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Isabella Hatch

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Antonia Randolph

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Antonia.randolph@unc.edu

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Digital Shame, Dehumanization, and Dismissal: An Analysis of Gender Policing

Isabella Hatch¹ and Antonia Randolph

¹Department of Public Policy
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill, NC 27514

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Antonia Randolph

Department of American Studies
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill, NC 27514
antonia.randolph@unc.edu

Abstract

Introduction: The online performance of gender provides a unique glimpse at how individuals manipulate digital settings to reflect their engagement with their own gender performance and the gender performance of others. The majority of gender performance occurs subconsciously and is learned through repeated engagement with gendered expectations. However, the performativity of gender is brought to individuals' consciousness when they are confronted with individuals who perform in a way that contrasts with previously held gender expectations. Transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals face frequent and often harsh gender policing that attacks them for their deviation from performances that are socially "acceptable."

Methods: An ethnographic research project was conducted by recording observations of individuals' interaction with, and response to, gender performances on the NBC News Instagram feed. Particular instances where the performativity of gender becomes a conscious engagement for users were detailed, and their reactions to different performances of gender were analyzed.

Results and Conclusion: Eleven posts with a collective 2,331 comments were analyzed throughout this research. An overwhelming majority of the comments observed implemented one of the three gender policing strategies outlined above. In the three comment sections with the least instances of gender policing, the rate of gender policing in the comments hovered around 50%, with roughly half of the comments utilizing one of the strategies of gender policing and the other half affirming the messages communicated by the post. For the other eight comment sections analyzed, comments that utilized gender policing strategies constituted roughly 75-80% of the comments. Across all eleven posts, 51 comments were utilized for a deeper analysis of the dynamics of gender policing online. While the three strategies of gender policing that will be discussed in this paper are by no means the only forms of gender policing observed on the NBC News Instagram feed, these strategies encompass a wide range of comments and appear the most frequently.

Gender policing occurs as a defensive response to gender performances that subvert expectations and draw prominence to the performativity that gender is. When trying to attack someone for contrasting gendered expectations, there are three main ways to accomplish this: try to make them feel bad about their gender performance, warrant harm towards them as a consequence of the "offensiveness" of their gender performance, or label their gender performance as invalid. These three defense mechanisms translate into the shame strategy, the dehumanization strategy, and the

dismissal strategy. Future studies should investigate how gender is policed and if these strategies are consistent across news platforms, regardless of political leaning. Additionally, future studies evaluate how gender policing on the Instagram pages of news sites compares to gender policing on personal Instagram pages.

Keywords: Transgender, Gender Policing, Gender Performance, Online Communication, Instagram

Introduction

Given the inherent performativity of gender, any performance that disrupts expectations of gender can heighten an individual's awareness that such performances are occurring. This can be confusing or even alarming considering the lack of consciousness that often goes into the performance of gender. The performativity of gender tends to be situated in consciousness when one is aware that another person is behaving in ways that deviate from gender norms or socially “acceptable” gender performances. Normative gender rules are governed by the gender binary, and gender policing is often discussed in relation to cross-gender transgressions. Gender policing refers to the ways in which individuals, groups, and systems attempt to regulate such expressions of gender through socially dictated expectations (Drescher, 2015). When confronted with a gender performance that disturbs expectations, individuals can police gender in various ways.

Gender policing can be both a conscious and subconscious act. Theorists of gender performance often view gender as created through social interaction and solidified in cultures through repetition of behavior (Sallee and Harris III, 2011). What begins as the social construction of the sex dichotomy between men and women transcends into the gender dichotomy. The sex dichotomy is purely anatomical, but there are no anatomical guidelines that set our expectations for gender. Instead, gendered expectations sit at the convergence of anatomy and socially constructed norms that are placed in relation to the sex dichotomy. Individuals are born with an anatomical gender, but psychological gender is a later, cognitive acquisition (Drescher, 2015). While genitals are the criterion for sex assignments, daily interactions involve sex attributions with a complete lack of information about others' genitals (Messerschmidt, 2016). For example, recognition of sex could be based on speech, hair, clothing, or overall physical appearance (Messerschmidt, 2016). Tied to these sex attributions is a set of behavioral expectations dependent on whether one is perceived as a man or a woman. These behavioral expectations are social constructions that have been historically constructed and reconstructed to generate the male-female binary that associates men with masculine characteristics and women with feminine characteristics.

