

Social Networking Sites as Platforms for Transgression: Two Case Studies of Russian Women Involved in Bisexual and Transgender Rights Activism

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Abstract: The current research explores the ways in which social networking sites are used as online activism platforms by bisexual and transgender Russian women and focuses on case studies of two activists. The paper draws on the data obtained from the in-depth semi-structured interviews with the activists and during a two-month monitoring of their Facebook and VKontakte pages. This qualitative research aims to reveal how the access to digital technologies and the use of own ICT skills allows the bisexual and transgender women to challenge and transgress the state-imposed conservative Russian discourse on ‘traditional’ sexuality and gender, as well as the discourses on gender and sexuality promoted within the Russian feminist and LGBTQ communities. Through a critical discourse analysis of the retrieved media data I investigate the discursive strategies of self-mediation applied by the activists and demonstrate how the women’s own cultural capital of intelligence and creativity informs their online activism.

Keywords: bisexuality, transgenderism, online activism, social media, LGBTQ, feminism

The year 2013 has come to be widely considered a turning point for contemporary Russia’s public discourses of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) issues. The Federal Law 195 Article 6.21, passed in June 2013, aimed to ban ‘propaganda’ of non-traditional sexual behaviour and relationships among minors, but its application turned out to be slightly different. On the one hand, it granted a means of censoring portrayals of LGBTQ people and limiting their visibility in the Russian media (Persson 2014; Edenborg 2017). On the other hand, similar to previous regional laws against ‘gay-propaganda’ (Cooper 2014; Sozaev 2012), the Federal Law came to be used against LGBTQ individuals, primarily against LGBTQ rights activists as a way of regulating and limiting their street-protests and activism in general (Kirichenko 2014; Wilkinson 2013). One of the responses

by LGBTQ rights activists to the new wave of regulations was the rise of online activism in social media, the two most popular and effective platforms being the global social networking website Facebook (www.facebook.com) and its Russian counterpart VKontakte (www.vk.com). Although Russia's state-promoted anti-LGBTQ policies and the LGBTQ community's responses to those policies have consistently attracted interest of scholars inside and outside of Russia (e.g. Kondakov 2014; Persson 2014; Sperling 2015; Pronkina 2016), there is a considerable lack of research specifically into bisexual and transgender rights discourses existent in contemporary Russia. By focusing on the online activism of bisexual and transgender Russian women rather than on the wider LGBTQ community's digital activism, I aim to bridge the gap in current scholarship between two marginalised social groups which suffer from double discrimination on the part of LGBTQ communities and of society as a whole, and which can be considered 'minorities within minorities' (Hagen et al. 2017).

This article presents the results of research conducted between November 2017 and January 2018, and explores some of the ways in which social networking sites Facebook and VKontakte are used as online-activism platforms by bisexual and transgender women. The paper focuses on two case studies of Saint-Petersburg based activists: Olga Masina and Ekaterina Messorosh¹. Selection of the two activists for this study was based on the following criteria: they identify as bisexual or transgender women and they are openly involved in bisexual rights activism or transgender rights activism. The aim of this qualitative research is to reveal how access to digital technologies and the use of their own ICT (information and communications technology) skills allow the bisexual and transgender women to challenge and transgress the state-imposed conservative Russian discourse on 'traditional' sexuality and gender, as well as discourses on gender and sexuality promoted within Russian feminist and LGBTQ communities. The paper seeks to address the following research questions: (1) What discourses do bisexual and transgender women promote and challenge in their online activity? (2) How do bisexual and transgender women mediate themselves in their social media activity?

The impression prior to the research was that due to widespread biphobia and transphobia in Russian society and in Russian LGBTQ and feminist communities alike, the primary focus of the bisexual and transgender women's activism would be to increase their own visibility within the LGBTQ and feminist communities, thus achieving validation and fighting the discrimination of non-monosexual (all sexualities and sexual identities outside of hetero- and homosexual dichotomy) and transgender people. The results of the research interviews and critical discourse analysis of collected media content supported this hypothesis: the social challenges of, respectively, monosexism (discrimination against non-monosexual, i.e. bisexual, pansexual, polysexual, asexual people) and bisexual erasure (exclusion of bisexual people and lack of bisexual visibility in public discourses) and transphobia and pathologisation of transgenderism are more important to the bisexual and transgender female activists than the problems that are acute for the wider LGBTQ and feminist communities, i.e. those of societal homophobia and sexism.

¹ The research presented in this article is an independent short-term research project connected to a larger body of research on LGBTQ discourses in contemporary Russian media for my PhD (ongoing since 2015).

Social movements and digital media: new opportunities for activists

In the same way that digital media have impacted politics in general, transforming top-down political hierarchies into participatory networks (Dartnell 2006), social movements and the notion of social activism have also evolved in the internet era. Protest voices (Couldry 2010) have been amplified by social media campaigns (Jenkins et al. 2016; Kang 2017; Kaun 2017), and citizen journalists generating amateur media-content on social media have come to be considered a reliable and trustworthy source of information (Bewabi and Bossio 2014). Since their appearance in the global media landscape, social networking sites, or social media, have evolved from focusing on ‘bonding social capital’, i.e. social bonds within a family or a small local or ethnic community, to ‘bridging social capital’ by providing links across ethnic groups or between various communities and ‘linking social capital’ by offering a new means of communication between political elites and the general public, and between different social classes (Flew 2014: 66–67). Social networks have become an integral part and a valuable tool of participatory media cultures across the globe (Flew 2014: 77–78). Like other internet resources, social networking sites can be viewed as dynamic horizontal communication spaces (Youngs 2013: 176), which, due to the shared internet tools’ characteristics of multiplicity and interactivity, are often perceived as resources with ‘radical liberatory potential’ (Curran et al. 2012: 151).

In contemporary Russia, a space prone to state surveillance and political monitoring (Uldam 2018), the internet offers its users such invaluable benefits as interactivity, participation and autonomy (Curran et al. 2012: 164; Denisova 2017), levels of which are especially high on social media platforms. Taking political and social protest to social networking sites such as Facebook and VKontakte provides activists with wider opportunities for contacting like-minded people and promoting individually-framed agendas. Social networking sites thus afford a means of coordinating and boosting collective action of various social movements: ‘collective actions are also becoming more inclusive, that is, they encourage participation of those who would not want to commit to the interpretations of a formal group and who would traditionally not be the target of organizational outreach efforts’ (Schumann 2015: 55).

In the current context, a ‘social movement’ is viewed as a network of individuals united by a shared collective identity (Kurylo and Dumova 2016); an ‘activist’ as an actor of a social movement (Kurylo and Dumova 2016: 131); and ‘social activism’ is interpreted broadly as any deliberate activity aimed at promoting agendas important to that particular social movement. Russian transgender rights and bisexual rights groups, which entered the public discourse in the late 2010s, are therefore approached as independent social movements, whose presence in political and media landscapes is evolving and growing, and the terms ‘bisexual rights activist’ and ‘transgender rights activist’ are used to refer to people voluntarily involved in any form of activity aimed to increase public awareness of bisexual and transgender issues and to promote bisexual and transgender rights in contemporary Russia.

The internet age offers a variety of digitally enabled strategies for social activism (Coban 2016), or e-tactics, such as online petitions, e-letter-writing campaigns, e-mail campaigns and boycotts (Earl and Kimport 2011: 14), which are available to anyone with access to the internet. Both the respondents of this study have been involved in such forms of activism: Ekaterina, for example, participated in an online petition criticising new Russian legislation pro-

posed in 2017 which aimed to regulate formal procedures of accessing sex reassignment surgery; Olga, for instance, conceived an open-letter campaign for introducing bi-inclusive vocabulary into all LGBTQ-related materials produced by Russian LGBTQ-organisations. However, in the context of Russia's ongoing legislative and censorship efforts to erase LGBTQ voices from the mediasphere, any attempt at promoting LGBTQ issues online and portraying LGBTQ individuals in digital media can be seen as LGBTQ-rights activism. Therefore, for the purpose of this analysis, online activism for bisexual and transgender rights is interpreted in a broad sense as any kind of digital media activity that aims to mediate images of bisexual and transgender people.

The vast opportunities for inclusion and collaboration intrinsic to social media platforms are crucial to many contemporary social movements: for example, to feminism and other social movements supporting women's rights. Although the digital divide still has a gendered dimension, in that women have suffered from inequalities in terms of access to the internet and other ICT (Ross and Byerly 2004: 187), the internet has also enabled a considerable empowerment for women through cyberpolitics and cyberfeminism (Ross and Byerly 2004: 197–198), especially so for women involved in grassroots and community groups, whose activism increasingly takes place on the internet (Ross and Byerly 2004: 200). Internet-based activism has become vital for such marginalised and discriminated social groups as bisexual and transgender women, representatives of 'minorities within minorities' (Brown et al. 2017; Egar 2005; Hagen et al. 2017; Ingram et al. 2017; Serano 2013; Shapiro 2004).

Perceived as a threat to the binary gender system of men and women and to the monosexual dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality, bisexual and transgender women are being discriminated and ostracised both by heterosexual society and by the homosexual cis-gender members of LGBTQ communities (Cashore and Tuason 2009; Garelick et al. 2017; Nutter-Pridgen 2015; Roberts et al. 2015), at the same time as suffering from sexism and other forms of societal oppression and violence against women. In the case of Russian bisexual and transgender women, this double discrimination on the grounds of sexuality and gender identity is heavily complicated and aggravated by the Russian anti-LGBTQ legislation that imposes and sustains the discourse of 'traditional' sexuality and gender roles, as well by the ubiquitous sexism and societal discrimination of women inherited by contemporary Russia from the Soviet and post-Soviet eras (Ashwin 2000; Baer 2009; Kon 1997). As bisexual and transgender rights activists, Olga and Ekaterina use internet and social media technologies to transgress societal and media discourses on gender and sexuality, becoming 'the locus of coordination and action' (Kurylo and Dumova 2016: 134) with the capability to create their own networks and potential to mobilize supporters.

