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Digital Feminism, Popular Intersectionality, and White Femininities in the Neoliberal Age

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The Politics of 'Including Everyone': Digital Feminism, Popular Intersectionality, and White Femininities in the Neoliberal Age

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A thesis submitted to King's College London
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis explores the popularisation of intersectionality in neoliberal digital media cultures. Specifically, I examine how intersectionality is articulated in popular German (speaking) digital feminist discourses, such as on feminist blogs and on social media platforms like Instagram. I contend that intersectionality, a term coined by activist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to challenge existing "single-issue analyses" (p. 149) of the discrimination Black women faced in the US legal system, experiences a transformation and a rearticulation in contemporary digital feminist spaces which ultimately fails to disrupt existing power structures in meaningful and productive ways.

To explore the popularisation of intersectionality in digital media, as well as the social, political, and technological forces that condition this phenomenon, I set out to research both feminist media producers and consumers, while acknowledging that this distinction is increasingly replaced by the notion of 'prosumers' (Fuchs, 2014). I employ a variety of methods, including a combined thematic and critical discourse analysis of a feminist blog, in-depth online interviews with self-identified digital feminists [Netzfeminist*innen], as well as a focus group discussion using a secret Facebook group. My analysis follows feminist critiques of neoliberalism and takes a Foucauldian governmentality approach in exploring how neoliberal market logics, which are embedded in digital platforms, produce and operate through popular articulations of intersectionality and allyship. In doing so, I am drawing on and contributing to a variety of academic disciplines and fields, including feminist media and cultural studies, digital platform and communication studies, affect theory, as well as digital intersectionality studies.

To account for the above developments, I put forward the concept of 'popular intersectionality' in this thesis. Popular intersectionality is a feminist discourse which promotes an affective desire for and an understanding of intersectionality as an imperative of inclusion, while simultaneously reinforcing norms of whiteness and reproducing white saviourism. Having gained increased popularity and visibility in mainstream media, popular culture, and digital spaces in the past decade, popular intersectionality constitutes a neoliberal technology of self which entices digital feminists to engage in 'perfect allyship' with marginalised Others through performing caring and pleasing notions of white normative femininities. Ultimately, popular intersectionality assists in the production of anxious feminist subjectivities heavily invested in white normative femininity, and fails to achieve long-lasting structural change.

In this thesis, I contend that articulations of popular intersectionality produce discourses that recentre white individuals and (their) affective responses to intersectionality. My thesis therefore aims to explore the ways in which intersectionality is articulated and transformed in digital feminist spaces, particularly in relation to whiteness, white femininities, and under the influence of neoliberal-capitalist digital platform cultures. More precisely, I propose the concept of popular intersectionality as an umbrella term for discourses and speech acts that articulate intersectionality as synonymous with a highly affective, all-inclusive feminism that rejects 'bad' white feminism and instead focuses on individual narratives and visibilities of marginalised identities. At the same time, such articulations of popular intersectionality appear to negate the concept's Black feminist origins, produce hierarchical thinking about marginalised groups, and neglect structural analyses of oppression.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

This thesis explores the popularisation of intersectionality in neoliberal digital media cultures. Specifically, I examine how intersectionality is articulated in popular German (speaking)[1] digital feminist discourses, such as on feminist blogs and on social media platforms like Instagram. I contend that intersectionality, a term coined by activist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to challenge existing "single-issue analyses" (p. 149) of the discrimination Black women faced in the US legal system, experiences a transformation and a rearticulation in contemporary digital feminist spaces which ultimately fails to disrupt existing power structures in meaningful and productive ways.

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[1] I acknowledge that German is spoken in different countries, but want to highlight that my focus is on Germany nonetheless.

[2] A secret Facebook group is a private group that can only be seen by members, which brings the advantage of anonymity, as I discuss further in Chapter 7.

feminists to engage in ‘perfect allyship’ with marginalised Others through performing caring and pleasing notions of white normative femininities. Ultimately, popular intersectionality assists in the production of anxious feminist subjectivities heavily invested in white normative femininity, and fails to achieve long-lasting structural change.

Popular intersectionality thus describes a cultural sentiment that shapes contemporary popular, commercial, digital, and activist cultures. Popular intersectionality, in turn, is shaped by critiques of popular mainstream feminisms as ‘white feminism’ (see Chapter 4). Moreover, the discursive speech acts and articulations that express the notion of a popular intersectional feminism produce a feminism marked by a neoliberal self-governmentality that requires feminists to constantly consume knowledge, learn, reflect, and actively work on becoming a ‘good’ white feminist (see Chapter 4), and increasingly a perfect intersectional feminist and ally (see Chapter 6). These articulations, as I demonstrate, are closely linked to the expression of normative white femininities (see Chapters 6 and 7). As such, popular intersectionality often employs a postfeminist vocabulary (see Chapter 7). Popular intersectionality should not be understood as another expression of postfeminism though. Rather, popular intersectionality – in contrast to postfeminist sentiments – actively acknowledges the continued need for feminist politics (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), which has been further accelerated by the social and political events of the summer of 2020, while also producing discursive ‘hierarchies of oppression and privilege’ (see Chapter 5) that articulate relatively privileged white women as more ‘empowered’ than other subordinated groups (see Chapter 7).

This is also reflected in popular intersectionality’s discursive focus on whiteness (see Chapter 4). I contend that articulations of popular intersectionality produce discourses that recentre white individuals and (their) affective responses to intersectionality. My thesis therefore aims to explore the ways in which intersectionality is articulated and transformed in digital feminist spaces, particularly in relation to whiteness, white femininities, and under the influence of neoliberal-capitalist digital platform cultures. More precisely, I propose the concept of popular intersectionality as an umbrella term for discourses and speech acts that articulate intersectionality as synonymous with a highly affective, all-inclusive feminism that rejects ‘bad’ white feminism and instead focuses on individual narratives and visibilities of marginalised identities. At the same time, such articulations of popular intersectionality appear to negate the concept’s Black feminist origins, produce hierarchical thinking about marginalised groups, and neglect structural analyses of oppression.

Feminist scholar L. Ayu Saraswati (2021) reminds us that we have to "be mindful about how dominant ideologies and discourses inform our feminist activism and social media practices, so that we may find new ways to challenge rather than be complicit in these limiting ideologies and practices" (p. 28). Taking Saraswati's lead, this thesis takes a closer look at the neoliberal, postfeminist, and popular feminist sentiments that shape the current cultural moment in which articulations of popular intersectionality are produced.

1.1. Research Questions and Methodology

The objective of this thesis is to understand what popular intersectionality is and how it operates as a feminist discourse in the contemporary, digitally mediatised era. Moreover, a further aim is to investigate the social, political, and technological forces that condition and produce popular intersectionality. This thesis sets out to answer the following research questions:

> 1) How is intersectionality articulated as a political perspective within contemporary digital feminism in Germany?
>
> 2) How do feminist articulations of popular intersectionality navigate whiteness, particularly in relation to gender?
>
> 3) How do digital platforms combine with neoliberal and digital feminist affect cultures to enable, or obstruct, the articulation of popular intersectionality?

To answer these questions, I employ a variety of methods. I chose not to present these methods in a separate methodology chapter but, rather, to discuss my methods and ethical considerations in the empirical chapters that analyse the data collected through the respective method. Chapter 4 therefore presents my reflections on conducting a critical discourse analysis of a feminist blog to understand how 'intersectionality' is being mobilised within digital feminist media spaces. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss my findings from qualitative interviews with digital feminists to explore how they engage and navigate popular ideas of intersectionality. I introduce my participants and the interviewing process at the beginning of Chapter 5. In Chapter 7, I review my method of using a secret Facebook group as a focus group tool to encourage more vulnerable or contested explorations of intersectionality within a 'safe space'.

In designing, conducting, and evaluating my research project, I have been guided by feminist ethics and research principles, such as reflexivity about my own positionality (see point 1.6.), considerations about power relations during the interviews (see Chapter 5), and the use of a social media platform for conducting my focus group (see Chapter 7). Moreover, all data has been anonymised in this thesis to protect participant privacy, but also to focus on discursive patterns and their problematic discursive effects, rather than critiquing certain groups or individuals (Hemmings, 2011). I have also translated the data from German to English myself. In the case of the blog analysis, translation also bears the advantage of preventing a reversed-search for blog posts on search engines. However, both quotes from the blog and the Facebook discussion group proved difficult to translate at times, due to the nature of long sentence structures in the (written) German language, or terms or expressions that are not easily translatable. For instance, a term used repeatedly in the interviews, Facebook group, and in the blog, is the notion 'alle mitdenken'. A possible translation might be 'keeping everyone in mind', however, I chose to translate this as 'including everyone in one's thinking' to account for the importance of inclusion in the popular intersectionality discourses I examine. Additionally, I hope that the phrase I chose embodies the epistemological impossibility of such a task, a point I return to in later chapters. Finally, applying feminist research principles to my thesis also includes the use of non-academic sources, such as web/blog articles, essays, personal conversations, or nonfiction books, as well as following feminist citation politics of citing authors with their full name (Cameron, 2021).[3] In the following sections, I present a brief summary and timeline of the data collected, as well as some challenges encountered during collection.

I begin my analysis by looking at feminist blogs, as this was where I first noticed expressions of what I later termed popular intersectionality. The blog I analyse for this thesis, which I have given the title *Zine_X* to preserve anonymity, was selected as a case study as it fulfilled three criteria. Firstly, the blog was produced by a group of feminists. This was important as I was not interested in 'critiquing' individuals, but in focusing on collective and repeated patterns of discourse. Secondly, the bloggers described the blog as 'intersectional', meaning intersectionality was likely to be a key concept addressed in the blog. Thirdly, I was able to gain permission from the editorial team to analyse chosen blog posts.[4] In the autumn of 2020, I conducted a combined thematic and critical discourse analysis of these posts, before subsequently emailing interview questions to the

[3] Due to the length of this thesis, I employ these citation politics only when mentioning an author for the first time in a chapter. For references in brackets and the reference list, I use the APA style.

[4] Out of the five blogger collectives I initially contacted, only two responded and *Zine_X* was the only group to provide permission to analyse their blog posts.

editorial team. These were answered by two members of the team in February 2021 and then I incorporated this data into my analysis of the blog posts.

I also interviewed 22 digital feminists who engage in discourses about intersectionality on other platforms, to both gauge whether they observe similar dynamics in German (speaking) intersectionality discourses, and to understand how they engage with intersectionality in their own digital feminist and activist practices. Additionally, as Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller (2019) point out, the experiences of digital feminists remain under-researched. Interviewing digital feminists engaged in intra-feminist debates about intersectionality allowed me to better understand the affects circulating in these digital and discursive spaces. Specifically, I planned to interview digital feminists who discuss intersectionality on social media platforms such as in Facebook groups, since the interactive nature of this feature encourages discussion and debate on the platform. Yet, due to the fast changing nature of digital platforms and its uses (Kaun & Uldam, 2018), as well as the increased platformization of feminism (Barbala, 2022), the majority of German (speaking) digital feminist debates had shifted onto Instagram by the time I began to recruit interviewees. This was noticeable during the recruitment process, as participants recruited via various channels reported using Instagram predominantly. After gaining ethics approval by the university in March 2021, I conducted in-depth online interviews via Zoom calls and email during spring and summer of the same year. Through reading my thematic and critical discourse analyses of the blog posts published between 2016 and 2020, and the participant interviews in 2021 in tandem, some tentative shifts in the ways intersectionality is articulated became noticeable. My analysis of Instagram in Chapter 5, and the neoliberal forces governing post-2020 allyship discourses in Chapter 6, thus aim to improve scholars' understanding of how platform affordances and cultures, in addition to neoliberal logics influence social justice discourses.

My last method, a focus group with some of my interview participants, served to explore some of my initial findings with participants, as well as to 'recreate' a social media environment through conducting the discussion in a secret Facebook group. This last part presents the most experimental method in this thesis, as no comparative study exists in the realm of feminist cultural and media studies.[5] While some scholars have interviewed digital feminists about their experiences in pre-existing feminist Facebook groups (Clark-Parsons, 2018; Coffey & Kanai, 2021; Kanai & Coffey, 2023; Kanai & McGrane, 2021), to my knowledge, this thesis is the first project in the field that

[5] As I discuss in Chapter 7, the Facebook group method has been pioneered in social and health science research.

has set up a new group to invite research participants to discuss the topic under examination. While I had originally expected and hoped for critical debate and potentially friction in the group, I was struck by the normative, pleasing and accommodating femininity displayed by all three participants. This prompted me to reflect on the strong forces of postfeminism in contemporary popular intersectionality discourses, as I discuss further in Chapter 7.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I highlight the key areas my research speaks to and its underlying themes and contexts, such as feminist critiques of neoliberal governmentality, affect theory, and the rise of 'woke' and cancel cultures in recent years. Following this discussion, I introduce popular (digital) feminisms to provide the contexts in which the discourses I examine in this thesis are situated. Next, I set forth the concept of popular intersectionality, which I develop in this thesis to understand how intersectionality is articulated in neoliberal, digital feminist spaces. Since popular intersectionality is closely articulated in relation and response to whiteness, I also introduce white feminism and white femininities, which are key forces in structuring articulations of popular intersectionality. Finally, I discuss my positionality as a researcher, before presenting the structure of the thesis.

1.2. Rationale

This thesis contributes to our understanding of the popularisation of feminism, and intersectionality in particular, over the past decade. This allows us to better grasp the entanglement of neoliberalism and popular feminisms (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Rottenberg, 2019), as well as how neoliberal logics dominate contemporary understandings of social justice and activism (Kanai, 2020; Kanai & Gill, 2020). My thesis thus takes a Foucauldian approach[6] which articulates neoliberalism both as an economic theory as well as a cultural mindset that dominates individual subjectivities (Brown, 2015; Gilbert, 2013; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1999). Feminist scholars have illustrated how neoliberalism governs women's lives (Elias et al., 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2022a; McRobbie, 2015; Orgad & de Benedictis, 2015; Scharff, 2015, 2019) and the lives of marginalised identities (Gilroy, 2013; Kanai & Gill, 2020; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022) in particular. Key elements of this neoliberal (self-)governmentality, such as the imperative to think 'positive'

[6] I would like to highlight here the uncomfortable and problematic nature of using Foucault's work following allegations of sexual abuse (Campbell, 2021), which feminist scholars have been noticeably silent about. Moreover, I would also like to acknowledge the difficulty, if not impossibility, of 'cancelling' Foucault's body of work due to the immense influences it has had on cultural and media studies.

(Calder-Dawe et al., 2021; Gill & Kanai, 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2022b; Kanai & Gill, 2020) as well as individual responsibility and self-improvement (Gill, 2007; Scharff, 2019), are crucial to the production of popular intersectionality discourses, as I demonstrate throughout this thesis.

In grappling with how neoliberal governmentality operates on the level of subjectivity, the concept of affect is extremely useful (Kanai & Gill, 2020). Affect, I suggest, also assists in understanding the 'psychic life' (Gill & Kanai, 2018; Scharff, 2015) of popular intersectionality. Moreover, as media and communications scholars have demonstrated, affect is a crucial aspect of social media cultures (Döveling et al., 2018; Papacharissi, 2016). That is, platforms driven by neoliberal-capitalist logics encourage the display of a positive, branded and curated (feminist) self (Abidin, 2016; Mahoney, 2020; Saraswati, 2021; van Dijck, 2013b), while simultaneously, fostering anxiety and fear about saying or doing the wrong thing online (Gill, 2021a, 2021b; Ng, 2020, 2022). The latter in particular leads to longer engagement on the platform, which in turn serves its capitalist interests (Fuchs, 2014). Affect as an analytical lens thus elucidates what moves feminists to participate in digital feminism (Charles et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2019) as well as critique, and possibly attack, other digital feminists in intra-feminist debates (Kanai & Coffey, 2023). This thesis helps to further unpack both aspects in the context of popular intersectionality debates.

Another way neoliberalism continues to dominate social justice discourses is through the mainstreaming of Black feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial discourses. 'Wokeness' in particular has gained much popularity in recent years due to social media affordances and Anglophone celebrity and consumer cultures (Brown, 2022; Kanai & Gill, 2020; Sobande, 2019; Sobande et al., 2022). Originating in African-American culture, 'woke' has come to embody a variety of meanings, ranging from 'insults' and 'mockery', to being perceived as 'inauthentic', and critiqued as a 'tool of (self-)branding' (Sobande et al., 2022). Feminist media and communications scholars have studied the neoliberal, capitalist co-optation of 'wokeness' as a brand, which has been described as "woke-washing" (Sobande, 2019) or "woke capitalism" (Kanai & Gill, 2020). However, how 'wokeness' functions as a brand in digital feminist discourses remains under-explored. This thesis aims to outline the proliferation of antiracist discourses under neoliberalism in the context of popular intersectionality, personified in the brand of what I call 'good' white feminist and the 'perfect intersectional feminist'.

Furthermore, 'wokeness', particularly in digital culture, is marked by ambivalence, as "the actions of people may be simultaneously praised and policed for allegedly being 'woke'" (Sobande et al., 2022, p. 1583). This ambivalence of 'wokeness' is tied in with contemporary, popular notions of

callout and cancel cultures (Clark, 2020; Duffy et al., 2022; Ng, 2022). Rooted in womanist and queer communities of colour, the 'call out' and subsequent 'cancelling' have come to be closely associated with attacking someone and withdrawing support for someone's work, including stopping to buy, consume, and share someone's work, but also unfollowing on social media (Brock, 2020; Clark, 2020). This creates enormous pressures to always say or do the right thing online. My research contributes to exploring the ambivalence of demonstrating 'wokeness' and the fear of being called out in the context of popular intersectional allyship discourses.

The neoliberal mainstreaming of 'wokeness' has been further accelerated in the past four years. This is important to note in relation to discussing my interview and focus group findings in Chapters 5-7, which were conducted in 2021. As such, I analysed the data in light of the global Covid-19 pandemic and long periods of national lockdowns in most countries all over the world, including Germany, as well as the resurgent Black Lives Matter movement. Protests took place on a global scale in the wake of two events that happened on 6th July 2020 in the US: The killing of a Black man, George Floyd, by a white policeman, Derek Chauvin, and an incident in New York's Central Park, which saw a white woman, Amy Cooper, falsely accuse a Black man, Christian Cooper,[7] of harassing her during a phone call with the police. Both incidents occurred within hours and happened to be filmed and posted on social media, after which they gained huge traction and media coverage. Although the #BlackLivesMatter movement had gained wider attention between 2014 and 2016 (Clark, 2019), it was the combination of witnessing yet another brutal police murder on the same day as a white woman, referred to by Internet communities as 'Karen',[8] was filmed enacting her racial privilege and entitlement towards a Black man – all while billions of people across the planet were forced to stay at home during national lockdowns, spending increased time online, and thus watching both incidents in near real-time on social media – that sparked particular outrage.

As a result, renewed Black Lives Matter protests took place all over the world during "the Great Antiracism Summer of 2020," as Regina Jackson and Saira Rao (2022, p. 110) put it. In Germany as well, tens of thousands went on the streets all over the country (Perrigo & Godin, 2020). Moreover, as author Emma Dabiri (2021) notes, "the proliferation of allyship guides became overwhelming" (p. 7). Anti-racism books, such as Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* (2018) or Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (2018) saw rising

[7] Both are unrelated.

[8] A denomination that originated on Black Twitter and is used for white middle- and upper-class women displaying entitlement (Negra & Leyda, 2021).

sales in the US and UK (Flood, 2020). In Germany, Tupoka Ogette's *exit RACISM* (2020 [2017]) climbed the bestseller lists, as did Alice Hasters' *Was weisse Menschen über Rassimus nicht hören wollen aber wissen sollten* [What white people don't want to hear about racism but should know] (2020 [2019]). Notably, these books had been published prior to the events of 2020. Their rising sales could be an indication of the 'urgency' white people felt to engage with anti-racism (Dabiri, 2021). Additionally, 'antiracist reading lists' (see Chapter 4) were circulated both on social media and in traditional media. *Vogue Germany*, for example, published a list of German and Anglophone books to read and documentaries to watch (Sand, 2020). For the first time in history, there were discussions about white privilege in German mainstream discourses. Although I had begun my doctoral research on popular intersectionality in 2018, these cultural and political developments highlight the importance of exploring the discursive and political dynamics of (digital) discourses on intersectionality, race, whiteness, and allyship.

Furthermore, my rationale for focusing on the German (speaking) context are of a personal, practical, and academic nature. They are personal because German (speaking) digital feminist spaces, such as blogs, Facebook groups, and more recently, Instagram, have not only educated me about feminism, intersectionality, and queer theory, but have also enabled me to stay connected with everything feminist in the German context since I moved to the UK. Practically, my familiarity with German (speaking) feminist debates and my understanding of the language did not require further linguistic skills. Finally, from an academic perspective, most scholarly discussions of intersectionality tend to focus on Anglophone contexts and there is a paucity of research focusing on these debates in Germany. Importantly, I do not claim that popular intersectionality is only a German (speaking) phenomenon. Rather, I contend that we can observe articulations of popular intersectionality in other Western contexts, as media scholar Akane Kanai (2020, 2021) has demonstrated at the example of Australian digital feminism, and political scientist Jenny Morrison (2021) has observed in the radical left of the Scottish independence movement. German (speaking) digital feminism thus forms my case study for exploring intersectionality's popularisation under neoliberalism.

Since I have conducted this PhD research while residing in the UK and my thinking is informed by Anglo-American scholarly debate, I am more interested in exploring parallels and similarities with the Anglophone context, rather than focusing on a singular approach. That is, I foreground German specificity, but I do not only focus on the German context. Moreover, as I discuss in detail in Chapter 3, contemporary research on digital feminist activism within Anglo-American feminist media studies forms the framework of my study. Although my thesis is situated in the German

context, many of the aspects of popular intersectionality that I discuss apply to other Western contexts as well. Thus, while it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a historical review of German feminisms here (see for instance Feree, 2012; McCarthy, 2019 [2017]; Mikus & Spiers, 2016; Scharff et al., 2016; Smith-Prei & Stehle, 2016), I explore aspects of German feminisms relevant to my discussion in more depth where necessary. For example, I sketch out the brief moment of 'popfeminism' that Germany experienced in the mid-2000s in the next section of this chapter. In Chapter 2, I discuss Afro-German feminism and (white) German academic feminist debates in the context of intersectionality's travels to Germany, as well as the role of whiteness as social norm in German society. Chapter 7 highlights the so-called 'headscarf debate' in the context of the Facebook discussion group, which illuminates the role the hijab plays in German mainstream feminist cultures.

1.3. Introducing Popular (Digital) Feminisms

In recent years, feminism's reach into (Anglophone) mainstream and popular culture has spanned from celebrity feminists (Chidgey, 2021; Farris & Rottenberg, 2017; Hamad & Taylor, 2015; Kanai, 2020), to feminism in fashion (Repo, 2020; Titton, 2019), to big corporate brands using feminism to market their products – a trend that has been described as "femvertising" (Gwynne, 2022), "marketplace feminism" (Zeisler, 2016), and "feminist commodity activism" (Repo, 2020). What characterises contemporary expressions of popular feminism, according to media and communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018), is an increased visibility and accessibility of feminism. However, more visibility of feminism in popular culture does not necessarily lead to more media and political representation of (all) women and marginalised groups. Feminist activists, commentators, journalists, and cultural and media scholars have argued that popular feminism is best understood as a feminism of, and for white, heterosexual, middle-class, cis-women (Beck, 2021; Evans & Bussey-Chamberlain, 2021; Loza, 2014; Phipps, 2020; Rottenberg, 2019). When (celebrity) women of colour claim the feminist brand, they are often scrutinised, as media scholar Nathalie Weidhase (2015) notes in the context of feminist critiques of singer Beyoncé's infamous performance in front of the word 'feminist'. Weidhase argues that "the dismissal of Beyoncé's feminism is more indicative of a lack of intersectional thinking in the current celebrity feminism discourses and dialogues that are largely shaped by white women" (p. 130). Popular feminism, as Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, "frequently refuses intersectionality, and often erases and devalues women of colour, working-class women, trans women, and non-heteronormative women, even when it claims to include all women" (p. 14).

Moreover, popular expressions of feminism are marked by superficiality and a lack of interest in engaging with deeper systemic issues. As Banet-Weiser (2018) further analyses, "it does not necessarily mean that popular feminism critiques the roots of gender asymmetry; rather, popular feminism tinkers on the surface, embracing a palatable feminism, encouraging individual girls and women to just *be* empowered" (p. 21; emphasis in original). Indeed, popular feminism is more visible when it lacks any structural critique, which makes it easier to consume (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This, as I argue in this thesis, also applies to popular articulations of intersectionality.

Furthermore, the visibility of popular feminism is accelerated by social media platforms and the rise of digital feminist activism. As Banet-Weiser reflects in conversation with Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg (2020), "perhaps it is social and digital media that has been the most visible platform for popular feminism" (p. 11). Indeed, Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller (2019) refer to their case studies of digital feminism as "popular feminism in action" (p. 12). Many feminist scholars have discussed how feminist debate and feminist activism have increasingly moved into online spaces over the past decade or so (Baer, 2016; Munro, 2013; Scharff et al., 2016). As a result, feminist activism experiences an increased 'platformization' (Barbala, 2022) and can no longer be imagined without the use of social media platforms.

Popular feminism is also affectively appealing. As psychology scholar Adrianne Evans (2023) notes, under popular feminism, "a feminist-inspired femininity is created and consumed through shareable and networked content, from user-generated hashtags (e.g., #effyourbeautystandards, #nomakeupselfie) to commercial campaigns selling products with feminist-inspired messaging, which often draw on the recognisable feel-good factor of Dove style advertising" (p. 3). In the context of the rising commercialisation and corporate branding of feminism – and intersectionality (Banet-Weiser & Glatt, 2023; Sobande, 2019) – feminist cultural and media scholars have observed increased self-branding of (digital) feminists as well (Chidgey, 2021; Mahoney, 2020; Novoselova & Jenson, 2019; Pruchniewska, 2018; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022; see Chapter 5). In a cultural climate in which popular/white feminism is increasingly repudiated, it is thus unsurprising that the brand 'intersectional feminist' has gained currency as well (Kanai, 2020).

In the German case, feminism experienced a particular wave of popularity in the mid-2000s. Popfeminism, a term specifically used in the German context (Smith-Prei & Stehle, 2016), was widely understood as a response to the so-called 'Demography Debate', in which young, educated 'career' women were blamed for the country's decreasing birth rate (Baer, 2012; McCarthy, 2019 [2017]; Scharff et al., 2016). Predominantly young, white women from the middle-class countered

the debate with a number of literary publications, which all exhibited a similar style. As German studies scholar Hester Baer (2012) observed, "popfeminists sample from, remix, and resignify received elements of feminism derived from global and local pop culture in order to redefine feminism as a popular movement for a new generation of Germans in the twenty-first century" (p. 356). Moreover, popfeminist writers often "adopt the form of the autobiographical essay, memoir, or interview" (Baer, 2012, p. 366). As cultural scholar and journalist Sonja Eismann (2007), who coined the term 'popfeminism', explains in the introductory chapter of the essay collection *Hot Topic: Popfeminismus heute* [popfeminism today], participating authors were asked to write about topics such as sexuality, the body, media and work, DIY and activism, or music, from a biographical standpoint, "since the personal is still political" (p. 12; my own translation). As this example illustrates, German popfeminists both 'sample' second wave feminism, while simultaneously rejecting it, often by dismissing writer and editor Alice Schwarzer, who has come to personify second wave feminism in Germany (Mikus & Spiers, 2016; Sadowski, 2016).

That said, popfeminism does not necessarily equal third wave feminist movements in the US or the UK. As Baer (2012) notes, "race, ethnicity, and the critique of white feminism, issues at the very core of both third wave feminism's development in the US context and debates about intersectionality in German academic feminism, are notably absent in popfeminist texts" (p. 365). In a sense, the German popfeminism of the mid-2000s shows commonalities with contemporary articulations of popular feminism in Anglophone cultures: both present a polished version of feminism for white, middle-class, cisgendered women which promises empowerment and the achievement of career goals. Yet, a crucial difference is that popfeminism was marked by its exclusionary nature. While contemporary popular feminism addresses intersectionality on a superficial level, at least, German popfeminism did not engage with these issues at all (Mikus & Spiers, 2016; Scharff et al., 2016). As Christina Scharff (2011b) noted, "The focus on privileged, white heterosexual and German women is striking in mainstream endorsements of a new feminism" (p. 269). However, in recent years, coinciding with the revived popularity of feminism in the Anglophone world – and, I would argue, accelerated by the rise of digital feminisms which allow for cross-geographical and cross-linguistic communication and content consumption – feminism has gained renewed interest in Germany, and discussions around difference and intersectionality have been placed on the feminist agenda. To account for these developments, I propose the concept of popular intersectionality.

1.4. Introducing Popular Intersectionality

Popular intersectionality is interlinked with popular feminism in complex ways. Similar to popular feminism, intersectionality is increasingly employed in commercial spaces like advertising (Banet-Weiser & Glatt, 2023; Sobande, 2019). However, popular intersectionality is also especially prevalent in activist spaces (Morrison, 2021) and in digital feminist practices on social media (Kanai, 2020, 2021). Moreover, popular intersectionality 'calls out' popular feminism – or white feminism as it is often called in these instances – on the issues popular/white feminism engages with only superficially, or not at all. Crucially though, due to its reactionary nature, popular intersectionality centres whiteness and white women in particular, despite aspiring to centre those affected by intersectional discrimination (see Chapter 4). This 'callout', I contend, is propelled by a number of social, cultural, and technological developments (see Chapter 3). As I aim to demonstrate in this thesis, platform affordances designed to keep users on the platform, a neoliberal governmentality towards constant self-improvement (further encouraged by these platforms), increased global public discourse around white (and other forms of) allyship since the summer of 2020, as well as notions of normative white femininity as pleasing and accommodating (also further encouraged by digital platforms), converge in producing popular intersectionality (Kanai, 2020; Kanai & Gill, 2020).

Hence, I conceptualise popular intersectionality both as a cultural sentiment dominating the contemporary popular zeitgeist in the above described ways, as well as a feminist discourse whose discursive speech acts exhibit a distinct focus on whiteness, white (and other) privilege(s), and the perceived responsibilities resulting from such privilege. I hereby build on critical race scholar Sara Ahmed's body of work on whiteness, anti-racism/diversity work, speech acts, and performativity (Ahmed, 2004b, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2012). Ahmed in turn draws on philosopher J. L. Austin's (1962) linguistic theory of performative utterances. Such utterances are, for example, "I do", "I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*", or "I give and bequeath my watch to my brother" (p. 5). Such sentences have in common that they do not describe what the speaker does. Rather, the utterance itself is "the performing of an action" (p. 6). Of course, simply uttering a sentence is not sufficient, certain actions have to be performed while speaking. In the case of the ship-naming example, the speaker would usually smash a bottle of champagne against the ship, and, in some instances, only certain authorised people can perform the action, such as priests or judges.

In her research on institutional diversity work, Ahmed (2012) develops the notion of performative speech acts further. She argues that "non-performatives" are spoken and written "commitments"

to anti-racist work, for instance, which could be regarded as "performative effect" (p. 177) but, in reality, do not perform what they promise. This way, institutional statements of commitment to anti-racism do not acknowledge the existence of racism in the institution in the first place – they are "non-performative". As Ahmed further explains:

> In my model of the non-performative, the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance, *but is actually what the speech act is doing*. Such speech acts are taken up as if they are performatives (as if they have brought about the effects they name), such that the names come to stand in for the effects. As a result, naming can be a way of not bringing something into effect. (p. 117; emphasis in original)

Popular intersectionality as a speech act, I propose, often operates as a 'non-performative' in similar ways.[9] In Chapter 4, for instance, I argue that the claim that a feminist blog or activist project is 'intersectional' functions to relieve the speaker of further engagement with and explanation of what makes the project 'intersectional' in the first place.

Popular intersectionality is also highly affective. As such, my research seeks to contribute to existing scholarship on the importance of affect in (feminist) social media cultures (Coffey & Kanai, 2021; Döveling et al., 2018; Kanai & Coffey, 2023; Mendes, 2022; Mendes et al., 2019; Nau et al., 2022; Rovira-Sancho, 2023; Saraswati, 2021; Schoettler, 2023). Affect, as this body of work reveals, can both move digital feminists to participate in feminist activist practices, but it also manifests as insecurity, fear, and anxiety about making mistakes. As I demonstrate in Chapter 5, the affordances and vernaculars of the platforms on which popular intersectionality takes place, in this case Instagram, encourage an affective positivity as well as a culture of aestheticism and felt membership in a (supposedly) intersectional feminist 'bubble'.

[9] It is important to point out that the term 'performative' carries different meanings throughout this thesis. Ahmed (2012) uses the term in accordance with Judith Butler's definition, in which 'performativity' "must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, 2011 [1993], p. xii). Similarly, when discussing how participants enact normative white femininities (see Chapters 6 and 7), I refer to the term in the Butlerian sense. However, my interview and Facebook group participants (see Chapters 5-7) mobilise 'performative' in an everyday, 'common sense', for instance, when discussing 'performative allyship' (Kutlaca & Radke, 2022; Savaş, 2021; Wellman, 2022). In this sense, 'performative' describes a critique of individual actions that are intended to demonstrate allyship but are commonly perceived as "inauthentic displays of support" (Kutlaca & Radke, 2022, p. 2). Such everyday notions of 'performative' hence gesture towards the idea of what Ahmed calls 'non-performative'.

Moreover, the notions of goodness and allyship that my predominantly white participants express are symptomatic of white saviourism (Finnegan, 2022), although I claim that popular intersectionality allows for saviourism in relation to other marginalised groups as well. In other words, it simply feels 'good' to be an intersectional feminist and thus discursively save the (alleged) oppressed Other. Additionally, neoliberal dynamics of competition, in combination with these historical notions of (white) saviourism may also contribute to a sense of feeling 'better' than others (Kanai & Coffey, 2023).

However, as I discuss in Chapter 6, in light of contemporary 'woke' and cancel cultures (Clark, 2020; Negra & Leyda, 2021; Ng, 2022; Sobande et al., 2022) and increased mainstream attention to structural and everyday racisms following the Covid-19 pandemic and the global Black Lives Matter movement (Milman et al., 2021), the stakes for intersectional allyship have never been this high. This is further enabled by digital media, which function as potential catalogues or records of 'mistakes'. That is, platforms like blogs and social media like Instagram allow any visitors/followers to (more or less) publicly trace digital feminists' engagement in popular intersectionality discourses. This visibility, in turn, increases digital feminists' vulnerability and accountability (Mahoney, 2020), and thus heightens the fear over 'getting it wrong'. Notably, anxiety, pressure, and exhaustion are the main affects articulated by my participants, which is in keeping with other research (Gill, 2021a, 2021b; Kanai, 2020; Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022; Krogh, 2022; Lehto, 2021). Intersectionality has never been as popular as in the current cultural moment, I contend, but at the same time, the fear of failing at intersectional allyship, has never been this high.

1.5. Introducing White Feminism and White Femininities

Whiteness is the invisible norm[10] that structures social institutions such as the education system as well as everyday interactions, including in digital media and social networks (Bhopal, 2018; Dyer, 2017 [1997]; Eddo-Lodge, 2018; Noble, 2018). Consequently, feminist activists and scholars have analysed the role of white women in feminist movements, and Black women and women of colour have written about the exclusionary nature of women's movements for decades (e.g., Chow, 1987; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1986; see Chapter 2). Moreover, digital media scholars have discussed how social media platforms encourage the performance of hegemonic

[10] As I discuss in Chapter 2, this norm is not invisible to people of colour, but whiteness operates in ways that it does not name itself.

(white) femininities (Bishop, 2018a; Fritz & Gehl, 2016), and feminist scholars have analysed how digital feminists and activists are governed by neoliberal (platform) logics (Baer, 2016; Mahoney, 2020; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022; Saraswati, 2021). However, despite a history of feminist activisms actively rejecting patriarchal norms dictating the meanings and expressions of femininity, the digital feminists in my study – across various gender identities – perform normative white middle-class femininities, highlighting moral virtues such as self-negation and goodness (Kanai, 2020), as I discuss in Chapters 6 and 7. In the following, I sketch out how the notion of 'good white femininity' is entangled with neoliberal anti-racist discourses.

In her article "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism" (2004b), Ahmed maps out six modes through which whiteness is declared and performed in the field of critical whiteness studies (although these modes exist outside of academia as well). Ahmed contends that these acts often have the opposite effect, in that "declaring one's whiteness, even as part of a project of social critique, can reproduce white privilege in ways that are 'unforeseen'" (2004b, para. 12). Entangled with declaring one's white privilege is showcasing the efforts to 'unlearn' racism and white ignorance (Ahmed, 2004b). In the context of popular intersectionality discourses, I suggest the signalling of an intersectional perspective in one's thinking becomes another way of demonstrating the effort to 'unlearn' racism.

However, there is a further issue in declaring white responsibility and learning: "one problem with being so used to the learning = good equation, is that we might even think that everyone should aspire to such learning, and that the absence of such learning is the 'reason' for inequality and injustice" (Ahmed, 2004b, para. 37). The result seems to be that good, responsible feminist practice is understood as displaying one's efforts, including discursively distancing oneself from what is perceived as white feminism. Importantly, this focus on learning is not primarily directed towards structural change but, rather, it aims towards self-improvement, especially in the neoliberal digital economy (Dabiri, 2021; Kanai, 2020; 2021; see Chapter 6). I therefore claim that the current focus on one's own intersectional thinking and practice that we observe in digital feminist spaces ultimately constitutes a continuation of neoliberal ideals and their entanglement with feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Rottenberg, 2019). It also raises the question of who has the necessary cultural capital to learn and be seen as learning about intersectionality (Mendes, 2022; Scharff, 2023a).

Moreover, it is necessary to analytically distinguish two types of 'white feminism' that are articulated in my data. On the one hand, there is the notion which journalist and author Reni Eddo-

Lodge (2018) calls "whiteness as a political structure" (p. 78), and which sociologist Alison Phipps (2020) describes as "political whiteness". According to Phipps, political whiteness is common in mainstream feminism, a feminism that is mainly white and middle-class/bourgeois, and explicitly racist and transphobic. The main goal of mainstream feminism is to protect white womanhood and in turn to protect white supremacy. Since the summer of 2020, literary author J. K. Rowling's espousal of trans-exclusionary content on (then) Twitter has become a poster child for this kind of 'bad' white feminism. As I explain below, 'bad' does not reflect my own judgement but, rather, denotes the positioning of white feminism in popular intersectionality discourses.

Being a white feminist, on the other hand, can also mean to be white and a feminist. However, given that the current predominance of the first definition in mainstream and popular culture has led to the term 'white feminist' becoming a slur (Eddo-Lodge, 2014), feminists who are white often work hard to establish that they are not the 'bad' kind of white feminists (Srivastava, 2005). Similarly, in her interviews with self-identifying feminists in Australia, who use the Internet to primarily educate themselves about feminism, Akane Kanai (2020) identifies a rejection of white feminism and a claiming of intersectionality:

> In seeking to renounce white feminism, my white participants tended to characterize white feminism with associated 'bad' personal traits of (deliberate) wrongdoing in the face of individual power and privilege. Being 'intersectional' as a feminist identity, then, became wholly consistent with being a good, white woman in these terms. (p. 19)

As I argue in this thesis, similar dynamics are observable in my data. Therefore, in my analysis, I distinguish between 'bad' white feminists who use political whiteness to establish their goals and 'good' white feminists who attempt to distance themselves from said political whiteness by repudiating it. It is crucial to note that such a distinction does not reflect my personal judgement of either of these feminist camps. Rather, this analytical distinction aims to acknowledge the discursive distancing from 'white feminism' that I observe in German (speaking) digital feminist spaces.

Repudiating certain political positions to establish one's identity is not a new phenomenon in discourses around feminism. Christina Scharff (2016 [2012]) has shown how young German and British women repudiated feminism in the early 2000s, because – following the postfeminist, individualist, neoliberal zeitgeist – they saw themselves as already empowered and liberated, while depicting Muslim women as the Other in need of saving (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988). I contend that this assumed need to save the racialised (and otherwise marginalised) Other, continues today, operating through articulations of popular intersectionality, such as the progress narratives and

discursive hierarchies of oppression and privilege I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5. These rhetorical devices, especially when articulated from a position of privilege, serve to point out how the racialised Other is still in need of saving and thus reaffirm existing hierarchies of power, rather than disrupting them. Importantly, as I highlighted in the beginning and discuss further in Chapter 7, this does not mean that popular intersectionality simply represents a renewed expression of postfeminism, but that articulations of popular intersectionality operate through employing postfeminist logics and vocabulary.

Moreover, the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' whiteness is not a new one. As I explore in Chapter 2, the distinction between 'good', non-racist, and 'bad', racist white people is a common perception in Germany (Ogette, 2020 [2017]; Roig, 2017; Sow, 2018). What is different about the contemporary digital 'good' white feminists I aim to characterise throughout this thesis, is that they are (at least to a certain degree) familiar with intersectionality theory, as well as contemporary critiques of white feminism. The here described 'good' white feminist has usually studied intersectionality in some capacity at university – although she is also increasingly Instagram-educated (Dabiri, 2021) – and thus positions herself as an 'ally'.

Terese Jonsson (2021) observes similar dynamics in the context of British academic feminism, where she notes "a trend whereby contemporary white feminists are positioned as knowledgeable about and attentive to race, implying that the problem of white feminist ignorance of racism has been left behind" (p. 72). In the context of German (speaking) digital feminism, I argue that white ignorance (Mills, 2017, 2022 [2015]) is not located in the past, but rather in other feminists, who are hence considered 'bad' white feminists. Moreover, Jonsson (2021) argues in her analysis of academic feminist books that:

> the recognition of ongoing problems of whiteness within feminist politics can be incorporated into white-centred feminist theorising in ways which still reproduce white dominance and which evade serious attention to what white feminist accountability and commitment to change might look like. This is partly achieved by the continued marginalisation of women of colour's involvement and labour within the contemporary feminist communities and 'moments' . . . (pp. 97-98)

Similarly, as I discuss in this thesis, the repeated articulation of intersectionality not only as a sole response to white feminist movements perceived as excluding, but also as a concept recently arrived in Germany/digital feminist spaces (hence mirroring white German academic debates), fails not only to acknowledge the digital (Nakamura, 2015), historical, and activist labour of Black

feminists and other feminists of colour, but also fails to interrogate the governing role of whiteness in these discourses.

Additionally, feminist scholars have noted an increased pressure on women to be perfect in every aspect of life (Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022; McRobbie, 2015), including their feminism (Bobel, 2007; Kanai, 2020). This has been further accelerated by neoliberal platform affordances and cultures (Gill, 2021a; Mahoney, 2020; McRobbie, 2015; Savolainen et al., 2022), and, as I suggest in this thesis, the earlier described social and political events of 2020. As my analysis of the interviews and focus group with digital feminists reveals, participants experienced increasing pressures to perform 'perfect' intersectional allyship with a variety of marginalised identity groups, while also engaging in exactly the type of neoliberal discourses that produce such pressures. To account for these developments, I develop the figure of the perfect intersectional feminist and the popular intersectionality masquerade based on Angela McRobbie's work (2009, 2015) in Chapters 6 and 7. The perfect intersectional feminist, I propose, marks a continuation of the 'good' white feminist – since 'good' is no longer good enough – and is governed by neoliberal self-optimisation narratives in regards to intersectional allyship. The popular intersectionality masquerade on the other hand reverberates postfeminist logics which simultaneously articulate and disarticulate intersectionality in my participants' talk, and thus 'mask' problematic and exclusionary statements, in this case about the hijab, behind the signifier 'inclusive feminism'.

1.6. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

This thesis addresses various discourses about identity. I therefore want to take a moment to reflect on the use of identity, as well as my own identity. As cultural scholar Stuart Hall (1996a) argues, identity is a concept "operating 'under erasure' in the interval between reversal and emergence; an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all" (p. 2). In other words, the use of identity categories such as race is both 'necessary' and 'impossible' when thinking about identity and difference (Hall, 1996a; St Louis, 2009). However, it is crucial to remember that "race – and related concepts such as ethnicity – are so entangled with histories of colonialism and nationalism that they are incapable of innocent, descriptive meaning" (Gunaratnam, 2013, para. 17). Similarly, terms used to discuss experiences of racial discrimination implicitly perpetuate racial thinking and hierarchies. For instance, terms such as 'non-white' defines people by what they are not, and maintains whiteness at the social norm (Aspinall, 2020). In the context of German (speaking) feminist and antiracist discourses, the terms used most commonly are the English terms 'BIPoc' or 'people of colour', as well as the

German translation of ‘racialised’ [rassifiziert]. However, both terms render group disparities as well as whiteness invisible, and therefore reproduce racial homogeneities (Gonzalez-Sobrino & Goss, 2019; Kalunta-Crumpton, 2020). Thus, following Hall, thinking and writing about, as well as researching intersecting forms of oppression is always at risk of reproducing harmful and problematic social categories of identity. Yet, categories like race, class, and gender are necessary in order to name those most affected by intersectional oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), but also, as is the case in this thesis, to shed a light on the racialised, gendered, and classed dynamics of the production of popular intersectionality. So while I employ terms such as ‘people/women of colour’, ‘Black’, or ‘marginalised identities/groups’ in this thesis, I do acknowledge their simultaneous ‘necessity’ and ‘impossibility’ (Hall, 1996a; St Louis, 2009).

Naming my own identity as a researcher faces a similar dilemma: While I do not wish to simply reproduce ‘declarations of whiteness’ (Ahmed, 2004b) or ‘privilege or intersectionality disclaimers’ (Beck, 2021; Gill & Orgad, 2022a) in listing my various ‘identities’ and thus run the risk of empty, ‘performative’ gesturing, I do believe it is necessary to position myself as a white German researcher, producing scholarly critique within the neoliberal British academe, as well as someone with a keen private and academic interest in German (speaking) digital feminist debates. Crucially, there are some ethical and political risks in examining popular discourses on intersectionality and whiteness as a white woman. As I outline in Chapter 2, intersectionality has been appropriated by white (German) academics for several decades, and similar dynamics are at play in digital feminist activist spaces. In focusing on the affective lives of my participants, who are mostly white women, I run the risk of re-centring white women’s feelings (Cargle, 2018; Jackson & Rao, 2022; Nash & Pinto, 2021). Yet, as I hope to have demonstrated in this introductory chapter, popular intersectionality’s discursive proximity to whiteness requires feminists, and in particular feminists who are white, to critically engage with these discourses.

Moreover, my positionality as a white person might lead me to have overlooked certain aspects and dynamics in the data. However, as Lisa Kiyomi Hanasono et al. (2022) note in their research on university faculty allyship, “Our positionality and investment in the content may have led us to be particularly critical of participants’ responses” (p. 565). That is, a crucial task in writing this thesis was navigating the question of how to best produce a productive critique of popular intersectionality, rather than replicating a ‘callout’, similar to the ones my participants describe as common in (digital) intra-feminist debates (see Chapter 6). Notably, I do not wish to position myself as yet another “gatekeeper” of intersectionality (Tomlinson, 2018). I am also not claiming the moral high ground of having never articulated popular sentiments of intersectionality. Rather,

I believe in the importance of highlighting the underlying politics of 'including everyone', as many of my participants put it. I take inspiration from sociologist Sarita Srivastava (2005) who has expressed the following so eloquently:

> I should emphasize that my aim is not to critique or dismiss the range of excellent antiracist work that has been undertaken by both white and nonwhite activists, and more notably by feminists, but rather to explore the subtle and not-so-subtle resistance of this work as well as the pitfalls of well-meaning efforts. (p. 29)

To avoid the pitfalls of critical dismissal in my own research, I focus on themes and discursive patterns in the language used to articulate intersectionality (Hemmings, 2011), as I outline further in my methodological discussion in Chapter 4. Moreover, my analysis foregrounds the structural, rather than the individual, conditions of popular intersectionality (see Chapter 3). Additionally, I aim to identify moments of rupture, counter discourses, and critical questioning in my data, to demonstrate that the digital feminists in my study do, albeit to varying degrees, critically engage with the discourses I am examining in this thesis.

1.7. Structure of the Thesis

In the next chapter, I review the discursive and political tensions in activist and academic debates on intersectionality and whiteness. This discussion provides a crucial background to my analysis of popular intersectionality in digital feminist spaces. I begin by sketching out intersectionality's Black feminist origins, before outlining some key academic discussions and contestations of intersectionality. In particular, I highlight debates over the concept's ownership and its appropriation by white academics. Due to my focus on German (speaking) digital feminist spaces, my discussion in Chapter 2 also reviews how intersectional thought was embedded in the writings and activisms of Black German feminists, as well as how white academics in Germany contribute to the appropriation of intersectionality in wider academia. Following this, the second part of Chapter 2 discusses whiteness as a structuring social force and zooms in on how whiteness has governed white women's feminism. Ultimately, my discussion in this chapter lays the groundwork for my analysis of articulations of popular intersectionality, identifying whiteness and particularly white femininities as key forces that condition popular intersectionality discourses.

Whiteness, however, is not the only force that shapes popular intersectionality. In Chapter 3, I discuss further social, cultural, and technical conditions of popular intersectionality. Outlining literature on feminist critiques of neoliberalism and postfeminism, as well as affect theory, I aim

to demonstrate the structuring forces of a neoliberal governmentality and its feeling rules, which dictate women and marginalised groups' everyday thoughts, actions, and feelings. I refer back to this literature at various points in my analysis, for instance, when discussing how neoliberal economic logics dictate popular intersectionality and allyship discourses. Chapter 3 further reviews feminist literature on digital feminist activism, teasing out the elements that feminist scholars have come to view as characteristic of digital activism, and highlights how my analysis of popular intersectionality contributes to this body of literature through documenting and critically questioning some recent changes in digital feminist practices. Chapter 3 also discusses the technological conditions of popular intersectionality, such as an increased platformization of digital feminism and its focus on visibility.

Chapters 4 to 7 mark the empirical chapters of this thesis. In Chapter 4, I conduct a critical discourse analysis of a (white-presenting)[11] German feminist blog. My analysis of selected blog posts and an email interview with two bloggers reveals that intersectionality is articulated as an affective buzzword and a response to white feminism. I further develop the notion of 'good' and 'bad' white feminists, which assists our understanding of the discursive dynamics of the blog, and contend that articulations of popular intersectionality centre the feelings of white individuals. Reflecting neoliberal logics of responsibility and self-improvement, my analysis identifies the use of what I call 'good' white feminist checklists, as well as expressions of white saviourism, as key strategies in aspiring to become a 'good' white feminist.

In Chapters 5 and 6, my analysis draws on twenty-two in-depth video call and email interviews with German-speaking digital feminists. My participants, although engaging with intersectionality on a variety of platforms, report using Instagram predominantly. In Chapter 5, I therefore analyse the platform's affordances that enable the 'sharepic' culture and the felt notion of being a member of an intersectional feminist 'bubble'. In light of this analysis, the chapter proceeds to critically engage with my interviewees' articulations of intersectionality. I suggest that Instagram's platform features and visual cultures actively shape my participants' understandings of intersectionality theory. As a result, intersectionality is articulated as a novel phenomenon in light of the global Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, as an highly affective, inclusive feminism, and as concerning individual identities, narratives, and experiences. Moreover, several participants' definitions of the

[11] As I explain further in Chapter 4, the blog presents itself as if the majority of the bloggers are white, for instance, through the naming of white privilege in selected blog posts. This positionality is crucial in understanding the political implications of articulations of intersectionality in the blog.

concept produce discursive hierarchies of oppression and privilege, with the result that white women are (still) centred in the discussion of intersectionality.

Chapter 6 then moves on to discuss the governing forces of neoliberalism in my interviewees' talk about intersectional allyship. I develop the figure of the perfect intersectional feminist to make sense of the 'perfect standard of activism and allyship' palpable in my participant's responses. My thematic analysis in the first part of the chapter highlights how the perfect intersectional feminist is produced through neoliberal logics of self-competition, self-improvement, and individualised responsibility. These logics, I contend, have been further exacerbated by the rise of 'woke' and cancel cultures in light of the global Black Lives Matters protests in 2020. Identifying notions of white middle-class normative femininity in my participants' articulations, I tease out the gendered, racialised, and classed dimensions of the perfect intersectional feminist, before discussing my interviewees' affective responses to these demands of perfection in the second part of the chapter. As my analysis shows, during the pandemic, these digital feminists experienced increased pressure and exhaustion to stay on top of all things intersectional, and therefore expressed insecurity and anxiety about saying or doing the wrong thing, particularly as an ally.

The last analytical chapter discusses findings from a four-week long Facebook discussion group with three of my interviewees. Specifically, Chapter 7 aims to investigate how popular intersectionality encourages the enactment of a normative femininity reminiscent of postfeminist expressions of femininity. My analysis focuses on discussions in the Facebook group about allyship and the fear of making mistakes, as well as exclusionary statements expressed in the context of debating the Muslim headscarf (hijab). I contend that the various pressures and insecurities relatively privileged white women, such as my focus group participants, experience when it comes to enacting 'perfect' allyship, often result in the performance of a 'popular intersectionality masquerade', which promises an all-inclusive feminism, yet simultaneously disarticulates popular intersectional claims through problematic statements such as the ones made in the group about the hijab.

Finally, Chapter 8 brings together and reviews my discussions and findings from the empirical chapters. It also highlights my theoretical contributions, making a case for the usefulness of my concept of 'popular intersectionality' in understanding contemporary discursive and political dynamics in German (speaking) digital feminist debates on intersectionality. Furthermore, building on Angela McRobbie's (2009, 2015) work, I offer the figure of the perfect intersectional feminist as well as the popular intersectionality masquerade to conceptualise the neoliberal

dynamics that govern digital feminist debates on intersectionality and allyship, which are further encouraged by capitalist platform logics and increased allyship discourses in the aftermath of the summer of 2020. Ultimately, as I argue throughout this thesis, popular intersectionality, conditioned by neoliberal notions of normative white femininities as well as digital feminist and 'woke' platform cultures, fails to challenge social institutions and systems of oppression in meaningful, transformative ways.

Chapter 2. Discursive and Political Tensions: Intersectionality and White Feminisms

This chapter sets out to discuss the academic debates and political tensions concerning the two "imperatives" (Lawson, 2022) dominating contemporary popular culture and digital feminist spaces – intersectionality and white feminism. The widely discussed concept of intersectionality emerged from the intellectual and activist labour of Black feminists and anti-racist activists, and has been the site of much (academic) debate, including whether intersectionality constitutes a political practice, a theory, a methodology, or a knowledge project. It has further been debated who qualifies as an "intersectional subject" (Nash, 2008), as well as the concept's ownership. Moreover, some scholars have critiqued that intersectionality has been appropriated by white feminist scholars, claiming intersectionality as an intellectual product of feminist theory in the academe. This critique is particularly relevant in the context of the digital feminist discourses I am interested in, as my analysis reveals that popular intersectionality is predominantly articulated in relation to whiteness and as a response to white feminism (see Chapter 4). Finally, scholars have noted intersectionality's travels in and out of academia and across national and linguistic borders. My thesis contributes to this body of work by examining discourses which are taking place in (but are by far not limited to) the German (speaking) context.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first half discusses intersectionality's delineation as a metaphor, political and activist framework, and knowledge project, as well as its Black feminist and anti-racist origins. I further outline some key contestations in academic debates around intersectionality, before concluding with a discussion of how intersectionality has travelled to Germany. I highlight the importance of Afro-German[12] activism, writing, and theorising, critically discuss the "displacement and disavowal" (Lewis, 2013) of this body of work in German (speaking) white academic spaces, and the problematic of translating intersectionality. The chapter's second part then moves on to discuss whiteness and white feminism, examining whiteness as a historical construct and social norm governing many white women's understanding of feminism. My objective in this chapter is to foreground the various political tensions that

[12] Using the term 'Afro-German' [Afro-deutsche], I refer to self-described Black German feminists who used the term in the 1980s (Ayim et al., 2018 [1986]). However, following Anglophone people of colour who use 'Black' with a capital B ['Schwarz' in German] is common practice nowadays (Piesche, 2018 [2012]). In the following, I use both terms interchangeably.

determine both academic and, as I aim to investigate in this thesis, digital feminist debates on intersectionality and white feminism.

