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## Networked subversion: a catalyst for a change in thinking about sexuality

**ABSTRACT.** The picture is an important element of Western Culture. Boldly it can be called a universal means of transmission, an inherent part of social and virtual communication. For this reason, in my text, I have decided to analyze images in social media, cultural objects that deal with issues of breaking the cultural pattern of gender and sexuality. I will focus on the subversive nature of these images and how they can be put into public discussion. Simplicity, literacy, and above all, the visuality of the message, are the characteristics of the image, that led to its inclusion in the digital communication process. Contemporary man is "homo videns", communicates with the world, receives the world through images. Language is an abstract message, the image provides precision, versatility. The ease of reading a visual message makes certain cultural content more accessible. The issue of gender, the artificiality of meanings given due to sexual characteristics, is easier to say with images. Due to the photos present in the social media, the academic discussion on the limitations of the sex bureaucracy is becoming more common. Everyone can express their voice, give discussion, confront other people's opinions. Because of the number of users, the freedom of uploading photos, the topic of breaking the heterodogmat is global. Social media as a tool to undermine cultural gender stereotypes.

**KEYWORDS:** gender, body, social creation, social media, subversion, pictures, massive communication

### Introduction

The way we understand human sexuality and set boundaries between the sexes, or define the essence of the category of gender itself, is historically and culturally contingent.

Contemporary western culture accepts sexual differentiation based on anatomical differences. Yet at the same time, the same culture provides tools for changing this order. By combining the world of show business with the world of social networking, a channel which promotes attitudes that go beyond the limits of biological sexes has come into being.

In order to understand the idea of networked subversion better, I find it justified to analyse selected cases of it and have a closer look at promoted slogans, at the main participants of social networking campaigns and at a provoked discussion. I am going to focus on images that undermine the cultural norms of masculinity and femininity and that have been presented in various social networks. In this way, by using research materials, I would like to present manifestations of gender-based games, which are visible in the web sphere of entertainment. I wish to focus particularly on the issue of free creation of femininity and masculinity, regardless of the carnal limitations, as a form of cultural contestations of gender norms that close sex in the body.

My analysis includes three images, which have been selected by me deliberately. The purpose of these images is to show ambivalence about sex. The pictures show, in a preserved way, a problem of reducing femininity and masculinity only to a bodily narrative. Sex is dressed in a stiff anatomy corset and the selected images depict people who are well-known and popular. That why, I think, the images have gained public, mass character. Two of these pictures illustrate a campaign which breaks binary thinking about sex and convinces that gender is a social, mental construct that does not depend on the anatomy. These images originally appeared in the Internet but the third picture, the picture from the cover of one of the most famous magazines in the world, had appeared on the magazine cover first and then it was published on the Internet.

So, why do photographs function in the social media? Firstly, photographs are unique research material. They grab a fragment of the reality and write down on its surface not only images but also content that requires reading. As Kazimierz Wolny-Zmorzyński pointed out, a photograph “has become a sign, as a letter, word, and even sentence (...). It has become a new, more universal means of communication (...)” (Wolny-Zmorzyński, 2007, p. 42) I have chosen the photographs due to the fact that the contemporary culture is dominated by visual information. Some researchers even call our culture “the culture of images”. What is more, the scholars label contemporary people as “homo videns”. A contemporary person prefers an image as a communication tool. He or she uses an image or a simple visual code that transfers knowledge or emotions. That perceptual language accompanies us during every step of depositing the spoken or written word, which requires completely different communication skills.

Secondly, the contemporary western culture can be described as interactive, modern, and high-tech, because the idea is focused on co-creating, modifying and commenting content. The three activities listed above have become qualities of the culture. A new habit of being up-to-date and of participating in the circulation of information within social networks is constantly being formed. Yes, we want to receive information quickly, stay informed at all hours or even have an opportunity to see what is taking place on different social networking sites. Thanks to new media, we can do it. That is why we carry mobile phones around and check updates constantly. Such behavior has become an inherent feature of the contemporary culture. Additionally, the behavior has changed the way we communicate and live. Long ago, Marshall McLuhan wrote in "Understanding Media" that "...the medium is the message" and it is still a valid cultural diagnosis. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result in the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 37). The nature of culture depends on the dominant medium. Media indicate how we think and they order our reality.

In "Amusing ourselves to death", Neil Postman goes even further. He claims that the media have become our language that we use to communicate and think about things. More importantly, today they condition our view of the reality because they have become our "metaphors". "A message denotes a specific, concrete statement about world. But the forms of our media (...) They are rather like metaphors (...)" (Postman, 2006, p. 10), which "create the content of our culture" (Postman, 2006, p. 15).

