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*Biographical Experiences
Entangled in New Technologies*

by

Joanna Wygnańska

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Work, Identity, and Paradoxes. The Intertwining of New Technologies, Algorithm Logic, and Individual Experiences

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Joanna Wygnańska, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology of Culture at the Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz. She is a member of the research team in the Center of Biographical Research and Oral History, University of Lodz, and a research assistant and contractor in national and international research projects concerning biographical research. She is the author of the scientific monograph *Oswajając bałkańskie demony. Rzecz o Serbii. Dyskursywne konstruowanie serbskiej tożsamości narodowej* [*Taming the Balkan Demons. The Thing about Serbia. Discursive Construction of Serbian National Identity*]. Her current research interests concern the experience of human relations with artificial intelligence. In this aspect, she mostly focuses on analyzing human interaction with (mainly well-being) chatbots. Her other research interests lie in issues of constructing national identities, discourse analysis, and biographical research. She is also fascinated by the issues related to the impact of symbolic culture on social life, especially in the context of portraying social problems through the lenses of contemporary cinema.

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Nowadays, people's everyday experiences in virtual and non-virtual reality overlap. It becomes increasingly apparent that the boundary between what is encountered "offline" and "online" fades away. Referring to Roland Barthes (1977) and Jean Baudrillard (1981), Manuel Castells (2009) notes that all cultural forms of communication are based on the production and consumption of signs. Reflecting on the phenomenon of real virtuality and defining the experiences of virtual reality specific to the present day, Castells (2009:404) emphasizes that "It is a system in which reality itself (that is, people's material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make-believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience." In this perspective, the internet as a medium "has become so comprehensive, so diversified, so malleable that it absorbs in the same multimedia text the whole of human experience, past, present, and fu-

ture" (Castells 2009:404). The category of "real virtuality" refers to the merging of virtual worlds, where individuals reside, communicate, and produce content (and/or are recipients of content), with everyday practices they undertake in non-virtual life.[1] In this light, virtually created communities[2] and relationships, mediated by technology, can have a symbolic impact on individuals' experience of the everyday world. It is recognized that "Cyberspace has its own unwritten rules" (Eshet-Alkalai 2004:102). Digital literacy and an understanding of the "rules" of cyberspace are deeply permeating contemporary individuals' experiences. Technological innovations enable interpersonal communication online, unlimited by time and space, which has significantly influenced and continues to influence the nature of social bonds, conversations, and contemporary communities (e.g., Tapscott 2009; Turkle 2011; Melosik 2016; Drapalska-Grochowicz 2019; Szpunar 2019). Researchers have long pointed to the issue of new technologies permeating the experiences of individuals. Don Tapscott (2009), for example, describes the concept of the "Net generation." He refers to the experiences of individuals who, through their life stories, are immersed in digital worlds. Many studies point out that people born after 1995 were significantly shaped by the internet and social media during adolescence (e.g., Katz et al. 2021). These technological enhancements and digital practices are perceived to influence (especially young) people's cognitive structures, social attitudes, and life orientations. In the experience of the present day,

"technology is becoming one of the decisive reference points for people in constructing their identities and lives" (Melosik 2016:57 [trans. JW]). In this sense, new technologies are not only a way to share information and produce content on specific topics. They are also a space where people can create and build their identities. Being part of digital reality can affect how people think about themselves, interfering with their personality and identity. Sherry Turkle (1995:267) states that "People who live parallel lives on the screen are nevertheless bound by the desires, pain, and mortality of their physical selves." Digital experiences express a sense of community, albeit ephemeral, but offering individuals channels of communication and spaces for self-expression.

With the next stage of network development, Web 2.0 interactivity, and the emergence of user-generated content, social media became popular. Social media has grown into an integral part of everyday life, with digital content intertwining with the tangible offline world. In this reality, the boundary between the public and private spheres is blurring. One practice that "is undergoing multidirectional changes caused by the global rise in popularity of social media is 'sharing'" (Filipek 2023:134 [trans. JW]). A study on sharing practices in social media shows that its characteristics include "flexibility, conditionality, and ambiguity" (Filipek 2023:151 [trans. JW]). The development of social media has also led to the emergence of an industry of online creators who have exploited and continue to exploit new opportunity structures,[3] such as the creation,

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[1] It is also worth noting the emergence of virtual communities in the computer games world that extend into the outside world to enter the space of real-life interactions.

[2] Virtual communities are characterized by the fact that "they are not 'unreal,' they work in a different plane of reality. They are interpersonal social networks, most of them based on weak ties, highly diversified and specialized, still able to generate reciprocity and support by the dynamics of sustained interaction" (Castells 2009:389).

[3] I understand the concept of "opportunity structures" in reference to Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas and Katarzyna Waniek's (2020:286) considerations, both as: "subjectively experienced (consistent) aspects, components, and institutional arrangements but also as dimensions of the political/institutional systems or environments, which frame activities of individual and collective social actors."

distribution, and monetization of content on social media platforms. Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012) describe contemporary phenomena as the new social operating system of "networked individualism." The networked individualism expressed in the actions of individuals is a consequence of the transformations resulting from the triple revolution (network, the internet, and mobile in terms of mobile devices). They consider how the transition to networked individualism has blurred the boundaries between personal and public experiences of private matters. They also note that technological developments have strongly encouraged individuals to create and share content digitally. It is advisable to distinguish between internet creators and influencers as two analytical categories. Influencers focus more on their personal brand and growing their audience. Internet creators, on the other hand, emphasize producing high-quality content (Kozinets, Gretzel, and Gambetti 2023). However, in the case of the second category, the relational aspect, inherent in the resonance of the content produced with the audience, is also essential.[4] At the analytical level, it is still very difficult to fully separate these two categories because the experiences of both types of activities can overlap, especially in the context of content monetization and profits resulting from an increasing audience. Some of the articles released in this issue of *Qualitative Sociology Review* address this topic (see papers by Kaja Kaźmierska, Kamil Łuczaj, and Aleksandra Drążczyk), and their authors, with a keen awareness of the research context, clearly specify whom they are writing about in their texts.

Being an internet content creator entails biographical and identity work, which can bring some income (become paid work). Reflecting on the identity of an individual entangled in digital experiences brings to mind Ralph Turner's (2006) classic concept of the self in social interaction. The author distinguished between a relatively permanent and usually idealized self-concept based on socially embedded shared values and attitudes, and variable and fleeting, ephemeral self-images that require tailoring to the requirements of the interactional situation each time it occurs (Turner 2006:279). When interpreted in the context of the experiences of individuals involved in new technologies, this theme indicates that (personal) digital content creation is based on identity dilemmas. The resolution of these dilemmas translates into the real status of the creators in and beyond the digital reality. Therefore, identity entangled and revealed through social media algorithms can also experience tensions, fractures, and crises inherent in the biographical experiences of internet content creators. One of the major challenges is balancing the authenticity of one's message with the creation of content that can easily be monetized. Strategies creators use to balance authenticity and monetization are studied in the context of their dilemmas (Hofstetter and Gollnhofer 2024).[5] In addition, internet content creators may find it difficult to produce enough new and sufficiently engaging content to keep up with the expectations of their audience. Changing preferences of online content users and dependence on the culture of algorithms and content moderation rules (e.g., Szpunar 2019; Duffy and Meisner 2022) generate experiences of uncertainty and fears about the future of their ac-

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[4] Furthermore, as Crystal Abidin (2016:2) notes, "Emically, influencers often brand themselves as having 'relatability,' or the ability to persuade their followers to identify with them."

[5] In the mentioned study, researchers analyze five in-depth interviews with mega-creators (content creators with more than one million followers). Referring to the proposed distinction between influencers and content creators mentioned in the text, they note that "As creators are more fundamentally engaged in content creation, they are most likely to be affected by the tension arising from creators' dilemma" (Hofstetter and Gollnhofer 2024:428).

tions (Dopierała 2024). In this sense, referencing Actor-Network Theory (Latour 1996; 2005), it can be observed that creators treat algorithms as actants, partners in interaction, similar to internet users (Dopierała 2024:13). The entanglement of individuals' everyday lives in virtual and non-virtual reality, and the constant intermingling of the two, can also generate fears—concerning the progressive development of new technologies and technology itself,[6] especially in the sense of the dependence of individuals' functioning and the content they generate on the efficiency of the technology itself. Being an internet content creator also involves "navigating between different motivations and often conflicting expectations of oneself, the audience, and media and market institutions (as is often the case when working with advertising companies)" (Dopierała 2024:19 [trans. JW]).[7] Therefore, social media platforms are both a social phenomenon and a specific area of new technologies. They are spaces for expressing individual experiences, forming identities, engaging in interpersonal interactions, and collaborating with various organizations. This system of meanings operates within the technical limitations of new technologies and the constructed (explicit and implicit) rules of social media communities that have been and still are being formed.

Moreover, nowadays, the categories of digital work and digital labor represent broad terms that encompass a variety of technology-focused work practic-

es (Fuchs and Sevignani 2013).[8] Lizzie Richardson (2018:248) stresses that "emergent properties of digital work are ambivalent. The extension of work beyond the formal/institutionalized workplace requires greater intensities of work that might be both affirming and negating." Researchers argue that working on (and through) digital platforms goes beyond traditional employment relationships, with workers mostly considered entrepreneurs, independent contractors, or independent professionals. In addition, employees are often directed and controlled by technologically automated decision-making systems and algorithms (Waldkirch et al. 2021). Researchers studying the phenomena of the digital workplace and algorithmic management emphasize that "In nearly all categories of logistics jobs, capital expands the complexity of workplace control mechanisms through technological innovation employed to monitor and enforce productivity" (Miszczyński and Pieczka 2024:415). In this employment perspective, the category of employee autonomy deserves attention. It is a very vague concept and only a symbolic resource of the biographical experience of the world of work mediated by digitalization and algorithmization. "The autonomy…deliberate strategy in logistical capitalism, designed not to empower workers, but to shift operational risks and costs onto them, particularly in handling non-routine, interactive tasks" (Miszczyński and Pieczka 2024:427). Researchers point to the illusion of freedom that appeals to the imagination, especially of young people, who increasingly enter the labor market through platform work mediated by new technologies. As a result, the

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[6] I discuss yet another perspective on the fear of new technology in a text devoted to the relationship between humans and well-being chatbots. It is anxiety and fear about the feelings of the technology—that it cannot cope and function without the user's presence and their conversations. This dimension of anxiety and fear is directly related to users' concerns for the well-being of the virtual entity (see Wygnańska 2023).

[7] Importantly, Renata Dopierała, who conducted a mentioned study of the experience of being an internet creator, based her analyses on materials collected as part of the project discussed in this editorial and three articles released in this issue.

[8] The authors point out the need to distinguish between the concepts of digital work and digital labor because of the distinction between the concepts of work and labor. In this perspective: "labor is based on a fourfold alienation of the human being: the alienation from oneself, the alienation from the objects of labor (instruments and objects of labor), and the alienation from the created products" (Fuchs and Sevignani 2013:257).

experience of platform work often pushes platform workers into precarious employment and reinforces systemic inequalities (e.g., Borkin 2019; Polkowska 2019; Muszyński et al. 2022). The emergence of digital platforms and, more broadly, the phenomenon of the app-work and platform economy can be interpreted both as a revolution and a consequence of contemporary changes, often difficult for individuals to experience in their lives. The basis of platform work is the use of information and communication technologies, in particular, mobile applications or websites. The app informs the platform worker about the order to be completed and provides all the necessary information. At this point, it is also salient to mention the concept of the gig economy, which: "involves both work that is performed via platforms but delivered locally, and thus requires the worker to be physically present (e.g., Uber), and work that is performed and delivered remotely via platforms (e.g., Amazon Mechanical Turk)" (Polkowska 2021:S322). Platform work, therefore, refers to work performed (or at least delivered) online and hybrid work that takes place offline but is enabled and mediated by apps such as on-demand passenger transport and on-demand food delivery platforms (e.g., Bolt food delivery platform studied by Maija Spuriņa and Iveta Ķešāne in one of the articles published in this issue). One of the analyses of Polish platform workers' experiences (Muszyński et al. 2022) indicates that loyalty is an important factor enabling them to remain in this algorithm-controlled work environment. Through loyalty, they "accept the disadvantages and instability that working outside a standard employment relationship entails" (Muszyński et al. 2022:472). Self-organization of work made possible by digital technologies, permeating the experiences of individuals in terms of artistic, creative, and platform work, may indicate that "people increasingly have to become their own micro-structures, they have to do the work of

the structures by themselves" (McRobbie 2002:518 as cited in Richardson 2018:248). In addition, technological startup organizations provide additional space in the landscape of shaping individual experiences through new technologies. An important feature of technology startups is the generation of technological workplaces. Apart from the modern technology and IT industries, startups are increasingly operating in other sectors of the economy. "Startups are most often regarded as a new type of entrepreneurship in the form of an internet organization that utilizes the latest technological solutions" (Adamczyk 218:43 [trans. JW]). They represent a specific ecosystem understood as complex networks of relationships and a modern form of work organization that plays a key role in the new economy development. Employees working in technology startups can also experience tensions resulting from interpretative patterns inherent in the world of technological work. Research devoted to studying work experiences in the technology industry focuses on issues of gender and ethnicity (e.g., Li 2023; Mellström, Balkmar, and Callerstig 2023). These have been discussed in detail in one of the articles in this volume (see Edyta Tobiasiewicz's paper). As can be seen, the involvement of individuals in new technologies is a multidimensional and highly complex issue, covering many areas of their everyday experiences.

Some of the articles in this volume are based on data collected in the research project "Post-Transformation in the Perspective of Biographical Experiences of People Born Between 1980 and 2005. A Sociological Analysis."[9] Here, post-transformation should not

be understood as "the time after transformation" but as a fundamentally new aspect of an ongoing social change in Poland that is shaped by global processes. This assumption is made according to the logic of the processual and sequential nature of social change. The dynamics of post-transformation change are mainly shaped by at least two global processes: (1) the growing role of social media and the internal logic of the virtual world, which are influencing the lives of individuals, and (2) dynamic cultural changes in value systems and attitudes.[10] The subject of the study is, therefore, individual sequentially-ordered biographical experiences influenced (and also discursively constructed) by contemporary global processes related to the development of technology, the role of social media, accelerating social changes, secularization, the processes of individualization, the impact of therapeutic culture and therapeutic discourse on feelings and experiences of individuals, et cetera. The research materials gathered in the project constitute a rich collection of 80 autobiographical narrative interviews conducted and analyzed according to the procedure developed by Fritz Schütze (2008). Consistent with the adopted method, in the collected interviews, people talk about the course of their lives *ex tempore*, without prior thematic guidelines. Themes that are insufficiently developed, unclear, or illegible are supplemented with additional questions after the story has been completed. Research questions are asked after the narrative themes have been exhausted. By examining life stories, it becomes possible to capture the dynamics and consequences of social change over a long period. This research perspective allows us to grasp the mutual influence between individual experiences and macro socio-cultural process-

es. Moreover, it allows us to study the interplay between public discourse and individual experiences, following the assumption that discourse shapes one's cognitive structures, but, at the same time, it is shaped by how people act in their everyday lives. The discussed study is, therefore, an attempt to reconstruct the *emic* perspective (the experience of individuals involved in a given system of meanings), as opposed to the *ethic* perspective (Pike 1967:37). Following Herbert Blumer (1969), researchers in the project distinguished three "sensitized spheres,"[11] according to which they differentiate categories of interviewees sought for interviews: 1) the sphere of work; 2) the sphere of family[12]; and 3) the sphere of social networks.[13, 14] Due to the subject matter of this volume and the topics discussed in the articles, it is salient to refer to the sphere of work identified among these "sensitized spheres." One of the categories[15] of interviewees chosen according to this sphere are people representing the so-called *new professions* connected mainly, but not exclusively, with the in-

[10] Researchers are still developing a more in-depth and more specific definition of the post-transformation phenomenon (based on the analyses carried out in the project).

[11] Based on the collected interviews, it is worth noting that the designated sensitized spheres do not exist in rigid, separate frameworks but often overlap at the level of individual biographical experiences.

[12] In the family sphere, researchers selected two cases: a) large families (having at least 3 children) and b) couples without children, the so-called DINKs (double income, no kids), i.e., people who, at least at the time of the interview, declared that they do not want to have children.

[13] The sphere of social networks concerns the broadly understood building of social bonds through membership in various social worlds. Researchers mainly focus on the dimensions and biographical experiences of contemporary social activism.

[14] It is important to emphasize that these spheres emerged from the autobiographical narratives collected in the previous project under the direction of Kaja Kaźmierska (see Kaźmierska and Waniek 2020), "Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective," funded by the National Science Center in Poland, UMO-2013/09/B/HS6/03100, carried out in the Department of Sociology of Culture at the University of Lodz in years 2014-2019.

[15] Furthermore, in the work sphere, researchers planned interviews with small and medium-sized entrepreneurs and public sector employees.

ternet sphere, for example, internet content creators. Researchers managed to collect 26 autobiographical narrative interviews with internet content creators. The empirical material gathered reveals similarities and differences between their experiences. Important topics for consideration here (addressed in the texts in this volume) include: the orientations and values shaping the biographical experiences of individuals; their visions of social reality; moral standards and their strategies for coping with everyday life; tensions between self-concepts embedded in contemporary influential public discourses and traditional patterns into which individuals inscribe their biographical experiences; also, the aspects of identity formation, authenticity, and uncertainty evident in the life stories of internet content creators, and the role the virtual space of the internet plays in their biographical experiences.

All articles presented in this volume analyze the experiences of individuals involved in new technologies. Some of them take the perspective of the individuals, voicing their experiences. One of the texts undertakes algorithmic management and discusses the internal functioning of control technologies in platform work. Despite the diversity of the issues addressed, all articles engage in a discussion of the role of new technologies in the everyday lives of individuals, immersed in algorithms, virtual codes, and interpretative frameworks shaped by contemporary transformations.

The first article by Edyta Tobiasiewicz, *Disruptive Masculinities? Male Workers Challenging Gender(ed) Norms in Technology Startup Organizations*, studies how men in different roles in tech startups challenge, transcend, and redefine dominant gender norms in their workplaces. The researcher draws conclusions based on the analysis of selected cases

from her collection of 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals engaged in tech startup organizations. The text contributes to discussions on masculinity and emotional labor, which are explored by Edyta Tobiasiewicz through her research on male employees of technology organizations.

The second text by Kaja Kaźmierska, *The Biographical Experience of Being a Stay-at-Home Mother of a Large Family Versus Online Activity. A Case Study*, explores tensions in the biographical experiences of women who attempt to reconcile their identity as mothers with that of active modern women. The researcher conducts an in-depth case study of two female internet content creators' life stories. The tensions studied are expressed in contrasting patterns of tradition and modernity, combined by the interviewees in their experiences and identified as mutually exclusive in public discourse. An interesting perspective is provided by the role of new technologies (in terms of social media space) emerging in the study of the biographical experiences of the interviewees.

The third article by Aleksandra Drążczyk, *Can You Make Money from Being Queer? Commodification of Queerness on Social Media as Biographical Experience*, analyzes the biographical experiences of a young booktoker. Through an in-depth case study, Aleksandra Drążczyk considers the interrelationships between the booktoker's activity on social media (bookmedia sphere in this case) and his biographical experiences. The analysis also addresses the thread of the queer identity of the interviewee and the problem of commodifying queerness. The author discovers social worlds at the intersection of virtual and non-virtual reality, which are a source of values and life aspirations for the interviewee in his everyday life.

Another text by Kamil Łuczaj, *Navigating Recognition: The Symbolic Struggles in the Biographies of Young Polish Internet Content Creators*, investigates the phenomena of "recognition" processes and "symbolic struggles" pertinent to the profession of internet content creators. Kamil Łuczaj attempts to highlight the difficulties associated with the professional career of internet creators, especially in the context of the symbolic struggle for recognition of their activities as work. The study presented in his article is based on a mixed approach (biographical method analysis and qualitative thematic analysis). The author reconstructs many dimensions in which the interviewees' actions and struggles involving new technologies can be recognized as part of their broader biographical experiences.

The last article in the volume by Maija Spuriņa and Iveta Ķešāne, *Affective Governmentality in Food Delivery Platforms: A Study of Bolt Food Riga Push Notifications*, focuses on the qualitative analysis of the content of push notifications sent by Bolt Food Riga to its couriers. The analysis is part of a larger study focusing on the experience and practice of remote work by food delivery couriers. The text highlights the affective aspect of control technology in platform work. By studying push notifications sent by the platform to employees, the authors inspect a valuable insight into the governmentality technologies in gig work. They also emphasize the importance of understanding the human element involved in automated algorithmic management systems, as defined by new technologies.

I hope this richly informative and analytical volume will serve as a salient contribution to further reflection on the experience of change in the context of individuals' everyday involvement with new technologies.

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Disruptive Masculinities? Male Workers Challenging Gender(ed) Norms in Technology Startup Organizations

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Challenging Masculine
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Abstract: The tech industry is one of the most influential and profitable sectors of the new economy, with startup organizations playing a significant role within it. Existing research highlights that these emerging companies remain male-dominated—structurally, normatively, and symbolically. However, researchers rarely consider how norms and gender inequalities, which privilege men and masculinities, might be questioned and negotiated by male employees, especially those in positions of privilege. This article examines how men occupying different roles in tech startups contest, transgress, or redefine dominant gender(ed) norms in their workplaces. Drawing on semi-structured interviews conducted between 2021 and 2023 with 43 male and female startup employees—as part of a broader study funded by the Polish National Science Centre (grant no. 2020/37/N/HS6/03913)—this analysis demonstrates how men engaging in emotional labor (on individual and collective levels), actively reconfigure the gender regime and "disrupt" the reproduction of normative models of masculinity within their companies.

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In the new economy, the high-tech industry is recognized as one of the most "powerful and profitable" industries globally (Neely, Sheehan, and Williams. 2023:320). Available data and forecasts from various institutions indicate that the prominence of this sector for the economy will be and is constantly increasing (Eurostat 2024; Saura García 2024). The development of this industry is not only a fact but also the strategic aim of public policies, oriented toward the digital transformation of societies and economic growth. Tech organizations and new jobs emerging in this sector are changing the structures of the labor market, but also the technologies created in this area (especially communication-information technologies) are transforming the character of work and workplaces (including tech companies) (see: Barney 2008:114; Knappert, Cnossen, and Ortlieb 2024). The spread of non-standard forms of employment (part-time work, freelancing), spatial and temporal dislocations of work (elastic work time, remote work), horizontal and decentralized organizational structures (Barney 2008:102), digitalization and robotization of organizational processes, and new management solutions (e.g., agile management), are just some of the changes that are revolutionizing spaces of performing paid jobs.

Many of the above-mentioned phenomena occur in startup structures. These organizations present a specific technological landscape characterized by an ideology rooted in Silicon Valley, specific organizational culture and work ethos, flat structures, non-traditional financing methods, and orientation for generating "disruptive innovations" (Levina and Hasinoff 2017; Tobiasiewicz 2022). It should be noted that they are not just small versions of large companies (Blank and Dorf 2013). Technology start-ups represent a modern form of work organization that plays a crucial role in developing the new economy. As some researchers suggest, "startup entrepreneurship and startup cultures need to be understood as a transformative social force that expands way beyond Silicon Valley" (Koskinen 2023:814), due to the popularity of this organizational form in various parts of the world and the positions that startups achieve in the global economy. At the same time, a large and still growing body of literature has demonstrated that work organizations are gendered (Acker 1990; Connell 2006; Martin 2006; Ely and Kimmel 2018; Kaplan 2022; Alegria and Banerjee 2024). Workplaces are seen as spaces shaped by masculine values (e.g., "rationality" and "competitiveness" [Ely and Kimmel 2018:628]), norms (e.g., "displaying strength" and "showing no weakness or doubt" [see: Berdahl et al. 2018:424]), rules, identities, or images (Acker 1990) of privileges men and masculine practices have in this context. On the other hand, the concept of masculinity is co-constituted by achievements in the domain of paid work (Berdahl et al. 2018; Ely and Kimmel 2018), where masculinity is constantly achieved, demonstrated, and confirmed. Furthermore, masculinity is symbolically intertwined with the meanings attributed to technology (Bray 2007). This dynamic is often described in the literature as the "co-production" of masculinity and technology (Ottemo 2019).

From this landscape, tech workplaces emerge as spaces distinctly unfavorable for women and femininity. This is corroborated by numerous studies that present women's struggle within this male-dominated environment (Frenkel 2008; Alfrey and Twine 2017; Ozkazanc-Pan and Muntean 2018; Alegria 2019; Li 2023; 2025). However, we still know little about the difficulties and challenges experienced by men working in tech companies, who—as previous

research has shown—do not constitute a monolithic group (Li and Chan 2024), differ in terms of their access to power and privilege, and have different (im)possibilities to embodying the dominant patterns of masculinities in the structures organizations. This article addresses this gap by exploring how men in various positions within tech organizations challenge, transgress, or redefine dominant gender norms in their workplaces. The analyses presented in the following sections contribute to this literature by examining the gendered struggles and tensions experienced by men working in startups.

Startups as a New Model of Work Organization

Studying the sociological literature focused on the relationship between gender and technological organizations, Megan T. Neely, Patrick Sheehan, and Christine L. Williams (2023) noted two main approaches to understanding the tech industry. The first approach is based on economic categories used by public institutions to define and analyze this sector (Neely et al. 2023:321). Specifying production methods (electronic and computer) or the percentage of employees working in STEM occupations in organizations is distinctive for this current. Another stream (key to this article) defines the tech industry through the prism of the organizational form and work culture common in this sector (Neely et al. 2023:321), typically exemplified by "startup organizations."

However, the "startup" category in academic and popular science literature, as well as public or industry discourse, remains vague (Cockayne 2019; Neely et al. 2023). Available studies present these organizations fragmentarily, characterizing selected dimensions of their activities. In limited sociological literature, these organizations are often identified with the "flat," anti-hierarchical, and antibureaucratic structures (Neely et al. 2023), which reflects the short social distance separating startup founders and employees, the pursuit of power decentralization (partial), and the application of a democratic model of organizational management. In the cultural dimension, startups are usually linked with a specific work ethos and an "informal and playful" work style (Koskinen 2023). Their ideological roots can be traced to Silicon Valley, where belief in the potential of technological solutions as tools that can generate social change, progress, profit, and simultaneously solve the social problems of the modern world is widespread (Levina, Hasinoff, 2017; see also Alfrey and Twine 2017).

A review of recent literature on startups points out a few additional elements that distinguish this form of organization. Various researchers emphasize that startups are organizations immersed in networks of complex relationships among interconnected individuals, institutions, and resources supporting their development, referred to as "startup ecosystems" (Cervantes and Nardi 2012). This relationship system may include large business companies with an established market position, universities, public and private institutions financing startup activities, or non-governmental organizations supporting the local development of this type of entrepreneurship (Kałowski and Góral 2017). Incubators, accelerator programs, technology parks and hubs, and business campuses are only some examples of the elements of a specific institutional startup environment (Tripathi and Oivo 2020). Furthermore, startups are often positioned as companies oriented on collaboration between academia and business and focused on commercializing academic "ideas" (solutions, inventions, and theories) within a business

context. Next, a high percentage of workers with a postgraduate degree is visible among startup employees (Startup Poland 2019; Koskinen 2021). What seems to be equally important, startups differ from standard companies in terms of access to and exercise of non-traditional methods of financing their operations, as, for example, crowdfunding, venture capital funds, or "business angels" (Cegielska and Zawadzka 2017; Cavallo et al. 2019). But, above all, startups are focused on creating new business models based on breakthrough ideas and technologies (Savin, Chukavina, and Pushkarev 2023:660), called "disruptive innovations," which will enable these companies' rapid growth (and profits) in the international arena, and in the long term will change grounded markets paradigms.

Numerous gender researchers argue that gender inequalities are built into the structure and ideology of professional organizations, which create "enduring systems of stratification along the gender axis" (Healy et al. 2019:1749; see also Acker 1990; Bates 2022). It should be emphasized that these emerging gender regimes are not rigid, unchangeable, and identical in all work organizations but fluid, specific, and adapting to local conditions. Within this approach, new forms of work organization are seen as a space in which reconfigurations of gender practices become possible (Acker 2012; Bates 2022). According to scholars, new technologies used in a workplace also create opportunities to redefine gender relations, division of labor, or power in organizations (see: Connell 2006; Acker 2012; Young, Wajcman, and Sprejer 2023). In light of the above reflections, startups constitute a landscape where people may configure new, more diverse, inclusive, and egalitarian patterns of gender relations. What can potentially support the pursuit of gender equality in startup organizations is the above-average belief

in progressivism that characterizes the startup community and the widely shared belief that the products created by these organizations themselves can contribute to solving current social problems (Chen 2022). It can be assumed that the implementation in this environment of non-traditional organizational forms and ways of performing work, based on the empowerment of the individual, freedom of self-expression, and the abandonment of the control and subordination of employees, will allow for going beyond the traditional patterns of gender schemas. However, whether this occurs in startup organizations remains open at this stage of the article.