2.1. Intersectionality

2.1.1. Metaphor, Framework, Methodology, or Knowledge Project?

It is widely known and recited that legal scholar and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term 'intersectionality' in an essay examining Black women's experience of discrimination in the US legal system. Crenshaw argued that anti-discrimination law at the time did not fully consider the experiences of Black women as women *and* persons of colour: "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (p. 140). Developing a "Black feminist criticism" (p. 139), Crenshaw employed the infamous "analogy to traffic in an intersection" (p. 149) to express how Black women are, metaphorically speaking, harmed simultaneously by traffic from the direction of 'race' and 'gender'. Both feminist and anti-racist political organising and theorising, Crenshaw insisted, must rethink approaches and concepts of discrimination and develop a new language and framework to account for the intersectionality of Black women's and other marginalised groups' experiences of subordination.

In another article, Crenshaw (1991) further distinguished between structural, political, and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality describes the ways institutional structures and intervention strategies fail to account for women of colour's experiences, such as in the case of women's shelters which exclude immigrant women due to English language policies. Because "systems of race, gender, and class domination converge" for these women, "intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1246). Structural intersectionality, I claim, is often neglected in digital feminist popular intersectionality discourses in favour of political and representational intersectionality (see Chapters 4 and 5). The political dimension of intersectionality refers to the feminist and anti-racist movements that centre the political demands of white women and Black men respectively. As Crenshaw (1991) wrote:

> For example, racism as experienced by people of color who are of a particular gender – male – tends to determine the parameters of antiracist strategies, just as sexism as experienced by women who are of a particular race – white – tends to ground the women's movement. (p. 1251)

It is important to highlight that Crenshaw noted a lack of intersectional analysis in both movements. In the popular intersectionality discourses I examine in this thesis (see Chapters 4 and 5), however, intersectionality is often constructed as a sole response to white feminism, which results in a discursive focus on the role of white women within feminist movements (Morrison, 2021), and hence distracts from intersectionality's original concerns. Finally, the concept of representational intersectionality delineates the ways Black women are harmed by representations of female Blackness in media and culture (see for instance Gammage, 2016; Slakoff & Brennan, 2023). In my research participants' talk (see Chapter 5), representational intersectionality seems to dominate (Banet-Weiser & Glatt, 2023), and is often translated as (the need for more) visibility of marginalised identities (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022).

Importantly, Crenshaw's intervention is built on a "body of proto-intersectionality theorizing" (Cooper, 2015, p. 388), such as Frances Beale's (1995 [1970]) "double jeopardy", Deborah King's (1988) "multiple jeopardy", the Combahee River Collective's (1982 [1977]) analysis of the "interlocking" systems of oppression which create "the conditions of [their] lives" (p. 13), or Audre Lorde's (2007 [1984]-a) declaration that "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (p. 138).[13] Intersectional thinking is also embedded in the writings and activism of Asian American (Chow, 1987) and Latinx women (Roth, 2004). Similarly, European feminists, such as Beverley Bryant, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe (1993 [1985]) in the UK,[14] described their "triple state of bondage" (p. 2). In Germany, Afro-German women and migrant women have also employed an intersectional perspective to write about their positionality as women of colour (Ayim et al., 2018 [1986]; Florvil, 2020; International Women* Space, 2019; Piesche, 2018 [2012]), which I discuss in more detail later. Despite a flourish of (US) Black feminist writings in the 1970s and 1980s, intersectional thought and theorising can be found as early as in the works of Anna Julia Cooper (2007 [1892]), or in Sojourner Truth's infamous speech at a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio (US), in 1851 (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to recount a comprehensive history of Black feminist and intersectional thought – a task others have already undertaken (see for instance

[13] See also Collins (2009 [1990]), Davis (1981), hooks (1986), Guy-Sheftall (1995), Wallace (1982).

[14] See also Brah and Phoenix (2004), Carby (1982), Mirza (1997), Mirza and Gunaratnam (2014).

Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Cooper, 2015; Hancock, 2016; Nash, 2019) – it can be argued that "intersectionality has provided a name to a pre-existing theoretical and political commitment" (Nash, 2008, p. 3).

Since Crenshaw's influential articles, intersectionality has travelled as a social theory and has been widely developed by feminist academics and activists. It is nowadays understood as a concept, a theory, a methodology, an analytical framework, a research paradigm, a disposition, and a heuristic and analytical tool (Carbado et al., 2013; Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Collins & Chepp, 2013). However, Patricia Hill Collins and Valerie Chepp (2013) prefer to understand intersectionality as a broad-based knowledge project. Borrowing from the sociology of knowledge, Collins and Chepp describe intersectionality as (research) projects whose "purpose is to understand all dimensions of power relations" (p. 59). In an ongoing process, everything that is written, said, or produced on intersectionality contributes to these projects. Similarly, Devon Carbado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Vicki Mays, and Barbara Tomlinson (2013) describe intersectionality as "a work-in-progress" (p. 304).

Moreover, Collins (2015) distinguishes broadly between three categories of the intersectional knowledge project. First, intersectionality as a field of study aims to explore the concept's history, themes, boundaries, debates, and directions (Carbado et al., 2013; Cho et al., 2013; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Hancock, 2016; Nash, 2019). Second, intersectionality as an analytical strategy uses an intersectional framework to produce new knowledge about the social world (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Third, intersectionality as a form of critical practice describes how social actors, like teachers, social workers, or nurses, use intersectionality in their daily work as social justice fighters (Thornton Dill & Zambrana, 2009). According to Collins, the second field is by far the one that produces the most publications and can thus further be divided into six subfields of research. The first area covers research that uses an intersectional analytical strategy in order to rethink key sociological concepts such as work, family, or the media (Collins, 1998). Another vast field marks the integration of other identity categories such as sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, religion, age, and dis/ability into the study of race, gender, and class (Annamma et al., 2018; Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Calasanti & King, 2015; Chow, 2011; El-Tayeb, 2011; Gerber et al., 2015; Mirza, 2013; Taylor et al., 2011). The third field is occupied with understanding violence and its gendered, racial, and classed dimensions (Crenshaw, 1991; Salter, 2013). The fourth area deals with identity and questions such as whose identity constitutes an intersectional identity (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Nash, 2008, 2019), a discussion I outline further below. And finally, there are the fields of the

epistemology of intersectionality and its methodology (Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005), which I also elaborate on next, when discussing some of intersectionality's main contestations.

Intersectionality, despite its popularity, has repeatedly been critiqued and contested. For instance, scholars have questioned the usefulness of Crenshaw's metaphor in conducting legal, political, or social research (Chang & Culp, 2002; Ken, 2008), as well as the language used to describe intersectionality in feminist research (Ken & Helmuth, 2021). Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016) criticise that intersectionality is often expected to provide a fully-fledged framework: "Far too much scholarship starts with the assumption that intersectionality is a finished framework that can simply be applied to a given research project or political program" (p. 31). As Crenshaw (in Berger & Guidroz, 2009) notes, "And my own use of the term 'intersectional' was just a metaphor. I'm amazed at how it gets over- and underused; sometimes, I can't even recognize it in the literature anymore" (p. 65). Yet, it is precisely because of its incompleteness and vagueness, sociologist Kathy Davis (2008) suggests, that intersectionality has been so popular.

Attending to these issues, scholars of various disciplines have discussed how intersectionality can be employed as a research paradigm (Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005). Leslie McCall (2005), for example, advocates for an 'intercategorical' approach in social sciences methodology, "which focuses on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories" (p. 1786). Similarly, political scientist Ange-Marie Hancock (2007) praises that the 'intersectional' approach "not only recognizes the political significance of one or another category . . . but it also sees more than one category's explanatory power in examining political institutions or political actors" (p. 67). Importantly, such approaches to methodology suggest that intersectionality as a research framework and paradigm is applicable to any research project investigating multiple categories of identity. However, critics like political scientist Nikol Alexander-Floyd (2012) argue that such approaches render the work of Black women invisible as they "help to legitimate analyses produced under the rubric of intersectionality that have nothing to do with black women or women of color" (p. 11). This criticism relates to another point of contestation, the focus on Black women's identities in intersectionality.

Many scholars have critiqued intersectionality's narrow focus on Black women (Carbado et al., 2013), claiming that it excludes other non-Black women of colour (Puar, 2012) and women in the Global South (Patil, 2013). Relatedly, is has been argued that "black women are treated as a unitary monolithic entity" (Nash, 2008, p. 8), since their differences in regards to class, nationality, or sexuality are oftentimes ignored when positioning Black women in contrast to white women and

Black men. However, in her 1991 article, Crenshaw clarifies in a footnote that intersectionality is only a "provisional concept" (p. 1244), which "can and should be expanded by factoring in issues such as class, sexual orientation, age, and color" (p. 1245). Moreover, many critiques of intersectionality, Tiffany Lethabo King (2015) notes, implicitly entail "the notion that Black women are too particular, too embodied and therefore not capable of producing knowledge that can transcend identity" (p. 124).

Additionally, as these critiques demonstrate, intersectionality is often linked to Black feminist standpoint theory (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2011; Naples, 2009). Standpoint theory, as Collins (1997) explains, "refers to historically shared, *group*-based experiences. Groups have a degree of permanence over time such that group realities transcend individual experiences" (p. 375; emphasis in original). That is, "standpoint theory places less emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups than on the social conditions that construct such groups" (p. 375). However, as Collins further elucidates, while standpoint theory is helpful in explaining race or class struggles, gender works differently, since it stretches across race and class, thus represents "a distinctly different intellectual and political project within standpoint theory" (p. 378). Intersectionality therefore provides a useful concept for analysing how these different systems of power interact (Yuval-Davis, 2012). As I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, a common (mis)understanding in popular intersectionality discourses, however, appears to be that in order to be able/allowed to speak about certain experiences of oppression, one needs to embody that group's standpoint (e.g., usually that of a marginalised person).

This also links to questions on who is considered an "intersectional subject" (Nash, 2008). Regarding intersectionality as a broader framework to analyse women's oppressions, philosophy scholar Naomi Zack (2005) suggests that intersectionality "refers to multiple oppressions experienced by nonwhite and poor women in particular, but more generally to all women because differences in sexuality, age, and physical ableness are also sites of oppression" (p. 7). Other scholars have also discussed male identities as intersectional (Carbado et al., 2013; Dean, 2011), since "straight white maleness arguably is a multiple identity, but intersectionality theorists would resist the claim by straight while males that theirs is an intersectional subjectivity" (Kwan, 1997, p. 1275). As transnational feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) cautions, "if we begin our analysis from, and limit it to, the space of privileged communities, our visions of justice are more likely to be exclusionary because privilege nurtures blindness to those without the same privileges" (p. 510). This is, of course, not to say that we should not analyse dominant social groups at all, but that employing intersectionality to focus on these groups bears the risk of re-

marginalising other groups who are already less visible in academic research (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Cooper, 2015; Lethabo King, 2015; Nash, 2016). In this thesis, my attention lies on white femininities and how these govern the popular intersectionality discourses I examine (see Chapters 6 and 7). As Terese Jonsson (2021), among others, rightly reminds us, "There is a danger inherent in analysing white and white-centred feminism of inevitably contributing to reinforcing its centrality" (p. 9). Yet, I believe it is necessary to engage with these gendered dynamics, as they not only appear to cut across race and gender formations, but ultimately harm those who developed intersectionality in the first place (see also Chapter 4).

A further key contestation is related to intersectionality's 'inward turn' under neoliberalism (Collins, 2009). As Collins (2009) notes, "intersectional analyses have far too often turned inward, to the level of personal identity narratives, in part, because intersectionality can be grasped far more easily when constructing one's own autobiography" (p. ix). This inward turn, however, leads to intersectionality being criticised as a theory of identity and its advocates being attacked for conducting identity politics (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Lethabo King, 2015). As Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016) pointedly ask: "Who benefits from the suppression of identity politics advanced by disenfranchised groups?" (p. 132). Following feminist theorist Barbara Tomlinson (2018), criticism of intersectionality as identity politics constitutes precisely identity politics. Intersectionality theory, however, has always exceeded the individual experience. Not at least because Crenshaw (1991), as I outlined earlier, examined the structural, political and representational dimension of intersectionality. As Crenshaw (in Berger & Guidroz, 2009) expresses elsewhere: "I've always been interested in both the structural convergence and the political marginality" (p. 65). Additionally, Black and women of colour feminists and activists articulated the notion of intersectionality long before Crenshaw's use of the metaphor, as I discussed above. And yet, academic discussions – and as I demonstrate in this thesis, also increasingly digital feminist discussions – have come to favour the individual dimensions of intersectionality in academic and activist discourses over structural ones.

Moreover, discussions about intersectionality as identity politics often serve to distract from critiques of intersectionality's 'appropriation' through white feminist scholars (Bilge, 2013). For instance, Tomlinson (2018) examines the neoliberal and powerblind "discursive devices" and "rhetorics" that "many white scholars [use to] position themselves as 'rescuing' the concept of intersectionality from the inadequate thinking of the women of color who developed it" (p. 6). Collins (in Collins et al., 2021) further highlights that often the pure mentioning of intersectionality in the title or introduction of an academic paper appears to serve as distraction from its lack of

intersectional analyses. Through naming intersectionality, Collins argues, "an author can harvest the intellectual cachet now afforded the term intersectionality without directly engaging its political, substantive, or methodological substance" (p. 693). Moreover, critics of intersectionality's appropriation by white academics, such as sociologist Sirma Bilge (2013), criticise the "whitening of intersectionality" through European and especially German scholars, which "is achieved in part by excluding from debate or overlooking the contributions of those who have multiple minority identities and are marginalized social actors – women of color and queers of color" (p. 412). Moreover, a further mechanism of appropriation is the claiming of intersectionality as feminist theory's 'brainchild' (Collins et al., 2021; Lewis, 2013). As Maria Carbin and Sara Edenheim (2013) note, intersectionality is no longer perceived by white scholars as a critique of white feminisms, but rather an inclusive feminism:[15]

> the concept has moved from being a sign of threat and conflict to (white) feminism, to a consensus-creating signifier that not only made the concept successful but also enabled an institutionalization of a liberal, 'all-inclusive' feminism based on a denial of power as constitutive for all subjects (and non-subject alike). (p. 234)

I further outline discussions of appropriation in the context of European/German scholarship in the next section, after exploring how intersectionality has travelled to Germany.

2.1.2. Travelling Knowledge Project: Intersectionality in Germany

Intersectionality has been described as a travelling knowledge project and theory (Carbado et al., 2013; Knapp, 2005; Lewis, 2013). Literary theorist Edward W. Saïd's (1983) notion of "travelling theory" conveys that "ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another" (p. 226). In this section, I focus on intersectionality's travels to Germany and establish how intersectional thought was articulated by Afro-German feminists in the 1970s/1980s, how this articulation was influenced by Black US feminists, as well as the problems that arise when attempting to translate gender, class, and race. I further discuss how the notion of travelling theory can actually hurt those who articulated the concept and ideas around intersectionality first. As with the previous section, my explorations cannot be understood to be comprehensive, but rather aim to highlight some key examples of intersectional thought of colour in Germany (see for instance Florvil, 2020; Groth, 2021; Haschemi Yekani et al., 2008).

[15] I discuss similar tendencies of popular intersectionality in Chapter 5.

One of the earliest endeavours to heighten the visibility of Black female experience in Germany was the volume *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (2018 [1986]),[16] edited by May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz. The book entails Ayim's diploma thesis which discusses Germany's colonial past and analyses racism in German children's books, as well as poetry, conversations, and personal narratives by Afro-German women about their daily experiences in a white-dominated culture. These women address a variety of topics such as the lack of a sense of belonging and what it means to be biracial, for example when white Germans point out their accurate German language skills. Throughout the volume, Black German women experiencing racism and sexism simultaneously, is a recurring theme:

> Due to their multi-layered links, racism and sexism cause a situation in which its complexity oftentimes is not recognised. (May Ayim, p. 64)

> As a woman of colour, you're considered exotic, which matches the usual cliché that is propagated everywhere. For men, I believe, it is different. (Laura Baum, p. 191)

> Once, I spoke to a good friend about different degrees of discrimination. She was struggling with being chubby and sometimes felt unfeminine, because she didn't correspond to a certain beauty ideal. People sometimes have a go at her because of it. And that's why she believes that she experiences discrimination just like me. I think it isn't comparable and not on the same level. There's so much more that goes into it. If I sum it all up, it's inconceivable. And she thinks that she can reduce the inconceivable to being chubby in our society. (Eleonore Wiedenroth, p. 229)

Just like many Black writers before her, May Ayim's analysis of "multi-layered links" of racism and sexism articulates the notion of intersectionality. Similarly, Laura Baum and Eleonore Wiedenroth express how they experience racism and sexism in an intertwined way, as well as in different ways than Black men experience racism and white women sexism. Although the experiences of Afro-German women are contextually specific, they resonate with the experiences of US and other European women of colour described earlier.

Another topic in *Farbe bekennen* is that of Black solidarity and the need for collective activism. As Eleonore Wiedenroth writes in her contribution, "I think, we shouldn't disappear as individuals in a white society, but rather have to face discrimination as a group, we need to learn to fight back collectively" (p. 219). Moreover, the book also addresses international solidarity by including a portrait of the Black lesbian group, *Sister Outsider,* based in the Netherlands, and an introduction

[16] *Showing our Colours: Afro-German Women Speak Out*, the English version, was published in 1991. All passages cited here are translated from the German version by me.

by Audre Lorde titled 'Gefährtinnen, ich grüße euch'.[17] The latter is not a coincidence: Lorde connected with the contributors of *Farbe bekennen* when she lectured at the Free University of Berlin. Collectively, they developed the term "Afro-German" (Ayim et al., 2018 [1986]). Peggy Piesche's edited collection, *Euer Schweigen schützt euch nicht: Audre Lorde und die schwarze Frauenbewegung in Deutschland* (2018 [2012]),[18] credits the influence of Audre Lorde on the Afro-German women's movement: "The beginnings of the Black women's and lesbian movement in Germany are closely affiliated with Audre Lorde, precisely because its protagonists had the vision of a diasporic network of Black people across national borders" (p. 7; my translation). Moreover, Dutch feminist scholar Gloria Wekker (2018) praises both Audre Lorde and Angela Davis as "identificatory possibilities with real-life Black women" for Black Germans (p. 161; see also Ellerbe, 2018; Florvil, 2020; Kraft, 2014).

Farbe bekennen was not the only Afro-German project Audre Lorde inspired. ADERFA, nowadays Generation ADERFA, is a black queer feminist organisation that emerged in the 1980s. As historian Tiffany N. Florvil (2020) explains, a group of female members started meeting separately after experiencing sexism, misogyny, and homophobia at earlier meetings of the Black German organisation ISD:[19] "A December 1986 meet-up in Cologne was important for [Katharina] Oguntoye, [Jasmin] Eding, Katja Kinder, Elke Jank (Ja-El), Eva von Pirch, Daniela Toukarzi, the sisters Christina and Domenica Grotke, and others, who were from different regions in Germany. After this meeting, ADEFRA was born" (p. 80). Florvil further highlights ADERFA's contributions to German Black feminism, in particular its intersectional approach:

> Embracing intersectional politics, Black German women insisted on a space within white German feminist and queer discourses. They built on, responded to, and challenged mainstream white German feminists who still ignored the impact that overlapping systems of oppression had on Black women and Women of Color in the nation. As such, ADEFRA emerged as a Black queer feminist project that produced different modes of political action and gave Black feminism room to evolve and thrive in society. (p. 77)

Moreover, ADERFA published between 1988 and 1990 a literary magazine called *Afrekete: Zeitung für afro-deutsche und schwarze Frauen*,[20] through which "Afro-German women cultivated affective ties that broadened their understanding of belonging and reflected their desire

[17] 'Companions, I greet you'.

[18] 'Your silence will not protect you: Audre Lorde and the Black women's movement in Germany'.

[19] Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland [Initiative Black people in Germany].

[20] 'Afrekete: Magazine for Afro-German and Black Women'

for acceptance; their connected differences strengthened their practices of kinship" (Florvil, 2020, p. 78). Thus, collaboration and coalition are highlighted as key practices in Black feminist community and movement building.

Intersectional thought reverberates through the writings and activism of non-Black women of colour, Jewish women,[21] and migrant women in Germany as well (Groth, 2021; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2011; International Women* Space, 2019). For instance, sociologist Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez (1999) analyses the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity in the biographies of migrant women, arguing that "gender is not just produced on the basis of gender relations, but also in relation to ethnicizing, racializing, sexuality, and class relations" (p. 12; my translation). Similarly, the edited collection *Als ich nach Deutschland kam* (2019),[22] presents the personal stories of "women, who came to West-Germany as so-called guest workers, or as contract workers to East-Germany; women, who came to the formerly divided, later reunified, Germany as migrants and refugees, as well as German women who experience racism" (International Women* Space, 2019, p. 10; my translation). As these examples illustrate, a vast range of writing and activism of German women of colour has contributed to travelling intersectional thoughts. However, applying intersectionality in a different geographical and linguistic (academic) context also bears certain problems and risks.

Kathy Davis (2014) claims that "travelling theories demand cultural as well as linguistic translations" (p. 216). In German, a linguistic distinction between sex and gender does not exist, and it is common practice to use the English terms 'sex' and 'gender', especially in academia where 'gender studies' is now an established discipline. The concepts of 'race' and 'class', however, require more effort to translate. The problematic nature of the former lies in its historical

[21] Jewish feminist Jessica Greenebaum (1999) has argued in the US context that Jewish women are often excluded from intersectionality debates, since Jews are often perceived as economically privileged and white. German Jews, however, as author Laura Cazés contends in an interview with Sharon Adler (Cazés & Adler, 2022), are not always perceived as white. As Cazés explains, despite having a German passport, many Jewish people in contemporary Germany, or their parents, have migrated to Germany from Eastern European or former Soviet countries since 1945. As such, Jewish people in Germany experience both anti-Semitism and racism. However, Cazés also notes that in many cases, German Jews are 'white-passing'. I am unable to discuss the specific experiences of Jewish women in Germany in more detail here, since, notably, these were rarely mentioned in my data (see Chapter 8). For a detailed discussion of Jewish women's experiences in Germany, as well as their exclusion from the German mainstream women's movement, see Zena-Henry et al. (1994) and Groth (2021).

[22] 'When I arrived in Germany'.

use by the National Socialists to propagate their racial ideology (Lewis, 2013; Müller, 2011). As social scientist Gudrun-Axeli Knapp (2005) explains:

> *Rasse* is a category that cannot be used in an affirmative way in Germany: it is neither possible to ascribe a *Rasse* to others nor is it acceptable to use *Rasse* as a basis for identity claims, which by comparison is a common practice in the US. And this holds true not only for scholarly contexts, but also for general public discourse, where even racists tend to avoid notions of *Rasse*. (p. 257; emphasis in original)

However, feminists of colour have pointed to the problematic nature of treating 'Rasse' as unspeakable (Cattien, 2023; Lewis, 2013; Roig, 2017). Gail Lewis (2013), for instance, highlights that this narrative leads to a lack of engagement with race as well as the erasure of intersectional subjects:

> for feminists in some parts of Europe to seemingly uncritically reproduce the position that race is unutterable and without analytic utility in the contemporary European context can be experienced as an act of epistemological and social erasure – erasure both of contemporary realities of intersectional subjects (including racialization of whiteness) and of the history of racial categories and racializing processes across the whole of Europe. (p. 887)

Moreover, in an attempt to avoid the use of 'race', many European scholars employ 'ethnicity' (Lewis, 2009). However, this term is problematic as well, since it takes out the context of colonialism that 'race' historically inhabits (Lutz et al., 2011). I return to these issues in the second part of this chapter.

The problem with 'class' on the other hand is a more theoretical one. As Knapp (2005) notes, the German term 'Klasse' usually refers to Marxist theory and hence appears outdated. As sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) put it, "questions concerning inequality are no longer perceived and politically handled as class questions" (p. 53) in Germany. Sociologists hence prefer to speak of 'Schicht' [strata] to describe social formations in Germany (Knapp, 2005). 'Schicht' usually refers to the educational background or type of vocational training one has undergone, as well as economic positionality (Niehues & Stockhausen, 2022). In sticking to the use of the English term 'class', German feminist theorists have "not really engaged in reformulating it" (Acker, 2003; cited in Knapp, 2005, p. 257). Following Saïd (1983), Davis (2014) claims that "the meanings, relevance and uses of theories change in accordance with the needs and understandings of local audiences" (p. 216). In this thesis, however, I wish to critically examine this claim, as I contest that intersectional travels necessarily lead to actual and political translation. That is, the digital feminists in my study tend to employ intersectional discourses without context-

specific translations, and rather appropriate or copy US Black feminist thought, often without crediting it or discussing its complexity (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Another issue with intersectionality as a "fast travelling theory" (Knapp, 2005), is that within German academic debates, intersectionality is often regarded as having travelled from the US, and to some extent from the UK, to Europe/Germany in the early 2000s (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2011; Haschemi Yekani et al., 2008). For instance, cultural studies scholar Ina Kerner (2012) claims that intersectionality is considered "one of the most prominent topics of current feminist theory in many European countries, including Germany" (p. 203). However, such 'arrival' narratives bear the risk of rendering the labour of German feminists of colour and Afro-German women invisible (Haschemi Yekani et al., 2008). Similar dynamics were also at place at a conference on intersectionality's 20th anniversary, organised by white German academics in Frankfurt in 2009, which failed to invite any German speaker of colour but rather invited speakers of colour from abroad (Lewis, 2009, 2013). As political anthropologist Jennifer Petzen (2012) critically notes, "The choice to include people of colour only from abroad – a move repeated over and over in gender studies conferences – has the effect of relegating race and post-colonial and/or antiracist scholarship to a place outside Germany" (p. 293). As Umut Erel and colleagues (2011) critically observe, intersectionality in the German academe is at danger of becoming "a mainstreamed shortcut that can instantly 'politically correct' your output, the pain-free way" (p. 72). As I demonstrate in Chapters 4 and 5, popular intersectionality similarly functions as a 'buzzword' in German (speaking) intersectionality discourses, which often fail to account for earlier Black feminist and women of colour's writings and activisms, treating intersectionality as a relatively recent phenomenon. In reviewing some of these critiques, Kathy Davis (2019) points out the problematic nature of US-based scholars treating European scholars as a homogeneous group. Davis acknowledges though that "Race is, without a doubt, the pain point in the transatlantic intersectionality debates" (p. 121), and that white European scholars should indeed be critiqued for negating Europe's racial past and present. While I agree with Davis that treating the large, heterogenous group of European feminists as one entity can be problematic, I do also agree that white European academics generally need to further address white privilege and Europe's colonial past – as I aim to do in the next part.

2.2. Whiteness and White Feminisms

2.2.1. Whiteness as Historical Construct and Social Norm

When discussing intersectionality, it is inevitable that one also names whiteness[23] and how white supremacy operates as a structural system of oppression. As Heidi Safia Mirza (1997) writes in the introduction of *Black British Feminism*:

> Whiteness: that powerful place that makes invisible, or reappropriates things, people and places it does not want to see or hear, and then through misnaming, renaming or not naming at all, invents the truth – what we are told is 'normal', neutral, universal, simply becomes the way it is . . . (p.3)

In other words, whiteness is an underlying structure that operates within societal institutions as much as in everyday discourses. It is difficult to provide a concise overview of whiteness, as it seems to be everywhere and matters in different forms, and is contingent on history, location, and time. I therefore discuss whiteness in light of what is relevant for my area of exploration, focusing on how whiteness operates in German society, while also relying on Anglophone literature since whiteness has been explored much more thoroughly in the US context (Haritaworn, 2005).

Whiteness is historically conditioned. The "invention of the white race" (Allen, 1998 [1994]), that is, its social construction for the purpose of oppressing those designated as non-white, dates back to the 1600s and 1700s. While the binary notion of 'white = light, good' and 'black = dark, evil' roots in medieval Christianity – for instance, in artistic depictions of the crusaders – the category of 'race' was firmly embedded in religious-bourgeois reasoning of the Renaissance period (Husmann-Kastein, 2006). In 1775, German philosopher Immanuel Kant was the first to write about race in a (pseudo)scientific treatise. Kant's ideas about supposedly four original races, which implied that race mixing was unnatural, built the basis for many intellectuals after him (Bernasconi, 2016). In order to defend the capitalist and brutal exploitation of their colonies, European settler nations employed the concept of 'race' and the notion of the superior white race, which, in their minds, justified the colonisation, oppression, and exploitation of supposedly inferior races (Boulila & Motsi-Khatai, 2021).

[23] Despite common practice in German (academic) writing (Lorey, 2006), I choose not to capitalise 'white' and 'whiteness' in order to avoid reinforcing notions of white dominance, but also to highlight the re-claimed capitalisation of 'Black' (see footnote 12).

Although the common imagination in continental Europe seems to regard colonialism as a British (and sometimes also French) phenomenon foremost (see below), other nations, including Germany, colonised as well – and often more countries and for a longer time span than most people are aware of:[24]

> The German Empire held numerous colonies from 1884 until the end of World War One. These included territories in modern-day Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, Namibia, Cameroon, Togo and Ghana. But it was not only in Africa that Germany's aspirations to be a major power made themselves felt: colonies were also established in Jiaozhou in China and on the Pacific islands of Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Nauru, the Caroline Islands, Palau, the Northern Marianas and the Marshall Islands. (Auswärtiges Amt [Federal Foreign Office], 2020, para. 1)

Following World War I, many Germans 'mourned' the 'loss' of the colonies. This, as well as the occupation of Black soldiers from French colonies in Germany and the pseudo-scientific construction of race and whiteness, served Hitler's race ideologies and the Nazis as justification for the Holocaust. As philosophy scholar Robert Bernasconi (2016) analyses:

> Hitler took full advantage of the emotional antipathy many Germans felt toward race mixing. That antipathy had been heightened as a result of the so-called Black Horror: the occupation of the Rhineland by Black soldiers from France's colonies after the First World War and the mixed-race population that resulted from their presence there. (p. 92)

Thus, given Kant's writings, Germany's role as coloniser, as well as the Holocaust, Bernasconi (2016) considers 'race' a "German invention". Although the colonial and imperial history of other European countries should neither be ignored nor diminished, the role Germans have played in the invention and upholding of the racial system cannot be denied.

And yet, colonialism in particular is nowadays frequently considered an event of the past (Roig, 2017). As a consequence, white supremacy continues to operate in invisible structures, and hence, whiteness, and accompanying white privileges are often not seen by white people (Bhopal, 2018). As feminist and anti-racist scholar and activist Peggy McIntosh (2018 [1988]) explains in her often quoted essay 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack':

> I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White

[24] This might be due to a lack of addressing colonialism in many of Germany's federal states' curriculums.

> privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks. (p. 73)

As McIntosh explains, white people are supposed to remain ignorant about their privileges. This kind of "white ignorance", as philosopher Charles W. Mills (2017) theorises, is crucial to how white supremacy operates. Using the term "global white ignorance" to describe white ignorance as not just an Anglo-American phenomenon, Mills (2022 [2015]) elucidates how white ignorance during colonialism operated through the assumption that people of colour were inferior, through legitimising of white rule, as well as through "corollary racialized assumptions and frameworks" (p. 219). In contrast, global white ignorance, Mills further explains, nowadays is "more likely to take the form of at least a nominal, and sometimes even genuine, acceptance of nonwhite equality . . . coupled with prejudicial views along other axes, such as cultural ones, and broadly deracialized conceptions of social causality" (p. 219). However, as Sara Ahmed (2004b) writes, "*Whiteness is only invisible to those who inhabit it.* To those who don't, the power of whiteness is maintained by being seen; we see it everywhere" (para. 14; emphasis in original). That is, white people perceive themselves "as non-raced . . . in the absence of reference to whiteness in habitual speech and writing of white people in the West," as film scholar Richard Dyer (2017 [1997], p. 2) notes. Moreover, white people tend to assume that black people do not see their whiteness, which bell hooks (2015 [1992]-b) calls a 'fantasy of whiteness':

> Some white people may even imagine there is no representation of whiteness in the black imagination, especially one that is based on concrete observation or mythic conjecture. They think they are seen by black folks only as they want to appear. Ideologically, the rhetoric of white supremacy supplies a fantasy of whiteness. (pp. 168-169)

While whiteness remains invisible to most white people, this is often accompanied by the claim to be 'colourblind', or to 'not see race', in an attempt to express that they are not racist or to cover up their racism – what sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2018 [2003]) names "color-blind racism". Following Bonilla-Silva, colourblind racism is a "racism lite" that "otherizes softly" (p. 12). That is, rather than using outright racial slurs, colourblind racism works more subtly, in expressing views about people of colour as less intelligent and inferior, and via structures and institutions, such as the education system or housing market.

In a similar way, discourses on whiteness and racism often portray these as 'extreme' forms, in contrast to the speaker's 'ordinary' whiteness (Dyer, 2017 [1997]). Exploring this notion more internationally, sociologist and cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy argued already in 1990 in the

context of British anti-racist politics, that racism is regarded as extreme and fascist and thus ignores everyday forms of racism. Gilroy (1990) argued that "anti-racists have become a discrete and self-contained political formation. Their activism is now able to sustain itself independently of the lives, dreams and aspirations of the majority of blacks from whose experience they derive their authority to speak" (p. 73). Gilroy's critique of British anti-racist movements and activism at the time highlights that the notion of racism as extreme has a long history. Sociologist Minna Seikkula (2019) demonstrates in the Finnish context that these sentiments still persist today, outlining how anti-racist activists describe racism as "exceptional and suddenly emerging" (p. 1012), instead of an underlying societal structure. Moreover, these anti-racists' narratives focus on fighting racists rather than what racism does to the lives of people of colour in Finland on an everyday basis.

Not surprisingly then, English literature scholar Susan Arndt (2020 [2005]) also identifies a discursive distinction between 'bad' and 'good' whites in the German context. Racism in Germany has been historically attributed to the Nazis, and the far-right parties NPD[25] or DVU[26] in more recent times, Arndt argues – and we could add the AfD[27] nowadays as well. Thus, when it comes to racism in contemporary Germany, the mainstream belief appears to be that racism works on the level of the individual, rather than representing a structural injustice (Roig, 2017). As educator, activist, and podcaster Tupoka Ogette explains, "Racism, in Germany, is regarded as individual, conscious misconduct of others. That means it is assumed that racism occurs only among Nazis or other 'bad' people and that there always needs to be an individual intent present" (2020 [2017], p. 16; my translation, quotation marks in original). And as author, artist, and activist Noah Sow (2018) explains, it is often an "automatism" (p. 39; my translation) triggered by media representations to view far-right groups as the only perpetrators of racism. Consequently, as Arndt (2020 [2005]) summarises, many white Germans tend to think of themselves as "open and liberal, self-reflecting and solidary, in short: good(willed)" (p. 349; my translation). Moreover, given the close relationship between whiteness and Christianity (Dyer, 2017 [1997]), it should not be surprising that the notion of 'goodness' is closely intertwined with whiteness. Sociologist Aleksandra Lewicki (2022) studied the role of whiteness in two German care home providers and

[25] The Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands [National Democratic Party Germany] is a German party on the far-right extremist end of the political spectrum. Despite several attempts to prohibit the party for its 'neo-Nazi' politics, the German Federal Constitutional Court of Law has repeatedly ruled that the party is not unconstitutional.

[26] The Deutsche Volksunion [German People's Union] was a far-right extremist political party in Germany. In 2012, the DVU merged with the NPD (see previous footnote).

[27] The Alternative für Deutschland [Alternative for Germany], founded in 2013, is a German far-right populist party known for its anti-European Union stance and opposition to immigration.

identified that the interviewed policy experts and care home managers described "themselves as 'dedicated professional', 'anti-racist German' or 'good Christian' – each of which signalled their embodied commitment to equal treatment of care recipients, especially those from marginalised groups" (p. 903). However, as Lewicki's analysis reveals, these "narratives of self" (p. 903) facilitate the denial of what was perceived as 'special treatment' of Muslim care home residents, or everyday racism, such as in staff encounters with care home residents.

While the performance of the 'good' white subject originated during colonial times, and is also a particular gendered and classed one (which I expand on more below), being a 'good' white person nowadays often entails 'helping' people of colour and being an 'ally' (see Chapters 4 and 6). US writer Robin DiAngelo (2021) argues that "white progressives", who are predominantly middle-class and politically left oriented (p. 2), are perpetuating racism through "fleeting, hollow, performative" (p. 50) niceness. Similarly, as philosophy scholar Shannon Sullivan argues in her book *Good White People* (2014), it is particularly white middle and middle-to-upper class folk in the US who think of themselves as 'good' white people – in contrast to the working class who are considered 'white trash'. Following Sullivan, "white trash are othered by white liberals particularly through race-class etiquette and the resulting abjection of poor whites" (p. 26). That is, white middle-class people hail themselves as non-racist through discursively distancing themselves from the white working class who are perceived as less educated and therefore racist. Moreover, theologist Eske Wollrad (2008), discussing the German precariat, points out that 'white trash' is the only social group being named as white. Wollrad further highlights that "White trash embodies the opposite of dominant Whiteness: [Whiteness] defines itself through power, access, reason and control in the sense of being able to control oneself" (p. 39; my translation). In other words, dominant whiteness (re)produces itself through colonial (and male) notions of domination and reason, in contrast to the racialised 'white trash' who are discursively produced as racist. Once more, we can observe a discursive distinction between 'good' and 'bad' whites.

Related to goodness is the notion of innocence. For instance, gender studies professor Gloria Wekker's (2016) comprehensive study of Dutch colonial history and contemporary mainstream culture, showcases how the Netherlands understand themselves as "a small nation, innocent; we are inherently antiracist; we do not have bad intentions" (p. 80). As Wekker demonstrates throughout her study, the collective white Dutch mindset has erased the nation's history of colonialism, or remembers it as 'less bad' than British colonialism. Wekker further argues that these ways of thinking function as "defense mechanisms" which "serve to preserve this ideal image of ourselves as deeply color-blind and antiracist" (p. 80). In a similar way, I claim, the white

German mainstream understands themselves as anti-racist and colourblind. Although Hitler's fascism and the Holocaust are not denied in the mainstream – though certainly on the far-right – but in fact have been quite thoroughly reviewed and processed, the common narrative positions these 'extreme' forms of racism firmly in the past. Additionally, German colonialism is either erased or downplayed (Eggers, 2020 [2005]; Roig, 2017), not least because Germany lost its colonies after the First World War. As Tupoke Ogette (2020 [2017]) notes, the common argument goes, "Oh, Germany had colonies only very briefly and only a few. The English were much worse" (p. 45; my own translation). Whiteness in Germany, I suggest, can therefore be attributed with 'innocence' as well. As Noah Sow (2018) writes, "Because Germany insists on remaining in a state of voluntary ignorance in regards to colonialism and racism, the opinion still persists in this country that racism does not exist when those who perpetrate it did *not mean it like that*" (p. 88; my translation, emphasis in original).

Similar mechanisms of denial and erasure are at place in the academic field of critical whiteness studies in Germany. Although the field has gained more visibility in the past two decades (Eggers et al., 2020 [2005]; Tißberger et al., 2006), it is still very much compared and contrasted to the US, where critical whiteness studies seems to have a better reputation and acknowledges its roots in critical race theory and major contributions of Black and people of colour thinkers (al-Samarai & Piesche, 2018), such as W. E. B. du Bois, Franz Fanon, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks. In the German context, it is particularly Audre Lorde, as I discussed earlier, and May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, or Peggy Piesche, among others, who influenced emerging critical race theory and critical whiteness studies (Eggers & Mohamed, 2014; Florvil, 2020; Salehi-Shahnian, 2014). And yet, critical whiteness is (still) often positioned as primarily the research focus of white scholars (Piesche, 2020 [2005]). These discrepancies and research gaps are symptomatic of the unease with which white German society deals with topics of race, racism, and whiteness – a sentiment that continues after the global Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 brought more awareness of systemic racism to German mainstream culture (Milman et al., 2021), which I return to in Chapter 6. For now, I focus on the role of white women and white supremacy in feminist movements, and the affects that move white women to engage with anti-racism and (intersectional) feminism.

2.2.2. White Women[28] and Feminism

White women inhabit a unique positionality under white supremacy. On the one hand, they suffer from (white) heteropatriarchy, but on the other hand, they are also complicit in and benefit from white supremacy. Notions of white femininity as 'good', innocent, docile, modest, and putting oneself last in order to help others are historically constructed (Srivastava, 2005; Ware, 2015 [1992]) and, in the German case, rooted in Protestantism and colonialism (Braun, 2017). Particularly, German missionary women were expected to display "housewife skills, robust health and a deep devoutness combined with an attitude that corresponded with an ideology of victimhood and self-negation" (Wollrad, 2012, p. 20; my translation). Moreover, white bourgeois women served as role models for working class men (Walgenbach, 2006), and as saviours of the non-Christian, colonial (female) Other (Wollrad, 2012) – and were thus complicit in the racial hierarchies of white supremacy.

This hierarchical thinking has also been reflected in predominately white feminist movements, such as the historical US suffragette movement. Spearheaded by white middle- and upper-class women, Black and white working-class women were not represented in suffragette demands. For instance, Angela Davis (1981) describes how the 'Seneca Falls Declaration', the document resulting from the first women's rights convention in the US:

> ignored the predicament of white working-class women, as it ignored the condition of Black women in the South and North alike. In other words, the Seneca Falls Declaration proposed an analysis of the female condition which disregarded the circumstances of women outside the social class of the document's framers. (pp. 53-54)

Such a limited understanding of feminism[29] and feminist demands reverberates a feminism which has been called 'white feminism' in contemporary academic literature and popular culture (Nash & Pinto, 2021). Journalist and writer Koa Beck (2021) defines 'white feminism' as:

> an ideology; it has completely different priorities, goals, and strategies for achieving gender equality: personalized autonomy, individual wealth, perpetual self-optimization, and supremacy. It's a practice and a way of seeing gender equality that has its own

[28] This is not to say that only white (cis) women feminists engage in the problematic practices described here. However, due to a focus on white (cis) women in the literature and my interest in white femininities, I focus here on the role of (cis) women.

[29] As Red Chidgey (2018) points out, "white feminist nostalgia" continues to be "performed in political graphics and actions" (p. 161), e.g, through the constant re-production of Rosie the Riveter, or the imagination of the (British) suffragette movement as entirely white.

> ideals and principles, much like racism or heterosexism or patriarchy. . . . It's a specific way of viewing gender equality that is anchored in the accumulation of individual power rather than the redistribution of it. It can be practiced by anyone, of any race, background, allegiance, identity, or affiliation. White feminism is a state of mind. (p. xvii)

Notably, as Beck emphasises, white feminism, although predominantly practised by cisgendered and able-bodied middle-class white women, can be practised by anyone who subscribes to this specific "way of seeing gender equality". As sociologist Alison Phipps (2020) highlights, this understanding of feminism includes a 'reactionary trans-exclusionary and anti-sex-work feminism' as well as a 'carceral feminism' (Terwiel, 2020). As Phipps (2020) further analyses:

> Marginalised people are not only collateral, but are threats impeding the white feminist will to power. This is a colonial and capitalist mentality – engrossed in scarcity narratives, and competitive and ungenerous as a result – which has been empowered in the current economic crisis. (p. 160)

Nonetheless, in contemporary popular (and especially online) cultures, it is particularly white women who are denoted as 'white feminists'. As Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto (2021) write, "white feminism [is] a term used to condemn white women offenders who often speak in the language of feminism while performing racism" (p. 889). I therefore agree with Terese Jonsson's (2021) definition of a 'white-centred feminism', which "retains white women as the central subjects of theorising and activism, even though women of colour and race analysis may also be visible to varying degrees within such work" (p. 9).

Such a 'white-centred feminism' is characterised by the above described markers of colonial and bourgeois white femininity. Moreover, as many scholars, writers, and feminists of colour have highlighted (Jackson & Rao, 2022; Lorde, 2007 [1984]-a; Srivastava, 2005), white-centred feminism centres the feelings of white women and feminists – both in terms of how white women respond to accusations of racism, as well as their commitment to anti-racist causes. As cultural and gender studies scholar Sarita Srivastava (2005) explains, white feminists often react with "anger and defensiveness", while others respond with "fear and terror that their moral accounts of self will be challenged" (p. 43). To counter this challenge, white women tend to react with 'strategic innocence', which is "a way of tempering white women's feelings of desolation and of protecting them from anger and criticism by women of colour" (p. 46). Robin DiAngelo (2018) also describes this defensive reaction as "white fragility". Yet, as Audre Lorde (2007 [1984]-b) highlights, feelings of desolation or guilt do not dismantle 'racial blindness': "Guilt is only another form of objectification. Oppressed peoples are always being asked to stretch a little more, to bridge

the gap between blindness and humanity" (p. 132). And Regina Jackson and Saira Rao (2022), founders of *Race2Dinner*,[30] argue that even the very term 'white fragility' is "problematic", as it re-centres white feelings, but also re-emphasises notions of white femininity, such as "daintiness, sensitivity, vulnerability" (p. xx).

White innocent femininity, as discussed earlier, is closely related to goodness, which in turn drives a white saviour complex. In the context of aid work, the notion of the white saviour complex has been used to describe "the idea that people of colour, whether in the Global South or in the West, need 'saving' from a white western person or aid worker" (Sondarjee & Kanakulya, 2023, para. 1). White saviourism is firmly rooted in colonialism, and as sociologist Barbara Heron (2007) demonstrates, also bourgeois white femininity.[31] Researching white Canadian women who have worked as development workers on the African continent, Heron notes that her participants' motivation for development work is marked by gendered and classed notions of the "altruistic" middle-class female subject (p. 52). White saviourism, particularly in the context of development work, has rightly been criticised for being "propelled by ego and a deeply rooted determination to be the one to 'make a difference'" (Finnegan, 2022, p. 630). Similarly, the white saviour trope in screen cultures (Belcher, 2016) or on Instagram (see for instance the @barbiesavior account) has been increasingly critiqued in recent years. However, as English and cultural studies scholar David Jefferess (2021) points out, "critiques of the white saviour mentality often narrowly understand the problem only in terms of representation; the spectacle of the white body, surrounded by Black and Brown children in the voluntourist selfie, becomes the focus of concern, not necessarily the kinds of work voluntourists do" (p. 426). Similarly, leisure and tourism studies scholar Stephen Wearing and colleagues (2018), while appreciating "the importance of satirical critiques such as Barbie Saviours", also highlight that through "pointing to the individual, primarily female volunteer tourists as the primary offender at the centre of the industry, these critiques fail to account for the broader structural context of volunteer tourism and the neoliberalisation of international development" (p. 502).

Moreover, white saviourism also occurs in white-centred feminisms. For instance, as sociologist Ruth Frankenberg (1993) in her book-length study on white women notes, anti-racist work, for

[30] *Race2Dinner* is a US-based organisation facilitating dinners with wealthy white women in order to enter conversations about white supremacy and racism with them.

[31] This is of course not to say that white men are unable of expressing a white saviour complex, but in the context of this thesis, I am more interested in the relation between white saviourism and femininity.

many of the interviewed women, is regarded as "an act of compassion for an 'other', an optional, extra project" (p. 6). Yet, the notion of the white feminist self as compassionate saviour of racialised Others, innocent of racist thought, is not only patronising, but also ineffective, since "an attachment to white innocence too often continues to get in the way of concerted attempts to dismantle white power structures within feminist politics" (Jonsson, 2021, p. 21). In other words, feminists engaged in white-centred feminisms who want to demonstrate their commitment to anti-racist causes, might end up upholding white supremacy if they do not actively engage with their own role in it. This is also emphasised by writer and activist Helen (charles) (1992) who critically asks, "Could it be that it is far easier for some 'white women' to speak of racism from an assumed Black woman's point of view? What happens to the 'white woman' who feels more confident about anti-racist strategies than her own place in the dominant whiteness that we live in?" (p. 30). Similarly, the unwillingness to self-critically engage is symbolised in feminist philosopher Mariana Ortega's (2006) "notion of 'loving, knowing ignorance', a type of 'arrogant perception' that produces ignorance about women of colour and their work at the same time that it proclaims to have both knowledge about and loving perception toward them" (p. 56). These characterisations of white feminists, as I demonstrate in the analytical chapters, reverberate in articulations of popular intersectionality in contemporary digital German (speaking) feminisms. Particularly in Chapter 4, I elucidate how the white saviour complex operates through articulations of solidarity and the notion of 'wanting to help'.

2.3. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined both intersectionality as well as white feminisms. I have outlined intersectionality's Black feminist origins, its travels to Germany, as well as key academic debates and tensions, such as intersectionality's 'whitening' (Bilge, 2013) and claiming as feminist theory (Collins et al., 2021; Lewis, 2013). Notably, debates on intersectionality tend to be affect-laden (Ilmonen, 2019; Lewis, 2013), which is important in light of the affective dimensions of popular intersectionality that I discuss in this thesis. Jennifer Nash (2019), who critically observes that black[32] feminists are trapped in "Intersectionality Wars" as they continue to defend intersectionality against its critics, argues that such endless debating neglects the development of further black feminist thinking. Nash therefore urges fellow black feminists to 'surrender' by

[32] In using a lowercase when spelling 'black', I choose to follow Jennifer Nash's writing here, whose "archive of black feminist theorists includes black, white, and nonblack scholars of colour who labour in and adjacent to black feminist theory" (p. 5). 'black' in this case hence describes the theoretical field and not embodied experience.

‘letting go’ of their defences. Instead, Nash advocates for a “politics of care” (p. 76) and urges intersectionality scholars to become a “‘steward’ of intersectionality” and “recognise one’s place in a long lineage of scholars and activists who carefully and lovingly preserve the term for future generations” (p. 77). Yet, as I demonstrate in this thesis, in popular German (speaking) digital feminist discourses, intersectionality continues to be articulated in relation to whiteness. As such, it is important to continue to further examine the politics of claiming intersectionality in this context.

The second part of this chapter has looked at whiteness and white feminism. I have explored how whiteness is a product of colonialism, which continues to operate as invisible social norm in contemporary societies. I have further addressed the idea of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ whiteness, which I suggest is reflected in the figures of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ white feminists in contemporary digital feminist debates (see Chapter 4). My discussion of white-centred feminisms (Jonsson, 2021) teased out tensions in regards to white women’s role in historical and contemporary feminist movements, including the white-saviour-complex. As I have shown, notions of normative white femininity govern the feminist self and thus condition popular intersectionality discourses and sentiments. In the following chapter, I expand on further conditions of intersectionality, namely neoliberalism, affect, and digital platform cultures.

Chapter 3. The Conditions of Popular Intersectionality: Neoliberalism, Affect, and Digital Feminist Platform Cultures

This chapter discusses the theories and concepts I draw on in examining popular intersectionality and allyship discourses in the context of neoliberal digital feminist platform cultures. Specifically, I am interested in the social, cultural, and technical forces that produce and condition the ideal (female) neoliberal subject reflected in the figure of the perfect intersectional feminist I develop in Chapter 6. The neoliberal discourses and affects that govern the perfect intersectional feminist, I propose, are encouraged and produced by profit-oriented social media cultures and architectures as well as by 'neoliberal feelings rules' (Hochschild, 2003 [1983]; Kanai, 2019a), resulting in the expression of positive affects, such as inclusivity and a commitment to learning and becoming a better intersectional ally, while simultaneously experiencing insecurity and anxiety. I am thus exploring Foucauldian theories of neoliberal (self-)governmentality, feminist media and cultural studies, affect theory, digital media and platform studies, as well as research on digital (feminist) activism in this chapter.

The following is divided into four parts. The first part explores Foucault's notion of neoliberal governmentality and technologies of the self to understand how neoliberalism structures everyday life, discourses, and individual conduct. My discussion then zooms in on postfeminist discourses which govern hegemonic femininities under neoliberalism, and how postfeminism continues to operate in and through recent popular forms of feminism. The second part focuses on the role of affect and neoliberal feeling rules, highlighting the "positivity imperatives" (Gill & Orgad, 2022b) for women and marginalised groups to constantly express positive affects, such as confidence and resilience. Next, I discuss literature on digital activism and digital feminism, teasing out the various aspects of digital feminist practice that feminist researchers have identified. These aspects include the forming of feminist connections and communities, affective mobilisation, digital (affective) labour, as well as discussions around accessibility, education, and identity formation as feminists. Finally, the last part of this chapter reviews literature on digital and social media platforms, foregrounding digital feminist platform cultures which are dominated by the 'visual turn' on social media platforms and an increased importance of individual self-branding. My discussion in these four part also outlines the contributions my thesis makes to these various bodies of literature. Ultimately, this chapter highlights that contemporary practices of digital feminism operate at the junction of neoliberal and postfeminist forms of self-governmentality as well as

neoliberal feeling rules, which are both further reinforced by the capitalist platform logics of a "neoliberal visual economy" (Mahoney, 2020, p. 525).

3.1. Neoliberal Governmentality and the Postfeminist Subject

Neoliberalism has increasingly been studied by feminist media and culture scholars (e.g., Baer, 2012; Baer, 2016; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; De Benedictis & Orgad, 2017; Gill & Kanai, 2018, 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2022a; Kanai & Gill, 2020; Orgad & de Benedictis, 2015; Rottenberg, 2019; Saraswati, 2021; Scharff, 2015, 2016 [2012]). While it remains a complex and contested concept (Ganti, 2014; Hardin, 2014), neoliberalism describes both "a theory of political economic practices" as well as "a mode of discourse" (Harvey, 2007, pp. 2-3), underscoring "the extension of market principles into all areas of life" (Elias et al., 2017, p. 23). While providing a detailed overview of neoliberalism is beyond the scope of this thesis, for the purpose of my study, I focus on how neoliberal market principles govern every day culture, and in particular women's and marginalised groups' affective lives. In what follows, I adopt a Foucauldian governmentality perspective as developed by scholars like sociologists Nikolas Rose (1999) and Thomas Lemke (2001), and political theorists Jeremy Gilbert (2013) and Wendy Brown (2015), and discuss how neoliberal norms have become inextricable from postfeminist subjectivities.

Central to Michel Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism is the notion of governmentality. Described by Foucault as the "art of government" (Foucault et al., 2008), governmentality refers to the ways power operates through domination as well as self-regulation (Foucault in Martin et al., 1988). As Lemke (2001) explains, "Foucault defines governments as conduct, or, more precisely, as 'the conduct of conduct' and thus a term which ranges from 'governing the self' to 'governing others'" (p. 191). In the words of Foucault, governmentality refers to the "contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self" (Foucault in Martin et al., 1988, p. 19). Having discussed technologies of power at length in earlier years (Foucault, 1995 [1975]), Foucault concentrated on 'technologies of the self' in later years, in an attempt to understand how neoliberalism operates as an everyday ideology. Following Foucault, these 'technologies of the self':

> permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault in Martin et al., 1988, p. 18)

In other words, governmentality includes "the ways in which one might be urged and educated to bridle one's own passions, to control one's own instincts, to govern oneself" (Rose, 1999, p. 3). Thus, governmentality describes the different ways in which the individual's behaviour – or conduct – is shaped, encouraged, or restricted through power.

Consequently, neoliberalism as "political economic practice" (Harvey, 2007, p. 2) views the role of the state as providing the financial, structural, or legal conditions to maintain a free market with only minimal, but deliberate state interventions. As a result, neoliberal policies are marked by individual responsibility, not only of individual companies and entrepreneurs, but also individual subjects who become solely responsible for their own happiness and well-being, thus "cultivating . . . individualistic, competitive, acquisitive and entrepreneurial behaviour" (Gilbert, 2013, p. 9). As Foucault explains in lectures on neoliberalism (Foucault et al., 2008), the homo oeconomicus no longer functions as a "partner of exchange". Rather, "*Homo oeconomicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself. . . . being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings" (p. 226; emphasis in original). Thus, as Lemke (2001) concludes, "Neo-liberalism encourages individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form" (p. 202). As a result, Lemke further elaborates:

> The strategy of rendering individual subjects 'responsible' (and also collectives, such as families, associations, etc.) entails shifting the responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, etc., and for life in society into the domain for which the individual is responsible and transforming it into a problem of 'self-care'. (p. 201)

This neoliberal transformation of subjects has far-reaching consequences for all areas of everyday life. For instance, Wendy Brown (2015) discusses the "neoliberal transformation of subjects, states, and their relation" (p. 27) and argues that neoliberalism endangers fundamental principles of democracy. Following Brown, neoliberalism encourages the "economization" (Çalışkan & Callon, 2009) of human capital. That is, neoliberal marketisation logic "configures human beings exhaustively as market actors" (Brown, 2015, p. 31) who adhere to neoliberal principles even without the promise of economic gain as they expect profitable results in other ways. For example, as Brown explains, a student might engage in unpaid volunteer work in order to improve their CV for college applications. Thus, the transformation of individual subjects into human capital has profound consequences for democracy, such as the normalisation of social inequalities or alienation and exploitation of labourers (Brown, 2015). Similarly, education policies in most Western countries dictate a school curriculum that fosters a character education of children and young people as 'resilient' and 'optimistic' (Bull & Allen, 2018), ultimately producing neoliberal

subjects who do not question the status quo. As Jeremy Gilbert (2013) cautions, "the point of neoliberal ideology . . . is to console us that the sense of insecurity, of perpetual competition and individual isolation produced by neoliberal government is natural, because 'that's what life is really like'" (p. 15).

