Celebrities, Fans, and Queering Gender Norms: A Critical Examination of Lady Gaga's, Nicki Minaj's, and Fans' Use of Instagram

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CELEBRITIES, FANS, AND QUEERING GENDER NORMS: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION
OF LADY GAGA’S, NICKI MINAJ’S, AND FANS’ USE OF INSTAGRAM

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Texts & Technology
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2018

Major Professor: Stephanie Vie
ABSTRACT

This dissertation used queer rhetoric as a lens for studying queering gender norms on Instagram by using Lady Gaga’s, Nicki Minaj’s, and fan posts as case studies. The research considers how celebrities may use social media, like Instagram, for queering gender norms, and what this might look like. This research also aimed to better understand if and how fans may take up celebrities’ efforts at queering gender norms and, in turn, queer gender norms in their own Instagram posts where they tag Gaga or Minaj. To conduct this research, I took a multimodal methodological approach and collected and coded 1,000 posts from Gaga and Minaj, respectively, and 1,000 posts that used the hashtag Gaga and another 1,000 posts that used the hashtag Minaj. My findings suggested that Gaga and Minaj do not engage in the queering of gender norms as frequently as anticipated, and when they do it is often in relation to their public, staged performances as musicians. Furthermore, Gaga also spoke on issues relating to gender and marriage equality whereas Minaj also spoke on issues relating to racial equality. The data collected on fans was inconclusive in part because of the large number of spam posts and also because, without interviewing fans, it was difficult to discern whether they were taking up celebrity messages in their posts given information shared in the photo and in the caption. However, I was able to note that, most often, fans were engaging with celebrities by expressing admiration. This research is useful for considering how gender performance manifests on Instagram, and possible ways celebrities can utilize Instagram to queer gender norms as well as promote other messages. With regard to fan posts, I argue for continued research in ways to support fans becoming critical rather than passive consumers of celebrity culture.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my dissertation committee for their unwavering support of my research and their thought-provoking feedback throughout the duration of this process. Thank you to my partner and family who have also been so supportive of my research, even though at times writing has kept me a bit distracted. Thank you to my parents who, I suspect, struggled at first with the thought of one of their children moving across the country alone, but have always exuded their confidence, support, and excitement on this journey.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION: QUEER RHETORIC AND GENDER THEORY

It is not uncommon for famous musicians to play with their gender performances and sexualities as a part of their personae (e.g., Prince, Joan Jett, David Bowie, Boy George, Suzi Quatro, Bryan Ferry, and Roy Wood) (see Auslander, 2006; Clifford-Napoleone, 2015; Denski & Sholle, 1992; Hawkins, 2016). However, what does this gender play look like for present-day musicians whose performances are no longer limited to TV appearances, interviews, and stage performances? How does social media play a role in this gender play, if it plays a role at all? How might gender play and other messages celebrities espouse be recirculated through fan posts? These are the driving questions behind my research as I aim to better understand the role social media may play in gender performances and queering gender norms. The term “queering gender norms” used here is defined as using queer approaches, more specifically queer rhetoric, to challenge heteronormative gender performances. Using Lady Gaga’s and Nicki Minaj’s Instagram accounts as well as fan posts that use the hashtags #LadyGaga and #NickiMinaj as case studies, this research seeks to explore whether or not musicians and other celebrities queer gender norms through social media and, if so, how and why. The case studies on fan posts seeks to understand if and how fans may recirculate these musicians’ efforts at queering gender norms in their own posts. Furthermore, by focusing specifically on Instagram, this research can explore how Instagram may serve as a rhetorical tool for communicating particular ideas, concepts, or messages (such as those connected to gender or sexuality) to fans through a visually driven social media site. Because of the potential communication between fans and celebrities through Instagram, selecting case studies of celebrities with large fan bases, like Lady Gaga and Minaj, will help readers better understand how musicians’ gender performances can transcend the stage
and cross over to social media, and, more specifically, how Instagram may serve as a rhetorical tool for musicians like Lady Gaga and Minaj to communicate particular messages (e.g., queering gender norms) quickly and on a large scale.

To explore how musicians and celebrities may queer gender norms through social media technologies, this case study focuses on two popular musicians, Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj, and their fans because of these musicians’ complex social media performances and because of their expressions of and advocacy for gender expression in popular culture. For example, both Gaga and Minaj, among many other celebrities on Instagram, share photos and videos that demonstrate the variety of their daily lives: showing stage performances, appearing at social events, spending time with family and friends, celebrating birthdays and holidays, sharing memes to depict their current moods, and so on. These two musicians are representative of women artists with different racial backgrounds who perform different musical genres, which is important for considering how music genre and race may intersect with gender performance and queering gender norms on Instagram.

Both Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj use their presence on Instagram as a platform for activist work by, for example, promoting and engaging with political movements like Black Lives Matter and Marriage Equality, which is rarely seen on celebrities’ social media accounts, if seen at all. This activist work is also important for their efforts at queering gender norms as they not only support movements based on racial or gender equality but also, to an extent as is discussed in later chapters of this dissertation, queering gender norms through their own gender performances. Gaga, a white pop artist, recently spoke about her own sexual assault, and at the 2016 Oscars she performed a song that originally appeared in a documentary about sexual assault at college campuses. Prior to her performance, she used social media to dedicate her performance
to another artist, Kesha, who was undergoing a legal battle with her manager who Kesha said abused her for years. Additionally, during the performance, 50 sexual assault survivors joined Gaga on stage to stand in support of this message. Notably, she also has a male alter ego, Jo Calderone, Gaga’s “ex-boyfriend,” who attended the MTV Video Music Awards on her behalf and performed for her, although Jo very rarely makes appearances. Minaj is of Indian and African descent from Trinidad and Tobago and is a hip-hop artist. Traditionally, hip hop is a male-dominated music scene that tends to be demeaning towards women, who are typically depicted as sexual objects and the property of male rappers visually and lyrically (Balaji, 2010). However, Minaj challenges this depiction of women as she positions herself as an equal to her male counterparts in the music industry.¹ In her music video for the song “Anaconda,” for example, the audience sees Minaj embracing her body and looking directly into the camera, exerting her autonomy and power by moving from a sexual object to a sexual subject. She, too, has male and female alter egos that exemplify different personalities and often appear in her stage performances and in her music.

Both musicians present complex gender performances (discussed in depth in Chapters Three and Four) while advocating for gender representation by using their own status as celebrities to forward these messages, and my aim is to discover how these gender performances may serve as rhetorically strategic efforts to queer gender norms, as defined on page 1. In American culture, celebrities of all types constantly appear in news magazines and tabloids as many Americans soak up the celebrity lifestyle, which then tends to inform our own actions and

¹ For clarity, I am using the terms male/female and man/woman to refer to gender. However, these terms are far more complex than simply referring to gender (see Butler, 2004; Fuss, 1989).
activities as celebrities provide a voice for fans and supporters (Marwick, 2015). This is important because if Americans look up to celebrities and mimic them, then celebrities normalizing certain gender performances may bleed into the general populace, which could then be helpful or harmful depending on the norms established. Broadly, this research can inform how photos, videos, and social media sites could be used to queer gender norms by musicians, but also other celebrities, fans, supporters, followers, and other citizens interested in employing queer rhetoric in this way, and considers how consumers of such social media posts might engage in queering gender norms themselves.

**Literature Review**

**Queer Rhetoric and Gender**

As Jean Bessette (2013) explained, “‘Queer’ is defined in queer studies not as a synonym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender individuals but rather as an orientation against normativity; someone, or something, is queer when s/he or it challenges the social processes that consolidate and normalize gendered, sexual, raced, and classed identities” (p. 29), and it is this understanding of the word queer that I am referring to when using the term “queering gender norms.” However, Bessette (2016) noted in her later article “Queer Rhetoric in Situ” that queer studies must still attend to the rhetorical nature of texts and consider how texts may be read as both queer and normative by different audiences across times and spaces. Therefore, my attention to queering gender norms in my own study hinges on the contextual nature of these social media posts. From the standpoint of musicians in the pop and rap music industries, elaborate and complex stage performances is normative amongst performers. But from the standpoint of fans who do not engage in these elaborate and complex stage performances, these performances may be read as queer. Even still, some musicians or persons involved in various
parts of the music industry would not read these performances as normative, nor would all fans. Thus, positionality, particularly my positionality as a white cisgender woman, plays a crucial role in determining “queer” and “normative.” Queer rhetoric also complicates the dichotomy of normative and queer as it questions what “normal” is (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012).

Queer rhetoric, more specifically, is defined by Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2012) as “self-conscious and critical engagement with normative discourses of sexuality in the public sphere that exposes their naturalization and torques them to create different or counter-discourses, giving voice and agency to multiple and complex sexual experiences.” Queer rhetoric hinges on questioning what has been established as “normal,” and even attempting to broaden what normal means (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012). In doing so, Alexander and Rhodes aren’t just focused on texts being either normative or queer, but instead on creating opportunities and spaces for various discourses to exist outside of the dichotomy. Thus, queer rhetoric serves as a lens for considering how celebrities such as Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj may use queer rhetoric to queer gender norms beyond “the hierarchical structure of heterosexuality in which men are understood to subordinate women,” according to Judith Butler’s (2004) interpretation of Catherine MacKinnon (1987) in Feminism Unmodified. Furthermore, texts being read as both queer and normative (Bessette, 2016) provides space for multiple readings of texts and complicates how researchers might approach the study of gender norms, although such research is fundamentally necessary considering how far-reaching celebrities’ social media posts are and the vast ranges of audience members reached through such posts. This demonstrates a need for approaching the study of gender norms through qualitative methods due to the subjective nature of what constitutes queer and normative.
In the intersection between heterosexuality and heteronormativity, “women are frequently identified and evaluated in terms of their sexual availability/attractiveness to men and their presumed ‘place’ within heterosexual relationships as wives and mothers” (Jackson, 2006, p. 114). Furthermore, Stevi Jackson (2006) noted “womanliness” is most often the object and equated with sexual attractiveness and domesticity while “manliness” is most often the subject and equated with physical and mental prowess, courage, leadership abilities, and through sex. Raewyn Connell and Rebecca Pearse (2015) elaborated on these gendered divisions of labor in society by noting in the workforce women tend to find themselves in service jobs or those that involve caring for the young and sick, whereas men tend to dominate jobs in heavy industry, management, and other technical professions. Statistically, “women do most of the cleaning, cooking and sewing, most of the work of looking after children, and almost all of the work of caring for babies” (Connell & Pearse, 2015, p. 3). Men are seen as the “decision makers” and “bread-winners” of a family; they are the consumers of the services provided by women (Connell & Pearse, 2015). These representations of women and men are often pervasive in the rap music industry (see Balaji, 2010; hooks, 2003; Oware, 2009; Reid-Brinkley, 2007; Smalls, 2011). For the purposes of this dissertation research on queering gender norms, gender performance (distinct from Butler’s (1993) gender performativity) is understood as moments where someone would express themselves or engage in behaviors that would traditionally be associated with their assigned sex based on societal conventions. Therefore, queering gender norms here is understood as instances where gender performances, drawing on Bessette (2016), may be read by audiences as challenging the heteronormative view of women as subordinate, sexually available, and/or sexually attractive to men to further reveal the complexity and fluidity of gender performance (Bessette, 2016; Jackson, 2006). Further, queering gender norms may challenge
masculine heteronormativity by showcasing female masculinity through the use of masculine language and exerting power through their bodies and sexuality (see Balaji, 2010; hooks, 2003; Reid-Brinkley, 2007; Smalls, 2011). Queer rhetoric acts as an analytical lens for studying the potential use of Instagram as a rhetorical tool for queering gender norms by providing opportunities and spaces for celebrities and fans alike to express counter-discourses for what some may read as either queer or normative, depending upon the audience.

Gender and performance are complex concepts to understand, and there are various definitions, approaches, and theories used to discuss these concepts, as can be observed in the rich body of scholarship already discussed. However, it’s important to further note how culturally situated gender and performance can be (see Halberstam, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Schwartz & Rutter, 2012) in addition to how rhetorically situated it can be (see Bessette, 2016). Pepper Schwartz and Virginia Rutter (2012) argued there are three different perspectives on gender and sexuality: biological, evolutionary psychological, and social constructionist (Schwartz & Rutter, 2012). The biological view of gender focuses on hormones, namely estrogen and testosterone, as markers of femininity or masculinity, respectively (Schwartz & Rutter, 2012). The evolutionary psychological approach holds that “humans have an innate, genetically triggered impulse to pass on their genetic material through successful reproduction” (Schwartz & Rutter, 2012, p. 15). The social constructionist view argues that cues from the social environment, which would vary from one location to the next, influence what to desire and how to behave in order to be a “normal” member of society (Schwartz & Rutter, 2012). However, the authors noted that none of these perspectives allow room for other approaches, and they concluded that gender, sexuality, and desire are a culmination of biological, evolutionary, and social forces taking shape. This is evidenced, in part, by the fact that people in different countries...
with different cultural beliefs (but the same biology and evolutionary drives) view sexuality very differently from one another (Schwartz & Rutter, 2012). Other scholars, like Jackson (2006), argued “gender categories have no natural existence” because gender is a result of “social division and a cultural distinction, given meaning and substance in the everyday actions, interactions, and subjective interpretations through which it is lived” (p. 106). Even within the same culture, people may express gender and sexuality differently. This can be evidenced in Brandon Teena’s story, a young transgender man living in a small town in Nebraska (Halberstam, 2005).² Brandon was murdered in 1993 by two men threatened by Brandon’s masculinity and choice to date women. Jack Halberstam noted:

While gender codes may be somewhat more flexible in urban settings, this also means that people become more astute in urban contexts at reading gender. In the context of a small town where there are strict codes of normativity, there is also a greater potential for subverting the codes surreptitiously. (p. 44)

Brandon “had been passing for male with only mixed success in the city of Lincoln, Nebraska, since his early teenage years,” and it was not until moving to Falls City, Nebraska, that Brandon was able to successfully pull off a male presentation (Halberstam, 2005, pp. 42-43). Brandon serves as an example of how, even within the same country, performances of gender and sexuality may differ by focusing on the differences between rural and urban settings.

Halberstam’s (2005) comparison of Brandon’s experiences in an urban setting versus the strict codes of normativity found in a small town highlights the argument that texts, in this case Brandon’s body and gender performance, can be read as both normative and queer, depending upon the context (Bessette, 2016). Unfortunately, Brandon’s story, too, highlights the potential

² When referring to Brandon Teena, I will use his first name Brandon because this was his chosen name.
danger of performing gender outside of the social norms, and over 20 years later it is still
dangerous. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) (2015) found that for
LGBTQ and HIV-affected communities there were 20 homicides reported to NCAVP member
programs in 2014, up from 18 in 2013, and 55% of those were transgender women.3 With
transgender survivors only representing 19% of total reports to the NCAVP, there is a
disproportionate rate of homicide of transgender people (National Coalition of Anti-Violence
Programs, 2015). With this research in mind, gender performance cannot be neatly categorized
or defined, and it differs from one social context to another as does the violence against members
of the LGBTQ and HIV-affected communities (Bessette, 2016; Halberstam, 2005; National
Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2015; Schwartz & Rutter, 2012). This makes studying
gender and sexuality especially complicated because researchers must categorize their findings
but, in doing so, they likely are not able to account for all people and all different experiences
(Schwartz & Rutter, 2012). Furthermore, both Halberstam’s and Schwartz and Rutter’s
discussions of gender performance in the offline settings of our day-to-day lives lend insight into
the complexity of gender performance online. From this we can conclude that, just as in offline
settings, gender performance in social media is a complex experience that differs from one social
situation to the next but is also impacted by biological and social forces because, when
participating in social media, we engage in an embodied experience. Finally, Bessette (2016)
reminded us that, in studying gender performance, we must attend to the historical and rhetorical
nature of these performances lest queer studies research merely confirm what “we already

3 The data in this report was collected in 2014 from 16 NCAVP members and organizations in 14 states.
Consequently, this data does not reflect the actual numbers but merely serves to gain a sense of trends in hate crimes
and violence. Additionally, the report specifically used the acronym “LGBTQ” and that is why I’ve used that
acronym here.
‘know’ [about how] insidious regulations of binary gender and opposite-sex relations pervade everything, and always have and always will” (p. 152).

This case study that considers how musicians’ (and potentially other celebrities’ as well) messages are presented and how fans may take up those messages is important for considering how social media performances may play a role in queering gender and engaging in queer rhetoric. As discussed earlier, Alexander and Rhodes’ (2012) definition of queer rhetoric aimed to give voice to multiple, varied, and complex sexual experiences through “self-conscious and critical engagement with normative discourses of sexuality in the public sphere.” In distinguishing rhetorical work as queer, Alexander and Rhodes were careful to note that queer rhetorical practices intend to broaden, even break, what passes as normal, and in doing so “queer rhetoric works to unseat the rhetorical and material tyranny of the normal itself.” In other words, queer rhetoric uses rhetoric to challenge the socially constructed normative conceptions of gender performances that arise in a particular environment under particular conditions, as discussed by other scholars (see Halberstam, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Schwartz & Rutter, 2012). Further, understanding queer as antinormative can often lead to “a concurrent focus on alternative possibilities for living that exceed or diverge from normalcy” (Bessette, 2016, p. 151) such as is seen in José Esteban Muñoz’s (1999) work discussed later in this chapter. Butler (1993), though, turned her focus more directly to the abjected bodies reflected in this definition of queer: the “‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life” (p. 3), particularly in regard to gender performance that lies outside what society has deemed appropriate in its construction of gender. A subject who assumes a culturally constructed sex that governs her body “enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications” (J. Butler, 1993, p. 3). The disavowed identifications are the abjected bodies who are not yet subjects
because they are outside of the domain and, therefore, have not assumed society’s heteronormative subject domain that governs their bodies and identifications (J. Butler, 1993).

To subvert these socially constructed norms, Nancy Van House (2011) noted three key concepts from Judith Butler’s scholarship she argued informs our understandings of human-computer interaction through social networking sites: performativity, citation, and interpellation. Butler had been careful to distinguish the first concept, performativity, from gender being performed. In an interview, she explained her belief that gender is performative, meaning “it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman” (J. Butler, 2011). She further stated that individuals really aren’t any gender from the start because gender has been reproduced over time to be what society generally thinks of as a man or a woman (J. Butler, 2011; also see Jackson, 2006). In her book *Undoing Gender*, she said, “Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes” (J. Butler, 2004, p. 42). Furthermore, she argued that “terms such as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are notoriously changeable; there are social histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending upon geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose” (J. Butler, 2004, p. 10). Butler’s socially constructed view of gender as performative is reaffirmed through other scholarship on gender (see Bessette, 2016; Jackson, 2006; Schwartz & Rutter, 2012), as mentioned previously. While I recognize the malleability of the terms “masculine” and “feminine” and how understandings of gender are socially constructed, for the purposes of this dissertation research I have elected to focus on societal, normative
interpretations of gender (as discussed by Connell and Pearse (2015) and Jackson (2006)) in order to consider the queering of gender norms in my data set.

This connects to the second concept discussed by Van House (2011), citation, which refers to the ways people reiterate or cite the norms of their cultural contexts. Citations take hold through the reiteration of normative performativity, and their power lies in the citations the performativity compels: “Citation will be at once an interpretation of the norm and an occasion to expose the norm itself as a privileged interpretation” (J. Butler, 1993, p. 108). In other words, by engaging with gender performativity, one must necessarily cite normativity, even when critiquing it, to compel alternative or subversive citations. Furthermore, normative gender performativity is “repeatedly fortified and idealized” to the extent that it is reiterated, produced, and cited as a norm through “the differentiated citations and approximations called ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’” (J. Butler, 1993, pp. 14-15). There can be good and bad citations: those which are subversive and forced, respectively (J. Butler, 1993). The forced citations are not a choice because for one to be a subject, one must engage in these citations, whereas the subversive citation exposes and reverses the norm through theatrics like miming and hyperbole (J. Butler, 1993).

The final concept, interpellation, refers to identity markers attributed to an individual by others (e.g., race, sex, and class), which can effectively impose constraints on autonomy (Van House, 2011). More specifically, interpellation facilitates the sexing of a child (J. Butler, 1993). An infant is identified as a girl, and then she is “girled” or her sex is made recognizable through the language and kinship surrounding the identified sex (J. Butler, 1993). This is then repeatedly

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4 Sexing here refers to the biologically assigned sex.
reinforced through a variety of authorities, thus normalizing the sexed identity (J. Butler, 1993). In doing so, this imposes particular qualities or traits that would necessarily need to be adhered to for one to be identifiable as “girl,” for example (J. Butler, 1993). This is also evidenced in racialized interpellations where race has been partially constructed through the boundaries surrounding racism (J. Butler, 1993). For Butler, race highlights power and difference not just being an issue of heteronormativity, as sex and gender highlights, but one where boundaries are drawn around racial purity and racial distinction as well. In sum, interpellation constrains autonomy and agency through boundaries surrounding race and sex, effectively othering or dehumanizing bodies outside of those boundaries.

In addition to the use of performativity, citation, and interpellation to subvert norms (J. Butler, 1993, 2004, 2011; Van House, 2011), Muñoz’s (1999) concept of disidentification, highlighted by Alexander and Rhodes (2012), can also serve as a tool for queer rhetoric as it “works on and against dominant ideology” by neither assimilating or outright opposing it. Disidentification, according to Muñoz, refers to the survival strategies minorities employ to negotiate the public sphere where those who are nonconforming are punished for their existence. Muñoz further explained it is through disidentifying with the mass public sphere that the counterpublic emerges and functions. He elaborated:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. (Muñoz, 1999)

Disidentification, then, provides an alternative method for challenging heteronormative and racial norms of performance and expression by simultaneously working within and against these norms. One example of this is the muscle magazine Physique Pictorial from the 1950s that,
on the one hand, portrayed heteronormative masculinity focused on dominance, power, and strength, but on the other hand served as a form of pornography for gay men at the time since the magazine featured muscled, barely clothed men (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012). While the magazine pandered to heterosexual men, it also served homoerotic purposes. Disidentification serves as one way to approach queer rhetoric as it can, but does not necessarily, engage self-consciously and critically with normative discourses.

Of particular importance for my own research is queer rhetoric and citation. Musicians’ fame allows more room to subvert norms through the use of queer rhetoric and citation because, while there is still risk, there is significantly less risk due to their power and positioning in society than there would be for other individuals. This is similar to analyses of the sexual lives of working-class women, who were viewed with disgust and distaste, as deviant and unfeminine, but middle-class women were not viewed with the same disdain (Skeggs, 2001). In the context of social media research, using feminist theories like Butler’s (1993, 2004, 2011) citation, interpellation, and performativity related to subject formation, positionality, and power also plays a crucial role in the identity and performance practices as they are guided by the interface and norms of their online network (Van House, 2011). Through these case studies on two musicians and their use of Instagram, readers can gain a deeper understanding of whether and how those with power can utilize the interface and normalizing effect of social media to, in turn, shape the norm rather than simply reinforce it. Furthermore, in considering my study of gender and social media, queer rhetoric and citation provide a fruitful lens for seeking gendered performances and instances where these performances may be read by some fans as queer (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012; Bessette, 2016; Muñoz, 1999). In contrast, interpellation and the boundaries of autonomy would be difficult to discern due to how carefully these musicians’ identities and performances
are likely crafted behind the scenes. It would be challenging to determine whether a particular interpellation is a part of the musician’s branding and image or not. Additionally, profile pages on Instagram do not request identifying information such as gender or sexuality, and so limits on autonomy would also be difficult to discern due to a lack of any identifying, normalizing information requested for the profile. Therefore, for the purposes of this study I will use queer rhetoric and citation to analyze photos on Instagram to identify moments of disruptions of norms and subversive or coerced citations. This is a critical lens for examining the possibilities of queering gender norms through social media and, potentially, effectively disrupting established gender norms and moving towards a more inclusive norm regardless of one’s gender identity and expression.

Queer Rhetoric and Race

Race is an important factor to consider in queer rhetoric because disidentification, and thus queer rhetoric, can become a survival strategy for minorities “negotiat[ing] a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz, 1999). More specifically, black female sexuality in the cultural marketplace becomes an opportunity to disrupt the stereotypical objectification of the wild and savage Other depicted by having black women exert their sexuality as power (Balaji, 2010; hooks, 2003), although some critics (Oware, 2009) argued that women exerting their sexuality undermines attempts at feminist and empowering performances. However, these different readings as women exerting sexuality as both empowering and disempowering highlights how we must attend to contextual situations of texts and consider how readings will differ with the audience (Bessette, 2016). Black female sexuality sells because it is still seen as an icon for deviant sexuality, the wild and savage, and/or the desirable Other (hooks,
This is evidenced in black women performers and also in the models featured in many music videos where black women are portrayed as if they are sexually available, and therefore are desirable for their bodies rather than their vocal abilities (Balaji, 2010; hooks, 2003). Additionally, within the rap music industry more specifically, black women performing artists typically find themselves playing the old tropes of “the Afrocentric ‘queen’ and ‘righteous’ woman, or the modernist, Eurocentric ‘whore’” (Smalls, 2011, p. 89). The “queen” is typically “characterized by sexual purity, motherhood, spirituality, commitment to the uplifting of the race, and in particular the uplifting of black men” (Reid-Brinkley, 2007, p. 247). However, it is noteworthy that there are some musicians and performers, like Janelle Monáe in the song and music video Q.U.E.E.N., who are working to defy these tropes through their music (also see Balaji, 2010; hooks, 2003; Smalls, 2011). Shanara Reid-Brinkley (2007) studied respectability as it appeared in conversations in an online forum discussing a series of articles titled “Take Back the Music” in the black women’s magazine *Essence*. In her analysis, she argued black women, particularly middle- and upper-class black women, discipline and police one another’s performances of black femininity in an effort to gain recognition and respectability from white patriarchy and distance themselves from the lower-class, oversexualized “jezebel” (pp. 245-246). Stepping outside of these typical boundaries of the “queen” and the “whore” or “jezebel” within the cultural marketplace challenges heteronormative and racial assumptions of black female sexuality, causing tensions and anxieties to arise as there is debate over the various readings (both positive and negative) of expressions of black female sexuality.

However, music also becomes a way to discuss black sexuality and “challenge racist assumptions that suggest it is an ugly sign of inferiority, even as it remains a sexualized sign” (hooks, 2003, p. 123). Black women’s buttocks, in particular, continue to be a fascination in
American culture. hooks elaborated that “in the sexual iconography of the traditional black pornographic imagination, the protruding butt is seen as an indication of a heightened sexuality” (p. 123). hooks advocated for black females becoming the subjects of their sexuality (rather than the objects) in order to create new representations of themselves. Tina Turner’s image, for example, transitioned from being the wild savage her abusive partner created her to be to an autonomous black woman who uses her sexuality to exert power over others (hooks, 2003). In this transformation, disidentification is evident. Tina Turner continues to play into this idea of the wild savage and sexually available woman, but she is no longer the object of desire but the subject. Here she is recycling and rethinking, as Muñoz (1999) described, the image of black women as savage and sexually available often depicted in the cultural marketplace, and reconstructing that message by reversing the roles of the people involved by making herself in power of her sexuality and positioning men in a subordinate position.

Another example is the rap artist Jean Grae. In Smalls’ (2011) analysis of her music, she found Grae used patriarchal language to showcase her lyrical mastery and desirability to both men and women. In the song “The Illest,” as well as others, Grae used language typical for the genre (“bitch,” “homo,” and “nigga”) but she also alluded to having sex with a woman when saying “fuck your girl like a nigga” (Smalls, 2011). Grae’s performances as a rap artist position her between man and woman, as her lyrics argued she can perform the role of a man, and Smalls argued for an interpretation of these performances as queering black female sexuality as they disrupt heteronormativity where black men rappers must uphold the ideal of being virile and strong but black women rappers must address their display of sexuality. Grae embraces disidentification by neither identifying with the Afrocentric queen or Eurocentric whore, mentioned earlier, but through her lyrics complicates these depictions of women by displaying
sexuality through recycling the language of the genre to position a woman—herself as the performer—adopting a male role—fucking a girl—to give an example. However, some researchers like Oware (2009) acknowledged the constraints of the rap music industry and the tropes of the genre, yet still contended women rappers expressing their sexuality and using demeaning language undermines positive messages of empowerment that can be found within the music. Using queer rhetoric as a lens for interpreting this work, though, these performances can be read as empowering as women rappers are working within the rap industry and utilizing the tropes of the genre to provide critiques of the misogyny and sexism they face. However, as Bessette (2016) encouraged researchers to consider texts being read as both queer and normative, depending on the audience, these performances can become representative of the rap industry and black female sexuality, and in doing so they can be read by some audiences as promoting negative and harmful stereotypes about black women’s sexuality.

As for music video models who perform a supporting role to the main rapper(s), Murali Balaji (2010) discussed how one model, Melyssa Ford, worked to take on a more dominant role. For example, Ford would physically obscure male rappers’ bodies with her own, look down on male rappers, and wink and make sexually suggestive gestures towards the camera as if she was choosing her sexual partners rather than just being the property of the rappers in the video (Balaji, 2010). These gestures indicated she is in charge of her sexuality and her sexual exploits, even while playing to the male gaze and consumerism in this hypermasculinized music industry where women are viewed as the property of rappers (Balaji, 2010). With these examples in mind, these women worked to survive in the music industry through Muñoz’s disidentification (1999). To be successful in the music industry, Tina Turner and Melyssa Ford needed to appear sexually available and be sexually suggestive and Jean Grae needed to exert power in a male-dominated
industry, but they used their bodies, language, and/or their performances to indicate their power and autonomy as sexual subjects. Returning to Alexander and Rhodes’ (2012) definition of queer rhetoric, these performers used queer rhetoric when they turned “normal” depictions of women in the music industry as sexual objects on their head by using sexuality for their own sexual autonomy.