Gender in Tech (Startup) Organizations

A significant portion of the literature analyzing the relationship between gender and technology organizations focuses on uncovering various forms of oppression against women in the sector (Frenkel 2008; Petrucci 2020; Mickey 2022; Twine 2022; Li 2023). Recent research has provided evidence for experience of women's exclusion, hostility, and routine microaggression in interaction with men (Alfrey and Twine 2017), intra-occupational gender segregation (they occupy lower paid and less prestigious positions) (Campero 2021), barriers in career progression (Alegria 2019), and are more vulnerable to layoffs in the event of an organizational restructuring (Mickey 2019). In this collection of research, the specificity of masculinity is revealed indirectly—in the process of discovering women's experiences. It is mainly portrayed as a monolithic construct characterized by domination, antipathy, and sometimes violence applied to women and almost everything identified with cultural femininity.

Nowadays, exploring men's experiences and models of masculinity is considered equally important for

understanding how gender dynamics and related systems of inequality operate (Budgeon 2014). This also applies to recognizing gender regimes reproduced in technological organizations (Lohan and Faulkner 2004; Li and Chan 2024). Although, to my knowledge, this literature is not extensive, there are several studies that trace the connections between masculinities and the (startup) technological organizations. This discussion primarily engages with two key thematic areas: (1) the strategies undertaken or inequalities experienced by racial and ethnic minority men in technology companies, and (2) the specific models of privileged masculinity ("nerd," "geek," or "entrepreneurial") that emerge and are reinforced within this organizational context.

An example of the first approach is research conducted by Johanna Shih (2006). Shih illustrated how Asian men who faced prejudice, objectification, and cultural disadvantage in startup workplaces decided to look for new jobs to secure a more equitable work environment and actively sought out companies with ethnically diverse management teams to which they applied. In some cases, Asian men decided to leave their jobs and start their startups, encouraging their colleagues to leave the organization (Shih 2006). To compete with the "old white boy" social networks in the new economy, these men created supportive networks based on solidarity among people of the same ethnic or gender category.

The significance of gender and race in the tech workplace has also been examined by Sharla Alegria and Pallavi Banerjee (2024). Their analysis reveals that Indian temporary workers have less control over their work hours than US permanent engineers. Due to their visa status and precarious employment, they feel pressure to accept extreme work demands and "sacrifice family life" to achieve the status of a "desirable worker" (Alegria and Banerjee 2024:9). Although full "work devotion" in tech companies proves the masculinity of men, this principle does not apply to India workers. In the competition for hyper-masculinity, social recognition for the effort put into the task is not available to them, due to their inability to control their working hours. In this context, the "work devotion" of Indian workers is interpreted as the result of coercion rather than a privilege available to true tech enthusiasts and is evidence of their subordinate status in the workplace (Alegria and Banerjee 2024). It can, therefore, be concluded that the (im)possibility of controlling one's working time is becoming a new indicator and mechanism of the distribution of power and prestige in tech companies.

Other studies that address the issues of masculinity, migration, and class present research by Xiaotian Li and Jenny Chan (2024). Researchers described how men working in Chinese technology organizations produce a model of "guru masculinity" that arises at the intersection of gender norms prevalent in Chinese society and specific gender regimes in the tech sector. "Guru masculinity" encompasses a range of practices: showing overwork, being proactive, subordinating personal life to a professional career, meeting the material needs of the family, or (temporarily) migrating to big cities (Li and Chan 2024).

The second stream of research on masculinities and technological organizations is represented by Marianne Cooper's research (2000). She observed that the hegemonic masculinity constructed in Silicon Valley differs from the hegemonic masculinity prevalent in broader American society. According

to Cooper, the new economy, driven by advanced technologies, produces a form of masculinity in which physical appearance and athletic ability lose significance, while technical skills and intellectual brilliance take priority. In the context of technology startups, competition between men in sports or romantic pursuits ("getting the girl") is replaced by competition in ingenuity, innovation, endurance in working excessive hours, and the ability to write the "best code" (Cooper 2000:382). This acclaimed Silicon Valley model of masculinity, referred to as "geek" or "nerd masculinity," is strongly connected to the ethos of hard work because demonstrating a fanatical interest in technologies for someone employed in the tech industry is expressed through work that is "highly enjoyable," exciting, and borders on addiction (Feldman, Armitage, and Wang 2017; Cooper 2000). In her research, Cooper also illustrates different models of combining family life and work life ("superdads," "traditional," and "transitionals") as embodied by male fathers employed in startup organizations.

A similar issue is explored in the study by Ulla Hytti, Päivi Karhunen, and Miruna Radu-Lefebvre (2024), who examine the types of masculinity enacted by entrepreneurial fathers (or the attitudes of men without children toward future fatherhood) in the tech industry. These fathers, on the one hand, seek to maintain the ideal of neoliberal, heroic, entrepreneurial masculinity, while on the other hand, they struggle to reconcile it with the demands of family and personal life. To alleviate the tensions that occur as a result of divergent normative expectations in the various contexts in which they participate (professional and personal), male entrepreneurs embodied a model of hybrid hegemonic masculinity and navigated between three variations of it: "heroic,"

"breadwinner," or "caring" entrepreneurial masculinity. Including care practices and feminine dispositions in the repertoire of (the last two mentioned) varieties of entrepreneurial masculinity does not lead to the deconstruction of gendered power relations or the pattern of hegemonic masculinity but merely "restructures and broader" this model (Hytti, Karhunen, and Radu-Lefebvre 2024:266).

Scholarly works argue that the emergent model of tech entrepreneur masculinity—materializing through displays of heroism, risk-taking, hyper-individualism, passion, and unconventional behaviors or ideas—is becoming a dominant form of masculinity on a scale previously unseen both normatively and economically (Mellström, Balkmar, and Callerstig, 2023; Mendick et al. 2023). Ulf Mellström, Dag Balkmar, and Anne-Charlott Callerstig (2023) argue that this specific configuration of masculinity has moved from the margins of geeks and nerds toward a position of control propelled by structural shifts in the global economy that have cantered digital technologies as key drivers of power and wealth.

As we have seen, the existing body of research has mapped out key dimensions of a broad spectrum of struggles and strategies of racial and ethnic minority men in the technology industry. Prior investigations have provided valuable insights into the experiences of male fathers founding and employed in tech companies. Scholarship in this area has significantly advanced our understanding of the most desirable and privileged model of masculinity in this context. However, little research has examined how male employees—particularly those in privileged positions—question, challenge, or negotiate gender(ed) norms and inequalities that sustain the dominance of a narrow group of men and specific forms of masculinity

within technology organizations. Meanwhile, social agents navigate complex matrices of domination and subordination. Individuals who hold high-status and prestigious positions within one set of interpersonal relations may find themselves dependent or subordinate in a different situational context, even within the same institutional field. Moreover, even those occupying positions of respect and privilege, with access to control, are subject to various norms, pressures, and expectations imposed by their social environment (see: Scott 2015:145-158). Available literature depicts men and the masculinities they embody as primarily constructed in relationships, interactions, practices, or processes taking place *within* organizations. I mentioned earlier that tech startup companies (and, in effect, their employees) are immersed in complex networks of relationships. As I suggest, to fully understand specificities emerging in this context of masculinities, it is also necessary to consider professional relationships that extend beyond organizational structures but influence their shape (with investors, mentors, or different supportive institutions).

Research Methodology

The analyses presented in this article aim to explore how men occupying different positions within tech startup organizations challenge, transgress, or redefine dominant gender(ed) norms in their workplaces.

To address this research question, I analyzed empirical material from qualitative research conducted between 2021 and 2023, as part of a broader research project.[1] This study draws on 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals engaged in tech startup organizations (38 individual interviews, one dyadic, and one triadic interview). Among these participants, 17 were female, and 26 were male, representing 27 different startup organizations. The interviewees included people representing various positions: startup founders, managers, ordinary employees, investors, mentors in acceleration programs, and representatives of local institutions focused on supporting startup activity. Due to the specificity of the research problem, which concerns, among others, the difficulties and barriers experienced in the startup context, I decided to include the stories of those who resigned from working in a startup or (permanently/temporarily) from developing their startup.

Research participants were mostly between 20 and 43 years of age. Only one person was over 50, but the group of people surveyed was dominated by people between 25 and 35 years of age. The participants usually lived in large (less often smaller) urban agglomerations, such as Cracow, Warsaw, or Gdansk. Of the total interviews, 29 were conducted face-to-face, 13 were conducted remotely via MS Teams, and one was conducted by phone (since the survey was also conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic). The interviews usually lasted from one to two hours, with the shortest lasting about 50 minutes and the longest 135 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed, resulting in nearly 1,300 pages of standardized transcript data. The interviews covered a range of topics, including participants' pathways into their organizations, descriptions of a typical workday, conceptualizations of the ideal startup employee, strategies for conflict resolution within teams, and how family and friends perceived their work in startups. The content of the interviews at the first stage of analysis was coded according to a categorization key developed on the basis of the theoretical framework ad-

opted in the research project (Connell 2006), which was then expanded to include additional empirical categories emerging from the analysis of the material. Empirical data were coded using MAXQDA 2023 qualitative data analysis software.

None of the interviewees received financial gratification for participating in the study. Before the interviews, interviewees were briefed on the purpose of the project, how the data would be used, and the possibility of withdrawing consent to participate in the study. The research procedure received a positive opinion from the Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Jagiellonian University.

I support my analysis of the empirical data from the interviews with analyses of ethnographic notes, which were created during the course of overt observations carried out between March and August 2022. These observations were conducted during public events for the startup community (e.g., speeches, mentoring training, and final events of accelerator programs known as *demo day*), as well as during a three-week stay in a coworking space that served as the headquarters for several emerging startup organizations and individual employees of startups companies operating in other regions. It is worth noting that when I entered the field, I was not part of the startup community, nor was I in any way connected or familiar with it.

The names in the empirical section are not the real names of the people who took part in the study but fictitious pseudonyms intended to facilitate the presentation of their narratives and experiences. To protect the anonymity of all interviewees—particularly those whose identities could be easily discerned based on age and position within the startup ecosystem—I only provide information regarding their gender and organizational role alongside the quoted material.

Research Analysis

"Some People Actually Have a Private Life Too…": Redefinition of Work Norms

Numerous studies proved that the ethos of hard work is one of the key norms in startup culture, which permeates and shapes the practices undertaken in these structures while also being reflected in the symbolic dimension of these organizations (dress or language) (Cooper 2000; Wynn and Correll 2018; Papageorgiou 2023; Li and Chan 2024;). This conclusion is confirmed by the statements of many male interlocutors. In their narratives, men spontaneously emphasized the central role of professional work in their lives, highlighting the pleasure, satisfaction, and sense of fulfillment it provides—regardless of the energy and effort it demands from them. They frequently reported exhaustion due to excessive workloads while simultaneously expressing difficulties in controlling or limiting the amount of time they dedicate to work and establishing clear boundaries between their professional and personal lives. For example, Robert, the founder of a small startup, states that he is unable to do work that will not give him pleasure. However, he admits that he finds it difficult not to engage in additional tasks for the same reason, leaving him feeling overtired.

> **Robert:** He works there for the money—for him, it's basically an ATM, so to speak. But I just can't do that. I have this thing... I can't do something that doesn't bring me joy…
> **E.T.:** …And roughly how many hours a day do you spend working? Either on the startup or in general? Or is that hard to calculate?

Robert: It's hard to calculate because I work, let's say, quite flexibly. Sometimes I get up really early and work until, I don't know, 3:00 PM, then take a two-hour break and work again from 5:00 PM to 10:00 PM. I basically work whenever I can—unfortunately…And eventually, my batteries started running low, and I realized I don't really have time for myself. I used to feed off other people's success. Like, if the founder I work with achieves something, I get excited about it and support him. And like I said, I don't know how to say no. For example, someone I used to work with might text me saying, "Hey Robert, can we jump on a call at 11:00 PM on a Friday?" because they're in the US, and would that be a problem? And I'm like, "Of course!" [male, startup founder]

Robert's approach to paid work closely resembles what previous research has termed the "founderitis syndrome," which is characterized by a "bulimic working pattern" and an endless competition for overwork, driven by the blurring of boundaries between labor and passion (Papageorgiou 2023:9). Robert's preferred model of work did not receive the approval or enthusiasm he had eagerly anticipated from his coworkers. The group of friends with whom he had set out to build the startup openly resisted and rejected the level of commitment he attempted to impose. Since everyone except Robert opposed the manic work style, the team ultimately made a "democratic" decision to establish alternative work standards.

Robert: Well, yeah, because for me, like I said, this is my whole life. I dedicate myself to it completely. I love doing this, and honestly, I'd love to get a call from the guys at 3 AM, like, "I have an idea for this or that—let's do it." But that doesn't happen. I just got the information that some people actually have a private life too…It turns out I'm the only one who wants to do it

this way…Like, in the end, it turned out that I was the only one…So, democratically, we decided that maybe it wouldn't be that way…I had to learn that a bit, but I think we've worked through it—we figured it out. [male, startup founder]

The cited excerpts illustrate that the work patterns promoted within startup culture are not always uncritically adopted and reproduced by employees. Instead, they are sometimes resisted and "refrained" by workers, who, thanks to democratic management models, the diffusion of power in startup structures, and close relationships in the workplace, gain a relatively strong negotiating position within the organization. The principles underlying startup operations can, as demonstrated, serve as a tool for renegotiating workplace rules and challenging the demanding norms of professional commitment. Robert's experience shows how men in leadership positions in startups were often obliged by co-workers, co-shaping work structures and expressing their expectations, to change their behavior and practices of managing their emotionality.

The theme of reconfiguring workplace norms also emerges in Grzegorz's account. He shares the story of a colleague who, upon joining a startup, had to "teach his boss" to respect the boundary between work and private life by refusing to be available for tasks in the evening hours due to his family responsibilities:

Grzegorz: Actually, I have a good example—a colleague of mine…He had just had a baby and started working at a startup…it was just before the baby was born. And he told me that one of his biggest challenges was that his boss would call him at 7 PM…but he simply couldn't pick up because he was taking care of his child. And it was really difficult to get his boss to understand that…if you're able to set boundaries,

it's fine [in a startup—E.T.], that's all it really is. [male, software developer]

In Grzegorz's view, employees in startups can negotiate their working conditions with their boss, as these organizations foster a "different" and "modern" approach to employees—one that is reflected in more informal and casual employer-employee relationships and a greater level of respect for workers. To better illustrate the realities of working in a startup, the participant outlines the differences between working conditions in a startup and a software house, as he said:

> **Grzegorz:** In a regular job, there's a typical boss, basically a ruler, and I'm expected to answer calls at 10 PM—because if I don't, I might get fired. But in startups, there's a slightly different approach. In my opinion, a more modern approach to work. There's a bit more separation within the hierarchy...And that's a real difference because in those kinds of companies, the boss sees themselves as the boss, and you have to be their servant. [male, software developer]

The startup is thus portrayed as a type of organization where employees experience greater empowerment, gain a stronger sense of agency, and exert more influence over their superiors' behavior. Notably, the practices of challenging the prevailing work regime in startups, as described, were undertaken not only by men who were fathers but also by those who did not engage in care work in their private lives but simply sought to maintain a better work-life balance.

Individual Dimension of Emotional Labor: Transgression of the Norm of Unemotional Masculinity

The analysis of the interviews indicates that work overload was a common experience among men involved in the creation and operation of the examined tech startups. Spontaneously emerging declarations of experiencing mental health crises and professional burnout in the interviews (with employees in different positions) were framed as a consequence of the physical and emotional exhaustion resulting from an intense work regime. A compelling example of this is Michał, a startup co-founder with prior experience as a programmer in various international companies. When asked whether his personal life had changed since transitioning to startup work, he responded:

> **Michał:** I have already been through clinical depression—I was treated for depression caused by overwork and burnout.
> **E.T.:** Was that during your time at this startup, or was it earlier?
> **Michał:** Earlier. Earlier, but apart from [name of a large international startup], I have always worked in startups, and it always happened there.
> **E.T.:** I see.
> **Michał:** And it was total burnout, and now I am through a year of therapy. And now I am careful. And I can designate a place to which I can continue to work, but no further. [male, startup co-founder, programmer]

Michał's statement illustrates how the ubiquitous culture of overwork in the startup environment can lead male workers to a deep health crisis and start seeking and participating in therapy. The same pattern is visible in Robert's experiences:

> **Robert:** Basically, I work whenever I can—unfortunately… And right now, for example, I'm also working with a therapist to kind of slow down because I'm the kind of person who doesn't say… I don't

know how to say "no" and I just keep working all the time. [male, startup founder]

Issues described by Robert and Michael's actions, which are an attempt to resolve their mental health problems, can be interpreted as an example of undertaking personal "emotional labor" (Kaplan 2022). This term defines a set of various practices aimed at meeting the needs of other people to provide others with a sense of satisfaction, often at the expense of personal needs and ambitions (Leszczyńska 2016:230). Emotional labor, therefore, describes the intentional regulation of one's emotions to adapt to the rules applicable in a given context (Hochschild 1983:7; see also Szczygieł et al. 2009). To regulate their emotional state, the interviewees decided to start therapy, which can be interpreted as transgressing traditional norms of masculinity. As analyses show, cultural constructions of masculinity are symbolically separated from emotionality, especially in the professional sphere, which is usually understood as the domain of rationality (Murgia and Poggio 2013).

The accumulation of extensive responsibilities and a heightened sense of accountability for the organization's success, combined with limited financial and human resources, as well as time pressure and investor expectations, were frequently the causes of the described emotional crises among founders. This is exemplified by Marcel's story. When asked to describe the most challenging experience of his professional career, he recalled a time when he and his business partner decided not to inform their employees about the startup's financial difficulties. Instead, they chose to forgo their salaries to ensure that their employees continued to receive their wages. The emotional labor performed by Marcel involved concealing his stress and maintaining a false impression among his colleagues of both

his well-being and the company's stability. As he notes: "People know, they just feel it internally, that you are too stressed, you don't laugh at jokes. Like, something is wrong, but no one knows why, and everyone's imagination just goes crazy."

In interviews with participants, the shareholders—who operate within a logic of profit and calculative reasoning (Cooper 2000)—were portrayed as yet another group to whom founders felt compelled to mask their emotions and the challenges they faced throughout the startup's development:

> **Izabela:** ...often, as a CEO, you are alone with the problem. You can't tell your employees about it because they will start feeling that something is wrong. If you have co-founders who, let's say, are not as deeply involved as you are, they either don't understand or just don't worry about it as much. You can't really go to your investors either because if you tell them, like, "I feel like I'm burning out, and you gave me money," they will immediately have this red flag—like, oh! Something must be wrong with the company…And you can see, for example, that women tend to be more open, you know, they talk about things, whereas men often come to you only when they really see that… [female, investment manager]

According to interviewees, the reluctance to admit their mistakes (and thus the need to mask difficult emotions) was less common among female founders. In contrast, male founders seemed to get bogged down in the "heroism trap." They constantly experience the compulsion to demonstrate dominance by displaying strength, perseverance, and endurance. However, these practices have proved to be devastating for them. Embodying a successful entrepreneur, effectively operating in a high-risk environment (Li and Chan 2024), promoted by the

startup community, has often been problematic or impossible for startup founders.

> **Izabela:** They often hide the pressure they are under, the fact that they can't cope with it…Because you are a man running a company, you have a certain image to maintain, you have to be strong. You are not someone who cries when things go wrong. And she [coach who is friends with the interlocutor—E.T] says that, during coaching sessions, she often witnessed situations where men, once the relationship had been built, simply broke down and cried—because the whole world sees them in this way, and they cannot, for example, afford to start behaving differently in a business context. But internally, they still feel that they are human, too. [female, investment manager]

Masking difficulties can be seen as a male founders' strategy for coping with high demands and pressure from investors. Some participants emphasized that practices of humiliating, belittling, or mobbing startup founders by investment fund representatives are not uncommon but still present in this environment. Jacek's statement illustrates this tendency well:

> **Jacek:** It's in their interest to crush a startup founder's ego—after crushing it, then you start negotiating with them…So basically, this kind of grinding people down, a form of mobbing—not employee mobbing, but more like, "You're coming to us for money? First, we'll humiliate you, and only then we'll start working with you"—this is still pretty common. LESS than before, it's changing and so on. But it hasn't disappeared; it's just normal. [male, startup mentor]

Toxic and abusive relationships with investors were one of the triggers for seeking help and beginning emotional labor.

Collective Dimension of Emotional Labor: Transgression of the Norm of Uncaring Masculinity

"Doing" emotional labor by male workers in startups takes various forms. In Błażej's case, it manifests during social interactions. Identifying himself as an "introverted person" with an "analytical mind," he extensively described how, in daily interactions with colleagues, he develops the ability to empathize and accurately interpret others' statements, a willingness to understand and adopt different perspectives, as well as an attentiveness to the emotional states and impressions of other people:

> **Błażej:** …I had to come to terms with the fact that not everyone I work with perceives the world the same way I do, and sometimes I also need to adjust how I communicate to the person I'm talking to…And that's a challenge because, compared to working with programmers or just with code, everything there is very concrete and precise…You have to take into account that someone might be in a different emotional state, that they might be, I don't know, more excited or feeling down. Working in such a small team requires greater sensitivity to who the other person is. You can't just send an email with dry facts, orders, or just bounce things back and forth. Because for me, it somehow naturally happened that when I was talking to someone like that, I would just bounce the ball back at them to make them express themselves, articulate something. But sometimes, it actually requires more, I don't know, flexibility in communication to really understand what state that person might be in, what they mean, how they usually communicate. We work much better when we know each other well, when I know who I'm dealing with…And in our team, we talk a lot about whether someone has mental health struggles, if they're in a worse mood, or if they're go-

ing to therapy. So it's like, someone comes into the office, and we know, for example, that they have therapy at 3:00 PM that day, and then it's clear that we shouldn't flood them with emails because that's their time for themselves. And later, they just come back, and sometimes we even talk about it. [male, startup co-founder, programmer]

In the organization developed by Błażej, discussions among men about their emotional experiences and participation in therapy became normalized. Moreover, workload distribution was adjusted according to employees' capacities and current psychological well-being. The practices described in Błażej's narrative exemplify "empathetic emotional labor" (Ward, McMurray, and Sutcliffe 2020), a form of affective engagement that, as scholars have argued, is far more commonly associated with feminized forms of labor and professions (see: Nixon 2009; Godfrey and Brewis 2018). Popular discourses in startups that emphasize the autonomy and uniqueness of the individual encourage employees to practice "philanthropic emotion management," that is, to undertake emotional work in which interpersonal relationships, sympathy, caring, and concern for others, among other things, become important (Lewis 2008:131). It is worth noting that Błażej's motivations for undertaking emotional labor were partly instrumental. This approach, he claimed, allows him to interact more effectively in a dynamic work environment: "Sometimes, if there's a quick decision to be made, you have to quickly understand what the person is talking about." Nevertheless, my interlocutor's experiences indicate that men in startup organizations are contextually mobilized to reproduce practices typical for normative femininity, which are perceived as a significant resource in tech startup companies.

Conclusions

The contemporary gender system is changing (Ridgeway and Saperstein 2024). Extensive research has documented how the social organization of gender relations is renegotiated and contested by individuals who reproduce non-hegemonic gender patterns (Alfrey and Twine 2017; Risman 2018). The analyses presented in this article further demonstrate that the labor norms prevalent in Polish tech startups—consistent with those observed in other cultural contexts (see: Papageorgiou 2023; Li and Chan 2024)—are not only oppressive to women, caregiving men, or individuals with minoritized status, as previous studies have reported, but also to privileged men within these organizations (founders and programmers).

Empirical data reveal that male founders striving to meet the divergent expectations of those in their professional surroundings (e.g., investors and subordinates) experienced significant tensions and emotional distress. High demands and excessive workloads, compounded by insufficient organizational resources, contributed to serious emotional and health-related crises. The imperative to address these challenges necessitated engagement in emotional labor—practices that extend beyond normative models of masculinity. Notably, the strategies employed to manage these difficulties—such as initiating therapy or fostering workplace discussions on mental health needs, care, and empathy—appear unconventional when viewed through the lens of the broader literature on normative masculinity (Hearn 1993; Bradley 2008; Nixon 2009). Thus, the specific neoliberal conditions in which startups develop, intersecting with normative ideals, as well as the motiva-

tions and ambitions of entrepreneurs (who seek both success and fulfilling the role of the "good leader") not only facilitated but, in some cases, necessitated a redefinition of emotional norms within tech startups. Moreover, horizontal structures and informal organizational culture of startups provided space for negotiating dominant work ethics and, at times, enabled a partial transformation of the labor regime in tech organizations.

The existing scholarship on emotional labor from a gendered perspective has primarily focused on the empathetic emotional work performed by women (Ward, McMurray, and Sutcliffe 2020). In relation to men and masculinities, studies have largely examined emotional labor in the context of men employed in feminized professions (Ward, McMurray, and Sutcliffe 2020; see also Nixon 2009). More recent research has provided insights into the emotional labor performed by men in stereotypically masculine and highly masculinized professions—such as soldiers (see: Godfrey and Brewis 2018) and security guards (see: Søgaard and Krause-Jensen 2020; see also Nickson and Korczynski 2009). This article contributes to these discussions on masculinity and emotional labor by examining how—and under what conditions—men occupying various positions within (masculine) tech organizations engage in emotional labor.

In the literature, ongoing debates examine the implications of selectively integrating nonhegemonic practices—including those stereotypically associated with femininity—into dominant masculinity models (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018; Bridges and Ota 2020). These discussions often revolve around the concept of hybrid masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014), raising the question of whether such hybridity supports greater gender equality or operates as a mechanism for reinforcing hegemonic masculinity and sustaining gender inequalities. Many scholars argue that hybrid masculinity ultimately does not transform gender relations (Eisen and Yamashita 2019; Kluczyńska 2021; Leszczyńska, Zielińska, and Urbańska 2024). However, the hybridization of masculinity models may manifest differently across diverse socio-cultural contexts.

I interpret the described practices in which men working in startups engage and to which they are mobilized by external expectations as a reproduction of specific hybrid masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014), characteristic of tech startup organizations. This form of masculinity partially realizes the pattern of *positive masculinity*, which, as suggested by James W. Messerschmidt and Michael A. Messner (2018:42), "contributes to legitimating egalitarian relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities," but only in selected dimensions of startup organizational structures (Connell 2006). While it represents the most celebrated and prevalent form of masculinity in this organizational field—thus functioning as a "dominant masculinity" (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018:41)—it remains unable to challenge or transform dominant gender norms and structures beyond the immediate organizational boundaries. The lack of control over key resources valued in the institutional field (financial, social, and structural) prevents startup hybrid masculinity from evolving into a "dominating masculinity" (Messerschmidt and Messner 2018:42), thus remaining insufficiently powerful and hegemonic to fundamentally "disrupt" the dynamics of the wider system of gender inequality in this context.

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Citation

The Biographical Experience of Being a Stay-at-Home Mother of a Large Family Versus Online Activity. A Case Study

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Abstract: The article presents the analysis of two cases of women reconstructed based on autobiographical narrative interviews. They are mothers of many children and are active online, having accounts on Instagram and creating content. Most research focused on the activities of online creators is based on an analysis of their web content. Due to the type of research data, autobiographical narratives and the interpretations of one's biographical experiences and actions are the main frame of this analysis. Both narrators represent contemporary modern women, combining opposing patterns of tradition and modernity, which are often presented in public discourses as contradictory or mutually excluding. Internet activity seems to remedy the accompanying experience of tension and supports women's biographical work. What stands out is the identity work undertaken by the two narrators, whose frame of reference is the tension between the planned and voluntary entry into traditionally understood motherhood and the plan for one's development inscribed in the identity of an educated modern woman socialized in a culture of individualism. In this respect, their online activity appears to have a compensatory function in their biographies.

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The objective of this article is to combine two analytical threads that, among other things, have become the subject of research in the project "Post-Transformation in the Perspective of Biographical Experiences of People Born Between 1980 and 2005. A Sociological Analysis."[1] The threads refer to young women—mothers of many children—who are active online, having accounts on Instagram and creating content. The text will present two cases of women called Aleksandra and Helena, reconstructed based on autobiographical narrative interviews conducted with them as a part of the project. We have collected 80 autobiographical narrative interviews with people born in the decades of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000-2005.[2] In the study, we applied a qualitative approach and specifically a method of autobiographical narrative interview developed by Fritz Schütze (Schütze 2008a; 2008b). Each interview lasted from 2 to 3 and sometimes 4 hours. The interviews were anonymized and transcribed.

The transcriptions were analyzed according to the methodology of autobiographical narrative interview analysis.[3] It enables gaining insight into the ways of perceiving social reality both for the life of an individual (individual dimension) and for the social processes (collective dimension). In the applied method, the researchers rely on the informant's presentation of the flux of events and their interpretation.