Many feminist scholars have argued that neoliberal discourses address women (Budgeon, 2015; Elias et al., 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2022a, 2022b; Orgad & de Benedictis, 2015) and marginalised groups (Gilroy, 2013; Kanai & Gill, 2020; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022) in particular. Since the 1990s, (Anglophone) feminist media scholars have critically examined postfeminism as a powerful force of structuring femininity under neoliberalism (Gill, 2017). Although the term's meaning has been repeatedly contested (Gill, 2007; Hall & Salupo Rodriguez, 2003), postfeminism as an object of analysis has come to be understood in mainly two ways. Rosalind Gill (2007) famously characterised postfeminism as a "sensibility" circulating in popular culture and media, highlighting elements of this sensibility, such as the centring of the female body, women's self-surveillance and self-monitoring, or a focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment. The other way in which postfeminism has been commonly understood is Angela McRobbie's (2009) notion of a "double entanglement", in which feminist gains are "taking into account" while feminism is simultaneously "repudiated and vilified" (p. 89). Christina Scharff's (2016 [2012]) analysis of how young women in the UK and Germany engage with feminism, exemplifies such postfeminist sentiments and the repudiation of feminism. Through articulating feminists as lesbians and regarding themselves as already liberated in contrast to Muslim women, the women in Scharff's study successfully disarticulate feminism.

In postfeminist (media) cultures, women are portrayed as subjects freed from patriarchal oppression and thus no longer in need of feminism (McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2016 [2012]). Rather, they are considered responsible for their own success in the workplace (Gerodetti & McNaught-Davis, 2017) – or in the case of young girls, at school (Ringrose, 2007) – and liberated to *choose* to present their bodies in a sexualised fashion (Budgeon, 2015). These discourses of choice and success responsibilise the individual to perform better in all areas of life and overcome any adversities, effectively 'concealing' structural inequalities such as the ones produced by social class (Gerodetti & McNaught-Davis, 2017). In recent years, new feminist discourses have developed which continue to perpetuate neoliberal and capitalist ideologies. Catherine Rottenberg (2014, 2019) compellingly demonstrates how such a neoliberal feminism addresses well-educated white middle- and upper-class women and encourages them to 'lean in' at work, all while managing the family and the household – via hiring working class and/or of colour cleaners and

nannies, as Rottenberg points out (see also Ortega, 2006, p. 57) – as well as maintaining the 'perfect' body, thus trying to 'have it all' (McRobbie, 2015).[33] This is of relevance in the context of the popular intersectional allyship discourses I examine in Chapter 6. As I tease out, neoliberal self-improvement narratives govern my participants' understanding of 'perfect' allyship and lead to a focus on the individual feminist's responsibility to learn about various identity groups, while neglecting structural analyses of social inequalities.

Importantly, the hegemonic role of white Western femininities in popular culture (Budgeon, 2014), and a focus on these femininities in feminist research, has been critically noted. Jess Butler (2013) and Simidele Dosekun (2015a, 2020) highlight that women of colour and women in the global South are affected by postfeminist discourses in similar ways. This suggests that a malleable and adaptable postfeminist sensibility continues to operate in neoliberal media cultures. Despite feminist activisms' resurgence and increased visibility of popular feminisms in recent years (Banet-Weiser, 2018), Gill (2016) contends, "Far from receding or losing analytical relevance the notion seems to be gaining prominence as a way of engaging with some of the distinctive gendered features of contemporary neoliberal societies" (p. 620). Postfeminism thus remains "virtually hegemonic" (Gill, 2017, p. 609).[34] I return to postfeminism in Chapter 7, where I discuss how my focus group participants' articulations of intersectionality and allyship reverberate a postfeminist sensibility, and in which ways popular intersectionality needs to be distinguished from postfeminism. In the next section, I discuss neoliberal feeling rules (Kanai, 2019a) that govern (postfeminist) subjectivities under neoliberalism.

3.2. Affect and Neoliberal Feeling Rules

When analysing contemporary (digital) media cultures, it is crucial to pay attention to how neoliberal capitalism and its feeling rules (Hochschild, 2003 [1983]; Kanai, 2019a) shape our understanding of media and ourselves (Gill & Kanai, 2018). That is, we need to examine which affects and emotions circulate in current media and popular cultures (Ahmed, 2004a, 2014 [2004]). Indeed, the "turn to affect and emotion in media studies" (Lüneborg & Maier, 2018) has increasingly led to scholarly focus on how media evoke and communicate emotions and affect, as well as how audiences are affected by emotions. Despite a scholarly focus on emotion, affect does

[33] I return to Angela McRobbie's figure of the 'perfect' in Chapter 6, when I introduce the perfect intersectional feminist, a continuation of the 'perfect'.

[34] As I discuss in Chapter 7, Gill (in Banet-Weiser et al., 2020) has since suggested that postfeminism continues to operate as a "gendered neoliberalism" (p. 16).

entail much more though (Shouse, 2005). As communications scholar Zizi Papacharissi (2016) puts it:

> Affect is not emotion. It is the intensity with which we experience emotion. . . . More precisely, it is the drive or sense of movement experienced before we have cognitively identified a reaction and labelled it as a particular emotion. Its in-the-making, not-yet-fully-formed nature is what invites many to associate affect with potentiality. (p. 316)

Affect hence describes the sensation of being *moved* by some things in a particular way which may lead to certain feelings or emotions, or in the words of communications scholar Eric Shouse (2005), "affect is what makes feelings feel" (para. 5). Affect can also *move* us to do certain things, such as joining a feminist activist group (Charles et al., 2018) or posting in a feminist Facebook group (Coffey & Kanai, 2021).[35] Focusing on affect as something that *moves* people can hence assist our understanding of the "psychic life of neoliberalism" (Gill & Kanai, 2018; Scharff, 2015) and the forming of subjectivities in contemporary media cultures, including social media.

One affect that circulates in contemporary neoliberal media and cultural economies and that moves neoliberal subjects in particular, is positivity. Catherine Rottenberg (2019), for example, highlights the role of positive affect and behaviour modification in neoliberal feminist discourses which portray the balancing of care work and professional work as "happiness objects" (Ahmed, 2010). Likewise, Kanai and Gill (2020), analysing affect in Anglophone advertising, find that "across particular media and consumer culture . . . we see the increase of 'feel good', positive and affirmative discourses in which the injunction to invest in the self is addressed to historically marginalised and non-normative people more broadly" (p. 20). Similar trends are observed on social media and in digital feminist spaces, for instance by L. Ayu Saraswati (2021), who notes that the "pressure to project a happy self on social media" (p. 6) is driven by neoliberal sentiments, a discussion I return to in the final section of this chapter.

Moreover, women and marginalised groups are expected to express 'confidence' (Gill & Orgad, 2022a) and 'resilience' (Gill & Orgad, 2018) under neoliberal capitalism, and stay 'positive' even in light of crisis, such as the global Covid-19 pandemic (Gill & Orgad, 2022b). Similarly, Scharff (2019) describes the "trickle-down effects of neoliberalism" in her interviews with female classical musicians based in the UK, who explain battling the social inequalities they experience in the industry through articulating 'resilience', 'hard work', and 'self-care'. Such neoliberal "positivity imperatives" (Gill & Orgad, 2022b) are not just addressing adult women, however, but

[35] I return to the discussion of affect in digital feminism further below.

increasingly also young girls and children (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Ringrose, 2007). For instance, education scholar Louise Couceiro (2022) discusses how contemporary biographies about women, such as the popular *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* (2016), while creating more female representation in children's books, also encourage girls and children to "not only be individually responsible for themselves, but also to be extraordinarily selfless. This type of messaging is in keeping with neoliberal individualism, and the limitations of feminist politics within this context are well-documented" (pp. 13-14). Moreover, cultural and media scholar Shir Shimoni (2021) analyses how in Anglo-American culture, such as hit streaming series *Grace and Frankie* (2015-2022), ageing women are produced as "happy and entrepreneurial" subjects. Instead of being aspirational towards the future though, these women have to operate within a "'here and now' temporal register" (p. 349). Thus, under neoliberalism, women are instructed throughout their whole lives to self-regulate, and told how to feel about their job, family, dating life, and body, always expected to express confidence, happiness, positivity, optimism, and aspiration.

This 'feel-good' affective culture also encourages and conditions the rise of popular feminisms (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The accounts of the digital feminists I examine in this thesis, however, reveal that there is an affective attachment to popular intersectionality that goes beyond a simple 'feel-good' nature. Although intersectionality is articulated by my interviewees in positive and relatable terms (see Chapters 4 and 5), my research participants also experience pressure and anxiety in digital feminist debates about intersectionality (see Chapters 6 and 7). This, I argue, is not only due to the increased demand for digital feminists to perform normative notions of femininity, such as care, but also because foregrounding digital feminists' efforts to 'do good' is a profound political thrust for a socially-just feminism, which popular intersectionality seemingly promises to be. This profound desire for justice, I maintain, distinguishes popular intersectionality from other forms of popular feminism, in which desires for radical change are less articulated.

Moreover, social groups form "affective communities" through being affected by some objects in similar ways (Ahmed, 2010). Certain affects hence circulate in ways that reinforce normative white femininities. In Chapter 2, I briefly outlined how affects of defensiveness can serve to maintain white female innocence when accused of racism (Srivastava, 2005). Similarly, education scholar Moira L. Ozias (2023) observes in white female US-based college students' narratives about race that "niceness – both claims to be enacting it and demands that it be given – is code and provides cover for racial harms" (p. 42). At the same time, Ozias's analysis also reveals that these white women's stories exhibit "feelings of anger at racist systems, frustration with racist actions, and guilt for feelings of fear and past inaction" (p. 42), demonstrating a form of conscious

knowledge of racist dynamics and complicity in white supremacy. Affective expressions of normative femininity, such as niceness, can assist in producing white feminine subjectivities that understand themselves as feminist and anti-racist (Halász, 2019; Kanai & Coffey, 2023; Rault, 2017). Crucially, as visual sociologist Katalin Halász (2019) highlights, "anti-racist white femininities only acquire their meanings in relation with racialized others, *in performances of white affects*: when a range of discourses, power relations and bodily states that are attached to whiteness and femininities get activated and assembled in affective practices" (p. 94; emphasis in original).

As I demonstrate in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, in contemporary popular intersectionality discourses, normative anti-racist white femininities are produced in various ways, such as through the repeated affective articulations of intersectional feminism as inclusive. In turn, I further argue, the assumed responsibility of white privilege is articulated as the task to demonstrate 'care' and ensure that 'everyone is included', which reverberates notions of normative white middle-class femininity (Kanai, 2020). In the next part, I review literature on practices of digital activism and feminism and discuss the role affect plays in the mobilisation and digital labour of digital feminists and activists.

3.3. Feminist and Activist Practices in the Digital Age

Digital feminist activism has changed immensely in recent years following social, economic, and technical changes and developments (Scharff et al., 2016). Particularly technological innovations such as smartphones and other devices, as well as the rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have led to new ways of connecting feminists and activists with each other. As media scholar Ealasaid Munro (2013) notes, "it is increasingly clear that the internet has facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the internet both for discussion and activism" (para. 6). Hester Baer (2016) describes the rise of digital activism as a "paradigm shift within feminist protest cultures" (p. 18), while others consider digital feminist activism the fourth wave of feminism (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015; Munro, 2013).[36] It is therefore not

[36] It should be noted that the use of the wave metaphor has been widely contested. There is especially disagreement about what constitutes the third and fourth waves (Dean & Aune, 2015). For a more detailed discussion on the usefulness of the wave metaphor, see Evans and Chamberlain (2015).

surprising that a prolific body of research on digital feminist activism has emerged over the past decade.

A well-known struggle in digital research, however, is the difficulty of keeping up with the fast-developing nature of digital innovations. As Anne Kaun and Julie Uldam (2018) point out, "digital activism is a growing field [that] lacks a cohesive mode of inquiry" (p. 2100). This is complicated by the lack of a precise definition of what constitutes digital feminist activism (Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Schuster, 2013), which partly arises from its fluidity of on- and offline activist practices (Sadowski, 2016). The terms 'digital feminist activism' and 'digital feminism' are often used interchangeably[37] in describing anything from using digital platforms and media to facilitate offline protests like SlutWalks (Chidgey, 2021; Mendes, 2015), to hashtag activism (Clark, 2016; Dosekun, 2022; Jackson et al., 2020; Loza, 2014) like #MeToo (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Pain, 2021; Yin & Sun, 2021), to signing and circulating online petitions – often considered 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism' to express concerns about its lack of effectiveness (Munro, 2013; Schuster, 2013). Moreover, digital feminist activist practice also includes partaking in discussions around feminist topics in forums and on social media, such as in Facebook groups (Clark-Parsons, 2018; Kanai & McGrane, 2021), as well as the production and sharing of feminist content on image-based social media such as Instagram (Barbala, 2022; Caldeira, 2023; Crepax, 2020; Mahoney, 2020), blogs (Keller, 2016; Mendes, 2021; Novoselova & Jenson, 2019), podcasts (Fox & Ebada, 2022; Wiesler, 2020), and video-based platforms like YouTube (Sobande, 2017), and, increasingly, TikTok (Steele, 2021a).

The range of these examples illustrates the complexity of what constitutes digital feminist activist practice. Since many scholarly definitions of digital activism exhibit a "techno-deterministic tendency which reads technology as the ultimate cause of social transformation" (Gerbaudo, 2017, p. 478), media and communications scholars suggest that research on digital activism needs "to look beyond digital media affordances and also consider political, and societal norms as contextual factors conditioning activist uses of digital media" (Kaun & Uldam, 2018, p. 2102). Similarly, feminist media scholars Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller (2019) argue that "digital feminism should not be merely understood via digital artefacts, but through social and cultural processes and their entanglement with technologies" (p. 6). Besides cultural and societal factors, individual factors also play a role, such as age, gender, ability, education, geographic

[37] And to a lesser degree, terms like 'cyberfeminism' or 'online feminism' (see for instance Sadowski, 2016).

location, and access to the Internet or certain platforms (Fotopoulou, 2016; Keller, 2016; Schuster, 2013), which I address in further detail below.

In the following, I approach a definition of 'digital feminism', the term I prefer using in this thesis, rather than 'digital feminist activism'. This has two reasons: On the one hand, the term reflects my participants' hesitancy to call themselves activists (see Chapter 6). On the other hand, I believe feminist media scholars need to trouble and critically question the activist potential of contemporary digital feminisms. This is not to diminish the importance of 'everyday feminist activism' (Mansbridge & Flaster, 2007), but to critically examine the neoliberal tendencies of contemporary online feminisms, such as a focus on increased visibility (see Chapter 5) and individual self-improvement (see Chapter 6) over meaningful transformation and structural change. In doing so, I am paying attention to both the technical, cultural, societal, as well as individual factors conditioning the feminist use of social media and other digital platforms. In an attempt to further characterise digital feminism, I discuss several aspects of digital feminist practices which are identifiable in the feminist academic literature: the forming of feminist connections and communities (and related to this, the question of intersectionality and whose voices are represented), the role of affect and digital labour, as well as digital feminism as an accessible, educational, and identity-forming tool.

3.3.1. Connections and Communities

Digital feminism is often celebrated for its potential to enable feminist connections and communities. In her study on feminist girl blogging, Jessalynn Keller (2012, 2016) highlights that the young bloggers formed online support networks and friendships with other bloggers, not differentiating between on- and offline friendships. Similarly, Megan Schoettler (2023) describes social media as "a powerful tool for feminist activists to connect, protest, and make change" (p. 5). In particular, the interviewed feminist activists in Schoettler's study use a range of platforms to connect with other sexual assault survivors and activists, ranging from WordPress, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, to Instagram. Digital feminists and activists hence form connections across various platforms (Kanai & Coffey, 2023; Novoselova & Jenson, 2019) and platform features, such as Facebook groups, which function as "safe spaces" (Clark-Parsons, 2018) and "filter bubbles" (Kanai & McGrane, 2021) for digital feminist discussions. Moreover, digital feminists also connect behind the scenes of digital feminist media production. For instance, networking and exchange are common practices among German feminist podcasters (Wiesler, 2020). More precisely, the digital feminists in Lena Wiesler's (2020) study express "belonging to a mutual

movement, idea or community and related to this, the wish to include the opinions, perspectives, demands, and opportunities of other people and groups in one's thinking" (p. 17; my translation). Notably, the 'wish to include everyone in one's thinking' highlights the importance of intersectionality in digital feminism – and is also reflected in my interview and focus group participants' articulations (see Chapters 5, 6, and 7).

Indeed, feminist scholars have celebrated the intersectional potential of digital feminism and activism: "Looking to, and actively calling attention to, the less toxic feminist debates happening online can hopefully give us a sense of how to implement these difference accepting group politics on a larger scale" (Thelandersson, 2014, p. 529). Others lobby for intersectional coalition-building among digital feminist and activist groups (Mohammed, 2022), while hashtags in particular are considered an easy way for individuals to join conversations with testimonies of their personal experiences (Clark, 2016). Hashtag activism has been cherished for its potential to create more visibility for marginalised groups, such as Black women and women of colour (Jackson, 2016; Loza, 2014; Steele, 2021b; Williams, 2015, 2021) as well as queer folks (Kilic, 2021) – thus deconstructing dominant representations of whiteness and heteronormativity. For instance, the hashtag #GilrsLikeUs is used by trans women of colour for "trans feminist advocacy and community building" (Jackson et al., 2020). Hashtags are also crucial in shedding light on incidents of police violence which the mainstream media might not report on: Melissa Brown, Rashawn Ray, Ed Summers, and Neil Fraistat (2017) examine how the hashtag #SayHerName[38] functions as "intersectional micromobilization" – instead of addressing police violence against women of colour on a systemic level, the activists share individual stories and names of victims via the hashtag. Additionally, hashtags help connect "people who may be isolated geographically into online communities and helps coordinate in-person actions with deeper impacts" (Garcia, 2021, p. 195). The global #MeToo campaign has repeatedly been celebrated for its solidarity among and with survivors of sexual violence, seeing how users employed the hashtag to express support with survivors, create awareness, or share information and resources in regards to sexual assault (Li et al., 2020).

[38] In December 2014, the hashtag, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, was launched by the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (CISPS), and was thus first used in the US. It has since spread to other geographical contexts. In Germany, the alteration #SayTheirNames is used to commemorate the victims of a racist attack in Hanau on 19 February 2020, which killed nine people: Gökhan Gültekin, Sedat Gürbüz, Said Nesar Hashemi, Mercedes Kierpacz, Hamza Kurtović, Vili Viorel Păun, Fatih Saraçoğlu, Ferhat Unvar und Kaloyan Velkov.

However, it has also been contested whose voices are represented in the #MeToo movement (Mendes & Ringrose, 2019). Notably, Verity Trott's (2020) analysis of Anglophone tweets under the hashtag shows that intersectional issues were hardly discussed within the early days of the hashtag's use in 2017, as well as the hashtag's most prominent users being popular white feminists, such as actor Alyssa Milano or singer Lady Gaga. The latter aspect is particularly noteworthy since the launch of the hashtag – although the phrase had been coined by African-American Tarana Burke in 2006 – has been attributed to Alyssa Milano, who is white. Trott therefore concludes that, "digital networks and technology do not empower marginalised voices equitably" (p. 1140). Similarly, Sara de Benedictis, Shani Orgad, and Catherine Rottenberg (2019) note that, "#MeToo has helped to reinscribe a dominant version of feminism, one that forefronts White women, and most often White women with a substantial amount of economic, social and cultural capital" (p. 734).

Other scholars have also discussed #MeToo's exclusive nature in terms of class. For instance, Siyuan Yin & Yu Sun (2021) examine the impacts of the #MeToo movement in China and note that "among the discussions of MeToo on Weibo, Douban, and WeChat, issues about and voices of rural and working-class women are largely absent" (p. 1185). The authors urge that concepts such as patriarchy, gender inequality, and sexual harassment need to be translated into more accessible terms and relate to the lived experiences of rural and working-class women. In the context of the Indian #MeToo movement, Paromita Pain (2021) finds that that working class, lower cast, rural, and poor women as well as queer voices are underrepresented, with the majority of Indian #MeToo tweets being authored by English-speaking women in large metropolitan areas. As Narayanamoorthy Nanditha (2022) argues, "This exclusion is primarily the product of increased attention to issues of sexual abuse among the Indian elite including Bollywood celebrities, journalists, politicians, and well-known media personalities who employ Twitter as a space for 'coming-out'" (p. 1690), thus mirroring critiques of US celebrities appropriating the hashtag. Relatedly, other hashtags such as #BeingFemaleinNigeria, have also been criticised for their exclusivity. Simidele Dosekun (2022) demonstrates that posts using the hashtag are primarily discussing the experience of "the empowered Nigerian woman", that is, well-off and university educated individuals.

Building on these scholars, my exploration of popular intersectionality underscores the contested meaning of inclusivity within digital feminism. As I demonstrate in Chapter 7, the imperative of an 'inclusive feminism' was reiterated by my focus group participants at the same time as exclusionary statements were made about women wearing the hijab. As I further argue, such

exclusionary statements are part of how articulations of popular intersectionality reproduce racial hierarchies and hegemonic whiteness (see also Chapters 4 and 5). My own discussion of inclusivity in the context of popular intersectionality therefore joins the call to critically question digital feminism's alleged promise of 'including everyone' – a promise which is not only problematic, but also epistemologically impossible, I contend.

3.3.2. Affective Mobilisation

A further crucial element in digital feminist community-building is affect, since "what it means to *be* feminist is entangled with what it means to *feel* feminist" (Kanai & Coffey, 2023, p. 646). Moreover, digital feminists utilise "tactics of feminist affective resistance" (Schoettler, 2023) to navigate hostile online environments[39] and create feminist communities. These 'tactics', according to Schoettler, involve "creating feminist affective counterpublics and sustaining these communities through affective dispositions, enacting community care, curating social media by seeking out content and users, embracing productive discomfort, and eliding content by blocking, muting, and stepping away" (p. 15). Various scholars have also examined the role of affect in digital feminist mobilisation (Charles et al., 2018). In exploring the "feminist fire" that moves digital feminists to participate in digital feminist debates, Julia Coffey and Akane Kanai (2021) note:

> bodily sensations, feelings and affects are important as they directly mediate the modes of engagement and orientations related to feminist conflict and debates online. Embodied sensations and affects motivate decisions on how and when to 'engage' (such as being too annoyed to let something 'pass', or feeling heart palpitations and wanting to 'run far away'). (p. 639)

Affective mobilisation has also been discussed in the context of hashtag activism and #MeToo. Charlotte Nau et al. (2022) detect that although users rarely expressed emotions directly, affect played a huge role in the movement nonetheless: "There were several ways in which users of the #MeToo hashtag expressed *something* in their tweets even when that something was often highly unspecific or when explicit comments on lived experiences and perpetrators remained absent" (p. 13; emphasis in original). Moreover, Kaitlynn Mendes and Jessica Ringrose (2019) conclude from surveys and interviews with Anglophone #MeToo participants, that "many were seemingly

[39] Despite vast scholarship on sexual (online) harassment, trolling, and feminist counter-activism (see for instance Clark-Parsons, 2018; Cole, 2015; Eckert, 2018; Fileborn, 2016, 2019; Herring et al., 2002; Jane, 2015; Mendes, 2015; Mendes et al., 2019; Salter, 2013), I do not discuss these issues in detail here, as my focus lies on digital intra-feminist debates.

compelled to add their voice and often literally felt 'moved' into doing so from outrage, anger, and a desire to be heard and spark social change" (p. 39; emphasis in original). Similar affective responses in terms of feeling anger and wanting to create social change are reported by Paromita Pain (2021) in the context of the #MeToo movement in India.

However, as Kanai and Coffey (2023) point out, these discussions of affective mobilisation focus mainly on feminism's "oppositional and activist character" (p. 651). In analysing other affective dimensions, such as "feminist righteousness and wilfulness" (p. 663) in intra-feminist debates, the authors not only complicate digital feminism's affective register, but also highlight power imbalances within digital feminist communities along racial lines:

> We suggest that imperatives of righteousness might be located within histories of feminist entanglement within colonial legacies of white authority and confidence – but also and simultaneously in the feminist 'fire' of articulating what is not right, and what is unjust. These were felt in the uneasy match between the pleasures of 'being right' in relation to clear injustice – and the need to ensure one performed 'correctly' in spaces where individual actions were continuously seen and marked. (p. 663)

Kanai and Coffey's research crucially highlights the affective complexity and development in digital feminism in recent years, which I argue, has been fuelled by the increased popularity of intersectionality discourses. My own research hence aims to contribute to the further entanglement of affects dominating digital allyship discourses and the need to perform 'perfect' intersectional feminism in the digital age, by looking at the increased pressure and exhaustion my participants feel in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as insecurity and anxiety over 'getting things wrong' (see Chapters 6 and 7).

3.3.3. Digital (Affective) Labour

Besides functioning as a catalysator for digital feminist community-building and maintaining emotional support, affect also plays a role in the labour digital feminists and activists perform. As Kaitlynn Mendes (2022) notes, digital feminist labour – in contrast to common depictions as "aspirational work" (Duffy, 2017) – also includes boring, tedious, and repetitive tasks such as uploading and moderating content on websites and apps, as well as invisible and unacknowledged work, like organising volunteer rota systems. As Mendes further explains, digital feminist labour often involves time-consuming and unpaid but politically necessary tasks such as translating content into various languages for better accessibility. Consequently, digital labour often leads to

exhaustion and burnout. As Mendes summarises, “the labour involved in digital feminist activism is invisible, immaterial, precarious, and highly affective” (p. 702).

Elsewhere, Mendes, and her colleagues Ringrose and Keller (2019), examining digital activism against rape culture in a book-length study, highlight the affective labour of the activists they interviewed: “it becomes clear that while digital feminist activism can be exhilarating and life changing, it is often exhausting and draining” (p. 99). Similar affective digital labour is also observed by Paromita Pain (2021), whose interviewees, despite their motivation to participate in the Indian #MeToo movement, often felt ‘triggered’ by its emotionally challenging content. Likewise, Guiomar Rovira-Sancho (2023) notes the affective labour of the Mexican #MeToo movement: “The campaign was exhausting for those curating accounts, and who had read through reports, which sometimes made them aware of their own personal experiences of sexual violence” (p. 151).

Although these studies focus on the affective and unpaid labour of digital feminists, it is important to consider the ways in which digital feminists (and other activists and influencers) attempt to monetise their labour (Scharff, 2023b). Whilst the call to renumerate digital activists for their labour done on social media platforms continues to be ignored (Verma, 2018) – in fact, as social network scholars remind us, all users’, but particularly activists’, digital labour is exploited by social media companies as their time spent on and content posted to these platforms generates data and thus potential economic gain (Fuchs, 2014; Jarrett, 2015) – digital feminists attempt to finance their activist work via merchandise, asking for donations, or product placements, often with little financial success though (Mendes, 2022). Yet, digital feminists who engage in popular feminism’s consumerist culture or ask for donations to sustain their activism are often criticised and called out (Verma, 2018). However, Mendes (2022) also points out the economic necessity of monetising digital feminism: “we must remember that fempreneurial activities are increasingly necessary to generate or supplement income, as neoliberal governments around the world withdraw welfare provisions and support” (p. 704).

Crucially, it needs to be acknowledged that ‘branded’ digital labour, and this certainly also applies to digital feminists, is often only successful when performed by thin white middle-class women (Bishop, 2018a; Mendes, 2022). However, as Lisa Nakamura (2015) reminds us, the bulk of digital feminist labour is:

> hidden and often-stigmatised and dangerous labour performed by women of colour, queer and trans people, and racial minorities who call out, educate, protest, and design

> around toxic social environments in digital media. Social media platforms benefit from the crowd-sourced labour of internet users who, with varying degrees of gentleness or force, intervene in racist and sexist discourse online. This labour is uncompensated by wages, paid instead by affective currencies such as 'likes', followers, and occasionally, acknowledgement or praise from the industry. Cheap female labour is the engine that powers the internet. (p. 106)

Hence, as Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) concludes, "social media economies are unfolding in ways that are highly uneven, favoring particular subjectivities of race, class, and body aesthetics" (p. 140). These observations link back to questions regarding digital feminist activism's intersectional potential discussed earlier, and also help contextualise the hegemony of normative white femininities I observe in my research participants' popular intersectionality allyship discourses. Not only is popular intersectional allyship articulated by my participants in neoliberal terms as 'work on the self' through constant learning and self-reflection, but also through the responsibility of using white privilege to 'do good', which reverberates normative white middle-class femininity (see Chapters 4 and 6).

3.3.4. Education, Accessibility, and Identity-Formation

Digital feminism is often celebrated for its accessibility (Keller, 2016; Schuster, 2013) and educational potential (Schoettler, 2023), acting "as consciousness-raising tool" (Mendes et al., 2019, p. 185), particularly for many young feminists. Indeed, Kanai and Coffey (2023) note that "for girls and young people in particular, digital culture is viewed as a pedagogical resource in relation to questions of power and identity across gender, sexuality and race" (p. 7). Similarly, Wiesler (2020) points out how "continuous learning and questioning" (p. 19; my translation) is an important part of feminist podcasting. However, universal access to digital feminist debates should not be taken for granted. Keller (2016) identifies in her study on feminist girl bloggers the need for regular access to computers and the Internet, as well as a substantial amount of free time in creating the blogs, arguing that many girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who may need to work in their free time to support their families or look after younger siblings, might not have the time to engage in blogging. Ease of access to digital activism can therefore be affected by technical as well as socio-economical positioning.

Moreover, although blogging and other digital feminist practices arguably are considered accessible activism for teenage girls and young women, they might be less accessible to older women. Aristea Fotopoulou (2016) points out how a lack of technical skills and resources can often be a hindrance for older activists who might feel excluded from current feminist movements.

Similarly, Julia Schuster (2013) detects a generational divide among feminists in their use of digital media for feminist activism. Besides technology, access can also be restricted on a linguistic level. Language specifically used in online spaces, such as terms like 'cis' or acronyms like 'SWERF', 'TERF', or 'WOC' might feel exclusive to especially older feminists (Mendes et al., 2019; Munro, 2013). This is, of course, not to say that older women do not engage in digital activism at all. In Spain, Las Kellys, a group of "middle-aged, working-class (immigrant) women with no university background who fit their activism into their spare time and do not master the conceptual complexity and academic jargon of intersectionality" (Alcalde-González et al., 2022, p. 13) organise via Facebook groups to protest their dire working conditions. Even though the group does not explicitly employ an intersectional framework, the authors highlight that Las Kellys use intersectional practices nonetheless, such as when addressing interlocking issues of class, gender, and migration.

Digital feminism is not only considered educational and accessible, but can also lead to the forming of a feminist identity. As Sue Jackson (2018) illustrates, "Clearly, the cultural 'cool' of feminism and the wide dissemination of feminism and feminist activism via mainstream and digital media are a significant discursive resource for young feminists' understanding of self and others as feminists" (p. 33). Specific platforms can also foster feminist identity formation. As Catherine Knight Steele (2021a) and Francesca Sobande (2017) demonstrate, video-based platforms like TikTok and YouTube respectively provide platforms for Black (feminist) identity formation. And Kim Fox and Yasmeen Ebada (2022) discuss how young Egyptian women form their feminist identity through podcasting.

Crucially, my findings challenge these discussions of education, accessibility, and identity-formation. My critical discourse analysis of a feminist blog in Chapter 4, for example, suggests a discursive shift in the blog over the years, from notions of communal learning to neoliberal self-improvement imperatives. The importance of learning and self-reflection is also articulated in the interviews with digital feminists I discuss in Chapter 6. Contemporary digital feminist spaces, my findings suggest, might no longer be (perceived as) accessible, since digital feminists appear to be expected to join a discussion already fully informed about every marginalised identity groups' political struggles (Kanai, 2021; Scharff, 2023a). Thus, the identity as intersectional feminist, for many of my participants, is one that creates anxiety and pressure. These developments, as I argue, are fuelled by neoliberal-capitalist platform logics, which I discuss next.

3.4. Digital Feminist Platform Cultures: Between Postfeminism and Popular Feminism

Digital activism and feminist debates nowadays primarily occur on a range of digital platforms, most prominently social media (Barbala, 2022). Platform, a contested term, has gained additional meanings beyond the "architectural" and "computational" sense of the word in recent years – especially in the social media context, platform is often understood in a "political" and "figurative" sense (Gillespie, 2010). For instance, as I discuss in Chapter 4, the digital feminists whose blog I analyse urge their readers to "use your platform", referring to large(r) follower numbers, in order to support marginalised groups. The concept of affordances, on the other hand, serves to "account for how material qualities of technologies constrain or invite practices while also accommodating emergent meaning" (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015, p. 1; see also van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Within the realm of this thesis, platform affordances are also understood to encourage certain discourses and "digital affect cultures" (Döveling et al., 2018), such as positivity and relatability in the intersectionality discourses I examine in Chapter 5. The role platform affordances play in boosting specific contents and affects has been discussed by other scholars as well (Saraswati, 2021). Crystal Abidin (2016), for example, explores the "visibility labour" of young female Singapore-based Instagram users who curate their selves to positively appeal to followers, the media, as well as possible future employers.

Additionally, technological platform affordances, both visible (e.g., user interface design) or invisible (e.g., algorithms), vary across different social media – as does the "platform vernacular", which refers to how users make use of platforms. As Martin Gibbs et al. (2015) explain:

> each social media platform comes to have its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics, which can be considered as constituting a 'platform vernacular', or a popular (as in 'of the people') genre of communication. These genres of communication emerge from the affordances of particular social media platforms and the ways they are appropriated and performed in practice. (p. 257)

For instance, Keller (2019) shows that teenage girls engage with feminism on a range of different platforms, but also make careful and conscious choices about *how* to engage with feminist topics depending on the platform, such as posting about experiences with sexism on Twitter or Tumblr, but not on Facebook where family members might see the post.

Crucially, platforms and their affordances are never neutral (Gillespie, 2010), particularly due to capitalist interests and racial, sexist, and ableist biases of platform designers (Bishop, 2018a;

Noble, 2018). This should come as no surprise – after all, the Internet is not a tabula rasa for defining social relations anew as early users had hoped, but rather a reflection of existing unequal power structures within society (Milford, 2015; Travers, 2003). Scholars have revealed how gender, for example, is embedded in social media platforms via algorithms or sign-up interfaces, often encouraging conventional and hegemonic expressions of a white middle-class femininity (Bishop, 2018a; Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Fritz & Gehl, 2016). Moreover, Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) cogently demonstrates how algorithms are infused with racist, sexist, and capitalist values. However, it is not just technologies that are racist or sexist, but also social media cultures. For instance, Facebook's white community norms dictate what types of nudity are acceptable to display (Trott, 2018), and similarly, whiteness dominates the debate culture of feminist Facebook groups (Kanai & Coffey, 2023).

While earlier studies have emphasised the fluidity of on- and offline feminist activist practices (Sadowski, 2016), scholars have been noting the increased "platformization of feminism" (Barbala, 2022). Platformization, a term coined by Anne Helmond (2015), describes "the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web and its consequences" (p. 1). That is, current feminism and feminist activism primarily takes place in the digital sphere and is often restricted to social media platforms. This development has been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and increased time spent online (Nguyen et al., 2020), as well as neoliberal influencer and micro-celebrity cultures which demand constant online presence and content production (Brown, 2022; Marwick, 2013). These social changes, in turn, have been enabled by digital media's "visual turn" (Gibbs et al., 2015; Gretzel, 2017), i.e., the move away from more text-based forms like blogs and discussion forums to more image- and video-based social media, such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, or Douyin/TikTok, as well as the rise of (self-)branding cultures (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Chidgey, 2021; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022) and the "professionalisation" of social media users (Simatzkin-Ohana & Frosh, 2022), including digital feminists (Novoselova & Jenson, 2019).

While the digital feminists I interviewed for the second part of my study (see Chapters 5 and 6) engage with a vast number of social media (Kanai & Coffey, 2023; Novoselova & Jenson, 2019), Instagram stands out as all but one participant indicated engaging with feminist topics on this platform. This is not surprising as Instagram's affordances highlighting the visual – thus literally allowing for more *visibility* (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022) – offer feminists a space to "document themselves living and performing their feminist politics" (Mahoney, 2020, p. 521). As Tobias Raun and Maria Bee Christensen-Strynø (2022) poignantly

analyse, the "conviction that visibility is inherently empowering when it comes to minorities" (p. 1799) dominates contemporary digital feminism and minority activism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Digital feminists, as Cat Mahoney (2020) argues, hence follow the logics of a "neoliberal visual economy" (p. 525). In Chapter 5, I contend that the increased focus on visibility influences the ways digital feminists engage with intersectionality, favouring representational over structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). I therefore propose that feminist scholarship on digital practices of feminism would benefit from a closer analysis of the platforms' affordances and vernaculars, as I do in my analysis of Instagram's sharepic culture and the 'bubble'.

However, as Mahoney points out, more visibility leads to increased accountability. To avoid repercussions such as critical comments and backlash, digital feminists, like other users, carefully curate, or "filter" their content (Savolainen et al., 2022). Platforms like Instagram therefore function as "a tool of neoliberal self regulation [*sic*]" (Mahoney, 2020, p. 3), particularly for women and marginalised groups. As a result, digital feminists engage in affective positivity and "represent themselves as happy, entertaining, or successful, no matter what happens to them (even sexual harassment, violence, and abuse)," as L. Ayu Saraswati (2021, p. 6) highlights. This in turn is in keeping with social media cultures that place "excessive value on the individual as an entrepreneurial self, a self that can be capitalized on" (Saraswati, 2021, p. 7). Similarly, Jean Jin (2021), researching the connection between veganism and feminism on Anglophone Instagram and YouTube, observes that:

> The majority of influencers prefer to nurture individual notions of growth instead of directly tackling social and systemic issues. . . . The world in 2020 is intertwined with social media and seems to be immensely influenced by neoliberal individualistic ideals as well as a special emphasis on capitalism and consumption. Social media influencers, who most successfully grasp the public's attention, promote their own lifestyle and simultaneously value superficialities as distraction from confronting political and activist aspects of living. (p. 50)

The digital self as a brand thus requires a constant 'appealing' and 'marketable' self-representation (Marwick, 2013; Saraswati, 2021).

As I discuss in Chapter 5, some of my interviewees also report using self-branding strategies, such as a 'corporate' design on their feminist accounts. However, my participants do not necessarily employ these strategies for commercial gain (in fact, no one reported any cooperations with brands) but, rather, I claim, to conform to increasing demands of perfection in digital feminist spaces. Popular intersectionality, I suggest, marks as a high-stakes discourse for my participants to attain, as I demonstrate in my discussion of the toxic callout culture and related negative affects,

such as pressure and anxiety, in Chapter 6. As such, I join Mahoney's (2020) critical estimation of the "danger of failing to adequately evidence feminist practices" (p. 521) that Instagram's visibility brings.

Finally, Instagram in particular "can continue to reinforce and reproduce existing hegemonic notions of gender" (Caldeira et al., 2018, p. 26), including through, but not limited to, the practice of selfie-taking (McGill, 2022). Instagram can hence be understood as a platform where both postfeminist as well as popular feminist sentiments and expressions meet and converge. As Sofia P. Caldeira, Sander De Ridder, and Sofie Van Bauwel (2020) in their research on young women's use of Instagram note:

> despite their political and feminist potential, these posts were also frequently marked by contemporary postfeminist sensibilities (Gill, 2016), having a vague tone of feminist celebration, while focusing mainly on questions of individual empowerment and personal choice, while disregarding wider notions of systemic inequality. (p. 12)

As I demonstrate in Chapters 6 and 7, articulations of popular intersectionality produce traditional notions of normative white femininities – regardless of the gender identity the digital feminists in my study identify with. These two perceptions of Instagram, as a site of feminist engagement and simultaneous neoliberal tool of self-regulation, while seemingly contradictory, mirror the current cultural entanglement of popular feminism, postfeminism, and neoliberalism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020).

3.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the cultural, social, and technical conditions of popular intersectionality. My discussion emphasised a gendered neoliberal self-governmentality as well as neoliberal feeling rules (Hochschild, 2003 [1983]; Kanai, 2019a), which are crucial in producing ideal neoliberal subjects, and are particularly directed towards women and marginalised groups. The primary affect these neoliberal subjects are encouraged to display is positivity, often in combination with expressions of confidence, happiness, or resilience. These affects, in turn, are encouraged by the social media platforms upon which digital feminism nowadays primarily takes place. I further reviewed the academic literature on digital feminist (activist) practices, highlighting that such practices employ affective tactics to mobilise, educate, and foster on- and offline feminist communities and identities, and are sustained mostly by the un(der)paid digital labour of marginalised groups. Additionally, I teased out the areas in which my thesis contributes

to this body of literature, such as through investigating the affects of popular intersectional allyship during pandemic times.

Moreover, my discussion of digital feminist platform cultures addressed the platformization of feminism, social media's visual turn, as well as self-branding cultures and the need to curate the 'perfect' self. I return to these discussions, as I indicated, when analysing the role Instagram's features and vernaculars play in enabling a popular intersectional feminism that predominantly focuses on visibility and individual narratives of marginalised folks (see Chapter 5). Furthermore, my analysis also raises important questions about the ways digital feminists form connections on contemporary social media platforms such as Instagram (see Chapter 5 and 6). Finally, as I discussed in the previous chapter and briefly above, whiteness, normative white femininity, and affects such as 'niceness', being friendly or kind, play a crucial role in the production of popular intersectionality discourses. I will discuss the role of normative white femininities in Chapters 6 and 7. In the following chapter, I tease out the relationship of whiteness and popular intersectionality, which operates through the discursive logics of 'good' and 'bad' white feminists.

Chapter 4. "I am white and a feminist, how can I avoid 'white feminism'?": Popular Intersectionality, Feminist Blogging, and 'Good' & 'Bad' White Feminists

Feminist activism has a rich history of alternative media, which play a "central role . . . in the dissemination of political ideas, political mobilisation and the constitution of political identities" (Gunnarsson Payne, 2012, p. 54). Feminist alternative media include print zines, flyers, leaflets, and other DIY outputs, theatre performances, music and other art forms, but also increasingly digital media such as forums, blogs, podcasts as well as social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok (Chidgey, 2012; Groeneveld, 2016; Gunnarsson Payne, 2012; Mendes, 2021; Wiesler, 2020; see also Chapter 3). Besides disseminating feminist ideas, feminist alternative media have the crucial function of archiving and historicising feminist activism (Mendes, 2021). They thus form part of a "feminist cultural memory" (Chidgey, 2012), providing a collection of feminist theories and debates that are used and discussed by activists. However, despite feminist activism's paradigmatic shift into online spheres (Baer, 2016), "only a small proportion of studies have focused on the content, processes, or experiences of feminist blogging" (Mendes, 2021, p. 411; see for instance Novoselova & Jenson, 2019). In this chapter, I conduct a critical discourse analysis of a German (speaking) feminist blog, as I contend that digital alternative media such as blogs and social media constitute important sites of popular intersectionality discourses. In doing so, I am able to trace some of the developments of popular intersectionality discourses over the period of 2016 - 2020.[40]

I begin by presenting the case study, a digital magazine published by a collective of feminist bloggers. Following a discussion of my methodology, my analysis further develops my theory of popular intersectionality. In particular, I examine articulations of intersectionality in relation to whiteness and critically interrogate the political distinction between 'bad' and 'good' white

[40] Crucially, digital spaces like blogs or social media should not be simply considered digital versions of 'conventional' archives as systems of information management and memory. Although these spaces can be understood as "archive[s] of digital traces of life", as sociologist and memory scholar Brady Robards and colleagues (2018, p. 76) argue in the context of Facebook, they are also "imperfect, and subject to erasure, re-ordering, and interference, both between users and by Facebook as a corporate entity itself" (Robards et al., 2018, p. 76). Similarly, Kaitlynn Mendes (2021) highlights the impermanence of blogs, as "digital technologies are inherently unstable" (p. 424). This point is sadly well illustrated by my case study: After completion of this thesis, I noticed that the blog ceased to exist and the blogger's domain is now available for sale. Thus, digital archives of feminist media prosumption – captured in blogs and on social media platforms – need to be understood as potentially temporary and 'imperfect'.

feminists that I observe in these discourses. Popular intersectionality, I argue, needs to be understood through this distinction. Moreover, I analyse how the affective desire for intersectionality centres the white individual's feelings about intersectionality and thus prevents deeper political and structural analysis, while also upholding white hegemony. I further elaborate how popular intersectionality operates through the use of checklists as well as declarations of whiteness (Ahmed, 2004b) and white saviourism (Finnegan, 2022; see also Chapter 2). The here examined articulations, I suggest, constitute what Sara Ahmed (2004b, 2006, 2012) calls "non-performatives speech acts" (see Chapter 1).

4.1. Methodology

4.1.1. Case Study and Ethical Considerations

The analytical case study for my exploration of popular intersectionality is a German-speaking feminist blogger collective that identifies as "intersectional" and "queer feminist". The collective actively blogged between 2016 - 2020. They also posted on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, understanding themselves as a "cross-media magazine". I use the terms 'magazine' and 'blog' interchangeably to avoid disturbing the flow of writing, though this project should be considered a feminist blog rather than a magazine in a journalistic sense due to its oftentimes colloquial language and lack of journalistic standards. However, since feminist 'zines' are rooted in feminist pop culture and the riot grrrl movement (Peglow & Engelmann, 2013), the blog can be considered a (maga)zine in this sense.

While I have obtained written consent to analyse the magazine's blog and social media posts,[41] I use the pseudonym, *Zine_X*, and cite the date of publication of the post instead of the author (whose names/alias I removed from the blog posts before the analysis). The reasons for this practice are twofold. Firstly, I am inspired by scholar and activist Rianna Walcott's 'Black Feminist ethic of care' (personal communication, 20 December 2021), which she applies to her community centred research on Black digital spaces. Walcott builds on Patricia Hill Collins (1989) whose "ethics of caring" highlights "developing the capacity for empathy" (p. 766). As a German-speaking feminist interrogating German digital feminist spaces, one could argue that I am investigating my peers. And while I am approaching their articulations of popular intersectionality from a critical

[41] My analysis focuses on the blog posts, as the collective's social media pages contain only retweets and pointers to new blog posts.

perspective, I endeavour to do so from a place of empathy, and love and care for the feminist project and my fellow (digital) feminists. My aim is not to critique these feminists in a similar way they are critiquing other white, cis feminists (as I analyse below), but instead, I view feminism as a communal project that needs to be practised, interrogated, and developed communally. As such, I am hoping for my research to inspire communication, conversation, and debate, especially among my fellow (white) digital feminists (see Chapter 8). Secondly, I am not interested in critiquing individuals. Rather, my aim is to investigate the discourses on intersectionality and whiteness, which are exemplary of a bigger current cultural phenomenon – popular intersectionality. I follow feminist theorist Clare Hemmings' (2011) example who suggests that "taking the authors out of the citation frame is thus a way of focusing attention on repetition instead of individuality, and on how collective repetition actively works to obscure the politics of its own production and reproduction" (p. 22).

4.1.2. Dataset and Analysis

The dataset consists of 64 (32.5%)[42] blog posts, posted between February 2016 and July 2020. I filtered the blog posts with a keyword search for the German and English versions of 'intersectionality', 'intersectional', 'Black', 'poc/people of colour', 'white', 'race', 'gender', 'class', 'ethnicity', and 'queer'. While 'cis' was not included in the original search term list, its frequent use became apparent in the initial data assessment, and I therefore included it in my analysis. Blog posts were saved securely in pdf format during the data collection period and subsequently analysed. Additionally, I conducted an email interview with two members of the editorial team.[43] A set of 17 questions, which were based on my analysis of the magazine, was sent in November 2020 and the responses were received in February 2021. Interview questions included "How do you define the term 'intersectionality'? What does intersectionality mean to you personally?", "Who 'owns' intersectionality?", or "What makes *Zine_X* intersectional?". Subsequent follow-up questions remained unanswered, however, the bloggers had indicated in a previous email that they were suffering from mental exhaustion due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which may also be an indication as to why they stopped publishing under the *Zine_X* banner in 2020. At the time of writing in spring 2023, the blog's website was still available, however no new entries had been posted since 2020. This mirrors Kaitlynn Mendes' (2021) observation that "some

[42] Percentages refer to the total of 197 blog posts publicly available at the time of writing in spring 2023.

[43] It is unclear how many people are involved in *Zine_X* and to what degree, but the 'About us' page lists six board member profiles.

of the most prominent feminist blogs in the Global North such as *Feministing*, *Lenny Letter*, *Feminist Philosopher*, and *The Establishment* have recently shut down" (p. 411).

For the purpose of my analysis, I combined two analytical approaches. In a first step, I began by thematically coding the data. Following critical psychology scholars Virginia Brown and Victoria Clarke (2006), "thematic analysis involves the searching across a data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning" (p. 86). After familiarising myself with the data through repeated readings and notetaking, I developed themes from my notes and subsequently identified these themes in my data. However, since thematic analysis "does not allow the researcher to make claims about language use, or the fine-grained functionality of talk" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 97), I chose to conduct a second layer of analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA), of the identified themes in the blog posts and the email interview. Scholars of CDA understand "language as a form of social practice" (Fairclough, 1996 [1989], p. 20). That is, language, both written and spoken, never exists purely on its own, but always needs to be examined within specific social contexts (Fairclough, 1996 [1989]; Mogashoa, 2014). Moreover, CDA is also a political form of analysis: One of its key concerns is how language constructs power and thus hierarchical relationships (Mullet, 2018). Ruth Wodak (2001) therefore argues:

> CDA may be defined as fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language. In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse). (p. 2)

Following this, CDA appears appropriate for analysing feminist discourses on intersectionality.

However, since I am exploring *digital* feminist discourses, there are a few more things to consider. While traditional CDA has been more concerned with how media and elites use language to produce power relations, the rise of blogs and social media networks, necessitates a closer inspection of how these platforms operate through algorithms, design, and other affordances (Bouvier & Machin, 2018). Additionally, "the idea of the 'social' suggests that we need to locate social media in terms of how it is part of other, broader social shifts" (Bouvier & Machin, 2018, p. 188). Due to social media's fast pace, spreadability, and users being able to create their own content (Fuchs, 2013), social shifts can almost be observed on social networks in real-time. Therefore, my analysis in this and the following analytical chapters always considers the specific platforms upon which the digital feminist discourses examined in this thesis occur. Finally, in

attempting to identify articulations (Hall, 1996b) of popular intersectionality, I am paying particular attention to choice of words,[44] metaphors, images, repetitions, the context and history of German (speaking) feminisms and issues of race, as well as the affordances of the social media and blog platforms used by the digital feminists investigated in this study.

Before discussing the identified themes, I want to emphasise that I do not know the bloggers' identities and embodiments (a common issue in digital research), though the two editorial members acknowledged in the email interview that they "are at odds with the fact that [their] editorial team is so white" (Email interview with *Zine_X* editors, 16 February 2021).[45] While the average blog reader might not be aware of this fact, what is important for the purpose of my analysis, is that the blog, despite claiming to aim to "give a platform to feminist, queer and intersectional voices" (Twitter bio), is white *presenting* through self-identification in the articles. This can be both directly, e.g., "I am white" (25 October 2019), and indirectly, e.g., "we as white cis-women*"[46] (1 February 2017). Of course, this is not to say that there are no bloggers of colour among the group, but that the blog is presenting as if all writers are white and, as Sirma Bilge (2013) puts it, "one does not need to be White to 'whiten intersectionality'" (p. 413). Moreover, when an audience is identified, it is often identified as non-Black, e.g., "this is what you can do as a non-Black person" (6 June 2020), or white, such as in the headline "I am white and a feminist – how can I avoid 'white feminism'?" (5 October 2018).

Moreover, several blog posts in the sample allude to the author(s) being university students, such as in "It was a usual Thursday: I woke up early, walked the dog, then headed to uni and to work afterwards" (21 December 2017), or "[Our generation is] disciplined ad nauseam, we study for exams for which we don't have a date yet and attend uni at 8 o'clock in the morning, our hair curled perfectly" (21 November 2017). Additionally, some blog posts reference gender studies and queer theory (20 October 2016), and Judith Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix (6 January 2016). Class in the German context is closely intertwined with educational qualifications (Niehues

[44] Since German-speaking digital feminists tend to borrow an increasing number of English terms (which indicates a lack of debate on how to translate intersectionality theory into German), these are made visible as underlined words in my English translation in this and the following analytical chapters. Through this practice, the number of English terms used, and hence the influence of Anglophone feminist debates, becomes visible in the discussed data immediately.

[45] All interview and blog quotes discussed in this chapter have been translated from German to English by myself.

[46] It used to be common practice among German feminists to spell 'women*' with an asterisk to indicate the social construction of the term, and to include trans women, a practice that has since been debated as it arguably singles out trans women from the status of womanhood.

& Stockhausen, 2022; see Chapter 2). As such, it could be argued that the bloggers embody (or at least it appears as if they do) an educated middle-class and demonstrate familiarity with gender and queer theories.

Finally, the blog also appears to be queer presenting, to a degree. For instance, on the blog's glossary page, 31 out of 37 items refer to sexuality and/or gender. Furthermore, some guest authors and interview guests indicate being non-binary or transgender. Yet, a number of authors directly name being cisgender, e.g., "I am cis" (25 October 2019), "I am a Cis woman in a relationship with a Cis man" (8 November 2019; note the capitalisation of 'Cis' here, which puts even more emphasis on the word), or the above "we as white cis-women*" (1 February 2017). Gender diversity thus appears to be 'invited in' through guest bloggers or interviewees. Blog entries that address sexuality are rarely written from the first person perspective, except for a text on being asexual (6 November 2017). What remains is the assumption that at least some of the regular writers are members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

4.2. Popular Intersectionality and Whiteness

4.2.1. 'Intersectionality Is Taken For Granted': Intersectionality as Buzzword and 'White Noise'

The keyword search for the whole blog revealed nine posts (4.6%) that use the word 'Intersektionalität' [intersectionality] and five (2.5%) that used 'intersektional/intersektionell' [intersectional]. For a blog that claims "to render intersectional, queer feminist reporting" (About us page), this does not seem much; albeit one does not always have to use the term 'intersectionality' when applying an intersectional analysis. Moreover, 37 blog posts (18.8%) include the search term 'weiß' [white], while only 16 posts (8.1%) include 'schwarz' [Black] and six (3%) include 'people of colour' or 'poc'. Black and people of colour are usually just mentioned in these instances, whereas the discursive focus of the blog centres around the role of white people in intersectional feminism, which I discuss further in the following section, 'Intersectionality and a Focus on Whiteness'.

When intersectionality is addressed in a blog post, it is often used as a buzzword (Bilge, 2013; Davis, 2008; Hancock, 2016; Nash, 2008). That is, intersectionality, or its adjective, 'intersectional', is pronounced without further explicating intersectionality's political and structural dimensions or relevance in the context of the blog post. For example, in a post about

creating an online zine on the topic of (queer) anxiety, the authors writes: "I wanted to reach people internationally and include worldwide perspectives. I wanted intersectionality, every facet of this topic and all kinds of media that can be included in a free, digital PDF document" (27 July 2018). And in another post, it reads as follows: "Some of us are very lucky to be part of awesome, open, intersectional feminist circles, in which we are accepted, respected and listened to" (3 August 2018). In the blog posts these quotes are taken from, these are the only moments where intersectionality is referenced and there are no further explanations of what intersectionality means and why it would be important to include intersectionality in an online zine on anxiety. Similarly, an exploration of what makes intersectional feminist circles better than other feminist circles, let alone, what an intersectional feminist circle is, is missing. When I ask the editorial members in the email interview what *Zine_X*'s self-description as "intersectional, feminist cross-media magazine" means, their response is brief and begins with a half sentence: "That all our content is written from a feminist and intersectional perspective – this simultaneously limits our area of topics. So we don't address topics that are not related to feminism and similar discourses" (Email interview with *Zine_X* editors, 16 February 2021). In this response, intersectionality is equated with feminism. Moreover, intersectionality becomes a tautology: intersectionality is intersectional. Such a discursive device relieves the speaker of a deeper structural and political analysis. It appears that the use of intersectionality operates here and in the above examples as 'common sense', or, as is written in another post, "an intersectional perspective is taken for granted in modern feminism (even though it sometimes fails in practice)" (20 February 2017). The articulation of intersectionality as "taken for granted" does not require further engagement and explanation of why intersectionality is important, and as such offers "a catchy and convenient way of expressing the author's normative commitments" (Davis, 2008, p.75).