When it comes to the concept of transgression as the process of crossing the boundaries of the self and cultural norms and of destabilizing the accepted social and gender norms (Jenkins 2003: 7; Hashamova et al. 2017: 2-3; Wolfreys 2008: 3), it is important to note that, although an important tool of social movements challenging societal norms and accepted laws and boundaries, online activism is not transgressive by default. It is therefore necessary to define the grounds for recognising certain types of activism as transgressive. In present-day Russia, social media activism is not the sole prerogative of male activists or of oppositional activists. For example, there are cases of personalised media such as Twitter or Facebook being used by pro-Kremlin agents competing for the right to contribute to the reinforce-

ment of the state brand 'Russia' (Strukov 2016: 186). One such agent is Margarita Simonian, the director of the pro-Kremlin international RT (previously, 'Russia Today') television channel, who uses her LiveJournal and Twitter accounts for promoting conservative ideology of patriotism and anti-western rhetoric (Strukov 2016:187), and whose online activism is therefore not politically transgressive. It can nevertheless be viewed as transgressive from the point of view gender norms, as Simonian's engagement in social media conservative activism challenges Russian 'traditional values' prescribing the woman's primary role as wife and mother within the boundaries of domesticity.

In this respect, by challenging the perceptions of the public domain in general and social activism in particular as spaces of hegemonic masculinity, the female activists for bisexual and transgender rights transgress Russian societal gender norms replicated on the Russo-phone internet. However, their transgression goes further than that and challenges the wider discourse of Russian LGBTQ-community's resistance to the Kremlin's anti-LGBTQ policies. The principal concern of LGBTQ people in contemporary Russia is the fight for equal rights, for being perceived as normal and conforming to society. It is therefore not surprising that the discourse of hegemonic resistance of the Russian LGBTQ-community replicates the binarism of the 'traditional values' conservative discourse by focusing primarily on the issue connected with cisgender gay masculinity and cisgender lesbian femininity. Any activity which threatens the community's fight for conformity can therefore be considered transgressive, as Christina R. Foust argues:

While hegemonic resistance also incites responses, its relationship to dominant powers is fundamentally different than that of transgression. From a hegemonic perspective, social change occurs as the result of crystallizing a new order, one which will replace the status quo following a revolutionary or reformist struggle. A hegemonic movement may manifest alternative ways of living, ones which also disrupt the normal operations of a dominant bloc. But hegemonic movements are typically vested in becoming the new status quo. (Foust 2010: 4)

As the two case studies analysed in this article demonstrate, both in terms of activist goals and mediated content, the online activism of Russian bisexual and transgender women is interconnected with the global agenda of bisexual and transgender rights activists, such as: the problems of bisexual erasure and monosexism (Corey 2017); the importance of bi-visibility in media (Capulet 2000, Yescavage and Alexander 2000); achieving depathologisation of transgenderism (Kirey-Sitnikova 2017); raising awareness of transgender issues in media and other public discourses (Capuzza 2014); and reclaiming feminist movements as trans-inclusive (Williams 2016). The primary purpose of Olga Masina's online activism goes beyond the problems of 'normalising' homosexuality and is aimed at deconstructing the binary concept of sexuality as hetero- vs. homosexuality. The primary objective of Ekaterina Mesorosh's online activism is to challenge and deconstruct the binary concept of gender as essentialist categories linked to biological sex, male or female – the concept which is widely accepted both in conservative Russian discourses and, partly, within the Russian LGBTQ community as a norm. In this respect, Olga's and Ekaterina's activism is transgressive towards the hegemonic Russian LGBTQ-activist discourse of normalcy and equality that focuses on gay men's and lesbian women's issues and rights.

Method

The hybrid methodology (Anderson 2012: 72) applied in this research is two-fold and entails analysing the narratives obtained during research interviews with the two activists participating in the project and analysis of media content data received through close monitoring of the activists' pages on two social media websites.

The two participants' involvement in bisexual and transgender rights respectively was identified during the monitoring of the Facebook community '*LGBT-Diskussionnaia Ploschadka*' (onwards referred to as 'LGBT Discussion Board') as part of the media data collection process for my primary PhD research. I have monitored this Russophone virtual community, which has 5,801 Russian speaking members from Russia and from outside Russia (numbers true for 31 January 2018), since 2015, and I noted that bisexual agenda tends to be promoted most frequently and regularly by a Saint-Petersburg activist Olga Masina, who identifies as a non-monosexual cisgender woman, while transgender issues are regularly promoted and discussed by a Saint-Petersburg activist Ekaterina Messorosh, who is also one of the moderators of the 'LGBT Discussion Board' community. It was clear from the posts, reposts and comments left by both the participants on the 'LGBT Discussion Board' wall that they identified as women and considered themselves part of the wider LGBTQ community; in other words, the two respondents' self-identification and self-definitions as 'bisexual and transgender women involved in bisexual and transgender rights activism' were accepted as the basis for nomination.

I contacted Ekaterina and Olga to recruit them for the research participation directly through the Facebook messaging service, and arranged 1.5-hour long-frame in-depth semi-structured research interviews. The interviews conducted in Russian language (although both the respondents are fluent in English, the mother tongue was chosen as a preferred means of communication) were recorded during the fieldwork in Saint Petersburg in December 2017. The primary aim of the interviews was to receive first-hand information on the goals, objectives and challenges the activists themselves identify as significant for their online activism, as well as to identify what vision or concept of online activism each of them had. The interviews also aimed to find out how the activists define and assess the value of digital technologies in general and, in particular, social media for promoting their activist agenda. The interviews also served to find out which social media outlets – public pages, forums, virtual communities – the women themselves considered as the primary platform for their social media activism.

It was identified during the interviews that Olga was active on two social media platforms, VKontakte and Facebook, administering and monitoring two Russophone virtual communities devoted to non-monosexual identities: 'Bisexuality' (<https://vk.com/bisexuality>) and 'Bisexual Rights Movement "LuBI"' (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1453792034842926/>). In contrast, Ekaterina considered her own personal Facebook page, where she posts and shares content in Russian and English languages, as the main platform for speaking out in support of transgender rights (<https://www.facebook.com/kate.messorosh>). Both the VKontakte and Facebook groups devoted to bisexuality are open and visible to all users of those social networking sites; the content on Ekaterina's personal page is also accessible and visible to all Facebook users. The two VKontakte and Facebook communities and the Face-

book page associated with the activists were monitored daily for the duration of two months, from 28 November 2017 to 28 January 2018. All publications, both original and shared posts (the majority of them in Russian, but some containing Anglophone content), were observed and totals of 86 publications were retrieved from the page 'Bisexuality'; 21 from 'Bisexual Rights Movement LuBI'; and twelve from Ekaterina Messorosh's personal Facebook page. The primary goal of this media content collection and subsequent analysis was to identify the ways in which the activist strategies and tactics named by the respondents during the interviews are implemented in actual media content generated by the respondents on the social networking sites.

The media content that was observed, retrieved, collected and analysed includes textual content in the form of posts or comments written in Russian; visual content in the form of images and video files; and links or reposts of content from external internet resources or other pages within the same social networking website, the reposted content being both in Russian and in English, the latter either supported with Russian translation or an explanatory note in Russian. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003; Fairclough et al. 2007) of the obtained media data was carried out in order to identify the discursive strategies of self-mediation and of the transgression of dominant discourses on sexuality and gender, as well as to demonstrate how the women's own cultural capital of intelligence and creativity informs their online activism. The textual and visual content was classified according to themes and types (genres) to determine what the activists themselves consider as an important agenda, with the sources of the content (own or reposts) taken note of. The textual content was further analysed through close reading techniques to identify discursive markers of the mediation of images of non-monosexual and non-cisgender women. In the case of Olga Masina's social networking pages, visual content was studied as part of Olga's creative approach to social media activism. According to the activist's responses during the research interview, creating memes or images with bisexual themes is as important to her as writing or translating textual content on the relevant topics, and the monitoring of her social media communities proved the significance of visual images for promoting bisexual agenda: shared posts and online materials are always accompanied by photos; Olga regularly publishes images in the colours of the bisexual flag (purple, pink and blue); and she often creates her own memes devoted to the problems of non-monosexual individuals, example of which are analysed further in the paper.

The audience reaction to Olga's and Ekaterina's activity (in the form of likes or reposts) is not considered at this stage of research as the primary focus of the analysis is on the themes and qualitative features of activist media content itself rather than on the relationship between the media content producers and their audiences. Another reason for not taking audiences' reaction into account is to avoid the assumption that the majority of social media users accessing Olga's and Ekaterina's content are by default bi- and trans-friendly individuals or people who identify as bisexual and transgender and are therefore by default (in general) supportive of the agenda Olga and Ekaterina are seeking to promote.

