image or video is reacted to within the community in the digital space.

While the first sample set comprised images and videos that have been published by the official *Hamilton* accounts in order to represent the creator's perspective, a complementary second sample set included posts regarding the musical published by other media outlets like news platforms or organizations in an effort to figure out how *Hamilton*-related content resonates in digital media spaces outside of the '*Hamilton*-bubble'. As a third and fourth sample set, the user-perspective takes

center stage, considering both memetic and non-memetic images and videos that show how *Hamilton* is experienced by fans and users on digital media platforms, engaging with the musical in their own creative ways. As an exception to the other sample sets, the last sample set contains content from all different creational origins focusing on the connection of *Hamilton* and the 'Black Lives Matter' movement as investigated through the third research question. Through this range of sample sets, the different forms of existing *Hamilton*-related content could be covered while still laying a specific focus on the theme of 'Black Lives Matter'. In all sample sets, the data itself ranges from videos posted on the online video platforms YouTube and TikTok to images and videos shared on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, or Reddit, covering the social media sphere to a large extent.

Analysis

Starting off with a closer look at the fact-fiction dynamic of *Hamilton*, a key cause behind the resonant character of the musical will be identified. The inter-generic spaces then introduce a threefold distinction of where to look for resonances before the third section directly addresses the centerpiece of this thesis. Resolving the quest for a critical analysis of cultural, social, and political resonances in the context of *Hamilton*, the analytical findings will be used to introduce a model demonstrating the interconnectivity of the concept. After that, the knowledge of the previous themes is applied to the case of *Hamilton's* association with the 'Black Lives Matter' movement in the last section.

Hamilton between fact and fiction

Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan find a balanced interpretation of the dynamic between fact and fiction by acknowledging that "fiction can contain statements that happen to be true in the actual world" (2020:3) as much as majorly factual texts may embed nonfactual statements in order to support an argument (ibid.:4). As a historical fiction musical, *Hamilton* is characterized 'by an imaginative reconstruction of historical events and personages', taking into account the genre definition provided by dictionary.com. Despite these characteristics, in accordance with the first point brought up by Fludernik and

Ryan, *Hamilton* contains factual truths that have been implemented into the dramatized story, partly even as word-for-word quotations like in the song 'One Last Time', where sentences from George Washington's 'Farewell Address' (1796/1812) are sung and performed by the actors on stage:

> 'Hamilton: Though, in reviewing the incidents of my administration, I am unconscious of intentional error, I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors. […]' (Miranda 2016)

Attention to detail like that enables audiences to experience authentic content in the form of historical facts, creating "an illusion of historical accuracy" (Harbert 2018:418).

The analysis of *Hamilton*-related digital media content brought up diverse forms of handling the historical actualities presented or disregarded in the musical's narrative. Community discussions about historical facts are no rarity, sometimes accompanied by criticisms or corrections directed at the musical's creators and audiences.

> 'All though this production was very well acted. But people need to do their research on Alexander Hamilton. He was no great Abolitionist. He went along with the whole thing, to get along for his self interested. why is he so celebrated. He might as well been a Slave owner'[1] (Twitter user)

What this commenter notes, is upheld by Andrew Schocket's assessment of the real Alexander Hamilton's unsuccessful, mostly non-existent fight for abolition (2017:266f) in contrast to the musical's depiction of Hamilton as a true abolitionist (ibid.). Another, thematically close, point of critique that causes dissonance with commenters on different platforms is the violent history of slavery remaining audibly silent in *Hamilton* (Herrera 2016, as cited in Nathans 2017:276) as well as the glorification of the historical figures given their real-world misdeeds.

[1] All comments implemented into the analysis chapter have been taken from their social media origin, unredacted and regardless of grammatical errors or misspelling.

Figure 2: Musical-reality mixture in a meme

Apart from the comments, a form of mixing the musical with the historical and current realities came through the creation of user-generated content as seen in the memetic image in Figure 2. The meme displayed here serves as an example of how the fictional narrative of *Hamilton* in combination with a painting of the actual Alexander Hamilton can create a dynamic social media post, even carrying a political meaning, and being a trigger point for commentaries. The quote in the meme, even though it is misspelled, stems from the *Hamilton*-song 'Farmer Refuted', where Alexander Hamilton gets into a dispute with a bishop called

Samuel Seabury, eventually insulting him for his lack of eloquence. The meme shows former US president Donald Trump next to a painting of the real Alexander Hamilton, created by painter John Trumbull in 1805. Through the visual effects of creating a collage and zooming into the image of the painting as well as the insertion of the text, the musical quote is brought into an entirely new context. Hamilton's pose and standing position in the painting is utilized, directing the insult towards Trump, giving the fact-fiction mix an additional political charge that not only results in positive reactions as the following critical comment demonstrates:

> 'Did you feel the need to post this? Like he was our president a little while ago and we are still a country aren't we? Now can you lay off of the presidential slander a bit?' (Reddit user)

Through the political context, another noticeable phenomenon became apparent in *Hamilton*-related posts with digital media creators re-texting whole passages of *Hamilton* songs on TikTok or users re-phrasing musical lines in order to voice their opinions and bring the play into a real-world context. The following comment was made in reaction to a post about the outcome of the 2020 US Election, re-texting the musical song 'The Adams Administration':

> 'Kamala's the runner up which makes her the vice president. Trump is out of office, no more Mr. lice president. Democracy fires trump, publicly does its goddamn job. Trump has no platform to publish his response.' (Reddit user)

The song's theme of the transition of power closely resonates with the real-world situation in the US in 2020, resulting in several Reddit users creatively adapting musical lines. For the interpretation of these, contexts like the election result, the Vice-Presidency of Kamala Harris or Donald Trump's Twitter ban were crucial.

But the fictional narrative of *Hamilton* and real-world contexts do not only clash through political aspects. The analysis has shown that personal resonances with the musical can lead to all kinds of user-generated adaptations ranging from the memes and re-enactments to graphical artworks and even body art. For the latter, one of the most impressive fact-fiction mix-ups found during this study came through the tattoo of a Facebook user, perpetuating a recurring musical phrase in the handwriting of the real Alexander Hamilton (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Musical quote tattooed in Alexander Hamilton's handwriting

> 'Rise up, but in Hamilton's handwriting (searched through many many of his letters in the Library of Congress digital catalog to find the two words)!' (Facebook user)

While there are '*intra*personal pleasures and motivations among fans' (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2017:9) the relationship between the fan themselves and the fan object (ibid.) becomes ambivalent in the example above. While the fictional narrative's persistent influence (Appel & Richter 2007:129) on the tattooed user is apparent, the fan relationship directed at the musical transcends the fictional boundaries of the show by including the historical person, Alexander

Hamilton. What historian Nancy Isenberg calls "an endearing and whimsical portrait" (2017:297) of Alexander Hamilton made him into the heroic character of the musical, obviating character traits that may have undermined this narrative (ibid.).

Because of the musical's themes and closeness to real-world history, *Hamilton's* dynamic between fact and faction continues to be apparent in the digital sphere, as a trigger for resonance, a point of critique or simply a starting point for discussions. Online users find creative ways of adapting the musical to thematically close, socially, or politically charged real-world situations.

The inter-generic spaces of *Hamilton*

Hamilton is a popular culture product which is fully immersed into 'the flow of content across multiple media platforms' (Jenkins 2006:2) known as 'convergence' (ibid.). Its transmedia qualities comprise distribution and engagement as two interrelated processes (Evans 2011:40) that have been captured through the sampling of this study, including data sets with content originating from the creators of *Hamilton* as well as data produced by audiences of the show. In order to approach *Hamilton* from an inter-generic perspective, the distinguishment into the dramatized space, the mediated space and the real-world space is required. Inter-generic spaces can cross from entertainment spaces into the real world and result in different forms of engagement by audiences (Hill 2019:161). In the case of *Hamilton*, meanings and messages get mediated in the digital sphere, transcending the enclosed dramatical space of the musical and film version, and impacting real-world situations as illustrated through the analytical findings showcased in this chapter.

To illustrate the inter-generic spaces of *Hamilton* and their interconnected nature, it makes sense to break down an example from the musical, which has been captured in the sample sets analyzed for this study. Starting with the dramatic space, this passage from the song 'Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)' is performed by the characters of Marquis de Lafayette and Alexander Hamilton in the musical and film version of *Hamilton*:

> 'Lafayette: Monsieur Hamilton.
> Hamilton: Monsieur Lafayette.
> Lafayette: In command where you belong.

Hamilton: How you say, no sweat.
We're finally on the field. We've had quite a run.
Lafayette: Immigrants:
Hamilton/Lafayette: We get the job done.' (Miranda 2016)

Especially the last line 'Immigrants: We get the job done', which is regularly followed by the audience cheering in the musical, is of interest, as it made its way beyond the dramatized space of *Hamilton*. Drawing back on the previous section, a Reddit user created a memetic musical-reality mixture including real-world paintings of the protagonists Lafayette and Hamilton while hinting criticism at the Anti-Muslim travel ban imposed by former US president Donald Trump in 2017 (Figure 4). Through the meme, the musical's message is mediated into the social media space and brought into the real-world contexts of both the political situation in the US and the real historical figures featured in *Hamilton*.

Figure 4: 'Immigrants: We get the job done' meme

Elizabeth Evans detected the phenomenon of online transmedia distribution being an audience-led process in the context of the television industry (2011:63). As the web increasingly grew into a part of people's daily environment (Dahlgren 2013:36), other industries and pop-cultural productions followed suit, going

through "several processes of convergence" (Meikle & Young 2012, as cited in Dahlgren 2013:37) on technological, organizational and communicational levels (Dahlgren 2013:37) and experiencing the emergence of content-specific convergence models like transmedia or mash-ups (ibid.), the latter of which the meme in Figure 4 can be sorted into.

Hamilton's online transmedia distribution is performed in the mediated space of the musical on officially verified social media profiles on Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter and Instagram, where Figure 5 is set in. The image features an user-generated artwork shared on *Hamilton's* Instagram presence, crediting the orginal artist in the caption, and showcasing the musical quote wandering from the dramatized into the mediated space as a form of transmedia storytelling. As a post published by an official *Hamilton*-profile, the example of Figure 5 shows how the concept of transmedia can be applied to the case of the musical. In accordance with Evans' definition of transmedia storytelling (2011:38), the musical's narrative is utilized in the temporal context of June 2021 being National Immigrant Heritage Month while sharing authorship with the graphic artist mentioned in the caption.

Figure 5: "Immigrants: We get the job done" artwork

What Evans coined 'transmedia engagement' is the way audiences are reacting to, or using the transmedia content distributed to them (2011:64). One way in which

this study was able to analyze this form of engagement was through the commentary sections of digital media posts as seen in Figure 4 and Figure 5. A dynamic form of engagement that was detectable on several different posts was the respondance to or continuation of dramatical story elements indicated in the postings, further taking the musical's narrative into the mediated space. The following two commentary reactions to Figure 5 illustrate this phenomenon, with the first comment referencing the musical scene's usual audience reaction and the second comment following up on the musical quote displayed in the image with the subsequent musical line in the play.

> ''Immigrants we get the job done' *inserts applause*' (Instagram user)
>
> 'So what happens if we win?' (Instagram user)

Next to the musical itself and the mediated sphere, the third inter-generic space 'Immigrants: We get the job done' is found in is the real-world space. Figure 6 shows a viral tweet published by British actor Riz Ahmed, where the musical quote was brought into the streets for a protest in London shortly after the previously mentioned Anti-Muslim travel ban was introduced by Donald Trump in 2017. Expanded by the phrase 'Refugees Welcome', the quote outgrew its dramatical boundaries, carrying social and political meaning outside of the fictional world of *Hamilton*.

Figure 6: 'Immigrants: We get the job done' protest sign

The musical line further inspired a follow-up hip hop track on the *Hamilton* mixtape thematizing real-world social and political issues like contemporary immigration policy or social inequality (Williams 2018:488). What Williams assessed for hip hop in general is underlined by this analysis of the musical *Hamilton* and its quotes as experienced in the digital sphere in that it 'lends cultural citizenship to those who feel outside other definitions of citizenship' (2018:502). That being said, it is important to keep in mind the friction between fact and fiction – especially in the context of the dramatical theme of the musical, painting Alexander Hamilton's life story as a flawless immigratory ascent is a point of critique with historian Phillip W. Magness calling the musical production 'a shockingly rose-colored depiction of Hamilton's immigrant identity' (2017:498), indicating that the protagonist's real-world characteristics are falsely mediated in the musical and its attached forms of distribution.

'Immigrants: We get the job done' is just one vivid example of how the inter-generic spaces of *Hamilton* function. The analysis of the musical in the digital sphere implied an inherently inter-generic nature and it became apparent that almost all of the samples taken into account for the research cross over the three spaces in one way or the other. Be it the original dramatical story performed on Broadway, the film on Disney+, artworks or memes as shown before, or the original cast's musical performances at White House or Congress events. In that sense, the analysis also pointed out that *Hamilton* employs transmedia practices through their transmedia storytelling, engagement and distribution (Evans 2011:173) across multiple media channels.

What is evident at this point of the analysis, is the presence of two major findings that are distinct from each other but both work together in generating resonance. The inter-generic character of *Hamilton* impacts the transmedia distribution of the musical and its contents while providing spaces of discourse and resonance in form of social media commentary sections. In these spaces, the story's dynamic between historical actualities and the fictional narrative acts as a trigger point for discussions, judgements or adaptations that ultimately influences the way *Hamilton* resonates on a cultural, social, and political level, making it a resource for civic values.

Cultural, social, and political resonance of *Hamilton*

Figuring out ways to critically analyze the cultural, social, and political resonance of *Hamilton* was one of the main objectives of this study. Analyzing captions and comments of digital media posts together with the original text in form of images or videos enabled an extensive examination of the case, demonstrating that resonances relating to the musical constantly radiate, often not only on one of the previously mentioned levels but between one another, showcasing the interconnected character of resonance. The model displayed in Figure 7 was created in an effort to visualize the three levels of resonance considered for this study and will be completed with the findings of the analysis of *Hamilton* at the end of this section. Being created for the study on a popular culture product like *Hamilton*, the triangle features the cultural aspect atop, emphasizing the inherently cultural nature of a musical or film that is able to inspire adaptations into other art forms like paintings, graphics or even memes. Social and political resonances are subordinate but still influenced through the cultural characteristics of the popular culture product, creating intersections in form of socio-cultural or cultural-political resonance. While never being completely detached from the cultural nature of the original product, the bottom of the triangle considers socio-political resonance as a way in which the meanings and messages conveyed by popular culture find their way into society, resonating in the context of social and political issues without the story of the original product itself being the focal point.

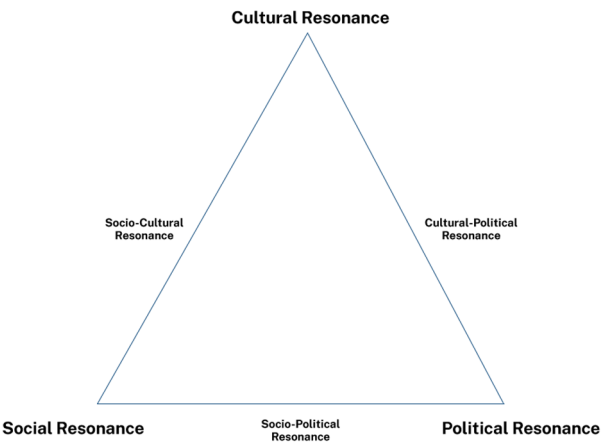

Figure 7: Triangle of resonance

Having the conceptual framework in mind, the analysis of *Hamilton's* cultural, social, and political resonances can be presented. While the musical's inter-generic character and fact-fiction dynamic have been established as causes for oscillations in the digital sphere, according to Anne Fleig and Christian von Scheve, resonances between texts, individuals and the world can also be the result of an intertwinement of language and affect (2020:6). Cases of *Hamilton's* literary reception with quotes being transformed into artworks, protest signs or even tattoos support this assumption. Bogart's assessment of factors like perception, sensation and feeling (2021:14) being an important part of resonance underlines the 'primacy of affect' (Zajonc & Markus 1982, as cited in Fleig & von Scheve 2020:5) when studying the concept of resonance. In fact, emotional resonances regarding *Hamilton* were detected in the majority of samples, fluctuating between the positive notions of belonging or sameness and negative notions of non-belonging or dissonance (Fleig & von Scheve 2020:7) as the following two comments demonstrate.

> 'I've watched this probably two dozen times now and I still cry every time. Chris Jackson's voice and delivery are perfection.' (YouTube user)

> 'Can't wait til this show comes to Florida. Fruit throwing on the stage will be making a comeback!' (YouTube user)

Another characteristic of *Hamilton*-related resonances that became apparent early in the analysis was the context-sensitivity. As indicated in the methodology chapter, the inclusion of background information and real-world contexts was crucial for the analysis of certain samples. In a video-interview analyzed during this study, *Hamilton*-creator Lin-Manuel Miranda addressed the context-sensitivity towards the societal situation in the United States, identifying the musical's theme as a driving factor, bringing us back to the dynamic between fact and fiction thematized earlier.

> 'What's weird about the show is – because it brushes up against sort of the origins of our country, like, it just hits different depending on where we are as a country.' (Lin-Manuel-Miranda 2020, The Tonight Show)

The analysis of *Hamilton* brought up several ways the musical culturally resonates beyond the digital sphere, further solidifying human actions as the key component for both culture (Highmore 2015:155) and resonance (Bogart 2021; Rosa 2019)

in form of the creation of social media texts in postings and comments. Individuals resonating with the musical's content were a common sight during the analysis, following up musical lines, applying them to the themes of posts or using them to interact with one-another like seen with two Twitter users, picking up musical quotes by character John Laurens from independent musical songs, re-arranging and using them as tools for their discussion thread:

> ''To freedom something they could never take away no matter what they tell you'' (Twitter user 1)
> ''But we'll never be truly free until those in bondage have the same rights as you and me'' (Twitter user 2)

This shows how the musical as a pop-cultural product itself in combination with the digital media posts generates resonance. Depending on the post's theme and context, users tend to utilize the literary toolkit provided by *Hamilton*, referencing scenes or lines from the musical either word-for-word or re-texting them for their purposes.

Not only the qualitative text analysis of data in the comment section of *Hamilton*-related digital media posts allowed an insight into the cultural resonance of the musical, the semiotic analysis of some of the samples themselves provided a clear indication of how the musical inspired other cultural artefacts. By allowing the reappropriation and transformation of existing content (Phillips & Murphy 2016:133), digital media platforms facilitate users' ways of culturally resonating with *Hamilton*. The results are far-reaching and diverse with TikTok performers utilizing the original acoustical versions of musical songs for their own parodical interpretations, users creating memetic images with either musical quotes or images from the stage performance, or painters illustrating *Hamilton* in their own artistical style as seen in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Hamilton poster by Reddit user

Hamilton's social resonance could be experienced in a variety of ways during the analysis both in captions and comments as well as the visual content of digital media posts. Social media affordances like persistence, visibility and spreadability (boyd 2014:11) can be used in order to raise awareness for social issues (James & Lee 2017:120) and *Hamilton* did just that by utilizing their official social media accounts, speaking out for LGBTQ+ and voting rights as well as representing minority groups like Asian and Hispanic Americans. 'Creating space for the realization of certain brutally present truths about the world is key to changing our current political and social landscape' (Bogart 2021:10) and through their postings on online platforms the creators of *Hamilton* open up and encourage the discourse about underrepresented social issues, facilitating the creation of a space of resonance in the comment sections.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter about the inter-generic spaces of *Hamilton*, content from the mediated and dramatic space of the musical can cross over into the real world as seen in Figure 9. The figure shows a collage of nine images of protest signs taken at the 2017 Women's March and posted on Pinterest. Each of the protest posters is inspired by a quote from the musical, underlining Hinck's observation of pop-culture inspired social movement themes and signs (2021). A noticeable finding of this analysis was the spread of people and groups socially resonating with the musical and feeling represented by its story. Next to the women in Figure 9 and immigrants in Figure 6, not least through its casting, *Hamilton* gained traction in non-white communities, culminating in the support of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement which will get special attention in the last section of this chapter, further showing the musical's role as a resource for cultural citizenship.

Figure 9: Hamilton-inspired protest signs

What has been indicated in some of the previous sections and samples is the political resonance of *Hamilton*. Through its theme and the roots in the political rudiments of the United States, the musical has an inherently political nature that

became apparent time and time again during the analysis of *Hamilton*-related social media posts. While the politically charged community discussions and re-textings of musical songs into the current real-world political context have been touched upon, *Hamilton's* political position and stances need to be addressed.

Elizabeth Craft assessed the musical's onstage messages as multivalent which led to a positive reception across the political spectrum (2018:434) as the following comment illustrates, appreciating the musical while disagreeing with its stances:

> 'I love Hamilton and I'm a Trump supporter. It doesn't mean I support everything this musical stands for, but I can recognize and appreciate talent and take opinions that I don't agree with (based on facts) with a grain of salt. The world doesn't need further division' (Instagram user)

This study's analysis of the musical's offstage efforts further solidified Craft's judgement of *Hamilton* itself being sorted into a liberal position inside the political sphere (ibid.:436). Posts about political decisions and milestones as well as the support of liberal causes and movements utilized the amplification of affective dynamics in political mobilization through social media (Fleig & von Scheve 2020:2) that is further strengthened by politically charged user-generated content.

Hamilton's close connection to American politics has experienced a resonance shift throughout the last years. In 2022, a digital performance of a *Hamilton*-song at a January 6 remembrance event in front of the US Congress (Figure 10) encountered a majority of negative reactions, burying the power of the performance in the comment section. While this could partially be caused by the absence of costumes, instruments and setting, as the performance was created online during the COVID-19 pandemic, the criticism found in the comment section draws a different picture where the context of political dissatisfaction in the US plays a major part in the way the performance causes dissonance. This is where John Street's point of political parties being dependent on popular culture (1997:48) in order to find relatability with citizens comes into play and is dramatically backfiring as the comments below show.

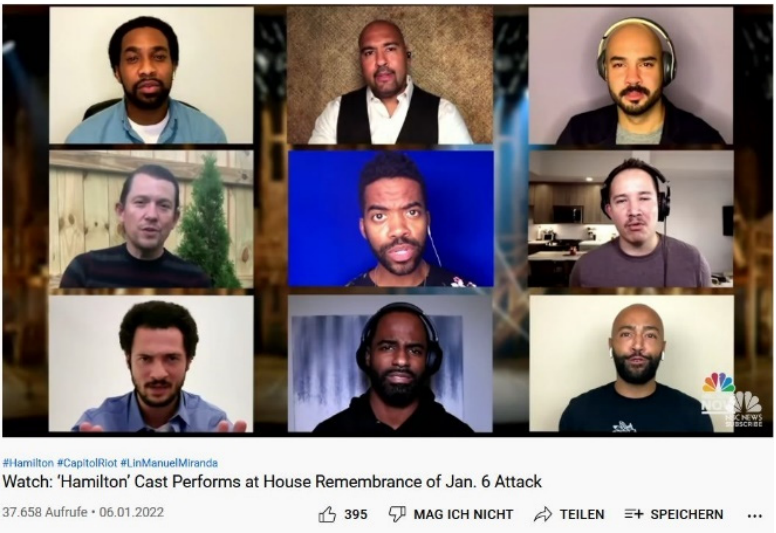

Figure 10: Digital Hamilton performance at Congress event

> 'This is pure spectacle, and ear to ear cringe. In terms of tone, this is horrendous, but it is my understanding that it was certainly no accident of popular culture that Nancy Pelosi invited the Hamilton cast to sing […]' (YouTube user)

> 'This performance perfectly illustrates just how performative the Dem establishment's approach to everything is' (YouTube user)

The commentary section is filled with dissonances indicating disturbing and unpleasant experiences (Bogart 2021:7f) in connection to the musical's decision to participate in the event. Emotionally charged comments are critiquing the political actors in question, at times resulting in commentary discussions. This example shows how the collective nature of resonance that has been addressed earlier can swing over into collective dissonance.

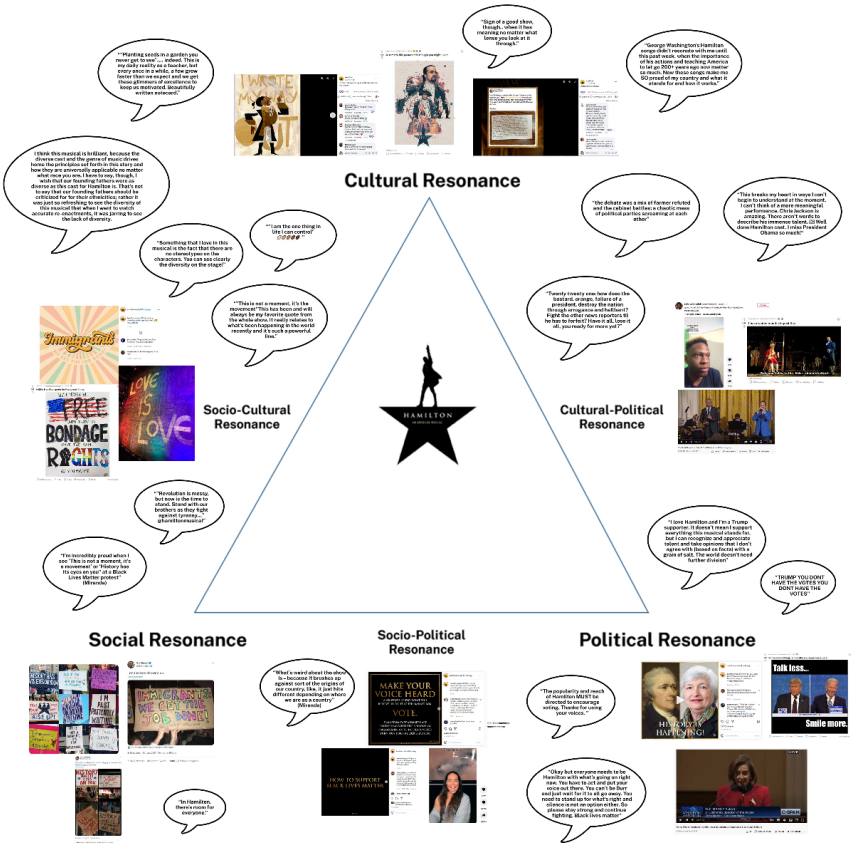

Figure 11: Triangle of resonance (Hamilton interconnections)

The analysis proved resonance to be a fluent and interconnected process. Posts, captions, and comments in the digital sphere resonate between the cultural, social, and political levels as shown through the semiotic and qualitative text analysis. There is an interpretative character to the classification of findings to the model and once again context is a key factor. Main takeaways of this part of the analysis are the continuity and adaptability of *Hamilton* resonances in the digital sphere. Several years after its release, the musical's message is ongoing and its content gets re-imagined and adapted to whatever the current cultural, societal, or political situation entails. Moreover, glances of personal resonances with the musical could be experienced in the comment sections analyzed. However, this study's

methodology brought to attention the comprehensive findings it sought on the case of *Hamilton*, showing how collective resonances are present in the digital sphere of the musical.

Hamilton and the 'Black Lives Matter' movement

In order to put the knowledge of the previous sections to use, this last segment of the chapter will feature the example of the 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM) movement as experienced throughout the analysis. The findings presented will showcase how the previous themes of the fact-fiction dynamic, the inter-generic spaces and resonance interconnect in the context of one specific case. As indicated in the paragraph about social resonance and described by Erika Arivett, *Hamilton* grew into a tool for social change (2020:137), utilizing its pop-cultural position and reach in the digital sphere. During the analysis, particularly the commitment towards the 'Black Lives Matter' movement became clear through dedicated long-term Instagram story highlights or posts voicing support for the movement over multiple platforms (Figure 12).

