

Religious masculinities: performing in/visibility on Instagram *

Alberta Giorgi**
University of Bergamo

Digital media studies on gender and religion have steadily grown in the last decade, showing that digital platforms: (1) contribute to the visibility and voice of marginalized actors, including religious women and LGBT+ people, and offer a place for the expression of the complex nuances of gender performances of religious individuals; (2) are spaces of development of “alternative” forms of religious authority, that challenge, negotiate or complement traditional ones; (3) constitute a safe space for marginalized or minority voices to cope with exclusionary processes they may have suffered within their communities, and to activate forms of re-plausibilization of religion, to make it possible to re-embed oneself in the religious community; (4) open up spaces to unpack, discuss and criticize religious norms and conventions.

This article explores Catholic masculinities by means of digital ethnography, focusing on Instagram posts that use two hashtags: #thosecatholicmen and #dignityusa. The first hashtag performs and renovates traditional Catholicism, praising fatherhood and brotherhood, while the second celebrates LGBTQI Catholics. Both hashtags are related to specific groups; however, focusing on hashtags rather than groups’ accounts allows exploring whether and how the hashtag is appropriated and experienced, broadening its scope beyond its initial launch. Differently to what occurs on Twitter, in fact, Instagram hashtags are used to specify the image content and to connect to *ad hoc* communities. Three main elements emerge from the analysis, contributing to the research on gender, digital media, and religion. First, the research shows the differences in the visual representations and expressions of masculinity emerging around the two hashtags – muscular and militant in one case, familiar and non-threatening on the other. Second, it illustrates the differences in the use of Instagram, which in one case is the place to construct and affirm role models, while in the other it offers the chance of claiming the legitimacy of being both homosexual and Catholic. Third, it clarifies the complex mechanisms of visibility and invisibility that are in play.

Keywords: digital religion; gender; visibility; masculinity; Instagram

In discussing the visual imaginaries connected to religion, Erin Wilson (2018) recently pointed out that, in the Global North

visual representations of religion contribute to a marginalisation of religious traditions and experiences that do not fit with the dominant definition of religion that is built on the Christian experience. They perpetuate notions of “right” and “wrong” forms of religious practice; that there are institutions and individuals who are part of those institutions, who are authorised to determine what constitutes “correct” religious practice and engagement, and others who are subversive, heretical (Wilson, 2018, p. 253).

This contribution deals with the visual representations and visibility of religious masculinities performed within Catholicism on Instagram. Two groups performing homosexual (non-mainstream or “wrong”) and conservative (traditional or “right”)

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** alberta.giorgi@unibg.it

masculinities are compared to understand how they negotiate their visibility in the digital world (and in the Catholic digital world in particular) by selectively joining specific conversations, for example, or mobilizing specific textual and visual elements.

The paper is structured as follows: sections two and three present a brief overview of the research on digital religions and visibility, and religion and masculinity, respectively. Section four focuses on the case study, data collection and methodology. Section five is devoted to the analysis and discussion of the results, and section six discusses the outcomes

Digital religion and visibility

Brantner and Stehle (2021) highlight three interrelated layers of visibility in digital environments: visibility as online presence, visibility as voice, and visibility as recognition. Research in digital religion, steadily growing in the last decades, mostly focuses on the first two layers and shows that digital platforms modified the conditions of visibility, thereby offering a space for the articulation of a religious group's internal diversity (Evolvi, 2018). In particular, this research focuses on how women, (whose voices generally are silenced in many religious traditions) find spaces to connect, express themselves, discuss, creatively adapt, and challenge religious norms and gendered conventions in digital environments (e.g., Lövheim, 2012, 2014; Stephan, 2013).

In some cases, these creative adaptations have an impact on the taken-for-granted and dominant versions of religion. For example, research exploring the intersections of social media and religious practices shows the dynamics of development of religious influencers, whose voices become reputable sources of information about religion by means of the connection with the audience based on the perceived authenticity and intimacy of their posts (Lövheim & Lundmark, 2019).

Digital media in fact imply new conditions concerning the authority to speak about religion as they provide accessible information on religion complementing (or replacing) traditional and institutionalized mediators such as the clergy (Hjarvard, 2016). Scholars have documented the development of "alternative" forms of religious authority that challenge, negotiate with or complement traditional ones, redefining what is the "right" religious practice or what a "true" believer does, for example (Campbell, 2007; Cheong, 2012; Hoover, 2016).

