

YOUNG ADULTHOOD ACROSS DIGITAL PLATFORMS

DIGITALLY CONSTRUCTING
GENDER AND SEXUALITIES

EDITED BY

INÊS AMARAL
RITA BASÍLIO DE SIMÕES
ANA MARTA M. FLORES

Young Adulthood Across Digital Platforms

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EDITED BY

INÊS AMARAL

University of Coimbra, Portugal

RITA BASÍLIO DE SIMÕES

University of Coimbra, Portugal

AND

ANA MARTA M. FLORES

University of Coimbra, Portugal

fct Fundação
para a Ciência
e a Tecnologia



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2025

Editorial matter and selection © 2025 Inês Amaral, Rita Basílio de Simões and
Ana Marta M. Flores.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83753-525-5 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83753-524-8 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83753-526-2 (Epub)



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About the Editors

Inês Amaral is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra. Inês holds a PhD in Communication Sciences from the University of Minho and is a Researcher at the Centre for Social Studies. She has developed research on sociability in digital social networks, participation and social media, gender and media, feminist media studies, masculinities, media and digital literacy, technologies and active ageing, audiences and disinformation. She is the PI of the project MyGender and a member of the Masculinities Observatory and Cyberjournalism Observatory teams. Among her latest publications are articles published in journals such as *Social Media + Society*, *Social Sciences*, *El Profesional de la Información*, *International Journal of Communication* and *European Journal of Women's Studies*.

Rita Basílio de Simões holds a PhD in Communication Sciences and is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra (FLUC) in the Department of Philosophy, Communication and Information. She is a Researcher at the Centre for Social Studies (CES) and collaborates with CEIS20, also from the University of Coimbra, and ICNOVA, from the Nova University of Lisbon. She is the National Coordinator of the 'Global Media Monitoring Project – Who Makes the News?' She leads the Working Group on Gender and Sexualities of the Portuguese Association of Communication Sciences (SOPCOM).

Ana Marta M. Flores holds a PhD in Journalism and is a Researcher at ICNOVA/iNOVA Media Lab, affiliated with NOVA University Lisbon. She is also a Research Collaborator at the Trends and Culture Management Lab, part of the University of Lisbon's CEAUL. Currently, Ana Marta is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the MyGender project at the University of Coimbra while also assuming the role of Communication Officer for the Digital Culture and Communication section of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA).

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About the Contributors

Rita Alcaire is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Centre for Social Studies (CES) and a Collaborator Researcher at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies (CEIS20), University of Coimbra (Portugal). Her research interests lie in the study of gender and sexualities, mental health and pop culture, using media as a privileged way to engage with them. She is a Researcher in the *UnCover – Sexual violence in Portuguese media landscapes* (2023–2026) project. She participated in national (Ouvir Vozes, MyGender, Equal.STEAM) and European (ReMO, CILIA LGBTQI+ and KINDER) projects as a Researcher and a Consultant. She is a Guest Lecturer on MA and PhD programmes in (mental) health, media and communication and contemporary studies. She holds a PhD in Human Rights in Contemporary Societies (CES/III, 2019) and a Master in Cultural Psychiatry (FMUC, 2011). She is developing a postdoctoral project entitled *ENGAGE – Promoting gender equality and social justice through transmedia storytelling and social science communication* (2022–2025) that aims to propose changes in how research and scholarship in gender studies are co-produced and co-performed in and beyond academia.

Juliana Alcantara holds a PhD in Communication Sciences at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra (FLUC, Portugal). She holds a Master's degree in Journalism and Communication at the same institution, where she received the Top 3% of Students Award. She has a postgraduate degree in Business Communication and Higher Education Teaching. She also has more than 10 years of professional experience as a Public Relations Officer and a Journalist in the Brazilian media. She is part of the Interuniversity Network for Journalist Studies (RIEJ) in Portugal. Her academic interests have been directed to communication sciences, gender, health and democracy issues. Among her latest publications are articles published in *Journalism*, *Journalism Practice* and *International Journal of Communication*.