Nowadays, our culture is based on the Internet, and especially on global social connections, thanks to popular and common mobile accessories. For this reason, we can describe our culture as a "mobile-phone" or "thumb" one. (Maj, 2008, p. 112–127). The name comes from the phenomenon of continuous using a mobile phone/gadgets. The objects that we carry around are handy and personal. They allow us to stay connected constantly, and thanks to that they have become "an extension of ourselves". Global social networking is our new "metaphor". It changes our view on the reality and the way we communicate. Now information and ideas are presented in the form of short posts, or schematic pictures/symbols. These are rate, clarity, brevity, iconicity of information that are truly important. We can communicate wherever we want, all we

need is reception/connection to the Internet. There also exists another important aspect of the modern network of relationships, which we cannot forget about. This is the freedom of speech. We can talk about everything. These are active receivers who decide what topic is popular or worth talking about, even if the subject is controversial or forbidden beyond the virtual reality. This is how the global communication works, this is how we function in the world.

These two features of the modern times, that is the attachment to an image as a means of communication and the popularization of the Internet, especially of the social networking sites, have influenced the choice of subject and object of my study.

As a result of involvement of interactive media in the discourse about gender fluidity, there is a chance of starting discussions on sex/gender, gender roles, and social ideas about femininity and masculinity. These discussions are possible due to our ability to send images in the media and due to the speed of internet communication. We must remember that nowadays an access to information is fast. Users of social networking sites can also give individual responses. One comment or "Like!" is enough to spark a discussion. The form of communication is simple, concentrated in a single image or an entry, which increases its suggestiveness. Although we cannot talk about a simple relationship between actions taken in the network and in the sphere of everyday life, undoubtedly the online discussions about the relationship between the sex and gender have proven that there exist changes in thinking about their boundaries, making us aware of their permeability.

### **Heterosexual esthetics and the logic of thinking about gender**

The western culture puts sexuality in the binary, hetero-normative pattern, built on a traditionally defined gender differentiation. The pattern imposes thinking in the category of totality and naturalness of the woman-man differentiation. Because of the fact that sex is closely associated with physicality, it "produces" male and female bodies in accordance with the binary, heterosexual model, and reproduces this model by socialization. This means that western cultural models revolve around a traditional vision. They promote the binary differentiation between a man and a woman. They recognize the body as the main category for differentiating between the sexes. The models fill in femininity and masculinity with sep-

arate social content, thus creating distinct repertoires of behaviors typical for each of the sexes. The cultural models strongly emphasize boundaries between the sexes. This is the effect of the so-called cultural scenarios. William Simon and John H. Gamon define the cultural model as an instructional guide applicable in a given society, community. There are three levels of scripting: intrapersonal scripting, intrapsychic scripting and cultural scenarios. All of them are different in every social setting. When talking about the cultural scenarios, we can call them attempts to create shared meanings. The most basic types of the cultural scenarios are those that concern sexuality and gender norms. The aim of that cultural (sexual) script is to determine the limits of ideas, norms and behaviors. As a result, the binary thinking sets two different sex roles, two different, stereotypical, and what is the most important, closed habitus assigned to male/female bodies. This model is constructed by the boundaries defined by the anatomy and tradition (Simon & Gamon, 2007, p. 31–41). In this way, some ideas of femininity/ masculinity or of thought patterns are born. Later, these ideas or patterns are duplicated in other areas, such as sport and business. That cultural binary scenario does not lose its coercive power, but thanks to social organizations, social movements, social campaigns or gender/sexual education and to showing a different sexuality understanding, talking about sexuality and related issues, the binary thinking is becoming less effective. This means also that we have a possibility to discuss different points of view.

In my opinion, thanks to feminist movements and gender studies, the approach to sexes is changing. For instance, a distinction between sex and gender has been introduced. As Judith Butler claims, sex is biologically defined (by gonads, genitals, chromosomes or anatomy of body) while gender is culturally constructed. According to Butler "(...) gender in neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is thus already potentially contested by the distinction that permits of gender as a multiple interpretation of sex" (Butler, 1990, p. 6).

Thanks to J. Butler's performativity theory, gender is starting to be seen as a creative act, which is done in accordance with general social principles. "Gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts would be no gender at all. Gender is (...) the tacit collective agreement to be performed, produced and sustained (...). (...) [It] is produced through the stylizations of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way, in which body gestures, movement and styles of various kinds constitute the

illusion of an abiding gendered self. [Gender] is created thought sustained social performance (...)" (Butler, 1990, p. 140–141). It is role-playing and constructing possibilities that gender gives us. Gradually, the categories of masculinity/femininity stop being explicitly closed.