Research also explores how digital environments have contributed to the visibility and voice of non-mainstream religious actors, including religious feminists (Midden & Ponzanesi, 2013), LGBT+ people (Giorgi, 2019), and minority religions (Boutros, 2011). In many cases, online boards, webpages, and online forums constitute a safe space for marginalized or minority voices to cope with the exclusion they may have suffered from within their communities, and to activate forms of re-plausibilization of religion, to make it possible to re-embed oneself in the religious community (Neumaier, 2015, Kołodziejska, 2018).

More complex is the analysis of religions' digital visibility as recognition. In fact, individuals and groups performing non-mainstream religious identities or practices may seek recognition (1) through the connection with a community of equals, (2) from their broader religious community and, particularly, from formal institutions and authorities, or (3) from the general public sphere, thereby challenging stereotypes and categorization. As being visible implies that someone is indeed seeing, visibility is a relational concept, as well as an unstable condition: attention cycles and digital affordances can limit and constrain visibility regardless of users' intention and (unequally distributed) resources (Neumayer, Rossi & Struthers, 2021).

While the studies focusing on marginalized and minority identities often implicitly connect visibility and legitimation, visibility can also have negative effects. Brighenti (2010) underscores the disempowering effects of being noticed as an exception – something that is out of the ordinary and thus reinforces the normalcy of invisibility and exclusion, as in the case of the usually unnoticed Muslim women without the veil explored by Amiraux (2016) – or as an alarming anomaly that can trigger “hyper-visibility” and control – as in the case of the so-called “Muslim question” (Selby & Beaman, 2016). Depending on their resources and opportunities, marginalized groups may choose selective invisibility, or camouflage instead – in the social media, this would mean being present but not visible (for a more in-depth discussion, see Boccia Artieri, Brilli & Zurovac, 2021). As Yeshua-Katz and Segerstad (2020) argue, affordances such as high visibility can in fact marginalize certain communities such as those that face social stigma.

Masculinity and religion

While women are an object of attention in research on digital religion, men's experiences are often overlooked. Broadly speaking, masculinity refers “to all of the social roles, obligations, behaviors, meanings, and all manner of actions, objects, and emotions prescribed for men within a given society or social context at a given point in time” (Pascoe & Bridge, 2016, pp. 37-38). Nyhagen (2020, p. 3) points out that masculinity norms upheld by religious traditions are also historically situated and observes that “While the Christian church itself has a history of male and heteronormative hierarchies, it has also offered men a plurality of competing masculinity norms.”

Religion and masculinities studies are an under-researched field (Krondorfer & Hunt, 2012) and studies “tend to focus on minority men's positioning within religious traditions, not men who appear in line with ideals of masculinity: white, middle class, heterosexual, and Christian” (Burke & Hudec, 2015, p. 331). The few studies that focus on conservative and traditional masculinity spotlight evangelical Christian men. Trends from this research include the importance of male brotherhood and a man's role as breadwinner and father. Also, Christian men performing traditional masculinities are usually skeptical toward mass media (Hoover & Coats, 2015), while religious media represent “manhood as an inherent—generally God-given—capacity for leadership, control of self and others, and

both familial and religious authority” (Sumerau, Barringer & Cragun, 2015, p. 583). Research also shows that ideal masculinity goes beyond “hegemonic masculinity” and ranges from the “godly masculinity” and “soft patriarchy” promoted by the Promise Keepers (evangelical men’s ministry spread in the USA) and epitomized in the image of men as “tender warriors”, carrying a moral obligation to guide their wives (Heat, 2003), to contemporary expressions of muscular Christianity (Putney 2000), to the embodiment of hybrid masculinities that combine aggressive and loving aspects, as in the case of Christian hardcore punk men studied by McDowell (2017). All are meant as reactions against the perceived feminization of Christianity (Gelfer, 2008) and the crisis of masculinity (Kimmel, 2013).

While attention to men’s ministry is higher in evangelical traditions, Gelfer (2008) notes that similar experiences have developed in Catholicism as well. Besides historical groups, Gelfer argues that more recent initiatives have been encouraged by American bishops since the late 1990s in the wake of the Promise Keepers success. Some of the relevant themes in Catholic men’s ministry are shared with Christian men’s movements: “soft patriarchy”, male bonding, and sports. Others are Catholic-specific, including devotion to the Saints. Gelfer observes that Catholic men’s ministry is less inclined to hyper-masculinity and allow for relatively diverse masculinities. However

The relative diversity is more a happy accident [...] Catholic men’s ministries still hold up the traditional family as the exemplar model for society. There is little room for even the straight man who seeks to pursue a mindful and compassionate sexuality while remaining single and childless. There is even less room for a gay man, whether he chooses to remain single or committed to a long-term relationship. So despite being less troublesome than its evangelical counterpart, the Catholic men’s movement is still a bastion of heteronormativity.” (Gelfer, 2008, p. 54).

