



Underneath Its New Hat: Probing Tensions and Contingency of Patriarchal Hegemony in the Philippine Cyberspace

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Abstract

Digital platforms have emerged as double-edged tools—to amplify feminist discourse while simultaneously reproducing the long-enmeshed patriarchal structures. This article probes the contingency of patriarchal hegemony in Philippine cyberspace, where digital platforms are examined as contested sites of empowerment and oppression. Using case studies, it investigates the experiences of female journalists on online gender-based violence and the emergence of diverse gender and sexual representations in media through BL/GL genres. Patriarchal structures are deemed resilient and adaptive to digital environments with new oppressive mechanisms that perpetuate the same themes of commodification and misogyny. At the same time, counter-hegemonic movements try to utilize these same spaces to disrupt normative gender hierarchies and counter these new forms of oppression. The paper argues that to address these tensions, a radical pluralist approach is necessary to foster inclusive alliances and challenge enduring patriarchal dominance. The pluralizing agenda centered on inclusivity and equitable, safe digital environments for all identities calls not only for policy reforms but also for reshaping the core narratives and norms towards gender and sexuality in both digital and physical spaces.

Keywords: Cyberfeminism, Digital Media, Philippine Feminist Experience, Discourse Theory, Patriarchal Hegemony

บทคัดย่อ

แพลตฟอร์มดิจิทัลเกิดขึ้นมาในฐานะ เครื่องมือที่มีสองด้าน คือ ด้านหนึ่งเพื่อขยายเสียงของวาทกรรมสตรีนิยม ขณะที่อีกด้านหนึ่งเพื่อผลิตซ้ำโครงสร้างแบบปิตาธิปไตยที่มีมานาน บทความนี้ค้นหาโอกาสที่จะเกิดการปรากฏตัวของ การครองอำนาจนำแบบปิตาธิปไตยในพื้นที่ไซเบอร์ในสังคมฟิลิปปินส์ ซึ่งแพลตฟอร์มดิจิทัลถูกมองว่าเป็นสถานที่แห่งการต่อสู้แข่งขันกันของการเสริมสร้างอำนาจกับ การกดขี่ บทความนี้จะสำรวจตรวจสอบประสบการณ์ของนักข่าวเพศหญิง ที่เผชิญความรุนแรงบนฐานเพศภาวะในพื้นที่ออนไลน์ และการเกิดขึ้นของการสร้างภาพแทนความหลากหลายทางเพศภาวะและเพศวิถีในสื่อผ่านสื่อประเภท Boy Love/Girl Love โดยใช้กรณีศึกษา โครงสร้างแบบปิตาธิปไตย ถือว่ายืดหยุ่นและปรับตัวให้เข้ากับสิ่งแวดล้อมทางดิจิทัลด้วยกลไกรูปแบบใหม่ในการกดขี่ที่ดำรงอยู่ร่วมกับกระบวนการทำให้กลายเป็นสินค้าและแนวคิดตรงเกียดเหยียดหญิง ขณะเดียวกันขบวนการเคลื่อนไหวเพื่อต่อต้านการครองอำนาจนำแบบปิตาธิปไตยก็พยายามใช้พื้นที่ไซเบอร์เพื่อรบกวนการจัดลำดับชั้นสูง-ต่ำทางเพศภาวะและต่อต้านการกดขี่รูปแบบใหม่ ๆ บทความนี้จึงโต้แย้งว่าแนวคิดเชิงรักเหง้าแบบพหุนิยม (radical pluralist approach) เป็นสิ่งจำเป็นในการส่งเสริมการสร้างพันธมิตรที่โอบรับทุกกลุ่มอัตลักษณ์และในการท้าทายอำนาจครอบงำแบบปิตาธิปไตยที่ดำรงอยู่ การกำหนดวาระที่หลากหลายซึ่งให้ความสำคัญกับแนวคิดการโอบรับความหลากหลาย และสิ่งแวดล้อมทางดิจิทัลที่เท่าเทียมและปลอดภัยสำหรับทุกกลุ่มอัตลักษณ์ ไม่เพียงแต่เรียกร้องให้เกิดการปฏิรูปเชิงนโยบาย ยังเรียกร้องให้เปลี่ยนแปลงเรื่องเล่าหลักและบรรทัดฐานเกี่ยวกับเพศภาวะและเพศวิถีทั้งในพื้นที่กายภาพและพื้นที่ไซเบอร์