But the discussion, which was the impetus for a change in thinking about sexuality, was in this case limited because it involved activists, academics and people socially engaged. It was not a personal statement or expressing an opinion on a massive scale.

### **Social networking—a step towards introducing alternative models of sexuality: a campaign example**

Social networking has become a sure step towards introducing alternative models of sexuality. A network of contacts does not only connect people with each other and turns them into a group friends. Thanks to its mass character and hyper-textuality, the network becomes a tool for commenting on and shaping our reality. Social networking sites enable us to express views of a wider social group or to bring together individuals from the bottom up, who feel engaged in a certain case. We can promote a new set of norms and standards of sexual conduct, undermining those current ones.

The new media, and the Internet in particular, allow us to publish and pass on to other people information that deviates from the accepted standards. Initiative is on the part of the audience, who become co-writers. By using words, images and comments that are distributed among friends, they introduce a new repertoire of behavior and sexual norms. In this way, the open communication distributes new content like a domino, going beyond spatial boundaries. Thanks to mass "likes", sharing and commenting on discussions, new topics are introduced to a public debate. As a result, sexual and cultural norms are reconstructed. Global social connections give us a possibility of promoting alternative concepts of sexuality and undermining the dominant discourse on a massive scale. Thanks to this, the concepts are noticeable. This way of acting is called "a subversion". In one of her works, Judith Butler suggests the following definition of this term: a subversion is "(...) exposing and challenging those culture mechanisms which produce the binarity and non-transferability of gender; it is an action which seeks to break the hetero-dogma and to open the hermetic discourse of contemporary

culture onto the potential that gender performativity brings” (Skowrońska, 2008, p. 279–280).

A social networking campaign created by FCKH8, a clothing company that supports the LGBTQ+ community by selling T-shirts with pro-equality and anti-sexist slogans, is an example of engaging social media in subversive actions. A motto for the campaign are Chaz Bono's words: “to me, gender is between your ears, not between your legs” (Bono, 2009).

In 2013, Iggy Pop took part in the campaign. He had been photographed wearing a dress, which is typically feminine attire and an attribute of femininity. This photo is a clear sign of going beyond the boundaries of sexual order. Additionally, the visual message has been reinforced by the verbal comment: “I’m not ashamed to dress ‘like a woman’ because I don't think it's shameful to be a woman” (Pop, 2013).

It is an objection to treating femininity and masculinity on the basis of opposition and domination. Gender equality means going beyond the patriarchal limits that have been set. Adopting attributes of another sex does not make a person ridiculous. Man loses nothing of his masculinity by wearing a dress because what we consider to be masculine or feminine is only a socially accepted rule.

Users of social networks can directly affect, comment on and react to a post. For instance, this photo with Iggy Pop interested more than four thousand users. There were a lot of comments under the picture, the people began to exchange their opinions, and some of the users were even joking about Iggy Pop looking better in a dress than his girlfriend. Others thought that the musician looked stupid and ridiculous.

The motto was used again in 2014. This time, it was added to a photograph with David Bowie and Tilda Swinton, or actually with David Bowie as Tilda Swinton and Tilda Swinton as David Bowie. The motto was reinforced with the visual message—how easy it was to confuse a woman with a man, using only the binary type of thinking. This is because a visual or outer change of sex is easy, it shows how easily we can break a division into a male and a female. Our patterns of femininity and masculinity are completely artificial creations that are culturally constructed. Gender is how we feel, it exists in our bodies and outside of them, but everything starts in our heads “gender is more complex and way more an internal state of being than you may have realized” (Unknown, 2016). Users of one of social networks agreed that the photo of Bowie and Swinton could help us explain and understand the idea of gender better.

Another example of subversion in the social media is a photo of Lady Gaga, or her alter ego Jo Calderone, which was on the cover of the Japanese edition of the fashion magazine for men "Vogue" in 2010. This is a unique image for several reasons. Firstly, it was designed to be the cover of the magazine. The purpose of such a photo is to attract readers' attention and to indicate the main theme of a given number. The photo has to match a profile letter and profile readers. It should provide customers with an image of their own future, the dream "I". "Vogue Hommes" Japan is the international high-fashion magazine for men and it needs attractive models who can be featured on its covers. Jo Calderone seems to meet this requirement. Although the picture is mysterious and artistic, it conveys a complicated message. We are not sure who is on the cover, this is not an easily recognizable character. It is also difficult to read the message of images and link them with the content of the current number. Therefore, I believe that this is not a typical cover photo. Of course, at this point we can ask about a purpose the picture serves. Is it the picture of Lady Gaga's alter ego or is it just another performance of a flamboyant singer, who keeps building her career on controversies and crossing cultural boundaries? Even so, the costume of the opposite sex that she is wearing puts gender outside the binary continuum. The cover photo gives us another reason to talk about what sex really is and what creates sex, as the appearance is important in the identification of one's gender. What is more, the appearance can be misleading.