Homosexuality is in fact a complex issue for Catholicism: it is tolerated as long as it is not practiced; however, it is actively discouraged. In parallel with the growing saliency of LGBT-related topics in the public sphere, the Catholic Church’s doctrine regarding homosexuality has become more detailed: on the one side, by issuing documents and supporting grassroots movements in favor of traditional heterosexual family (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017); on the other, by paying increasing attention to clergy virility (Turina, 2013). Yet, LGB Catholic groups have a long history of seeking recognition from the Catholic Church. They attempt to challenge heteronormative expectations and actively support hybrid and non-heterosexual masculinities (Taylor & Snowdon, 2014).

Case study, data collection and methods

From the brief overview reported in the previous sections, two main research gaps emerge: digital masculinity, and Catholic masculinity. Catholicism is a particularly interesting case for various reasons: it is part of the dominant Christian religious imaginary; it is a hierarchical religion, therefore likely to be more challenged by alternative digital

influencers than the other Christian traditions; and the gendered division of roles has a relevant role in its doctrine.

The focus of the analysis is the online performance of Catholic masculinity emerging through the practices of the networked publics gathering around the hashtags #thosecatholicmen and #dignityusa. The first use of #thosecatholicmen occurred in 2014 and the first post, posted by a Catholic church in Tennessee, consists of an image presenting a (presumably) new website, “Those Catholic Men”, in a couple of sentences that read: “By Catholic Men. For Catholic Men. There is a reason you have been unconvinced. There is a reason you are not satisfied. ThoseCatholicMen.com is designed to embolden, enlighten, and engage Catholic men for the renewal of masculine character and spirituality.” The group and related hashtag identify a problematic relationship between men and ministry, and it is designed to support and celebrate a specific masculine approach to Catholicism.

#Dignityusa celebrates instead LGBTQI Catholics. The hashtag was first used in 2012 and it is connected to the group “Dignity”, which began in 1969 as a ministry for homosexual Catholics promoted by an Augustinian priest in Los Angeles. The ministry rapidly spread throughout the country in the following years. In 1979 it acquired the name DignityUSA and later connected with similar initiatives and networks around the world (e.g., the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics and parents of LGB Catholics).

The hashtags – and related groups – allow exploring through digital ethnography two different masculinities: ideal and non-mainstream. The hashtags have been selected following the theoretical sampling approach (Emmel, 2014), aiming at exploring cases similar for culture and size, and dissimilar regarding masculinity. Following the logic of case study selection outlined by Seawright and Gerring (2008), the comparison of two diverse cases enables the exploration of the full range of variations in the practices of digital visibility.

In articulating masculinity narratives, the groups combine global and local elements – hence, I have chosen groups in the same regional contexts (US) that share the same cultural environment of Catholicism (Kronhofer & Hunt, 2012). The hashtags’ digital presence is numerically similar in reference to images and videos posted – considering multi-image posts as individually separated posts (#Thosecatholicmen 345; #dignityusa 329).

Being aware of the limitations in digital studies and of the role of the researcher in defining visibility (see Neumayer et al., 2021), I decided to focus on groups rather than individuals. I chose this focus because I was interested in understanding how narratives are created by designing an online presence. Here, visibility is meant as voluntary disclosure. However, focusing on hashtags rather than groups’ accounts allows exploring whether and how the hashtag is appropriated and experienced, broadening its scope beyond its initial launch. Unlike Twitter, Instagram hashtags are used to specify the image content and to connect to *ad hoc* communities (Caliandro & Graham, 2020).

With regard to methodology, I combined Instaloader and manual downloading to select all the images marked with the selected hashtags (up to July 31, 2021). Data were

collected, coded, and analyzed between May and August 2021. For each image, the following data were retrieved: date, username (and number of followers), engagement rate, number of likes and comments, location (if available), post type (image or video), caption, hashtags, and mentions. To ensure anonymity, I will not quote specific captions in this paper (Tiidenberg, 2018).