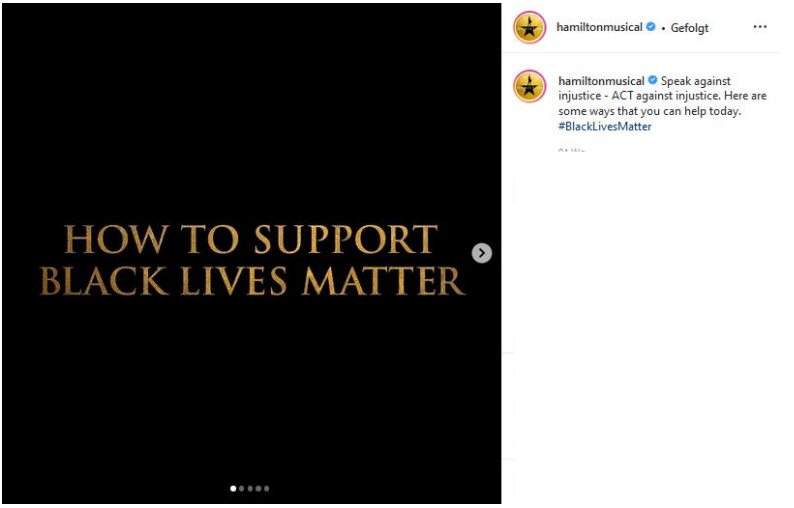

Figure 12: How to support BLM post on Instagram

The musical's misrepresentation of slavery touched upon in the fact-fiction section of this chapter results in an ambivalent dynamic overshadowing

Hamilton's association with the BLM movement. The cultural trauma and collective memory of slavery enables the formation of a collective identity (Eyerman 2019:28) that together with the century-long systemic racism roots the upspring of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement (Lebron 2017). In his previously mentioned Twitter apology video, *Hamilton* creator Lin-Manuel Miranda affirms these causes, together with the cultural influences, justifying the musical's stance in support of the movement:

> '*Hamilton* doesn't exist without the Black and Brown artists who created and revolutionized and changed the world through the culture, music and language of hip hop and while we live in a country where Black people are under attack from embolden white supremacy, police brutality and centuries of systemic anti-black racism it's up to us in words and deeds to stand up for our fellow citizens.' (Lin-Manuel Miranda 2020, Twitter)

As there was arguably a peak of the prominence of the BLM movement in the summer of 2020 in reaction to the murder of George Floyd (Lodge & Laird 2021:8), the density of BLM-related posts on the *Hamilton* accounts was the highest during this time. However, the analysis also took into consideration more recent postings like seen in Figure 13, where the murder of Daunte Wright in 2021 was brought to attention in combination with the BLM catchphrase 'Say His Name'.

Figure 13: Daunte Wright remembrance post

In this post, featuring the police violence victim and his son in the *Hamilton*-typical golden colored frame, the comment section entailed musical-reality mixtures that brought the fictional story into the real-world context of the incident like the following comment demonstrates, implementing a musical quote into the remembrance of Daunte Wright and other well-known victims that became icons of the BLM movement:

> 'Who lives, who dies, who tells their stories... justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Shukri Abdi, Daunte Wright & all of our other Brothers and Sisters who lives, deaths and voices have been silenced. I will fight for you today, tomorrow, and forever until justice is rightly served. Rest in peace dear angels ❤️' (Instagram user)

When studying 'Black Lives Matter', Lucia Abbamonte detected a cross-media resonance of the movement (2018) that can be projected to the movement's association with *Hamilton* as well, considering the inter-generic nature of the play. While the dramatical story of the musical cannot directly correlate with BLM, its message and preferred casting of non-white actors implies a correspondence of ideals. Further, in the mediated space of the digital sphere, the musical's positioning is clear – in the caption of the post displayed in Figure 13 even taking on a demanding tone – requesting the community to take action in support of the movement, which they do in the real-world space of protests, using *Hamilton*-inspired signs. Asked about this phenomenon, creator Lin-Manuel Miranda voiced his sense of pride:

> 'I'm incredibly proud when I see 'This is not a moment, it's a movement' or 'History has its eyes on you" at a Black Lives Matter protest.' (Lin-Manuel Miranda, 2020, The Tonight Show)

Nicholas Mirzoeff identifies social media as a facilitator to bring the BLM movement into the mainstream (2020:11) while describing protests as ways to reclaim spaces of connection (ibid.). This goal of reclamation is where the movement and the musical find a common ground under the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion in the heart of cultural citizenship (Stevenson 2003:18) as African American *Hamilton* actor Leslie Odom Jr. identified: 'It is quite literally taking the history that someone has tried to exclude us from and reclaiming it' (as cited in Binelli 2016). By including quotes from the musical, protests are one way

in which cultural citizenship is performed through *Hamilton* in the context of 'Black Lives Matter'. Popular culture tends to attract feelings of belonging more easily than issues of governance (Hermes 2005:1). When politics fail to achieve relatability or seemingly exclude or neglect parts of society, popular culture products like *Hamilton* are sought to fulfill the need for inclusion.

The analysis showed that through posting images and videos in support of BLM on their social media accounts, *Hamilton* created digital spaces of connection outside of street protests. A phenomenon apparent in the comment sections was the usage of symbolisms and emojis. As emojis can play a similar role to gestures or facial expressions (Danesi 2016, as cited in Kerslake & Wegerif 2017:77), users supported their opinions through the use of suitable emoji combinations like the gesture of the black or brown clenched fist which became a powerful symbol of the movement (Helligar 2021), sometimes even in combination with a reference to a *Hamilton* musical quote:

'✊🏾✊🏾✊🏽❤️' (Instagram user)

''I am the one thing in life I can control' ✊🏻✊🏼✊🏽✊🏾✊🏿' (Instagram user)

In a society where a large part of the people does not see an incentive in the eradication of existing negative conditions like racial inequality (Delgado & Stefancic 2001:7), the public positioning against these conditions by a musical with such a large following as *Hamilton* can have a powerful effect. While Loren Kajikawa sees *Hamilton's* role as a provider of cultural citizenship as a result of its connection to the hip hop genre (2018:475), this connection alone does not constitute the musical's value for people seeking cultural citizenship. *Hamilton's* role in that context is further strengthened through its offstage performance of support and representation in the digital sphere.

But *Hamilton's* claim of cultural citizenship is not exclusive to the community of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement but present for all the marginalized communities associated with its music (Craft 2018:432) and represented on its digital media profiles. *Hamilton's* commitment for diverse social justice causes (LGBTQ+, voting rights, minority representation) became apparent during the analysis and, as of 2022, has been further expanded and outsourced into the Ham4Progress program that has its own social media presence, showing how the musical's real-world impact is continuing years after its release.

Conclusion

This thesis conducted a social and cultural analysis of *Hamilton* under the concept of resonance and investigated the musical's offstage dramaturgical world (Boffone 2021:100) by analyzing visual and textual content found in the digital sphere. Through considering data from the original *Hamilton* social media accounts, other media sources, and user-generated content, the musical could be analyzed from several different perspectives, painting a comprehensive picture of the digital media appearance of *Hamilton* as well as showcasing its fluent movement throughout the inter-generic spaces.

Resonating culturally, socially, and politically

As outlined in the introduction of this thesis and indicated in the title, the critical analysis of *Hamilton's* cultural, social, and political resonance was one of objectives of this thesis. The research has shown that a multi-method design of semiotically analyzing digital media posts in combination with qualitatively analyzing textual content provided in the captions and comments allows the detection and examination of resonances as well as the deep exploration of a popular culture phenomenon. Being a product of popular culture, originally rooted in the Broadway musical production and later brought to the movie screen, *Hamilton* has had an inherently cultural resonance in its seven years of existence. As brought up in the literature review, scholars from several interdisciplinary fields have found ways to approach the musical from a variety of perspectives, demonstrating *Hamilton's* cultural relevance. The results of this study have further expanded this notion as experienced in the digital sphere. The musical culturally resonates in commentary sections through users quoting or re-texting musical lines that relate to original posts, a phenomenon that was noticeable independent from the post's origin.

Through its narrative and messages, *Hamilton* brings minorities and marginalized groups into the center of American culture (Craft 2018:441) and this study supports the argument that the musical itself grew into a part of the culture of the United States.

Hamilton's resonance could further be experienced on a social level, the critical analysis of which brought forward a manifold consideration. On the one hand,

commentary interactions highlighted an interpersonal way of resonating with the musical, sharing personal experiences related to the play or sharing its content with friends on the respective social media platform as forms of individual resonance. On the other hand, *Hamilton* socially resonates through its theme, narrative, and casting, representing minorities and underrepresented social groups. This notion is strengthened by the creators' efforts in the fight for social justice by taking stances and speaking out on social issues on their official accounts. These efforts do not go unnoticed and are widely appreciated by the community as seen in their commentary reactions, resulting in a form of collective resonance. Not least through the public voice of the musical, people are inspired to bring *Hamilton*-quotes into the real-world space of protests, voicing their opinions using the literary toolkit provided by the play.

Although supported by some politically charged samples, the critical analysis of *Hamilton's* political resonance turned out to be a natural byproduct of the analysis of all of the data sets as social media comment sections were filled with opinions and appeals from all sides of the political spectrum. While *Hamilton's* support for liberal causes speaks for its positioning on the left side of the spectrum, the musical's positive reception across the whole political spectrum (Craft 2018:434) became apparent in the analysis as well with users voicing their disagreements with *Hamilton's* political stances while admitting to liking the musical nonetheless. However, as illustrated in the analysis, *Hamilton's* political association through performances like the virtual singing of a song at a January 6 remembrance event before Congress caused friction and dissonance, showcasing that the musical's political resonance is divided – similar to the country it is set in.

What became clear throughout the analysis is that the levels of resonance are interconnected and have to be considered as a fluent concept. As outlined by the triangle of resonance and applied to the case of *Hamilton*, there are intersections between the three levels of resonance this thesis is built upon. The musical's inherent cultural resonance branches out into the other spheres when its content is re-texted and adapted to political situations and social movements or societal issues. This study also brought to light how the meanings of messages conveyed through *Hamilton* in the dramatical, mediated and real-world space can resonate on a socio-political level, where issues like voting rights or the support of social movements like 'Black Lives Matter' take the center stage of postings without references or connections to the musical being made. In that sense, the creators of

Hamilton are fully lending their platform and reach to the cause itself, rather than forcing the cultural artefact's presence in the postings. Further, continuity and adaptability turned out to be major characteristics of resonance as analyzed in this research. The example of *Hamilton* showed how a musical can still resonate multiple years after its release while adjusting to the changing societal and political situations throughout time.

Fact, fiction, and the inter-generic spaces of *Hamilton*

Another objective of this research set in the beginning of this thesis was the assessment of ways, *Hamilton's* dynamic between historical actualities and fictional adaptations became apparent in the inter-generic spaces of the musical. During the analysis, content creators interpreting *Hamilton* in a variety of ways could be found. Memes either brought historical figures into the fictional context of the musical or adapted *Hamilton's* content to real-world situations on the visual and textual level. In form of videos, the auditive perspective of *Hamilton* came to light.

Next to the inter-generic character of the musical, its dynamic between fact and fiction turned out to be omnipresent through all of the data sets considered for this research. This does not only affect how the musical resonates in the digital sphere today but also has implications onto the real-world legacies of the historical figures featured in *Hamilton*. Alexander Hamilton's depiction as an abolitionist and immigrant hero changes his actual characteristics (Isenberg 2017; Magness 2017) for dramatical purposes and influences how he is perceived by the public. While some commenters in the digital space could be seen calling out these factual inaccuracies, the majority of users appear to be praising and appreciating *Hamilton* as it is. The research pointed towards a dilemma where historical facts encounter a popular fictionalization resulting in an inaccurate representation of history. While this can strengthen feelings of belonging and cultural citizenship, the romanticization of history also carries dangers like the distortion of the public remembrance of historical figures. The work towards resolving this dilemma could be an inspiration for a follow-up study.

Hamilton and BLM – an ongoing charge for change

The last objective of this research was to find out how *Hamilton* acts as a resource for cultural citizenship in the context of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. Through the analysis of BLM-themed digital media posts and their comments and captions, the meaning of *Hamilton's* endorsement and support for the movement became clear. Cultural citizenship through *Hamilton* in the context of BLM is digitally performed via the expression of gratitude, use of symbolisms and the adaption of musical lines in commentary sections but also finds its way into the physical world in form of protests. The analysis made clear that while cultural citizenship is fueled by the musical's support through the creators, actors and digital media presence, the foundation for its connection to the BLM movement was set at an earlier stage of the creation of *Hamilton* through its narrative decisions, generic connections to musical styles shaped by Black culture and the proactive casting of non-white performers. While the regularity of BLM-related social media posts by the official *Hamilton* accounts decreased after the peak of the movement in 2020, the platform of the musical is still occasionally used to create spaces of connection for the community, raising awareness for current cases or verdicts related to the movement. Through its ongoing digital presence, *Hamilton* still acts as a cultural resource for civic values like racial equality allowing its consideration in the context of critical race theory, counteracting the reinforcement of white superiority and prevalent othering of minorities by literature and the media (Delgado & Stefancic 2001:76).

The study on *Hamilton's* association with the 'Black Lives Matter' movement turned out to unite all of the previous findings in one case. As an example, the fact-fiction dilemma of *Hamilton* arguably glorifying historical characters who were slave owners came up on more than one occasion. Further, the inter-generic character of the play became clear once again as for example the bending and adaption of dramatical musical lines could be experienced in the mediated space of social media posts as well as the real-world space of BLM demonstrations. *Hamilton*-creator Lin-Manuel Miranda emphasized the musical's cultural rudiments in the hip hop genre, giving an explanation for the social and cultural resonance of the play in the context of the BLM movement.

At the time of writing this thesis, the musical *Hamilton* is on the stage of popular culture for seven years and the analysis of digital media content produced in the past few years suggests that it is there to stay. As mentioned earlier, Erika Arivett

argued that the musical "altered the trajectory of theater and popular culture" (2020:137) – this study expands this point as *Hamilton* may have altered the notion of what musicals can do in the digital sphere, using transmedia storytelling to mediate their messages and providing a popular platform to bring attention to societal issues. *Hamilton* is a part of popular culture, and the theatre performance has been captured in the 2020 movie version. This thesis has shown how the musical continues to be adaptable to cultural, social, and political circumstances – majorly in the US – and how it is still resonating through its digital media presence. However, it is too early to evaluate the musical's cultural legacy, for now *Hamilton* is an unprecedented phenomenon irrupting the popular culture world, still testing and bending the boundaries of what popular culture can do on an inter-generic level. Being this early in the academic exploration of the musical, the cultural-historical assessment of *Hamilton's* legacy has to be left up to future scholars.

> 'Hamilton: […] Legacy. What is a legacy?
> It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see.' (Miranda 2016)

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“This is something we live through every day”: negotiating the cultural memory of the Decembrist revolt in Russian historical film *Union of Salvation*

Valeriia Sementina

Introduction

Memories can function as a powerful framing device for establishing or sustaining power relations in the present day (Wijermars 2019:21). Acknowledging the power that memories have on private and public lives, this project explores how remembrance of political dissent is negotiated in Russian popular culture. The focus on the dissent and relationship with power is crucial for modern Russia. Political dissatisfaction is growing among the population with protests and acts of civil disobedience becoming more frequent. Simultaneously, the pressure on the dissidents from the state rapidly increased after Putin's reelection in 2018.

The study specifically examines the narratives of the Decembrist revolt created in and around Russian state-funded cinema. Decembrists were a group of early 19th century Russian noblemen and military officers who formed anti-tsarist secret societies aimed at overthrowing the Russian government. In December of 1825, these secret societies organised a revolt against the newly crowned Emperor

Nikolas I and were defeated by tsarist forces. Many Decembrists were exiled to Siberia for hard labour and five of them were publicly executed in St. Petersburg.

Decembrists became significant figures in both Imperial Russian and Soviet popular culture. After the dissolution of the USSR, the Decembrist revolt was often invoked by activists across the political spectrum, linking them, for example, to the Communist coup of 1991, the stand-off during the Constitutional crisis of 1993, and to early 21st-century Russian protests (Trigos 2009). Nowadays, the memory of the Decembrist revolt is less prominent in the public discourse, creating an opportunity for reshaping the understanding of this event.

The 2019 historical drama *Union of Salvation* about the Decembrist revolt is the basis for this thesis. The film was produced by Konstantin Ernst, the CEO of Russian Channel One. It was made with financial support from Fond Kino - a governmental funding body for Russian cinematography. The production of the movie went parallel to several waves of mass protests.

The film was presented as a response to the Soviet myth of the Decembrist revolt. The producers of the movie claimed to introduce the public to a more truthful version of events (Mtsituridze 2020). *Union of Salvation* came under harsh criticism from historians, professional reviewers, and the public for distorting the facts and presenting Decembrists in an unfavourable light.

The idea that historical narratives and memories are moulded to fulfil the tasks of the present (Rigney 2005:14) will be the guiding notion of the research. By exploring the narratives surrounding a particular instance of political dissent in the past, the study seeks to understand the factors that impact on the negotiation of cultural memory between the text and the audience in the context of state-influenced media.

The study is conducted at the intersection of popular culture theory and the field of memory studies, with special attention given to the historical film genre. The theoretical focus of the research is put on outlining the audience perspective, which is largely absent from the discussion of cultural memory. Therefore, the classical perspective on cultural memory is developed further with the addition of active audience perspective and the notion of mnemonic imagination.

The research aims to examine how narratives surrounding the Decembrist revolt are negotiated by the Russian historical film *Union of Salvation* and its Russian audience. By examining the cultural memory of the Decembrist revolt, the

research aims to investigate potential lines of continuity, promoted by the historical film and conceptualised by the audiences. It also seeks to uncover the ways in which genre knowledge and awareness of production practices shape the engagement with cultural memory through popular culture. The research questions are:

> RQ1: What narratives are created in the *Union of Salvation* film to shape the cultural memory of the Decembrist revolt?
>
> RQ2: How does the audience of the film draw upon these narratives and existing interpretations of the event to shape their understanding of the Decembrist revolt?
>
> RQ3: In what way does the genre knowledge and expectations regarding state-funded cinema impact on the engagement with narratives present in *Union of Salvation*?

Literature review

The fundamentals of cultural memory

The theory of cultural memory is most thoroughly developed by a German Egyptologist Jan Assmann. He defined cultural memory as "all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation" (J. Assmann and Czaplicka 1995:126). World "knowledge" does not denote a factually correct recollection of past events. Instead, cultural memory rather has an "identity- index" (J. Assmann 2008:114), as it involves understanding history with the aim to derive a collective identity from it. The function of cultural memory is twofold: it is simultaneously formative and normative, determining what a specific group is, as well as defining the system of values the group is supposed to maintain (J. Assmann and Czaplicka 1995:131).

As cultural identity covers vast periods of time, it is disembodied and requires systematic "preservation and reembodiment" (J. Assmann 2008:111). Therefore, the key feature of cultural memory is that it is exteriorized and stored away in stable symbolic forms (ibid:110-1). The necessity to systematically preserve

cultural memory in symbolic forms opens the discussion of the power relations which shape and sustain the way the past is remembered. Yet, by focusing primarily on high culture and societal elites, Assman's work excludes the discussion of bottom-up power dynamics, the counter-memory of oppressed groups, as well as the cultural processes associated with popular, rather than high culture.

As Keightley and Pickering (2012:101) noted, "for Assmann cultural artefacts act as triggers or reminders because 'they carry memories which we have invested into them'". This highlights the crucial role of media and material culture as vehicles of memory, but it does not make clear the extent to which cultural memory is contested. Such understanding assumes that the narratives promoted by those in power and systematically communicated through cultural forms are accepted by the community they are addressed to.

Despite these weaknesses, several points of Jan Assmann's cultural memory theory will form a basis of this research. Firstly, cultural memory will be understood as an interpretation - rather than factual recollection - of the past, which has the potential to shape the values of the community and its understanding of the origins. Secondly, it will be seen as a part of power dynamics inside a community. Finally, it will be evaluated as requiring active preservation through various cultural forms and thus necessarily being mediated.

The dynamics of cultural memory

Although institutionalised and objectivized, cultural memory is not fixed and unmovable. There are several dynamics inherent to this phenomenon. Aleida Assmann (2008:98) points out that it is forgetting, not remembering, that is a default state of cultural life. Remembering requires active preservation and prioritises certain memories over others. Therefore, according to Aleida Assmann, cultural memory exists in two realms: the canon and the archive. The canon is a rigorously selected body of texts and myths that are actively circulated, performed and re-affirmed in the public sphere (ibid:100). The archive, on the other hand, consists of de-contextualized cultural relics, open to new interpretations (ibid:99). The movement from archive to canon is the result of power struggle and an attempt to redefine existing narratives.

The fact that the default operation is forgetting, rather than remembering, is connected to scarcity as the shaping factor in the working of cultural memory. According to Rigney (2005:16), scarcity makes recollection restrictive and selective, with memories being recycled and converged and memory models being transferred between different events. In other words, for something to be considered a cultural memory, it must be revisited again and again – often from different perspectives and representations. Various cultural activities repeat and reinforce each other to create and sustain the memory. This signifies that collective remembrance should be conceptualised as a project, not as a result. Therefore, memory should rather be understood as an active performance of selective recollection (Rigney 2005:17).

As cultural resources are scarce, cultural memory tends to converge, collide and coalesce. Forms of remembrance converge and spread beyond their immediate culture and the event they depict. It is expressed via the sites of memory - text in a larger sense of the word, which concentrate meanings about the past within themselves. These texts, according to Rigney (2005:18), become a "self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment", concentrating historical meaning and reducing the scattering of memories. What is more, these texts provide frameworks for remembering other similar but unrelated events (ibid:19). As a result, the memories overlap and superimpose on one another.

The dynamics of cultural memory described above - such as its recursivity and convergence - explain two other processes, connected to this phenomenon. Firstly, cultural memory is supported by premeditation - the creation of schemata and patterns of representation, which shape how future experience will be framed (ibid:8). Secondly, it is organised by remediation, a continuous referral to "a canon of existent medial constructions" (Erll 2009:111). As remediation stabilises a way of remembering certain points in history through constant repetition, premediation creates the line of continuity in the way past and present events and experiences are interpreted.

Two themes emerge so far. Firstly, cultural memory is affected by multiple intra- and inter-media dynamics which shape how it will change over time. Secondly, cultural memory requires complex mediation to function and develop.

Memory, mediation and popular culture

The relationship between media and memory goes beyond platforming memories. That is because media are dynamic in themselves – they are influenced by external factors and other media. They do not merely circulate and convey memories, they impact them, setting an agenda for future acts of remembrance.

According to Neiger, Meyers and Zanberg (2011:2), media engage with memory simultaneously as a memory agent and an "indicator for sociological and political changes". Besides archiving memories, media manifest tradition and heritage, and produce collectivities as they mediate shared recollection (Garde-Hansen 2011:38). What is more, media function as institutions of memory – they simultaneously produce memories and challenge dominant recollection which they helped to sustain (ibid:52). According to Rigney (2005:20) some texts, due to their aesthetic and artistic values, can even become catalysts for new topics emerging as a part of public remembrance. In other words, while circulating specific iterations of memory, media simultaneously reproduce the mythologies and communities based on them as well as challenge dominant ways of recollection.

All in all, cultural memory is not static, but is rather a dynamic result of recursive practices. The borders of cultural memory – or of the stories that constitute it – are broken down by artistic forms of media, which are mobile and flexible. They allow for circulation, reshaping and contestation of memories.

The contentious and negotiable nature of mediated memory is especially evident in popular culture texts, such as TV, cinema, and the press (Neiger,Meyers and Zanberg 2011:10). Popular culture challenges the ideas about cultural memory with its dynamics and processual nature. The structure of a story, characteristic for popular culture, imbues memory with moral messages and instructions. Additionally, it provides it with the beginning, development, and end as well as a protagonist and antagonist, crucial for the identity forming function of memory.

Popular culture is affective (Garde-Hansen 2011:40). It is involved in forming identity, mediating authority, and reproducing power relations. Understanding and recollection of the past is similarly not possible without the involvement of feelings and imagination (Morris-Suzuki 2005:25). It is not purely factual. History has an affective and imaginative dimension, which can bring marginalised memories to surface (Plate and Smelik 2009:5-6). That is, dominant memories

are also contested by alternatives – often marginalised – which introduces novelty and counters conformity (Keightley and Pickering 2012:74). Although the innovative potential of media is mentioned by many, the processes by which contestation and reshaping of memories happens beyond the textual realm is often absent from the discussion.

Cultural memory and historical film

Nowadays cinema is one of the main platforms where people encounter the past. To understand how films impact on the cultural memory, attention should be paid to genre as a structuring force that organises how meanings are constructed in the text and interpreted by the audiences (Frow 2015:10). While genres function as interpretive frames, they are not fixed and rigid but rather, "dynamic and historically fluid" cultural forms "rooted in institutional infrastructures" (Frow 2005:139),

This intrinsic flexibility of the genre as a concept allows for debates over the nature of historical films. According to Johnathan Stubbs (2013:10), historical films are generally diverse in their visual styles and plot types, as they can be set in any period in the past. This engagement with the past is done within the film itself, as well as in a larger cultural discourse around it, such as in advertisements and reviews (ibid:28). This understanding allows to explore not only the narrative form and style, but also the way viewers engage with the film to negotiate the cultural memory.

The study considers the distinct feature of historical films as the re-enactment of historical events, which involves not simply experiencing it anew, but rather re-imagining and re-interpreting it (Burgoyne 2008:8). One of the key issues regarding historical films is their relationship with cultural and social memory. The illustrative power of films concerns historians, as it allows movies to create a believable representation of the past, shaping the public understanding of certain historical events (Carlsten and McGrey 2015:3). The presentation of history in such films is deemed to be interpretive, rather than factual and realistic, with an unavoidable "hidden or not-so-hidden propagandistic dimension" (ibid:10). Indeed, Alun Munslow (2005:111) points out that every historical film is fictive to some extent, as the facts that are used in the films are selected and thus potentially ideologically driven.

The project will support the notion that historical films are filled with biases of the present that shape the representation of the past depending on the industry and social trends (Stubbs 2013:45). According to researchers, a historical film "can legitimize the codified narratives told about history, or it can subvert these by providing a range of competing images, symbols and discourses" (Carlsten and McGrey:9). Since shared understanding of history is important for developing common identity and fostering societal consensus, those in power are motivated to create and finance projects, oriented at forming and maintaining ideas about the past (Hughes-Warrington 2007:85). The genre is involved in reframing existing narratives. This places historical films on the border between past and present, as well as fact and fiction, connecting it to the mediated nature of cultural memory, which requires events to be pre- and remediated.

Cultural memory and audience engagement

The previous discussion makes evident that the affective nature of popular culture creates a platform for transforming memory and has the potential to both confirm and subvert dominant narratives. What the theories lack, however, is the acknowledgement of the audience's engagement with popular culture and its role in creating meanings and memories.

The connection between cultural memory and its private understanding is discussed by several scholars. One of the ideas commonly associated with cultural memory and media is the concept of prosthetic memory, which assumes emotional connection between audience and distant others and presupposes the influence of the memories on the subjectivity of the audience (Landsberg 2004). A less deterministic approach is taken by Marita Sturken (1997), who argues that personal and cultural memory are not separated by stark boundaries, as "[m]emories and memory objects can move from one realm to another, shifting meaning and context". Jose Van Dijck (2007), likewise, argues that mnemonic practices are simultaneously individual and social. Van Dijck describes the concept of personal cultural memories, which recognizes the structuring force of cultural conventions in the shaping of memories but argues for the transformative power of individual remembering.

The shortcomings of Van Dijck's personal cultural memory concept are highlighted by Keightley and Pickering (2012:105). According to them, the idea

"stops short of accounting for the new temporal meanings that are generated when we are confronted with the radical difference of the past of the distant other". They propose (ibid:106) that mnemonic imagination - "as an active synthesis of remembering and imagining" (ibid:7) - is the mechanism that both allows to encode distant experiences into cultural texts and makes them understandable to the audience who relate them to their own experience.

What Keightley and Pickering are arguing for is getting rid of the totalizing assumption that excludes human agency in the process of remembering. They replace it with "exteriorisation of memory and its circulation in social and public domains as involving a dialogue between the autobiographical memories of the experiential I and the shared cultural forms and processes of the remembering we" (ibid:102). This idea is similar to engagement which is understood as "energizing internal force; rooted in affect and identity, ... a subjective disposition that can propel us to do things" (Hill and Dahlgren 2020). This understanding of engagement involves audiences "acting as pathmakers in their media experiences" (Hill 2019:1), going beyond mere consumption and being able "to participate in politics, to recognise the social and cultural, as well as economic, values of media in our lived experiences" (Hill and Dahlgren 2020).

What is more, engagement is a spectral phenomenon which "includes affective, emotional and critical modes, switching between positive and negative engagement, to disengagement" (Hill 2019:61-2) It is shaped by several parameters, such as media contexts, motivations, affective and cognitive modalities, intensities and the consequences of engagement (Hill and Dahlgren 2020).

Examining mediated cultural memory requires looking into the relationship between the audience and text, as "if a cultural text is to become effective (politically or otherwise) it must be made to connect with people's lives" (Storey 2003:113). At the same time, as Neiger, Meyers and Zanberg (2011:16) acknowledge, only a small number of works "have probed the mediated memories and 'media biographies' of audiences or have aimed to assess the role of the mass media in the shaping of 'collected memories' among audiences". This study aims to contribute to this underrepresented area of cultural memory research.