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1. Introduction

The massive discursive shift in the feminist movement can be traced to the 1970s when radical feminist Shulamith Firestone introduced the focal point of women's struggle or the exploitative sexual class system thereof, being not merely settling into male privilege but "into the sexual distinction itself." (McIntosh, 1991) In succeeding works, scholars explored how women's access to knowledge and legitimacy within academia are influenced by the feminist movement's efforts to reconstruct patriarchal institutions—which affirmed Firestone's early conception that the struggle is not just against male privilege but also about redefining the structures that uphold gendered distinctions (Romito & Volpato, 2005). The broader critique of this system of subordination revealed further complications, adding multifarious layers. For instance, in analyzing indigenous women's activism within the American Indian Movement, studies showed how women navigate dual oppressions—both colonial and patriarchal— which implies that women's struggles operate in the context of intersecting social identities and the systemic forces that shape their realities (Voigt, 2023). This is attributed to succeeding works that reveal intersectionality and recognition of how various social identities—such as race, class, gender, and sexuality—merge to shape individual experiences of oppression and privilege (Heizmann & Liu, 2022) along with the neoliberal structure of commodification (Repo, 2020).

With the advent of digital technologies, these overlapping forms of oppression took on a new dimension, urging feminist movements to adapt their approaches to the changing landscape. Sousa et al. (2023) highlight how contemporary feminist movements navigate social media to articulate their political demands and engage with a broader audience, fostering a sense of camaraderie among activists. These developments in feminist works are illustrative of how addressing prominent forms of male privilege amidst digital developments should be interrogated with mediums and tools contingent

on the era where deep-rooted systems that sustain patriarchal dominance tend to be elusive and more complex. Regardless, the epistemic conceptualization of the dominant patriarchal norms and power structures has always been condensed into notions of “patriarchal hegemony.” In the works of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), the “hegemony” aspect is derived from patriarchy’s contingency upon discursive practices that shape social meanings and identities and are maintained through language and representation.

In early conceptualizations, patriarchal structures are seen independently from the discourses that sustain them. This perspective reflects an essentialist stance denoting a separate conception between structural power and the discursive machinery and ideologies. Although Gramsci’s original ideas help formulate the concept of hegemony through the role of consent and cultural leadership in sustaining power structures, they contribute significantly to understanding where patriarchal structures can appear fixed and inevitable, with the influence of Marxist economic base and class relations. In Laclau & Mouffe (1985), the hegemonic struggle was made more fluid and dynamic by considering not just the economic relations but also the multiple social antagonisms (gender, race, and identity)—thus arguing that there is no single or privileged group (or class) that must lead the struggle for hegemony. Instead, it advocates radical pluralism where various groups—such as feminist, LGBTQ+, and anti-racist movements—can become part of a counter-hegemonic bloc. The understanding of patriarchal hegemony is as potent as before with the emergence of digital technologies, where patriarchy, discourses, and modernity intersect. Digital platforms are also deemed to reproduce and amplify patriarchal practices (Arimatsu, 2019) as it inhibits the character of a contested space where empowerment and oppression coexist, even inside the counter-hegemonic bloc.

In the Philippines, the contingency of patriarchal hegemony is a critical consideration in approaching the contemporary state of women and people with diverse gender and sexuality backgrounds—as well as how they are