The cases of Aleksandra and Helena represent the large family category, where 10 autobiographical narrative interviews have been collected (4 with fathers and 6 with mothers) with parents having at least three children. The narrators were found mainly through personal contacts—we asked whether anybody knew people having large families; otherwise, we looked for them on social media. Although 10 autobiographical narrative interviews provide very rich material—each interview is an average of 30 pages of 50 lines per page—this sample has limitations. All the narrators are educated persons representing a middle-class lifestyle and standard of living. Thus, we have not been able to reach lower-class families representing the environments nowadays labeled or even stigmatized due to the large number of children.[4] For obvious reasons, all the narrators were born in the decade of the 1980s. They have children ranging in age from a few years old to teenagers. According to our knowledge, only one family increased the number of children from 5 to 6.

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[1] The project "Post-Transformation in the Perspective of Biographical Experiences of People Born Between 1980 and 2005. A Sociological Analysis," carried out with funds from NCN within the OPUS 21 competition, conducted in the Department of Sociology of Culture at the University of Lodz in the years 2022-2026 (no. UMO-2021/41/B/HS6/02048). When presenting the general characteristic of the project, I use the plural to refer to the work of the entire team: Kamil Łuczaj, Katarzyna Waniek, Joanna Wygnańska, and Aleksandra Drążczyk.

[2] The interviewees represented three spheres of social life: work, family, and social networks. In the sphere of work, among others (small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, people employed in the public sector), we focused on people representing the so-called new professions connected mainly, but not exclusively, with the world of the Internet, e.g., influencers, YouTubers, bloggers, etc. In the family spheres, we selected two cases: large families and couples without children—the so-called dinks (double income, no kids), i.e., people who, at least at the time of the interview, declared that they do not want to have children. The sphere of social networks concerned the broadly understood building of social bonds through membership in various social worlds, e.g., cultural, ecological, religious, political, involvement in local initiatives, etc.

[3] The single case analysis consists of three steps: 1) text sort analysis that aims at a description of the features of the ongoing interaction in the interview situation and the communicative schemes of narration, description, and argumentation; 2) structural analysis—a formal sequential analysis enabling identification of specific modes of experiencing one's life; and 3) analytical abstraction that allows to find out what is essentially unique in one's biography and theoretically remarkable, as well as what is common for several life histories.

[4] This phenomenon will be described in the next section.

Due to the character of the collected data, the distinction of three spheres (work, family, and social networks) did not create a closed set; on the contrary, it intermingled. Thus, in the category of large families, there were mothers who were online creators. Among the 10 interviews collected, there were three whose narrators are active on the internet, and the content they post online is related to their role as mothers. In the paper, I present two of them.

Most research focused on the activities of online creators is based on an analysis of their web content (e.g., Brosch 2016; Archer 2019; Latipah et al. 2020; Jorge et al. 2022). Due to the type of data and our interest in the project, autobiographical narratives and the interpretations of one's biographical experiences and actions introduced in the narratives are the main frame of this analysis that provides insights into the usually absent in the media messages (i.e., presented by content creators) biographical experiences that lead an individual to decide about self-presentation online. From the multifaceted narrative of the two women, two main themes emerge: their motherhood and their online activity, which, as we shall see, is derived from their experience of a large family. To clarify these two frames of reference biographically relevant to the female narrators, I have to make an analytical separation between the themes of motherhood and online activity. This divides the article into two parts.

Thus, the primary objective of this article is to analyze the biographical background that led the two narrators to their online activity. In their social media, a follower sees specific content and a form of self-presentation. The analysis of the narratives allows, firstly, to explore the motives and arguments behind the online activities both narrators undertake and, secondly, to explore how their con-

stellation of biographical experiences and different discourses on motherhood shape the perception of themselves as mothers, which also translates into the decision of their active online presence. In this way, I want to show how biographical analysis can contribute to enriching reflections on activity in the virtual world on the one hand and strategies for coping with motherhood as a biographical challenge on the other.

Before discussing the data, it is necessary to introduce the social context of the analysis. Thus, in the first part of the text, I present the main frame of interpretation to which the two women refer directly or indirectly when they talk about their motherhood. These are various, sometimes contradictory, discourses on family, motherhood, and parenting present in public and private discourse in Polish society. They provide a point of reference in their experience of motherhood. In the second section, I characterize the two cases, focusing on the narrators' experience of motherhood, and then I move to the description of their internet activity, which plays an interesting role in the process of reconciling the identity of a mother and an active modern woman. In the last part of the text, I comment on the specific role of online activity in their biographical experience.

The Image of Mother and Motherhood in Contemporary Public Discourse

According to the regular surveys carried out by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) (Boguszewski 2019), the family is invariably regarded as the highest value by Poles—as a rule, this is stated by more than 80% of respondents. At the same time, the family model has begun to change in recent decades. This applies both to parenting plans and to

ideas about motherhood and fatherhood. Divorce rates are increasing, resulting in a growing number of patchwork families. The conscious choice to be single, especially for women, can be combined with the decision to parent alone without a partner. Thus, the figure of a *single* mother is now substituted by an *independent* mother. Poland has had consistently negative birth rates since 2013. It currently stands at minus 3.9 per mille, higher than the European average (- 2.8 per mille). In addition, in 2023, Poland was the fastest depopulating country in Europe. At the same time, the number of dink families (double income, no kids) is growing. More and more couples openly declare that they do not want to have children. In some environments, motherhood is not recognized as one of the life goals. On the contrary, women consciously assume not to have children, and a woman making such a decision is no longer identified as *childless* but as *childfree* (Gromkowska-Melosik 2011 as cited in Krause 2020:48). There is no room here to discuss all these processes in detail, but it must be emphasized that they are the frame of reference for contemporary models of motherhood, which influence the idea of mothering. What is important nowadays, women must confront its various models supported by specific discourses focused on different, often contradictory, images of motherhood.

For years, a traditional model of a mother devoting herself to raising her children has been the most common in Polish society (Kusio 2004; Imbierowicz 2012; Titkow 2012). It had its sources not only in the image of a patriarchal family typical to the European culture (Rothman 1989; Taylor 2011) but also in the shape and strength of specific political and social circumstances. In particular, the history of the nineteenth-century independence uprisings and the two world wars in the twentieth century contribut-

ed to the establishment of the cultural figure of the so-called *Mother the Pole*[5] (*Matka Polka*). This phraseology was first used in romanticism by Polish poets and is still recognized in Polish society, also among young generation. The role of the mother was identified not only as the responsibility of housekeeping and childcare but also as the duty to struggle to cultivate tradition, patriotism, and bringing up children in the spirit of love for the fatherland and readiness to defend it. Therefore, heroism, sacrifice for the homeland, responsibility, and a willingness to give up one's aspirations for the sake of the family were inscribed in the figure of a *Mother the Pole*. Remarkably, this image, conservative in its reference, was also exploited in State Socialism. Two perspectives can be distinguished here. At the bottom up, it referred to the thousands of Polish women who had to combine their maternal, domestic, and professional roles within the framework of the traditional patriarchal family model (e.g., with little or no participation of husbands/fathers in household duties) and the additional difficulties resulting from the hardships of socialism (e.g., low living standards, shortages of provisions, the need to stand in long queues to obtain products necessary for living, etc.). Women/mothers became family "life managers" (Titkow 2012:30) creating a "domestic matriarchate" (Walczewska 1999:164-169), but with a focus limited strictly to managing the crisis of everyday life associated with the shortcomings of socialism. At the same time, mothers continued to cultivate patriotic values (counter to those offered by socialist propaganda) and conducted religious initiation into Catholicism being a crucial component of Polish identity built in opposition to the socialist system (Imbierowicz

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[5] This expression may sound bizarre in the English language; yet, it is idiomatic and, in my opinion, it cannot be translated as Polish mother as it can be found in some publications because it would limit its meaning.

2012:430-431). On the other hand, from a top-down perspective, the appeal of power to this figure was an element of socialist propaganda seemingly ennobling women (as brave mothers and workers) without simultaneously invalidating the patriarchal frame.[6]

Although the concept of *Mother the Pole* is more dated than actual, it needed to be given some attention because, over the years, its symbolic power has shaped not only the image of motherhood but also the concept of fulfilled femininity. Thus, it provides an important imagined point of reference. In the majority of texts on the contemporary role of women or the evolution of the concept of motherhood in Polish society, we find references to the image of *Mother the Pole* (e.g., Hryciuk and Korolczuk 2012; Imbierowicz 2012; Szerszunowicz 2013; Urbańska 2015). Still, the message of the Catholic Church is often limited to a vision of such a model of femininity—focused solely on self-sacrificing motherhood, with no consideration for the aspirations of women today, which otherwise reinforces contemporary criticism of the Catholic Church (Leszczyńska and Zych 2011; Pękala 2012; Radzik 2020).

In contemporary literature, at least two dimensions of critical approach toward such a model can be distinguished. On the one hand, a *Mather the Pole* model is contrasted with the concept of the super mother—the modern, professionally successful woman supported by her partner in the process of childcare, having the right to fulfill her personal needs (Demir and Vural Batik 2024). Thus, to some extent, a super mother model is a variant of a *Mother the Pole* model filtered through modernity, which is criticized especially from feminist positions (Rich 1995; Taylor 2011) promoting matricentric feminism (O'Reilly 2019) and another image of a contemporary mother who may have the right to be imperfect, for example, having her emotional problems (Sikorska 2012). On the other hand, the very idea of combining the realization of the fullness of femininity with motherhood has been denied. The questioning of the maternal instinct as inherent in the nature of femininity (Badinter 1982), together with the social emancipation of women, undermined the perception of motherhood as the only fulfilling life model for women. Thus, motherhood/parenthood has today become more of a socio-cultural construct than a biological imperative embedded in a woman's physiology. Investing in education and careers, women have begun to see tangible economic benefits of childlessness. The child began to be seen not as the most important goal in life but as the end of autonomy, a limitation, a necessity to give up the previous lifestyle, the main feature of which was the lack of obligations and responsibility for another person. The media has created the process of parenting as something extremely difficult and is constantly increasing the scale of difficulties, often presenting parenting as a traumatic experience and, on top of that, very expensive (Kusio 2004:41-42)—each year, the current annual cost of raising a child is made public.[7]

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[6] For example, one of the biggest and the most professional hospitals dedicated to women and children opened on May 26th, 1988 (the 26th of May is Mother's Day in Poland) was called the Memorial Hospital of *Mother the Pole* Health Center [trans. KK]. On the same day, the "Motherhood" monument in front of the hospital was unveiled. Such a name for a modern medical facility was intended to symbolize the socialist authorities' respect for femininity realized primarily in motherhood. It was also a clever change in the term's scope of meaning. According to this interpretation, the then *Mother the Pole* was supposed to sacrifice herself for the good of the socialist society, whereas the original meaning of this phraseology was inscribed in the cultivation of the independence tradition and, in this vein, contradicted the socialist system perceived as oppressive. Needless to say, this name has been very difficult to translate for foreign visitors.

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[7] Adam Smith Research Center. See: https://smith.pl/pl/szukaj?search_api_views_fulltext=koszty+wychowania+dzieci+. Retrieved January 25, 2025.

These phenomena are reflected in several parallel and largely contradictory discourses (Gromkowska-Melosik 2017:105-106). The first is related to the process of emancipation, women's activity in the labor market, and combining family and professional roles. Two types of this discourse can be identified here—a positive one, emphasizing the power of emancipatory processes to support women in successfully combining these roles, and a pessimistic interpretation, emphasizing the costs of fulfilling two roles with total commitment to them (Gromkowska-Melosik 2017). Expecting women to be good mothers and working professionally with the same intensity, efficiency, and commitment forces them into a superwoman model (Hansen Shaevitz 2000:157-159), often difficult or impossible to achieve. The second discourse is, in a way, a return to the narrative of motherhood as a woman's primary vocation. Women fulfill themselves completely as mothers. The component of modernity is embodied here in the vision of conscious motherhood, called intensive motherhood (Hays 1996). The woman-mother is an educated person, aware of the emotional and developmental needs of her child, and she takes care of the child's comprehensive education. The third type of discourse is associated with the so-called macho mothering (Rothman 1989:6; Smithson and Stokoe 2005) and refers to women actively developing their careers. Having a child completes their femininity, although motherhood here is clearly subordinated to work. Children are placed in the care of grandparents (a common model in Polish society), nurseries, and professional nannies as soon as possible (Gromkowska-Melosik 2017). Recently, one more discourse should be added in the Polish context. It emerged in connection with the increased presence of mothers on the internet and specific events such as the introduction of the parental allowance, commonly known as 500 plus

(Bańczyk 2021:74; Śliwowska 2022) (currently the amount is 800 PLN).[8] This discourse arose in online communities as a reaction to the self-presentations of a particular group of mothers who were labeled as *madka* (Wileczek and Raczyński 2021). According to the Polish language dictionary, *madka* is: colloquially and contemptuously a mother who cares for her child in a way that is burdensome to those around her, convinced of her superiority due to motherhood, and perceived as a demanding person.[9] The proper word for a mother in the Polish language is *matka*. The lexeme expressing dislike for this social group was formed from a combination of the Polish *matka* and the English *mad* (Szerszunowicz 2023).[10] There is no space here to give a detailed characterization of this phenomenon also called *madkizm* (Wileczek and Raczyński 2021). For the purposes of this article, it is important to point out that it is the source of a discourse that degrades motherhood, reducing it to reproduction. Although its origin was in the attitudes of claimant mothers, often uneducated and belonging to the lower class, the rhetoric of negative, ridiculing attitudes toward having children, especially in families with many children, is sometimes extended to motherhood as such (Śliwowska 2022).

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[8] The introduction of this parental allowance was addressed to all those with children aged 0-18. Its aim was to improve the economic situation of poorer families in particular, especially families with many children, and thus to equalize their educational and social opportunities. The second objective was to encourage Poles to have children in situations of dramatically low birth rates. In the first years of this project, the economic situation of poorer families actually improved and poverty among children was eradicated. Poorer families could afford to go on holiday. At the same time, criticism was leveled not only at the distribution of public money but also at its misuse, especially in the lower classes, which, according to these discourses, saw multi-children families as a way of earning money.

[9] See: https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/101056/madka. Retrieved January 25, 2025.

[10] *Madka* is translated into English as welfare mother (Wileczek and Raczyński 2021), "mudda" (Bańczyk 2021), or as a lacunary unit, i.e., the non-equivalent item from Polish-English perspective (Szerszunowicz 2023).

Agnieszka Gromkowska-Melosik (2017:106 [trans. KK]) comments on the role of the listed discourses in the following way:

> In terms of the problem of "socialization into the discourse of motherhood," there are a large number of contradictions, both at the level of theory and conception, as well as social life. Each discourse of motherhood has "possibilities" and "limitations" within it, depending on the perspective of perception. It is difficult to deny that there is in this area in social consciousness and practice a growing "confusion" (to have or not to have children?; how many?; in a marriage or as a single, to not be tied down?; at what age?; to give up a career and take care of the children?; give the child to the grandparents to raise and "do" a career?; etc.). Consequently, every woman faces at some point in her biography choices that irrevocably determine the shape of her future life.

In the next part of the article, I discuss two cases of women who have consciously decided to start a family and each has four children. In their narratives, they present biographical experiences of motherhood, directly or indirectly positioning themselves in relation to just characterized, contradictory discourses.

The Cases of Aleksandra and Helena

Aleksandra was born in 1986. From an early age, she had artistic interests and liked to paint. Her parents suggested that she take drawing lessons and apply for architecture. Aleksandra was not admitted to study in her hometown and ended up studying architecture in another university town. This was the first time when her expectations were not met. As she said: "I'm from [hometown], so, here, there's also such a big pressure to study in [hometown]. [Home-

town residents] do so, unless they simply don't see other cities as potential places to study." During her studies, she met her future husband, who was also studying architecture. They got married while still being students, and Aleksandra argued the decision in this way:

> And/ but it's also important, actually, 'cause I have been a believer all my life, and I always knew that family was very important to me, that I would like to start a family. I don't know if it comes from faith or if it comes from family experience and just some dreams. But it was obvious to me that I would like to have a family. I even say that it wasn't even in the realm of dreams, but simply that this is how things are, this is the way of things, and that I am sort of aware of it. It's just that all my life, I was convinced that it can be combined, that professional life is just a part of life and there is professional life, there is family life, and it all just goes together and everyone is happy there. ((laughs))

This argument, uttered almost at the beginning of her narrative, shows that Aleksandra's biographical plan combines the traditional idea of family and family life with the modern role of an active woman fulfilling her aspirations. This tension will accompany her throughout the rest of the story and become the main frame of reference in the process of self-presentation.

Aleksandra passed her master's exam when pregnant with her first child. She recalls the first years of their life together as very happy, although their life was very modest: "In general, we were terribly poor. Our parents helped us for a really long time." The husband was looking for a permanent job, which was not easy to find—this was the time of the 2008 crisis. Finally, the couple decided to return to Alek-

sandra's hometown, where they got the chance to live in the narrator's parents' house, and this way, Aleksandra came back to her home and the local community.[11] Slowly, their situation stabilized, but as she says: "We continued to live very modestly, but we seemed to be very much in love with each other. I also have great memories of that time; there was so much good energy in us."

After graduating, Aleksandra started working in her profession, realizing herself as an architect. Every two years, she gave birth to her four children. After the birth of her first and second child, Aleksandra returned to work. She was happy to fulfill her dream of combining her family life with a demanding but rewarding career. Yet, the narrator soon realized that it was a very difficult task.

> This work gave me a lot of satisfaction, especially when something was getting done, a project was being implemented, and then I could go to see it. This was very cool. Well, but I also remember many such situations, yeah, 'cause it was simply difficult for me. It was difficult for me to reconcile these different priorities 'cause I really wanted to be with my children in such/ well, that they would take their first steps with me, say the first words with me, and so on. Uhmm, and I missed some of these things when I was at work and here, er, it's also a matter of feeling this way/ I mean, my parents helped/ helped me a lot to pursue architecture.

Enjoying her work, Aleksandra gradually began to notice the cost to her family life. As a result, after the birth of their third child, she and her husband decided that Aleksandra would not continue working professionally for the time being, as she needed to take care of the children. She recounts:

> I once worked in such an office, I mean, I was offered a job for a competitor. In general, I think this is the most difficult mode of work for a person with children 'cause it is very intense work for a very short period of time, but from 8 a.m. to midnight, all the time, and, and I remember that back then, it was simply **a family tragedy, all the time someone would be terribly ill/ I mean, the children, they were terribly ill. I just felt guilty all the time, when I would come home, they were already asleep and I had/ it was just taken out of my life, as if.**[12] And then my husband said that it just didn't make sense, I mean, it didn't make sense, he said no, no/ that he preferred us to live more modestly, but not to make it so crazy 'cause that was tearing our family apart, right? Yes, and the children always become more difficult then, and it also becomes more difficult emotionally. So, in some/ at some stage, when I had my third child, I decided that for now not/ yes, when my third child was born, I decided I wasn't going to pursue architecture anymore until/ this situation stabilizes. I was always naive that when children go to kindergarten, things get easier, and then that when they go to school, things are easier.

It seems from Aleksandra's narrative that her decision to suspend her professional activity was a collective one. The husband started to bear the responsibility of supporting the family, and they both made the decision that it would be better to live more modestly but without emotional tensions and difficulties defined as a "tragedy." This strong expression relates to everyday difficulties (ill children complicate everyday routines), as well as to the

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[11] Aleksandra lives in one of Poland's largest cities, but the location of the residential neighborhood makes it a kind of local community.

[12] When putting the sentences in bold, I underline crucial statements in the presented excerpt.

experience of crisis in the family life. Besides, as the narrator indicates in the previous quotation, she had the feeling of missing important moments in children's lives. Perhaps the memory of the first years of a modest but happy life was an additional argument for this decision. The suspension of Aleksandra's career appears to be temporary, although the narrator suggests that she was naive in her expectations that slightly older children would require less attention. This statement is followed by a series of arguments related to the tension between seeing one's identity as a mother and as a modern, educated, and professionally active woman.

Thus, in the course of the narrative, Aleksandra conducts biographical work[13] addressing the tension associated with the different images of herself as a working professional architect, as an artistically gifted person, and as a mother. This reconciliation of identity takes place within the frame of the different discourses that Aleksandra confronts. In her narrative, one can find almost all the above-mentioned, as I indicated, mutually contradictory, discourses on motherhood and femininity. Importantly, these are not just imagined or media-mediated discourses. Aleksandra's narrative clearly demonstrates the power of environmental bubbles (Pariser 2011)—the discourses indicated are articulated by specific people and experienced at the level of interaction in particular encounters: family members, friends met at the fitness club who are single, and foremost the catholic community to which the narrator belongs with her husband. It is a specific movement dedicated to marriages and families organized in her

parish. Aleksandra emphasizes that it is not only a community of faith but also a network of support groups for childcare, help with daily activities, mutual work, or other household favors, et cetera. During the narrative, it is clear that, for her, this community is the most important reference group. As I mentioned, the main frame of Aleksandra's narrative is a biographical work on the tension between her role as a mother and a modern working woman with artistic aspirations. So Aleksandra is doing a mental operation of constant comparisons referring to her conflicting roles through different contradictory discourses.

> Sometimes, when I talk to someone, I say: "Oh yes! God!" That it is not so popular that people have four children 'cause at our [community] a lot of people have four children ((laughs)) and for me, it is not at all like/ or three/ and it is not for me/ for me, it's not a small fraction, but for me, it's actually half of the people I know. Right? Half of the community has many children. That's why every time I talk to my friends from secondary school, who, for example, don't have children or, in general, I've been going to CrossFit for some time now, and there are also people there who live for completely different, hmm, different things in life. Uhmm, then it's really hard for me to explain what I do, what I do, and what I have/ or what my day looks like. It's terribly, terribly difficult for me to explain it, and, to be honest, I often don't even feel like explaining it anymore. I'm already a grown-up, and, and yes. And those girls who understand me, or guys/ well, men also, usually, we understand each other without, well, without words. Yes? And here, it simply costs so many words, and I still feel that it is simply difficult to communicate. ((laughs))

In this passage belonging to the coda, Aleksandra compares her perspective with the attitudes of

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[13] Biographical work is "the insight that one's own identity is something unique with its own overall *Gestalt*, which matters and is essentially valuable and worthwhile to develop…biographical work consists of narrative recollection; reflection of symbolic, "deeper" meanings revealing self-historical *Gestalts* of life" (Schütze 2008a:160).

other mothers in her community who do not fully understand her dilemma. In this set, the narrator's artistic and professional aspirations are the point of reference. She then juxtaposes her life as a mother of a large family with that of singles, where her reference point is her committed motherhood. The final evaluation of her choice, although still permeated by reflections on the impossibility of reconciling roles, points to the community of families as the most important reference group. It is here that the narrator builds a world of shared values in which she does not have to explain the choices she has made. Interestingly, Aleksandra devotes so much space in this passage to communication and the difficulties of reciprocity of perspectives concerning peers who are not oriented toward family values.

In the following part of the coda, Aleksandra continues to argue in favor of the choice she has made, although it is still apparent that the biographical work on the accompanying tension has not been completed:

And what? I'm definitely not in a place now where I could say it's just the top. I've been to a place like this before, and now? Now I feel that I have to work again on some new system of work, life, help, etc. So, when you are at this moment, it is always a little more difficult, but in general, hmm, in general, I have a lot of pride in myself, and more often, hmm, more and more often, I think that it's like/ 'cause it didn't use to be obvious, 'cause now more and more often I think that my children have been brought up really well, such/ in the sense that my work is visible 'cause, for a long time, it seemed like it would never come. In the sense that it's like/ that I know that it's like this, subconsciously I know that I'm giving them something good and, and, hmm, I also kind of trusted the love that my parents gave me, this interest, etc. I also

say/ I love my husband very much, so it's like this is a continuation of our love, but I certainly had a lot of doubts along the way, does it even, shouldn't I have just gone to work, and they would have grown up, and everything would have been just as good? Was it necessary to make so many sacrifices? But they are older, and I also see what problems their peers have, which makes me even more convinced that it was worth it.

Other communication situations are also a source of dilemmas and reflections. Aleksandra speaks of criticism from her husband's family, who believe that she is wasting her artistic talent and training as an architect. The narrator also refers to media discourses on motherhood and large families, initiated primarily by family support programs such as the mentioned 500 plus benefit.

I remember how much anger I felt when 500+ benefit came out and all those comments that, in fact, for me, it was a program that returned some dignity. Well, 'cause, 'cause it's not a big amount really. I mean, I always said please take this money and now live with these children off this money. Well, like, like, people don't realize it, really. And, on the other hand, I understand that maybe some jealousy is also aroused. And besides, the mothers of four children received a pension. Yes? It was also just, I also remember such comments, some unpleasant ones, that at least I would have this pension.

Although family and motherhood are by far the most important issues for Aleksandra during the narrative, she is in constant dialogue with contradictory discourses. The narrator wants to position herself toward them somehow in the middle, which is impossible. She is constantly in the process of reconciling her identity in the face of these conflicting

discourses. Thus, Aleksandra tells the story of her life through the prism of the tension between conscious and intensive motherhood (Hays 1996) and the identity of an artist, a creative individual, and an educated, contemporary woman with aspirations. This theme will be revealed in relation to various discourses mediated by the media or expressed directly by significant others. She refers to the image of motherhood perceived as a way of earning money ("you have 500 plus means you have 2,000 zlotych for four children")—an internet discourse mediated by the stereotyping of *madkizm* (although Aleksandra does not belong to this group); to the image of a mother who should devote herself to her children—the image of motherhood in the religious community to which she belongs; to the image of the modern working mother—the critical voices of her husband's family who think she is wasting her talent; to the lifestyle of her friends who do not have children at all; and last but not least, to her four daughters, toward whom she positions herself not only a mother but also as a modern woman, an artist, and a figure of femininity. In the end, there is one more reference group—her female followers on the internet who accept her as an artist and a mother.

Helena was born in 1988 as the only child. From a young age, she had artistic talents. In secondary school, she began preparing to apply to art school. She graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts. In her narrative, she devotes a lot of space to her artistic activities during her studies and her thesis, which was an art installation. Helena also talks about the tensions with her parents, the difficulties of adolescence, and the therapeutic care she received over a long period. In this respect, her clear biographical plan to get married and have a large family may seem to be contradicted. Nevertheless, at the age of 22, she decided that she should start a family. She met her future husband through Facebook during her studies and systematically worked on developing this relationship. Besides her love feelings, she identified the man as a good candidate for a husband. He was older than her and engaged in a catholic community, which could mean he was mature and ready to start a family life. Helena, unlike Aleksandra, does not position herself by reference to external discourses and does not discuss them in detail, yet one can find their presence also in her story, especially when she is adopting the position of contestant and outsider.

> And that's when I met my husband, er, and, as I say, he chat/ chatted me up on Facebook. But I also led the conversation in such a way that we would meet up 'cause I didn't want to stretch it. I also had some experience of just stretching, I don't know, an acquaintanceship, which I didn't know if there was going to be anything or not with this friend. And, er, and so I just wanted to embrace this somehow quicker/ in general, I had this conviction that I would really like to get married or get married relatively quickly, and I wanted to have five children since I was a child. I wanted to have five children, but, of course, everyone scoffed at this in the family 'cause we tend not to have such large families.

The decision to marry and plan a large family is not typical for this generation at such a young age, especially in a specific artistic environment. In addition, Helena had to face, if not the critical, then the doubting attitude of her family, including her parents. Nevertheless, she got married and had four children. The story of motherhood is centered on the description of her pregnancies, deliveries, and the first year of life of each child, who is characterized by her as either a high- or low-need baby. After the first difficult delivery, she says:

So it was a bad start, a bad start, but it turned out that the baby was recovering well, and then he developed quite nicely. On the other hand, I have the feeling that, at the beginning of this motherhood, I was very much like that, basically, everything else ceased to exist, and only this motherhood. And it's not a matter of me getting so... that I find it so fantastic this motherhood. The best thing about it is that before I got married and had children, I had the feeling, I was even fascinated by this conservative approach, that I was going to cook dinners and clean the house, everything, er, tradwives,[14] right? It's fashionable now, apparently ((laughs)), so I had this conviction that, all in all, even though I was going on to these doctoral studies,[15] there are such contradictions again, right? I was so convinced that it was so cool: coo/ cooking dinner, when I was still single with my husband, I even cooked my own dinners, even though I don't particularly like cooking. From today's perspective, I hate cooking, but back then, I had the time, so I cooked those dinners, it was even cool, but when the baby was born, it turned out that there was much less time, that it didn't look like that at all, and my perspective changed completely. A partnership, no tradwife, that's not an option at all, we just share half, and that's it ((laughs)). To this day my husband still reproaches me for letting him down with that very approach, that he/ what I said was different, so now what? ((laughs)) So it's like I've changed a lot in this respect. But it's not that I was so oh, wow, wonderful motherhood, wonderful, it was more that I just... well, I didn't have the space for other things at the beginning, it kind of/ nor did I have the feeling that it overwhelmed me, in the

sense that it was so much... I don't know this first baby wasn't so very difficult either.