**Conclusion**

This research uses queer rhetoric as a lens for case studies focusing on Lady Gaga’s and Nicki Minaj’s gender performances on the social media site Instagram in an effort to understand if and how these music artists may be queering gender. Furthermore, this research aims to better understand how a social media site, such as Instagram, may be used to espouse particular messages and how those messages may be recirculated through fan posts on the site. By paying attention to gender performances in addition to the messages espoused, this research can better understand how musicians may promote particular causes to raise awareness through their fans. In the case of Gaga and Minaj, some of these messages are directly related to race and gender as they work to disrupt norms of women and sexuality in the music industry. Chapter One has provided an overview of existing research on queer theory and, more specifically, queer rhetoric and its intersections with race and gender in music. Chapter Two takes the frame of queer rhetoric from Chapter One and places it in the context of social media research by specifically focusing on the significance of studying gender and its intersections with social media, identity, and performance. Chapter Three will focus on my analysis of 1,000 photos and videos Lady Gaga posted to her Instagram account, describing the gender performances and messages espoused. Similar to Chapter Three, Chapter Four will be an analysis of 1,000 photos and videos Nicki Minaj posted to her Instagram account, describing the gender performances and messages
espoused. Chapter Five will focus on my analysis of 1,000 fan posts to Instagram that used the hashtag #LadyGaga and 1,000 fan posts that used the hashtag #NickiMinaj to consider and if and how fans may be engaging with these two celebrities’ performances and messages. Chapter Six will conclude my research by providing a summary and implications of this research, particularly as it pertains to how popular music artists’ gender performances and messages are espoused, and how fans may be engaging with these performances and messages. Additionally, Chapter Six will consider the ethics behind conducting social media research of this nature that relies heavily on the embodied work of gender performance. Although all Instagram posts collected for this research were public, ethical questions arise when considering what information and texts can be shared as a part of this research without potentially placing those who posted the materials at risk.
CHAPTER TWO: QUEER RHETORIC, IDENTITY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Introduction

Musicians, and other celebrities as well, are uniquely positioned, due to their power and leverage in society, to challenge societal norms as their voices, actions, performances, and appearances have a tendency to bring closer attention to the nonnormative. Queer rhetoric and race serve as important lenses for understanding gender performances in this study, but for this study social media technologies mediate these performances. To better understand how social media technologies impact gender performances and intersect with queer rhetoric and race, we must first consider identity performances more broadly.

Identity Theory and Performance

Identity performance, broadly, refers to the persona an individual presents in a given situation. With this in mind, an individual would possess multiple identities as they navigate multiple situations that call for different personas. The intersections of these identities have some aspects that could be described as constants (Buckingham, 2008). These can be evidenced in some core values, beliefs, and aspects of identity presentation that carry over across multiple networks and audiences. The identity performance shifts as one encounters different Discourses and new social situations for identity performances (see Buckingham, 2008; Gee, 1989; Goffman, 1956; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Furthermore, the constants of one’s identity may also shift and change as one encounters new Discourses and social situations. Through understanding identity performances, we can begin to understand how heteronormative gender performances emerge and become reinforced through social interactions. With this knowledge, we can begin to consider ways of challenging or critiquing heteronormative gender performances, and these case
studies of Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj look at the possibility of celebrities queering gender norms and, in doing so, influencing the ways their fans engage with gender norms.

Identity theory, according to Erving Goffman (1956), is a way of understanding how people determine their presentation of themselves. Upon entering a new situation, a person uses “sign-vehicles” to determine what behavior is appropriate in that given situation, and these would be the information gleaned when someone first enters a social situation, such as mannerisms, appearance, and status (Goffman, 1956). Furthermore, other research argued people’s behaviors are shaped by internal perceptions of a situation, and they respond according to what they internally perceive to be an appropriate response given the situation at hand (Buckingham, 2008; Stryker & Burke, 2000). In contrast, James Paul Gee (1989) used the terms Discourses and identity kits to discuss people’s ways of being in the world. Whereas Goffman argued for performances as a way of presenting oneself, Gee discussed Discourses and identity kits more as ways of being. Discourses are defined by Gee as “ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes” (pp. 6-7). A key component of Discourses is that they are not learned via overt instruction; instead, people learn Discourses through a sort of enculturation and apprenticeship by interacting with those who have already mastered the Discourse (Gee, 1989). In essence, identity performances are citational practices because performances emerge out of and are shaped by the environment and, consequently, other people’s performances (see Chapter One) (J. Butler, 1993).

In social media, the sign-vehicles and Discourses become even more complex and situational due to the millions of people from all around the world who engage with social media technologies. Additionally, performances are also influenced by the machines and interfaces of
the social media technologies that request particular profile information and, often, determine the basic layout of one’s profile page on a social media site (Van House, 2011). In some ways, interpellation is present here where people are asked to identify their gender, race, and sexuality, for example, even when the options provided may not align with the way the person identifies. For example, in terms of gender, some sites may only give the option to identify as either “male” or “female,” which excludes members of the LGBTQIA+ community who may not identify as their assigned sex at birth (although this is beginning to shift somewhat). Although the social media technology itself heavily influences what online performances look like, there does remain “the individual . . . intentionally or unintentionally express[ing] himself, and the others . . . be[ing] impressed in some way by him” (Goffman, 1956, p. 2). In other words, the machines and the people involved in creating a social media profile page are, together, determining an expression or performance of an individual. Because these performances are founded on sign-vehicles, enculturation, and the influence of the interface, many times performances unwittingly reinforce heteronormativity because those are the norms established in our in-person social interactions that transfer over to social media interactions (see Chapter One) (Connell & Pearse, 2015; Jackson, 2006). Although an individual’s performances are not necessarily impressed upon another as they are intended, there remains an exchange of an individual expressing herself and another being impressed in some way in social media performances (Goffman, 1956).

However, these theories of identity performance begin to break down when considering the multiple audiences served through social media as the situations become much more complex. In many instances, society is organized around groups, communities, and networks, and people largely engage and interact with those within their own groups, communities, and networks (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Engaging and interacting with one’s own groups,
communities and networks results in the development of particular patterns and behaviors for participation (Stryker & Burke, 2000), again reinforcing heteronormativity. In this way, people reflect the social structures they find themselves within as they participate within the boundaries of the social structure (Stryker & Burke, 2000), but with the easy spreadability of information through social media technologies this can be challenged in some ways as information can easily spread beyond the anticipated audience (see boyd, 2007; Gries, 2017; Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009). This becomes problematic when considering Goffman’s (1956) argument that the performances people convey are evidenced in identity because people convey multiple performances and identities based upon the situation surrounding each performance; an identity performance intended for a single audience now must be conscientious of other, unexpected audiences, and individuals craft their performances accordingly. This complicates Goffman’s (1956) and Sheldon Stryker and Peter J. Burke’s (2000) arguments because they argued a crossover between audiences and performances is problematic as it results in confusion for both the performer and the audience, and so performances must always remain separate from one another to avoid conflict. However, maintaining distinct performances becomes very complicated in the age of social media, as described above due to the spreadability of information.

On the other hand, Gee (1989) argued these conflicts and tensions within Discourses, the roles performed, would result in the individual trying to reshape the Discourses so they are no longer conflicting with one another. This is similar to Stryker and Burke’s (2000) conclusion that the identity with the greater commitment will be reflected. Although individuals engaging in social media sites could use sign-vehicles and apprenticeship to discover appropriate ways of interacting in these digital spaces, social media’s attention to connecting and engaging with audiences on a very large, potentially endless scale, could result in an overlap of performances
and roles. In other words, the nature of social media sites causes conflict with these theories in
that a single performance or role may be reaching both intended and unintended audiences
because there is less control over who can access these performances. Furthermore, the tensions
that arise from performances of multiple identities that cannot easily be reconciled highlights the
issue with social media performances where those who engage with social media will almost
certainly present conflicting, multiple identities to a variety of audiences unless they engage in
very labor-intensive identity management practices (see Marwick, 2013). For celebrities, though,
identity presentation looks very different as they often have a publicist or team of people
managing their social media presence, particularly in regards to establishing and spreading their
branding and image, and likely would have a bit more of a unified identity performance because
of how highly managed their performances are both on the screen and off. This would likely also
be the case for celebrities who play with queering gender norms because while there is more
fluidity in their performances, their performances that engage with queering gender norms are
still highly managed. In other words, a part of their branding and image that is propagated is one
in which queering gender norms is to be expected by the audience.

Scholarship that specifically addresses identity and digital technologies, however, does
not find tensions between identities as problematic (see Buckingham, 2008; Rheingold, 1992).
Howard Rheingold (1992) discussed identity in virtual communities from a personal perspective
where people are able to negotiate their various identities and connect with others who have
similar interests as them and/or to share knowledge with one another. Although Rheingold’s
arguments predate social media, it remains that there are some social media spaces today that are
similar to what Rheingold described, such as discussion board sites like Reddit or online fan
fiction communities. Participants in the virtual community The WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic
Link), a non-anonymous virtual community, required people to put forth some sort of identity in order to participate (Rheingold, 1992). Likewise, this is also often the case when participating in various social media sites as each site is often targeted towards particular types of social interaction (e.g., connecting with family and friends, creating a professional network, meeting and dating new people) that require some sort of identity performance for that particular social situation (also see boyd, 2010, 2014; Buckingham, 2008; Davis, 2011; Mascheroni, Vincent, & Jimenez, 2015; Ringrose, 2011; Thomas, 2004; Weber & Mitchell, 2008; Williams, 2008). However, even within these social media platforms that promote a more singular identity performance, it remains that by the nature of a social media platform targeting a particular type of social interaction it would continue to reinforce heteronormativity by normalizing certain gender performances within that particular site (Connell & Pearse, 2015; Jackson, 2006; Van House, 2011).

Social media sites that involve connecting with people on a more personal level, like the examples included above, would include performing constant elements of the self (e.g., race and gender) (Buckingham, 2008; Rheingold, 1992), which Butler (1993) argued are constructed elements of the self because they become apparent by assigning meaning through repeated performances. Rheingold (2002) argued that getting to know people in virtual communities and digital spaces happens differently because there is a tendency to get to know someone on a personal level before actually meeting them. As technology has evolved into what is now understood to be social media, social networking connections are typically preceded by face-to-face interaction, although some virtual communities as Rheingold (1992) described are still prominent. Despite the changes in technology, individuals who may face barriers when communicating in traditional kinds of communities tend to find the written communication in
virtual communities or social media to be more authentic. Because of this, some people become very close and personal with others, but this, too, can pose issues of authenticity “because of the masking and distancing of the medium, in a way that it is not in question in real life” (Rheingold, 1992, p. 147). These issues of authenticity with digital technologies is further discussed by others (see Donath, 1998; Nakamura, 2011), and the risks of people perceiving deception can be seen in Brandon Teena’s story (Halberstam, 2005) and the disproportionate rate of death among transgender people (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2015) (see Chapter One).

This research on identity performance illustrates that particular aspects of one’s identity performance—mannerisms, behaviors, interests, beliefs, and so on—cross over between online and offline identities. Although with this understanding people are able to present different selves than they might do in other situations, and while Rheingold mentioned he was sometimes surprised when meeting people offline because they were different than he expected, Rheingold (1992) did not seem to find these tensions in virtual communities especially problematic for one’s identity the way that Goffman (1956), Gee (1989), and Stryker and Burke (2000) did, except in cases of deception which are seen in Lisa Nakamura’s (2011) and Judith Donath’s (1998) work. For example, Nakamura discussed the issue of “identity tourism” where people (white men in the examples she cited) create fictional identities of persons in minority groups, such as a lesbian Syrian blogger or an Asian woman in chatrooms. Social media allows for easier dissemination of fabricated identities, which further highlights the tensions that can arise through the use of social media that Rheingold didn’t speak to when discussing some of the earlier forms of virtual communities.

In regards to celebrity presentations, authenticity is also questionable because so much of their social media presence is devoted towards branding, making it difficult to get a sense of the
person behind the fame. Some of this, however, can be gleaned by paying close attention to how mannerisms, behaviors, and beliefs, for example, might manifest in identity performances. In the case of social media more specifically, celebrities promoting or sponsoring social justice issues would likely believe in those causes by choosing to speak publicly rather than staying silent. This is not to say those who stay silent do not believe in these causes, just that they are choosing not to speak publicly. Furthermore, these mannerisms, like promoting social justice issues, provide an opportunity for using queer rhetoric as a lens for better understanding the messages espoused and in what ways, if any, these messages disrupt heteronormative gender and race performances.

If musicians, and other celebrities, like Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj, disrupt heteronormative gender performances, they may be leading the way for queering gender norms through establishing and normalizing different sign-vehicles and Discourses to shape patterns of behavior (see Gee, 1989; Goffman, 1956; Stryker & Burke, 2000) as their fans are exposed to and imitate these performances (see Marwick, 2015).

The ways people determine how to shape their identity for a given situation is discussed in a variety of ways in identity theory. One way is through the use of sign-vehicles (Goffman, 1956) where people read sign-vehicles for clues on how to perform in a given situation, how the performer might be deceptive in their presentation, how the audience reads the performer and uses their own sign-vehicles to shape their behaviors, and also how there can be team performances. This back-and-forth exchange between performer and audience is evident in both face-to-face interactions and digital interactions, and it provides a foundation for understanding identity performances on social media sites. An example of this would be the impact of audience when one engages in social media and social networking sites that potentially have broad and overlapping audiences. Other ways identity is shaped in a given situation are through the social
structures (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and apprenticeship (Gee, 1989) involved. These differing viewpoints are useful for considering social media research, where there is a mix of sign-vehicles and social structures already in place, and deepens the understanding of how identity performances are taken up and learned. A particular social media platform encourages its own ways of engaging with the site (Van House, 2011), and this is in part informed by observing existing performances to determine how a newcomer should perform. For my case studies, this will be especially useful for considering whether or not Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj are queering gender norms and how fans may be engaging with celebrity Instagram posts through posts of their own. Likewise, community-specific networked identity and identity presentations, particularly in regards to those communities focused more on interpersonal relationships and support systems, play an important role as well, such as in my case study of Gaga’s and Minaj’s messages and fan engagement with these messages. The fluidity of identity performances in communities and issues of literacy and access are also woven into virtual identity performances (Buckingham, 2008). An individual’s critical literacy for navigating and managing identity performances would be especially insightful when looking at social media and social networking sites where there are overlapping audiences and potentially more fluid identity presentations. Musicians and celebrities, like Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj, have the luxury of having publicists who facilitate managing these identities.

Social Media and Celebrities

To take a closer look at the role celebrities play in social media sites, specifically Instagram, I will first provide an explanation of Instagram. The description of the application in the Apple App Store is as follows:
Instagram is a simple way to capture and share the world’s moments. Follow your friends and family to see what they’re up to, and discover accounts from all over the world that are sharing things you love. Join the community of over 500 million people and express yourself by sharing all the moments of your day—the highlights and everything in between, too. (Instagram, Inc., 2016)

Instagram is a social media site that is driven by photo sharing. Users post photos they’ve taken or have found online, or they can repost photos via third-party applications. A driving factor behind the use of Instagram is the photo-editing capabilities of the app through applying filters, tilting photos, blurring photos and also making adjustments to the shadows, highlights, and development of photos. The photo-editing capabilities set Instagram apart from other photo sharing and social media applications that often take a “photo album” approach that gives users less control over editing the photo. Furthermore, these photos have captions that can include tags to connect to a larger conversation, similar to how tags work on Facebook and Twitter. My choice of selecting Instagram as a site of study is based upon the visual nature of this particular social media site. The primacy of the visual on Instagram, particularly when the body is visible, will be key for my considerations as to whether Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, and their fans are engaging in queering gender norms. The caption that accompanies the photo will also lend additional insight into these considerations. Other social media platforms typically rely more heavily on text whereas here my intent was to consider queering gender norms both visually and textually.

Many musicians and celebrities utilize social media as a way to connect with fans and increase their fan base by making their brand readily accessible via social media. Additionally, their use of social media gives the audience an illusion of interaction and friendship with celebrities (Marwick, 2015). Social media thrives on marketing everyday social relations and, to be “successful” at social media, one needs to simultaneously be oneself and edit oneself of the
“not-safe-for-work” behaviors and mannerisms (Marwick, 2013). However, the standards for what is “not-safe-for-work” likely differ from one individual to the next, so it is important to take a rhetorically situated approach to understanding social media behaviors and mannerisms. Furthermore, a study by Katrin Tiidenberg (2014) noted that engaging in these not-safe-for-work behaviors helped one woman develop a “new gaze” that “taught her to feel sexy in her body, but it also altered her material body-practices in terms of how she held herself, how she dressed and accessorized, whether she used make-up and how long she let her hair grow.” Those who are micro-celebrities—those who have achieved celebrity status for a smaller population (Marwick, 2013)—or engage in certain social media behaviors, like lifestreaming, must undertake an extensive amount of labor because they are constantly managing their social media presence to uphold ideal images (Marwick, 2013). For some, this constant management of one’s social media presence can take a very real toll on their lives. Essenia O’Neill, an Australian teen, was paid to market and promote products, and in doing so she felt social media consumed her life and took her away from the “3D world” (Hunt, 2015). When she became so exhausted with this self-promotion, she “dramatically edited the captions to the remaining 96 posts in a bid to reveal the manipulation, mundanity, and even insecurity behind them.” One example given was:

A photo of her wearing a bikini, once captioned “Things are getting pretty wild at my house. Maths B and English in the sun,” has been edited: “see how relatable my captions were – stomach sucked in, strategic pose, pushed up boobs. I just want younger girls to know this isn’t candid life, or cool or inspirational. It’s contrived perfection made to get attention.” (Hunt, 2015)

In regards to celebrities, without conducting interviews we cannot say whether celebrities feel their photos are contrived, feel they help develop a new, affirming gaze of one’s body, or maybe feel they are just a part of the job. But through my case studies, we can consider what
messages these photos are sending in regards to gender and race, and through the study of fan posts begin to theorize how these messages may be impacting their audiences.

Although research specifically discussed micro-celebrities, the importance of status, self-branding, and publicity is also apparent for other celebrities with broader appeal, like Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj. Likewise, other social media research (see boyd, 2010, 2014; Buckingham, 2008; Davis, 2011; Mascheroni, Vincent, & Jimenez, 2015; Ringrose, 2011; Thomas, 2004; Weber & Mitchell, 2008; Williams, 2008) tended to focus on teen social media use and identity formation in a digital age, but not celebrities. Within Instagram more specifically, the use of selfies—whether posted on celebrity accounts or not—serve as a way to show glimpses of one’s life, a way to connect audiences, and a way to receive feedback on images (Marwick, 2015). Jill Walker Rettberg (2014) extended this further by suggesting the outstretched arm in a selfie photo “very strongly includes the viewer in the space of the photograph,” as if in an embrace. Additionally, it is perceived that with a site like Instagram it is easier for audiences to determine authenticity (the user posting/taking a photo herself rather than a publicist or marketing team) in photos because visually it is easy to determine what is a publicity photo and what is a candid shot (Marwick, 2015). However, whereas research (see Marwick, 2013) discussed the management of social media, it did not address other celebrity social media performances that use social media platforms to espouse what may be considered “not-safe-for-work” messages (e.g., Gaga and Minaj wearing what might be considered revealing clothing as a means for empowerment [Figure 1 and Figure 2]), nor did it address this from a queer theory perspective where this could be studied further through the lens of queer rhetoric and citation. These “not-safe-for-work” messages challenge the idea that the Instafamous reinforce traditional hierarchies of fame by focusing on thin, buxom bodies and luxury, which tends to be replicated by audiences but only
highlights the divide between celebrities and the everyman and everywoman (Marwick, 2015). Instead, Gaga and Minaj lessen the divide between celebrities and fans by normalizing their bodies and gender performances, thus these norms can be more easily taken up amongst fans. In Figure 1 and Figure 2, while the clothing choices themselves may not be typical for fans, Gaga and Minaj choosing to wear revealing clothing and to publicize their bodies in this way challenges heteronormativity.

Figure 1 Photo posted to Lady Gaga’s Instagram on June 9, 2015 at 11:35 am ET. The caption read “Merci! I love this fishnet gown, me and Philip stopped by his shop to get a proper hat to wear with it. ## #PhilipTreacy”
Gender and representation play a prominent role in social media as users make decisions regarding what information they will provide when participating in embodied interactions with social media. Gender, which is informed by biological, evolutionary, and social factors, can be embodied and performed in a variety of ways that differs from one society and culture to the next, as was discussed in Chapter One (see Bessette, 2016; Halberstam, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Schwartz & Rutter, 2012). Furthermore, in embodying gender in social media sites, users may be exposing themselves to potential surveillance as their private memories and experiences are made public (see van Doorn, 2011). However, while dangers remain for participating in social media sites, the Internet and social media, more specifically, provide many opportunities to present and experiment with gender performances, and also to challenge established gendered norms. Even so, many studies have found that, oftentimes, users tend to uphold the norms already in place (see Duguay, 2016; Tiidenberg, 2015), although this is not to say there are not
examples of users who challenge or critique the norms. Gender and social media, then, are inextricably linked to one another, for better or worse.

When participating in social media, users are sometimes unaware or unconcerned with the issues of privacy that may arise. Lisa Nakamura (2015) explained that early promoters described the Internet as a way to become bodiless. They viewed the Internet as a space where one could be race- and gender-neutral. This viewpoint is challenged through many game and discussion sites that would ask people to identify themselves in some fashion by creating an avatar, for example, that they would use to participate. However, with social media technologies, we are moving even further away from the Internet serving as a race- and gender-neutral space as social media profile pages often request this identifying information (Nakamura, 2015; Van House, 2011). One study of the social networking site Myspace revealed how memories and experiences become publicly mediated within social media spaces (van Doorn, 2011). Virtual performances of gender, sexuality, and embodiment are not limited to the virtual and neither are they immaterial; instead, they are rooted in the experiences of everyday life (both physical and virtual) and they are socially embedded (van Doorn, 2011). This is further evidenced in a study of Russian-speaking pregnant women and their photos posted on Instagram, which revealed their posts reinforced normative ideologies of femininity in their daily lives (Tiidenberg, 2015). This also remains true when considering celebrity social media accounts because the photos shared are rooted in their lived experiences and memories created with other people. For example, a study of actress Ruby Rose’s Instagram and Vine accounts uncovered her use of Instagram was often more self-presentational and desexualized, whereas her use of Vine was often more playful and expressive of her lesbian identity (Duguay, 2016). Niels van Doorn further argued that performances “constitute a variety of events, affects, ideals and regulatory norms that are
repeatedly actualized in material-discursive practices,” (p. 534) much like heteronormativity and citation discussed in Chapter One (see J. Butler, 1993; Jackson, 2006). In the case of Ruby Rose’s use of Vine and Instagram, Instagram fosters attention to aesthetics through the photo-editing capabilities, but Vine fostered the use of raw material with very limited editing capabilities, which in turn normalizes particular performances in these social media spaces (Duguay, 2016).

The mediated memories that become prominent in social networking sites where people share, comment, and post about their embodied experiences are simultaneously private and public as they are intended for a particular individual or small group but become mediated through technology (van Doorn, 2011). This becomes problematic when considering the spreadability of information online (boyd, 2007; Gries, 2017; Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009) as these memories and presentations can spread to a huge audience base, possibly with unintended audiences which could result in consequences. For example, if we take Brandon Teena’s story shared in Chapter One and consider it in a time where social media and social networking plays a prominent role in everyday life, something Brandon (or others who identify as LGBTQIA+) might post online could make him a target for a hate crime. Another example is the case of a Canadian woman, Natalie Blanchard, who lost her disability benefits from having depression because the insurance company thought she looked “too happy” on her Facebook to be depressed (Nakamura, 2015). This example in particular demonstrates a failure to consider the normative behaviors that often become established through interacting in particular spaces that allow for the possibility that Blanchard was struggling with depression and was merely posting happy memories because that is the norm. A-list celebrities, on the other hand, have more security when it comes to sharing particular experiences and memories because, while everything about their
lives is in the public eye, they have the money and power to better protect them from crime as well as a team of publicists to manage every detail provided about celebrities. Consequently, they are better positioned to critique heteronormativity and queer gender norms.

With the normative constraints of engaging in social media and potential consequences in mind, my case studies of fan engagement with Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj on Instagram become all the more delicate as collecting fan posts and sharing them could, inadvertently, have negative implications. For example, a fan publicly posting a photo of herself on Instagram may tag a celebrity account, like Minaj’s, and also self-identify as being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community through other tags like #instagay (see Duguay, 2015). Using hashtags is an established norm through Instagram but although she may be comfortable expressing herself in this way on Instagram, she may not be comfortable doing so in other spaces. For this reason, I do not share any fan posts that could identify the individual in my research (see the Methods section later in this chapter for more information). From this research (Duguay, 2015; Duguay, 2016; Nakamura, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2015; van Doorn, 2011), then, we can see how with social media there is no gender- or race-neutral space because, through participation, we are performing our gendered, raced, and classed identities. My case studies of Gaga, Minaj, and their fans, then, show how they are also performing gendered, raced, and classed identities. These performances can put the individual at risk, and oftentimes this risk is unknowingly being assumed. For those performances that may be read as queer (Bessette, 2016), the risks are heightened as people’s lives could very well be in danger by performing queerness. This brings up questions of ethical use of data from social media research, which will be discussed further in the final chapter.

Aside from privacy implications for gender performance in social media, the visual and textual nature of participating in social media affords writing and performing gender in different
ways. The Internet has made writing queerness easier through profile pictures and text, and also in terms of the spaces it provides for experimentation and play (see Alexander et al., 2004; Dame, 2016; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013). Research demonstrated that LGBTQIA+ community members were able to express their desires and discover new desires in a low-stakes environment, and they were more forward when writing queer in these spaces than they tended to be in offline settings (Alexander et al., 2004; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013). More recently, a study of transgender tagging in the Tumblr community found tags were used to identify and participate in subgroups, but there remained tensions between the terms used (Dame, 2016). In other words, specific language and tags must be used to be a part of that subgroup, which effectively limited self-expression in this space by establishing normative language for expression (Dame, 2016). Similarly, Casey Miles (2015), in her multimodal performance on butch rhetoric, argued for “writing ourselves into existence . . . writing to see ourselves seen.” For Miles, butch is a way of seeing and being seen; butch is visual in that we see “masculinity in the soft curves of a female body.” The Internet provides a space for writing and seeing ourselves into existence through the visual and the textual, and for LGBTQIA+ community members this can be a crucial space for exploring sexuality and gender performance.

Other social media sites, like Instagram, are sites where we can see individuals performing gender in social media. Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj are examples of persons who perform gender in social media, Instagram more specifically. Throughout Gaga’s fashion, musical performances, and engagement with fans, Gaga is seen embracing Otherness and challenging established norms (Corona, 2013; Gray, 2012), which was discussed further in Chapter One (see Halberstam, 2012). With regards to fashion, she wears fashion that is usually only seen on the runway. She calls her fans her “little monsters” and encourages them to
embrace their inner monsters. In her performances, she plays with her gender and sexuality through her songs, videos, and stage performances. This is all in an effort to create a lasting name for herself, which she seems to have already done as she easily stands apart from the “girl next door” image with which many other pop stars were introduced to the music scene (Corona, 2013). However, we see slightly different performances on her Instagram account. There she is not as overtly sexual and she does not play with gender quite so much. For example, Gaga has a male alter ego, Jo Calderone, who first appeared in 2010 and was presented at that time as her lover. However, Jo very rarely makes a presence, although her fans widely share photos of Jo themselves and tag Gaga in the photos. Instead, we see Gaga performing various representations of femininity on her Instagram page as she posts photos of herself ranging from wearing elaborate make-up and attire for stage performances to wearing no make-up at all and dressing in an old t-shirt and jeans. We also see photos of her embracing her sexuality as she wears revealing clothing and poses in provocative ways. Gaga’s gender is not evident in a single performance of femininity, but is expressed and represented in a variety of ways. In this way, she both challenges and upholds heteronormative representations of gender discussed in Chapter One (see Connell & Pearse, 2015; Jackson, 2006).

Similar to Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj also performs gender in various ways on Instagram. Minaj tends to present herself more frequently as embracing her body and sexuality. Such various gender performances being made public by celebrities are important because they challenge our heteronormative society where performing gender in these ways may be viewed as immoral or wrong, as discussed in Chapter One (see Balaji, 2010; hooks, 2003; Jackson, 2006; Oware, 2009; Reid-Brinkley, 2007; Smalls, 2011). In her music, Minaj uses queer desire as a means for empowerment, self-objectification, and fantasy, and she does so to appeal to both
queer and straight audiences (Smith, 2014; White, 2013). Simultaneously, through some of her music she is critiquing the objectification of women’s bodies and lesbian sexuality but also using it to bait straight male audiences, which calls back to disidentification and queer rhetoric discussed in Chapter One (see Alexander & Rhodes, 2012; Muñoz, 1999; Smith, 2014).