Agents of bisexual and transgender activism: activists' direct speech

The narratives obtained during the research interviews revealed significant similarities between the interviewees. Both the women agreed to take part in the research willingly and welcomed the opportunity to talk at length about their activism. Not only did they agree for their names to be used in the published research, it was them who suggested that their names are disclosed, which is an important research finding *per se*. It demonstrates that the decision to resort to social media activism does not necessarily reflect a female activist's striving for a safe online space but, on the contrary, might be driven by an opposite desire for visibility and openness. Both Olga and Ekaterina are very well-educated: Olga is a PhD candidate working on a thesis in philosophy and Ekaterina has a higher education degree in chemistry and works in this capacity at the Saint Petersburg office of an international company producing educational products for chemistry studies. Both women have been involved in civil rights activism, e.g. protests against corrupt presidential elections, and both admit that their LGBTQ and civil rights activisms overlap. However, despite these important similarities, their activist strategies and the essential characteristics of Olga's and Ekaterina's online activism are different.

According to Olga Masina, who identifies as a cisgender bisexual (or, using her preferred term, non-monosexual) woman, the regional law banning propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors which was introduced in Saint Petersburg in 2012 was the motivational factor for her activism. She joined activist groups protesting the passing of that law in the autumn of 2011 and started taking part in LGBTQ street actions and protests, becoming a volunteer for Russia's largest LGBTQ film festival '*Bok-o-Bok*' ('Side-by-Side') in 2013. In the same year she became part of the 'Bisexual Rights Movement "LuBI"' and since 2013 has been focusing primarily on bisexual activism. In her own words, the ratio of her offline and online activism is still 50/50, only due to her volunteering for the '*Bok-o-Bok*' festival, but in fact she is more involved in online activities because of her PhD studies taking up a lot of her time. Olga has also had to reduce her participation in street and public actions as she hopes to find employment in higher education upon the completion of her PhD; her future employers are likely to consider LGBTQ activism a sackable offence, according to the Federal Law against propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships among minors.

In the interview, Olga identified the most critical everyday issues which bisexual women face and which she addresses in her social media activism. These issues appear to correlate with the global agenda shared by bisexual people and bisexual rights movements (Capulet 2000; Corey 2017; Yescavage and Alexander 2000): monosexism, or discrimination against non-monosexual (bisexual, pansexual, omnisexual) people; biphobia on the part of the heterosexual majority and the LGBTQ community; sexual objectification of bisexual women; bisexual erasure and bisexual invisibility in public discourses, especially LGBTQ activist and media discourses. Thus, Olga's bisexual activism aims to fight those issues by increasing the visibility of bisexual people and establishing validation for non-monosexual individuals, especially women. As Olga admits, these objectives are achieved within the scope of feminist movement, which Olga herself supports.

Interestingly, when asked about how the process of social media activism evolves day by day, Olga describes it as a creative process, something that fascinates and inspires her:

I try to repost whatever there is of interest about bi. Sometimes I get creative and write something. When there have been no updates for a while, I search for something specific. Or sometimes I realise there has been nothing on a particular topic, I need to write about it.

By producing and publishing her own visual and textual content on non-monosexuality and by posting and reposting content related to non-monosexuality and non-monosexual people in visual arts, cinema, music and culture in general, Olga not only challenges the hegemonic discourse of monosexism but also mediates her own image as that of a creative person, interested in both consuming and producing cultural content.

Ekaterina Messorosh identifies herself as ‘a transgender woman, a lesbian, a LGBT rights activist and a little bit, if possible and time permitting, a femactivist’. According to Ekaterina, her involvement in civil rights activism came first: in 2012 she joined the oppositional grassroots movement against corrupt presidential elections and later became a member of a regional electoral committee, monitoring and observing local elections to prevent electoral vote fraud. In 2015 Ekaterina started her transgender transition and came out as a transgender woman, which marked the beginning of her transgender rights activism. As she explains, before the transition she was a different person: although she had always been a non-conforming individual highly sensitive to civil and human rights causes, it is the transgender transition and joining the Saint Petersburg transgender activist group ‘*T-Deistvie*’ (‘T-Action’) that provided her with a feeling of empowerment and that inspired her to take her activism to social media platforms, widening the target audience and promoting the transgender issues beyond the LGBTQ community.

Ekaterina reveals that prior to the transgender transition she was not a frequent user of any social media, due to the inhibiting effect of gender dysphoria on her personality and psychological state. However, after the transition she radically changed her attitude to social networking sites. It was after becoming involved in transgender activism that she realised the communicative and discursive value of Facebook as a safer space, offering more opportunities for discussions, debates and perfecting one’s rhetoric skills. Unlike Olga, Ekaterina does not recognise any activism potential in the Russian social networking site VKontakte, confessing that after her transgender transition she ‘cleansed’ her VKontakte page, deleting from it any personal information and images. In her own words, ‘VKontakte does not invite any disputes or discussions; the style of communication on the public pages is all about bullying the opponent; perhaps it is because this is a Russian website’. Her Facebook page, on the contrary, is consistently being used as a platform to share her personal lived experience (transgender transition, relationship with her wife and son, her professional activity), her experience as a transgender rights activism (participation in street actions, content on transgender rights issues Ekaterina thinks of interest) and a feminist (content on women’s rights, problems and empowerment).

Based on Ekaterina’s own account, her strategies in the social media activism are defined by a ‘scientific’ rational approach she normally takes when dealing with any events and phenomena. Ekaterina views social media platforms as a field of rhetorical debate where she challenges and contests transphobic, sexist and anti-feminist discourses. She explains that, since no opinion, attitude or point of view can be completely objective and true, the primary

goal of her online activism is to convince the potential readers in the superiority of her opinions, attitudes and views over those of her opponents, sometimes even resorting to manipulation or emotional attacks. By consciously provoking her opponents to show emotional reactions and to give irrational responses to her comments, Ekaterina achieves an important goal of demonstrating to whoever is reading the discussion thread that her own calm and unemotional rhetoric is consistent with her scientifically based rational views, whereas the (for example, transphobic) rhetoric of her opponents does not bear any criticism as it is merely emotional, with no substantial factual base. The persona she generates is therefore transgressive in terms of societal gender norms, which view emotions and irrational argumentation as a feminine characteristic.

Taking her activism outside the relatively safe space of a virtual LGBTQ community, Ekaterina confesses that she considers her own Facebook profile page to be more important for her activist goals than any LGBTQ-specific virtual social media group, therefore she posts and reposts on her own page content which promotes feminist, transgender and queer agendas, as well as photographs and textual account of her own lived experience. Interestingly, it is the personal encounter with transphobia within the feminist movement and transphobic and homophobic abuse that followed Ekaterina's appearance in the regional media that helped her perfect her rhetoric, select discursive strategies of self-mediation and boost her activist potential. Through disputes with trans exclusionary feminists (TERF) and homophobic individuals, Ekaterina learnt to overcome psychological triggers, gained insights into the argument and logic of her opponents, developed a strong foundation for her own position and views, based on relevant scholarship and scientifically proven facts rather than emotions and opinions. Thus, activating her own cultural capital, i.e. intelligence, and using the technological opportunities offered by Facebook, Ekaterina manages to challenge the discourses she finds discriminatory.

The results of the research interviews demonstrate that both the bisexual and transgender activists ascribe high discursive, political and social value to their online activism on social media. They both consistently use their preferred social media pages to promote the issues they find essential and to challenge opposing views. The following paragraphs aim to illustrate how this social media activism is implemented.

The social media platforms of bisexual and transgender activism

The three social media pages chosen for the current analysis reflect not only the digital activism strategies of the two activists, but also the general trends in contemporary Russian social media activism. The Russian social networking site VKontakte, which is accessed by 97 million users every month², is the most popular platform among the Russian social media users. Although VKontakte's audience is quite diverse, the website is especially popular among younger users - children, teenagers, young adults, persons in their thirties. This factor makes VKontakte a valuable tool for Russian digital activists to target a younger audience. However, the platform also poses potential threats to LGBTQ activists as it is known to be regularly monitored and censored by Russian police forces in search of profiles and commu-

² See, for example, statistics available on the rusability.ru website: <https://rusability.ru/internet-marketing/smm/klyuchevaya-smm-statistika-na-2018-god/>