Almost any environment or setting can serve as a site for gender policing. Schools are often sites of surveillance for students as behaviors are governed and regulated by gendered norms and sex expectations (Davies, 2017). Parents are typically responsible for explaining the rules of society to their children (Drescher, 2015). Consequently, homes can also be sites where gender is policed, and gender norms are taught and

reinforced. While learning the socially sanctioned attributes of their own gender, children simultaneously learn about the other gender as culturally opposite (Drescher, 2015). Additionally, gender policing does not have to be a blatant command for someone to adhere to gendered expectations. It can be as simple as directing someone to where the “correct” public restroom is. We even police our own genders as we look for “male” and “female” symbols when seeking public restrooms for ourselves. Every site for gender policing can also serve as a site for resistance. For example, many scholars argue that through advocacy, policy, implementation, and the creation of gender-neutral bathrooms, safer and more positive school environments can be created for transgender and gender non-conforming students (Davies, 2017). On an individual level, this resistance could involve monitoring oneself to refrain from making assumptions or speaking on the gendered performance of others or criticize others that actively police gender.

This paper discusses strategies of gender policing: Digital Shame, Dehumanization, and Dismissal. These three strategies and other forms of gender policing stigmatize expressions that are unsanctioned and uphold the gender binary. An investigation of comments on photos posted to the NBC News Instagram feed was used to analyze gender policing online. After taking note of the online strategies of gender policing, conclusions were made surrounding who tends to police gender online and the methods they utilize to do so.

Materials and Method

To conduct this research, NBC News’ Instagram feed was selected because it is a marginally left-leaning news source (Jurkowitz et al., 2020). Unlike the left-leaning news, right-leaning news sources tend not to post stories involving transgender or gender-nonconforming individuals. 34% of United States’ adults turn to NBC for news, making it the third most relied upon network behind Fox News and CNN (Jurkowitz et al., 2020). While there is still a left-leaning bias, NBC News still provides a substantial number of both Republican and Democratic consumers that interact with posts.

Specifically, the lead author scrolled through the NBC News Instagram feed for one hour, three separate times. The first set of ethnographic observations were collected on September 1, 2020, from 1:30 pm- 2:30 pm, the second set on September 24, 2020, from 7 pm- 8 pm, and the third set of observations were compiled on October 20, 2020, from 7 pm-8 pm. The researcher noted any use of the following keywords: transgender, gender, and non-binary. In addition to reading and recording comments,

user profiles that were identified as participating in gender policing were noted and the following information was gathered: username, profile picture, indication of gender or race, general age. For the sake of anonymity, the usernames were omitted from this paper and replaced with study titles such as 'User 1' that lack any identifying features of the users.

Results

Eleven posts with a collective 2,331 comments were analyzed throughout this research. An overwhelming majority of the comments observed implemented one of the three gender policing strategies outlined above. In the three comment sections with the least instances of gender policing, the rate of gender policing in the comments hovered around 50%, with roughly half of the comments utilizing one of the strategies of gender policing and the other half affirming the messages communicated by the post. For the other eight comment sections analyzed, comments that utilized gender policing strategies constituted roughly 75-80% of the comments. Across all eleven posts, 51 comments were utilized for a deeper analysis of the dynamics of gender policing online. While the three strategies of gender policing that will be discussed in this paper are by no means the only forms of gender policing observed on the NBC News Instagram feed, these strategies encompass a wide range of comments and appear the most frequently.