Helena then talks about her engaged motherhood. In the background, in turn, we find references to images generated by media discourses. The traditional vision of marriage and family, which had been her biographical action scheme (Schütze 2008a) from the beginning, was reinforced by the media-fashionable model of contemporary traditional motherhood (tradwife). Helena, however, quickly revised this vision, and later in the narrative, her description of motherhood can be fitted more into the figure of a contemporary mother who is entitled to her weaknesses (Matthews 2022). The news about the third pregnancy appeared quite unexpectedly, but Helena, although somewhat surprised, accepted the news without hesitation. Surprisingly for her, she faced negative feedback from her significant others:

My mum also didn't take the news that I was pregnant again very well 'cause my parents didn't think it was that nice to have a large family and all that, they just thought I couldn't cope, they had this attitude toward me that I can't cope with organization 'cause, you know, as a child they organized everything 'cause... and till this day, they're still trying to organize for me a bit and, er, so they just thought that it was/ one thing is that my mum, that she was worried about my health, yes, that I'd ruin my health, so every now and then being pregnant for her, some people are pregnant every year, I was there, I was at much longer intervals, but for her it was already hardcore as she only had one child, so, generally, it was a combination of health concerns about the functioning of the family in general and, er, well, generally, yes, on the part of my parents this one, there was some kind of criticism, er, I faced in

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[14] A "tradwife" is a woman who does not work to look after their children, their husband, or their home, and then talks nonstop about how great this is on social media. See: https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2020/jan/27/tradwives-new-trend-submissive-women-dark-heart-history. Retrieved January 22, 2025.

[15] Helena said that she applied for a Ph.D. program but was not accepted.

different kinds of situations, so my mum was originally devastated when she found out about this third pregnancy. Surprisingly, when ((laughs)) she found out about the fourth one, she was completely fine with it ((laughs)), she didn't show/ well, maybe she felt bad after she reacted so badly to the third one, then she apologized to me for it, but it wasn't nice, anyway.

In the attitude of Helena's mother, we find earlier doubts of relatives about the vision of a large family, as well as a parental concern for her daughter's health and ability to cope with life's tasks. The first nationwide survey of large families conducted in 2016 by Ipsos Poland[16] shows that entering into a large family category is a turning point, for example, more concerns were declared by parents with the third than with the fourth child. As Helena recounts, it was not her but her mother who had, and expressed, doubts about her third pregnancy. Interestingly, the same study also found that parents and in-laws (among those closest to the family giving birth to many children) reacted most negatively to the news of another child.

As far as Helena's professional activities are concerned, she has pursued artistic endeavors and has also taken up wedding and family photography. However, these activities were irregular due to childcare. When building her life story, Helena has been seeking her identity through constant contestation. Thus, there is much ambivalence in her narrative. For example, she refers to contradictory interpretative repertoires—on the one hand, she seeks ways to be different and rebellious, and on the other, she fits into the traditional pattern:

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[16] *Wielodzietni w Polsce. Raport 2016*, Ipsos. See: https://www.3plus.pl/assets/file/1741,raport%20wielodzietni%202016.pdf. Retrieved April 11, 2025.

seeking a husband and starting a family is a biographical plan, she creates a large family, despite her critical stance, she remains a religious person and passes on her faith to her children. During the whole narration, it is obvious that Helena wants to sustain her identity as an artist commenting and contesting the world. After the birth of her third child, she set up an account on Instagram.

The Narrators' Online Activity

In the previous section, I provided a brief characteristic of the two cases. The narrators raise several themes in their narratives, yet in the above discussion, I have focused primarily on the theme of motherhood. What these two life stories have in common is that both women are educated middle-class representatives, and have artistic abilities, which reinforces their need to be creative and realize themselves in artistic activities. For both, starting a family and having more than two children was a biographical plan supported by religious convictions (although in Helena's case, this theme is less exploited by her). Both have four children and after the birth of their third child, they realized the importance of the emotional effort of childcare. In making this effort, neither of them abandons their aspirations of self-realization. It also becomes clear to both that regular professional work in their living situation is limited. Last but not least, both choose online activities as a field for their creativity. Let us, therefore, take a look at how they talk about it.

Aleksandra set up an account on Instagram some time ago. At the time of the interview, she had 6,000 followers. She presents her artistic works, for example, paintings and drawings, and shares her experience of motherhood. Answering the question in the second part of the interview, she recounts:

[1] I am from the generation that was just starting/ well, I remember that when I was in college, I remember that I started using the internet more. In general, I like fashion very much, I like looking for style there, etc. Yes, all the artistic stuff there, and I usually watched it. Fashion blogs also had their peak back then. Well, but I didn't have the courage to do it. Besides, I didn't have a camera, I didn't have anyone to take these photos of me, but I know that I remember that I just totally wanted to do it, but I didn't do it. And then, much later, when I had children, there was such/ a Facebook group called 365 Days in a Skirt. Oh God, it's always embarrassing when I mention it. Well, but that's how it was. ((laughs)) **And it was a very nice community built on the internet. Well, me too. Since I was at home with my children, I had very limited social contacts, and I was always an introvert, extrovert, a mix of both, and I mainly missed adults. Right? I missed people, especially those who had some interests, not only such family ones, and here, most of them focused on such, on upbringing, etc.** So it was kind of my enclave, where I could take it all out, also wear something crazy, just make a selfie and that's where I kind of got used to taking photos of myself 'cause it wasn't/ I'm just saying that I'm from that generation, that selfie is not yet/ it's lame and an embarrassment…And so, there, I kind of got used to it. And the girls would also share their stories there, as I say, it developed really nicely there. And, generally, I seem to have found a group of girls who think/ maybe even not that they think alike, but we just became for one another. I decided, this group was later deactivated, and I decided that I wanted to continue these relationships with these people, etc. And the plus is that **I always wanted to show my art, I mean, art, things that I drew, that I created there, I also showed them on Instagram, so it was like these two things were combined, that I wanted to show a little of myself and also a little of what I paint and/**

and, of course, Instagram was the best for this. So I generally love Instagram very much from the very beginning, when it was created, I wanted to have it. I didn't have an iPhone for a long time, then it was on Android and it was the first social media that I totally wanted to install. It really felt like this was my space. Well, and now I also feel that this is a bit of a decline in this Instagram…I have started to fulfill myself in these short film forms, these stories.

[2] I did various collaborations as well, there was a moment when I was involved in some children's projects, and I was offered, I don't know, some games for children or something like that. And, at some point, I also realized that this wasn't for me. Unless something actually suits me, but I was just positioning these children to take a photo 'cause, for example, this was the assumption of the cooperation that I had to take a photo with a product and I already remember how frustrating it was…Well, **I can't advertise something with my children**…Recently/ I'm also saying 'cause it's not, it seems to me that I'm not the kind of influencer who receives cooperation offers, but, for example, I receive strange ones/ such as, for example, someone calling me from a casting that they are looking for a family for a program and that we are in a group that would be suitable, which surprises me 'cause they have to do research too. Do I make money? **Generally speaking, I do make money 'cause what I do also influences the fact that I have customers for my paintings, for those individual orders, so this is also a tangible result of what I do. I think that I get a lot of orders 'cause I'm recognizable, right?** From this, from showing my life, I also get orders, and because of it I actually have a job.

In these two excerpts, Aleksandra describes in detail the process of entering into the internet world. As she says, due to her age, the internet is not a "nat-

ural" environment for her. She recounts the beginnings of familiarizing new new mediums (Levinson 2013), building social networks, and overcoming her fears about self-presentation—taking a selfie and uploading it to the web initially seemed strange. She is fascinated by Instagram (in another part of the interview she says that other platforms like TikTok are not acceptable to her as she does not have the skills to make content there). Aleksandra started her online activity of showing her artwork on Instagram what appears to be a form of self-realization—she is starting to get creative and is also running a family life counseling service. Sharing parenting experiences triggers proposals for collaboration.

However, the thread of internet activity is introduced spontaneously by the narrator in the main storyline.

> I think it was also some family matter, right? The fact that everyone lived in this context, that I am an architect anyway, and during my fourth pregnancy, I just reevaluated certain things and decided that painting was the most important thing to me, and, in fact, in all the activities I had done 'cause I did a lot of things, I did handicrafts, along the way I made Christmas tree decorations, I made jewelry. Well, I tried a lot of different things 'cause I'm also a person who has to have something of my own/ I mean, my own, I just pursue it 'cause I need to have some sense of agency, and it gives me that, either cooking, or doing all these different, nice little things, or, well, that's when I started doing the internet. It had always been my dream, too, but I just didn't have the courage. Then I thought: "Pff, I can also do this and have something interesting to say and to/ maybe I can even help someone with my story, with my life in general." And, well, I had a different feeling, a sense of mission also kicked in 'cause I also needed it at some stage, and I think that's why

> I started doing it. And it was also on the internet that I showed my works that I made for the kindergarten 'cause, in our kindergarten, the children always received such angels, guardian angels at the beginning of the year. I didn't like them aesthetically at all, so I told my sister that I would paint them myself 'cause/ 'cause they didn't suit me, and I had to put them in the room. ((laughs)) And I still had such concepts back then, I still had such architectural and design ambitions. And I painted this angel. It was in kindergarten, but then I showed it on the internet and, and I think that it's also like this that there are so many coincidences. Anyway, a girl who was also starting kind of opening a shop, selling devotional items saw it and immediately offered me cooperation. We were both total beginners, so the forms of cooperation were different, but it seemed like a big success.

In this fragment, the argumentation is subordinated to the main frame of reference described earlier. The story of entering into online activity is placed in relation to the dilemma accompanying the entire spontaneous narrative. Here, Aleksandra is again confronted with the issue of having to suspend her professional work as an architect. Thus, she focuses more on online activities as an alternative to professional activity. Having to stop working as an architect does not shut out her need for artistic creativity. The internet turns out to be a space that not only positively verifies her talents but also offers the possibility of professional realization if measured by financial gain. Thus, for the narrator, online activity is a form of alternative to work, and the possibility of earning money is a way of verifying the meaningfulness of these activities, which can be called work. It should be added here that this does not stem from purely economic needs. These are satisfied due to the husband's work. The need for self-fulfillment and utility comes to the fore here. Aleksandra's cre-

ative activity is mainly focused on aestheticizing her surroundings.

Helena set up an Instagram account after giving birth to the third child. This proved to be a turning point in her self-realization, but before that, the narrator recalls having blogged between the ages of 14 and 18. It was the first possible online activity for her generation, providing a space for expression—blogs became popular in the first decade of the 2000s.[17] Helena goes back even further and recalls:

> When I was a child, I used to write books, you know, books that I would just draw, I mean, I would illustrate these books, and I would write them myself. I've had such a passion for it since I was a child. And, er, but let's say I published it more as such, as a book, you know, I never published it anywhere, but it was something that could be a seed of something cool in my opinion, like from today's perspective.

In this context, Instagram becomes part of the framework of her creative abilities developed since childhood and systematically mastered during her studies. At the time of the interview (the end of 2022), Helena had 27,000 followers, and she described her activity in the following way:

> It was also with the birth of Tomislav that my journey began, with running an account on Instagram, with starting it 'cause **simply being so, so frustrated and with three children**, I found some kind of escape in the form of describing my **various maternal experiences and in general those connected with mental health 'cause then it also coincided with this psychotherapy.** It was just on Instagram 'cause I had

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[17] Helena has been blogging from 2002 to 2006. Let us note that YouTube was created in the spring of 2005 and gained popularity in 2006.

this account before, like most people, to upload some pictures, and then I started to, er, vent it somehow by writing, and I started, and I noticed that it was even getting some interest, right? That people were commenting on it, that they were interested in it, that they said I wrote well. So I just started writing more and more, and in the meantime, this prospect of moving and renovating came in. So it came out, it was another topic on Instagram, the renovation, and actually my Instagram became a bit of a springboard so I could, like they even say, that journaling and just keeping notes on what's going on during the day is also helpful for your mental health, it was something like that for me, I just did it in public and I think, er, it was helpful. Well, and then I found that more and more people were just following me, like that… I think moving house was especially useful here 'cause I got a kick out of these interiors, this and that, that that interior design, and I didn't know before that I had such a flair for it, and somehow I found myself in it again. So you could say I've found a lot of new hobbies over the last four years, I started to delve into a lot of subjects. I've found a lot of areas in which, thanks to this, this social media, I'm really good at, areas that I didn't know I was good at before, that, for example, I didn't know I was really good at doing research and being able to deeply, er, analyze a subject that interests me. **And it was only this Instagram that gave me such knowledge of myself, er, so I can say that these last four years, in this motherhood of mine, have been a period of my very intensive development and I don't know getting to know myself and they were very**/ and also I developed during this time such a project, my photo series "Where's mommy?"

In this dense piece, Helena describes the process of developing her activity on Instagram—from a "mere" account holder posting photos to inserting increasingly elaborate comments dedicated to the

experience of motherhood in the frame of an "imperfect" mother (Matthews 2022), to building thematic, evolving stories. These stories include a systematic description of moving and decorating a house, including interior design, or an artistic photography project on maternity themes to engage Instagram followers. Helena began to see her Instagram activity not only as an antidote to the hardships of motherhood and mental health problems but, over time, as a form of artistic expression. In addition, she emphasizes that she is discovering new areas of creativity and getting to know herself. The internet allows Helena to pursue her aspirations and continue her artistic interests, experimenting with creative forms. From the perspective of 2025, we can notice that she continues her activity successfully, increasing her Instagram audience—at the beginning of 2025, it has reached 65,000 followers. Online creativity is becoming a field for artistic contestation and thus for expressing her identity; compared to Aleksandra, she is much more engaged in online activity, embracing it as artistic expression.

Discussion

Analyzing the literature on internet performance, the online activity of the two narrators can be placed between that of an influencer and a content creator. Most definitions of an influencer point to monetizing the brand or influencing purchase decisions as an important component of the role (Ge and Gretzel 2018; Campbell and Grimm 2019; Lou and Yuan 2019). In the case of Aleksandra and Helena, however, this is not the essence of their activity. It is, therefore, worth referring to Robert V. Kozinets, Ulrike Gretzel, and Rosella Gambetti (2023:6), who argue that defining someone's activity as an influencer depends on the following factors: "(1) building relationships with people through (2) a consistent and distinctive voice

and image expressed through their (3) social media content. Influencers build relationships by leveraging some quality, virtue, or talent of their own and putting it out there on social media." The authors stress that it is not monetizing but the idea of self-presentation, self-expression, and authenticity that constitutes the core motivation for their activity. "Authentic influencers are true to their own values and character, regardless of the external pressure put on them. They are *real* in this way: they stand for something and aren't afraid to tell you what it is. And they are often passionate and enthusiastic about their beliefs" (Kozinets et al. 2023:7). They also do not need to have a big audience—they can be "nanoinfluencers" and "micro-influencers" (Kozinets et al. 2023:8) and still fulfill their needs.

The same authors emphasize the difference between influencers and content creators, where the latter are defined as creators with professional skills. Thus "content creators are those who focus on creating this high-quality, even distinctive content as a goal. Creators can be expert and highly skilled photographers, illustrators, writers, graphic designers, videographers, video editors, podcast producers" (Kozinets et al. 2023:10).

Given the terminology above, the two narrators are both influencers and online creators. Their artistic background speaks in favor of the latter category. Both aspire to express themselves in the artistic field and place activity in the self within the frame of their aspirations to be artistically creative. Both Aleksandra and Helena emphasize that they have been accompanied by creativity of an artistic nature since childhood. Both have such aspirations—Aleksandra's goal is to make the world more aesthetically pleasing and develop her painting creativity (until the interview, she created paintings on commission,

and this was her source of income) and to interest her audience. Helena, on the other hand, continues the theme of contestation that is characteristic of her biography—for example, she distances herself from perfect motherhood by means of artistic happenings, such as a series of artistic photographs shown online.

It should also be considered to what extent the activity of the narrators is part of the sharenting, defined as a phenomenon involving parents in regularly sharing their children's image on social media (Keith and Steinberg 2017; Jorge et al. 2022). For sure, both narrators present images of their children on Instagram, and in this respect, they represent common contemporary practices. According to various research in the EU, US, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, about 81% of children below 2 years of age have their photographs being published on the internet by their parents (Gotwald, Gregod, and Kowalczyk 2024; Tofil and Jagielska 2024), whereas according to the first research conducted in Poland in 2019 on online sharing of children's images, 40% of parents participating in the study shared images of their child online.[18] Documenting children's lives online has become a fairly common social practice for presenting oneself as a parent, showing competences, seeking inspiration and advice in the parenting process (Chrostowska 2018; Latipah et al. 2020). Sharenting helps build a network of parents/mothers/fathers, creates the space for presenting oneself as a good parent, and can also be a source of income (Brosch 2016; Kierzkowska 2022). A type of sharenting is represented by mumfluencers and mumpreneursers (Archer 2019). These activities are usually linked to profit, monetizing content, or even making

the presentation of their children a business (Blum-Ross and Livingstone 2017).

Thus, we may pose the question: To what extent do Aleksandra and Helena fit into enumerated types of activity? As has been established, the scope of meaning of the terms influencer, content creator, and sharenting encompasses their activities. If we were to subject the content of their Instagram accounts and blogs to analysis, it could be characterized within the framework of the ongoing discussion in the literature on contemporary online activities and the terms invoked. In this analysis, however, the primary point of reference is the autobiographical narrative, and, in this perspective, the concepts indicated and the meanings they contain seem to play a secondary role. What stands out is the biographical and identity work undertaken by the two narrators, whose frame of reference is the tension between the planned and voluntary entry into traditionally understood motherhood and the plan for one's development inscribed in the identity of an educated, modern woman socialized in contemporary society. This typical life project, formulated in the language of the culture of individualism (Jacyno 2007), is captured in this way by Aleksandra:

> I feel like a talented person from the 1990s who will just go to college, finish it, and make a career. Not that I will work, I will make a career. And, of course, family life will also be at a high level here, and I will be very happy. Well, it turned out a little different, so. I mean, it turned out a little different. It's just that this professional work no longer seemed to me as something very, umm, I don't know, prestigious, well, more/ but, I mean, it was a process that, at some point, I decided that I had to match the profession to my family, not the other way around. 'Cause it simply costs me too much.

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[18]   See: https://cluepr.pl/sharenting-po-polsku-czyli-ile-dzieci-wpadlo-do-sieci/. Retrieved January 25, 2025.

Here, the narrator presents a vision of the "good life" (Waniek 2023) of a woman belonging to the middle class and realizing her abilities and aspirations, additionally inscribed with artistic talents. Similarly, Helena's narrative is based on a fascination with her identity, biography, and emotions (cf. Sennett 2009:15).

> So it's just that now I have this perspective that I'm just developing this social media thing of mine…I am doing it a bit for myself 'cause I see it as a diversion and an outlet for myself, and I don't do it strictly for a target, I don't do it for profit. I mean, I do get some profit already 'cause I manage to have some collaborations. But it's not like it's a super income and the amount of time is worth the money. It's more that I'm doing it for myself and for my development.

The digital revolution in media technologies favors the singularity of subjects, images, texts, and other cultural elements stimulated by the web and followers. In such a form of virtual self-disclosure, the subject becomes singular, especially in the configuration of various elements: news from one's life, likes, cultural preferences, links relating to interests, a timeline of biographical events from the past, and, of course, images from one's life. Thus, online authenticity always takes the paradoxical form of performative authenticity: it must be presented in front of an audience in the hope that it will be noticed (Reckwitz 2020:151). In the case of Aleksandra and Helena, notability is inscribed in their artistic talents. Artistic creative action is the result of individual expression directed at the audience. In the case of both narrators, the internet has created new opportunity structures (Golczyńska-Grondas and Waniek 2020)—it has helped them to pursue their aspirations and to continue their interests despite having to be involved in family life. The narrators

were socialized at a time when such opportunities did not exist. They slowly entered the virtual world, starting with the now classic and disappearing blog formula. They had to learn the rules of the internet. One of them profits from combining her activity and receiving profits. However, neither Aleksandra nor Helena have an economic compulsion to monetize their activity. The observation of their activity two years after the interviews shows that Helena is more active, gaining new followers, and expanding her Instagram thematically. Aleksandra has not increased the number of followers, and it seems that her story is still relevant—she shows her work on Instagram, shares her family history in a rather limited way, and devotes a lot of space to religious themes.

Concluding Remarks

It is trivial to say that the internet has now become a space of almost unlimited communication. At the same time, when it was initially believed to be the expansion of the public sphere, it paradoxically became a "filter bubble" (Pariser 2011), an "echo chamber" (Wallsten 2005), closing users in digital ghettos limited to a homogeneous discourse and rejecting alternative perspectives, and thus strengthening their world views (Szpunar 2018). In this optics, web content can be a closure rather than an opening. Perhaps the cases presented here allow the positive, opening aspect of the web presentation to be highlighted. The cases of Aleksandra and Helena represent contemporary modern women combining opposing patterns of tradition and modernity, which are often presented in public discourses as oppositional or mutually excluding. Internet activity seems to be a remedy for the accompanying experience of tension and supports their biographical work. In the general sense of the word, this activity has, if not a therapeutic, then a reconcil-

iatory function. Additionally, the definitional scope of terms such as influencer, content creator, and sharenting can be broadened, as their activity can be included in each of them and in none of them at the same time. The source of the blurring of these categorizations is, in my opinion, the starting point for the interpretation of biographical experiences, in which motherhood plays a prominent role, and online activity has a compensatory function and becomes part of the biographical work.

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Citation

Can You Make Money from Being Queer? Commodification of Queerness on Social Media as Biographical Experience

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Abstract: The article presents a case study of an autobiographical narrative interview with Adam—a young influencer who creates books-related content. Special attention is given to Adam's relationship with his audience and how it influences his self-perception. Of significant importance to the influencer's biography are Adam's non-heteronormative sexual orientation and the stigma associated with it. Using the sociolinguistic tools of Fritz Schütze's biographical approach and its process structures, Erving Goffman's theory of stigma, and Anselm Strauss's concept of social worlds, I attempt to reconstruct the processes related to influencer activity on social media. The analysis reveals tensions between the ideological vision of one's duties and the necessity to meet the expectations of the audience, including in the context of accusations related to the commodification of queerness. The text attempts to capture the possible biographical meanings of being an influencer and the identity-related entanglements of this role. It also highlights potential disruptions to biographical work caused by activities within social media.

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In 2023, Polish public opinion was shaken by a wave of moral scandals involving sexual misconduct by influencers toward young women, some of whom were underage. This wave became known as the "Pandora Gate."[1] While individuals connected to social media had previously appeared sporadically in public discourse beyond the internet, it was the first time influencer activities provoked such a large-scale social reaction. Some of the alleged perpetrators involved in the scandal exhibited traits associated with the widespread image of the influencer: attention-seeking, wealthy, and creators of infantilized content primarily targeted at teenage audiences over whom they exercise charismatic authority (Weber 1946). Perhaps it is precisely charisma that explains why, in 2021, 46% of Polish girls aged 10 to 15 wanted to become influencers (Durka, Kwaśniewska, and Skrzeszewska 2021). These figures not only indicate the popularity of influencers among youth but may also be interpreted as a sign that more and more individuals will attempt to pursue careers on social media.

Activity on social media, including the monetization of published content, is emerging as a diversified phenomenon.[2] Although it is not difficult to find among popular profile owners those who align with public imaginaries of high earnings and charisma, it is impossible to draw a clear boundary between influencers and those who are not (yet) considered as such. Scandals like Pandora Gate direct attention to only a small segment of the influencer milieu and, as a result, obscure an understanding of the processes taking place within it. In this article, I define who the influencer is according to the definition proposed in the book *Influencers and Creators: Business, Culture, and Practice*, which recognizes central the activity of building "relationships with an engaged audience through a regular flow of consistent, authentic,[3] and distinctive content posted on at least one social media platform" (Kozinets, Gretzel, and Gambetti 2023:8). I see the main value of this definition in its emphasis on the relational[4] character of activity on social media. This approach to defining the influencer downplays the importance of quantifiable aspects of profile management (e.g., reach and income), which, in turn, leads to the inclusion of many individuals with small but engaged audiences in the category of influencers.

Despite the growing body of research on social media, most studies focus on the functioning of algorithms, platform users' habits, or the inclusion of influencers in product promotion. There is also a substantial body of literature based on qualitative social research (e.g., Senft 2008; Abidin 2016; Marwick 2016), but these studies are mostly conducted in Anglo-Saxon contexts. Research that goes beyond the scope of social media activity and reflects on the functioning of this group in other areas of life remains scarce. Considering that so many teenagers express ambitions to become influencers, it may be necessary to examine how such activity is embed-

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[1] A summary (in English) of the first days of the scandal can be found here: https://polanddaily24.com/pandora-gate-rocks-poland-popular-youtubers-accused-of-pedophilia/news/31355. Retrieved February 08, 2025.

[2] This diversification refers, among other things, to the themes and forms of published content, the degree of public visibility of the creators, and the income associated with it.

[3] When employing the concept of authenticity, it is important to remember that "contemporary authenticity is a social construction that can be used for strategic purposes" (Hund 2023:169). In social media, the ability to create content perceived by the audience as authentic constitutes a matter of considerable importance.

[4] Writing about individuals aspiring to become influencers, Stefanie Duguay (2019:7) defines one of the modes of their work as *relational labor*. She compares efforts undertaken on social media to the work of musicians—a profession aimed at the audience (Baym 2018).

ded in the broader life history of those who undertake it. The aim would not only be to investigate the reality of influencers and the phenomena observable within it but also to establish the general framework of mutual intertwinements between this type of activity in social media and biographical experiences and phenomena.[5]

This article addresses the above-mentioned research task through a case analysis based on an autobiographical narrative interview (Schütze 2008a; 2008b) with a young influencer—20-year-old Adam—who creates content within the so-called *bookmedia*[6] sphere. At the time of the interview, Adam is a student in two cultural studies programs in one of the largest cities in Poland. He chose his field of study due to a passion for literature and professional plans related to the cultural sector. The narrator works in the promotion department of a renowned Polish publishing house. Despite his young age, obtaining this position posed no major challenge as his social media activity had already provided him with extensive connections in the book publishing field. A passion for literature constitutes one of the

central threads that organizes Adam's experiences into a cohesive biographical *Gestalt*. Another crucial dimension of the narrator's identity, which underlies many of his experiences, is his queer identity linked to a non-heteronormative sexual orientation. The analysis aims to identify the possible biographical meanings of being an influencer and the identity-related entanglements of this role. Particular attention is paid to the intersections between social media activity and the narrator's sexual orientation, which, in certain contexts, functions as a stigma (Goffman 2005). A key element in this dynamic is the audience with whom Adam interacts and who significantly influences his self-conception (Turner 2008). The case also highlights the relevance of social worlds (Shibutani 1955) within which influencer activity takes place.

The analysis is primarily grounded in the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. However, references are also made to concepts drawn from other research traditions—most notably commodification. This concept is introduced to draw attention to the fact that actions undertaken on social media take place within specific economic conditions, making it difficult to avoid the broader consequences of living under capitalism. In sociological literature, commodification is understood as a process through which something that previously existed outside the market becomes integrated into it and begins to operate according to its logic (e.g., Abidin 2016; Ziółkowski, Drozdowski, and Baranowski 2022; Hund 2023; Lo 2024). One of the two definitional features of commodities identified by Karl Marx (1951) is exchange value, which refers to the potential of a good to be traded for another, thereby incorporating it into the larger commodity system. Capitalism exhibits a colonizing tendency, reifying and commodifying ever more spheres of life, ulti-

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[5] Addressing influencers, Ashman, Patterson, and Brown (2018) use the term *autopreneurs*—autobiographical entrepreneurs. However, this category does not serve as a conceptual tool for the type of reflection proposed here.

[6] The term *bookmedia* refers to an online literary community centered around social media content devoted to books (e.g., reviews, humorous videos related to specific books or emotions experienced while reading certain types of literature, videos showing bookstore hauls, and discussions). I use this *emic* term (the interviewee, for example, talks about "being active in bookmedia" or "having friends from bookmedia") throughout the article, as it aptly reflects the character of a "subworld of the social world" (Strauss 2012:478) in which Adam participates. The name *bookmedia* is derived from a linguistic practice of detaching the first part of a social media platform's name and replacing it with a prefix indicating the central topic of the presented content, intended to designate a broader space dedicated to that theme (Zajączkowska 2024:175). Within bookmedia, we can distinguish, among others, BookTok (on TikTok), BookTube (YouTube), and Bookstagram (Instagram).

mately turning everything into a commodity. In Adam's case, one particular aspect of commodification—related to his sexual orientation—proves especially relevant to his biographical experience.