Similarly, much of Gaga’s music advocates for LGBTQIA+ and women’s rights by calling out the misogyny and sexism of the music and pop industry and calling for acceptance of all people (Gray, 2012). She challenges people to see beyond what lies on the surface and the personal values and belief systems in their lives (Gray, 2012). Furthermore, these various gender presentations let young people know they are not alone as they see themselves reflected in celebrities and gain confidence to be themselves.

Taken together, this scholarship illustrates that the textual and visual nature of social media provides space for constructing gendered performances. Within these social media sites, as mentioned above, often there are smaller groups more specific to one’s desires, experiences, or identity that emerge and participation in these groups also allows for experimentation in these spaces (see Alexander et al., 2004; Dame, 2016; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013). However, social media sites that foreground the visual nature of gendered performance are especially useful as they allow the complexity of gendered performance to be depicted. Although within these social media sites there is room for play and experimentation, and possibly presenting performances that does not align with one’s identity, performing is still an embodied experience. Social media sites that are visual in nature would allow for multiple and complex depictions of gender performance due to the ease of posting material that may be more challenging to showcase in a social networking site like Facebook that is focused on networks and creating a primary narrative of oneself via the detailed information requested in the profile. However, gendered norms can
also be subverted by (mis)using social media sites like Pinterest (see DeLuca, 2015; Vetter, 2014) and Instagram, as I explore in this dissertation.

Social media and the Internet more broadly is not a gender- or race-neutral space. Performing in these spaces is an embodied experience linked to an individual’s raced, classed, and gendered identities, and these identities come forth in their presentations. As discussed in Chapter One, gender performance, in particular, is impacted by multiple factors (biological, evolutionary, and social), and the social factors, in particular, establish what the gendered norms are in a society or culture (see Halberstam, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Schwartz & Rutter, 2012). Even so, Brandon Teena’s story told by Halberstam (2005) and discussions of writing queerness illustrate how both in online and offline settings those gendered performances can be played with, but sometimes playing with those norms can put oneself in danger as we see in Brandon’s violent death (Alexander et al., 2004; Halberstam, 2005; Miles, 2015). These performances, too, can have real-life implications as Nakamura (2015) told the story of a Canadian woman who lost her disability because of how her insurance company interpreted her social media posts. In other social media sites, we see everyday users challenging what has become normative in the site, like on Pinterest, where content has typically centered on sharing recipes, fashion tips, and DIY projects (DeLuca, 2015; Vetter, 2014). Furthermore, we also see celebrities challenging performances of gender by fluidly presenting themselves in social media to a wide fan base—Lady Gaga presenting femininity in a variety of ways and Nicki Minaj embracing her body and sexuality. Being oneself and presenting one’s gendered identity in a culture that still appears hostile to anything that challenges the normative—being transgender or being too happy—is challenging, frightening, and even dangerous to one’s well-being. However, we can continue to
challenge the normative and use the gendered performances of celebrities to promote acceptance of a whole range of gender performances rather than heteronormative.

**Methodology**

In this dissertation, I draw on queer rhetoric (Alexander & Rhodes, 2012) and citation (J. Butler, 1993) to better understand how Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj might be using queer rhetoric and citation to queer gender and challenge society’s normative attempts to police gender. Citation (J. Butler, 1993) will frame my study as I consider the role that musicians and other celebrities may have in inciting change in our understandings of gender as they queer gender and develop a perceived friendship with fans through social media interactions (Marwick, 2015). Engagement through social media enables what Alexander and Rhodes (2012) noted in their discussion of YouTube as an opportunity for viewers to engage with the performance through commenting, mimicking, and making their own videos, “putting in motion ever-changing chains of connection that break the bonds of static and stable meaning.” This can, in part, be seen through these two musicians’ various alter egos (some of which are male), and it can also be seen in how they may queer gender when they exaggerate, emphasize, or accentuate particular aspects of their gender performances. Furthermore, the ways fans uptake these messages of queering gender or alternative gender performances may be reflected in their own social media use as they use tags to call on these two artists’ branding within their own posts.

**Data Collection & Methods**

The primary questions guiding my research are:

- How might celebrities use social media as a space to queer gender through the use of queer rhetoric? Looking more closely at two celebrities, Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj, are they queering gender in their social media performances? What might this look like?
What identities might be present as they queer gender and what might be missing (e.g., why are/are not the alter egos present)? When we compare performances from Gaga and Minaj, do important differences in queering gender emerge?

- Do fans uptake these instances of queering gender, and in turn queer gender via their own social media performances? Are Lady Gaga’s and Nicki Minaj’s efforts at queering gender reflected in fan social media performances, and if so how are they present (e.g., imitation, remediation, etc.)? If this isn’t present, then how are fans engaging with celebrities?

To understand how one may queer gender through social media performances and how social media can be used to espouse messages, I collected samples of Lady Gaga’s and Nicki Minaj’s social media performances on Instagram. These data were collected between May 29 and July 6, 2016, using the program 4K Stogram to view the photos, comments, and hashtags required for data collection. The program automatically downloaded the photos, but other data collection was done manually by copying the data left out when downloading the photos (date, comment, and corresponding URL for the photo). Because Instagram is such a visual medium that many celebrities use to connect with fans, I analyzed Instagram photos and comments from these musicians to determine how they might queer gender visually. To study Gaga’s and Minaj’s Instagram accounts to understand how they might queer gender, I took a qualitative approach to my study and viewed each social media post as a rhetorical text by making an effort to consider the message and audience of each post, from my position as a viewer, to inform my analysis through the lens of queer rhetoric. I conducted a naturalistic observation of each public social media profile through Instagram because it is not feasible to interview or interact with these musicians themselves (Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2012). Additionally, I used quota
sampling because I looked at these social media performances as rhetorical texts to understand how these musicians may queer gender (Geisler, 2003; Vogt, et al., 2012). Therefore, representativeness and statistical significance is not relevant to this research. In regard to quota sampling, I collected the last 1,000 samples from each musician’s Instagram account from the date of data collection, and so in total I collected 2,000 samples. At the time of data collection, Gaga posted 2,070 photos to Instagram and had 17.3 million followers, and Minaj posted 3,943 photos to Instagram and had 60.2 million followers. As Alexander and Rhodes (2012) noted in their own study of queer archives on YouTube, the sheer volume of data on Instagram mitigates the possibility of gaining a comprehensive understanding of whether or not Gaga and Minaj are, in fact, queering gender and how they may be doing it. Instead, this research can be used to begin understanding what some possibilities may be for queering gender through a visual social media site, like Instagram.

To code the photos, I modified the categorization used in a study concerning the depictions of women in human sexuality and marriage and family textbooks (Low & Sherrard, 1999). This categorization was initially modified from previous feminist research studies on Seventeen magazine (see Pierce, 1990; Schlenker, Caron, & Halteman, 1998), and the authors explained they aimed to include three categories that communicate traditional messages about women and three categories that communicate feminist messages about women. Although the studies these categorizations come from are dated, they are still applicable today considering research on gender and heteronormativity that indicates women continue to be viewed in terms of their sexual availability, attractiveness, and their positions in the workforce and the home which are focused more on caregiving (Connell & Pearse, 2015; Jackson, 2006). For my own dissertation research, the main categories used in the previous studies have remained the same,
but the descriptors for each have been modified to be applicable to and representative of the photos shared on Instagram that are a part of my data set. In regard to my focus on queer rhetoric and citation, these categories provide a framework for considering the messages women, specifically, send in these case studies to support or oppose traditional, heteronormative gender performances because three of the categories can be viewed as supporting heteronormativity while three of the categories can be viewed as opposing heteronormativity. I used Low and Sherrard’s main categories and then revised the description to be more fitting given my case studies, as shown below in Table 1:

Table 1 Comparison of Original and Modified Categorizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Revised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Appearance and Sex: photographs of women buying clothes; at a hair salon; putting on makeup; prostituting” (Low &amp; Sherrard, 1999, p. 313).</td>
<td>Appearance and Sex: photographs promoting or showing off clothing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Male-Female Relations: photographs dealing with relationships with a man” (Low &amp; Sherrard, 1999, p. 313).</td>
<td>Male-Female Relations: photographs where men and women are interacting with each other, including friendships and other casual interactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Self-Development: photographs of women taking care of themselves; their relationships with friends (excluding males)” (Low &amp; Sherrard, 1999, p. 313).</td>
<td>Self-Development: photographs of women caring for themselves and their relationships with women, and the sharing of selfies, quotes, and/or songs that are meaningful to the person posting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Career Development: photographs of women going to college; spotlight on famous women and their careers; women working in a certain career area” (Low &amp; Sherrard, 1999, p. 313).</td>
<td>Career Development: photographs of women attending media events, recording music, and acting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Political and World Issues: photographs of women in the feminist movement; abortion and AIDS marches; lesbianism” (Low &amp; Sherrard, 1999, p. 313).</td>
<td>Political and World Issues: photographs of women promoting organizations and causes, like Elton John’s AIDS organization or the Black Lives Matter movement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The language used in the comments accompanying the photos helped me attempt to determine the message of the photos to engage with queer rhetoric and/or disidentification and also in organizing the photos into the categories mentioned above. After categorizing the data, I then began to take a queer rhetoric approach to further analyze whether each musician was engaging with these broad categories. Finally, I selected two photos, one that from my reading was queering gender norms and one that was not, from each category for each musician to analyze further through the lens of queer rhetoric and citation to further explore if and how queering gender norms or upholding gender norms may be present. These photos were selected based upon my own observations of trends in the data set and, given the photo and the caption, suggested they may be fruitful for further analysis. For example, a photo of Lady Gaga or Nicki Minaj posing for photographers at a red-carpet event with no caption would result in quite a bit of conjecture on my part in comparison to a photo that depicts interactions with others and includes a descriptive caption. This allowed me to further ground my findings in the data than what might have been possible through a random selection. This supports the case study approach in my research that enables me to provide in-depth, contextual analyses of selected performances, rather than the entire data set, to gain a richer understanding of the role of queering gender on Instagram and how celebrities may take part in that (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Furthermore, these common patterns and the coding scheme developed will be used to further study fan engagement.

To study fan engagement with these artists and their messages regarding queering gender, I collected 1,000 samples from Instagram where fans have tagged Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj individually using #LadyGaga and #NickiMinaj, respectively, for a total of 2,000 fan samples. These photos were collected using the same methods as Gaga’s and Minaj’s posts to Instagram. I
elected not to collect the user names of those who posted the photos to protect their identities. A total of eight representative samples (four fan posts tagging Gaga and four fan posts tagging Minaj) were analyzed as case studies (see Rossman & Rallis, 2003) by using the patterns discovered in the analysis of Gaga’s and Minaj’s posts to determine if the patterns commonly associated with these celebrities were also apparent in their fans’ posts. This takes a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) by allowing for what emerges through the analysis of the musicians’ case studies to better understand the potential influence of musicians on their fans.

Although I did not interview fans to outright ask how fans may be citing Gaga and Minaj in their own posts, some of this may be apparent in how closely a fan photo imitates or resembles a celebrity photo and also the language that is used in the comments of the photo. Studying fan posts through the lenses of queer rhetoric and citation enables readers to better understand how fans might imitate celebrity performances and, in doing so, how celebrity performances can be used to critique heteronormative gender performances. However, as with the study of Gaga’s and Minaj’s posts, due to the enormous amount of data on Instagram that tags these musicians, I cannot draw generalized conclusions as to whether these musicians’ performances appear in fan performances. Instead, this research can be used to consider the multiplicity of ways this may occur and how it may be used critically.

There are some constraints and limitations to the research approach. For example, the case study approach to studying Lady Gaga’s and Nicki Minaj’s gender performances on Instagram means that I am restricted to studying the data set collected, which may have changed before I was able to collect all of my data. By studying only the most recent 1,000 posts for each musician, more than half of their posts were not included in the data set. Furthermore, posts can be edited and deleted after making the initial post, but because I collected my data through the
program 4K Stogram there was no way for me to know what changes, if any, had been made to the original posts. By focusing solely on Instagram, I am also not taking into account other gender performances that play an important role in these musicians’ performances, namely their use of various personas because they so rarely make appearances on Instagram. For the fan posts collected, a significant limitation was the massive amount of posts that are made daily that use the hashtags for my data collection. Collecting the most recent 1,000 posts for the hashtag #NickiMinaj only spanned July 7, 2016 from 4:12am ET to 1:55pm ET, less than 10 hours. For the hashtag #LadyGaga, the most recent 1,000 posts spanned May 14, 2016, at 5:50am to May 29, 2016 at 6:18pm, with the majority of photos being posted on May 29, 2016. Additionally, both of these hashtags were often used by spam accounts in an effort to boost the account’s presence on Instagram, and so there were many posts using these hashtags that were not clearly connected to these musicians in any way. The small scope these samples provide was surprising and limit the implications of my findings, as does opting not to interview or collect data regarding the accounts and profiles out of privacy and ethical concerns.

The next two chapters, Chapters Three and Four, will provide a detailed report of findings and analysis on Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj, respectively, and Chapter Five will discuss their fans’ posts to Instagram.
CHAPTER THREE: LADY GAGA AND QUEER RHETORIC

Introduction

This chapter serves as my first case study with the goal of understanding the ways celebrities may participate in queering gender norms in social media posts, specifically those that are driven by photo-sharing, given the embodied nature of gender performance. Lady Gaga serves as my case study in this chapter because she is an example of someone who has gained widespread success as a musician. Furthermore, Gaga has often spoken in support of LGBTQIA+ rights and marriage equality, and she is also an example of a musician who has been outspoken regarding sexism in the music industry as well as her own sexual assault. These factors position Gaga as an important figure with regard to gender and equality, and through my analysis of her Instagram photos I have discovered that Gaga most often challenged gender norms with her public performances rather than the day-to-day personal performances shared on Instagram. This suggests that Gaga’s public performances may be more deliberately constructed given such public performances will be more widely publicized through various media outlets unlike the more personal performances which would likely only be observed by her followers on Instagram. By exploring the ways that she may be queering gender norms throughout her performances on Instagram, researchers can then turn more fully to the ways that her engagement with queering gender norms encourages discourse on this subject as well as the potential for critical engagement and self-reflection amongst her fans. Thus, researchers are better able to understand the role photo-sharing specifically can play in queer rhetoric, particularly Alexander and Rhodes’ (2012) understanding of queer rhetoric that broadens what constitutes “normal” and allows for different and counter-discourses to challenge
heteronormativity and gender norms. The chapter begins with background information about Gaga’s music career as well as a brief literature review on pertinent scholarship focused on Gaga. Next, I identify the breakdown of photos in the six criteria used for categorization before analyzing 12 photos from Gaga’s Instagram account using Butler’s (1993) concept of citation and Alexander and Rhodes’ (2012) queer rhetoric in an effort to further explore moments of queering or not queering gender norms. This contributes to existing research on queer rhetoric by highlighting how and how often queer rhetoric manifests in celebrities’ social media accounts, which in the case of Gaga tended to be relegated to her more carefully constructed public performances. In turn, this enables researchers to further study the ways queer rhetoric can be used for challenging heteronormativity.

**Background on Lady Gaga**

Lady Gaga, born Stefani Germanotta, is a famous American pop star. In April 2016, *Billboard* reported she had sold 10.5 million albums in the US alone since her first album, *The Fame*, was released in 2008 (Trust, 2016). Her music and performances draw inspiration from artists such as Prince, David Bowie, and Madonna due to their stage performances and personas, some of which have been viewed as sexualized and scandalous, and Queen’s song “Radio Ga Ga” specifically inspired her name, Lady Gaga. Another important inspiration for Gaga is fashion, and she often wears clothing that appears to have come right off the runway. In some cases, she’s on the runway (see Figure 3). The driving message behind her performance is that fame, like other performances, is illusory (Gray, 2012).
Figure 3 Photo posted on February 18, 2016 at 7:48 pm ET. The caption read “I’ve adored @marcjacobs @thefavemarcjacobs since I was very young, so I was so honored to be one of his beautiful creatures tonight 🎀.”

Existing research on Lady Gaga (e.g., Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013; Corona, 2013; Gray, 2012; Halberstam, 2012) attends to her relationship with her fans, her use of social media as a tool to connect with fans, and the ways she challenges heteronormativity in her work. Gaga is often seen embracing Otherness and challenging established norms (Corona, 2013; Gray, 2012). This is done by playing with gender in regards to sexuality, assigned sex, and gender through her drag performance of Jo Calderone, for example (Gray, 2012). Furthermore, her songs, videos, concerts, and other public performances provide empowering messages that extend to all people (Gray, 2012). Her work specifically advocates for LGBTQIA+ and women’s rights by calling out the misogyny and sexism of the music and pop industry and calling for acceptance of all people (Gray, 2012), which can also be observed in some of her Instagram posts discussed later in this chapter. She pushes people to see beyond what lies on the surface by challenging personal
values and belief systems in people’s lives (Gray, 2012). Halberstam (2012) argued for a new form of feminism, called “gaga feminism,” to describe challenging and dismantling norms through critique, which Halberstam argued Gaga does continually in her performances. Gaga is a symbol for this feminism, but gaga feminism itself is focused more on what she embodies and symbolizes in her performances (Halberstam, 2012). Gaga feminism is associated with “nonsense, madness (going gaga), surrealism (Dada), the avant-garde, pop, SpongeBob; it means foolish or naive enthusiasm, going crazy, being dotty; it sounds like babbling or idle chatter” (Halberstam, 2012, p. xxv). The intent of gaga feminism is not to masquerade political expression as nonsense but to actually engage meaningfully and purposefully with critique. One prominent way she enacts gaga feminism is through her couture fashion, which intends to bring attention to the “whimsy of personhood, the ways in which we all need to see each other anew . . . and confuse the relations between surface and depth” (Halberstam, 2012, p. 26). Gaga feminism is present in Gaga’s performances in the way she plays with her gender and sexuality through her songs, videos, and stage performances to resist the “girl next door” image of many other pop stars (e.g., Britney Spears and Taylor Swift) (Corona, 2013). She again approaches this with whimsy as often through her performances she embodies what she is singing about, as Halberstam (2012) noted “she sings about the phone and indeed becomes a phone” (p. 140). This occurs literally and metaphorically, such as when she wears hairpieces that resemble a phone in the music video for “Telephone” and uses her voice to “dissect the pop market and find new sounds, new messages, and new forms of political engagement” (Halberstam, 2012, p. 140).

Lady Gaga’s relationship with fans is another way she separates herself from other pop stars, particularly because she refers to herself as “Mother Monster” (Click et al., 2013; Corona, 2013), which is unusual for a musician to adopt such a motherly persona within relation to their
fans. Gaga refers to her fans as her “Little Monsters” and she encourages them to embrace their inner monsters (Click et al., 2013; Corona, 2013). Furthermore, Gaga uses social media to connect with her fans, which impacts the ways fans identify with her because through Twitter specifically Gaga has been observed as sharing aspects of her daily life and would occasionally respond to fans on Twitter (Click et al., 2013). This perceived engagement with fans, though, changes from one social media platform to the next. For example, on Instagram, Gaga is not seen responding to her fans who leave comments on her photos, and so the messages communicated are not a dialogue between Gaga and her fans (although it does become one amongst fans as they engage with each other). One study concluded the metaphor of the monster served as a way for fans to learn to come to terms with their own imperfections, and through Gaga’s persona these fans feel like they are accepted and encouraged to be who they are (Click et al., 2013). It is here that Mother Monster emerges as Gaga provides an avenue for healing, acceptance, and love (Click et al., 2013); however, it is noteworthy that this furthers heteronormativity and gender norms as Gaga takes on a domestic, caregiver role for her fans (Connell & Pearse, 2015; Jackson, 2006). My dissertation research expands on this existing research (Click et al., 2013; Corona, 2013; Gray, 2012; Halberstam, 2012) by investigating the ways Gaga uses Instagram as a tool to engage with queering of gender norms. Because Gaga’s fans follow her social media presence so closely, this also serves as a tool for Gaga to communicate with fans on a more visual level than other social media platforms afford.

**Descriptions of Categorization of Lady Gaga’s Photos**

Before analyzing each category, here I will provide the quantitative data regarding the categorization of the photos (see Chapter Two for more detail on the categories) in order to gain a broader understanding of the kinds of photos she posts to Instagram, specifically. Each of the
1,000 photos were categorized into six categories based upon what was displayed in the photo as well as the caption that accompanied the photo, if a caption was provided. For example, Figure 4 was categorized under Male-Female Relations and Career Development. The caption accompanying the photo read “VEGAS Show #1 was killer. We’re just getting warmed up. See u tomorrow night #C2CTour.” This photo was placed into two categories because from the comment it is clear this photo was taken in relation to Lady Gaga’s “Cheek to Cheek” tour with Tony Bennett, which placed it into the Career Development category, and Bennett himself is seen in the photo, which placed it into the Male-Female Relations category.

Figure 4 Photo posted April 11, 2015 at 5:06 am ET.

Occasionally, I was unaware who was featured in a photo alongside Lady Gaga, and this at times made it difficult to discern whether or not the photo should go into any additional categories, such as Appearance and Sex if she was standing alongside a fashion designer that I was unaware of and who was not mentioned in the caption accompanying the photo. On the other hand, there were instances where my own knowledge of Gaga’s career, particularly her
acting roles with the TV series *American Horror Story*, helped me to categorize the photos beyond what could be discerned from the caption accompanying the photo because I could see from the photo she was referring to her acting career even when she didn’t specifically mention it in the caption. Furthermore, some photos did not have an accompanying caption, and so those photos were categorized based solely on what was perceived in the photo from my perspective. The six categories and the numbers of photos assigned to each category can be seen in Table 2.

### Table 2 Number of Lady Gaga’s Photos Per Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Photos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance and Sex</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male-Female Relations</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home and Mother</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Development</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Development</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political and World Issues</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in Table 2, Lady Gaga had the most photos in the Self-Development category (39.8%) and the Career Development category (36.7%). Given prior research on Gaga’s use of social media as a way to present parts of her day-to-day life experiences with her fans (see Click et al., 2013), it’s not surprising the Self-Development category is the largest. The same can be said for the Career Development category because, ultimately, she is a musician and thus would be sharing photos that relate to her career to further promote her own work. It is surprising here to note that the Political and World Issues category makes up only 6.4% of her photos posted given that other scholars have argued her music and fashion serves as a critique of society.
(Gray, 2012; Halberstam, 2012). This further suggests that on Instagram specifically there appears to be a stronger purpose for focusing on establishing a perceived connection with fans by sharing glimpses of Gaga’s daily life rather than only see Gaga through paparazzi photos or in prominent public performances. Just by looking at the numbers in the table and considering Low and Sherrard’s (1999) intent to have three categories communicating traditional messages about women and three categories communicating feminist messages about women, it would appear initially that because fewer than half of the photos appear in the categories associated with traditional messages that Gaga tends to skew towards communicating feminist messages, although not necessarily messages queering gender norms. Notably, as I analyzed the data I observed that upholding or queering gender norms was not relegated to particular categories. This demonstrates the need for a qualitative analysis because determinations about queering gender norms cannot be made from the numeric data in these given categories.

Appearance and Sex

This category attended to instances where Lady Gaga would draw direct attention to her appearance, clothing, or fashion in some light. In many instances, Gaga specifically mentioned a particular fashion designer or brand she was wearing, despite whether she was attending a red-carpet event (where it is typical to identify which designer’s clothing line a celebrity is wearing) or whether she was casually expressing her love of Converse canvas tennis shoes. Another common type of photo in this category were ones that depicted Gaga attending to her physical appearance (e.g., working out for a role, doing her hair and makeup, etc.), which can be seen as promoting heteronormativity because tending to one’s physical appearance could be interpreted as tending to one’s attractiveness (Jackson, 2006). For example, there were many pictures that showed her having her hair bleached by her personal hairdresser as well as pictures of her with a
face mask on. In addition to these pictures, there were also pictures that showed her having makeup applied for an event or, like with the fashion photos mentioned above, she would attribute her makeup to her artist. For such instances, it is expected that Gaga would be tending to her appearance in preparation for an event or public performance, and so this is not necessarily a gendered activity because any celebrity would be tending to their appearance in the same circumstances. Gaga also included photos of her assisting in New York Fashion Week in 2015 where she worked behind the scenes to support one of her friends, Brandon Maxwell. Finally, Gaga’s dog, Asia, was also included in this category because Gaga announced in a series of photos posted on May 28, 2015, that she would be launching a pet product line, including fashionable clothes for pets. The series of photos included Asia dressed up in various outfits, including a tuxedo. Of the types of photos mentioned, the most frequent photos were ones in which Gaga was speaking directly about her clothing and fashion designers, and there were also quite a few photos of Gaga attending to her appearance in other capacities, like exercising or bleaching her hair. The nuances of these individual performances, though, are important to consider because it is more complex than simply showing Gaga bleaching her hair, for example, because some of these photos demonstrate actions tied to other performances. In other words, by drawing on Goffman (1956) it can be seen that some photos are tied to multiple identity performances: one being the fans viewing the Instagram photo in an effort to establish a perceived sense of relationship, and another being the TV series being recorded for which Gaga’s hair is being bleached.

Male-Female Relations

The photos collected from Lady Gaga’s account that fell into this category included photos where Gaga was photographed with a man, regardless of her relationship to that man; was
a picture of Gaga where the caption talked about her relationship to a man; or was solely a picture of a man. Many photos included here featured her ex-fiancé, Taylor Kinney, who is an actor on the TV series Chicago Fire.\(^5\) These photos in particular tended to support heteronormativity as Gaga was positioned as being in a relationship with her ex-fiancé (Jackson, 2006), thus making the focus of the photo being heteronormative relationships. Additionally, there were several photos that included Tony Bennett, whom Gaga collaborated with on their album Cheek to Cheek (released in 2014) and with whom she toured. Although these photos position Gaga in relation to another man, the focus of these photos had a tendency to focus on their collaborative work rather than heteronormative relationships or masculinity or femininity. Other pictures in this category featured Gaga’s male friends, men who are a part of her personal team (e.g., manager, fashion designer, and makeup artists), or other male celebrities she was working with directly (e.g., Matt Bomer, an actor on American Horror Story: Hotel) or she encountered at red carpet events (e.g., Justin Bieber at an awards show), and so again the focus was not on heteronormative relationships with these individuals. There was also one picture of Gaga with a man whom she identified as Father Duffell from the Church of the Blessed Sacrament in New York.

**Home and Mother**

The photos in the home and mother category were focused around Lady Gaga’s family relationships, cooking, and other kinds of housework. The largest number of photos in this category were pictures of Gaga’s dogs, Asia and Koji. Gaga often referred to herself as

\(^5\) Lady Gaga and Taylor Kinney were engaged for over a year before they announced their split in July 2016. See Mizoguchi (2016) for additional details.
“mommy” in the captions of the photos of her dogs and, given that many people view pets as “children,” I included these photos in this category that attends to the home and motherly roles. Gaga also has a horse, Lady Arabella, whose photos were included in this category. Also included in this category were photos that featured Gaga cooking, cleaning, or walking the grounds and gardens at her home. For example, there were several photos that showed Gaga making a home-cooked meal, and on one occasion pasta from scratch, for her family and friends. All the different kinds of photos described so far in this category had a tendency to reinforce heteronormative gender norms as presented by Jackson (2006) and Connell and Pearse (2015) because, from my viewpoint, they primarily depicted Gaga in domestic roles caring for her home, her animals, and her family in various capacities. Finally, photos that included her spending time with her mother, father, or other close family members were included in this category. Because this last grouping of photos is focused more on developing relationships rather than adopting a caregiver or domestic role, these photos generally did not depict heteronormativity from my interpretation of the photos, although they didn’t appear to be queering gender norms either.

Self-Development

The photos included in this category are ones in which Lady Gaga is reflecting on her life and her relationships in some way. Some photos are quotes, books, or music that Gaga indicated she finds to be meaningful and moving in some way. These types of photos also included photos with a religious association, such as a photo where she mentioned she never leaves home without Holy Water or a photo where she expressed her faith as a Catholic. Such photos do not speak much to gendered performances or gender norms, but they are important for considering identity performance as they lend insight into Gaga’s value and belief systems, her Discourses (Gee,
1989). Other photos here were selfies or other photos of Gaga that appear to have been taken in a more intimate setting, such as at her home or in a car, rather than ones that were taken at red-carpet events. As Rettberg (2013) mentioned, selfies give the illusion of bringing the viewer into the space of the photo, which helps to establish a perceived sense of connection between Gaga and her fans, as does the use of photos that appear to be candid rather than staged photos and appear to be more authentic to viewers (Marwick, 2015). However, due to the nature of identity performances being focused on presenting oneself appropriately for a given situation (Buckingham, 2000; Goffman, 1956; Stryker & Burke, 2000), and also the interface and affordances of Instagram like adding filters to photos (Van House, 2011), it is likely that even the "candid" shots have been carefully selected out of multiple photos taken and edited, and thus are actually staged photos instead. Finally, photos that attended to her own self-care through relationships with female friends as well as those depicting Gaga practicing rest and relaxation were included in this category. Like the photos mentioned previously that depicted quotes, books, or other materials that are meaningful for Gaga and also photos referring to Catholicism, these photos that show Gaga practicing self-care lend insight into her Discourses.

