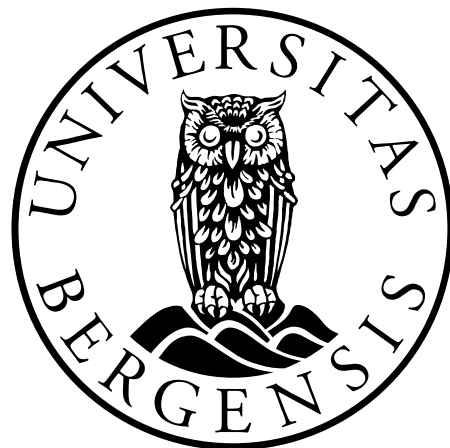# *"See me baby"*:

Colombian Youth Doing and Undoing Gender in Digital Spaces

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Finally, to my late grandfather, Einar Christian Gulbrandsen. Your unwavering support and unconditional love meant the world to me. I stand on the shoulders of giants, and you were one of them. This thesis is for you.

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Abstract

In a world that is constantly changing, young Colombians are navigating life in both digital and offline spaces. Though often approached with a dose of healthy scepticism by scholars, parents, and people in authority, social media can represent democracy, accessibility, freedom, and community for those who possess the resources to use it. Young Colombian people are increasingly exploring identities that deviate from the normative conceptions of gender, masculinity, and femininity. Instagram offers an arena where they can express themselves and their thoughts on gender and feminist issues more freely. Simultaneously, they risk facing the repercussions that come with challenging gender stereotypes in a country where conservative religious and political forces have significant influence in society.

This study sought to understand the complexity of young Colombian people's experiences with digital activism in relation to gender and feminist issues. I have employed qualitative methods, including six in-depth interviews with young Colombians aged between 18 to 34 years. Using snowballing technique, I recruited participants from similar socioeconomic- and demographic backgrounds who represented a range of different gender identities and sexual orientations.

The study found that the participants engaged in a myriad of different gender and feminist issues on Instagram, and the ways in which they chose to present these varied equally. Moreover, their motivations for engaging in these issues generated the identification of four different and overlapping roles that characterised their Instagram engagement: The respectful supporter, the activist, the role model, and the educator. The personal empowerment they gained, as well as the local impact their activism had on their family, friends, and in their local communities, highlight Instagram's potential as a supplement, and in some ways safer alternative, to more traditional and organised forms of collective action, such as street activism. However, the challenges the young Colombians faced on Instagram indicate that digital activism is limited in its ability to generate change on a structural level. This study concludes that while contesting gender norms and stereotypes on an individual and interactional level may not be sufficient to undo gender, ordinary people's digital activism can be an important step towards social and structural change.

Key Words: *Instagram, digital activism, gender stereotypes, feminism, women's rights, LGBTQIA+, doing gender, undoing gender, Colombia.*

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and relevance

Over the past decade, gender and sexuality politics and struggles for women's rights have produced a dividing line in Colombia. The country's 2016 peace agreement to end the five decade-long war against the guerrilla group the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP) was a significant victory for human rights; also due to its historically inclusive language addressing the rights of women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Corredor, 2021; Nylander & Salvesen, 2017). These advancements, however, prompted resistance from right-wing political leaders, parts of the Catholic Church as well as evangelical churches, who framed the gender perspective as a "gender ideology" that would subsequently threaten Colombian family values (Corredor, 2021; Nylander & Salvesen, 2017). The rise of the countermovement was evident during the election of current president Iván Duque in 2018. His centre-right political position gained him the votes of conservative groups and supporters of the anti-women's and LGBTQIA+ rights movement (Cardona, 2018).

Despite the resistance and conservative backlash, Colombia has made important strides towards gender equality (OECD, 2020a) – much thanks to women's rights and LGBTQIA+ activists who put their lives at risk to ensure basic human rights. The recent judicial court's decision to decriminalise abortion within the first 24 weeks of pregnancy stands as a powerful example of Colombian activists' achievements and is an important step towards reaching the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5, target 5.6[1]. However, Colombia remains one of the most dangerous countries to be an activist. By April 26th this year, 52 activists had been killed – a steep increase compared to the total of 145 activists murdered during 2021 ("Colombia reports 52 activists killed already this year," 2022). The statistics on the killing of women and LGBTQIA+ people are equally grim. In 2021, Colombia reported 622 cases of femicide[2] (Statista, 2022), while at least six LGBTQIA+ men were murdered in Medellín alone within the first quarter of 2022 (Lavers, 2022).

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[1] "Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences" (United Nations, n.d.).

[2] The intentional murder of women and girls because they are women (World Health Organization, 2012). Femicide can take on many different forms, including intimate partner killings, honour killings, the murder of women and girls in armed conflict, and the murder of women and girls because of sexual orientation or gender identity (Husum & Storøy, 2021).

Parallel to the rising number of killings and violence, the use of social media platforms is continuously increasing (Baglari, Sharma, Palaniappan, & Suma, 2020). Young Colombians are seeking out alternative platforms to fight back against conservative religious and political forces and contest gender stereotypes that are deeply embedded in Colombian society. Whereas digital activism has been found to facilitate feminist consciousness and foster solidarity (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018), its effectiveness and ability to bring about social change is disputed. Nevertheless, when access to unlimited amounts of information is only a click away and the possibility to connect to people across the globe simply requires Internet and a smartphone, the premises for interaction and activism have undoubtedly changed.

Although politicians and legislators hold much of the power for bringing about social change, in the end, ordinary people are the ones who are dealing with the consequences of political decision-making and social norms in their everyday lives. The tireless efforts of women's and LGBTQIA+ rights activists, environmentalist activists, and indigenous activists in Colombia is a reminder that it is also ordinary people who mobilise, resist, and call for change when their rights are violated and neglected. As the world changes and becomes more digitalised, so does our strategies to navigate within it, and the younger generations are leading the way. This study seeks to understand the experiences of young Colombian people who are using Instagram as a digital platform to express their thoughts on issues that spark controversy among their family, friends, local communities, and politicians.

1.2 Research questions

Drawing on a qualitative study among a group of Colombian youth, the study seeks to answer the following research question:

- What are these young Colombians experiences when engaging in gender and feminist issues on Instagram?

Additionally, three sub-questions will be explored:

- What do these young Colombians aim to achieve by posting gender and feminist content on Instagram, and how useful do they find Instagram to be in order to achieve these goals?
- To what extent does Instagram represent a safe/unsafe space for engaging in gender and feminist activism?
- To what extent does their engagement on Instagram contribute to undoing gender?

1.3 Context and definitions

Since its launch in 2010, Instagram is now the fourth most active of social media platforms, only bypassed by giants such as Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp (Kemp, 2022). In Colombia, 31,3 percent of the total population are Instagram users, among who 34,2 percent are between the age of 25-34 and 28 percent between the age of 18-24 (NapoleonCat, 2021). Instagram allows for myriad ways to communicate. Among the platform's many functions are posting photos and videos, going live, as well as the possibility to send direct messages and to comment on other Instagram users' content. Greijdanus and colleagues (2020, p. 49) have identified three different ways in which social media facilitate activism: Relating individual perspectives to activist causes, organising activist communities, and negotiating shared realities with outsiders. The interactive nature of Instagram makes it hence a suitable platform to conduct digital activism.

In this study, the term activism includes digital activism and subscribes to the understanding that activism is a broad concept that also comprises "everyday actions by individuals that foster new social networks or power dynamics" (Martin, Hanson, & Fontaine, 2007, p. 79). This definition of activism is a broadening of more traditional definitions that focus on activism as acts that result in direct political action. Martin and colleagues (2007) highlight the role of individuals in creating change, particularly how women can transform their everyday lives through interaction within their communities. Though individual activism may not have any direct impact on structures or institutions, its value should not be undermined as the local change they bring about can lead to more formal and organised forms of activism. Eventually, it may influence political decisions and transform institutions (Martin et al., 2007).

In order to understand how gender can be undone, as well as young Colombians' role in such a process, it is necessary to clarify what is actually meant when referring to "gender". Considering the relationship between the concepts sex and gender (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2018; West & Zimmerman, 1987), this study adopts the understanding that "sex is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as males or females" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127), such as genitals, whereas gender is made up of the everyday practices that we do, or do not do, in accordance with what is socially agreed upon as normative behaviour and display of masculinity and femininity (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127). West & Zimmerman (1987, p. 127) introduces a third concept, namely sex category, in which one's placement is determined by one's sex, but is maintained through "identificatory displays" that coincide with the category one claims to belong to.

1.4 Outline

The thesis is organised into eight chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 consists of a review of relevant literature. In the third chapter, I present the theoretical framework that guides the analysis, with a focus on the concepts of *doing* and *undoing gender*. Chapter 4 presents the research methodology employed. The empirical data is presented in Chapter 6, followed by Chapter 7 where I provide an in-depth discussion of the study's findings. Finally, Chapter 8 comprises the concluding remarks of this study, as well as recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter discusses previous research in the field to contextualise my own study. I conducted a literature search in 'Oria' and 'Proquest'. Additionally, Google Scholar was used to supplement with some relevant articles. I used search words and word strings that were relevant for my research, like 'feminist activism', 'digital activism', 'feminist and queer movements in Colombia', 'gender stereotypes', 'gender norms', 'machismo', and 'marianismo'. The selected literature structures the chapter into three sub-sections: Feminist activism in Colombia, digital activism, and gender stereotypes in Colombia.

2.1 Feminist Activism in Colombia

The history of feminist activism in Colombia can be traced back to women's fight for civil and political rights in the 1930s. The dominance of the Catholic Church has been identified as one of the main reasons why Colombian women were not granted suffrage until 1957 – relatively late compared to women in other Latin American countries like Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru (Gonzalez, 2000). After gaining foothold, the women's rights movements secured women a seat at the table during the peace and democratisation processes in Colombia from November 2013 to the signing of the peace agreement between the government and FARC in October 2016 (Céspedes-Báez & Ruiz, 2018; Gómez & Montealegre, 2021). In more recent years, feminist and LGBTQIA+ activism have put gender and sexuality on the political agenda, resulting in change and more liberal laws through judicial decisions (Biroli & Caminotti, 2020).

Several studies (e.g. Biroli & Caminotti, 2020; Ruibal, 2021; Zulver, 2021) discuss the politicisation of gender and feminist issues in Latin America, arguing that it is central to political disputes in the region today. Biroli & Caminotti (2020, p. 1) describe it as a "dividing line in the public identities of parties, politicians, and candidates", and abortion is identified as a central partisan issue (Ruibal, 2021). Thus, Ruibal (2021) stresses the role of constitutional courts to advance abortion rights in Latin America. She notes that the court has become an alternative platform for social change; a space where feminist voices are heard. In February 2022, Colombia's constitutional court made the historical decision to decriminalise abortion during the first 24 weeks of pregnancy, much thanks to the long-term efforts of feminist activists and their ability to find non-traditional ways of advocating for change. This supports the need to further investigate alternative ways to engage in gender and feminist issues.

However, several studies show that such progress is seldom linear. Some scholars (Biroli & Caminotti, 2020; Zulver, 2021) highlight the phenomena of "patriarchal backlash" and "conservative backlash" as a counter-reaction to feminist advancements. Far-right movements rooted in conservative and religious thinking gain momentum by acting as an opponent to the feminist agenda, which is portrayed as a threat to traditional family structures and the public's interests. On a different note, Zulver (2021) brings attention to the escalation of gender-based violence in the aftermath of armed conflict, specifically armed groups targeting activist women who mobilised for peace and women's rights during the Colombian peace processes from 2012-2016. Drawing on the experiences of the Alianza de Mujeres Tejedoras de Vida (The Alliance

of Women "Weavers of Life"), an association of women in Putumayo, Zulver illustrates how mobilisation strengthened the women, but also made them vulnerable. This shows how important it is to not only contribute to research on feminist advancement and activism, but also to explore the vulnerability of activism and what spaces are safe and unsafe for the promotion of a feminist agenda in Colombia.

2.2 Digital Activism

In recent years, feminism has found its way to well-established social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. In some cases, the engagement of a few individuals can develop into global movements, of which #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter are notable examples of. Digital activism has the power to impact contemporary issues, and a number of studies have explored the effects of digital campaigns on social change (e.g. Boling, 2020; Mendes et al., 2018). However, although the foundation of digital feminism to a large extent is built on the engagement and actions of young individuals, little research has been done on what such engagement actually means to them and what they hope to achieve (Jackson, 2018). What are their experiences? To further understand how and why young Colombian people express their thoughts on gender and feminist issues on digital platforms such as Instagram, it is thus necessary to listen to young Colombian people's own stories and their experiences with promoting a feminist agenda on these social media platforms.

Digital activism has been found to raise feminist consciousness and produce solidarity (Mendes et al., 2018), making social media platforms such as Instagram a platform for not only sharing one's own views and perceptions, but to learn, grow, and develop through interaction with others. To illustrate, a substantial number of women are taking to Instagram in various ways to support, defend, or merely normalize the use of the hijab (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018; Pahwa, 2021). Furthermore, Instagram provides an alternative platform for self-representation, where people can actively seek to empower themselves and to contest gender norms (Rahbari, 2019). On digital spaces in general, Wade (2018, p. 21) states that they have been "integral to organizing and creating communities that centre and support Black women and girls". To support this claim, she draws on the case of the hashtag #blackgirlmagic and young artist Willow Smith and how she challenges gendered behavioural norms by posting content of herself on Instagram, displaying her nonnormative black girl identity through fashion, make-up, body language, and symbols. Subsequently, young girls are inspired and encouraged to unapologetically embrace their authentic selves and not to conform to established gender

norms. Whereas these authors show how people challenge and contest gender norms through digital activism, they do not explicitly focus on how and if gender is undone.

Different ways of engaging on Instagram include producing one's own personalized content, reposting from individuals' accounts and/or the official accounts of world leaders, organizations, and celebrities, or using collective hashtags to support specific causes (Boling, 2020). For example, #MosqueMeToo sprung out from the global #MeToo movement and became a way for Muslim women to tell their stories of sexual assault or harassment whilst in the Mosque or other spaces for prayer. The movement gave the women a voice and an opportunity to speak their truth. However, some women experienced a backlash for their online activities in their communities. They were either blamed by Muslims for behaving inappropriately, or non-Muslims framed the stories as evidence of their prejudices against Muslim men (Hirji, 2021). It is important to note this double-edged experience of digital feminism as research has shown that digital spaces do not necessarily equal safe spaces (Camacho-Miñano, MacIsaac, & Rich, 2019; Hirji, 2021; Rahbari, 2019) and can, as put by Milner (2016, p. 5) "simultaneously facilitate both empowerment and marginalization". Whereas many of these studies focus on digital activism linked to the Arab and Muslim context, my research expands on these findings by exploring digital feminism in Colombia, a relevant context given the centrality of feminist movements in current political debates, as discussed above. It also adds to existing research by exploring young Colombian people's experience of Instagram as a safe or unsafe space for engaging in gender and feminist issues while comparing it with their engagement of feminist activism on the streets.