About the Interview and Methodology

The interview with Adam was conducted as part of the research project "Post-Transformation in the Perspective of Biographical Experiences of People Born Between 1980 and 2005: A Sociological Analysis."[7] One of its theoretical assumptions is the impact of social media on social relationships and the organization of everyday experiences. Consequently, one of the project's aims is to capture and analyze post-transformation[8] social processes—among others, those related to the development and ubiquity of social media—within the biographical perspective of those involved in these processes. This goal is pursued through conducting and analyzing autobiographical narrative interviews, following the approach of Fritz Schütze (2008a). One of the several groups of participants in the project consists of internet creators. The aim is not to interview widely recognizable online celebrities but rather to capture the experiences of individuals who, through their activity on social media, generate regular income (in this sense, online activity constitutes not only a passion but also labor), while remaining "ordinary"

people in the sense of Alfred Schütz (1946). Within the project, 80 autobiographical narrative interviews were collected, around 20 of which were conducted with internet creators.[9] I selected the interview with Adam for case analysis for two reasons. First, due to the multidimensional biographical significance of the narrator's activity on social media and the possibility of reconstructing the interactional dimension of this type of labor based on the participant's account. Second, Adam's story reveals the biographical consequences of the commodified character of certain aspects of selfhood grounded in a non-heteronormative sexual orientation. This identity is a significant element of Adam's self-concept[10] and a resource that makes him interesting to an online audience. At the same time, however, it remains entangled in cultural processes that lie beyond the narrator's control.

The autobiographical narrative interview begins with a request to spontaneously tell the story of one's life, offering relative freedom concerning the topics they choose to discuss. This approach aims to obtain a story about events in the narrator's life that can be ordered sequentially. A chronological reconstruction of these events enables the exploration of the processual dimension of the phenomena being studied. The analysis focuses not only on the story content but also on how the stages of life are narrated. There is a close relationship between the way life experiences are recounted and how the storyteller's identity has developed. Fritz Schü-

[8] The goals and assumptions of the discussed study were formulated based on observations from the project "Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective," which analyzed life stories of individuals born in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Narratives from people born in the 1980s significantly differed from those born in the two previous decades (Kaźmierska 2019), leading to the need for further exploration of the social changes visible in the biographical experiences of the youngest respondents.

[9] The term "internet creator" differs slightly from the concept of "influencer" used in this article. I understand the distinctions between these terms in the same way as Kozinets, Gretzel, and Gambetti (2023). For those interested in differentiating between these categories, I refer them to that publication.

[10] The notion of self-concept refers to an image of oneself that is relatively stable and includes, according to the individual's belief, their truth about themselves (Turner 2008).

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tze (2012:152) argues that by recalling stages and episodes of life during the interview, the narrator expresses the structure of their identity as experienced up to that point and extending into the future. Through the improvised story, it is possible to uncover the biographical processual structures[11] that have shaped the narrator's life. The analysis of these structures is carried out not only through the main narrative line[12] but also through statements made later in the conversation. After listening to the life story, the researcher encourages the storyteller to elaborate on certain themes that appeared in the story (or were surprisingly absent) and attempts to clarify any ambiguities. Finally, questions related to the specific research project's goals are asked. The interview is then transcribed in detail and analyzed using a comprehensive sociolinguistic toolkit, the most relevant elements of which will be discussed later in the article. It is salient to note that this approach aims to create theoretical models relating to types of socio-biographical processes (Kaźmierska and Waniek 2020:145). However, the starting point is case analysis, which is not only one stage of the research procedure but also an independent task. Even a single case allows identifying variants of biographical process connections with the phenomenon being analyzed and the individual entanglement in it, making it potentially theoretically representative.

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[11] Biographical process structures are the fundamental principles that organize a life history (Schütze 2012:157), "basic forms of biographical experience and orientation toward one's life" (Kaźmierska and Waniek 2020:105 [trans. AD]). There are four basic process structures—the biographical action scheme, the institutional expectation pattern, the trajectory of suffering, and the biographical metamorphosis—each following an internally ordered course. In a life story, these structures intertwine and do not necessarily occur in their fully realized forms. The analysis of individual experiences takes place primarily on the level of language.

[12] The main narrative line refers to the name of the improvised life story developed in response to the researcher's initial prompt that begins the biographical interview.

Adam's Life History and Some Notes on How It Is Told

I will begin with a brief presentation of the sequence of events in the narrator's life, reconstructed in chronological order. Outlining the general course of Adam's life story primarily serves to provide context for the subsequent analyses and to offer a minimal level of structure. The interviewee was born in a small town in the western part of Poland in the early 2000s. He describes his childhood primarily as a period of growing up alongside his brother and a time when his parents introduced him to literature. After completing lower secondary school in his hometown, Adam decided to attend a high school in a larger city. He presents the resulting three-year period of education outside his original place of residence as a time of the most significant changes in his life, influenced by a new peer environment. Meeting people who did not conform to heteronormative standards enabled Adam to develop his identity linked to his homosexual orientation. These new friends made him feel safe. Partly at their encouragement, Adam returned to running social media profiles focused on books—a practice he had previously abandoned—thus beginning his active participation in the world of bookmedia and establishing connections with other creators within it. After about a year of this activity, he was able to start taking on paid commissions from book publishers, creating and posting promotional content on his profiles. Beginning his university program in cultural studies was accompanied by another move. His choice of a new city was influenced not only by the educational offer but also by the presence of people from the social world of bookmedia in that urban center, as well as the location of a publishing house where Adam had an opportunity to work. During his first year of university, Adam decided

to reduce his involvement in running social media profiles, partly due to conflicts with some members of his audience. In search of new activities to fill the gap created by this decision, he began studying a second cultural studies program.

Before undertaking a detailed discussion of the individual themes signaled in the introductory section, it is salient to note that, methodologically, the analyzed interview can be considered unsuccessful. The account elicited in response to the request to tell a life story is short. Moreover, the narrator announced at the very beginning that he would structure the account around books, which, on the one hand, may signal the biographical significance of literature and, on the other, opens the door to omitting many themes that, for various reasons, the narrator does not want or is unable to share. In the first attempt to present his life story to the researcher, the dominant communication scheme is argumentative.[13] After this initial response, the researcher manages to prompt Adam to begin his story from the beginning, introducing events that allow for a general understanding of the course of his life. However, most of the themes brought up are still not elaborated upon, and several comments and descriptions are marked by a high degree of vague-

ness. Fritz Schütze (2008b:33) writes about short and disappointing narrative lines in the following way:

> Even a quite short main story line of an autobiographical narrative interview can prove to be very enlightening, since it expresses the sequence and concatenation of biographical process structures (or biographical context) in the most straightforward way. Especially the high points of biographical processes, the changes between biographical processes, i.e., the turning points of biography, and the eclipses of socio-biographical processes are expressed in a quite condensed and sequentially contextualized way during a comparatively laconic presentation of the main story line…However, the more detailed interrogatory parts of the interview which follow after the main story line can give important clarifications—especially regarding severe experiences of suffering or shame, which are not or only elusively dwelt on in the main story line.

The quotation fully applies to the interview with Adam. The brief passages summarizing life events (obtained in both attempts to narrate his life story) are later expanded upon. Furthermore, it becomes possible to identify the references behind argumentative comments that would otherwise remain obscure if taken out of context. That is because Adam uses the same predicates relating to his self-concept in the main narrative line as in his later statements. Juxtaposing the sequences in which a given expression appears leads to uncovering difficult experiences related to the failure to meet social expectations concerning sexual orientation.[14] The two aforementioned attempts to tell his life story, which occur in the interview with Adam, are treated here

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[13] An essential stage in working on a single case is the formal analysis of the text (Kaźmierska and Waniek 2020), during which an assessment is made on which communication schemes (narrative, argumentative, or descriptive) dominate the account. Each of these schemes serves specific functions. What is particularly significant, however, is the scheme in which particular pieces of information are recalled. Within the argumentative communication scheme, narrators explain the reasons behind their decisions, offer evaluations of certain events and their life as a whole, and present theories related to their identities or the nature of the social frameworks within which their story unfolds. Although argumentative statements can provide highly valuable insights into their attitudes toward events, the fundamental communication scheme that should predominate in a life story is the narrative. This term refers to utterances in which the sequence of events is recounted (Labov and Waletzky 1967:28).

[14] Perhaps it is precisely due to these experiences and the lack of full reconciliation with them that the narrator struggles to begin telling the story of his life.

as complementary. Although they introduce different themes, each sheds light on distinct aspects of the narrator's biographical figure. Despite analytical attentiveness and rigor, it is important to note that—among other reasons due to the predominantly argumentative-descriptive nature of the interview and the conditions under which it was conducted[15]—some of the analyses offered here should be regarded as one of several possible interpretations of the biographical phenomena discussed and their connections to macrosocial processes.

The Role of Stigma in the Relationship with Parents

One of the most vital axes shaping the narrator's orientation toward himself is his relationship with his parents and place of origin. The significance of family relationships is highlighted by the narrator in the first approach to telling his life story, where he presents his family primarily as the environment that socialized him to love literature. Although this theme is touched upon again in the second part of the story, Adam gives it significant context related to his choice of high school and subsequent education there. The narrator talks about these few years of his life as follows:

> So, I come from this (2)[16] / yy it's not a small town but a city that's between Leszno[17] and Zielona Gora, in the Wielkopolskie voivodeship. And there, I also finished lower secondary school, but then I wanted to go somewhere else, you know, I wanted to move up. So, umm, then I went to high school in a bigger city, actually, in Wielkopolskiem, and I think that's when I really opened up. Also and (2) ((smacking sound)) umm, that allowed me to get to know not just horizons connected with books but also with myself, with finding myself. This world is moving so fast now, and, yeah, umm/ (.) it's very quick, that sometimes I remember, I wasn't always as open as I am now, and I didn't always have that knowledge, those possibilities. So, I'm really grateful, that, y (.) well, to my family, who are very open, who pushed literature on me, sometimes/ maybe not pushed, but encouraged me, showed me different possibilities…So, I kinda moved from that yy small town, then to high school…I was very active, when it came to my school, umm. I also got more into activist, political/ more, I got more into politics, more into my rights. Also, umm, a lot of people, for example, talk about non-binarity as something new, fresh. I already encountered that in high school with my friends…But also, in high school, my bubble was really open, soothing, I felt like myself there. So, yyy (.) yeah, I was really lucky with a lot of people who taught me a lot, recommended, expanded my horizons.[18]

From the above quote, we learn that the decision to pursue education outside his hometown became a turning point (Strauss 2013:92), resulting in a significant change in the narrator's identity. It is not entirely clear whether starting a new stage of education involved partially moving out of the house and returning on weekends or if it was more about commuting daily to another city. In a later part of the interview, the narrator mentions that during the

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[15] Adam was informed that he was asked to participate in the interview because of his activity in bookmedia, so he may not have wanted to talk about his experiences unrelated to this area. That provides an alternative interpretation to the arguments presented later in the discussion.

[16] The transcription of the quotes was made according to the following rules: (2) indicates the length of a pause; (.)—a pause lasting up to one second; / stands for an interrupted statement; underscore—words pronounced with particular emphasis; (( )) represents a comment on the transcription; … stands for deleted fragments.

[17] All geographical names and other proper names have been anonymized.

[18] Due to the volume of the material, parts of the narrator's argumentative statements and the subsequent narrative relating to bookmedia and studies have been omitted.

pandemic, he stayed in the city where his school was located, which might suggest the first option. The issues related to the desire to *move up* were not elaborated upon. Regardless, it can be stated that one of the conditions for the turning point was the change of environment, possibly also reinforced by temporary distance from his family. The narrator says that it was the high school period that helped him in *finding* himself. He also notices a change in his self-perception. The difference between who he was then and who he is now mainly lies in being *open*. The term "open" is used repeatedly by Adam, referencing both himself and others. Later in the interview, this word is used to describe the mental state that allowed him to communicate his sexual orientation to his parents. In the interview, the term "open" seems to function as a predicate for experiences related to the development of a non-heterosexual identity and the anxiety stemming from a sense of difference. Thus, the turning point, in which Adam had the opportunity to "see things in a new light" (Strauss 2013:92 [trans. AD]), reshaped his identity concerning his relationship to his sexual orientation. After commenting on his transformation, the narrator expresses gratitude toward his family and then expands on his high school experience, which I will return to later.

Both in the quoted statement above and throughout the entire interview, the narrator emphasizes the extremely positive significance of his family for his development and declares that he received tremendous support from them. These declarations also appear when Adam is directly asked by the interviewer about his relationship with his parents:

> I have very open parents, I have very tolerant parents, very smart, who/ whom I'm a fan of…Same with music, with rock, with festivals, uh, once Woodstock,

now Poland Rock. I have very festival-like parents, uh, we often go together. Recently, from the things we did together, maybe it was Aerosmith that we went to. Um, so (.) it's great that I have such an open family and I'm also very lucky because mm, I also don't hide this, it's not any secret/ I don't always bring it to the forefront because I believe that also a person isn't just their uh sexual orientation or gender identity because I am a queer person. There was a lot of acceptance here, a lot of support. Uh, and that's great. I'm very happy about that. I have a lot of privilege, I/ I'm very lucky, and I want to experience that luck and that kind of acceptance too. I also think that in my media ((swallowing)) I give such a signal.

This fragment initially appears to describe an ideal relationship between a child who does not meet societal expectations regarding sexual orientation[19] and their parents. However, further analysis of the excerpt and other parts of the interview raises doubts about how Adam's biographical experience aligns with the vision he describes.

Queer identity (or *openness*) and relationships with family coexist in both of the excerpts cited so far. It is precisely in response to a question about his relationship with his parents that the narrator first reveals his sexual orientation during the interview, leading to a shift from a suspected to an open context of awareness[20] in the interaction between the re-

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[19] Although in this quote (as well as throughout most of the interview), Adam uses the term "queer person," it later becomes clear that, in his case, the experience of queerness is linked to sexual orientation. I will elaborate on the issue of queerness further in the following part of the article.

[20] The context of awareness is related to the information that the participants in the interaction possess about each other's identities and what each party thinks the other knows about them. In an open context, participants are clear about their identities and about the other's awareness of those identities. In a suspected context, at least one of the participants in the interaction suspects (but is not certain) what the true identity

searcher and the participant. The stigma of non-heteronormativity does not render the possessor discredited but only discreditable. This means that the problematic attribute is not immediately visible, and the individual can manage its visibility, knowing it might be seen as socially undesirable (Goffman 2005). While the "intrusiveness" of the stigma of non-heteronormativity seems to have decreased over the years, the narrator's reluctance or hesitation to disclose his identity is particularly understandable in the Polish context.[21] Managing the visibility of stigma is an utterly salient issue for Adam. The narrator did not explicitly tell his parents about his sexual orientation but merely signaled it by mentioning his time spent in gay clubs and meetings with a boyfriend.[22] Adam treats the acceptance of these indirect references as sufficient.

Statements regarding both relationships with parents and one's sexual orientation or queerness have been formulated in an argumentative or descriptive communication scheme, which may indicate a biographical unprocessedness of the experiences related to

them. In other words, they have not been worked on properly. Biographical work refers to the efforts undertaken to organize past life events and make them meaningful in relation to one's development. It also encompasses the process in which an individual makes decisions regarding future actions that would most support the development of the shaping biographical whole (Schütze 2012:160). Although arguments play a vital role in the linguistic presentation of identity development, they should support the narrative. As Fritz Schütze (2008a:173) writes:

> The communicative scheme of extempore narration is the most elementary means to focus on, to present and to understand the flow of events making up the smaller and greater changes of one's (everyday and biographical) life, and these changes are very deeply connected with—sometimes more and sometimes less decisive—historical changes of one's social surroundings.

The lack of references to events shaping relationships with parents and to the "moral career" related to sexual orientation (Goffman 2005:66) constitutes a significant marker of unfinished biographical work around these two issues and their intersection.[23] A notable point here is Adam's very young age. The fact that certain problematic identity issues have not been anchored in deeper reflection on the course of his life so far may be related to the relatively short passage of time that has not allowed him to deal with difficult experiences. However, the linguistic strategies involving, among other things, retreating into arguments and descriptions may suggest that Adam is attempting to conceal the pain of certain events, not only in front of the researcher

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of the other participant is or what their view is on the identity of the first participant (Glaser and Strauss 2008:286).

[21] Poland regularly ranks last among European Union countries in the "Rainbow Europe" ranking compiled by the International Lesbian and Gay Association. The study includes factors such as legally guaranteed equality regardless of sexual orientation, anti-discrimination laws, legal protection for same-sex unions, reproductive rights, the occurrence of hate speech, and freedom to engage in civil actions (ILGA 2024). Queer individuals in Poland not only receive no support from the state but are also portrayed in public discourses as a threat to Polish culture (Korolczuk 2020), although the situation is changing since the right-wing party Law and Justice lost its parliamentary majority (Smietana 2024).

[22] Avoiding conversations about sexual orientation while simultaneously ensuring that close individuals are aware of it is a common strategy for coping with the problematic nature of one's identity. In Poland, this is primarily used by older lesbians and gay men (Mizielińska, Struzik, and Król 2023). For younger individuals from a younger generation, the lack of open discussions about sexual orientation is felt as a lack of support from the family (Mizielińska and Stasińska 2017).

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[23] The biographical thread of Adam's work around sexual orientation and its connection with process structures and contexts of awareness in relation to his parents mirrors the case of Marco, discussed by Katarzyna Waniek (2021).

but also in front of himself, which would prevent him from working through them.

The previously mentioned turning point, which occurred during Adam's high school years, happened in his biography not only because of the distance from his previous environment but also because of the people he met in his new school. In the first interview excerpt, he describes his friends as *open* and *soothing*, with whom he feels like himself. Adam talks about the political and activist interests that emerged at that time, concerning his rights, as well as the fact that some of his friends were non-binary. In one of his statements, he mentions that it was the people he met during this period of his life (along with other creators from the bookmedia world) who make up his *found family*, which he places on par with his biological family.[24] It is probably with them that Adam has the opportunity to test his identity, without the fear of being discovered by his family.[25] Their acceptance leads to a positive evaluation of the possibility of continuing to present himself in this way. Importantly, the narrator also announces in the mentioned excerpt his actions around representation and advocacy for queer people, which he undertakes on his social media profiles. While the issue of queerness hardly appears in the narrative communication scheme, Adam, since the moment he revealed his identity, often refers to it in his arguments and formulates several comments about the essence of this phenomenon, one example of which is the following excerpt:

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[24] The introduction of the concept of a found family by the narrator serves as another reason why it seems that his relationships with his parents are less than ideal compared to what Adam would like them to be.

[25] Erving Goffman argued that homosexual individuals, by managing the visibility of their stigma, take actions to protect themselves from having the problematic attribute discovered by family members (2005:90).

Queer is also (.) something that goes beyond the norm, it's not something you can (.) just put in a drawer. Recently, a friend of mine said something really cool: that he didn't come out of the closet just to let himself be put back in some drawer.

The metaphor of queerness used by Adam aligns with the understanding of this category by theorists who contributed to solidifying the communities functioning under this label. The term "queer" allows different groups of individuals who do not fit into heterosexual expectations regarding sexual orientation and gender to unite. Sexuality is often understood as something fixed, while queer signifies movement, change, and everything that is "in-between" (Sedgwick 1993:8). Queer theorists emphasize that this concept not only gathers people interested in a common goal but also aims to denaturalize the very categories of sexuality and gender, even leading to the perception of these categories as limiting and threatening individual freedom (Jagose 1997). Alexander Doty (1993) states that queer also carries hope—and perhaps even a mission—of ending heterosexual hegemony, which is only possible through the implementation of a concept that does not follow the regimes of knowledge (such as the rigidity of categories related to sexuality) underlying them but transcends them. Despite the revolutionary potential and ambition inherent in the concept of queerness, non-heterosexual individuals function within heteronormative societies and are subject to the influence of their institutions, which provide the social framework for their experiences (Green 2002). In Adam's case, while he is somewhat familiar with the assumptions of queer theory, this understanding does not become linguistically embedded in concrete experiences that would be integrated into the biographical whole, typically expressed in spontaneous narration. Perhaps its de-

naturalizing and, therefore, complex nature makes it difficult to perform the biographical work.

The Social World of Bookmedia and Social Media Activity

The development of the narrator's non-heterosexual identity is realized, among other things, through his literary passion. In response to a question about changes in his literary tastes, Adam primarily refers to novels focused on same-sex romantic relationships. These books had particular significance during his teenage years because they presented Adam with an alternative model to the heteronormative one and offered ways to realize an identity related to homosexuality. The narrator sees the growing number of books with such representations targeted at young readers as carrying hope for the popularization of alternative ways of life. In contrast, Adam criticizes the portrayal of queer identities in mass media, stating that such representations exploit the minority for financial gain.[26] In the case of the publishing industry, Adam seems not to pay attention to the market-driven conditions of its functioning,[27] remaining enchanted by the world associated with it.

In both approaches to telling his life story, the narrator embraces literature not only as an object of individual passion but also as a part of group actions that have many dimensions:

It just somehow drew me toward cultural studies, where I'm now in my second year (.) with a literature specialization, so I'm constantly creating myself around this bubble. Umm, I sometimes say it's like a sect because, well, sometimes it's just that both the friends from this circle and I work and engage in this circle, and I'm studying in it.

Then I ended up in Wroclaw, which is also simply a unique city, yyy one of a kind, where I feel safe, where I feel understood, and where a large part of the publishing world is, not only (.) business-wise because here are also some of the biggest publishing houses, umm, Publishing House A, Publishing House B, but also this book space, the book influencers. There are quite a few of them here, my friends personally. Well, we also know each other from work because/ it's also nice that many of these people who started their work, I mean, started with passion (.) working in book media, later found themselves in these publishing houses and they bring freshness, so I'm glad I can meet with people who are shaping this market, who have fresh ideas, and from whom I can get support. For example, when I have some, umm (.) I don't know, some sadness inside or some problem. They understand me, which is great because I can have these people around me.

Activities related to books organize the narrator's life. Studies, work in publishing, creating content on social media, and friendships—these areas have been organized in such a way that they create a "bundle of activities" (Strauss 1991:236) within the social world[28] surrounding literature.[29] Adam is particularly engaged in its subworld,

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[26] Researchers point out that the actions of corporations (including media and film conglomerates) are primarily focused on profit. The queer community is a niche consumer group that needs to be "catered to" (Guidotto 2006), often merely attracting its attention with the promise of queer representation that ultimately remains unfulfilled (Woods and Hardman 2022).

[27] One of the ways to distinguish books from other commodities is by attributing them with transformational value, allowing for the exploration of various aspects of human experience (Wright 2005). Adam presents the transformational value of books by referencing the possibility of seeing himself in non-heteronormative characters.

[28] Adele Clarke (1991:131) defines social worlds as "groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business."

[29] Adam participates primarily in activities related to the promotion, publishing, and consumption of books.

which emerged as a result of the advent of new technology[30] that allows for the promotion of reading and the exchange of impressions from books. This subworld is associated with producing and consuming content related to books on social media. In the narrator's statements, it is referred to as bookmedia.

Adam does not recount how his involvement in the bookmedia subworld originated and developed when asked to tell his life story. However, later on, the researcher's questions stimulate the narrative, based on which it is possible to trace the course of events related to running social media accounts. Adam's profiles gained enough popularity to allow him to earn money by posting advertising content aimed at his audience. The narrator began his bookmedia journey during his lower secondary school years when he created an Instagram account for book reviews. However, he paused this activity, and in the summer before his first year of high school, he deleted his account. Later, he wondered whether to return to publishing on social media and started consulting it with his friends. He received not only approval but also support in the form of sharing his first posts. Adam began by posting on Instagram and later created an account on TikTok[31] as well. On this platform, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, he hosted nearly daily live streams for three months, during which he talked about books. The narrator also mentions the initiatives he took with other creators and

the awards he received for his work. For a time, this world completely "consumed" him (Strauss 2012:476). The account of these events is complemented by descriptions of interaction scenes with high school friends, other bookmedia creators, and his audience. After a while, Adam decided to reduce his involvement in the bookmedia social world. One of the reasons for this decision is negative interactions with his audience.

The Concept of Self in Interactions with the Audience

An important context for Adam's interactions with his audience is the fact that the narrator openly presents himself on social media as someone with a non-heteronormative identity. Additionally, his ambitions include educational and activist efforts regarding queerness, which he directly informs the researcher about after revealing his stigma. Mentions of the awareness of the need to fight for his rights also appear in his spontaneous narrative when retelling his life story. The narrator presents himself as someone with the knowledge necessary to carry out such actions. He wants to be an advocate for his minority group. In his statements, Adam refers several times to two public figures who serve as his role models. Both are homosexual men who are experts in the field of culture and provide media representation for those bearing the stigma associated with sexual orientation. It seems that these figures set the standards for Adam's achievements. They also influence his concept of self (Turner 2008), which has been shaped by ideological ideas about the possible outcomes of his actions. Adam sees himself as someone who is carrying out a mission for the emancipation of people with non-heteronormative sexual orientations. However, this concept of self is threatened.

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[30] In this context, the term can be understood in two ways: technology in its everyday meaning, as well as "ways of performing actions of social worlds" (Strauss 1991:236).

[31] In the context of this platform, there is talk of a new phenomenon that leads to an increase in reading among young people and influences the marketing strategies of publishing houses concerning young adult literature (Zajączkowska 2024:175).

When discussing his activities in bookmedia, the narrator becomes aware of accusations made by several people watching the content posted on his TikTok profile. These accusations can be divided into two categories. The first includes comments attempting to question how much of his online popularity is due to his efforts. According to these voices, Adam's reach is not a result of hard work but rather his minority status: his queer identity and gender (with women dominating the bookmedia world). According to those making such accusations, both attributes are seen as bait to attract viewers' attention. The second category of accusations includes allegations of homophobic attitudes, manifested in the use of a term describing homosexual men that is considered offensive. The narrator attempted to explain that, as a person belonging to the group to which the term applies, he has the right to use it.[32] He considers attempts to forbid him from using it a result of an outrageously ignorant lack of knowledge. Although these accusations did not constitute a massive attack, the situations in which they arose were particularly painful for Adam. His activity in bookmedia was focused on his identity (Turner 2008:279) and served as a form of seeking recognition. For this reason, within his interactions with the audience, the narrator was constantly sensitive to the emerging images that could either confirm or refute his developing beliefs about himself and his future possibilities.[33] The emergence of an image of himself inconsistent with his concept of self led Adam to take corrective actions aimed at reducing this dissonance and maintaining a positive image in front of others and himself. Tem-

porarily, the narrator stopped posting on TikTok, where the critics had come from. Later, he returned to posting there but refrained from monetizing his content.[34] At the time of the interview, Adam was still earning money from his bookmedia activities but he was only publishing promotional materials on Instagram.[35]

At this point, it is essential to return to the issue of Adam's sexual orientation in relation to his parents, specifically the lack of open conversations about it, which is probably one of the reasons why this area of biographical work has not been completed. The narrator's identity functions in a completely different way on social media, where his sexual orientation is not only mentioned but also widely discussed. Erving Goffman writes that stigma, as a "highly discrediting attribute," always functions in specific relationships (Goffman 2005:33). This same attribute may function in very different ways for different people: what may be considered a stigma by some can be completely normal or even elevating for others.[36] While in his relationship with his parents, the narrator has not managed to transition into a fully open context regarding his sexual orientation, in the online space, this may make Adam appear as someone interesting, exceptional, and with much to offer to the audience.[37]

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[32] Argumentation presented by Adam is based on the principles of language described by Erving Goffman (2005:62-63).

[33] The issue of being attentive to the reactions of the audience could also be considered in terms of the dependence of influencers on their audience and the necessity to adapt to its expectations (Senft 2008).

[34] One of the challenges faced by influencers is finding the right balance in the amount of sponsored content they can post without being accused by their audience of lacking authenticity and focusing solely on financial gain (Hund 2023).

[35] There are significant differences in the ways of self-presentation across different social media platforms (Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy 2018).

[36] Goffman provides an example of higher education, which, in some contexts, is concealed (Goffman 2005:33).

[37] The issue of whether Adam's parents watch his content is not determinable based on the interview. Even if they regularly followed the content he published, it does not translate into having in-depth conversations about his sexual orientation.

The Problem of Commodifying Queerness

During the interview, the narrator reflects on the connection between his non-heterosexual identity and the attention he has managed to gain:

> And also, um, a lot of people tried to discredit it, saying that I achieved something not through my hard work but just because I'm a guy. Well, it's clear that this is some kind of advantage in this community, right? Because I'm in the minority, I can attract attention. I'm also that sort of (.) stereotypical Netflix (.) um, I mean, I'm a stereotype created partly by Netflix, of a gay friend, right? Who is very friendly, pleasant, someone you can feel safe around. I think I also gave that sense of safety, so people were drawn to me.