Career Development

Photos in the Career Development category were directly correlated to Lady Gaga’s acting or music career in some capacity. Many photos were taken at award shows or charity and fundraiser events. These types of photos in particular often overlapped with photos in the Appearance and Sex category because Gaga would often identify the fashion designers and makeup artists responsible for her look at a particular event. The argument could be made that Gaga is tending to her appearance and, thus, the photo presents her attractiveness and, as Jackson (2006) identified serves as an indicator of “womanliness.” However, like with the Appearance
and Sex category, the sign-vehicles and circumstances surrounding these kinds of performances (Buckingham, 2000; Goffman, 1956; Stryker & Burke, 2000) complicate the readings of these photos because having one’s photo taken at award shows and other events celebrities attend as well as identifying the fashion designer one is wearing are normal behaviors. This is not to say that such actions aren’t typically gendered (they are because men often are not asked about the fashion designer they are wearing), but that behaving in a particular way at such events has become established and normalized. There were also several photos that were taken on stage or on set, sometimes with others she was performing or acting with at the time the photo was taken. This again highlights the need for an awareness of the circumstances surrounding these identity performances because that informs the behaviors, appearance, mannerisms, etc. (Goffman, 1956) that are observed. Gaga also posted about her foundation, Born This Way, that she established with her mother, as well as other professional photos that portrayed her iconic look for advertising purposes (see Figure 5). Finally, photos of Gaga’s fans and fan art were included in this category because the relationships she develops with her fans are directly correlated to her career. While other research has noted Gaga’s responses to fans on social media has been important for establishing a perceived connection (see Click et al., 2013), Gaga posting photos of her fans from meet and greets, for example, or the artwork fans have created develops a more personal connection with fans. Rather than simply responding to a comment or question, sharing a photo is in turn sponsoring and showing support of her fans.
Figure 5 Photo posted to Instagram December 3, 2015 at 9:55 pm ET. The caption read “Thank you David Casavant for the Dior Homme by Hedi Slimane jeans he lent and then gave to me after this photoshoot! I cried of happiness I’ve been hunting these down for ages! You are a fashion Saint @davidcasavant I will cherish them!”

Political and World Issues

Photos in the political and world issues category largely included those where Lady Gaga was attending a charity event or sponsoring an organization in some capacity as well as speaking to social justice issues. Regarding charity events and organizations she supported, these photos would include her as a guest or as a speaker, such as a youth workshop she led affiliated with the Born This Way Foundation. She also partnered with other celebrities, like the Elton John AIDS Foundation, through fundraisers and performances. In addition to these efforts, Gaga also advocated for social justice issues, including LGBTQIA+ rights by promoting Pride events and women’s rights. The events, fundraisers, and social justice issues Gaga elected to support further exemplify more about what her own values and belief systems are, and from this her Discourses (Gee, 1989), as these appear to be subjects that speak to her on a more fundamental level. In other words, her advocacy is not simply an example of a performance she’s doing as Goffman
(1956) discussed but instead is rooted more in her own belief systems, although appearing at events and speaking out about particular issues does serve as a performance in itself. Regarding women’s rights in particular, Gaga expressed her support for Kesha as the latter was caught in a legal battle with her producer whom she accused of sexual assault. Another important moment of advocacy for women’s rights relating to sexual assault was evident in Gaga’s performance of the song “‘Til It Happens to You” at the 2016 Oscars, which included 50 sexual violence survivors joining her on stage and, later, her more open discussion of her own experience with rape. Finally, there was also a group of photos focused on other individuals, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. or her friend, Emma, who had almost no strength in her legs when Gaga met her but was regaining her strength and ability to walk, which all further highlight what Gaga values.

Analysis of Lady Gaga’s photos

Photos Queering Gender Norms

Figure 6 Photo posted on Instagram on February 16, 2016 at 4:37 am ET.
Figure 6, in the Appearance and Sex category, was a photo posted on Instagram on February 16, 2016 at 4:37 am ET. Accompanying the photo was the caption “Thank You Kansai Yamamoto for working with us on this ZIGGY STARDUST CAPE which is your original design we are so grateful.” The photo was taken at the 2016 Grammy Awards during Lady Gaga’s tribute performance to David Bowie, who passed away January 10, 2016. The caption that accompanied the photo identifies the designer who worked with Bowie and played a role in creating Gaga’s clothing for the performance in Bowie’s memory. Other photos posted around this same time speak further about some of the designs featured on the cape that hearken back to Bowie’s career in various ways. Additionally, Gaga has outright attributed the cape to Ziggy Stardust, one of Bowie’s many personas that he adopted over the course of his musical career.

The context surrounding this particular performance is useful for those who see the photo. The fact that this is a tribute musical performance can be seen heavily influencing Lady Gaga’s identify performance. Taking a closer look at the photo itself, viewers can observe similarities to photos of David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust. As seen in Figure 7 (Doss, 1973), Stardust has vibrant red hair, pale skin, and rosy cheeks, just as Gaga does in the photo from her tribute performance (Figure 6). The cape is also another significant similarity. Stardust is described as an “omnisexual alien rock star” (Light, 2016) and, based upon appearance, has an androgynous look that doesn’t clearly indicate the sex of the alien, although part of the song “Ziggy Stardust” alludes to Stardust being “well-hung” which is associated with a male body and uses the masculine pronoun “he.” Because Stardust’s sex is unclear from his appearance alone, the persona of Stardust may be read as queer in that he is defying heteronormative expressions of masculinity (see Connell & Pearse, 2015, Jackson, 2006). Stardust is omnisexual, meaning he expresses sexuality in all its forms and/or engages in sexual activity with people of all gender
identities and sexual orientations. However, outward appearance aside, Stardust’s sexual exploits provided through song lyrics are masculine in nature as they demonstrate his sexual prowess (see Jackson, 2006). Returning to Bessette’s (2016) argument that, depending upon context and positionality, a single text can be read as both queer and not queer, Bowie’s persona Stardust can be read as queer and not queer. For example, Stardust’s omnisexuality and androgynous appearance may be read by some people in the LGBTQIA+ community as normative while others may read these traits as queer. Even so, here we can see Alexander and Rhodes’ (2012) queer rhetoric at work here because Stardust’s expressions of omnisexuality give voice and agency to alternative discourses of sexuality, particularly given that Stardust’s appearance was in the early 1970s.

Figure 7 David Bowie performing as Ziggy Stardust (Doss, 1973)

Given the background information on David Bowie’s persona Ziggy Stardust included above, Lady Gaga’s tribute performance as Stardust can be read as queering gender norms for several reasons, particularly in light of the ways she, a female, adopts a male persona. Because Gaga is a woman, adopting the Stardust persona, even for a tribute, results in her adopting or citing the masculinity associated with Stardust. In other words, Gaga was presented with a
situation where her identity performance (Goffman, 1956) would need to be read as hearkening back to Bowie and, as a result, be read as masculine/male in order to effectively present the tribute to the audience. In light of Butler’s (1993) argument regarding citation as it relates to gender performativity, the persona of Stardust would be a subversive citation as the persona is at once upholding normative gender norms through expressions of masculinity and sexual prowess, but due to the androgynous appearance of Stardust the persona is also critiquing the physical appearances related to masculinity. As Jackson (2006) described, masculinity is often associated with leadership, courage, and sex, and when Gaga adopted the persona of Stardust she also adopted his sexual prowess and omnisexuality, some of the characteristics of masculinity, while also playing up the androgyny and subversive elements of the persona’s physical appearance. Gaga’s performance as Ziggy Stardust is queering gender norms because as a woman, she is performing a male persona (considering the male pronouns used in the song) whose sexuality may be read as queer. However, the depth of the ways Gaga is queering gender norms remains unclear due to the fact that this particular photo is a direct result of Gaga being invited to perform a Bowie tribute and, thus, gain attention and fame for her own purposes. Butler (1993) described miming as one way to engage with citation, and for that reason I would argue whether or not the audience reads Gaga’s performance as queer, Gaga is engaging in a subversive citational practice and, therefore, is queering gender norms. Notably, Gaga also performed a tribute performance to Frank Sinatra on the date of what would have been his 100th birthday (see Figure 8). As is seen in Figure 8, this performance also engaged in queering gender norms through the citation and miming of Sinatra’s performances.
In contrast to the citation and miming performances of David Bowie and Frank Sinatra, Figure 9, shown above and in the Male-Female Relations category, features Lady Gaga casually sitting in a car by herself not engaged in a stage performance. Gaga’s identity performance here
is one that might be read by some audiences as being more intimate as it contrasts her public stage performances. With Gaga’s public stage performances, she presents herself as a performer and, as a result, crafts her stage performance around the music and the fans attending the performance. However, Figure 9 appeals to different audiences. Although a man is not featured in the photo, the caption refers to her fiancé which is why this photo was placed in the Male-Female Relations category for analysis. This also extends the audience being addressed here to those who may be able to relate to her expressing that she is, in a sense, lonely now that her fiancé had left. In other words, Gaga presents herself here as more human and relatable, more in line with the everyman and everywoman Alice Marwick (2015) when referring to celebrity culture. Furthermore, Gaga overtly expresses her sexuality in this photo’s caption by stating “I’m horny” as she explained her then fiancé (now ex-fiancé), Taylor Kinney, had left to film a movie. Within a heteronormative framework, a marker of masculinity is associated with sex whereas markers of femininity are sexual attractiveness and sexual availability (Jackson, 2006). In this photo, Gaga challenges these markers of femininity: Gaga’s body is mostly hidden by the car and she correlates Kinney’s absence with her sexuality. While some viewers might interpret her visible shoulders and upper torso as sexually attractive, her body positioning is not provocative or sexually suggestive. Additionally, by specifically mentioning Kinney, although it is to discuss his absence, she indicated that she is not sexually available.

Considering my own positionality as one audience member, I argue Lady Gaga is not performing for the male gaze because the focus of the photo and caption is on her desires and her fiancé. Instead, Gaga is providing space for overt expressions of sexuality, which is not unusual for Gaga but again is not a heteronormative marker of femininity. Notably, this is not to say that viewers of this photo do not objectify or sexualize Gaga of their own volition as women’s bodies
are often sexualized, particularly in the media. As Goffman (1956) noted, within an identity performance there is an exchange of a person expressing herself, as Gaga is doing, and another being impressed in some way, but that doesn’t mean the intended expression is the impression made. This further highlights the importance of considering multiple readings of a text, as Bessette (2016) encouraged, because while my reading of the text is that Gaga is not appealing to the male gaze, her reference to sexuality could in the viewpoint of other readers be doing just that. Another example of this is in a video she posted to Instagram that featured the inside of a car she was driving and included the caption “I just wanna take my panties off and do this car” (see Figure 10). Gaga isn’t seen or heard in this video as it just shows the inside of the car with the radio playing. Yet again, I argue she is not playing to the male gaze with this performance as she does not invite the audience into the interaction with the car but instead is focused on expressing her viewpoint, although men may find her statement regarding a car appealing which again highlights the need for allowing space for multiple readings.

Figure 10 Photo posted to Instagram on May 20, 2015 at 3:21 pm ET with the caption “I just wanna take my panties off and do this car.”
By Gaga making posts such as those in Figure 9 and Figure 10, Lady Gaga is working to question normal expressions of female sexuality and provide space for alternative discourses of sexuality (see Alexander & Rhodes, 2012) and disidentification (see Muñoz, 1999) as she uses her now ex-fiancé’s absence in Figure 9 as opportunity to express her sexuality. However, this is an example of a forced citation as Lady Gaga uses citation to position herself in relation to her now ex-fiancé and, although she does subvert that to an extent by discussing her sexual arousal, she is not using theatrics as a way to do so and, as a result, ends up reinforcing heteronormative, monogamous relationships. In light of this, Figure 9 demonstrates the ways that queering gender norms may be subtler through these overt expressions of female sexuality. In this case, Gaga challenged typical depictions of female sexuality by not revealing much of her body and, therefore, did not appeal to heteronormative femininity through sexual attraction. However, through this subtle form of queering gender norms, Gaga is seen as still upholding heteronormative, monogamous relationships through citation.
Figure 11 features Lady Gaga engaging in a domestic activity, caring for her chickens, which is another marker of femininity (see Connell & Pearse, 2015; Jackson, 2006). The identity performance observed in this photo, from my reading, is Gaga expressing a motherly side of her identity as she is seen taking on a caregiver role for her animals. This photo was in the Home and Mother category. Due to the nature of the Home and Mother category, it is not very surprising to find that many photos in this category feature Gaga upholding gender norms as she cares for her home and family. However, what is more unusual about some of these photos is her appearance, thus demonstrating markers of femininity are not necessarily equated to reinforcing or upholding gender norms. In Figure 11, Gaga is seen wearing an elaborate outfit that appears to be made, at least partially, of plastic, whereas many people who might also engage in caring for chickens would likely choose other types of attire for this kind of manual labor. Furthermore, her couture fashion serves as one way she engages with critique of personhood through whimsy, as Halberstam (2012) described in discussing gaga feminism. Here Gaga changes our perception of
the domestic activity by drawing the audience’s attention to her clothing instead of her actions. Considering queer rhetoric (Alexander and Rhodes, 2012) and queering gender norms, Gaga has opted to wear a couture outfit to engage in a fairly normal activity. Like with the photo of Gaga in a car analyzed for the Male-Female Relations category (see Figure 9), Gaga’s queering of gender norms are subtler here as she uses her attire to critique what is normal for a woman to wear while caring for her chickens. Furthermore, the eccentricities of Gaga’s outfit makes it all the more unusual because this piece looks more reminiscent of what would be seen in a fashion show rather than in a chicken coop.

Subversive citation is also evident here as Lady Gaga engages in citation by caring for her chickens, a domestic activity that may be perceived as a forced citation, but it becomes subversive through her choice of attire that is embellished and eccentric, which therefore draws on Butler’s (1993) mention of hyperbole for subversive citation practices. A blending of her identities is evident, too, as she wears attire more likely to be seen in her public stage performances than in a casual setting around her home. In other words, the audience sees a crossover between an identity associated with her career as a result of her attire and an identity associated with her home life as she cares for her chickens. Rather than causing tensions as these identities cross over, as Goffman (1956) and others (see Gee, 1989; Stryker & Burke, 2000) speculated, instead in my own reading of this photo I see Gaga attempting to critique normative attire and appearance expectations of women while caring for their homes. This perspective can also be evidenced by considering the images that circulated in the 1950s of women completing domestic tasks, like cooking and cleaning, in heels and a dress. Gaga is seen subversively citing the 1950s image of the housewife through her couture fashion.
Figure 12 depicts Lady Gaga wearing what appears to be a man’s suit jacket with a bralette and jean shorts on, and this photo was in the Self-Development category. The jacket is quite big for her and the sleeves are rolled up to achieve a better length for her arms. She is also wearing sunglasses and has her hair up in a ponytail. Given people appear to be walking past her in the background and there is no clear indication of where Gaga is, it appears that this would be an example of a photo that audience members would interpret this photo as a candid shot, thus Marwick (2015) would argue giving the photo more authenticity for the audience. However, because Gaga appears to have stopped to pose for this particular photo, I argue that it is not entirely a candid shot and, as mentioned previously, it is likely that multiple photos were taken and only one was selected to be shared. Despite this, here it appears the identity performance Gaga is portraying is one in which she is more relaxed about her appearance as it contrasts those photos that are associated with public performances or public appearances for celebrity events and she is not wearing couture fashion, which has become a significant marker of her identity.
Although wearing a man’s suit jacket likely would not be described as typical attire for a woman, Lady Gaga’s critical response through the comment accompanying the photo is most compelling here helps the audience gain a sense of what she’s attempting to express through this particular identity performance. Furthermore, as Connell and Pearse (2015) argued, the media tends to bring attention to women’s bodies by viewing them as marginal to the main event (e.g., cheerleaders at a football game) or by positioning them as objects of men’s desire, but I argue this is heightened for celebrities due to how much people follow celebrity culture through magazines and tabloids, as Marwick (2015) noted. This can be evidenced in the caption because, both as a celebrity and as a woman, Gaga’s appearance is consistently in the spotlight as is suggested by the caption as she explains people “sweat” her style “week to week.” However, the language she used in the caption indicated she dismisses people’s concerns about her style. The caption also impacted the way that I read the photo. Prior to reading the caption, I was focused on her choice of clothing as I believe what she was intending to express was simply her fashion choice for that evening, but after reading the caption my attention in the photo was instead drawn to her facial expression which might be read by some audiences as a dismissive smirk. In this light, Gaga is critiquing the heteronormative perception that a woman’s femininity or womanliness is, in part, dependent upon her appearance and attractiveness to men, as was argued by Jackson (2006), by being so dismissive in her comment and facial expression. However, her choice of wearing a bralette and shorts that reveals quite a bit of her midsection may cause the impression on audiences that there is a focus on her appearance and attractiveness, as some audience members might make the argument she continues to be attractive or is more attractive despite her choice in wearing a man’s jacket. Although Gaga’s appearance itself may not be read as queering gender norms, her attitude regarding other people’s views of her appearance is
queering gender norms within the heteronormative frame that positions a woman as being concerned for her appearance and her attractiveness to others.

Figure 13 Photo posted to Instagram December 5, 2015 at 1:50 am ET. The caption read “Best hug I got all night was from Nancy Sinatra. She shined through the night with such poise and elegance. We love you! #Sinatra100.”

Figure 13 depicts Lady Gaga at Frank Sinatra’s 100th birthday party alongside Frank Sinatra’s eldest daughter, Nancy, and this photo was in the Career Development category. Given the context that this photo was taken at an event in celebration of Sinatra, Gaga’s identity performance here appears to be a public, professional performance in memory of Sinatra’s contributions to music. Within this photo, this is largely achieved through her clothing and hairstyle. Gaga is wearing a tuxedo, reminiscent of one Sinatra would wear, with her hair styled back, which disguises the length and volume of her hair, and she appears to be embracing Nancy. Looking more closely at her body posture in the photo, Gaga has one hand reaching around Nancy’s back onto her shoulder with Nancy’s hand resting on top of Gaga’s hand. Gaga’s other hand is resting on Nancy’s upper arm. Additionally, the posturing and posing of this photo
suggests that this is an example of a staged publicity photo rather than a candid shot, even though the photo seems to portray a more personal relationship with Nancy rather than merely a professional one.

The posturing in this photo gives the impression of a couple embracing for a photo, and given Lady Gaga’s tuxedo and body language, here Gaga appears to be taking on a more masculine role as her body envelops Nancy. In other words, the sign-vehicles used here give the impression of Gaga taking on a masculine role and Nancy taking on a feminine role, even though Gaga does not exhibit “womanliness” or “manliness” as described by Jackson (2006) and Connell and Pearse (2015). Gaga’s appearance and body language complicates perceptions of femininity as Gaga is not positioning herself as sexually available or traditionally attractive, but nor is she portraying markers of masculinity, like physical and mental prowess or courage. Consequently, Gaga is engaging in subversive citation practices here as her mannerisms and dress cite perceived “masculine” traits through her performance while being a woman herself.

Although it appears Gaga’s intended impression here is one that memorializes Sinatra, the impression the audience receives could be one that suggests a relationship with Nancy and Gaga being gendered a woman despite her masculine clothing would be indicative of a same-sex relationship. Consequently, this serves as another example of the ways queering gender norms can occur because both Gaga’s clothing and her body language serve as sign-vehicles and may be read as queer by some audiences. However, it is noteworthy that the caption accompanying this photo does not suggest Gaga having a queer relationship with Nancy but instead focuses on a supportive friendship with her, and as a result it may be more likely that audiences would get the impression from this identity performance that Gaga is not performing queer despite her appearance and body language which I argue suggests she is.
Figure 14 Photo posted to Instagram on February 29, 2016 at 5:18 pm ET. The caption read “After my performance last night I felt a weight lifted. Like I didn’t have to hide anymore. looks like my outfit and this photo felt what I was feeling @brandonmaxwell @markseliger.”

Figure 14, from the Political and World Issues category, shows Lady Gaga in a white pantsuit with the train flowing out to the sides of and behind her. Given the flowing fabric and the caption, this identity performance appears to be giving the impression that she is light and free, and she is able to be her true self. In many ways, Gaga is not queering gender norms here because she appears in what seems to be a staged, publicity photo with her hair and makeup done and while wearing a designer pantsuit, which some may argue is an appeal towards her attractiveness as Jackson (2006) argued, but given the event, the 2016 Oscars, it is expected she would have carefully tended to her appearance. This is especially true given that she performed a song as a part of the event, the song “‘Til It Happens to You” which is about sexual assault, and was not merely an attendee.

The context of this photo is especially important because Lady Gaga wearing pants for such a highly acclaimed event is queering gender norms. Although Jackson (2006) and Connell
and Pearse (2015) do not speak as directly to dress as they do to behaviors and mannerisms, her
dress here is an important part of her identity performance. She is challenging normative dress
for such events, and pants in particular are an important sign-vehicle here because they are
viewed as political for women to wear because of their association with the women’s rights
movement as they became popular with the “working woman.” This specific pantsuit queers
gender norms in that it gives the illusion of being neither pants nor a dress; it is both a pantsuit
and a dress at the same time. In light of this, her choice of attire can be read as a subversive
citational practice as she defies the normative dress practices for the Oscars. The color of the
pantsuit being white is another important sign-vehicle. White is often associated with purity and,
as Gaga indicated in the description here, she has shed the weight of her sexual assault,
something she herself and possibly others have viewed as making her impure. In doing so, Gaga
is positioning herself outside of a heteronormative frame because she is not valuing her worth by
her associations with men, as Jackson argued is the case with heteronormativity as women are
placed within their relationships to men. Instead, her performance at the event gave her agency
over her body and promoted healing from a traumatic experience. In light of the sign-vehicles
associated with this particular photo and appearance, the identity performance Gaga is portraying
here is especially personal and intimate as it is rooted in her own experiences with assault, which
often is not something that is addressed in the setting of attending the Oscars. However, in this
case, the song she performed directly correlated to her experience with sexual assault and, thus,

6 Notably, women have been making political statements by wearing pants on the red carpet since the 1960s (see
Marriott, 2017). Even so, almost 50 years later a woman wearing pants on the red carpet is still viewed as unusual
and political.
she used this identity performance as an opportunity to vocalize what is often not spoken about, even in more private settings due to stigma.

Photos Not Queering Gender Norms

Figure 15 Posted to Instagram on July 27, 2015 at 7:29 pm ET. The caption accompanying the photo read “Me? Oh I’m not available. Check back later 🎉.”

Figure 15, in the Appearance and Sex category, was posted to Instagram on July 27, 2015 at 7:29 pm. The caption accompanying the photo read “Me? Oh I’m not available. Check back later 🎉.” The background of the photo includes a window and a standing lamp, so the photo appears to have been taken in a home or perhaps in a trailer or dressing room in preparation for an acting role or stage performance. Lady Gaga has a face mask on and her hair is in a hooded hair dryer machine while she is reading a book. The identity performance is clearly not intended to be a public, staged performance given that Gaga is the only person present in the photo and appears to be relaxing as she is reading a book while being pampered. Instead, from the sign-vehicles here the identity performance seems to be one that promotes taking care of one’s
appearance and reading a book as practices of self-care, which are further evidenced in the caption that indicates she’s not available. However, it is possible here that Gaga is tending to her appearance in the photos in preparation for a public performance that is not referenced here in the caption or in the photo.

One way this photo might be read is that by Gaga tending to her appearance and, potentially, her attractiveness as well, she is engaging in actions associated with femininity as Jackson (2006) described. Again, because it seems as though this is an action for herself rather than one in preparation for a particular public appearance, the photo gives the impression to the audience that Gaga is expressing her femininity. Although the particular ways in which Gaga is attending to her appearance and attractiveness may be unfamiliar or unknown to some, these actions are normative in that Gaga is not challenging or critiquing the normative, gendered behaviors seen here but is instead engaging in them herself. Additionally, this photo also serves as an example of the ways Gaga uses social media as a way to connect with fans on a more personal level, as other research (see Click et al., 2013) has shown with Twitter, as she is posting a photo of herself that appears to be more candid, which Marwick (2015) makes the photo appear more authentic to audiences. Instead, we see Gaga in a more raw, personal state as she tends to her appearance and enjoys a book while doing so, which is something her fans may be able to relate to on a more personal level than when she is performing and there is a clearer divide between celebrities and non-celebrities. Another important feature of this photo is that it appears to be a selfie, thus making the photo more of a candid shot rather than a publicity photo which, again, increases the personal, private nature of the photo as Marwick (2015) explained. Although the audience does not visibly see an outstretched arm to clearly include the audience in the space of the photo (Rettberg, 2014), the proximity of Gaga to the camera lens and the fact that we do
not see the whole frame of her body (the audience sees a side view of her face, a bare shoulder, and her fingertips holding the book) creates a stronger sense of intimacy here, as if the audience is a part of this space with her.

Figure 16 Photo posted to Instagram August 26, 2015 at 2:46 pm ET and the caption read “The 5am FaceTime with ure stylist and bestie @brandonmaxwell.”

Figure 16 features a screenshot of a FaceTime video chat Lady Gaga held with her stylist and best friend Brandon Maxwell, and it was in the Male-Female Relations category. Both Gaga and Maxwell are seen smoking cigarettes, and Gaga is wearing sunglasses. Gaga’s identity performance in this photo is one in which she is talking with a close friend, and so this is an example of a more personal, casual identity performance rather than a public performance. Some sign-vehicles that further convey that this is a casual interaction are the cigarettes and sunglasses, as these sign-vehicles typically do not appear in professional performances. Furthermore, the caption supports this as Maxwell is described as not just her stylist but also her best friend. For both featured in the photo, the audience only sees from the chest or shoulders up because both
persons are likely holding their devices in their hands. Additionally, it appears that Gaga is sitting in a car because the headrest and seat that is visible looks like that of a car seat. Like within the Appearance and Sex category, this creates a sense of intimacy as the audience is brought into Gaga’s intimate space and relationships through Gaga being seen extending her arm out towards the camera, as Rettberg (2014) discussed, and thus creates an illusion of a more intimate relationship with Gaga (Marwick, 2015). However, the fact that this is a screenshot of a FaceTime video that audience members were not privy to causes tension with these interpretations Rettberg and Marwick argued for because the screenshot very clearly depicts Gaga’s relationship to Maxwell. In other words, Gaga being seen extending her arm out towards the camera lens is bringing Maxwell into the space of the photo rather than her followers on Instagram, and thus depicts fostering an intimate relationship with Maxwell that is exclusionary.

Although Lady Gaga is not physically attending to her appearance in this photo, which Jackson (2006) identified as a marker of “womanliness,” the fact that she is speaking to her stylist suggests she may be having a conversation related to her appearance in some capacity. Because Gaga also identifies Maxwell as her best friend, though, there is no way to know the focus of the video chat. However, given what can be observed in the photo, Gaga would not be queering gender norms here as she is not seen critiquing stereotypical standards of femininity and it is possible that the conversation is focused on her appearance given she is speaking to her stylist. This is not to say that attending to her appearance could not be read as queering gender norms, but given the photo and caption there is nothing here to suggest she is queering gender norms through this discussion with her stylist. Instead, she is maintaining a relationship with her stylist and her best friend through video chat technologies and maintaining relationships in this
way does not question “normal” and does not provide space for alternative discourses, as Alexander and Rhodes (2012) argued occurs within queer rhetoric.

Figure 17 Photo posted to Instagram December 12, 2015 at 11:11 am ET and the caption read “What does Billboard’s Woman of the Year do on her day off? SAME AS YOU #HOUSEKEEPING while singing Christmas Carols!”

Figure 17 features Lady Gaga cleaning in her home, thus it was in the Home and Mother category. She appears to be wearing an old t-shirt and plastic gloves, has a cleaning towel over her shoulder, and is holding cleaning solution and a handle for what appears to be a broom or mop in her hand. These are all sign-vehicles that help the audience in understanding that she is engaged in cleaning her home, and thus this is an example of a forced citation where Gaga is seen engaging in these activities. However, the sunglasses are another interesting sign-vehicle here because it is unusual for someone to wear sunglasses in doors and while cleaning. The identity performance in this photo seems to be focused much more heavily on interacting with fans because there are no other people in the photo and Gaga uses the word “you” in the caption,
presumably referring to her fans. The sunglasses serving as a sign-vehicle is the only aspect that appears to be out of place within this photo.

Like Figure 11 where the audience observed Lady Gaga tending to her chickens, the audience again sees Gaga engaging in a domestic activity, which is a marker of femininity as women’s labor is frequently observed in maintaining the home (Connell & Pearse, 2015; Jackson, 2006). However, her own appearance and the accompanying caption differ significantly from Figure 11. Figure 17 depicts a fairly normal scene (sunglasses aside): a woman keeping her house clean in comfortable clothing. This contrasts with Figure 11 where she was wearing something much more elaborate and eccentric to check on the chickens in the coop, further highlighting the divide between the celebrity and the everyman and everywoman, as Marwick (2015) argued. Although, one could argue that Gaga’s unusual choice to wear sunglasses indoors may be divisive as well. Additionally, Gaga tries to bridge the gap between celebrities and fans by suggesting that, despite her success and being named Billboard’s Woman of the Year in 2015, she still does the same things that everyone else has to do: clean her home. Furthermore, her appearance also relates to fans as here she is wearing something a fan would likely wear (not something more likely to be seen on the runway like in Figure 11), a comfortable t-shirt with her hair unstyled. Notably, Figure 17 is accompanied by a statement that really draws parallels to fans in ways tending the chicken coop may not. Fans can relate to the woman seen in Figure 17 as she appears like everyone else, but the woman in the couture fashion “checking on [her] ladies” may not be as relatable as many people may not be familiar with raising chickens. Her appearance and her caption make a strong attempt to create an illusion of friendship and relatability between herself and her fans, as Marwick argued (2015), as does the fact that the photo appears to be a selfie as the audience can clearly see one arm but the other seems to extend
outward beyond the frame, which Rettberg (2014) argued serves to bring the audience into the scene.