2.3 Gender Stereotypes in Colombia

Several scholars (Demir, Bilkis, Jacobson, & Einstein, 2020; Englander, Yáñez, & Barney, 2012; Kulis, Marsiglia, Lingard, Nieri, & Nagoshi, 2008; Valencia-Garcia, Starks, Strick, & Simoni, 2008) highlight "machismo" and "marianismo" as concepts representing traditional Latin American gender roles and part of the underlying socio-cultural context in the region. According to these, machismo is characterized by stereotypical perceptions of male behaviour, such as aggressiveness, hypersexuality, and dominance over women and men through the means of violence (Mancera, Dorgo, & Provencio-Vasquez, 2017; Perrotte & Zamboanga, 2021). Simultaneously, marianismo is the female equivalent of machismo. Through the lens of marianismo, Latin American women are expected to embody characteristics such as sexual naivety, chastity prior to marriage, submissiveness, passivity, and nurturance (Rueda, Hoffman,

& Grytza, 2019; Villegas, Lemanski, & Valdéz, 2010). The direct reference to Virgin Mary also gives the concept a religious dimension and reflects the influence of the Catholic church in Latin American culture and society. Women are considered to be semi divine creatures, morally and spiritually superior to men (Hooge Michalka & Konieczny, 2019), and thus expected to exhibit self-sacrifice and devotion to their husband and children at the expense of their own well-being. In the article Prime-time narcos: the Mafia and gender in Colombian television, Miller, Barrios & Arroyave (2019) draws attention to how gender stereotypes infiltrate Colombian television, where women are generally portrayed as passive and submissive, but desirable objects, with slim, voluptuous bodies and delicate facial features. As a result, Colombian women are also faced with unrealistic beauty standards. It should be noted that marianismo as a conceptual framework is contentious in this field of research. Some scholars advise researchers to be careful when employing marianismo to avoid generalising and simplifying gender relations in Latin America (Hooge Michalka & Konieczny, 2019). Navarro (2002) actually rejects the concept completely, arguing that marianismo generalises women in a region where gender stereotypes vary depending on variables such as ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status.

Scholars have established that gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in traditional social relations in Colombia. Machismo and marianismo also contribute to uphold heteronormativity as an ideal, which can be linked to the Catholic Church's pursuit to maintain and protect Colombian traditional family values. However, recent studies (Khan, 2020; Peñaloza, 2020; Vásquez-Guarnizo, Chía-Ríos, & Tobar-Gómez, 2020) investigating Colombian students' perceptions of gender stereotypes and how they relate to them suggest that although traditional gender norms and stereotypes are still prevalent, there is unquestionably a shift in the attitudes towards gender and sexuality among the younger generations. Khan (2020), for example, finds that educators, specifically language teachers, can be agents of change by addressing gender, gender diversity, and sexuality in Colombian classrooms. This finding suggests that given a platform – in this case the classroom – individuals may have the ability to generate change in gender relations. My study expands on this finding by exploring how not only the classroom, but also social media can be a space where individuals can engage in processes leading to change in gender relations. Instead of examining people with authority, such as teachers, my study looks at how social media platforms such as Instagram represent spaces in which ordinary people can engage and possibly contribute to social change.

The digital shift is no longer a new concept, but it is an ongoing process. Thus, several studies have sought to investigate the effect of digital movements on social change. However, few address individuals' experiences of doing activism in digital spaces, despite being crucial for understanding how young people engage in contemporary issues. Additionally, existing literature mainly focuses on social change through organised activism or people in positions of authority, overlooking young people's everyday activism as they act as agents of change through Instagram and other social media platforms. This study will add to knowledge about young people, and particularly young Colombians', engagement with gender and feminist issues, as well as activism in digital spaces.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

3.1 Doing Gender

The term "doing gender" was coined by West & Zimmerman in 1987, who attempted to advance from a strictly structuralist approach to gender to understanding gender as something that is also constantly being performed through everyday interaction. West & Zimmerman (1987, p. 129) define gender as a "product of social doings of some sort", arguing that it is not "a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role". Instead, gender is in fact constituted through everyday interaction. This notion critiques the conceptual framework of "gender display" as presented by Goffman (1976). According to Goffman, gender display is an optional performance of femininity and masculinity. In contrast, the doing gender approach conveys that our own doing of gender and other people's judgement, and subsequently response, of our performance is constant and something we cannot chose not to participate in. Doing gender is therefore unavoidable. What we do and how we are judged by others is ultimately based on whether we are born with male or female genitalia, and to what extent we adhere to the agreed upon norms and behaviour belonging to one's respective sex category. Precisely because we are held accountable by others for our performances of gender, we therefore act with accountability in mind (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 136). West & Zimmerman (1987, p. 147) thus suggest that social change "must be pursued at both the institutional and cultural level of sex category and at the interactional level of gender". In this study, I employ the theoretical framework of "Doing Gender" because it allows me to examine in what way and to what extent activism on Instagram – where gender and feminist issues are expressed through a form of interaction with followers and other Instagram users – can challenge gender norms and stereotypes. Ultimately, this can

contribute to a better understanding of young Colombians' experiences of expressing their thoughts on gender and feminist issues on Instagram.

3.2 Undoing Gender

The article Undoing Gender by Francine M. Deutsch came as a response to West & Zimmerman's Doing Gender. Deutsch agrees with West & Zimmerman that gender must be seen as a result of more than behaviour that is passed down from generation to generation through socialisation. However, she critiques the way the concept has come to be used, arguing that the word "doing" emphasises gender conformity rather than reducing gender difference and gender inequality. Furthermore, Deutsch stresses that the doing gender approach fails to recognise the relation between social interaction and structural change. She suggests replacing "doing gender" with "undoing gender" when referring to the resistance of gender difference. When asking how we can undo gender, research should thus focus on (1) when and how social interactions can be less gendered, (2) whether gender can be irrelevant in interaction, (3) whether gendered interactions always underwrite inequality, (4) how the institutional and interactional levels work together to produce change, and (5) interaction as the site of change (Deutsch, 2007, p. 106). Deutsch further argues that when gender norms are challenged on an individual level through social interactions, it might promote "feminist consciousness" and reduce gender difference (Deutsch, 2007, p. 121). Hence, undoing gender can be understood as individual actions that potentially can lead to collective actions, which in turn might transform institutions and break gender barriers. She also emphasises that the assumed appropriate gendered behaviour changes over time and varies across and within societies. Therefore, the ways to undo gender must vary as well. Deutsch' framework can be useful for this study, particularly for exploring the relationship between the interactional and institutional level in relation to digital activism. Furthermore, this framework contributes to shedding light on the role of Instagram as a platform for doing and undoing gender.

3.3 Paradoxes of Gender Redux

Judith Lorber (2018) adds a third layer to the doing versus undoing gender debate in her chapter Paradoxes of Gender Redux, where she questions to what extent gender can actually be dismantled on an individual and interactional level. Lorber (2018, p. 299) argues that the presence of multiple gender identities has yet to invoke any change in the structure of binary gender regimes. Part of her argument is that the development of multiple genders, despite the

attempt to contest hegemonic perceptions of gender, is not revolutionary because it lacks a unified political movement. Lorber does recognise that individual actions, such as going by a non-binary name, challenge the binary to a certain extent. However, she distinguishes between matters of personal identity, matters of interaction, and matters of political unification. It is the latter that actually generates change on a structural level (Lorber, 2018, p. 306). Hence, I see Lorber's argument in relation to Deutsch's concept of undoing gender in order to problematise the effects of individual actions on Instagram on reducing gender differences and promoting a feminist agenda.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter describes and justifies the methodological approaches applied to this study. I will start by detailing the epistemological approach, the study site, methods for data collection, selection and recruitment of participants, data analysis, and trustworthiness. Finally, I reflect upon my role as researcher, as well as the ethical considerations of the study.

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is best suited when the aim of the study is to examine something holistically and comprehensively (Punch, 2014, p. 160). The qualitative study acknowledges that reality is not fixed but differs depending on context and how people interpret and put meaning into situations. People's perception of social reality is complex and affects their behaviour, which cannot be reduced to numbers and quantifiable variables. The qualitative approach allows me to obtain the rich and detailed data that is necessary to do an in-depth investigation of the experiences of young Colombians with Instagram.

I employ an interpretive phenomenological approach. As defined by Creswell & Poth (2017, p. 75) , a phenomenological study "describes a common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon". In this study, I want to explore the phenomenon of expressing gender and feminist issues on Instagram. The phenomenological approach allows me to discover the essence of this phenomenon through the shared experience of several young Colombians. The interpretivist approach is also closely linked to the qualitative study. From an interpretivist perspective, social reality is constructed by people and how they perceive it and attach meaning to it. The intent is to bring forth the perspective of the

people being studied and understand how the world looks through their eyes (Neuman, 2011). Considering the rapid growth of social media in general and Instagram in particular, it is important to understand different people's experiences with the platform, as well as their perception of Instagram's role in modern day activism.

4.2 Study site

Six Colombian youth were recruited to participate in this study, and all of them either live or come from large cities in Colombia. However, two participants are expats who have lived in Northern America and Western Europe for two years or longer, and one has recently moved from Colombia to Northern America. Limiting my research to only include participants residing in urban areas was a mindful decision, recognising that here are great cultural and socioeconomic differences within Colombia. Although poverty has declined, Colombia remains one of the most unequal Latin American countries. OECD's Economic Survey (2019) points to the large regional disparities, which are particularly high between urban and rural areas. As a consequence, levels of education, political involvement, and access to Internet and digital devices are lower in certain regions and rural areas. 64 percent of the population lives in cities of more than 50 000 inhabitants, including functional urban areas (OECD, 2020b) In 2018, the number of Internet users in Colombia was estimated to be 62,3 percent of the total population (United Nations Development Programme), while Statista (2022) claims that up to 69 percent of the population were social media users as of January 2020. Simultaneously, 7,35 percent of social media users actively used Instagram in 2022 (Statcounter, 2022).

4.3 Methods of Data Collection

The study mainly draws on data collected through semi-structured interviews. Additionally, I observed the participants' Instagram accounts as supplementary data. It is common to use interviews as a source of information when conducting qualitative research in general. Furthermore, interviews are well-suited and usually the primary form of collecting data when the study employs a phenomenological research design (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The semi-structured interview is defined as "an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 6). It is therefore a valuable tool when the aim of the researcher is to collect rich and detailed data from the participants where they reflect on their own perceptions and experiences. For the interviews I employed an interview guide (Appendix D) with a set of pre-established open-ended questions. All participants were given the opportunity

to speak and reflect freely upon these. In addition, I had some follow-up questions belonging to each of the main questions. However, I rarely had to ask any of these myself, as most of the participants touched upon them as part of their reflections. All interviews lasted about one hour, were tape-recorded with consent from the participants, and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted early spring 2022, whereas the observation of the participants' Instagram accounts lasted for a few months from the date each participant consented to be part of the study.

4.4 Selection and Recruitment of Participants

With its approximately one billion monthly users globally, Instagram is most popular among people aged 25-34, followed by 18-24 (Kemp, 2022). Thus, the inclusion criteria for the study participants were young Colombian people of any gender, aged between 18 to 34 years old who post content related to gender and feminist issues on Instagram on a regular basis. As I sought to recruit people who represent a variety of genders and sexual orientations, I used purposeful sampling as presented by Punch (2014, pp. 160-163). Among the six participants recruited, two participants identified as male, one as non-binary, one as gender queer[3], and two as female (See table 4.4.1). Previous studies on digital feminism have used specific geotags and hashtags for finding and recruiting participants (Savolainen, Uitermark, & Boy, 2020). I attempted this method briefly but ended up recruiting all six participants through the snowball technique, which was more effective. People in my own social network functioned as gatekeepers who could help me get in touch with potential participants. One possible risk of using this method exclusively is the lack of variation among the participants, as people tend to surround themselves with people who share the same values and experiences as them. However, as previously stated, this study does not aim to provide generalisability. Thus, I do not consider the primary goal of the study to be notably affected by this. A qualitative study consisting of six participants can in no way claim to be a generalisable representation of young Colombians' experience of engaging in gender and feminist issues on Instagram. However, it can provide valuable insight into *some* young Colombian's experiences, what they hope to achieve by

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[3] Whereas non-binary individuals do not operate within the socially constructed reality that there are only two categories of gender, gender queer is more an umbrella term for gender identities that do not subscribe to conventional gender norms and stereotypes (Retta, 2019). Sometimes these terms are used interchangeably. Similarly, the term "queer", when used in reference to sexual orientation, operates as an umbrella term that includes other sexual orientations such as lesbian and gay. The young Colombians who participated in this study stated what terms they themselves preferred and identified with.

engaging in these issues online, and to what extent they see Instagram as a safe space for expressing one's thoughts on gender and feminist issues.

As stated above, Colombia is a diverse country with great variations in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Therefore, I limited my recruitment of participants to people from urban areas, where school enrolment rates are higher, most people have access to Internet and digital devices, and actively use social media (World Literacy Foundation, 2021). This inclusion criteria might have affected the research. All participants stated that they belonged to either the middle- or upper-middle-class. Five participants held either a bachelor or a master's degree, and one participant was in the process of obtaining a bachelor's degree. The inclusion criteria in combination with the snowball technique can be part of the explanation to why the participants share such similar traits. Thus, it is important to emphasise that this study only provides insight into the experiences of a small sample of the Colombian population.

Finally, as I do not speak Spanish, I only recruited English-speaking participants, which also can be seen in correlation with their educational level and socioeconomic status. The English proficiency level among youth in Colombia varies, but as of 2021, the EF English Proficiency Index (2021) rates Colombia as "low" on a general basis. Hence, I was prepared that language barriers might pose a challenge to my research. Although all six participants stated that they were comfortable conducting the interviews in English, it should be noted that English is not their first language, neither mine. I am aware of the risk that language proficiency might have influenced the communication, and hence also some of the information shared. However, I am of the perception that the interviews went well and that we had no problem understanding each other. If something was unclear, either for me as an interviewer or for the interviewee, the question or statement was repeated and explained until understood. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and because the study participants were not concentrated in one geographical area, interviews were conducted through Zoom. Using Zoom for the interviews thus allowed me to broaden my sample of participants and also gain valuable insight into the experiences of young Colombians living abroad.