Moreover, these articulations are affect laden and constitute a form of what media studies scholar Jasmine Rault (2017) calls "white noise". Rault develops the term in the context of US queer popular culture, in particular, the Viceland television series, *Gaycation* (2016), hosted by actor Eliot Page and his friend Ian Daniel. In the series, the hosts travel around the world to explore LGBTQ+ cultures in Japan, Brazil, Jamaica, and the US. Drawing on Robyn Wiegman (2012), Rault argues, the white show hosts "want to establish themselves as the sort of hyperconscious white people who recognize the violence of colonialism" (p. 589). In doing so, they produce white noise. In the words of Rault, "white noise is a technology of sameness-feeling – a seemingly unobtrusive filter by which differences are both incorporated and obscured" (p. 586). In other words, liberal white queers utilise affects in order to not only align themselves with queers of colour – or in the case of cis queers, with trans folks – in a move to express allyship, but also to

imagine themselves as similarly oppressed. As Rault concludes, "*Gaycation* is not a show about different cultural articulations and negotiations of queerness, but, rather, about Page and Daniel's experiences of those cultures, framed as intimately emotional based on their universal access to all things gay" (p. 593).

In a similar vein, the articulations on the *Zine_X* blog, which, as explained earlier, presents as predominantly white and at least in parts, (cis) queer, create 'white noise' through the use of intersectionality as a buzzword. Besides establishing intersectionality as 'common sense', it also creates an affective atmosphere of 'sameness' (Rault, 2017). Another benefit is that the pure mentioning of intersectionality "can instantly 'politically correct' your output, the pain-free way" (Erel et al., 2011, p. 72). That is, in simply naming intersectionality, the sense is created that 'good' white feminists are at work here. However, the use of intersectionality as a buzzword and white noise, I contend, ultimately functions as "non-performative speech act " (Ahmed, 2004b, 2006, 2012), since it does not achieve a disruption of racialised social norms and hegemony, but rather continues to uphold the status quo, in this case white supremacy (Rault, 2017).

To further illustrate this point, in the following example from a *Zine_X* blog post reviewing a boardgame designed by a feminist artist, which uses photographed images of vulva casts, the use of *white* plaster cast is criticised as not intersectional. This critique could be interpreted as another way of performing "white hyperconsciousness" (Wiegman, 2012, p. 186):

> The white plaster doesn't tell us much of what is so important from an intersectional perspective. ***Race***, class and gender (and various other characteristics) of the people behind the vulva stay hidden and the experiences of discrimination are thus not tangible. (28 January 2020; italics in original)

Similar to the earlier cited examples, this is the only reference to intersectionality in this blog post. While judging someone's race from the colour of their vulva is problematic if not impossible, it is uncertain how one can guess a person's class or gender from looking at their vulva. It thus remains unclear in how far intersectionality theory could improve the diversity or accessibility of the boardgame (if this is, in fact, the author's point), particularly considering that intersectionality rejects such essentialist assumptions in the first place (Cooper, 2015). I therefore argue that the use of intersectionality in this example constitutes another instance of white noise, as well as a form of 'virtue-signalling'. As educational policy scholar Kenneth J. Saltman (2018) explains, virtue-signalling "refers to the act of expressing online outrage about injustice by a privileged person to other privileged people in order to elevate symbolic standing" (p. 403). Next, I discuss

the magazine's discursive focus on whiteness and the articulations of intersectionality as a response to whiteness and 'bad' white feminism.

4.2.2. 'Intersectionality is a Response to White Feminism': Intersectionality and a Focus on Whiteness

Besides instances in which intersectionality is used as a buzzword and white noise, there are numerous blog posts that offer a definition of intersectionality. These definitions often focus on whiteness by opposing white women or 'bad' white feminism, as in the following two instances:

> Intersectionality engages with multiple discriminations. There are many women* who are not only affected by sexist discrimination or misogyny, but also other forms of discriminations, such as racism, transphobia or classism. Intersectional feminism is a response to other strands of feminism which ignore such multiple discriminations or even promote them and who focus (have focused) on the support of white, usually middle-class as well as able-bodied cis women. (Glossary 'Intersectionality/ intersectional discrimination')

> The term intersectionality plays a huge role here. This word stems from the English term intersection, which means Kreuzung. The idea that structural categories can't be looked at individually and independently from each other is called intersectionality. Here a few examples for a better understanding: White heterosexual women* often profit from ascribed features that result from the structural categories race and sexual identity, whereas women of colour (non-white women) and/or queer women* are affected by multiple discrimination structures. . . . (20 October 2016)

The first quote, which is from the magazine's glossary entry on intersectionality, presents intersectional feminism as "an answer to other strands of feminism". Although the plural is used here, it becomes clear that what is meant is a feminism that supports "white, usually middle-class as well as able-bodied cis women", that is, 'bad' white feminism. In this section, I argue that there is a danger in the repeated portrayal of these women as 'bad' feminists, as it produces not only partial accounts of feminist history but continues to centre 'good' white feminists' affective responses to 'bad' white feminism, thus centring white feelings (Cargle, 2018; Jackson & Rao, 2022; Nash & Pinto, 2021). Moreover, sentiments like the ones above fail to acknowledge that intersectionality was also an answer to the sexism (US) women of colour experienced from men, including men of colour in the civil rights movement (Carby, 1982, p. 217; Combahee River Collective, 1982 [1977], p. 16; Wallace, 1982).

In the second quote, the definition of intersectionality is followed by a number of examples, of which the first one explains how white heterosexual women benefit from these structural

categories. In making this the first example, intersectionality is again articulated as opposed to white women or 'bad' white feminists, an opposition that is key to the critique of 'bad' white feminists that I discuss in the next section. Instead of concentrating on how different forms of discrimination intersect, the authors highlight how white heterosexual women benefit from white and heterosexual privileges, thus focusing on their (own) whiteness.

Whiteness is also centred in the *Zine_X* editors' response to my question regarding what intersectionality means for the bloggers personally:

> In practice, intersectionality means to us that in our daily work, we keep multiple discriminations in mind. It is very important to us, to question our privileges and to not do a 'white feminism', which, until recent years, has been the predominant stream of feminism in most Western industrial countries. I.e., we want to create awareness of the fact that sexism does not affect all women in the world in the same way, but that factors such as racism, classism, ableism, homo- and transphobia etc. condition the personal experience of sexism. (Email interview with *Zine_X* editors, 16 February 2021)

The response (which I have quoted at full length) points out the necessary 'undoing' of 'white feminism'. Although lacking deeper engagement with what it means to do intersectional work, this response implies a self-understanding as 'good' white feminists. Moreover, the goal of creating awareness that "sexism does not affect all women in the world in the same way", implicitly focuses on privileged white women who do not experience any other forms of oppression besides sexism. It also excludes those who do not identify as women but might still experience intersectional discrimination. While it is epistemologically impossible to always include every possible identity and form of oppression when discussing intersectionality,[47] the *repeated* focus on whiteness, despite the performed "white hyperconsciousness" (Wiegman, 2012) on the blog, serves to maintain white hegemony. As Heidi Mirza notes in conversation with Yasmin Gunaratnam (2014):

> So, for me, simply acknowledging the long list of isms – racism, sexism, classism, ableism … *and so on*, has the effect of re-centring hegemonic patriarchal whiteness. Saying you are 'for' intersectionality becomes a speech act performed by feminists who may pronounce intersectionality as their location but still continue to situate (white) gender difference as the foundational position from which they speak. (p. 129; ellipsis and emphasis in original)

[47] Of course, this is not to say that we should continue to only produce academic and activist analyses of privileged groups.

Articulations of intersectionality as primarily opposing whiteness (and 'bad' white feminism, as I explore in the next section) hence constitute "non-performative speech acts" (Ahmed, 2004b, 2006, 2012), as they help to re-establish whiteness as dominant societal norm.

Finally, the re-centring of whiteness leads to the negation of the historical political work of feminists of colour. A blog post on white feminism attempts a genealogy of this type of feminism. Despite the contention that white feminism has existed "unfortunately since feminism exists", it also claims:

> It wasn't until the third wave that the idea of white supremacy within feminism was critically questioned – and thus putting the focus on minorities. At the end of the 80s, the American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw spoke for the first time about intersectionality, that is, the intersecting of different forms of discrimination in regards to gender, ethnicity and class. When I look at profile descriptions on Instagram, "intersectional feminism" is widespread. But that doesn't mean that "white feminism" doesn't exist anymore. (5 October 2018)

Several things are noteworthy here. First, popular (white) narratives that intersectionality theory began with Crenshaw are replicated (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Nash, 2010). Second, this narrative eschews the existence of intersectional thought before Crenshaw (see Chapter 2) and positions the starting point of Black feminism(s) in the 1980s/the so-called 'third wave' of feminism. As Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande state in the introduction of their edited collection *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe* (2019):

> Black feminism is oftentimes positioned as a reaction to white-dominated feminism but this is a gross misreading of Black feminist history and theory. In fact, Black women have always been leaders of women's liberation and have had to struggle against and defeat white women so that everyone – and not just white men and women – can be free. (p. 4)

Moreover, this account of intersectionality's history completely ignores contributions of Black German feminists, such as the edited collection *Farbe bekennen* (Ayim et al., 2018 [1986]; see Chapter 2). Third, this blog post is thus written from a white perspective, focusing on whiteness and white feminism. However, as I discussed in Chapter 2, whiteness is only invisible to white people (Ahmed, 2004b), and thus the "focus on minorities"[48] (5 October 2018) was only new or revolutionary to white feminists in the 1980s. Lastly, the above quote, once more, produces

[48] It should be noted, that 'minorities' is a term that should no longer be used, as it derives from a white-centred perspective and is considered patronising. A more contemporary term is 'Black and Global majorities' (see also Chapter 1).

intersectionality as 'common sense' through reference to its widespread use in Instagram profile descriptions.[49] Crucially, the jump between the 1980s and feminism's reach into social media nowadays, erases several decades of intersectional and (Black) feminist history.

4.2.3. 'Feeling Especially Activist in Chic Shirts with Feminist Prints': Critique of 'Bad' White Women and White Feminism

As previously mentioned, the magazine's focus on whiteness is closely interwoven with critiques of the discursively constructed 'bad' white feminists.[50] The following two examples exhibit such critiques:

> 'White feminism' means a feminism that centres white cis women from the middle-class. These women utilise feminism first and foremost to gain advantages for themselves – be it feeling especially activist in chic shirts with feminist prints or to break the glass ceiling. It's a feminism that is not interested in questions of (ascribed) background or class and that ignores the multiple oppressions of minorities. (5 October 2018)

> Feminism that deals only with hostility towards women often reproduces other forms of oppression, like for example racism or trans misogyny, or does not include these, for example, when addressing homophobia, poverty and exploitation. Solely white, heterosexual, able-bodied cis women, who are 'only' restricted by misogyny, profit from such a feminism. I want intersectional feminism, which fights for a good, free, beautiful life for everyone! (21 December 2017)

Both quotes portray white, heterosexual, able-bodied cis women from the middle-class as the only group not interested in a feminism that is not intersectional, alluding again to intersectionality's 'common sense' nature. Providing a definition of 'white feminism', the first quote caricaturises a white feminist's look and behaviour, claiming this type of feminist is "feeling especially activist in chic shirts with feminist prints". This element of ridicule serves to ostracise 'bad' white women from intersectional feminism and in turn, distances the authors from white feminism. Moreover, the use of quotation marks around the term 'white feminism' as well as the phrase "gain advantages for themselves" in the above quote can be read as a further linguistic distancing tool. Similarly, in the second quote, distancing from the group of 'bad' white feminists occurs through the

[49] I later discuss an instance in which one of my interview participants deleted 'intersectional feminism' from their profile, out of fear of being called out for not knowing enough about intersectionality. This tension prompted my interest in the cultural, political and technical developments that have triggered such affective responses. I explore these issues further in Chapter 6.

[50] A number of blog posts also address white cis men, however, due to my interest in intra-feminist critiques, I focus on the bloggers' critiques of 'bad' white feminists who are cis women.

declaration: “I want intersectional feminism, which fights for a good, free, beautiful life for everyone!”. This declaration insinuates that ‘bad’ white feminists do not want such a life, or at least not for everyone. In this instance, intersectionality exhibits a “strong affective pull” (Kanai, 2021, p. 524) which is expressed through the desire for intersectional feminism.

This element of desire emphasises intersectionality’s popularity in contemporary digital feminisms and is reminiscent of the “fantasy of the good life” that cultural theorist Lauren Berlant so poignantly describes in *Cruel Optimism* (2011). In this fantasy, as Berlant theorises, our attachment to objects such as the good life can be thought of as a “cluster of promises” (p. 23). In the case of the second quote above, intersectional feminism as the object of desire not only offers the promise of a good life, but indeed a good life “for everyone”. Yet, as Berlant further argues, the hopeful optimism with which we are attached to certain objects can become cruel “when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (p. 1). In this case, I suggest that the “affective attachment” to and desire for intersectionality prevents further engagement with intersectional feminist theory in a more productive way. As Jennifer Nash (2010) states, “this plea for increased intersectionality suggests that ‘attending to’ or naming difference will undo hegemony and exclusivity within our own ranks” (para. 7). Similarly, the here examined popular articulations of intersectionality shift the focus from the structural forces that enable an exclusionary feminism such as ‘bad’ white feminism and distance the speaker from such a white feminism. Yet, those implied in the above quotes to benefit from intersectional feminism, are rendered invisible instead.

Notably, critiques of ‘bad’ white feminism and white women are neither new nor unique digital feminist articulations. As Clare Hemmings (2011) demonstrates, “progress narratives” by Western academic feminists construct feminist theory as having moved on from the exclusionary white feminisms of the 1980s into more difference incorporating feminisms:

> Progress narratives thus reflect the importance of critiques of white, Western feminism and reiterate the significant damage caused and privileges maintained when feminists assume that white, middle-class women are the *de facto* subjects of feminism. The critique . . . precipitates feminist analysis into a more enlightened era of interrogation of Western feminism from within. (p. 43)

These progress narratives, following Hemmings, thus claim that white feminism belongs in the past and that a “a more enlightened era” has been reached. This enlightenment, I suggest, is also expressed in the affective desire for intersectionality in the above example, and the earlier discussed articulations of intersectionality as “taken for granted” (20 February 2017).

Related to the optimistic attachment to popular intersectionality – and expressed in the discursive distancing – is the anxiety of accidentally or unconsciously (or perhaps being accused of) 'doing' white feminism. This is exemplified in one of the above cited articles in the question: "I am white and a feminist – how can I avoid 'white feminism'?" as well as "What to do about 'white feminism'?"[51] (5 October 2018). These type of questions are reminiscent of the style of a self-help manual or women's beauty magazine ('What to do about zits?') and emphasise the aforementioned "white hyperconsciousness" (Wiegman, 2012). Moreover, the declaration of whiteness[52] (Ahmed, 2004b) in the above cited question, alludes to the awareness that white feminism is 'bad' and that one needs to demonstrate one's efforts to avoid this type of 'bad' feminism in order to (learn how to) become a 'good' white feminist (Kanai, 2020). These type of affective responses embody a self-governmentality that is increasingly encouraged in and through digital spaces. Although blogs and social media, as I highlighted earlier, constitute 'imperfect' and 'unstable' digital archives (Mendes, 2021; Robards et al., 2018), they nonetheless provide at least a temporary publicly visible 'archive' or 'record' of one's feminist commitments to and statements about intersectionality, including any errors, which in turn raises the bar not to make any mistakes (Mahoney, 2020) or 'do' white feminism in these spaces. In addition, social media platform cultures foster neoliberal notions of individual responsibility and a culture of self-branding (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022; Repo, 2020; see Chapter 3). As Veronika Novoselova and Jennifer Jenson observe, "feminist bloggers are not immune to the pressures of neoliberal self-branding" (p. 268) – here, the brand being 'good white feminist'. I explore these themes further in Chapters 5 and 6.

Not all blog posts addressing white feminism provide a straightforward critique of 'bad' white feminists, however. For instance, the following quote originates from a review post,[53] which discusses a recently published book addressing issues regarding sexuality and sexual freedom, which includes narratives and reflections from the book author's biography:

> [The author] presenting herself as white German cis-woman with a French migration background, middle-class and without physical disability, calls herself "pretty normal", which raises the implicit question of who is not considered "normal" and whose experiences cannot be considered universal like hers. If one wanted to be malicious, one could call her book the basics of White Feminism. This type of feminism neglects intersectionality, that is, the fact that many people experience different forms of discrimination. An example: a Black woman in Germany experiences sexism differently

[51] I discuss the response to these questions in form of a 'checklist' in the next section.

[52] A point I explore further in the final section below.

[53] The *Zine_X* bloggers occasionally review feminist books, films, and other merch. In this case, the book under review had been supplied by the publisher.

> than a white woman, because racism additionally plays a role here. And it is similar with other forms of discrimination like homo- or transphobia, classism and ableism. Like I said: one would do [book title] injustice, if one was to fixate on the author's privileges. For one, it would be more than inappropriate to write about forms of discrimination which one does not know from own experience. This should be left to those who really have something to say. (. . . for instance the recently published "Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum" [Your Homeland is Our Nightmare] edited by Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah.) (16 May 2019)

This passage claims that the book author could be accused of white feminism, as she focuses on her experiences as a white, middle-class, cisgender, and able-bodied woman. Yet, as is also pointed out, to do so would be unfair and "malicious".

In contrast to the examples discussed earlier, this review demonstrates a certain degree of reflexivity. However, it is also argued that it would be inappropriate for the book author to write about forms of discrimination she does not experience herself, pointing towards another recent publication, *Your Homeland is Our Nightmare* (2019; English version published 2022). This anti-fascist essay collection features writers of colour, as well as migrant and queer writers, artists, and journalists in Germany. The argument that only those who experience discrimination can speak or write about their experiences, is evocative of common misconceptions of Black feminist standpoint theory as essentialist and positivist (Collins, 1997, 2009 [1990]; Yuval-Davis, 2012; see also Chapter 2). As sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis (2012) states:

> This, however, was not intended to imply that only those who share a certain marginal or oppressed positioning would be able to really understand it (and therefore only women should study women, only Blacks should study Blacks, etc.), or even enjoy thereby a privileged access to understanding society as a whole. (p. 48)

Yuval-Davis further highlights the importance for members outside of the social group in question to advocate for groups they do not belong to:

> . . . such advocates do not necessarily have to be members of the constituency they advocate for. It is the message, not the messenger, that counts. This avoids the necessity to construct fixed and reified boundaries to social categories and groups. It does not mean, of course, that it is immaterial who the "messenger" is, but it does avoid becoming involved in exclusionary politics. (p. 51)

The notion that it is not "immaterial who the 'messenger' is" emphasises the importance of positionality and context when advocating for others. Thus, rather than deliberating whether the author of the reviewed book should write about the experiences of Black women in Germany, it might be more helpful and productive to think about which subject positions white women (both

the book author *and* the bloggers) could take in debates on intersectional feminism, particularly in the alternative digital media spaces this thesis is concerned with.

Notably, despite the attempted reflexivity, the quote centres the book author's embodied identities and, in doing so, articulates the author in proximity to white feminism. As such, a discussion of the structural dimensions, in this case, the publishing industry in general, which privileges white, middle-class, cisgender, and able-bodied authors, and the publisher in particular, who supplied the book in question for the bloggers to review – rather than Aydemir and Yaghoobifarah's book, which was published by the same publishing house – are neglected in favour of discussing individual embodiments. As is pointed out, it would be unfair to "fixate on the author's privileges". Yet, in contrasting the authors' embodiment as a white, middle-class, cisgender, and able-bodied woman with intersectional feminism, this review post nonetheless implicitly articulates a critique of 'bad' white feminists speaking about their experiences. The blog does not only focus on critiques of 'bad' white feminists though, it also articulates ways that allow 'good' white feminists to distance themselves from 'bad' white feminism, as I discuss in the final two sections.

4.2.4. 'Sit Down and Inform Yourself: 'Good' White Feminist Checklist

According to the discursive logics within the *Zine_X* magazine, an easy way to avoid being a 'bad' white feminist is to follow what I call the 'good' white feminist checklist. These checklists appear in several of the analysed articles, often in the form of actual lists. For instance, an article titled "List of anti-racist resources – this is what you can do as a non-Black person" (6 June 2020) lists the following resources: English and German books by Black authors, films and (streaming) series by Black filmmakers (all US American), two podcasts by Black and white Germans, and a long list of Instagram accounts, mostly by people of colour. Immediately noticeable is the US-centredness of the list, which demonstrates the influence of Black feminists and activists in the US on (white) feminists and activists in Germany, and the travelling of popular intersectionality. Moreover, it shows the importance of self-education, which Akane Kanai (2020) notices as key among her digital feminist interview participants as well: "self-education was a highly important facet of life that was almost taken for granted as an everyday, responsible feminist activity for my participants" (p. 35).[54] Most importantly though, it exhibits (white) anxiety about (accidentally)

[54] I return to this discussion and the related notion of 'the perfect' (McRobbie, 2015) in Chapter 6.

articulating ‘bad’ whiteness or white feminism. This becomes apparent when looking at another checklist in the same article:

> Maybe you’ve been one of these people and now you don’t know how to behave, here are some basics:
>
> 1. Recognise that you have White Privilege.
> 2. Grapple with your own racist stereotypes (which we all have).
> 3. Sit down and inform yourself (see list below for suggestions).
> 4. Make sure, that BI_PoC voices are being heard (listen to them).
> 5. Inform other people with White Privilege.
> 6. Use your White Privilege: Don’t let racism pass through, be antiracist loudly.
> (6 June 2020)

While the importance of recognising, using, and informing others about white privilege is emphasised three times, no suggestions are offered for *how* exactly to do these things. In addition, neoliberal instructions such as “Sit down and inform yourself” combined with a pointer to the aforementioned list of cultural resources, not only demonstrates the previously discussed unease of white Germans around topics of race and whiteness (see Chapter 2), but also patronises and infantilises the white reader, thus enforcing white anxiety about not knowing “how to behave”. The instructions in this checklist therefore constitute a form of anti-racist governmentality, which urges the anxious white feminist to self-discipline through ‘learning’ (“inform yourself”) and consuming cultural resources (hooks, 2015 [1992]-a) on the topic of anti-racism. Such behavioural imperatives mirror Kanai’s (2021) observation of the “transformation of intersectionality into an abstract, individualistic model of conduct” (pp. 519-520) in the context of Australian digital feminism. In Chapter 6, I further explore how the anxiety of ‘getting intersectionality wrong’ seems to have increased since the summer of 2020 (note that the checklist discussed here was also posted during that time).

Additionally, the language used in the above checklist is reminiscent of the popular phrase ‘Check your privilege’, which as Saltman (2018) explains, oftentimes “is less of a request for reflection or recognition of the subordinate status of minorities and a way to end the exchange” (p. 404). In the same checklist, white people are further asked to listen to “BI_Poc voices”. As philosophy professor Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò (nd) writes:

> The call to “listen to the most affected” or “centre the most marginalized” is ubiquitous in many academic and activist circles. But it’s never sat well with me. In my experience, when people say they need to “listen to the most affected”, it isn’t because they intend to set up Skype calls to refugee camps or to collaborate with houseless people. Instead, it has more often meant handing conversational authority and attentional goods to those

> who most snugly fit into the social categories associated with these ills – regardless of what they actually do or do not know, or what they have or have not personally experienced. (para. 8)

Following from Táíwò's argument, the simplistic imperative to listen to people of colour relieves the speaker of any actual responsibility of deeper engagement with white supremacy.

Crucially, this type of checklist is not new, nor specific to the German context. As author Emma Dabiri (2021) notes, "in 1942, Lillian Smith, a 'white' US southerner, compiled a list of 'things to do' in a piece entitled *Address to Intelligent White Southerners*, a set of instructions for those who felt paralysed by the situation in the South" (p. 147). According to Dabiri, the list included instructions such as self-education and visiting (at the time segregated) Black communities, which as Dabiri points out, is not "a million miles away from 2020's 'diversify your feed'" (p. 147).[55] Similarly, social welfare scholar Juliana Carlson et al. (2020) note in their analysis of Anglophone scholarly and activist literature on men's allyship, the theme of "Listen+Shut up+Read" (p. 894) is a common one as it appeared in half of the sources in their data sample. Literature under the theme specifically asks allies to listen and learn, as well as doing their homework, and self-educate. Thus, the current version of checklists on the *Zine_X* blog could be interpreted as another instance in which German (speaking) digital feminists reproduce Anglophone discourses, and highlights how popular intersectionality in the form of self-educational and self-improvement discourses, travels and is mobilised in (digital) feminist media – more recently in the form of so-called 'sharepics', as I discuss in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6, I discuss how these neoliberal imperatives increasingly dominate digital feminist discussions on allyship in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resurgent global Black Lives Matter movement.

Furthermore, although the checklist's instructions seem very unspecific, they signal the importance of actions: "After you go through this list, it is important to also become active. So don't just subscribe, but really work on making White Supremacy become history" (6 June 2020). Even though the article provides a list of things to subscribe to (including Instagram accounts), it ends on this note without further expanding on how to "become active" or how to make "white supremacy become history". This phenomenon is not uncommon in alternative digital spaces such as (activist) blogs: Even though there is no character limit in place, the bloggers appear to replicate the vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015; Keller, 2019; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015), e.g., list format, from other media platforms (Wiesslitz, 2019), in this case social media like Twitter or

[55] I discuss the role of active feed curation in Chapter 6.

Instagram. In fact, Veronika Novoselova and Jennifer Jenson (2019) argue that "the analytical distinction between blogs and social media is no longer useful given a complimentary integration of these media forms" (p. 258). As such, it seems unsurprising that the *Zine_X* blog reproduces the vernaculars of other platforms.

Similarly simplistic advice such as the above is identifiable in other blog posts. The following quote, although not written in checklist format, provides steps one can take as a white and/or straight ally:

> if you want to call attention to racism, but you yourself are white: look for other activists and pass on the microphone! Ask them for an interview or offer your blog as a platform for guest posts or share their tweets and Facebook posts. . . . Of course, you can be a straight person and call attention to LGBTT*QI topics. But you shouldn't speak for others. So, whenever there's an opportunity: pass on your microphone, the stage is big enough. (19 February 2017)

The call to "pass on your microphone" is made twice, as well as an attempt to explain what this could look like in practice. The article suggests, "offer your blog as a platform for guest posts or share their tweets and Facebook posts". However, this implies that the white reader not only has blog and social media posts with a far reach, but also that people of colour and queer activists need the help of white people in sharing their social media content. This, I claim, is where the efforts to become a 'good' white feminist tip into white saviourism (Finnegan, 2022). That is, in an "economy of visibility" (Banet-Weiser, 2018), where visibility is regarded "as empowerment in and of itself" (Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022, p. 1799; see Chapter 5), the white (presenting) bloggers, rather than critically questioning the technical affordances of social media which favour hegemonic expressions of gender and race and therefore lead to less algorithmic visibility of marginalised expressions of race and gender (Bishop, 2018a, 2019; Noble, 2018), believe that it is their *individual* responsibility to create such visibility.

This saviourism is reminiscent of the mantra common in contemporary feminist scholarly and popular culture discourses that Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto (2021) point out:

> that white women's feminist labour is twofold: first, to expose the racism of other white women and to convert them and, second, to align their political interests entirely with Black women, to 'believe Black women', and let Black women lead feminist politics as a way of truly disavowing whiteness. (p. 895)

The incentive to "believe Black women" is also implicitly present in the following example. As aforementioned, the blog post on white feminism that asks "What to do about 'white feminism'?" offers a checklist as response:

> Even when we listen and do our own research, we are still not off the hook. It will probably happen sooner or later that – maybe accidentally – we discriminate against someone, say or do something racist etc. That's when we need to plea for forgiveness [um Entschuldigung bitten]. We purposefully do not use the phrase "to apologise" [uns entschuldigen]. Only the person who we've hurt can forgive us.
>
> **What does such a plea for forgiveness look like?**
>
> - Do not centre yourself: We do our activism in our free time, the critique really rattles us, we have sleepless nights – this may all be true. But it should not be part of our apology.
>
> - Do not justify: Principally, it doesn't matter why we did something or said something. When we hurt someone, that weighs more than our intentions.
>
> - Do not counter attack: It can hurt a lot when we are being criticised. Especially, when the words are harsh. It's still wrong though to attack our critics and to distract from the actual topic. As we already mentioned: "Tone policing" is part of the problem.
>
> - Do not sugar-coat the deed: We should call a spade a spade. For example, when we've repeated a racist stereotype, we should acknowledge that. To veil our action as "mistake" or as "putting our foot in our mouth", only diminishes the action – and does not show that we understand its scope. (5 October 2018; bold emphasis in original)

The first thing that is noteworthy about this list is the conscious distinction between 'pleading for forgiveness' and 'apologising', as this (seemingly) shifts the power to whichever social group has been harmed by the speaker. However, 'pleading for forgiveness' ultimately centres the white speakers' own feelings (Jackson & Rao, 2022; Lorde, 2007 [1984]-a; Srivastava, 2005) – despite demanding to "not centre yourself" – as it forces the harmed party to engage with these feelings of guilt and shame, and asks to be absolved of them (Lockard, 2016). Moreover, the injunction to "not justify", I argue, is in line with the above cited "believe Black women" narrative (Nash & Pinto, 2021), and reminds me of Saltman's (2018) discussion of 'Check your privilege': It ultimately ends the conversation.

Notably, the imperative and essentialist tone of the above cited checklists is in stark contrast to an earlier blog post criticising the way digital feminists deal with their own and others' mistakes:

> Solidarity in the queer scene is more important than pointing out each other's (linguistic) faux pas, as we can observe in the comments of (anti?) social networks. We all make mistakes, formulate something clumsily or forget to mention an identity group sometimes. To insult and be aggressive is neither particularly helpful for the political fight nor in solidarity with others. Critique yes, but please formulated in an appreciative way, in the spirit of communal learning, with a minimum of respect. More love on the Internet [Netz]! (6 February 2016)

This quote demonstrates empathy for mistakes, such as 'clumsy formulations' or forgetting "to mention an identity group" and accentuates "communal learning". It is important to point out that the blog post this quote originates from was published in February 2016 and thus marks one of the earliest publications on the *Zine_X* blog. Comparing this quote to the "List of anti-racist resources – this is what you can do as a non-Black person", which I discussed above and which was published in June 2020 (shortly after the police murder of George Floyd and the 'Central Park birdwatching incident', see Chapter 1), a discursive shift can arguably be observed here. Phrases such as "we all make mistakes", "communal learning" and "love on the Internet" (2016) express empathy and understanding, in contrast to the notion of anxiety and a neoliberal self-governmentality articulated in "now you don't know how to behave" and "Sit down and inform yourself" (2020). This discursive shift, I claim, indicates a broader cultural shift, which, as I demonstrate throughout this thesis, has been further fuelled by digital feminism's move onto social media platforms like Instagram as well as an intensification of the neoliberal responsibilisation of the individual (Brown, 2015; Gilbert, 2013). Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic and the global resurgence of the Black Lives Matters movement of the summer of 2020 have further accelerated these trends (see Chapters 5 and 6).

4.2.5. 'How Can I Use My Own White Privilege to Help Other Queer People?': Declaring White Privilege and Solidarity

Another way of distancing oneself from 'bad' white feminism, according to the discursive logics of the blog, is declaring one's privilege(s). However, as Sara Ahmed (2004b) argues, "whiteness gets reproduced through being declared, within academic texts, as well [*sic*] public culture" (para. 11). That is, whiteness, through its repeated declaration, becomes re-established as cultural and societal norm (see Chapter 2). I argue that these declarations of white privilege do not stand alone though, but that, in the case of the *Zine_X* magazine, such declarations are often accompanied by expressions of white saviourism. Sociologist Amy C. Finnegan (2022) describes the White Saviour Complex as a quest for:

> being extraordinary. It is part of a pursuit to find purpose. It is about being right and good, and it is about reaching out to assist another while avoiding examination of both oneself and the conditions that enable the suffering in the first place. (p. 619)

In the following, I discuss two passages from the *Zine_X* blog which I argue articulate white saviourism through the expression of wanting to use white privilege to 'help' and be in 'solidarity'.

The first passage is from a blog post discussing the Kenyan film *Rafiki*[56] (2018, dir. by Wanuri Kahiu). The film review concludes with a focus on the author's white privilege and how they can use this "to help other queer people in the world":

> **Privileges and Solidarity**
> The film changed my perspective a bit. I was able to briefly see the feminist fights that we fight here in Germany in a different light. Not in a way that would tell me they are less important in comparison. But in the light of gratefulness. For all feminists and activists who have come before me. We have achieved quite a lot. And to make oneself aware of our own privileges in a global context does not mean to stop fighting our own fights.
> And another feeling stayed with me: solidarity. I want to be in solidarity with queer people in other countries. I do not want to exclusively help gay boys in central European countries, just because these are the kind of fights that are more approachable to us in Germany. The question that Rafiki poses – and to which I don't have an answer yet – is: how can I use my own white privilege to help other queer people in the world? (9 August 2019; bold title in original)

While the articulation of wanting to be in solidarity with queer folks in the Global South demonstrates some reflexivity about the author's own privileged positionality and familiarity with the notion of feminist solidarity, I propose that this text passage not only re-establishes the German norm as white and privileged (Ahmed, 2004b), but also positions the author as potential saviour of queer people of colour outside of Germany/Europe. It does so in a number of ways. First, the notion of "gratefulness" for "all feminists and activists who have come before me", as well as the statement that "We have achieved quite a lot", invoke Western feminist narratives of progress (Hemmings, 2011). This particular progress narrative claims that women and queer folks in Germany have reached a certain level of equality, in contrast to the unnamed Other in the Global South who is still in need of "help", i.e., saving (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988; Zakaria, 2022), whilst disregarding the colonial dynamics that produced such inequalities in the first place. Second, the declaration of the author's white privilege in combination with said progress narrative,

[56] The film addresses queer issues in Kenya by telling the story of two young Kenyan women, Kena and Ziki, who fall in love with each other and face pressure and rejection from their families and society.

situates queers of colour outside of Germany and Europe and thus renders European queers of colour invisible (El-Tayeb, 2011; Haritaworn, 2005; Petzen, 2012).

In light of these discursive effects, the notion of wanting "to be in solidarity with queer people in other countries" becomes a double-edged sword. On the one hand, solidarity, both transnational and between women of colour and white women, is a common feminist political goal and affect (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019; Hemmings, 2012; hooks, 1986; Mohanty, 2003). On the other hand, articulations of solidarity in popular feminism – similar to popular intersectionality – bear the risk of being reduced to slogans and hashtags, lacking any concrete action, help, or understanding of complex social and political situations (Olufemi, 2020). Indeed, the rise of social networks, blogs, and other digital media used for feminist causes appear to have increasingly facilitated the expression of solidarity with other feminists and activists across the world, such as the global #metoo hashtag (Li et al., 2020). However, women and activists of colour have repeatedly criticised white women's lack of solidarity with women of colour (Carby, 1982), for instance, through the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen (Loza, 2014). As such, the statement of wanting "to be in solidarity" in the above quote, in combination with the progress narrative, could be read as yet another declaration of whiteness and privilege.

Additionally, the desire "to be in solidarity" in the above quote creates a liberal queer "sameness-feeling", and hence constitutes another production of "white noise" (Rault, 2017). While historically white queer solidarity with queers of colour has been lacking (Ferguson, 2019; Haritaworn, 2005), it is nonetheless problematic to assume that queers of colour who reside outside of Europe are not only in need of being helped, but specifically need to be helped by a white European queer. As Hemmings (2012) notes, "feminists acknowledge that the other, the object of empathy, may not wish to be empathised with when empathy is 'bad', but tend to assume that 'good' empathy will always be appreciated" (p. 152). That is, the aspiration to be a 'good' white feminist perpetuates the belief that 'good' empathy will be welcomed. More importantly though, such declarations of solidarity and using white privilege to help are "non-performative" (Ahmed, 2004b, 2006, 2012) and result in the upholding of hegemonic whiteness. As communication and cultural scholars Danielle Endres and Mary Gould (2012) argue:

> Using White privilege to 'help the other' is an explicit acknowledgement of White privilege/whiteness accompanied by a justification for sustaining privilege and power as a means to help others. This strategy reifies dominant and subordinate social positions and is problematic because it creates a paternalistic relationship between Whites and the 'others' that they serve. (p. 429)

However, as Dabiri (2021) emphasises, "While White Saviours might think they are being 'good people', black people do not need charity, benevolence or indeed guilt. It is unhelpful and patronizing" (p. 85). Similarly, the expression of solidarity at the end of a film review is not only patronising, but focuses on the white individual's own feelings (Cargle, 2018; Jackson & Rao, 2022).

A comparable dynamic of declarations of whiteness producing white saviourism is at work in the second passage I want to discuss here. The quote presented originates from a 'checklist' of things white feminists who participated in the global women's marches in protest of Trump's inauguration in January 2017, should and should not do:

> **To avoid: drowning out the critique of minorities**
> As white women*, we are in the majority in Germany. In the USA, white women* were such a majority, that their votes were pivotal in contributing to Donald Trump's victory in the election. It was women of colour particularly who pointed out this uncomfortable truth and they didn't only receive positive responses. . . .
>
> **Instead:**
> We need to recognise our privilege and use it. As white, European feminists, we are doubly and triply privileged in the fight against Donald Trump. We march in crowds and in peace, all while teargas and water guns are used against Black and indigenous protesters at peaceful protests in Ferguson and at the Dakota Access Pipeline. We are Europeans, we do not even have to be afraid of direct repercussions of Trump's politics.
> . . .
> I'm not saying that it was wrong or hypocritical to protest. But we need to understand why we are doing it. When we protest, we are doing it for others. Because we as white Germans can be sure that when we go out on the streets against Trump here in Germany, we have to face almost no [consequences] or just mild inconveniences. We protest out of solidarity. We must not claim that we are in a similarly great danger to American Women of Color and trans* women, regardless of how much it would catch the media's attention. (1 February 2017; bold headings in original)

In this instance, white German/European feminists are urged to be in solidarity with Black and indigenous protesters, as well as women of colour and trans women, in the US. Similar to the first quote, a progress narrative (Hemmings, 2011) positions white German feminists as emancipated and no longer in need of protesting for themselves, thus "doing it for others". Women of colour and trans women in the US, on the other hand, are in "great danger".[57] In contrast to the first quote, however, this passage describes solidarity with people in another Western country. Yet, the declarations of white privilege and the articulation of progress narratives produce a discursive

[57] My point here, of course, is not to deny or downplay the various dangers of institutional and physical violence trans and cis people of colour experience in the US. Rather, I wish to emphasise how the rhetoric tool of comparison discursively produces progress narratives and saviour tropes.

racial hierarchy nonetheless. This reminds me of the postfeminist sentiments Christina Scharff (2016 [2012]) identified in her interviewees' responses, in which "the figure of the powerless, other woman was not tangential, but was central to maintaining the intelligibility of the research participants' positioning as western, empowered individuals" (p. 46). In a similar vein, the above quote hails white German/European feminists as 'empowered individuals' (see also Chapter 7).

Moreover, despite highlighting the danger of Trump's politics, this passage focuses on the role of white women (Zakaria, 2022), both in terms of what they did wrong (e.g., "drowning out critique of minorities") and what they should do instead (e.g., "recognise our privilege and use it"). This resonates with Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto's (2021) observations in the US:

> Trump is the obvious symbol of white patriarchy, tragicomic in his outsized inhabitations of the role of feminist villain. But in media and academic coverage since the election, we argue that feminism has hailed its bad object for a focus of rage beyond Trump: "white women" as a collective, as an ideological category as well as a demographic one, at least in part because white women are seen as the group that made possible Trump's election and almost enabled his reelection. (p. 887)

Notably, the ideological category of 'white women', in the here discussed example on the *Zine_X* blog, refers not just to 'bad' white women who voted for Trump in the US, but includes white women in Germany and Europe. Once again, we see how Anglophone popular intersectionality and allyship discourses circulate in German-speaking digital feminist spaces. While the focus on white German feminists perhaps demonstrates some reflexivity on the author's part and willingness to critically engage with their own whiteness, in might be more productive to reflect on the role of white women in feminist and anti-racist spaces in Germany instead. However, I contend that the affective appeal of solidarity, particularly when shared in digital spaces, prevents deeper, meaningful engagement with how individuals can 'help' – the "affective attachment" to solidarity, like intersectionality, thus becomes "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011).

Crucially, such affective expressions of solidarity – or, in more recent years, allyship – perform white saviourism, because they discursively invoke a racialised hierarchy with the help of progress narratives and comparisons (see also Chapters 5 and 7). Additionally, the Other at the bottom of such hierarchies is further imagined in need of a (white) saviour. Yet, these declarations, as Dabiri (2021) argues, ultimately serve the speaker in positioning themselves as a 'good' person:

> The allyship space is an arena in which White Saviourism flourishes. One could say that allyship is, in many ways, today's 'on trend' articulation of White Saviourism. Given the relationship between Christianity, improvement and civilizing missions, it's not hard to

> see the way much of this is linked to notions of being a 'good' person and being *perceived* as a 'good person'. (p. 84; emphasis in original)

In the case of the here analysed *Zine_X* quotes, being a 'good' person may also refer to being a 'good' white feminist. Although I have discussed only two passages, my hope is that my in-depth critical discourse analysis of these passages has demonstrated the problematic power relations such articulations can create. This is, of course, not to say that digital feminists should not engage with (their own) whiteness, but that we need to be cautious of reproducing "non-performatives" (Ahmed, 2004b, 2006, 2012). As Dabiri reminds us: "the more you state and claim your 'whiteness', *without doing any further work* to unpack what *that means*, the more you become fixed to that articulations of self, the more you become wedded to whiteness" (p. 4; emphasis in original).

4.3. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have undertaken a thematic and a critical discourse analysis of a German-speaking digital feminist blog, *Zine_X*. My analysis has revealed that intersectionality is articulated in a popular and affective way. It is employed as a "buzzword" (Bilge, 2013; Davis, 2008; Hancock, 2016; Nash, 2008) or as "white noise" (Rault, 2017), which, similar to popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), only displays a superficial version of intersectionality. This version is marked by a discursive focus on whiteness which negates intersectionality's origins in Black feminism and activism (e.g., Beale, 1995 [1970]; Carby, 1982; Combahee River Collective, 1982 [1977]; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; King, 1988; Lorde, 2007 [1984]-a). Moreover, the repeated critique of 'bad' white women serves as rhetorical distancing tool, but ultimately re-centres whiteness and white women in popular intersectionality discourses (Morrison, 2021).

Popular intersectionality, as I have shown in this chapter, is further marked by a focus on the white individual's neoliberal responsibility to become a 'good' white feminist. Following the discursive rhetorics of the blog, I have identified two ways white feminists can avoid 'doing white feminism'. First, 'good' white feminist checklists offer brief and simplistic instructions to follow, such as feminist and antiracist films, books, and social media accounts to consume (hooks, 2015 [1992]-a). These checklists, as my analysis has demonstrated, are encouraged by social media platforms' affordances and capitalist and neoliberal logics, suggesting a discursive shift over the recent years from empathy and understanding for not always 'getting it right', towards self-education, anxiety, and self-governmentality (see Chapter 6). Although a blog would allow for more space to develop an argument and self-reflexivity, the articulations on the blog appear to reproduce the vernaculars

of other social media platforms like Twitter or Instagram. These are defined by a character limit and hence promote short, punchy statements, which do not allow for further engagement or analysis. Simplistic dichotomies of 'good' and 'bad' feminism are easily created this way. Moreover, the framing of the blog as 'magazine', which gives it a journalistic ring, might further increase the pressure to self-brand as 'good' white feminist (Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011; Novoselova & Jenson, 2019; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022; Repo, 2020). Second, declarations of whiteness and privilege (Ahmed, 2004b) supposedly demonstrate awareness of and distancing from 'bad' white feminism, but as I have argued, re-establish whiteness as the social norm in Germany and produce white saviourism instead. Additionally, declarations of 'wanting to help' and 'be in solidary' evoke progress narratives of Western and European feminists as more emancipated than those in the Global South, and are hence "non-performative" (Ahmed, 2004b, 2006, 2012).

However, articulations of popular intersectionality centring the white individual's endeavours to become a 'good' white feminist ultimately lead to the erasure of those who developed intersectionality theory to raise awareness to their experiences of intersecting, structural oppressions in the first place: women and queers of colour. Finally, through opposing intersectionality with whiteness as well as focusing on a critique of 'bad' white cis feminists, these articulations create a hierarchy of oppressions, a point I further develop in the following chapter (see also Kanai, 2021; Lorde, 2018 [1983]; Yuval-Davis, 2012).

Chapter 5. "To be for everyone's equality and freedom and against discrimination in any form": Popular Intersectionality and Instagram's Visual Platform Cultures

With the increased platformization of feminism in recent years (Barbala, 2022), blogs arguably cease to be the predominant arena in which digital feminism takes place. While some platforms like Facebook and its option to set up secret, closed groups provide a much more communicative and 'safe' environment for digital feminist debates (Clark-Parsons, 2018; Kanai & McGrane, 2021), it appears that Instagram has gained popularity among digital feminists in recent times (Crepax, 2020; Mahoney, 2020). Instagram, officially launched in 2010 and bought by Facebook/Meta in 2012, is famous for its photo sharing feature, images in square format, use of image filters, and story formats – none of which are unique nor have been pioneered by Instagram, but which are an expression of the "visual turn" scholars have observed on social media platforms (Gibbs et al., 2015). However, as Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin (2020, p. 14) note, Instagram continues to attract young adults and teenagers, while Facebook's user demographic becomes increasingly older. More precisely, it is Instagram's platform vernaculars which make for the platform's unique allure. Instagram's "aesthetics engrain the inspirational and affective appeal: the visual representation of space and experience becomes aspirational, both for recreating the look and for obtaining that feeling" (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 72). Given Instagram's 'feel-good' aesthetics, it might not be surprising then, that a 'visual turn' can also be observed in digital feminist content on Instagram (Crepax, 2020). Consequently, it is not farfetched to assume that digital feminists' articulations of intersectionality may be affected by Instagram's visual platform cultures. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse digital feminist content on the platform itself, this chapter seeks to critically interrogate popular articulations of intersectionality in the talk of German (speaking) digital feminists who engage with feminism on Instagram.

Thus, in this chapter, I present findings from 22 in-depth online interviews with German-speaking digital feminists. After introducing my methodology, I conduct a thematic analysis of my participants' accounts of Instagram's platform cultures, specifically the feminine aesthetic of the sharepic trend popular in German (speaking) digital feminism at the time of the interviews, as well as my participants' notion of the 'bubble'. Arguing that the former produces short, simplistic, and potentially problematic understandings of intersectionality, while the latter creates isolated echo chambers, this analysis provides the backdrop for my thematic analysis of popular articulations of

intersectionality in the final part of the chapter. The emerging themes suggest common constructions of intersectionality in my participants' talk as a recent phenomenon that primarily young(er) feminists engage with, as an inclusive feminism, as centring individual narratives and experiences, as well as discursive hierarchies of oppressions and privileges. My analysis interrogates both how these articulations are perhaps in part shaped by the platform, Instagram, as well as how digital feminists can engage with intersectionality in more productive ways. Crucially, I regard my participants both as "providing accounts of their own practices" of engaging with intersectionality, as well as "informants" (Kanai & McGrane, 2021p. 2311) sharing their experiences of Instagram's feminist platform cultures and intersectionality discourses.

5.1. Methodology

5.1.1. Interview Formats

Between March and September 2021, I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with self-identified digital feminists. I had originally planned to conduct these interviews face-to-face in Berlin and the Ruhr area in Germany (two urban 'hotspots' for on- and offline feminist activities and activism), however due to the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews had to be conducted online. This constraint brought some advantages: I was able to speak to digital feminists from all over Germany, making my sample geographically diverse. Moreover, given my interest in digital feminist debates, it made sense to conduct interviews online, where my participants carry out much of their activism.

Participants were offered three modes of interview format: a video call via Zoom, a written interview by email, or a written interview via Facebook or Instagram messenger. While I usually initially first spoke to participants via Facebook or Instagram messenger, participants chose only the first two options for their subsequent interviews. This may be due to messengers usually being accessed on small phone screens, whereas email might be used on bigger laptop or tablet screens, and thus be more convenient for answering interview questions. Out of 22 interviews, 15 were conducted via video call and seven via email. Six Zoom participants were either sent follow-up questions or sent their own comments and thoughts in relation to the discussed questions and topics via email after the interview. Another Zoom interviewee decided to answer my follow-up questions in three short self-recorded videos via Facebook messenger. All of these follow-up conversations have been included in the data sample.

Both formats have their advantages and shortcomings. Video call interviews resemble more traditional face-to-face interviews, allowing for instant follow-up and clarification questions, and come with the added benefit of a recording function, in addition to increased anonymity for the interviewee as they do not need to meet the researcher in person and in public (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Email interviews, on the other hand, eliminate the need for transcription and allow more flexibility timewise, but might have the limitation that "too many questions in one email results in diminishing value per question" (Burns, 2010, paragraph 12.6). As mentioned in Chapter 4, I waited three months for the *Zine_X* editors' response to my interview questions, which had all been sent in one email. To avoid this happening again, I followed Bampton and Cowton's (2002) suggestion of sending interview questions in (for the purpose of this study, four to five) batches, which allowed me to ask follow-up questions, but also limited the time spent on the email interview and thus prevented participants' responses petering out. Nonetheless, this also meant that conducting a full email interview took a lot longer than an interview via video call. While video calls lasted between fifty minutes and one hour and forty minutes, email interviews ranged from three days to three and a half months.

Given the often sensitive nature of my research topic, I believe that including a written interview form allowed me to speak to participants who otherwise would have been too shy or uncomfortable to chat to me via video. Although in the spring and summer of 2021, many people were used to communication via video calls, including with strangers, email participants often said that they felt more comfortable expressing themselves in writing. This might be due to the nature of my research topic (the anxiety of 'getting it wrong' when talking about intersectional feminism will be discussed in Chapter 6), but could also be due to changing communication patterns in recent years, which have only been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Nguyen et al., 2020). Moreover, some of my email participants did not write running texts, but instead used a bullet point format, emojis, and arrows to indicate conclusions, imitating platform vernaculars. This demonstrates the previously discussed brevity of written articulations of popular intersectionality, something that cannot be recreated in face-to-face interviews.

5.1.2. Ethical Considerations

Literature on feminist research methods and ethics highlights feminist researchers' discontentment with traditional approaches used in the social sciences. As Maria Mies claims, "there is a contradiction between the prevalent theories of social science and methodology and political aims of the women's movement" (1997 [1993], p. 66). Similarly, in her infamous piece on interviewing

women, Ann Oakley (1981) argues that the interview protocol in the social sciences was predominantly masculine in previous decades, such as demanding objectivity from the researcher and a friendly, but distant manner towards the research subject. Drawing on her research with soon-to-be mothers, Oakley deduces that the objectivity that is traditionally claimed in social research is not possible due to two major difficulties. On the one hand, the women interviewed were asking questions back, such as whether Oakley had children herself and how she had experienced pregnancy. On the other hand, Oakley reports that she developed a friendship with some of the women she interviewed. She further admits that "interviewees are people with considerable potential for sabotaging the attempt to research them" (p. 56), concluding that the personal involvement of both the researcher and the researched are not to be dismissed, as it is "the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives" (p. 58). Building on Oakley, it is important to be aware of the fact that an interview is not a one-way street in terms of power relations, and many of my interviewees are my peers in one way or another – be it through gender, age, race/ethnicity, sexuality,[58] university education,[59] nationality and language, or most importantly, our shared interest in digital feminism. Some participants had also been recruited through mutual friends or feminist Facebook groups I have been a (rather passive) member of, and others related to me through our mutual background in teaching. Notwithstanding the many things I have in common with my participants, it is pertinent to note that the relation between interviewer and interviewee is never an equal one (Bishop, 2018b).

While much of the literature focuses on feminist reflections on the researcher's superior position and the discomfort that comes with that (Dosekun, 2015b), Gabrielle Griffin (2012) addresses the (female) researcher's vulnerability, for instance, in situations when women interview men who make sexually explicit comments. Although Griffin's argument is problematic as it assumes the female researchers to have no agency, it is nonetheless a useful prompt to think about the fact that the relationship between researcher and researched is not always imbalanced in the same way. Ning Tang's (2002) reflections on her interviews with female academics in China and the UK, for example, show that said relationship can be fluid among interviews within one particular study. As Tang analyses, differences between her and her interview subjects were based on a number of factors, including power structures within academia itself, different personal characteristics like age, different academic disciplines, cultural differences, Tang's own cultural assumptions, and

[58] Participants could see from my email signature that I worked for a queer research centre at the time of the interviews and may have drawn conclusions about my sexuality from this.

[59] Two participants previously studied or were currently studying in the UK.

linguistic differences. The author therefore concludes that "the power relationship is very complicated not only in researching 'down' or 'up', but also interviewing peers" (p. 719). In my video call interviews, for example, I noted power imbalances when interviewing men or someone much older than me, as these interviewees tended to 'lead' the conversation, such as suggesting that we move on to the next question.

That said, the relationship with interviewees who were my peers in regards to age, gender, race/ethnicity, and sometimes also sexuality, proved challenging in different ways. While previous discussions of online research methods have mostly been concerned with the ethics of observation (Hine, 2000; Kelley, 2016; Whiteman, 2012), my interviews with digital feminists entail further elements to consider, which are specific to its conversational nature and the research topic. On the one hand, I am investigating a digital feminist community, of which I consider myself a member, albeit a rather passive one. My research participants are my peers not just in regards to our shared feminist politics and time spent in digital feminist spaces, but many of them are of a similar age, also white, and also queer. Both the conversations via video call, especially at a time when video calls with friends and family had rapidly increased, as well as via email, which might feel similar to writing to a pen pal, could easily evoke the intimate impression of two friends chatting about feminism. On the other hand, the goal of my research project is to critically examine how intersectionality is articulated, especially in regard to whiteness (see Chapter 4). This is of a particular sensitive nature in the age of call out and cancel cultures (Clark, 2020; Ng, 2022; Sobande et al., 2022), where a general fear of saying the wrong thing online persists (Gill, 2021a; 2021b; see Chapter 6).

I was therefore faced with the complex balancing of my position as a researcher and building friendly rapport. Moreover, the use of the German informal 'you' [Du], both in the video call and email interviews, created an instant but false sense of familiarity, despite having never met any of my participants in person, let alone seen some of the faces of my email participants. This, particularly in the case of email interviews which lasted over several weeks or months, led to situations that needed to be navigated carefully, for instance, when a younger email interviewee asked me about my understanding of intersectional feminism and my personal activism. Although some feminist scholars suggest that researchers self-disclose (Oakley, 1981), others, as I discussed above, have pointed out the various power imbalances in the relationship between researcher and participant (Wise, 1987). As such, I decided to keep my response rather brief, both to keep myself as well as the younger participant safe. Given the age difference and our very different positionalities as researcher and research participant, it felt inappropriate to share too many

personal details. Our email exchange, after all, was not an exchange between pen pals, but part of a research project. Moreover, since my interviewees are not bound by the same principles of research ethics as I am, I felt uncomfortable sharing too many personal details in light of the contested nature of intersectionality discourses. That said, I felt more comfortable sharing some personal information during video call interviews. For example, I shared with participants who worked as teachers that I am a trained teacher also, which assisted with rapport building.