Eduardo Antunes is a Research Fellow and a doctoral student in Communication Sciences at the University of Coimbra, where he completed his Master's degree in Journalism and Communication. Additionally, he is a Radio Broadcaster and an author at RUC, where he previously served as the Programme Coordinator. He seeks to develop studies on the dynamics of orientalism and gender in the media, with a particular focus on examining identity construction processes, having published works in journals like *Social Sciences*, *Social Media + Society*, *Lecture Notes in Computer Science*, *Media & Jornalismo* and *Comunicação e Sociedade*.

Sofia P. Caldeira is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow at CICANT, Lusófona University [g.a. 101,059,460]. She holds a Communication Sciences PhD from Ghent University, Belgium (2020). Her research focuses primarily on feminist media studies, social media practices and politics of gender representation. She currently serves as the Chair of ECREA's Digital Culture and Communication section.

Frederico Fonseca is a doctoral student in Communication Sciences at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Coimbra and has a degree in Multimedia. He is a Professor in public and private higher education and a Researcher in Communication Sciences and Information and Communication Technologies. He has recently been part of the research team for three funded projects, two national and one international (ERASMUS+). He is interested in topics related to algorithmic governance, datafication, m-apps, (in)fertility, serious games and active ageing.

Carolina Matos is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Sociology at the Department of Media, Culture and the Creative Industries (MCCI) at the School of Communication and Creativity at City, University of London, and also a former Visiting Associate Professor in Global Communications at the School of Communication, University of Miami, US. Matos' research is in the area of gender, media and development and international communications. She investigates the role of communications for social change in processes of development, paying particular attention to structural inequalities of gender, race and class. A previous Journalist, Matos is the author of four books, various chapters and articles, including the book *Gender, Health Communications and Reproductive Health in International Development* (McGill Queen's University Press, 2023).

Elena Pilipets is a Postdoctoral Researcher in Digital Media and Methods at the Department of Media Studies, University of Siegen (PhD in Media Studies, University of Klagenfurt). Her work focuses on the processes of social media circulation, with particular attention to the study of platforms through combinations of visual and digital methods. This includes online-grounded empirical investigations of internet memes, platform subcultures and social bots, the latter being studied in a working group funded by the Centre of Advanced Internet Studies (CAIS) in Bochum.

Sofia José Santos is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra and a Researcher at the Centre for Social Studies. Sofia studies the politics of media representations and media production from a critical and feminist perspective, focusing on international relations; peace, violence and security studies; masculinities; and technopolitics. Within CES, she is currently the PI of the project 'UNCOVER: Sexual Violence in Portuguese Mediascape' and a co-editor of *Alice News*. She has a PhD in International Relations from the Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra and a diploma in Advanced Studies in Communication Sciences from ISCTE-IUL. She was a Visiting Scholar at the Flemish Peace Institute, Belgium, and a Marie Curie Fellow in the Anthropology department at Universiteit Utrecht, the Netherlands. Her research has been published in academic journals

such as *Media and Communication*, *European Journal of Women's Studies* and *Contexto Internacional*.

Cosimo Marco Scarcelli, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology of the University of Padua (Italy). He teaches Media, Gender and Sexuality (BD in Communication) and Digital Culture, Gender and Society (MD in Strategies of Communication) and is a member of the board of PhD Programme in Social Sciences. His research deals with sexuality, gender and digital culture, intimacies, pornography, masculinities, love and emotions and young people. He is particularly interested in qualitative and participatory research. He is an Editor of *Journal of Gender Studies*. From 2016 to 2021, he served as the Vice-Chair and then the Chair for ECREA's Gender, Sexuality and Communication section.

Rita Sepúlveda is a Postdoctoral Researcher at ICNOVA, Instituto de Comunicação da Nova, Nova University of Lisbon (Ref: ICNOVA/PÓSDOC/2022). She holds a Communication Sciences PhD from ISCTE-Iul, Portugal (2021). Her research focuses on collective and dynamic expressions in digital environments regarding the transformation of intimacy in the context of digital platforms appropriation. She is an Associate Researcher at Cies (ISCTE-Iul) and coordinator of the MetDigi project (Cies-Iscte). Since 2019, she's been lecturing in postgraduate degrees on communication, social media, and methodologies subjects.