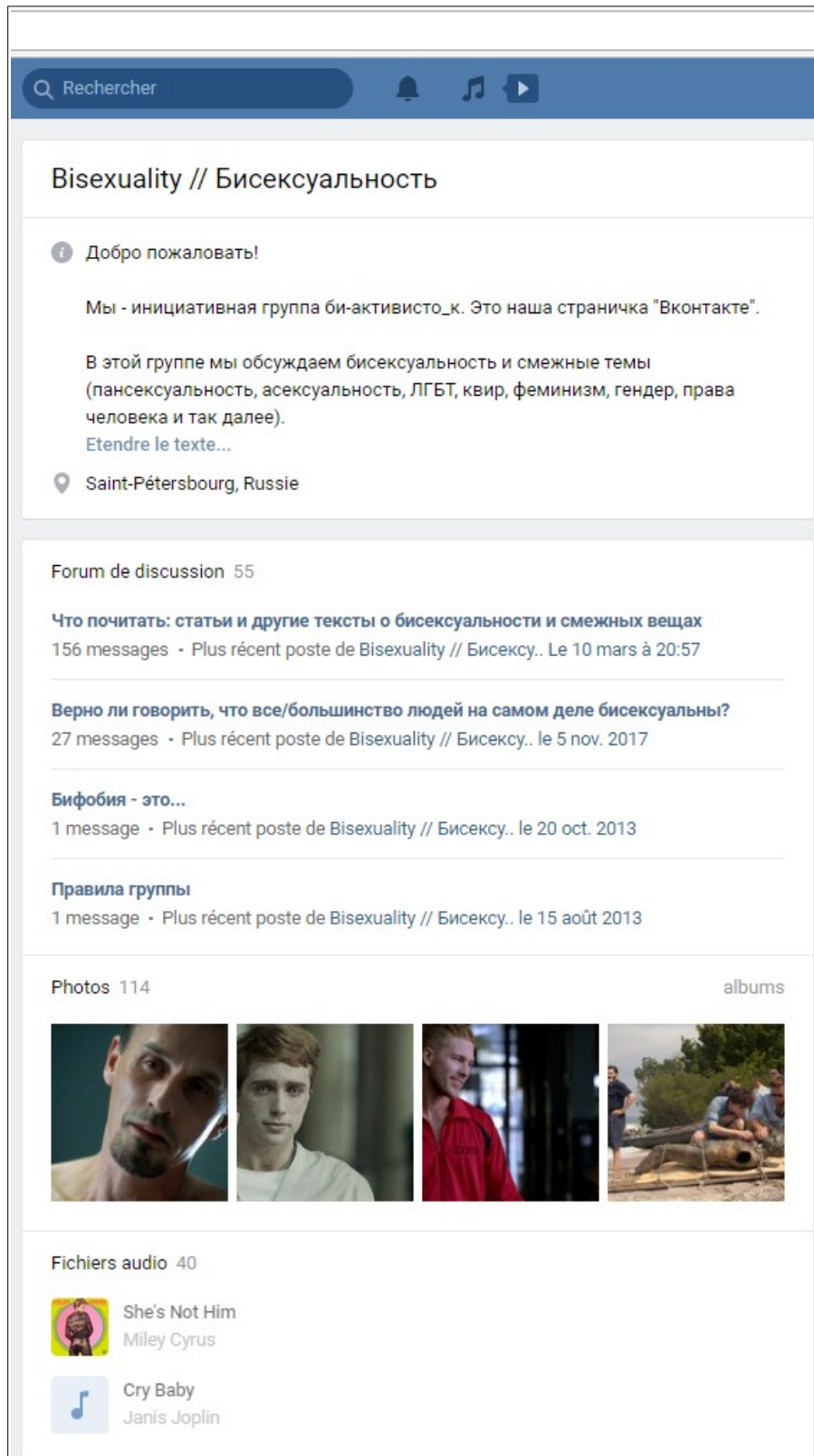
nities promoting content which could be considered harmful to minors or illegal (e.g. racist or fascist slogans; criticism of Russian Orthodox religion; information about methods of committing suicide; information about properties of various drugs or drug dealing; information about non-heteronormative sexualities which can be accessible to minors). It is also known that Russian police and Federal Security Service can potentially obtain an unrestricted access to the personal profile, messages and records of an individual user whom they suspect of promoting illegal or harmful content. Thus, on the one hand, vk.com enables activists to create a virtual community with a large young active audience, but on the other hand, the fear of prosecution makes it difficult for individual activists or bloggers to express their views freely on vk.com. On the contrary, Facebook, the most popular social network with a global audience of 2.19 billion monthly users³, is not subject to censorship or control on the part of Russian police forces, which makes it a popular platform for Russian oppositional bloggers and activists. It is, however, far less popular with young Russian users and therefore offers limited opportunities for activists in terms of reaching out to the target audience.

The reflection of these trends can be seen in the quantitative and qualitative features of the three social media pages analysed in the current paper. The vk.com community for bisexual people 'Bisexuality' has 4,384 members (numbers true for 31 January 2018), whereas the Facebook open virtual community 'Bisexual Rights Movement "LuBI"' has 189 members (numbers true for 31 January 2018). The content published and reposted by Olga is the same on both pages, but the vk.com wall demonstrates more interaction and participation on the part of the other members of the virtual community; in other words, the vk.com audience is not only more numerous, but also more active and more engaged. For Ekaterina, according to her own words, VKontakte offers no activist opportunities at all precisely due to no freedom of discussion on that social media platform. Although she has a vk.com profile, that is only kept as means to interact with friends or family and no activist content is shared there. Ekaterina's Facebook, however, is viewed by her as her primary activist platform. By making her page and all her posts public rather than open to friends only, Ekaterina turns her personal Facebook profile into a sort of personal blog, which makes her target audience not only the 367 Facebook friends (numbers true for 31 January 2018) linked to her profile, but potentially any Facebook user. Ekaterina's profile and the 'Bisexuality' and 'LuBI' pages existing independently of one another, all the three pages intersect in the common virtual space of the Facebook community for Russian speaking LGBTQ individuals 'LGBT Discussion Board': Olga reposts content from 'Bisexuality' and 'LuBI' onto the wall of the 'LGBT Discussion Board', so does Ekaterina, and both take an active part in discussing their respective agendas in the community forum.

The VKontakte public page 'Bisexuality', like other community pages on that social networking site, contains the following features: a brief description of the community; a list of members with links to their profile pages; a discussion forum; links to related or friendly public and community pages; photograph and video uploads; document uploads; links to the events connected with the community; list of contacts; and a wall where the community administrators and members can post and discuss content. Monitoring of the 'Bisexuality' page focussed on the community wall, with the posts by the community administrators and members interpreted as media publications or media content units.

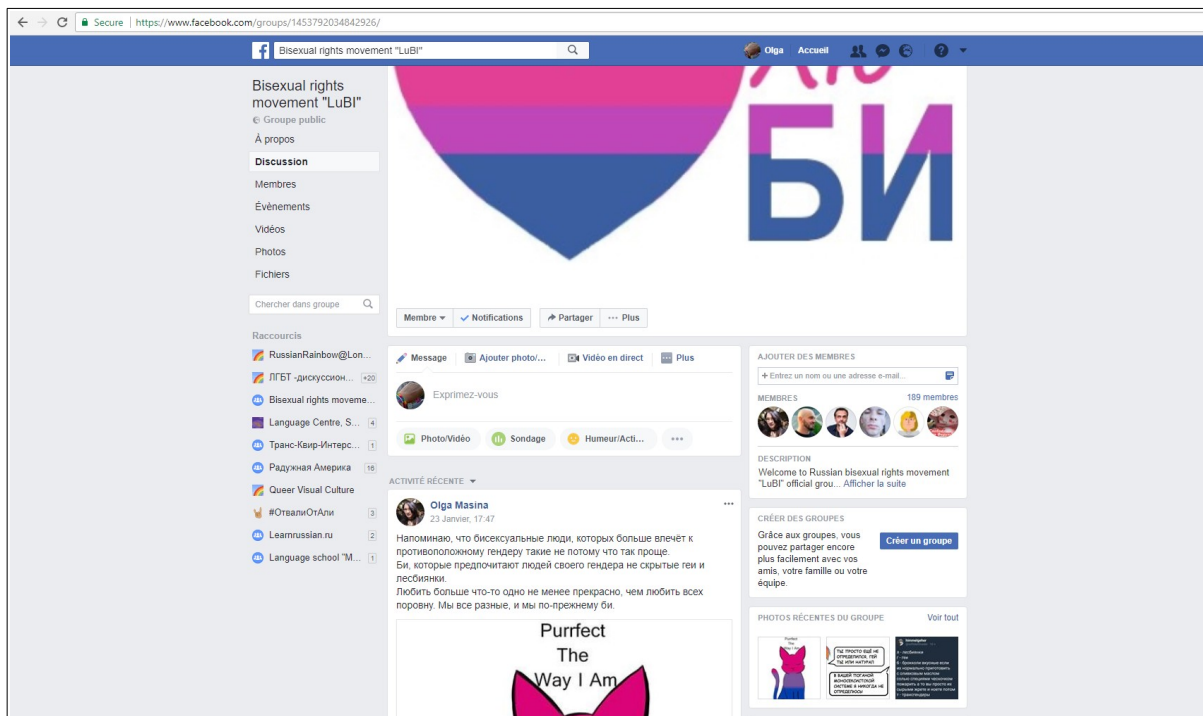
³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>

Image 1. A screenshot of the community wall of the VKontakte page ‘Bisexuality’



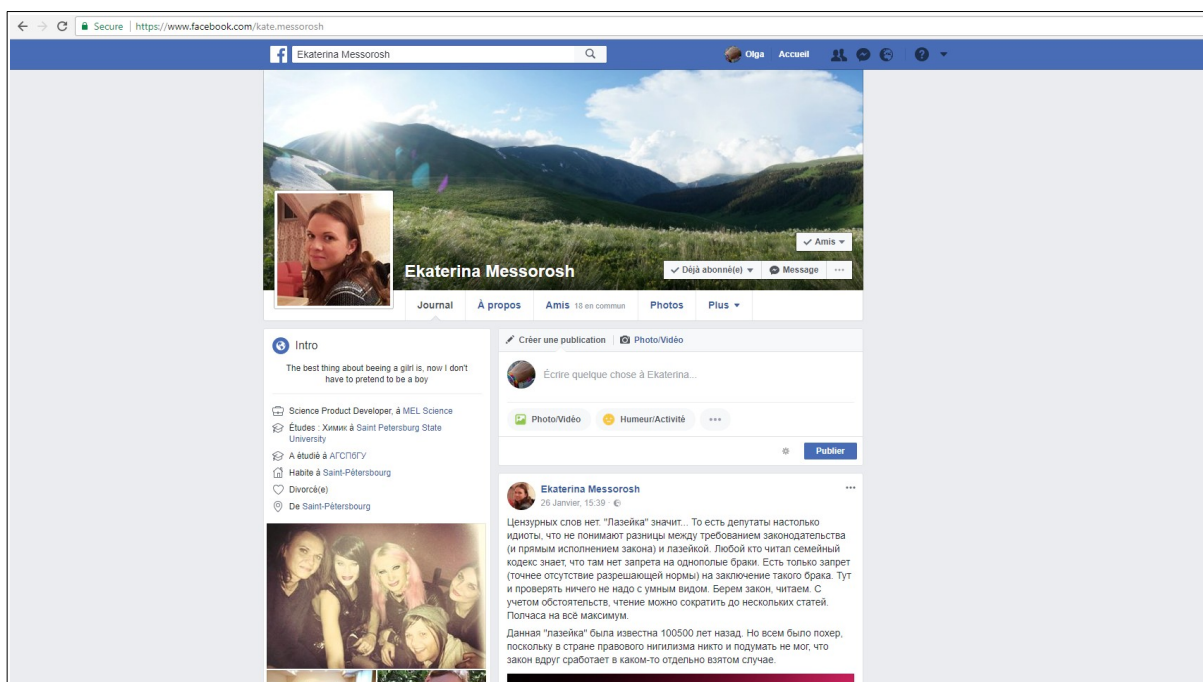
Source: <https://vk.com/bisexuality> (31.01.2018)