Gender Policing: The Shame Strategy

Shame is often used as an attempt to ridicule an individual's gender performance to the point that they consider adjusting how their gender is performed. Using shame as a strategy tends to include the use of inflammatory and demeaning diction, and often utilizes attacks on physical appearance. On a post about actress Angelica Ross making history as the first transgender actor to be a series regular on two simultaneous shows, User 1 commented: "He doesn't make a pretty girl." This comment utilizes shame in two main ways. The first is the insistence on referring to Angelica Ross with he/him pronouns. The second is by attacking Angelica Ross's physical appearance, claiming that she is ugly.

Within the gender hierarchy, cisgender male and female identities (meaning a person whose identity and gender correspond with their birth sex) are the hegemonic groups that lay the foundation for what is considered socially "acceptable" performances of gender. These hegemonic groups epitomize polar realms of gendered behaviors and physical appearances, and orient "valid" performances within the two categories. Within transgender or gender non-conforming identities, there is still a hierarchy, with

the most “convincing” gender presentations being regarded as more valid. These “convincing” performances are ones that manage to emulate hegemonic cisgender performances. The attacks on Ross’s identity used shame as an attempt to delegitimize Angelica Ross’s gender performance and claim that her performance fails to be “convincing.”

Of the 51 comments used for a deeper analysis of online gender policing, five utilized the shame strategy.

Gender Policing: The Dehumanization Strategy

Dehumanization is used as an attempt to characterize any individual who identifies outside of the male-female binary is to obscure that they should be considered less than human. Using dehumanization as a strategy to attack transgender or gender non-conforming individuals typically involves name-calling and mockery at an extreme level. Additionally, the dehumanization strategy can appear in instances where individuals excuse discrimination or harm perpetuated onto transgender or gender non-conforming people. On a post about Grey’s Anatomy star Sara Ramirez coming out as gender nonbinary and announcing they will use both she/her and they/them pronouns, User 2 commented. “How about using the pronoun IT.”

This is a prime example of the dehumanization strategy as it mocks gender non-conforming pronouns while simultaneously implying that any pronoun outside of she/her or he/him is indicative of inhuman qualities. Comments mirroring the one above and using the word ‘it’ to refer to transgender individuals were observed on three other posts. Four of the eleven posts analyzed involving comments using the word ‘it’ to refer to transgender individuals demonstrates the profuse use of the dehumanization strategy. Additionally, this demonstrates the high levels of discomfort individuals who police gender experience when confronted with people who choose to use gender non-conforming pronouns. Gender non-conforming pronouns serve as instances where the performativity of gender shifts from the subconscious to the conscious and consequently generate frequent instances of gender policing.

Another aspect of the dehumanization strategy involves the notion that transgender, or gender non-conforming individuals “deserve” any harm or discrimination they suffer because of what gender police claim is a “decision” to occupy a marginalized identity. On a post about a 29-year-old transgender woman who was murdered two years after being deported from the United States for failing to prove her life was at risk in El Salvador, the following comments were listed:

User 3 If HE failed to prove anything, then it's HIS problem

User 4: @User 3 well now she has no problems because she's dead... and your compassion is staggering

User 3: @User 4 it was a he

User 5: @User 3 people who are overtly discriminatory towards gay and trans people... are very statistically probable of being closeted themselves. You don't have to hate yourself, sweetie. You can come out that closet!

User 6: @User 3 thank you for spreading the hatred and misunderstanding that allows this violence to keep happening

User 3: @User 5 really? That's all you have?

User 3: @User 6 you are welcome. USA

User 3: @User 5 nature said man. He doesn't get to change that. He is dead now, so I suppose it really doesn't matter now

The dehumanization strategy may be the most blatantly disconcerting aspect of online gender policing. In general, online spaces provide users a certain laxity in regard to being held socially accountable for words or behaviors. This laxity can lead users to say things they may never say in real life but feel comfortable saying online due to a lack of real consequence. The dehumanization strategy already operates on notions that transgender, and gender non-conforming individuals are less than human. Pairing these notions with the permissiveness of online spaces generates frequent instances where individuals can excuse violence, even to the extent of death, perpetuated onto transgender or gender non-conforming individuals.