In this statement, Adam refers to the phenomenon of Netflix—a streaming platform particularly known for producing queer TV shows (Bradbury-Rance 2023). He mentions how his similarity to the homosexual characters in these shows arises from possessing traits that can fulfill certain needs of the audience. His non-heteronormative identity forms the basis for building relationships with other social media users with similar experiences.[38] This quoted fragment appears directly after the first mention of

[38] A common practice among influencers, especially in Western contexts, is to share their stories of discovering and revealing their sexual orientation to others (Lovelock 2017; Abidin 2019). This offers a form of self-realization that others can follow. Revealing intimate details provides influencers with a sense of authenticity, which is crucial for gaining an audience. Queer influencers often attract niche audiences. As a result, collaborating with them is valuable for companies looking to advertise their products to a specific demographic (Kozinets et al. 2023). However, queer creators must remain cautious and carefully balance engaging in lucrative collaborations with publishing content that is perceived as more authentic and not commercially driven. They can easily lose the support of their community if it becomes apparent that their involvement with queer identity was leveraged for financial gain (Raun 2018).

the accusations Adam has faced. It thus serves as a response, reflecting on how some aspects of these accusations might be justified. In later utterances, Adam discusses the functioning of non-heterosexual representation in mass media, highlighting its exploitative nature. He indirectly refers to his right to be a spokesperson for this group. According to him, this right stems from two factors. First, he is a person with an authentically homosexual identity, and second, he has a deep knowledge of the history of the queer movement. Adam tries to justify the accusations he faces by pointing to the commodification[39] of queerness, which happens, among other places, in the media. From Adam's perspective, those accusing him of using his orientation as a tool for gaining audience attention lack the resources to distinguish his actions from the exploitative practices of media corporations. However, the issue with publicizing one's image on social media is that it begins to function in an area of extremely high commercialization. Establishing relationships with the audience can happen when a creator presents themselves as someone with traits or skills that potential viewers find interesting and are willing to exchange their attention and time for. What traits are perceived this way, however, has a cultural basis. In Adam's case, his sexual orientation becomes a resource, the value of which is partially determined by macro-processes related to the commodification of queerness (Guidotto 2006).

Biographical Process Structures and Adam's Influencer Activity

Referring to the beginning of his social media activity, Adam primarily describes his experiences using language characteristic of a biographical ac-

[39] This category does not have an *emic* character.

tion scheme.[40] He uses expressions that signal intentionality and recounts interactions and dialogues in which he calculated the possible next steps. This biographical action scheme emerges as the dominant structure in Adam's engagement with the social world of literature. When asked about his plans, Adam declares his wish to become someone connected to culture—an expert in his field, someone who "talks about it [about culture]." At the time of the interview, his ambitions were not directly tied to a career as an influencer. Instead, his planned path of development was more connected to his university studies. For him, social media activity primarily offers an opportunity to immerse himself in the literary world and to test his skills in reviewing books. To talk about culture, an audience is needed. For Adam, building relationships with audiences through book-media profiles is a good starting point for gathering his future listeners.

However, to succeed in his desired area, Adam will have to undergo biographical work that can help him develop resilience against negative audience feedback. His partial withdrawal from social media was, among other things, a result of the fact that the accusations he faced concerned an area of experience that he has not yet worked through. Moreover, it appears he does not yet allow himself to consider that this area might require such work. His non-heteronormative sexual identity is linked to painful experiences that have not yet been integrated into his biographical whole. At the same time, these experiences carry metamorphic[41] potential for the

narrator's biography. Going through this process of metamorphosis could perhaps lead Adam to become a spokesperson for the homosexual minority, one who acts based on a deep understanding of the needs of that community. However, this metamorphosis appears to be stalled—likely due to the lack of an open context in his interactions with his parents regarding his sexuality. There also seems to be a need for deeper reflection on his entanglement in the commodification of queerness in social media spaces. Paradoxically, Adam's online activity centered on his sexual orientation may hinder his ability to do the necessary biographical work. Prematurely assuming the role of educator and activist reinforces the impression that the narrator's homosexuality no longer requires further reflection. An excessive focus on the role of the family in shaping his passion for literature may lead to the same conclusion.

Summary

Adam is an example of a person who becomes a successful influencer at a very young age. His case demonstrates the active role of the audience in shaping how internet creators perceive themselves. Adam seems particularly vulnerable to the impact of criticism directed at him in the virtual space. This vulnerability may arise, among other things, from the fact that he is still at the threshold of adulthood and has not yet established a solid identity. Another reason likely lies in the absence of a thorough biographical work surrounding difficult experiences related to the sense of alienation concerning the heteronormative model (represented, among other things, by his parents) that governs the world he was socialized into. At the same time, Adam's case presents the many social entanglements of sexual orientation, which may carry the potential

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[40] The biographical action scheme is a process structure expressing an individual's plans through which they shape their life—often rooted in their passions and interests. Within this structure, the individual engages in intentional actions aimed at achieving a defined goal (Schütze 2012:157).

[41] Metamorphosis is a process structure within which an individual discovers previously unknown potential, initially feeling lost and gradually developing new skills.

for creative metamorphosis, function as a stigma whose visibility requires management, or be treated as a commodity for exchange in social media. For a long time, the narrator treated his social media channels as a space for actions he perceived as advocacy for his minority, but reactions from some members of the audience led to the suspension of this activity and a change in the management of the commodification of his content.

The interview with Adam highlights the connection between social media and extensive social worlds, such as the literary world, or specifically, bookmedia, in his case. Many of the activities within this subworld extend beyond the internet, and it is also possible to function within spaces entirely unrelated to social media but focused on literature. The social world at the core of which Adam belongs is a source of his values and life aspirations. The narrator primarily functions in environments that lie at the intersection of the literary and queer worlds, seemingly enchanted by them. This, perhaps excessive, enchantment sometimes hinders his critical perspective on certain conditions of their activities, such as the market-driven nature of some bookmedia practices. Much suggests that Adam will continue to pursue his development within a biographical action scheme, in line with aspirations naturally forged through participation in the intersection of two worlds tied to his essential identifications. Although the narrator's plans could be carried out independently of social media, it was the start of his influencer activity that allowed him to fully participate in the literary social world.

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Citation

Navigating Recognition: The Symbolic Struggles in the Biographies of Young Polish Internet Content Creators

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Abstract: This paper aims to examine the symbolic struggles embedded in the biographies of internet content creators. Pursuing a relatively new profession that lacks symbolic legitimization necessitates both explanatory and emotional labor to justify a "biographical action scheme" that does not align with existing "institutionalized schedules for organizing biographies," in Fritz Schütze's sense. Drawing on interviews with young Polish internet content creators, I analyze these struggles through the lens of Axel Honneth's concept of the "struggle for recognition" and Michèle Lamont's notion of "symbolic boundaries."

The empirical analysis suggests that the initial struggle involves proving their worth to close family and friends, who may question the legitimacy of being an influencer compared to a stable 9-to-5 job. This tension is particularly pronounced in intergenerational relationships, such as between children and their parents. The second struggle occurs between content creators and their audiences. Here, the challenge is defending oneself against justified or unjustified accusations and hate speech. The third struggle is inherent to those operating at the intersection of various social fields. For these influencers, who build their content on popular science, the lack of recognition or hostility from the academic community is another serious biographical problem.

The necessity to engage in constant power struggles, which demand considerable skill, challenges the widespread perception of internet influencing as a "childish" profession—one that offers an enjoyable job paired with undeservedly high earnings.

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Axel Honneth (1996) famously argued that the struggle for recognition, alongside the fair distribution of material goods, lies at the heart of social conflicts. He posits that autonomy in the modern world depends on developing three fundamental modes of self-relation: self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Cultivating these modes requires recognition from others, who are, in turn, also recognized. Although Honneth does not explicitly present media or social media as "institutions of recognition," it is difficult to deny—as Bruno Campanella (2024:1) emphasizes—their crucial role in struggles for social recognition in Western societies.

While evaluating the overall validity of this social theory or determining the status of media as institutions of recognition lies beyond the scope of this paper, I focus on a more specific research problem: examining the various recognition processes within the biographies of a largely under-researched group—internet content creators (henceforth: ICCs). This group primarily includes influencers and internet journalists, individuals who earn their livelihood through online activities. What remains particularly unclear is how individuals in this relatively new profession navigate justifying their professional activities to various "significant others." These include family members and close friends, their audiences, and other professionals within their social field and related fields. The research gap identified here does not concern studies on ICCs in general but rather those focusing on their occupational careers. While there is an abundance of both English-language and local studies on topics such as influencer collaboration in business, personal branding, influencer marketing, and manipulation strategies, as well as psychological studies on the desire to become an influencer—which, although country-specific, has been linked to traits such as extraversion, narcissism, and histrionism (Misiak et al. 2025)—a sociological account of content creation as a profession remains largely absent.

An important exception is the study by Renata Dopierała (2023), who examined these careers through a generational lens. However, fundamental questions drawn from the sociology of professions remain unanswered. For example: How do ICCs draw boundaries between work and leisure? Is their professional activity symbolically recognized? These questions become particularly intriguing in societies where the profession of an ICC is not only relatively new—emerging after the formation of well-established capitalist professions—but also shaped by the legacy of socio-political transformation from socialism. In such contexts, private entrepreneurship was historically viewed with suspicion, and individualized capitalism, including self-employment, continues to occupy an ambivalent position, often perceived as inferior to stable working conditions.

This paper, thus, investigates the biographies of young Polish ICCs to delve into the "recognition" processes and "symbolic struggles" pertinent to their profession. For this reason, I analyze a sub-sample of autobiographical narrative interviews drawn from a broader project devoted to the biographical experiences of young Poles.[1] Being an influencer is simultaneously a highly desirable profession with great financial prospects for those who succeed and a symbolically contested way of making a living. The lack of symbolic recognition is evident in research on the prestige of professions, where "Youtuber" and "Influencer" have consis-

tently ranked among the lowest in recent years, in contrast to traditional professions such as firefighter, medical doctor, or university professor (SW Research 2024a; 2024b). Unlike traditional professions, people in "new internet-based professions" must engage in a symbolic struggle for legitimization to prove the worth of their work in the eyes of others.

In this paper, ICCs are defined as individuals who produce and share content on social media as their primary source of income. They exhibit a professional level of skill in communication (e.g., writing, photography, or video editing), producing what can be described as "stylized creations that emphasize unique content" (Kozinets, Gretzel, and Gambetti 2023:11). This distinguishes ICCs from influencers, who deliberately "gather a focused or niche audience on social media platforms" and offer "authentic performances, such as personal life experiences, resulting in strong personal branding" (Kozinets et al. 2023:11). Despite the overlap between these two categories, ICCs prioritize content quality over personal branding and audience engagement (Kozinets et al. 2023). Many of the ICCs interviewed in this study could be classified as internet journalists or science popularizers, leading to an intersection of multiple social fields. This is where Bourdieu's concept of the field provides valuable insights into the dynamics of symbolic processes at play.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing on Honneth's (1996:1) theory, this paper analyzes three types of relationships associated with social recognition: (1) love—linking the individual with people one interacts in private, (2) rights—legally institutionalized relations of universal respect, and (3) solidarity—shared values within which the community of practitioners can assign

the particular worth of individuals. Recognition, or the lack thereof, can be granted or withheld at each of these levels, with profound implications for an individual's identity (Honneth 1996:92-130). In this theory, love corresponds to building basic self-confidence (or trust in oneself[2]), rights to self-respect, and solidarity to self-esteem.

This study is also grounded in the tradition of examining symbolic boundaries across different social worlds (Pugh 2013; Sølberg and Jarness 2019; Drewski 2023), a perspective I view as complementary to Honneth's moral grammar of social conflicts. Dating back to a classic Bourdieusian study on the intersection of social stratification and cultural sociology, symbolic boundaries are believed to be "lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others" (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015:850). These distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes. Thus, symbolic boundaries are never sharp. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1987:13), the boundaries between theoretical classes are like the boundaries of a cloud, a forest, or a flame, "whose edges are in constant movement, oscillating around a line or surface":

> These boundaries can thus be conceived of as lines or as imaginary planes, such that the density (of the trees or of the water vapor) is higher on the one side and lower on the other, or above a certain value on the one side and below it on the other.

Symbolic boundaries are being built between various social groups or cultural products across all human societies. In the class context, people use various

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[2] See translators' Introduction (Honneth 1996:XIII).

criteria "to define and discriminate between worthy and less worthy persons, i.e., between 'their sort of folks' and 'the sort they don't much like'" (Lamont 2000:254). In other words, symbolic boundaries are different ways of believing that "we" are better than "them." Symbolic boundaries are often defined in terms of what it means to be a "worthy person." For instance, American upper-middle classes may want to distinguish themselves from the lower- and working-class by the means of possessions but also cultural resources—the cultural references in their everyday speech and the very manner of speech (Bourdieu 1994; Streib 2011). At the same time, East European intelligentsia, a fraction middle-class, put a premium on the latter but not necessarily the former (Hołówka 1997; Zarycki 2008).

Symbolic boundaries can be constructed not only between people but also between cultural products. One of the most well-researched examples is musical taste (cf. Cicchelli et al. 2023). For decades, cultural sociologists have examined the relationship between taste and class position. Early Bourdieu-inspired studies confirmed the simple reproduction of class distinctions, highlighting certain genres as markers of cultural prestige or degradation. In most cultural contexts, classical music has traditionally been associated with cultural capital; however, recent Polish research suggests that alternative rock also serves this function (Domański et al. 2021). Meanwhile, genres associated with lower-class status vary significantly across contexts. In Poland, for example, disco polo is widely perceived as a lower-class genre (Łuczaj 2020).

Over time, research on musical taste has evolved, engaging with the "cultural omnivorousness" hypothesis. Scholars have debated whether musical taste continues to serve as a marker of distinction in the postmodern world, with studies either supporting or challenging this idea (Grodny, Gruszka, and Łuczaj 2013; Domański et al. 2021). The same theoretical assumptions, namely, that 1) people use symbolic goods to make distinctions marking their position in the social structure, 2) these boundaries are effective in structuring social words, but yet 3) are subject to historical changes, are useful in studying the so-called new professions.

Another research tradition that informs this study is the sociology of professions. Traditional career models, such as the "employment lifecycle"—moving from joining an organization to contributing, growing, plateauing, and ultimately passing on wisdom (Lavelle 2007)—are not easily applicable to ICCs. This is due to the highly individualized nature of their work, carried out in a digital, non-unionized environment. Under these conditions, professional identity—or the absence thereof—becomes a key research problem that cannot be assumed. What makes this particularly intriguing is not only the unclear identity of individuals within this "new" profession but also the broader question of recognition: what they do may not necessarily be regarded as legitimate work or as morally valuable labor. In this respect, studying ICCs departs from the long-standing tradition of research on occupational careers rooted in the Chicago School of sociology. Questions of recognition—on multiple levels, as outlined by Honneth—and the emotional labor that accompanies them (Hochschild 1979) seem more central than the "classic" concerns of the sociology of professions, such as working conditions, labor protections, struggles for fair remuneration, professional burnout, or a sense of agency within an organization. Nevertheless, examining this social world from a sociological perspective still requires situating individuals as "members of social structure"

(Strauss and Becker 1975:81). A recent meta-analysis suggests that the most common forms of online hate are related to religion, racism, political views, and gender (Castaño-Pulgarín et al. 2021). While hate speech targeting professions was not explicitly listed, there are compelling reasons to expect that certain professions are particularly vulnerable to such abuse due to stigmatization. Examples include occupations physically stigmatized, such as butchers (whose "dirty" work can be viewed with some disdain), or professions marginalized for social reasons, like correctional officers (who deal primarily with convicted criminals in prisons, which makes their job undesirable). Similarly, massage therapists may face moral stigmatization due to societal stereotypes and misconceptions about their work (Butler, Chillas, and Muhr 2012:263). Interestingly, stigmatized professions are often both well-paid and highly skilled. For example, in some cultural contexts, advertising has long been criticized as complicit in exploitative capitalist mechanisms and cultural degradation (Cohen and Dromi 2018:175). In this context, the profession of ICCs is likely to be contested due to the lay perception that posting content online is not a "real" job. According to proponents of theories of moral worth, such perceptions may position individuals in such roles at the margins of societal esteem.

Methods

The data analysis for this study was conducted as part of the research project "Post-Transformation in the Perspective of Biographical Experiences of People Born Between 1980 and 2005. A Sociological Analysis." Adopting a biographical perspective enables the research team to examine the dynamics of "post-transformation change"—a distinctive aspect of ongoing social transformations in Polish society shaped by global processes. Specifically, the study analyses the biographies of individuals born between 1980 and 2005, focusing on the growing influence of social media and the internal logic of the virtual world in reshaping lives, widening intergenerational gaps, and driving cultural shifts in values and attitudes. The interviewees were selected based on several sampling criteria. All internet content creators fall into the category of the so-called new professions. The entire primary dataset consists of 80 autobiographical narrative interviews (Schütze 1983; Domecka et al. 2012). The broader project aimed to compare diverse life stories against the backdrop of historical events and media discourses surrounding the post-transformation period.

The interview process began with a broad, open-ended question inviting participants to share their life stories. This was followed by probes to explore themes that emerged spontaneously during the narrative. The conversation concluded with a series of targeted questions on key areas of interest, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, attitudes toward religion, political views, and media consumption habits. All interviews were fully transcribed, pseudonymized, and subsequently discussed in research seminars (Kaźmierska and Wygnańska 2019).

The interviews used for this analysis were selected through a two-step procedure. First, a sub-sample of internet content creators was drawn from the full dataset, resulting in 25 cases. In the second step, I identified those interviewees who explicitly problematized the recognition of their professional status. For this reason, the findings focus primarily on seven unambiguous cases of internet content creators who struggled with social recognition. The remaining cases were excluded either because the

individuals combined content creation with other primary occupations or activities (e.g., university studies), or because their professional identity was not contested (as in the case of some online journalists).

To address the research question of this paper—What symbolic struggles related to their profession are embedded in the biographies of internet content creators?—I conducted a re-analysis of selected biographical cases. I focused on ICCs who problematized the issue of symbolic boundaries in their autobiographical interviews, even if they framed it in different ways. Following the approach used by Michèle Lamont (1992)—who examined symbolic boundaries by analyzing both the standards underlying status assessments and the characteristics of symbolic boundaries themselves—I identified sections of the interviews that illustrate the construction of symbolic boundaries. My analysis considers both explicit and implicit narratives of boundary-making.

The interviews were interpreted during regular seminars, with the participation of both senior and early-career scholars. For the purpose of this paper, I subsequently re-analyzed selected cases. Thus, the data analysis strategy was two-tiered. The first step involved a collective interpretation of each complete interview, while the second consisted of an individual re-analysis conducted in the spirit of classical qualitative thematic analysis rather than a biographical approach to address the specific research question of this study.

This mixed approach allowed me to identify three key types of symbolic tensions and the associated boundaries. The first struggle involves proving one's professional legitimacy to close family and friends, who may question the value of content creation compared to a conventional 9-to-5 job. The second concerns the interaction between content creators and their audiences, where boundaries emerge in defining expertise and authenticity. The third struggle arises for those operating at the intersection of multiple social fields, who may encounter a lack of recognition or even hostility from adjacent fields—for example, science popularizers striving for symbolic legitimacy.

Findings

Struggle for Private Recognition: Influencers and Their Families

The biographical analysis of moral boundaries through professional choices and career paths is particularly well-suited to indicate moral worth for two key reasons. First, in most Western-like societies, professional work serves as a primary marker of social status. Second, the boundaries between professions are often blurred, creating space for boundary-making processes, as Bourdieu theorized. This is especially relevant for emerging professions. For example, in the following passage, Aleksandra, a parenting influencer born in the late 1980s, reflects on how her work on the internet is not always regarded as legitimate or "proper" work.

And it's mainly the family that doesn't understand, well, what can I say? Well, my family doesn't understand what I do on the internet.
Family in the sense of your parents or what?
No, my husband's family.
Husband's family? OK, can you tell me about a time when they made you feel like they didn't understand, so I can get a better feeling for it?

Well, it's like, yes, every day there is some commenting that I am doing something wrong or that I am educated but I'm doing something like that. Well, I don't know how familiar you are with what I do. Mainly, I like to laugh, I like to distance myself, maybe distance myself from the fact that motherhood is difficult and parenting is difficult, that there's always a mess or something, and that it's just not appropriate to do such things. [Aleksandra]

The lack of recognition for Aleksandra's work primarily arises from cultural expectations that associate higher education with highly skilled, white-collar jobs. Agata Bachórz (2023:64) explored a similar tension between hegemonic career visions and alternative pathways, focusing on highly educated professionals who opted for "work with food," which included elements of manual labor. Such choices were often difficult for older generations to understand, particularly those unacquainted with the processes of re-skilling and the increasingly blurred boundaries between work and leisure (Stebbins 2014).

Aleksandra's professional choice might be perceived as a form of declassing, as she holds a diploma in a field that traditionally offers straightforward employment opportunities. Moreover, the content she produced challenged the revered figure of Mother the Pole (Matka Polka) (see: Kaźmierska 2025 [in this issue]). Consequently, the skepticism surrounding Aleksandra's work can be linked to shifting cultural norms regarding professional identities and motherhood—changes that younger generations are more likely to embrace. Subsequently, in her distinctly "feminine" narrative—largely centered on childrearing, family life, and religious communities—Aleksandra frames her decision not as an economic one but rather as a lifestyle choice.

[In my professional career, I believed that] You have to work all the time. So I kind of feel, I feel like a talented person from the 1990s who will just go to college, finish it, and make a career. Not that I will work, I will make a career. And, of course, family life will also be at a high level here, and I will be very happy. Well, it turned out a little different, so. I mean, it turned out a little different. It's just that this professional work no longer seemed to me as something very, umm, I don't know, prestigious, well, more/ but, I mean, it was a process that, at some point, I decided that I had to match the profession to my family, not the other way around. 'Cause it simply costs me too much. [Aleksandra]

The narrative of Anastazja—a well-known parenting influencer and performer—seems to reflect both the societal expectations from her family of origin and her unspoken concerns about her daughter. Perceived as a "loser" throughout her childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, her family began to regard her as a valuable individual only after she gained public recognition.

I'm starting to break away from this, uh, cliché of being "Little Nastka," who, no matter what she achieved—even if she's on national TV—was still seen as "Little Nastka," the one who tended to lose her wallet as a child. I remember this conversation with my sister, who's now very proud of me, brags about me, and her friends from the mothers' forum even attend my performances. She even bought a ticket to one of my shows. And my brother-in-law, who treated me my whole life as, well, just because my sister presented me that way—as a bit of a klutz—came to my performance too. He laughed his head off. [Anastazja]

This family could benefit not only from Anastazja's popularity but also from tangible material bene-

fits—for instance, they could choose shoes from the brand that sponsored the ICC. All of this contributed to a sense of private recognition. On an emotional level, Anastazja describes the pride of her relatives, all of whom live in a rural area and work manual jobs. However, she also notes that this pride is often accompanied by jealousy.

> Well, they're supposedly proud, supposedly supportive, but then there are texts like these…That I don't have a normal, real life, no responsibilities, because I have a fun life, and then this line came: "Aren't you bored driving around those cities and repeating the same things over and over?" I fired back: "Aren't you bored going to the same houses and cleaning the same toilets?" And that, for me, was symbolically important. Look, I'm in my thirties now. Right? I am, I have/ and I don't feel like explaining myself to my family anymore. Also, I kind of do this to show that influencers aren't just some pathology from the internet, because behind it, there can be a really cool topic. [Anastazja]

Anastazja felt the need to explain herself not only to her parents but also to her growing daughter. In this case, the inadequacy that required explanation was again linked to the blurring of boundaries between leisure and work (Stebbins 2014).

> [In my daughter's life,] however, more and more, her peers have a say, and I'll be honest, it's a bit of a pickle because "My mom is from the internet, does funny things, dresses up, goes out." And I already hear from my daughter: "You call this work? Really? Is that why I should study? So I can host events, for example?" And like, no, it's to find yourself and build your life the way you want it, but my child keeps throwing arguments at me because she's so sassy. [Anastazja]

Anastazja, whose decision to become an ICC was driven in part by the economic challenges of previous unengaging and low-paid jobs, places significant emphasis on the role her child played in her career planning. However, in this case, family considerations led her to refrain from certain professional activities.

> I feel like I don't only do meaningless things. Of course, that might be a naive belief because, to some people, I'll be an idiot on the internet, but for a year, there has been nothing on my blog. My personal life really fell apart, and I paid a heavy price for it. Ten years ago, no one thought about the impact that sharing personal things could have on you. I didn't write about my child's pooping because I thought that was absurd, but I did openly write about my parental doubts, and that helped a lot of girls…It was therapeutic for me. Many girls saw themselves in it, but, for example, as a consequence, I later read comments like, when I admitted that my pregnancy wasn't planned and was a huge, huge surprise… well, I had to read comments saying that one day my child would read that they were an accident, that their mother didn't want them. [Anastazja]

In this passage, Anastazja discusses the adverse impact of her professional activities on her beloved daughter while simultaneously addressing public recognition. She mentions young mothers who are inspired by her critical stance on motherhood and reflects on the positive emotional influence this has on her professional motivation. This perspective captures an important aspect of the story. However, at the level of public recognition, we also observe power struggles.

The narratives of Aleksandra and Anastazja predominantly centered on non-material disputes re-

garding the "worth" of their profession. In contrast, many of the male narrators emphasized that their career-planning strategies were intrinsically linked to the economic field and the necessity of making a living. This framing, which applies exclusively to the male interviewees, aligns with the traditional social role of the male breadwinner. Tymoteusz, Zbyszek, and Szymon all stated that the decision to become an ICC was only possible once their internet job began generating significant profits—despite the fact that some of these narrators could have easily relied on their parents' substantial financial resources.

Tymoteusz, a former civil engineer and now a popular YouTuber, initially began his online activity as a form of serious leisure (Stebbins 2014). From a professional standpoint, it was a side activity. However, as his popularity quickly grew, he was able to transform his channel into a family business, with his partner collaborating with him and subcontractors being hired to assist.

> That was also a moment when I was essentially working two full-time jobs—I was employed as a civil engineer while simultaneously running two YouTube channels, and those channels were really growing, right? So, we [me and my partner] thought that, at some point, I would have to give up one of these things, right? But I was always thinking in terms of quitting my job as an engineer because, well, it was simply the safer option, so to speak…I was happy to work in that role, but it was never my passion… Whereas what I do now genuinely fascinates me, and I'll say it again—it fascinates me. [Tymoteusz]

Szymon, a former journalist in traditional media and business owner, now a podcaster who covers events rarely discussed in public discourse in Poland, recalls his transition from a conventional pro-

fession to online content creation in a strikingly similar way. None of them chose to pursue an ICC career until they had achieved dual recognition. They likely would not have made that decision if they had not been recognized in their private lives—particularly by a partner. More importantly, as men, they wanted to ensure they were recognized publicly enough to sustain a livelihood. Their decision, therefore, represents an entanglement of two types of recognition struggles—individual and structural—shaped by social expectations, or feeling rules (Hochschild 1979).

And did you start the podcast after closing down your business, or was it before?
I was still doing both at the same time. But mentally, we were [me and my partner] already withdrawing from the company, really. However, the podcast was never meant to be a way of making a living. It was simply... I see journalism as a social mission, and one of the reasons I started the podcast was to provide information to people who don't speak other languages well enough to find such information on their own but might still be interested in it…I soon realized that it was extremely time-consuming and that I would have to dedicate an entire day each week to it—literally from six in the morning until one at night, right?…I thought, okay, if that's the case—if I have to spend that much time just on the technical side, and the creative part [laughs] is already connected to my work, or at least it was, because, on the same day, I published the first material online, I also submitted a job application to a multinational consulting company. That was supposed to be the moment when I finally left journalism behind and just did this in my free time. But then I thought, well, I don't know if they'll actually hire me, and so on, and so on. And after some encouragement from my girlfriend, I set up an account on a crowdfunding platform.

For Zbyszek, the transition from a standard service job to creating internet content was characterized by a unique blend of a desire for independence and uncertainty about the financial prospects of their new profession.

> I had a few smaller successes like that, but there was no money in it that would allow me to live normally. It was more like, "Wow, I'm doing something with soccer and getting some pocket money." But apart from that, I still had to go to work. Umm, after a while, I was in a steady relationship, and I wanted to start living more like a normal, adult person… Eventually, I decided that I was missing soccer in my life, so I created a YouTube channel…I just played soccer games, FIFA, and at the age of 28, 27, I started feeling old and like it wasn't really appropriate anymore, but I already knew that I was somewhat recognizable in the soccer world through my website, writing for newspapers, and appearances. I didn't want people to associate me with playing games and wasting time on that. But it turned out that within a year of running this channel, I gained a few thousand subscribers, then it went up to tens of thousands. In the meantime, besides the games, I started talking more about soccer, about the Champions League, not just about the games. And it turned out that people definitely preferred the videos where I talked about soccer, not where I played soccer games. [Zbyszek]

Zbyszek's narrative highlights the perception that being an influencer may not be regarded as a serious profession ("it wasn't really appropriate anymore")—a concern initially raised by Aleksandra and Anastazja—along with the pressure to achieve financial independence. Like Tymoteusz and Szymon, Zbyszek emphasized that the decision to assess whether they could sustain themselves

through their creativity was a deliberate part of their biographical action scheme (Schütze 2014).