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Level of Education	Current residence
Thor	27	Male	Queer	M.A. degree	Western Europe (5+ years)
Isabel	22	Female	Heterosexual	B.A. degree	Colombia
Julien	29	Gender queer	Queer	B.A. degree	Northern America (2 years)
Ava	24	Non-binary	Queer	B.A. degree	Colombia
Alex	22	Male	Gay	B.A. degree	Northern America/Colombia (2 months)
Sandra	23	Female	Heterosexual	M.A. degree	Colombia

Table 4.4.1: Description of Participants

4.5 Data Management

The recordings of the interviews were stored on SAFE: a system for storing data safely, provided by the University of Bergen. In SAFE, the interviews were transcribed and anonymised in a Microsoft Word document and stored. To further ensure the anonymity of the participants, I made use of a scrambling key, as recommended by Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) (n.d.). A list of the participant's real names and other identifiable information, like birthplace, Instagram accounts, and current residence, was kept separately from the data material.

4.6 Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis to analyse the data. The analysis was conducted in six steps in reference to the framework provided by Braun & Clarke (2006, pp. 87-93). The first step was to familiarise myself with the data, which includes immersing oneself in the data through repeated reading. Transcription is part of this process. Then, when reading through the finished transcript, I started identifying patterns and potential themes. The second step was to generate initial codes, which means to start organising the data into meaningful groups based on what seems interesting and significant to the research question. The third step was to search for themes. The codes that had been identified were organised into overarching themes and sub-themes. The fourth step was to review the themes. At this stage of the analysis, the themes were

refined in terms of ensuring that existing themes and codes fit, deleting those that did not fit, and creating new ones if necessary. The fifth step was to define and name themes. When the data was fully sorted into well-fitting themes, it was time to identify *what* was interesting about each theme and *why*. The sixth and final step was to produce the report, providing evidence that convincingly links the themes to the data and captures the essence of it. I used the data analysis software NVivo 12 as a tool for coding and categorizing the data into themes.

4.7 Trustworthiness

To maintain the trustworthiness of this qualitative research, I strived to achieve credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. As presented by Yilmaz (2013), drawing on the concepts of Lincoln & Guba (1985), "credibility means that the participants involved in the study find the result of the study true or believable". In other words, the participants should feel like they have been accurately presented in the study and that the findings are presented as closely to reality as possible. The researcher should also pay awareness to credibility when analysing the data. To ensure dependability, I have aimed to select, justify, and apply well-established research methods (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 320). To achieve credibility and dependability, I also aimed to provide thick descriptions of the research design and its implementation (Shenton, 2004, p. 71). This was done by using interviews as the primary method for data collection and Instagram content as supporting data, as well as recruiting study participants identifying with different genders and different sexual orientations to ensure diversity among the participants (Shenton, 2004). For transferability, I aimed to provide sufficient information about the contextual factors of the study. Finally, to ensure confirmability, reflections on my own role as a researcher and possible biases are important. Full objectivity is impossible to achieve, but detailed descriptions of the research design and its procedures contribute to the research's confirmability.

4.8 Role of Researcher

As a researcher, I have been aware of my role and my own cultural background throughout the whole process of conducting the research. I identify myself as a white Scandinavian woman, which influences my understanding of the world. I was therefore prepared that the study participants could have different views and experiences of feminism and gender than myself. When such cultural differences arose during the interviews, I was aware to remain neutral, respectful, and understanding. I have rather been curious to explore the study participants' view of what feminism is. Consequently, it has been important to me to minimise bias as much as

possible. I thus employed the concept of "bracketing" (Creswell & Poth, 2017) by attempting not to impose my own normative understanding of feminism onto the participants or to pose any leading questions.

4.9 Ethical Principles

Any research should strive to follow the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and formal ethical clearance to ensure ethical research throughout the whole process (Shenton, 2004). In a study like this, where I needed to interview young Colombians and to observe and describe their Instagram content, the participants should always be fully aware of the purpose of the study, the scope of the study, and how it will be conducted (Yilmaz, 2013). This was solved by offering each participant a consent form (Appendix C) that explained the study and stated their rights as participants. All participants read and signed the form prior to the data collection. A comprehensive analysis of the participant's Instagram content would have complemented the interviews and enriched the data in this study.[4] However, as it would require an extensive process to receive ethical clearance from NSD, and in order to preserve the participants' anonymity, I have not included an in-depth analysis of the participants' Instagram content. I have rather used the content to support the participants' narratives. For the sake of confidentiality, it has been important to me that the data from this research was handled in an ethical manner. The research material was stored safely and deleted after being transcribed by myself. Together, confidentiality and anonymity cover the rights of the study participants. The precautions I have taken to ensure anonymity are to store the data safely, to construct pseudonyms for the participants, and to maintain secrecy (Oancea, 2014, p. 47). Finally, NSD approved the project (Appendix B).

Chapter 5: Findings

This chapter presents the wide range of feminist and gender-related topics the participants engage in on Instagram. I also discuss the motivations and reasons for engaging in these topics and how they perceived their own role and impact on the feminist agenda and in the gender debate. Finally, the chapter explores the participants' thoughts on Instagram as a platform for

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[4] Initially, I also planned to do an in-depth analysis of the participants' Instagram content and include visuals in the thesis. However, I was advised by Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) to avoid this in order to preserve the principle of anonymity.

doing activism. I discuss the benefits and limitations that the participants link to this platform, as well as their thoughts on digital activism compared to more traditional activism.

5.1 Diversity in Young Colombians Engagement with Feminist and Gender Issues on Instagram

The young Colombians that I interviewed all used Instagram to promote a feminist agenda. The topics they focused on, and the way they chose to present these topics, however, varied. All participants reported that they engaged in topics related to LGBTQIA+ rights, but to a varying extent often depending on whether they identified with the community or not. For the participants who identified as non-binary and gender queer, it was particularly important to use their platform to speak up about discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community and educate people on gender and sexual diversity. Ava explained, "*Like, put my profile like a non-binary person is interesting because it's another form to share to the others, my person, my personality. I show how the non-binary people exist".* Alex, who identified as a gay cis man, explained that he normally reads more than he shares, but occasionally uses his platform to speak up against injustices towards LGBTQIA+ people, far-right movements, and the constant persecution and killing of trans women in Colombia. He, as well as the other participants who lived abroad, found it meaningful to engage in current issues in Colombia and convey them to their Colombian followers.

Furthermore, a majority of the participants were involved with what they labelled as feminist issues, most notably within the category of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Participants commonly named abortion as the most controversial topic they engaged in. One participant stated that most of her Instagram content comprised of promoting body positivity, whereas another participant used her Instagram platform to talk about menstruation and sexual consent. Additionally, some participants mentioned that they would occasionally engage in other topics as well, like mental health, racism, indigenous rights, and climate change and environmental issues – usually within a Colombian context.

The participants did not only have their own Instagram accounts but were also involved in a variety of Instagram collectives. Julien, Ava, and Sandra reported being part of different collectives that work both digitally and on the streets. The objective of Julien's collective was to be a resource to queer people in Medellín. Ava was engaged with a collective that advocates

for legal abortion in Colombia, and Sandra was part of a collective that promotes body positivity and representation among women and non-binary people. Each collective worked for causes that reflect the engagement in the participants' personal Instagram accounts. Julien explained that whereas they used their own account to document their own personal journey as a gender queer person, the collective was specifically aimed to educate people on queer issues in general and to be a resource to queer people in Medellín, for example by providing safe venues to meet or by supporting queer artists. Their involvement in Instagram collectives show how the participants used Instagram for both individual and collective action.

5.2 "We are here, we exist, and we have rights… so f*#ck you…": Motivation and Purpose for Engaging

The participants stated different reasons for engaging in feminist and gender issues. Engagement triggered by personal experience, wanting to help others, and searching for a platform where they could express their own identity and seek empowerment were the most common ones and often overlapped with each other.

Some participants traced their activism back to one pivotal moment in their life. Isabel, for example, told a personal story from when she was 15 years old and was sexually assaulted by an ex-boyfriend who did not respect her boundaries. Two months after the incident, she spotted him at a shopping mall in company with another young girl. Seeing him triggered a reaction in Isabel, who started crying and suddenly realised what she had been through. She explained how this realisation made her start posting about consent:

> *My motivation was the girl I saw with him. Like ... Poor girl. I mean... She is with someone who can in any moment rape her, touch her without her consent. I don't want this to happen to anyone else. And I thought... I was so young. I didn't know something bad was happening. So maybe if I start speaking up someone would realize that this is bad, that no one can touch them without their consent. Many play them [young girls] emotionally to get sex. That's not right.*

Isabel clearly linked her engagement to her own personal experience. She felt that speaking up about consent helped her process her own trauma and could potentially help others with similar experiences.

For Sandra, her struggle with alopecia – an autoimmune disorder that causes spot baldness – is what initiated her engagement on Instagram. When Sandra was diagnosed three years ago, she spent a lot of time and resources trying to get her hair back. She described the process as very painful, and after ingesting lots of medications and injections, Sandra decided that enough was enough. She stopped the treatment and started accepting herself for who she was, "*And there was a moment I decided to change my look and be a bald woman. And that decision, especially in Colombia, is a bomb because a woman is... Let me think about how I'm going to say it... Normally, a woman needs to have long hair to be a woman in this culture*". Sandra realised that her condition was not a problem that needed to be fixed. On the contrary, it was the norms and beauty standards that needed fixing. This new-found perspective got Sandra engaged with body positivity and the Instagram collective she is part of today.

Ava, on the other hand, could not identify one single crucial moment. Rather, they explained how a series of homophobic attacks from professors and peers when they attended school and university ultimately motivated their engagement for LGBTQIA+ people's rights, "*I want to say it louder, 'We are here, we exist, and we have rights. We will defend it, so fuck you homophobic person'*". Ava elaborated that their activism today was motivated by the liberty and sexual freedom they wish they had in their teenage years. Thus, similar to Isabel and Sandra, Ava' engagement was also triggered by personal experiences.

All participants reported that helping others was among the main reasons they engaged in gender and feminist issues. Julien, Thor, and Ava saw contributing to representation within the LGBTQIA+ community as way of helping people accept themselves and others. Julien specifically discussed the importance of functioning as an accessible and relatable resource for Latin American youth:

> *I mostly want to reach out to young Latin Americans who can be either LGBTQ or allies, and who can empower themselves with the knowledge of things that I share and to be able to, you know, become changemakers themselves within their scope. Or hopefully inspire them to live truer identities or to live truer lives by understanding that there are other possibilities of existing besides a heteronormative certain way of living that they have been taught.*

By displaying their own personal journey, Julien thus hoped to inspire others. Thor, who identified as a queer cis man, shared this viewpoint, and described his content as an effort to show some diversity within his gender,

"Sometimes I like to put stuff that shows I am not like the masculine guy that you will find in Colombia, or the typical macho, you know?". All participants mentioned the term "machismo" and it was particularly important for the cis-male, non-binary, and gender queer participants to challenge this stereotype. Thor's example above illustrates how Instagram has become an important platform where non-binary and gender queer Colombian youth can not only speak up, but also contribute to broaden traditional gender categories. The term "marianismo", however, was unfamiliar to most of the young Colombians, but they all highlighted the ideals identified with this concept as prevailing stereotypes they found necessary to challenge.

Isabel and Sandra shared the same objective of wanting to help women love and accept themselves by deviating from normative beauty standards. Isabel specifically referred to the prevalence of eating disorders among girls and young women, "*That's a very common thing in school. When I went to the bathroom, you could hear people throw up. The girls. And that's really common, also at university. That's a real problem*". Isabel and Sandra both attributed girls and women's insecurities to the unachievable stereotype of the Colombian woman that is normally presented in Colombian mainstream media. Sandra, who identified body positivity as her main feminist cause, explained:

> *In the traditional media, I think the standards appear there. So, that's why I think Instagram is so cool, because you can transform that or change that kind of woman that we always watch on TV. Because the woman who presents the news never is going to be a bald woman. Never *laughs*. For example, a bald woman could be appearing in the news if she the one who is interviewed, like, 'Oh my god, why did you lose your hair?'*

Sandra's example shows how Instagram functions as a platform for young people to contest traditional stereotypes and to express themselves in their own way. Through contesting stereotypes on her personal Instagram account and the collective's Instagram account, she aspired to help others.

Ava described how volunteering the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) inspired them to dedicate their life to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights for women and youth in Colombia, which they attempted to do by spreading information through Instagram, *"Because Colombia has very huge inequalities to access contraceptives. The access is different if you are in the cities or not. Many women in this country don't know about the possibility to interrupt their pregnancy"*. When asked why abortion is such a flammable topic in Colombia, Ava explained that abortion and topics like LGBTQIA+ rights are heavily

politicised during elections, referring to the conservative right-wing Duque government. Thor, who used to post content related to the abortion debate every day, agreed with Ava's view, and further elaborated on how the Catholic church influences Colombian society and politics:

> *I think that one sparks a conversation with my followers sometimes. I don't understand it. They want to hide it. Like, they [Colombians] are so religious and so catholic. They all want to say 'Pro-life, pro-life, pro-life', but when the baby is born they are not going to take care of it, you know. If it's a poor baby or a low-class baby they don't care, they are not that pro-life. So that's actually what pisses me off. It's a very... It's a very hot topic, you know. It's a very hot topic in Latin America, I think.*

Thor's statement highlights the complexity of the abortion debate in Colombia and how it evokes emotions and heated discussions. It also highlights how Instagram becomes a space for young people to engage in issues that are in the spotlight.

Instagram was also highlighted as a space for empowerment and display of identity. Isabel described how posting pictures of herself in a bikini or in underwear felt empowering. In one of her Instagram posts, she was also showing off her shoulder-length hair cut, which she thinks is a statement against the Colombian female stereotype, *"That's really a stereotype of the Colombian girl, with long hair. Now I have my short hair, but he [ex-boyfriend] would hate that"*. In the post, Isabel is situated in the middle of the photo, which is taken from a frog's-eye view, glaring down at the photographer. The white lace bralette she is wearing stands in stark contrast to the red lipstick, and the confident look on her face radiates power. Likewise, Sandra, who shaved her head and went bald, turned to Instagram to reveal *"the new me"* with a series of well-taken photos where she posed confidently, laughed, and wore bold makeup and hoop earrings.[5] Sandra explained that she used Instagram to send a message to her followers, *"I want to show everyone that I'm comfortable being who I am"*. For Sandra, "owning" her baldness by proudly displaying it was an important step on her journey as a bald woman. Similar to several of the participants, she found it easier to reveal her non-normative identity as a bald woman on Instagram, as it felt like a softer transition to living it out on the street and in real life.