Figure 18 features Lady Gaga standing in the corner of a room holding a bouquet of flowers, and this photo was in the Self-Development category. The railing that is visible behind Gaga suggests she may be in an elevator somewhere, which could be somewhere like a hospital, workplace, or high-rise apartment or townhome building. The caption accompanying the photo suggested she was taking flowers to someone who she identified as “[her] baby.” It is unclear who, specifically, she was taking flowers to, but given the sign-vehicles here it appears she is giving the flowers to someone she knows personally and knows well (otherwise, she wouldn’t refer to the person as “baby”). The impression Gaga is giving within this identity performance is one that is based on developing and maintaining personal relationships in her life. Furthermore, although Gaga is alone in this photo, the sign-vehicles in this photo suggest her attention is
focused on whomever she is giving the flowers to, which leaves little space for fans to get the impression Gaga is building relationships with her fans since her focus is elsewhere. However, Gaga’s choice to share this photo on Instagram may give fans the impression that Gaga wants them to be privy to these details of her life, thus as Marwick (2015) argued giving fans the illusion of having a friendship with Gaga.

Regardless of who the flowers were intended for, Lady Gaga taking a bouquet of flowers to someone could be read as a marker of domesticity as she was engaging in an act of caring for another person through giving a gift. While Jackson (2006) specifically referred to women and their “place” within heterosexual relationships as a mother or wife, and while we do not know the exact circumstances surrounding this event, Gaga’s actions remain indicative of something a mother or wife would do for a loved one. Furthermore, Connell and Pearse (2015) noted women have a tendency to find themselves in service jobs, which I would argue Gaga is a part of through her career as a musician, and those that involve caregiving, as well as taking on more domestic labor at home to care for their families. While Gaga is a musician and, therefore, would be considered the “breadwinner” in her household, which Connell and Pearse noted tends to be a role men take on, here Gaga is seen taking on a caregiver role, a role women statistically have higher involvement in. In this way, Gaga was acting within the heteronormative framework and fulfilling the role of the dutiful woman caring for someone else.
Figure 19 shows Lady Gaga sitting in the passenger seat of a golf cart with a group of men in suits surrounding her, and this photo was in the Career Development category. She is wearing what appears to be a jumpsuit with sunglasses. Given the caption accompanying the photo, the audience can assume this photo was taken at the Super Bowl. With this contextual information in mind, and also considering the timestamp of the photo, it appears Gaga is making preparations for her Super Bowl appearance where she sang the National Anthem prior to the start of the game. Her appearance at the Super Bowl serves as an example of a public, staged performance, but what is seen here in the photo serves as an example of a more private performance leading up to the public performance. The outfit she is wearing in this photo is different from what she wore during her public performance and she is surrounded by unknown men in suits, presumably security personnel and administrators to ensure the event goes smoothly. This is what Goffman (1956) would describe as “backstage” as the audience gets a glimpse behind-the-scenes, so to speak. Consequently, by giving her fans this behind-the-scenes
look at the events leading up to her Super Bowl performance, Gaga continues to foster a perceived relationship with her fans, as Marwick (2015) noted can occur when sharing photos on Instagram that help to foster connections to audiences.

In regard to queering gender norms, this photo does not depict Lady Gaga with reference to her attractiveness to men or in a heterosexual relationship, which Jackson (2006) argued is a marker of womanliness. However, it does depict Gaga being tended to by having a man drive her in the golf cart and also by having other men surrounding her (although, it is unclear who, exactly, these men are). Because Gaga is being catered to rather than taking these actions herself, this photo reinforces gender norms. In other words, she is not exerting her own independence here as she is relying on the support of others. Furthermore, this photo also presents a divide between celebrities and non-celebrities. Marwick (2015) argued this occurs when there is a focus on thin, buxom bodies as well as luxury, which in turn supports hierarchies of fame. This photo is unlike some of the other photos she has posted, because here the luxury of her career is especially apparent as she has the luxury of performing at the Super Bowl as well as the luxury of having someone else drive her around in a golf cart versus driving herself or having to use other forms of transportation for traveling (e.g., walking, taking a bus, etc.). Consequently, Gaga ends up reinforcing rather than critiquing gender norms through this backstage performance.
Figure 20, from the Political and World Issues category, shows Lady Gaga at the 2016 Oscars with her now ex-fiancé, Taylor Kinney. Gaga is wearing the white pantsuit shown in Figure 14 and Kinney is wearing a tuxedo. Gaga is kissing him and she has her hands on the sides of his face. The identity performance seen in this photo appears to be a mix of what Goffman (1956) described as frontstage and backstage performances; the frontstage performance of attending such a highly publicized like the Oscars and the backstage performance of sharing an intimate moment with her fiancé. The overlap of these performances and audiences, though, appears to be intentional from my reading and doesn’t cause distress, as Goffman argued such an overlap would. Instead, by considering Gaga’s performance of a song about sexual assault at the 2016 Oscars, being photographed kissing her partner at that time while still being at the event helps to showcase her message of feeling empowered by the events that took place and the role Kinney played in that by “[standing] by [her] all night proud and unashamedly.” This message
might still be impactful under different circumstances, but given that they are clearly still celebrating the 2016 Oscars event brings a certain timeliness to the message being communicated.

However, in turning to consider queering of gender norms, the caption of the photo reinforces heteronormativity because Lady Gaga discusses her value in relation to her ex-fiancé loving her. This places Gaga within her “presumed ‘place’ within heterosexual relationships” where she is evaluated within the context of that relationship (Jackson, 2006, p. 114) as opposed to her own individuality. The statement “I never thought anyone would ever love me because I felt like my body was ruined by my abuser. But he loves the survivor in me” suggests that she needed love to feel that she was no longer ruined by her abuser. Furthermore, in the caption Gaga also described his actions (standing beside her) as making him a “real man,” which reinforces heteronormative masculinity by indicating he is brave and courageous for standing with her despite her “ruined” body. Figure 20 is particularly interesting when comparing it to Figure 14. In Figure 20, Gaga suggests she needed to feel love from her ex-fiancé to overcome the trauma of abuse, yet Figure 14 suggests the power of her own performance has allowed her to heal. Although it is inappropriate to suggest one way of handling trauma of this nature is better than another, or that there is only one way to do so, the two photos present alternative views for processing trauma: one being self-empowerment and the other relying on a heteronormative relationship.

**Conclusion**

Through analyzing Lady Gaga’s photos on Instagram, scholars can begin to see one way in which celebrities can use their social media presence, Instagram more specifically, as a tool for espousing particular messages. In some cases, the photos shared appeared to be focused more
on establishing and building relationships with fans, while other photos appeared to take more critical stances to the subject matters being addressed in the photo when read through a lens of queer rhetoric. By understanding some of the possibilities here, scholars can conduct further research to better understand the role celebrities have in influencing their fan bases and also how they might bring attention towards particular causes. In the case of Gaga, her photos tended to take more critical, queer approaches when the photos were relating to a public performance in some capacity, like while attending red carpet events or preparing for a stage performance. Notably, there were some instances where Gaga engaged in subversive citational practices that were outside of the public sphere, such as when she very openly discussed her sexual arousal. However, typically, the more intimate, personal photos shared on Instagram tended to reinforce gender norms rather than critique them while also often making the effort to bridge the gap between the celebrity and non-celebrity by demonstrating she engaged in normal, everyday practices (e.g., cleaning and cooking). This suggests that Gaga’s engagement with queer rhetoric is largely relegated to her public performances where she embodies queering gender norms as a form of critique of heteronormative gender performances.

Even though Lady Gaga did not continually take a queer rhetoric approach to her performances, her performances do reveal the complexity of identity and embodiment: people (celebrities included) are not always critically engaged and, further, there may be times where people unintentionally reinforce societal norms. It is also significant to note that there were several photos that took on a more activist role that was not directly tied to queering gender norms (and, therefore, were not included in the photos analyzed more deeply in this chapter) as she advocated for the LGBTQIA+ community, persons with HIV and AIDS, and survivors of sexual assault. This suggests that engaging in critical practices like queering gender norms may
not commonly be happening consistently for a white, cisgender woman, although the instances it
did occur are noteworthy and important for attempting to normalize what may be read by some
as queer. A close analysis of Gaga’s Instagram posts revealed Gaga does engage with queering
gender norms, although it tended to be in relation to her stage performances, and she did take on
an activist role in ways that weren’t directly correlated to queering gender norms, such as when
she worked to bring attention to sexism and misogyny in the music industry. Due to my
dissertation’s focus on queering gender norms, the additional activist work Gaga engaged in fell
outside the scope of my research but this does serve as one possible avenue for further research.
CHAPTER FOUR: NICKI MINAJ AND QUEER RHETORIC

Introduction

This chapter provides a second case study focusing on Nicki Minaj’s Instagram posts to further understand the ways celebrities may queer gender norms on social media sites, particularly social media sites driven by photos because of the way gender is embodied in photos. Minaj serves as the case study for this chapter because of her advocacy for gender expression in popular culture, especially within hip-hop culture, as well as her outspoken support for other movements, such as Black Lives Matter. By looking at the possible queering of gender norms on social media through the lens of queer rhetoric, social media researchers can begin to better understand how celebrities may possibly use social media to espouse particular messages. In other words, social media researchers can begin to see the other ways celebrities might be using social media aside from personal branding purposes because, through sharing photos of themselves on Instagram, these celebrities are undoubtedly engaging with Butler’s concept of citation (1993). However, the extent that queer rhetoric (see Alexander & Rhodes, 2012) plays a role in these performances is more nuanced and rhetorically situated.

The case study on Lady Gaga in the previous chapter found that she had a tendency to engage with queering gender norms in performances that were focused on public, staged performances, and this was still only on occasion rather than appearing consistently throughout; however, there were a few exceptions where posts not tied to public performances did engage in queering gender norms. Furthermore, such occurrences were not outright in their engagement with queering gender norms. In other words, it is through the lens of queer rhetoric that in my own reading I identified instances of queering gender norms; this was not something Gaga
explicitly stated she was doing in her performances. The case study of Minaj in this chapter builds off of the findings on Gaga as Minaj, too, often engages in queering of gender norms more so through public, staged performances, but again these are not frequent or regular occurrences. However, a notable difference between these two case studies is the way Minaj plays with queer desire in ways Gaga does not, which supports existing research on female rappers who argued queer desire serves as a way to appeal to various audiences. Even so, from these findings, future research can further trace the messages being espoused by celebrities and how their fans may be taking up those messages as they share their own photos and tag celebrities. Such research could further indicate the power celebrities may have in shaping the views of non-celebrities, if fans are taking up these messages and, in turn, espousing the messages themselves, which will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

**Background on Nicki Minaj**

Nicki Minaj, born Onika Tanya Maraj in Trinidad and Tobago, is a famous American rap artist. The name “Minaj” was recommended by her first male producer because it “sounded better,” and it resembles the term ménage à trois (Smith, 2014). Her first album, *Pink Friday*, was released in 2010, and since then she has had several Billboard Hot 100 hits. According to a *Billboard* article by Erika Ramirez (2015), Minaj had 65 Hot 100 hits, making her tied for third place on the list beneath Aretha Franklin with 73 hits and Taylor Swift with 69 hits. The last album she released was *The Pinkprint* in 2014. Before Minaj’s mainstream success, she openly identified as being bisexual, but since her success, she has been more elusive regarding her sexuality and relationships (Smith, 2014).

Nicki Minaj is one of the few female rappers to gain mainstream success in recent years and has followed in the footsteps of artists Missy Elliott, Foxy Brown, and Lil’ Kim, who also
brought attention to black women’s bodies and black female sexuality (Smith, 2014). For Minaj, though, there is a much stronger attention to using queer desire for empowerment, self-objectification, and fantasy to appeal to both male and female, as well as queer and straight, audiences (Smith, 2014; White, 2013). Theresa Renee White (2013), in discussing research by Harvey and Gill (2011), described Minaj as a “sexual entrepreneur,” a new feminine subject that “recuperates” female sexuality in male-dominated consumer capitalism (p. 610). Some examples of where the sexual entrepreneur can be seen are “in magazine sex advice, in (fashion) advertising, across social networking sites, and in music videos” (White, 2013, p. 610). Minaj accomplishes this through both her music and media appearances as she raps about engaging in sexual acts with women as well as wears clothing that displays her sexuality and femininity (Smith, 2014; White, 2013). Furthermore, she encapsulates these messages through performances as her various alter egos, like Cookie, Harajuku Barbie, Nicki Lewinsky, Roman Zolanski, and Tyrone. These alter egos allow Minaj to “give voice to thoughts she otherwise cannot express freely as Nicki Minaj” (Smith, 2014, p. 368). Notably, Minaj refers to her fans as “Barbz” and her use of parody with the Barbie image critiques heteronormative, white femininity as well as authenticity in hip-hop culture where the mainstream is that she can either be “Barbie” or a “bad bitch,” but not both (J. Butler, 2013; Whitney, 2012).

Descriptions of Categorization of Nicki Minaj’s Photos

Before analyzing the selected photos from Nicki Minaj’s Instagram page, I provide the quantitative data collected regarding the categorization of Minaj’s 1,000 photos and comments.

7 For more information on Nicki Minaj’s alter egos, visit her wikia page created by her fans at http://nickiminaj.wikia.com/wiki/Alter_egos.
collected from Instagram. The photos were categorized into 6 categories (see Chapter Two for more details on the categories used) based upon what was shown in the photo as well as the caption that accompanied the photo. Additionally, some photos were placed into multiple categories. For example, Figure 21 features a picture of Minaj with several members of her family. This photo was categorized in the Home and Mother and the Career Development categories because her family is shown in the photo and the caption explained they attended a concert of hers in New Jersey. Thus, the photo is related both to her family and her career.

Figure 21 Photo posted to Instagram on July 24, 2015 at 11:59 pm ET. The caption read “💕 guess who came to the NJ show? 😁”

Like with Gaga, while coding Minaj’s photos there were occasions where I didn’t recognize the other people featured in the photo or Minaj made references to persons or events I was unfamiliar with. When I was unfamiliar or unsure of the context surrounding a photo, I categorized it based upon what I could understand given the content of the photo and the caption. There were also moments, though, where I was familiar with certain details about her career, such as her role in the film *Barbershop: The Next Cut*, and I was able to identify photos as being
related to the film even if it wasn’t explicitly mentioned due to the background or other people appearing in the photo (e.g., Ice Cube). This familiarity with some of her work helped me to categorize some of these photos. Photos that did not include a caption were categorized based solely on what was depicted in the photo. The number of photos assigned to the six categories can be found in Table 3.

Table 3 Number of Nicki Minaj’s Photos Per Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Photos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appearance and Sex</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male-Female Relations</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home and Mother</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Development</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Development</td>
<td>548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political and World Issues</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in Table 3, Nicki Minaj had the most photos in the Career Development category (54.8%) and the Self-Development category (35.8%). It is interesting to note that Minaj’s Career Development category contained roughly 18% more photos than Gaga. Given this and that there is 19% between the Career Development and Self-Development categories, it appears Minaj’s Instagram is more focused on sharing details regarding her career and less about fostering relationships with others. Because Minaj is primarily a musician and also does some acting, it is not surprising that Career Development makes up the largest number of her photos. Since the rap industry tends to be hypermasculinized and makes strong appeals to the male gaze and consumerism through viewing women as the property of rappers (Balaji, 2010), it may be
that Minaj feels she needs to work twice as hard to position herself as a force to be reckoned with in the rap music industry. This is further evidenced in how few photos were in the Home and Mother category (2.2%), which gives fans glimpses of a more intimate, personal side of Minaj, particularly given Jess Butler’s (2013) findings that Minaj can either be a “bad bitch” or a “Barbie” but not both. Given such a strong emphasis on her career over other areas of her life, it appears she’s making a stronger effort to maintain the “bad bitch” image through a focus on her career rather than being viewed as “soft” or “feminine.” Within this “bad bitch” image, she challenges the hypermasculinized rap industry through her expressions of queer desire, sexuality, and through her appearance (Smith, 2014; White, 2013). Although the Appearance and Sex category only made up 11.8% of the photos, far fewer than the Career Development category, these areas are important for her efforts to critique the industry. Additionally, considering Low and Sherrard’s (1999) intent for the Self-Development, Career Development, and Political and World Issues categories to be feminist in nature, looking at the numbers in the table it would appear that Minaj engages less in traditionally feminine roles and more with feminist ones. This finding was the same with Gaga, but by analyzing the photos for Minaj and Gaga I uncovered the categorizations alone are not adequate indicators of queering gender norms. There remains a need for a contextual analysis using queer rhetoric as a lens to better consider the performances Minaj engaged in as well as potential readings of those performances. The remainder of this chapter will provide descriptions of the types of photos included within each category, and then an analysis of photos that were read as queering gender norms and photos that were read as not queering gender norms.
Appearance and Sex

The Appearance and Sex category included photos where Nicki Minaj drew attention to her fashion, body, and/or sex and sexuality in some capacity, as well as photos where Minaj promoted particular products (both her own product lines and other product lines). The majority of these photos were identifying the specific designers and labels she was wearing, such as her dress, shoes, or bag. Alternatively, there was one photo where Minaj shared a Tweet of a game that helped the reader identify her “stripper name” by identifying the color of one’s underwear and the last food eaten, to which she indicated she was not wearing any underwear. Similarly, in another photo she used the hashtag #MeAndTheTWINZ, which was a photo of Minaj wearing a dress that accented her breasts and her pose appeared to be bent over to draw attention to her breasts even further. These photos most explicitly drew attention to sex and sexuality in some capacity, and they also serve as examples of ways Minaj engages with black female sexuality and at times attempts to disrupt the objectivity of black women’s bodies by exerting her own power, which hooks (2003) and Balaji (2010) noted can occur within the music industry.

Notably, hooks (2003) also argued deviant sexuality and the desirable Other is a selling point in the industry, and one might read Minaj’s overt expressions of sexuality and her body as deviant. However, Muñoz’s (1999) disidentification and Butler’s (1993) subversive citations serve as ways Minaj critiques the objectification of black female sexuality. There were also a large number of photos of Minaj promoting her own fashion line, the Nicki Minaj Collection. Occasionally, there were photos that promoted specific beauty products (aside from her own products), specifically Hairfinity and a waist trainer by No Waist Clique. Finally, there were occasionally photos where Minaj discussed her hair, makeup, and nails, most often by acknowledging the individual responsible for the hairstyle, makeup, or nails in the photo.
Considering the various kinds of photos that appeared within this category, it is clear that Minaj engages with various kinds of identity performances here. Some of these performances are performances intended for a wide public audience as Minaj discusses the designers and labels she is wearing as she appears to be attending events. Other performances, though, appear to give the impression of being more intimate or personal to draw attention to her sexuality by focusing solely on her and/or her body without much other contextual information.

Male-Female Relations

The Male-Female Relations category included photos of Nicki Minaj with her male family members; other male rappers and actors, like Robin Thicke, 2 Chainz, and Ice Cube; and her now ex-boyfriend Meek Mill. The majority of the photos in this category were with her collaborators or her ex-boyfriend. These included several pictures of stage performances or professional photos taken to promote the collaborations between the artists, including Mill. However, photos with Mill also included spending time together on dates, such as attending a basketball game, and with these photos the audience sees a different side of Minaj as she focuses on her personal relationship. Additionally, there were a handful of photos that showed Minaj in the recording studio with other rappers she was collaborating with or who are on the same recording label that she was signed with, Young Money Entertainment. Occasionally, there were also behind-the-scenes photos where Minaj took photos with other celebrities, such as her costars in the film Barbershop: The Next Cut, and Kobe Bryant, in what appears to be a dressing room backstage. Notably, the majority of the photos in this category featured Minaj alongside male

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8 Rumors had been swirling about the status of Nicki Minaj and Meek Mill’s relationship during 2016 (Johnson, 2017). In January of 2017, Minaj confirmed that she was single and would be focusing her attention on her career (Johnson, 2017).
rappers or actors. Given that men continue to dominate the rap-music industry, these photos position Minaj beside these male rappers presents Minaj as the “sexual entrepreneur,” as described by White (2013), of the industry as she brings attention to black female sexuality. In this light, she juxtaposes the male rappers in many of these photos, even if not expressing black female sexuality in a particular photo. Photos of her family members were rarer, and those featured were mostly related to family gatherings for her brother at his 2015 wedding. Like with photos that featured Mill, the photos with her family members depicted a different side of Minaj that was more personal than what is seen in many other photos, and again this can be read as Minaj making an effort to maintain the “bad bitch” image, noted by J. Butler (2013), by not showing much of other sides of herself. Finally, there were a few photos where Minaj spoke in memory of someone who had passed, specifically Prince and a photographer whom she had done a photoshoot with not long before his passing. The identity performances within this category are mainly showing more of Goffman’s (1956) backstage performances as many are focused on her collaborations and relationships with family members or loved ones.

**Home and Mother**

As seen in Table 3, Nicki Minaj had very few photos in the Home and Mother category with only 22 out of 1,000 (2.2%). The photos included in this category were mostly about Minaj’s family, and 10 of these were from a single event, her brother’s wedding. Most of the photos were of Minaj and her family posing together for family photos at events they were attending together, like her brother’s wedding or bowling. Additionally, a few of the photos were pictures of Minaj’s nieces (but Minaj herself did not appear in these photos). Many of these photos depicted a more loving, emotional side of Minaj that is largely unseen in photos from other categories. In one photo, Minaj critiques herself as she comments that she couldn’t believe
she cried at her brother’s wedding. Consequently, these photos continue to show Minaj’s struggle with maintaining an image of a “bad bitch” (J. Butler, 2013), particularly where her family is concerned. Finally, two of the pictures didn’t include Minaj or her family members at all. Instead, one was a meme that referred to being asked if a woman can cook and Minaj’s caption on the photo mentioned that she “throws down in the kitchen,” which highlights the domestic labor Minaj does, but this was the only instance in the data set that domestic labor was made visible in some way. The other photo was a screenshot of a text message conversation where Minaj appears to be asking the name of the family’s turtle, and then in the caption she joked about how this happens when a five-year-old is allowed to name the family pet. The identity performances within the photos in this category are much more personal and intimate in nature than photos within the other categories as these photos showcase her personal relationships with family members. In choosing to share these photos, Minaj has made herself more vulnerable to her fans and, as a result, I argue the photos in this category are working to establish a sense of relationship with fans, which Marwick (2015) argued can occur by sharing photos on Instagram that are more personal in nature, by highlighting a different image of Minaj that is not often made visible.

Self-Development

The Self-Development category included photos that showed Nicki Minaj spending time with other women, photos of her friends or people she expressed admiration or condolences for, selfies or photos someone else took of Minaj posing, photos of her surroundings, and comical photos like memes and parody photos. The majority of photos were those that just featured Minaj, which included selfies and photos of her posing. I argue the selfies and parody photos and memes work at fostering a sense of relationship to her fans. Rettberg (2014) argued selfies invite
the viewer into the space of the photo, which helps to foster that sense of relationship that
Marwick (2015) can occur on Instagram. The parody photos and memes function a bit differently
in that they are not publicity photos (although they aren’t candid photos either) and give viewers
a greater sense of authenticity because the photos are not staged (Marwick, 2015). In many cases,
the photos of her posing were photos taken before or after a performance, and she was posing to
show off her clothing and body. As hooks (2003) noted, black women’s buttocks are viewed as
an indicator of sexuality, and often Minaj’s posing and clothing highlighted her body shape.
Consequently, depending upon one’s reading of these images, one might argue Minaj is
objectifying herself rather than repositioning herself as the subject. The identity performance of
these photos, in particular, are focused around her public performances as Minaj attempts to
carry over her public, staged performances to her Instagram feed. There were also a large
number of photos that showed Minaj spending time with her female friends (photos that included
male friends were also placed in the Male-Female Relations category). Photos that expressed
admiration or condolences were those featuring people influential to Minaj, like her pastor,
Marilyn Monroe, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the reality TV star Angela “Big Ang” Raiola who
passed away in 2016. Similarly, Minaj would share photos of her surroundings, typically when
she was in awe of them. For example, she shared a photo of a statue outside of her hotel room in
Rome as well photos of the interior of the room. Lastly, Minaj shared several photos that were
meant to parody or joke about the situation or content depicted in the photo, or quotes that were
powerful or meaningful to her. One such example was the Bible verse Matthew 5:44 that she
shared, which discusses loving and doing good to one’s enemies. The range of photos included
in this category further demonstrates the vast array of identity performances Minaj engages in,
the more public, staged performances, and also her backstage performances that give the audience glimpses of who she is when she isn’t performing.

Career Development

The career development category contained by far the largest number of photos out of the six categories used. These photos included those which showed Nicki Minaj performing or preparing for a performance, attending social events, sharing news stories regarding her success, promoting her own perfume, clothing, and wine, and showing photos of her fans (both fan interactions and fans’ photos shared with Minaj). A large number of these photos were focused around Minaj’s performances or before/after shots of her performances. Oftentimes, these were photos of Minaj on stage with her back-up performers or with other celebrities she was performing alongside, such as Taylor Swift and Beyoncé. Due to the nature of these photos, they are easily recognizable as being public, staged performances with the intention of reaching a wide audience through various outlets. Another large number of photos were focused on Minaj’s fans. These fan photos were typically photos or videos taken from the stage and depicted the crowd of fans at her shows or at what appeared to be scheduled meet-and-greets. Although these photos would again be considered public performances, by posting several fan photos on Minaj’s Instagram account she is again fostering a perceived sense of interaction and relationship with the audience that Marwick (2015) discussed. However, there were also photos from her fans that didn’t include Minaj in person, but instead were people posing with an image of Minaj, like a shower curtain with Minaj on it or her figure at the wax museum Madame Tussauds in Las Vegas. Similarly, there were several photos, especially around Halloween, where people were dressed up as Minaj or were imitating her photos. These photos were placed side-by-side to show the original and the fan photo for comparison purposes. Another group of photos were focused
much more heavily on promoting her brand and products by showcasing her success highlighted in the news media by screenshotting headlines to share easily with fans, and by showing photos of her products. The photos of her products were often slowly introduced by letting fans know there was some big news that would soon be shared, and once it was shared Minaj often posted photos that indicated where her products could be purchased. This continued as new stores picked up her products and began selling them. Finally, a handful of photos were of Minaj attending social events and awards shows, like the 2015 American Music Awards. These photos that were more promotional in nature again are focused on public, staged performances as Minaj makes an effort to further her branding.

Political and World Issues

The photos in this category were ones where Nicki Minaj was making a political stance by addressing societal issues and concerns or where she spoke specifically about inspiring young people, often young girls. Five of the eighteen photos were relating to police violence against African American citizens, first by sharing photos relating to Sandra Bland and the last was of Alton Sterling, both of whom died. These photos were not directly tied to a public, staged performance, although it given how many followers Minaj has on Instagram it seems as though she was using her wide reach to discuss this societal issue, much like Gaga did when speaking about sexism in the music industry. There were also several photos of Minaj visiting with children in Philadelphia at a group home and at a children’s hospital, and the captions accompanying these photos tended to express her support for and inspiration from the young people she visited. However, in these photos, Minaj wasn’t caring for the children herself and, therefore, was not seen acting as a caregiver, which is what Connell and Pearse (2015) noted, statistically, women engage in more often than men. She also shared a photo that discussed a
promotion for her Moscato and sangria product where a $1 donation would be made to the American Breast Cancer Foundation for every limited-edition bottle sold. Additionally, she shared a photo of three women of color, Viola Davis, Regina King, and Uzo Aduba, and congratulated each of them for winning awards at the Emmys and helping to pave the way for other women of color. This identity performance in particular may be read by some as Minaj upholding particular representations of black women, which Reid-Brinkley (2007) observed taking place in an online forum where black women would discipline and police one another’s performances. Overall, the identity performances in this category had a tendency to showcase a different side of Minaj than the “bad bitch” image that is seen more prominently throughout her career.

Analysis of Nicki Minaj’s photos

Photos Queering Gender Norms

Figure 22 Photo posted to Instagram May 4, 2016 at 2:51 pm ET and the caption read “📸: by TerryRichardson in Moschino #MeAndTheTWINZ.”
Figure 22 depicts Nicki Minaj posing for a photo in the outfit she wore to the 2016 Met Gala. The deep V neckline and the way the material crosses her chest by her collarbones accentuate her breasts. Additionally, because the photo is only from the waist up, the audience is drawn more to her body rather than the outfit since it cannot be seen in its entirety, which gives the photo a more provocative and suggestive feel. This is also suggested by her pose where she appears to be pushing her chest out as she has one hand by her neck as she looks directly into the camera. Furthermore, in the caption, Minaj focuses the attention on her breasts by only attributing the photographer and then using the hashtag “#MeAndTheTWINZ.” For these reasons, this photo was categorized in the Appearance and Sex category. The identity performance in this photo is one that is staged for a public performance as the photo itself likely intends to be shared widely given a prominent (although not without issue) photographer is taking the photo, and she identified him by name in the caption to showcase who was responsible for this particular photo. From looking at the photo, it is clear that this photo has been staged and posed in a particular way in order to achieve a particular shot for publicity reasons. Consequently, from Marwick’s (2015), this photo may be read as less authentic by fans than one that is a candid shot as her appearance in this photo appears to be very intentional. The photo also brings strong emphasis to her body and her clothing, which may serve to further the divide between celebrities and non-celebrities and, in turn, Marwick noted this can reinforce traditional hierarchies of fame.