Filipa Subtil is a Coordinator Professor at Escola Superior de Comunicação Social, Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa, and a Researcher at LIACOM and ICNOVA. She holds a PhD in Social Sciences from the Universidade de Lisboa. Her research interests include the sociology of communication, social theory of communication in the United States and Canada, and media frameworks on gender issues. Her work has been published in academic journals such as *Journalism Practice*, *Journalism Studies*, *History of Media Studies*, *Media e Jornalismo*, *Revista Famecos* and *Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação*. She is also co-editor and author of *Os três D's dos media: desigualdade, desprofissionalização e desinformação* (2021) and *Media and Portuguese Empire* (2017), among others.

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Acknowledgement

Portuguese national funds through FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia) provided financial support in the framework of the project ‘Mediated young adults’ practices: advancing gender justice in and across mobile apps’ (PTDC/COM-CSS/5947/2020). <https://doi.org/10.54499/PTDC/COM-CSS/5947/2020>

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Chapter 1

Reimagining Identity in Mobile Apps: The Intersection of Gender and Sexuality Among Young Adults

Ana Marta M. Flores, Inês Amaral and Rita Basílio de Simões

University of Coimbra, Portugal

Abstract

The influence of digital media and mobile technologies on the interpersonal dynamics of young individuals across various aspects of their daily lives underscores the significant role of digital media in shaping their experiences. Research exploring how individuals engage with mobile applications (m-apps) has revealed the constraining effects of platform norms and politics on users' expressive identities. This chapter examines the evolving landscape of media consumption, engagement and civic participation amidst the proliferation of new media modalities, focussing on m-apps. The authors highlight the pervasive adoption of mobile apps across diverse categories and the escalating temporal investment individuals allocate to these platforms for fostering interpersonal connections. Drawing from a feminist and intersectional perspective, the authors explore how young adults navigate the technicity and imaginaries of m-apps, incorporating them into their daily routines and (re)negotiating their gender and sexual identities. Through the MyGender project, the authors investigate the relationship between m-apps and power dynamics, examining the construction and reconstruction of gender and sexuality across platforms. The findings underscore the need for critical engagement with digital technologies as sociocultural products actively reshaping gender relations and sexual practices. The text ends with an overview of the book, briefly presenting the remaining nine chapters.

Keywords: Gender; MyGender project; society; mobile apps; self-expression; social media

Introduction

The transformative impact of digital media and mobile-based technologies on the interpersonal dynamics of young individuals within various spheres of their daily existence underscores the pivotal role of digital media in shaping their lived experiences. Research into the nuanced ways individuals engage with the technical intricacies and conceptual frameworks embedded within m-apps, seamlessly integrating them into their quotidian routines, has enlightened the constraining effects of platform grammars and politics on users' expressive identities as digital technologies exert regulatory control over the interpretations and appropriations afforded by these platforms. The evolving landscape of media consumption, engagement and civic and political participation has remained a persistent concern amidst the proliferation of new media modalities.

The widespread adoption of m-apps across diverse categories, spanning social networking, dating, gaming, health, fitness and self-tracking domains, underscores the escalating temporal investment individuals allocate to these platforms for fostering interpersonal connections. These mobile-centric technologies have transcended the realm of mere tools to become indispensable extensions of individuals' selfhood, intricately interwoven into the fabric of their daily existence. Consequently, unravelling the multifaceted layers of individuals' utilisation and diverse appropriations of m-apps is paramount in elucidating how these technologies either challenge or circumscribe their personal narratives.

Interactions within the realm of mobile application platforms (m-apps) intricately interlace with collective narrative processes, exerting a reinforcing influence on prevailing power dynamics and perpetuating hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity deeply entrenched in heteronormativity (Amaral et al., 2021). These constructions of masculinities and femininities represent culturally constructed norms, semiotically and discursively transmitted ideals dictating how individuals should embody and enact gender roles as either masculine or feminine entities (Amaral et al., 2019). Given the socially constructed nature of gender (Butler, 1990), it is imperative to acknowledge that these notions of masculinity and femininity are not innate, fixed or immutable; instead, they undergo continual evolution through dynamic social and cultural processes, susceptible to contestation, reconstruction and transformation (Boni, 2002).