Thor recently started posting videos of himself doing ballroom dancing, an African American and Latin American underground LGBTQIA+ subculture where people battle against each

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[5] Circle shaped earrings, often used as a symbol of Latinx culture.

other and are judged on their dancing, posing, vogueing, costumes, and attitude. In addition, Thor explained why sharing photos of him at the beach wearing a speedo was a conscious act of identity- and gender expression and to counter ideals of masculinity and heteronormativity:

> *It happened to me in Colombia that I just go to a pool, or a public place, and I get stared at because I am wearing something that shows so much skin. Because I am not supposed to wear that as a guy, even if it's made for men, you know? But in Colombia you are supposed to wear, like, long shorts. We have this typical type of shorts that straight men will wear, and if you wear something else, you know… They don't have to talk to me to assume that 'He is probably gay'.*

However, the display of identity served more than one purpose for Thor. He used Instagram to show people from High School, who knew a very different him, who he is today, what he thinks, and how he feels - suggesting that he has gradually grown into his identity in his young adult years.

For Julien, posting pictures that challenge gender stereotypes was part of their journey as a queer person. They frequently shared pictures of themselves wearing nail polish, jewellery, and sometimes in a full drag outfit. In one of their Instagram posts, Julien is wearing a skirt while posing with a cigarette and referring to themselves as *"Le gender bender"*. Julien explained that being non-binary is not a box or a fixed category, but a spectrum. They want to display what being gender queer looks like for them personally. Ava also told that they frequently posted pictures of themselves in their statement hoop earrings. Nevertheless, Ava relayed that they felt that stating their pronouns and self-given gender-neutral name in their Instagram biography was the most powerful symbol of their new identity:

> *I want to change my way too. I want to change my personality. I want to change my life. So, I would like to change even my name. It's like a personal, and very familiar and very sensitive thing, but I changed it. I changed it because the new name is like: "C'mon. Feminine? Masculine? What are you?", and I'm like "I don't know."*

Ava explained that in Colombia, names are often inherited from family members and therefore holds a lot of significance. Thus, it was important to Ava to be called by their new name by family, friends, and colleagues, and Instagram offered them a space where they could raise this claim.

Although all participants engaged in posting feminist and gender related content, some accounts were clearly more activist than others. Overall, Alex' Instagram account was less characterised

by activism than the other participants. However, his pronouns in his Instagram biography, photos featuring rainbow symbols, and occasional glimpses of him and his boyfriend, told a story of his identity. To Alex, it was not so much about activism as just being comfortable with his sexual orientation and showing that he is not ashamed of who he is.

5.3 "To raise awareness, to be able to create change, and to educate in order to formulate change" - Perception of One's Own Role and Impact

Several themes emerged when the participants were asked about their perceptions of their own role and impact on the debates they engaged in. Interestingly, their answers were often multifaceted and coincided with each other. Based on the participants' own reflections, I have thus identified four different and overlapping roles: The respectful supporter, the activist, the role model, and the educator. None of them are static but interact with each other. Normally, each participant would mention characteristics that can be identified with at least three of these roles.

When the participants did not identify with the issue or the group in question, but still engaged in it, they acted as **the respectful supporter**. For example, Thor and Ava supported the feminist cause and frequently engaged in the abortion debate. However, both emphasised that they are not women and therefore did not want to claim that space. Thor, who grew up in a house full of women, explained, "*I am not a woman, so I don't have to face all the feminist stuff myself. When I share, it's for friends or people I know that face it. I have the male privilege you know, not having to suffer that*". Although it was important to him to support the women in his life, Thor was aware of his role in this debate and wanted to avoid "stealing the attention". Sandra and Isabel engaged in LGBTQIA+ issues, but also in the role as supporters. They were both aware that they did not have ownership to the cause. Isabel stated that instead of posting her own statements, she preferred to reshare content from LGBTQIA+ creators themselves in order to bring forth their voices. Julien was married to an Afro-Colombian man and supported the rights of black people in Colombia. However, they emphasised that it is not their fight, and therefore not in their right to take up too much space in the discussion. Julien also explained that they tend to shy away from topics they are not very educated on, "*It's not just because he is my husband that I'm an ally and have to educate myself on these issues, but precisely because I lack a lot of education on black issues and feminist issues I tend to, you know, first learn*". Alex shared this viewpoint and stated it as one of the reasons he reads more than he shares, for

example during global movements like Me Too and Black Lives Matter, "*But I was always following and reading up about it. That's the thing about me, I read more than I post. Like, I want to be informed but I don't really post much about it.*"

When the aim was to generate change, the participants took on the role as **the activist.** To Ava, change begins with breaking the silence on topics that are considered taboo in Colombia:

> *Because I want to break the silence, I think. Break the silence about these kinds of topics, these kinds of rights. Because in Colombia, in the region, the way to ignore things is to not talk about it. Like, "We don't talk about Bruno",[6] it's like that. We don't talk about abortion, about the LGBTQ rights, we don't talk about the violence, we don't talk about... No, we need it! And we have to talk about it.*

Sandra also aimed to generate change by breaking the silence, but in a different way. Together with her collective, she arranged real-life catwalks with women displaying underwear. Later, she would share videos and photos of the event on Instagram. Sandra believed that putting diverse women on a catwalk was an efficient way to challenge the marianismo ideal that women should be virtuous, as well as removing the stigma around "unperfect" bodies, *"Most people are shocked when you are modelling on a catwalk in underwear. They are like 'Oh my god. You as a woman can't be in the streets in that way'. And if you don't have the body we see as correct in a woman, you can't show your body either".* To Sandra, the catwalk was a direct attempt to challenge these societal norms.

The role model sought to inspire others. To Thor, that meant being the representation within the LGBTQIA+ community that he never had as a child:

> *You had the typical queer gay person on TV, being like a fashion guy always bitching around, you know. So, we had all of these stereotypes. And I think representation from regular people just like me, showing and doing stuff that probably is not seen by everyone in the Colombian society, can show someone that "Oh, yeah, it's good. You can do that".*

Sandra wanted to inspire women who struggle with hair loss specifically, and women in general, to embrace their bodies and love themselves, *"I try to be a model for representation. I want you who have problems with hair loss to look at me and know that... You can be a bald woman without being sad about that".* She explained that promoting body positivity helped

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[6] A reference to the song "We don't talk about Bruno" from the Disney movie *Encanto*, which is set in Colombia.

women reclaim the power over the female body, "*All the body of the woman is defined by the society. The nails have to be long, and you must have an hourglass body. Yeah. And the way you dress needs to be in dresses and high heels*". For Sandra, posting pictures of herself that did not align with the Colombian female stereotype was a way to free women from this ideal. Isabel too promoted self-love and body positivity through her content by showing a body and a look that do not necessarily comply with the Colombian female stereotype.

Through their own journey and discovery of their identities, Julien and Ava hoped to inspire young Colombians to express their authentic selves. Julien explained how they wanted his content to be inspiring, but also consoling to queer youth who are in the difficult situation of discovering themselves, "*Well, yeah, it might be hard to deal with societal norms, but at least you will live a happier life by being true to yourself. It's transformative to people who are trying to understand themselves still*". Ava mentioned that they like to express themselves through fashion. When asked what kind of reactions they get, Ava laughed and replied, "*I go out in the street in Medellín with a falda – a skirt – and the people in the public transport... It's uncomfortable for them, not for me. I'm glad. I'm like, 'See me, baby'*". Instagram allows these young Colombians to not only be seen on the streets, but on social media where they can be role models for young people who might struggle with similar issues as themselves.

The educator wanted to spread awareness, highlight certain topics and issues, and educate others. Ava specifically wanted to be a resource to women who are struggling with abortion-related issues or unwanted pregnancy. Isabel wanted to highlight topics she felt was missing in sexuality education at school, for example the importance of consent and menstruation, while Sandra was educating her followers on alopecia and assisted girls and women who struggle with the disease by answering their questions. Julien explained why they aim to educate people on non-binary identities, trans identities, and queer issues in general:

> There is a lot of lack of education on these issues still. It's a lot of questions about these issues. And because of this lack of education, there is a lack of interest from both the private and public sector to address these issues within their scopes of action. So, my main reason to post this: To raise awareness, to be able to create change, and to educate in order to formulate change.

The last sentence of Julien's statement reveals the complexity of why these young Colombians engage on Instagram, where roles that are normally separated and clearly defined overlap and melt into each other.

5.4 "changemakers…within their scope" – ordinary people with an ordinary an amount of followers

A majority of the participants did not have a significant number of followers, meaning that their follower base spanned from minimum 500 to maximum 2000. The exception was Julien, who had approximately 4100 followers. In other words, most of the participants are ordinary people, mostly followed by friends, family, acquaintances, and some strangers. When asked about what they hoped to achieve by engaging in gender and feminist issues, all participants pointed out that their influence is limited because of their number of followers. However, Julien and Ava had experienced the phenomenon of "going viral": Julien with a picture as a statement to support a queer couple that was harassed in a public space, and Ava with a post on Twitter. The participants did not report having any ambition to grow their number of followers. To them, reaching out to friends and family was most important. As Alex put it, *"I mean, I don't have a large following, but people do follow me, so I think it's important that I share this with other people and create awareness. I do what I can with what I have"*. Despite perceiving their impact to be limited, the participants found their engagement to be meaningful. They all saw value in voicing their opinions to family, friends, and peers, and to visibly take a stand in issues that mattered to them.

5.5 "I was still doing my little part… sharing what was happening" – Instagram as a Resource

Overall, the participants felt that Instagram, if used correctly, can be a great resource. Their answers varied from the endless options and possibilities of Instagram to Instagram as an accessible tool for democratic action. One thing they all agreed on: Instagram is safer than the streets.

Several participants stated that Instagram is a great tool because it provides different options and formats to post within. Alex elaborated, "*I do think, obviously, that social media – Instagram – is a great tool, because you have stories, you know, you have links, you can spread awareness really easily*". Additionally, some participants mentioned the frequency of posting: That Instagram allows you to post as much as you want, whenever you want. Julien also talked about how he would sometimes "go live" on Instagram in order to discuss important topics while interacting directly with followers,

"*I have done lives with other people who have more visibility than me to talk about these issues, or to talk about specific cases of discrimination that have occurred and to explain to the audience why these are cases of discrimination*". Thor talked about how Instagram allowed him to take part in the events that were going on in Colombia while he was abroad, "*Sadly, the last two years it has been a lot of social movements in Colombia. I was not there but I would have loved to go. So, I was still doing my little part, just sharing what was happening on Instagram for example*". Instagram can be a great resource in many ways. For example, its various tools allow for being creative in one's communication of a cause or specific message. Additionally, Instagram has been important for young Colombians abroad, who could not only follow but also participate in the events that took place in Colombia during the past years.

Accessibility was brought up by all participants as one of the major benefits of Instagram. By accessibility, the participants meant that Instagram is a media platform that is open to most people with access to Internet and a smartphone. In contrast to traditional media, which is usually an arena for debate that is reserved for a certain few, anyone can voice their opinion on Instagram. Julien further explained that Instagram is democratic in the sense that it allows people who are not given much space in traditional Colombian media to speak up, "*I would rank the representation of minority groups, or sexual minority groups, in Colombia as very poor. And social media is a platform that allows these minority groups to have a voice*". Alex, who stated that he tends to read more than he shares, also mentioned the accessibility to information on Instagram. From this perspective, Instagram served additional educational purposes, not only for output but also for input.

The participants generally viewed Instagram as a safer space than the streets. All participants reported that they had attended at least one or more street marches and/or protests, and everyone highlighted the police brutality in Colombia and the possibility of being hurt or attacked when attending these. Isabel, for example, recalled her first and only protest:

> *I was eighteen years old, and it was my first protest. But since that day I haven't went to others because it's really hard to go. It's a really, like, heavy environment to be in. It's very violent also. You can get kicked by the police. Also, you can get groped by the assistants, you can get hurt, and yeah... It's really not a good place to be in.*

Isabel further explained that people who regularly attend protests usually are trained in knowing how to best take care of themselves if violent or potentially dangerous situations should arise.

Sandra shared Isabel's viewpoint. She believed that being an activist on Instagram is easier than doing traditional activism in the street because you are less exposed to violence.

Alex and Julien both pointed to severe cases of police brutality and military forces during recent protests in Colombia. Alex elaborated, "*So, there were a lot of civilians being killed every day by, you know, shootings or rockets. Like, heavy, heavy military, you know. And it was unfair. I mean, people have the right to protest against the government. But the government didn't like it, so they pulled out the big guns*". Julien specifically mentioned the 2021 Colombia protests[7] talking about how he was left shocked and appalled by the police brutality that manifested as the protests unfolded:

> *It was just really shocking to see the police brutality and the oppression of police against protesters who were asking for justice, who were asking for equality, or asking for more opportunities. And I feel like those mass protests... Instead of empowering people, like the ones in November 2019[8] did, left a lot of people disheartened and without hope for a better Colombia.*

Julien actively participated in the protests, which lasted for several weeks, and left Colombia right before the violence escalated further. However, they vividly remembered the feeling of collective outrage among the protesters, who were trying to hold the government accountable for the lack of action regarding the high rates of femicide and killings of activists, among other issues.

As these statements illustrate, the participants clearly viewed activism on Instagram as safer than activism in the street in terms of safety and physical well-being.

5.6 "It works in both good and bad ways" – Instagram as a Double-Edged Sword

Although perceived to be saf*er* than the street, the participants did not necessarily view Instagram as a safe space for doing activism. Censoring, fake news, and hateful comments and threats made up some of the most notable limitations of Instagram according to the participants.

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[7] "Between late April and mid-June, tens of thousands of people took to the street across Colombia to protest a range of issues, including a proposed tax reform, economic inequality, police violence, and little protection for vulnerable communities in remote areas. Police officers repeatedly and arbitrarily dispersed peaceful demonstrations and used excessive, often brutal, force, including live ammunition and gender-based violence" (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

[8] In November 2019, discontent over social inequality, injustice, and corruption and cuts in public education prompted thousands of Colombians to take to the streets to protest against President Duque and his government (Grattan, 2019).