These pictures, transmitted, commented on and published on profiles of both organizations and individuals triggered a massive debate. This would not have been possible if the social media had not been so popular, peculiar and interactive. They have changed the way we talk about gender. Commented on by friends, popular images enable us to have discussions not only on a massive scale. From now on, we can express our own opinions on a massive scale. The strength of social media is the ability to express opinions and views, to create forums that present views and to comment on visual and virtual reality (Krok, 2011, p. 50). The pictures did not go unnoticed, were not lost in the sheer volume of data transferred. As we could see in the comments under the photographs, the pictures gained both supporters and opponents promoting the concept of gender. The people commenting on Iggy Pop's pictures paid attention to a man looking good in a dress and some women even said: "he looks better in a dress than I do". Here, we can say that in same way Iggy escapes the topic of gender specification of the body,



using culturally accepted sexual attributes. The readers of the post focus on the attributes of femininity: the purse and the dress. Because of these sexual attributes, the picture remains the subject of a discussion and invites people to express their opinions on the notion of sex. There are statements about the futility of hiding masculinity. A man remains a man, even if he is a man wearing a feminine outfit. Another photo covers an issue of ease with which people are able to transform their bodies, giving them new forms—gender. It provokes us to say that sex/gender is a liquid, constantly played with and created with the use of tools available in a given culture. Because of the motto “Gender is between your ears, not between your legs”, the photo stimulates a discussion about classification as a man or a woman. Many people, in their comments, point out that doctors determine sex on the basis of a child's sexual organs. So sex depends on what you have between your legs. In the case of this photo, the issue of transformation into the opposite sex, through putting on outfits of the opposite sexes, seems to be not that important. Of course, the image is admired because of the idea behind it, which is “cheating” its audience in terms of gender of the characters in the picture, but the idea itself is not surprising. Perhaps this is the result of images that the characters from the photo have created—androgynous beauty, a feature which both Tilda Swinton and David Bowie are famous for. Maybe these people have inured us to their sexually ambiguous and androgynous images.

It seems to me that the use of their images in the campaigns aimed at fighting for gender, and the play with their own appearance, highlight perfectly the concept of “body” in general. The body is only the surface on which matters are recorded. The body itself takes on meaning only through the process of determining sex—by using the anatomy, attributes or identity. You can read the image of Lady Gaga in a similar vein. The scandalous singer breaks boundaries by showing that gender can be understood in a new post-structural way and that it can be treated as a unit that is not assigned permanently and definitively.

## Summary

Thanks to social networking, the photo of Iggy Pop wearing a dress or Bowie and Swinton dressed up as each other or the alter ego of Lady Gaga can “live their own lives”. The pictures circulate between users of

portals, the people can talk about the images or just comment on them because the content of communication is controversial. It opposes the treatment of masculinity and femininity on the basis of opposition and domination. The message evokes a massive discussion because it undermines culturally created sexual differentiations. It shows that the things which we consider to be male or female are the social creations and the gender equality means going beyond the patriarchal order. Social networking has become a sure step towards the introduction of alternative models of sexuality. Why is that possible? In the last few years, there has been a change in the nature and the importance of social networking sites. A network of contacts does not only connect people with each other and turns them into a group friends. Thanks to their mass character and hypertextuality, social networking sites have become a tool for commenting on and shaping our reality. They enable us to feel engaged in a certain case as grassroots. We can promote a new set of norms and standards of sexual conduct, undermining those current ones. We can not forget that thanks to our phones, we can receive that kind of grassroots messages very quickly. I think that the appearance of such images, which have been previously obtained from our friends or from different social organizations, on our private profiles shortens the distance to some kind of topics. These topics become closer to us because we can comment on them, initiate significant discussions, get to know different views, agree with them or disagree. As it turns out, topics that were at some point unfamiliar or insignificant to us, can later become close to us. For this topic, I perceived sex for the situation, process but not to the individual feature. Only the images that disturb our idea of the appearance of a man and a woman, reproduced and transmitted by members of a social network, through their persuasiveness and presence on a mass scale are able to bring a new sense of understanding gender. The new media are becoming the extension of our senses, the contemporary perception is reduced to schemes, logs and short pieces of information and I think pictures are an excellent way of subverting the binary view of gender. These pieces of information say more than great campaigns or academic discourse. Their social significance is increasing. Therefore, I believe that the subversion in the social media is an important issue in the discussion and research on the social and cultural dimensions of human sexuality. It is so persuasive and influential that it can surely be regarded as a modern philosophical catalyst for a change.

Ethical approval: This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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