Of the 51 comments analyzed for a deeper analysis of online gender policing, eleven utilized the dehumanization strategy.

Gender Policing: The Dismissal Strategy

The dismissal strategy may be the most common, as it can appear in a variety of ways. Additionally, this strategy is less verbally aggressive than the other strategies. The relatively lower verbal aggression of this strategy enables more users to participate in gender policing without feeling that their statements are inherently detrimental. The dismissal strategy often involves statements that try to delegitimize transgender identities by insisting on the rigidity of the male-female binary. On a post of an

Egyptian transgender activist, User 7 commented, “There is no such thing as transgender.”

A similar comment by User 1 reads, “Start acting like your own gender.” While comments that utilize the dismissal strategy are less verbally inflammatory, they are still damaging. This strategy caters to hegemonic cisgender identities, further reifying cisgender identities as the only forms of “valid” gender performance while simultaneously reaffirming the gender binary. Users who implement the dismissal strategy presumably benefit from the hegemonic relations that assign the most validity to cisgender identities. Participating in gender policing by dismissing transgender or gender non-conforming identities while simultaneously benefiting from a hegemonic gender identity demonstrates the operative role cisgender users play in determining which gender performances are “valid.”

Of the 51 comments analyzed for a deeper analysis of online gender policing, 35 utilized the dismissal strategy.

Who is Doing the Policing?

All but three of the 51 gender policing comments analyzed belonged to Instagram profiles of White men. Additionally, many of the avatars of these users depicted stereotypically masculine traits or activities. User 8, who utilized the dismissal strategy, has an avatar that displays a photo of a white man wearing camouflage and wearing a gun. Another user that utilized the dismissal strategy, User 1, has an avatar that displays a photo of a young white male jumping over a hurdle. There is an American flag emoji in his bio, along with text reading ‘5x State champion’. User 7 also used the dismissal strategy, and his avatar depicts a middle-aged white man wearing military garb. Alternatively, women tend to be on the monitoring side of gender policing interactions, calling out users who participate in gender policing and attempting to challenge their statements. User 5 was an active participant in monitoring User 3’s gender policing and provided a source of online accountability for the statements he was making. The authors believe the fact that the majority of users observed that participated in gender policing were White men is coincidental. Perhaps the White cisgender men’s hegemonic positioning at the top of the racial hierarchy, sexuality hierarchy, and gender hierarchy provides them with an inflated sense of “responsibility” to police gender.

Digital Gender Performance

Digital interactions are inherently different than in-person interactions, and those regarding the performance of gender are no different. It is highly unlikely that any of the users who participated in gender policing on the NBC News Instagram Feed will actually ever meet the transgender and gender non-conforming individuals they are policing. Yet, the users quoted above still felt some compulsion to engage in gender policing. This touches on the inherent power individuals who inhabit hegemonic identities feel that enables them to police gender online. Additionally, several users that engaged in gender policing appeared in comments from multiple posts observed, demonstrating a commitment to repetitive policing. A 2010 study by Janet Armentor-Cota analyzed how gender appears online. Three distinct patterns were observed, including gender fluidity, reproducing gender stereotypes, and simultaneous gender fluidity and gender reproduction (Armentor-Cota, 2010). Reproducing gender stereotypes includes the reproduction of gendered identities and interactions, gender harassment, and gendered expression (Armentor-Cota, 2010). This was the pattern most consistent with the interactions that were observed in this study.

Conclusion

Gender policing occurs as a defensive response to gender performances that subvert expectations and draw prominence to the performativity that gender is. When trying to attack someone for contrasting gendered expectations, there are three main ways to accomplish this: try to make them feel bad about their gender performance, warrant harm towards them as a consequence of the “offensiveness” of their gender performance, or label their gender performance as invalid. These three defense mechanisms translate into the shame strategy, the dehumanization strategy, and the dismissal strategy. Future studies should investigate how gender is policed and if these strategies are consistent across news platforms, regardless of political leaning. Additionally, future studies evaluate how gender policing on the Instagram pages of news sites compares to gender policing on personal Instagram pages.

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