9 The photographer, Terry Richardson, has been accused of sexual assault by multiple clients and models, and his photography has been described as risqué and pornographic (Wallace, 2014). He has also worked with Lady Gaga.
With this photo, Minaj is engaging in heteronormative conceptions of women expressing sexuality, as her “womanliness” is equated to her sexual attractiveness, as Jackson (2006) argued is most often the case. However, while there is no indication of her sexual availability, another marker of femininity according to Jackson, the hashtag suggests her enjoyment of her body without the need for a partner or, alternatively, that she has the power to choose her partner. This positions Minaj as the subject rather than the object, which hooks (2003) argued facilitates creating new representations of black female sexuality. Additionally, this image could also be read as an example of Minaj as a sexual entrepreneur who makes appeals to both male and female as well as queer and straight audiences since she does not explicitly reference particular gender or sexualities in this photo, only herself, just as Smith (2014) and White (2013) observed in studying Minaj’s music. Therefore, while Minaj does seem to, in part, be appealing to the male gaze in the photo, her hashtag referring specifically to herself by using the language “me and” is indicative of exerting her own power and dominance over her body rather than merely being an object of the male gaze. This expression of power through sexuality is also apparent because Minaj is gazing directly into the camera, again demonstrating her awareness of and ownership of her body, which has previously been studied in rap music videos (Balaji, 2010) and other performers (hooks, 2003). Thus, in Figure 22 Minaj positioned herself as the subject of desire rather than the object, and it is in this light that she queers gender norms, specifically by engaging disidentification (Muñoz, 1999) where Minaj simultaneously works within and against heteronormative conceptions of gender performance. On the one hand, Minaj is using her breasts to indicate her sexual attractiveness, which works within heteronormativity, but her gaze and her language is more subversive as it demonstrates her power over her body and her sexual exploits. Minaj effectively uses sexual expression to demonstrate sexual autonomy, which contrasts the
heteronormative frame of womanliness that views a woman with regard to her attractiveness or relationship to a man, according to Jackson (2006).

Figure 23 Photo posted to Instagram August 11, 2015 at 9:28 pm ET. The caption read “I was gonna beat them in spades but I beat them in pitty pat instead. 😂Comparer play ya cards right 😄.”

Figure 23 shows Nicki Minaj playing cards with a group of men while traveling on a plane for a performance. The fact that Minaj is shown only with three other men here is the reason the photo was placed in the Male-Female Relations category. This photo is a candid shot and depicts Minaj dealing the cards for a game of pitty pat, a matching game where the first person to reach three pairs wins the round. The identity performance in this photo appears to be one that is not intended to be for a public, wide-reaching audience (although that can happen when posting on social media, but given there is nothing particularly sensational about this photo it seems unlikely to go viral) through a public, staged performance, but instead is more focused on sharing a casual interaction with friends and what appears to be a break from the regular work routine. Other sign-vehicles that suggest a more casual interaction are the positioning of people
around the table where they are all at the same level, the playing cards, drinking glasses, and casual clothing. These sign-vehicles suggest a comfortable and familiar relationship with those in the environment, and this combined with the caption gives the impression to the audience that Minaj feels she is among friends. Consequently, this photo shows a more casual, personal side of Minaj focused on building and maintaining relationships. By sharing this as a photo on her Instagram, she is also working to foster a sense of connection to fans by giving them a glimpse of another part of her life, which according to Marwick (2015) develops a perceived sense of relationship and connection.

Whereas Jackson (2006) stated femininity is typically depicted with regards to sexual attractiveness and availability to men, here Minaj does not exert or express sexual attractiveness or her sexual availability in the photo caption or in her interactions with the men shown in the photo (although, it is possible that those viewing the photo may disagree given that Minaj is wearing a tank top and shows her arms). However, simply not expressing her sexuality here is not enough to be viewed as queering gender norms because it does not engage with gender in critical ways, a key aspect of queer rhetoric from the perceptive of Alexander and Rhodes (2012). Additionally, Minaj is not seen serving as a hostess, but instead she is engaging in what is typically perceived as a male activity, playing cards and presumably gambling for money given the dollar bills sitting on the table. Here Minaj appears to be on equal footing as she is “one of the guys” playing cards. In the caption, Minaj’s indication that she was beating the men at the table is more specifically where we see her queering gender norms as she expresses her prowess in playing cards. The caption suggests she would have beat them in a game of spades, but she ended up beating them in pitty pat instead. Jackson (2006) argued expressing one’s prowess is something typically associated with manliness, and so by seeing Minaj expressing her
prowess at playing cards can be read as exerting masculinity and, thus, she is queering gender norms even while not engaging in representing or expressing sexuality. A heteronormative frame here would suggest that Minaj would not be playing cards in the first place, but if she did she would be in deference to the men at the table given the societal perception that men subordinate women (see J. Butler, 2004; MacKinnon, 1987). Instead, she shows off her skills at the game by beating them and then bragging about it on her Instagram page, which tend to be viewed as masculine instead of feminine traits as she competes to win.

Figure 24 Photo posted to Instagram August 22, 2015 at 11:02 pm ET. The caption read “I would cross the ocean for u. I would go & bring u the moon. Promise u. For u I will. I love my brother so much man. Can’t believe I cried during his wedding and his first dance like a punk. May God bless him and his union. Tonight has been one of my favorite nights of all time. I do anything to see my brothers smile.”

Figure 24 shows Nicki Minaj posing with her brother following his wedding ceremony. The photos in the Home and Mother category often were not read as queering gender norms as Minaj often talked about how much she loves her family in these photos. The identity performance in this photo is one that is much more personal in nature as Minaj discussed her
brother’s wedding and here the audience sees little evidence of the hip-hop star. Instead, the identity performance depicts a close relationship with her sibling and her joy in being present with him and her family. Because this photo appears to be staged rather than a candid shot (given their posing and expressions), Marwick (2015) would argue this photo lacks the authenticity of a candid shot which would suggest a marketing team or publicist was responsible for the photo. However, in terms of an identity performance, I argue that this photo is authentic in that this is one of the few photos where the audience gains a glimpse of Minaj’s own values and belief systems, her Discourses according to Gee (1989). Although a publicist or marketing team may be responsible for taking the photo, the content of the caption and the relationship that is clearly visible within the photo itself goes beyond something that could be staged for marketing purposes. Furthermore, because the photo seems to speak to who Minaj is when she is not on stage performing, the audience again gains a sense of getting to know Minaj as a person as they are privy to more intimate and personal details of her life. This is in support of the view that social media serves as a space to develop perceived relationships with fans (Marwick, 2015) through sharing everyday relations and interactions, as often occurs on social media (Marwick, 2013).

In this photo, though, the image of Minaj, the rap artist, fractures a bit as she simultaneously expresses her deep love for her brother and criticizes herself for expressing emotion during his wedding ceremony. On the one hand, Minaj is expressing a very feminine and nurturing side of herself and she said, “I do anything to see my brothers smile,” but in the same caption or breath, if you will, she calls herself a “punk” for crying. Here we are seeing the tension between the “bad bitch” image she needs to uphold as a rap artist conflicting with her representation of self with her family (J. Butler, 2013). While this is not necessarily queering
gender norms, it is noteworthy to see Minaj struggling with her emotional expressions here as she sees crying as a sign of weakness, yet the language she uses to express her love for her family is also heavy with emotion but does not manifest physically. If Minaj does, in fact, use Harajuku Barbie (one of her alter egos) as a tool for critiquing white femininity and challenging authenticity in hip-hop culture, as J. Butler (2013) and Whitney (2012) argued she does, then her comments with this photo demonstrate one way she grapples with this tension. Being supportive and loving towards her family serves as a feminine trait as she is positioned in a particular way in relation to her family and it may also be read as expressing Barbie-like femininity, all the while still being a “bad bitch” by calling herself out for her behavior. There appears to be a need here to uphold her authentic and authoritative position in the hip-hop community that displays of emotion associated with femininity, like crying, might undermine.

Figure 25 Photo posted to Instagram July 10, 2015 at 3:28 pm ET. The caption read “Just know that if I was a man this is the woman I would marry. I’d buy her mad shit😂 my FKN wife 👶การทำงานใจครับ @iamlaurenlondon baddest of all time.”
Figure 25, in the Self-Development category, shows Lauren London with her partner, rapper Nipsey Hussle. Given London’s arms and body positioning in the photo, it appears that she is taking a selfie as her partner appears behind her in the corner of the frame. The identity performance of the photo suggests London is trying to convey having fun or being silly with her partner, given that they are both making faces in the photo. However, the caption gives a different identity performance because the caption was written by Minaj and Minaj does not appear within the photo anywhere. The identity performance Minaj has expressed through sharing this photo and including the caption gives an expression of queer desire, which Smith (2014) and White (2013) observed in studying Minaj’s music. The caption of this photo is also interesting to consider in light of queering gender norms. Minaj here states “if I was a man this is the woman I would marry,” which furthers a heterosexual, heteronormative relationship because as a man (not as a woman), she would marry this woman. Jackson (2006) argued women are often identified and placed within heterosexual relationships, and here Minaj is placing London in that frame by positioning herself as a man and London as a woman. It is in this light that Minaj is furthering heteronormativity as she imagines positioning herself in a heterosexual relationship with London, and this is heightened when considering when this photo was posted, July 10, 2015, just a few weeks after same-sex marriage was legalized in the United States on June 26, 2015.

Similarly, by saying “I’d buy her mad shit” Minaj further expressed that, if London were her wife, she would take care of her needs, which promotes masculinity where the man provides for his wife and family, which Connell and Pearse (2015) argued is often the case as men are the “decision makers” and “bread-winners” of the family. In these ways, Minaj appears to be playing into the essentialist understanding of gender by imagining what she would do if she were a man.
However, I argue this photo does engage with queering gender norms as she adopts a female masculinity to exert her power of being able to provide for London. In other words, Minaj expresses here that she can perform the role of a man, if she chose to do so. This supports Smalls (2011) analysis of Grae’s music as she argued Grae’s queering of black female sexuality disrupts heteronormativity by adopting a male role, as the audience sees Minaj doing the same here. Furthermore, this photo also ends up positioning Minaj as making appeals to both male and female, and queer and straight audiences (Smith, 2014; White, 2013) as she suggests being with another woman. This is also depicted through the emojis that are used. The tongue is used to indicate being silly or playful, but it also has a more sexual connotation of french kissing and intimacy. The water droplet emoji is used to show sweating or movement of water, but the sexual connotation is arousal. The heart emoji is used to show love, whereas the sad face depicts being upset or saddened. Different audiences may interpret these sign-vehicles in different ways, and as Bessette (2016) argued there needs to be space for multiple readings of a single. In this case, one reading may be that Minaj is being playful and joking and, therefore, is not expressing her sexuality in any form or instead is reinforcing heteronormativity as described above. Another reading, though may interpret the sexual connotations of the emojis and might believe that Minaj is alluding to imagining a sexual relationship with London and, while expressing this as a woman herself, alludes to same-sex relationships and intimacy. This, especially, is where queering gender norms comes into play as Minaj engages disidentification as she uses heteronormative male performance as a way to subversively express queer desire (Muñoz, 1999). The language and words used in the caption and the photo itself express heteronormative relationships, but the emojis are used to express queer desire.
Figure 26 Photo posted to Instagram July 27, 2015 at 7:40 pm ET. The caption read “Ummm excuse me Della, but wtf u doin? 😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂.”

Figure 26, from the Career Development category, depicts Nicki Minaj and one of her on-stage dancers during a performance. Her dancer, referred to as Della in the caption, is behind Minaj. Both Minaj and Della are squatting and sticking their buttocks out. Della is seen grabbing Minaj’s buttocks as Della looks down. Because Minaj is not fully within the frame of the photo, and because Della is on the far left side of the frame, Della grabbing Minaj ends up being centered in the frame of the photo, which makes this the focus. Given what can be seen in this photo (a screen in the background, an ear piece in Minaj’s ear, lights in the bottom of the frame), the identity performance in this photo is one that was clearly intended to be a staged, public performance. With this context in mind, it is expected that the dancers and actions on stage would have been choreographed to be a part of the performance, and from this it would also be expected that this particular interaction was choreographed as well with Minaj’s fans being the audience in mind. Furthermore, because this is for a public, staged performance and due to
Minaj’s popularity, it is expected that this particular performance would reach a large audience through a single performance.

Minaj’s expression isn’t entirely in the frame of this photo, but from what the audience can see it does not appear that Minaj is offended by Della’s action, as it seems to be a choreographed part of a performance. However, the language used in the caption of the photo, particularly where Minaj asks Della what she was doing, suggests the action was unwanted or questioned. On the other hand, like with Figure 25, the emojis used give a more lighthearted and playful tone to the message so it comes across as a joke. Also like Figure 25, here we see Minaj expressing queer desire and, thus, queering gender norms, which supports the findings of Smith (2014) who studied artist Jean Grae and White (2013) who studied Minaj. The photo itself makes appeals to male and female, and queer and straight audiences as the focus of the photograph is the action of grabbing Minaj’s buttocks, an action that might appeal to many straight male audiences and queer female audiences as it is suggestive of same-sex intimacy as well as the audience potentially imagining or wishing to touch Minaj in that same way. Unlike Figure 25, the photo in Figure 26 makes the stronger position of queering gender norms as we visually see queer desire taking place as Della grabs Minaj’s buttocks. However, it is the caption in Figure 26 that reinforces heteronormativity (like the photo in Figure 25) as here Minaj appears to be jokingly rejecting Della’s advance. Yet again, Minaj’s sexuality remains elusive (Smith, 2014) as she engages with disidentification to simultaneously subversively express queer desire and question it within the same performance, which is a key component of Muñoz’s (1999) disidentification as meaning is reconstructed and encoded in cultural texts to work within and against normative performances.
Figure 27 is a photo of Nicki Minaj’s Barbie doll created by Mattel, and this photo was in the Political and World Issues category. The caption that accompanies the photo is congratulating Zendaya, a biracial actress, singer, and dancer, on having a Barbie made for her, and Minaj particularly draws attention to the doll’s hair, which is in dreadlocks. The doll, shown in Figure 28, was created in the likeness of Zendaya’s 2015 Oscar appearance where she received criticism for wearing her hair in dreadlocks, and here Minaj highlights the importance of this gesture as Zendaya was aiming to showcase the beauty of dreadlocks, which African Americans sometimes receive harsh criticism for. Because the photo Minaj shared was of her Barbie that was previously released, the identity performance of this Instagram post is one that is

10 For more on the criticism Zendaya received, and her response to the criticism, see Steiner (2015).
more personal in nature as it is not a staged, public performance, although her success as a musician certainly played a significant role in the Barbie being made in the likeness of Minaj in the first place. The identity performance in the caption, though, depicts a clearer picture of the identity performance as it engages Gee’s (1989) concept of Discourses by highlighting Minaj’s values in particular. Furthermore, the photo speaks to the value of these Discourses with regard to young girls who will see Zendaya’s Barbie, which expresses Minaj’s hope that the Barbie will be impactful for young girls’ own Discourses.

Figure 28 A side-by-side photo of Zendaya and her Barbie that Zendaya posted to her Instagram account.

This photo specifically engages with queering gender norms by the association to Barbie and empowerment. Barbie has often been criticized for creating a feminine ideal that is impossible to reach, and Lady Gaga has criticized Barbie heavily for this reason (Whitney, 2012). Minaj, though, celebrates and identifies with Barbie’s femininity, and presumably her fans do as well since they are called “Barbz,” according to J. Butler (2013) and Whitney (2012), and have developed Barbie aesthetic fan blogs and online fan communications that draw
inspiration from Minaj (Whitney, 2012). Additionally, Minaj’s language in the caption, “I love what it means for other little girls who will identify with it & be empowered. Continue to be proud of yourself girls!!!!,” challenges the feminine ideal of Barbie, an almost impossible aesthetic to achieve, where the focus is on girls seeing themselves in the doll rather than becoming doll-like themselves. Further, whereas Jackson (2006) argued femininity is typically portrayed with regards to a woman’s sexual attractiveness and relationship to a man, and this is something many might say Barbie upholds with the Ken doll, Minaj challenges this representation of femininity through her appropriation of Barbie as she finds representations of herself and Zendaya in Barbie empowering for girls. In this light, Minaj engages with J. Butler’s (1993) subversive citation as she cites Barbie but brings the audience’s attention to Barbie’s features that society has deemed unprofessional given the harsh comments made about African Americans wearing their hair in dreadlocks. Barbie serves as an opportunity to play dress up and revel in expressions of femininity for themselves rather than conform to the norm, and so Minaj’s attention to Barbie queers the normative perception that girls must be like Barbie rather than see themselves in Barbie and as a chance to express femininity.
Figure 29, in the Appearance and Sex category, shows Nicki Minaj posing in front of a blank wall or perhaps a white curtain, and she’s wearing what appears to be an outfit for a stage performance because she has a visible microphone and the fishnet clothing looks similar to outfits shown in photos of her stage performances. However, what is different here that does not appear in the outfits from her stage performances is the blue waist trainer. Minaj explained in the caption of the photo that she wears the waist trainer when she warms up for her performances to help her stay in shape. The identity performance in this photo is one in which that gives the audience a behind-the-scenes look, or a backstage look to use Goffman’s (1956) language, at Minaj’s preparations before a performance. This photo captures a more typical, daily experience Minaj faces and, in turn, Marwick (2013, 2015) argued these photos can serve to develop a perceived sense of friendship and relationship to her fans. The photo helps to bridge the divide
between the celebrity and non-celebrity by showing Minaj essentially preparing for her professional work, which is something fans do themselves although the nature of that preparation likely looks quite different.

Given what is seen in the photo and what the caption says, here I argue Minaj is reinforcing gender norms rather than queering them. Although Minaj is not positioned explicitly in relation to men, which Jackson (2006) identified as a marker of heteronormativity, the waist trainer does reinforce womanliness being equated to sexual attractiveness as well as upholding a certain ideal for women’s bodies, which are other markers Jackson (2006) identified. Given Minaj’s interest in Barbie as well, the waist trainer also upholds the Barbie doll-like figure (Whitney, 2012). However, unlike Figure 27 where Minaj argues for Barbie serving as a tool for empowerment for girls, something to identify with, here the impression the audience may receive is that Minaj is promoting a particular body image for sex appeal and not for empowerment through promoting the waist trainer she uses. In other words, the sign-vehicles in this photo (her body shape, the waist trainer, Minaj’s claim to use it daily to warm up) end up reinforcing a desire for a particular body size/shape. However, this is not to say that having a particular body image is not empowering, but that this does not appear to be the message being expressed here. As Goffman (1956) argued, the impression Minaj may be attempting to give here is one that is intended to give fans a behind-the-scenes look, and some fans may read this photo as such, but others may get the impression that waist trainers are an important part for making one desirable to others. Thus, Minaj engages with a forced citation, as J. Butler (1993) described it, where a common trope of femininity is the hourglass shape, which Minaj reinforces through her waist trainer that is intended to help provide that hourglass shape where the waist is smaller than the upper torso and the lower hip area. Additionally, she does so without acknowledging how this
performativity of femininity has been reinforced and fortified over several centuries of women wearing corsets, similar to a waist trainer but more damaging to one’s health than a waist trainer, to attain a particular figure.

Figure 30 shows Nicki Minaj with her ex-boyfriend Meek Mill at the 2015 American Music Awards where she won two awards, one for Favorite Rap/Hip Hop Artist and another for Favorite Rap/Hip Hop album. This photo was included in the Male-Female relations category because the photo itself and the caption is emphasizing her relationship to Mill. Although this photo was taken at the American Music Awards in 2015, this photo was reposted (Minaj originally posted it at the time of the awards in November of 2015) on Mill’s birthday as Minaj wished him a happy birthday in the caption. The identity performance of this photo is one in which there Minaj is navigating both public and private performances at the same time. While this is not a public, staged performance, she is seen here attending a highly publicized event, the
American Music Awards, and due to media coverage of this event her performance would be viewed as public. However, the performance is also a personal one as her relationship to Mill is emphasized in the photo as well as in the caption. In other words, she is seen here engaging in an identity performance that is associated with her fame as a musician as well as a personal relationship to Mill. Goffman (1956) argued this overlap in identities can be problematic, but I argue this photo serves as a testament to the ways multiple performances are navigated for multiple audiences. Due to Minaj and Mill’s relationship at the time this photo was taken, it would be expected that they would be seen interacting with one another in this manner, and the same applies to Minaj reposting the photo to wish Mill a happy birthday. The identity performances, then, are working alongside one another rather than competing and conflicting with one another.

In the photo, the focus is on Minaj and Mill, which places Minaj in a presumed place of the girlfriend, a marker of womanliness, according to Jackson (2006). Her body language, specifically the way she is leaning into him and touching him, also positions her as upholding heteronormative depictions of relationships and the role women play in such relationships. Additionally, Minaj is again engaging in forced citational practices noted by J. Butler (1993) as this photo upholds a heteronormative relationship where Mill shows affection through more masculine gestures and Minaj through more feminine gestures. Mill’s arm is seen extending behind Minaj’s shoulders, an action typically done by men, and Minaj is seen lightly placing her fingers on his leg and reaching across to hold his hand, an action typically done by women. These sign-vehicles give the audience an impression of the nature of their relationship, which adheres to heteronormativity. Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that Minaj signs her birthday message as “Cookie,” which is said to be her first alter ego. Cookie is a child-like, girly
persona that, in an interview, Minaj said she used to escape from the fighting that took place in her home (Goodman, 2010). The fact that she adopted this child-like and girly persona to wish Mill a happy birthday is again reinforcing heteronormative roles in relationships.

Figure 31 Photo posted to Instagram on July 27, 2015 at 4:25 pm ET. The caption read “When a baby u held the day he was born gets taller than u then refuses to cut his hair when u tell him to. Smh. #IWantCaiahToGoToCollege love of my Life. Him and Jelani. My world til my last breath. 😍❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️.”

Figure 31, from the Home and Mother category, shows Nicki Minaj posing with her younger brother, Micaiah (who she refers to as Caiah here). The caption draws attention to the fact that her younger brother, who she held the day he was born, is now taller than her and no longer listens to her. Additionally, the caption states she wants him to go to college, and that her brothers are the loves of her life and her world. The identity performance in this photo is one that is much more personal in nature than other photos Minaj has posted because it shows an intimate relationship with her family that rarely is seen on her Instagram account. The impression Minaj gives with this photo and the accompanying caption is that her family means everything to her. This lends insight into her Discourses, as described by Gee (1989), where she places a high level
of importance on the well-being of her family. This backstage identity performance, to use Goffman’s (1959) language contrasts the “bad bitch” image J. Butler (2013) observed in her study of Minaj that can be seen more prominently in her public, staged performances. Whereas Goffman (1959) might argue not maintaining this “bad bitch” image in front of her fans is problematic, I argue that this photo instead fosters personal connections with fans by showcasing details of her day-to-day interactions and experiences. In other words, Minaj is depicted as a complex individual in such a way that her fans may be able to easily relate to, which Marwick (2015) argued is important for building a perceived relationship with fans.

However, it is also important to note that this photo positions Minaj as taking on a more motherly role for her brother as his older sister, which Jackson (2006) and Connell and Pearse (2015) argued reinforces heteronormative femininity where women serve as caregivers for their families. Minaj adopting a more motherly role is also apparent through an interview she gave to Rolling Stone where she discussed having an abortion at the age of 15 (Rolling Stone, 2014), which comes up again in her song “All Things Go” where she rapped:

I want ‘Caiah to go to college, just to say “We did it!” / My child with Aaron, would’ve been sixteen, any minute / So in some ways I feel like ‘Caiah, is the both of them / It’s like he’s ‘Caiah’s little angel, looking over him. (Maraj, Samuels, Dean, Hernandez, & Ritter, 2014)

The sign-vehicles of the song and caption highlight that, in some ways, Minaj appears to feel that her lost child remains present in her life through her younger brother, Caiah. Having this knowledge about Minaj helps to give some context to her interactions and may change the impression audiences get of Minaj when seeing this image as they may perceive her comments and interactions as adopting a more motherly role in her relationship with her younger brother because of the reminder of her own child. Audiences without this knowledge, though, may read
this at the surface level of a bond between siblings. Even so, it remains that Minaj reinforces heteronormativity through her interactions with her younger brother as she partakes in forced citational practices, as described by J. Butler (1993) that suggest the norm is for a woman to also serve as a mother and caregiver for her younger siblings.

Figure 32 Photo posted to Instagram March 22, 2016 at 9:50 pm ET. The caption read “Pink Barbie hat w/the pink Barbie headphones to match. 🍴.”

Figure 32, in the Self-Development category, appears to be a selfie of Nicki Minaj wearing Barbie attire, specifically a hat and headphones. The identity performance in this photo is one that establishes a more personal connection with fans. As Marwick (2015) and Rettberg (2014) noted, selfies foster a sense of friendship and also invites the viewer into the space of the photo. This helps to separate the divide between the celebrity and non-celebrity by using sign-vehicles that non-celebrities could easily connect or relate to, and this is important for maintaining and further Minaj’s social media presence by appearing relatable to her fans. Furthermore, the impression Minaj gives in this photo is one in which she endorses the Barbie aesthetic and ideal for women as she promotes the Barbie brand. In this light, Minaj reinforces
gender norms through these actions. Although it remains unclear whether or not these products are official Barbie products since product labels are not visible, the fact that she attributes them to Barbie, even simply through describing the color as “Pink Barbie,” reinforces the Barbie ideal as something that is desirable.

Additionally, within this photo Minaj positioned herself just as the “Barbie” and not the “bad bitch,” which have been noted in previous studies by J. Butler (2013) and Whitney (2012), as she is not visibly critiquing Barbie or speaking to empowerment through Barbie as she did when discussing Zendaya’s Barbie doll (see Figure 27). However, this photo does not explicitly depict Minaj in a heterosexual relationship as she is not being identified through her relationship to a man. Consequently, Minaj is reinforcing gender norms despite the fact that she is not engaging with the factors Jackson (2006) and Connell and Pearse (2015) identified correlate to the heteronormative masculine and feminine. Even so, Minaj engages with a forced citational practice, as J. Butler described it (1993), that presents the Barbie aesthetic as desirable for women, specifically by referring to the color pink (a color that is heavily gendered female) and her matching headphones and hat (matching being a fashion aesthetic that also tends to be gendered female). Arguably, other sign-vehicles in the photo, like Minaj’s blonde hair (again correlating to a Barbie aesthetic), her nails, and her jewelry, also serve as markers of femininity and forced citations as these adhere to heteronormative beauty standards of women.
Figure 33 Screenshot of a video posted to Instagram on March 20, 2016 at 1:02 am ET. The caption read “When work feels like the vacation u needed. #tranquility 7am in #Durban #SouthAfrica beautiful😍😍😍😍 wish u were here.”

Figure 33 shows a picture of the beach in Durban, South Africa. This video was taken while Nicki Minaj was on tour there and the caption specifically refers to “work,” and so it is in the Career Development category. Although only a screenshot is included here in Figure 33, the video in its entirety is just looking down the beach as the camera pans to the right and back again to the left, and from the caption the audience learns that it feels like she is on vacation even though she is there for work purposes. The identity performance associated with this photo shows a glimpse of Minaj’s day-to-day experiences, which Marwick (2015) noted can serve to develop a sense of a relationship amongst the viewers of the photo. However, in this case, the photo also serves to divide the celebrity and non-celebrity, not through the image of thin-buxom bodies as Marwick noted but by the viewer seeing how Minaj’s work leads to a life of luxury. In other words, many fans would not be able to relate to work feeling as if it was a vacation, and as
a result this photo may both serve to develop a relationship and further the divide between herself and fans.

Unlike the other photos discussed here, Minaj does not appear at all in this screenshot shown in Figure 33 or in the original video posted to Instagram. Even though she is not shown here, the caption indicates her thoughts and feelings about what she is seeing in Durban, which is that she is enjoying the beautiful landscape where she is. What is shown here is not necessarily equated to femininity/masculinity or womanliness/manliness, as was described by Jackson (2006) and Connell and Pearse (2015) as it just shows an appreciation for the view, thus it is not queering gender norms. Additionally, it is also noteworthy that this is one of the few moments where we don’t see Minaj within the data collected for this dissertation research. In this case, Minaj presents a different side of herself that differs from the “bad bitch” image as the impression is given that she is merely enjoying the moment of looking out on the beach. So many of her Instagram posts collected here for this research were focused on promoting her brand, and it was rare to see moments, like this one, where she was not doing so.
Like Figure 33, Figure 34 does not depict femininity/masculinity or womanliness/manliness as it was discussed by Jackson (2006) and Connell and Pearse (2015). Figure 34 directly engages with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, although Nicki Minaj did not invoke the hashtag, by sharing this photo that has the names of those who have lost their lives as a result of police violence. By using the hashtag #RIPAltonSterling, she engaged with the most recent case at the time of her posting where a black man was shot and killed while being manhandled by police who appeared to be using unnecessary force. Minaj’s post draws attention to the fact that several people have lost their lives at the hands of police, yet there remain no convictions. Although Minaj mentioned “hug[ging] the ppl u love a little tighter,” which may be read as being a more feminine gesture to express affection through adopting a compassionate, caregiver role, given the circumstances of this post she appears to be speaking to everyone, regardless of gender, and so she does not engage with queering gender norms here. That being
said, the importance of her speaking on this issue does not go unnoticed, as many of Minaj’s more outspoken posts circulate around racial equality and empowerment (e.g., Figure 27 and other photos she shared, such as recognizing women of color for their Emmy awards). Although this photo does not depict Minaj herself or a particular identity performance of hers, it does lend insight into Minaj’s Discourses as the impression this photo gives the audience is that she, too, is angry and concerned over police violence that, statistically, has most often impacted people of color.