5.1.3. Participant Recruitment

I recruited interview participants via a number of channels, including a snowball system whereby I asked friends, family members, and former work colleagues to share my call for participation, as well as sharing the call via mailing lists and on social media. The call consisted of a number of sharepics in bright colours to facilitate easy sharing on social media and 'replicated' the digital feminists' social media vernacular. It is important to note that the call sought people who were willing to talk about their experiences in digital feminism. It was only after potential participants had contacted me that I specified that I was particularly interested in how they perceived debates about intersectionality. This was both to avoid misleading participants, but also avoiding speaking to people who are not familiar with these issues. The decision to not directly mention intersectionality in the call came out of my struggles to recruit bloggers for the case study, but was also an attempt to avoid participants potentially feeling that their knowledge was being tested.

In addition, I also contacted gender studies programs at three different universities and asked them to share my call via their student mailing lists. I also used my funding body's PhD student mailing list and contacted a network for women's and gender studies. Notably, I was able to recruit most participants via social media. I posted the call in two feminist Facebook groups I was already a member of, as well as in two intersectional feminist Facebook groups I had joined for the purpose of the study – although it should be noted that the groups seemed quite inactive by the time I posted. I also contacted the editors of a feminist print magazine that primarily reports on queer feminist and pop cultural issues, Missy Magazine,[60] who shared the call in the magazine's

[60] Missy Magazine, founded in 2008, is a feminist print magazine that primarily reports on feminist, political, and pop cultural issues. In the 'About' section on Missy's website, it says: "We write about trans families, sex work, the political move to the far right, coding, fat acceptance, the compatibility of family and work, anal plugs, care work, Rap, cats, menstruation in horror films, asylum and the everyday, armpit hair, and new [TV/streaming] series highlights" (https://missy-magazine.de/ueber-missy/; accessed 25 November 2013; my translation). Moreover, the magazine's website further described itself as "intersectional and inclusive" (my translation).

Instagram stories. I also created an Instagram account specifically for the study and asked friends to share it. On this account, I posted more images which included sample questions from the interviews, such as "What does feminism mean to you?", "What does intersectionality mean to you?", or "Which digital feminists do you follow?". Later, the account was also shared by strangers and some of my participants offered to share the account after their interviews. Finally, I contacted a number of digital feminists on Instagram who I found through the hashtag search for #intersektionalität [#intersectionality].

It should also be noted that I did not actively search for participants on other platforms, such as Twitter, for a number of reasons. Firstly, I had been able to recruit a sufficient number of participants via the above mentioned channels. Secondly, my sample does include Twitter users, and, finally, both my own observations as a user as well as many of my participants' observations, confirmed that most German (speaking) feminism takes place on Instagram and Facebook (with Facebook slowly petering out though). While we have witnessed feminist hashtag activism in Germany in the past, for example when feminist blogger and writer Anne Wizorek created the hashtag #Aufschrei [#outcry] in 2013, which lead to women sharing their experiences with sexism, Twitter has since been perceived as an increasingly unsafe space by many German (speaking) feminists (Drücke & Zobl, 2016). Later global hashtag movements like #MeToo have never gained as much traction in Germany as in Anglophone countries (Wolcke, 2020). Of course, this is not to say that digital feminism no longer takes place on German (speaking) Twitter – indeed some of my participants say they prefer Twitter over Facebook – but to explain why the focus in my analysis in this chapter is on the role of Instagram.

5.1.4. Participants' Demographic Information

Interview participants were asked to fill in a demographic information form before the interview and indicate their age, as well as self-identify their gender, ethnicity,[61] and sexuality. Interviewees were also asked to indicate via tick box whether they lived in a village/in the countryside, small town, or big city, as well as their highest educational degree at the time of the interview (see Appendix). I decided to keep the questions limited to one page so as to not deter potential participants by asking for too much information. While age, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality may

[61] Due to the previously discussed problem of race not inhabiting a neutral or affirmative meaning in German (see Chapter 2), I chose to use the term ethnicity while being aware these terms are not to be used interchangeably.

be of particular interest when discussing issues of digital feminism and intersectionality, the questions about the region and educational degree were included to see whether digital feminists live predominantly in urban areas, and to gain a better understanding about the interviewees' social strata.[62]

Most participants' ages ranged from 22 to 30. Two participants were 35 and 38 respectively, and one was 64. The majority of interviewees identified as female (13). The rest indicated their gender to be cis female (2), female/femme (1), male (2), gender queer (2), agender (1), and no gender (1). In terms of sexuality, interviewees identified as heterosexual (9), heterosexual with a tendency to bisexuality (1), queer (2), bisexual (2), bisexual/queer (2), pansexual (2), bi/pansexual (1), queer/polysexual (1), asexual/aromantic (1), and one participant indicated that they "prefer not to label but would most accurately be labelled 'straight'". It can thus be concluded that at least half of the sample identifies as queer or under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella. It should also be noted that none of my participants identified as gay – which leads me to wonder whether this is a reflection of 'queer' being a more popular and perhaps more palatable identity nowadays.

Regarding ethnicity, participants stated white (6), German (4), German/white (5), German/white/European (1), Middle European (1), Caucasian (1), white/Russian/post-Eastern/Jewish (1), white & Jewish (1), Italian, Spanish, Turkish, & Kurdish (1), as well as Mixed (Irish, German, Native American, Ivory Coast) (1). These varying responses may be surprising to someone in the Anglophone world, however, Germans are not used to being asked about their race or ethnicity in a questionnaire (as it is very common practice, for example, when seeking medical help in the UK) – a consequence of accounting for the Holocaust and racist Nazi ideology (Knapp, 2005). In addition, this could be indicative of white Germans' anxiety or unease in discussing and naming whiteness in particular, but also a possible lack of these issues in German (speaking) digital feminist debates, as well as the connotation of 'bad' white feminists (see Chapter 4). Moreover, the inclusion of the very question in the questionnaire itself may indicate as to why my participant sample is predominantly white, which I ended up discussing with one of my interviewees, Samantha, a woman of colour:

> yeah, like you just said, people don't know, for example, which box they should tick, and why don't they know it? The question is, they don't know whether they should be

[62] Class, or social strata in the German context (see Chapter 2), is often determined via income and further educational qualifications or vocational training in social research (Niehues & Stockhausen, 2022). Since it would have been unethical to ask participants about their income, I chose a question about participants' highest educational degree instead.

> offended or not. Well, it's more than that. They personally know what is meant but they don't know, oops, should I be insulted and can I support this or not. (video call)

As Samantha intimates, the very question of someone's ethnicity (or race), when asked by a white person, can be reminiscent of questions like "Where are you really from?" which people of colour often experience in mainstream white societies, and that aim to Other them (Ogette, 2020 [2017]). While I had anticipated that white participants would feel uneasy being asked this question, I had not sufficiently considered the implications of the question for participants of colour – a methodological shortcoming that illustrates my own positionality as a white researcher. In Samantha's case, I met her unease by holding the interview first, thus establishing rapport and allowing her to gain a better idea about my research, and then asking her about her demographic information.

Another possible explanation for the predominance of white participants in the sample, besides people of colour potentially being more hesitant to speak to a white researcher (which I had anticipated), is the actual focus of the study. At the beginning of our call, Samantha expressed a concern that she might not be the right person to talk to: "I wouldn't say I'm interested in digital feminism and I don't really look for it". After having clarified that I do not understand digital feminism to be a closed space and that my assumption is that many (online) feminist debates will be similar to, or overlap with, debates in leftist or anti-racist circles, Samantha felt more comfortable talking to me. This interaction indicates that German (speaking) digital feminism might be viewed as a white space that does not include anti-racist debates – despite (or because of) its engagement with popular intersectionality.

This is, of course, not to say that there are no German (speaking) digital feminists of colour in these spheres. Yet, it does show that these spaces are white-dominated. Nonetheless, I was in contact with a number of interested digital feminists of colour, but what all these interactions had in common was the potential interviewee expressing interest in the study while also mentioning a lack of time. Some had agreed to be interviewed but never confirmed a time or date. My impression was that this was due to many of the digital feminists of colour I spoke with being active in other on- and offline spaces, with some writing books, volunteering in activist groups, or running for political offices. This raises questions about who can afford the time and energy to participate in digital feminism, and who needs to spend these resources on surviving in the offline world and

focusing on everyday offline activism.[63] Ultimately, despite some methodological shortcomings, I argue that my analysis still bears relevance, since, as analysed in Chapter 4, popular intersectionality is closely articulated to whiteness.

Regarding location, the majority of participants, i.e., 16, indicated living in a big city. Four lived in a small town at the time of the interview, and two in the countryside/in a village. Although I did not ask to specify the region, eighteen participants mentioned the city or region they lived in during the interview. Out of those 18 interviewees, eight lived in Berlin, two in the North of Germany, three in South Germany, three in the West, and two in the East. The predominance of Berlin dwellers should not be surprising given Berlin's attractiveness to (young) politically interested people. Moreover, one participant indicated that they were from Austria originally, but now reside in Germany.

All but three participants, who at the time of the interview were students, have at least an undergraduate degree. This not only demonstrates a high level of education among my participants, but also indicates that many of them can be considered middle-class. While I attempted to recruit participants from a broader spectrum of social strata – for instance, to reach non-academic participants, I asked family members who are active on social media to share my call – it should be noted that those attempts were fruitless. That said, five participants happened to report being from working-class, "lower class" (in one participant's words), or non-academic family backgrounds. Another four mentioned a middle-class background and one said they were from a liberal household. Although the size of my study is not representative, and it is widely known that those with academic degrees are more likely to talk to researchers (Bishop, 2018b), I argue this indicates a tendency for well-educated middle-class people to engage in certain German (speaking) digital feminist debates.

Furthermore, interviewees also mentioned the subject they studied and their current occupation, usually in response to the initial warm-up question in which I asked them to introduce themselves. This information is helpful in contextualising some of my data, but also supports the notion of middle-class-ness among my participants. Most notably, ten participants mentioned further degrees in the arts and humanities, such as gender studies, cultural studies, literature studies, (art)

[63] See my discussion of academic literature on digital feminist labour in Chapter 3, particularly Mendes (2022) and Mendes et al. (2019) for an exploration of the digital and affective labour that digital feminism entails, and Nakamura (2015) for a discussion of the 'unwanted' digital labour women of colour perform.

history, theatre and film studies, as well as journalism. Six more participants have a been trained in social areas, such as teaching, pedagogy, social work, and psychology. One participant was studying medicine and another was a trained mathematician. Interviewees also mentioned the following occupations: student, PhD student, journalist, social media manager, consultant, translator, nursery school teacher, teacher, equal opportunities officer, coach/seminar facilitator, software engineer. One participant was unemployed after recently having finished a Master's degree and another was a retired teacher.

Some participants also indicated a disability during the interviews. Two participants mentioned a mental health disability and one a chronic health condition. Moreover, one participant reported having autism, although it is unclear whether they identify as being disabled.

Finally, as part of the interviews, I asked participants which feminist activities they participated in, specifically avoiding a direct question about activism to include a broader sense of feminist (digital) activities. Interviewees reported the following on- and offline activities: participating in Facebook groups, posting stories and/or sharepics on Facebook and/or Twitter and/or Instagram and/or WhatsApp, running a feminist Bookstagram,[64] listening to podcasts or giving podcast interviews, participating in activism around yoga and feminism, publishing a feminist zine (print), posting (and occasionally selling) their feminist art on Instagram, blogging and YouTube-ing for a queer media charity, activism 'on the job' (i.e., posting via professional social media account), participating in a student newspaper, donating money and period products, volunteering (in queer organisation or a sports club), talking to friends and family about feminist topics. Some participants declared that they mostly follow digital feminist debates passively through reading, liking, sharing, and sometimes commenting. Two participants further highlighted that they call themselves 'feminist' in their social media bio.

This range of activities already indicates that the digital feminists in my study engage with feminism on a range of platforms (Kanai & Coffey, 2023; Novoselova & Jenson, 2019). Instagram appears to be the most popular as it was mentioned by all but one participant. It should be noted though that participant recruitment was also most successful via Instagram, but many participants recruited via other channels reported Instagram as a prime channel for engaging with digital feminists debates. Other platforms mentioned – the term platform is used here in a wider sense – include blogs (some participants used to read blogs), Twitter, Facebook (groups), TikTok, Tumblr,

[64] The term 'Bookstagram' refers to an Instagram account which predominantly discusses books. Some participants would also describe their Bookstagram as a (feminist) book club.

YouTube, podcasts, feminist newsletters, as well as the print and online magazines Missy Magazine and Pinkstinks.[65] It is further noteworthy that not all of these platforms might be considered social media and many, such as podcasts or newsletters, are less participatory compared to Facebook groups or posting an Instagram story – although they most likely serve as sources of information about feminist debates and intersectionality theory for the digital feminists in my study, and thus should not be disregarded. Lastly, participants' follower numbers at the time of the interviews ranged from just slightly above one hundred to over ten thousand, with one participant reaching over 10K followers, two interviewees having followers in the low thousands, and the majority under a thousand followers.

5.1.5. Data Analysis and Presentation

In the following, I present a thematic analysis of my participants' accounts of Instagram's platform cultures (i.e. the sharepic trend and the notion of the 'bubble') and of articulations of intersectionality in my participants' talk. I employed Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. As discussed previously (see Chapter 4), thematic analysis refers to a process of identifying patterns and repetitions across the data set through repeated reading and notetaking. For the purpose of processing the 330 pages of interview transcripts, I used NVivo software to carry out the initial steps of familiarising myself with the data and grouping it into initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 87-89). This process was guided by looking for themes previously found in the blogger case study, but also new themes that might contradict or extend the analysis of this case study. Due to health issues that prevented me from prolonged computer work, I conducted the subsequent steps of searching for, reviewing, and defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 89-93) with pen and paper.

All interview quotes used in this chapter (and in Chapter 6) have been translated from German to English by myself. Words and terms that were used in English in the original are, again, indicated through underlining. Occasionally, I have slightly edited quotes to aid with understanding (e.g., deleting filler words such as "erm", or repetitions). Where words or sentences have been added or omitted, this is indicated via "[added text]" and " . . . " respectively. Moreover, pseudonyms are used for all participants and some personal information has been anonymised, e.g., [workplace].

[65] *Pinkstinks* is "a magazine, campaigning office, and educational organisation against sexism", [https://pinkstinks.de/was-wir-tun/; accessed 21 September 2022; my translation]. The organisation is widely known for its campaigning against sexism in advertising and against the popular, but problematic TV show *Germany's Next Top Model* hosted by Heidi Klum.

In some cases, information such as the type of activism engaged in, have been changed due to some participants knowing and/or following each other.

When citing my participants, I have chosen not to include any markers of identity. Firstly, I wish to protect interviewees' anonymity. Secondly, despite common practice in feminist research, the inclusion of participants' sexuality, class, and other statuses often leads to the false perception of research being intersectional due to the very mentioning of identity categories. Finally, the discourses I analyse here and in Chapter 6 tend to cut across gender and race (see Scharff, 2015). Removing this information from my discussion hence serves to emphasise how hegemonic these modes of discourse are. I chose, however, to include the interview format when discussing interview quotes to account for differences in style (writing vs. speaking).

5.2. Instagram's Platform Cultures

5.2.1. Feminine Aesthetics and Sharepic Culture

As previously mentioned, Instagram is a popular platform upon which my participants engage with feminism (Crepax, 2020; Mahoney, 2020). For instance, Hannah declares, "Instagram is, for me, my source of truth" (video call). Similarly, Clara states, "I definitely get the most input from feminists and activists on Instagram" (email). 'Getting input' already indicates a change in how communication occurs on Instagram compared to previously popular platforms such as Facebook. Indeed, Leah explains that due to Instagram's character limit, the focus is on "having a pretty picture [that] needs to be shareable and adapt to the circumstances of the platform and what is currently popular" (video call). As Leah highlights, which 'aesthetic style' is popular in Instagram's quick-pacing visual economy keeps changing. At the time of my interviews in the summer of 2021, a popular trend among German (speaking) digital feminist is the so-called 'sharepic'.[66] Leah explains:

> Yeah, I still remember when I joined the feminist bubble on Instagram for the first time [laughs]. Back then, it was popular to have long captions and to use a cheesy picture, either a book, or of yourself, or of the book and yourself [laughs]. Yeah, a combination of that, or sometimes something mundane, just a pretty picture, but with a long text

[66] At the time of writing in summer 2023, sharepics are still present in German (speaking) digital feminism, however, a new trend seems to have emerged. Judging from my own observations, the increased amount of short (15-90 seconds) and heavily filtered videos – so-called Reels – reflect the rising influence of video-based platforms like TikTok. Additionally, Reels are increasingly produced in English, or both German and English.

> below it, sometimes reaching into the comments. And this has become an absolute rarity by now. I think at the moment it's this, this sharepic trend is a thing. Like five different images in a post and then a headline in one of them and then explaining a phenomenon in five bullet points and a comment on something. (video call)

According to this account, the sharepic is a 'slide show' of a number of edited[67] photos or text-based images (using Instagram's carousel feature which allows up to ten images in one post), usually containing a 'title slide' followed by 'content slides' in bullet point format. These slide shows are not uniquely a German (speaking) digital feminist phenomenon, though. For instance, US-based journalist Terry Nguyen (2020) notes that "social justice slideshows" started appearing in Instagram feeds following the global Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. Similarly, in Portuguese digital feminism on Instagram, communications scholar Sofia P. Caldeira (2023) observes a "dominance of graphic compositions that combined colourful backgrounds with overlayed text, and, at times, also including other visual elements such as photographs, illustrations, or little graphic elements to add visual interest" (p. 9).

Moreover, sharepics often display a feminine aesthetic and uniform design. Clara describes the design of the feminist self-care account she manages with friends:

> In the beginning, when we started with the account (summer 2020), we had many Zoom sessions and meetings where we agreed more or less on a 'Corporate Design', that is, the purple, pink and yellow that you see in our posts is the same 'colour code' that we always use. We also have the same fonts that we always use, so that it looks uniform. Regarding the logo, we created that in the beginning, simply with Canva, and we make sure that it's on all our posts. (email)

The aesthetics of Clara's feminist self-care account, a 'corporate design' including designated colours and fonts, as well as a logo, not only reflects the professionalization of users and digital feminists increasingly observed on social media and blogs (Novoselova & Jenson, 2019; Scharff, 2023a; Simatzkin-Ohana & Frosh, 2022), but is also symbolic of an increased trend of digital (feminist) self-branding (Banet-Weiser, 2012, 2021; Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011; Chidgey, 2021; Mahoney, 2020; Repo, 2020; Savolainen et al., 2022).

Clara explains why a 'corporate design' can be useful:

> I have definitely seen on many accounts that the posts are very uniform and thus have a brand recognition. I think that's definitely not a disadvantage on IG [Instagram]. [Other

[67] As some participants tell me, Canva is a popular free software for producing such sharepics. I used the same software for creating my call for participation.

> feminist account] for example has a super impressive corporate design, where it is always easy to recognise whose post it is! Also seen this with a lot with individual people, who have a corporate design in their posts (white margins, same filter) because it leads to a unique image when you scroll through their account. (email)

The trend of individual users' accounts appearing increasingly corporate is also observed by Leah who has seen "sharepics in the beginning mostly on group accounts and then it spilled over onto private accounts of individual people" (video call). However, running a successful Instagram account requires some "degree of aesthetic literacy" (Caldeira, 2023, p. 9) as well as marketing skills:

> I think many people see successful accounts and think it's easy and want to jump on the bandwagon. The hard work behind it is often invisible or gets trivialised. And then they do not come up with anything, or they realise that it is actually not that easy to come up with a caption for an image that will interest people. (Louisa, email)

As Louisa's example shows, producing image captions for posts to gain sufficient traction can be a laborious process. This suggests that digital feminists need to think in social media terms while trying to think politically as an activist. An attention-seeking design, Caldeira (2023) points out, thus helps gain visibility for feminist topics, yet, in order to do so, digital feminists need to comply with the platform's algorithmic logics that favour certain types of content. As Caldeira concludes, "these posts can thus be read as both seeking to genuinely advance feminist causes and self-promotional" (p.12). This can also be seen at the choice of the designated colours in Clara's example: purple, pink, and yellow. These colours reflect what fashion scholar Rosa Crepax (2020) terms, Instagram feminism's "'Girly' Aesthetics" (p. 76), which hints towards the performance of normative femininity in digital feminism, which I explore further in Chapters 6 and 7. As Crepax notes, "Rather than disassociating from forms of aesthetics that can be described as stereotypically feminine, new digital feminisms appear to openly embrace them" (p. 76).

Despite an increased professionalisation in digital feminism, some participants claim that digital feminists are becoming "sloppier" (Leah, video call) though, and forget to indicate their sources, especially when explaining a certain term – a critique that indicates German (speaking) digital feminists' proximity to academic debates, but also resonates in an age of post-truth (Burke et al., 2022; McIntyre, 2018), fake news, and generally less fact checking, especially on social media. This 'sloppiness' can have negative consequences for digital feminist debates, as Victor informs me:

> And when people who have trillions of followers and think they wouldn't be in a position of power, then I [disagree and] think it actually is a position of power. And that's true for myself if I know that I'm the only trans person who people follow. And especially on Instagram. Like I use [Instagram] myself, but I still view it critically, this 'I crank out an info post, I wrap it up nicely. I basically present my opinion. Maybe I add a few sources. End of story'. And then people read this and take [someone's opinion] at face value. Yeah. And that is, on the one hand it's good that Instagram is so accessible and I think it's good that such debates can be held beyond academic spaces and that many people can participate. But on the other hand, a lot of complexity gets lost through [Instagram]. (video call)

Following Victor's account, the danger of adhering to Instagram feminism's common design practices is that sharepics designed as information posts may contain an individual's opinion rather than actual facts. Information, Nguyen (2020) argues, "can easily be shared countless times – regardless of whether it's been fact-checked, properly sourced, or proofread – with little or no accountability" (para. 23). Consequently, with the rise of the sharepic trend, information about intersectionality and other key feminist theories and terms become not only more condensed and accessible, but also oversimplified and possibly incorrect. This, I contend, contributes to the rise of superficial – and in the worst case, problematic and exclusionary – popular articulations of intersectionality, as I demonstrate later in this chapter.

Given Instagram's visual culture and the sharepic trend in particular, it thus seems unsurprising, that many of my participants disclose that they do not actively engage in debates on feminist topics in the comments under their own and others' posts. Reasons as to why they do not actively participate in these debates include a lack of time, mental health difficulties, the belief that it is not necessary, as well as wanting to avoid emotionally challenging discussions attributed to backlashes from anti-feminist men, users on the far-right political spectrum, or bots.[68] In particular, this latter aspect regarding challenging affective discussions reverberates with scholarly observations in other digital feminist contexts, as discussed in Chapter 3 (Mendes, 2022; Mendes et al., 2019; Pain, 2021; Rovira-Sancho, 2023; Schoettler, 2023). Several participants further describe that they read comments passively and/or prefer direct messaging with like-minded feminists. One participant who reports enjoying debates and actively fostering discussions on feminist topics is Gabi, the only participant who does not use Instagram but who moderates two feminist discussion groups on Facebook. Although my dataset is by far not representative, this perhaps suggests that Instagram's architectures actively discourage feminist debate and exchange in the digital sphere – thus complicating scholarly analysis of the role other digital platforms play in connecting feminists

[68] In Chapter 6, I discuss emotionally challenging intra-feminist debates, which may be another reason why many of my participants refrain from active engagement in comment sections.

with each other and enabling communication and networking (Keller, 2012, 2016; Schoettler, 2023). In other words, I propose that Instagram, given its affordances (e.g., character limit and focus on the visual) and platform cultures (e.g., aesthetic and self-promotion cultures), is not conducive to active communal engagement with feminist topics. Moreover, Instagram's increased visibility in particular connects to my previous discussion of digital platforms as records of potential mistakes (see Chapter 4), which might lead to increased anxiety and hesitancy to engage in discussions in the comments.

As a result, participant Noa explains, digital feminist content on Instagram becomes 'superficial':

> People just post and don't think about what they want to achieve with this and what possible solutions there are and how they could actually reach those. At the same time, there are many followers who just let the content wash over themselves and don't really reflect on it, and they hardly use posts as a prompt to engage with a topic more deeply – which is what they should do. A post can only ever cover a topic very superficially. That's not enough. And most of the time it's preaching to the converted. (email)

The phenomenon that Noa describes as "followers who just let the content wash over themselves" may also be accounted for by another affordance of the platform, "scrollability" (Searles & Feezell, 2023). Platforms like Instagram and Facebook display posts of the accounts one follows, as well as suggested posts and ads, in a never-ending feed of information. Consequently, users scroll through the contents, often without clicking on posts and reading them. When using Instagram to stay in touch with German (speaking) digital feminism while writing this thesis, I have noticed similar patterns in my own scrolling behaviour. At times, I have felt overwhelmed with the amount of posts in my feed – and, if I am honest, bored with the repetition of topics and arguments and annoyed at the number of advertising posts – I catch myself reading only the 'headlines', and occasionally the first few slides of longer sharepic slide shows, before scrolling on to the next post. Scrolling, as Kathleen Searles and Jessica T. Feezell (2023) note in the context of news reporting, becomes "both the means and the goal" (p. 671). Thus, digital feminists who primarily engage with feminist content on Instagram via scrolling may encounter feminist topics such as intersectionality theory in only a 'superficial' way.

Even when digital feminists attempt to lead more complex debates, sharepic culture often prevents this. For instance, Leah describes how her intersectional feminist print magazine's Instagram account struggles with gaining a wider reach:

> . . . because [of our] deeper topics which can be painful sometimes, which are uncomfortable, topics which you are usually not confronted with and which you have

> to think a bit more about. I think such a simple 'Check Your Privileges', and then everyone thinks, 'Yeah, I am white, okay, cool' is a different threshold . . . I think that is a deciding factor why on Instagram things are more negotiated like on a billboard. That is, you can't write an essay on Instagram and [expect] people [to] read that. Yeah, it is my experience that people prefer sharepics sometimes, everything that is short and brief, rather than a book recommendation where they would have to engage with a concept on 300 pages. (video call)

Leah's observation that on Instagram "things are more negotiated like on a billboard" is an apt explanation for the rise of popular intersectional phrases such as 'Check Your Privileges'. The above discussed affordances mimic the affordances of a billboard, and hence, articulations of popular intersectionality, as I demonstrate later in this chapter, have become even more condensed and shortened as they already were on the *Zine_X* blog (see Chapter 4). Moreover, besides platform cultures and affordances, the contemporary commodification of feminist activism, such as feminist slogans on T-shirts (Repo, 2020), contributes to the popularity and circulation of brief, simplistic (and often problematic) feminist slogans (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Finally, Franzi highlights that platforms like Instagram are owned by giant corporations operating for profit, which stands in contrast to anti-capitalist feminist politics:

> Instagram is not a platform fighting for feminist goals primarily. The total opposite actually. There's a huge corporation behind the platform which tries to make profit and exploits people. So it's kind of a paradox to use a capitalist platform for criticising capitalism. But of course there are also many advantages and a lot of activists use the platform, cause you can reach a lot of people very quickly and there's a lot of lively exchange. Generally though, I'd say that Instagram doesn't 'like' feminist content. (email)

The attentive reader might note that this statement seemingly contradicts my earlier argument about Instagram preventing active communal engagement within feminism. Indeed, many participants tell me that an advantage of digital feminism is that it enables feminist connections, or, in Franzi's words, "lively exchange". This makes me wonder whether the notion of social media platforms enabling 'feminist connections', a common scholarly (see Chapter 3) and activist perception inspired by bloggers and discussants in forums and Facebook groups, needs to be adapted in the age of Instagram feminism. Perhaps, 'feminist connection' also needs to be understood in new terms. That is, acts such as following, liking and sharing each other's content are regarded as 'connecting' with one another, but they do not necessarily include meaningful, deeper exchange. Thus, contemporary visual self-branding and self-promotion cultures as well as neoliberal platform logics and capitalist interests are shaping the digital feminist content on Instagram, resulting in a sharepic culture that leads to not only new forms of feminist connections,

but ultimately condensed and possibly problematic engagements with intersectionality, as I demonstrate below. Next, I examine another key feature through which the digital feminist in my study engage with intersectionality: 'the bubble'.

5.2.2. The Bubble

Since the publication of political activist and campaigner Eli Pariser's influential book in 2011, the term 'filter bubble' has moved into everyday speech. 'Filter bubble' describes the process of data personalisation, in which algorithms are designed to predict user behaviour and preferences, resulting in personalised Google search results, individualised Netflix viewing suggestions, and tailored Amazon offers (Pariser, 2011). As such, data personalisation is closely related to capitalist interests. Similarly, social media platforms display content users might like, click on, and ultimately incites them to spend more time on the platform (Fuchs, 2014). Importantly, "if a piece of news is about sex, power, gossip, violence, celebrity, or humour, we are likely to read it first. This is the content that most easily makes it into the filter bubble" (Pariser, 2011, p. 18). The filter bubble, as Pariser argues, "fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information" (p. 9).

In digital feminist spaces, filter bubbles can also offer some benefits such as providing a safe space and protection from sexist and misogynistic messages. Akane Kanai and Caitlin McGrane (2021) demonstrate this in the context of Australian private feminist Facebook groups, defining feminist filter bubbles as "digital spaces in which sexist, misogynist and anti-feminist content is 'filtered out' so that focused feminist content and discussions can occur" (p. 2308). However, the authors also highlight the problematic nature of the "privatised and individualised measures of information filtering and control" employed in the examined Facebook groups, such as the use of content and trigger warnings, which are "forcing users into enclaves where personal 'safety' is promoted but not necessarily delivered" (p. 2310). Although Facebook groups are a platform specific affordance, it is noteworthy that the majority of my participants mentions being part of a 'bubble'. Hence, given Instagram is the primary platform upon which my participants engage with digital feminism, I explore what the bubble refers to in the context of Instagram.

Importantly, the digital feminists in my study do not foreground the 'safety' aspect of feminist bubbles. Rather, the bubble[69] describes a group of 'like-minded' feminists, i.e., the people one follows on Instagram; people who are in political agreements about social justice issues. This reverberates Pariser's notion of the filter bubble. As Romy puts it, "the bubble is a group of like-minded people who have developed a similar stance on certain topics" (video call), and to Louisa, the bubble "means people who I've only met through [my] Instagram account and with whom I mostly share the same views and values" (email). To Clara, the bubble refers to "a community of 'like-minded people', that is, a group of people who have already engaged with societal topics more or less intensively and who show a willingness to recognise their privileges and to educate themselves respectively" (email).

Moreover, digital feminist bubbles have become "more and more homogeneous" (Leah, video call), as Hannah's description of her bubble implies:

> My bubble are, I think, people with whom I can more or less identify with, who probably have more or less similar realities of life. [The bubble] is indeed rather female, certainly, and probably rather academic, I'd say so. Of course, I don't know [everyone's] background, but [judging from their] behaviour, [people in my bubble are] more political. (video call)

Elisabeth's explanation suggests that German (speaking) digital feminist bubbles might also be predominantly white, as she notes that "some bubbles can burst – like e.g., through Georg Floyd's murder, which made the bubble 'Happy Land' burst for many of us and brought the structural racism to [Germany's] mind" (email). Here, 'Happy Land' refers to an analogy used by Afro-German educator, podcaster, and activist Tupoka Ogette (2020 [2017]) to describe the moment when white people start grappling with systemic racism, thus being forced to leave the 'Happy Land' in which the naive belief that systemic racism is no longer an issue in Germany, still persists. Elisabeth's understanding of feminist bubbles therefore suggests that many white-dominated digital feminist bubbles have only recently also become anti-racist – which resonates with the fact that many interviewees tell me they only recently, inspired by the resurgent Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, started engaging (more) with anti-racist discourses, as I discuss below.

[69] Although filter bubbles on social networks are probably infinite, participants tend to talk about 'the bubble' in the singular, perhaps because they experience it as one bubble.

In contrast to the feminist bubbles in Facebook groups analysed by Kanai and McGrane, numerous participants understand the bubble to be a space that does not just exist online, but also marks a space they actively seek offline, as Clara and Fabienne describe:

> The bubble definitely exists offline. I believe, [the bubble] is 'easy to create', with the environment and the people you surround yourself with. E.g. during my degree, I was definitely in a bubble. Never before have I had so many people of different sexualities around me, e.g., which made it super strange and weird to return to my 'family' environment, where the awareness was not as progressed, or where those topics had no relevance. (Clara, email)

> The bubble is an environment created by myself. Both [in regards to] people as well as the information I engage with. That is, there are people who share similar interests like me, who have a similar worldview. But it is also, for example, media articles or such, which are displayed to me due to the algorithms, on which I click, which I read, and which [form] a virtual space or a fictitious space, whether in the Internet or real world, where everyone is like me and everyone knows what intersectional feminism means or ally or able-bodied or whatever. (Fabienne, video call)

Both definitions not only point towards not just a community of like-minded people, but also a space in which everyone allegedly shares the same knowledge about intersectional feminism. Members of the bubble seem to (be required to) bring a specific set of knowledge to the bubble (Kanai, 2021; Scharff, 2023a). However, this also makes the bubble a space that does not leave room for debate (Kanai & McGrane, 2021; Pariser, 2011) – if everyone shares similar opinions, what is there to debate about?

Moreover, as Fabienne notes in the above quote, her experience of the bubble is shaped by algorithms displaying exactly the kind of media articles and posts she might be interested in (Pariser, 2011; van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Indeed, several participants critically reflect on how algorithms create a felt environment of like-minded-ness and agreement:

> But if you really just move within your bubble, then you sometimes don't notice anymore what happens outside. . . . So if everyone confirms each other in my bubble, then I feel like there's a shedload of people who think the same. But if I step outside, then we are maybe like 0.5% or so, right? (Maria, video call)

> Well, if I would believe my Instagram [feed], then the world would be relatively left and green and there wouldn't be a climate problem [anymore]. But then I look outside and I think 'Oops, how did Trump get elected? What the fuck? Or the AfD?[70] Huh?'. That is, personalised advertising lets you think this is your reality. . . . AfD voters, or now anti-vaxxers, regarding Covid, are shown adverts and accounts which totally

[70] Alternative für Deutschland [Alternative for Germany], right-wing and populist party in Germany (see Chapter 2).

> confirm this and let them think this is the truth. And the same happens with left people and feminist activists and so on. (Samantha, video call)

Thus, even though the bubble might be a space digital feminists actively seek in order to be part of a community of like-minded feminists, that is, through following certain accounts or clicking on certain links (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), what the bubble looks like and whose content they are shown, is not entirely in their hands.

Despite this awareness though, not all of my participants view filter bubbles critically. For example, Hannah states:

> I think it is super great that we can compile our bubbles. Of course, it has good and bad sides, but I think, when did we ever have the freedom to consciously choose a community in which we feel good, in which we feel seen, in which we can learn something, where we are being challenged and not just, it's very democratic, isn't it, where we don't have to go to university for? You don't need to go into existing political circles for that. (video call)

Hannah's account of the bubble highlights the affective and educational dimension of filter bubbles. In the bubble, digital feminists not just only find a community, but they "can learn" and "feel good" and "feel seen", which resonates with the expressed positivity and relatability I discuss later in this chapter. Yet, the statement that digital feminists "don't need to go into existing political circles for that" hints towards an increased individualisation of activism (see Chapter 6). In addition, the filter bubble also means that certain contents and topics never leave the bubble. As Tim points out: "Digital activism is one thing, but . . . when in the eighth division [of the German football league] – I'm a footballer – when someone says something stupid in the changing room, then the prettiest Instagram page is of no use" (video call). Louisa also informs me that, in many Instagram bubbles, digital feminist accounts look very similar and address similar topics: "There are for instance thousands of 'Bookstagram' accounts which all look the same and they all read the same new publications of the same publishers" (Email). Thus, although feminist filter bubbles can provide safety, protection, and feminist community (Kanai & McGrane, 2021), they also produce isolated echo chambers. In the final part of this chapter, I explore how Instagram's visual economy and the sharepic trend, as well as algorithms and the notion of the bubble, inform my participants' understandings of intersectionality.

5.3. Popular Articulations of Intersectionality

5.3.1. Discovering Intersectionality and Anti-Racism in 2020

Several of the digital feminists I interviewed in the spring and summer of 2021 cite the summer of 2020 as the starting point for their own, as well as German (speaking) digital feminism's continuous engagement with Black Lives Matter, antiracist discourses, and intersectionality theory[71] (see Dabiri (2021) for the Anglophone context). For example, Kathi tells me: "I heard [about intersectionality] a lot in the last year, but I can't say whether I did for the first time last year. Last year, I definitely engaged much more consciously with racism and anti-racism" (video call). In a similar vein, Leah observes that "the intersection of racism and sexism has moved much more into the focus since the summer and Black Lives Matter" (video call). Samantha sees the rise in increased anti-racist discourses enabled by social media:

> Maybe since two, maybe also three, whatever, it feels like it's been two years, something slowly changes, because through Black Lives Matter, I can't breathe, it feels like there are many, many more people in Germany who have become aware, or want to position themselves . . . Yeah I think we are in times of change I think that especially the Internet makes it possible. And then also the contemporary racism makes it possible [laughs]. And that people can complain more easily, can make others aware of things now more easily. (video call)

As Samantha points out, "the internet" (i.e., social media) allows individuals to share their experiences of discrimination with a broader audience (Jackson, 2016; Loza, 2014; Steele, 2021b; Williams, 2015, 2021). Additionally, with the rise of visual social media cultures, experiences of racism become more palpable (Mirzoeff, 2018), for instance when videos of acts of racial violence or racism are shared on social platforms, as was the case with the police murder of George Floyd or the 'Central Park birdwatching incident' in May 2020 (see Chapter 1). Thus, an increased online presence during the Covid-19 pandemic (Nguyen et al., 2020) has led to more awareness, particularly among those previously unfamiliar with digital activism and social justice discourses such as intersectionality theory.

Moreover, some participants believe that younger people in particular engage with and learn about intersectionality online, reverberating scholarly work that highlights digital feminism's educational potential, especially for young(er) feminists (Kanai & Coffey, 2023; Keller, 2016;

[71] Many participants also mention having first encountered intersectionality at university.

Schuster, 2013). Jessica, for instance, shares how she learned "why feminism should be intersectional" on Twitter:

> Katrin: Why do you think young women, or young people, are more open, or it's easier for them, to incorporate intersectionality in their feminism, compared to an older generation of feminists?
>
> Jessica: I think it is through the Internet, to be honest. Like, you've got the cart before the horse. [both laugh] For me, it's that, I have learned so much over the Internet and understood so much why feminism should be intersectional. I have to say, I grew up in a very white environment. I don't know a lot of people who, for example, wear a headscarf or something. And I have only learned on Twitter that [women who wear a headscarf] are indeed smart, autonomous women. (video call)

Jessica's example shows that engaging with intersectionality in digital feminist spaces has helped her overcome her prejudices towards Muslim women wearing a headscarf. However, it also illustrates the aforementioned self-governmentality in which the individual concentrates on improving as a feminist, rather than why a structural analysis of intersecting forms of inequality might be necessary in feminist theory and activism (see Chapter 4). Similarly, Fabienne describes that young feminists learn online which "terms" and "identities" exist and that it "is okay to be who they are":

> Yeah regarding getting information, I feel that most [feminists] get their information online. Especially when you think about the younger generation, I think, that it does so much with people, because they realise which terms exists, which identities actually exist, which, which streams [of feminism] exist, which –. That it's okay to be who they are, that they can learn from others, ... Which is totally empowering for them and which gives them a feeling of freedom and something –, that you now see the things online that the textbooks, at the time when I went to school, did not reflect that all. And that's where I see potential especially for future movements. (video call)

According to Fabienne, the identity-based information young feminists encounter in online spaces has not been taught through traditional educational contexts, such as school textbooks. This implies a progress narrative (Hemmings, 2011), in which young(er) digital feminists appear to have access to more knowledge than previous generations. This point is more explicitly articulated by Victor, who highlights that many digital feminists in "[his] generation" engage with intersectionality solely, or predominantly:

> I would definitely say that, I notice it more and more, when I read texts from the 70s, the 80s, that they always get rehashed in digital feminism. And that is true especially for me and my generation, that we come here and think 'Woah, we're right at it, leading the important debates, and we will all be, dunno, totally antiracist or discover

> intersectionality' and that's not true. Like the debates have already existed . . . (video call)

Following Victor's depiction, it appears that due to social media's ease of access, anti-racism and intersectionality debates reach younger generations who might be unfamiliar with feminist writings of the 1970s and 1980s, and thus might feel new to these young(er) digital feminists.[72] However, due to the earlier analysed affordances and platform cultures embodied in sharepic culture and the isolated nature of many feminist filter bubbles, these digital feminists encounter intersectionality in a condensed, bullet-point format instead. Moreover, as Jenny Morrison (2021) highlights, "This framing of intersectionality as emanating from the contemporary movement erases the hierarchical power dynamics which continue to structure feminism" (pp. 645-646). That is, the perceived novelty of intersectionality discourses on social media platforms leads to narratives of feminist progress (Hemmings, 2011; see also Chapter 4), which write out earlier work by Black feminists and activists (see Chapter 2). It also leads to the assumption that the current generation of (digital) feminists no longer fails to 'include everyone', a point I explore next.

5.3.2. 'Including Everyone': Positivity and Relatability in Intersectional Feminism

Resonating with the neoliberal zeitgeist and affective positivity observed by feminist media and cultural scholars (Calder-Dawe et al., 2021; Gill & Orgad, 2022a; Kanai & Gill, 2020; Rottenberg, 2019; Saraswati, 2021), in response to my question regarding what feminism means to them, my participants express a number of positive concepts such as achieving gender equality or certain rights. For instance, Romy describes feminism as "aspiring towards [brief pause], it is a human right in the end, I'd say" (video call). And feminism to Fabienne means "achieving gender equality. That is, that all people who are discriminated against because of their gender receive the chance to have the same rights as us, who are privileged" (video call). The distinction between 'us, who are privileged' and those who are not, already indicates an opposition between 'more' and 'less' oppressed groups and a possible hierarchy, a point I return to later. Overall, when defining feminism, interviewees tend to use a range of concepts that have positive connotations, such as

[72] I would like to acknowledge that Anglophone texts might be less accessible for German-speaking digital feminists due to a language barrier, however, as I have explored in Chapter 2, Black German feminists have also written about intersectionality. Nonetheless, it should be noted that academic and activist offline texts published several decades ago are much harder to access (in terms of financial access and complexity; and of course, the need to have awareness of these texts in the first place in order to access them) than sharepics, for instance.

'freedom', 'equality', 'human rights', 'empathy', 'acceptance', 'diversity', 'support', 'community' or 'empowerment'.[73]

One concept that stands out, as it is articulated particularly in relation to intersectional feminism, is 'inclusion'. "Well, it simply means, yeah, we include everyone," as Tim puts it briefly (video call). Louisa explains that:

> Feminism means to me a social movement that has the goal of reaching equality of all people, while thinking intersectionally, to really include EVERYONE, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, origin, age, disability or illness. (email; emphasis in original)

The importance of inclusion can be seen in the use of the quantifier 'really' and the capitalisation of the word 'EVERYONE', although there is no further explanation as to how everyone can be included in feminism.[74] Indeed, when I ask Louisa how she attempts to 'include everyone' in her feminist art, she informs me that: "When it comes to my art, I do not always include multiple discriminations in my thinking, I'm doing [my art] only in my free time" (email). This response suggests that 'including everyone' is rather difficult, if not impossible, in practice – particularly for digital feminists who participate in digital feminism and activism in their free time.

Notably, Kanai (2021) also notices that, in her interviews with Australian digital feminists, 'inclusion' is a key feature of intersectional feminism. In my interviews, the 'inclusion of everyone' is sometimes articulated as 'support' or 'empowerment': Jessica explains she wants "to be a feminist who supports other women and who encourages them" (video call) and for Hannah, "feminism is empowerment of all people who do not have the same share of power in current society" (video call). Such 'buzzwords' are indicative of the affective dimension of popular intersectionality, in that they serve the purpose of creating an allegedly inclusive, feel-good feminism. Intersectionality, once again, holds "a strong affective pull" (Kanai, 2021, p. 524). Importantly, participants do not simply articulate the importance of inclusion, but express the idea that intersectional feminism is the only right, or 'good' feminism, *precisely because it includes everyone*:

[73] Some of these concepts, such as 'empowerment' and 'freedom', also resonate with postfeminist values (Caldeira et al., 2020; Pruchniewska, 2018). I explore the entanglement of postfeminism and popular intersectionality further in Chapter 7.

[74] The relative absence of 'class' in this definition is also notable.

> And for me feminism . . . it is really part of it, that [feminism] is intersectional and does not exclude anyone, and not just, dunno, only biologically born women or just white women or something like that. Also not just women, but also men. (Kathi, video call)

> Feminism to me means equality, not just for all genders, but for all people. Totally independent of sexual orientation or gender identity. It is also important to me that feminism can never stand alone. Feminists always need to include other forms of discrimination in their fights, for example, sexism, racism, ableism, classism and also capitalism critique. Following the motto: only intersectional feminism is actually feminism. (Franzi, email)

The last sentence in the second quote, which insinuates that there is only one right kind of feminism, further highlights popular intersectionality's affective dimension. Sentiments like these *move* digital feminists to claim intersectionality for themselves to make sure they are on the right side of feminism and not being 'bad' (white) feminists (see Chapter 4).

As digital media scholars have noted, positivity encourages users to engage with content and share it, which in turn creates economic gain for the platform (Kanai, 2019b; van Dijck, 2013a). Platforms like Instagram foster these positive affective articulations, for example, through design affordances such as a feminine colour scheme and a heart-shaped 'Like' button. Instagram, as Saraswati (2021) points out, "is structured to encourage viewers to externalize their feelings (by way of clicking a like button or leaving a comment)" (p. 58). Externalising feelings is a way for users to engage on the platform.[75] As Mahoney (2020) notes, "Engagement functions as the currency of Instagram's visual economy, making likes, comments and shares essential for visibility" (p. 4). Additionally, expressing positivity can, following neoliberal logics, contribute to users' self-optimisation and self-promotion (Abidin, 2016; Bishop, 2018a; Calder-Dawe et al., 2021; Saraswati, 2021).[76] Thus, provided that 'positivity' on social media is encouraged and rewarded by platform affordances, it is not surprising that the digital feminists in my study, many of whom have learnt (more) about intersectionality on social media platforms, articulate intersectional feminism with the above mentioned positive attributes.

What is more, in articulating positively connoted concepts like inclusion that everyone – even non-feminists – would agree with, my participants articulate feminism not just as something 'good', but something that you would be *moved* to be part of. As Noa puts it, "For me, feminism means to

[75] In Chapter 6, I discuss negative affects, such as outrage, which are even more effective in encouraging circulation on social media platforms (Lehto, 2021; Ng, 2020).

[76] See also Gill and Orgad (2022a) for a discussion of 'confidence culture' that is based in positivity.

be for everyone's equality and freedom and against discrimination in any form and to adjust your own actions accordingly" (email). Besides the neoliberal imperative "to adjust your actions" (see Chapter 6), the sentiment of being for/against something creates a very simple 'good'/'bad' dichotomy – which reminds me of the discursive logics of 'good' and 'bad' white feminists on the *Zine_X* blog (see Chapter 4). Leah shares similar observations with me:

> I believe many debates about intersectionality never go beyond 'Check Your Privilege'. And this is where digital feminism makes it easy to get the good feeling of being on the right side . . . Then you can give yourself a pat on the back, then you've done something good. I think digital feminism is sometimes not profound enough. (video call)

Leah suggests that a discursive and performative act as simple as 'Checking One's Privilege', through its repeated articulation, gives digital feminists a "good feeling". Thus, being on the 'right'; the 'good' side of feminism, I argue, also creates affective relatability among digital feminists. As highlighted by feminist media scholars (Gill & Kanai, 2018; Kanai, 2019a, 2019b), relatability is a key feature in producing (white) neoliberal femininities in contemporary culture and can be expressed, for example, through shared, self-deprecating humour. Digital feminists who engage in popular debates on intersectionality, I suggest, relate through shared (re)articulations of popular intersectionality, often in the form of images, memes, or slogans such as 'Check Your Privilege'.

Popular intersectionality's relatability and positivity are closely correlated. As Sara Ahmed (2008) notes, "Groups cohere around a shared orientation towards some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight" (p. 4). Elsewhere, Ahmed (2010) further explains, "To be affected in a good way by objects that are already evaluated as good is a way of belonging to an affective community" (p. 38). In treating intersectional feminism as 'good', digital feminists affectively relate to each other, or in the words of Ahmed, form an affective community – while simultaneously discursively distancing themselves from exclusive kinds of feminisms like 'bad' white feminism, thus creating a common 'enemy'. As Katrin Döveling, Anu A. Harju, and Denise Sommer (2018) put it, "Emotions within a given community gradually become normative as discoursal demarcation of communal boundaries is constructed" (p. 4). Thus, affective expressions of inclusion, positivity and relatability are key to contemporary articulations of popular intersectionality in Instagram's visual platform cultures.

5.3.3. 'Lived Realities', 'Multi-Layered Identities', and 'Individual Experiences': Intersectionality's Inward Turn

Most articulations of positivity and inclusion were uttered in response to my question regarding what feminism means to my participants, however, I also asked interviewees explicitly about their understanding of intersectionality (while highlighting that I was not interested in textbook definitions). Notably, participants' definitions of intersectionality centre individual identities and 'lived realities'. As Romy puts it, "I would say the term intersectionality describes, is the academic term for something that is simply lived reality for many people" (video call). According to Elisabeth, "social categories like Gender, Race, or Class can 'intersect' or be knotted together in the lived reality of many people" (email).

The notion that intersectionality refers to different social categories converging in a person's identity, can also be found in the following deliberations:

> Sky: And intersectionality is, what I briefly mentioned earlier, this multi-layered-ness. That is, simply saying: Okay, there is a person, which we could unpick. This is where they come from, this is how they are viewed from the outside. . . . Like how do they identify themself. Or how they simply are. And then there's that, in this context, discrimination can happen, because it is, for me, it is, for example, I look, well, I am cis passing. I just say it how it is. This doesn't change that I am agender. . . . And to pay attention to, that it is multi-layered, erm, people are, and how you should engage with others and how you should, in your own fight for freedom, that sounds exaggerated, but in the end it is-
>
> Katrin: Mhm.
>
> Sky: -how one acts in their fight for freedom, is multi-layered and one should pay attention that one does not just consider what you see, but also how a person feels. (video call)

Intersectionality, in this instance, refers to the 'unpacking' of a person's different 'layers', such as their looks/outward appearance or their gender identity. It is also highlighted that how a person presents themselves should not lead to conclusions about their gender identity. Rather, it is important to remember in one's activism that a person can inhabit multi-layered identities, and to consider how a person 'feels'.

Articulations of intersectionality that are concerned with multi-layered identities and lived realities reflect the aforementioned (see Chapter 2) 'inward turn' of intersectionality described by Patricia Hill Collins (2009) in the US context:

> This stress on identity narratives, especially individual identity narratives, does provide an important contribution to fleshing out our understandings of how people experience and construct identities within intersecting systems of power. Yet this turning inward also reflects the shift within American society away from social structural analyses of social problems, for example, the role of schools, prisons, and workplace practices in producing poverty, and the growing rejection of institutional responses to social inequalities, e.g., how governmental social policies might address this intractable social problem. (p. ix)

As Collins points out, individual narratives are indeed important for understanding *how* systems of power intersect to create oppression, however, it is nonetheless problematic if we focus solely on such narratives and neglect structural analyses which could produce solutions to social inequalities. Jennifer Nash (2010) similarly argues, "While naming difference certainly allows feminists to bear witness to power's operations, it does little to analyze the mechanisms by which these systems of exclusion are replicated and re-created" (para. 7). In a similar vein, I suggest the here examined articulations of intersectionality in German (speaking) digital feminism neglect structural analyses in favour of individual identities and narratives. As such, intersectionality's 'inward turn' does not only exemplify the aforementioned neoliberal self-governmentality expressed in individual feminists being concerned with improving their feminism (see Chapter 4), but also refers to a discursive and visual focus on individual identities and embodiments.

Intersectionality's 'inward turn' is also reflected in the use of the term, 'experience', as the following two examples demonstrate:

> Intersectionality is a great term for, when you engage with the definition, to understand that, that everything that happens to us, our experiencing, our, our coming together with other people is multifaceted and not just one thing that someone who, for example, makes a racist remark against me, or in a job, erm, the insult can be very sexualised and related to the fact that I'm dark skinned, mixed, whatever you want to call it. And also from a psychological viewpoint, that with sexual assaults, there is so much connected with not looking like the norm, for example, to be a woman, background plays a role. Yeah, the term [intersectionality], I think, is great when – and I wish that it would be used more. (Samantha, video call)

> The term intersectionality means to me the reality that several experiences of discrimination can simultaneously interlock, and while other FLINTA*[77] and I are

[77] The commonly used acronym FLINTA* stands for 'Frauen, Lesben, Inter, Non-Binary, Trans und Agender' [women, lesbians, inter, non-binary, trans and agender] and is the attempt to use a

> affected by sexism, we all have our own experiences and I can't use my experiences to speak for everyone, and also don't want to. (Clara, email)

Both quotes highlight that intersectionality refers to different, individual experiences. The first quote demonstrates that intersectionality is articulated as helpful in talking about a person's individual experiences with racism and sexism. It is also noteworthy that described acts of racism and sexism are acts perpetrated by individuals rather than referring to structural forms of discrimination (Bouvier & Machin, 2021), further demonstrating popular intersectionality's entanglement with neoliberal notions of individual responsibility (see Chapter 6). Importantly, the attentive reader may have noted that Crenshaw (1989, 1991) did indeed refer to Black women's experiences. However, it is important to highlight that Crenshaw's use of experiences referred to the experiences Black women have in relation to structural powers, i.e., the law, and as a group. As gender studies scholar Brittney Cooper (2015) explains:

> The implicit distinction being made here between personal kinds of identity and structural identities is an important one. The law conceptualizes people through the structural identities of gender, race, sexual orientation, or national origin. These kinds of identities are different from personal identities of the sort that refer to personal taste, personality traits, gender performativity, or intimate and filial relationships. (p. 391)

Furthermore, the second participant quote evokes the previously discussed problematic notion that only certain groups have the right to speak about certain "experiences of discrimination" (Collins, 1997; Yuval-Davis, 2012; see Chapter 4). However, the phrase "we all have our own experiences" alludes to an understanding that everyone fits under the umbrella of intersectionality, that everyone "can recognize themselves in (at least) one of the categories provided by intersectionality" (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013, p. 245). This resonates with the notion that everyone is 'included' in popular intersectionality discourses, as discussed in the previous section.

This discursive focus on individual identities, embodiments, and experiences in my participants' responses is evocative of Instagram and other platform's visual culture. Popular feminisms, as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) analyses, circulate in "economies of visibility". That is, popular feminisms are particularly visible and accessible on social media platforms. And while visibility is politically important, and suggests that marginalised communities are literally *seen* and arguably

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term that describes everyone who is not cis male, i.e., everyone who may be affected by sexism and misogyny. Different versions of the acronym exists, e.g., FLINT*, FINTA*, or FLINTA – reflecting discussions on whether lesbians should be included in the 'F' for women, or whether being lesbian is an identity in its own right.

their political demands are heard this way, Banet-Weiser reminds us that in current social media environments, "visibility becomes *the end* rather than a means to an end" (p. 23; emphasis in original; see also Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022). As a result, "political categories such as race and gender have transformed their very logics from the inside out, so that the visibility of these categories is what matters, rather than the structural ground on and through which they are constructed" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 23).

These developments have only been intensified by a rising influencer culture in which individuals come to represent a certain identity group (Hutchinson, 2021), as participant Clara observes:

> I often feel that certain people (who are particularly vocal in the media) are used as spokesperson for racism/sexism/ableism etc. and through that, a general truth is formed, instead of listening to the many voices and the many different opinions and experiences.. Which would make a difference in the sense of diversity and then intersectionality.. (Email; ellipsis in original)

As journalist Symeon Brown (2022) notes, "In the past, raising awareness was a first step of activism, but for influencers it is the only stage" (p. 192). Similarly, Tobias Raun and Maria Bee Christensen-Strynø (2022) argue that influencers who self-brand as 'minority identities', "subscribe to an individualised identity politics in which visibility is a requisite for social change" (p. 1799). It is unsurprising that popular intersectionality, circulating in comparable social media economies of visibility (e.g., via sharepics or Reels), has come to signify visibility of individual identities and 'lived realities'. As Banet-Weiser and Zoe Glatt (2023) argue, representational intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), "has been capitalized on by neoliberal corporate culture, where intersectionality is firmly tied to the realm of representation . . . where the representation of intersectionality becomes an end in itself, severing ties with both politics and structures" (p. 501).