Consequently, the integration of technical features and visual representations within m-apps into individuals' daily routines incites a reassessment of their sexual and gender identities. How individuals engage with the technological functionalities and visual elements of m-apps, alongside their interactions with fellow users, has garnered considerable attention amidst the emergence of novel forms of social interaction (Ohme, 2020). The pervasive adoption of m-apps across diverse categories, ranging from social media platforms and dating applications to gaming apps, health and fitness tools and self-tracking applications, underscores the escalating temporal investment individuals dedicate to these platforms for interpersonal connectivity and multimedia engagement. Consequently, these mobile technologies have evolved into indispensable extensions of individuals' identities, seamlessly woven into the fabric of their daily lives (Zhang et al., 2018). Within this framework,

it becomes imperative to probe how individuals' utilisation of and varied appropriations of m-apps play a pivotal role in elucidating how these technologies either challenge or constrain their personal experiences, particularly concerning renegotiating their sexual and gender identities. By being rooted in a new materialist feminist perspective and from a feminist and intersectional perspective, this book explores how young adults engage with the technicity and imaginaries of m-apps, incorporating them into their daily lives, embodying them in their everyday practices and (re)negotiating from it their gender and sexual identities.

Exploring young adults' interactions with m-apps within the uses and gratifications theory framework or the risks and advantages paradigm has constituted a focal point of scholarly inquiry. However, this book adopts a critical lens towards contemporary digital media, rooted in an understanding of technology as a potent generator of meaning, subjectivity and agency intricately intertwined with power dynamics.

Young Adulthood Across Digital Platforms: Digitally Constructing Gender and Sexualities is framed within the project 'MyGender – Mediated Young Adults' Practices: Advancing Gender Justice in and across Mobile Apps', which aimed to understand the relevance of m-apps in the lives of Portuguese young adults and how their use dialogs with their contexts and experiences. Across 10 chapters, the book embarks on a feminist and intersectional exploration of how individuals navigate digital technologies and m-apps' technicity and conceptual underpinnings, seamlessly integrating them into their daily routines and utilising them as conduits for the (re)negotiation of their gender, sexual identities and intimacy, as well as to create engagement between communities that promote health and deconstruct myths of disinformation disorder.

Mediated Interfaces and the Extension of the Self

Technological uses are intricately interwoven with specific cultural and ideological contexts, engendering diverse social structures and hierarchies (Simões & Amaral, 2022). M-apps often prompt users to interpret their data through normative constructs of masculinity and femininity, fostering behaviours entrenched in conventional gender norms and power dynamics, thereby delineating gendered social spaces.

Research delving into how individuals engage with the technical intricacies and visual elements of m-apps, integrating them into their daily lives, has unveiled that the grammatical structures and platform regulations inherent in these apps can constrict users' expressions of identity, as digital technologies govern and oversee their utilisation (Correa et al., 2010). Consequently, a comprehensive analysis of the impacts of these applications necessitates a dual perspective: one that acknowledges the symbolic nature of m-apps as digital communication environments and another that delves into their experiential dimension as technological tools. Drawing from a new feminist materialist standpoint (Lupton, 2019), individuals' interactions with people and objects are viewed as profoundly generative (Bennett, 2010). When individuals engage with digital technologies, they adopt

prevailing modes of thought and experience and internalise affective amalgamations of material, ideas and language (Lupton, 2019), thereby cultivating capacities for agency and reasoning to navigate the notions of masculinity and femininity.

As technology assumes roles in shaping meaning, subjectivity and agency, digital practices are intricately intertwined with the technical aspects and imaginaries of the social milieus in which they operate, influencing personal decision-making in individuals' everyday lives (boyd, 2015). The intricate interplay between technological tools and their utilisation and appropriation necessitates a deeper understanding of digital practices as sociocultural artefacts shaped by power dynamics (Lupton, 2019). Within this context, feminist media studies challenge the naturalised status of gender disparities, recognising that all significant social attributes are actively constructed and not inherently biological, socially ingrained or structurally predetermined (Silveirinha et al., 2020).