Conclusion

Through analyzing 12 photos Nicki Minaj posted to Instagram, I have discovered that, like Lady Gaga, Minaj does not frequently or regularly engage in queering gender norms because, often, the critique of gender norms is not evident in the photos shared. Instead, it is through the lens of queer rhetoric that this critique can become evident. However, more so than Gaga, Minaj plays with queer desire publicly, and does so in such a way that reinforces previous research (see Smith, 2014; White, 2013) on female rappers, and Minaj more specifically, that female rappers make appeals to male and female, and queer and straight audiences. Minaj does this by carefully choosing her language in the captions of photos that play with queer desire so that there is space for multiple readings and interpretations by different audiences, which Bessette (2016) noted is a critical component of queer studies. In the case of Minaj, many of her Instagram photos are meant to promote her career, and playing with queer desire and queering gender norms like this serves as another way for Minaj to be read by different audiences in different ways. This further highlights the need for providing space for multiple readings and considering the contextual nature of texts (Bessette, 2016), as it is inevitable given the photos analyzed here from my own positionality that different audiences would perceive her messages
differently. For example, some might not see her discussion of Zendaya’s Barbie doll empowering as something for girls to identify with or might not read a backup dancer touching Minaj’s buttocks as expressing queer desire. Furthermore, there were several examples of Minaj speaking out against racial injustices by discussing police violence and in support of racial equality and the recognition of women of color for their successes. Whereas Gaga tended to espouse messages more strongly associated with gender, specifically sexual harassment and assault, and LGBTQIA+ rights, Minaj tended to espouse messages relating more strongly to race. By sharing these photos on Instagram, both Minaj and Gaga are encouraging their fans and, essentially, their consumers, to participate in critical engagement and self-reflection with these subjects.
CHAPTER FIVE: FAN POSTS AND QUEER RHETORIC

Introduction

This chapter is an attempt to address my second research question which focuses on the ways fans uptake celebrities’ queering of gender norms through their own performances on Instagram, and more broadly how they are engaging with celebrity posts when tagging them in the captions of their own Instagram photos. Studying fan posts can help social media researchers better understand the impact celebrity posts have on their fans. For example, if a celebrity speaks in support of a movement or societal issue, researchers could use fan post analysis to consider if and how the celebrity’s stance is being received and potentially recirculated through the fan posts. In this chapter, I have elected to seek out particular themes or messages Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj espouse in an effort to determine if there are traces of these messages in fan posts. Given my findings that, on occasion, Gaga engaged with queering gender norms in public performances and Minaj engaged with queering gender norms through expressions of queer desire, analyzing fan posts can be one way of considering if and how fans may be interpreting and further integrating these performances into their own performances. By looking for the themes and messages celebrities espouse within fans’ posts, researchers can gain a clearer sense of the ways fans themselves embody and express similar messages to the celebrities they choose to engage with. This is important for queer rhetoric because it reveals opportunities for celebrities to critique normative discourses by advocating different and counter-discourses, a key component of queer rhetoric according to Alexander and Rhodes (2012). However, given my data set and methods, the data on fan posts is largely inclusive for determining the ways Gaga’s
and Minaj’s fans may engage with queering gender norms and other activist messages these
celebrities espouse. This is discussed in more depth throughout the remainder of this chapter.

To study photos posted by fans that tagged Lady Gaga or Nicki Minaj, I took a grounded
theory approach to uncover whether particular themes or messages the musicians were posting to
their own accounts would appear within the fan posts. One obstacle to studying fan posts was the
amount of spam posts that appeared in the data set, and in the first phase of coding I parsed
through and noted which posts were spam and which posts were not spam. Spam accounts post
photos that they anticipate will get likes and will use a wide range of hashtags so that they will
appear in search results. This ultimately boosts their presence on the social media page so that it
will be more likely to appear in search results. At times, the person(s) posting may use trending
hashtags, or those that are most popular at a given moment, in an effort to gain further attention.
In many cases, spam accounts and spam photos are closed or removed for violating the terms of
the site, so they often are not active for very long. I interpreted spam based upon the content of
the photo and the hashtags that were used, and I looked for two criteria: 1) the post did not
contain an image of Gaga or Minaj but instead focused on other celebrities with no apparent
connection to either musician, and 2) the use of spam hashtags like #like4like or #spam4spam.
There were many posts, for example, that would feature other celebrities besides the ones in
these case studies (e.g., showing pictures of Rihanna but tagging Minaj). Additionally, for the
hashtags accompanying the photos, several posts were clearly attempting to gain visibility on
Instagram by using hashtags like #like4like or #spam4spam, in addition to having a large number
of other hashtags, when the posts themselves weren’t clearly related to the hashtags being used.
After identifying the spam posts (381 of those that used the hashtag #LadyGaga and 589 of those
that used the hashtag #NickiMinaj), I then recoded the data with the main themes that emerged
from my analysis of Gaga and Minaj in mind. For Gaga, two common themes that emerged were related to expressing one’s sexuality and engaging in activism, specifically relating to gender and sexuality. Minaj’s posts predominantly related to expressions of queer desire through the use of the body, rather than merely embracing one’s sexuality, and activism as it relates to racial equality and acknowledging the successes of people of color.

While my intent was to consider if and how fans may engage with queering gender norms and/or other messages Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj espouse, the photos and accompanying captions in most cases were not enough to make such a determination. My attempts to be an observer resulted in lacking sufficient data to fully answer my second research question. For future research on fan engagement with celebrity’s messages, I recommend that researchers take a longitudinal or interview-based approach in addition to acquiring fan posts. Although conducting longitudinal and interview-based research is more challenging in digital spaces because the researcher has fewer possible forms of contact (in addition to the interviewee simply not responding or deleting their account), this would allow the researcher to gain a clearer picture of the intent behind making a post that uses particular hashtags that remains unseen simply as an observer. Nevertheless, what follows is an analysis of fan photos that used the hashtags #LadyGaga and #NickiMinaj to the extent that I was able given the data collected. The full captions of the posts are not included and photos featuring fans have been blurred in order to protect the poster’s anonymity.

Lady Gaga’s Fan Posts

The date and time that I collected fan posts happened to be when Lady Gaga was riding in a racecar for the Indianapolis 500, and she was posting about her experience at this event. Because my data collection aligned with a moment when Gaga herself was posting, many of the
fan photos (or photos that used Gaga’s name) were reposting the same pictures Gaga had posted herself, sometimes with the fan having edited the photo a bit first. Due to the timing of my data collection, my data collection only spanned a 15-day period with the majority of posts (n = 993) occurring on May 29, 2016 (the date she rode in a racecar for the Indianapolis 500). This highlights the difficulty of conducting a qualitative study on the use of hashtags because, depending upon the popularity of the hashtag, the amount of data increases exponentially in a very short time period. Furthermore, the use of hashtags might fluctuate greatly depending upon current events, which in this case was Gaga engaging in a highly publicized activity. Several fans posted other photos of Gaga from throughout her career as well, but again this happened in a very small window of time. Only a small group out of the photos collected were pictures of the fans themselves. There were also a large number of spam posts (n = 381). Occasionally, there were photos that would use spam hashtags but did depict Gaga. Photos were also categorized according to main themes that appeared in Gaga’s own Instagram posts, sexuality and activism relating to gender equality. Table 4 depicts the numeric breakdown of the fan photos categorized.

Table 4 Number of Lady Gaga’s Fan Photos Per Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Photos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spam</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activism relating to gender equality</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>573</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Descriptions of Categorization of Lady Gaga’s Fan Posts

As discussed previously, photos that fell within the spam category often were not clearly tied to Lady Gaga in any way. Mostly, the photos within this category were focused on self-promotion to gain attention through using the #LadyGaga hashtag. This self-promotion was focused on promoting one’s own career, such as when there were several spam posts promoting an Instagram account for an Algerian singer and actress, or it was focused on gaining more followers by posting photos of celebrities (sometimes Gaga but typically not) and using tags like #like4like. Photos that appeared within the sexuality category were ones where fans identified their sexuality either through the caption or through the tags on the photo. Mostly these photos were selfies or portraits where the poster would use the hashtag #LadyGaga, even though she wasn’t depicted in the photo, in conjunction with a caption or other hashtags that indicated their sexuality. There were also a few photos that shared photos of Gaga from different moments in her career, such as an image from her music video for the song “Born This Way,” that would use tags like #gay or #gaygaga. Finally, there were a few photos that appeared to take place at a parade or celebration, perhaps something akin to an LGBTQIA+ pride event, where rainbow colored floats or a person impersonating Gaga were visible. The activism category contained photos similar to those in the sexuality category, but there were fewer selfies and portraits. Instead, most of the photos were promoting equality. There was some overlap between these two categories, though. For example, a photo of an LGBTQIA+ pride event referenced sexuality and equality, and so it appeared within both of these categories. There were also some photos shared that were photos of posts on Twitter or photos that had texted added to them that were intended to highlight inequality, particularly with regard to the treatment of women. Photos in the other category were almost entirely focused around sharing existing photos of Gaga or fan artwork.
There were occasionally other photos that didn’t appear to have an explicit connection to Gaga, such as those that were selfies or portraits, and also didn’t appear to be spam given the criteria mentioned above, but the majority of photos did include Gaga in them. Due to the timing of my data collection, many photos that appeared within this category were ones taken at the Indianapolis 500.

Given this data, I was surprised by just how many spam posts there were and how few posts there were that engaged with specific causes Lady Gaga herself seems to engage in. Combined, the photos related to activism (1.5%) and sexuality (3.7%) are only 5.2% of the 1,000 photos most recently posted at the time of data collection. The numeric data shown in Table 4 further suggests that, most often, fans are engaging with Gaga simply by reposting photos of her rather than focusing on the larger topics or issues that she represents or speaks to. One photo from the four categories will be analyzed and discussed further to demonstrate a few ways in which fans engaged with Gaga by using the hashtag #LadyGaga on photos they posted. Additionally, these photos will be analyzed to consider if or how these photos may be engaging with queering gender norms through the use of queer rhetoric (see Alexander & Rhodes, 2012) or citation (see J. Butler, 1993), although again this is difficult to consider given the limitations of the data set. These photos and captions will be edited to protect the anonymity of the person(s) featured in the photo and who made the posting, unless the person(s) depicted are celebrities. A discussion of the ethics of this research appears in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.
Figure 35 Photo posted to Instagram May 29, 2016 at 2:04 pm ET.

Figure 35 is a photo that was posted to Instagram that used the hashtag #LadyGaga. In this case, the hashtag was not used in the initial caption on the photo (“@ashleytisdale” appeared first), but it did appear in a comment left on the photo. It is unclear why someone would have used the hashtag #LadyGaga in this case. However, considering the sign-vehicles associated with this post, particularly the use of such a large number of hashtags that aren’t clearly connected to one another aside from being a string of celebrity names, my impression is that this is an example of someone using trending or popular hashtags to try to gain visibility and increase their number of followers. The person featured in the photo is Khloe Kardashian, a reality star. As can be seen in the photo, there is no clear reference to or association with Lady Gaga. Furthermore, the only person tagged in the caption is Ashley Tisdale, even though she is not featured in this
photo. By looking at the hashtags, as well as the fact that Kardashian is not tagged first (her sister, Kim Kardashian West, is the first that appears), it is evident that this is an example of a spam photo. Although this is a spam photo, it is useful to consider whether or not this photo that invoked Gaga’s name as a way to gain visibility is engaging in queering gender norms since Gaga does that in some of her own posts. In this case, though, Kardashian appears to reinforce gender norms as she engages in forced citational practices, as J. Butler (1993) noted, and normative expressions of femininity, according to Jackson (2006) and Connell and Pearse (2015). This is done through her tight and revealing dress, as well as the highlighter around her breasts and collarbones to amplify the attention to her body and the lines of the dress, without any indication of critically engaging or critiquing this type of dress by drawing attention to it, such as through engaging with Muñoz’s (1999) concept of disidentification. Instead, although Kardashian is not positioned here within her presumed place in a heterosexual relationship (e.g., as a wife or mother), which Jackson (2006) argued plays a key role in heteronormativity, this photo does reinforce her womanliness with regard to her sexual attractiveness due to her attire. Consequently, this spam photo reinforces heteronormativity rather than critiquing it.

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11 A tag is distinct from a hashtag. A tag uses the @ symbol to connect to someone else’s account on Instagram, whereas a hashtag uses the # symbol and is followed by a word or phrase to connect to a larger conversation on a topic.
Figure 36 depicts a selfie of a woman holding up a bottle of Diet Coke that was a part of the #ShareACoke campaign. The slogan on this bottle is “Baby, I was born this way,” which are part of the lyrics to Lady Gaga’s song “Born This Way.” This song focuses on self-empowerment and has become an anthem for some in the LGBTQIA+ community. Given the sign-vehicles present here, the impression given is that Gaga was tagged because the person posting has made an association between the Diet Coke bottle and Gaga’s music. Further, the specific song being referenced and its association with the LGBTQIA+ community clarifies the use of the hashtags #lesbian and #prideyall, as the person who posted this photo is indicating the association she made between the bottle, Gaga, her identity as a lesbian, and pride. Even so, with this photo, it does not appear as though this fan is as critically engaged in Gaga’s fan community because she doesn’t use any hashtags associated with Gaga’s fan community, such as #mothermonster or #littlemonster. Still, the impression given in this identity performance is that
this poster is familiar with Gaga and her advocacy for equality because she is showing a Diet Coke bottle that references one of Gaga’s songs, specifically one that has become an anthem for the LGBTQIA+ community. Additionally, this fan has also implied that she herself is a lesbian, so again we gain a sense of her identity and how she sees Gaga and Gaga’s relationship to the LGBTQIA+ community. This poster’s own identity, though, does not necessarily mean she was engaging with queer rhetoric. In the photo, the poster is not directly engaging with heteronormative depictions of womanliness, as was described by Connell and Pearse (2015) and Jackson (2006) as the focus is not on her attractiveness or her relationship to a man. At the same time, though, the viewer does not see the poster engage critically with queer rhetoric or subversive citation as she does not present an alternative or nonnormative discourse around femininity simply through the use of the hashtag #lesbian. Consequently, without conducting an interview to better understand the poster’s intention with this photo and caption, it seems as though this poster does engage with similar causes that Gaga advocates, which is important for future research to further understand what messages fans take up and to what extent they do so, but does not appear to engage in queering gender norms.
Figure 37 Photo posted to Instagram May 29, 2016 at 5:47 pm ET.

Figure 37 shows a collage of four photos of different music artists (Lady Gaga, Rihanna, Katy Perry, and Miley Cyrus) who have posed nude at some point in their careers. The text appearing across the four images “She did it. She did it. And she did it. So why judge her?” is bringing attention to the way Cyrus has been criticized for posing nude, despite the fact that other music artists have done the same in the past. Additionally, the video shoot depicted in this photo of Cyrus was from 2013 and is quite old, which raises the question of why this is still being discussed three years later. Without interviewing the poster, though, it is unclear if this particular concern of Cyrus posing nude was still an issue in 2016 that the poster was attempting to address or if this was simply something the poster had found online and decided to post of their own volition. The hashtag #LadyGaga is primarily used here because Gaga is present in the collage alongside other women, who are also tagged.
While Lady Gaga is an advocate for women’s rights, given the sign-vehicles present here, such as the caption accompanying the photo, it is unclear if the poster was making that association when sharing the post. Without conducting an interview with the poster to ask about their intention and awareness of Gaga’s advocacy, it is unclear why these three celebrities were selected for this collage. Even so, it is significant that Gaga is being associated with this cause for supporting women’s rights, particularly women’s expressions of sexuality, given she has publicly spoken about her experience with sexual assault and her outspoken support of music artist Kesha regarding her accusations of sexual assault. Gaga’s posts regarding political and world issues only made up 6.4% of her posts collected as a part of my research, and so her posts specifically engaging with women’s rights are even fewer, but in some capacity there may remain this perception (perhaps subconsciously) that Gaga serves as a representative for women’s rights. Consequently, this photo engages with queering gender norms as it presents an alternative discourse for women’s expressions of sexuality. The women depicted in this photo don’t appear to be posing merely to be seen as sexually attractive, but instead to use their bodies and nudity to express themselves in their work as musicians and artists. Although some of the artists shown here may be posing in sexually suggestive ways, the fact that they alone are in the photos and two of the artists are making eye contact with the camera presents an exertion of agency and ownership over their bodies and sexuality, thus contrasting the heteronormative depiction of women that presents women in regard to their sexual availability and sexual attractiveness to men. In this light, this photo is similar to photos of Nicki Minaj and other rap or hip hop artists who use their bodies and their gaze to exert their agency and power (see Balaji, 2010; hooks, 2003; Reid-Brinkley, 2007; Smalls, 2011).
Figure 38 is a collage of two photos depicting Lady Gaga alongside Mario Andretti as they were preparing for the Indianapolis 500. Here it is clear that Gaga is mentioned in the caption of the photo because she is one of the people featured in the photos posted. The use of the hashtags that accompany the photo are also significant, such as #ladygaga4ever, #mothermonster, #monsterstyle, #littlemonster, and #pawsup. Although this may not mean much to someone not very familiar with Gaga or her fan community, it is very telling about the fan. Gaga refers to herself as “mother monster” and her fans as “little monsters,” and she uses the phrase “monster,” in particular, because she encourages fans to embrace their inner monster, whatever that may be for each individual. “Paws up” functions in a similar fashion here as Gaga often invites her fans to put their paws/hands up to show their monster side. From this, it is evident that the person who posted the photo is familiar with the particular lexis and discourse that is specialized for Gaga’s fan community, even if this person is not engaging with some of
the more specific causes and messages that Gaga espouses through her own posts. However, the poster does not engage with queering gender norms as there is no indication of critically engaging with gender norms but instead merely admiring the celebrities depicted. Furthermore, here Gaga herself does not appear to be critiquing gender norms as the photo depicts her in relation to a male race car driver. Although the photo is not necessarily tied to her sexual availability or attractiveness to men, which Jackson (2006) argued is a key role in upholding heteronormativity, Gaga takes on more of a role as an object rather than a subject because she is along for the ride in the racecar. In this way, Gaga does not critically engage with her role as an object and, in turn, engages in forced citational practices where she does not play the dominant, key role in this interaction.

More broadly, in the case of Lady Gaga’s fan posts, it is noteworthy that of the photos that engaged with Gaga’s messages of sexuality and gender equality, there were more photos that were focused on sexuality (3.7% versus 1.5%). This correlation is significant given how outspoken Gaga has been for LGBTQIA+ rights as it is evident that fans associate LGBTQIA+ rights with Gaga. Furthermore, this demonstrates that at least a portion of Gaga’s fans engage with the messages she espouses but, given the constraints of this research study, the extent to which fans are engaged with these messages, particularly queer rhetoric, are unclear. While my hope was that by remaining an observer I could gain insight into fans’ intentions for posting by reading the caption accompanying the photo, I discovered the captions were not substantial enough. The four photos analyzed more closely here showcase the difficulty of attempting to assess engagement with particular messages through an observation of this nature. Instead, the analysis reveals more about what fans are posting and speculates why particular celebrities may have been tagged. Further, most photos that were not labeled as spam tended to be focused on
admiring Gaga and her celebrity status rather than demonstrating a critical engagement with her messages. Even so, this provides insight into the ways fans are engaging with celebrity posts on Instagram when they post photos and use a celebrity’s hashtag, which primarily is expressing their admiration for celebrities and seeking out attention for their own Instagram accounts.

**Nicki Minaj’s Fan Posts**

The date and time I collected fan posts for Nicki Minaj coincided with Minaj making a post about police brutality, as it was directly following the death of Alton Sterling in 2016. As a result, many of the fan posts were focused on racial inequality, and quite a bit of this ended up being marked as spam posts, given the criteria I discussed previously, because Minaj wasn’t featured or discussed in the photo and hashtags were being spammed. In total, Minaj’s fan posts included more spam posts (n = 589) than Lady Gaga’s fan posts. Also, like Gaga, many of the fan posts were reposting photos of Minaj, many of which she had previously posted and some of which had been edited by fans prior to posting. Additionally, there was only a small group of photos that featured fans themselves. Many of the photos that featured the fans were videos of a lip sync music app that allowed the fan to record themselves lip syncing to Minaj’s songs. Photos were also categorized according to main themes that appeared in Minaj’s own Instagram posts, the body and activism relating to racial equality. Table 5 depicts the numeric breakdown of the fan photos categorized.
Table 5 Number of Nicki Minaj’s Fan Photos Per Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Photos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spam</td>
<td>589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activism relating to racial equality</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Descriptions of Categorization of Nicki Minaj’s Fan Posts

Photos that appeared in the spam category were focused on speaking to racial inequality or self-promotion. The posts focused on racial inequality were likely prompted by the death of Alton Sterling, which Nicki Minaj spoke about on her Instagram account, and these photos included photos of Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as photos of other prominent figures tied to black history in America. The captions and content of the photos, though, did not speak to Minaj in any way except by using her hashtag and while the message was meaningful and relevant, spam hashtags were still being used in order to promote those messages and so they were classified as spam. Other spam photos that were focused on self-promotion would also use the spam hashtags, and there were also instances where the posts were attempting to promote a particular brand or product, such as hair extensions. The body category included photos that brought attention to curvy bodies, either Minaj’s body or other women’s bodies. Often there was an emphasis on the buttocks. Photos within the activism category were focused on racial inequality, and the majority of these posts were screenshots of text that listed the names of several victims of police brutality or other text meant to promote inspiring messages like “black is beautiful” or “dark skin is not a crime” while still drawing attention to racial inequality. The
photos that contained people within this category depicted people of color. The other category contained photos and videos that were of Minaj or products she sells. These photos were mostly used to express admiration for Minaj. Unlike Lady Gaga, there was not much in the way of fan art, but there were some photos where fans had addressed up as Minaj. Several photos were also memes where fans had taken an image of Minaj and turned into a meme by adding text to it. There were also some photos where fans would share selfies or self-portraits of themselves and, although there wasn’t a clear connection to Minaj in these photos, they would use the hashtag #NickiMinaj.

Similar to Lady Gaga’s fan posts, I was surprised by the amount of spam that appeared in this data set and how few posts engaged with Nicki Minaj’s own messages. Out of the 1,000 photos collected, only 2.3% engaged with messages about the body and only 1.5% engaged with activism aimed at bringing light to racial inequality. Combined, this is only 3.8% of the photos posted. However, it is important to note that the photos categorized as spam are excluded from these categories. Because these were spam posts, there would be no way to determine whether the poster had used the hashtag #NickiMinaj because they felt the message of the post related to her in some way or if it was merely to gain views. Even so, these photos are useful for further understanding the ways fans are engaging with Minaj through their own posts on Instagram that use the hashtag #NickiMinaj, particularly as it relates to queering gender norms through queer rhetoric (see Alexander & Rhodes, 2012) or citation (see J. Butler, 1993). Like with Gaga’s fan posts, Minaj’s fan posts are edited for anonymity, except in the case where celebrities are depicted. A discussion of ethics follows in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.
Spam Photo Analysis

Figure 39 shows two side by side photos of Kim Kardashian West with the hashtag written across the top of the images #TeamNatural. This photo was categorized as spam because it used hashtags such as #likeforfollow and #likeforlike in addition to hashtags associated with other celebrities. Although some of the other celebrity hashtags have an association with West, such as her siblings Kourtney, Khloe, and Kylie, the #NickiMinaj hashtag does not have a clear association to West, her siblings, or the content of the photo that was posted. The content of the photo, though, does reference West’s appearance by using the hashtag #teamnatural and #fake, and as a result the photo correlates to a degree some of Nicki Minaj’s own messages about the body. However, Minaj’s references to the body often revolved around queer desire, power, and agency, none of which appears in the photo shared here (see Chapter Four). The photo itself does not engage in queering gender norms and instead serves as a critique of West’s own choices about her body and appearance, which I argue is in direct opposition to queer rhetoric as it
establishes a natural body as the normative standard instead of providing space for alternative discourses about the un/natural body, which Alexander and Rhodes (2012) argued is a key component of queer rhetoric.

Body Photo Analysis

Figure 40 Photo posted to Instagram July 7, 2016 at 8:23 am ET.

Figure 40 is a selfie a woman took posing beside a pool in what appears to be a two-piece bathing suit. The caption accompanying the photo consists entirely of hashtags invoking multiple rappers, like #lilwayne, as well as making several references to the body, like #thickwomen. Notably, there are no direct references to Nicki Minaj’s fan community, although the hashtag #NickiMinaj was used here. Even so, this photo is noteworthy due to the association the poster made between “thick women” and “curves” to Minaj and the hip-hop community more broadly, hence the use of other rappers’ hashtags. Given that Minaj herself posted many photos that featured her posing to show off her body, it is significant that we see a fan posing in a similar
fashion, although the intention behind the use of the #NickiMinaj hashtag remains unknown.

There is no other person shown in the frame of this photo, thus the photo could be read as the poster exerting agency and power over her own sexuality. This is similar to the findings of Minaj’s photos where she would also exert agency and power over her sexuality and body through her body’s positioning and gaze at the camera. As a result, this photo may engage with queering gender norms as the poster is not presented with regard to her sexual availability or sexual attractiveness to men, an important component of heteronormativity according to Jackson (2006), but instead is taking a more assertive role in purposefully presenting her body in a particular way that many in the hip-hop community have done (see Balaji, 2010; hooks, 2003; Reid-Brinkley, 2007; Smalls, 2011). However, an alternative reading might be that by using male rapper hashtags, the poster is presented with regard to her sexual availability or sexual attractiveness to men. The potential readings of this photo rely heavily on how one might view the purpose of the use of rapper hashtags, such as being used to seek out attention and views or being used to make an appeal to men, and without conducting an interview the purpose behind the post remains unclear as the use of the #NickiMinaj hashtag may not have intended to indicate the poster was a fan but merely correlated “thick women” and hip hop with her.
Activism Photo Analysis

Figure 41 Photo posted to Instagram July 7, 2016 at 10:26 am ET.

Figure 41 is a photo of white text on a brown background that reads “Dark skin is not a crime.” As mentioned previously, my data collection took place the day after Alton Sterling was killed and Nicki Minaj had made a post just prior to my data collection about police brutality. Given the photo itself and the caption that accompanies it, this post appears to be directly engaging with this same issue of police brutality. The poster also invoked the hashtag #blacklivesmatter (and subsequently the hashtag #NickiMinaj in a following comment on the photo), which has become an important activist movement for speaking out against violence and systemic racism towards black people. Although this photo does not engage with queering gender norms, as gender norms are not addressed or discussed in this Instagram post, it is important to note that this post does parallel Minaj’s own messages relating to police brutality and racial inequality. This post suggests that a small percentage of fan posts (3.8%) are engaging with the messages celebrities espouse on some level, as was discussed with Lady Gaga’s fans,
although the extent of that engagement on Instagram specifically does not appear to be very widespread. However, given the constraints of the data set, it is difficult to make more specific and concrete claims about the ways fans are engaging with these messages and how much influence celebrities have in their engagement. In other words, it is likely that this photo would have been posted regardless of the post Minaj made.

Other Photo Analysis

Figure 42 Photo posted to Instagram July 7, 2016 at 6:45 am ET.

Figure 42 depicts two photos of Nicki Minaj that have been placed side-by-side. The entire caption consists only of two hashtags: #NickiMinaj and #barbiebitch. The hashtag #barbiebitch is in reference to Minaj in a couple of ways. One of Minaj’s alter egos is Harajuku Barbie, and in several interviews she has spoken about wanting to be a Barbie. She also has her own Barbie that was made by Mattel. The second way this relates to Minaj is through her fans. Minaj refers to her fans as “Barbz” and, although that hashtag is not invoked here, the reference to Barbie is still significant and could be read in that light. From this, it appears the poster is a fan of Minaj due to her association to Barbie but may not be very familiar with the specific lexis within Minaj’s fan community. Still, the photos selected and shared by this poster do engage in
queering gender norms as Minaj gazes directly into the camera while posing to accentuate her figure, an act others have argued showcases agency (see Balaji, 2010; hooks, 2003; Reid-Brinkley, 2007; Smalls, 2011). Additionally, Minaj being the only person shown in these photos also positions her as having agency over her body and her sexuality as she is not positioned in regard to her sexual availability or attractiveness to men, as Jackson (2006) explained occurs with heteronormativity, but instead is having these photos taken of herself as an individual. This again suggests that fans are engaging with the messages Minaj espouses as it relates to her own agency over her body, although again the extent of this engagement by fans cannot be determined as it is possible this fan posted these photos because they liked them without much consideration over the message being sent about power and the body.