Julien, Ava, and Alex all mentioned the issue of censoring on Instagram. Julien underscored the LGBTQIA+ community in Colombia and their attempt to reclaim terms like "marica" and "maricon", which are normally used in a derogatory manner against LGBTQIA+ people. To avoid a misuse of these words, Instagram completely censors them and sometimes even bans accounts that use them. Despite Instagram's seemingly good intentions, Julien explained that its inability to distinguish different contexts ultimately censors the voices of LGBTQIA+ people who are trying to speak up against discrimination and hate. Julien has experienced that Instagram has deleted photos and stories posted by their collective, as well as threatening to ban their personal account for violating Instagram's community guidelines. Furthermore, Julien highlighted the censoring of queer and female bodies and referred to the Free The Nipple movement[9], which has not yet achieved its goal, as Instagram continuously censors female nipples. Julien also stated that Instagram's newly established function that allows people to add their pronouns to their Instagram biography is a step forward, but not without its limitations:

> *You're only able to identify as male or female to the algorithm of Instagram, so on our collective social media for example, we're only able to view our audience through this binary gendered terminology. So, we are only able to see our male and female followers and we don't know who's in-between. And for us that would be very important statistics because we would love to know how many who follow us are within this spectrum of non-binary identities.*

Although Instagram has become a platform for self-expression, it still limits women and LGBTQIA+ people by partially censoring their voices. In a way, these are structural barriers on Instagram that are stuck in a binary notion of gender.

Several participants addressed the issue of fake news on Instagram. Ava described how both spreading and believing misinformation can damage the feminist and LGBTQIA+ cause. They emphasised the increased need for good source criticism, which traditionally has been the responsibility of mainstream media, but now has become a relevant skill for anyone who uses social media. Similarly, Isabel explained that the way one chooses to communicate information matters, because it can be manipulated and misused by people with conflicting intentions. Thor took this argument further and reflected upon how Instagram is a platform for all kinds of movements to gain foothold,

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[9] Free The Nipple is a campaign founded in 2013 that aims to legalise female toplessness (Matich, Ashman, & Parsons, 2019). The overarching goal of the movement is to address censorship of female breasts as a consequence of sexualising women's bodies.

"*It [Instagram] works in both good and bad ways because of the movements that are like racist, or Neo-Nazi movements, or stupid-people movements, you know. By "stupid" I mean, like, racist or LGBT-phobic. Because now it is also a platform for them to come together. Before it was more difficult, you know"*. Participants thus demonstrated awareness of Instagram as a double-edged sword. Some of the positive characteristics that they associated with Instagram, like accessibility and democracy, could also potentially facilitate a space for fake news, racist thinking, and extremist ideologies.

Some participants had experienced receiving negative reactions to the content they have shared or posted, usually in the comment section of their Instagram posts or direct messages in the app. The severity of these reactions varied from plain disagreement to hate speech, harassment, and threats. When asked if he perceived Instagram as a safe space for expressing thoughts on gender and feminist issues, Alex replied, "*Really, what social media is safe nowadays? Everyone has an opinion, and everyone can DM [Direct Message] me and say whatever they want. Obviously, you have people who will support you, and spread awareness, and repost you and everything. But of course, you will have people in your DMs who say 'Go die. This is not right', you know?*". Overall, Alex had never posted anything he would label as controversial, which he thought could be part of the explanation to why he had never received any negative reactions.

Julien, who reported having experienced negative reactions *"for sure"*, found that racism and transgender people participating in sports were topics that sparked controversy and discussion among their followers. Julien also talked about the time he went viral with a photo of him and his then boyfriend kissing in support of a queer couple who was discriminated against. In the aftermath, they received a lot of hateful comments, but comments of support as well. Julien emphasised that although they received hateful comments from time to time, it was more common that people either supported them or simply disagreed, which they found to be fair. However, there was a certain degree of self-censoring as Julien deliberately moderated their statements on Instagram, "*Yeah, I try to create these healthy debate relationships within my social media. I try to stay away from radical positions as well, and rather be very informative, educational, and try to open up discussions for people*". Although occasionally being subjected to negative reactions, Julien rather chose to focus on the positive aspects of communicating on Instagram, like having an open dialogue with their followers.

Ava experienced receiving hateful comments and threats based their gender and sexual orientation. Ava explained that they normally tried to ignore such comments, but that it had gotten mentally and emotionally draining at times. Regardless, Ava did not blame Instagram, but rather the dangerous environment for activists in Colombia:

> *The problem is not Instagram. I think the problem is living in Colombia. To be an activist in Colombia is not safe. Last year, for the protests in the country, I got threats to kill me for my political positions by the illegal groups. So, it's not, like, Instagram, it's Colombia. Yeah, it's Colombia. I think it's not Instagram, or Twitter, or Facebook, or WhatsApp. It's the real life, the real place. Colombia is dangerous for social activists.*

While the, occasionally, rough climate on Instagram put the participants in vulnerable positions, the Colombian context they engaged within also impacted the reactions they got.

5.7 "Instagram is not enough; the real thing happens in the street"

All participants in this study agreed that despite the continuously growing impact of Instagram and other social media, activism cannot and should not be completely digitalised. A few of the participants worried that because digital activism can be done from the comfort of one's own home, people forget to transform their words into action. Isabel, for example, explained, "*By speaking up on a digital platform, you are just speaking up in a digital way. You don't do anything, like, physically in real life. So maybe people start digitalising actions, but not materialising actions*". Sandra shared this view and expressed that she felt bad if she engages in a cause on Instagram but did not attend the protests in her city. She used the ongoing protests at her university against professors who are sexually assaulting female students as an example, "*The things we are fighting for here in the city or in the university are actually happening in that place, so you need to be in that place. And you need to confront, like... confront the aggressors*". To Sandra, being physically visible was essential in order to advocate for change.

Participants also kept the Colombian context in mind when discussing the limitations of Instagram. Ava pointed to the unequal distribution of resources in Colombia and the fact that many people do not have access to Internet, which is a reality to consider when discussing the "accessibility" and "democracy" of Instagram. Thor talked about the long and proud tradition of women's rights marches and peace marches in Colombia. He emphasised that Instagram is good for sharing movements, but that the actual activism happens in the street,

"*You cannot just stay online, you know. People are always going to be in the street and movements are always going to be in the street. For me, I think it's still very important. I think it's still the ground pillar of social movements, the street*". Although Instagram can be a helpful tool in process of social change, it falls short in certain situations and contexts and can therefore not replace traditional and well-established forms of activism.

Julien, who attended the protests against the Duque government back in 2019 and 2021, found it to be a "*beautiful experience*" and described the sense of collectiveness among the protesters:

> *When you march in a protest, people feel connected to a cause. People feel more, you know, sort of connected to other people because they're physically next to each other and you can see the multitude of people supporting your cause. So, that in itself is very empowering, and it also creates more pressure and more visibility for traditional media to cover these large protests that cannot go unseen because they block traffic, they stop... You know, they can even stop economic activities for hours, or days, or sometimes weeks.*

Not only was street activism seen as important for generating change through concrete and immediate actions, such as blocking traffic, but the unique sense of collectiveness was highly valued.

Overall, the participants described a symbiotic relationship between digital and physical activism. Julien, for example, believed in a combination of both. They explained that Instagram helps spread awareness and information, which makes people who are not directly involved in a cause sympathise with it more. As an example, Julien again referred to the 2019 and 2021 protests:

> *I think the reason that the 2019 and 2021 protests in Colombia were so large and massive was precisely because of digital activism. Because people were able to sympathise a lot more with causes that may not have been their own, but they understood the roots of the problem because they had, you know, been obtaining education on these issues through social media.*

Julien and the other participants underscored the significance of protesting and marching in the street, which is a longstanding tradition in Colombia. Instagram and other social media were viewed as valuable resources to help increase movements and spread awareness on different causes.

In this chapter, I have outlined the findings that emerged in this study. The participants discussed their motivations and purpose for engaging in gender and feminist issues, their perceptions of own role and impact on these issues, as well as the benefits and limitations of Instagram as a platform for doing digital activism. In the upcoming chapter, these findings will be discussed further in reference to literature and theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 6: Discussion

The overarching objective of this study was to explore the experiences of young Colombian people who engage in gender and feminist issues on Instagram. Though young Colombians expressed their thoughts on gender and feminist issues in a variety of ways, their overall purpose and motivations for engaging were similar, usually encompassed by wanting to help others, educating and spreading awareness, generating change, and self-empowerment.[10] In this chapter, I will discuss the findings presented above within the context of existing literature. The theoretical frames of doing and undoing gender will further guide my understanding of how and to what extent these young Colombians are using Instagram to challenge and transform Colombian and universal gender stereotypes.

6.1 Contesting Gender Stereotypes

In one way or another, all participants contest a range of gender ideals and stereotypes by deriving from what is seen as appropriate behaviour for the gender they were assigned at birth. When the participants post pictures of themselves in an attempt to display a way of doing gender differently than established gender norms, are they actually challenging these norms? Or are they still at the risk of reinforcing the very norms they are trying to contest?

The notion of marianismo is one of many ideals that the young Colombians in this study face and aim to contest. For example, Isabel explained that she poses in underwear on Instagram in order to "reclaim" her identity and agency as a Colombian woman. In the photo where Isabel poses in underwear, which is described in further detail above, she presents herself in a way

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[10] This study uses the concept of "empowerment" as presented by Kabeer (2005, p. 13), who refers to empowerment as "the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability". Furthermore, Kabeer (2005, p. 14) emphasises that empowerment often starts from within and encompasses of individual's meanings, motivation, and purpose.

that rejects Colombian female stereotypes as it is perceived through the lens of marianismo. In the photo of Isabel, feminine elements, such as the white lace bralette, are mixed with elements that break with the marianismo traits, such as the short hair, the bold look, red lipstick, and confident pose. In more than one way, she is contesting the female gender stereotype. For example, female subordination is emphasised by several scholars to characterise stereotypical gender relations in Latin America (2013, p. 49; Kulis et al., 2008; Mancera et al., 2017; Piña-Watson, Lorenzo-Blanco, Dornhecker, Martinez, & Nagoshi, 2016). Isabel is challenging this notion by taking ownership of her body and sexuality. She is in control, and she decides how she will present herself. At the same time, she is redefining what femininity looks like for her. Similarly, the participants are consciously challenging machismo ideals such as heteronormativity, hypersexuality, and dominance According to the marianismo ideal, women should be submissive, nurturing, and practice chastity prior to marriage (Rueda et al., 2019; Villegas et al., 2010). Paradoxically, women should also be desirable objects, pleasing the male gaze. Machismo and marianismo are just a few of many ideals young Colombian people face in their everyday lives, as they turn to Instagram in an effort to break down societal expectations to gender and sexuality linked to how they dress, behave, and present themselves. Their actions, however, are not always without a personal cost.

According to West & Zimmermann (1987, p. 136), people do gender at the risk of being assessed: We judge others based on their performance of gender, and whether it is in accordance with the norms associated with masculinity and femininity. Moreover, this assessment is not strictly limited to the performance of gender, but can influence whether we judge people's performance of other activities as legitimate or not (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 136). Thus, the stakes are high when the participants are contesting gender norms. Several of them explained that they had experienced being judged by the way they dressed, looked, or behaved in public spaces. However, the participants' activities on Instagram show that they did not allow accountability to correct the way they presented themselves. On the contrary, Instagram enabled the participants to further resist ideals such as marianismo, machismo, and heteronormativity, and the assessment that comes with them, by purposely displaying their non-normative identities.

In some cases, the participants challenge norms that are rooted in Colombian culture, for example through specific pieces of clothing or the way they keep their hair. Several scholars (Miller et al., 2019; Odinga & Kasten, 2020) discuss how gender stereotypes presented on

Colombian television is partly responsible for creating unrealistic beauty standards for Colombian women and girls, highlighting the defining power of the media. This narrative was echoed by several of the participants, who stated that Colombian traditional media lacked diversity, both within and outside the gender binary, as well as glorifying and reproducing the machismo and marianismo stereotypes. However, statistics show that Internet and social media are gradually replacing traditional media outlets, especially among young people (Global Web Index, 2019). These findings could indicate that the power of media is also shifting to social media platforms such as Instagram. As stated by the participants, they turned to Instagram to be the representation they felt was lacking in traditional media. Thus, whereas traditional media has the power to cement and reinforce gender stereotypes, the interactionist and democratic aspect of Instagram allows it to be a platform of resistance to the stereotypes presented in traditional media. Equally important, Instagram is a space for young Colombian people to express themselves and display their identities – which might be quite valuable on a personal level.

6.2 Social Media's Global Reach versus Local Lives with Local Impact

Participants used Instagram as a platform to contest gender stereotypes and empower themselves, but do their actions have any impact on others? Wade (2018) discusses how Instagram has helped facilitate spaces where Black women and girls are supported and encouraged to embrace their authentic selves. More specifically, she examines how the young artist, Willow Smith, has contributed to the digital movement #blackgirlmagic by using Instagram to display her identity. The case of Willow Smith can be used as an example to illustrate how individuals make use of Instagram as a "scene" for displaying identity, opinions, knowledge, and values. Moreover, by challenging the gendered behavioural norms that apply to Black girls, she inspires others to do the same.

Whether it is intentional or not, Smith has the power to inspire young girls to live their true selves and embrace their non-normative Black girl identities, much like the participants in this study aspire to do. It should be noted that Willow Smith was born to world famous parents Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith, released her first hit song at the age of ten, and currently has ten million followers on Instagram. She obviously holds a powerful position to influence that is much greater than the participants in this study. Nonetheless, should the effect of digital influence be exclusively measured in numbers? What about the participants ability to generate

change within their scope? Will it not contribute to generate actual change if young Colombian people influence on a local level by reaching out to the people within their social circle?

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, most participants felt very passionately for the issues they engaged in. Although their motivations and purpose for engaging varied, many aimed to help and inspire others, often through the means of displaying identity and tell their personal stories. Simultaneously, the participants talked about how their overall impact on these issues was limited due to their number of followers. However, they still found it meaningful to engage. Kahn (2020) suggests that Colombian teachers should highlight gender and sexuality in their teaching to foster a more inclusive and empathetic society. By situating narratives on gender and feminist issues in a local context, students are taught how to think critically and reflect upon social issues within their society, making teachers "agents of social change" (Khan, 2020, p. 417). The young Colombians who participated in this study aimed to be agents of social change on a local level in a similar way, but within their own scope of action, by voicing their thought on gender and feminist issues on Instagram.