Memory and media in Russian context

Like general research on the topic of cultural memory and popular culture, the studies that focus on Russia largely examine texts as they are created to be consumed by people, leaving the practice of engagement outside of the discussion. For example, great attention is given to the way memories of the Great Patriotic War are politically utilised by Russian elites, making it the leading nation-building myth (Malinova 2017). The empirical material, analysed in the context of Russian cultural memory, predominantly includes speeches, made by politicians, public policies, state symbols, history textbooks, and commemorative events. This allows researchers to establish grand historical narratives, used for the purpose of building national identity and established from the top-down. However, it limits the ability to examine more narrow aspects of cultural memory, such as the ideas of political dissent. Additionally, it excludes the bottom-up perspective on cultural memory, which is crucial to popular culture studies.

One of the latest contributions to the field of cultural memory studies in the Russian context is the book *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia*, written by Mariëlle Wijermars. It investigates several key cultural memories in Russia, presented in TV dramas. Wijermars (2019) analysed the texts and their context, as well as interviewed people involved in their creation. However, the focus of the book was on the official memory politics of the Russian government and how it is either facilitated or criticised by cultural agents and the media. Although the book provides crucial insights into the production of cultural memories from the top-down under the condition of declining media freedom, it leaves out the question of audience agency and engagement with the narratives. This research aims to fill a gap in this bottom-up dimension.

Methodology and sampling

Research design

The research design consists of two major steps: identifying the narratives about the Decembrist revolt, present in the Union of Salvation film, and establishing how the audience negotiates these narratives to maintain or create their personal cultural memory of the event. This two-step process requires creating a hierarchy

of methods to analyse engagement with references to specific narratives discovered in the film. The two methods of data generation in this study are film narrative analysis, as proposed by Bordwell, Thompson and Smith (2017), and qualitative semi-structured interviewing. The latter is the dominant method.

Film narratives analysis

Bordwell, Thompsons and Smith's (2017) method of film narrative analysis provides an array of tools to dissect narrative and stylistic form of a given film. This research limited the toolbox of the method to the steps that examine the narrative of the film as "a chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space" (ibid:73). This included deconstructing the plot and looking at narration, or specific stylistic patterning, which impacts on how the viewers understand the plot and the "agents, circumstances and surroundings" (Bordwell 2007:75) of the story.

To uncover the consistent patterns that shape the narrative structure of the film, the analysis should be applied to the entirety of the movie (Bordwell 2007:94). Therefore, every scene of *Union of Salvation* was taken into consideration during the analysis. The film was viewed 12 times, with memos taken each time.

The narrative form was analysed by segmenting the plot, which involved creating a "written outline of the film that breaks it into its major and minor parts, with the parts marked by consecutive numbers or letters" (Bordwell, Thompsons and Smith 2017:68). This allowed to determine the patterns of development, which drove the events in the film, noting the parallels and juxtapositions made by *Union of Salvation*. Several other aspects of the narrative form were established. These were the temporal relations within a film (ibid:79-81), cause and effect associated with characters (ibid:77), the extent to which information flow is restricted (ibid:88) and the level of subjectivity presented by the film (ibid:90-1). This created rich descriptions of the narrative form, which structured the aspects of engagement discussed with the audience.

Qualitative semi-structured interviewing

The method of semi-structured interviews was employed to research the audience's engagement with the film. This method investigates the values and attitudes of participants and establishes their views (Byrne 2018:219-20).

The interviewees were asked to re-watch the film prior to the interviews. The interviews followed a semi-flexible guide based on the narrative analysis of the film, as well as the parameters of engagement proposed by Dahlgren and Hill (2020). This guide was first tested during a pilot interview. After the pilot, the sequence of questions in the first part of the interview was changed with several questions removed, as they repeated each other.

The five themes established in the interview guide aimed at uncovering the general knowledge and opinion on the Decembrists and the Decembrist revolt, the overall spectrum of engagement with the plot and the style of *Union of Salvation*, the genre knowledge and work of the participants and the detailed discussion of the film narratives. All in all, the interview guide was created as a funnel, leading the interviewees from their personal cultural memory to the specific production, its genre, and the narratives of the film. The last section of the interview guide allowed to express any opinions that did not fit into the structure of the interview.

All interviews were conducted confidentially via Zoom or Telegram calls with obtaining both verbal and written informed consent to their audio recording. Participants in the study signed a consent form that set out the terms of the interviewing and the way generated information will be used. Before the interviews, the consent form was read by the interviewer out loud, allowing participants to ask clarifying questions off the record. This ensured that each interviewee knew what the study was about and how their interviews will be used for the purposes of the study (Brennen 2017:31).

The interviews ranged in length between 1 hour and 22 minutes and 1 hour and 47 minutes. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed manually.

Sampling for the interviews

The sample of the interview participants included 10 young professionals and students - 5 identifying as women and 5 identifying as men - between the ages of 21 and 26. According to polls, this is the most politically active and protest-

oriented demographic in Russia (Volkov 2020). These were Russian citizens who grew up in Russia and lived in Russia at the time of the interview. These factors are important as the primary and secondary educational background of the participants had to be similar. All the interviewees saw the film at least once before being asked to participate in the study.

The interviewees were recruited using a snowball sampling technique, which involved obtaining participants through personal referrals from people who share the same characteristics and personally know the respondents (Seale 2018:167). According to researchers, this technique is useful in the situations when the participants engage "in illicit or stigmatised activities" (ibid), which in the Russian case includes oppositional activity. Notably, Seale (ibid) points out that snowball sampling may lead to interviewing people with too similar experiences, which limits the variety of opinions and creates artificial uniformity. To avoid it, this project used several reference people from different backgrounds and places in Russia.

The names of the interviewees were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their anonymity (Brennen 2017:31). All personal information, such as names of their employers and universities, mentions of the places they reside in or the names of their friends and acquaintances were removed from the transcripts to protect participant's identity.

Thematic coding

The interviews were examined via Thematic Qualitative Text Analysis, or Thematic QTA (Kuckartz 2014). This involved categorising parts of the text to discover larger patterns and themes, based on which the research report was created (ibid:69-70). The process involved "looking across the data set rather than within one case" (Rivas 2018:430) to understand experiences of the sample.

The coding of the transcribed interviews was done inductively. That is because while the interviewees discussed the narratives that were uncovered during the previous stage of the study, the focus of the research was on how the participants engage with these narratives, rather than how they identify them. Therefore, the way respondents characterised the film and the narratives could only emerge directly from the text of the interviews, and employing pre-established codes was not feasible.

The study "broke the seal on the data" (Kuckartz 2014:27) by descriptively coding interviews point-by-point. This involved creating open codes which captured the literal meaning of the interviewees' statements (Rivas 2018:433). At this stage the points made by participants were labelled descriptively. All the coding was done in the original Russian language, ensuring the semantic consistency between the codes and the quotes they were assigned to.

Next, the study compared the labels within the same interviews to create more refined codes. The next step was to compare refined codes between the interviews to formulate categories. Naming categories too generally hinders the researchers' ability to identify patterns and access evidence later (Bazeley 2013:158). Therefore, the study tried to detail the categories as much as possible, specifically applying in-vivo coding to identify the most important points (Saldana 2013:92). Following this, the categories were compared between each other and merged to create larger themes. The themes formed the basis for the second half of the analysis presented below.

Film Narrative Analysis

Overall narrative form of *Union of Salvation*

The film opens with a scene in a Paris boarding school in 1808. The school is visited by Napoleon who asks to show him the best pupil. After hesitation, one boy steps up without the teacher's permission and introduces himself as the best in several subjects. Napoleon asks the boy what, in his opinion, is freedom. The boy replies, that "freedom is the ability to follow your destiny". As Napoleon expresses admiration for the boy's answer, it is revealed that the student is Sergey Muravyov-Apostol, the son of the Russian ambassador in Paris and the future leader of the Decembrist revolt. This scene is followed by a flashforward, in which a grown up - and slightly beaten up - Sergey is interrogated by Nicholas I, the emperor of Russia. As Nicholas reproaches Sergey for organising the revolt, the rebel retorts stating that there is no difference between those in power and the rebels as both have righteous causes and use criminal methods. Thus, a protagonist of the film is first introduced to the audience. The purpose of the beginning of the film is to create expectations "by setting up a specific range of possible causes for what we see" (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 2017:85). Through this scene, *Union of Salvation* established Sergey as outspoken and waiting for recognition

and highlights the connection between his rebellious behaviour and his ultimate ending.

Sergey's storyline is afforded most subjectivity in the film. The audience is introduced to the story of the film through his memories and the film ends with his dream. Moreover, Sergey is the only character in the movie with a developed romantic subplot. The psychology and desires of Sergey are explored in depth, with the character consistently presented as ambitious - but well-meaning. He is not afraid to speak his mind, take initiative and break orders; however, he is also trying to avoid bloodshed and is not ready to take power by stepping over people's heads. This is illustrated by one of the first scenes, in which young Sergey disobeys the orders of the higher ups and personally convinces a revolting Semenovsky regiment to complain directly to the emperor and spare their commander who unjustly punished them. According to Bordwell, Thomspon and Smith (2017:92) such high subjectivity is usually employed by filmmakers to establish sympathy towards the character as well as explain their motives and actions.

Despite the high subjectivity of Sergey's storyline, the overall narration is not restricted to his view. The audience knows more than him or any other character in the story, which creates "the sense of many destinies intertwined" (ibid:88). There are three parallel storylines presented in the film. The first one is the storyline of the Southern society of Decembrists, which follows the plans of rebels - Sergey included - who served in Ukraine. The second storyline is of the Northern society, which depicts the plans of the Decembrists who remained in St. Petersburg. The last storyline offers a glimpse into the life of the Imperial family in Russia before, during and after the revolt.

These storylines are explored parallel to each other, with events of one storyline affecting the events of the other, often without the character's knowledge. They offer a juxtaposition between those in power and those who are prepared to revolt against it. The film focuses on the personal struggles of characters be it Sergey's love story and ambitions or Nicholas's attempt to gain power after the death of his brother. This follows the conventions of mainstream historical films, where the history is depicted as "the story of individuals" (Rosenstone 2006:47), personalising and emotionalising the past.

However, the unrestricted narration does not include a larger overview of the socioeconomic and political situation in the country at the dawn of the revolt.

Most noticeably, the discussion of serfdom is excluded from the film. Abolition of serfdom was the key article of all the Decembrists' programs. However, this point is absent from the film and should be assumed by the audience based on their extra-textual knowledge of Russian history.

Temporality, cause, and effect in the narratives of *Union of Salvation*

The temporal aspects of the plot frame the storylines in a specific way. Firstly, the film heavily utilises flashbacks and flashforwards. These techniques establish the cause and effect of the events in the film. For example, one of the earliest flashbacks is Sergey's memory of breaking the ceremony of imperial review to offer champagne to Emperor Alexander I after the victory over Napoleon. In this flashback the emperor rejects the offer but asks the generals not to punish Sergey for misbehaviour. At the end of the film, as Sergey is hanged for organising the rebellion, he revisits the memory, this time imagining how Alexander accepts the offer and joins the regular soldiers for celebration. This suggests that the revolt could have been avoided, if the people in power were more open to the young and progressive officers.

These flashbacks and flashforwards additionally fold the narrative time, excluding years of the Decembrists' lives from the film. While the *story* of the film spans over 18 years, the plot highlights the events that took place in 1825 - immediately before and during the revolt. This excludes the development of relationships between different Decembrists, with the audience seeing all the rebels together only at the beginning of the film as they drink and discuss their political views.

Overall, the narrative of the film presents the story of the Decembrists revolt as a personal struggle between those in power and those opposed to it. What is more, while the film explores the motivations of most Decembrists, it encourages the audience to establish emotional connection with the character that opposes radical action.

Ambition and rebellion of the Decembrists

One of the patterns of the plot is the presentation of Decembrists as heavily ambitious and rebellious, in some cases bordering on selfish and corrupt. This is most evident in the protagonist of the film, Sergey Muravyov-Apostol. From the

beginning of the narration, young Sergey puts himself in the spotlight and later follows the French emperor as he leaves instead of looking at him through the window like the rest of the pupils. This demonstrates the strong will of the character and the desire to achieve his interests despite the rules that might limit him. Similarly, Sergey breaks the rules when he offers champaign to Alexander I, and later as he personally addresses the revolting division instead of waiting for the reinforcement that would violently force them to calm down. All these examples indicate the willingness to act, to put himself in the front, to do what he finds necessary, and to disobey those in power. Nonetheless, the clear goals of Sergey are not established. In the film he rejects several plans of actions, with the end goal of his rebellion being left off screen. Beyond trying to overthrow the government, Sergey has no specific ambition. As the character says himself, while Napoleon wanted the whole world, he desires even more; however, what this "more" means is not explored. As a result, his rebellion and death are ultimately seen as tragically aimless.

Sergey is not the only rebellious and driven character in the film. Pestel, his co-conspirator from Southern society, is also presented as ready to act, and unlike Sergey, his goals are clearly set. His ambitions, however, have a distinct negative characteristic: unlike Sergey, who limits the violence, Pestel advocates for the murder of the emperor and a military coup. He is ready to step over people, including his co-conspirators and friends, and undermine their safety. For example, in the summer of 1825 the preparations for the revolt were threatened by the exposure of the fact that Pestel took money out of the army treasury for the purposes of the revolution. To cover for this, he forces his fellow co-conspirator Mayboroda to sign a document stating that it was him, and not Pestel, who took money for his personal gain. This led to Mayboroda writing a denunciation, which made Pestel's plans known to the emperor and his general. The arc of Pestel ends with him willingly surrendering to the police instead of trying to flee the prosecution. As his plans become useless, his goal changes to framing himself a martyr who would inspire future revolt. At the end of the day, Pestel is ready to sacrifice everything, even his life, for his cause. However, due to his previous actions and the violent outbursts this is presented as calculating and mad rather than sincere and heroic.

Finally, another Decembrist that is presented as ambitious is the fictional private Baranov, who was demoted from the rank of a major for an unknown reason.

Throughout the entire film he follows Sergey and participates in the rebellion boasting about Decembrists' plan and even exposing them to the local colonel. At the end it is revealed that Baranov's only goal was to get his status back when the new people come to power. As such, it is shown that the movement is predominantly used by the Decembrists to fulfil personal ambition rather than larger political and societal goals.

Decembrists as disunited

In addition to being divided geographically, Decemberists are also clearly shown to be divided ideologically - and unable to come up with a common strategy or even a common goal. The disagreements are first established in the only scene where all the lead Decembrists are present together. These key members are Sergey Muravyov-Apostol, Prince Trubetskoy, lieutenant Mikhail Bestuzhev-Ryumin, poet Kondraty Ryleev and colonel Pavel Pestel.

After the revolt in an army division, where Sergey serves with Bestuzhev-Ruyimin and prince Trubetskoy, the co-conspirators come to the apartments of poet Ryleev to discuss the event. From their exchange it becomes clear that they disagree on fundamental issues. Pestel desires a military coup which will turn Russia into a republic. Ryleev desires to reshape Russia in the image of the United States. Bestuzhev-Ruymin envisions something closer to the French revolution. Trubetskoy, however, is afraid that these scenarios will lead to the death of not only of the Imperial family, but also the aristocrats. The members of the movement are visually divided into groups with Sergey and Prince Trubetskoy standing away from the rest of the rebels, quietly confiding in one another. The scene ends with Pestel breaking an Imperial China plate and toasting Ryleev to the death of the emperor. This makes Sergey and Trubetskoy exchange concerned looks. The group did not achieve a common strategy as there is no commonly established goal.

The point of Decembrists disagreeing is repeated twice afterwards, establishing a pattern in the narrative form of the film. After the rebellion in the regiment, some of the conspirators were sent to Ukraine, among them Pestel, Sergey and Bestuzhev-Ruyim. Five years after the discussion at Ryleev's apartment, the Decembrists in the South are shown to plot the revolt again. As Pestel describes a bloody plan to kill Emperor Alexander and his brother Nicholas during the army

viewing, Sergey reacts with disapproval. Pestel asks him "Do you want to win, or do you want to be a hero?". Sergey responds, "I want to win as a hero". The rest of the Decembrists grunt, as in the last five years there was no progress neither in revolution, nor in their careers.

Finally, as the plot of the Southern Decembrists is revealed, Pestel comes to St. Petersburg to discuss the plan of action with Trubetskoy and Ryleev. While Pestel insists on a common assault, Trubetskoy and Ryleev dismiss his pleas claiming that the Northern society should not suffer for the mistakes of the Southern society and suggesting that Pestel disband his wing of the movement. This exchange results in threats and insults and fosters no coordination between the parts of the rebellion. The inability to work together coupled with individual ambitions is shown as the set up for the movement's failure.

The mercy of people in power

The story of the Decembrists ends with their revolt violently suppressed by tsarist forces. The leaders of the movement are publicly hanged. The violence against the rebels, however, is not portrayed as villainous. Instead, Nicholas I and the higher ups are shown as victims of the circumstances, who deploy deadly force after exhausting other options.

Throughout the film those in power aim to avoid violence, trying to talk Decembrists out of rebelling until the last moment. For example, as the assassination plot is revealed to Emperor Alexander I, he asks his generals not to punish the Decembrists. As he points out, both he and the revolutionaries want the same changes for the country. He only verbally warns co-conspirators through his adjutant. Thus, none of the Decembrists are arrested.

Later, the first explicit confrontation between a Decembrist and the authorities is shown with Ukrainian Colonel Gebel reproaching Sergey from spreading revolutionary ideas. While Gebel expresses his dissatisfaction with Sergey, he does not threaten him. The conversation is not followed by any repercussions for the Decembrists. Gebel only points out that Sergey's actions are aimless, as he already has everything that could be desired.

The attempts at dismantling the rebellion at the Senate square in St. Petersburg start with general Miloradovich trying to convince rebels to leave the square and

beg for forgiveness. Even after he is fatally wounded, the tsarist forces refrain from employing deadly force against the Decembrists, resorting to cavalry charge to lower the morale and scare the revolutionaries away. The attempts at peacefully ending the conflict stop after another count asks the rebels to leave on behalf of the new emperor. The count offers a peaceful and safe way out for the insurgents, stating that Nicholas does not want to know their names. After this offer is rejected and one of the Decembrists tries to shoot the count, the emperor agrees to the grapeshot attack. In total, *Union of Salvation* presents 11 scenes in which people in power are trying to talk the Decembrists out of rebelling.

After the grapeshot attack, as the rebels run towards the frozen Neva River to escape, the emperor asks to shoot cannons at the ice, sparing people. The death in the cold water is presented as more humane than the death from bullets and cannons. In this manner, the theme of the mercy of those in power is expressed, with the limits of the mercy established.

The film proposes a dialogue between those in power and those opposed to them. That is done explicitly, with several characters in the position of authority stating the need for cooperation instead of resistance. For example, the character of a Senator who acts as a mediator between the rebels and the monarchs throughout the film, implores Ryleev to abandon revolutionary ideas the night before the revolt. He suggests that the Decembrists should work together with people close to Nicholas to influence the decisions of the new emperor.

The need for dialog instead of resistance is reiterated in the penultimate scene of the film. This scene presents the interrogation of Prince Trubetskoy conducted by Nicholas I. During the interrogation, both the emperor and Trubetskoy stand facing one another, with no restraints put on the latter. As Nicholas asks Trubetskoy about his plans, he points out that he was ready to speak with the disgruntled Decembrists, but their revolt made it impossible. Notably, while the camera shows Trubetskoy from the perspective of the emperor, the Decembrist is filmed at eye level. At the same time, from the perspective of Trubetskoy, Nicholas is consistently shown from a low angle, towering over the camera. The stylistic decisions of the scene are of special importance as they highlight both the potential equality between the emperor and Trubetskoy and the perceived imbalance in power between the two.

Engagement analysis

The interviews demonstrated that the young Russian audience mostly based its engagement with *Union of Salvation* on three pre-existing points: knowledge of the historical event, understanding of historical film as a genre and the expectations towards Russian cinematography in general and state-funded projects in particular.

Prior knowledge and attitude towards the Decembrist revolt

All of the interviewees encountered the story of the Decembrist revolt in secondary school, where the event is briefly taught during the 19th century segment of Russian History. At that time, the majority of participants did not become intensely invested into this topic, with Alisa, a 22-year-old Master student, explaining that the discussion of the revolt "was not accentuated and textured" enough to interest her as a child. Nonetheless, eight out of ten interviewees claimed to expand on their knowledge of the Decembrist revolt in later years. The expansion of knowledge ranged from reading program documents of Decembrists to watching documentaries and discussions with professional historians on YouTube.

Explicitly fictionalised narratives were not a popular source about Decembrists for the interviewees. Out of all participants, only Alisa watched another feature film about Decembrists. Additionally, Pavel, a 24-year-old podcast creator, primarily engaged with the story of Decembrists through the narratives created by classic Russian literature, for example, War and Peace and poems by Alexander Pushkin. The rest of the participants engaged with either educational content or primary sources, such as Decembrists' letters, diaries, and program documents. Thus, the premediation of this event was done within the educational context rather than through popular culture. The discussion of the Decembrist revolt exists in the realm of historicity and factuality, rather than artistic interpretation and explicit symbolism. This puts an emphasis on the historical accuracy of the event, which is evident from the interviews.

Interviewees claimed to form conscious opinions on the topic after high school. For example, Anna, a 26-year-old architect, linked her understanding of the revolt with the formation of her political views, stating that

> Seven years passed between school and this film. That is, after watching this film, I began to think about it a little differently, because I had already acquired more stable political views. I have a more competent, adequate, reasonable assessment. Rational. At school, we are still children and there is no such stable position, our environment, teachers influence us a lot, and when a person grows up, he has more stable principles.

Similarly, Dmitry, a 24-year-old marketing specialist, became interested in the event and the movement "around 3 years ago", after researching multiple sources. According to him, he has strong political opinions which impact on his understanding of the Decembrists.

> My beautiful Russia of the future is a free state where there is not one dictator, but there is a parliament, where laws are enforced, the constitution has weight, and therefore the zeal of Decembrists is certainly sympathetic to me. But again, there are a lot of additional factors here. I love history, and politics, because it's all basically intertwined. But I cannot say that the sources of information influenced me and formed my position. No. Still, I tried to draw on some bare facts and give them my own assessment.

Most commonly, the interviewees characterised Decembrists as progressive educated aristocrats who aimed to install the constitution in Russia, abolish serfdom, reform the army, and establish a more democratic state. All interviewees approved of their intentions, with several participants particularly highlighting the thoroughness of their plans. For example, Elya, a 22-year-old tutoring school administrator, described them as

> Progressive and rather brave people who had an opinion about the political structure that Russia needed. Their thoughts were quite collected, that is to say, this was not just a bunch of young people who decided to organise a coup. As far as I know, these were very thoughtful actions.

However, the overall assessment of the Decembrist revolt varied significantly among the interviewees. Anna stated that she is neutral towards the event, seeing it as a mere historical fact. Dmitry and Alisa expressed regret over the failure of the revolt, with the latter participant explaining that for her Decembrists are a symbol of attempted progress. At the same time, both Dmitry and Alisa, as well Alexander, a 22-year-old student, criticised the method of the revolt, stating that

for them violence of any kind is unacceptable. Contrary to the rest of interviewees, Lev, a 24-year-old bank worker, felt explicitly "repulsed" by the event, as he saw Decembrists as oath breakers who wanted to kill a lawful monarch.

Overall, most interviewees had strong and stable opinions on the issue of the Decembrist revolt prior to watching the film, which they claimed came from their extensive knowledge on the subject. The idea that unlike them, the majority of Russians do not have a clear understanding of the Decembrist revolt, was also prominent among interviewees. For example, Marina, a 24-year-old international relations analyst, explains that the Decembrists are commonly associated with their wives who voluntarily followed them to Siberia to share the exile with their husbands. The memory of the event itself, of executions of the Decembrist leaders or of their goals is less prominent. Similar ideas were expressed by Dmitry and Elya. As Elya points out, discussing dissent in Russia is generally "uncustomary", as if "it could inspire someone". The lack of discussion around dissent in general and the Decembrist revolt in particular results in an opportunity to shape the public understanding of the revolutionaries and their movement.

Understanding of historical film as a genre

Interviewees also had strong expectations associated with the film's genre. All but one of the participants identified *Union of Salvation* as either a historical film or a historical drama. All the participants determined specific criteria they believed a historical film should fit. Predominantly, interviewees mentioned the focus on real-life events, historical accuracy of the general story outline and the presence of characters, based on real historical figures. This fits into the general framework of the genre, determined earlier in the literature review.

Opinions on the expected level of historical authenticity varied between interviewees. For example, Evgeny, a 24-year-old lawyer, allows the filmmakers "some digressions if they explain some of the characters' motives". The fictionalisation is acceptable to him, if these digressions do not "completely contradict the real facts and characters". Dmitry affords films similar flexibility, noting that they are accepted if they serve artistic purposes. Similarly, Alexander claims that he expects historical films to provide a point of view on the facts rather than to simply recite what happened. He expects the director "to rely on the facts,

not invent them out of thin air, but think some things out, since not everything is known".

At the same time, Elya and Anna emphasise the educational value of historical films, referencing the fact that school children often watch them instead of reading textbooks. For them historical accuracy is a priority in their assessment.

> Authenticity is the most important thing for me. If you turn on a film about a historical period, about a specific event or a phenomenon, then it must be reliable <…> It should not be that you watched an entertaining movie and nothing was left in your head. Well, probably in historical cinema, it seems to me that drama should not come to the fore. This is still more of a narrative focused on facts, and not on drama (Elya).

All the interviewees acknowledged that historical films offer an interpretation of the past, which is often shaped by the present-day context, rather than provide an exact retelling of the events. For example, Alexander cannot "imagine history without interpretation at all". To him, any text always offers an interpretation of the past rather than its perfect recollection, with historical films being even more interpretive because of their "artistic component". What is more, Alexander establishes a clear influence of the present on the representation of the past.

> It seems to me that a historical film is always about the present. As I see it... a historical film is made by people in the present, with their ideas, feelings, experiences, and values.

Similarly, for Evgeny, the present determines what creators would want to "build upon the historical basis". According to him, in most cases this manifests in artistic interpretations which are grounded in the director's and screenwriter's personal beliefs. However, the socio-political and economic context of *Union of Salvation* makes it "a tool for simply influencing the consciousness of the masses". According to the lawyer, the film had a goal: "to claim that they show how it was in reality, to rid it of the veil of Soviet ideology, but in fact to replace one idea with another".

Assumptions about Russian films

The expectations put on Russian state-sponsored productions also impacted on the audience's engagement with *Union of Salvation*. For example, Alisa emphasised that she is conscious of the influence state funding has on historical cinema, making "truth" almost impossible to find in productions, sponsored by the government. According to her,

> Many historical films, especially those made in relation to public administration, for example, sponsored by the state, do not have the task of letting you form your own understanding. They have the task of creating the necessary idea of the events that took place.

Most of the interviewees highlighted that the involvement of the Ministry of Culture and Fond Kino turned them against the movie even before they watched it. For example, Alisa expected "a typical cardboard story: Decembrists bad, people in power good, do not trespass and we will all live happily". Evgeny also admitted that he had biases and assumptions regarding the message of the film even before the viewing. Similarly, Dmitry felt immediate distrust after seeing the logo of Fond Kino on screen. After watching the film, he felt the need to research the topic further because of his distrust of the state-funded productions.

> I didn't expect it to be a super detailed historical film. I initially understood that this was filmed with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Fond Kino, and they like to lie. That's why I immediately got into reading all sorts of sources, because I was wondering about what really happened.

This signalises awareness of how the semi-authoritarian system shapes Russian media context. According to Morozov (2015, p. 94), the early development of the resource economy in Russia made the state the dominant entity that subsided civil society. This led to the Russian state taking up a paternalistic role regarding the media. According to Dunn (2014, p. 1435), such paternalism is aimed at limiting the pluralism of opinions and discussion of sensitive topics. While in academia Russian state dominance over media is discussed in relation to journalism (see, for example, Vartanova 2012), Russian film critics extensively discuss it in relation to cinematography. For example, journalist Andrey Arkhangel'skiy (2013) compares current practices of state-funding historical blockbusters with the Soviet tradition of goszakaz - a film created on a state budget, which "must uphold some

ideology". Such relations make Russians interpret media as an essential part of state power structure (Vartanova 2012, p. 132).

All in all, the interviewees expect *Union of Salvation* to manipulate historical facts because of their assumptions about Russian film in the historical genre, created by the soviet and post-soviet media context. Like Dmitry, several other respondents described the urge to fact check the film after the viewing. Notably, Elya stated that she generally checks the accuracy and authenticity of every historical film she watches, approaching them analytically, rather than emotionally. This connects her expectations put on the genre and on the Russian state-sponsored cinema.