Image 2. A screenshot of the discussion page of the Facebook group ‘Bisexual rights movement “LuBI”’



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1453792034842926/> (31.01.2018)

Image 3. A screenshot of Ekaterina Messorosh’s Facebook page



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/kate.messorosh> (31.01. 2018)

The Facebook open virtual community ‘Bisexual Rights Movement “LuBI”’, being a standard Facebook group, offers its members the following options: a brief description of the group; a discussion forum where all the members can post and comment on content; a list of members with links to their profile pages; a list of events related to the group; videos; photographs; a list of uploaded documents. The monitoring of the ‘LuBI’ group focussed on the discussion page, with the posts by the community members approached as media publications or media content units.

Ekaterina’s account of her online activism reveals patterns different from those applied by Olga. In Ekaterina’s own words, apart being an active member of the Facebook group of the Saint Petersburg transgender-rights organisation ‘*T-Deistvie*’ followed by 218 people (numbers true for 31 January 2018), and apart from being a moderator of the ‘LGBT Discussion Board’ Facebook group, she views her own personal Facebook profile page as a major resource of her online activism: she expects her Facebook friends to see her content in their news feed and thus hopes to raise their awareness of the topics and issues she finds important. The monitoring of Ekaterina’s profile Facebook page focussed on her journal, with retrieved media content including Ekaterina’s own posts, the content she reposted and the comments she left in the discussion threads under her journal posts.

Social media activism in action: themes, tools and goals

Despite differences in their approaches to social media activism, both activists demonstrate similarities in selecting the communication tools offered by their preferred social networking websites. Based on the collected media data, the activities through which Olga and Ekaterina fulfil their activist goals can be classified into several types. One way to promote the relevant agenda is by creating and publishing one’s own unique textual and visual content as a separate post. Another way is to repost Russophone content created by other LGBTQ-rights activists or by various media outlets (e.g. the news and entertainment portal *meduza.io*, which consistently produces LGBTQ-friendly materials). Anglophone content can be either reposted in the original language and accompanied by an explanatory post or can be translated into Russian and posted with a link to the original online publication. Another activist tool is their own English to Russian translation of relevant materials from Anglophone websites or social media (e.g. the Anglophone website *bisexual.org*); sharing links to online petitions and joint (electronic or virtual) letters to support a cause (e.g. a petition against the suggested new legislation regulating the procedures of obtaining permission for changing identity documents after a transgender transition – a legislative project which was widely criticised in the Russian transgender community). Using the ‘comment’ function on both Facebook and V Kontakte is also used as an activist tool that allows Olga and Ekaterina to express their own views on bisexual and transgender people’s problems.

For the purpose of this research, both the activists’ original content and reposted publications are considered. The rationale for this is the proposition that sharing and reposting content produced by other agents is a discursive strategy as valuable as creating and publishing own content: it is the social media user who decides which publication to approve and which to remove from a common discussion page; which content is worth sharing and commenting

on and which is not; which content is helpful in promoting and sustaining their views and beliefs, and which shared content will have a desired effect on the audience.

The themes developed through the tools outlined above differ between the activists, which is consistent with general bisexual and transgender rights agendas. As the monitoring and analysis of the content in 'Bisexuality' and 'LuBI' shows, Russian bisexual online activism focuses on the themes and objectives significant for non-monosexual people and activists in western countries as well. These themes include the problems of bisexual erasure and of monosexism and biphobia experienced by non-monosexual people on the part of the LGBTQ community and wider society (society as a whole). The objectives involve the task of increasing bi-visibility (visibility of bisexual identities and individuals) in the public discourses and biphobia experienced from the LGBTQ community and wider society (society as a whole); self-advocacy, or the mediating images of bisexual people and promoting the agenda connected with bisexual rights.

The themes and objectives singled out as significant in transgender online activism demonstrated an agenda similar to the topics and issues shared by transgender rights activists in western countries. One of the identified objectives is the task of battling against the medicalisation of transgenderism and against the societal gatekeepers of access to transgender transition opportunities, which is achieved through self-advocacy and depathologisation of transgenderism. Another important theme is challenging the common discourse of 'true transsexualism' (often referred to as '*iadernii transseksualizm*' in the Russian-speaking LGBTQ community) and 'not true' transgenderism. Promoting trans-inclusive language and campaigning for inclusion of transgender people into the LGBTQ and feminist communities, as well as into wider society prove to be as significant for Russian transgender rights activists as for their western counterparts.

The following paragraphs illustrate the practical implementation of the themes and objectives highlighted above on the activists' social media platforms and explore the discursive value of self-mediation expressed on those platforms.

Creativity as a tool of transgressing the discourse of monosexism and biphobia

The first interesting research finding obtained from the monitoring of the Facebook and VKontakte page administrated and moderated by Olga Masina is the dramatic difference in the number of retrieved media publications. The data pool for 'Bisexuality' on vk.com amounts to 86 publications in total (73 by other members of the community and thirteen created by Olga specially for the page or reposted from her personal profile in vk.com), whereas for the Facebook page 'LuBI' the figures are 21 publications in total, comprising seventeen reposted publications or other members' content and four posts created by Olga. Olga herself does not express preference for one or the other page, which is confirmed by the fact that the VKontakte and Facebook pages are synchronised, i.e. when Olga publishes something on the vk.com page this content appears automatically on the facebook.com page, and vice versa.

A plausible explanation for the quantitative differences between the content of the two pages seems to be the significantly larger audience in the case of the VKontakte community and a higher level of engagement and involvement of that audience. One of the indicators of the higher level of engagement of the VKontakte page audience is the wide variety of sources for reposting content and the higher number of publications posted by community members.

For example, fifteen of the publications containing reposted content were from the VKontakte community pages that have no analogue groups on Facebook, i.e. whose target audience was solely vk.com users.

Although certain discrepancies were observed in the number of media publications on 'Bisexuality' and 'LuBI', the discursive value of the published content is consistent. Quite naturally, the most frequently mediated issues are the problems of the bisexual community. For example, 19 publications (four reposts on Facebook, nine reposts on VKontakte and six VKontakte publications of Olga's authorship) are devoted to bi-visibility and bisexual coming-out of celebrities and politicians. The problem of bisexual identity and its independence of both homosexual and heterosexual identities is raised in six publications (four of Olga's publications on vk.com, one of Olga's publications and one repost accompanied by Olga's comment on Facebook). Three items of media content are devoted to the problem of monosexism and bi-inclusivity in LGBTQ organisations (one repost on vk.com, two of Olga's original publications - one in the 'Bisexuality' group on vk.com and one on Facebook). Two reposts with Olga's comments on vk.com focus on the problem of heterophobia applied against bisexual people who are involved in a heterosexual relationship. One repost on Facebook and one on VKontakte are devoted to the issue of biphobia in a broad sense.

Apart from the bisexual rights agenda, Olga's social media pages demonstrate open and consistent support of other non-monosexual and non-binary identities and sexualities. Five of the seventeen Facebook reposts, fifteen of the 73 VKontakte reposts, two of Olga's four original Facebook publications and two of Olga's thirteen VKontakte publications address the limitations of the binary system of gender and sexuality by validating polyamory and pansexual relationships and by celebrating queer and non-binary identities. Olga also promotes transgender rights issues and shows support and sympathy to the feminist agenda, e.g. by reposting a publication about the #MeToo social media campaign and the black-outfit flashmob among prominent actresses of the US film industry to protest against the sexual harassment of women in the entertainment industry at the 2018 Oscars.