Several of the participants articulated that they hoped to educate their followers on the topics they engaged in. Consequently, instead of asking if ordinary people with an ordinary number of followers can achieve something, is it not more appropriate to ask to *what extent*? As discussed by Hirji (2021), the #MosqueMeToo movement was a result of a number of individuals telling their story of being sexually harassed or assaulted in the mosque or other spaces for prayer. The movement gained momentum because the women inspired each other to come forward and share their experiences. As a result, #MosqueMeToo developed into a movement of significance, which in turn contributed to shedding light on a particular issue. Also, the women, who had previously remained silent about their experiences, found a way to tell their story and to speak their truth. In many ways, #MosqueMeToo illustrates the importance of everyday activism and how people can be agents of change in their local communities. Similarly, the young Colombian people in this study wanted their Instagram accounts to be a resource and a platform of support for other people who grappled with the gender and/or feminist issues they engaged in. The predominance of positive feedback they received on their content indicates that they in fact were able to reach out on a local level, making them fulfil their self-assumed position as role models and educators.

6.3 Doing or Undoing Gender?

6.3.1 Instagram as a Platform to Interact

The participants in this study highlighted the importance of Instagram as a platform for displaying identity, particularly aspects of their identities that do not comply with traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Why and how has Instagram become such an important tool for identity display? Drawing on the example of the #MeToo movement, Mendes and colleagues (2018) discusses the positive and the negative aspects of digital activism as a tool for the feminist cause, particularly for resisting and challenging sexism. They conclude that among digital activism's positive traits is the ability to generate a feeling of community, feminist consciousnesses, solidarity, and support. This notion is supported by Wade (2018), who underscores the effect of informal communication through Instagram as a way to participate in discussions and political activities. Furthermore, digital spaces are said to "(…) blur the lines between the public and the private" (Wade, 2018, p. 30), suggesting that it is possible to achieve change that stretches beyond the digital world. This argument aligns with my findings, where all participants articulated that they, through their activities on Instagram, hoped to inspire other people within their scope to embrace their true identities and become changemakers. Moreover, their Instagram activities had the potential to manifest in real-life, for example through living out their non-normative identities in offline spaces such as the streets.

The participants thus demonstrated the power of "interaction as a site of change" (Deutsch, 2007), as well as the power of Instagram as a platform to interact: Instagram allows for people to find and create communities where they can actively join discussions, construct meanings, and develop a political consciousness. Furthermore, it aligns with Deutsch' (2007, p. 121) argument that "when individuals challenge boundaries by resisting conventional gendered behaviour in ongoing social interactions, it can facilitate feminist consciousness". In her study of the Instagram account @empoweredbirthproject, Shui-yin Sharon Yam (2019) examined how a birth photographer challenged Instagram's public policy, which at the time forbade visual depictions of nudity in any context. Via her Instagram account, the photographer initiated a petition that urged Instagram to lift its censorship of birthing bodies. The petition stirred engagement among her followers, who started to contemplate the hegemonic discourse of the female body as predominantly sexual. Eventually, the engagement prompted Instagram to change their policy. @empoweredbirthproject is an example of how conversations on gender and feminist issues can elevate and be forwarded to the public sphere (Boling, 2020). This

example indicates that the young Colombians' attempt to educate others and raise awareness on gender and feminist issues may have a similar rippling effect.

This aspect of Instagram as a platform to interact resonates with one of Deutsch' main arguments – that gender is both done and undone through interaction with others – and thus emphasises the importance of the interactional level. Instagram provides a space where the possibilities for interaction are countless, which is significant in more than one way. Not everyone has the opportunity or privilege to interact with others as the person they themselves want to be. Real-life public spaces can be a restrictive venue for people who do not fit within the normative expectations of gender. In such cases, Instagram can be a valuable tool for those who have limited opportunities to resist gender norms and social norms in real life (Hirji, 2021; Rahbari, 2019; Wade, 2018). Colombian activists have found alternative platforms to raise their voices, such as judicial courtrooms (Ruibal, 2021). The participants in this study, however, have turned to Instagram as an alternative platform to express their thoughts on gender and feminist issues, with an aim of having an impact on people's real-life situations.

According to Lorber (2018), however, attempts to change the normative discourse on gender on an interactional level is not enough. Rather, she advocates for change on a structural level, which can, according to her, only be achieved through political unification. Unlike Instagram, the court is a tangible site for change, and decriminalisation of abortion has been one of the main political causes for Latin American feminists for decades. Furthermore, when the participants are displaying identity on Instagram, they are inevitably being judged on it, and thereby held accountable, by others (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Thus, the participants are not intentionally doing gender display: A finding that supports West & Zimmerman's (1987, pp. 129-130) critique of Erving Goffman's argument that display of activities that coincide with "maleness" and "femaleness" is something we choose to do, and other people choose to respond to. Contrary to Goffman's idea of gender display as something we choose to participate in, these young Colombians do and undo gender in their interaction with their followers and other Instagram users – even if that's their intention or not.

Interaction is the "action or influence of persons or things on each other" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018). Although interacting through Instagram does not necessarily provide any immediate response (or any response at all), the participants are aware that silence does not mean that they are not being judged on their performances of gender by their followers. For

example, Alex stated that he never posted anything controversial, and thought that to be part of the reason why he had never gotten any negative reactions on his content. It is possible that people are holding back on Instagram due to the fact that even on a digital platform, we are judged and held accountable by others. If so, this could be seen as a form of self-censoring as a way to protect oneself. This notion highlights the complexity of the doing/undoing gender debate. Though Instagram is a platform that can contribute to the undoing of gender on an interactional level, the risk of gender assessment can limit people's will and opportunity to use the platform for this purpose.

6.3.2 Doing one's gender differently

The participants are contesting gender stereotypes, but two question remains: Are they doing or undoing gender? And are they contributing to transforming unequal gender relations? For the participants who identified with the gender they were assigned at birth, the gender binary was important to actually challenge the norms associated with their gender. For example, when the participants' aim was to challenge or broaden masculine gender norms and stereotypes, this quest derived from a set of universally, but also culturally, agreed upon characteristics for what it means to be a man (Deutsch, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987). A similar narrative is also discussed by Rahbari (2019) in her study on Iranian women bodybuilders on Instagram: Iranian women who also are bodybuilders are pursuing alternative forms of femininity than what is considered normative within the Iranian context. By taking to Instagram to display their existence as female bodybuilders, the women are contesting traditional norms of femininity. Some of the Colombian participants in this study had a similar experience to the Iranian bodybuilders: They used Instagram to contest traditional gender norms they faced in their local context and, hence, pursued alternative forms of femininity and masculinity. In their article on sex roles and gender structure, Risman & Davis (2013, p. 742) particularly emphasises the potential of undoing gender when "boys and girls, men and women, do not follow traditional scripts, whatever these are in their own cultural setting". The young Colombians in this study chose to use Instagram as a platform to display *that* and *how* they do not follow traditional scripts of doing gender within their cultural setting. Thus, in line with Risman & Davis' argument, they are undoing gender.

The findings in this study suggest that the gender binary enables resistance by serving as the normative discourse for gender. Some of the participants did not seek to dismantle the gender binary as described by Lorber (2018) who propose eliminating the binary categories of gender

and instead seek gender neutrality, for example in the workplace. Rather, they sought to expand the definitions of femininity and masculinity. Sandra, for example, emphasised that she was proud to be a bald woman and wanted to challenge the perception that women should have long hair to be feminine. In Sandra's case, femininity is clearly an important part of her activism. By displaying her identity as a bald woman on Instagram, she resists the Colombian stereotype that women need to have waist-long hair to be feminine.

The participants' attempt to broaden gender stereotypes relates to West & Zimmerman's (1987, p. 137) understanding of "doing gender", namely "creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Having long hair is not a "natural, essential, or biological" difference between men and women. Yet, it is perceived to be a physical feature in accordance with a "correct" performance of femininity in Colombian culture. According to Deutsch (2007, p. 122), gender is "done" when social interactions produce gender difference and "undone" when social interactions reduce gender difference. Being a bald woman or a man wearing nail polish may not reduce gender difference in itself. However, in line with Deutsch' argument, I will argue that in a Colombian context, these are individual acts of resistance on an interactional level. As sexual and gender minorities, some of the participants contributed to showing diversity and representation simply by sharing content of themselves.

The participants' quest to challenge the normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity, indicates that they are undoing gender to a certain extent by doing their gender differently. Deutsch (2007, p. 108) argues that gender norms and gender inequality vary in time, within, and across societies. And so, ways to undo gender must vary as well. When the participants' efforts to free themselves from gender norms are situated in a Colombian context, they could have an impact on the undoing of gender stereotypes. Marianismo, machismo, and heteronormativity are some of many existing ideals in Colombia and Latin America (Montoya, Frazier, & Hurtig, 2002). For example, when Colombian women are taking to Instagram to defy ideals that are associated with the marianismo ideal (Rueda et al., 2019; Villegas et al., 2010), that in itself is an act that deconstructs the notion that women are and should be submissive and passive. Similarly, for young Colombian people to display their non-binary and queer identities is to confront ideals such as machismo and heteronormativity, and thus the idea that men should be hypersexual, dominant, and violent. Subsequently, this could be a step on the way to more

equal gender relations because it contests gender stereotypes that legitimise violence against both women and men.

6.3.3 Undoing gender: The interactional versus the structural level
On the other hand, is the gender binary an unavoidable prison in the sense that no matter what you do to contest gender norms, you will always be measured up against the sex category you are assumed to belong to? Lorber (2018, p. 307) addresses the "paradox of multiple gendering", arguing that all alternative genders to the binary distinction of "man" and "woman" originate from and exist on the basis of the gender binary, and will continue to do so as long as the gender binary is only challenged on an interactional level. Thus, from Lorber's perspective, the participants' individual actions on Instagram are not undoing gender, or at least their undoing is limited since their actions might not have an impact on a structural level. Is a world without gender actually possible, or just a mere utopia? As we preform gender at the risk of being assessed by others (West & Zimmerman, 1987), will we not always measure Ava and Julien's non-binary identities up against the binary imaginary of a world divided into males and females? How feminine are they? How masculine are they? Are they leaning more towards one than the other? Ava is wearing big hoop earrings, so they are feminine, but the beard is a masculine trait and outweighs the feminine. Thus, they can be seen as more masculine than feminine. Gender norms have the power to persuade people to think like this, and thereby determine and limit what rights, resources, and social capital people who live both outside and within the gender hegemony have access to. Although Ava and Julien are able to express their non-binary identities on Instagram, they could still benefit from the male privilege if other people, in their assessment of them, deem them closer to male than female on the unavoidable scale of the gender binary. At the same time, they risk facing the consequences of not conforming to traditional gender norms. Likewise, the Iranian women bodybuilders may pursue alternative forms of femininity on Instagram, but it does not necessarily transform unequal power relations or ensure gender equality for Iranian women or women in general. Based on Lorber´s reflections, does this not indicate that the display of identity is not enough to actually challenge unequal gender relations?

However, Deutsch (2007) argues that gender difference does not necessarily have to produce gender inequality. Referring to Le Feuvre (1999) and Lorber (1999) she highlights the distinction between "transgressive" and "transformational" change (Deutsch, 2007, p. 120). Transgressive change happens on the individual level and can reduce gender difference when

men and women contest gender norms. Transformational change, however, involve politics that reduce gender inequality on a structural level. As mentioned, Rahbari (2019) discusses how the Iranian women bodybuilders used Instagram to challenge the perception that bodybuilding is a hypermasculine sport. Their Instagram activities are transgressive in the sense that they display alternatives to the social and cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity. Similarly, the young Colombians in this study are using Instagram as a site of transgressive change. Deutsch (2007, p. 121) further argues that though it may be difficult to grasp the overall impact of change that happens on the interactional level, "acts that change consciousness could encourage collective action to transform institutions". The participants' aim to spread awareness on issues such as LGBTQIA+ rights, gender diversity, and women's access to abortion services can be identified as such "acts that change consciousness" on an interactional level and with a local impact. As mentioned, facilitation of feminist consciousness is discussed by Wade (2018) in relation to the #blackgirlmagic movement on Instagram. According to Wade, the "magic" happens when Black girls use Instagram to connect, interact, and thereby inspire each other to claim their (digital) space and challenge the gendered perceptions that are forced upon them. Subsequently, the blurred lines between digital and physical spaces can cause the effect to spill over to their everyday lives. This notion underscores Deutsch' (2007, p. 106) advice to focus on "how the institutional and interactional levels work together to produce change". In a similar manner, young Colombian people's Instagram activism and engagement can contribute to facilitate feminist consciousness and encourage collective action.

The participants' involvement in Instagram collectives could be an argument supporting the presumption that formal collective action is a premise for actual change (Martin et al., 2007). The collectives that Julien, Ava, and Sandra participated in apparently see the need for physical action as well, such as working to provide safe spaces for queer people. The fact that some of the participants chose to engage in these collectives, which is more of an organized and hybrid (digital and physical) way of doing activism, could indicate that engaging on Instagram is not enough to undo gender. Thus, participants' personal activism is a supplement to more traditional forms of activism, and its ability to undo gender is limited on its own. This is in line with Lorber's (2018, p. 309) argument that the creation of multiple genders may not in itself be revolutionary. Displaying identity may not alone change the binary categorisation of gender because it does not necessarily invoke change on a structural or institutional level (Lorber, 2018, p. 299). In order to do so, there needs to be a collective cause with a unified political agenda that can actually transform laws and institutions (2018, p. 306).

Nonetheless, Lorber (2018, p. 306) recognises that individual actions similar to those undertaken by the participants on Instagram do challenge the gender binary to a certain extent. She distinguishes between matters of personal identity, matters of interaction, and matters of political unification (Lorber, 2018, p. 306). The participants' engagement on Instagram falls into the category of the first and the second. Some have stopped using their birth name in favour of a non-binary name, which Lorber categorises as a "matter of personal identity" and aligns with the participants' display of identity on Instagram. Matters of interaction entail to "act out" multiple identities and have the potential to "challenge face-to-face interaction" (Lorber, 2018, p. 306). Julien and Ava are acting out their non-binary identities on Instagram but also in real-life, as several of their Instagram photos require being physically present in public spaces to shoot them. In a way, their Instagram activism is intertwined with face-to-face interaction because it reflects their everyday lives: The photos do not seem to be staged but represent honest depictions of young Colombian people's lives and identities. Similarly, the cis-gendered participants are using Instagram as a platform to act out non-normative ways of doing their gender. It is therefore reasonable to believe that these young Colombians' digital activism should not be underestimated, as it holds the potential to challenge conventional face-to-face interaction.