On top of that, interviewees highlighted their initial scepticism towards the film because of its general Russian origin. As Alisa said, she does not have high expectations of Russian movies, unless they are "auteur cinema". Kristina also highlighted that she does not "expect something incredible" from Russian mainstream cinema, "especially when Fond Kino is engaged in it, and Konstantin Ernst is producing it". Similarly, Elya, Evgeny and Dmitry expressed that their expectations were low, as they are used to poor quality productions made in Russia, with Pavel specifically explaining that he is sceptical of "projects of Konstantin Ernst".

The poor quality is expected specifically of the plot of the film, rather than of its visuals, costumes or acting. That is because the audience expects the plot of state-funded productions to focus on delivering a message rather than telling a compelling story. As Marina explained, she does not doubt the talent of Russian costume makers, cameramen or set designers. However, she noticed that "in recent years the goal of Russian historical films is to make people leave cinema saying "that's how it was! We are proud of our past and everything in Russia is good!"".

Overall, engagement with the narratives of the film was heavily shaped by the previous knowledge of and opinion on the Decembrist revolt, as well as assumptions and expectations that the interviewees placed on the genre of historical films and on Russian productions. Most participants approached the film with strong views on the events and explicit scepticism towards Russian state-funded productions. They expected the facts to be interpreted and even distorted, based not only on the generic conventions of the movie, but also on their

experience with the state-sponsored media and awareness of the practices like *goszakaz*. This resulted in higher scrutiny of the film's narratives.

Negotiating film narratives and the memory of the Decembrist revolt

The understanding of generic conventions, the assumptions regarding the quality and the goals of Russian state-sponsored films, and the strong opinions about the Decembrist revolt impacted on how respondents negotiated the narratives present in *Union of Salvation*. The most prominent mode of negotiation was rejection, caused by pre-established scepticism and based on the clash with the premeditated ideas about the Decembrists.

Although most interviewees claimed that a historical film can interpret events and does not have to necessarily be historically accurate, a large proportion of the respondents still engaged with *Union of Salvation* within the framework of factuality, desiring a comprehensive explanation of the events. That was connected to the feeling regarding the public memory of the revolt: since it is an event from a distant past that does not have live witnesses anymore, the audience felt that the film was responsible for maintaining the knowledge and the memory of the Decembrist revolt. Therefore, they scrutinised it heavily, looking for what is lost and what is lied about.

Stumbling over "storytelling incompetence" of *Union of Salvation*

The interviewees highlighted that the film displayed general storytelling incompetence, with Pavel calling it a "dramaturgic failure". The lack of exposition, the jumps in the narrative time and the absence of details about key characters were pointed out by the respondents.

> Why all this is happening is not clear, the motivation of characters is not disclosed, the chronology is not disclosed, and some historical facts that are important are not explained to the audience. Moreover, the authors themselves understand this, and when they realise that they are covering events so complex that people need to understand at least something, they put a huge amount of text into the frame that needs to be read. It is also being voiced, this text. It seems to me that this is generally unacceptable for feature films. (Evgeny).

This encouraged the audience to approach the film with even heavier scrutiny, furthering already existing scepticism towards the film. The incoherent plot structure inspired several interviewees to conduct their own in-depth research on the topic which resulted in them rejecting the message of the film long after the initial viewing. For example, Krisitna, who admitted that she had substantial gaps in her knowledge of Russian history, claimed that the film failed to explain to her anything about the event or its participants, making the message of the film effectively useless to her, as she generally could not comprehend the narrative. Elya, who also did not have extensive knowledge about the Decembrist revolt before the viewing, stated that the film forced her to read on the subject after watching it. As she stated,

> This film leaves you no choice - you must go and read, because you are like "who was this? What did this conversation mean?" And then it turns out that there was no such conversation, and this episode was completely different. For example, the uprising of the Semenov regiment, which is shown in a different way than it was in reality. You find one inconsistency, the second inconsistency, and decide - I'll go and read another review, or maybe I'll read this book to understand. Then it's all catching up, and you're like… interesting. This film is not historically accurate at all.

As a result, she started questioning the narratives that were present in the film and completely rejected the movie's interpretation of the Decembrist revolt. Therefore, the strictly technical incompetence of the film from the standpoint of moviemaking encouraged the audience to engaged with it negatively, which, in the context of authenticity's heightened importance, led to the dissection of film's factuality and resulted in almost unanimous rejection of the narratives presented by the movie.

Looking for omissions

The interviewees focused on discussing what is absent from the film. This was common among interviewees who claimed to be well-versed in the topic. As Evgeny highlights, he had expectations regarding the story that were not fulfilled, which made him "nitpick more, pre-setting myself against the film".

> You wait for the first 15 minutes, after 20-30 minutes you understand that everything is not as you wanted, not as you expected, and something is wrong. You feel like they try to sell you something in this picture and you begin to be even more wary of the film, and as a result, at the end of the viewing, you already begin to tangle this kind of ball of negativity. (Evgeny)

Seven participants in the study said that they felt as if the film was trying to give them a specific idea of Decembrists that was different from reality. Elya directly claimed that *Union of Salvation* was trying to "manipulate" her mind, stating that the intent of the producers was to show her what to think. This manipulation, according to the interviewees, was done through omissions and re-framing of the facts rather than through addition of direct lies. For example, Dmitry, Evgeny and Marina pointed out inconsistencies in the representation of emperor Alexander I, who on screen claimed that he desired the same changes as the Decembrists. This, according to them, was not true, as the liberal attitudes were shared by the emperor before 1812. Later Alexander I became more conservative, reverting several liberalisation policies. As Marina puts it, "I know about arakcheevshchina [a regime of police and military despotism in the first quarter of 19th century - V. S.], but if you don't know about it and only look at the film, Alexander seems very nice".

Furthermore, as Alexander points out, the on-screen text that appears at the end of the film connected events that were separated by more than half a century, linking together the Decembrist revolt and the killing of Alexander II by political terrorists in 1881. According to the interviewee, this established a chain of cause and effect that is supposed to turn the audience against the Decembrists. Notably, *Union of Salvation* frequently uses on-screen text, since a film set in the past often needs to "form connections with events beyond its own narrative world" (Stubbs 2013, p. 21) to immerse viewers into the story and "stitch the events depicted in the main body of the film to written accounts of history" (ibid). In *Union of Salvation* the on-screen text appears several times throughout the film, explaining events that were not explored visually. According to Stubbs (ibid, p. 21), written text on the screen might connect the film to a more authoritative form of historiography, as the written history is perceived to be more trustworthy. The formal style of the text and its simple expository language create a sense of neutrality, even though the facts presented in this way are also selected and rhetorically processed. Although the aim of the on-screen text was to further the

truth claims of the film, the pre-existing knowledge and bias of the interviewees nullifies this effect, leading to further scrutiny and scepticism.

Connected to this was the recurring criticism of the temporal leaps that characterised the film. *Union of Salvation* omits 5 years of the Decembrists' lives before the revolt of 1825, during which they, according to interviewees, were most productive in developing their plans.

> There is literally this flashforward, as it were, five years later. It's outrageous, just because... Like, uh... What does five years later mean? It was the twentieth year, then it became the twenty-fifth. It was at this time that the Decembrists were doing their work! It was at this time that it was decided why they wanted an uprising! It was at this time that they trained their soldiers, they found people in the army who could support them. (Evgeny)

Most participants specifically criticised the omission of the Decembrists' political goals. This was caused by the absence of the Decembrists' secret meetings, during which they discussed and debated their programs. According to Alisa, Dmitry, Evgeny and Marina, the film made it seem like the Decembrists did not know what they were doing and why they were committed to the revolt.

> The motivation of Decembrists in the film is not traced. Their main goal is to change something and be participants, that is, they want to be heroes. Sergey is talking about this, I want, he says, to be a victorious hero. Accordingly, in the film they are driven by vanity, some kind of thirst for change. What is it based on? It is not clear. (Evgeny)

Contrary to the rest of the interviewees, Lev felt like the depiction of Decembrists was accurate. According to him, the absence of the Decembrists' motives and goals from the film is justified, as this was the reality. To him, the actions of Decembrists were a result of "youthful maximalism" and "burning hearts" that were coupled with malicious ambition of some of the Decembrists. Lev's engagement with the film was largely positive, which was consistent with his high expectations from a state-funded production.

Focusing on the details

According to interviewees, the film paints Decembrists as disorganised, vain, aggressive and ready to risk someone else's lives for the achievement of unclear goals. As Alisa points out, it is the small details that determine how the character of a historical figure will be judged, and the small details in the film point to the picture that she disagrees with. Similarly, Alexander emphasises that "in the camp of Decembrists, details that speak well of them are not shown, and in the opposite camp, details that speak badly about them are not shown".

According to the interviewees, the manipulation of images is especially evident in how Sergey is presented in the film. Sergey was unilaterally identified as the main character of the film and the lens through which the viewers observe the events of the movie. As Pavel ironically states, he is presented as a "sharp kid" and "an alpha", who is ambitious and outspoken, and who is not to be taken seriously. According to Alisa, over the course of the narrative Sergey transitions from a moderate young man with ambitions into a violent fanatic, who is ready to commit murder to achieve his political goals. Similarly, Dmitry characterised Sergey as a "progressive guy who took a wrong turn". This interpretation of the character made respondents feel annoyed, angry, and confused, as it clashed with their pre-established ideas about Decembrists and Sergey in particular.

This image is contrasted with the people in power, specifically Nicholas, who is presented as "consistent" and "righteous". Generally, according to Alexander, Dmitry and Pavel, the film presented two camps rather than specific characters who were supposed to be compared to each other. This was evident from the way the disunity of the Decembrists was established. While, according to Evgeny, the Decembrists are shown to "quietly dislike each other", the people in the pro-tsarist camp are presented as united under one leader. Similarly, Alexander connects this depiction of the Decembrists' disagreement with general criticism of democracy, common among Russian political elites.

> In one camp, there were scandals and disputes, and disputes were not in a good sense of the word, as in a normal parliament, but disputes like in the kitchen, so dirty, unpleasant, with threats, about money <…> And in the other camp, everything is beautiful, because everyone obeys each other implicitly. This moment of relationships within different camps is also a narrative. To obey is good, because not to obey means disputes, fights, threats and dirt. You don't want this, do you? Then better obey (Alexander).

At the same time, according to most of the interviewees, the film was trying to "blur" both the image of the Decembrists and that of the people in power. As Evngeny pointed out, the goal of the film was to evoke a sense of ambiguity, rather than establish a direct disgust or disapproval of Decembrists.

The narrative of paternalism was identified by all interviewees. According to participants, the movie insisted on the possibility of reaching agreement between Decembrists and the monarchs. However, as Evgeny puts it, "Russian monarchy was not open to dialogue at any point in history". For Alisa, the attempts to iron out the differences, which were especially noticeable in the penultimate scene of the film, made it "look like a caricature", as the conflict of the movie became pointless.

Additionally, interviewees established connections with the present, purposefully and non-purposefully perpetuated by the film. For Kristina, the story "once again confirmed that history is cyclical", as, according to her, the state in present-day Russia "just tries to eliminate what does not fit into the big picture". Drawing on the feeling of being manipulated, most of the interviewees highlighted that *Union of Salvation* was trying to send them "a clear message" about acceptable forms of the dissent in present-day Russia.

> I think that this was a certain message from a fairly young part of the population who study at universities, who are very interested, who form the civil society in the rudiment that we now have, and this is a serious message to them that no events should be forced, that everything will be decided, that educated, knowledgeable people are already in their places, and that everything will be decided. There is no need to interfere. This is a very bad message (Alisa).

Overall, the negative framing of Decembrists was rejected by 9 out of 10 interviewees. Dmitry highlighted "internal disagreement" with the narrative of the Decembrists being disorganised, as it clashed with his previous "mythologised" ideas about Decembrists. Similarly, Evgeny felt "frustrated" and "disappointed" by the rebels' depiction.

While the absence of facts and details, caused either confusion or frustration and ultimately rejection among most of the interviewees, the fact that they were present made participants feel like the manipulation of the film was generally inefficient. As Evgeny stated, it is hard to twist the facts so much as to make Decembrists the villains and people in power the heroes. Similarly, Elya stated

that for her the execution of the Decembrists was the key moment that determined her attitude towards the event. Therefore, several respondents noted a clash between what the film was trying to portray and the outcome of this framing because of the reality that could not have been reshaped drastically enough.

Notably, the annoyance at the image of Decembrists promoted by the film encouraged several participants to think about the rebels in a more positive light.

> I began to think about them better. The film shows them as unfounded, frivolous guys, but it turned out that in reality they were cool characters. I started thinking about them better and, first of all, I started thinking about them as brave people who did not sit, wait and endure, but tried to do something. They really tried something and unfortunately it didn't work out, at least the way they wanted (Elya).

Conclusion

Being a dynamic phenomenon, which can connect seemingly unrelated events and establish a pattern of understanding history, cultural memory is heavily influenced by media and popular culture. Although cultural memory necessarily involves establishing personal relations with the past of others, its research predominantly investigates what is told about the past from the top-down, sidelining the engagement with such recollection. However, it is exactly through the combination of collective frames of remembering and personal imagination that the cultural memory is transformed.

This project examined how recollection of political dissent – the Decembrist revolt - is negotiated, contested, and discoursed upon in Russian popular culture. The focus of the research was on the complex relationship the audience builds with historical state-funded film Union of Salvation. To examine this, the methods of film narrative analysis and semi-structured interviews were combined, with the latter building on the results of the former.

The project uncovered the viewers' opinions on the Decembrist revolt, the factors that shape the audience's interpretation of a text as well as the awareness of the political and economic factors that shape the genre of historical film in the Russian

context. The research contributed to the underdeveloped area of research on the crossroads between cultural memory studies and popular culture research, bringing the analysis of bottom-up understanding narratives into the field.

Answering RQ1, the paper finds that the film predominantly characterised Decembrists as disunited and callously ambitious, omitting the development of the relationships between rebels and several years of their activity, during which the ideas of the movement were formulated. Omission and absence are the key characteristics of the narrative structure of Union of Salvation, with the picture heavily employing flashbacks and flashforwards, as well as on-screen text explanations to avoid contextualising socio-political realities of the era. Another technique that shapes the narratives of the film is the repetition of similar scenes. It was applied to sustain the narrative of the mercifulness of people in power, with authorities persistently and peacefully discouraging the Decembrists from rebelling.

Answering RQ2, the paper finds that the narratives previously established through the film analysis were recognised by the respondents. While the interviewees acknowledged the presence of the narratives, they rejected them with reference to their pre-established understanding of the revolutionaries and their actions. The perceived attempts to manipulate made most of the audience feel annoyed, angry, frustrated and bored. In some cases rejection of film narratives led to further research into the history of the Decembrist movement and increased approval of Decembrists' actions and ideas.

Answering RQ 3, the paper finds that the understanding of the interpretive nature of the historical film genre, as well as the expectation of manipulation from a state-funded Russian production, further set most of the participants against the film. Due to the bias towards state-sponsored cinematography and predominantly positive opinion on the Decembrist revolt, the interviewees largely focused on what is absent from the narrative, approaching the film critically and analytically.

Overall, collective frames of recollection, combined with personal understanding of the Decembrist revolt, opinions on the genre and ideas about Russian media, rendered the narratives of the film ineffective. he analysis of the interviews highlighted the reflexive approach of the audience towards the cultural memory in state-influenced popular culture texts.

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The Instagram witch: An ethnographic study about practicing witches in contemporary postsecular Sweden

Filippa Jonsson

Introduction to witchcraft

I have been seeing witches.

I have been seeing witches on Instagram and TikTok, I see podcasts on Spotify about witchcraft, I see them portrayed in Netflix shows and in the cinema. I see them in political slogans across Europe and I see stores devoted to them when walking around the city in which I live. Wherever I go, both physically and digitally, I see traces of this notorious practice occurring around me, and all clues point toward the same thing: Witches are on the rise. Not only as movie or TV tropes, but across a multitude of societal spheres – political, commercial and cultural spheres, - serving as a testament to Henry Jenkins (2016) theory of *convergence culture*. Jenkins pointed out how convergence across media technologies, industries, cultural and social change is not merely a top-down corporate driven process; it is also a bottom-up consumer driven process (ibid). Somehow the witch is back with us in our social and collective consciousness. As part of a cultural zeitgeist- the witch has moved into our cities and onto our for-you pages on Instagram. This thesis is about the practitioners of witchcraft. Let

us proceed by heading straight into the eye of the storm, or if I may- the witch's den.

Witchcraft might seem directly oppositional to the study of media and communication. However, as will be presented throughout this thesis, the two are quite interlinked and at sometimes even oxymoronic. As the concept of convergence (Jenkins 2006) implies, more and more societal sectors converge. One convergence is between the practice of witchcraft and digital domains- such as social media and the development of the internet (Bogdan 2016:388). In these digital environments, nature worshiping cultures seem to be thriving. Modern spiritual movements with deep adorations for nature goes under the umbrella term *neopaganism* (ibid). Witchcraft is one of them. Due to the important role that digital media play in the formation of neopagan communities, it naturally becomes a study within the field of media and communication.

By exploring the mediatization of witchcraft, specifically through the visual social media Instagram, I will explore how practices are shaped and transformed when witchcraft is practiced in a contemporary society using new technological tools and platforms. Sweden is considered to be one of the most secularized countries in the world (Bogdan 2016:343). However, in recent years scholars have begun to question the premises of secularization all together. Academics such as Jürgen Habermas (2008) and Charles Taylor (2007) have argued for a societal and cultural upsurge regarding religious and spiritual beliefs and practices in the late modern Western world, introducing the concept *postsecularized* society.

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the neopagan practice of witchcraft in contemporary Sweden. The study aims to understand how Swedish witchcraft is practiced in today's contemporary Sweden. In doing so, the study employs Elisabeth Shove's et.al. (2012) discussion of *social practice theory*, centered around how practices of everyday life change and transform over time. I investigate how witchcraft is practiced today in a mediatized and 'secular' society and what role the social media platform Instagram has in shaping and transforming those practices, in doing so the concept of *mediatization-from-below* (Andersson 2017) and the concepts of *affordances* (Costa 2018; boyd 2014) are introduced. Lastly, I deal with themes of commercialization and marketization, that might challenge witch ideals (Banet-Weiser 2012; Belk 2022).

To study these phenomena, I pose the overarching question, "How is modern Swedish witchcraft practiced today?" which has then been divided it into the three following, more concrete, subsections:

1) How are these practices mediated, with a special focus on the platform Instagram?
2) How are the practices connected to nature and locality?
3) How is contemporary witchcraft transformed into work, i.e., as something generating a salary/money?

Literature review

The witch in history

There is a plethora of cultural tropes surrounding the archetype of the witch and her craft. Historian Julian Goodare (2016) describes how witches were believed to be in league with the Devil, and the European witch trials were initiated by the church to charge people for worshiping the Devil rather than God (Hutton 2017:41-42). In Sweden, there are records of people being accused of witchery in between the period of 1597-1720 (Bergenheim 2020:143). The people accused of witchery were mainly women, especially those who practiced herbal medicine (Goodare 2016:11). With the growth of modern medicine and the pharmaceutical industry, the practice of herbal medicine slowly disappeared (ibid). Essentially, many of the accused witches were ordinary folk, who practiced herbal folk medicine.

Neopaganism, new age and Wicca

Witchcraft goes under the umbrella term of paganism, a term used for ancient spiritual religions that worship nature and its magical capacities (Harvey & Hardman 1996). Today these ancient beliefs are called neopagan, referring to the modern interpretations of ancient paganism. An example of this is the New Age hippie movement that grew large during the 70s in the U.S. (Salomonsen 2002), which proved to be a massive commercial success for selling spiritual related items and services (Banet-Weiser 2012:189-190).

One of the leading spiritual communities from around that time, apart from the New Age communities, is that of 'Wicca'. Wicca is a religion founded in the U.K. around the 40s by a man called Gerald Gardner that later grew large in the U.S. Wicca combined the beliefs of paganism with those of witchcraft, creating a much more religious variation of witchcraft (Berger 2019:5). Important to note is that not all witches are Wiccan (in this thesis, only one of the nine participants are a Wiccan witch), the others refer to themselves as pagan witches (partly due to Wicca being a more institutionalized practice, that many witches are critical of). Paganism, on the other hand, is de-institutionalized, it has no 'church', no leading figure or holy scripture. Anyone can call themselves pagan witches and therefore the number of pagan witches is unknown. Another distinction to make is how many neopagan communities do not consider witches to be solely women, they include both men and women in the communities (Berger 2019:5). Not all participants in this study are women as a reflection of this.

More recent years of witchcraft

During the middle of the 1990, neopagan groups set roots in Sweden, mostly in urban areas in larger cities. Most of the communities that are documented during this time are Wiccan, however this is partly to do with the fact that paganism is de-institutionalized and therefore does not leave a paper trail but also due to the small quantity of research on paganism in Sweden. This makes it impossible to be entirely sure about the lineage of Swedish paganism (Bogdan 2016:380). Further, this uncertainty is a reflection of the few studies made on the topic in Sweden.

However, something else occurred during the 90's: the development of the internet and growing computer access in Swedish households (Johnsson-Smaragdi 2002). The internet has played an important role for pagan witches to be able to find and connect with each other. This has allowed for so-called *solitary* witchcraft, referring to witches who do not practice witchcraft as part of a physical community (a so-called coven), and instead choose to practice alone. Helen Berger (2019) found that solitary witches were overrepresented in contemporary practice of witchcraft (2019:xiii). One reason for this is how witches can join online communities and forums instead where the physical locality is of lesser importance, for example on Facebook (Bogdan 2016:388). Fortunately, social media allows for more insight into the popularity of these communities. For example, on Instagram #witchesofinstagram have 8.5 million posts and #witchraft

7.3 million. On Tiktok #witchtok have 25.7 billion views, #witchcraft 8.9 billion and #paganwitch 102.2 million.

Mediated communication does not only simplify the introduction of witches to one another, it also introduces diverse online communities to one another. Witchcraft has been connected to other alternative social movements on the internet- some of whom can be labelled as conspiratorial. Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011) created the concept "conspirituality" to grasp how conspiracies are formed online alongside the growing popularity of alternative worldviews and spirituality (2011:103). A recent example of this is the Qanon conspiracy cult that was partly behind the storming of the Capitolium in Washington D.C. in January 2021 (Meltzer 2021). Similarly, anti-vaccination movements and far-right conspiracies have had a strong foothold in spiritual communities online (Parmigiani 2021; Wiseman 2021). These overlaps are worth noting, even though not all witches agree on these matters.

Postsecularism and modern fascinations with the supernatural

There has been a rise of more popular cultural content surrounding witches over the past few years. However, it did not start out as a popular culture fascination with witches in particular. Annette Hill (2011) introduces her book on *Paranormal Media* by writing: "There is a paranormal turn in popular culture. Beliefs are on the rise in contemporary Western societies" (2011:1). Hill's book is centred around different paranormal themes in popular culture, and one of the key points is how the increases in spiritual and paranormal awakenings in audiences can be understood as a reflection of societal insecurities. Beliefs sometimes rise in times when people seek agency over their lives (2011:9-10).

This can be linked with the postsecular turn in the late modern world. Scholars such as Habermas (2008) have pointed towards a return of faith in society. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004) introduce the debate on secularization (the separation of religious institutions and state) by taking off from the Enlightenment. Even since the Enlightenment, leading figures in philosophy, psychology and anthropology have claimed that the role of faith will gradually be replaced by the natural sciences, calling on the 'death of religion'. However, these ideas are now under criticism, due to a number of reasons, one of them being the growth of spirituality in western Europe (Norris & Inglehart 2004:3-4). Giovanna

Parmigiany explained it as: "post-secularism does not imply a 'return to religion'", but "rather, an awareness of the continued relevance of religion in secular societies, as well as changing perceptions of what actually counts as religion, what functions it may have and where it can be located" (Parmigiani 2021:516). Religious expressions are still important for people in contemporary society, people are still spiritual but in different forms today.

Hill (2011) points out how the paranormal has gone mainstream and is widely consumed and represented in popular culture (2011:37). According to Hill, increases of the paranormal and spiritual awakenings can be a reflection of a shaky society and people seeking agency over their lives in times of societal insecurities (Hill 2011:9-10). Therefore, dimensions of mediatization are necessary when studying contemporary witchcraft. In this research study, I take off from the work of Hill- seeing how people include paranormal aspects in their everyday lives. But instead of pointing towards the paranormal in their cultural consumption, I refer to the paranormal practices of the spiritual community of witches.

Commercializing spirituality

When something is part of popular culture or in mainstream culture, it is usually also profitable. Popularity is usually accompanied with implications of commercialization and the commodification of those practices and/or themes. Russell Belk (2020) defines commodification as the process of something being turned into a commodity and converted into something you can sell or buy on a market, according to capitalist logic (Belk 2020:31). According to Belk (2020) consumption culture has been explored in a wide variety of research, such as sociology, history and anthropology (2020:37), however Belk fails to mention religion studies. Luckily, Sarah Banet-Wiser (2012) does. Banet-Weiser (2012) theorizes a commodification of religion as follows: "Religion has been powerfully, though not wholly, culturally defined by the content of its beliefs rather than its social, economic, or commercial purposes." (2012:166).

Denise Cush (2007) and Chris Miller (2022) have explored aspects of commercial forces in relation to young female witches. Cush (2007) explores the distinction between the commercialization of authentic and in-authentic witchcraft among young witches and found that the distinction was hard to make and often overlapped (2007:51). Miller (2022) focuses on witches on the social media platform TikTok. Miller highlights 'material religion', which refers to the material

means of the practice of witchcraft and how different objects are attributed certain qualities or mystical powers. Miller watched videos under certain witch-related hashtags on the platform and explored how aspects of commodification were represented (2022:2). However, the study fails on actually speaking to witches, asking them about their religious expressions or potential opinions on consumerism or the commercialization of their communities. Both studies reproduce the antiquated argument of associated young women in particular with the sphere of mass-consumption and commodities.

Paranormal practices

Two words that are usually applied to the practice of witchcraft are *esotericism*. Esotericism refers to secret knowledge production in closed communities, where the knowledge of the group is gatekept by its practitioners from the rest of the world. The initiation into these communities are often very limited to a small and specific group of people (Bogdan 2016:343). Judging from this concept, the world of witchcraft is historically associated as secretive and mystic communities. However, with the rise of the internet and digital technologies, the nature of these previously esoteric communities become less hidden (Bogdan 2016).

The practice of witchcraft today is *eclectic*, a concept referring to a practice embedded with a combination of beliefs and cultural traditions. According to Berit Renser & Katrin Tiidenberg, this is a result of mediated communication that globalizes and spreads magical practices (2020:4). Another way of describing these eclectic tendencies are how they are characterized by a "pick and mix" model (Renser & Tiidenberg 2020:1), or what others would call "patchwork religion" (Helland & Kienzl 2021:45). This refers to how witches can individualize their spiritual beliefs and expression using a combination of practices that are not adherent to one single tradition and/or culture. Researching aspects of online dimensions is important in understanding how these communities are formed today, when the entire practice around witchcraft is shaped due to new technological means of communication and information.

Researching religion online

Digital Religion

Religious activities online have been studied even since the emergence of the internet Campbell and Tsuria (2021) mention how one of the first studies of religious activities online was made in 1995 by Greg Grieve, who actually wrote about neopagan communities. Since then, many studies have followed focusing on everything from paganism to Christianity in these online environments (Campbell & Tsuria 2021:2).

Across these studies, many different concepts are presented, such as: 'identity', 'authority' and 'community'. Helland & Kienzl (2021) partly focuses on the concept of ritual. The concept of ritual is not only associated with religion, many mundane everyday activities can be described as rituals since the concept refers to cultural meaning making systems in our everyday lives, religious or not (Helland & Kienzl 2021:50). Rituals can be performed both in *online* and *offline spheres*, often embedded in one another. The work of Nadja Miczek (2008) has been very influential in the study of digital religion. Miczek (2008) proposes that when looking at rituals in an online environment, elements of: transformation, invention and exclusion, should be taken into account. These are tools that can grasp how ritual transfer changes in an online environment (Miczek 2008:150). This is explained further in the section: "Theoretical tools".

Witches on social media

Witches have been studied by academics and historians for many years. The primary focus of this thesis includes the online sphere and more recent years of technological developments.

Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy (2009) for example, studied young witches and their relation to mass mediated portrayals of witches and witchcraft. They found that the practices of witchcraft are very heterogeneous. Without a centralized institution, no one can really determine what is the correct way to practice the craft (Berger & Ezzy 2009:503). Thus, resulting in these very individual, reflexive and reflective practices. Similarly, to the previously mentioned notions of "eclectic witchcraft", Berger and Ezzy (2009) also point out that the growth of feminism, environmentalism, individual reflexivity and magical realism have contributed to the growth in these communities (2009:502). The study weighs heavily on the

concept of identity and discussions of mainstreaming witchcraft rather than a focus of everyday life and the actual practice of witchcraft. In this thesis study, 'practice' is emphasized rather than notions of 'identity'.

Renser and Tiidenberg (2020) research a community of Estonian witches in a group on Facebook. The study aims to answer how the online sphere and social media shapes the online practices of neopaganism (2020:3). My study is very much inspired by this article, with a few exceptions. Much like the method of Renser and Tiidenberg (2020:4), I include both ethnographic interviews and online observations in my empirical material. However, this thesis focuses on Instagram rather than Facebook. My participants were not very fond of the communities on Facebook and preferred Instagram when consuming and producing mediated witchcraft. Renser and Tiidenberg (2020) focus mostly on the concept of 'authority' from the book *Digital religion* (Campbell & Tsuria 2021), asking how authority is maintained and achieved in the witch-groups on Facebook. I am focusing on the concept of 'ritual' instead. Facebook groups have a group dynamic which makes matters of authority relevant. On Instagram on the other hand, the individual Instagram accounts are more centered around the person's individual display of magic, which is why the concept of ritual makes more sense to apply to that platform. Furthermore, the concept of 'ritual' better encapsulates the individualized practices of witches.

Culture as contestation and ecofeminism

To freshen up our memory of neopaganism, it is the modern practice and interpretation of old pagan religions, characterized by the worship of nature. Paganism is characterized by *animism* which is a fancy way of referring to the spiritual belief that all things in the universe are connected (Salomonsen 2002:8). Neopaganism comes in many different forms, such as the New Age movement and the religious witchcraft Wicca (Harvey & Hardman 1996; Salomonsen 2002). There are many overlaps between neopaganism, witchcraft and ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is a feminist tradition that was initiated around the same time as New Age movements grew strong in the U.S. What makes ecofeminism different from many other feminist branches are the spiritual project embedded in the movement, which is also what makes it one of the more controversial feminist traditions (Adams & Gruen 2014:14). Ecofeminism values living in balance with nature and considers the exploitation of nature as a similar

experience to that of sexism and racism. Tone Salomonsen (2002) describes how ecofeminism considers the oppression of women equal to the oppression of animals and nature under the patriarchal regime (Salomonsen 2002:6). This is why anti-patriarchal consumerism is the core of ecofeminism (Mies & Shiva 1993:2). The religious historian Per Faxneld (2017) states that witchcraft has historically been linked with women's liberation and empowerment and how the act of practicing witchcraft can be a way for the "powerless" to attain respect and agency (Faxneld 2017:45). In the overlap of these movements and communities, the notions of women's empowerment and elevation and environmentalism become apparent.

Research gap

Witches and witchcraft has not gone unexplored in academic research. However, most of this research is centered around the witch as a historical figure and less about the witch as a contemporary one (Bergenheim 2020; Goodare 2016; Hutton 2017). While much research has been done around practices of witchcraft, it lacks a more contemporary understanding of the influences of mediatization and the digital sphere (Salomonsen 2002; Berger 2019). The more contemporary studies have had a less ethnographical approach and reinforced prejudice of young women's large and mindless patterns of consumption (Cush 2007), or simply studied the expressions of witchcraft and consumption without actually speaking to the participants (Miller 2022). Further, the witch needs to be understood in other ways than how authority is maintained and achieved (Renser & Tiidenberg 2020) or how popular culture influences practitioners (Berger & Ezzy 2009). To truly grasp what everyday life is like for these people and how it reflects society as a whole, both offline and online dimensions of witchcraft should be considered.

Further, there is a gap in research about these communities in Sweden in particular. Witch communities in the U.S. have been studied quite extensively in the 90s and beginning of the 2000s (Harvey & Hardman 1996; Salomonsen 2002). More recent studies have studied concepts such as the conspirituality of witches in Italy (Parmigiani 2021), and how authority is achieved in Estonian Facebook groups for witches (Renser & Tiidenberg 2020). But as Henrik Bogdan (2016) has pointed out, the field of paganism in modern Sweden is unexplored and incomplete (2016:388).

Theoretical framework

Practice theory, affordances and mediatization

The approach embedded throughout this thesis is *mediatization from below* (Andersson 2017). In unity with mediatization, the method and theory of *practice theory* as proposed by Shove et.al. (2012) is used throughout.

Andersson (2017) proposes to conduct analyses with thick description in relation to the mediatization concept, to avoid the pitfalls of either oversimplifying or relativising mediatization. Mediatization refers to how mediated processes are both *constructed* by society and simultaneously *construct* society (Couldry & Hepp, 2016:35). Andersson (2017) also advises on adding another layer of theory to that of mediatization (2017:49), in this thesis that part is played by Elisabeth Shove et. al. 's (2012) book *The Dynamics of Social Practice, Everyday Life and how it Changes*.

Shove et al. (2012) presents the cultural theoretical approach and framework of social practice theory. The theory (and method) captures how behavioural change stems from changes in social practices, framing the dynamics of societal change through looking at the changes and stability of human practices (2012:2). Shove et.al. (2012) situates their approach to practices from Giddens structuration theory, that largely focuses on dynamic between agency and structure. This theory revolves around how human activity and social structure are recursively related (ibid).

In both cases of mediatization and practice theory, the dynamic aspects of the relationship between a large structure and a smaller practice is at hand. Since mediatization is sometimes criticized for the lack of exemplification and practicality (Andersson 2017), practice theory allows me to fill that gap by pointing at the specific practices of witchcraft of my participants, both offline and online. I use Andersson's (2017) mediatization from below in order to exemplify the mediatization processes and pointing out how practices in the communities of witchcraft, point to larger societal structures.

The main concepts from practice theory that are applied to capture the changes in the social practices are: the *material* of the practice (e.g., the tools, tangible objects, technologies), the *competence* required (e.g., skill, technique and know-how) and lastly *meaning* (e.g., symbolic meaning and aspirations) linked with the

practice (Shove et.al., 2010:8). Breaking apart contemporary practices of witchcraft into these elements, allow for insight into how the practice changes over time (ibid). Especially when the practice exists in the dynamic reality of social media and new technologies, and the spheres of offline and online practices are embedded in one another (Helland & Kienzl 2021:44). This double theorization, as proposed by Andersson (2017), is made in order to uncover how processes of mediatization of witchcraft transform the practice and its meaning to its practitioners.

In order to discuss how practices are shaped on social media, the concept of *affordances* is applied. Affordances refer to the possibilities and limitations of Instagram, simplified the affordances points at the means of practice. For example, the searchability and visibility of a platform (boyd 2014; Costa 2018:3649). Tom Leaver's et.al (2020) book *Instagram* is centered specifically on the platform Instagram and its layout and affordances and will also be used when describing how the platform works. This will be combined with the more ethnographic affordance concept proposed by Elisabetta Costa (2018), called *affordances-in-practice.* This is used to highlight people's agency when using online platforms (2018:3651), instead of giving away all agency to the infrastructure of a platform. Costa's concept of affordances-in-practice is a good complement to Andersson's (2017) 'mediatization from below' where he argues for a more ethnographic approach when using the concept of mediatization in order to refer to a macro perspective. Costa's (2018) concept allows for a thick description of how the practitioners use their agencies on the platform of Instagram and how they reflect upon the mediation of witchcraft.

There is constant dialogue between mediatization and practice, where practices are shaped by affordances of given platform. In addition, practices shape social worlds and culture. Practice theory compensates for how concepts such as mediatization and affordances can strip the participants of their agency, and refer all agency to the intangible, sublime notion of "the media". The combination of these theoretical frameworks allows for an ethnographic exploration of the communities of witchcraft without stripping the agency and importance of the practitioners.

Ritual transfer

In Campbell and Tsuria (2021) book on digital religion, they propose many different ways of approaching the subject of religion in an online sphere. The book is mainly focusing on the Abrahamic religions, which is important to note as they are much more institutionalized and conformed than witchcraft (Campbell & Tsuria 2021). I chose to focus on the concept of ritual in this thesis study for a number of reasons. First of all, there is no universal way of defining a ritual, no classification will please everyone. However, Christopher Helland and Lisa Kienzl (2021) write: "a ritual is used to teach, it forms identities, regulates societies, draws communities together, transforms the psyche, and enacts faith", referring to the work of Bell (1992) who emphasized that it is less useful to try and define a universal concept of rituals, instead the focus should be to uncover human activities and how they define their own differentiation and purposes (Helland & Kienzl 2021:42). The concept is rewarding due to its fluid nature and how it can be performed individually, which is what I will be researching as (most of) my participants are solitary and use the more individualized platform of Instagram. Worth noting is that I do not aim to define or debate the definition of a ritual. Instead rituals are regarded in this study, as a manifestation of the witches' spirituality, both in their offline and online practices.

Nadja Miczek's concept of *ritual transfer* (2008:150) is the main tool for grasping the ritual practices of witchcraft. The work of Nadja Miczek (2008) has been very influential in the study of digital religion. Miczek (2008) proposes that when looking at rituals in an online environment, elements of: *transformation*, *invention* and *exclusion*, should be taken into account. These are tools that can grasp how *ritual transfer* changes in an online environment. These theories are tied with the discussions around how technologies, society and social constructions of belief shapes human practices (Miczek 2008:150). As ritual transfers can be understood as individual expressions they are also linked with elements of aesthetically, inspired by Giovanna Parmigiani (2021) who argue for the aesthetic (sensory and artistic) elements of New Age movements (2021:509). She explores this in regard to conspirituality, a concept referring to the overlap between spiritual movements and conspiracy theories (2021:506). In this thesis conspiracies will not be explored as that would make this study a whole lot longer. Still, aesthetic elements will be used in combination with ritual transfer. In order to understand the possibilities and limitations of the ritual transfer, the concepts of affordances-in-practice are introduced in conversation with it. Further, the ritual transfer is a form of practice,

sort of a practice with a spiritual undertone. Which is why it marries well with practice theory (Shove et.al. 2012).

Neoliberal commercialism

Lastly, theoretical frameworks surrounding neoliberalism and capitalism will be applied. Ben Highmore's (2015) description of culture as a constant battle of meaning will appear in order to understand how the communities of witches differentiate themselves from dominant hegemonic culture (2015:20). This will be understood according to Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2012) description of the ambivalent brand culture, where she explains how groups such as pagan communities that identify as outside of mainstream capitalist culture, still suffers under the same neoliberal values that any other cultural sphere and should include an analysis surrounding issues of *authenticity* (2012:167). The traditional sociological concepts of *commodification* and *marketization* are applied, inspired by Russell Belk (2020) and his discussion of how markets constantly are tapping into new spheres due to the market logic of today's society (2020:31). Allowing for a critical reflection of the more commercial dimensions of modern witchcraft today.

How to talk to witches

Approaching the case of contemporary witchcraft in Sweden this thesis study conducts a qualitative research approach. Qualitative analysis is contextualized, non-linear and thrives toward a deep understanding of the topic (Bazeley 2013:4). The empirical material in this thesis consists of interviews, online observations and field diaries.

Methodological aims and reflections

My research has its footing in a *phronetic* approach in order to achieve a reflexive analysis, inspired by Bent Flyvbjerg (2001). Phronetic research allows for the study of practice and a detailed narration of reality (2001:129). Flyvbjerg emphasized the 'power of example' and how case studies can produce contextual knowledge in order to understand human experience (Flyvbjerg 2001:71). People

are self-reflective and cannot always be quantified, individuals and communities are far too complex.

Sandra Harding (2008) argues for a scientific methodology that does not speak for its research subjects. Harding promotes treating research participants as agents and historical subjects, rather than objects (2008:106). According to Harding (2011), this is the most empirically rich positioning as well (Sandra 2008:114-115). Aligned with Harding's methodology, this thesis study does not only watch witches on Instagram, TikTok or Facebook as other studies have done (Miller 2022), but also include empirical testaments from the actual practitioners. In order to give the participants empirical agency, I chose to conduct an ethnographic research approach. As John Corner (2011) writes: "Assume less, investigate more" (2011:86).

(Digital) ethnography

Media is an integral part of every-day life in the Global North. Social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, have become hubs for knowledge and connection, as proposed by David Gauntlett (2018). Witchcraft has naturally made its way to those places. Seeing as witchcraft historically is understood as spiritual and abstract practice yet centered in rituals performed by the body, one aspect of this study investigates how witches utilize modern technology in their practices and every-day lives. Shaun Moores (2012) describes a non-media centric approach when studying media does not explicitly need to be centered around a media object itself, partly due to how media play such a massive role in every aspect of how we understand society and ourselves (Moores 2012:11). In my ethnographic approach, I do not only focus on the practice and use of social media and technology but also how the world is imagined in and outside of it. As Christine Hine (2015) points out, digital ethnography is a study *for* the internet and not *of* the internet. This can be done by not only studying digital practices, but what practices in general the internet gives rise to (2015:6).

Practice as theory and method

Karen O'Reilly (2012) writes how "ethnography should be informed by a theory of practice" (2012:1). There is no standard definition of ethnography, O'Reilly (2012) asserts how the term can be applied to any small-scale research centered around an everyday life setting that uses more than one method and that focuses

on individual practices and explanations rather than their quantification (2012:3).

This research is centered around the concept of *practice*, mainly inspired by Shove et.al.'s (2012) practice theory and how practices are ritualized as suggested by Campbell (2022). O'Reilly (2012) stresses how the bridge between micro and macro perspectives can be achieved by looking at the practice of individuals to be able to notice wider structures. Andersson (2017) also proposes micro-level contexts that in a second-order of investigation can say something about larger society in order to conduct a 'mediatization from the below' type of study (2017:36). Much like Andersson (2017) and O'Reilly (2012) practice theory also vouches for the study of contextualized social practices in relation to societal structures in order to understand how societies change (Shove et.al. 2012:3). The methodological choices are made in light of this, making sure that both the qualitative interviews, the meetings and the digital observations are different ways of grasping these practices.

Ethnographic methods

I combine the interview method with field diaries and online observations of the participants' Instagram accounts. O'Reilly (2012) suggests how ethnographic research is *iterative-inductive*, referring to the inseparability of inductivism, data collection, analysis and writing (O'Reilly 2012:5). I also conduct *field diaries* from the interviews and meetings with my participants. Bazeley (2013) illustrates how part of ethnography is the observational method and fieldwork (2013:68), taking field notes are part of the researcher's way of making sense of the observations and are valid for the study (ibid). I was inspired by Shanti Sumartojo and Sarah Pink's (2019) description of atmospheres. How using sensory impressions to describe the atmosphere of a place are insignificant to the study of how people experience the world. In order to understand atmospheres however, the qualities and affordances of that place must be taken into account (Sumartojo & Pink 2019:3). My field diaries serve these purposes as they are essential for really understanding the atmosphere and aesthetic nature of the culture but also the ethnographic method.

Interviews

Interviews were my main method and source of empirical data. I carried out nine qualitative interviews. Four of them conducted in person and five of them over Zoom. The somewhat uneven, and at times frustrating, division of four offline and five online interviews stand as reflection of conducting a research study in the unsteady context of a world suffering through a pandemic. I conducted *semi-structured* interviews, inspired by the article "Making Sense of Teen Life: Strategies for Capturing Ethnographic Data in a Networked Era" by Danah boyd (2016). I went along with the topics of my interviewee and followed their lead and rarely stayed on scripts and each of my interviews was different due to this (boyd 2016). In the article boyd (2016) explains how this style of interviews works well when including the digital sphere, the relaxed interview style allows for the interviewer to spin along with the interviewee when those topics come up naturally instead of forced (2016). Seale (2012) describes this interview style as relying on an interview guide, yet allowing the conversation to go anywhere the interview subject wants to. It's a way to have a reflexive approach (Seale 2012:220), something that is very important for an ethnographic and inductive research study (Pink et.al. 2016:3). The length of the nine interviews spanned from 65 minutes to 116 minutes, resulting in almost 14 hours of interview material.

Sampling

For my method of sampling, I set up a few very open criteria for participants. Hansen and Machin (2013) stresses how criteria for sampling can be very different and wide- however, it is important to be clear and transparent about the reason for the sampling criteria (2013:42). Since the topic of this research is such a narrow field and the subject of study is a rather specific group of people, I did not want to exclude possible participants and therefore kept the criteria simple. My sampling criteria were 1. Do they identify as and call themselves a witch? and 2. Do they practice witchcraft? If the answer was yes to both questions it got a green light from me.

The participants

The names of my participants' pseudonyms in alphabetical order: Aradia, Demeter, Diana, Freya, Hekate, Hel, Kali, Stigrid and Vita Stjärnan. The names were chosen by the participants themselves with the expectation of Aradia and Demeter where the participants asked me to choose for them. I didn't intend for

the names to be inspired by folklore and mythology but since many practicing witches have a strong connection and interest in these topics it naturally ended up so. The participants of these types of communities are usually specialized in a wide range of different practices as every single participant had practiced witchcraft for at least 3 years (some had practiced for over 30). In the chart below I give a simplified overview of the witches' difference in specialities and traditional background.

Table 1. Overview of participants's preferred practices and traditions

Pseudonym	Speciality/Preferred Practices	Tradition
Aradia (Zoom)	Clairvoyance, tarot readings	Wiccan
Demeter (In person)	Herbal medicine, author of books related to witchcraft and herbal medicine	Nordic tradition, herbal tradition
Diana (Zoom)	Curses	Nordic tradition,"'historically anchored tradition"
Freya (In person)	Healing, tantra massage, Reiku	Nordic tradition, eclectic
Hekate (In person)	Astrology, tarot readings, divination	Partly hellenistic astrological tradition but not interested in labeling it too much.
Hel (In person)	Herbal medicine, ceremonial work, online witchcraft → account on Instagram	No specific tradition mentioned
Kali (Zoom)	Astrology, yoga, tarot readings	Celtic goddess tradition, Avalonian tradition
Stigrid (Zoom)	Herbal medicine, spiritual communication, tarot readings	No specific mentioned tradition
Vita stjärnan (Zoom)	Ceremonial work, healing, artist (art and craft)	Avalonian tradition

Ethical considerations and reflections

In this research study, there are a few ethical considerations to go over, the most obvious one is about anonymity (Hansen & Machin 2013:77-78), especially since a few participants are not open about their identity as witches, in fear of harassment or trivialization. Mark D. Johns (2021) writes about ethical considerations when studying the relationships between religion and new media (Johns D. 2021:250). The main concern is the archiving ability of the internet and how easy it is to find material online with only little information (2021:262). For this reason, I have chosen to not include any photos from the participants' Instagram accounts, censored or not. As D. John writes, religiosity is sensitive and

it is important to remember that people's lives and right to privacy should be the number one priority when conducting research on online religious practices (ibid).

Analysis: The witch of today

The analysis is divided into three parts: I. The Mediatized Witch, II. The Nordic Noir of Witchcraft and III. The Commercial Witch.

I. The Mediatization of witchcraft

Naturally, the first part of this analysis addresses the contemporary elements of modern witchcraft- the mediatization of it. Grasping how the practice and expression of witchcraft are shaped by digital affordances. I refer to this as the 'mediatization of witchcraft'. Suggesting, inspired by Andersson (2017), how social media, popular culture and commercial spheres generate an *intensification* of mediated witchcraft. In reference to Campbell and Tsuria's (2022) *Digital Religion*, I call these mediated practices "Digital Spirituality", referring to the rapid increase of spiritual content on social media.

Creative spirituality

Ritual transfer is one of the main building blocks to digital religion (Miczek 2008:150)- or Digital Spirituality in this case. As the ritual transfer is applied into a digital sphere, it changes (Campbell 2022). When it comes to the practice of online rituals it is crucial to pinpoint these changes, or 'transformations' as Miczek calls them (Miczek 2008:150). Thus, the concept of affordances is our best friend here, since they pinpoint possibilities of practice. In this context, the affordance of 'visibility' is highlighted (Boyd 2014; Leaver 2020).

Introducing our first witch- Vita Stjärnan. He is a male witch and lives on a Swedish Island. He moved there during the pandemic and stayed since the nature of the island spoke to his spiritual expression. In one of his characteristic posts on his Instagram account, he poses with a scarf wrapped around his head and shoulders, his face painted with occult symbols, holding a cup with smoke coming out of it. Further, Vita Stjärnan has photo shopped illustrations of majestic birds

and more occult symbols into the blue sky. Vita Stjärnan described this portrayal of magic and ceremony as a creative process, especially when it came to Instagram:

> "I am a very visual person /…/ I have a visual way of looking at things and it is also how I explore the spiritual world /…/ the art I create is a manifestation of the visions I receive from the spiritual."

When Vita Stjärnan expresses his Digital Spirituality, the 'meaning' signifies in essence to creatively capture and visualize the feeling of spirituality. His main art form is that of photography- something he shares regularly on his Instagram account dedicated to his spiritual expression. The 'transformation' (Miczek 2008:15) in this ritual transfer is not to perform witchcraft per se, but rather to visualize the spiritual experience of witchcraft.

Using the visual affordances and tools of Instagram, Vita Stjärnan is able to enhance the ritual transfer (Miczek 2008) online, in a way he physically could not accomplish in an entirely physical sphere. The 'invention' (2008:150), or nuance here, is how Instagram allows for creating these montages of spirituality. The affordances of Instagram allow for an additional layer of spirituality that is not seen in the offline environment. The witches use affordances-in-practice (boyd 2014) to frame creative expressions of their experiences of the spiritual, and in extension- of witchcraft.

Further, by adding a camera for an intended audience, the aesthetic elements of the witch ritual demand and foster a new 'competence' required for the practice of the ritual. Shove et.al. (2012) writes how new competences required is one aspect of how practices change. Here the new competence encompasses the requirement of creating and capturing beauty in the everyday life practices of magic. The creative elements of how to imagine and display magic and ritual online also becomes a spiritual practice.

Another witch, Hekate, works within the cultural sector. We sat in the beautiful building of her workplace, a cultural institution, and spoke of the overlaps between witchcraft and creativity. Hekate told me the story of how witchcraft entered her life:

> "It became clear to me that I had a desire to play again and learn something that was not attached to my professional identity /…/ but it didn't become a physical place but a creative and playful one, this spiritual space where I was allowed to build my own belief system."

Witchcraft is heavily individualized today and the practices of witchcraft are broad (Renser & Tiidenberg 2020), since witchcraft is a de-institutionalized space, and does not conform to a rigid frame of belief. Witchcraft is a generous space for an individualized and creative exploration of faith. Giovanna Parmigiani (2022) argues that the aesthetics of New Age communities are vital in how the community experiences a sense of community with one another (2022:523). Digital platforms, such as Instagram, are arenas for practitioners of witchcraft to share their imaginations of spirituality with others. Digital Spirituality is a dynamic process between physical and imagined material, that enhances the spiritual experience by using affordances-in-practice as a creative tool. I would therefore add the concept of *creativity* to Miczek's (2008) theory of online transfer to fit the contemporary environment of Digital Spirituality.

What is magic? Baby re-enchant me

When I first met Hel, I drove far out to her house in the outskirts of Stockholm where she and her family live in a collective with another family. Hel is used to being interviewed as she is a public witch and also hosts a successful podcast on the topic. We sat in her kitchen as the afternoon sun drowned the room in a warm light. Through the large window behind Hel, I saw the blurry figures of her children playing on the grass field behind the house. In this sunken quiet oasis, Hel and her family live rather secluded lives. By the edge of the forest, growing their own vegetables and herbs. It is from this environment that Hel post most of her content on Instagram.

As a non-religious Wester European living in a secularized country, I have never witnessed magic outside of popular culture. I would probably go as far as stating that I do not particularly believe in magic- at most, I am somewhat superstitious. Therefore, I couldn't help but ask Hel about magic as it was such a casual part of her vocabulary. Especially in relation to how she wanted to make the world magic again, or as she called it- re-enchant it. "How do you re-enchant the world then?" I asked her.

> "You can do it in your everyday life. By listening to your intuition, be in your full authenticity for a moment each day. By putting up boundaries, not agreeing to have sex, by having the courage to be separated from your children, by changing your diet. I think those practices are a way of re-enchanting the world /…/ Also more active things like having an altar, taking walks outside in nature without rushing, without listening to a podcast."

There is a need to "re-enchant the world", however this re-enchantment is not portrayed as extraordinary, it comes across as almost the opposite, as ordinary. Hill (2011) writes that the extraordinary becomes ordinary, once it has become part of popular culture, "Beliefs become lifestyle practices." (Hill 2011:64). Unlike the portrayal of magic, we are used to seeing in the media, the witches in this study continually described magic as something inherently different. Rather than an extraordinary spectacle- magic was described as a rather mundane practice.

Another example is when Stigrids spoke to me about demons. Personally, I think of demons as portrayed in horror movies- scary figures lurking in dark corners, or possessed individuals. According to Stigrid however, this is a misunderstanding. On the topic of demons, she told me:

> "You have to learn many things before doing blood and demon magic. I am not ready for that yet, even though I have many years of experience. Demons usually attach themselves to your psyche and break you down physiologically."

According to Stigrid a demon is not some kind of entity or being, it is rather manifested as mental illness. Once again, the visuality of magic, or in this case demons, is non-existing. It is once more described as an inner mental journey. As Hill (2011) points out, when the extraordinary becomes part of popular culture, it becomes ordinary to us (2011:64). Demons going from a monster figure to something as mundane as mental illness, illustrate this quite well. In this case it seems that when magic is given the affordances of being made visible, it becomes mundane and ordinary and invisible.

In relation to how Ben Highmore (2015) describes culture as a contestation of meaning (2015:20), there is here a contestation of the meaning behind how magic is materialized. There is a fight for definition of magic between the popular cultural representations and the descriptions from the actual practitioners who lean into a more mundane description of it. The mediatization of witchcraft and

magic through popular culture have constructed an idea of magic as visible and tangible, resulting in that those people who actually practice contemporary witchcraft have to redefine what magic means and looks like, and thereby implicitly or explicitly, contesting (Highmore 2018) the popular cultural definitions of magic. One of the reasons for this might, I would argue, is the affordance of visuality and visibility that social media and new media technologies bring.

Magic is in reality, according to the practitioners, quite ordinary and comes across more as a way of *playfully romanticizing everyday life*: seeing mental issues as demons rather than a chemical imbalance in the brain, seeing magic as inner processes of self-loving, rather than visual manifestations and regarding a re-enchantment of the world. Not as a magical fairy land, but a place where you are in tune with yourself and the world around you without distractions.

Concluding reflections

The first research question that this thesis asks in relation to modern witchcraft is: "How are these practices mediated, with a special focus on the platform Instagram?". When magic is mediated on Instagram, the practice of witchcraft transforms. The need for an aesthetic eye and artistry becomes prominent and practitioners use the affordances-in-practice as an extension of their spirituality. Further, the mediatization of witchcraft creates a cultural imaginary of magic as tangible. Something that is contested by witches by making magic ordinary and part of everyday life experiences. In this case the romanticism is linked with making mundane everyday life activities imagined as enchanted.

II. The Nordic Noir of witchcraft

During this part of the thesis I head further into the territory of the spirituality of witches.

A shaman can only work in their local village

My grandmother grew up in the northern part of Sweden. In the village in which she grew up, it is cold for many months of the year. The forests are thick with tall trees and the ground is frozen long into spring. As a kid she would warn me from stepping too close to the roots of fallen trees, as they could be caught in the wind

and stand up tall once more, capturing you in the prison of its roots. My grandmother and her sister grew up on a farm where their parents were employed, their mother milked the cows and their father took care of the soil. One day, my grandmother and her sister were out playing in the snow for too long and as they came back inside realized that the sister's legs were frostbitten. The farm was located deep into the forest and they did not have a town doctor nearby. However, they did have what is called a *wise woman*, an old Nordic term for village witches specialized in herbal medicine. This wise woman came over to the farm and performed a blood ritual using glass cups on my grandmother's sister. After that she healed. When I spoke to my grandmother about the topic of my thesis project- this is what she told me.

Witchcraft is not only about the performance of rituals and magic. It is also a spiritual, and as will be argued, a cognitive connection with nature. The latter part refers to the importance of having knowledge about the local nature. A village witch in the northern part of Sweden, such as the one who healed my grandmother's sister, would know how to cure frostbite rather than how to cure sunburn. One of the most prominent cultural associations we have of witchcraft in Sweden is the close link between its magic and herbal medicine (Persson 2020:105), a heritage of these so-called wise women.