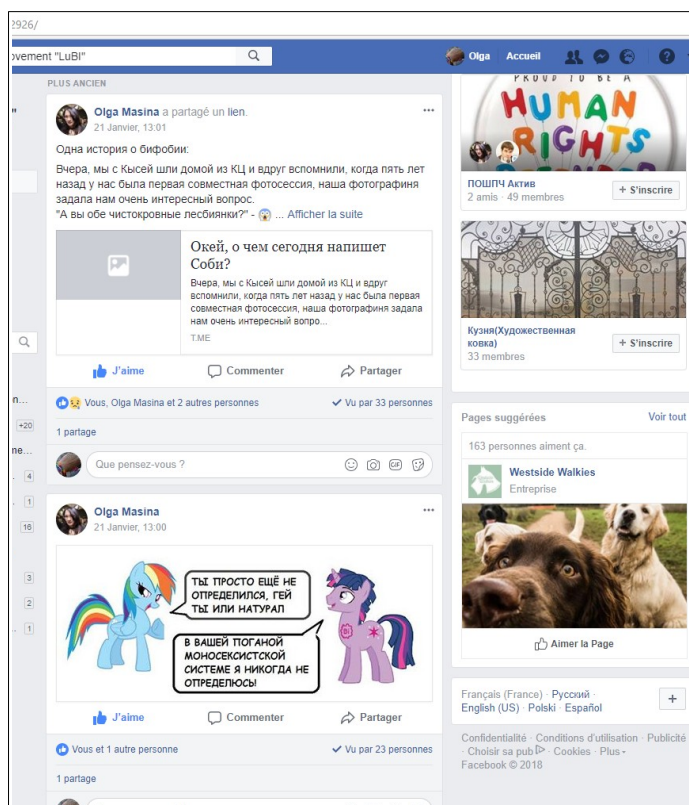
What strikes as an interesting research observation in analysing the 'Bisexuality' and 'LuBI' social media pages, is the significant number of own and reposted publications connected in one way or another with creative processes, creative personae and with culture and art in general, which supports arguments made elsewhere that non-monosexual individuals tend to demonstrate a higher interest in and inclination to arts and creative subjects (Konik and Crawford 2004). This can involve references to non-monosexual characters in popular dramas and TV series, e.g. Magnus Bane from the *Mortal Instruments* TV show [2016-2018, developed by Ed Decter, multiple directors,] or Loki from the film saga *Thor* [2011-2017, dir. Kenneth Branagh]. It can be a link to a review on films or performances tackling bisexuality, e.g. the ballet *Nureev* [2017] directed by Kirill Serebrennikov in Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre, the coming-of-age drama *Call Me By Your Name* [2017, dir. Luca Guadagnino], which was highly praised by LGBTQ and general audiences alike, or the documentary film about the late singer Whitney Houston *Can I Be Me* [2017, dir. Nick Broomfield,], which was shown as part of the Russian LGBT Film Festival 'Side-by-Side' [Bok-o-Bok]. Another such example is Olga's own translation of a detailed analysis of the report 'Where We Are on TV' by the United States LGBT-rights organisation GLAAD (formerly known as Gay &

Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), which reveals how the visibility of bisexual characters on television has evolved.

Not only does Olga repost content related to various aspects of creativity, but she also produces her own textual (articles, commentaries, appeals) and visual (memes, images, photographs) content, thus increasing the discursive potential of her publications in terms of effect on the prospective audience. The images below show a few of the samples of Olga's creative work, which she regularly publishes both on the 'Bisexuality' and 'LuBI' social media pages.

For example, to express criticism of the monosexist approach to sexuality common not only among the heterosexual majority but also among LGBTQ communities, Olga created a meme using characters of a popular cartoon *My Little Pony* [2010 - present, dir. by Jayson Thiessen], where the rainbow-coloured pony, who symbolises the homosexual community, tells the pony that is coloured in purple, pink and blue (the colours of the bisexual pride flag) and that stands for the bisexual community, that the latter has simply not made up their mind yet whether they are gay or straight (see image 4). This remark reflects the attitudes bisexual people have to face regularly, when they are expected (both by heterosexual and homosexual people alike) to 'choose sides'. The bisexual pony responds to that by pointing out it is impossible to make up one's mind or choose sides in the monosexist system which leaves non-monosexual people no choice whatsoever.

Image 4. A screenshot of the community wall of the Facebook group 'LuBI' containing Olga Masina's own creative content: in the picture the rainbow pony tells the bisexual pony that the latter has not made up their mind whether they are gay or straight; the bisexual pony replies they will never make up their mind in this damned monosexist system.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1453792034842926/> (31.01.2018)

Another example of content criticising monosexism and emphasising bisexuality as a valid sexuality regardless of the person's behaviour and choice of partner is the image of a

cat coloured in bisexual pride flag colours with the words ‘Purrfect The Way I am’ (see image 5). Olga published this image on the wall of the community with a reminder that, no matter what the romantic preferences of a bisexual person are (whether they are attracted to one gender more than the other or equally to both), bisexuality is beautiful and equal to other sexualities. This kind of anti-monosexist content demonstrates that the goals and objectives of Russian bisexual activists are in line with social media campaigns led by bisexual activists globally (e.g. the ‘#stillbisexual’ hashtag on Twitter). It also proves that bisexual activists have full access to information about global activist trends, regardless of the Russian legislation aiming to restrict access to information on LGBTQ issues.

Image 5. A screenshot of the community wall of the vk.com group ‘Bisexuality’ showing Olga’s use of bisexual flag colours in her own creative publications. The text above the image says: ‘May we gently remind you that people who have stronger preferences for the opposite gender are not like that because it is easier. Bi people who prefer people of their own gender are not closeted gays and lesbians. To love one is as beautiful as to love all equally. We are all different, and we are still bi’.

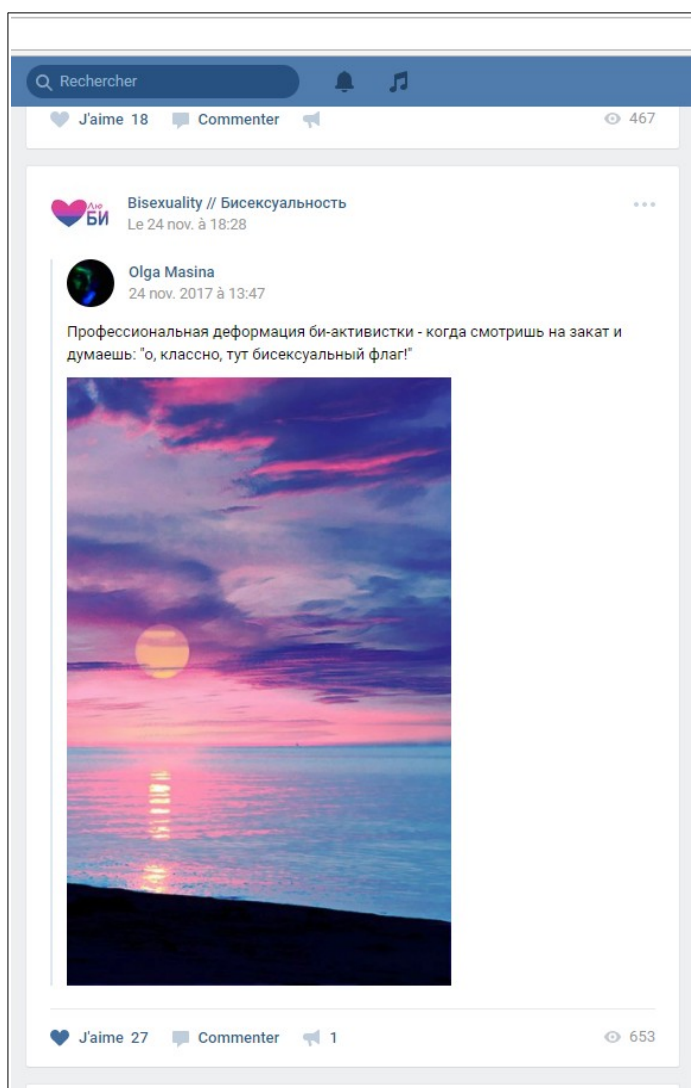
Source: <https://vk.com/bisexuality> (31.01.2018)



Another image used as an illustrative example here (see image 6) fulfils two objectives: it contributes to promoting bisexual visibility and, in a humorous way, it describes a bisexual activist’s emotions and feelings. The photo is of the sunset on the seaside, where the skies and water are coloured purple, pink and blue. To the photo Olga added a comment saying that it is a sign of an activist’s professional deformation when they look at the sunset and see the bisexual pride flag. This post was first published on her personal vk.com profile and then reposted on the ‘Bisexuality’ community wall. Publishing visual content in the colours of the bisexual (or transgender, asexual, homosexual or other relevant) pride flag is a common tool among LGBTQ activists worldwide, which makes Olga’s post promoting bi-visibility potentially resonant with and clear to a wide bisexual audience, Russophone or non-Russophone.

This example also demonstrates how Olga uses references to her own emotions, feelings and impressions when promoting the visibility of bisexuality and bisexual people.

Image 6. A screenshot of the community wall of the vk.com group ‘Bisexuality’ showing Olga’s use of the bisexual flag colours in her own creative publications. The text above the photograph says: ‘Professional deformation of a bisexual female activist – when you are watching the sunset and thinking, ‘Oh, cool, there is a bisexual flag there!’