Yet, articulations of intersectionality as relating to different experiences and lived realities open up endless possibilities of identities to consider in one's activism, rendering it even more difficult to 'include everyone'. As interviewee Alexis reflects:

- All these different levels of discrimination need to be kept in mind, I think, to achieve a sustainable, just social change. This is of course super difficult because most of us aren't affected by all possible combined forms of discrimination

- That's why it is important in my opinion, to acquire expertise not just from one 'corner', but to create diverse teams in all areas of society… That's probably

> the only way for us to keep everyone (or at least most people) in our mind (email; bullet point format[78] and ellipsis in original)

Alexis' reflections, albeit brief, not only acknowledge the difficulty of keeping "all these different levels of discrimination in mind", but also articulate the need for structural solutions: If positions of decision-making and power, such as in politics or media, are filled with "diverse teams", then arguably this would not just create more visibility, but could also lead to actual social change.

5.3.4. 'A poor Muslim homosexual trans woman with a disability': Hierarchies of Oppression and Privilege

Despite many of the above discussed definitions of intersectionality and intersectional feminism highlighting its supposedly inclusive nature, several interviewees articulate intersectionality in a way that reinforces a hierarchy of oppressed identities. The idea that oppressions can be listed along a linear hierarchy is also reflected in Kanai's (2021) notion of "a conceptual grid plotting women's differences along one axis, and measuring relative privilege and disadvantage on the other" (p. 519). In contrast, the digital feminists in my study do not only distinguish differences among women, but also include men as well as trans and gender non-conforming identities. Additionally, they treat other 'classifications' such as race, class, sexuality, or (dis)ability as a conglomerate of oppressed identities, thus creating discursive hierarchies of oppression:

> Well, I understand the term to mean that one recognises that a person can be affected by several discriminating factors. Like for example, a Black, Muslim, homosexual trans woman is affected by many more discriminating factors than a white, heterosexual, healthy German [woman] like me for example. And intersectional feminism keeps these discriminating factors in mind and campaigns to make all discriminating factors better. (Fabienne, video call)

> Well, firstly that a black trans woman with a disability experiences more discrimination, and that these probably condition and reinforce each other. E.g., black people in the USA have less access to health care, which can be a disadvantage when being trans as well as for the disability. (Louisa, email)

Both quotes evoke perceived epitomes of multiple discrimination, the "Black, Muslim, homosexual trans woman" and the "black trans woman with a disability". It is noteworthy that both of the here articulated figures are trans women, reflecting the "discursive mobilisations of

[78] It is worth pointing out that Alexis' text format replicates the sharepic vernacular, demonstrating once more the influence social media platforms have on digital feminist discourses.

trans-inclusivity" (p. 639) within intersectionality that Jenny Morrison (2021) notices in Scottish grassroots movements as well (see Chapter 8).

Moreover, while Black Muslim homosexual trans women with disabilities may indeed be affected by intersecting structural oppressions, the above quotes are not referring to concrete persons but rather conglomerate a mental (check)list of oppressed identities. This impersonal adding up (King, 1988) constitutes a tick box approach to marginalised identities with the goal of mentioning as many subordinated identity categories as possible. However, such a tick box approach is problematic because it produces caricatures of archetypal oppressed figures, rather than talking about structural forms of discrimination.

Additionally, the comparison with a "white, heterosexual, healthy German [woman]" in the first quote creates a simplistic dichotomy of 'oppressed' and 'not oppressed' (or 'only a little oppressed'). I hence employ the term 'hierarchies of oppression', rather than Kanai's 'conceptual grid', as the term hierarchy emphasises that contemporary articulations of popular intersectionality avow and simultaneously reproduce power inequalities. That is, following the logics of such a rhetoric, those at the top of the hierarchy who are perceived as 'less oppressed' still wield power over the other groups that are assumed 'more oppressed'. While I am not arguing against existing power structures and inequalities among marginalised groups, I am wary of the implications such articulations have, since they 'rank' the importance of group-specific social justice fights. As Gloria Wekker (2004) critiques in the Dutch context:

> the familiar tradition-modernity binary is given a new purchase, by representing white Dutch women as the epitome, the teleological endpoint of emancipation, the example for black, migrant and refugee women, who apparently still have a long way to go before they can measure up. (p. 490)

Thus, similar to the declarations of whiteness and white saviourism I examined in Chapter 4, hierarchies of oppression evoke progress narratives of emancipated white women (Hemmings, 2011; Scharff, 2016 [2012]).

However, as Audre Lorde (2018 [1983]) poignantly argues in her essay, 'There is no hierarchy of oppressions':

> As a Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, mother of two including one boy and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself part of some group in which the majority defines me as deviant, difficult, inferior or just plain "wrong." From my membership in all of these groups I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of

> difference come in all shapes and sexes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression. I have learned that sexism and heterosexism both arise from the same source as racism. (p. 76)

Thus, following Lorde, true liberation for all oppressed identity groups can only be achieved through integrated activism and intergroup solidarity.[79]

A comparable exclusionary mechanism occurs through the repeated declaration of privilege, which works similarly to the previously discussed declarations of whiteness (Ahmed, 2004b; see Chapter 4):

> Yeah, my understanding is, erm, to include multiple perspectives. Well, of course, also the levels of discrimination. Or even levels of privilege, there's this privilege checklist, where I as a white woman might have less privilege than a white heterosexual man, but might not necessarily have more privileges than a black man for example. And if I was black, I would experience more discrimination on the basis of race and not just gender. (Stine, video call)

> What intersectionality means for me, is the unconditional, the unconditional support of all women and the acceptance, that there are women, who are less privileged than me for various reasons. Even when I have my own points where I might be less privileged, that does not mean that I don't also have privileges, and most importantly, that certain mechanisms of discrimination work together in such a way that other women might be discriminated, maybe differently than me. That [technical disruption] for me intersectionality, like I said, for me, intersectional feminism means indeed this unconditional recognition and solidarity and acceptance of all women. Every woman, who regards herself as a woman, feels as a woman. (Jessica, video call)

The first quote references the "privilege checklist", which, interestingly, several other participants mention as well. Furthermore, the discursively produced hierarchy of privileges places white heterosexual men at the top, while white women are positioned on the same 'level' as Black men, thus erasing the significance of racial and gender differences, and failing to consider inner-categorial differences based on sexuality, age, (dis)ability, or nationality (McCall, 2005).

The second quote further articulates intersectionality as an "unconditional support of all women and the acceptance, that there are women, who are less privileged than me for various reasons".

[79] Political scientists Nikita Dhawan und María do Mar Castro Varela (2023) additionally report that Kimberlé Crenshaw noted that "Intersectionality should not become a competition between those claiming oppression" during the "Celebrating Intersectionality?" Conference in Frankfurt, Germany in 2009 (see Chapter 2).

Although this comparison might be less explicit than the above examples focusing on oppressions, it nonetheless reverberates a similar intersectional hierarchy in which more privileged women are placed higher in the hierarchy, that is 'less oppressed' than less privileged women. This reflects Kanai's observation that intersectionality renders digital feminists "able to recognise women's experiences in terms of more, or less, privilege" (2021, p. 526).

Moreover, such discursive hierarchies can have real and tangible consequences in terms of how digital feminists further engage with intersectionality in digital spaces and how they understand their role as allies. For instance, Fabienne tells me about posting about intersectionality on International Women's Day. For this special post, Fabienne explains that she collected "quotes from different people who are affected by discrimination. . . . I asked three Black women, two trans people. Two women with headscarf. A queer woman. . . . and a woman with a disability" (video call). In this approach, each person represents one identity marker due to which people experience discrimination, e.g., Black, trans, headscarf (=Muslim), queer, and disability. It appears that the (check)listing of identity characteristics is conflated with addressing intersecting forms of oppression. Moreover, having asked her why she wanted to post about intersectionality on this particular day, Fabienne responds that it was important to her that:

> not five white women say, dunno, [laughs] I'm not allowed to show my breasts, and I'm sexually harassed and, yeah, dunno, everyone stares on my arse or something, yeah. And that is, that is, of course, not nice. And, of course, there are women who experience much worse things. I don't want to downplay it. There are just people who have really blatant problems and should have the opportunity to speak about it. And I want to include different topics with the quotes, because feminism is such an incredibly big field. (video call)

The notion that the post on International Women's Day should not just include "five white women" who 'complain' about sexual harassment and double standards for female bodies, not only implies that sexual harassment is solely a white women's issue, but also that "there are women who experience much worse things". This comparison produces a discursive hierarchy of oppressions and privileges similar to the ones outlined above. Furthermore, these articulations exhibit the aforementioned conflation of visibility with active social change (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Brown, 2022; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022), as well as the previously discussed question of who is perceived to have the right to talk in contemporary digital feminism/about intersectionality.

Another participant, Leah, shares similar observations:

> It seems to be a phenomenon, at least I've heard about this quite often, that many white feminists who run successful accounts, sometimes with more followers than Black women for example, I feel, are well-served in sharing the content of Black feminists, to make their white communities aware and to remind them: 'Yeah okay, our community is extremely white, but I want to point out that there are people who talk about other struggles. It would be really cool if you could visit [their accounts] and engage with this'. I think, as multiplicators, these big accounts can be very, very valuable, if they act that way. But I think, it can also go wrong, when you feel that they are appropriating some topics. And when there is a post about the intersection of racism and sexism by a white woman, then the content is very different and written from a different life experience, but gets shared more often than the one by a Black woman who has said something similar. And then I'm thinking, well okay, we don't need to compete in our engagement with certain topics. And it's not about running the most popular Instagram account. At least not for me, it's about making cool content and to encourage productive debate, to share information. And that's where Instagram plays a role. Like, I think there used to be certain accounts that turned into influencers and that suddenly try to sell face cream besides posting about feminist topics. And I'm like, yeah okay, what happened? . . . And I think those who want to sell you a face cream are the ones who might address the topic [of intersectionality] only superficially, rather than doing something cool and encouraging people to say, 'Hey, I'm going to buy Natasha Kelly's *Black Feminism* and work through that and I read an essay from that book every day, every week, and engage with it'. Instead, it is escalated into this, 'Yeah, we are questioning our privileges and that's enough'. I think that's a shame. (video call)

Leah points out that it can be beneficial when white feminists use their Instagram accounts to create a wider reach for Black feminist content. However, she further acknowledges that such acts "can also go wrong" and lead to the appropriation of intersectionality and related topics, since "a post about the intersection of racism and sexism by a white woman . . . is very different and written from a different life experience, but gets shared more often than the one by a Black woman". This leads me, once more, to the question of which subject position white feminists *can* take in order to avoid such appropriations while still engaging with intersectionality in a meaningful way. As Leah suggests, "we don't need to compete in our engagement with certain topics. And it's not about running the most popular Instagram account". That is, popular articulations of intersectionality as a feminism that includes everyone create the false impression that every digital feminist needs to produce content (in form of 'informative' sharepics) about every intersectionality-related topic (or at least the ones currently trending). As a result, Leah describes a commonly held belief in contemporary German (speaking) feminism: that "we are questioning our privileges and that's enough".

Similarly, Louisa argues that "it doesn't add any value" when digital feminists keep producing similar content:

> I am bored when I see the x th image of Frida Kahlo or Ruth Bader Ginsburg on an account. In so many bubbles, there are so many accounts that look alike, and I don't want to be part of that. I'm usually repelled when I see a quote I have seen many times

> before, and then I think, that it doesn't add any value if I also do something [referring to her art] on that. (email)

Ultimately, in the neoliberal-capitalist Instagram economy, such popular digital feminist content ultimately only serves, in Leah's words, "those who want to sell you a face cream". While I am not claiming that my interviewees engage in such self-promotion – nor have any of them disclosed any corporate collaborations – I want to emphasise that the articulations of popular intersectionality examined in this chapter assist in creating a culture of self-promotion (Caldeira, 2023; Saraswati, 2021) and distract from more meaningful debates about the importance of intersectionality.

Another way to engage with intersectionality productively and share content without appropriating it could be to explore using different platforms. Kathi, for instance, tells me that she recently, after realising that her Instagram stories only reached those already in agreement with her, started posting content in her WhatsApp status, noticing that this way, she could reach friends and family members outside of the Instagram 'bubble':

> I reach completely different people, who I would not reach at all on Instagram. Like, dunno, my parents, my cousin, or even my siblings. They're a bit older than me and that's why they are not [on Instagram]. Or, yeah, just many, many other friends who, mh, yeah, who are not on social media. (video call)

Kathi further describes how one of her recent WhatsApp statuses led to a conversation with her mother on why blackface is problematic. While this marks a successful example, I am not proposing that digital feminists abandon Instagram as a platform upon which to engage with digital feminism and activism completely, but that they engage more consciously with the platform and feminist content on it.

To not tap into the trap of neoliberal self-promotion, feminist scholar L. Ayu Saraswati (2021) has developed three sets of questions digital feminists should ask themselves before posting. These questions refer to the content and practice of posting, and encourage focusing on the collective, such as:

> Is the content about ourselves, our personal stories, or our community/ collective/system/ecology? Does the content invite others to do collective action, broadcast community events and programs, or simply project oneself as a successful neoliberal self(ie)? . . . .When we tell a story about ourselves or anything at all, do we contextualize our posting within a larger context? Does the context we provide allow other people to understand how the ecology/structure/ideology works and therefore

> possibly evoke social change? . . . . Does this posting prioritize the collective? Is it "collectively oriented"? . . . Does it work toward ending systemic oppression? (p. 169)

These questions, I suggest, might also be helpful in thinking about how digital feminists can engage with intersectionality productively in their activism and social media postings.

5.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed 22 online interviews with German-speaking digital feminists to explore how the platformization of feminism (Barbala, 2022), in this case on Instagram, may affect how my research participants grapple with intersectionality. Analysis of my participants' accounts of digital feminist platform cultures has shown, in the first part, a correspondence with the wider literature on digital feminism and social media practices in a neoliberal age; that Instagram's visual focus as well as the image carousel feature enable the sharepic trend popular in German (speaking) digital feminism at the time of interviews. Leading to condensed and oftentimes superficial, as well as possibly incorrect, information about intersectionality and related theories, sharepics form an "uneasy relationship" between "feminism and online self-promotion" (Caldeira, 2023, p. 12). Additionally, the analysis of my participants' notion of a feminist 'bubble' has not only confirmed existing literature on filter bubbles (Kanai & McGrane, 2021; Pariser, 2011), but also contributes to our understanding of feminist filter bubbles on Instagram, where 'safety' is less of an issue, but foregrounds the existence of a group of like-minded feminists who (are expected to) share similar knowledge about intersectionality and related topics.

In the second part of the chapter, my thematic analysis has identified four themes. The first theme demonstrates how for several of my participants, intersectionality is a topic of relatively recent engagement, sparked by the global Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and more 'visibility' on social media. Moreover, some participants believe that it is predominantly young(er) feminists who engage with intersectionality online, and thus perceive intersectionality as a recent theory, unaware of the concepts' Black feminist and activist origins. The second theme encapsulates the notion of intersectional feminism as inclusive, highlighting affects such as positivity and relatability which are embodied by this notion, and which are actively encouraged by platforms such as Instagram. The third theme focused on intersectionality's 'inward turn' (Collins, 2009), which was expressed discursively by my participants as 'lived realities', 'multi-layered identities', and 'experiences'. This focus on individual narratives, as I have argued, is encouraged by recent social and political shifts in activist cultures that treat visibility as *the* primary goal of activism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022). Related to this is the final theme, the

discursive hierarchies of oppression and privilege. Such hierarchies present intersectionality either as a (check)list of singular oppressed identities or a conglomeration of marginalised identities, which leads to the epitome of intersectionality, the 'poor Muslim homosexual trans woman with a disability'. Thus, intersectionality in my participants' definitions is often reduced to identity or multiple forms of discrimination, rather than concerned with systemic forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Similar to the articulations on the *Zine_X* blog, the digital feminists I interviewed appear to understand intersectionality as embodiment and the right to talk about intersectional issues. However, in contrast to the blog, which mainly criticises 'bad' white feminism and positions intersectionality as a response to whiteness, my interviewees articulate intersectionality in much more positive ways through emphasising inclusion and individual narratives. Both appear to be encouraged by platforms like Instagram which actively foster expressions of positivity and focus on the visual. Despite its positive affective appeal, such articulations are nonetheless problematic, as they do not address structural issues of social justice concerns. Moreover, they articulate a critique of 'bad' white feminists less explicitly through discursive hierarchies of oppression and privilege, which imply that certain feminist issues are more important and deserve more visibility, than others. As a result, the here analysed articulations of intersectionality and intersectional feminism assist in foregrounding the responsibility of individuals to create more visibility of marginalised groups, as I discuss further in Chapter 6.

Furthermore, my analysis has revealed some of the ways in which digital feminists can engage with intersectionality in more productive ways, which do not neglect a systemic analysis nor engage in discursive hierarchies. For instance, several participants critically question some of the common constructions of intersectionality I have analysed here, and interrogate the role of white feminists in intersectionality discourses. As Leah's account shows, it is unhelpful to think of (white) digital feminists being in competition for the topics they engage with. Moreover, participants appear, to a certain degree, aware of the potential pitfalls of using platforms like Instagram for digital feminist causes. Kathi's example of using WhatsApp to inform friends and family about the problematic nature of blackface suggests that digital feminists could seek alternative platforms. Finally, I have introduced Saraswati's (2021) set of questions, which can help digital feminists re-evaluate their intentions and positions when posting about intersectionality. However, meaningful engagement and allyship are, of course, not easily achieved. In the following chapter I demonstrate how popular allyship discourses are conditioned and expressed through neoliberal articulations of individual responsibility and 'the perfect' (Kanai,

2020; McRobbie, 2015), the previously mentioned importance of learning and educating (see Chapter 4), and the individual digital feminist's anxiety of 'getting intersectionality wrong'.

Chapter 6. "My profile said 'intersectional feminism', now it only says 'feminism' because I didn't feel safe with that anymore": Individual Responsibility, Anxiety, and the Perfect Intersectional Feminist

Feminist media and cultural scholars have extensively discussed how neoliberalism governs women's psychic and affective lives (Budgeon, 2015; Gill, 2007; Gill & Orgad, 2022a; Kanai & Gill, 2020; McRobbie, 2015; Saraswati, 2021; Scharff, 2015; see also Chapter 3). In particular, as Angela McRobbie (2015) theorises, the figure of 'the perfect' has become "a leitmotif for contemporary femininity" (p. 4). 'The perfect' describes "a heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the 'good life'" (p. 9), and thus provides a "neoliberal spreadsheet" (p. 10) for women, dictating what to eat and how to dress, think, or behave at work and in relationships, in order to reach this (unattainable) ideal. Additionally, 'the perfect' is marked by heteronormativity and self-competition, which leads women to experience insecurity and anxiety, constantly asking themselves, "Am I good enough?" (McRobbie, 2015). In recent years, 'the perfect' has been even further encouraged by contemporary social media platforms like Instagram (McRobbie, 2015). Research has shown that women and young people especially feel the pressure to present a 'perfect self' on social media, but also experience anxiety about 'getting it wrong' (Gill, 2021a, 2021b; Kanai, 2020; Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022; Krogh, 2022; Lehto, 2021). It is unsurprising that the 'perfect' is a "standard" (Bobel, 2007) we observe in (digital) feminist and activist discourses as well. For instance, Akane Kanai (2020) notices in her participants' engagement with intersectional feminism "palpable anxieties in relation to regulating and perfecting the self" (p. 38).

In a similar vein, I identify neoliberal logics of self-improvement towards perfection in my participants' talk about allyship. Education studies professor Ellen M. Broido (2000) defines allies as "members of dominant social groups (e.g., men, Whites, heterosexuals) who are working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based on their social-group membership" (p. 3). In my participants' talk, the work towards ending such systems, however, manifests as individualised responsibility, as well as self-competition and self-improvement narratives in keeping with the neoliberal ethos of 'the perfect'. These discourses, I argue, influenced by contemporary 'woke' and cancel cultures (Clark, 2020; Duffy et al., 2022; Kanai & Gill, 2020; Ng, 2022; Sobande et al., 2022), constitute another category of the perfect – what I propose we call 'the perfect intersectional feminist'. The perfect intersectional feminist, I contend,

is a continuation of the 'good' white feminist (see Chapter 4), since 'good' no longer seems to be 'good enough' in contemporary German (speaking) digital feminism. The perfect intersectional feminist thus embodies another version of the "heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the 'good life'" (McRobbie, 2015, p. 9), where the 'good life' can be substituted with 'good feminist/ally'.

This chapter sets out to critically examine the gendered, classed, and racialised underpinnings of neoliberal self-actualising and self-transformation that govern popular intersectionality and allyship discourses, as well as the affects it gives rise to. Drawing on the same 22 online in-depth interviews I discussed in Chapter 5, I develop the figure of the perfect intersectional feminist in this chapter. In the first part, I examine the neoliberal principles that constitute the perfect intersectional feminist through highlighting the "perfect standard" (Bobel, 2007) of activism and allyship, as well as the neoliberal allyship discourses on self-improvement and individual responsibility articulated in my interviewees' talk. I also shed a light on the gendered, racialised, and classed dimensions of these discourses and how they produce the figure of the perfect intersectional feminist. Following this, the second part of this chapter focuses on the toxic callout culture in digital feminism that the figure of the perfect intersectional feminist contributes to, as well as the pressure, exhaustion, insecurity, and anxiety my interviewees appear to experience in such a culture. My primary goal in this chapter is to better understand the post-Covid culture in which contemporary articulations of popular intersectionality take place, and which engenders such pressure to conform to the perfect intersectional feminist ideal.

6.1. The Perfect Intersectional Feminist

6.1.1. 'I don't know enough yet': Competing with the Self

One of the ways in which the perfect intersectional feminist manifests in my participants' talk is through the notion of an invisible – and unattainable – "perfect standard" (Bobel, 2007) of activism and allyship. For instance, this becomes apparent in responses to my question of whether participants identify as activists. A typical response is usually that the participant does not do enough (yet) to consider themself a (digital) activist. As Alexis confesses: "I struggle calling myself an activist, because I look up to many activists like eg Tupoka Ogette and then I think: I don't do enough, by far" (email). Later, Alexis explains that she regards the work on her feminist Instagram account as "leisure time activism" (email) – in contrast to someone like Ogette, who works full time as an author, podcaster, and keynote speaker and workshop facilitator on topics of

anti-racism. The sentiment of 'not doing enough' is also present in Maria's response: "I think I don't have that image of myself, to be an activist. . . . Because I always think, I am not enough, I could do more" (video call). Statements like these are reminiscent of the "perfect standard" of activism that women's and gender studies professor Chris Bobel (2007) observes in her research on menstrual activism:

> To duly earn the esteemed title of activist, you must put in your time and demonstrate your commitment. But how much time? According to those I interviewed, only those who 'live the issue', working very hard and at great personal cost over a long period of time, merit the designation activist. (p. 153)

Moreover, the idea that one does not do enough to be considered an activist, reflects the (self-) competition under neoliberalism that feminist scholars have well documented (McRobbie, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014, 2019; Scharff, 2015). Women in particular express an "inner directed self-competition" (McRobbie, 2015, p. 15), since due to a "gendered double standard", it is "less acceptable for women 'to look competitive'" (Mavin & Yusupova, 2022, p. 891).[80] As such, it is unsurprising that especially female interview participants articulate not doing enough to consider themselves activists. The strive for the unattainable goal of the 'perfect' thus serves as "a kind of neoliberal spreadsheet, a constant benchmarking of the self, a highly standardised mode of self-assessment, a calculation of one's assets, a fear of possible losses" (McRobbie, 2015, p. 10). I return to the sentiment of 'not doing enough' in the second part of this chapter when exploring my participants' affective responses to these discourses.

Next, I want to focus on how a "perfect standard" (Bobel, 2007) of allyship also refers to 'not knowing enough'. For instance, Hannah tells me in the context of debates about ableism, that she feels she does not know enough about the topic yet: "For me it is the whole discussion around ableism, I've zero engaged with it, yeah, I should engage with it much, much more. I don't know enough. . . . I'm not in those bubbles [that discuss ableism]" (video call). This sentiment reflects Kanai's (2020) observation, that in her interviews, there was "a sense that one needed to continually keep up with new knowledges" (p. 35). The felt need to 'keep up' with different intersectional identities' concerns, I contend, might be further propelled by popular articulations of intersectionality as an 'inclusive' feminism (see Chapter 5): To include everyone, one would need to know about everyone's struggles. Although, as I have previously pointed out (see Chapter 4), it might be epistemologically impossible to always include everyone, the "perfect standard"

[80] Yet, as I will show in a later section on calling out mistakes among allies, outer-directed competition does indeed exist between digital feminists.

(Bobel, 2007) of intersectional allyship dictates that one does. Moreover, Hannah also mentions that she currently "engage[s] a lot with the topic Colourism" (video call). This remark suggests that certain topics 'trend' at certain times, something I observed when conducting interviews over a period of seven months, as the 'trendy' topics in regards to intersectionality appeared to reflect current social and political events, including social media outcalls and 'shit storms'.[81]

The notion of 'not knowing enough' also affects how much participants actively engage in digital feminist debates:

> Katrin: Do you participate in digital feminist discussions? Why (not)?
>
> Franzi: Rarely. With my current level of knowledge, I currently feel more in the position that I can listen and learn – but not properly help shape the discourse. My participation in digital feminist debates hence currently involves asking many questions, questioning statements and supporting individual people and positions (for instance sharing content in Instagram stories). (email)

In this quote, the 'perfect standard' materialises as a "level of knowledge" that one needs to reach to be able to participate in digital feminist debates. This resonates with my previous analysis of feminist bubbles on Instagram in which one is expected to be already familiar with intersectional feminism (Kanai, 2021; Scharff, 2023a; see Chapter 5). Additionally, the assumption that only some knowledgeable digital feminists are in a position to "help shape the discourse" further supports my argument that in contemporary Instagram feminism, feminist communication and networking has transformed from group discussions to individual activists and digital feminists shaping the discourse – which highly resonates in contemporary influencer and micro-celebrity cultures (Brown, 2022; Marwick, 2013; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022). Next, I explore the

[81] Overall, my participants consider the most important debates/topics around intersectionality in Germany to be racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, racism against Asian people, racism against Sinti and Roma, Afro-German feminism, Black Lives Matter, BIPOC representation in film and theatre, colonialism, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the NSU (Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund [National Socialist Underground], a fascist terrorist organisation that killed nine migrant men and one police woman between 2000 and 2007 – the investigative process of these murders has continuously been obstructed by the German secret service and thus continuous to attract media attention), the 'headscarf debate' (see Chapter 7), normalisation of periods, sex workers, trans rights, trans women, access to gynaecological care for trans men, women with disabilities, (sexualised) violence against people with disabilities and queer people, abortion, care work, mental health, ADHD, gender neutral language, the Covid-19 pandemic, the unjust education system in Germany, long-time unemployment and homelessness, and the climate crisis.

importance of 'listening', 'learning', and 'reflecting', which are related to the imperative to be knowledgeable about multiple intersectional social justice issues.

6.1.2. 'Listening, Learning, and Reflecting on Yourself': Self-Improvement as Allyship

A common allyship 'mantra' in my interviewees' articulations – and another rhetoric through which the perfect intersectional feminist manifests – is the imperative to 'listen, learn, and reflect on yourself'. As Tim explains, the role of white people "is first and foremost the role of someone listening. It makes sense that one learns about other people's perspectives" (video call).[82] Besides learning "about other people's perspectives", reflecting on oneself is another key element of allyship. Torben believes for him as a "hetero man", self-reflection is crucial: "I think the first and most important step is the mindset, simply to reflect oneself" (video call). However, as Leah highlights, learning and self-reflection are only the first steps and should be followed by behavioural changes:

> Recognising the problem is step one, yeah. And that's cool. But I think one has to stay with it, and not send the message to people: 'Do you acknowledge it? Then all is good, you can't make any mistakes anymore.' But instead the second step should be that you inform yourself about other lived realities and that you change something in your behaviour, to make it better for everyone. (video call)

What these articulations share is an understanding that through 'listening' and 'learning' about the experiences of other groups, a process of self-reflexivity is ignited through which the self is transformed into an ally. This mirrors Kanai's (2020) observations of "commitment to self-improvement and ongoing self-actualization" (p. 34) in her interviews with digital feminists, which is in keeping with neoliberal self-improvement narratives (Scharff, 2015). As sociologists Natalia Gerodetti and Martha McNaught-Davis (2017) note, "The ideology of individualism contends that, through reflexivity, individuals can reinvent themselves in adherence to their subjectivity" (p. 355).

Self-improvement, then, can be understood in my participant's terms as a form of "everyday activism" (Mansbridge & Flaster, 2007) – or everyday allyship. According to feminist scholars

[82] Interestingly, Julia Coffey and Akane Kanai (2021) report from their research with Australian digital feminists that, "Participants described online feminist spaces as not necessarily being conducive to 'listening'" (p. 9). This might be further indicative of discrepancies between affective discourses about the potential of digital feminism, and the reality of contemporary digital feminism, as I discussed at the example of 'feminist connections' in Chapter 5.

Jane Mansbridge and Katherine Flaster (2007), an 'everyday activist' advances the feminist cause "by wielding their selected cultural critiques in micro-negotiations with their bosses, husbands, and friends" (p. 628). In contrast, my participants appear to direct their everyday activism/allyship overwhelmingly towards themselves via self-reflection and self-improvement imperatives. These allyship imperatives thus function as a technology of governing the self (Foucault in Martin et al., 1988). In other words, 'fixing' the self becomes a project through which racism, sexism, and other social justice issues – supposedly – are 'fixed'.

Self-improvement and self-transformation become the focus of the following email interaction between me and participant Alexis:

> Katrin: You say that the goal of your [Instagram] account is "those journeys of self-reflection and self-education" – This is something I repeatedly encounter in my research. Why is learning and self-reflection so important in digital feminism, in your opinion?
>
> Alexis: For me it is the logical first step: If I want to engage myself for a cause, then I really need to understand it myself first and ask myself, how do I contribute to that problem. This principally creates a basic understanding, which is super important in order to address the problem. If all people would do that, imagine the world we could live in ... 🌈
> But this self-reflection also has many other (totally logical) advantages: If I start with myself, then I can at least see with "open eyes" what I can change about my behaviour in everyday life – that would make a huge difference. That's when I probably realise which things are easier to do or to admit and which ones are harder. . . .
> And another thing I realised: If we train to critique ourselves (e.g., "Yes, of course I am a racist. I was socialised in a racist society, that is simply a fact."), then it will be easier for us to accept critique/feedback from others, when they make me aware of certain (e.g., racist) behaviours or expressions. (email; first ellipsis and rainbow emoji in original)

Critical self-assessment is articulated as self-evident in this example, or "totally logical". This articulation responsibilises the individual for creating social change. Rather than assuming an ally needs to understand how systems of oppression work on a structural level, the importance of understanding "how do I contribute to that problem" is highlighted.

While I return to the issue of individualised responsibility in the next section, I want to use this example to focus on the positivity embodied in my participants' allyship discourses. Highlighting the "advantages" of self-reflection, as well as using the English phrase "imagine the world we could live in …" (which could be read as a nod to John Lennon's famous song, *Imagine*) and adding the rainbow emoji, suggests a positive attitude towards self-reflection and self-monitoring as allyship. This is in keeping with the previously discussed positivity expected from women and

marginalised groups under neoliberalism (Gill & Orgad, 2018, 2022b; Kanai & Gill, 2020). Drawing on interviews with mothers, influencers, and service workers (all self-identified as women) in Aotearoa, health psychologist Octavia Calder-Dawe and colleagues (2021) find that in their interviewees' discourse "the ideal positive person takes shape as a go-getter who is willing to work on their mindset" (p. 561). As the authors further highlight, their observations of their participants' positivity discourses align "clearly with core elements of idealized postfeminist and neoliberal femininities" (p. 565). Similarly, I argue the perfect intersectional feminist embodies neoliberal expressions of positivity and aspiration towards self-improvement as an intersectional ally associated with hegemonic neoliberal femininities. Yet, interestingly, in my data sample, participants of varying gender identities (female, male, non-binary, agender, and genderqueer) adopt discursive practices of positivity, self-improvement, and self-monitoring. This, I suggest, may be related to the digital environment my participants engage with intersectionality in, Instagram, which, as previously discussed, encourages expressions of patriarchal femininity (Caldeira et al., 2018; Crepax, 2020; Mahoney, 2020) and positivity (Abidin, 2016; Saraswati, 2021).[83] As I demonstrate in the second part of this chapter, in actuality, the unattainable ideal of the perfect intersectional feminist also gives rise to feelings of anxiety and pressure (McRobbie, 2015).

One particular way in which my participants 'listen to' and 'learn' about the perspectives and experiences of other identity groups in digital spaces, is through creating a diverse social media feed (Kanai, 2020). That is, the digital feminists in my study make a "conscious decision" (Romy, video call) about who they follow on social media, which is influenced by which 'identity group' the person/account followed embodies.[84] For instance, Franzi informs me that for her, "it is especially important that the people I follow represent a maximum amount of diversity" (email). And Louisa explains:

> It is important to me to have a diverse feed, and to read many different voices ([my feed] could be much more diverse,[85] but then I can't follow-up anymore.) I live in a relatively small town (120k residents), work in a rich part of town and have rather few [social] contacts. On the Internet, I can extend my views, like it wouldn't be possible in offline life as an introvert human. (email)

[83] This resonates further with feminist research that demonstrates how queer, non-binary, or trans influencers produce Instagram content which reads as "hyperfeminine" (Streeter, 2023p. 129), and embodies "an idealised neoliberal femininity" (Chen & Kanai, 2022, p. 113).

[84] This is of course a very essentialist approach.

[85] Note again the 'perfect (yet unattainable) standard' of allyship.

As Louisa points out, in the context of living in a small town and working in an affluent area, social media becomes a tool for learning about digital feminism, as it "can extend my views". Similarly, for Laila, it is important "to read a lot, books, but also on social media, how people of various gender identities and sexualities report about their histories (of suffering) [(Leidens]geschichten]. It's only then that I feel properly connected with the topic and the people" (email).

However, while the affective need to be exposed to different viewpoints resonates in a post-2020 'woke' culture, I contend it also showcases a tendency of 'consuming' the Other (hooks, 2015 [1992]-a) in pursuit of one's own self-improvement, rather than in support of subordinated groups. As bell hooks (2015 [1992]-a) eloquently argued several decades ago:

> Within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference. The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. (p. 21)

In a similar way, in contemporary digital feminism influencers and activists from (multiple) discriminated groups become the "spice seasoning" in the individual "dull dish" of allies' social media feeds. Moreover, the notion of 'consumption' as self-improvement appears to be further driven by neoliberal logics of individual responsibility and 'the perfect' (McRobbie, 2015), in which a "toxic individualism . . . . places the onus for progress and improvement on an individual, and it erases the need for systemic change, obscuring the white supremacy that harms marginalized groups" (Jackson & Rao, 2022, pp. 130-131).

Structural inequalities, however, are not 'fixed' solely by individuals who 'listen' to discriminated groups and 'learn' about their experiences and perspectives. In Chapter 4, I introduced philosophy professor Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò's (nd) argument that the imperative to listen ultimately relieves the 'listener' of actual engagement with white supremacy and racism. Relatedly, professor of African-American studies Hazel V. Carby (1982) famously argued in the British context that the call to white feminists and researchers to 'listen' refers to recognising the structural oppression of women of colour, and the "mechanisms" within the feminist movement that exclude these groups:

> In arguing that feminism must take account of the lives, herstories and experiences of black women we are not advocating that teams of white feminists should descend upon Brixton, Southall, Bristol or Liverpool to take black women as objects of study in modes

> of resistance. . . . The WLM,[86] however, does need to listen to the work of black feminists to take account of autonomous organizations like OWAAD (Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent) who are helping to articulate the ways in which we are oppressed as black women. In addition to this it is very important that white women in the women's movement examine the ways in which racism excludes many black women and prevents them from unconditionally aligning themselves with white women. Instead of taking black women as the objects of their research, white feminist researchers should try to uncover the gender-specific mechanisms of racism amongst white women. (p. 231)

While following Black feminists and activists on social media is, of course, not the same as white researchers using Black women as their object of study, I do believe Carby's call is helpful in reflecting on the true purpose of a 'diverse feed'. Instead of focusing on the acquisition of 'knowledge' about the Other (Dabiri, 2021), it might be more productive to focus on "listening across difference" (Dreher, 2009). As media studies professor Tanja Dreher (2009) explains:

> Listening across difference suggests a subtle shift, from seeking better understanding of an 'other' to listening for better understanding of relationships and complicities, issues and the workings of privilege. Following these arguments, listening across difference need not aim at understanding or knowledge of 'others', but might instead gravitate towards understanding networks of privilege and power and one's own location within them. This shift may also enable a politics of listening to avoid the pitfalls of identity in favour of a politics of interaction. A focus on listening and privilege thus highlights incompleteness and connection rather than knowing and mastery. (p. 451)

'Listening across difference' thus aims towards understanding social inequalities on a structural level. It prioritises comprehension of how processes of structural oppression operate, how they relate, connect, and intersect (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), rather than accumulating as much knowledge as possible about certain identity groups. However, as I demonstrate in the second part of this chapter, contemporary social media platforms are not necessarily conducive to 'listening across difference', nor do they encourage systemic analysis (Bouvier & Machin, 2021).

Lastly, it is incumbent to point out that the here identified allyship discourses are not new nor unique to the German-speaking digital feminist context. As I have discussed previously, neoliberal imperatives on how to behave, such as the ones identified in my interviews, resonate not only with the checklists for 'good' white feminists on the *Zine_X* blog (see Chapter 4), but also with popular (Anglophone) allyship literature (Carlson et al., 2020; see also Chapter 8) and research in educational contexts (Hanasono et al., 2022; Sumerau et al., 2021). Crucially though, allyship discourses were particularly pronounced in the political and social media moment of the summer

[86] Women's Liberation Movement.

of 2020, and its accompanying rise of 'woke' culture (Kanai & Gill, 2020; Sobande et al., 2022). As such, my participants' articulations of self-reflection and self-improvement must be understood in this context. The interviews I conducted in 2021 are hence informed by the felt urgency of allyship and allyship declarations many social media users and influencers expressed in 2020 (Wellman, 2022). This in turn has led to the solidification of the ideal of the perfect intersectional feminist in my participants' articulations. Or in borrowing McRobbie's (2015) words, these allyship discourses provide a "neoliberal spreadsheet" (p. 10) on how to behave as an intersectional ally. Moreover, I would like to highlight that self-reflection should not generally be condemned, but rather, we need to be wary about self-reflection in the sense of neoliberal self-actualising and self-transformation becoming a discursive end in and of itself. In the following, I analyse related allyship discourses around the notion of 'recognising' and 'using' privilege, which have also regained increased importance in recent years (Dabiri, 2021; Saltman, 2018).

6.1.3. 'Using Privilege': Individualised Responsibility

One outcome of self-reflection, following my participants' articulations, is 'recognising' and 'using' one's privilege(s). As Louisa puts it, her goal is "to always be aware of my privileges and to be aware of prejudices in my worldview" (email). The notion of 'always being aware of one's privileges' exhibits an individualised responsibility in keeping with neoliberal logics (Scharff, 2015), and marks another unattainable facet of the perfect intersectional feminist. Privilege, in my participants' talk, commonly refers to an individual's "more favourable, mobile, and dominant position vis-à-vis the structures of power/knowledge and society" (Alcoff, 1991, p. 30, endnote 4), which, in turn, engenders the individual's responsibility to use this position to 'do good' – particularly as a feminist who is white:

> Katrin: Which role do white people play in intersectional feminism?
>
> Clara: . . . a super important and essential role, because white Cis-women (I'll ignore Cis-men for now) belong to the privileged ones in feminism. Through [this position] they have (and if I am honest, yes, I as well, because I am also a white Cis-woman) the opportunity and also the responsibility, to make feminism intersectional, to lend a voice to minorities, to raise awareness about other lived realities and to really include all women* in their thinking. That's why we have the term 'white feminism', which gets criticised so often because in this feminism only white Cis-women are thought of [mitgedacht]. (email)

> . . . if you look at all the discriminating factors, white women are the ones who have it a little bit easier, then you could say that they should use their priv-, or that I as a white woman should use my privilege and raise attention to other topics. Yeah, platform is important, if you can create a platform, then you should do it. (Fabienne, video call)

Two aspects are noteworthy here. First, both quotes focus on white (cis) women using their privilege (the first quote deliberately disregards men), reverberating a discursive focus on white feminists (Morrison, 2021; see Chapter 4). Secondly, both quotes exhibit an "inner directed self-competition" (McRobbie, 2015, p. 15; Scharff, 2015) through the discursive shift from white women in the abstract, to "I as well" and "I as a white woman". As feminist philosopher Sonia Kruks (2005) notes, "what is striking is that when feminists, notably white feminists, come to reflect on their own privilege a peculiar analytical shift usually takes place. Privilege generally ceases to be thought about as structural" (p. 181).

Moreover, some participants' articulations of 'using privilege' for intersectional allyship also exhibit normative expressions of femininity:

> [To be active in a feminist sense] means to me to move life from suffering towards empathy and solidarity every day. It means to me, to be in solidarity with the marginalised, to place my privileges at the disposal of others and to oppose injustice and violence loudly. (Elisabeth, email)

> . . . and to always check: Have we perhaps forgotten about somebody on the way to completing the picture [of intersectional feminism]? That's what I would consider intersectional thinking. To start with yourself and to see 'Okay, what do I have, what enables me to forward something?', because maybe I'm privileged in one aspect, like education, like I simply have the knowledge, and, and 'Who is there who might need my, my support?' And then, then I'm in this allyship mode and I ask 'What do you need, before I start doing something randomly?' Like, I think there are extremely many offers [of support] without asking, 'What do the people actually need'? (Maria, video call)

The first quote emphasises "empathy and solidarity", which are typically feminine and feminist values, as I discussed when looking at the example of 'solidarity' in Chapter 4. As I argued, such 'declarations' (Ahmed, 2004b) serve to preserve hierarchical dynamics of 'privileged' saviours and the 'non-privileged' Other in need of saving. Additionally, the notion of 'placing privileges at the disposal of others' reminds me of the type of self-sacrificing femininity commonly associated with motherhood (Gallagher Elkins, 2020). In a similar vein, the second quote articulates care and inclusion through questioning whether anybody might have been "forgotten about" or if someone "might need . . . support". These articulations thus exhibit normative "notions of virtue, hospitality and self-negation" (Kanai, 2020, p. 41), resonating with the normative femininity advocated by 'the perfect' (McRobbie, 2015).

Articulations like these, as Kanai (2020), drawing on Sharon Sullivan (2014), argues, "may paradoxically reinvigorate investments in middle-class whiteness" (p. 27). This is of relevance in

the German context, where Protestant principles guide middle-class ideas about morality. As sociologist Katherine Braun (2017) argues in her analysis of German volunteers helping migrants who sought refuge in Germany in the summer of 2015:

> In the German case, it is not possible to understand this trope of the helper and helped without first considering the particular form of bourgeois femininity (*bürgerliche Weiblichkeit*) – which values education and takes a classically humanist view of what it means to be modern – on which it relies. (p. 39; German translation and emphasis in original)

Thus, the imperative to 'use' one's privilege to 'do good' and 'help' other, less privileged groups, is deeply grounded in normative ideas of white middle-class femininity, which in turn is further encouraged by the ideal of the perfect intersectional feminist. However, as I demonstrate in the next part of this chapter (and in Chapter 7), the 'performance' of such femininity can bear problematic pitfalls for contemporary popular intersectional feminism.

While the notion of 'using privilege', particularly in anti-racist contexts, is not new (Case, 2012; Endres & Gould, 2012; Saltman, 2018; see also Chapter 4), it has, similar to the imperative to 'listen, learn, and reflect on yourself', certainly gained renewed importance in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and global Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, as well as the rise of 'woke' culture (Kanai & Gill, 2020; Sobande et al., 2022). Additionally, the rise of popular intersectionality, which I claim has been accelerated by the social and political changes of 2020, lead to an extended understanding of privilege. In my participants' talk, privilege does not only refer to white privilege. Rather, privilege can refer to gender, sexuality, class, finances, education, nationality, or holding a German passport – to name just a few privileges my participants mention. These examples indicate that there are various possibilities of 'using privilege' – the pressure this may give rise to will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

6.2. Toxic Callout Culture and the Fear of 'Getting it Wrong'

6.2.1. Calling Out Mistakes Among Allies

Through the figure of the perfect intersectional feminist, I want to analyse further how digital feminists engage with mistakes – both their own and others. While some interviewees report being harassed by right-wing anti-feminists, trolls, and men in general (Herring et al., 2002; Massanari & Chess, 2018), the overwhelming display of normative femininity in my participants' allyship discourses lead me to be more interested in intra-feminist critiques. As popular culture author

Dianne E. Anderson outlines in their book *Problematic: How toxic callout culture is destroying feminism* (2018):

> Increasingly, however, online feminism in particular has become a hornet's nest of blocking, muting, trolling, and subtweeting, with each person attempting to build their own little circle of sympathetic friends who will listen to them. Liking a particular celebrity or a particular song is grounds for being persona non grata in some circles – or, worse, deemed 'problematic,' with that label following you like a tiny cat who simply won't leave. (p. 86)

While Anderson refers to the US context, my participants describe incidents of tone policing, gatekeeping, and turf wars in German (speaking) digital feminism as well. For instance, Victor informs me, "Tone policing in my estimation is the standard form of reacting to critique. Some master it so subtly that it is difficult to recognise" (email). And Tim shares his observations and critique of 'gatekeeping':

> And I think that there is a strong practice of [gatekeeping], in that, dunno, 'You haven't read this or that book, what are you doing here?' Or, 'Yeah, you don't know much about this topic', or that kind of stuff that's communicated, it has become an intellectual bubble in itself, where terms are thrown around, although the concept [of intersectionality] is actually good and important, [but] . . . a product that's actually good gets represented badly and one loses people who would be important for a movement through that. It doesn't matter whether it would be influencers or politicians who could provide a reach, who are then scared off by this. And I'd say for the people who are not on Instagram, who have never engaged with such a topic, for those it's completely not graspable. (video call)

Tim highlights what other interviewees have reported as well: an ongoing fight over who has the prerogative of interpretation of certain terms in relation to intersectionality, the canon of authors to read, as well as which topics one must be knowledgeable about. As Tim fears, this gatekeeping might lead to people in positions of power, such as "influencers or politicians who could provide a reach", to stay away from partaking in intersectionality discourses and sharing relevant content – and might alienate those who are not regular social media users from discussions about intersectionality.[87] It appears, then, that instead of focusing on how to reach those outside of digital feminism's realm, German (speaking) digital feminists engage in turf wars over terms and identities. As Céline reports:

> I experienced it, whether in queer feminist or feminist debates in general, that one's own identity or the identity of their counterpart is being used to silence others . . . . For

[87] In Chapter 8, I briefly discuss some examples of how (popular) intersectionality has been appropriated and (purposefully) misunderstood by actors on the political conservative and far right spectrum.

> example, one gets accused of not having the right identity to speak about something, and that goes both ways, that people after critically reflecting on themselves think that they are allowed to speak about everything and don't accept any critique anymore. These are the worst sides, so to say, that I have experienced so far and unfortunately, especially on social media, these turf wars [Grabenkämpfe] are being held openly, to gain support. (video call)

This account of silencing others based on their identity is in keeping with intersectionality's inward turn (Collins, 2009), as well as essentialist notions in which particular embodiments grant the right to speak about certain issues (see Chapters 4 and 5).

Moreover, following Céline, these feminist turf wars occur "especially on social media". This might be due to social media platform affordances encouraging such behaviour, as Céline tells me at the example of the "toxic structures" she observes in digital feminist debates on Twitter:

> And sometimes [these toxic structures] are even much stronger there, because [Twitter] is a text-based medium, where one can take screenshots or something like that. That means one can confront people, 'But you said this!' Doesn't matter how long ago it was, and whether one has atoned for it or apologised. But sometimes it can really happen that someone brings up your statement from three years ago and uses it against you. And yeah, it can be, especially when you're mentally not that extremely stable, it can be really toxic structures. . . . And especially when you look at it intersectionally, how many categories play into this. I do not expect that all people are perfect, yeah. . . . But one should be able to, when one is made aware of it, to reflect on themselves and to change one's behaviour. (video call)

As Céline points out, Twitter's affordances as a text-based medium – although this can be extended to other platforms like Instagram with equally comparable characters limits and brief text on sharepics (see Chapter 5) – mean that statements cannot only be taken out of context when used against someone, but also be 'dug up' after years, disregarding whether the author has since changed their mind, and possibly apologised.[88] As cultural and media scholar Eve Ng (2020) notes, "platforms such as Twitter can foster ideological rigidity and lack of nuance due to the typical textual brevity of any individual post, the speed with which posts are disseminated, and the rapidity of online exchanges, which militate against considered responses" (p. 623; see also Bouvier & Machin, 2021).

[88] This example also illustrates how digital spaces like social media platforms can function as records of potential mistakes. Although users can in theory delete problematic posts, the ever-growing amount of posts makes it increasingly difficult to remember what one posted years ago (Robards et al., 2018) – and whether it would nowadays be considered 'problematic'. Later in this chapter, I discuss an example which indicates that digital feminists are indeed aware of the pitfalls of the ever visible digital 'archive' their social media profile pages and timelines constitute.

Moreover, as gender studies scholar Camille Nurka (2014) remarks in the context of online polling platforms that invite users to judge the desirability of women (and as Nurka rightly reminds us, this is exactly how Facebook started out):

> The modern incitement to judgement is at once so pervasive and seductive that the act of judging itself has overshadowed the importance of why it is that we're evaluating something, and what we want to achieve with that evaluation. That is, judgement . . . has become an end in and of itself, exhausted of political charge. It is in effect, in part, of contemporary neo-liberal modes of the production and capture of consumer identities. (p. 486)

Similarly, contemporary social media platforms' affordances operate in ways that entice judgement of others (Bouvier & Machin, 2021), as judgement and dislike guarantee continuous traffic (Brown, 2022; Dabiri, 2021). As Ng (2022) further explains, digital platforms are designed to produce outrage in order to encourage users to stay on the platform: "The longer users stay engaged, the more profitable it is for a platform, and the algorithmic promotion of content that feeds back into users' affective intensity favors extreme over moderate political expression, outrageous false claims over factual content" (p. 43).

Notably though, in the final part of the above participant quote, the importance of self-reflection and self-transformation is pointed out – which stands in contrast to the first part of the quote highlighting the ways some digital feminists police each other, and how mentally challenging these 'toxic structures' can be. The quote thus reverberates exactly the conflicting discourses that lead to such policing in the first place. The following articulations contain a similar tension:

> Principally, I am of the opinion that all activists should have empathy – but that is sadly often not the case. I have often encountered that people were downright attacked or blocked, just because they didn't report about some topics or not enough. I would say it's always better to seek the discussion – but that can also be very exhausting especially when it's always about the same thing. It's often easier to just stop following a person instead of explaining to them why a term, a person or an issue is problematic. [The way people deal] with mistakes in the [digital feminist] community is often problematic. Everyone can make mistakes and often mistakes are helpful to learn from. It is important that one openly admits their mistakes, realises the mistake and informs oneself, to make it better – potentially deleting problematic content and realising that other people were hurt. A '<u>shit storm</u>' can break out quickly, especially on social media, when someone makes a mistake and does not stand up for it and the apology is questionable. (Franzi, email; quotation marks in original)

On the one hand, this example expresses the need for more empathy in a culture where digital feminists are always at the danger of facing a 'shit storm'. Yet, on the other hand, the potential reason for getting attacked and blocked is explained: "because they didn't report about some topics

or not enough". This relates to my earlier discussion of the "perfect standard" (Bobel, 2007) of activism and allyship, and the perceived need to be knowledgeable about every intersectionality-related topic. However, while mainstream awareness of minoritised social justice concerns is, of course, important, I also note that the imperative to always be informed, and additionally 'report' about these issues, is a lot to expect from individuals who participate in digital feminism in their free time. Additionally, the common allyship mantra that one should realise mistakes, learn from mistakes, and inform oneself (Carlson et al., 2020) – "to make it better" – once again, responsibilises the individual to achieve social change (Hanasono et al., 2022; Sumerau et al., 2021).

Looking at these tensions in my participants' talk, I want to suggest that it is the figure of the perfect intersectional feminist, governed by neoliberal logics of self-improvement (as I have demonstrated in the first part of this chapter) and encouraged by judgement-enticing platform architectures, which sets the "perfect standard" (Bobel, 2007) of activism and allyship as the benchmark, and provokes exactly the anxiety-ridden callout culture that my interviewees report on (as I discuss below). This spiral of allyship display and calling out mistakes is, of course, not exclusive to digital feminists or specific platforms, but, I argue, particularly pronounced in the figure of the perfect intersectional feminist. Similarly, Anderson (2018) observes in the context of Anglophone feminism:

> The standards to which we hold each other create an unreasonable conception of what feminism is and what it means to the larger world. . . . Perfection has become the end-all and be-all of who we are as progressives, as feminists, as people. Our politics have become our identity, and an imperfect implementation of that identity into action is grounds for termination. (p. xiv)

The ideal of the perfect, in the worst case then, leads to policing and disciplining others.

Whether surprising or not, this policing behaviour appears particularly strong within feminist communities (Nash & Warin, 2017). That is, digital feminists are quicker and harsher to judge – and correct – their fellow feminists for 'mistakes', than folks outside of those communities. As Fabienne explains:

> And when it's about feminist debates, then I'm a little stricter, then I'm saying clearly what is happening. And then I say more like, 'One now rather says blah blah blah', yeah. Yeah, like 'Things have developed and there're new insights now.' Or 'the affected group would rather that you say it this and that way.' Yeah, it's more that I expect that people understand it then, that is not from me, that I don't personally say that they made

> a mistake and that they should do it this or that way, but that it is officially preferred by the affected group, so to say. (video call)

It thus appears that in contemporary German (speaking) digital feminism, it is mainly allies calling other allies out. This interpretation is supported by Victor's comments, who does not observe much calling out "among activists", but "rather among allies":

> In my experience there are people who e.g., start calling others wild insults when someone misgenders a person. But I have never noticed this in my 'bubble'. I especially do not see this kind of behaviour among activists. There is a lot of communication, educational work and networking in the background before a callout ever happens. If it does happen, then it has several reasons, not just that a person expressed themselves in a hurtful way once. Additionally, I see this behaviour rather among allies, who surely mean well. In my experience, marginalised people do not have the energy to be appalled at every 'problematic' phrasing. I wouldn't have anything else to do if I always attacked the people who misgender others ;) (email; quotation marks in original)

Victor's account suggests that groups affected by particular forms of discrimination participate in callout culture less often due to a lack of time and energy, and that it is "allies, who surely mean well".

Moreover, embodied in the notion of 'meaning well' is hegemonic feminine behaviour that, as discussed earlier, self-sacrifices and prioritises the well-being of others (Gallagher Elkins, 2020). This suggests that the ideal of the perfect intersectional feminist leads to allies' perceived responsibility to educate others (Kanai & Coffey, 2023), and in the worst case call out and police, those who make mistakes such as misgendering someone. As communications scholar Thomas Nakayama (2017) puts it, "The performance of outrage . . . can lead others to perform more outrage in an attempt to position themselves as morally, ethically superior" (p. 71). Since the perfect intersectional feminist is a morally superior figure qua definition of 'the perfect', it is no wonder that digital feminists engaging in popular intersectionality, 'perform outrage' (Nakayama, 2017) or "righteousness" (Kanai & Coffey, 2023) when witnessing 'mistakes', in order to express their allyship. As Regina Jackson and Saira Rao (2022), reflecting about their experiences at *Race2Dinner*, argue, the ideal of 'the perfect' is deeply ingrained in patriarchal white femininity, which causes white women to criticise each other's allyship:

> Your need for perfection, in fact, makes it impossible to engage in antiracism work. At every dinner, at least one white woman talks about an instance where she's been "burned" on social media for saying the "wrong thing." She's been publicly humiliated, often at the hands of a fellow white woman, who is angling to show her how much more perfect *she* is at antiracism work. Yes, you even compete in the antiracism space. We refer to this as the White Woman Woke Wars. (p. 12; emphasis in original)

As discussed earlier, I believe these 'White Woman Woke Wars' extend to (white) digital feminists of all genders due to the feminisation of digital feminist spaces such as Instagram (Caldeira et al., 2018; Chen & Kanai, 2022; Crepax, 2020; Streeter, 2023). In the remaining part of this chapter, I discuss the affects that result from such a toxic callout culture.