Analysis considered three elements: co-hashtags, type of users and mentions, and textual and visual contents of the 674 posts. Co-hashtags, type of users and mentions have been analyzed to understand the conversations and imaginaries associated to the hashtags, whether the users engaged with religious institutional profiles, and who participated in the discourse (individuals or groups). Visual and textual contents were manually coded according to the principles of thematic analysis to construct a typology of posts. Visual materials included pictures and images and coding included themes such as the presence of gendered bodies, activities, (indoor and outdoor) places, sacred or symbolic materials (e.g., statue of a saint). Textual materials included sentences in the images and captions and the coded themes included explicit mentions of masculinity and connected elements mentioned in the literature (e.g., fatherhood), religious or inspiring quotes, or personal content. Analysis focused on two aspects: masculinity (section 5) and visibility (section 6). I focused on dominant masculinities (Messerschmidt, 2018), specifically the ones celebrated by the hashtag. This paper explores how hashtags users negotiate the (in)visibility of diverse masculinities through co-hashtags, visual and textual elements. It does not focus on the scope of visibility, whether it works, or how Instagram affordances shape visibility.

Results and discussion

The discourse that has developed around the two hashtags can be characterized primarily as a community discourse. This discourse engages hashtags with similar content and meaning and engages with the networks of likeminded people.

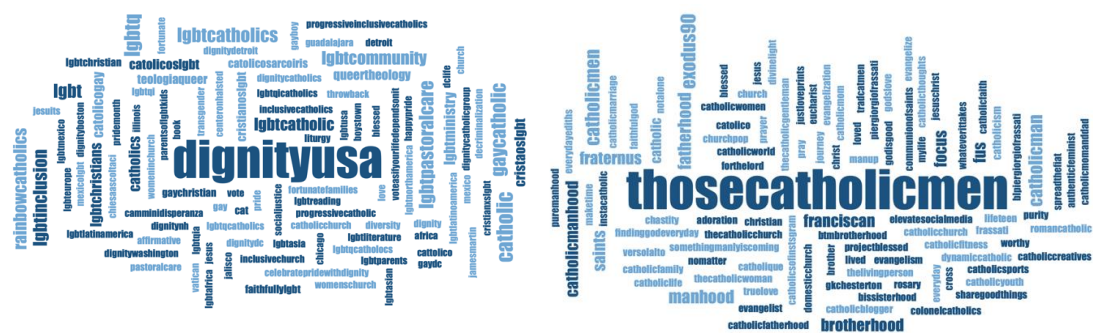


Fig. 1 Hashtags word clouds

Among the hashtags connected to #dignityusa (hereinafter DUSA), for example, are included general hashtags referring to the Catholic LGBT community, both in English and Spanish, names of specific organizations (such as the Italian *Cammini di Speranza*), or relevant concepts (such as queer theology). Some of the hashtags, such as in the case of #catholic or #pastoralcare, also connect the discourse to the broader Catholic visual discourse on Instagram – that is, the discourse composed by all the hashtags related to Catholicism and all the Catholic-related profiles both official and unofficial. In the case of #thosecatholicmen (hereafter TCM), many hashtags refer to the specific community (e.g., #catholicmen, #catholicman, and #catholicmanhood), specific organizations and initiatives (such as the ritual fasting #exodus90) or relevant concepts (such as fatherhood). TCM hashtags related to Catholicism are less general than in the case of DUSA and refer to rituals and symbols (e.g., the eucharist and the cross) or express Catholic identities, how to be Catholic, and ultimately build an imaginary of Catholic community in everyday life (e.g., #catholiclife and #catholicblogger).

#DUSA is mostly used by collective (73%) rather than individual (27%) profiles, while for #TMC the profiles are almost perfectly split in half, showing that there has been an appropriation beyond the initial group. The percentage of other users (media) is negligible in both cases. Mentions and retweets related to DUSA and TMC are all community-related: no institutional authority such as the Catholic Pope or Church structures such as the bishop conference are mentioned or tagged. In other words, the conversation mostly takes the form of self-celebration and community building, although it also pluralizes the Catholic imaginary by combining #DUSA and #TMC with general religious hashtags.

#DUSA

The majority (70%) of posts using #DUSA can be labeled as “celebrative” of different factors: the group/network of LGBT Catholics, visibility that can be reached, allies, faith, and inclusivity by inviting people to join the network. Other posts (14%) call for action or denounce discrimination by local dioceses or the Vatican itself. The remainder is divided between informative and personal posts or “inspirational cards” such as images of saints with quotations related to endurance or joy. In some cases, the hashtag is also used to express criticism, arguing that there is no place for homosexuality in Catholicism. Many visual materials (47%) show pictures of people in Churches or indoor spaces. The people are usually male and portrayed in groups, in different physical shape, wearing different styles of casual clothing, and of various racial backgrounds. Other posts (24%) are set outdoors and show men and women at Pride or Catholic LGBT initiatives. These pictures are either snapshots or group pictures, and they feature people with different body shapes, clothing, and racial backgrounds. The people in these pictures are almost always smiling.