Patryk, in turn, recounts "a typical maternal concern," which forced him to explain his professional decisions. His mother was concerned about the professional opportunities offered by his new career path—internet content creation—compared to the stability of a job in the advertising industry, which led him to defend his moral worth in her eyes. Being an advertising executive represented an institutionalized career path for organizing one's biography (Schütze 2014), which conflicted with Patryk's biographical action scheme because, in post-socialist Poland, advertising is not seen as a stigmatized profession (cf. Cohen and Dromi 2018) but rather as one of the stereotypically well-paid jobs (Luczaj 2016).

> Yeah, I mean, I spent a lot of time at the computer, so my mom sometimes told me to go outside, but it wasn't like... No, I wasn't really persecuted for that at home. In fact, my mom didn't get too involved in what I was doing. She was more excited that I was doing something, you know, something I was passionate about. My mom always supported me strongly. And, of course, when I got older and the time came, for example, to choose my studies, I was still doing it. So, my mom would ask questions like, "But do you want to keep doing this? Do you have a plan for it? How do you imagine it, or will you be able to support yourself from it?" I told her, "Don't worry, I've got it covered, I have things to do, etc. I know how to make money from it, so you don't need to worry." My mom suggested things like maybe working for an advertising agency. I explained to her, "Mom, I didn't spend all these years working to be on the other side because I work with advertising agencies." [Patryk]

In another part of the interview, Patryk explains that agencies typically demand "overly polite" (Polish: *ugrzeczniony*) content, which does not align with his preferred style. This highlights his decision to collaborate with agencies rather than work for them, emphasizing his commitment to preserving his creative autonomy.

Struggle for Public Recognition: Influencers and Their Audiences

ICCs earn money because they are deemed worthy of being followed by various audiences. Through their clicks, subscriptions, and follows, ICCs receive payments either directly from major tech companies like YouTube or indirectly through sponsorship deals. All the individuals analyzed were successful enough to make the internet their primary source of income. However, this did not shield them from numerous waves of disrespect (German: *Missachtung*)—to borrow Honneth's term—particularly from those who openly contest their content. This is evident in Julka's narrative. The supportive community she has built as a lifestyle influencer helps offset the negative comments she faces as an online creator, particularly for addressing controversial topics within the Catholic Church.

I had a big problem for a long time because I took those relationships [with the audience] very personally, and actually, only in the last few months have I really learned to distance myself a bit, to focus more on myself rather than the audience. It was always for them and so on because it also made me dive into topics where I felt uncomfortable, whether they were related to the Church or some social dramas. I felt like people needed it or that if someone asked me, I should do it for others. It was always that pattern. So, I fought for myself, setting the boundary that "No,

I want to talk about something else, in a different way." Umm, and so, yes, definitely, I'm really happy because I managed to build a community of people who are also reflective, interested, and at the same time open to lighter, soothing content, not judgmental ones. And I think they're quite aware of mental health and overall care for their well-being, as well as a community that takes care of that, and people for whom it's also important. [Julka]

Criticism, which seems to be a natural epiphenomenon of all human creative endeavors, especially when social topics are discussed, is separated by only a thin line from the internet hate experienced by Klaudia and Anastazja. What is at stake is one's "face" (in Goffman's sense [Goffman 1955]), necessitating either biographical work to defend it or the capacity to ignore critics and haters.

I don't know if they're trying to degrade me or if they really don't see, er, um, they too/ I don't know to what extent they are trying to put me down or to what extent they really don't see the difference between me and some influencer like, I don't know, Aniamaluje [an Instagram account with 159K followers], some lifestyle girl who sells them some stuff, products, ebooks. Where I don't do that, and I never wanted to do that, but they somehow force me into this role that I'm one of those girls. They don't notice that I don't advertise things, that I have 5,000 followers, that I care about a career in journalism and writing, etc. [Klaudia]

In Klaudia's case, internet hate stemmed from two key aspects of her online creativity, which focused on commenting on culture and societal issues. While not fully aligning with either right-wing commentary or the leftist ideological package, she had a clear worldview and presented a new perspective, which made her susceptible to attacks from both

ends of the political spectrum. At the same time, as she emphasizes throughout her narrative, being a young, physically attractive female ICC made her even more vulnerable. However, the attackers were not who one might expect. They were, in fact, other females.

In Anastazja's case, the trigger for attacks was not the seriousness of her content but rather the perceived lack of it, as a significant portion of her creativity involved humorous short films, many of which went viral. In this instance, the criticism seems tied to her mass popularity. Unlike Klaudia, Anastazja struggled to move past this and continue as usual.

> Many years of writing a blog, despite the popularity of these texts, didn't achieve as much as a few, unfortunately, recorded videos. A couple of them went viral, much to my despair, so I know what it means to be insulted on all platforms. I experienced that when I was 20-ish. I read that I was "a fucked-up whore not wanted by anyone," while I was struggling with my identity and depression, so I think it was a very unfortunate time for something bad to happen to me. [Anastazja]

Typically, cyberhate took the form of internet-based activity analogous to "slacktivism," where individuals engage in actions requiring minimal effort, time, or commitment (Żuchowska-Skiba 2023), usually without active mobilization, as seen in the narratives of Klaudia and Anastazja. However, Tymoteusz, perceived as controversial (though he saw it quite differently), experienced real threats. In his case, real-world violence was, if not likely, at least possible.

> I had a situation where someone sent me threats. Umm, well, I mean, they specified exactly what they would do to me and my family. Right? But I even asked some people once, you know, about reporting such things, right? But generally, the police would say that such threats can always be reported [only] if you're [really] worried about their execution. So the thing is if someone even writes to you that they'll kill you, well, you're probably not worried about it actually happening. Another thing is that once, umm, someone sent me screenshots from a forum where a group of people, umm, were agreeing that it would generally be good to kill me, and even my address was given, fortunately, an old one, but if it had been my current address, I would have probably really been concerned at that point because, well, this was... I mean, without any details, they were just considering ideas, right? [Tymoteusz]

For Anastazja, a significant boundary-making moment occurred during a live event in her hometown, where she was invited as a rising celebrity alongside Adrian Nowak,[3] a very well-known singer, also "from here." This was part of her biographical action scheme to have a career outside the internet, a decision she made confronting the image of an ICC with the social need to have a respected profession. Her performance was not very successful at first.

> And so, I walk out, and the audience is practically all seniors. It just didn't land—not at all, not even a little. Right? It didn't land so badly that my mum, sitting in the first row, was in tears. And I was terrified, thinking she was offended by the jokes, that I'd have no home to return to. Right? I was so stressed that I was literally hitting the microphone with my teeth. I came off stage crying and said, "Fuck, I'm never performing again." Even my own father said, "Well, you've got a lot of work ahead of you." So I had a total breakdown

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[3] Throughout the paper, I use pseudonyms.

because this was supposed to be a turning point [*moment graniczny*], a shift where I committed to this path. Right? My fate was supposed to change here. But there was also an evening performance. My friend, who organized the event, came to me with a [alcoholic] drink and said, "Nastka, you're either going to go out there and screw it up again, or you're going to learn from it." So I just downed the drink and thought, "Screw it, whatever." And it turned out that the second audience was younger, and I just didn't care as much this time. It also turned out that the first performance didn't have Nowak's manager in the audience, but he was there for the second one. It went so well—people were laughing so much at the jokes [about the region where the show took place]. [Anastazja]

The struggle for public recognition is evident not only between creators and their audiences but also within broader social circles, as is particularly clear in another excerpt from Anastazja's interview. Continuing her "feminine" narrative focused on maternity posited that her occupation resulted in some identity dilemma, giving rise to a need to perform emotional labor (Hochschild 1979).

I was already under the care of a psychiatrist and psychologist, but, you know, this process of building an identity online couldn't go unnoticed. So, it was at that time when my daughter was in kindergarten that my, let's say, professional journey related to the internet began to develop a bit, but I still didn't know what I was supposed to answer the kindergarten teacher. Who am I? An influencer, a girl from the internet? What do you do?…What does your job involve? And I was looking for an idea for myself. [Anastazja]

Anastazja's identity struggle arose from a perceived lack of dignity associated with her profes-

sional role. The emotional labor (Hochschild 1979) she performed stemmed from two sources, which, at times, required contradictory actions. First, there was the need to manage her emotions to meet the expectations of her audience. In her role as a live performer, she was constantly required to amplify or suppress her feelings to remain entertaining and engaging. This pressure led her to refer to herself as an "internet ninny" (Polish: *dziewucha z internetu*), highlighting her sense of being trivialized and her efforts for recognition continually dismissed. She also described her work as "childishness" (Polish: *dziecinada*), further emphasizing her feelings of invalidation.

At the same time, Anastazja was bound by the obligations associated with her social role as a mother—a role that is both highly stigmatized and burdened with high expectations, as articulated by Aleksandra in her narrative. She found herself fighting not only to be famous and entertaining but also to gain respect from people important to her and her daughter, many of whom did not recognize content creation as a legitimate profession—especially when it was pursued in unconventional ways. In this case, Anastazja, like other influencers (Hemming Pedersen 2022), had to struggle not only for affirmational recognition, which "constructs and affirms their personal identities and their place in society," but also for transformational recognition, aimed at addressing "instances of misrecognition that seek to rectify perceived injustices" (Giles 2020:209-210). Additionally, the inevitable ups and downs of every public career meant that recognition was never stable. For ICCs, this struggle is intensified when they must navigate multiple audiences: online and offline, younger and older, urban and rural, male and female, public and private.

Struggle for Symbolic Power: ICCs and Traditional Professionals

The professional status of an ICC can be questioned not only by close family and friends, as well as those with whom they interact in their professional and social lives (as illustrated by Anastazja), but also by individuals from adjacent social fields. According to Pierre Bourdieu's theory (1994; 1996), such fields can interact with the power struggles within the primary field being analyzed. For instance, a journalist, typically operating within the journalistic field (Bourdieu 2005), may find the political field and the academic field important. The political field might offer the journalist political power or financial rewards, while the academic field could serve as a source of inspiration, offering a form of cultural ennoblement. This latter dynamic is similar to the case of Tymoteusz, whose work often intersects with the academic field. In the interview, he recalls that one of his controversial videos on abortion rights was a response to what he saw as a pseudo-academic debate published by a Research University. Tymoteusz was frustrated by the one-sidedness of the perspective presented in the material, which not only conflicted with his worldview but, as he pointed out, was framed as an idea grounded in legitimate academic research.

> She simply adopted/presented the, well, affirmation paradigm, right? The goal of this approach is not to describe the phenomenon—its declared purpose is to change social attitudes toward abortion. The aim is to influence actions, not to provide a descriptive account of the phenomenon. However, she didn't say this outright—in the sense that she presented these ideas as if they were self-evident truths, revealed truths. In reality, what she was doing was activist work, right? And this was under the banner of a Research Univer-

> sity, advertised as a legitimate source of social science from a Research University. So, I just recorded a video in which I said that this is all nonsense…And she has every right to preach her views, absolutely, but maybe not under the university's logo and not, um, presenting herself as an authoritative source of knowledge. [Tymoteusz]

In this material, Tymoteusz points to several academic papers highlighting the negative aspects of abortion, but he does so in a way that diverges from accepted academic standards. He admits to having only skimmed these papers, explicitly stating that he relied on details from their abstracts rather than conducting a thorough analysis. Furthermore, as someone without formal training in the social sciences, Tymoteusz failed to recognize that the research he pointed to might not be directly comparable to studies cited by university experts due to differences in methodology, scope, and objectives.

Tymoteusz's case reflects a typical conflict between social fields, where the academic approach to presenting knowledge—especially social knowledge—often clashes with the journalistic approach, which tends to simplify complex phenomena. Symbolic power-related tensions of this kind may arise for various reasons, including ideological beliefs (liberal doxa versus more conservative views), the contrast between disinterested scholarship and a business-driven mindset, and the aesthetics of content production (a hermetic message shaped by formalized poetics and hierarchized power relations versus an accessible message crafted for the general public). As a result, while Tymoteusz garnered significant support from his internet audience, his contributions were largely ignored by the academic community. Solidarity, grounded in shared values, was evident among academics, but

there was little overlap between their approach and that of an internet science commentator, who embraced a different mode of knowledge production. This divergence likely contributed to Tymoteusz's frustration when the same female expert released another video.

> And she directly says to the camera: "Such data doesn't exist, or at least I've never come across it. I've never seen such data." But in my first video, I showed her that data, and she saw it because she emailed me, saying, "Your video is unsubstantiated. I watched it." So, she saw it and still claims she's never seen it. That's just—you have to have no shame. With all due respect. [Tymoteusz]

The customary expression "with all due respect" contrasts sharply with the (mutual) lack of respect evident in this debate. Zbyszek, whose content creation aligns more closely with the journalistic field rather than the academic one, highlights a source of this disrespect: the perception that an internet journalist is not a "real" journalist. When explicitly asked whether he feels marginalized in Poland, Zbyszek acknowledges:

> Maybe in the soccer industry, there are moments when I feel marginalized, but those are petty issues because it's just about the soccer industry, umm, because, you know, I'm a YouTuber, not a professional sports journalist.
> **So there's the difference? I was wondering about that.**
> I mean, I consider myself a sports journalist, just that I do it in a way that's more approachable and easier to digest. But you know how it sounds: "I'm a YouTuber." And it doesn't matter what you do—if you're a YouTuber, people assume you're probably doing something for kids, right? [Zbyszek]

Discussion

Becoming an ICC means entering a profession fraught with challenges, ranging from income instability to the ongoing struggle for social recognition—what Axel Honneth famously termed the struggle for recognition or, in Michèle Lamont's terms, the constant need to prove one's social worth. The biographical experience of being an ICC involves three levels of symbolic struggle: the quest for private recognition, public recognition, and symbolic power, corresponding to Honneth's (1996) concepts of love (associated with care), respect (associated with rights), and esteem (associated with solidarity).

The first level, love, pertains to the fight for being recognized as a morally valuable person engaged in serious work that deserves respect. A lack of such recognition can result in feelings of inadequacy, such as those expressed by Anastazja, who described herself as an "internet ninny," or in assumptions like the one Zbyszek encountered, where YouTube is dismissed as being "for kids."

The second level, rights, represents a broader struggle for societal recognition and respect, particularly from an ICC's followers. Like other cultural producers, ICCs face criticism, with their competence and expertise frequently challenged. Despite efforts to establish hierarchies in the field—whether through rankings based on technocratic metrics or earnings—no definitive order emerges, leaving ICCs locked in a constant symbolic struggle intrinsic to their profession.

The final level, symbolic power, lies at the heart of an ICC's professional identity. While being an ICC is socially desirable in certain circles (e.g., among younger audiences), it remains a relatively unstruc-

tured and non-institutionalized profession. This lack of institutionalized schedules for organizing biographies (Schütze 2014:254) creates a power imbalance when representatives of traditional professions encounter their counterparts in the digital sphere. For instance, when a journalist from a respected newspaper or television station debates with an internet journalist, the former often holds a position of initial advantage due to the established legitimacy of their field.

These levels align with Honneth's types of recognition, reflecting the nature of the relationships that connect the ICC with various social agents (e.g., love links them with family). Simultaneously, the analysis suggests that the social boundaries significant in the biographies of ICCs encompass all the types identified by Michèle Lamont (1992): socioeconomic, cultural, and moral boundaries. Socioeconomic boundaries, arising from judgments about one's social position based on wealth or power, were particularly evident in the "male" breadwinner narrative, where success was perceived as dependent on financial standing. This was also evident in Anastazja's case, where her nearest and dearest closely associated wealth with professional success.

Moral boundaries, defined by assessments of moral character, appear in the material in two distinct forms. First, the internal reflection on whether one's job is meaningful and serious enough cannot be separated from individual qualities such as work ethic, consideration for others, and personal integrity. ICCs also faced the critique of "living beyond one's means" (Polish: życie ponad stan), which served as a form of moral judgment. Second, their audience questioned their moral judgments, views, and opinions. In this same relationship, cultural boundaries were also constructed, as not only the ICC's moral

character but also their intelligence, manners, and tastes were subject to scrutiny. The struggle for cultural recognition was particularly evident in interactions with professionals from other social fields. Education and standards of judgment—what might be termed the aesthetics of content creation—played a crucial role in the contest for symbolic power.

Conclusion

Being an ICC is often perceived as an easy profession, one that many young people worldwide covet—a profession where creators can do what they love and make a living. Despite this common yet simplistic view of turning a passion into a profitable career, this analysis suggested that an ICC performs three types of work. The first two can be summarized as proper work and work-for-labor (Standing 2011). The first type involves tasks such as finding a topic and preparing content, which includes subsequent steps like recording and editing. The second type encompasses everything required to create content and financially benefit from it. This includes, but is not limited to, promoting one's material, attending professional events, and engaging in activities such as reading, watching, or playing games that will inform the content produced.

Lastly, the paper argues that ICCs must also perform emotional labor to justify their profession to those unacquainted with this social world—most notably to family members but also to others they interact with, such as teachers. This emotional labor becomes indispensable throughout the ICC's career, though it is most intense at the outset when the identity of the ICC is being formed. Later, substantial emotional labor is required to maintain relationships with the online community. While positive bonds are easier to sustain, a significant

challenge arises in dealing with online adversaries who often become haters. For various reasons, ICCs face criticism, slander, and even threats from individuals they have never met in person. Depending on the context and individual resilience, this may require social strategies, such as focusing on supportive community engagement, as Julka described, or psychological methods, such as therapy, which helped Anastazja.

Finally, the world of influencers is far from an autonomous social field. The emotional consequence is that whenever an ICC's activity intersects with more legitimized social fields, such as journalism or academia, they must fight for recognition. ICCs are often not treated as a legitimate voice in debates, whether on topics such as abortion rights or the latest season of the UEFA Champions League.

This final type of symbolic struggle is a particularly clear example of the theoretical significance of this paper, as it directly engages with Bourdieu's theory of social fields and symbolic struggle. The various symbolic struggles analyzed here through a biographical method confirm that the careers of ICCs, operating within the broader field of cultural production, are influenced not only by market forces but, perhaps more significantly, by the intangible rules of the field of cultural production. In this context, navigating symbolic capital and establishing social boundaries becomes a crucial skill that ICCs must master to succeed within the field.

This finding further demonstrates that the profession of an ICC is far more complex—and demanding—than a simplistic, layperson's analysis might suggest. Moreover, the biographical experiences of ICCs indicate that any analysis conducted purely from a technological, economic, or psychological standpoint fails to capture the unique nature of this new profession. In contrast, the biographical perspective allows uncovering this complexity, offering deeper insight into the multifaceted realities of the ICC career.

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Citation

Affective Governmentality in Food Delivery Platforms: A Study of Bolt Food Riga Push Notifications

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Abstract: The paper uses a governmentality perspective to discuss the issue of control in food delivery platforms through analysis of 4083 push notifications sent by the Bolt Food platform to its couriers in Riga from 2020 to 2023. It examines intensity, rationalization, subjectification, and the use of emojis in push notifications and demonstrates affective governmentality technology to control labor mobility. The analysis contributes to the literature on algorithmic management that focuses predominantly on the control embedded in the platform application. Suppose a platform application is viewed as an algorithmic panopticon in which a worker is free to enter or exit by signing on or off. In that case, other semi-automated control technologies, such as push notifications, are affective persuasive tools for bringing workers into the panopticon that limits workers' autonomy and control.

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Introduction. Research Rationale

The study tackles technologies of control in platform work. Also called gig work, it is an increasingly widespread format of work characterized by an algorithmically managed string of short-term engagements, engagement-based pay, and certain flexibility of when and how work is performed (Woodcock and Graham 2020). In 2021, alarmed by the bad working conditions of many gig workers and their lack of access to social protection, the European Commission proposed a directive that would reclassify a significant number of the platform workers as employees and, therefore, push platforms to treat them as subjects of rights and protection provisioned by national and EU labor law. The central issue for interpretation in this debate was that of control—to what degree the workers control the conditions and process of their work and to what extent they are controlled by the platforms (Council of the European Union 2021). In 2024, after a lengthy negotiation between the European Parliament and member states and extensive lobbying by platforms (Corporate Europe Observatory 2024), a new platform work directive was adopted that left the mem-

ber states free to regulate the classification issue. The new rules direct member states to establish a legal presumption that persons working on digital platforms can evoke if they feel they are being directed or controlled by the platform and thereby misclassified as self-employed (Council of the European Union 2024).

The platforms present themselves as information technology companies that aggregate and analyze data, and, through the provision of information, connect service providers and customers, in the case of food delivery platforms—restaurants, customers, and food delivery couriers. The platforms insist that they are not providers of food delivery services but are data companies that supply independent contractors—food delivery couriers—with information about market opportunities that they can use to provide delivery services and make a profit (Shapiro 2017). The freedom and flexibility to decide when, where, and how to work is the key promise platforms make to attract workers, and this autonomy is perceived as valuable by the workers (Dunn 2020; Schor et al. 2020; Ķešāne and Spuriņa 2024a). This representation of platform work is disputed by

a wealth of academic studies that demonstrate the disproportionate control platforms have over every aspect of the food delivery process, including the distribution of incoming orders amongst the couriers ready to deliver, fees for delivery, delivery routes, timing, and measurement of workers' performance (Aneesh 2009; Rosenblat and Stark 2015; Shapiro 2017; Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin 2020; Lata, Burdon, and Reddel 2023).

The issue of control in platform work is even further complicated by the so-called algorithmic management that platforms rely upon. Because the daily operations of a platform are based on algorithms that process data, platforms can argue that routine decisions—the delivery fees, routes, and allocation of orders—are not *controlled* by their managers but instead are *calculated* by algorithms. The platforms might argue that, instead of *controlling*, they merely *collect* data about incoming orders and couriers ready to deliver and then *calculate* a way for all incoming orders to be delivered fastest and most efficiently. The algorithmically calculated decisions supposedly make objectively optimal choices for the smooth functioning of the whole system, leaving the workers with a certain freedom to schedule their working hours and accept or reject specific orders (Shapiro 2017). Due to the use of machine learning algorithms that are trained on extensive amounts of data collected via the platform app, nobody in the platform management can fully explain what specific considerations and facts have been taken into account in the calculation of a particular algorithmic decision, such as allocation of an incoming to a specific courier and determination of a specific fee for a particular gig.

A substantial body of qualitative ethnographic studies demonstrates how workers perceive algo-

rithmic control (Rosenblat and Stark 2015; Shapiro 2017; Galière 2020; Richardson 2020; Veen, Barratt, and Goods 2020; Parth and Bathini 2021; Zong, Tsaur, and Dai 2024). Since platforms are very protective of their algorithms and data, interviews with workers and ethnographic studies have been the only ways to inquire into the gig work practice

This study provides much more direct insight into the inner workings of a platform through analysis of push notifications sent by the Bolt Food platform to its couriers in Riga from 2020 to 2023. The paper highlights techniques of control through analysis of this dataset using "governmentality" (Foucault 2007; 2008; Bröckling, Krasmann, and Lemke 2012) as an analytical perspective. Recognition of rationalization and subjectification as mechanisms of control and the distinction between calculative and affective rationalization allows us to compare the extent to which push notifications provide information about the market and give workers a certain freedom to calculate their decisions and the extent to which they exert direct affective control over the workers.

The study contributes to the cross-disciplinary inquiry into on-demand platforms from a cultural sociological perspective. While organization studies, human resource management, sociology of work, and technology examine platforms as primarily economic organizations and focus on management techniques, we look at labor-based platforms as cultural actors engaged in meaning-making processes to facilitate work efficiency. By close examination of platform communication with its couriers as a cultural text that defines the workers and the work they are doing in a certain way, we follow the call to study the affective grip of ideology in digital control (Pignot 2023) and to

uncover how the platforms use cultural affective means to control the workers.

Governmentality Perspective

We find the "governmentality" approach useful to conceptualize control in on-demand labor platforms beyond the distinction between the controllers and the controlled. The notion of "governmentality," introduced by Michael Foucault in his 1978 and 1979 annual lecture series at the College de France in Paris (Burchell, Graham, and Foucault 2007; Foucault 2007; 2008), since then, has evolved into an analytical perspective used across many disciplines (Bröckling et al. 2012). Defined broadly, governmentality is a "conduct of conduct" that encompasses *technologies* and *rationalities* guiding the conduct of societies, groups, and individuals, including self-guidance and guidance of others (Foucault 2007:192-193). Technologies of control do not work by forcing others to behave in a certain way but rather by creating "lines of force" that make certain behaviors more probable than others and invoke people to move within these lines (Bröckling et al. 2012:12). Such lines of force can be clearly stated or implied as *rules of the game* maintained by the governing agency that rewards certain forms of behavior and punishes other. Thus, control is exercised not through constraining individual behavior but through structuring their field of action and subjectivity (Galière 2020).

From the governmentality perspective, control is ensured not only through a certain technological infrastructure but also through communicative or discursive practice—the production of truth and morality claims that maintain particular *rationalization*. Rationality, in this case, does not refer to abstract reason or logic but rather is understood as "any form of thinking which strives to be rela-

tively clear, systematic and explicit about aspects of 'external' or 'internal' existence, about how things are or how they ought to be" (Dean 2010:18-19), thus presupposing the existence of multiple rationalities. Such rationalization might include descriptions of reality, its problematizations, and propositions to transform it. It can also include claims about the *subject*. The definition of the subjects of governance or *subjectification* is carried out through explicit reasoning for certain forms of behavior or implicitly by addressing the subjects in a certain way, thereby emphasizing certain subject positions and omitting other self-understandings.

While initially, based on Foucault's work, rationalization was discussed primarily considering calculative and tactical reasoning, more recently, scholars across many disciplines have pointed out that it can have an affective dimension, meaning that governance technology and rationalization can also address emotions or how one feels (D'Aoust 2015). Such affective governmentality (Harmat 2023) is exercised by framing and evoking individuals' desires, aspirations, and anxieties (Moisander, Hirsto, and Fahy 2016). Emotions, such as happiness, anxiety, fear, anger, shame, and self-esteem, among others, are not simply a by-product of the subjectification process but can instead be the target of power and control and can be instruments through which control is enacted (D'Aoust 2015; Kantola, Seeck, and Mannevuo et al. 2019). By working on feelings, such governmentality techniques affect the very behavior since people act upon their emotions.

In our analysis of Bolt Food Riga push notifications, we identify control technologies, rationalizations, and subjectification and observe affective technologies and rationalizations targeted at workers' emotions.

Push Notification in the Context of Algorithmic Management

The vast majority of existing empirical studies on algorithmic management in on-demand labor platforms demonstrate how "rules of the game" in platforms are embedded in the technological infrastructure—the platform application through which the work is carried out. The observed governance mechanisms can be summarized under three main headings—surveillance, measurement, and asymmetry (Kadolkar, Kepes, and Subramony 2024). Data *surveillance* mechanisms are fundamental to the business model of food delivery platforms, which, along with a broader IT and data industry, constitute contemporary "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2019). To work, each courier has to install an application on their phone. While a courier is signed in to the app, their every action generates data. The platform collects and accrues the data and uses these in analysis. One could say that, while working, every move of a courier is observed but meticulously recorded. Platforms develop ratings and *measures* of workers' performance based on collected data. Platforms use these measures to exert direct control over workers—from affecting the allocation of orders to having one's account suspended or even blocked. They also exert indirect control through regular personalized feedback reports that inform workers about their performance and recommend how it could be improved (Rosenblat and Stark 2015; Kellogg et al. 2020; Veen et al. 2020; Duggan et al. 2023; Wiener, Cram, and Benlian 2023). Finally, control of the labor process in a platform is achieved through deliberate and carefully administrated *asymmetry of information* (Shapiro 2017; Veen et al. 2020; Kadolkar, Kepes, and Subramony 2024). Each worker receives information on an incoming order piecemeal while the platform management monitors the whole fleet of workers

on real-time digital maps. The asymmetry of power over information is exacerbated through frequent updates of the application that change the visibility of information, rearrange how it is displayed, and even change the basic "rules of the game" (Shapiro 2017).

Two critical aspects of the control issue in platforms are inadequately acknowledged and understudied in the literature on on-demand labor platforms. First, the focus on the platform application overemphasizes automation in platform operations, whereas, in reality, platforms are only partially automated (van Zoonen, ter Hoeven, and Morgan 2023). They combine automated management with traditional human-controlled managerial techniques, and a better understanding of the latter is needed (Li 2022). Second, aforementioned studies of technologies of control account only for the control of the labor process—how the work is carried out—but tell very little about the control of labor mobility—when and how much workers decide to engage. To match fluctuating market demand with the very mobile workforce, the platforms use other mechanisms, such as push notifications, to reach out to workers and convince them to log in and work.

This paper contributes to other studies that address additional mechanisms of control beyond the platform application. Angela Ke Li (2022), in her research of the Didi Chuxing platform in China, observes that platforms use labor intermediaries and communication technologies, like push notifications, to ensure a sufficient supply of workers in times of high demand. Shalini Parth and Dharma Raju Bathini (2021), in a study of Uber and Ola platforms in India, demonstrate how these platforms combine algorithmic data analyses with other control mechanisms. For example, they use push notifi-

cations to "nudge" workers to work at specific times or longer hours, announcing price surges, special bonuses, and workers' competitions. Alex Rosenblat and Luke Stark (2015), in their study of Uber in the USA, mention the use of heat maps, incentives, and frequent messaging as "soft control" mechanisms urging drivers to log in or stay online.