represented. With the onset of digital technologies, the feminist movements in the country have adapted (and are continually trying to adjust) to the unique challenges that come with its developments—through a mixture of grassroots activism, digital engagement, and intersectional approaches (Sanchez, 2022; Sousa et al., 2023). It is thus worth revisiting in this context the notions of the contingency of patriarchal hegemony as drawn from the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe (1985). With these considerations, the paper explores the unique circumstances in the Philippine context with the case of Maria Ressa and female journalism in the country and the emerging themes of diverse gender and sexuality backgrounds in media and pop culture, particularly in the rise of BL/ GL (girl’s love/ boy’s love) genre in the country (Santos & Baudinette, 2022). The paper also explores how digital spaces are contested arenas with constant tension between empowerment and oppression, reflecting the discursive struggles over gender and representation. Central to this understanding is the commodification of self-representation that reinforces the ideal representation when it comes to gender, as illustrated in the work of Thorpe et al. (2017) in their examination of how sportswomen were represented on social media. Although these platforms offer opportunities for women to assert their identities and challenge stereotypes, they also expose them to capitalistic pressures that align with normative gender roles. The paper is structured as follows. First, it provides a theoretical overview of patriarchal hegemony, contingency, and critical concepts employed in this paper. Second is an exploratory venture on feminist social movements and the dual nature of digital platforms as empowerment tools and sites for discursive interaction where various forms of oppression co-exist. Then, it will narrow down to the feminist digital struggles in the Philippines using selected case studies re-affirming the presence of discursive tensions between empowerment and oppression. Thirdly, it will situate how these struggles relate to the role of counter-hegemonic discourses in disrupting patriarchal hegemony in digital spaces. Lastly, the paper summarizes the arguments and

restates how patriarchal hegemony in digital spaces is contingent and subject to disruption through a radical pluralist approach.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings: Patriarchal Hegemony and Its Contingency

2.1. Patriarchal Hegemony

Foundation for Media Alternatives (2024) showed in their report an alarming number of online gender-based violence in the Philippines, where most of the victims were below 18 years old (53.1%). They stated how this does not account for the complete picture as the normalization of violence, lack of mechanisms for social justice, and persistence of a culture of victim-blaming and misogyny in the country have dissuaded women and sexual and gender minorities from speaking up and holding perpetrators accountable. There is then a need to revert to seeing these problems as systemic—and to understand the contingency of the systems of violence and gender-based subordination that espouses male dominance in digital environments as gauging into the fundamental concepts surrounding “patriarchal hegemony.” Patriarchal hegemony, as approached in this paper, draws from the earlier conception of ‘hegemonic masculinity.’ They defined the term as:

“... centrally connected to the subordination of women. It is a way of being masculine that marginalizes and subordinates not only women’s activities but also alternative forms of masculinity such as ‘camp’ or effeminate masculinity. Typically, it also involves the brutal repression of the activities of gay men and their construction as a despised ‘Other.’” (Weatherall, 2016)

Currently, hegemonic masculinity has actualized into a complex digital phenomenon called the ‘manosphere’—a loosely connected network of

websites, blogs, forums, and online communities that focus on mainstreaming issues of men and masculinity as opposed to feminism. Its existence provides an avenue to discuss men's rights, gender relations, and the adverse effects of feminism. (Sugiura, 2021) The emergence of the manosphere has also been traced to where hegemonic masculinity, power, and a sense of "victimhood" intersect. Feminism is seen as a marginalization movement, and its legal manifestations are painted as class legislation. With these developments, social media then became a platform to amplify the expression of a "new hybrid" of masculinity—also called 'aggrieved manhood' or expressions of victimhood by men (for example, feeling displaced by feminism or social progress) with defensive reassertions of masculine authority (Ironwood, 2017). In further analyses, Van Valkenburgh (2021) revealed that these manifestations of patriarchal hegemony tend to incorporate both elements of neoliberalism and scientific discourse, where women are treated as commodities possessing Sexual Market Value (SMV).

“Neoliberalism has failed to give men the self-confidence it promises, instead relying on misogynistic ideas, which has resulted in reactive violence against women who do not comply with patriarchal gender roles for sexual reproduction. This violence often starts with online harassment and increases in severity. This abuse has been unsurprisingly denounced by MRAs (Men's Rights Activism), who dismiss the experiences of women and feminists as victims of online violence in forum discussions. Any online abuse of women and feminists is justified as retaliation for men's victimization.” (Sugiura, 2021)

While hegemonic masculinity is keen on the ideal male behavior that upholds gender dominance, patriarchal hegemony can be taken as the broader system of male dominance embedded in society's structures and institutions. Regardless, both are the fundamental motivators of cyber-related sexism and gender-based violence and harassment in digital environments, which are of focal interest to this paper. These manifestations are characterized by their lingering occurrence in cyberspace, sexism, homophobia (lesbophobia), sexual nature, and the reiteration of dominant gender normativity. (Richard & Couchot-Schiex, 2020).