Digital technologies present new avenues for engagement in gender politics, fostering more emancipatory social contexts, behaviours and relationships (Simões & Amaral, 2022). Moreover, digital environments offer novel avenues for identity expression and subjectivity. Given that the Internet serves as both a producer and reproducer of social roles, practices, identities and forms of oppression, digital feminist research provides a unique lens for dissecting the intricate ramifications and mechanisms of the digital environment. M-apps must be recognised as mediated interfaces for gender identity performances, yet studies on their usage, appropriation and impacts remain varied and often lack a gender-focused perspective.

A substantial body of research on m-apps has predominantly focused on utilising social networks and visual representations (Berry, 2017). Drawing from the uses and gratifications theory, numerous studies have explored the appropriation of specific platforms by young adults, encompassing social networks (Khadir et al., 2021), social media (Ash et al., 2020; Moreno & Whitehill, 2016; Song et al., 2021), news media applications (Antunovic et al., 2018) and home banking (Prom Tep et al., 2020).

Scientific inquiry into integrating m-apps into the daily lives of young adults is entwined with the usage of information and communication technologies and social media. However, m-apps encompass a broader spectrum and permeate various facets of young adults' lives. From gaming to shopping, dating to health and nutrition, and fitness to self-monitoring, many m-apps are used daily by young adults. danah boyd (2015) asserts that mobile communication is restructuring socio-technical practices, leading to the construction and reconstruction of sociability cultures (Amaral, 2012, 2016), social structures and hierarchies, thereby embedding technology in different realms of daily life (Simões & Amaral, 2022).

Given the hybrid nature of the new media ecosystem, scholarly literature has examined how young individuals utilise digital technologies, interact with others, incorporate digital devices into their daily routines, alter their perspectives and behaviours based on networked practices, participate in civic and political movements (Ohme, 2020), consume news, follow trends and influencers, form

friendships and engage in digital intimacy within a multiplatform paradigm that fosters active experiences (Gerlich et al., 2015).

Considering the central role of digital platforms in young people's lives (Jenkins et al., 2016) and their extension as embodiments of the self (Zhang et al., 2018), risks and opportunities have emerged as prominent research areas. Risks often feature prominently in discussions surrounding youth technology usage. Concerns regarding addiction, cyberbullying, hate speech, online sexual exploitation, sedentary lifestyles, depression and suicide are frequently cited in research on youth and technology (Amaral & Simões, 2021; Sinkkonen et al., 2014; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2019; Twenge, 2017). Conversely, another line of study emphasises the positive aspects of digital media usage, highlighting digital activism, public and civic engagement, and social and political participation (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Ekström et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2013).

Given the diverse patterns of media consumption fostered by the digital ecosystem (Gurevitch et al., 2009) and its constant evolution (Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2019), various theories on social media effects (Boulianne, 2015) posit their potential impact on civic and political engagement (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020), the creation of new engagement repertoires (Cammaerts et al., 2014), incidental news exposure (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017) and the strengthening of social bonds (Amaral, 2016). It should also be noted that other research strands explore the immersion of young individuals in digital media within their daily lives, acknowledging that while technologies promote social interaction, they may also foster isolation and loneliness (Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2019). Additionally, research on youth also delves into networked sexual identities and the Internet as a realm of digital intimacy (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015).

Regarding young adults, a substantial research domain has focused on examining the use and appropriation of m-apps by men who have sex with other men (Blackwell et al., 2015), often explored through studies on health and risks associated with sexual behaviours, frequently framed as pathologies. However, these inquiries have expanded to encompass questions centred on digital sexual cultures from a 'data culture' perspective (Albury et al., 2017). This viewpoint pertains to the digital mediation of intimacy and the manner in which algorithms capture user data, monitoring habits and routines to 'suggest' other users and activities (Albury et al., 2017; Light, 2014). Thus, the negotiations and renegotiations of gender and sexual identities that young adults undergo on mobile apps directly intersect with their cultures of intimacy and sexuality through pronounced technological intrusions into their daily lives (Gillespie, 2014; Mollen & Dhaenens, 2018).