These and many other studies rely on interviews with workers and a limited number of actual messages the workers have shared. By analyzing Bolt Food Riga's communication with its couriers, we can provide a much more thorough empirical analysis and more detailed insight into the platforms' governmentality techniques.

From Panopticism to Affective Governmentality

Extensive surveillance, meticulous measurement of performance, and asymmetry of information make platforms into digital "panopticons" (Foucault 1991), where the supervisors are missing, and the surveillance is carried out through algorithmic management (Veen et al. 2020; Woodcock 2020). Once workers sign in to the application, they find themselves in an "algocratic organizational system" (Aneesh 2009), where the application structures all their actions, and their freedom to choose is restricted by a limited set of programmed choices. Like Bentham's prison guard, the platform has a clear overview of the whole system—every move of each worker while they are signed on the app. The workers, just like Bentham's prisoners, are invisible to each other (van Doorn 2017:904) and receive only the minimum information needed to accomplish each task. The awareness of the prison guard or the "illusion of control" (Woodcock 2020) is maintained through the performance measures that workers perceive in

monthly reports or once their account gets temporarily blocked. Some argue that it is exemplary of a new technique of control—"algorithmic governmentality" (Rouvroy and Hildebrandt 2011)—that is the anticipation of human behavior based on massive amounts of raw data without being concerned with causes or individual intentions (Lemke 2012). Without denying panopticism and algorithmic governmentality in on-demand platforms, our analysis of push notifications suggests that the control in platforms is not fully algocratic and that affective governmentality plays an essential role in the overall assemblage of algorithmic management (Kotliar 2021).

In gig work studies, emotions and affects are most frequently discussed regarding "affective labor" (Clough and Halley 2007) performed by gig workers who have frequent interpersonal contacts, such as taxi drivers or on-site micro workers (Wu and Huang 2024). However, some studies touch upon the role of affects and emotions in the rationalization and subjectification of workers. Aaron Shapiro (2018), in a study of Caviar and Postimees in Philadelphia, introduces a new term—"qualculation"—to refer to gig workers' "affective form of reasoning" that combines self-interest with moral considerations and on-the-job bodily and affective sense-making. Edouard Pignot (2023) points out ideological control in the platform economy and argues that it takes place at subjective-affective level via "persuasive performances" or personalized "interpellations" (Althusser 1971), such as algorithmic notifications, motivational incentives, and surge pricing. Sophia Galière (2020), in a study of Deliveroo, demonstrates how, besides disciplinary power, platforms exert normative power. Platforms use discursive features to prompt workers to view themselves as entrepreneurs, and workers consent to discipline because

they see it as "a tool for a hyper-meritocratic ideal of justice" (Galière 2020:9).

With our analysis, we aim to contribute to understanding governmentality technologies in food delivery platforms beyond the algorithmic infrastructure of the platform application. Using qualitative analysis of Riga Bolt Food notifications, we will demonstrate how push notifications serve as an affective control mechanism to reach out to workers and drag the workers into the algorithmic panopticon.

Methodology

The present study is part of a larger research project conducted from 2022 to 2024 in Riga and focused on the experience and practice of gig work by food delivery workers on two platforms—Wolt and Bolt Food. Several qualitative research methods were used to collect data, including 60 in-depth interviews with gig workers of both platforms, analysis of communication among workers on the Telegram platform, and communication between the platform and its couriers—push notifications sent by Bolt Food to its couriers on its official Telegram channel. Based on the data, we have analyzed differences in our respondents' motivations for choosing this work, their position, and historical mobility in the social structure (Ķešāne and Spuriņa 2024a; see also Ķešāne and Spuriņa 2024b) and have addressed the tension between autonomy and control in gig work (Ķešāne and Spuriņa forthcoming).

The analysis reported here is based on qualitative content analysis of push notifications sent by Bolt Food Riga to its couriers from January 01, 2020 to October 03, 2023 via Telegram instant messaging service. The use of an external channel of communication—Telegram—allowed us to download a complete archive of notifications sent by Riga Bolt Food to its couriers over four years of its operations and thereby provided a rare opportunity to get an insight into the internal workings of a platform that, being in the information technology and data business, is typically very seclusive and protective of its information. The following circumstances allowed us to treat the acquired data set as a part of the public domain, similar to any other publicly available promotional and advertising material, and therefore to be used for analysis without any ethical restrictions. First, at the time of the download, the data set was publicly accessible to any subscriber of the specific Telegram channel. Second, the channel itself was administrated by Bolt Food. All the notifications in the data set were authored by Bolt Food Management in Riga.

At the time of the download (October 03, 2023), the archive comprised 4153 text messages and had 7230 subscribers. The channel administrator had authored all notifications, and there were no comments or responses by any subscribers. The majority of messages were in two languages—Latvian and English. The archive was downloaded in JSON format and processed using Open Refine into a table format, where each message had a unique identifier, the date and time it was sent, and content in text format. The data were analyzed using Excel and Open Refine, an open-source application for data clean-up. The facet function in Open Refine and the in-built General Refine Expression Language (GREL) were helpful in data overviewing, transformation, text pattern identification, and coding. The resulting data set was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively through reiterative thematic coding (Gibbs 2007; Corbin and Strauss 2008).

The quantitative analysis focused on the metadata of notifications—the dates and times when each message was sent. Analysis of dates allowed us to arrive at the intensity of messaging—the number of push notifications sent per day, week, and month. Analysis of the time each message was sent revealed the daily rhythm of messaging. We also used quantitative analysis to see the frequency and prevalence of various emoji types used in platform communication with couriers.

The qualitative analysis focused on the content of notifications and the conveyed meaning of emoji to identify patterns in rationalization and affective framing. Preliminary analysis of the data corpus revealed variations in the spelling, construction of sentences, and choice of specific expressive means that suggested that notifications are not fully algorithmic but human-generated texts. At the same time, the notifications were repetitive and formulaic. There were a limited number of recurring themes, the structure and expression varied only slightly, and one could observe periods when the use of expressions had not changed at all, suggesting that the author had been writing new texts using the old as a template.

The content of the messages was analyzed thematically (Gibbs 2007; Corbin and Strauss 2008), using faceting and GREL search functions in Open Refine to aid the process. First, a four-month data subsection was inductively coded to find a range of communicative purposes of Riga Bolt Food push notifications. Second, the whole data set was coded using the identified categories, adding new categories if needed. This process was reiterated several times until all messages were categorized according to their communicative purpose. One of the subsections of messages—messages urging couriers to work—was further analyzed thematically, looking

for 1) rationalization used to encourage couriers to work and 2) instances of subjectification.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the notifications provided us with a range of topics indicative of the purposes for which the platform has used them. We identified four dominant themes. Only about *one-tenth* of all messages are aimed at providing *information* on working conditions, such as warnings about traffic restrictions or severe weather conditions, notices about temporary application malfunctions, and information on the measures taken by the platform to fix these troubles.

About *one-fourth* of messages set *disciplinary measures*—general "rules of the game," such as the default delivery rates and times of the day when rate multiplicators are applied, and listed recommended and forbidden behavior while delivering. While the information on rates is communicated somewhat regularly and does not change significantly over the four years, the rules of behavior, on the other hand, are set sporadically and inconsistently and vary from warnings that couriers cannot contact customers after completing the delivery to instructions to carry a second layer of clothing on hot summer days so they can change clothes if the first set gets sweaty.

About *two-thirds* of all notifications are invitations and encouragements to work. This part of notifications is particularly interesting because they construct rationalizations of why one should work and subjectify workers by addressing them in specific ways. Analysis of these notifications reveals three kinds of affective governing that will be described and illustrated in the subsequent sections: a) intensity and asymmetry of information, b) affective framing, and c) emoji that directly communicates emotion.

Intensity and Asymmetry of Information

Looking at the number of daily notifications, we see affective governmentality in the intensity of reminders about work and the one-sided flow of information.

On average, Bolt Food Riga couriers have received about twenty-two notifications per week or three per day. The number of weekly notifications varies from more than 90 messages in December 2022 to two or fewer notifications for an entire week in February and March 2021. There are no visible patterns in the variation of the number of notifications; without additional information, it is hard to explain.

The uneven flow of notifications contradicts the view of the platforms providing information. If the push notifications served as a channel of information about market demand, one would expect them to be regular, like news about the weather or the currency exchange rates. Instead, the high intensity of messaging at some periods (13 notifications per day) and complete silence for as long as a week signal that these notifications are purposefully used to govern the behavior of their recipients.

If we look at the timing of notifications or the average number of notifications sent per hour (see Figure 1), we can see that there are three peaks in the number of notifications on weekdays (12:00-13:00, 17:00-18:00, and 20:00-21:00) and only one on holidays (20:00-21:00). These peaks coincide with traditional times for lunch, the end of the working day, and dinner, suggesting that push notifications are sent out predominantly during periods of high demand.

Figure 1. The total number of notifications sent by Bolt Food Riga to its couriers in 2021-2023 in each hour of the day
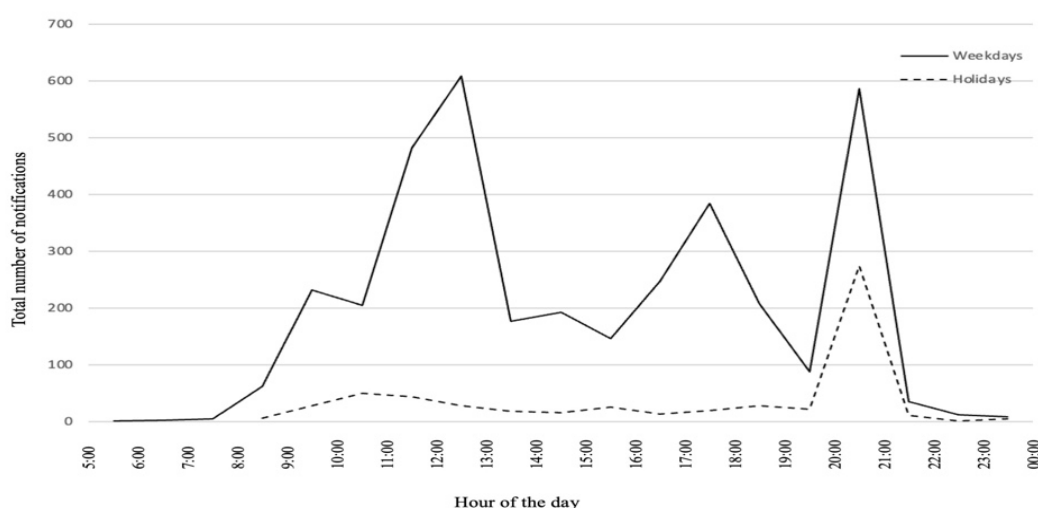
[The total number of notifications sent is indicated on the y-axis. The hour of the day (5:00 to 00:00)—on the x-axis. There are two lines—one for weekdays and one for holidays. The weekday line stays at zero from 5:00 to 8:00 and again from 22:00 to 00:00. From 9:00 to 21:00, it fluctuates around 200, with three significant peaks—600 at 12:00-13:00, almost 400 at 17:00-18:00, and almost 600 at 20:00-21:00. On holidays, the line stays below 50 from 8:00 to 00:00, with the only peak of about 250 at 20:00-21:00.]

Source: Authors' calculations.

The apparent correlation between the market demand and the intensity of the platform's communication with its workers demonstrates that the platform uses notifications to increase the number of couriers on the streets. Rather than regularly informing workers about the number of incoming orders, providing a complete picture of the market, and letting workers make calculated decisions and plan their working hours, the platform "informs" workers only when the demand for labor exceeds the supply. At other times—for example, when the demand is low or decreasing and workers could take a break—the platform remains silent.

The data demonstrate that control of the platform is exerted not only through its technological infrastructure—the application—but also through a discursive communicative practice—push notifications. This shows that push notifications are an essential control supplement to the platform application's digital panopticon (Veen 2020; Woodcock 2020). The platform Bolt Food uses push notifications to reach out to workers who are off and, therefore, are outside of the panopticon. The intensity of intrusive notifications can be considered a form of affective control. Repeated reminders of work that address individuals as workers during their off-hours inhibit their ability to relax and focus on their lives. Such messages appeal to such feelings as guilt for not working and might provoke feelings of anxiety. Such intrusive and, at times, very intensive communication contradicts the platform's promise that couriers can set their schedules.

The one-sidedness of the communication—the intensive messaging at times when the market demand is high and the lack of communication when the market demand is decreasing—contributes to the understanding of the asymmetry of information in platform labor found in other studies (Shapiro 2017; Veen et al. 2020; Kadolkar et al. 2024). We can see that the information asymmetry is not only built into the application, where workers receive information piecemeal while the platform has an overview of the whole system. It is also an integrated part of platform communication outside of the application. This communication pattern suggests that push notifications are used as a mechanism of control, and further analysis of the content of the notifications corroborates this interpretation.

Affective Rationalization and Subjectification

Content analysis of push notifications reveals the predominance of affective rationalization and subjectification. In its invitations to work, the platform does not communicate calculative rationale but rather appeals to the fear of missing out and losing opportunities. It also addresses the couriers in a way that targets their self-esteem and sense of duty.

More than half of all notifications urge couriers to activate the application and work or stay longer at work. Only one-fifth of the notifications inviting to work were grounded in calculative rationalization, offering higher remuneration or promising some other bonus or benefit. Some of these calculative rationalizations can be considered semi-affective mechanisms of control because they include elements of "gamification" (Woodcock and Johnson 2018; van Doorn and Chen 2021; de Krijger 2023), for example, announcements of a reward for a courier that delivers most orders at a specific time or an extra pay if a courier delivers a certain number of orders in a certain period. Other studies have documented that, due to information asymmetry,

such mechanisms of control sometimes result in feelings of anxiety and powerlessness when couriers extend their working hours to receive a volume bonus but fail to achieve it because they do not receive enough orders to deliver (van Doorn and Chen 2021).

The majority of notifications urging couriers to come out and work or to extend their working hours beyond planned, four-fifths of all invitations to work, are based on affective non-calculative rationale claiming that there is an extremely booming market and staying home one will miss out on their opportunities. In these notifications, information about incoming orders is expressed in a hyperbolic way, with extensive use of exclamation marks and excessive means of expression. As for example, here:

> WOW! So many orders today. Do not lose your chance and come online now! 🔥🔥🔥 [fire emoji, fire emoji, fire emoji] 95 % of couriers are with orders! 💣 [bomb emoji] [2020-07-08T11:36:08]

> 🆘 [SOS button emoji] The city is already on fire! The best time to join us now! 🙌 [raising hands emoji] [2021-03-10T12:19:26]

> City is on fire, tons of incoming orders 🔥 [fire emoji] [2022-12-18T12:56:50]

The emotionally loaded way of expression and the use of superlative terms to characterize the status of the market, such as "on fire," "so many," and "tons of," do not merely provide information on market opportunities based on which couriers can make reasoned decisions to work or stay home. Instead, as an affectively loaded statement of how things are, they create rather narrow "lines

of force" (Bröckling et al. 2012) within which there is only one right course of action—to work.

There are no notifications that would inform about other degrees of the demand—low or medium—or more detailed information on the level of demand, for example, the number of orders per hour. We can see another form of information asymmetry—the platform informs the couriers only about the times when the demand is high or is going up, but it gives no indication that the demand is decreasing or it is so low that the majority of couriers could stop working and take a rest. There is an affective asymmetry, where the platform communicates care about couriers missing out on opportunities to earn but does not demonstrate any care about their need to rest and recuperate.

The information on the high market demand is often narrated in a way that it is something unique, happening right now, and can be lost or wasted. Here are some examples:

> Come on guys! No time to waste. More you wait, more you lose 😉 [winking face emoji] [2020-05-11T11:46:14]

> Super huge amount of incoming orders! If you are not online, then you are losing a great chance to earn! ❄️ [snowflake emoji] [2021-12-03T12:00:49]

> The city is full with orders! ❌ [red cross mark emoji] Come-online and dont miss an opportunity to earn! 💸 [money with wings emoji] [2022-08-11T20:28:07]

This sense of urgency maintained by warning against "losing time" or "missing opportunities" is hardly informative. It is important to note that this sense of urgency comes on top of the overall

temporal regime maintained by the platform application itself, where workers are given a very short time to review and accept an incoming offer and are prescribed a certain time to pick up and drop off an order. It is clear that the collective availability of workers in the on-demand economy comes at the expense of each worker's temporal autonomy (see also Shapiro 2017; Chen and Sun 2020).

The same expressive means are used to communicate information about the actual high number of incoming orders and expected high demand in the coming hours, often not clearly distinguishing the two. The expectations being communicated in the same hyperbolic way as statements about the present situation create an impression of complete certainty of the future. Certainty, as an emotion that is based on cognition (Barbalet 1992), is crucial to orient one's action in a positive way as it gives a sense of predictability and control. Here are some examples of it:

Hey, rain is expected today, which means that the number of orders will increase rapidly. Remember - rain is your best friend when delivering! ☔ [umbrella with raindrops emoji] = 💸 [money with wings emoji] [2022-08-22T08:20:35]

🔥❤️🔥 [fire emoji, red heart emoji, fire emoji] Valentine's day - the most active day yet 🇬🇧 [flag of UK emoji] Hey! Already tomorrow a record amount of orders are expected all day long. The peak of the day is expected from 5 PM - 10 PM. 🚀 [rocket emoji] Earn your highest earnings yet and receive the money already on Monday! 💥 [collision emoji] [2020-02-13T18:56:05]

Similar observations of the lack of distinction between reality and expectations based on algorithmic

calculations are reported in other studies. Rosenblat and Stark (2015) and Pignot (2023) report that experienced gig workers learn not to trust the platform's assertion of high expected demand because, reportedly, they often turn out not to come true. These observations show that due to asymmetry of power and information, the platforms are not motivated to increase the precision of their predictions or urge couriers to stop working because a mismatch between the demand and supply of labor is costly for the platform only if the demand exceeds the supply. Whereas, when the labor supply exceeds the demand, the only ones who suffer are couriers who have planned to work but are forced to stay idle.

Finally, in attempts to draw workers online, the platform appeals not only to the rational opportunity to earn but rationalizes their work as an act of bravery or a civic duty and asks couriers "to help" concealing the asymmetric employer-worker power relation behind an ideological fantasy of the platform and couriers united in a civic mission. This is done through subjectification—through addressing couriers as partners in a civic mission and heroes. Here are some examples:

SOS! This city needs you! Be a hero and go online to help the citizens to cope with their hunger 🦸‍♂️🦸‍♀️[man superhero emoji, woman superhero emoji] The orders are coming more and more! 🌋 [volcano emoji] [2020-06-02T09:05:22]

Orders are coming in non stop! Need more heroes to help us! 🚨 [red police car light emoji] [2021-05-08T13:07:03]

Couriers who are online now - you are real heroes! 🦸‍♂️🦸‍♀️[man superhero emoji, woman superhero emoji] [2020-06-08T17:36:08]

This subjectification of couriers as "heroes," portrayal of delivery work as bravery, and rationalization of work by statements that "people are hungry" have been observed in other studies of platform labor. Jeremias Prassl and Martin Risak (2016) report that TaskRabbit refers to its workers as "neighborhood heroes" and "entrepreneurs like you who can help [busy people] get things done" (Prassl and Risak 2016:24). Pignot (2023) argues that such personalized corporate interpellations platforms "seduces and flatters the self by silently depriving workers of their social and legal status as 'employees' or 'workers,' and by removing from them any chance of challenging the existing power structure" (Pignot 2023:148).

Overall, it is clear that affective governing at platform delivery works through texts and signs to appeal to workers' emotions that prompt their action to work.

Emoji

This discursive affective governmentality technique is supplemented by extensive use of emoji—digital pictograms encoded in Unicode that today are a standard part of computer-mediated communication and serve as "signifiers of affective meaning" (Stark and Crawford 2015). Emoticons, emojis, and kaomoji nowadays are used not only in digital communication but also in social debates, economy, art, and literature (Giannoulis and Wilde 2020), and as we can demonstrate, also in labor relations.

The whole corpus of Bolt Food Riga notifications to its couriers from 2020 to 2023 contains 36,164 emoji of 237 different kinds, or on average, eight emojis per message. The analysis of these emoji complements the text analysis in the previous section. Our anal-

ysis suggests that the platform uses emojis to create a sense of urgency and alarm, whereas the emojis most frequently used in everyday communication—those that express positive emotions and support, such as regular smileys—are very marginal in the Bolt Food Riga communication.

The most frequent emoji in Bolt Food Riga messages is *high voltage*, followed by *fire* and a *red pin*. Such emojis emphasize the need to be alert and get involved, making a reader anxious that something important is going on and that help is needed. Table 2 shows the rest of the top 10 most frequent emojis and their frequencies.

Table 2. Top 10 most frequently used emoji in Bolt Food Riga notifications, 2020-2023

Emoji	Name	Frequency
⚡	lighting	4950
🔥	fire	4315
📍	red pin	3056
💚	green heart	2238
❗	red exclamation mark	2125
🍏	green apple	1871
💸	flying money	1275
💡	lightbulb	1149
💰	money bag	962
🍔	burger	919

Source: Authors' calculations.

To get a more thorough overview of emojis, we did a thematic analysis of all emojis and found five general themes.

Table 3. Themes of emoji in Riga Bolt Food notifications, 2020-2023, and the prevalence of each theme in the total corpus (N = 36164)

Theme	Emoji (images)	Emoji (names)	Prevalence
urgency and alarm		high voltage, fire, red pin, red exclamation mark, lightbulb, backhand index pointing up and down, police car light, face screaming in fear, red cross mark, red circle, waving hand, alarm clock, exploding head, rocket	55%
food delivery		red cars, shopping cart, burger, bowl, noodles, pizza, coffee, pancakes, hot dog, drink, smartphone	11%
money		dollar bills, credit card, euro bills, diamond, money-mouth face, dollar sign, flying money, bag of money	11%
corporate green		green apple, green heart	11%
affection and support		raising hands, relieved face, star-struck, smiling face with smiling eyes, flexed biceps, smiling face with heart eyes, smiling face with sunglasses, star, face savoring food	5%

Source: Authors' calculations.

As can be seen in Table 3, more than half of all emojis (55%) communicate *urgency and alarm*. Among those are the most frequently used emoji of high voltage, fire, and red pin, but also other red-colored emoji, such as red exclamation mark, red cross, red dot, and red police sirens. Besides these, the sense of alarm and urgency is also expressed through the face screaming in fear emoji, exploding head, a rocket, and several hand gestures—upward and downward pointing index fingers and a waving hand.

Only about 5% of emoji are the most common emoji of affection and support—various smileys and raising hands or high-fives, as well as flexed biceps and stars. The rest of the emoji can be divided into three equally represented themes. One, the most expected, is emojis thematically related to food delivery, such as delivery cars, various food items, and smartphone emojis. Another is what we call "corporate green," which entails only two emojis—a green heart and a green apple. These emojis match the corporate color of Riga Bolt Food and are used along with the company name throughout the corpus. Finally, equally prevalent as the previous two is the theme of money that includes dollar and euro bills in various formats, as well as a money bag, a flying pack of money, and a smiley with money on the eyes and tongue.

The extensive use of emojis in Bolt Food notifications demonstrates Riga Bolt Food's communication with the couriers as an affective governmentality practice (Harmat 2023). Emojis expressing urgency, such as lightning, fire, and red colored dots, crosses, and exclamation marks, clearly serve as instruments of affective control (D'Aoust 2015; Kantola et al. 2019) and are aimed at evoking the decision to work based on emotions—the feeling of anxiety (Moisander et al. 2016). These emojis feed into the rationalization of the market situation as fast-changing that can be lost or wasted, where there is no time to reason and calculate, and one should act fast, not "miss out" and "lose opportunities" that are out there. The analysis demonstrates that emojis are an important tool to induce an "affective form of reasoning" (Shapiro 2017) on a subjective-affective level (Pignot 2023) and that push notifications as a discursive affective governmentality practice is an important component of the overall algorithmic assemblage (Kotliar 2021) in food delivery platforms.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our analysis demonstrates that affective governmentality techniques play an important role in the overall assemblage of algorithmic management (Kotliar 2021) in food delivery platforms. It is clear that the platform is not a neutral provider of information but rather uses affectively loaded discursive rationalization and subjectivization to control workers' behavior. If the platform application is viewed as an algorithmic panopticon (Veen et al. 2020; Woodcock 2020) that a worker can enter or exit by signing on or off the application, the push notifications resemble intrusive missionaries that reach out to workers while they are off and drag them into the panopticon using effective persuasive techniques. The affective governmentality mechanisms, illumi-nated by our analyses, demonstrate that platforms inhibit the promised autonomy and freedom of couriers to work when and how long they want by affective subjectification and rationalization. Platforms construct morality claims they systematically deliver to couriers (Dean 2010). They subjectify couriers by appealing to their courage, heroism, and "civic duty" to feed the hungry and play on the fear of missing out and losing opportunities. They also rationalize the decision to work when the platform is experiencing a shortage of couriers by exaggerating the market demand and by evoking the feeling of anxiety through the use of an extensive amount of alarm and urgency-provoking emojis. In line with the governmentality studies, platforms emphasize and promote only certain forms of couriers' self-understanding (Dean 2010). With their push-notification platforms form continuously active subjects but never inform them about their need to rest to rejuvenate (cf. Galière 2020; Pignot 2023). In other words, the study demonstrates that push notifications are affective governmentality mechanism used to increase the number of couriers on the streets at times of high demand, and this instrument of control is affectively loaded and asymmetric.

Besides illuminating the affective aspect of control technologies in platform labor, the study adds to the understanding of the human element in automated algorithmic management systems in more than one way. In a fully automated food delivery system, the delivery would be ensured by a set of robots or drones that would be activated and deactivated whenever necessary. In such an automated system, the deactivation of the robots would be important to decrease costs. In a current system, where deliveries are performed by humans, the key issue is the availability of the labor force. Because the cost of the supply of labor exceeding the demand is fully paid

by the workers, the platform cares only about increasing the number of riders in the system without taking care of "switching" them off.

The invisible authors of push notifications are among those new and understudied occupations that have developed alongside algorithmic management and bridge and bypass the gaps in global sociotechnical systems (Kellogg et al. 2020). One could say that the notifications they draft and send to the couriers accommodate the human factor in a system moving toward automation. In its present format, the platform relies on the communication skills of these workers and their mastery of the local language. In this, they resemble other local workers in global economic systems, such as the-last-mile delivery couriers in Poland whose local knowledge, analytical, and interactive skills are crucial for the smooth functioning of the global and slowly automating ecosystem of logistics (Pieczka and Miszczyński 2024).

Our findings raise important ethical and regulatory concerns about the role of affective governmentality in the platform economy. The use of persuasive communication techniques to influence worker behavior—without formal employment relationships—complicates existing debates on labor rights and workplace autonomy. Traditional employment structures are subject to regulations that limit excessive managerial control, yet platform-mediated work often circumvents these protections by relying on algorithmic and affective nudging rather than direct supervision. This raises pressing questions about consent, coercion, and the limits of self-employment in the gig economy. To address these concerns, policymakers and labor advocates may need to explore new regulatory frameworks that account for the psychological and emotional pressures imposed by digital platforms. Such mea-

sures could include transparency requirements for algorithmic decision-making, limits on the frequency of push notifications, or worker rights provisions that acknowledge the hidden forms of control embedded in platform labor.

Our analysis has certain limitations. It demonstrates the technologies of control and the affective rationalities push notifications project onto workers. How workers perceive, experience, and feel about these push notifications has been left outside of this study. Other studies demonstrate that gig workers are not passive recipients of platforms' affective control (Shapiro 2017; Woodcock 2020; Pieczka and Miszczyński 2024; Tuomi et al. 2024). For example, Shapiro (2017) argues that workers use "qualculation"—a combination of rational calculation, intuition, and on-the-job bodily and affective sense-making to make decisions and gain control in gig work (Shapiro 2017). Aarni Tuomi and colleagues (2024) demonstrate what they call "algoactivistic approaches" used by workers to mitigate algorithmic control. Yet, given the affective load push notifications carry, it is important to study to what extent their affective influence reaches gig workers and what kind of workers' subjectivities these push notifications shape. Such knowledge is crucial to understanding the power dynamics of the platform economy and how it affects the well-being of workers.

Our study underscores the need for a more integrated, interdisciplinary approach to understanding control and agency in the platform economy. While labor studies have extensively examined algorithmic management and surveillance, and digital communication research has explored the persuasive power of platform design, there remains a gap in understanding how these elements interact as part of a larger socio-technical system. By drawing from

sociology, psychology, media studies, and labor economics, future research can offer a more nuanced perspective on how workers and consumers navigate these digital environments. This cross-disciplinary engagement is essential for identifying new forms of resistance, adaptation, and policy intervention that can help shape a more equitable future for digital labor and platform-based work.

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