2.2. Laclau and Mouffe's Hegemonic Contingency

Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) understanding of hegemony is crucial in reflecting not only how patriarchy is ideo-structural but also how patriarchy, in the digital age, is not reducible solely to class struggle and is a result of intersecting, overlapping, and complex forms of discourses. Their early work tried to break from the Marxist strict class essentialism, which reduced the diversity of identities and struggles into a single tantamount class as logic. However, without class as a basic unit of analysis, they need to explain how collective identities are formed in their revised conceptualization of hegemony. They turn their attention to linguistics and discourse theory.

The “signifiers” and “signified” of the linguistic theory were employed to understand the meaning construction through which languages are derived. Signifiers are the form or sound images of linguistic signs, while signified refers to the concepts associated with the signifiers. Among the elements they mentioned are floating signifiers within discourse, which have no definite meaning and are open to different interpretations. Because they can potentially represent multiple meanings, hegemonic projects aim to articulate floating signifiers into stable meanings and transform them into moments—elements successfully articulated into a particular discourse and represent temporary stability of meaning. Moments are crucial in espousing

discursive contingency since the moments, denoting a spur of time, pertain to impermanence and non-completion. It means hegemonies can be replaced or transformed through articulatory processes (may also merge with other discourses) available in the status quo.

In their understanding, hegemony is attributed to privileged signifiers (also called nodal points), where discourses are organized by fixing the meanings of other signifiers around them. They are inherently empty but have only acquired meaning through their positions relative to other signs. In this regard, the discursive struggle and hegemony are the competing attempts to fix the meaning of floating signifiers and transform them into moments.

In the Marxist tradition, hegemony was a marginal and regional concept. However, Laclau and Mouffe argue that any level of society and social change can be understood through the logic of hegemony. Discursive understanding of hegemony means it is constituted by the relationships among social elements (or signifiers) and the contingency of these elements—which are open for hegemonic articulation. Articulation is the crucial concept in Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory about how different elements (signs or signifiers that have not yet been fixed into a particular meaning within a discourse) are connected to create meaning (Rustin, 1988). With articulation, discourses attempt to structure specific meaning in a certain domain, reducing possibilities and exhausting power. Articulation also justifies how specific social orders are created and how the meanings and practices in social institutions were fixed by repeatedly articulating discourses to form a dominant social orientation. However, these are, albeit temporary. The fleeting aspect of hegemony ascertains that the ongoing discursive struggle will always exist, as counter-hegemonic practices will continually attempt to disarticulate existing moments and rearticulate signifiers in new ways (Rear, 2013).

3. Evolution of Cyberfeminism and the Tension Between Empowerment and Oppression in Digital Spaces

In the late 19th century, Donna Haraway (1985) argued that the moral boundaries that separate man and woman would be obsolete, turning the world into a “utopian dream for the hope of a monstrous world without gender.” This notion taps into gender-neutralizing representations rather than simply favoring empowerment on single-gender icons. However, Haraway’s dream is merely a precursor of a more profound examination of the computer as an ideological medium that nullifies the cultural norm and distinctions between sex, gender, and even racial differences. With the dynamics of patriarchy, historicity, and materiality (Sewell, 1990), an add-on for virtually mediated communication via media and the Internet could be another recourse to propagate systemic marginalizations and reproduce power relations (Hill & Allen, 2021).

In this evolving landscape, cyberfeminism emerged as a subversive movement that directly intersected with computer technology, aiming to disrupt the patriarchal structures prevalent both offline and online (Issac, 2023). Its existence embodies the counter-hegemonic practices in digital spaces that directly oppose the patriarchal power structures that have dominated cultural and media landscapes. It also has gained traction in a variety of cultural contexts. In the Arab case, cyberfeminism was crucial in promoting social justice and gender equality through online activities, encouraging Arab women to express grievances and catalyze actions in significant political movements like the Arab Spring (Tazi, 2020). The same can be said in contemporary social movements such as #MeToo, which harnessed digital platforms to amplify women’s voices and experiences, thereby challenging the status quo (Jain, 2023). The rise of cyberfeminism has been significantly influenced by digital advancements such as anonymity, algorithms, and virality, which have provided a fertile ground for feminist discourse and activism.