Many of the participants in this thesis study either identify completely as herbal witches or practice it as one of their crafts. Going back to the practice theory concept of 'materials' (Shove et.al. 2012), in order to work with the materials that are herbs, you need the 'competences' in order to do so. The competences rely on knowing the flora around you, how to use it and for what purposes. When I spoke to Hel about herbal medicine, she beautifully captured this way of thinking, by saying:

> "/…/ you have to work with the local place where you are. I condition myself to Scandinavia but also Sweden. There is a big difference between Skåne and Umeå too when it comes to their seasons. I read somewhere that 'a shaman can only work in their local village', you work with origin and you heal the earth from where you are standing.".

This sense of the locality kept recurring during my fieldwork. The witch Kali has tried a multitude of different traditions of witchcraft in her exploration of spiritual

places. At one point during our conversation she told me regarding the point of it all:

> "It is about bonding with the earth and its history /…/ it is about knowing where I place my feet."

The spiritual beliefs of witchcraft highlight the importance of a deep connection with nature, advocating for a lifestyle where you live close to it (Salomonsen 2002; Harvey & Hardman 1996). Despite the fact that 'the Instagram witch' is globalized, mediatized and eclectic, she is still rooted and anchored in a local physical space.

In Sommerlad-Rogers study (2013) a strong correlation between participation in pagan movements and making "pro-environmental choices" was found (Sommerlad-Rogers 2013:49). This is not very surprising as witchcraft is based on neopaganism, a movement worshiping nature itself (Salomonsen 2002). These attitudes are present in my empirical material. Many of my participants promoted crafting instead of buying, second hand shopping and a general anti-capitalist political lifestyle. However, witchcraft takes the values of environmentalism one step further. Nature is not only regarded as a limited resource, it is embodied, nature is Mother Earth. When speaking of nature and the local environment, Freya expressed sentiments such as:

> "We have contact with Mother Earth, we are breathing her breath, we are breathing together with her and we breathe in her power in our bodies and reclaim the contact with her as a woman. To awaken our feminine power, and she longs for it."

This type of description of nature was shared among all of my participants. They would discursively embody nature- giving her a face, lungs and a physical body. This embodiment or romanticizing might create more initiative to live environmentally friendly lives.

Nature as the body and knowledge of a woman

Witchcraft shares many similarities with a branch of feminism called *ecofeminism*. During the 90s, a time in which paganism and neo spirituality was blossoming the two ecofeminists Mies and Shiva (1993) wrote:

> "Feminists also began to realize the significance of the 'witch hunts' at the beginning of our modern era in so far as patriarchal science and technology was developed only after these women (the witches) had been murdered and, concomitantly, their knowledge, wisdom and close relation with nature had been destroyed." (1993:16f).

Ecofeminism and neopaganism, criticizes globalization and advocates for an anti-globalization development in order to preserve ecological balance (Salomonsen 2002:6). This is the root of why these groups instead highlight the importance of locality- the local, which opposes the global. Spiritual dimensions of witchcraft and nature comes from the idea of nature being its own *entity*, for some described as Mother Earth. She is femininely conditioned, as the woman is a metaphor for the cradle of life, much like nature- the woman becomes the divine metaphor for nature. The (symbolic) 'meaning' (Shove et.al. 2012) for the practice of witchcraft is the importance of gaining knowledge about the local and remembering the wisdom that the witches and women who were killed, once had.

The pharmaceutical industry was often put in rhetorical opposition to this ancient feminine knowledge. Usually in regard to agency -how people should value self-sufficiency and independence. For example, Diana prefers to make her own herbal medicine for headaches instead of immediately taking an aspirin, saying:

> "It is scientific that it helps, even though you have to drink damn much of it and it tastes like shit".

The problem Diana refers to here is how we depend on modern medicine for things that are already available to us in nature, as long as we know what to do with it. Stigrid mentioned to me how dandelions can be used in heart medicine, birch for treating colds and lavender for sleeping. All things that are part of the Swedish flora. Demeter also spoke about relearning the herbal knowledge of the witches that have been replaced by pharmacies, hospitals and synthetic drugs. In knowing and learning about "the local" the witches vouch for the reclaiming of the knowledge of the old herbal witches. This reclaiming of the old witches, is strongly linked with the ecofeminist movement of the 70s (Mies & Shiva 1993:16f).

The pharmaceutical industry represents all the things that the participants dislike about living in late modernity, and the alienation from nature that modernity

brings. One of the means of bridging the alienation is the old herbal medicine that is associated with witches and witchcraft, the craft of the wise women. It comes across as a reclaiming of old knowledge that was lost during the Enlightenment that reinforced the duality described by ecofeminists between science and nature, where men 'are' science and women 'are' nature (Adams & Gruen 2014:5). This old knowledge based on natural herbal medicine was the realm of women in particular. However, it does make you wonder if this dualism that is described as criticized by ecofeminists is simply reproducing the continuation of associating nature with the body of a woman, and herbal alternative/medicine with the sphere of women's knowledge.

Contesting alienation in modern society

Studying modern witchcraft through the lens of media and communication allows for similarities with other social trends to unravel. In particular what Trine Syvertsen writes about in the book *Digital Detox* (2020), that explores a rather boujee trend with the same name where you travel to a vaccination spot where you detox yourself from technology. Particularly in the form of mobile phones and the internet (2020:4-6). Syverten links these tendencies with a growing societal environmentalism (2020:7). In many ways, witchcraft is also a digital detox. In the ritual transfer (Miczek 2008:150), there are also notions of 'exclusion' in the transformation of the ritual work. However, not necessarily excluding technology per say, as we have seen that most witches do use social media and technological tools in their practice. But rather a detox of modern society that alienates you from self-sufficiency.

Hel grows most of her vegetables herself, Demeter makes her own makeup, Diana brews her own medicine. Part of the 'meaning' behind the practice of witchcraft is centered around exclusions in the ritual transfer (Shove et.al. 2012). Excluding industries in particular, and their mass-produced items. Thus, implying that the meaning of practicing witchcraft is bridging the gap between yourself and what you consume. A modernization detox, I would argue. They never explicitly mention new technologies or social media as they are dependent on it in their daily lives, using it for information and connection with other witches. The enemy is not necessarily technology, but the alienation that technology brings.

Concluding reflections

Contemporary witchcraft acts as a contestation to the alienated modern society and a dream about going back to the old local village, where people live in harmony with mother earth. Fiske (2017) points out that pagan romanticizing of nature has deep connections with a re-imaginary of it rather than a truthful depiction of the past (2017:22). Ben Highmore (2015) points out we tend to project contemporary social values on phenomena such as 'nature' (2015:25). During the pre-modern era, nature was regarded as the enemy as people were more exposed to its conditions. Modernity and industrialization, vaccines and mass-produced goods were idealized as the saviour from a vicious nature, in contrast today when we are increasingly worried about it due to climate change. Witchcraft is re-romanticizing nature as its own entity and saviour from the neoliberal modernity that is destroying the planet, and with it- ourselves. This is part of the reason why modern witchcraft cannot be transferred into an entirely digital ritual practice.

III. The commercial witch

In this final part, the commercial tendencies embedded in the practice of witchcraft are addressed. Lastly, I argue for a contemporary definition of the concept of esotericism.

An oxymoronic practice

Many scholars of neopagan religion have noted a growing global market for witchcraft and the services related to it (Cush 2007; Miller 2022). Denise Cush (2007) discusses the connection between increasing amounts of teenage witches with the many portrayals of young witches in popular culture (2007:49). 'Commercialization' refers to the process of e.g. witchcraft, being moulded into a valuable commodity on a market, something that can be prized and sold (Belk 2020:31). Seeing as Digital Spirituality is growing, commercial forces are tapping into this rather unexploited market. Banet-Weiser (2012) points out that historical commodifications of faith have been proven to be successful business initiatives (2012:171). Commodification refers to the process of something previously considered not to be a market good, becoming commodified according to a market logic that can be prized, branded, promoted and sold (Belk 2020:31). The commodification of witchcraft leads to the marketization of it, referring to

how witchcraft, that previously was considered to exist beyond a neoliberal market logic, is brought into it (ibid). On the basis of a postsecular neoliberal logic- the growing interest for pagan spirituality can be translated into a profitable (and relatively untapped) market.

Consumer culture is mentioned briefly in Helen Berger's (2019) book on contemporary witchcraft but never goes into depth about it. Berger does point out how witchcraft is generally opposed to commercialism (2019:110). These opinions are prominent in my interviews as well, many witches advocated for an environmentally friendly lifestyle of self-sufficiency, as described in Part II. However, Miller (2022) points out how witchcraft relies on a lot of materiality for ceremonial and ritual purposes (2022:7), e.g. herbs, sage or incense, statues, not to mention the billion-dollar industry of magic crystals (McClure 2019). Some of my participants encouraged themselves and others to collect these materials themselves. Yet, that is not realistic. In modern society, most people live in urban cities and cannot access the local places where these things might be collected. For example, most of my participants lived in bigger cities and therefore bought their materials online. If breaking this practice into pieces (Shove et.al. 2012), the symbolic 'meaning' of these practices are to consume sustainably, yet in reality, those 'material' means are not always accessible, even if the participants might have the 'competences' required for knowing them.

Turning hobby into work

Hekate has worked within the cultural sphere for many years, specifically that of theatre. For a long time, she had felt an urge to *play* again. We spoke about how she ended up finding witchcraft where she specializes in tarot card reading. Through one of the podcasts that Hekate listens to she came across an American artist that has made his own deck of tarot cards.

> "Even though I had said that I was going to have tarot as my hobby I started thinking, what if I could spend more of my time doing this?".

Hekate went on to purchase a shipment of these tarot cards with the purpose of reselling them on the Swedish market. The idea of turning a hobby, or lifestyle, into work kept coming up during the interviews. By turning witchcraft into a profession, they found that they could spend more of their time doing it as it brought them an income outside of their day jobs.

In light of all of this, there is an empirical dissonance between the interviews and the Instagram accounts. The witches advocate for a lifestyle without commercialization during the interviews, yet most of the content on the witches' Instagram accounts are advertising commodities and services. Stigrid links her second Instagram account on her main account where she posts about her services selling spells and tarot readings to her followers. Freya links her website on which all of her services are posted: reiki healing, tantric massage and workshops on how to 'become a witch'. Sometimes with hashtags such as #lovemyjob. These practices suggest that witchcraft is in the process of marketization. Belk (2020) cites Mark Tadajewsk who defines the concept of marketization as: "the promotion of market ideologies and the expansion of the market into areas traditionally beyond its purview." (Belk 2020:31). How does this fit together with the ecofeminist and environmentalist values embedded in the practice of witchcraft?

It seems like the eclectic nature of witchcraft is a major key here. The participants all have some sort of specialty when it comes to their craft, and abided by different traditions of witchcraft. Even though the internet means that "information is free" and witchcraft is no longer secretive and esoteric (Faxneld 2020:18), it still takes time and effort to become specialized in a particular craft. Similarly, to Banet-Weiser's discussion of "individual entrepreneurialism" (2012:168). Many of my participants practiced for years before having the confidence to call themselves specialized in something and when they do, they can profit from it and this specialty. Turning it into a job, a salary and thus- a profession.

What about authenticity?

When a movement that claims to be opposed to the establishment and institutions in this form of neoliberal market logic, taps into that very same logic, issues of authenticity arise.

When investigating New Age communities in relation to the commodification of religion, Banet-Weiser (2012) found that branded spirituality is more closely tied with commercial culture than the authentic source of the practice (2012:197-198). Even though none of these services are a tangible commodity, they are still commodifying something by putting a price tag on a spiritual experience and applying it under the logic of a market. What Belk (2020) would call the correlation between commodification and marketization (2020.31). Yet, these services are branded as not abiding to these logics.

On her Instagram Hel markets her retreats in one of her posts with pictures of naked bodies wandering around a deep forest. The caption reads as follows:

> "I know that many have reached out to me saying, oh if it could be cheaper and I say as I say to everyone that yes but arrange something easier cheaper, book a place, arrange all the practical stuff and I will be happy to come and fill up with everything I may. But this is what I believe in, I remember when I for the first time put a large part of my savings on just myself, wow what a thing it was. I had never spent 10,000 sek on myself in one go. /…/ Well, little did I know, investing in myself is the best thing I have done. /…/ We can offer Klarna if it helps /…/"

The retreat is promoted as an investment in one's self and how spending money on yourself is a good thing, to some extent commercializing the inner journey of the self. As Belk (2020) points out, commodity culture makes more and more things into exchangeable objects (2020:33), even such deeply personal things as the inner journey of the self. Benet-Weiser (2012) writes how "religious brands openly use the strategies of capitalism while denouncing the ethos of capitalism." (2012:167). The commercial aspects of these ceremonial retreats are debunked by the reference to an investment of the self (which we remember from part 1 is the method for re-enchanting the world). The authenticity becomes ambivalent, as these retreats are important and valuable to many, yet still surrendering to capitalist logics that witchcraft claims to oppose by commodifying the magical journey of the self.

Creating a salary by gatekeeping magic

The second thing that relates to the topics of authenticity are related to matters of esoteric knowledge. Esoteric refers to the secretive knowledge production of small tight-knit communities, witchcraft often being referred to as such an esoteric community (Faxneld 2020:18), at least historically, that abided by secrecy due to fear of prosecution from religious institutions. As mentioned in Part I, the emergence of the internet and social media, the esoteric nature of these communities have somewhat vanished as the accessibility is open and free to the general public. Witchcraft is described as a folkloristic heritage and as presented in Part II. a way of not depending on any institutions by becoming self-sufficient. However, by looking further into contemporary witchcraft it seems like this practice during the 21st century has, like a pendulum movement, becoming esoteric once more, but in another shape. In the process of marketization where

spells, ceremonies and workshops are sold by these individual spiritual entrepreneurs, as Banet-Weiser (2012) calls it, there is not another kind of closed nature of witchcraft today. In order to gain access and help from specialized witches to navigate the overwhelming amount of information about witchcraft online, you have to pay. The access is no longer hidden but instead placed behind a paywall. A type of market-esotericism, or *neo-esotercism* as I would argue, that gatekeeps the information of contemporary witchcraft, despite the open nature of it at first glance. Thus, the marketization of contemporary witchcraft means that the only way of creating a salary of this practice is by constructing neo-esoteric paywalls around the craft.

Concluding reflections

The marketization and commodification of witchcraft are an ambivalent feature of contemporary witchcraft. On the one hand, it allows the witches to practice their passion full time and specialize themselves further in their craft, on the other hand it commodifies the practice and encourages a neo-esoteric development of contemporary witchcraft. In the new esoteric form, witchcraft is shaped by neoliberal and commercial forces. Modern witches can create a salary by gatekeeping the knowledge production of witchcraft and maintaining the esoteric status of the initiation of witchcraft, thus contradicting the core values at witchcraft as inclusionary, anti-capitalist and equal. Clearly exemplifying the oxymoronic nature of contemporary witchcraft.

Conclusion

During the beginning of this research, I directed questions around the general inquiry: How is modern Swedish witchcraft practiced today? During the analysis portion of this thesis I have discussed the topic of practice surrounding three major themes: mediatization and ritual transfer online, nature and environmentalism in the offline environment and lastly the macro perspective by investigating the processes of commercialization of witchcraft. In this last section, these questions are answered and summarized into a final take on the world of contemporary witchcraft in Sweden.

1. How are the practices of witchcraft mediated today, with a special focus on the platform of Instagram?

Platforms such as Instagram are an important dimension of the practice of witchcraft today. Witches pilgrim to the platform to post pictures and videos about their own ritual transfer, and to be inspired by others. Instagram is a new 'material' tool in this sense for the practice and study of witchcraft. As the ritual transfer (Miczek 2008) of witchcraft is displayed on Instagram, the affordances of the platform change the possibilities of the magical exercise, not simply due to the infrastructure of the platform but due to how the witches work with and around the platform to their own needs and ambitions, as Costa's (2018) concept of affordances-in-practice.

In order to understand how ritual transfer changes, we must look at the 'exclusion', 'invention' and 'transformation' of these rituals (Miczek 2008:150). Shove's et.al. (2012) concept of 'competences', helps determine the notion of 'transformation' when performing a ritual in the context of Instagram. The most prominent new required competence is the technique of displaying magic and ritual as aesthetically pleasing. Instagram is a highly visual medium, one of the main affordances when it comes to the platform is the visualization of it (Leaver et.al. 2020; boyd 2014). When the ritual transfer is performed or translated into the online sphere of Instagram, it becomes a requirement to look beautiful. The necessity of aesthetics are also important in order to gain a following on Instagram, something that is commercially necessary as demonstrated in part III. of the analysis.

In Parmigiani's study (2022) she notes how the aesthetic dimensions of New Age spiritual communities are a way of imagining the world with others and creates a sense of communities (2022:523). I would like to argue that the aesthetic elements are not only required due to the affordances of social media, but also an extension of the spirituality itself. The affordances of these platforms and the eclectic and individualized nature of contemporary witchcraft, generate a playful imagining of the magical and enchanted world that is not possible in an entirely offline setting.

Further, the modern transformations of witchcraft exemplify Hill's (2011) discussion of how the extraordinary becomes ordinary (2011:64). In its new format, witchcraft is described as a rather mundane filter over everyday life. Witchcraft is ordinary and essentially a way of re-enchanting the world by

romanticizing everyday life practices by labelling them as 'magical'. The notion of re-enchanting the world is made with rather ordinary methods such as taking a walk outside without distractions, meditating and setting up boundaries and saying no to sex, as exemplified by Hel. The visuality of Instagram forces magic to become an invisible and mundane material- an internal feeling, mental illness or personal agency. Otherwise, why would you not capture it on camera?

2. How are the practices of witchcraft related to nature and locality?

Not all things can be studied by discussing matters of an online sphere. Even though we exist in a mediatized society, technology and modern media is present in our perception of reality even when it is not physically present (Moores 2012; Syvertsen 2020). The offline sphere is incredibly important for the witches in this study. At the end of the day, witchcraft is a pagan religion that worships nature. Even though Instagram and the accessible nature of witchcraft is a result of globalization and technology, witchcraft values the local. Contemporary Swedish witchcraft emphasizes anti-globalization values similar to the ideology of ecofeminism (Salomonsen 2002; Mies & Shiva 1996), and goes to show the strong link between witchcraft and environmental movements.

As witchcraft is spiritual and not only political, they speak of nature in a poetic or enchanted version of environmental critique. Materializing earth as a magical female entity, with a face, a uterus, a soul. It is a way of romanticizing the environment, as if the ground we walk on is enchanted, it is the body of Mother Earth. The practice (Shove et.al. 2012) of knowing the local and caring for the environment is done due to the symbolic 'meaning' of caring for the body of Mother Earth. Living sustainably is not only a political stance, but a spiritual practice and display of love for Mother Earth. As Hill (2011) pointed out, beliefs rise in times of societal worry (2011:9-10). Witchcraft proposes a spiritual lifestyle that lives in harmony with nature instead of harming it and converges (Jenkins 2006) political contestations to power and spiritual constructions of beliefs.

The 'meaning' behind the practices (Shove et.al.) of caring and knowing about nature in the form of Mother Earth is also a way of bridging the alienation that modern society brings. It is a way of becoming closer to the spiritual entity of earth and becoming less dependent on industrial institutions. The ritual work in

the offline sphere is largely about connecting and learning about what is out there and how to make use of it. Witches present the practice of witchcraft as a *panacea* for a sustainable lifestyle and behavioral change. Further, witchcraft claims to heal the world from the alienation of modern society, where people depend on different institutions in their everyday lives. Witchcraft is a way of becoming self-sufficient through knowledge and practice of 'the local'.

Contemporary Swedish witchcraft romanticizes and embodies nature, much like Fiske (2017) reflected upon in her study of pagan communities. Mother earth is presented as a strong feminine force and nature as the cathartic panacea from the loss of agency that modernity brings. However, as Ronald Hutton (2017) pointed out, there is a tendency to sometimes romanticize and reimagine historical epochs. Pagan religion is sometimes reimagined as a liberating world with an elevated status for women (2017:12). The witches romanticize leading lives close to nature, as society did many years ago during a time before many of these scientific discoveries, when people could not depend on the pharmaceutical industries and had to treat themselves from various illnesses and issues. Which is a dimension of witchcraft where so-called 'conspiritualities' (Parmigiani 2021) might stem from. This would be a relevant topic for further research on Swedish witchcraft.

3. How is contemporary witchcraft transformed into work, i.e. something generating a salary?

As Shove et.al. (2012) highlights when it comes to social practice theory, looking at the smaller practices allows for pointing towards a larger structure (2012:3). In this case, that larger structure is the marketization of Swedish witchcraft. One of the most prominent examples of this is how witches are marketing and profiting from their witch-related services by using Instagram as a commercial platform. The 'individual entrepreneurship' as Banet-Weiser calls it (2012:168) is most prominent when observing the Instagram accounts of the witches. With the mediatization of witchcraft, knowledge and information of different spiritual practices become available for many, only a few of the witches are specialized in a specific craft. On top of that even fewer succeed in the additional required 'competence' (Shive et.al.) of 'aesthetic practice' that generate a following on Instagram and in extension: consumers.

The eclectic witchcraft (Renser & Tiidenberg 2020:3), creates many different job titles or entrepreneurial business opportunities for these witches. What once characterized witchcraft as esoteric (Faxneld 2020), due to witches' fear of societal stigma that made them gatekeep the magical practices, was replaced with a more open attitude towards this magical knowledge, due to new technology, e.g. the internet. With the rise of entrepreneurial witchcraft there seems to be a new wave of esoteric witchcraft, this one commercially characterized and hidden behind paywalls. The only way of creating a salary of witchcraft is through the marketization of witchcraft that gives rise to the construction of paywalls around the craft. This is especially significant due to two things. Firstly, what most witchcraft is centered around is the reclaiming of folk medicine and lifestyles, a knowledge that traditionally was practiced by the common man. Secondly, magic and witchcraft is described as the 'panacea' for the alienation of modernity. However, the 'great equalizer' of this panacea is not equally distributed unless you are willing to pay for it. If you want to be saved from the "curse of modernity" and enter the re-enchantment of life- you need to pay. This development I call *neo-esoteric* witchcraft- how witchcraft is still gatekept and hidden, but this time around behind neoliberal and commercial paywalls rather than occult orders of secretivity. Contemporary internet/platforms pave the way for the rise of neo-esoteric practices. The characteristic visuality of social media maintains an idea of inclusion and accessibility. Yet surrender to the capitalist logic with the promise of turning your hobby into work, your identity into your profession. Your anti-capitalist witchcraft- into commodities. Capturing the deeply oxymoronic nature of The Instagram Witch.

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At the intersection of pornography and sexual health media: A case study on the *Pornhub Sexual Wellness Center*

Kerstin Sophie Uebele

Introduction

There is a unique relationship between sexuality and media. In the last years, digitalisation has created a myriad of new ways for media, technology and intimacy to intersect. We can now meet people for sex over apps (Waling et. al. 2019:11), we can send them nude pictures or have 'phone sex' with them while being on different continents (Attwood 2009:xiv). But we can also become victims of sexual harassment through unwanted 'dick pics' or revenge porn (Stokowski 2016:20).

Intimacy is also part of the ways that we engage with sexual media and content. When we feel that something is out of place with our sexuality, we can google our problems and find help in private, before or instead of talking to a partner, a friend or a doctor (Christensen 2016). There is intimacy within media, and there is media within intimacy. In media studies, it has long been acknowledged that digital media technologies are not things 'that simply happen to society' (Gillespie, Boczkowski & Foot 2014:1). Rather, they are born out of cultural structures and phenomena, while also shaping them.

One of the largest porn platforms worldwide is Pornhub. As a user-based video platform comparable to YouTube in its digital infrastructure (Paasonen 2018:175). Pornhub, at this point, is a brand. It has merchandise and sex toys, a Premium subscription, 13 million followers on Instagram and its own statistics website called Pornhub Insights. On top of this, with the creation of the *Pornhub Sexual Wellness Center*, Pornhub has also taken on the role of an educator.

Sexual Wellness, by Pornhub

The *Sexual Wellness Center* was created in February 2017 (Fessler 2017). It is a sub-website to Pornhub's main website, accessible from its main page. Claiming to offer 'real talk about sex from those who know it best', Pornhub positions itself as an expert in the areas of love, sexuality and health. As the director of the website states in the introductory video, 'The *Pornhub Sexual Wellness Center* offers a full range of information on sexually transmitted infections and birth control, general anatomy, trans health, LGBTQ issues, relationship advice, and insight into different kinds of lifestyles (2018).

When the *Sexual Wellness Center* was released, the media coverage, aside from a general notion of confusion, was mixed: While it was praised in some cases for offering a sexual health service in a space in which people might need it the most, others critically linked it to discussions of corporate social responsibility and hypocrisy (Beard 2017). The latter becomes more clear when understanding the various angles of criticism on both the genre of mainstream porn, as well as the porn industry as a whole: Here, feminist porn critique addresses the objectification of women, toxic beauty standards, heteronormativity and male-centric production (Srinivasan 2021), as well as the exploitation of sex workers, depictions of abuse, and uploads of revenge porn. All of this makes it worthy of asking: What does Pornhub know about sexual wellness? What puts it in a position to educate about it? And how can we understand the relationship between pornography as an institution and knowledge production in form of sexual health media?

By conducting this case study, I want to produce knowledge in an academic gap that we did not even know existed. If we do not know that porn platforms offering sexual health media exist, we also cannot know what they look like, where to place

them within other forms of sexual knowledge production, and what they can tell us about a culture of porn-'platformification' (van Djick, Poell & de Wall 2018).

In digital spaces

In *Mediatization and Sexuality*, De Ridder (2017:6) states that approaching sexuality from a media perspective is in some ways an understudied field, and often 'only' concerns representations and diversity within sexual media such as TV shows. Paasonen (2018) positions pornography as an understudied field within internet research, which appears paradoxical considering the sheer amount and omnipresence of digital porn.

Taking these findings, it seems as if sexuality and related 'taboo topics' are not the most typical repertoire of media scholars. Sexuality as an area of life, as well as an area of study, is something private, something intimate, and also something that can be tied to shame and embarrassment. This makes the study of sexuality from a media angle both a challenge and an opportunity. I situate this study as interdisciplinary since I make use of theories from queer and gender studies to approach the content. Furthermore, I position mediated sexual education and sex advice within health communication, contributing to this field as well as to public (sexual) health studies.

Both media and sexuality are influenced by, but also actively create, culture. In the same way that media and technologies are more than 'hardware' and institutions, so is sexuality more than biology and bodies. This makes their study with culture and power structures in mind so relevant.

Aim and questions

The aim of this case study is to explore the *Sexual Wellness Center* as an intersection of sexual health media and digital porn platforms. In particular, I want to understand the content that Pornhub offers as a form of sexual knowledge production and investigate what kind of knowledge is communicated, and the meanings and implications behind it. Through a qualitative text analysis nuanced with discourse analysis on material from the *Sexual Wellness Center*, I approach this digital space from multiple angles with the following research questions:

1.) How are sexual norms constructed and engaged with under the notion of 'sexual wellness' in content by the *Sexual Wellness Center?*

2.) How do the writers of the *Sexual Wellness Center* make use of different knowledge systems to create expertise in the field of sexuality?

3.) What can the *Sexual Wellness Center* tell us about the intersection of pornography and sexual knowledge production through digital media?

Literature

Pornography

When approaching the *Sexual Wellness Center*, it is impossible to not first acknowledge and assess the social implications of pornography. While the *Sexual Wellness Center* is siloed off from the main Pornhub website, the Pornhub brand name is at the top of each page and it remains the top-level domain of the website. Pornography, as a content as well as an industry, is therefore the frame in which this sexual health media is embedded.

I understand the contemporary state of pornography through van Dijck, Poell and de Walls' theory of social 'platformification' (2018), which suggests that the emergence of digital platforms has fundamentally reshaped our social world. Platforms like Uber not only changed how we book transport, but how we understand mobility and urban life in general (ibid). In this sense, porn aggregator platforms change not only our porn consumption habits (Paasonen 2018; Vogels & O'Sullivan 2018), but also our sexuality; our desires, fantasies, our sexual imaginaries.

With the emergence of digital porn platforms, porn became much more *anonymous, affordable* and *accessible* (Vogels & O'Sullivan 2018:669). Porn audiences no longer have to take trips to the adult video store around the corner, nor do they have to show ID to verify their age. This has lead to Pornhub and other free, online pornography sites being criticised and challenged by governments and society. Pornhub has therefore launched initiatives to demonstrate its contribution to the public good, which can be categorised as taking on corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Kopp 2020).