6.2.2. Pressure and Exhaustion

In participating in digital feminism and trying to keep up with the right terms and phrases, several participants describe a felt pressure and exhaustion. Given the "perfect standard" (Bobel, 2007) of activism and allyship, the toxic callout culture focusing on other's 'mistakes', as well as social media platform affordances such as "scrollability" (Searles & Feezell, 2023) which create the sensation of never-ending news, debates and topics to be informed about (Kanai, 2020), this comes as no surprise. As Julia Coffey and Akane Kanai (2021) find in their research with Australian digital feminists, their participants reported "annoyance" about online debates and discussions, and despite "momentary catharsis", often described these as "draining" (p. 646). "Emotionally draining" is also a term used by Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller's (2019) international participants to describe the "affective intensities" of their digital feminist and activist work, as well as "exhausting" and "taxing" (p. 86).

While several of my participants express feelings of exhaustion as well, it appears these feelings have been exasperated by increased time spent at home during national lockdowns in the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. As Victor and Hannah inform me, it is impossible to stay up to date with everything discussed in digital feminist filter bubbles on Instagram, especially during pandemic times:

> Well firstly, incredibly much happens and incredibly fast. And me? . . . even when I'm not in the office but at home, there are things that I have to do and I'm not on Instagram for hours. When I then quickly swipe through and try to understand everything in its depth and complexity with references to other profiles, then it is an enormous amount. (Victor, video call)

> Katrin: How does one, or how do you manage to stay up to date with all these topics?
>
> Hannah: I don't manage it. And I think I would never claim to be up to date with any topics, yeah. I am always amazed how much I had missed out on when I stumble across a new [Instagram] account or new debate. But I think I am really [laughs] far away from, by any means, being up to date on anything. But I also don't think that that should be the aspiration, yeah. One should, honestly, we're just living during a glaring pandemic, we realise more and more that we are being exploited, we are all mentally at the end of our tether, because it isn't possible anymore. We still have to perform though. . . . And

> then you have to fulfil your own aspiration to be morally good, whatever that means. And that's why I think it can't be the goal to always be up to date, but instead to do whatever is possible with your capacities right now. Everything else is, dunno, yeah, I think the pressure is so high, especially in the leftist bubble, to always be as perfect as possible and as discrimination free as possible, as informed as possible, and always keeping the newest debate in mind when being active. This pressure is not healthy, yeah, we need to allow ourselves to make mistakes, as long as these mistakes can be made up for. (video call)

As Victor points out, digital feminist discussions on Instagram develop quickly, sometimes within the span of a few hours, and can be quite complex to grasp due to the nature of cross-referencing towards other profiles (a popular imperative on Instagram is to "Follow these accounts!"). Simply trying to follow up with all debates can already be exhausting, on top of which comes the added pressures of living during a global health pandemic with its additional effects on people's mental health, as Hannah describes. Against this backdrop of never-ending news feed and pandemic exhaustion, Hannah highlights both her "own aspiration to be morally good" as well as the pressure "to always be as perfect as possible and as discrimination free as possible, as informed as possible, and always keeping the newest debate in mind when being active" – in other words, to be the perfect intersectional feminist.

Such pressure and exhaustion can also lead to digital feminists avoiding debates and conflicts (Coffey & Kanai, 2021). For instance, Maria, who primarily uses Instagram, describes how she is "simply going empty" and increasingly avoiding conflict on social media:

> And I notice, more and more often on social media, that I pull away from things, that I don't go into the conflict, because I notice I am going empty. I'm simply going empty. And then I can't do anything anymore. Then I can neither work, nor take care of myself. . . . And I don't think it's worth it. (video call)

In a similar vein, Céline explains to me why she hopes that her tweets do not go viral or gain much attention:

> Yeah, I think, would I be mentally healthy, I would see it that way. But when something goes viral, then you are often forced to interact. Like, you crank something into the Internet and that could be something that you thought about for hours, or just a thought you just had and you think 'Okay, I'll write a tweet or post about that'. And, yeah, I don't want to be forced to interact. I don't want something that I wrote on [Twitter] to be commented on by thousands of people who sometimes take it out of context. (video call)

Hearing that she does not want her tweets to go viral, I ask Céline why she posts on Twitter in the first place. As she explains, her motivation is that "sometimes it is good for me". She further

expands that she feels part of a generation that has grown up with social media and that she used Facebook like a diary as a teenager. And, of course, as she puts it, Céline wants to:

> express myself via social media, especially right now [during the pandemic], because it is the only form of communication that I have with many people . . . And I think, it is in parts also important to get a response, ideally of course positive, from certain people. (video call)

Céline's reasoning illustrates not only that connecting via social networks gained renewed importance during the Covid-19 pandemic, but also that social media can be a place of positive affirmation about doing or saying the right thing for some (Gill, 2021b) – while simultaneously being a source of anxiety, as I discuss below.

Moreover, the pressure my participants feel on platforms like Instagram or Twitter to always do, say, post, and share the right thing, and hence demonstrate their "moral goodness" (Hannah, video call), is, as I suggested earlier, propelled by the increased popularity of 'woke' culture. That is, the ideal of the perfect intersectional feminist produces the pressure to express one's 'wokeness' in order to demonstrate one's allyship. At the same time, the danger of being accused of 'performative allyship' (Kutlaca & Radke, 2022; Wellman, 2022) and of being 'woke' in the negative sense (Sobande et al., 2022) persists, as the following account demonstrates:

> I thought it was super dumb last year, when suddenly everyone participated in the sympathy Olympics [Betroffenheitsolympiade] for Black Lives Matter. . . . But to simply post black squares and to repost everything that has a pretty graphic, doesn't change anything – other than that you can position yourself publicly as someone who is woke. And I feel that the same is currently happening with the Israel-Palestine conflict, that people just think, 'I need to quickly share something because otherwise people think I am pro-violence or have no interest and that doesn't fit with my image'.[89] (Hannah, video call)

Following Hannah, 'wokeness' can indeed be perceived as inauthentic and a tool that Instagram users employ to 'self-brand' (Sobande et al., 2022; Wellman, 2022). This demonstrates the difficulty of navigating intersectional allyship and the pressure to always 'get it right'.

[89] At the time of the interview, renewed violence had erupted in the Israel-Palestine conflict and left-leaning German-speaking social media heatedly debated whether digital activists and influencers should take a stance, with many users publicly announcing that they were not informed enough to take a stance in this conflict. This is a surprising contrast to the usual imperative to be informed about everything, which can be explained with Germany's history of the Holocaust and still persisting white insecurities around that.

The inner conflict between wanting to do everything perfectly (Kanai, 2020; McRobbie, 2015), and feeling overwhelmed and exhausted by these aspirations, is particularly pronounced in Maria's take on 'wokeness':

> And that's one thing, to be woke as a trend. And the other thing is, one engages with certain topics for many, many years, and I'm sure you know that as well, . . . Once you've realised one thing, then the next follows, but you also recognise that you could do better. And then also this and also that. That means, you have already internalised this constant conflict – if that's your personality type – I am not enough, I don't do enough, I have to [do] more, I've got too many-, if you think about privileges and realise it, then you always see your privileges. And then, whoa, then I need to give something here and to give something there, and actually you end up in a constant conflict with yourself, and that is based on the kind of thinking, I am not enough. I have to do more. . . . Woah, there was milk in the chocolate, or something like that, although that is, of course, a basic topic compared to racism, which then again is what-about-ism [laughs]. But that is, you know what I mean? Yeah, in the end you can't do everything, you can't make everyone happy and you won't always do everything right, because we've grown up in capitalism and are socialised in it, and also in the patriarchy . . . . I have to be better. That means, this fight, many of us who are engaged [in feminism and anti-racism] fight it, even with ourselves. Yeah, what I perceive is that things are being made visible. One talks about things and what happens a lot on social media is that fights are started in the comments over the wrong use of terms. . . . And that is something that does indeed trigger me, honestly, I admit it, because I think it needs the room, it needs the room to say I don't want to be called a racist, that hurts me. I don't want to be called misogynistic. Of course, I engage with that [critique] and it hurts me. And it needs this pain to learn. But there also needs to be room to be allowed to make mistakes, to be allowed to realise things. And when everyone who is woke and has their expertise on a topic and so on, when everyone then points the finger at each other and says 'You said this, but it's still wrong', then that takes a lot of energy . . . . And this fight is already so fucking exhausting. Everyone has reached their limits, and also the pandemic, isolation. Everyone has reached their limit. And then people start pointing fingers at each other. . . . And one could use this energy to point towards those who are still doing it wrong. At least those. Yeah, and I don't want to say that critique is always damaging, I think it's important and I think it's good. And I want to reflect on myself. I hope that comes across in this chat, but I think it's a shame when people put each other down. (video call)

I am citing Maria at length because her remarks illustrate the different conflicting aspects of the perfect intersectional feminist. On the one hand, the mantra "I am not enough, I don't do enough, I have to [do] more", reflects the "self-benchmarking" of 'the perfect' (Kanai, 2020; McRobbie, 2015). More precisely, it illustrates the insecurities many of my participants feel, particularly around their (white, cis, and class) privileges, when it comes to their role in digital feminist debates on intersectionality and related social justice topics. Participant Romy shares similar insecurities: "But that is indeed the topic I am constantly labouring on. Am I, in my work, antiracist enough? Am I intersectional enough?" (video call). While the notion of white guilt about 'not doing enough' is not new (Clark, 2019; Engels, 2016), I argue that in contemporary popular intersectional spheres, the feeling of guilt applies not just to interracial allyship, but to all other forms of (popular intersectional) allyship as well. In Maria's case, despite her feminist labour on Instagram and in

her job, as well as regular donations of period products and money to feminist causes, she feels she cannot fulfil her own moral aspirations, always noticing an aspect in which she could 'do more' or 'learn more'. This, once more, reflects patriarchal notions of 'perfect' femininity (Kanai, 2020; McRobbie, 2015) – the critical questioning of which is conspicuously absent in the majority of my participants' articulations of allyship, as I discuss further in Chapter 7. It also highlights the perfect intersectional feminist and ally once more as an unattainable ideal, marked by self-competitiveness (Mavin & Yusupova, 2022; McRobbie, 2015; Scharff, 2015).

On the other hand, the above quote describes related feelings of exhaustion and being overwhelmed, especially in pandemic times, as well as the "fear of getting it wrong" (Gill, 2021a; Kanai & McGrane, 2021). Aspiring to be a perfect intersectional feminist is not easy in a toxic callout culture that demands 'wokeness' and where "fights are started in the comments over the wrong use of terms", as Maria puts it. At the same time though, the articulations in this quote still produce the neoliberal allyship discourses of self-reflection and self-improvement, and Maria makes sure that I am aware of this during our conversation. This points towards an awareness that it is seemingly unacceptable to publicly express negative emotions in the context of digital feminism and allyship discourses, particularly for women. As Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad (2022a) argue:

> neoliberalism not only shapes culture, conduct, and psychic life but also produces a distinctive 'structure of feeling' in which women are called on to disavow a whole range of experiences and emotions – including security, neediness, anger, and complaint – all displaying others such as 'positive mental attitude' or 'inspiration'. (p. 17)

Thus, neoliberal virtues and feeling rules (Hochschild, 2003 [1983]) dominate digital feminist allyship discourses, as contemporary digital feminists are aspiring towards the self-regulating ideal of the perfect intersectional feminist. However, we can also observe feeling rules in the toxic ways digital feminist practice is both critiqued as not good enough – not intersectional enough – as well as how digital feminists are wary of expressing feeling overwhelmed by all these demands of perfection. As mentioned before, these dynamics feed into the capitalist orientation of social media platforms. If digital feminists worry that their knowledge and feminism/activism is never 'good enough', they will continue to return to these platforms to 'learn' and 'self-reflect'.

6.2.3. Insecurity and Anxiety

The pressure and exhaustion my participants experience in digital feminist debates often leads to feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Louisa shares her observations:

> Indeed I've noticed that some people seem to be afraid to talk about certain topics because this would be immediately followed by many comments about the trivial trivialities. This includes messaging followers of that person who made a mistake to tell them to stop following that person. . . . I feel that these kind of debates turn trivial very quickly and you lose sight of the important things, as well as people who you might scare off with that. (email)

Louisa's description reflects the above discussed toxic callout culture, in which every misstep could lead to long, "trivial" debates in the comments and even losing followers (Anderson, 2018). Anxiety and insecurity are also expressed in the interviews, both directly and indirectly. Kathi, for instance, expresses insecurity about which terms "I can use now and what I can't use" (video call) when it comes to talking about race in German. Gabi appears worried about some of the things she said during the interview and states at the end: "Okay, cool. Good. So, anonymised, you promised me that, because it is indeed, erm, right-" (video call). Although she does not finish her sentence, reading this statement in the light of our conversation about intra-feminist critique and turf wars, it seems to indicate Gabi's awareness that some of the things she told me during the interview could be considered controversial. Jessica, on the other hand, surprises me with her statement: "I don't know if that helps you, but you happily can use my answers non-anonymised. Honestly, there wasn't anything that I wouldn't also say publicly" (video call). Reading both expressions together, they seem emblematic of a 'woke' culture in which both the desire to take a public stance and the anxiety over saying the wrong thing and being called out persist. As Francesca Sobande, Akane Kanai, and Natasha Zeng (2022) analyse:

> 'woke' crystallizes the contestations over subjectivity that arise when visible declaration and taking a *witnessable* stance on racism and other social justice issues, become *the* dominant, legible form of doing politics. It indexes the anxieties and ambivalence felt by citizen-consumers desiring to *participate* in culture and leave their 'mark' in a different way . . . (p. 1583; emphasis in original)

In a similar way, my participants appear to strongly want to take a stance on contemporary social justice concerns (see Chapter 5), yet, at the same time, they express anxiety and insecurity about 'getting it wrong' (Gill, 2021a, 2021b; Krogh, 2022).

The fear of doing something wrong or not being in the right position to talk about certain things is also palpable in Maria's account when she tells me that she deleted the term "intersectional feminism" from her Instagram profile:

> Well, the realisation that I deleted it from my profile, is still relatively fresh. I haven't fully-, well, I haven't comprehended it completely, why it is that way. I just noticed in the moment, okay, I want to take it out, off my profile. It said intersectional feminism, now it only says feminism, because I didn't feel safe with that anymore. . . . This whole woke scene, they all put each other down at the moment. . . . That is really exhausting. Like who is more woke than-? (video call)

Maria's explanation for why she took the qualifier 'intersectional' out of her profile description highlights intersectionality as a contested terrain in contemporary German (speaking) digital feminism, as well as the ambivalence of 'wokeness' (Sobande et al., 2022). This is apparent in Maria's fear of being "put down" by the "woke scene", which seems to outweigh her desire to publicly take a stance for intersectional feminism. Her struggle explaining what exactly she is afraid of (it can be assumed a public outcall and/or harassment) and why it does not make her feel "safe with that anymore" illustrates digital feminists' awareness that content posted online, particular in the context of intersectionality discourses, might be subject to being scrutinised by other feminists. The fear of making mistakes is thus further perpetuated by platform affordances which function as digital records of potentially everything one has ever posted online, including any errors or statements one might not be able to fully explain yet (which, following this logic, violates the previously discussed imperative to always be informed about everything intersectional). Moreover, this example further demonstrates the inner conflict and insecurity digital feminists face (Kanai & Coffey, 2023) – and the anxious, insecure, self-doubting femininity 'the perfect' embodies (Kanai, 2020; McRobbie, 2015).

Insecurity and self-doubt are also present in the questions Maria keeps asking herself:

> Is my activism maybe performative? Do I want to be liked? You know, these are things that make me so insecure, but I'd rather take ['intersectional'] out [of my profile] to not get stuck in a discussion where I can't explain it. And so I'm currently at a point where I need to do more work and think, okay, how and where I might actually be active and where do I want to be active? (video call)

What is noteworthy about this quote is that as a consequence of the toxic callout culture Maria and other participants describe and are afraid of, they do not remove themselves from these digital feminist spaces on social media – similar to Rosalind Gill's (2021a) young social media users. Rather, the takeaway seems to be that one needs to do even "more work and think[ing]", which

exemplifies the earlier discussed feeling of not being a 'good enough', not a perfect intersectional feminist. Moreover, it is a further reflection of the neoliberal, individualist approach to digital feminism on platforms such as Instagram (Mahoney, 2020; Saraswati, 2021) – and intersectionality's inward turn (Collins, 2009).

Finally, it is crucial to highlight that anxiety and insecurity are actively encouraged and produced by social media platforms and cultures. Media studies scholar Mari Lehto (2021) argues in the context of Finnish 'mommy bloggers' that some influencers actively post about their "performative anxiety", since the expression of anxiety and insecurity – being vulnerable (Gill & Orgad, 2022a) – leads to more traffic. As Lehto explains:

> The experience of anxiety is viscerally felt at the individual level, but it is also important to consider the roles of anxiety and insecurity on more a structural level. From the influencer industry's point of view, anxiety is useful, as it works to drive a relentlessly renewed resolution to make a self who is appropriate to and acceptable within the system . . . . In other words, instead of paying attention to the conditions that enable or constrain the formation of subjectivities, an individualized subject chooses to be responsible for those conditions and concentrates on managing anxieties and insecurities. (p. 209)

Lehto therefore contends that anxiety needs to be "recognized as a structural problem and not solely as the property of individuals" (p. 207). Moreover, I realise that my analysis of popular intersectionality discourses may contribute to this culture of anxiety. Although my aim is to provide a scholarly critique that helps us understand the dynamics in contemporary digital feminism, I am fully aware of the risks of perpetuating this culture of fear with my critique. That said, as I hope to have shown throughout this thesis, I believe we need a structural critique of social media cultures to understand what enables this culture of fear and anxiety in the first place.

6.3. Conclusion

Building on existing feminist literature on neoliberalism, media, and culture, and in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the rise of 'woke' culture on social media, I have introduced the figure of the perfect intersectional feminist in this chapter. The perfect intersectional feminist marks a new dimension of Angela McRobbie's figure of 'the perfect' (2015) – and a continuation of the 'good' white feminist I discussed in Chapter 4. This figure manifests in my participants' talk through a "perfect standard" (Bobel, 2007) of activism and allyship, as well as neoliberal allyship imperatives of self-improvement and individual responsibility. I have further explored how articulations of perfect intersectional allyship are marked by normative white middle-class femininities (Kanai, 2020) and are infused with neoliberal positivity and aspirations for digital

feminists and allies to listen, learn and reflect on themselves, as well as to take up their responsibility associated with white (and other) privilege(s) to 'do good'. In the second part of this chapter, I have critically examined how the perfect intersectional feminist contributes to the toxic callout culture in German (speaking) digital feminism, as well as my participants' feelings of pressure to always be informed and never make mistakes, the exhaustion particularly in the context of keeping up with everything intersectionality-related during the pandemic, as well as feelings of insecurity and anxiety about 'getting it wrong' (Gill, 2021a). As such, I have shown that popular intersectionality is attached not only to positive affects (see Chapter 5), but negative ones as well, hence complicating its affective register.

Reflecting on this chapter, I cannot help but notice the irony of writing about pressure and exhaustion in digital feminism. Indeed, it is surely not surprising that I share my interviewees' feelings of exhaustion, overwhelmed-ness, and insecurity. At the beginning of my doctoral research, I was an avid reader of feminist blogs and Facebook group discussions, occasionally commenting on the latter. I learnt a lot from these online debates and felt part of a community, even when living abroad and participating rather passively. However, observing German (speaking) feminist debates on Instagram throughout this research project (and conducting my participant interviews during the pandemic), has changed my relationship with digital feminism. Even though I consider myself highly educated on feminist theory, intersectionality, queer feminism, and other related social justice issues, I share my participants' worry about 'not knowing' or 'doing enough' when scrolling through my Instagram feed. At the same time, I am frustrated by unproductive debates about intersectionality in feminist Facebook groups and Instagram comment sections. As sociologist Gargi Bhattacharyya and colleagues (2021) observe, "debate online often seems totally disconnected from political action and strategy – and from a wider critique of the state and big business" (p. 97). Rather, as my analysis has suggested, contemporary allyship discourses focus on the role of the individual (Dabiri, 2021; Saltman, 2018). Therefore, I have argued we need to critically engage with contemporary articulations of popular intersectionality on social media and examine its underlying neoliberal structures. As L. Ayu Saraswati (2021) puts it, "it is not a critique of these individuals/feminists per se. Rather [we need to] focus on the operating neoliberal ideology that governs, structures, and limits these feminist social media activism practices" (pp. 8-9).

Moreover, feminist media scholars as well as activists need to critically question whether contemporary understandings of allyship are truly helpful in dismantling oppressive structures. Following Emma Dabiri's (2021) assessment:

> Today's allyship fails to build the necessary coalitions[90] . . . . With its reliance on information rather than knowledge, its fetishising of privilege without any clear means of transferral, as well as the ways in which it actively *reinforces* whiteness, allyship is not only not up to the task, it is in many ways counterproductive. (p. 19; emphasis in original)

My analysis of the perfect intersectional feminist has uncovered some of the ways in which contemporary allyship fails to be "up to the task". What remains is the question of how allyship can be meaningful and productive. As Dabiri further suggests, instead of thinking about allyship, we need to start building *coalitions* through linking various social justice struggles together in "an understanding, not so much of an intersectionality of identities, but an intersectionality of *issues*" (p. 25; emphasis in original). This proves increasingly difficult in contemporary social media cultures, as I have demonstrated in the second part of this chapter. In Chapter 7, I discuss how three of my interviewees negotiate allyship, popular intersectionality, and normative femininity in a secret Facebook discussion group.

[90] See Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983) for a discussion of coalition politics.

Chapter 7. "In our left, woke bubble we don't want to step on anyone's toes": Negotiating Allyship, Normative Femininities, and Popular Intersectionality in a Secret Facebook Group

This final analytical chapter discusses findings from a four-week long Facebook discussion group with three participants.[91] The objective of this part of the study was to set up a focus group which would allow me to discuss some of my initial blog analysis and interview findings with participants, but also to provide a space for debate. However, in the group's discussions, expressions of normative femininities, such as pleasing others, insecurity and a fear of making mistakes, were palpable (Kanai, 2020). Surprisingly, the Facebook group's discussion also yielded exclusionary statements about Muslim women wearing the headscarf (hijab). Such statements appear incompatible with the popular intersectionality discourses examined in this thesis so far. Rather, they seem to employ the vocabulary of a postfeminist sensibility in which Western women perceive themselves as more empowered than Muslim women (Scharff, 2011, 2016 [2012]). Likewise, the performance of pleasing femininities resonates with renewed postfeminist expressions of normative femininity (Kanai, 2019a, 2019b), which is reminiscent of a "post-feminist masquerade" (McRobbie, 2009).

Indeed, various feminist media, gender, and cultural scholars have emphasised the continued relevance of postfeminism as an object of analysis (Gill, 2016, 2017), whilst also highlighting the need for re-conceptualising postfeminism in current times and in digital cultures in particular (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Caldeira et al., 2020; Chidgey, 2021; Evans, 2023; Kanai, 2019a; Pruchniewska, 2018). As Adrienne Evans (2023) notes, due to cultural and technological developments in the past two decades, as well as the rise of popular feminism, postfeminist logics have been transformed: "Although postfeminist sensibility has adapted to this changing context, I suggest the ambiguities and ambivalences of femininity . . . hold relevance – and are possibly even more profound" (p. 1). This chapter therefore has three objectives: to explore the ambivalences of normative femininity noticeable in the Facebook group in my study, to investigate how far participants' articulations employ a postfeminist sensibility and what the relation between postfeminism and popular intersectionality is, as well as to address how digital feminists can openly admit to 'not knowing enough' and perhaps ask questions differently.

[91] Participants were recruited from the pool of interviewees introduced in Chapter 5. See the methodology section of this chapter for further details.

After a discussion of my methodology, my analysis focuses on two aspects. Revisiting selected literature on postfeminist femininities, such as Angela McRobbie's (2009) "post-feminist masquerade", I first examine which aspects of a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007) appear to continue to operate in popular intersectional feminism. As I demonstrate, popular intersectionality is articulated by my participants as a kind, pleasing feminism, which is supportive of other women (Kanai, 2019a, 2019b). As such, postfeminist ideas of individual empowerment are transformed into the notion of enabling the empowerment of other women, which is in keeping with my previous analysis of hierarchies of oppression and privilege (see Chapter 5). Next, I discuss the exclusionary statements about Muslim women made in the context of the privacy of the Facebook group. I argue that these statements are guided by a "suturing" (Hemmings, 2018) of postfeminist expressions of normative femininity and popular intersectionality discourses, hence resulting in the simultaneous articulation and disarticulation of (popular) intersectional feminism, or the performance of a 'popular intersectionality masquerade'. Crucially, my analysis does not intend to critique the individual participants of this group – to whom I feel incredibly grateful towards for volunteering their time and perspectives – but rather, aims to highlight how normative femininities govern digital feminist debates and popular intersectionality.

7.1. Methodology

7.1.1. Online Focus Groups

Traditionally, focus groups have been conducted in offline settings, with a small group of four to 12 participants. The researcher usually functions as moderator in these scenarios, asking questions to prompt a discussion, which is audio- or video-recorded and then transcribed and analysed. In comparison, online focus groups vary in form and are typically either conducted face-to-face, using software like Skype, or via typing in an online forum. Although online focus groups bear more similarities than differences with offline focus groups (Stancanelli, 2010; Watson et al., 2006), there are some benefits and shortcomings that distinguish the digital version. For instance, online focus groups provide the possibility of reaching participants not only in a different geographical location from the researcher, but also from each other (Biedermann, 2018), with the added benefit of eliminating travel time and costs (Im & Chee, 2006). Considering that my participants were located in different regions in Germany and that the group was conducted during a pandemic which brought travel restrictions to most countries, this was a clear advantage. A further benefit is that the tedious step of transcription becomes obsolete as this is an online focus group using written communication (Fox et al., 2007). There is a possible risk that written focus

groups do not produce similar rich data compared to in-person focus groups, though as research psychologists Christina Underhill and Murrey G. Olmsted (2016) demonstrate, the quality of computer-meditated focus groups and groups conducted in person does not vary significantly. While the latter may have produced more words in total, both generated about the same amount of new ideas – which reflects my experience with written interviews as well as the online focus group.

Moreover, online focus groups can be conducted synchronously, that is in real-time, or asynchronously, at a scheduled time. In the former case, similar to offline focus groups, the researcher can intervene or ask follow-up questions (Strickland et al., 2003). However, as social scientist Fiona Fox and colleagues (2007) note, participants in synchronous groups might experience technical issues, such as losing their online connection. Additionally, as the authors further highlight, "Although the participants have an equal opportunity to respond and contribute, the participant who is the most proficient at typing has the power to say the most" (p. 544). While power imbalances among focus group members might not be unusual, "The race to type and send responses may limit the participants' presubmission deliberation" (p. 544). A further problem could be the task of organising participants to be online at the same time, an issue similar to offline focus groups. Asynchronous focus groups conducted in an online forum thus appear to counter these two concerns, as they allow members to respond in their own time and at their own pace. Participants may require reminders to contribute though, as well as enough time to respond (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015). This reflects my experience of conducting an online focus group. Despite regularly 'nudging' participants to engage with a certain prompt or respond to a particular discussion thread, two of the three participants were notably more active, of which one produced much longer responses than the others.

7.1.2. Facebook as Asynchronous Focus Group Tool

Regarding the technology itself, digital focus groups require the researcher, as well as the participants, albeit to a different degree, to possess relevant technical skills and knowledge of the software being used (Strickland et al., 2003). After considering a number of options, ranging from traditional forums, to the educational platform Padlet, to the professional communication app Slack, I encountered psychologists Anastasia Lijadi and Gertina van Schalkwyk's (2015) research on 'Third Culture Kids' who are considered "hard-to-reach participants", due to living in many different countries. The authors report setting up Facebook groups for their project due to the platform's "popularity and ease of access" (p. 2).

It should be noted that using Facebook as a research tool is not without its risks and (ethical) problems. For instance, Facebook itself will have access to the data conducted in the group (though similar can be said for video call software Zoom, which I used to conduct interviews). It is therefore essential to inform participants who have not used the platform previously about Facebook's data collection. Lijadi and van Schalkwyk (2015) voice further ethical concerns regarding the requirement of signing up to Facebook to participate, however, this turned out not to be an issue in my study, as all participants had existing Facebook accounts and intended to use these – despite my offer to create an anonymous account.[92] Another concern though is that Facebook is a commercial platform operating for profit. As Christian Fuchs (2014) notes, "time spent on Facebook and other corporate platforms is not simple consumption or leisure time, but productive time that generates economic value" (p. 98). More precisely, economic value is created through data collection of "individual, affective, social, economic, political, cultural data" (p. 115). Thus, the more time a user spends on Facebook, the more data they generate. Consequently, asking my focus group participants to spend more time on the platform as part of my study, encouraged them to generate more data and hence economic gain for Facebook, essentially asking my participants to perform free labour for Facebook. While this dilemma must not be underestimated, I also recognise that – as with most ethical considerations – there is no perfect solution. As Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller (2019) articulate:

> feminist activists engage in a type of trade-off that many of us do; they strategically navigate their own use of commercial platforms – and the patriarchal context in which they are created – in order to harness the lucrative visibility and spreadability that commercial platforms offer. (p. 179)

In a way, I as a researcher face a similar trade off. However, I believe that given my aim of tracing articulations of popular intersectionality in digital feminist spaces, conducting a focus group on one of these platforms provided a more 'authentic' environment.

Ultimately, the benefits of using Facebook as online focus group tool in my study, such as its ease of use (Dinhopl, 2017; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015) – and thus the increased likelihood of interviewees agreeing to participate – outweighed its disadvantages. As mentioned above, since participants had already signed up to Facebook, they were familiar with how the platform operates. Facebook also allows users to express their opinions, thoughts, and feelings by incorporating emojis, gifs, pictures, or videos. Additionally, videos or newspaper articles can be posted to

[92] This might be an indication of the changing nature of online cultures and behaviours in an age where authenticity seems increasingly more important than privacy (Banet-Weiser, 2021).

support the discussion topics. Furthermore, the layout of Facebook groups functions as a forum and a chat at the same time, offering participants more flexibility in when and how they engage with the discussion topics. Moreover, the reply function (@username) allows participants as well as the moderator to respond to individual messages.

Moreover, to minimise the risk of confidentiality breaches by participants who might take screenshots of the discussions, I implemented the following measures: First, by signing the consent sheet, participants agreed to keep everything posted in the Facebook group confidential. Second, setting the privacy settings of the groups to 'closed' and 'hidden' prevented the group from appearing in any searches (neither Facebook, nor search engines) and participants were only able to join the group by invitation. Upon entering, group members were asked to read the code of conduct and confirm their agreement with the rules. By clicking on the 'about' section, participants could revisit the rules at any time. In addition, the groups' size was particularly small with only three participants. Asking participants to introduce themselves before posting the first discussion prompt resulted in quick rapport building among each other, which rendered confidentiality breaches less likely. Finally, the group was deleted after a pseudonymised transcript had been produced.

Given all the above discussed points, I believe that a focus group conducted on Facebook provided an adequate time and cost-efficient solution for a digital focus group. Surprisingly, cultural and media researchers have not been at the forefront of online focus group research – a method pioneered by social health, psychology, and medical scientists. And despite a growing number of online focus group research, I have encountered only a small number of studies using Facebook as a group discussion tool (Biedermann, 2018; Buelo et al., 2020; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015; MacLeod et al., 2016). Therefore, I share critical reflections on the use of secret Facebook groups as online asynchronous focus group tool in the concluding chapter.

7.1.3. Participants

Participants in the discussion group were recruited from the pool of interviewees introduced in Chapters 5 and 6. After the interview had ended, I would usually invite participants to partake in a two-week long,[93] secret Facebook discussion group with other interviewees. I chose not to invite

[93] With participants' consent, I ended up extending the group by two more weeks to allow more time for discussions to develop.

those who identified as cis men, in order to create a 'safe space' (Clark-Parsons, 2018) in the group. For the same reason, I also refrained from inviting one person whose articulations during the interview I read as transphobic. Recruitment was more difficult than expected though. My rationale for conducting the interviews prior was to give participants a chance to get to know me and gain a better understanding of the topics I am researching, and which would also be discussed in the Facebook group. Some interviewees declined right away, others later on via email, usually stating a lack of time or energy. While pandemic and online fatigue may have certainly been contributing factors, I am left to wonder about the extent to which fears and anxieties about 'getting it wrong' (Gill, 2021a; Kanai & Coffey, 2023) in the group may have influenced the decision not to participate. Eventually, the group was conducted with only three interview participants. To retain their anonymity, I am using different pseudonyms in this chapter.

All participants had chosen the video call format for their interviews, identified as cis female, white, and heterosexual, were of a similar age (either late 20s or early 30s), and university educated (i.e., had obtained at least an undergraduate degree). Participants reported using predominantly social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to engage with digital feminism. All three described their main (digital) activism/feminist practice as posting feminist content on social media or reading and commenting. In contrast to the relative diversity of my interviewees, the homogeneity of the Facebook group participants is noticeable. While it might be a coincidence that three university-educated white heterosexual cisgendered women signed up for this part of the study, it is also reminiscent of the previously raised question of who has the time and energy to participate in digital feminism, as well as who feels safe to do so (see Chapter 5).

Finally, a note on how I present my participants' quotes here. Since this focus group was conducted via Facebook, I wish this to be reflected in my chosen citations. However, due to the group being conducted in German, I am unable to use anonymised screenshots and rely on the provision of a translation instead. To preserve the character of a typical Facebook post, I include the date and time stamp of each post (which also highlights how the conversation developed over time) and keep any lacking capitalisation at sentence beginnings as well as missing periods. Regarding typographical errors, these are more difficult to preserve in a translation and I chose to disregard them to avoid confusion. Moreover, whenever the author of a post 'tags' someone (usually at the beginning of the post), this is included and signified in **bold** print. Omissions are indicated via use of '. . .' and the use of English terms continues to be <u>underlined</u>. Finally, due to the aforementioned uneven participation in the group, I do, in one instance, incorporate an interview quote of one of

these Facebook group participants in my analysis, as it speaks to the here discussed theme of postfeminism.

7.2. Negotiations of Popular Intersectionality, Allyship, and Normative Femininity

7.2.1. 'One has to consider increasingly more, carefully choose the words': Insecurity and Pleasing Femininities

Many discussion threads in the Facebook group, whether actively encouraged by my prompts, or developed naturally over the course of the conversation, ended up deliberating questions of how to be a 'good' intersectional ally, or why allies tend to focus on calling each other out for (perceived) mistakes. One particular grave mistake appears to be failing to include an identity group in one's thinking and activism:

> **Sophie** – Friday 25 June 2021 at 12:24
>
> . . . I notice that when someone articulates a justified critique that a certain aspect was not considered in a posting, many [posters] completely retract their statement, instead of saying "okay, that's true, I have not considered this point, I'm sorry, but my statement is still valid in regards to this or that point". It seems to me that it rains unproductive or simply too strong criticism at the smallest mistake or not considering of an aspect or group, so that many pull back then. Despite all justified critique, dialogues are stopped and (depending on the topic) the fronts harden.
>
> *Like (2) Melanie, Thea*

The notion of feeling easily "misjudged" for "saying something 'wrong'" is also present in another discussion thread a few weeks later:

> **Thea** – Wednesday 14 July 2021 at 22:28
>
> Well, it is not enough to 'just' be a feminist. That is very noticeable. And in some ways also social currency (think I already wrote about it [in another thread]), that is, [it is] a little bit of a status symbol how 'woke' one is.
> And to be misjudged. Like when I use ableist language out of thoughtlessness, my feminist point may not be taken seriously anymore or I'm generally perceived as inconsiderate or something like that… [Ellipsis in original]
>
> *Like (1) Sophie*

> **Sophie** – Saturday 17 July 2021 at 07:73
>
> **Digital Feminism** The danger of saying something "wrong", not including a group in your thinking and thus appearing "backward" (that is, that one is not ready/woke like others), just increases. One has to consider increasingly more, carefully choose the words. . . .
>
> *Love (1) Thea*

As Thea mentions, "it is not enough to 'just' be a feminist". Digital feminists, as both participants suggest – and my previous analysis has shown – need to demonstrate their 'wokeness' through 'including everyone in their thinking' ['alle mitdenken'], a common mantra in German (speaking) popular intersectionality discourses. Moreover, Thea's claim that feminist points are not taken seriously, are "misjudged" if they do not check certain criteria, speaks to the toxic callout culture I previously analysed (see Chapter 6; see also Gill, 2021a). Sophie makes a similar point and describes the anxiety of 'getting it wrong' (Gill, 2021a; Kanai & Coffey, 2023).[94] Her choice of words is particularly noteworthy though. The use of the word "danger" indicates that "saying something 'wrong'" might have real consequences (Anderson, 2018; Jackson & Rao, 2022). That is, if digital feminists do not 'include everyone in their thinking', they might be perceived as "backward" (Sophie) or "inconsiderate" (Thea). As a result, "One has to consider increasingly more, carefully choose the words" (Sophie), and prove that one is a caring and inclusive feminist.

Notably, the fear of upsetting others and wanting to please others are notions reminiscent of normative girlhood and femininities (Gonick, 2006), and particularly pronounced in postfeminist expressions of femininity (Kanai, 2019a; McRobbie, 2009). While feminism has arguably gained more popularity and visibility in recent years (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016), and is no longer 'repudiated' in the same ways (McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2016 [2012]), the predominance of normative femininities persists. In her analysis of affective relatability in women's blogging cultures, Akane Kanai (2019a) notes that, "in an environment where feminism is enjoying renewed visibility . . . feminism is not repudiated, but rather, instrumentalised in pleasing, 'smart', and relatable ways" (p. 174). In the context of the Facebook discussion group, I argue that

[94] Notably, this not only applies to the digital feminist contexts in which my participants engage with intersectionality, but also the Facebook group in my study. In an unprompted email Thea wrote me after the focus group was concluded, she references "the anxiety that we all felt in the group about saying something 'wrong'". In the second part of my analysis, I discuss an example in which a participant addresses her anxiety about discussing problematic statements in the group.

intersectional feminism is instrumentalised in similar 'pleasing ways' through employing postfeminist normative femininities.

One of the 'pleasing ways' intersectional feminism is instrumentalised in the Facebook group manifests through "a constant imagining of 'others'" (Evans, 2023, p. 1).[95] Originally theorised in the context of postfeminism, the practice of constantly imagining others shaped femininity through imagining "people, places, and consumer items" in relation to the self (Evans, 2023, p. 1). In a similar vein, it appears that feminists in contemporary German (speaking) digital feminist spaces enact their (digital) feminist selves through attempting to visualise how other digital feminists might react to their contributions in feminist discussions, and thus continue to measure themselves against the unattainable "perfect standard" (Bobel, 2007) of activism and allyship (see Chapter 6). This view is also supported by Sophie's comment in the Facebook group:

> **Sophie** – Monday 12 July 2021 at 17:34
>
> . . . . I would say that we reached a point in our left, woke bubble where we don't want to step on anyone's toes. Maybe it is also related to the fact that many of us are women who are socialised to want to/should please. That is definitely the case for me and I think I see it in others as well. So far, so good. But it is also really difficult to post something that really everyone likes, as we discussed in the thread on allyship…. At least that would be my theory as to where the panic comes from. [Second ellipsis in original]
>
> *Like (1) Thea*

As Sophie suggests, many of the digital feminists who engage in these debates are women who have been socialised to please others – and I would add, this includes having grown up surrounded by postfeminist media cultures reinforcing such notions of femininity (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). This observation is crucial in understanding the dynamics of popular intersectionality discourses, especially if these discourses take place on platforms that further encourage the expression of normative femininities (see Chapters 3 and 5).

In light of this, I propose that the normative femininities expressed in the Facebook group operate through the performance of a 'popular intersectionality masquerade', similar to McRobbie's (2009) 'post-feminist masquerade'. McRobbie's analytical figure described how young women, having gained a certain status of gender equality, disarticulated feminism through a re-focusing on

[95] I am borrowing this articulation from Adrienne Evans who uses it in the context of reflecting about her previous work on postfeminism and how these postfeminist notions continue to operate through contemporary femininities, albeit in transformed ways. It therefore ties in with my own analysis of femininity in the context of the Facebook group.

traditional gender roles and expressions of normative, pleasing femininity – including fashion and beauty practices (Elias et al., 2017; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009) – in order to continue to be desirable to men. The 'post-feminist masquerade' therefore functioned as "technology of the self", which rendered women into anxious, "pleasing postfeminist subjects" (McRobbie, 2015, p. 8). The popular intersectionality masquerade, I suggest, works in similar ways, as it promises an all-inclusive feminism (in contrast to other popular feminisms that promise gender equality and which have come to signify 'bad' white feminism), yet simultaneously disarticulates popular intersectional claims through problematic statements such as the ones about the hijab I analyse later in this chapter. It is also a technology which governs the digital feminist selves of my participants, interpellating them as anxious, 'pleasing intersectional feminists', to paraphrase McRobbie. Moreover, while the 'post-feminist masquerade' served to uphold patriarchal gender norms (McRobbie, 2009), I contend that a similar reinforcement of hegemony is taking place here, as the uncontested neoliberal and postfeminist expressions of femininity and the 'perfect' (embodied in the perfect intersectional feminist), ultimately distract from achieving long-lasting, intersectional structural changes. The question hence remains why hegemonic femininities appear to dominate contemporary digital feminist discourses, particularly discourses on intersectionality – which are exactly the type of discourses one would expect feminists to be critical of.

As sociologist Shelley Budgeon (2014) observed almost a decade ago, "Despite a proliferation of femininities, a privileged construction taking the form of a white, western heterosexual femininity continues to circulate" (p. 321),[96] enabling women to "pursue the idealized subject of late modernity . . . and reasonably assume the position of an individual and not primarily as a member of a disadvantaged group" (p. 325). In other words, postfeminist and neoliberal logics allow women through performing privileged white femininities to view themselves as primarily liberated rather than still oppressed by the patriarchy and other systems of oppression. Popular intersectionality discourses, I contend, open up a comparable opportunity for those who (discursively) conform to hegemonic, normative femininities. That is, while under postfeminism, the message that women are 'empowered' and no longer in need of liberation widely circulated (Gill, 2007), popular expressions of feminism, such as popular intersectionality, acknowledge and even highlight the continued importance of feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Yet crucially, under popular intersectionality it is relatively privileged (white) women[97] who implicitly regard

[96] I would add that this femininity is also distinctly middle-class (Gerodetti & McNaught-Davis, 2017), youth-based (Kanai, 2019a), as well as able-bodied.

[97] As Jess Butler (2013) and Simidele Dosekun (2015a) argued, despite feminist scholar's predominant discussion of white Western women, postfeminist logics also appeal to women of

themselves as more 'empowered' than other subordinated groups, as I have demonstrated in my analysis of hierarchies of oppression and privilege in Chapter 5, and of intersectionality and whiteness in Chapter 4. The individual subject position that white women can hence assume, following the rhetorics of popular intersectionality, is that as an ally who is 'caring' and 'inclusive', as Thea's and Sophie's accounts discussed above suggest.

The importance of presenting as a feminist who 'cares' and 'includes others' was also present in the interview I conducted with Facebook group participant Melanie prior to the group (see Chapter 5 for methodology). In the following example, she shares how her understanding of feminism developed over the years:

> Well, I would say, [my] feminism has totally changed over the years. At some point I went to university. Of course, this added an academic perspective to [my] feminism. In recent years, also an intersectional perspective, definitely. In the past, my basic attitude was more 'I can do the same things men can do', but in parts indeed a misogynist attitude towards other women. . . . Like, I often viewed myself as the exception. Dumb things. Like, I've always liked football. I've always been a football fan. I've always liked drinking beer, stuff like that. But in the past, I thought-, I got many compliments from [male] friends for that, who said 'Melanie, you're half a guy!' Maybe also because I have a dark sense of humour and such. And of course, nowadays, I view this a little bit different and don't like hearing these things anymore and think, err, know that this is all to do with socialisation and such. And now I would like to be a feminist who supports other women and cheers them on, and yeah, that's the rough summary. [laughs] (video call)

As Melanie describes, her attitudes towards feminism have changed notably. In the past, she disarticulated feminism through sentiments such as "I can do the same things men can do", exhibiting a postfeminist sensibility that disavows continuing gender inequalities (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2016 [2012]). However, through attending university as well as gaining an "intersectional perspective", she now "would like to be a feminist who supports other women and cheers them on". This statement articulates feminine notions of 'inclusion' and 'care' in correspondence with popular intersectionality and allyship imperatives. Moreover, the phrase "would like to be", suggests that a "feminist who supports other women and cheers them on" – that is, a (popular) intersectional feminist – is an aspired subject position for relatively privileged (white) women. Thus, in the wake of popular intersectionality's increased visibility, the

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colour and women in the Global South. However, due to my participants being three white German women, I focus on white Western femininities. I use the term 'relatively privileged' to express that the normative femininities analysed here do not just apply to a homogenous group (despite the homogenous set-up of the Facebook group). For instance, both my male and genderqueer-identifying interview participants enacted, at least in parts, normative femininities as well, as I argued in Chapter 6.

postfeminist fear of being viewed as a feminist and being rejected by others, most importantly men, appears to have been replaced or transformed by the fear of being viewed as a 'bad' (white) feminist and being rejected by other feminists and social media users (see Chapters 4 and 6).

The Facebook group participants' citing of postfeminist femininities resonates with feminist scholarship on popular feminisms. The "suturing [of] femininity and feminism" (p. 971), as Clare Hemmings (2018) notes, means that "feminism can be claimed as the new, caring position to take up if one is to be properly ethical and political, in contrast to feminism's prior (and dominant) representation as marginal or old-fashioned" (p. 968). Similarly, Kanai (2019a) contends that "feminism is often translated into an affective performance of 'kindness' that reconfigures feminism into something that (white) young women with good intentions cannot afford to ignore" (p. 163). Popular intersectionality, I suggest, is equally adapted into 'affective performances' of being 'kind' and 'supportive of women', as Melanie's example demonstrates (Kanai, 2019a, p. 163; see also Chapter 5). Yet, as I have argued previously, 'including everyone' is epistemologically impossible.

Given the epistemological impossibility and consequently the increased likelihood of 'failing' at 'including everyone', it is no wonder then, that the limiting subject position of the perfect intersectional feminist leads to anxiety and pressure (see Chapter 6). This is also thematised in the Facebook group. In a discussion on the navigation of various allyship 'demands', the notion of wanting to please others and insecurity about how to achieve this balance, stand out:

> **Sophie** – Tuesday 29 June 2021 at 11:01
>
> I find this balance incredibly difficult, as you know from our interview, Katrin.[98] Because on the one hand, it is demanded that those not affected do not always rely on the educational work of those affected, and do not just post a black square and Co once, but should do MORE, should participate actively, should educate others not affected and so on. On the other hand, it gets criticised that those not affected should not take over the space, that they should not speak for others, that they should not centre themselves (again). I believe (hope) indeed that there is a fine line on which one can walk, which works for both arguments and critiques. But it is damn difficult to find it. I surely have not found it yet. I want to do more but don't know really how I can do it without accidentally centring myself too much. It is probably the case that it will always be difficult to become and stay a good ally, like, that you will never fully arrive and can never rest on being a good ally. And also that you can never make everyone happy and you have to be okay with that – although that is indeed difficult for me. I often stay

[98] "I am (as someone who avoids conflicts) very careful – and then, of course, I'm scared to be too careful and not to do enough (that gets demanded a lot as well and I'm trying to comply, which is not always easy, because there are these hardly distinguishable lines)." (Sophie, unprompted email post-interview)

> silent to not step on anyone's toes, but of course then I can't fulfil the demands from the other side which asks for more participation from those not affected.
>
> *Like (1) Melanie*
>
> **Melanie** – Wednesday 30 June 2021 at 09:04
>
> **Sophie** I feel similarly. I think it really depends on who you are talking to. Not every affected person agrees with it, one person might wish for more engagement, while another wishes for more holding back. Personally, I sometimes have to suppress the impulse to apologise for other white Germans. Because it would, in the end, correspond with this notion of race [Rassendenken]. I don't have more or less in common with [other white Germans] than with a black person, other than that we are both not affected by racism.
>
> *Like (1) Sophie*

As both participants highlight, they experience conflicting, almost paralysing demands in contemporary German (speaking) allyship discourses. On the one hand, allies "should do MORE, should participate actively" (Sophie), "while another [person] wishes for more holding back" (Melanie), on the other hand. While Sophie also acknowledges "that you can never make everyone happy and you have to be okay with that", she also points out "that is indeed difficult for me". Such articulations of insecurity in regards to navigating allyship, as Shannon Sullivan (2014) suggests, might be related to feelings of white guilt: "because of their guilt, white people sometimes feel incapable of making moral decisions about racial matters. The paralysis associated with white guilt can inhibit not only action, in other words, but also judgement" (p. 129).

While I agree with this analysis, I believe that normative femininity further encourages articulations of insecurity about the right behaviour. Indeed, as Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai (2018) note, "a certain kind of performative insecurity has historically been a mandatory element of femininity" (p. 322). In the above participant quotes, normative feminine behaviour and insecurity are articulated, for instance, as not wanting to "accidentally [centre] myself too much" (Sophie) or wanting to "apologise for other white Germans" (Melanie). Moreover, the repeated articulations of insecurity and fearful, pleasing femininity, which were present throughout the Facebook group's discussions, remind me of Gloria Wekker's (2016) analysis of white innocence. Reflecting on her experience of teaching (English speaking) texts on race and ethnicity in a gender studies classroom where the majority of the students encountered these texts and ideas for the first time, Wekker notes that:

> there are gendered responses to discussions about race and racism. . . . mainly white male responses . . . are anger, aggressive dismissal, and even death threats. Here, among

> highly educated white women, we find anxiety, fear, avoidance, and feelings of guilt. Fearful avoidance and aggressive ignorance are archetypal female and male responses. (p. 79)

Yet, if such expressions of femininity and fearful avoidance as described by Wekker and noticeable in my data are not critically interrogated in digital feminist spaces, meaningful allyship is impeded and potentially becomes impossible. Additionally, insecurity over the correct balancing of allyship demands of 'stepping up' and 'not centring oneself', as well as the resulting lack of action further responsibilise subordinated groups to fight against the systems which oppress these groups in the first place (Sullivan, 2014; Sumerau et al., 2021).

Of course, navigating digital allyship is further complicated by the affordances of social media platforms compared to allyship in offline life. As I have argued throughout this thesis, profile pages and timelines present a (to varying degrees) visible and public 'archive' of one's feminist politics. The awareness of this, and the anxiety this creates, was notably present during the Facebook group discussion. In addition, the supposed 'flatness' of platforms (Gillespie, 2010, p. 350) like Instagram creates the illusion that social media is a level playing field, in which the individual user has the same responsibilities and commitments to social justice causes as public figures like politicians, celebrities, influencers, or activists.[99] At the same time, as Sofia Caldeira et al. (2020) observe in the context of young women's Instagram use, practices of self-branding "previously mainly associated with celebrities, get adopted by 'ordinary' Instagram users as they craft an 'edited self'" (p. 7). Digital feminists, as I discussed in Chapter 5, participate in self-branding cultures as well (Banet-Weiser & Juhasz, 2011; Caldeira, 2023; Chidgey, 2021; Pruchniewska, 2018; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022). Consequently, if everyday users who claim to be (or brand themselves as) intersectional feminists, do not post (enough) about issues of race (or transgender, class, or dis/ability, etc.), they may be accused of not caring enough and, in the worst case, of being a 'bad' white feminist. However, if they do post about it, but not regularly or appear not 'informed' enough, accusations of performative allyship and appropriation of topics ensue (Kutlaca & Radke, 2022; Wellman, 2022).

Thus, to reiterate my previous argument, while toxic callout cultures produce such pressure and anxiety, it is also the architectures of platforms like Instagram as well as social media cultures of self-branding and perceived 'authenticity' (Banet-Weiser, 2012, 2021) fuelled by neoliberal

[99] As I discussed in Chapter 6, this appears to be indeed the expectation in German (speaking) digital feminist spaces.

imperatives to aspire towards the perfect (Kanai, 2020; McRobbie, 2015) which encourage and foster such an anxiety-ridden culture. As I touched upon in Chapter 6 and aim to demonstrate in this chapter, I believe postfeminist expressions of normative femininities further contribute to the problematic dynamics of perfection. In the following, I discuss an example from the Facebook group which highlights how the lack of critical questioning of such femininities can lead to confusion and problematic statements.

7.2.2. 'I have a problem with headscarves': Exclusionary Statements

On Saturday 26 June 2021 at 12:47, Facebook group participant Thea shared a post from another Facebook page which includes a sepia photo of two young women wearing hijabs and modest clothing, standing next to each other laughing. At the bottom of the photo, it reads "if a woman is free to show her body, why should she not be free to cover it?". The post was 'liked' by the other two participants, but no one commented on it. A few weeks later, towards the end of the discussion group, Thea posted the following:

> **Thea** – Monday 19 July 2021 at 18:23
>
> Okay, then I will write something that is difficult to admit for me, because I'm afraid it is a no-go 'opinion'. It is not a fully-fleshed-out opinion and I want to learn more. It would be boring if we all agreed with each other all the time.
> I have a problem with headscarves/veiling.
> I do not mean the people who are wearing it. I have a few female friends, a [sport] colleague ([sport] hijabi – very cool) etc, but I notice again and again that I have very negative associations. This probably comes from the fact that I'm not religious and just simply don't like it when people publicly express their religion (this definitely applies also to big crucifixes etc etc). Although it really shouldn't matter to me as an expression of individuality.
> I see religion very much in connection with the oppression of women (and LGBTQ+). It annoys me when religion has influence on political decisions. When there are exception of rules due to religious reasons.
> Example: it was highly praised[100] that a teacher got up at three am during a class trip, to prepare food for the children during Ramadan. I have often been a chaperone on these kinds of trips, there is always much to do and never enough sleep. It would really annoy me if that was the expectation.
> I have only talked about this to a few people due to the reasons we have been writing about here all this time. The only thing that I publicly say about it is that I think the discussion generally is not differentiated enough. When people say it's just a piece of clothing. It's not correct in my opinion, it is loaded with too much meaning and women are forced to wear it. It's a symbol of oppression for many. 'Modesty culture' restricts women, men not/much less. To ignore this and the discussion is proof of unreflective privileges. Of course, when women will no longer be oppressed anywhere, it will be different. I'm really curious what you are going to say to my comment/how you will

[100] Participant did not specify who or where.

react and whether you can help me to distinguish.
I actively inform myself and consciously engage with the topic.

The 'confession' of having "a problem with headscarves/veiling" is striking, as statements like these appear indeed to be a "no-go opinion" in popular intersectionality discourses – and especially in a German (feminist) context where the headscarf is one of the most discussed topics (Baer, 2016; Sabel et al., 2023; Weber, 2016). In order to contextualise this statement, one needs to take a closer look at the role the headscarf plays in German culture. Although usually depicted as a discussion about religion, "the debate in Germany has been focused on the role of Islam in particular, rather than religion in general" (Sinclair, 2012, p. 34). The 'headscarf', a term often loosely referring to practices of veiling one's hair, neck, and ears (Berghahn, 2009; Sinclair, 2012), has been the primary focus of these debates. While the headscarf is of course not the only piece of cloth assigned political meaning, political scientist Sabine Berghahn (2009) notes that the headscarf has become a "projection surface" in German society: "Meanings and messages far beyond the role of traditional religious social behaviour roles are assigned to it" (p. 34; my translation). This observation is also reflected in the above participant quote: "When people say it's just a piece of clothing. It's not correct in my opinion, it is loaded with too much meaning".