Gender and Sexuality Across Mediated Mobile Interfaces

The dizzying evolution of technology and the proliferation of mobile communication have profoundly altered the landscape of human interaction, ushering in new paradigms of usage, practices and consumption behaviours. The ubiquitous

presence of smartphones and tablets has engendered a thriving market for competitive m-apps, spanning various categories whose functionalities, structures, policies and content pose challenges to users and their utilisation of these applications. Moreover, m-apps, characterised by their user-friendly interfaces and mobility, have emerged as a prevailing trend, owing primarily to their versatile features surpassing conventional devices (Gerlich et al., 2015).

Furthermore, mobile-based technologies facilitate the convergence of media content, functionalities and features from disparate platforms onto a singular device, fostering seamless integration of diverse digital experiences (Deng et al., 2019). Indeed, smartphones and other mobile devices excel in multitasking capabilities, enabling users to concurrently engage in multiple activities, thereby optimising time utilisation and consolidating tasks previously performed using separate devices.

The evolution of media consumption, engagement and civic and political participation has become a perennial concern amidst the proliferation of new media modalities (Ohme, 2020). These mobile-based technologies have transcended mere utility to become indispensable facets of individuals' lives, serving as extensions of their identities and augmenting their digital self-expression and interaction capabilities.

The use of technology is intricately entangled within specific cultural and ideological contexts, which actively (re)generate diverse social frameworks and hierarchies (Simões & Amaral, 2022). Numerous m-apps prompt users to interpret information through the lens of conventional conceptions of masculinity and femininity, resulting in behaviours rooted in established gender norms and power dynamics that sculpt gender-specific social environments.

Research delving into how individuals integrate the technical features and visual aspects of m-apps into their daily routines has unveiled how the structures and guidelines inherent to these apps can constrict users' expressions of identity as digital technologies oversee and regulate their utilisation (Correa et al., 2010). Consequently, it becomes imperative to evaluate the impact of these applications from a dual perspective: one acknowledging the symbolic role of m-apps as digital communication environments and another recognising their experiential dimension as technological tools.

Drawing upon the perspective of new feminist materialism (Lupton, 2019), individuals' interactions with other people and objects are perceived as profoundly generative (Bennett, 2010). When individuals engage with digital technologies, they are not merely adopting prevailing modes of thinking; they are also experiencing and internalising affective amalgamations of material, ideas and language (Lupton, 2019), thereby cultivating capacities and reasoning to grasp the concept of being and behaving as a man or a woman. In this framework, gender is constructed as a construct intricately interwoven with specific social elements and the power dynamics they instantiate.

As technology evolves into a source of meaning, subjectivity and agency, digital behaviours become intimately intertwined with the technical elements and the constructs of the social contexts in which they are employed, subsequently influencing individual decisions in people's daily lives (boyd, 2015). The intricate

interplay between technological instruments and their usage and adaptation necessitates a deeper understanding of digital behaviours as sociocultural artefacts shaped by power dynamics (Lupton, 2019). Within this milieu, feminist media studies challenge the taken-for-granted nature of gender disparities, acknowledging that all significant social attributes are actively constructed and are neither biologically inherent, permanently socialised nor structurally predetermined (Silveirinha et al., 2020).

Digital technologies present new avenues for active participation in gender-related issues, fostering more emancipatory social environments, behaviours and relationships (Simões & Amaral, 2022). Furthermore, digital realms offer novel pathways for expressing identity and subjectivity. Acknowledging that the Internet produces and reproduces social roles, practices, identities and forms of oppression, digital feminist research provides a unique perspective for scrutinising the intricate ramifications and mechanisms of the digital environment. It is essential to recognise m-apps as mediated interfaces for performing gender identities. However, research on their utilisation, adaptations and consequences remains diverse and often lacks a gender-oriented perspective.

Research concerning m-apps has primarily focused on the uses of social networks and visual representations (Berry, 2017). Leveraging the uses and gratifications theory, numerous studies have explored how young adults appropriate specific platforms, including social networks (Khadir et al., 2021), social media (Ash et al., 2020; Moreno & Whitehill, 2016; Song et al., 2021), news media applications (Antunovic et al., 2018) and home banking (Prom Tep et al., 2020).