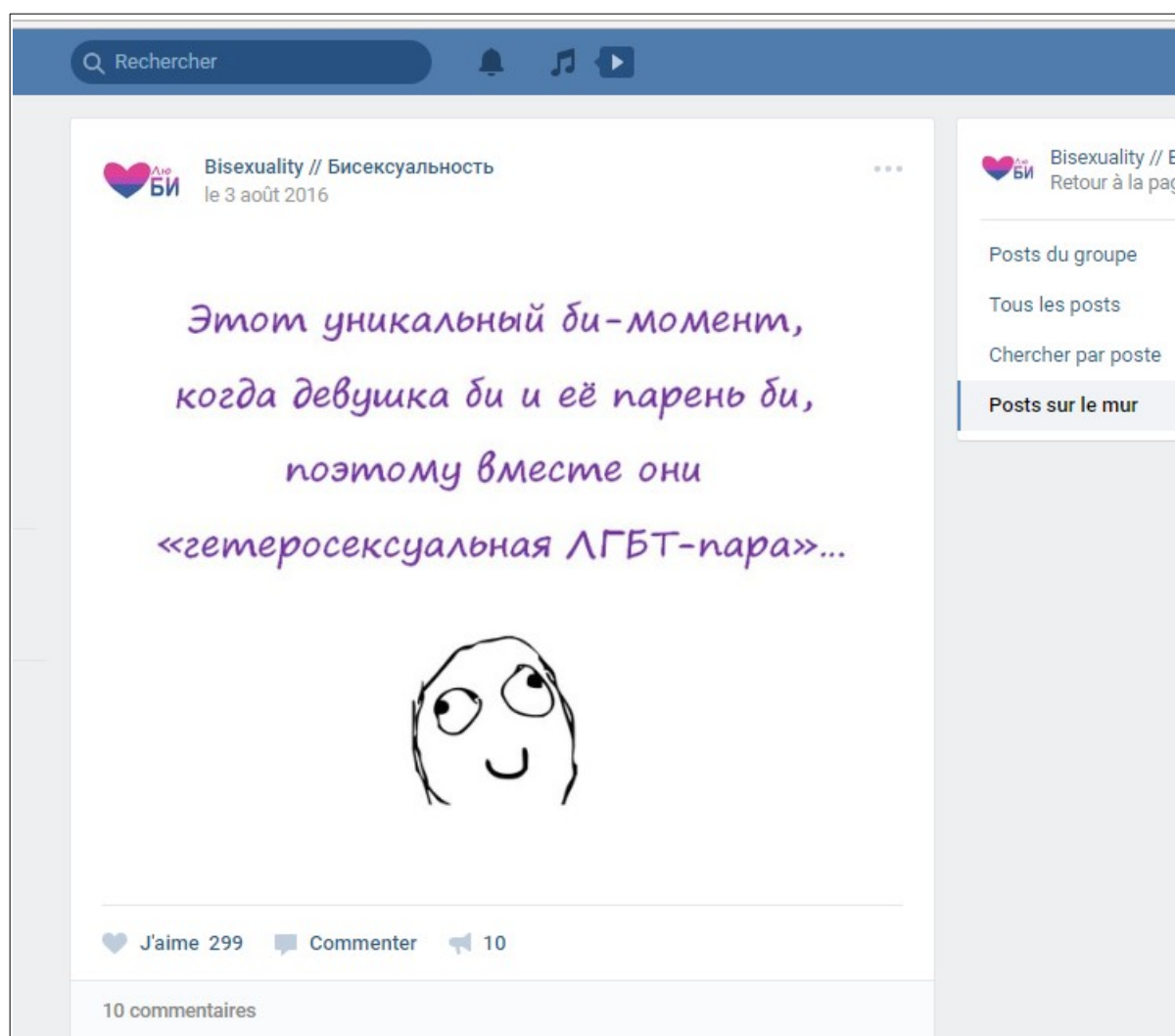
Source: <https://vk.com/bisexuality>
(31.01.2018)

Another example quoted here aims to demonstrate the use of humour and irony in promoting a bisexual agenda (see image 7). Olga created this post in August 2016 and it gained the maximum audience response becoming, according to Olga, the most ‘liked’ post of the community so far⁴. In this post Olga used the ‘Derp of Herpuary’ meme face and the reference to the popular internet meme ‘That unique moment’. The meme image is placed at the bottom of the picture, and the text above it says: ‘That unique bi-moment when the guy is bi and the girl is bi, so together they are a “heterosexual LGBT couple”’. The ‘DERP’ meme face generally used to refer to stupidity, Olga mocks the monosexist vision which defines anyone in a relationship with a person of the opposite gender as ‘heterosexual’, allowing the use of oxymoronic concepts like ‘heterosexual LGBT’. Mocking the absurdity and stupidity

⁴ After I had shared the interim results of the current analysis with the two activists, Olga recommended including this image into the paper as an example of content most popular with the community audience.

of the monosexist lens, Olga reinforces bisexuality as a valid sexuality and calls for rejecting, criticising and fighting against monosexism.

Image 7. A screenshot of an earlier (03.08.2016) post in vk.com group ‘Bisexuality’ created by Olga, which contains a variation on a popular internet meme and which collected the highest number of ‘likes’ from the group subscribers. The text on the post says: ‘That unique bi-moment when the guy is bi and the girl is bi, so together they are a “heterosexual LGBT couple”’.



Source: https://vk.com/wall-52159480_7680 (31.01.2018)

As the findings outlined in the paragraphs above demonstrate, the case study of Olga Masina’s pages ‘Bisexuality’ and ‘LuBI’ on the social networking websites Facebook and VKontakte reveals how the use of social media technologies opens up new opportunities for creativity and activism, for reaching out to a wider audience and for promoting opinions and attitudes which strongly contradict and transgress state-imposed heteronormative discourses

of traditional sexuality, as well as the monosexism that is common to the LGBTQ community and Russian society as a whole.

Logical argumentation as a tool of transgressing essentialist transphobic discourses

Upon completion of the two-month monitoring process, twelve publications were retrieved from Ekaterina's profile page on Facebook, all of them presenting reposted content supplied with the activist's commentary containing her evaluation or criticism of the content. Five posts are devoted to wider LGBTQ issues: same-sex marriages and LGBT families (three publications) and homophobia (two publications). Three publications tackle specifically a transgender rights agenda: transphobia and trans-inclusivity (two posts) and depathologisation of non-cisgender people, e.g. intersex individuals (one post). Three of the retrieved posts focus on women's rights and feminism: the problem of sexual harassment and sexual violence against women (two publications); women's empowerment (one publication); and issues of same-sex marriages and LGBT families (three publications).

The range of the topics is consistent with the problems and issues Ekaterina pronounces to be important to her activist stance, and the highest discursive value in her publications is that of her own comments.

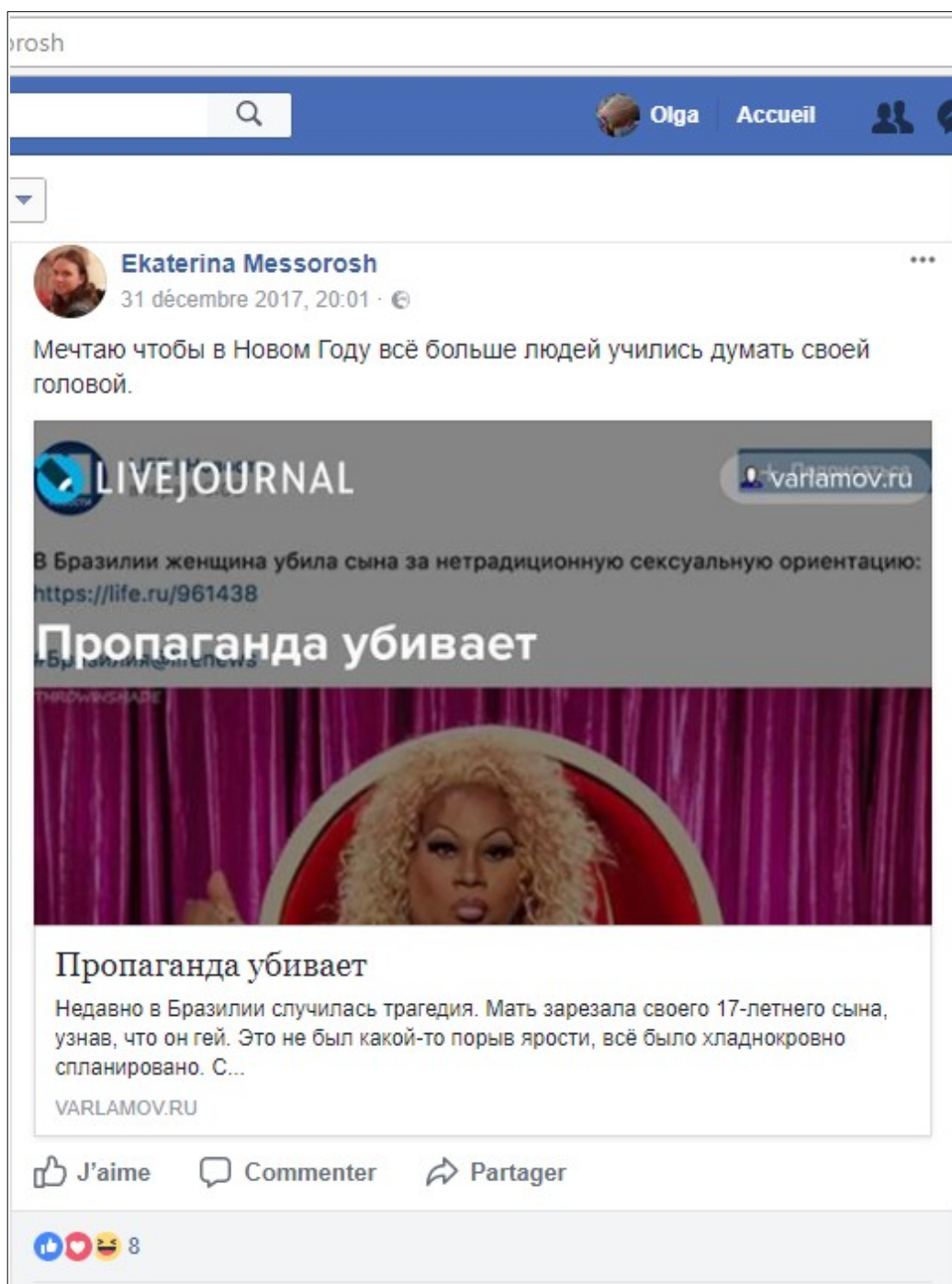
In-depth analysis of Ekaterina's profile page content immediately reveals the importance of a rationalised logical argumentation and normalising approach when it comes to the issues of transgenderism, non-heteronormativity or non-cisnormativity. For example, on New Year's Eve (31.12.2017) she shared a LiveJournal⁵ post entitled '*Propaganda ubivaet*' ('Propaganda Kills'), which tells about a murder of a Brazilian gay man by his own mother. Ekaterina supplied this content with a comment which calls for people to learn to make their own decisions and not to believe propaganda (see image 8); thus, the activist celebrates the rational approach to non-heteronormative sexualities and condemns 'homosexual panic' and other types of irrational emotional reactions to homosexuality.