Despite Lorber's (2018, p. 306) emphasis on political unification to be able to achieve structural change, the value of the interactional level should not be undermined. When Julien and Ava are displaying their non-binary identities, they are normalising living outside the gender binary while simultaneously educating people on gender diversity. Not only did expressing themselves on Instagram benefit these young Colombians on a personal level, but their actions may also represent an important step towards a more tolerant and inclusive society, particularly on a local level, that is safer for women, LGBTQIA+ people and activists. Subsequently, it may inspire people to engage in collective action on the streets. And if they are lucky enough to go viral, they might also be able to influence politicians and lawmakers. This notion is echoed by Martin and colleagues (2007, p. 91) who emphasise the activism that takes place in informal and local social relations and argue that its impact should not be underestimated but rather examined from a long-term perspective. When women engage within social networks that vary both geographically and among women themselves, they have the potential to "reach broader societal structures" (Martin et al., 2007, p. 91). Thus, the local change that is brought about by individual activism can encourage formal collective action, which in turn may transform

institutions and social structures, as the Colombian constitutional court's decision to decriminalise abortion in February 2022 is an example of.

6.5 Instagram as a Safe, but also Limited, Space for Doing Activism

6.5.1 Instagram is safer than the street

The young Colombians who participated in this study talked about how Instagram is safer than the streets due to the risk of being physically hurt or attacked. This was particularly noted by Julien, who witnessed the police brutality during the national protests in 2020. What is more, Colombian activists are vulnerable in the aftermath of doing activism. With attention to the possible risk of violent experiences on the streets, Biroli & Caminotti (2020) and Zulver (2021) discuss the phenomena of "controversial backlash" and "patriarchal backlash" as a response to feminist achievements. Patriarchal backlash refers to counteractions, particularly in the form of violence, that targets women who have mobilised for their rights and thereby "threaten" men's hegemonic control (Zulver, 2021). Similarly, conservative backlash includes the emergence and support of far-right movements as an opposition to policies and frameworks that advance women's and LGBTQIA+ rights (Biroli & Caminotti, 2020). Both patriarchal and conservative backlash thus repress women and LGBTQIA+ people and their voices and amplify the risk of gender-based violence. As mentioned, Zulver draws on the case of women activists in the peace processes and particularly sheds light on how the women in the Colombian association Alianza de Mujeres Tejedoras de Vida were subjected to violence as a consequence of their activism. Not only does this example highlight the risk of doing activism in physical public spheres, but it also highlights the risk of being an activist in Colombia. This notion is reflected in my findings, where several of the participants listed abortion as the most flammable topic they engaged in, much due to the influence of the Catholic Church in Colombian society. For these young Colombians, Instagram offers a space where they can engage in controversial topics without exposing themselves to the risk of being hurt or attacked.

It has been established that digital activism can facilitate feminist consciousness and foster solidarity (Mendes et al., 2018). This should be considered when discussing Instagram as a safe space for doing activism, but also its impact as an alternative platform to traditional activism. Above, I have referred to Julien who explained how Instagram and other social media platforms contributed to the 2019 and 2020 national protests in Colombia. People who did not identify with some of the issues that were disputed could still comprehend and support them because

they had been exposed to information through social media platforms. Here, two of the four different and overlapping roles identified in the previous chapter are evident: People use Instagram to **educate** others into being **respectful supporters** of issues they find important but do not necessarily identify with. The example provided by Julien indicates that Instagram activities has the potential to impact real-life issues and politics. When people are educated on feminist issues and LGBTQIA+ rights, they have the necessary knowledge to make strategic decisions that can influence political matters and potentially generate change on a structural and institutional level. Furthermore, awareness of certain issues on Instagram might push people into engaging in the streets.

However, advancement within gender and feminist issues is oftentimes followed by various forms of counteractions (Biroli & Caminotti, 2020; Zulver, 2021). It can be useful to examine this phenomenon to grasp some of the challenges that these young Colombians face when they take to the street to protest for women and LGBTQIA+ people's rights. Bentancur & Rocha-Carpiuc (2020, p. 13) provides a model for better understanding political backlash against sexual policies in Latin America. The model distinguishes between two dimensions: The level at which the reaction occurs (macro or micro), and the actors' strategies (institutional or noninstitutional). Whereas the actors on the macro level consist of formally organised groups, the actors on the micro level are "individuals who aim to obstruct policies in face-to-face relationships" (Bentancur & Rocha-Carpiuc, 2020, p. 13). Counteractions that fall into the category of the "noninstitutional macro level" are physical protests and other forms of "street politics", often organised by social organisations (Bentancur & Rocha-Carpiuc, 2020, p. 14). The model emphasises the impact of street activism, but it also emphasises the power imbalances that might occur when young people stand face to face with social organisations equipped with resources, such as money and support from politicians or religious leaders. Thus, the digital nature of Instagram, accompanied by its myriad of ways to interact, offers young Colombian people a space where they can engage in gender and feminist issues safely and from afar, whether they choose not to participate in physical protests or are prevented from attending. As discussed by the participants, this aspect of Instagram aligns with the perception that Instagram is a democratic and accessible platform.

Though none of the participants had experienced being subjected to violence, some had received comments and looks from people when being out in public. Some of the participants explained that they used Instagram as a platform to "reveal" their newfound non-normative

identities because it felt like a softer transition to living it out on the street. For these young Colombians, Instagram offered them a space where they could reveal themselves to the world from a safer distance.

6.5.2 Limitations of Instagram as a space for doing activism

Simultaneously, participants expressed that Instagram facilitates another form of patriarchal and controversial backlash through comments, direct messages, and various types of feedback on the content one posts. Several of the participants had experienced receiving hateful comments, and some had been subjected to threats. Biroli & Caminotti (2020) as well as Zulver (2021) suggest that patriarchal and controversial backlash provides soil where far-right movements and politicians can grow and thrive because they act as opponents to the feminist agenda. As Thor specifically pointed out, this phenomenon takes place on Instagram as well. As much as Instagram is a space where feminist and LGBTQIA+ voices can be heard, it is equally accessible for people who represent conservative or extremist thinking and ideologies. Despite Instagram's efforts to tackle hate speech, fake news, and other types of content that violates their guidelines, the platform sometimes misses the mark. Though Instagram can be an alternative platform when public spaces or traditional media are restricted, or even censored (Rahbari, 2019, p. 593), its value crumbles when Instagram itself censors. This argument is echoed by Faust (2017), who highlights the paradox that Instagram allows for women to display their identities, connect and build communities, while their nipples and menstruating bodies are censored. The participants in this study were also victims of this paradox, as Instagram censored their queer and female bodies, as well as words such as "marica" and "maricon". Thus, parts of Instagram's community guidelines directly oppose their efforts to support, educate, inspire, and generate change within the issues they engage in.

Biroli & Caminotti (2020) examine backlash in the form of campaigns, such as *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas*[11] (Don't Mess with my Children) in Colombia's neighbouring country Peru, implying that such movements actually do have an impact on political decisions. Further, their analysis underscores the importance of leaders and political front figures in order to mobilise conservative movements. The findings of their study support Lorber's claim that political unification is necessary for structural change, which in turn is necessary for fully being able to

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[11] In 2016, Peru adopted a new school curriculum based on gender equality and non-discrimination against sexual minorities. *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* was launched as a countermovement led by evangelical pastors and priests (Rousseau, 2020).

undo gender. On the other hand, Biroli & Caminotti (2020, p. 4) also point to Gisela Zaremberg (2020) and her study of contemporary feminist activism existing in parallel to the emergence of conservative religious groups in Mexico, stating that "the activists raised demands for women's rights that resulted in innovative institutions and cutting-edge legislation, such as gender parity". This example illustrates that activism is both needed and able to generate actual social change. However, it should be noted that these advancements were accompanied by the transition to democracy, which includes change on a structural and institutional level. It is reasonable to suggest that we need activism on all levels in order to ensure change. For can we really expect any political unification if ordinary people are not engaged in the cause? Lastly, Biroli & Caminotti (2020) stress that conservative backlash has consequences for democracy and citizen rights in Latin America. This is an important point, because it emphasises one of many reasons why raising awareness on gender and feminist issues is crucial. It also highlights the importance of activism that may contribute to changing values, norms, and attitudes, because Colombian people's values, norms, and attitudes are part of shaping the politics as well. Hence, changes on the interactional level may eventually contribute to institutional and structural change, for example within families or through policies and decision-making.

6.5.3 Why we need them both

Several of the participants pointed to the risk that digital activism is not materialised in real life. For instance, Alex reported that he normally uses Instagram to educate himself on the issues he engages in, rather than to post and share content himself. Although reading up on issues and being informed is important and, as discussed above, can elicit activism, Alex' comment echoes the other young Colombians' reflections on this topic. It also indicates that Instagram and other types of digital activism relies upon people being active participants and not just passive spectators. Hence, the participants agreed that digital activism should be a supplement to traditional forms of activism, as was the case for Sandra. The Instagram collective she was part of occasionally arranged real-life catwalks with the purpose of displaying alternative femininity and body diversity. To reinforce the message, Sandra then used Instagram as a supplement by posting pictures and sharing content from the event. The real-life catwalk differs from Instagram as a platform to display body diversity because in the streets, the models are subjected to the assessment of any spectator or random by-passer. Hence, they also have the opportunity to reach a broader audience than on Instagram, where most of their followers are people who know them and/or relate to their message. However, it should be noted that there is always a possibility that the participants go viral or grow their follower base. In that case, Instagram

could reach a broader and larger audience than more traditional platforms for doing activism such as the streets.

The way Sandra's digital activism supplemented the more traditional forms of activism she participated in, is in line with Greijdanus and colleagues' (2020, pp. 50-51) description of an "intrapersonal" effect: Either offline activism "spills over" to digital spaces, or digital activism prompts offline activism. These authors conclude that in many cases, online and offline activism are positively related, and they are unquestionably intertwined (Greijdanus et al., 2020, pp. 51-52). For example, online activism may mobilise people to engage in offline protests. The intrapersonal effect resonates with **the role of the activist**, which was sometimes adopted by the young Colombians who participated in this study. The predominant role of the activist is to generate change. For Ava, for example, that meant to speak loudly about issues they felt passionate about, such as abortion or discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people. Thus, the intrapersonal effect also demonstrates how the different roles overlap. When the participants use their Instagram platforms to foster awareness and highlight certain topics and issues as **educators**, they were simultaneously taking on the role as the activist. In turn, the participants' digital engagement could potentially transform their followers into **respectful supporters**, or it could help their followers who are grappling with the same issues as themselves to feel empowered and inspired to seek change within their own scope of action. Nonetheless, these young Colombians' digital activism could potentially lead to mobilisation and collective action that goes beyond the limitations of Instagram, such as participating in real-life protests or reaching politicians and legislators online with their message.

Based on the findings and analysis of this study, young Colombian people's digital activism can contribute to self-empowerment, spread knowledge and awareness, facilitate feminist consciousness and foster solidarity, and it can be a step on the way to impact gender relations and feminist causes, at least on a local level. This study has also detailed the limitations of Instagram in relation to the expression of gender and feminist issues, particularly in comparison to street activism. Therefore, one platform should not exclude the other. Instagram can be useful for contesting gender stereotypes and undo gender on an interactional and individual level. However, when the goal is to dismantle the gender binary and transform unequal power relations, there needs to be change on the structural and institutional level as well. Combining engagement on Instagram with street activism might be a way to create important synergies and lead to structural change.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The overall objective of this study was to explore the experiences of young Colombian people who engage in gender and feminist issues on Instagram. It specifically explored what they aim to achieve with this and how useful Instagram is for achieving these goals. The study further aimed to examine to what extent the participants were undoing gender on Instagram, and whether Instagram is a safe space for engaging in gender and feminist issues.

The participants engaged in gender and feminist issues for various reasons, as did the topics they chose to focus on. Based on the participants' reflections of the motivations behind and purpose of their own engagement, four different and overlapping roles were identified: The respectful supporter, the activist, the role model, and the educator. The roles indicate what the participants hoped to achieve with their Instagram engagement as well as how they presented it. For example, all participants expressed a desire to be a resource and inspiration to peers who are grappling with similar issues as themselves, such as gender identity, sexual orientation, restrictive gender norms, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. A lack of representation and diversity within Colombian traditional media was commonly named as a reason for displaying their non-normative young Colombian identities on Instagram. Knowledge gaps in the educational system was also stated as a reason. Participants used Instagram as an alternative platform to spread and obtain information and knowledge. In some cases, display of identity was also linked to a quest for personal empowerment. The participants viewed Instagram as a platform where they could express themselves, often through clothing, makeup, hairstyles, poses, gestures, text, and symbols. By doing so, they aimed to contest gender norms and stereotypes, reclaim their identity and power over own body, and take a stand against conservative and radical voices on gender and feminist issues. Wanting to raise awareness on topics such as discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people, abortion, sexual consent, and body positivity was another main cause for engaging.

My findings further revealed that all participants were contesting gender norms that are associated with traditional gender stereotypes. For some of the participants, the main objective was to challenge norms linked to their assigned gender, namely to broaden stereotypical Colombian definitions of femininity and masculinity. Their strategies varied from displaying non-normative hairstyles and clothing, to displaying non-normative behaviour. One participant expressed how posting pictures in underwear triggered negative reactions from people who

found it inappropriate for a woman to expose her body. Another participant challenged the machismo ideal that men should be hyper masculine by posting videos of himself dancing. For the non-binary and gender queer participants, the overall objective was to challenge the hegemonic discourse of gender based on cis-gender and heteronormative ideals. Through openly displaying their non-binary identities, the participants aimed to normalise existing outside the gender binary.