Broadly, the number of fan posts that engages with Nicki Minaj’s messages about the body and racial inequality are very small in number. However, the number of fan posts that addressed racial inequality (1.5%) is important to note and suggests that, like Lady Gaga, at least a small percentage of her fans are concerned with similar messages, in this case racial inequality. The photos that show women posing to show off their bodies (2.3%), on the other hand, show ways that Minaj doing such poses herself may reinforce specific depictions of women’s bodies as each instance from this data set specifically draws attention to curvy women and ultimately leaves little space for different body types. However, this is not to say that these women do not find these actions empowering, so without speaking to these women there is no way to know how these actions might be queering gender norms for the posters on a more personal level. It is important, though, to consider that women with similar body types to Minaj are utilizing a visual form of social media to potentially challenge the mainstream representation of (typically white) thin bodies, and this may also be an empowering act as their bodies are being seen and
represented. Even so, it is apparent that fans are engaging with the messages Minaj espouses and it is the extent to which and in what ways fans are engaging is left up to question given the constraints of this data set.

Conclusion

By analyzing the fan posts that used the hashtags #LadyGaga and #NickiMinaj, it is evident that a large number of fans are engaging with these celebrities on Instagram, although a much smaller fraction of these fans appear to be engaging directly with the messages Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj espouse in their own Instagram posts. However, the number of unique accounts engaging with Gaga and Minaj are unknown because usernames were not collected to protect the anonymity of posters. Fans of both Gaga and Minaj were seen engaging with gender norms as well as other primary causes these celebrities engage with, namely relating to gender and racial inequality through activism, sexuality, and the body. However, a fan seeming to engage with celebrity messages (by my own impression) often did not correlate to queering gender norms as the two do not necessarily coincide. While my intent was to conduct an observation to determine what messages fans are engaging with, ultimately fan posts did not include enough data to come to such a conclusion. Instead, this data provides into the ways fans are engaging with celebrity posts, particularly Gaga’s and Minaj’s, on Instagram, which predominantly (spam excluded) was to express their own admiration of the celebrity and to gain attention for their own accounts. This further suggests the difficulty of using Instagram as a site for study, especially in isolation, because Instagram itself is most often used as a platform for sharing photos and getting “likes” rather than engaging in a dialogue about the content of the photos. In other words, my findings on fan posts are shaped by the platform studied, and the platform does not easily support dialogue as it is focused more heavily on gaining followers and photo likes to enhance one’s
presence and visibility on the platform. For example, while viewers can leave comments on the photo, the original poster will not receive a notification of a comment unless the person leaving the comment tags the poster. Additionally, comments do not appear in threads or subthreads, which makes following a conversation in the comment section very difficult, and again makes participating in a back-and-forth discussion much more challenging. It is possible that fans may engage with these messages in a more forthright fashion on a social media platform that is focused more on the use of words to communicate (e.g., Twitter or Facebook) versus images.

Studying these photos has again made apparent the contextual nature of this type of research (see Bessette, 2016) as I was analyzing these texts through my own positionality and perspective. Viewing fan photos as texts without having the opportunity to interview fans enables me the same position that many others viewing the photos would likely have: the text is being read in isolation without the original poster having the opportunity to elaborate on their intentions. This approach allows for a single reading of these texts given the information provided, and through this approach I discovered that some photos were engaging with queering gender norms as well as some of the celebrities’ own messages. However, the extent to which fans are critically engaging with these messages as opposed to simply recirculating remains unknown without interviewing the fans. Further, the accounts where my reading suggested fans were or weren’t queering gender norms are speculative without interview data to shed light on the poster’s intentions. These findings demonstrate that fans are paying attention to what celebrities post on their social media accounts and, in some cases, fans make their own posts

12 This feature has changed since my data collection and the original poster now receives a notification any time a comment is made.
13 This feature has also changed and threads are now possible within the comment section, although they were not at the time of data collection.
based at least in part on celebrity posts. Furthermore, given that existing research demonstrates Americans, in particular, are often influenced by celebrity lifestyles (see Marwick, 2015), and as my research here begins to also demonstrate that at least a small percentage of fans are engaging with celebrity messages (on social media and otherwise), celebrities posting on social media should take a critical approach to the messages they espouse because at least a small portion of their fans are paying attention. Fans are also occasionally seen recirculating those messages through their own posts, such as in Figure 36 where the poster associated the Diet Coke bottle with Lady Gaga’s song “Born This Way” and, by making her own Instagram post about it, was promoting LGBTQIA+ pride.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION: SOCIAL MEDIA AND GENDER RESEARCH ETHICS

Introduction

Through my dissertation research, I have discovered that Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj do engage with queering gender norms in their Instagram posts. Furthermore, these musicians espouse activist messages, such as LGBTQIA+ rights and racial equality, and although these messages do not directly engage queering gender norms, other messages they espouse do engage with queering gender norms. The variety of content posted on Instagram by Gaga and Minaj exemplify how social media platforms can be used to portray multiple personas and identity performances. Whereas some scholars argue an overlap of multiple personas for the same audience can be problematic (Gee, 1989; Goffman, 1956; Stryker & Burke, 2000), Gaga and Minaj intentionally navigate multiple and varied situations on their Instagram accounts. In line with Marwick’s (2015) claims, I argue that, in doing so, Gaga and Minaj gain a wider appeal to their audiences by demonstrating how multi-faceted their lives and interests are. Both Gaga and Minaj utilize their Instagram accounts to critique and queer gender norms, particularly with norms relating to the body and expressions of sexuality. However, it is important to note that not all of their photos analyzed here were queering gender norms; there were several photos that reinforced gender norms. Although the photos analyzed depict both queering and reinforcing gender norms, these findings support the complexity and fluidity of gender performance in a heteronormative, patriarchal society. Additionally, Alexander and Rhodes (2012) also emphasized the creation of space for various discourses outside of the dichotomy; the complexity and fluidity of Gaga’s and Minaj’s public gender performances through their Instagram accounts serve as one way to facilitate the creation of such spaces. The dismantling and unpacking of
societal norms on a personal level is immense, and even those who are critically engaged like Gaga and Minaj are not able to uphold that critical engagement all of the time. This is not to say the work such celebrities are doing is unimportant, but that celebrities are human and their gender performances may not always hold up to a critical analysis, thus demonstrating the complexity and fluidity of gender performance.

From analyzing fan posts, it appears that the messages celebrities espouse also have an impact on what fans post about when using the celebrity’s hashtag. Although a large majority of fan posts were found to be spam posts or simply posting photos in admiration of these musicians, there were a handful of fan posts (5.2% of Lady Gaga’s fan posts and 3.8% of Nicki Minaj’s fan posts) that did engage more specifically with the messages that celebrities espoused. This indicates that a portion of fans are paying attention to the messages celebrities espouse, as well as the activist causes celebrities engage with, and in some capacity they are communicating with others about these messages, but the extent of the engagement is undeterminable from this data set. In other words, while fans do seem to be speaking to similar subjects as the celebrities they are tagging, and in some cases appear to be engaging in presenting counter-discourses, it is unclear whether they are doing so self-consciously and critically, as Alexander and Rhodes (2012) explained is key for queer rhetoric, or they are simply reposting with no clear justification for doing so. However, the small percentage of fan posts engaging with celebrity messages could be indicative of the ways the Instagram interface shapes interaction and, as some scholars argued (Duguay, 2016; Tiildenberg, 2015), there is a tendency for the interface to reinforce heteronormativity because certain gender performances within that space have become normalized. Furthermore, these findings suggest the possibility of fans navigating the “sign-vehicles” (see Goffman, 1956) of engagement on Instagram through their own posts and use of
hashtags, as well as influence from the interface itself as the interface presents its own constraints for navigating and interacting on Instagram (see Van House, 2011), which in turn supports and promotes particular forms of interaction and engagement. Future research on fan posts using a social media platform could continue interrogating the role of the technological interface in interaction and engagement and would need to determine what constitutes tangible interaction and critical engagement with celebrity posts because the observation done here does not provide adequate support. Even so, several of the fan posts also involved posting photos of the fans themselves, which suggests a certain level of self-consciousness with celebrity messages as the fans were drawing parallels between the celebrities’ messages and themselves, but those moments of engaging in queering gender norms through queer rhetoric and citation are not apparent.

Throughout the duration of this research, though, new ethical questions and concerns continued to emerge for me as a researcher due to the very personal nature of embodied research. Through my case study analyses, I am in part discussing people’s genders, bodies, and sexualities as I am considering their engagement with queering gender norms. While this is an important and necessary component of my research, I began to become increasingly aware of how these people (both fans and celebrities) might feel if they knew about my research. Although all of the posts collected and analyzed here were posted publicly, I wondered if any of them really expected to have more than a small handful of people see those photos. Further, I wondered if those posting may be comfortable posting such personal details about themselves on Instagram (e.g., identifying one’s sexuality), but not on other social media platforms. Finally, I could not know for certain the countries the posters live in, and given that even within the United States, which is rather open with freedom of expression, it may still be dangerous for one to
speak so explicitly about their sexuality, I struggled with the unintended harm that might come as a result of this research. As a result, my thinking often returned to the potential real-life impacts of posting on social media (see Nakamura, 2015), and how my own research fits into that scope of considering impact. While my institution’s review board approved this research without question, I began to become increasingly aware that scholars have an ethical obligation and responsibility to practice a rigorous ethic of care that may extend beyond what institutional standards might be. In other words, while my institution’s review board for ethical research has rigorous standards of their own that resulted in the approval of my research very quickly, I (and other scholars) should continue to practice a rigorous ethic of care which, depending on the individual research project, may result in more stringent ethical practices than the minimum required by one’s own institution. The remainder of this concluding chapter discusses scholarship on ethics for social media and other digital research, and the chapter ends with my own recommendations for the ways scholars might approach studying gender performance, more specifically, on social media.

**Literature Review**

The ethics of conducting research is complex in all fields and areas of research. When it comes to Internet research, social media research more specifically, people’s identities and intimate details about their lives become the focus of this research. Consequently, scholars must carefully consider ethics for their research projects because the nature of this research is so personal as scholars are literally studying the way people talk about their lives and experiences in online environments. For my own dissertation research, the topic of one’s sexuality and body may be a sensitive one for the persons being studied, and it was my own internal struggle with the nature of this research that kept bringing the question of how to ethically study this topic to
the forefront of my work. It is also important to note that while I had gone through my institution’s approval process for my research, various entities have their own guiding principles for ethics as well as competing interests (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; McKee & Porter, 2009), and while scholars should certainly meet their own institution’s ethical standards, they should not stop there. In my own experience, my institution did not view my research as involving human subjects, even though I am looking at social media posts made by people. However, through the course of my dissertation research I’ve come to the conclusion that this is human subject research for my own field (even if not from the perspective of my institution) and should undergo rigorous ethical considerations by the researcher using a situational approach of inquiry (see Markham & Buchanan, 2012; McKee & Porter, 2009; Sullivan & Porter, 1997).

Adopting a situational approach of inquiry allows the researcher(s) to be flexible when undergoing ethical and methodological considerations for a research project, which is especially important with Internet research as there are different tensions and issues that arise when researching online spaces. One way to approach this is by emphasizing “critical and reflective practices (praxis) that are sensitive to the rhetorical situatedness of participants and technologies,” and a balance of four principles: “respect difference, care for others, promote access to rhetorical procedures enabling justice, and liberate the oppressed through empowerment of participants” (Sullivan & Porter, 1997, pp. ix, 110). Similarly, Heidi McKee and James Porter (2009) took a case-based approach that focused on utilizing heuristics and existing cases of ethical concerns for navigating the ethical choices scholars make throughout their own projects and in future projects. Despite the importance of this foundational research on the field of computers and composition more broadly as it speaks to navigating digital research, it fails to speak more explicitly to navigating social media research. I argue computers and
composition would benefit from more clear and explicit discussions of the ethics of social media research, and a way to begin to bridge this gap is to draw on the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) as I did for my dissertation research. AoIR released an updated statement on the ethics of conducting Internet research in 2012. In this statement, the authors and contributors took a macro-level perspective which emphasized taking a process-based approach to the ethics of conducting Internet research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). They argued scholars must take note of the situational nature of one’s research, and instead of opting for strict rules and guidelines they should allow their research to be guided by ethical principles and considerations.

This process-based approach, then, encouraged scholars to return to the question of ethics throughout the duration of a research project as new or unexpected situations arise. A prominent moment in my own research that I returned to ethical considerations I thought I had resolved was when it came time to include fan photos. Throughout my research I had anticipated that I would include the photos as they were posted to Instagram, but when it came time to embed the photo I hesitated. That hesitation led me down the path that is laid out here in this concluding chapter. Through bringing together these two subfields, computers and composition and Internet research, social media scholars can find a more nuanced yet flexible ethical framework for navigating situational inquiry. The combination of the process-based approach and the case-based approach provide various perspectives for scholars to consider grappling with the ethics of Internet research that meet similar ends: a rigid, rule-based approach is not a sufficient framework that can account for the complexity and vast array of situations that arise when conducting Internet research.

Another important issue with the ethics of Internet research relates to public and private postings. Due to the networked nature of social media interactions, the debate of public and
private becomes further complicated. By participating in various social media sites, Instagram included, people are making determinations of how they want to be present themselves and how they want to be seen by others. Furthermore, there are often a set of limitations one can put on their own profile to limit or expand the visibility of their own posts. At first thought, the debate might seem rather simple: a post is either public or private and should be treated accordingly. However, boyd (2010) and others (see McKee & Porter, 2009) have emphasized that often posts were not intended to be truly public. boyd argued people craft an imagined audience they have in mind while posting, but without actually knowing who is viewing their posts they are unable to make adjustments to what they post and the visibility of those posts with the actual audience in mind. This is further complicated by considering the position that the erosion of privacy is not the primary issue, but that “what people care most about is not simply restricting the flow of information but ensuring that it flows appropriately” (Nissenbaum, 2010, p. 2). Thus, it is evident that given this research there remains a desire to control, to a degree, the information people share via social media sites, although one’s ability to control that information is constrained by the social media site itself. An example of a more recent social media platform that enables greater control from the user is Snapchat. Snapchat also relies on photo-sharing, as Instagram does, but the person sharing the photo can limit who can see the photo and for how many seconds until it disappears from the conversation log (although there are ways to work around this constraint, such as through screenshots, without the consent of the person sharing the photo).

In the context of my dissertation research, a fan would post a photo and use the hashtag #LadyGaga or #NickiMinaj likely imagining they are expanding the reach of their posts to fans of these celebrities. However, they may not anticipate people who are not fans would search for
these same hashtags and access their photos. There is also the possibility of the posts being spread further than intended due to the ease of resharing and spreading content throughout various parts of the Internet (boyd, 2007; Nissenbaum, 2010). The difficulty in truly controlling the content shared blurs the lines between public and private, and while the poster’s own decision in making a post public or private is important, ethically the issue remains more complex than simply indicating material is either for public or private consumption.

Discussion

The AoIR provided a discussion of issues and set of questions to serve as a heuristic for scholars as they navigate the ethics of their own research projects, each of which will be discussed in depth here as they apply to my dissertation research. I have elected to focus on the AoIR heuristic over others because it was the most comprehensive and had a tendency to echo the guidance of other scholars while speaking to the shortcomings in the computers and composition research that doesn’t so explicitly address social media research (see McKee & Porter, 2009; Sullivan & Porter, 1997). These four issues were: “human subjects, private/public, and data/persons…[and] tension between top down regulatory models and case based, situated approaches” (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 6).

In terms of human subjects, the term is arguably ill-suited for Internet research, but it does bring to the forefront questions about “harm, vulnerability, personally identifiable information, and so forth” that are important considerations for Internet research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 6). For my dissertation research, it remains unlikely that there would be harm as a result of my research because, realistically, a small number of people will access and see the information shared in my dissertation. However, it does remain a possibility that someone might see my dissertation research and wish to cause harm to those whose information is shared in my
research. Despite how small of a possibility this might be, it is still crucial to consider that because my dissertation will be available for others to read, and given my focus on queering gender norms, a topic that might draw out trolls, it is entirely possible that this issue will arise. For that reason, I did not collect nor have I shared any personally identifiable information, and I have opted to edit photos so the faces of fans are not visible. Furthermore, I have not included the full captions to eliminate the possibility of someone using a search engine to find the original posts because, through my own search using Google, I was able to find one of the posts quickly by searching for the caption. This eliminates the possibility of someone recognizing a fan’s face, someone using facial recognition software to identify the person, or someone searching for particular phrases in an effort to identify the photo and original user who posted the photo.

The second issue regarding private/public materials is another complex issue. While people might knowingly post to social media publicly, without restrictions as to who can access the post, there might remain an expectation that the post would remain within that network or space. Even so, it is still important to note that the data I have collected as a part of my dissertation research was public-facing and not a part of private correspondence (or any back-and-forth dialogue) amongst Instagram users. With this in mind, I have effectively removed these posts from their intended environment, even though they were public, and now these posts are viewed without the context of the original space. Furthermore, some posts might be viewed as sharing private information (e.g., identifying as a lesbian), which further complicates the issue of private/public material. However, it’s noteworthy that there was not an indication from the fan photos used in this dissertation research that the fans were speaking privately or confidentially, like they might do if they were speaking about a topic they intended to remain within a small group as sometimes occurs on social media. Still, this again reinforces the need to edit the photos
so the faces of fans are not available because, despite my own reading of these texts, fans may be sharing what they view to be private information within a public space with the expectation that the private information would remain within that public space only.

The third issue is focused on the data collected. Does this research involve “data” or does it involve “persons”? The distinction can become blurred when this research is done on a larger scale and does not involve one-to-one interaction with participants in a study, such as is the case with my dissertation research. However, given that my dissertation research is focused on gender performance and often involves people’s bodies appearing in photos, it is especially important to think of these participants as persons and not merely data. Furthermore, because I am doing a visual and content analysis of the posts, there is a more personal, involved nature to this research. The posts collected are not just statistical numbers; they belong to people who have chosen to share a glimpse of themselves in particular ways that I have elected to study further.

The final issue, top-down versus case-based approaches to ethics, once again reemphasizes the viewpoint of the AoIR that too many rules and restrictions may not adequately serve the scholar due to the contextual nature of research (also see McKee & Porter, 2009; Sullivan & Porter, 1997). This is the issue that I personally faced most often as I sought the input of other scholars through various workshops I participated in. Oftentimes, I would receive the feedback that to overcome these ethical concerns, I could take one of two routes: 1) I should simply ask the persons who made these posts for their consent and ask to interview them to further understand their intent with their own posts (which I couldn’t do since I purposely did not collect that data to begin with), or 2) that I should view this as being akin to archival research (e.g., where the persons didn’t anticipate their memoirs or journals to become the focus of
research, but these materials are being studied and it is accepted in the field). Both of these approaches, though, had their issues with regards to the intent and methods of my research.

My goal for studying fan posts was to discover not what fans intended to say in their posts, but instead to consider if celebrity messages seemed to appear in fan posts (the intentionality of these findings being irrelevant for the research questions, which is primarily what I might discern from an interview). Furthermore, I did not want to interfere with fan behaviors and wanted to observe fan posts in their natural setting, and so contacting fans and making my presence known would disrupt that. Finally, there remained this assumption that by seeking consent harm is no longer a concern, but by choosing to study public posts I ethically would not need consent but have elected to edit the photos for the ethical reasons described above. With viewing this research as being similar to archival research, I struggled with the time of my own research (the photos being studied were posted in either 2015 or 2016) whereas my research is much more current than typical archival research where several years have passed prior to the materials being studied. Given the concerns I had with the advice I had received at workshops, I elected to dismiss the advice and focus instead on the scholarship.

**Recommendations**

In my dissertation research, I have attempted to balance what McKee and Porter (2009) referred to as a utilitarian position, where “the benefits of the research outweigh the possible harm,” and the deontological perspective that “put[s] the privacy rights of individuals over and above the benefits of the research” (p. 110). I have done this by electing to pursue my research without seeking the consent of participants, which takes more of a utilitarian position, while still upholding the deontological perspective that values the privacy of the participants, which is why I did not collect identifiable information from the fan posts and have edited the photos of fans so
they could not be identifiable. My aim for my dissertation research was to better understand the messages celebrities espouse, particularly with regard to queering gender norms, and the ways fans engage with those messages. By attempting to balance the utilitarian and the deontological perspectives, I was able to uphold both the importance of my research for better understanding queering gender norms on Instagram while also upholding and protecting the privacy of fans whose posts were a part of my research. While I could have asked for consent, given my intent to be an observer on Instagram by collecting thousands of posts, seeking consent would have likely impacted fan behaviors which would in turn impact my findings in addition to being a very time-consuming process that would need to be highly managed and documented. Furthermore, seeking consent on a site like Instagram is further challenging because of the tenuous nature of social media posts where people often edit or delete individual posts or entire accounts. The snapshot captured as a part of my data collection might look quite different a month or even a week later, especially with regard to fan posts on Instagram where there is an overwhelming volume of posts using the hashtags #LadyGaga and #NickiMinaj.

For others conducting Internet research, I echo the recommendations of the scholars mentioned here: avoid blanket guidelines and rules that don’t allow for the contextual, situated nature of conducting research (see Markham & Buchanan, 2012; McKee & Porter, 2009; Nissenbaum, 2010, Sullivan & Porter, 1997). Instead, identify guiding heuristics and principles that ask researchers to interrogate their research projects, and that enable ethics to become a recursive topic that is revisited again and again over the duration of the research project. McKee and Porter (2009) noted scholars should look both backward and forward and reflect on what new ethical decisions need to be made by considering what has already been done and what yet still needs to be done. In the case of social media research that involves photos of people, selfies
or other kinds of photos, I further urge scholars to be even more cautious in how they present this data. My first inclination, as might be the case for others, was that these people have opted to publicly post photos of their bodies where they discuss sexuality. However, as I further considered ethics throughout my research, I came to realize that while the topics at hand may not be especially private or sensitive, such as studying online communication about sexual assault or suicidal ideation, this research does attend to the very personal nature of people’s bodies and performances of gender. The nature of this research necessitates that, to a point, the audience sees the photos people are sharing, but due to the capabilities of facial-recognition software and the searchability of the Internet, scholars have an ethical obligation to consider the ways sharing these photos may impact people’s lives. For my own research, I have opted to err on the side of caution due to the violence women face for being sexual (e.g., slut shaming) and the violence the LGBTQIA+ community faces (see National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2015). The context from which I am analyzing the photos as well as the accompanying captions of the photos are key factors in making this decision.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, this dissertation research aimed to answer two primary research questions: 1) If and how Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj may be queering gender norms via their Instagram social media postings, and 2) If and how fans may uptake these instances of queering gender norms and, in turn, engage in queering gender norms via their own Instagram social media postings.

With regards to the first research question, I discovered that Instagram can be used as a space to queer gender norms, particularly through depictions of the body, but captions accompanying the photos shared on Instagram are critical for beginning to discern the use of
queer rhetoric. My case studies of Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj revealed that they are engaging in queering gender norms on a smaller scale than I initially anticipated, and this would often occur in relation to their stage performances. The finding that Gaga and Minaj typically engaged with queering gender norms through their stage performances aligns with existing research (see Auslander, 2006; Clifford-Napoleone, 2015; Denski & Sholle, 1992; Hawkins, 2016) on other musicians (e.g., David Bowie and Boy George) who play with gender and sex as part of their personae, which further suggests this work is at least somewhat normative for musicians (although still controversial to some audiences). Furthermore, what I hoped might be further evidence of their engagement with queering gender norms, their inclusion of their alter egos, was not at all present for my case study of Gaga’s posts and only twice for my case study of Minaj’s posts (and these were female alter egos). This is especially interesting in light of identity theory that argues performing multiple identities creates a tension or conflict that the performer attempts to resolve to ease the tension and confusion that might arise (see Gee, 1989; Goffman, 1956; Stryker & Burke, 2000). For Gaga and Minaj, it is as if their alter egos appear in their careers only momentarily to provide a critique before being put aside again, despite that some research on identity performances through digital technologies has suggested there is greater fluidity and opportunity for play (see Alexander et al., 2004; Buckingham, 2008; Dame, 2016; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013).

Even so, there were notable differences in the instances of queering gender norms within these two case studies. Lady Gaga’s efforts at queering gender norms often took shape in her appearance, such as her attire for the tribute performances for Frank Sinatra and David Bowie and her selection of wearing a white pantsuit that was neither fully pants nor a dress at the 2016 Oscars, which aligns with Halberstam’s (2012) claim that one way Gaga engages in gaga
feminism is through couture fashion. Nicki Minaj’s efforts at queering gender norms, however, often took shape in one of two forms: expressions of female sexuality and femininity or a critique of her own expressions of femininity. In other words, Minaj engaged in queering gender norms by fully embracing her sexuality and femininity in ways that may be seen as not typical or rejecting her own femininity to make an effort to be perceived as not emotional and/or as a strong individual. My findings support existing research (Balaji, 2010; hooks, 2003) as Minaj uses her sexuality to exert her own power and authority, although this research tended to focus on sexuality as it related to the body and language and not other expressions of femininity, such as expressing emotion. These case studies support that there are multiple ways for celebrities to engage in queer rhetoric, and also that the use of queer rhetoric to queer gender norms may predominantly appear within public performances. Given the fame of these two celebrities, it is also clear that their social media postings are highly managed for branding purposes and there must be an extensive amount of labor happening behind-the-scenes (see Marwick, 2013), which may explain why their efforts at queering gender norms were so often tied to public performances while the personal postings that allowed more glimpses into their personal lives had a tendency to uphold gender norms. The candid shots of Gaga’s and Minaj’s daily lives promote authenticity and relationship (see Marwick, 2015) with their fans by showing what appears to be a side that isn’t “camera ready.” Of course, there were exceptions to this that were discussed further in my analysis, but the trend leaned towards more public performances involved queering (although not all) and more personal photos upholding gender norms (although, again, not all).

With regards to the second research question, the data on fan interactions and uptake was largely inconclusive due to the overwhelming amount of spam posts that were collected in this
data set. Consequently, Lady Gaga’s and Nicki Minaj’s instances of queering gender norms, even though they were only occasional, do not appear within the fan post data set and, therefore, there is little to demonstrate if and how fans may be uptaking these messages. Despite the challenges associated with this data set, it is clear that at least a small subset of fans are taking up the broader messages associated with each musician, as can be seen in Table 4 and Table 5, as their own posts appeared to acknowledge certain messages these celebrities were themselves conveying. For example, a fan would post a photo of an LGBTQIA+ pride parade and tag Gaga in the photo. However, the most common ways fans engaged with Gaga and Minaj when using the hashtags #LadyGaga and #NickiMinaj was by sharing their admiration for these musicians through posting photos from throughout their careers, imitating them through their appearance (e.g., dressing up as the musician for Halloween), and spamming the hashtag so the account making the post could boost its presence to reach a wider audience.

These findings build off of existing research on social media and identity research by bringing together various subfields of research on celebrity culture and queer rhetoric in order to consider how social media can be used as a tool for queering gender norms. Other existing research on celebrities does consider social media use in terms of fan engagement, but not on how celebrities can use their social media presence to espouse particular messages or queer gender norms. Consequently, these findings allow social media scholars to think more deeply about the ways social media can be used to promote alternative discourses, in this case queer rhetoric, to challenge the dominant narratives of our society. This becomes heightened when celebrities are involved in promoting alternative discourses given their large fan bases. By better understanding how celebrities can utilize queer rhetoric to critically engage with gender norms, scholars can further study how societal viewpoints and movements relating to gender norms
might be shaped by celebrity use of social media platforms like Instagram. Furthermore, instead of focusing on how celebrities connect with their fans through social media as existing research has done, my dissertation research encourages scholars to consider the level of critical engagement fans have with celebrity content which, I argue from my findings, also demonstrates a need for promoting greater awareness and critical engagement in fans when encountering celebrity culture given the political and social issues at the time of conducting this research.

Further research on celebrity accounts and their efforts at queering gender norms should include a broader data set to further determine the messages being shared across various social media platforms and, in the case of musicians, also messages that appear in their music and music videos. This would allow me to further explore my findings that Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj had a tendency to queer gender norms in their public performances because my data set would include those performances (e.g., a concert). Such findings would allow me to further consider the implications of celebrities’ queering gender norms if they continue to be relegated to public performances. Furthermore, studying multiple social media platforms would allow for considering if messages across platforms are consistent with one another. This additional research would be useful for scholars and those involved in marketing for considering how public performances across social media platforms and other venues may be used to convey particular messages.

For further research on fan posts, I plan to collect data from specific fan accounts rather than only collecting data through the use of a hashtag. This will allow me to more deeply research what fans are doing across their account as well as if and how they are interacting with celebrities. Interviews and surveys would allow further insight into the interactions taking place as well as what messages they are taking away from celebrity posts. For example, one possible
route would be to ask fans how they are interpreting celebrity posts to better discern what messages fans are receiving and if they find queering gender norms to be present. By conducting this additional research on fan posts, researchers will better understand how fans are receiving the messages communicated by celebrities which, in turn, would further support continuing to deepen the understandings of various ways to reach fans with their intended messages. This would be especially pertinent when looking across multiple social media platforms to consider if and how fan engagement with celebrities may change from one platform to the next (e.g., including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram since these platforms promote different forms of engagement).

Attending to the impact of celebrity messages on fans is important for considering the influence celebrities have in shaping fan viewpoints. Due to the dominant presence celebrities have in the media, it is crucial that researchers understand the power celebrities may have for mobilizing fans around particular movements and causes. Although that is yet to be seen in my dissertation research, I believe celebrities can leverage their fame to incite change by presenting alternative narratives, for better or worse. Furthermore, by understanding the role celebrities play in circulating messages, critical and media literacy scholars in particular can conduct further research that focuses on points of intervention so that fans can become critical rather than passive consumers of celebrity culture.
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