Critical voices have discussed whether Pornhub is trying to cover all possible angles of consumer interest when it comes to digital sexuality, creating its own sexual monopoly (Beard 2017). Fessler (2017) speaks of a 'cognitive dissonance' when thinking of a mainstream porn platform that wants to teach about healthy sexual behaviour: 'Can a site that grosses billions of dollars per year and develops brand loyalty through eroticized abuse, lies about women's bodies and desires, and disregard for contraceptives simultaneously teach users about consent and safe sex?'

Sexual health media

The internet has become a major source of information relating to health and wellbeing, where we can google our problems and find answers immediately. I root mediated sex education and sex advice within the field of health communication (Lewis & Lewis 2015). Health communication through media, according to Christensen (2016:207), is not translatable to other forms of acquiring knowledge about health: Health *communication* is also always a way of health *promotion*, through which the mediated framing of health becomes an individual's lifestyle choice.

Media coverage on the PornHub Sexual Wellness Center primarily uses the terms 'sex education' or 'sex-ed'. However, I found that it is better described when drawing from both the terminology of sex *education* and sex *advice*, and how they are constituted in literature and research.

Sex education and sex advice

The options for mediated sex education, as opposed to its 'offline background' in schools, have proliferated in recent years due to digitalisation, but also because of growing criticism towards the existing options. Contemporary sex education can come in the form of governmental websites, reports in online magazines and journals, content creators on social media, forums, apps or popular culture (Ragonese et al. 2017). An advantage of these formats is that content can be more 'niche' and can cater to specific groups of people, such as LGBTQ+ people, older people or disabled people, giving them information more applicable to their lifeworlds (Riggs 2013).

Nonetheless, it is argued sex education on the internet should be approached with critical media literacy, as it is less controlled by authorities and the level of expertise is less transparent (Ragonese et al. 2017:306). This is particularly the case when porn is used as 'practical sex ed', an instructive 'how to' (Albury 2014), which links back to a lack of practical knowledge or focus on pleasure in sex ed classes, with porn as an easily available resource. Here, Albury argues for 'porn literacy'; as a crucial skill that should be taught in sex education, the conscious and reflective engagement with pornography (ibid.).

Where mediated sex *education* is oriented towards the school model, mediated sex *advice* is inspired by sex or relationship therapy, but turned into self-help. Mediated sex advice can come in print media like books or newspapers, or through digital formats like websites, blogs and social media (Barker, Gill & Harvey 2018:1f.). Media sex advisors appear as 'sexperts', often through a real or fictional academic qualification (Attwood 2009:xv).

Sexperts aim to improve their audiences' sex and love life by presenting sexuality as a matter of choice, through neoliberal narratives of self-improvement and entrepreneurship (Bay-Cheng 2017:325: Barker, Gill & Harvey 2017). Here, sexuality is communicated as a basic human need that is universally desired, but which simultaneously requires work and self-surveillance (Gill 2009). The 'generic infrastructure' of the format is shaped by problematization, through the *problem page* and the *agony aunt*. The problem page is the column in newspapers and journals in which reader's questions are published anonymously with a public answer from an advisor, the so-called agony aunt.

Sex education is associated with underage audiences who are learning to make their 'first sexual steps', it is often criticised for being too medical and lacking pleasure. Sex advice is associated with older, sexually experienced audiences and more practical help on how to have sex. These two forms of sexual teaching, which are somewhat contradictory in their approach, can come together in the *Sexual Wellness Center* – because of 'adult audiences'. As porn platforms are not legally allowed to have underage visitors, Pornhub's statistical age tracking on both the porn website and the *Sexual Wellness Center* starts at age 18 (Pornhub Insights 2020, 2021). It would be naive to assume that the website has *no* underage visitors, yet the content seems to strategically avoid anything that could attract minors – like teenage pregnancies or school romance.

On being normal

In this section, I approach the idea of sexual norms through areas that emerge both in feminist porn critique as well as in research on sex education and sex advice as contributors to constructing sexual normativity. I do this under the notions of *gender*, *heteronormativity,* and a general approach to what '*being sexually normal*' implies.

Interwoven into these theories, I make use of feminist critique on mainstream pornography to position my study. Feminist porn critique was a substantial part of second-wave feminism and evoked the so-called 'porn/sex wars' (Kang et al. 2017:131; Srinivasan 2021:35). The starting point of this critique was that pornography depicts violence, oppression and harm to women (McNair 1996:3).

Martin (2013:1) summarises many points of contemporary porn critique as following: 'The majority of mainstream pornography is heteronormative, depicts fairly homogenous and repetitive forms of sex and sexual representation, and contains highly normative scripts of gender and sexuality '. In combination with critique on the porn industry as a whole, contemporary porn critique focuses on narrow gendered scripts, phallocentrism, power asymmetries, body ideals and heteronormativity.

Following gendered scripts

I approach gender as a key factor in sexual health media and as something that can be constructed through representations in the media, which can imbue gender roles with meaning that give guideance on 'how we should behave and what we should look like' (Krijnen and Van Bauwel 2015:143).

For understanding the content itself, I work with the theory of *sexual scripts* by Simon and Gagnon (2003). In this approach, sexual learning and sexual knowledge are not seen as biological and natural, but imbued with cultural and societal values (ibid.:493). Sexual scripts theorise the ways we understand sexuality and act in sexual situations, by applying cultural 'blueprints' for categorising what is normal and abnormal (Hauck 2015:1).

Sexual scripts are essentially inseparable from the idea that they come in gendered versions (Simon & Gagnon 2003:494). The 'sex drive discourse' exemplifies how cultural ideas on sexuality not only embody, but also serve to manifest, gendered roles: Here, the male libido is communicated as active and insatiable, whereas

female libido is manifested as weaker, passive and tied to romance (Hauck 2015).The theory of sexual scripts has been applied to studies of pornography to research 'scripts' in a more literal sense, but can serve to research various forms of content and media in which sexuality is represented (Simon & Gagnon 2003).

A look into queer theory

Heteronormativity, for instance, refers to the many ways cis-heterosexuality is assumed as the most normative developmental outcome for a person, and is thereby enforced in a society (Warner, 1991). De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013:567) state that there is a close relationship between heteronormativity, its reiteration and proliferation, and the media, as the media can have a *normalising function*. While the media on one hand has the power to contribute to a more diverse and pluralistic sexual culture, through representations, medial attention and giving voice to marginalised groups, De Ridder (2017:11) also states that 'sticking to the heteronormative' in various media formats can have something 'safe' to it when it is perceived as the most natural or unoffensive way of showing sexuality.

Riggs (2013:77), who analysed sex education on Australian websites, found a similar marginalisation of 'special interest' content that is outside of the heteronormative, and found that website layout and digital affordances can further support 'the silencing of queer voices'. This marginal representation is mirrored in mainstream sex advice media in which non-heteronormative identities are often only mentioned tokenistically, and the main body of help is only useful for cis- and heterosexual people (Gill 2009:27).

Approaching sexual knowledge production

In this section, I approach the notion of knowledge itself. I find the investigation of Pornhub as a sexual educator particularly interesting because of their claim to '*know it best*'. What does this mean when we think of sexuality, something that is so deeply personal and intimate? To understand this, I draw from the literature on different knowledge systems, knowledge authority, and injustices in knowledge.

Knowledge and authority

When we speak of authority in knowledge, we need to consider power. When we study power and knowledge, we should focus on the areas where power moves away from the big institutions and becomes 'capillary', such as in bodies and society (Foucault 1980). Therefore, we need to think of Pornhub as a space that is imbued with power, and of the *Sexual Wellness Center* as a space where power relations are constituted on the ground of media. Here, I argue that we can also apply this capillary perspective to understand new media in the digital world: Instead of seeing the media as a top-down model from conventional mass media institutions, media can come from everywhere, from more alternative or even 'taboo' places, which have their own structures, meanings and implications.

The concept of authoritative knowledge stems from the thought that multiple knowledge systems exist in a societal body, of which some come to carry more weight than others (Jordan 1997:56), meaning they are trusted more and perceived to contain more truth. The knowledge system considered the authoritative one, meaning it holds the highest amount of power in a society, does not necessarily correlate with how correct it is; it merely needs to be perceived as such (ibid.). The idea of authoritative knowledge can tie into notions of cultural scripts, which describe what kind of sexuality is 'best' for a person.

Borkman's (1976) introduction of the concept of *experiential knowledge* gives an insight into the variety of different knowledge systems. In her research on self-help groups, she found experiential knowledge as a form of truth that is learned from personal experience with a phenomenon rather than truth acquired from professional information provided from the outside (1976:446). The counterpart to experiential knowledge is *professional knowledge*, which she states as a better-known concept and a more widely accepted source of.

Knowledge and injustice

Gender is also an important factor to consider when speaking of different knowledge perspectives, in order to counter a prevalent belief of (gender-) objectivity in knowledge, which is also fundamental to my methodological framework. *Androcentrism* refers to the propensity to centre society around men and men's needs, priorities and values, and to relegate women to the periphery (Hubbard 2004), where they appear as a gender-imbued Other to the norm (Lupton 2012:143). When applying androcentrism to the construction of sexual

knowledge, the male perspective on sexuality appears as the one more often reproduced and represented.

When women learn about sexuality and their own bodies as something that serves others first, with their own needs coming second, we can speak of an *epistemic injustice*, a distributive unfairness of epistemic goods such as information or education. Fricker (2007) distinguishes between testimonial and hermeneutic injustice, from which hermeneutic injustice is more relevant here. This refers to 'a gap in collective interpretive resources that puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences' (ibid.:1).

Finishing touches

To round up the literature review, I want to address the knowledge gaps that arose. Since sexual health media produced by porn websites is a novel change in the current 'pornsphere' and has not occured before Pornhub's *Sexual Wellness Center*, I have no reference for what could be typical or atypical for this kind of format. Nevertheless, I can draw from research of other sexual health media formats, which can help to explore what the *Sexual Wellness Center* is, and also what it is not.

To study media often means to be interdisciplinary. In this study, I draw also on concepts that were not developed in the field of media, but in queer and gender studies, sociology and epistemology, some of which have rarely been applied in media studies before. Further, the new media of the *Sexual Wellness Center* are woven into new media technologies and platform discourses, creating a more multifaceted angle than 'just' taking the text-based media content as subject of inquiry. Having a cultural angle to media as well as to sexuality means that we are able to move away from singular understandings and start to grasp them in their complexities.

Methodology

Building a framework

I root this thesis in different approaches to knowledge and research to build the methodological framework. Different theoretical approaches to understanding the social world lead to different questions being asked, and different concerns in analysis (Bazeley 2013:147). *Social constructivism* is a paradigm that understands characteristics typically thought to be biological and of 'universal truth' as products of human definition and interpretation, shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Subramaniam 2010, cited in Kang et al. 2017:35). We can acknowledge that there are bodies with penises and bodies with vaginas, but we can also acknowledge that the biology behind sexuality is only a fraction of how we perceive, interpret and conduct sexuality in the social world.

When we apply social constructivism to research, it means we adopt a critical stance towards our-taken-for-granted knowledge about the world and ourselves. Nevertheless, researchers do not conduct work in a space outside of social norms and structures, but stay submerged in them. This suggests that we also need to overcome ideas of neutrality in research.

Feminist standpoint theory is rooted in the belief that objectivity in knowledge does not exist; rather, it is situated and shaped by one's political and cultural position (Harding 2008:117). Especially *because* sexuality is a part of life that is so private, it can feel strange to imagine 'society being in bed with us' (Stokowski 2016:147). We might prefer to shelter it from discussions of politics, power and injustice, to not make our most intimate selves the target. Nevertheless, this was the foundation for the claim of second-wave feminism, that *the private is political*, that we must not discard areas of life as irrelevant or untouched by power structures because the conversation might be uncomfortable. This is why feminist views on the social construction of sexuality through media representations are especially useful here, as essentially all feminist porn critique is rooted in the belief that it matters *how* sexuality is portrayed (Paasonen 2019:2).

Working on text

Hall defines text as 'literary constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its widest sense' (1975:17, cited in Brennan 2012:14). Texts provide traces of a socially constructed reality that we can interpret as qualitative researchers in an effort to understand some of the many relationships between media, culture and society (ibid:204).

I approached text as data by constructing a methodology based on qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz 2014) and inspired by discourse analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999:3) but without building on it fully. I take the discourse approach to text and language within social constructivist and post-structuralist theories (e.g. Foucault 1995), through which language becomes 'a powerful medium which shapes our understanding of sexuality and normativity' (Motschenbacher 2019:4). Here I applied Bazeley's advice to 'be informed by methodology, but not a slave to it' (2013:89), and thus constructed my own methodological tool kit. Further, I adopted Kuckartz's approach to a qualitative text analysis, which is characterised by a focus on multiple coding steps, the creation of categories and classifications, and hermeneutic interpretation of the text as a whole (2014:34).

Creating the sample

Qualitative research allows us to approach sampling beyond strategies of generalisability, representativeness and probability, and create a sample that is driven by purpose (Seale 2018:339). I took an approach of purposive and theoretical sampling that allowed me to create rich data for engaging with concepts and theories (Patton 2014:438). The aim of purposive sampling is not to generate knowledge on how common or likely something is within a population, but what a phenomenon, which could be hitherto unstudied, looks like (Seale 2018:339).

In preparation for creating a pilot and a sample, I constructed a database with all content from the website in late January 2022, and I subscribed to the email newsletter that updates when new content is published. This helped to get a sense of the entirety of the population, which was 551 units (publications such as articles, videos etc.) in late January 2022, and the frequency with which new content is published, which is around four times a week. For the database, I

worked with the 'tag bar' through which the website is organised, currently containing 46 tags that indicate different topics. I categorised these into eight themes, which I later used for constructing a purposive sample:

- Love, dating and relationships
- Reproductive health and birth control
- Lust and orgasm
- Female bodies (bodies with vulvas)
- Male bodies (bodies with penises)
- Sexual practices
- Other / Miscellaneous
- Administrative

Piloting

Piloting in qualitative inquiry is a good way to conduct the planned research project on a small scale, to get clarity on methodology, focus or sample characteristics, and to be reflective and self-evaluative. I piloted 18 units of content, from which 10 were included in the final sample. The pilot led me to create a scheme for constructing the sample, based on the elimination of unfitting cases and the identification of requirements that must be met. This left me with a sample size of 50 units in total, of which 26 were articles and 24 were Q&As.

Analyzing the data

For analysing the data, I started with open descriptive coding that compressed passages to labels (Bazeley 2013:127). I went through multiple rounds of creating, revising and moving codes around to find a structure. I later revised the code structures into a more thematic focus with a stronger flow for the analysis, and created categories and subcategories (Kuckartz 2014:24).

After the piloting, which I conducted in Google Docs with colour codes, I turned to working with NVivo, which offers tools that assist in conducting qualitative research. For visualising the codes and placing them in relation to each other, I used Miro, which is a digital whiteboard website for creating mind maps. For presenting the data in the analysis, I created pseudonyms for the 12 different

authors of the material to retain anonymity, and I used quotes to exemplify the findings. Since the writer 'Sonia' hosts the Q&A format, her material is inevitably represented more strongly than the other authors, which explains why there are more quotes by her than from others.

Analysis

The analysis chapter is structured into three sections. In *discourses of sex and gender*, I look at the construction and engagement with gendered sexual norms through discursive practices in writing, under the notion of sexual knowledge production. In *mainstreaming sexual wellness*, I break down the idea of what sexual wellness means under the notions of sexual normativity and deviance, to find out how and who Pornhub sets out to help. Lastly, I ask how we are *learning from media (s)experts*, what practices of knowledge production the writers apply to generate trust and expertise, and where they position themselves as media sex educators. I accompany each section with a concluding discussion of the findings.

As a general way of understanding the focus in knowledge production on the Sexual Wellness Center, I highlight a finding from the digital infrastructure. Pornhub's statistics on the Sexual Wellness Center from 2020 showed that 72% of audiences were male and 29% of audiences were female (Pornhub Insights 2020). Adding to this, their porn audiences in 2021 were 65% male (Pornhub Insights 2021). While the gender gap in porn consumption has narrowed in recent years, (Vogels & O'Sullivan 2018), I found that a focus on male audiences is an influential factor to the digital affordance of the thematic 'tag bar': It includes seven different tags around the penile reproductive system, but only two around the uterovaginal reproductive system. One of them is the gendered category Female Orgasm, while the gender-neutral categories Orgasm and Orgasms also exist.

The woman as a gender-imbued Other to the male norm body, as Lupton writes (2012:143), appears at the digital point of entry into the content. In digital media technologies, the architecture and the media content are intertwined, making it a considerable part of media that cannot be disregarded as neutral or free from meaning (Scotto 2020). It is important to have this androcentric focus in mind when understanding the data, as it also explains why both the articles and the

Q&A have such a strong focus on penises and construct knowledge about women often from the viewpoint of heterosexual men.

Discourses of sex and gender

The first section looks into practices in writing that the authors of the Sexual Wellness Center use to educate about sexuality under the notion of gender. In qualitative media research, we view text and language as an embodiment of social realities (Brennan 2012). The dimension of cultural sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon 2003) as something that can be constructed through media representations helps here to understand how common beliefs, myths and misconceptions are utilised by the writers to create educational content.

Myths and myth busting

First, I explore the writers' engagement with beliefs around male and female libido under the notion of 'sexual myths', which emerged strongly in the data because of the chosen *Lust and Orgasm* theme in the sample. The discursive practice of 'myth busting' is commonly used in sex advice media (Attwood et al. 2015), as a way to locate knowledge gaps and counter them with the 'actual truth'. I use the term sexual myths here since it appeared like this in the data, but myths can also be understood as the cultural scripts in sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon 2003): Overarching beliefs about sex that circulate within a society, for which the actual truthfulness does not matter as much as their persistance.

Within the discourse of gendered *sex drive*, male and female libido is communicated as fundamentally different by nature (Hauck 2015). I found this embodied in the way that Sonia (clinical psychologist and media sex advisor) approached the topic of libido loss in heterosexual relationships:

> For most men, sexual desire remains a constant. It doesn't change too drastically over time [...]. Many straight men are left quite confused when their partner just doesn't seem all too interested in sex. He wonders how come he does all the initiating, how come she doesn't get horny like he does, and even questions whether there is a problem with attraction to him.

Further, Sonia explains the motivations that women have for engaging in sex:

> A woman will choose to engage in sex, not necessarily because she is horny, but rather it may be based on her need to be close to her partner, to please them (and herself in the process), for the affection, love, and a sense of emotional bonding.

Two things are to be highlighted here: Male and female libido are conceptualised by not only presenting them as two different versions, but also they become a reference point for the other ('How come *she* doesn't get horny like *he* does'). This creates an idea that men and women are not only different, but each other's counterparts. On the other hand, the female libido is communicated through attributes of *emotion* and *affection*. These attributes are not limited to sexual discourses, but exist as general cultural ideas of 'how women normally are': caring, emotional, always willing to put other people's needs first (Stokowski 2016). An article by Christopher (sexuality journalist) focuses on the myth of gendered motivations for engaging in sex:

> There's an old saying: Men have relationships to gain sex. Women have sex to gain relationships. This isn't true for everyone, but it's true often enough to become cliché—at least for people under about 50.

The thematic focus of this article is intimacy after the age of 50, which, according to Christopher, leads to the typical roles becoming flipped. He writes: 'Surprise: Physical women, emotional men', as a reaction to data by a survey on heterosexual couples at higher age, which shows that women start to care more about the physical side of sex, whereas men become more interested in relationship quality.

However, in the discourse of myth busting and challenging common beliefs, Attwood et al. (2015:10) highlight that myth busting alone is not enough when the belief itself is challenged, but not the underlying assumptions it is based on. The assumption in this case is that men are less or not emotional compared to women, and that women mainly have sex for emotional bonding, but not for pleasure. In the example of John, a woman wanting to have the focus on her pleasure is called *selfish*, establishing that extensive pleasure is out of place for her. In these attempts to critically engage with myths, they actually become reinforced in the process, as they end up putting men and women in their 'rightful place'.

In contrast, I found that myths and beliefs were also taken on in a stronger critical manner at times, alongside appeals for a fundamental, societal change. This came

mostly from female writers. Merle (sexuality educator) writes about female focused pleasure education:

> Most of us are still existing under a male-centric paradigm where, in heterosexual relationships, the types of sex that many people are engaging in prioritizes male pleasure above female pleasure. [...] It's not until the last decade that we started talking about the anatomy of the clitoris (it's not just that little pea in the pod).

The implication of a 'male-centric paradigm' acknowledges that there are mechanisms behind those beliefs and common knowledge that are not siloed off, but tied to cultural relations, in this case, androcentrism in pleasure discourse (Hubbard 2004). It even leaps into common knowledge of anatomy, which Merle exemplifies through the case of clitorial anatomy, which has long been misinterpreted. Sarah (clinical sexologist and sex coach) approaches a misbelief in female pleasure on the base of orgasms by stating that, contrary to portrayals in porn, 'about 75% of women must have clitoral stimulation to orgasm'.

Here, common knowledge and beliefs are not taken for granted, and instead challenged in their origin. In particular, knowledge of bodies in sex education is often communicated as 'hard facts', something that gets taught as neutral and is not up for discussion However, writers like Sarah and Merle show that culture within sexuality has deep roots, that culture shapes the knowledge we have of sexuality, by acknowledging the gendered power relations in it (Foucault 1980). Instead of just using myths as a form of entertaining writing, they use them to argue for why fundamental change in sexual knowledge production is necessary.

The female body in metaphors

As a discursive practice, metaphors and comparisons were used in the context of education. The female body was prominent as a subject to be described or explained by metaphors that make it easier to grasp. John uses both the metaphor of female pleasure as a '9-course meal' and later on, he compares female anatomy to a sports game in which clitoris, vagina, cervix and anus are different field players that should all be 'played' with. Sonia uses the analogy of a car to explain how female libido works:

> A car that is in neutral still has a working battery, but it requires an action to put it into gear. So, from a human perspective, if a woman is in a neutral position, it doesn't mean she has a desire problem. There is quite a difference between being in a neutral position and having no desire (a dead battery).

What is striking here is that this metaphor of a car compares women to an object that needs another person to be operated. As a script of sexual subjectivity, Hauck (2015:44) fittingly describes it as 'putting the individual *in the driver's seat*'. In this case however, another person is put in her driver's seat, her male partner (since Sonia speaks of a heterosexual relationship).

Within the use of metaphors to explain 'how women work', which can also be understood as male-coded interests like sports and cars, the male body itself was used as a metaphor. The comparison, 'Ignoring the clit is like just stroking the bottom third of a cock while ignoring the tip' (John), appears to make the unfamiliarity of the female anatomy more graspable; similar to how female libido is described by Merle as a 'ladyboner'. What also appears in the case of the car analogy is that there are elements of *strangeness* and *difficulty* that surround the female body: The wording of 'the mystery of the vagina' or the alliteration of 'cunnilingus confusion' underline this. In the context of knowledge production, the authors use the conceptualisation of women as hard to understand as a means to explain why people (particularly men) might have trouble understanding women: They are just more complicated. It becomes established that many men do lack fundamental knowledge of women, as Merle tells from her experience:

> When engaging with heterosexual men, who would often describe themselves as "woke", the belief among many is STILL that the epitome of being a pleasure-oriented lover is to eat a woman out for 12 minutes before going in for the jackhammer.

But then, who are women confusing to? Themselves? Or their partners? What kind of cultural implications enable this knowledge gap that is constructed around the female body that the writers of the *Sexual Wellness Center* take on to close? These metaphors embody a myth that is not limited to sexual discourse, but can also appear in pop culture media as general conceptualisations about men and women (Volpe 2019): That women are typically confusing and puzzling, whereas men are simple and straight-forward (Gill 2009:10). The gendered descriptors of easy vs difficult appear in the perspective in writing that was often employed when

looking at women: Through the lens of a male outsider. It also establishes the discursive viewpoint of the male reader, who is assumed to have a penis and is therefore able to relate.

A reality check on porn

In a similar manner to how myths around libido were dealt with, the writers picked up on beliefs that related to porn, like portrayals of certain practices or 'industry secrets'. The discursive engagement with beliefs around and through porn was constituted as a form of giving a 'reality check'. Penis size appeared as a prominent concern for men in the articles as well as in questions by the Q&A. Here, the writers draw a connection to the practice of prioritising porn actors like larger-than-average penises (Srinivasan 2021): Merle argues for education through which people can learn that 'the average penis isn't nearly as big as it is seen in porn', and advises men 'to not use pornography as vague images of masculinity to evaluate your sexual worth'. Here, statistics are often used to show the size of the average penis in comparison to the average porn penis.

The writers promote education and reflective engagement with porn, that porn should not be applied as a realistic expectation of everyday life sex:

> Most of us watch James Bond movies, but we don't assume we can do wild stunts like James Bond. However, many people, especially young men, base their expectations for their sexual performance on what they see in pornographic movies. They eventually learn that professional pornographic actors make these movies, and scenes often require multiple different takes (Eric, urologist).

Men and women become advised to take on conscious porn consumption as a skill, to manage their expectations towards themselves, their bodies and the sexual ability of their partners: 'It is imperative for us to be thoughtful porn consumers' (Merle). Here, the writers establish porn itself as a creator of 'myths' around sexual performance, practices and bodily norms, which can lead to feelings of insecurity and enforcement of false beliefs about lived intimacy. Contemporary feminist porn critique has picked up on those exact issues (Schor 2017) - but here, the level of systemic critique, larger implications against the industry, is missing. Merle writes that although she promotes a conscious engagement, she also agrees with production choices as long as they are 'really hot'. Here, the writers from the

Sexual Wellness Center take a responsibility-based approach to navigate healthy consumption around porn as something that 'just is what it is'.

Discussion

As 'tools' to sexual knowledge production, the writers work with gendered myths and beliefs that exist about sexuality in Western cultures, which can be understood as cultural scripts (Simon & Gagnon 2003). Often, they use myths as an entry into where they see a gap in knowledge, to establish where education is still necessary.

However, sexual myths are more than a stylistic choice in writing: they are rooted in larger cultural implications about how men and women are, or how they are supposed to be. The media and its use of language have a normalising function when something is constituted as natural or typical without a critical reflection to it (Krijnen & Van Bauwel 2015). Just because something has a historical tradition (like women being assigned the societal role of the giver), does not make it *neutral*, as Foucault's (1980) knowledge/power nexus highlights. Research on sexual subjectivity has shown that women do tend to explore their partners body and sexuality more often than their own (Boislard & Zimmer-Gembeck 2011). In this context, we need to understand that gendered norms do not start in behavior of lived intimacy, but much earlier, in the ways they are communicated in sexual health media when male and female sexuality become taught as fundamentally different, but without discussing the role of culture in these differences.

The use of metaphors and analogies to make female sexuality easier to grasp imply that these practices in writing and educating are necessary to make sense of the female body, to which the male body appears as the easier standard model (Lupton 2012). It gives an insight into where Pornhub positions their educational mission in relation to their audiences, linking back to the androcentric and heterosexual focus that appears in digital infrastructure. But the fact that women are communicated as something that needs a comparison to an object – to be *objectified* in the most literal sense – in order to understand them, needs to be critically discussed in its meaning. Rich wrote: 'The truths of our minds and bodies have been mystified to us' (1970:110, cited in Tuana 2017:125), on the mechanisms that enable hermeneutical injustice, the ways that knowledge about women has been hidden. Here, the writers fail to discuss *why* women are seen as generally difficult in sexual knowledge production; why common knowledge

contains so many misbeliefs, myths and gaps, and why they are not to be understood as separate cases, but as a collective injustice.

Here, we find embodiments of the approach to 'myth busting' that only takes on the porn myth itself, but not the larger implication it is based on: What it enables that porn actors with huge penises are preferred, why certain practices in porn have come to look arousing to us. Here, the critique on porn stays rather shallow and lingers on individual examples, rather than discussing porn, as a genre and an industry, as something that is not incontestable, and as something with economic and cultural *power*. Given this context, the argument for porn literacy (Albury 2014) through an approach of *individual responsibility* on the consumer, coming from a platform with economic interests in high porn consumption and production, leaves, to put it bluntly, a bad taste.

Mainstreaming sexual wellness

A key part to health communication in media is the way that health is constituted: Not only through means of informing and educating, but also through the means of promoting and giving motivation to improve one's own health (Lewis & Lewis 2015). This section looks into the construction of norms, of a sexual mainstream, and how this links back to the *Sexual Wellness Center* as a sexual health service that takes on concerns and problems. By doing this, I approach the very idea of a 'sexual wellness', and what this means under the notions of norms, majorities and deviance.