Within feminist media studies, surveillance technologies have consistently functioned as tools of discipline. Consequently, investigations into inequalities, power dynamics and commodification have revolved around how digital technology fosters particular practices and conceptions of identity and subjectivity. This perspective posits that digital technologies are (re)shaped within social contexts defined by gender expectations and norms governing individuals' engagement (Simões & Amaral, 2022).

Sexual identity and sexual orientation play pivotal roles in shaping young adults' interactions with m-apps, particularly evident in dating platforms and social media. Research by Chester et al. (2016) suggests that sexual identity, including LGBTQ+ identities, influences app usage preferences and online profile presentation strategies. Furthermore, studies such as Light (2014) shed light on how geolocation technologies embedded in dating apps impact digital intimacy experiences, providing unique opportunities for interactions based on physical proximity and shared interests.

Digital intimacy, as an emerging interdisciplinary field, explores how digital technologies reshape and redefine forms of intimacy and interpersonal connection. Research from Mollen and Dhaenens (2018) investigates how instant messaging apps and social networks facilitate the expression of affection and emotional support in online relationships, challenging traditional notions of physical closeness. Additionally, Albury et al. (2017) research examines how recommendation algorithms in dating apps shape online interactions, influencing matchmaking dynamics and virtual intimacy experiences.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge that digital intimacy may pose challenges and risks, especially concerning online privacy and security. Scholars such as [De Ridder and Van Bauwel \(2015\)](#) delve into the complexities of sexual and gender identities in digital spaces, highlighting how social norms and gender expectations manifest and are contested in online interactions. Moreover, works like those of [Blackwell et al. \(2015\)](#) investigate the experiences of men who have sex with men on dating apps, examining issues related to sexual health and informed consent in digital contexts.

MyGender project aimed to explore how these apps relate to power relations, examine the construction and reconstruction of gender and sexuality across these platforms and scrutinise their enactment and reenactment within the realms of app imaginaries and utilisation. Additionally, the project considered how these processes manifest in data monitoring and mining, ultimately forming distinct sociability and intimacy domains.

While existing critical research on digital surveillance technologies has primarily focused on the broader sociocultural impact of m-apps, shedding light on their potential to either combat or reinforce social inequalities ([boyd, 2015](#); [Correa et al., 2010](#); [Wajcman, 2007](#); [Whiting & Williams, 2013](#)), we argue that, without diminishing the value of these studies, there is a pressing need for a critical examination of digital technology tools as sociocultural products actively reshaping gender relations and sexual practices. The results of this project show that personal technological agency in people's everyday practices ([boyd, 2015](#)) is influenced in different ways by sociodemographic factors such as gender, sexual orientation and living with parents.

Through mixed methods and within a multidimensional and holistic approach, MyGender has examined mobile app affordances, grammars, platform politics and content and their uses, appropriations and embodiment. The overall research design combined qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, analysis and inference within different phases and axes of the research process. The research design encompasses an analysis of m-apps to examine the technicity of a sample of apps through the interfaces and five fieldwork studies implemented to investigate how young adults engage with technicity and imaginaries of mobile apps: a survey to a representative sample of Portuguese young adults between 18 and 30 years, six focus groups, a tracking survey and two ethnographic studies – one centred on semi-structured interviews to investigate the issues in-depth and the other centred on diary records to address emotional and interpersonal.

In the survey, we found that m-apps directly interfere with the gender identities and sexual practices of young adults, depending on the affordances of the platforms, which substantially shape, condition and constrain how these identities are (re) negotiated and imagined in mediated experiences, in perceptions of others and their self-representations. We also identify digital dependency and anxiety when separated from their mobile phones, highlighting the role of technology in shaping emotional well-being. The several studies demonstrated that m-apps have a direct impact on the sexual and gender identities of young Portuguese adults. The affordances and grammars of these platforms play a pivotal role in shaping how individuals negotiate and imagine their identities in digital spaces. Likewise, sociodemographic factors,