Posts do not explicitly mention masculinity; however, as all the posts revolve around the issue of being both homosexual and Catholic, it can be argued that masculinity is an implied aspect of these posts given gender's relationship to sexual identity. Visual and textual materials show a diversity of men's portraits in terms of bodies, racial background, and class. Generally, adults and middle-aged men are featured, while the young and elderly are invisible. Activities and situations expressed in the pictures include: (1) family-men, either devoted children of supporting parents or caring fathers of happy children, (2) devoted men, actively committed in their churches services and activities, praying and celebrating; (3) committed men, celebrating fellows' victories and friendship, praising endurance and strength; (4) allied men, supporting women, transgender people or nuns denouncing harassments, and joining political campaigns for social justice; (5) educated men, participating in lectures and debates; and (6) sensitive men, loving animals, flowers and nature. The emerging masculinity is reassuring and perfectly compatible with Catholic values and life: these are "good men" working for the glory of God.

#TMC

Half (50%) of the #TMC posts can be classified as "inspirational" – featuring sentences or quotes, sometimes with pictures in the background. Other posts are meant to construct a specific masculine identity, either referring to the activities of the group or the larger network (14%) or through educational posts (17%). A large percentage (12%) is also related to advertisements, higher than personal posts (5%). A small (2%) but interesting part are women offering to share prayers. Visual materials can be divided into three categories: pictures with separate captions (48%); pictures or images as a background for inspirational quotes and prayers (44%); and selfie and group pictures (8%). In the first two categories the visual element is mostly used to illustrate the caption or the embedded quotation and it mostly features natural landscapes, sport activities, old craft workshops, and stock images of beautiful white women, children, men, and family, for example. By contrast, personal pictures mostly show Filipino young adults and middle-aged men who are not always in the best physical shape. While ethnic background is apparent, class is less visible; however, some of the captions promote the value of all types of labor and pictures often show agricultural and manual activities.

TCM combines traits of hegemonic masculinity (that is, masculinity that legitimizes and reproduces unequal gender relations) with what has been called "positive" masculinity. In this sense it is a hybrid hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt 2018). Central elements of the ideal TMC masculinity are: (1) leadership and inspiration, as Catholic men should love and protect their family and community, be good fathers and good people, and inspire others with their fortitude, endurance, courage and purpose; (2) faith, conceived of as challenge, upholding values even when the broader world seem to consider them antiquated or worthy of ridicule; (3) male bonding and brotherhood or homosociality; (4) bodily practices, such as practicing sport, annual ritual fasting, eating meat, and wearing beards; and (5) "good old things" such as being in nature instead of cities and loving crafts

and agriculture. Except for the last one, results corroborate other studies findings (Gelfer, 2008). In #TMC discourse it is also clear what men are not (or should not be): “wimpy”, as the common sense would describe Catholic men according to them (Delap & Morgan, 2013); “wordy”; “sinful”; “unreliable.” Heterosexuality is not brought to the fore, but it is taken for granted. The emerging masculinity portrays men as firm and tender leaders who prefer outdoor life and manual activities.

Conclusions – the practices of layered in/visibility

The visual and textual conversations developing around the two hashtags contribute to pluralize the visual imaginary of Catholicism as it relates to masculinity. Both groups negotiate masculinity in relation to global and subcultural concerns. For example, they are both informed by the awareness of the spread of heteronormative ideals, while other cultural references are specifically related to Catholicism. #DUSA is a perfect example of how dominant masculinity is different from hegemonic masculinity since what is praised in the group is mostly stigmatized outside of the group. Conversely, in #TMC the dominant masculinity is a modern hybrid form of hegemonic masculinity (Pascoe & Bridges, 2016; Messerschmidt 2018). The tensions around masculinity ideals emerging from the case studies are not particularly different from those characterizing the broader society. As Orit Avishai points out

What makes religion cases so powerful gender studies is that they are rife with contradictions and tensions that can teach us how gender regimes are produced, reproduced, challenged, and dislocated; what happens when doctrine and ideology meet the messiness of everyday life; and how power structures are practiced and challenged.” (Avishai, 2016, pp. 273-274).