Due to Germany's history of reunifications in the 19th and 20th century, a shared German language and Christian values have been of particular importance to the country's national identity – and are closely connected to the notion of German citizenship (Lewicki, 2018; Müller, 2011; Sinclair, 2012). Islam is generally regarded as incompatible with German culture, and so is the headscarf, which "is perceived as indicative of a value set within what is essentialised as a coherent group" (Lewicki, 2022, p. 924). It thus often symbolises "FOREIGN" in German media representations (Schiffer, 2023, p. 20; my translation, capitalisation in original), and Muslim women are expected to remove their headscarves to demonstrate assimilation into German culture and the state's democratic values such as 'neutrality' (Amir-Moazami, 2023; Sinclair, 2012).[101] Yet, as sociologist Schirin Amir-Moazami (2023) argues, this alleged 'neutrality' "is based on hegemonial and often unspoken expectations of appropriate (good) and inappropriate (bad) religion" (pp. 79-80; my translation). As such, arguments about neutrality are often symptomatic of underlying fears of 'foreigners', and Islamic extremism and indoctrination in Germany (Ludin, 2023; Sinclair, 2012).

[101] This is especially the case for Muslim teachers and other civil servants wearing headscarves (Berghahn, 2009; Ludin, 2023; Sinclair, 2012).

Moreover, discourses about Islam not conforming with German values also operate through the trope of the headscarf as a tool of oppression (Ludin, 2023; Sinclair, 2012). This sentiment is also reflected in the following excerpt from the above participant post:

> . . . women are forced to wear it. It's a symbol of oppression for many. 'Modesty culture' restricts women, men not/much less. To ignore this and the discussion is proof of unreflective privileges. Of course, when women will no longer be oppressed anywhere, it will be different.

There are seemingly conflicting speech acts at work in this excerpt. The argument that women are forced to wear the headscarf reverberates postfeminist sentiments. As Scharff (2016 [2012]) analyses, "the trope of the 'oppressed Muslim woman' figures as yet another side for the disarticulation of feminism" (p. 60). However, the following statement referencing self-reflection and using privilege, does not disarticulate feminism in the same way. Rather, it demonstrates familiarity – and agreement – with popular intersectionality and allyship discourses through mobilising articulations of privilege and associated individual responsibility, as discussed in Chapter 6. The coexistence of these conflicting speech acts, I propose, is enabled by a 'suturing' (Hemmings, 2018) of normative femininity and popular intersectional feminism. Following the postfeminist logics of normative femininity, as I discussed earlier, the hegemonic subject position a relatively privileged (white) feminist can take is that of someone who demonstrates 'care' and 'inclusion'. Yet, in this instance, these values are translated as 'inclusion' of Muslim women through 'caring' about their (alleged) oppression. As such, popular intersectional notions of 'care' and 'inclusion' are 'misinterpreted' and continue to be evocative of a postfeminist sensibility.

Moreover, the notion that "it will be different" once women's oppression "everywhere" has ended, ignores an intersectional analysis of context-specific factors and conditions of patriarchal oppression (Pedwell, 2010). I expand on this point below after introducing another participant's response to the above post:[102]

> **Sophie** – Thursday 22 July 2021 at 12:12
>
> Interesting topic! I can certainly understand your opinion and am of the same opinion in certain points. I am not a fan of religion myself, especially when it is strongly expressed, because I can't do anything with it, but unfortunately often get the feeling from some very religious people that they want to missionize. Religion gives you

[102] At first, neither of the other two participants responded. I tagged both in the comments and the here cited response appeared three days later. Whilst this might be a coincidence, it might also hint towards the delicate nature of such 'confessions' in contemporary German (speaking) digital feminism.

> support and strength? Cool, but I'm very content in my agnosticism, and I don't try to convince you either, so please don't [try to convince me]. I also think that hijab[103] and of course the burka in some countries definitely serve/contribute to the oppression of women. When veiling is mandatory, I am absolutely against it. But when women, for example here in Germany, voluntarily decide to wear a headscarf, then I do not mind if they do. I honestly do not see it as much as a religious symbol compared to the wearing of a crucifix. I don't know enough about it to say if that's really always the case but I grew up with crucifixes of course, which is why I perceive the wearing of a crucifix almost as more foreign. I can of course imagine that there are also women here [in Germany] who are forced by their fathers or husbands to wear the hijab. Of course I do not think that's right! But when a woman tells me that she wants to do it because she otherwise would not feel comfortable, who am I to judge/question her? That is where I absolutely agree with the message of the picture you posted.
> And then one should look at what society does with women's bodies and their clothing. Is it too little, it's not right (keywords "slut", Victim Blaming, etc.), is it too much, it's also not right (see discussion about headscarves, or currently the penalty for the Norwegian women's volleyball team – in this case [it is] interesting in which context how much is "too much", especially if you think that the same outfit would be considered "not enough" in other contexts).
> When it is about complete veiling a la burka and Co. Then I have to admit that I also simply feel a little uncomfortable when I am standing across someone like that – it is also incredibly difficult for me to understand why someone would do that voluntarily. And then it raises the question, what a bad state society is at, when someone does not dare showing their face out of fear of being sexualised (I don't know if there are other reasons for it… have not engaged this much with it either). [Ellipsis in original]
>
> *Love (1) Thea*

In this example, two interesting comparisons take place. First, there is a differentiation between Muslim women "in some countries" who are forced to veil and are hence 'oppressed', and Muslim women "here in Germany" who wear the headscarf voluntarily. It is noteworthy that the latter group is not described as German Muslim women, but Muslim women *in Germany*, indicating that the notion of citizenship and race are still closely intertwined in Germany (Lewicki, 2018; Sinclair, 2012), and thus articulating Muslim women as Other. Moreover, the fact that many women in the Global South veil voluntarily is not further considered (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Yet, the trope of Islam as oppressive in Germany is re-invoked through the speculation that "I can of course imagine that there are also women here [in Germany] who are forced by their fathers or husbands to wear the hijab".

The second comparison contrasts the (forced) veiling of Muslim female bodies with the sexualisation of (white) female bodies in Western cultures. Both comparisons, I suggest, are an

[103] Notably, the participant uses the term 'hijab' instead of 'headscarf'. It is unclear why, but could indicate familiarity with international (digital) feminist discourses around the topic of veiling. The Arabic term 'hijab' is much more commonly employed in English-speaking debates than German-speaking ones, in my observation.

attempt at producing a nuanced argument akin to (popular) intersectional analysis. However, such analogies fail to contradict essentialist analyses, as feminist media scholar Carolyn Pedwell (2010) argues. Pedwell, who analyses academic discourses which compare Muslim veiling with anorexia and Western fashion and beauty practices, contends that, "in linking embodied practices through an exclusive metric of gender/sexuality, these analogies often do not enable rigorous analysis of intersectionality and are liable to reaffirm, rather than disrupt, essentialist articulations of cultural difference" (p. 87). Through employing such rhetorical devices of comparison, Pedwell further argues, colonial hierarchies are re-established:

> the primary role of 'the veiled woman' in these examples is to help Westerners become more developed, aware and multifaceted subjects. The risk of such constructions is that both the fixed position of 'the veiled woman' and the implicit authority of the 'Western feminist subject' remain fundamentally intact (rather than radically displaced) (Hemmings 2011). (p. 101)

A similar fixed positionality of 'the veiled woman' and the 'Western feminist subject' is established in the above participant quote through the identified rhetorics of comparisons.

Moreover, these comparisons are guided by a popular intersectional understanding of feminism as inclusive: A feminism that includes everyone, does also include women who wear the headscarf. This becomes noticeable in the following statement: "But when a woman tells me that she wants to do it because she otherwise would not feel comfortable, who am I to judge/question her? That is where I absolutely agree with the message of the picture you posted". At the same time, this statement also articulates postfeminist notions of freedom, choice, and emancipation. In contrast to the individualised notions of freedom that many feminist scholars have observed in postfeminist cultures (Budgeon, 2015; Gill, 2007), the notion of freedom refers here not to the speaker herself, but to the (formerly) oppressed Other. This freedom appears to be limited though, as the following excerpt indicates:

> When it is about complete veiling a la burka and Co. Then I have to admit that I also simply feel a little uncomfortable when I am standing across someone like that – it is also incredibly difficult for me to understand why someone would do that voluntarily. And then it raises the question, what a bad state society is at, when someone does not dare showing their face out of fear of being sexualised (I don't know if there are other reasons for it… have not engaged this much with it either). [Ellipsis in original]

Here, the veil is not articulated as a choice but linked to oppression in a patriarchal society. The freedom for Muslim women to veil is hence both acknowledged and contested in the participant's above post, reverberating a "double entanglement" (McRobbie, 2009) of popular intersectional

ideas and values, which are simultaneously 'articulated' and 'disarticulated' (Scharff, 2011a). As a consequence, statements such as the ones about Muslim women's freedom to veil are rendered "non-performative" (Ahmed, 2006; 2012; see also Chapters 1 and 4), as they appear to be conditional on the degree of veiling the speaker seems comfortable with.

Popular intersectionality's 'double entanglement' is hence enabled through postfeminist notions of normative femininity. As Hemmings (2018) theorises it in her discussion of popular feminism and femininity:

> I want to propose that the linking of feminism and femininity domesticates the former . . . . it is this made-over feminist subject who continues to do the rescue work in relation to those female subjects imagined as hyper-terrorized: the cut; the veiled; the temporally stymied. Only this time our feminist heroine does not have to give up her femininity or her victimhood; she can be both *victim and agent*. (p. 973; emphasis in original)

That is, the 'suturing' (Hemmings, 2018) of popular (intersectional) feminisms and (postfeminist) femininity, allows white women to both claim the subject position of someone marginalised by sexism (and potentially other -isms) in a patriarchal society, while simultaneously taking the subject position of an 'ally' doing the 'rescue work' – thus ultimately establishing a hierarchy of oppression and privilege (see Chapter 5). In this regard, the positionality of Western white women, such as my participants', is no longer the same as it was under postfeminism (i.e., allegedly empowered and freed from patriarchal oppression). Yet, I argue that through discursive devices such as the above discussed comparisons, postfeminism manages to tighten its grip on contemporary expressions of feminism, including popular intersectionality.

To be sure, I am not critiquing my participants for enacting postfeminist notions of normative femininity per se. Rather, I want to emphasise that popular intersectionality, both as a cultural sensibility and a speech act, does not operate without the performance of normative femininity, as it is an essential part of the neoliberal self-governmentality enabling popular forms of feminism and allyship. This self-governmentality, as I previously discussed (see Chapter 6), and as the Facebook group participants' accounts in this chapter confirm, simultaneously enables and is enabled by toxic callout cultures. As such, it comes as no surprise that my participants do not feel comfortable publicly voicing statements like the here examined ones regarding the headscarf. This becomes apparent in Thea's disclaimer: "I have only talked about this to a few people due to the reasons we have been writing about here all this time." Moreover, her addition, "I actively inform myself and consciously engage with the topic", is reminiscent of allyship imperatives to 'inform yourself' and 'learn', but also demonstrates an actual willingness, I believe, to debate this topic

and possibly be convinced by a different opinion. Importantly, Thea could have simply shared the photo and let everyone believe that she agreed with the message – as was my first interpretation. And Sophie could have agreed with the message as well, or even 'called' Thea 'out' (or 'in') for being a 'bad' white feminist. Instead, and this marks my second point, both admitted to their biases and subsequently had a more detailed discussion, attempting nuanced analysis in parts.[104] While not every problematic and exclusionary statement was 'debunked' during this discussion, I do wonder about the real pedagogical potential of open feminist debates. If both had posted these statements in a more heterogeneous Facebook group, possibly with more members, who might have been able to point out the fallacies in these articulations, perhaps the participants could have been challenged in a much more empathetic and long-lasting way. Such a space would also allow room for less hegemonic expressions of femininity without the danger of being punished for not adhering to the feminine norm. In reality, however, statements like the ones I discussed here would have most likely led to the speaker being accused of 'bad' white feminism and/or blocked from an intersectional feminist Facebook group. As a result, there is a danger that these types of discussions occur only in all-white spaces such as the secret Facebook group in this study, and thus remain unchallenged and less productive.

7.3. Conclusion

This final analytical chapter has introduced some findings from a four-week long Facebook discussion group with three of my interview participants. My analysis has shown that participants observed and expressed anxiety about saying the wrong thing, both in the discussion group as well as in wider digital (feminist) contexts (Gill, 2021a; Kanai & Coffey, 2023). This anxiety also translates into insecurity about correct allyship behaviour. As I have theorised, insecurity and worrying about saying or doing the right thing are closely related to notions of normative white femininities, which in turn parallel McRobbie's (2009) 'post-feminist masquerade': Both postfeminist and popular intersectional discourses produce pleasing femininities. In contrast to postfeminist sentiments, however, popular intersectionality discourses no longer repudiate feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Yet, as I also have argued, a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007) continues to reverberate through discursive logics of popular intersectionality, such as hierarchies of oppression and privilege (see Chapter 5), which lead to relatively privileged white women regarding themselves – while not fully empowered yet – as more empowered than other oppressed groups. This has become apparent in the second part of my analysis, in which I discussed

[104] Due to the scope of this chapter, I am unable to reproduce the complete discussion here.

exclusionary statements in the Facebook group about Muslim women who wear the headscarf. My reading of participants' various seemingly contradictory statements and rhetorics of comparison has, as I hope, demonstrated how popular intersectional feminism experiences a "double entanglement" (McRobbie, 2009) akin to postfeminism, which simultaneously articulates and disarticulates intersectionality theory.

To be sure, I am not arguing here that popular intersectionality *is* postfeminism in disguise. Rather, I contend that popular intersectionality operates at the convergence of postfeminist media cultures, neoliberal-capitalist platform architectures, and increased visibility of popular feminisms (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Kanai, 2020), as well as an increased appetite for socially-just feminisms post-2020.[105] However, as I have hopefully shown, postfeminism continues to provide a helpful framework in analysing normative expressions of femininity in the context of popular intersectionality, albeit having "undergone some significant transformations" (Rottenberg in Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 16). As Rosalind Gill (2016) contends, "One of the strengths of postfeminism as a critical concept is that it attends to and makes visible contradictions" (p. 622). Yet, as Gill discusses in conversation with Sarah Banet-Weiser and Catherine Rottenberg (2020), the term 'postfeminism' itself might be confusing to "new generations of students" (p. 16) – Gill refers here to her teaching at university – embracing (popular versions of) feminism. Gill therefore concludes, "I would understand this now in terms of a gendered neoliberalism" (p. 16). Which terminology will stick, remains to be seen.

Importantly, the question of why the hegemony of normative postfeminist white femininity in contemporary intersectionality discourses is not challenged (more), both by my participants[106] and in broader German (speaking) digital feminism, remains. Further explorations beyond the scope of this thesis are needed to answer this query.[107] A possible explanation is perhaps that digital feminists are wary of how they might be perceived if they uttered such critiques. To some, critically questioning normative feminine behaviour in these discourses might not only go against the mantra of 'including everyone', but perhaps also appear femmephobic (Blair & Hoskin, 2015) or 'gender critical' (Thurlow, 2022), particularly in queer feminist contexts. Femme theory

[105] This may also explain why my participants, despite harbouring negative connotations about the headscarf, and feeling anxious and insecure about saying the wrong thing, still felt the urge to discuss this topic and demonstrated a willingness to be convinced differently.

[106] Admittedly, I did not explore this question with my participants further, as the predominance of normative feminine behaviour became apparent during the data analysis process.

[107] See Chen and Kanai (2022) and Streeter (2023) for queer expressions of normative femininity in the influencer industry.

scholars and queer activists have rightly argued against perceptions of femininity as "infantile or weak" (Hoskin & Blair, 2022, p. 3) in broader feminist scholarship, and for the value of femme theory. Judging from my own observations, the validity of femme identities and discrimination and prejudice femmes experience are topics of increased occurrence in German (speaking) queer feminist contexts. As such, the critique of normative femininity in popular intersectionality discourse might falsely be understood as critical of femme identities. Equally, such interrogations might be perceived as 'gender critical', a term repeatedly used in transphobic contexts in recent years (Thurlow, 2022). In contemporary toxic callout cultures, the probability of being perceived as femme- or transphobic might hence be too great. This is of relevance in Germany, where 'antigenderism' on the far right and in certain feminist streams has been on the rise (Cattien, 2023; Hark & Villa, 2015). Yet, I argue that a better understanding of the ways normative femininities dominate articulations of popular intersectionality, improves feminist scholars' understanding and critical analysis of such articulations.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

This thesis had set out to examine the popularisation of intersectionality under neoliberalism in contemporary German (speaking) digital feminism. In order to do so, three sets of data were collected: 61 blog posts, 22 qualitative interviews, and a four-week long Facebook group discussion with three participants. In this concluding chapter, I present my key findings in relation to the initial research questions as well as its theoretical contributions. Moreover, I critically reflect on methodological strengths and challenges, followed by considerations about future directions of research on popular intersectionality. I conclude this chapter – and this thesis – with final reflections on the question 'What can (white) digital feminists do?'

8.1. Findings

8.1.1. Popular Intersectionality as Cultural Sentiment and Discursive Speech Act

This thesis contends that a popularised version of intersectionality is the predominant political perspective articulated across my data. It further argues that this 'popular intersectionality' operates as both a cultural sentiment, as well as a discursive speech act. That is, popular intersectionality needs to be understood as a cultural sentiment similar to postfeminism or popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill, 2007), which shapes contemporary popular, commercial, and activist cultures. Throughout my data, a 'common sense' mobilisation of popular intersectionality reverberates; or, in the words of the *Zine_X* bloggers, intersectionality is 'taken for granted'. Moreover, the cultural sentiment that popular intersectionality describes is governed by normative femininities and neoliberal-capitalist, digital platform cultures, as I discuss in the next two sections.

Popular intersectionality also describes a set of speech acts. These speech acts often constitute what Sara Ahmed (2004b, 2006, 2012) calls "non-performatives", as they do not enact what they promise to 'perform', such as anti-racism or an intersectional perspective, as I demonstrated in my analysis of a feminist blog. Moreover, my analysis also revealed that intersectionality is articulated on the blog as a historic and contemporary response to a 'white-centred feminism' (Jonsson, 2021) and specifically criticises 'bad' white women who subscribe to this kind of feminism. Articulating intersectionality in this way thus erases the concept's Black feminist origins, and serves the purpose of repudiating what is perceived as 'bad' white feminism. Following the discursive logics on the blog, I further identified two ways through which feminists who are white aspire towards

the subject position of the 'good' white feminist: the 'good' white feminist checklist and declarations of privilege and solidarity. Importantly, both devices articulate white saviourism through a focus on self-improvement and the notion of wanting to help others (Finnegan, 2022). Reflecting neoliberal logics of individual responsibility, these discourses and practices thus mark a technology of governing the self (Foucault et al., 2008; Martin et al., 1988), which ultimately distracts from wider structural change.

Popular intersectionality is also highly affective, as both my discourse analysis of the blog posts and the interviews showed. I noted in the context of the blog that the desire for popular intersectionality reminds me of the attachment to 'the good life' that Lauren Berlant (2011) so poignantly theorised. That is, the 'affective attachment' to popular intersectionality prevents the speaker from further productive engagement with intersectionality theory. My analysis of the interviews with self-identified digital feminists highlighted that popular intersectionality is also attached to affects such as positivity and relatability, which, as I suggested, might be encouraged by the social media platforms on which popular intersectionality discourses circulate, such as Instagram (see section 8.1.3.). Notably, there was less of a focus on critiquing 'bad' white women in the interviews, which might speak to the overall positivity my participants expressed. And yet, as I demonstrated, my interviewees' talk produced hierarchies of oppression and privilege, and thus implicit critiques of white women and white-centred feminism.

Moreover, intersectionality was articulated in the interviews as a feminism that 'supports' and 'empowers' marginalised groups, and importantly, 'includes everyone'. Similarly, in the Facebook group discussion, participants reflected on the importance of demonstrating that one 'includes everyone in their thinking' in German (speaking) digital feminist spaces. While such a sentiment may explain why intersectionality has become so popular in digital feminist spaces, it fails to offer any structural critique or further epistemological reflections on how the 'inclusion of everyone' can be achieved. Rather, the focus on visibility of minority groups is heralded as one, if not *the* main political achievement, which resonates with research on popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022).

However, my findings also revealed the pressure and subsequent exhaustion that the task of 'including everyone' and intersectional allyship can produce, particularly in a pandemic context and times of global Black Lives Matter protests, which brought more awareness of intersectionality and anti-racism to the German mainstream. In light of rising 'woke' and cancel cultures, it is unsurprising that both interview and focus group participants articulated anxiety and insecurity

about doing intersectionality wrong, which is in keeping with other research on the fear of 'getting it wrong' (Gill, 2021a, 2021b; Kanai, 2020; Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022; Krogh, 2022; Lehto, 2021). To conclude, across my data, popular intersectionality is articulated as the main political perspective. Yet, at the same time, intersectionality theory experiences a rearticulation as a highly affective 'buzzword' which continues to deliver the opposite of what it claims to do. That is, popular intersectionality re-establishes hegemonic whiteness and hierarchical power structures while negating its roots in Black feminist activism and intellectual thinking.

8.1.2. Popular Intersectionality is Governed by Normative Femininities

My findings further highlighted that the examined popular intersectionality discourses are dominated by notions of normative white, middle-class, cisgendered femininities. This is noteworthy for a number of reasons. For instance, my interview participants articulated neoliberal narratives of self-improvement and individual responsibility, which feminist media and cultural scholars have noted are primarily directed towards women (Budgeon, 2015; Elias et al., 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2022a, 2022b; Orgad & de Benedictis, 2015). Yet, my participants articulated these narratives, albeit to varying degrees, across power dynamics of gender, class, and race. While this neoliberal self-governmentality was present in *Zine_X* blog posts published in 2020, it was even more palpable in the interviews conducted in 2021, thus resonating with the rise of post-2020 'woke' and cancel cultures. To account for the increased pressure such self-optimising narratives produce, I developed the figure of the popular intersectional feminist, which can be understood as another dimension of Angela McRobbie's (2015) notion of the 'perfect'. The perfect intersectional feminist, aspiring towards the 'perfect standard' of activism and intersectional allyship, is marked by an inner-directed self-competition which feminist scholars have described as typical for women under neoliberalism (Mavin & Yusupova, 2022; Scharff, 2015).

What stood out further in my data was that discussions of allyship in the blog, the interviews, and the Facebook group articulate normative feminine notions such as using one's privilege to do good, help others, be in solidarity with those oppressed, and make sure everyone is included. As I argue, such articulations run the risk of turning into white saviourism and re-establishing hierarchical thinking and progress narratives, in which white and/or Western feminists are more empowered than the racialised Other. Moreover, it was also striking that nearly none of my participants seemed to critically question the hegemony of normative feminine behaviours in popular intersectionality discourses. Indeed, as the Facebook group discussion revealed, it appears that punishment in the

form of ‘calling out’ and/or ‘cancelling’ occurs on a regular basis, e.g., when a digital feminist fails to act feminine by not including everyone in their thinking.

Notably, only one participant reflected on the fact that the hegemony of normative femininities might be explained by the fact that many digital feminists are socialised as women and thus socialised to want to please others. The notion of wanting to please others, or in the words of a participant, ‘wanting to not step on anyone’s toes’, and insecurity about saying or doing the wrong thing in digital feminist spaces, strongly resonated throughout the Facebook group discussion. At the same time, exclusionary statements about Muslim women wearing the hijab were articulated, which is in contrast with the notion of ‘including everyone’. To make sense of these conflicting statements and sentiments, I reviewed selected literature on postfeminism and argued that in the context of the Facebook group discussion, popular intersectionality operates through a popular intersectionality masquerade, similar to McRobbie’s (2009) ‘post-feminist masquerade’. While the post-feminist masquerade describes how young women in the early 2000s simultaneously avowed and disavowed feminism, the popular intersectionality masquerade refers to the simultaneous articulation and disarticulation of intersectionality in my focus group participants’ postings. That is, the popular intersectionality masquerade promises an all-inclusive feminism akin to intersectional feminism, but in actuality revokes popular intersectional claims, such as the ones about inclusivity, through exclusionary statements resembling a postfeminist sensibility.

8.1.3. Popular Intersectionality is Governed by Neoliberal-Capitalist, Digital, and Affect Platform Cultures

This thesis demonstrated that popular intersectionality discourses are governed by neoliberal (platform) logics and affective regimes. As I discussed, the ideal of the perfect intersectional feminist demands that digital feminists listen, learn, and reflect on themselves. These self-optimising allyship practices articulated by my interview participants, and to a certain degree in the blog, are laden with neoliberal imperatives of (white) individual responsibility to improve, an observation which is in keeping with feminist research on individualism under neoliberalism (Gill & Orgad, 2022a; McRobbie, 2015; Rottenberg, 2019; Scharff, 2015, 2019). Furthermore, I discussed the notion of active feed curation, a practice several of my interviewees reported engaging in, and which entails the curation of ‘intersectional diversity’ in one’s feed in order to learn about marginalised identities groups. Yet, as I argued, in doing so, digital feminists treat marginalised groups as commodities that can be ‘consumed’ (hooks, 2015 [1992]-a) for self-improvement.

Moreover, I suggested that this neoliberal 'mindset' is encouraged by the affordances of the platforms digital feminism takes place on nowadays. In contrast to traditional forums which allow time and space for debates, contemporary social media, such as Instagram, have become a place where 'prosumers' post content for other users to consume. As a result, many of my interview participants reported not actively engaging with feminist debates on social media. Additionally, the "visual turn" (Gibbs et al., 2015) and character limit on many platforms have changed the nature of digital feminist content. As my analysis of the sharepic culture on Instagram showed, complex debates about intersectionality and related issues tend to be reduced to a bullet point format. One possible result of these developments is that several participants articulated intersectionality as a (relatively) new theory, thereby rearticulating narratives of feminist progress. However, such narratives, as I noted previously, erase intersectionality's Black feminist history.

Affect, as I discussed in the beginning of this thesis, *moves* feminists to participate in digital feminism. These affects have been described as "feminist fire" (Coffey & Kanai, 2021) and "righteousness" (Kanai & Coffey, 2023) among others, indicating that both positive and negative affects inspire feminists to partake in digital feminism. As discussed earlier, the digital feminists interviewed in my study articulate popular intersectionality in explicitly positive terms. This increasingly positive outlook on intersectional politics may be explained with the general cultural shifts towards positivity and confidence (Gill & Orgad, 2022a), which only increased during the pandemic and specifically targets women (Gill & Orgad, 2018, 2022b). My findings are also in keeping with existing feminist research on how hegemonic femininities are produced online through shared affects such as relatability (Kanai, 2019a, 2019b), and which are noticeable in the interview data as well. That is, the digital feminists in my study articulate popular intersectionality in a welcoming and inviting way, such as through the repeated notion of 'including everyone', that would easily move one to want to 'participate' in the feminist movement. Crucially, I also discussed that these affective expressions of popular intersectionality are explicitly encouraged by platform affordances. As I discussed, Instagram's affordances foster a culture of 'girly' aestheticism (Crepax, 2020) – which was reflected, for example, in the 'corporate design' a participant described in relation to her feminist self-care account – and (felt) perception of membership in a 'bubble' of like-minded feminists, which is enabled by the platform's algorithms and encourages perceived relatability among digital feminists.

Yet, I also discussed how digital platforms encourage the performance of affects such as outrage for capitalist purposes (Ng, 2022; Zarzycka & Olivieri, 2017). As I contended, platforms foster a toxic 'callout culture' in German (speaking) digital feminism, as posts that produce outrage receive

more likes and shares, and thus more visibility, which in turn leads to users spending more time on the platform. Yet, neither the bloggers nor the majority of the interviewed digital feminists or Facebook group participants critically interrogated the role platforms play in producing a culture that focuses on policing each other, especially since this culture stands in contrast to the inclusivity and culture of learning and self-improvement that my participants have lauded. Some participants, however, did show awareness of the potential for social media to function as (to varying degrees) publicly visible, digital records of one's (intersectional) feminist politics, including mistakes and missteps. One interviewee's account of deleting 'intersectional' from their profile description highlights the anxiety these platform affordances produce in particular.

Reviewing all the above findings together, I contended in this thesis that popular intersectionality operates as a cultural sentiment and a set of speech acts, at the convergence of postfeminist, popular feminist, and neoliberal media cultures, as well as digital feminist affect cultures, and 'woke' cultures further fuelled by the social and political events of the summer of 2020, while also being driven by a genuine thirst for a socially-just feminism. The latter aspect is of particular importance to note, as I do not argue that the digital feminists I interviewed and whose digital content I analysed are simply 'dupes' of neoliberal-capitalist platform logics, or even ill-intended. But rather, to echo the words from L. Ayu Saraswati (2021):

> it is the ways in which feminist activism, even when it was not originally founded on neoliberalism, is carried out on digital platforms governed by neoliberal values of personal responsibility, entrepreneurship, and liberation through capitalism and by the neoliberal logic of the visual-economy marketplace, which limit and shape the trajectory and practice of feminist activism in this domain. (p. 67)

Thus, my thesis has uncovered some of the structural dynamics that govern contemporary German (speaking) digital feminism in the context of popular intersectionality discourses.

8.2. Theoretical Contributions

This thesis has developed the concept of 'popular intersectionality' in order to theorise the popularisation of intersectionality in digital feminist platform cultures under neoliberalism. It has also introduced the figure of the 'perfect intersectional feminist' and the 'popular intersectionality masquerade'. These analytical figures and the concept of popular intersectionality can help feminist cultural and media scholars to elucidate some of the social, cultural, political, and technological dynamics in contemporary digital feminism. They also enable scholars to critically question the role neoliberal-capitalist social media platforms and their affordances, as well as the

repeated production of hegemonic femininities on these platforms, play in shaping contemporary popular discourses on intersectionality and allyship. In short, they help us untangle the digital feminist politics of 'including everyone'. In doing so, this thesis has added to the growing body of research on intersectionality's popularisation in commercial, activist, and popular cultures (Banet-Weiser & Glatt, 2023; Kanai, 2020, 2021; Morrison, 2021; Sobande, 2019). Moreover, this thesis contributes to research on affect in digital (feminist) activism (Kanai & Coffey, 2023; Kanai & McGrane, 2021; Mendes et al., 2019; Papacharissi, 2016; Zarzycka & Olivieri, 2017) and neoliberal culture more broadly (Gill & Kanai, 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2022a, 2022b; Kanai & Gill, 2020; Scharff, 2015).

8.3. Critical Methodological Reflections

Reflecting on the various methods employed in this study demonstrates the strengths and shortcomings, as well as aspects that could be improved in future projects. Starting with the blog analysis, I believe that it would have been insightful to focus on blog posts published during the data collection period in 2020, particularly during the first pandemic-related national lockdown, as well as during the period of interviewing digital feminists in 2021. This would have allowed me to explore in more detail how the bloggers responded to the social and political events in the summer of 2020 and the pandemic, and to compare these accounts with those of my interviewees. However, since the blogging stopped in early 2020, reportedly due to 'exhaustion', I had to resort to analysing earlier posts. An advantage though was that this enabled me to trace articulations of popular intersectionality on the blog over a longer period of time (2016 - 2020), and thus sketch out some historical developments in popular intersectionality discourses, such as the discursive shift from 'empathy' and 'communal learning' to neoliberal responsibilisation through imperatives such as 'Sit down and inform yourself'.

Regarding the overrepresentation of Instagram users in the interviews, it would have certainly been useful to include a visual analysis of participants' Instagram accounts.[108] For instance, the 'scroll back method' (Robards & Lincoln, 2017, 2019) would have provided the opportunity to directly

[108] An area of further exploration could also be articulations of popular intersectionality in visual culture. Francesca Sobande (2019) has already analysed the "woke-washing" of intersectionality in contemporary Anglophone advertising. It could be insightful to extend this research to screen cultures. For instance, in my teaching of popular intersectionality, I usually discuss the Netflix film *Moxie* (2021) with my students. A further area of focus could be popular intersectional merchandise, as can be found on DIY platforms like Etsy (Banet-Weiser & Glatt, 2023).

engage participants in the visual analysis and hear their perspectives on content posted via their Instagram accounts. However, since I had originally decided against collecting data directly from social media platforms such as Facebook due to ethics-related practicalities (e.g., collecting data from Facebook groups would have meant gaining users' permission for each collected 'comment', which, while ethically imperative, would have been very time-consuming), using the scroll back method would have meant reapplying for ethics approval, which would have significantly disrupted the timescale of the project. That said, I believe my analysis of the blog provides important insights into how popular intersectionality is articulated on digital platforms. Moreover, as digital media scholars have argued, research on popular culture and media, particularly social media cultures, is always attempting to 'catch up' with the fast-developing nature of technologies and platform uses (Kaun & Uldam, 2018).

A further aspect concerning the interview method, is the use of 'ethnicity' in the form circulated prior to the interviews to collect demographic information. As I discussed in Chapter 5, offering participants of colour to conduct the interview first and then complete the form might have been more successful in recruiting more digital feminists of colour. A more productive approach would have been not to use the term though, or make it clear that I follow Stuart Hall's (1996a) understanding that concepts like race operate 'under erasure'. That is, while these concepts are problematic to reproduce, it is nonetheless important to employ them to discuss the social implications of race (see Chapter 1). Moreover, I should have explained my goal to interview a heterogeneous group of digital feminists, which includes people who experience racism. Another option could have been to dismiss the form completely and instead enquire about demographic information during the interview, once rapport had been established. My reasoning for using the term in the first place was that I had planned to ask interviewees which terms they think we should use, thus approaching the difficult issue of the translation of 'race' and 'class'. However, as it turned out during the interviews, the majority of participants seemed rather confused by the question – which suggests a lack of critical reflection on travelling theories and discourses in German (speaking) digital feminism.

Lastly, I want to reflect on the feasibility and practicality of a secret, private Facebook group as online focus group tool. Firstly, not everything went as planned. For instance, the group had to be extended by two weeks to allow participants more time to respond in depth to the various discussion prompts and for the discussions to develop. It would be advisable to plan for a longer duration and stretch the posting of discussion prompts further out. Secondly, despite the small number of participants, the different discussion threads quickly became hard to follow up with

(particularly when participants used their phones instead of devices with bigger screens), which was aggravated by Facebook's option to reply directly under each post, and was also reflected in the participants' post-group feedback. That said, it also reflected the 'messiness' of real-life digital feminist discussion spaces. Thirdly, not all discussion prompts generated as much debate as I had hoped. Particularly a prompt on white saviourism led to confusion. While my questions referred to white saviourism in the context of digital debates, I had also included the link to a German-speaking online article on white saviourism in the context of volunteer tourism in the global South. I had added the article in an attempt to make the group discussion as inclusive and accessible as possible but also because I had been unable to find other, more fitting, German-speaking resources. As participants' postings under the prompt demonstrated, there was confusion (and possible defensiveness) in response to the prompt. My clarifications did not lead to further discussion, which could also be explained with the above mentioned fact that the different discussion threads were difficult to keep up with. Initial confusion over the purpose of the group was also articulated by a participant following my final discussion prompt which invited participants to reflect on the group and provide feedback. This shows that both the purpose of a Facebook group when used as a focus group tool as well as the discussion prompts require careful phrasing. On the other hand though, participants highlighted that the group was "enjoyable" and "pleasant", which might stand in contrast to the earlier discussed anxiety some participants felt (see Chapter 6), but could also be read as an expression of the pleasing femininity participants performed throughout the group (Kanai, 2019a, 2019b).

Finally, the Facebook group's discussion was valuable in confirming some of my previous findings regarding toxic callout cultures as well as generating new ones in terms of better understanding the enactment of normative femininity. Notably, I believe the open discussion about my participants' conflicting feelings regarding the hijab was enabled by my methodology. The setup of the group as secret and closed, its small size, as well as platform affordances such as the 'reaction' function to signal agreement with statements in addition to written agreement in a response post, encouraged rapport building among participants. It does not appear to be a coincidence then, that the headscarf-discussion 'popped up' towards the very end of the group. At this point, participants had engaged with each other for about a month and were therefore able to build trust.[109] While the Facebook group methodology has been conducive in these ways, I also want to acknowledge its limitations given the small number of participants and resulting

[109] Of course, as I discussed, there were still palpable anxieties. Nonetheless, participants appeared comfortable articulating these.

homogeneity. Although I am aware of the risk of centring educated white middle-class cis women's perspectives – and their emotions – throughout this thesis, and particularly in Chapter 7 (Jackson & Rao, 2022; Jonsson, 2021), I do believe tracing expressions of normative femininities provides extensive value for an improved understanding of the conditions under which popular intersectionality emerges and evolves.

8.4. Future Directions

8.4.1. Allyship Discourses and the 'Allyship Industry'

Following my analysis of popular allyship discourses in relation to intersectionality in Chapter 6, I believe it would be insightful to further study such allyship discourses in broader culture. As many have noted, publications of popular nonfiction literature on allyship have risen since 2020 (Dabiri, 2021; Jackson & Rao, 2022). These publications, I contend, are influenced by popular discussions on social media, including digital feminist debates, and vice versa. It should not be a surprise then, that we find similar articulations of popular intersectionality in contemporary allyship literature. For instance, browsing at my local bookshop, I found a small pocket-sized volume, *Being an Ally: Real Talk About Showing up, Screwing up and Trying Again* (2023), edited by writers Shakirah Bourne and Dana Alison Levy, in the Young Adults (YA) section. The book, available for the price of just £1, appears to be a shorter version of the book *Allies* by the same editors, which includes essays by critically acclaimed YA authors on allyship. In the first essay of *Being an Ally*, Levy writes about what it takes to be an ally. Not surprisingly, the essay includes a 'checklist' which asks readers to "Read books by diverse authors", "Follow diverse voices on social media, especially local ones and folks without millions of followers. Amplify them and help them get noticed", as well as, "Educate yourself" (p. 9). What is striking about this example, is that it is geared towards young adults, which reminds me of the neoliberal responsibilisation of young children in popular women's biographies that Louise Couceiro (2022) discusses.

An example of a checklist for adult allies can also be found in Robin DiAngelo's book, *Nice Racism: How Progressive White People Perpetuate Racial Harm* (2021). DiAngelo lists fourteen "basics" that white (middle-class) people who want to hold themselves "accountable" can follow, e.g., "Promote the work and services of BIPOC people", "Break white silence on racism", and "Never consider your learning finished" (pp. 178-179). These are, of course, just two (English-speaking) examples, and a more comprehensive analysis would be necessary to map the contours of the current 'allyship industry'.

8.4.2. Backlashes Against Popular Intersectionality

In *Empowered* (2018), Sarah Banet-Weiser not only analyses how popular feminism circulates in current "economies of visibility", but also discusses how popular misogyny moves through contemporary culture: "Misogyny is popular in the contemporary moment for the same reason feminism has become popular: it is expressed and practiced on multiple media platforms, it attracts other like-minded groups and individuals" (p. 2). Banet-Weiser further explains that popular feminism is *active* in shaping culture, whereas popular misogyny is *reactive* to popular feminism. In a similar vein, I suggest that we can observe backlashes against popular intersectionality in current social media cultures. For instance, in the US, conservative media outlets and advocacy groups, *The Daily Wire* and *Prager U*, have posted videos with the title 'What is Intersectionality?' on YouTube in 2017 and 2018 respectively. In these videos, the commentators Andrew Klavan and Ben Shapiro portray intersectionality as identity politics of the political Left, ridicule and gaslight its proponents, and attack Kimberlé Crenshaw.

Notably, Ben Shapiro claims in one of the videos (which has almost four million views at the time of writing in December 2023) that "individual thoughts, experiences, and ambitions" are outweighed by a person's "sex and race". Shapiro further claims that according to intersectionality's proponents, a hierarchy of various "victim groups" exists in society, in which straight white men are at the very bottom. Following Shapiro, the "victim group" at the top of the hierarchy will be the one whose opinions are being heard in society. While I do not wish to further reproduce Shapiro's highly problematic – and racist and homophobic – misinterpretations of intersectionality theory, I do believe they represent a direct *reaction* to the type of popular intersectionality discourses that I have identified in the context of German (speaking) digital feminism (which I believe are not exclusive to German digital feminism, as I mentioned previously): from hierarchies of oppression and privilege to the policing nature of the toxic callout culture in (intra-)feminist debates. While I have not come across similar social media content in the German-speaking realm, it is not to say that such content does not exist.

Moreover, popular intersectionality experiences backlashes in academia and broader culture as well, both in the US and Germany. A recent example is linguist John McWhorter's book *Woke Racism: How a New Religion has Betrayed Black America* (2021). McWhorter argues that discourses on racism and 'wokeness' have become a new "religion" in the US, where (declaring) white privilege is the "original sin". He further blames among others critical race theory and its influential thinkers for the rise of 'woke' culture: "Critical race theory tells you that everything is

about hierarchy, power, the abuses – and that if you are not Caucasian in America, then you are akin to the captives oarsman slave straining below decks in chains" (p. 63). Once again, this critique, which mirrors Shapiro's argument discussed above, appears to be a reaction to the discursive hierarchies of oppression and privilege I identified in my data. However, what distinguishes my argument from McWhorter's is not only that my analysis is guided by feminist research principles and ethics, but also that I believe in the importance of intersectionality theory to better understand, analyse, and eventually overcome structural, intersecting forms of oppression. As such, my goal is to contribute to a productive critique of popular intersectionality discourses, in contrast to McWhorter's polemic and distorted dismissal of critical race theory.

Earlier in 2023, Germany saw a similar publication by liberal-conservative magazine *Cicero*'s editor-in-chief Alexander Marguier and journalist Ben Krischke. In the introduction of *Die Wokeness-Illusion: Wenn Political Correctness die Freiheit gefährdet* [The Wokeness Illusion: When Political Correctness Endangers Freedom] (2023), the editors claim that Germany's Social Democratic chancellor Olaf Scholz answering yes to the question whether he considers himself an 'intersectional feminist'[110] during an election campaign:

> is a gesture of submission in the culture wars on 'Wokeism', which are all about further differentiating alleged victim groups and working out the intersections. In 'intersectional feminism', the disadvantage of women cannot just be explained with their gender, but also other characteristics such as ethnicity, class, religion, or sexual orientation. . . . No wonder then that the 'Social Justice Warriors' of the post-modern Left driven by identity politics work towards reaching their agenda with such religious efforts as the hysterical witch hunters of the 16th century did. Following this concept, one is practically a perpetrator qua birth as a non-coloured [*sic*], possibly heterosexual human of the male sex – and only regular antiracist atonement can relieve you from the original sin. If at all. (pp. 7-8; my translation)

What is striking about all these examples (which are notably all written and produced by men!) is not only their 'common language', i.e., similar phrases and metaphors (e.g., "victim groups", "religion") which demonstrates once again the close proximity of German-speaking cultural discourses around intersectionality to the US, but also that they all root the cause for 'wokeness' in feminism, critical race theory, and intersectionality. All in all, these popular critiques of intersectionality, remind me of Francesca Sobande, Akane Kanai, and Natasha Zeng's (2022) discussion of the high visibility and contested nature of 'wokeness'. Research on theses backlashes

[110] Note how popular intersectionality has now reached Germany's political mainstream.

to popular intersectionality, I suggest, could help further elucidate the links between popular intersectionality and backlashes to 'woke' culture.

8.4.3. Gender, Race, and …?

My analysis in this thesis focused on how whiteness and femininity intersect in the production of popular intersectionality discourses. I concentrated on gender and race as these categories were the most salient in my data, but also because an analysis that integrated further identity categories would be beyond the scope of this thesis. Moreover, class as the third axis of the 'intersectional trifecta' was notably absent in the blog and interviews (outside of critiquing 'bad' white middle-class women), despite my questions about it. For instance, I asked the editorial members of the blog how we should approach the translation of 'race' and 'class' into German (see Chapter 2), which terms they are aware of, and which terms they think we should use. In their response, the bloggers discussed the use of 'race' but ignored 'class' completely. Similarly, in the interviews with self-identified digital feminists, participants seemed to be more familiar with discussions of the use of race than class, or indicated not having further engaged with it. However, some interviewees addressed class issues when being asked what they consider the most important current intersectionality-related topics. Examples mentioned often referred to people of lower socio-economic backgrounds and how they are further marginalised during the pandemic. Thus, (further) feminist research specifically interrogating the use of class, or lack thereof, in digital feminism might be helpful (see for instance Scharff, 2023a).

In a similar vein, dis/ability, nationality, or faith only featured in my participants' articulations of hierarchies of oppression and privilege or in deliberations about the responsibility to 'do good' associated with all sorts of privileges (see Chapter 6). Notably, Muslim faith, both in the interviews and the Facebook group discussion, was predominantly articulated through the mentioning of Muslim women wearing the hijab. Jewish people and their experiences of (intersecting) oppression were only mentioned by two Jewish participants. This is, of course, not to say that intersecting oppressions of faith, nationality, or dis/ability are not being discussed in more depth in broader German (speaking) digital feminist spaces, but it is to say that they did not feature predominantly in my data and hence require further research.

Moreover, it has been beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss popular intersectionality's relation to queer feminism. The blogger collective *Zine_X*, for instance, self-identify as 'intersectional and queer feminist' and regularly posted about topics regarding queer sexualities and transgender

identities. However, the discursive focus in the blog appeared to centre transgender women. Similarly, when I enquired about queer feminism in the interviews with digital feminists, interviewees often articulated queer feminism as the fight for trans equality. Interestingly, Jenny Morrison (2021) notes in her interviews with feminist activists in the radical Left of the Scottish independence movement, that "participants mobilised the trope of the TERF to present the contemporary movement as intersectional" (p. 644). This suggests that further exploration of the focus on transgender issues in popular intersectionality and popular queerness debates might be insightful in understanding how contemporary notions of intersectional allyship operate.

8.5. Final Reflections: What subject positions can (white)[111] digital feminists take?

Reviewing my critique of popular intersectionality, the attentive reader might wonder what is left to do for digital feminists who want to avoid the pitfalls of popular intersectionality. This question is of course difficult to answer without reproducing popular articulations such as 'Really listen to those affected' or 'Reflect more on yourself'. In approaching my answer, I draw on two feminist scholars who have previously deliberated on similar questions. Sara Ahmed (2007) recounts that whenever she presents her research on whiteness to white audiences, she is usually asked afterwards, 'What can white people do?'. Unsurprisingly, I received similar questions following conference presentations on my initial findings. Looking back at my analysis in this thesis, it appears that popular intersectionality, embodied in checklists and neoliberal imperatives on how to behave, attempts to exactly answer this question. Yet, as I argued, such expressions of popular intersectionality do not dismantle, but rather uphold the status quo of whiteness. Ahmed further notes, responding to the above question is to "re-position the white subject somewhere other than implicated in the critique" (p. 165). Moreover, Ahmed cautions not to move on too quickly from the moment of critique: "The desire for signs of resistance [to whiteness] can also be a form for resistance to hearing about racism. If we want to know how things can be different *too quickly*, then we might not hear anything at all" (p. 165; emphasis in original).

Building on Ahmed's argument and feminist work on listening (Carby, 1982; Swan, 2017), Terese Jonsson (2021), in her analysis of innocent whiteness in feminist academic, news, and popular literature in the UK, also advocates for 'staying with critique' and 'deep listening'. In arguing for

[111] I am putting 'white' in parentheses since although white allyship has been a focus, this thesis has also touched upon other forms of (popular intersectional) allyship, such as male allyship or straight/cisgender allyship.

staying with the critiques, both Ahmed and Jonsson urge us to stop ourselves from wanting to jump to action immediately and instead take time to deliberate on the critiques. In the context of fast-pacing social media economies, however, this appears increasingly difficult to achieve. Jonsson, who is white herself, shares what staying with the critique means in writing a book about white-centred feminism:

> This book in itself is an attempt to stay with critique. Yet, of course, while it critiques whiteness, this does not mean that it is not simultaneously entangled in it. In particular, I am fully aware of how the mechanism of distancing looms large in this book – unavoidably my critiques of the works of other white feminists function to position me as potentially more 'critical' or more 'knowledgeable' about racism, which could again be understood as an attempt to position myself as a 'good' white feminist. . . . Yet, these deliberations, in my experience, can lead down endless rabbit holes. And while reflecting on one's own practice and motivations is crucial, when white people make such processes extensively visible, this is ultimately not that helpful for anti-racist work. The display of white anxieties around whether you are 'doing it right' are of course still wrapped up in a moral framework of guilt versus innocence, and shifts the focus back towards white people and their intentions. I see this kind of critical reflective work as best done in private and/or together with other white people who are concerned with racism. (pp. 175-176)

I am citing Jonsson here at length since she expresses so eloquently many of the dilemmas I face in writing this thesis and critiquing popular intersectionality. And, of course, my deliberations on Jonsson's deliberations do, ironically, extend the visibility of white feelings of guilt and innocence. And while I do want to highlight with this quote that I view myself as implicated (see below) in popular intersectionality – rather than just someone critiquing from the outside – I also want to use it as a starting point in thinking about how white and other digital feminists can approach such reflection work by revisiting some previous discussion points.

As an interview participant puts it, is important to remember that digital feminists are not in competition with each other when it comes to the question of which topics to cover online, and as I would add, digital feminists are also not in competition with each other in regards to the (intersecting) forms of oppressions they face (Crenshaw in Dhawan & Castro Varela, 2023). To repeat Audre Lorde's (2018 [1983]) words, "there is no hierarchy of oppressions". Moreover, although contemporary digital feminists engage with feminism on a variety of platforms, certain platforms such as Instagram stood out in its popularity. Yet, as my analysis suggested, Instagram's affordances are not very conducive to active exchange and productive learning. The Facebook discussion group, on the other hand, indicated that in more private, digital 'safe(r)' spaces, digital feminists, while still anxious, might feel more comfortable to ask difficult questions (although arguably, the discussion in this instance also lead to the reproduction of problematic statements).

Regarding the blog format, I noticed a shift in more recent posts towards 'replicating' the bullet point format and neoliberal imperatives from platforms like Instagram, but also noted that earlier posts declared the need for more empathy and communal learning in digital feminist debates. In addition, as an interviewee's story about using WhatsApp to reach friends and family with anti-racist content suggests, digital feminists might take inspiration from this and seek alternative platforms. For instance, following Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter (now X), many users switched to alternative platforms, such as Mastodon. Whether smaller, independent, and user-based platforms can provide a real alternative to the big corporate giants like Google (YouTube), Meta (Facebook, Instagram), or ByteDance (TikTok/Douyin), remains to be seen though. However, switching platforms might feel too drastic (after all, many of my participants choose to stay on these platforms and continue to engage with digital feminism despite experiencing anxiety and exhaustion). I therefore introduced L. Ayu Saraswati's (2021) set of questions developed for digital feminists to ask themselves before posting, and to ensure that the content posted serves the community and does not simply serve further self-improvement following neoliberal logics (see Chapter 5).

Finally, in this thesis I have proposed critically questioning how contemporary notions of digital allyship operate. As I noted, critics like Emma Dabiri (2021) have advocated for a coalition politics instead of allyship. A concept that might be helpful in thinking further about coalition politics is memory scholar Michael Rothberg's (2019) notion of implicated subjects. Following Rothberg, implicated subjects "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes" (p. 1). Moreover, thinking through the analytical figure of implicated subjects allows to form "new coalitions across identities and groups" (p. 20). As Rothberg further elucidates:

> It has the potential to do this, I propose, because it does two things simultaneously that stand in tension with each other: it both draws attention to responsibilities for violence and injustice greater than most of us want to embrace and shifts questions of accountability from a discourse of guilt to a less legally and emotionally charged terrain of historical and political responsibility. (p. 20)

Thus, if those of us in positions of privilege begin to view ourselves as implicated subjects in the power dynamics of intersectional forms of oppression, we may eventually be able to shift the discursive and activist focus from individual responsibility towards coalitional politics. My hopes and wishes for the digital feminists in my study, as well as digital feminism more broadly, are therefore that we 'stay with the critique' through entering a conversation about a critical

interrogation of the role social media platforms play in our feminism and activism, as well as the affects and performances of normative femininity they encourage us to produce. In summary, conversation about the false promises and pitfalls of popular intersectionality, and the politics of 'including everyone'.

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Appendix: Interview Participant Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity / nationality	Sexuality	Highest educational qualification	Currently lives in...	Further education / training	Occupation	(Digital) activism / feminist activities	Platforms / websites / newsletters used to engage with feminism
1	22	Female	German	Bisexual/ queer	Abitur (A-levels)	Big city	Cultural & literature studies, political science	Student	Bookstagram	Instagram, Twitter (rarely)
2	22	Female	German/ White	Queer	University degree	Big city	Literature & art history (focus on gender studies)	Student/ research assistant	Posts on feminist topics on Instagram, publishes feminist DIY print (maga)zine	Instagram, Facebook groups
3	23	Female	White	Queer/ polysexual	Abitur (A-levels)	Big city	Medicine	PhD Student	Volunteers at non-profit organisation, Bookstagram	Instagram, TikTok
4	25	Female	White	Queer	University degree	Big city	Theatre & film studies	Translator	Bookstagram	Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter (rarely)
5	25	Male	German	Hetero-sexual	University degree	Village	Psychology	Unemployed	Currently works with a friend on developing a project on anti-racism in schools, shares other people's posts on social media	Instagram, podcasts

6	25	Gender-queer	White & Jewish	Bisexual/ queer	University degree	Big city	Gender studies	Student	Creates Instagram content about transgender topics	Instagram, used to read blogs
7	26	Female	German	Bi-/ pansexual	University degree	Big city	Gender studies	Student/ research assistant	Mostly passive reading (and commenting)	Twitter, Instagram, You Tube, podcasts
8	26	Female	German/ white	Hetero-sexual	University degree	Big city	Journalism	Journalist (TV)	Posts on Instagram about feminist topics such as sexual harassment, rape, abortion, or slut shaming, takes part in discussions in YouTube comments	Instagram, YouTube
9	26	Female	Dunno, I'm a big mix	Hetero-sexual	University degree	Small town	Psychology	Coach for people who experience intersectional discrimination	Mostly passive reading (and commenting)	Instagram
10	27	No gender	German	Pansexual	University degree	Big city	Mathematics & philosophy	Software engineer	Posts on Instagram on topics of feminism, body building, and neurodiversity	Instagram, YouTube, podcasts
11	27	Agender	German/ white	Asexual/ aromantic	University degree	Big city	Social work	Works in a project on digitalising social work	Blogger and YouTube host for queer media charity	Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook

12	28	Cis female	Middle European	Hetero-sexual	University degree	Big city	Cultural studies	Journalist	Writes journalistic articles from a feminist perspective, shares other people's posts on social media	Instagram, Twitter
13	28	Female, femme	White/ Russian/ post Eastern/ Jewish	Hetero-sexual	University degree	Big city	Gender studies	Social media manager	Mostly passive reading on social media	Instagram, TikTok, YouTube
14	28	Cis female	German/ white	Hetero-sexual	University degree	Small town	Pedagogy	Nursery school teacher	Sells feminist art on Instagram and donates the proceeds to feminist causes	Instagram, blogs (rarely)
15	29	Female	German	Bisexual	University degree	Big city	Cultural studies	Consultant/ Yoga teacher	Instagram activism around yoga & feminism, gives podcast interviews	Instagram, podcasts, Missy Magazine, Pinkstinks (feminist newsletter)
16	29	Female	White	Hetero-sexual	University degree	Small town	Translation studies	Translator	Mostly passive reading (and commenting), shares other people's posts on Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp	Instagram, Facebook, Missy Magazine, Pinkstinks (feminist newsletter)
17	29	Female	Italian, Spanish, Turkish, Kurdish	Hetero-sexual, tendency to bisexuality	Abitur (A-levels)	Big city	Cultural & media studies, political sciences	Student/ journalist	Posts on social media on topics of feminism and racism	Instagram, Facebook, blogs

18	30	Female	White	I prefer not to label but would most accurately be labelled 'straight'	University degree	Village	English literature	PhD student	Writes emails to authors of sexist newsletter, shares other people's posts on social media, gives podcast interviews on topic of sexism in sports	Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinkstinks (feminist newsletter)
19	30	Male	Caucasian	Hetero-sexual	University degree	Big city	Teaching	Teacher	Mostly passive reading (and commenting)	Facebook, Instagram, Pinkstinks (feminist newsletter)
20	35	Female	White	Bisexual	University degree	Big city	History (focus on gender studies)	Consultant/ yoga teacher	Shares other people's posts on Instagram, donates to feminist causes	Instagram, used to be active in the blogging scene
21	38	Gender-queer	White/ German/ European	Pansexual	University degree	Small town	English literature	Equal opportunities officer	Mostly passive reading and commenting, shares other people's posts on Instagram	Instagram, Podcasts
22	64	Female	White	Hetero-sexual	University degree	Big city	Teaching	Retired teacher/ teaches German to migrants	Moderates two feminist Facebook groups	Facebook