Moreover, the participants compared Instagram to the street as a space for doing activism. They all found Instagram to be safer than attending physical protests and marches due to the high levels of police brutality and the general risk of getting hurt on the streets. Additionally, the participants appreciated the democratic aspect of Instagram: Anyone with access to Internet and a smartphone has the possibility to participate in the conversation, as opposed to traditional media which is more restrictive. However, the risk of receiving backlash was present when doing digital activism. All participants had experienced being critiqued for the content they posted, and some had received hateful comments and threats. They also agreed that Instagram should not replace the street as the preferred space for doing activism. Some participants explained that digital actions alone are not sufficient in order to generate social change. One participant emphasised the unique feeling of collectiveness and solidarity when marching and protesting in the street and its power to unite people and place issues on the political agenda. While participants generally found Instagram to be a safe space for engaging in gender and feminist issues, they thought of it as a supplement to more traditional ways of doing activism, such as the street.

Hence, as the young Colombians in this study illustrate, Instagram can be a powerful platform for expressing one's thoughts on gender and feminist issues. Instagram can be an alternative, and in some ways safer, space than more traditional and restrictive venues, such as mainstream media and the educational system, for contesting gender norms and stereotypes on a local level. The participants in this study demonstrated how they took on different roles for different purposes, but also how these overlapped. Instagram, thus, functioned as a platform where they could achieve personal empowerment while being a resource to others. On the other hand, Instagram has its limitations. It is therefore important to be mindful of how Instagram is used and for what purposes. Although perceived to be safer, people are still held accountable for their performance of gender on the platform. It is therefore not a "free" space in terms of gender assessment. Furthermore, when the aim is to undo gender, posting feminist content on

Instagram may not necessarily generate change on a structural or institutional level. The findings in this study indicates that a combination of digital spaces and traditional spaces, such as the street, is more powerful in order to reach activist goals and bring about social change.

Finally, whether the participants' engagement on Instagram is undoing gender or not largely depends on the perspective one employs. It also seems plausible to ask *to what extent* they are undoing gender rather than *if* they are doing so. Based on the findings of this study, it is thus reasonable to suggest that the young Colombians are challenging both cultural and universal gender norms and stereotypes, and Instagram as a digital platform enables them to do so on an interactional level. Instagram facilitates feminist consciousness and fosters solidarity. In turn, such actions may undo gender to the extent that they reduce gender difference and allow for people to pursue alternative forms of masculinity and femininity. However, in order to undo the gender binary and reduce gender inequality in line with Sustainable Development Goal 5, it may require structural and institutional change achieved through political unity and more organised forms of collective action. Nonetheless, the young Colombian people who participated in this study are doing what they can as young individuals to contribute to a Colombia, and a world, where gender is not a limitation, nor an advantage.

The focus of this study was on young Colombian people's experiences with Instagram. Other studies could expand on the findings of this study by exploring other social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok to understand young Colombians experiences with activism on digital platforms in general. Furthermore, the participants in this study all belonged to the middle- or upper-middle class (with one exception) and lived in urban areas. They all held, or were in the process of obtaining, a university degree. Further research is needed, however, to understand how young Colombian people who live in rural areas, or do not have access to the same resources as the participants in this study, experience Instagram and other social media platforms as arenas for engaging in gender and feminist issues. Instagram might not be equally democratic for everyone, as it may be more difficult to some to access smartphones, reliable Internet connection etc. This study also provides some recommendations for policymakers both in Colombia and on an international level:

First, Instagram is an important, and to a large extent democratic, digital platform that may serve as a safer and alternative space to people whom of various reasons are limited from expressing themselves and their thoughts in offline public spaces. Therefore, Instagram should

make an effort to ensure that they do not censor women or LGBTQIA+ people, as it counteracts their struggles to advocate for their rights while also undermining the democratic potential of Instagram. Second, raising awareness and educating people on gender and feminist issues is crucial in order to foster solidarity and build a more tolerant and diverse society. Thus, it would be beneficial to continue to integrate such topics into Colombian curriculums and classrooms. Lastly, though social media offers a space to display diversity, the power of traditional media should not be undermined. The Colombian broadcasting media should hence aim to represent its people and show diversity in all its forms, for example different gender identities, sexual orientations, and bodies. Meanwhile, however, Colombian youth, such as Ava, Thor, Sandra, Julien, Alex, and Isabel, continue their individual and collective engagement on Instagram in order to achieve personal empowerment and local impact on gender and feminist issues.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Thematic Table

Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes
Diversity in young Colombians engagement with feminist and gender issues on Instagram	Raising awareness and supporting the LGBTQIA+ community	Gender diversity Gender diversity within one's own gender Speaking up against discrimination Educating on queer rights and queer history Supporting LGBTQIA+ rights
	"Le gender bender" – Instagram as a space for displaying identity, contesting stereotype, and personal empowerment	Challenging the "macho man" stereotype Challenging the Colombian female stereotype "The new me" Exploring non-binary identity Being comfortable with oneself
	Feminist issues	Abortion rights Talking about menstruation Promoting body positivity
Involvement in Instagram collectives		Meaningful Educational
Motivation and purpose for engaging	Engagement triggered by personal experience	Sexual assault Consent Disease Accepting oneself Harassment LGBTQIA+ rights
	Wanting to help others	Help LGBTQIA+ youth accept themselves Help women love themselves Normative beauty standards The Colombian female stereotype
	"Doing it for myself	Empowerment Love oneself Use Instagram to tell one's own narrative
"See me baby" - Perception of one's own role and impact – Four different and overlapping roles	The respectful supporter The activist The role model The educator	Supporter/Ally Does not identify with the cause Lack of knowledge Break the silence to challenge taboos Remove stigma Wanting to inspire others Representation Be a resource to others Inhabit knowledge Spread knowledge
"I do what I can with what I have" – normal people with normal amounts of followers		Influence is limited Going viral Engage within one's own scope

Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes
Instagram as a resource	The multitool	Endless options Possibility to engage from afar
	"Allows minority groups to have a voice" – How Instagram facilitates democracy	Accessible Democratic Enables minorities to have a voice
	Safer than the streets	Street activism can be physically dangerous Police brutality in Colombia
'It works in both good and bad ways' – Instagram as a double-edged sword	Censoring	Censoring LGBTQIA+ voices Censoring queer and female bodies Binary gendered structure
	Fake news	Information can be fake or misused Space for extremist movements
	Disagreement, hate, and threats	You are vulnerable Controversial topics generates negative reactions Debates are healthy Emotionally tiring Colombia is the issue
"Instagram is not enough; the real thing happens in the street"		You cannot stay online The street is a ground-pillar for activism Sense of collectiveness Instagram as a supplement to street activism

Appendix B: NSD Ethical Clearance Form

NSD NORSK SENTER FOR FORSKNINGSDATA

Vurdering

Referansenummer

849817

Prosjekttittel

Undoing Gender in Digital Spaces

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Universitetet i Bergen / Det psykologiske fakultet / Hemil-senteret

Prosjektansvarlig (vitenskapelig ansatt/veileder eller stipendiat)

Ann Cathrin Corrales-Øverlid, ann.overlid@uib.no, tlf: 46511540

Type prosjekt

Studentprosjekt, masterstudium

Kontaktinformasjon, student

Julie Louise Falck Husum, juliefalckhusum@gmail.com, tlf: 97787889

Prosjektperiode

01.12.2021 - 01.07.2022

Vurdering (1)

16.11.2021 - Vurdert

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen, så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet den 16.11.2021 med vedlegg, samt i meldingsdialogen mellom innmelder og NSD.

Behandlingen kan starte.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET
Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige personopplysninger, særlige kategorier av personopplysninger om etnisitet og seksuelle forhold eller orientering frem til 01.07.2022

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG
Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 nr. 11 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse, som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake.

For alminnelige personopplysninger vil lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen være den registrertes samtykke, jf.

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personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 a.

For særlige kategorier av personopplysninger vil lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen være den registrertes uttrykkelige samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav a, jf. personopplysningsloven § 10, jf. § 9 (2).

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER
NSD vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen:

- om lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke viderebehandles til nye uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet.

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

NSD vurderer at informasjonen om behandlingen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18) og dataportabilitet (art. 20).

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER
NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må prosjektansvarlig følge interne retningslinjer/rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER
Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilken type endringer det er nødvendig å melde:
https://www.nsd.no/personverntjenester/fylle-ut-meldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/melde-endringer-i-meldeskjema
Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET
NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Gry Henriksen

Lykke til med prosjektet!

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Appendix C: Consent Form

Are you interested in taking part in the research project

" Undoing Gender in Digital Spaces" ?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to contribute to the field of research by shedding light on young Colombian people's experiences of expressing their thoughts on gender and feminist issues on Instagram.

In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

This project is a 30-credit master's thesis. The central research objective is to explore how young Colombians express their thoughts on gender and feminist issues on Instagram.

Who is responsible for the research project?
The department for Health Promotion and Development at the University of Bergen (Bergen universitet) is the institution responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?
You match the following inclusion criteria:
1) Colombian nationality
2) Age: 18-35
3) Regular engagement on Instagram related to gender and feminist issues
4) English-speaking
5) Comes from and/or lives in an urban area of Colombia

Acquaintances who fit the inclusion criteria-profile function as gatekeepers. They either know or know of people who fit the inclusion criteria and recommend them as possible participants for the study. The gatekeepers might have provided the researcher with your contact details, or they might have contacted you directly.

What does participation involve for you?
If you choose to take part in the project, this will involve that you take part in a digital in-depth interview. It will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour. The interview will be recorded, and the data will be stored safely and deleted after being transcribed by the researcher.

Furthermore, the project includes descriptions of Instagram content that is relevant to answer the research objective and research questions*.

*The researcher will take any precautions needed to ensure the participants' right to privacy. Anything considered a possible risk to the participant's anonymity will not be included in the project.

Participation is voluntary
Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at

any time. All information about you will be kept anonymised and deleted. There will be no consequences if you choose not to participate or decide to withdraw from the research.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data
We will use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter only. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

Myself, as a student and researcher, as well as my supervisor, will have access to the personal data. To ensure your anonymity, I will replace your name and contact details with a code. The list of names, contact details, and respective codes will be stored separately from the remaining data on a research server.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?
The project is scheduled to end 01.07.2022. All personal data, including digital recordings, will be deleted after the end of the project.

Your rights
As long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:
- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?
We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with Universitetet i Bergen, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS have assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?
If you have any questions about the project, or if you want to exercise your rights, contact:
- Universitetet i Bergen via Julie Louise Falck Husum – student, by email: (juliefalckhusum@gmail.com), or by telephone: +47 97 78 78 89
- Or Ann Cathrin Corrales-Øverlid – supervisor, by email: (ann.overlid@uib.no), or by telephone: +47 46 51 15 40
- NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS, by email: (personverntjenester@nsd.no) or by telephone: +47 55 58 21 17.

Yours sincerely,

Student   Supervisor
Julie Louise Falck Husum   Ann Cathrin Corrales-Øverlid

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project "Undoing gender in digital spaces" and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- ☐ to participate in an interview
- ☐ for activities on Instagram posted or shared by me to be analysed and described

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. 01.07.2022

(Signed by participant, date)

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Demographic questions:

- o   What is your age?
- o   What gender do you identify with?
- o   What is your sexual orientation?
- o   What is your civil status?
- o   Where did you grow up, and where do you currently live?
- o   What is your level of education?
- o   What socio-economic class do you perceive yourself to belong to?

Overall objective: Explore how some young Colombians express their thoughts about gender and feminist issues on Instagram.

Theme: What type of feminist/gender-related content is posted?

- o   Can you tell me about what kind of gender equality/feminist content you post (i.e., body positivity, GBV, SRHR etc.) and why you post it?
- o   How would you describe the type of content you post?
- o   Do you tend to post within one category (issue) or several?
- o   How often do you post X content?
- o   Have you posted anything personal related to this issue? (Personal experiences, thoughts etc.)
    - o   If yes, can you explain what type of content and why you chose to post it?
    - o   If no, can you explain why not?
- o   Have you reposted anything related to this issue originally posted by an organization, a world leader, a celebrity, or anyone with influence?
    - o   If yes, can you explain the type of content and why you chose to repost it?
    - o   If no, can you explain why not?
- o   Have you engaged in any global issues or campaigns on Instagram?
    - o   If yes, can you explain what kind of issues/campaigns and why you chose to engage with them?
    - o   If no, can you explain why not?
- o   When you post about X, do you usually post about it:

- o On a regular basis?
- o When you feel like it?
- o In accordance with what is on the national or global agenda?
- o Or several of these options?

Theme: What do some young Colombians want to achieve by posting this type of content, and what do they see as their role?

- o Can you tell me about your personal reasons/motivations for posting X content?
- o When you post X content, what do you hope to achieve?
    - o For example: raising awareness, showing support/being an ally, showing resistance etc.
- o Who do you wish to reach out to when posting this type of content and why?
    - o For example: family, friends, people in general, a wider community (through hashtags etc.), politicians, world leaders and influential people?
- o When you engage in X on Instagram, what do you think is your role in this debate?
- o Do you engage in this/these issue(s) primarily online, or in real life as well?
    - o If primarily online, are you active on any other digital platforms than Instagram as well?
        - ▪ If yes, can you explain which ones and why?
        - ▪ If no, can you explain why not?
    - o If in real life as well, in what way do you engage in this/these issue(s)?
        - ▪ Can you explain which platforms you are using and why?
        - ▪ In your experience, what is the difference between expressing these issues in real life or online?

Theme: Do Colombian people experience Instagram as a safe space to express feminist or gender equality content?

- o Can you tell me about your experience with Instagram as a safe space to express your thoughts and views on feminist/gender-related issues?
- o Do you ever receive any reactions/responses on the content that you post?
- o Have you ever received positive reactions?
- o Have you ever received negative reactions?

- Can you describe these reaction(s)?
- In what way did you receive positive/negative reactions?
    - For example: in the comments, in direct message (DM), face to face?
- Who gave you these reactions?
    - For example: family, friends, random followers, people in your local community etc.
- Why do you think they reacted like this?
- How did the reaction make you feel?
- In what way did you respond to this/these reaction(s)
    - Did the reaction(s) influence your Instagram activities in any way? (Scared them from posting, encouraged more posting etc.).
    - If yes, can you explain how and why?
    - If no, can you explain why not?
- Can you share your thoughts on whether Instagram as a social media is a good channel for raising awareness about this/these issue(s)?
    - Have you ever worried about the content you posted or hesitated to post something because you were scared/worried about people's reactions to it?
- Can you tell me about your perceptions of Instagram as a safe space to express thoughts on gender and feminist issues?
    - In comparison to other digital spaces?
        - If yes, in what way?
        - If no, in what way?
    - In comparison to real-life situations?
        - If yes, in what way?
        - If no, in what way?
- What do you think would make Instagram a safer space for expressing these views?