The inquiry of absence: Norm and deviance

Foucault suggests norms as a type of ideal that produces ideas of what a person should be (Foucault 2003, cited in Taylor 2009:50). The concept of a norm is part of heteronormativity, which constructs gender identities as binary 'package deals' with respective bodies and attraction to the opposite gender (Nagoshi, Nagoshi & Brzuzy 2014). For approaching sexual health media, we have to keep in mind that they are a form of media that does not translate to, for example, news or fictional media. Therefore, inquiry on representations or diversity means finding out who receives help and knowledge, and who does not (De Ridder 2017).

In heteronormativity in regards to sexual orientation, I found overlaps with a previous finding: The 'look through the opposite gender', not only by producing knowledge about women that addresses male audiences, but vice versa. Harriet (relationship and sex therapist) answers the question whether penis size matters as something that stands in relation to cis-female genitalia:

> So my answer to the question "Does size matter?" is "eh – not really." Size seems to matter most when the penis is too big or too wide. Depending on the time of the month, the cervix is located in different places. This matters with vaginal penetration because too much length can cause pain while hitting the cervix.

Eric further writes that 'premature ejaculation has become a liability' *because* of the different average time spans that it takes for men and women to orgasm: 'men climax in 5 minutes whereas women climax in 17 minutes'. Queer 'counterparts', for example how queer men experience ejaculation or size problems, I found to be almost entirely absent. Within the Q&A section, men who are attracted to women were also represented most strongly (if visitors revealed information about themselves); in only one instance, a woman stated being queer.

The lifeworlds of non-cis people, such as trans or nonbinary people, are not mentioned, let alone subject to advice giving. In accordance with textual discourse, language is a powerful medium for sexual normativity (Motschenbacher 2019). With this in mind, I found practices of non-gendered body language either not used at all, or used inconsistently: 'Find a position that hits her clit, ask what they like' (Alice, sex coach). Biological sex was mostly used as interchangeable with gender: 'The key to reducing the risk of an STI, for any man, is to use a condom' (Sonia). By returning to the text as a whole instead of reading it separated (Kuckartz 2014), the insivibility of non-heteronormative sexualities becomes apparent, and the lack of actual help that is presented to them. This *absence* is telling, since an exclusion of non-cis lifeworlds is not the exemption, but the norm in sexual knowledge production itself, which becomes continued by the *Sexual Wellness Center*.

Christopher describes the process of erectile decline with age:

> Post-50 erection changes are normal and inevitable. But some lifestyle factors can postpone or even temporarily reverse them: falling madly in love, getting in shape, and making love earlier in the day when you have more energy. [...] When erection dissatisfaction develops, some men think it's the end of sex.

While describing these occurrences as normal or even inevitable, they are nonetheless presented as *not* desirable, and subject to making changes in life. Whereas the imperative of disciplinary power comes from attempting to leave the abnormal behind, the imperative here comes from not letting the normal take over too much control. While this contradicts the idea of 'being normal' as the preferred way of being, it exemplifies the *Sexual Wellness Center*'s focus on problems that the supposed statistical majority experiences, as issues were often addressed and given room when they were seen as common or universal experiences.

A one-size-fits-all approach to sexual wellness

During coding, I worked with a node called *1-size-fits-all solutions* for things the authors suggest with a high or 100% success rate, as I found this in multiple occurances. I then expanded on this finding and apply it here as a lens for sexual normativity. The previous findings gave a glimpse into areas that are deemed as worthy or necessary for fixing, such as a declining sex life or the loss of erectile abilities.

The authors often position their contribution to sexual wellness in ways that can be easily implemented into everyday life. In accordance with the idea of 'sex hacks', Anita (relationship and sex therapist) suggests scheduling partnered sex:

> We must remember to create time for sex, rather than waiting for life to create the time for us. And while we'd like sex to be spontaneous, sometimes we have to schedule it. [...] It can be a sure-fire way that you get that physical intimacy time in amid busy lives.

This connects to the findings from the previous section on the problematisation of sex loss or sexlessness, by creating an urgency for taking on sex as a responsibility. Anita also refers to sex within ongoing relationships as a given, as

the most natural context in which sex takes place. Similar to a schedule, Alice gives guidelines on how to 'please that pussy' that read as a checklist. Foreplay entails the steps of:

> Making out
> Rubbing their body while their clothes are still one
> Kissing their neck and other parts of their body
> Using your hands to massage their pussy
> Fingering their vagina
> Oral.

Aside from the relation to penetration-centric sexuality, as both manual and oral practices are listed as foreplay (Attwood et al. 2015:5), it constructs a literal script for pleasure. Concluding, Alice states: 'if you follow these techniques you will significantly increase your ability to please your vulva owner'. Christensen's (2016:205) studies of mediated health expertise frame the media as 'communicators of a moral economy' that set out guidelines on how health should be. In this case, it sets out guidelines on how giving pleasure should be, and what kind of tips should work on a female partner.

In two instances, the authors also refer to external apps, one for sex therapy and one for weight loss to improve erectile abilities. Technology in everyday life, like apps, can take part in 'maintaining the self', and often build on self-surveillance (Couldry & Hepp 2013). Practices like scheduling sex or applying a pleasure script also embody notions of Foucauldian self-surveillance and disciplining, in ways that the 'instinctive' ways of doing things need to be overcome (2006a:75, cited in Hoffman 2011:28). The suggestions appear like fights against a 'sexual comfort zone'. There is an element of subjectivity that is placed on the reader promising that sexual wellness *is* possible, and it can be easily achieved through self-help.

However, Bay-Cheng (2017) who analysed neoliberal paradigms in sex education in relation to marginalised groups, raises that a 'Just Do It!' approach to health and wellbeing inevitably suggests that everybody has the same chances and possibilities. While she is referring to resources like local health clinics and financial security, the approach is applicable here too. To place all responsibility on the individual person to fix their sexual health creates injustice when it means that structural problems are not acknowledged. Queer people, chronically ill

people or victims of sexual assault (Bay-Cheng 2017:346) are examples of marginalised groups that cannot easily take the DIY route to sexual wellness. But it is even the smaller things, that we all have individual bodies or relationships, that become hindrance to an idea of sexual wellness that can be achieved 'hack by hack'. Universalizing knowledge in order to attract as large of an audience as possible makes cases invisible where a 'niche approach' is necessary to give it the space it deserves.

Wellness as work

Related to the idea of quick-fix solutions, I also found a general theme of how sexual wellness is conceptualised as *labour*. Our first association with this would perhaps be to think of actual sex workers like porn performers. However, not only are easy-to-implement solutions for problems suggested, as impromptu or temporary things; rather, there is an approach to sexuality as *continuous* work that can even become a lifestyle. A quote from an article by Merle in which she interviewed 'sex hacker' John, exemplifies this:

> According to John, we need to adopt a growth-oriented mindset to sexual pleasure. "People need to start thinking of sexuality like fitness or nutrition," explained John, "as something that we continue to learn and understand, and as something that can be improved with practice.

The labour of pleasure here is not necessarily supposed to be difficult work but, as John says, a 'growth-oriented mindset'. His comparison to fitness and nutrition – other areas of life that have become subject to entrepreneurship and proliferated through digital technologies (van Dijck, Poell & de Wall 2018) – create both urgency, as well as potential, around sexual labour, as something that we can use to become better versions of ourselves.

The knowledge on *how to work* on yourself and how to avoid certain scenarios then becomes a treasured good, since being in the possession of this knowledge means being a step closer to sexual wellness. Relevant here is the individual imperative (Lewis & Lewis 2015:23) that is part of health communication, and the matter of *choice and willpower*, as Christopher writes:

> Erection changes can mark the end of sex or a new erotic beginning. When erection dissatisfaction develops, some men think it's the end of sex. Others accommodate and continue to enjoy lovemaking as long as they live. The choice is yours.

Discussion

The *Sexual Wellness Center* has a stronger focus and offering of content that is applicable to heteronormative lifeworlds than for non-heteronormative lifeworlds. Based on the questions asked in the Q&A section, it also becomes evident that normative sex or relationships were often the position visitors asked questions from; for example, about struggles in monogamous marriages. Here it appears that Pornhub creates their focus through a supply-and-demand approach, which ties into how Paasonen described the *Sexual Wellness Center* as 'covering all angles of consumer interest' (2019:11).

Maybe the discussion could end here, by concluding that queer people are just a smaller group and apparently not the strongest audiences of the *Sexual Wellness Center,* or of Pornhub in general. However, in the introductory video on the website, Sonia claims that the website 'offers a full range of information on sexually transmitted infections and birth control, general anatomy, **trans health, LGBTQ issues**, relationship advice, and insight into different kinds of lifestyles' (Pornhub 2018).

This promised focus on trans health was entirely absent in the sample. From the 551 units of content in the database, I only found 7 that were about trans people in some way. At the same time, 'transgender' was the 10th most viewed category of male porn audiences in 2021 according to their own statistics (Pornhub Insights 2021). Anzani et al. (2021) raise that there is a significant overlap between discriminated groups, such as non-cis people, and their fetishisation and objectification. Like in sexual health media, questions of representation or sexual diversity here need to be seen through a different lens. Trans representation in mainstream porn is neither a continuation nor the end goal of the fight for trans rights. We need to be critical towards the fact that Pornhub commercially benefits from trans porn performers (Paasonen 2018:11), but is not able to include trans experiences and advice in their health service, *especially* when the range of content for heteronormative lifeworlds is that extensive.

The advice that Pornhub offers under the notion of sexual wellness can be understood as neoliberal 'Do-It-Yourself projects' that place responsibility on a person to improve their sex lives through their own power, tying into the notion of 'help to self-help' (Barker, Gill & Harvey 2018:212). In order for this to show success, however, certain factors must be in place to begin with. Univeralising how wellbeing can be achieved through small changes in everyday life implies that

sexual wellness, as a state of overall health and happiness, is only one or two DIY projects away from us. Through the lens of normativity, it constructs what 'normal sexual problems' should be to be worthy or approachable in sexual health media, inevitably creating deviances around those where this is not enough.

Learning from media (s)experts

In the last section of analysis, I approach the notion of knowledge production and the origins of Pornhub's knowledge. With the idea that 'knowledge exchange is driven by the very fact that some know more about certain matters than others do' (Kotzee 2017:326) in mind, I investigate the different knowledge systems that the authors draw from to link back to their (s)expert status and the promise of 'knowing it best'.

The writers on the *Sexual Wellness Center* come from a myriad of professional backgrounds, for example, clinical psychologist, sex therapist, sex coach, relationship therapist, urologist or porn actor. At the same time they also have experience working in the media industry, as sexuality journalists, podcast hosts or creators of various online formats. Having a background not only in sexuality-based professions, but also in media practices, constructs the meaning of a 'media sexpert' (Attwood et al. 2015) who has the power to bring sexual health into the public (Briggs & Hallin 2016). Thus, for investigating professional knowledge (Borkman 1976), we have to be mindful of this duality of sexual health and media professions.

Between office and bedroom

The writers made use of their professional background in various ways. Harriet refers to her background as a relationship and sex therapist to break with the myth that a long penis equals more pleasure for a partner:

> If you were to ask me in my experience "within the therapy room," when asking clients [...] to choose between what matters more, 9 out of 10 will choose girth (width/circumference) over length.

Based on the article's topic to draw away the fixation from penis size (although here it rather shifts fixation on girth), this 'insight into the office' is used as for reasoning that penis size is not as relevant for everyday life sex, as for example, in

porn. In a similar way, Sonia answers the question of a woman who has difficulties to understand what an orgasm feels like:

> Please know that the vast majority of women do not orgasm from intercourse alone. [...] I often meet women who tell me that they expect some huge sensation and get frustrated when they don't and then interpret that as not having an orgasm at all.

This information from their professional background works to underline their methods of advice giving. In Sonia's case, it also works to reassure the person that she is not alone with her struggles. This was also present in an article by Eric on different penile health problems: By writing: 'In my 25 years of working [as a urologist], I have seen a lot', he creates a sense of comfort that stems from his extensive expertise.

In some instances, knowledge that comes from the sexuality profession is translated more directly into the content, such as the checklist by Alice on how to give pleasure contained in an article titled: 'Lessons from a sex coach: The smarter way to please that pussy'. Jordan wrote on professional knowledge that things such as titles can make knowledge documented and visible (1997). The ways that the authors use their expert status and nuance with it in writing is something to be linked to the notion of a *media* (s)expert, since it also requires knowledge on how to communicate to audiences in the right tone.

We can investigate this double layer of expertise by looking into health communication in mass media. Christensen wrote about health-based TV programmes that the media act as transporters between health authorities and audiences, in this case, families that are watching TV (2016:206). However, in the case of media (s)experts, the relation between health authorities and the media is more complex. The authors essentially are both the health authority *and* the media, and in their writing, they are moving in between the professions (Briggs & Hallin 2016).

Professional knowledge was also present in *external knowledge*, meaning when the authors underlined or confirmed their positions by referring to research. A common recurrence was research on the ways that women have orgasms, by referring to different, but similar statistics on clitoral and vaginal orgasms, and demonstrating that orgasms from solely vaginal stimulation are more uncommon

than assumed. However, often the authors used research that was only conducted on heterosexual people and couples, like in Christopher's case:

> 'But after around 50, things change [sexually]. At least that's what researchers found in an analysis of data on 1,035 heterosexual adults, age 40 to 59, from the National Health and Social Life Survey, a representative national sample of Americans.

Their findings suggest that older woman continue to care about emotional closeness, but that the physical aspects of sex become increasingly important to them. Meanwhile, men continue to value the physical joys of sex, but relationship quality [...] becomes increasingly important to them.'

Besides this, no statistics in the sample included gender identities beyond the binary, or stated to separate between gender and biological sex. This is to be kept in mind under the notion of heteronormativity, as it shows that a focus on heteronormative lifeworlds is not only (re)produced in advice giving, but also in a previous step, in the way that the authors require their knowledge or do additional research. I will return to this in the discussion under the notion of hermeneutic injustice (Fricker 2007).

While staying within different knowledge systems, Jordan and Borkman position experiential knowledge as a counterpart to professional knowledge (1997:57; 1976). Although experiential knowledge can be seen as contradictory to professional knowledge, for example in self-help groups (Borkman 1976), it can also accompany and be used alongside professional knowledge.

Experiential knowledge, which is here the personal experiences with sex in everyday life, was used by some authors as a certain style of writing. In one instance in the Q&A, Sonia replies to a man who has trouble with maintaining a long distance relationship, that 'she knows how frustrating it can be to want someone physically who is so far away and out of reach'. Merle is more explicit with insights into her own bedroom:

> I'm usually not much of a butt girl, but once I have had an orgasm and get into this state, a finger in the butt begins to feel incredible. That's why it's so important to vary methods and experiment with new sensations once a woman is sufficiently aroused.

Here, Merle equates her own experience in sexuality with what 'works' for other women, by using herself as a testimonial. A similar approach to knowledge production was found in ethnographic research on commercial lifestyle blogs with a sex-ed section (Abidin 2017), where the personal narration was often used for informal lesson teaching, accompanied with the underlying meaning of 'don't make the same mistake I did' (ibid.:501).

Within those experiential insights, we need to return to the factor of *entertainment* as part of sexual health media. Johnston (2017:79) found, in her research on sex 'edutainment' on YouTube, that establishing trust with audiences by creating a relatable and casual environment is crucial, since sexuality is an intimate and often embarrassing topic. Giving personal insights can give the writer behind the knowledge a face and offer the reader to identify with them, but it can also make the experience of reading about sexual health more fun (Lewis & Lewis 2015).

The order of sexual authority

On the notion of where the *Sexual Wellness Center* positions itself, I found linkings to authoritative knowledge (Jordan 1997:57). In the original case of childbirth as a space for authoritative knowledge, medical knowledge is seen as dominant, and instinctive, experiential knowledge as usually less valued or 'not true enough' (ibid.). This was especially a factor when Pornhub writers acknowledged their own *lack* of expertise or ability to help.

In the Q&A, Sonia often told people who had questions about medical problems to seek out a doctor, either if illness symptoms prevail, or if she could not give judgement on a person's situation from afar. To a man who worried about having a cyst in his penis after his doctor told him there was nothing to worry about, Sonia answered: 'If your doctor has examined you and says it is nothing to worry about, then why doubt him?'

The value that is attached to medical knowledge sources is in line with more traditional understandings of knowledge and trust, especially in the medical field where professional or expert knowledge is seen as the overarching one (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2016:409). Indeed, the description of the Q&A form includes the following text:

> We have received many questions from men worried about something being physically wrong with their penis. Dr. Sonia is not a medical doctor nor a specialist such as a urologist. Furthermore, it would be irresponsible to offer any kind of conclusive advice based on limited information and a lack of proper medical exam.
>
> If you feel that there is something quite not right with your penis, or there is some change to it, then you should seek the guidance of a medical professional.'

Here, we can see where the *Sexual Wellness Center* positions its contribution to sexual wellness. It takes on the role of a mediator between audience and traditional healthcare, by not claiming to being able to help with every sexual problem, and referring to an institution that they see as better suited. We also need to acknowledged the possible strategic motivations behind this disclaimer, since it can be read as a way of removing responsibility for possible medical consequences.

Authority in knowledge that came more directly from the *Sexual Wellness Center* itself was also present when advising *for* or *against* things, again with references to research and statistics. Christopher writes on the topic of female orgasms:

> Sexuality authorities encourage couples in this situation to let go of the idea that women "should" have orgasms during penis-vagina intercourse. They encourage men to help bring women to orgasm with gentle sustained clitoral caresses using a hand, tongue, or sex toy.

In a similar manner, Sonia advises *against* starting a romantic affair at work by referring to research on how often couples break up. Here, the findings from researchers, 'authorities', become their own opinion and translate into the advice they give out. I want to look at this under the notion of an *epistemic* authority (Kotzee 2017). As a take on Foucault's technology of the self and bodies, Lupton and Tulloch (1998: 20) wrote: 'People now cannot simply rely on local knowledges, tradition, religious precepts, habit or observation of others, [...] but *must look principally to experts* they do not personally know to supply them with guidelines'.

How can we understand authority in sexuality? Would it mean that there is someone out there, a stranger or an institution, who always knows our most intimate parts better than we do ourselves? Christopher implies that the knowledge that sexual authorities have can help us figure out what the right or smart thing to do is. It leaves the final decision up to the reader, in this case, how

to have sex, but the reference to what authorities recommend serves to give a nudge in the 'right' direction.

Discussion

This section has highlighted how sexual knowledge production in a digital space like the *Sexual Wellness Center* is navigated through different layers of expert status. The concept of a 'sexpert' is both seen as a traditional part of sex advice media (Barker, Gill & Harvey 2018) but is also used in news ways on this website, as there is a multiplicity of writers and creators who come from various professional backgrounds. This makes the *Sexual Wellness Center* distinct from other media formats that are led by a single person, for example, a personal blog (Abidin 2017) or a YouTube channel (Johnston 2017).

Different knowledge systems are not always in conflict (Jordan 1997). They can also compliment each other, or can be used to make a stronger argument in writing. In accordance with 'sexuality authorities' and conveying a perspective that is in line with research, experiential knowledge sometimes appears as contradictory to expert advice, for example, when Alice encourages the viewer to not jump to the same conclusions she did that the relationship will fall apart, but to essentially underline what is actually right, or *best*.

Interestingly, all experiential insights 'into the bedroom' came from female writers in this sample. Under the notion of 'edutainment' (McKee 2011), this could possibly link to the *Sexual Wellness Center* being a male-focused space, through which a female writer talking about her own sexual experience can be a 'hot twist', and to underline that suggested techniques *actually* work. The explicit insights also show that the *Sexual Wellness Center* is less limited to be modest in the way the authors communicate, and that pleasure is not a taboo topic, but part of their standard repertoire in educating.

In the system of academic/statistical knowledge, the heterosexual focus makes it worth critically asking about the *gaps* that arise in knowledge production from the perspective of hermeneutic injustice (Tuana 2017). If knowledge about non-heterosexual/non-cis people is already underrepresented in the external research that is used, it also cannot be translated into offering actual help, meaning that knowledge gaps turn into advice gaps. Queer people and their needs are often understood as less relevant in sexual health formats when they do not represent a statistical mainstream that most people will fall under (Ragonese et al. 2017; Riggs

2013), which can be found on the *Sexual Wellness Center*. Foucault's power/knowledge nexus shows the constructedness of knowledge and how power systems lead to normalising and giving some types of knowledge more space than others where they tie into power relations, mirrored here in the absense of queer knowledge and support (Foucault 1980).

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the *Sexual Wellness Center* as an intersection of sexual health media and digital pornography. Through the analysis, I approached text-based content by the *Sexual Wellness Center* under the notions of sexual norms, wellness and knowledge production. Analysing gendered norms in writing showed that while common beliefs and myths are often used to underline the necessity of sexual education, the beliefs itself cannot become 'busted' when a critical discussion of the larger implications and power relations behind those beliefs is absent.

Pornhub's contribution to sexual wellness can be understood as giving help to self-help within sexual problems that are seen as universal or common experiences, constituting a general mindset for responsibility and growth as crucial for intimate wellbeing. However, this approach leads to a mainstreaming of sexual knowledge that fails to give room to non-heteronormative lifeworlds and other 'deviances'. The inquiry of different knowledge systems within sexuality showed that the writers draw from their professional knowledge and from external knowledge such as statistics and research, but they also give insights into their own sex life, which underlines that their contribution to sexual wellness is more on the social and emotional, and less on the medical side.

Understanding sexual norms

The first research question was about going into the content itself, to find out how sexual norms are constructed and engaged with. Sexual norms around gender emerged in the discursive ways the writers communicated about sexuality and their educational mission. The use of 'myths' came with practices to 'debunk' them through research and their own expertise. However, in these attempts, a

larger discussion of political and cultural meanings behind myths was mostly absent, which ended up reinforcing the origins of these myths. Through the use of metaphors, female sexuality appeared as something difficult that needed to be made easier to grasp. Here, the male body appeared as a simpler, more relatable counterpart, delegating women to the sexual Other (Lupton 2012).

The analysis showed that sexual norms regarding sexual orientations and sexual identities appeared through their absence in sexual knowledge production. Queer lifeworlds were hardly part of external research the writers used, and they were not subject of generating help and advice. Especially non-cis lifeworlds were completely invisible, despite Pornhub claiming to lay a focus on trans health (2018). The 'mainstreaming' of knowledge under sexual norms showed that the *Sexual Wellness Center* positions itself as trying to appeal to a larger audience of people and by picking up on problems that are seen as universal, but this comes to the disadvantage of societal groups who would benefit from receiving tailored knowledge and help.

Dhaenens and Van Bauwel wrote that 'the so-called new media are not automatically a symbol for social progress, as they can still reproduce former inequalities' (2017:178). I find this a fitting thought for how the *Sexual Wellness Center* appeared through this analysis. Androcentric perspectives and a 'sticking to the heteronormative' (De Ridder 2017) without critical discussions to it are not the deviance, but the norm in sexual knowledge production itself, such as in school sex ed. Here, the *Sexual Wellness Center* appears as everything but unprecedented in what they actually offer, and it goes to show that the context is more novel than the content.

Knowledge and (s)expertise

With the second research question, I approached the origins of knowledge that the writers of the *Sexual Wellness Center* have and how this serves to create a notion of expertise. Here, the inquiry showed the writers position their contribution to sexual wellness and pedagogy more within the social and emotional dimensions of sexuality. They see themselves not suited to take on medical problems, but refer to the authoritative knowledge system, traditional healthcare, instead. Within the interpersonal side of sexuality, they make use of their experiential knowledge at times. Under the notion of a (s)expert, this serves to underline that the writers are

not only professionally equipped to give advice, but have also come in touch with the same problems that the audiences may struggle with.

The *Sexual Wellness Center*'s use of (s)experts is not a novel creation, but one of the key traits of sex advice media (Attwood et. al. 2015). However, in contrast to other formats of sex advice that are led by a single author, agony aunt or communicator, the *Sexual Wellness Center* has multiple writers from different professional backgrounds within sexuality, that take on topics and problems suited to their expertise. Aside from their experience in sexuality professions, their background of having worked in media before also relates to the ways of writing and tonality, and using personal illustrations to pull in attention and create a casual atmosphere.

Being able to talk about personal experiences with sex is something that distinguishes the *Sexual Wellness Center* from other sexual health media formats where this would be seen as inappropriate, for example, in content that specifically addresses children and teenagers (Abidin 2017; Johnston 2017). It underlines that the focus are adults who are assumed to be sexually experienced themselves, or at least open to reading about it in a practical manner. Drawing from personal experience can not only underline arguments, it can also offer the reader to identify with them (McKee 2011), confirming again on how intimate and sensitive the topic of sexuality is. The study shows that being a (s)expert on the *Sexual Wellness Center* comes with multiple levels of expertise that are not necessarily contradictory, but are used to guide the reader on what the 'right' or 'smart' thing to do is, based on the multiple layers of *knowing it best.*

At the intersection of pornography and sexual health media

In an article by Vogels & O'Sullivan from 2018, they bring up the *Sexual Wellness Center* and describe it as as a platform with no porn on it (Vogels & O'Sullivan 2018). At this point, the website was still somewhat in development, but I would like to take this as an opportunity, four years later, and reflect on this claim: *Is the Pornhub Sexual Wellness Center a 'porn-free' space?*

For multiple reasons, I disagree with this. On one hand in a literal sense, since I did find content while constructing the database that are links to videos on Pornhub directly - produced and starred by 'sex hacker' John, demonstrating, for example, how to have anal sex. But more importantly and from an academic angle:

The *Pornhub Sexual Wellness Center* is all but porn-free. It is imbued with the space it is located in. In the same way that a governmental website for sex education has a certain position, motives and limitations (Riggs 2013), so has sexual knowledge that is produced by a porn website.

In the literature review I stated that sex education and sex advice are two different media formats within health communication, that are usually not published or studied together. While it was not my focus in the analysis, I found a kind of 'ease' of combining the two formats, since Pornhub does not have to aim for modesty and being appropriate for minors. This ease was present in language and writing, by using words like pussy or cock to refer to anatomy, or by casually sharing stories from inside the bedroom. This study shows that porn platforms as educators are able to provide information where other formats are limited through their position, for example, social media sex-ed creators that cannot use graphic words in order to not be demonetized or censored (Johnston 2017).

The implications of this space also emerge when porn itself is turned into a subject of education under the notion of 'porn literacy' (Albury 2014). The authors argue for porn literacy in relation to body ideals, portrayals of the female orgasms and performance of porn actors. By establishing that Pornhub sees it as the responsibility of the individual consumer to not get affected by porn, I found a lack of *systemic* critique: The way that the *Sexual Wellness Center* deals with porn consumption responsibility shows parallels to the way that underage porn viewers are currently dealt with, through age-checkers that are essentially just a measure to remove responsibility from porn platforms, but do nothing to *actually* prevent minors from accessing. The industry and the genre of mainstream porn become constituted as something unchangeable, rather as something that could or should undergo fundamental change.

Pornhub has economic interests in keeping porn consumption and production high (Paasonen 2019). Not all problems and conflicts within sexual health have something to do with porn, but, as Fessler (2017) puts it: It creates a *cognitive dissonance* to look at the values promoted in mainstream porn, and then to look at a mainstream porn platform arguing for intimate wellbeing.

I do not argue against porn literacy. I think porn literacy is a necessity in a digitalized world where porn is so omnipresent and yet still imbued with taboo in its consumption, conversation and even research. But I argue that porn literacy,

and all teaching of how to be sexually healthy, has limits when the porn industry itself takes this on in a sense of educational greenwashing. This study has shown that individual responsibility for sexual wellness ends where structural and systemic problems begin.

'Coitus can scarcely be said to take place in a vacuum' wrote Kate Millett (cited in Stokowski 2016:146). We cannot separate sex and intimacy from its cultural meanings and categorize it as a solely corporeal act. In this manner, we also cannot separate sexual knowledge production from its 'corporeality', meaning its context and its place. The *Sexual Wellness Center* is not enough for Pornhub to consider their contribution to sexual wellness as done. Knowledge, sexual knowledge, always appears as interwoven into a network of power relations (Foucault 1980). In this sense, we need to consider that Pornhub, as a corporation, will always have economic interests and a respective motivation, that hinder it from being a trustworthy source for sexual education.

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Kerstin Sophie Uebele holds an MSc in Media and Communication Studies and a BA in Public Relations. She grew up near Frankfurt am Main, Germany and now lives in Malmö, Sweden. She has published prose and contemporary poetry in multiple books and magazines within the young German writing scene. Her research interests lie at the intersection of media, feminism and (reproductive) health. She is considering doing a PhD in a similar field in the future.

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