In this paper I focused on two hashtags that are used as a form of cultural activism that pluralize the socially mediated visual imaginary of Catholicism. With #DUSE, LGBT Catholics are made visible and with #TMC, guns and non-white men became part of the conversation. However, this pluralization also shows limitations to what is made visible and what is instead invisibilized.

Collective and individual profiles adopting #DUSE showcase Catholic homosexuality, usually invisible and actively invisibilized in the Catholic world. Therefore, by using the hashtag, they mark a presence in the digital world. Visibility is in fact the fundamental strategy of modern queer politics. Also, #DUSE is mentioned in connection to broad Catholic hashtags: in this sense, LGBT Catholics are seeking a voice. Nevertheless, they stay invisible for the Church institutions that are not called into cause. Additionally, the hashtag is far from explicit; in fact, it has been used by members of a movement that supports formerly incarcerated women – and only those who know its meaning can detect and recognize it. In this sense, the third layer of visibility, recognition (Brantner & Stehle, 2021), seem to be targeting primarily the community of equals, functioning as a networking and celebrative hashtag. Moreover, #DUSE rarely caption everyday life. An active filtering

takes place that selectively shows only certain aspects of LGBT Catholics' identity (Savolainen, Uitermark & Boy, 2020). LGBT Catholics portrayed in the pictures are smiling and reassuring, and masculinity bears reassuring traits. Life beyond the group and religious celebration is invisible. Furthermore, the hashtag is primarily used from a collective, rather than individual perspective, which could suggest the pivotal role of the community (along the lines of "you are not alone") or that individuals try to protect themselves from possible negative reactions. That is, they shy away from individualized visibility having internalized anti-LGBT+ stigma. In other words, these forms of invisibility may relate to the ambivalent position of this specific group in the Catholic world (tolerated but not accepted), carrying a social stigma in the broader Catholic community for which hyper-visibility can be a risk (Brighenti, 2010; Yeshua-Katz & af Segerstad, 2020). In this sense, #DUSA users emerge as competent digital actors trying to balance a complex form of what could be defined as "layered in/visibility." They join the broad Catholic digital conversation, try to reach out and be recognized by their community, and at the same time adopt complex digital practices of so-called camouflage.

#TMC is in an almost-opposite position, as it represents an ideal and mainstream masculinity that is usually privileged and taken-for-granted and, therefore, invisible (Pascoe & Bridges, 2016). In this sense, individuals and groups adopting #TMC negotiate visibility in complex ways, taking care to not to stray far from traditional and ordinary masculinity. For example, illustrative pictures only feature white people. Yet, the invisible diversity becomes visible in personal posts of individuals appropriating the hashtags, who actively racially diversify Catholic masculinity by posting mainly non-white selfies and pictures. In the visual and textual materials, emphasis is placed on everyday life and ordinary activities that can illustrate how Catholic men are masculine, heroic, people-loving, traditional, as well as ordinary. Among the personal objects made visible are guns, rosaries, and portraits of Saints. As in the case of #DUSE, there is a selective disclosure since homes and workplaces are always excluded from pictures. The hashtag works as an inspirational and celebrative network for like-minded people committed to the same values and people who remain mostly invisible, which suggest that they may feel not up to par. Partially, this invisibility could also relate to the traditional suspicion over media shared by Christian men (Hoover & Coats, 2015). #TMC is mostly adopted by individual users who visibilize and construct community and belonging, and actually construct community and belonging, a homosocial brotherhood of like-minded people, that makes its possible contradictions invisible.

In both #DUSE and #TMC, the visibility of a networked community of like-minded individuals is nuanced by practices of filtered invisibility that address a broader digital audience and construct complex layers of in/visibility. Intimacy and everyday life are invisible in both cases, while what is brought into light is, in one case, dignity and collective belonging, and, in the other, different aspects that constitute an aspirational identity.

In this perspective, the results contribute to digital studies dealing with visibility and invisibility, to digital religion studies, and to masculinity studies.

Nota biografica

Alberta Giorgi, senior assistant professor in Sociology of Cultural and Communication Processes, University of Bergamo, and associate researcher of the research groups GSRL (Paris) and CRAFT (Turin), and the research centre CES (Coimbra). She participated to Grassrootsmobilise ERC-funded project. Alberta is chair of the research network Political Sociology (European Sociological Association), and elected board member of the research network on Religion (Italian Association of Sociology). Among her publications: *Religious Feminists and the Intersectional Feminist Movements – Insights from a Case Study* (European Journal of Women's Studies, 2020). She works on the intersections of religion and politics – namely secularism, and gender and religion.

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