As part of her ongoing criticism of essentialist interpretations of sex and gender, Ekaterina reposted an article describing an intersex individual's experience (see image 9) entitled '*Ia interseks, i eto normal'no*' ('I am intersex, and it is normal') and published on the entertainment portal takiedela.ru. One of Ekaterina's friends commented on the publication, wondering what makes normality so attractive to everyone and declaring that, to her, normality is boring; therefore, she prefers to be 'abnormal', to which Ekaterina replied:

This is all true while we talk about normality in its everyday sense. But in this case the issue of normality is closely connected with medicine and unnecessary imposed 'normalising' surgery. In that sense, the discourse of expanding the norm makes a lot of sense. We are normal, our body is normal, don't touch us unless we ask you to! In the same way different orientations are variations of the norm, as well as gender identities. Not some fab normality (although it sounds unbelievably cool), but diverse normality. The acknowledgment of the variability of the norm is the way to depathologisation.

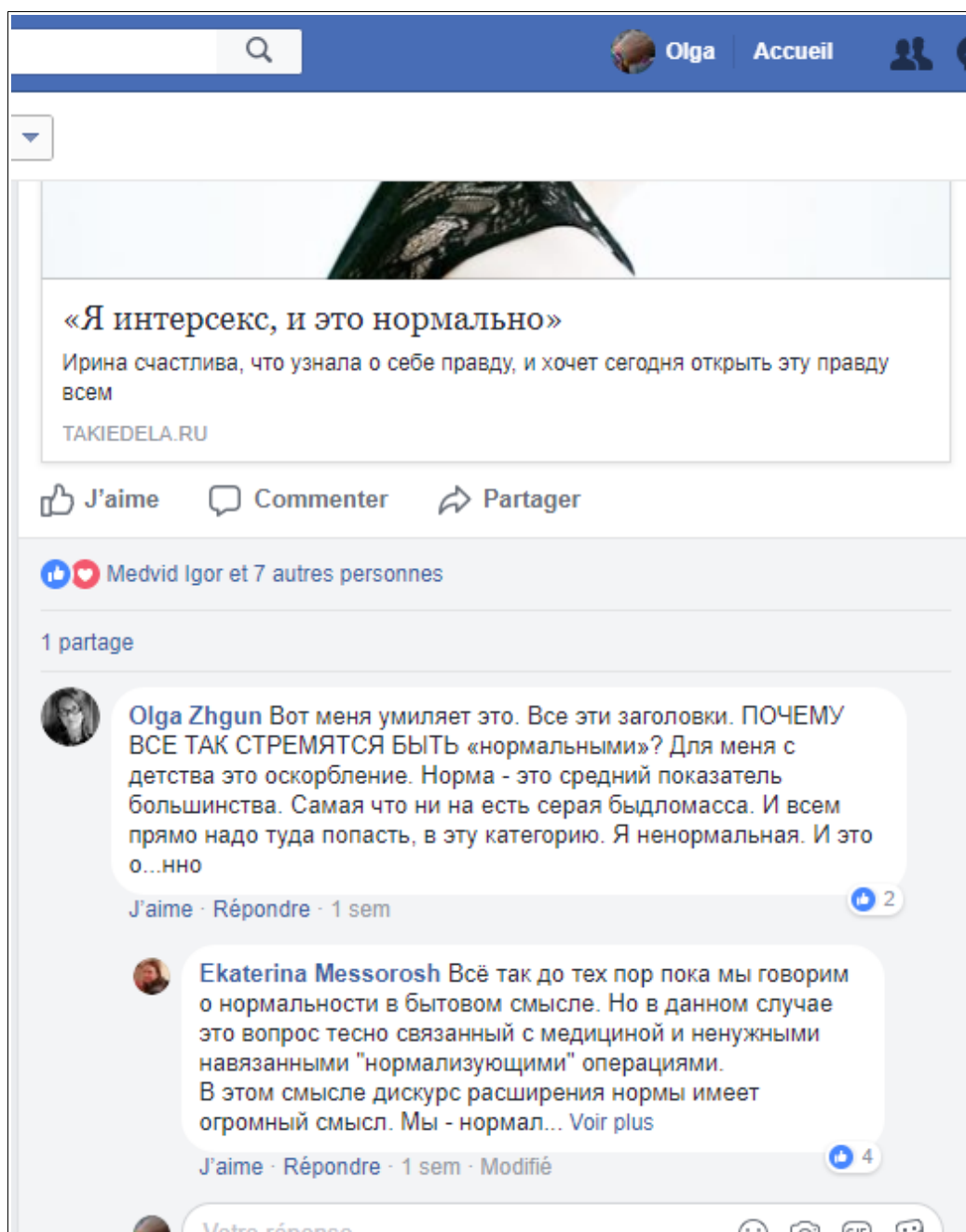
⁵ Russian social networking service for blogging.

Image 8. A screenshot of a reposted publication on Ekaterina's Facebook page. Ekaterina's comment above the reposted publication says: 'My dream is that in the New Year more people should learn to think using their own brain'.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/kate.messorosh> (31.01.2018)

Image 9. A screenshot of a reposted publication on Ekaterina's Facebook page with Ekaterina's own comment.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/kate.messorosh> (31.01.2018)

This example demonstrates how Ekaterina uses the opportunity to promote her strong views on the importance of depathologising the phenomenon of transgenderism, as well as the phenomena of non-heteronormative sexualities and non-cisgender gender identities. Ekaterina questions the value of the rigid binary discourse on sex, gender and sexuality sustained in contemporary Russia and argues that a discourse of ever-expanding variable norms should be promoted instead.

Image 10. A screenshot of a reposted publication on Ekaterina's Facebook page.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/kate.messorosh> (31.01.2018)

Another publication worth discussing is an article published on the news and entertainment online portal *mel.fm* and reposted by Ekaterina. It is an interview with a girl who was raised in a LGBT family by a lesbian couple and a biological father (see image 10). The article describes a very positive experience of a child in a LGBT family, which counters socially accepted views on LGBT families as inadequate and corrupt, and that is also how Ekaterina comments on it: ‘The article is wonderful. No, not because of the information in it. To be honest, there is not much information at all: so, a child grew up in a family. Nothing intriguing. But what a firework of butthurt homophobes!’. This example demonstrates that, in compliance with her statements during the interview, Ekaterina acknowledges the discursive value of challenge and manipulation in promoting her agenda. In her online interaction with homophobic and transphobic interlocutors, Ekaterina focuses not on the ethical and emotional factors, such as the reaction of the audience, but on the ultimate goal of the interaction, i.e. attempts at deconstructing a negative image of LGBT people held by an anti-LGBT reader.

The case study of Ekaterina Messorosh’s personal profile Facebook page illustrates how the transgression of hegemonic discourses on gender and sexuality can be achieved through promoting one’s own philosophical and scientific views on the open social media platform. As a transgressive woman, Ekaterina believes achieving goals by means fair or foul is legitimate when it comes to dismantling the binary discourses of hetero- and cis-normativity, and she grounds her opposition against the state-imposed homophobic and transphobic rhetoric in her own scientific way of thinking, her personal philosophy and relevant scholarship and research.

Conclusion and further discussion

As the analysis presented in this paper demonstrates, the very context of state-promoted anti-LGBTQ discourses in contemporary Russia, the ongoing attempts of the Russian state to make the internet a state-controlled and monitored space and the creation of a situation, in which Russian activists and common citizens run actual risks of being detained, arrested or trialled for reposts, ‘likes’ and publications on social media, the online activism of Olga Masina and Ekaterina Messorosh appears an important contribution to the evolving LGBTQ identities and to the strengthening and solidifying of LGBTQ communities. Not only do these female activists attempt to challenge and deconstruct the binary hegemonic heteronormative, cisnormative and monosexist discourses through the content they publish and repost on their social media pages and through mediating their own images as those of creative, intelligent and transgressive women, but their very use of digital technologies in the form of social media can be interpreted as transgression of the imposed conservative discourse on ‘traditional’ gender roles which interprets anything connected with technology as inherently masculine and which imagines and presents women as incapable of making use of advanced technologies on their own.

The use of only two case studies makes it difficult to define whether the activist strategies and trends presented in this paper are intrinsic solely to the respondents of the study or shared by other bisexual and transgender activists across Russia, but these case studies nevertheless reveal that transgressive online social activism can potentially be used both as a response to

anti-LGBTQ societal discourses and as a means of circumventing oppressive media policies through mediation of bisexual and transgender identities on social media platforms. The use of digital technologies can allow bisexual and transgender activists to transgress both the discourses of dominant power as well as the dominant LGBTQ resistance practices discourses. However, despite the potential for empowerment and effective activist tools offered by social media activism, it is important not to ignore its limitations and the potential political and personal risks to activists it involves. Such limitations and risks can be identified through further research into social media activism of Russian bisexual and transgender women. A further broader study on this subject will also make it possible to revisit and complicate discussions on how bisexual and transgender rights movements interact with one another in the deconstruction of binary discourses on gender and sexuality, and how they both intersect with feminism.

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