According to Hall (1996), two of the most prominent cyberfeminism ideals currently dominate contemporary cyberspace: liberal and radical cyberfeminism. Postmodernists and queer theorists introduced liberal cyberfeminism as a liberating utopia where social dichotomies are irrelevant. One of its distinguishing features is that it mainstreams the sexual liberation theory, which suggests that to achieve gender equality, women’s sexual freedom to decide must first be considered. This is where it contradicts the radical cyberfeminism’s take, especially on controversial societal issues like pornography and prostitution. While liberal feminism sees these as a right, radical feminism may see them as malicious acts of commodification. Radical cyberfeminism is firm in its grounds of seeing these issues as inseparable from the neoliberal paradigm, where it traces its corresponding practices to the culture of women’s objectification. Despite these fundamental differences, both are contending ideals in the virtually mediated environment to bring the offline struggle against patriarchy to the internet.

The cyberfeminism movement operates against three kinds of oppression that I argue to have possibly comprised patriarchal hegemony, all being subjected to cyberfeminism critique—and which I will enumerate in this paper. First is a critique that views digital platforms as a reflection of the physical patriarchal structure, the second is an embodiment of the commodification of representation that happens in digital environments, and lastly, the claim of “oppression” derived from reproducing patriarchal hegemony in cyberfeminism movements that are supposed to topple it. The first one manifests as either material—where the economic landscape of digital platforms often reflects gender disparities in terms of accessibility, with education systems that favor men and male-dominated industries offering higher salaries (Martinez et al., 2021)—and ideological—where going back to the work of Hall (1996), they contend how males dominate the electronic platform in expressing their ‘effect.’ However, the problem is not in the number of male internet users but the tendency of online sexual harassment

towards women, instigated by patriarchal indoctrination offline in the presupposed gender-neutral space. It is made more apparent in recent studies like Dehingia et al. (2023), which revealed the prevalence of violence against women on platforms like Twitter, indicating that the feature of anonymity can lead to an increase in online misogyny. More evidence of patterns of misogyny and “trolling” that perpetuates online gender-based violence was the studies on online harassment and sexism towards the trans community (Reyes et al., 2024) and the behavior of the supporters of former President Duterte, who casually invokes misogynistic rhetoric and emboldens trolls to reinforce cyber violence. (Go, 2019)

Digital platform’s algorithms are also blamed for facilitating the rapid dissemination of hateful content (Park et al., 2023), leading to real-world consequences, such as the normalization of such rhetoric, which contributes to a culture of misogyny and violence. Virality, another feature of the internet, also allows messages to spread rapidly across networks, allowing for the swift spread of harmful content. Misogyny and homophobia, after all, are not inseparable from hate speeches (Gracia-Calandín & Suárez-Montoya, 2023), as they can lead to significant societal harm and perpetuate cycles of violence against women and people of diverse gender and sexuality backgrounds.

The second oppression relates to the commodification of self-representation, identity, and visual culture in the digital environment, which was briefly discussed in the introductory part of this paper. It occurs through the intersection of consumer culture and gender norms that further entrench patriarchal hegemony. Mackenzie & Louth (2024), in their analysis, showed how consumer culture often promotes ideals of femininity that align with patriarchal expectations, reinforcing gender inequalities. It also leads to exclusionary practices that prioritize particular identities over others (Thoyib & Miranda, 2023). When it aligns with heteronormative standards, it also perpetuates marginalizing LGBTQ+ identities. The focus on traditional gender roles within commodified representations can reinforce patriarchal structures

by excluding non-heteronormative experiences (Girdhar, 2020). Moreover, the digital environment can also subject women to scrutiny and judgment, reinforcing patriarchal norms that dictate acceptable behavior through surveillance and control over identity (Alexiou, 2005).

The third oppression originates from some of the practices of cyberfeminism itself. While it is often seen as a progressive movement that seeks to empower women in digital spaces, it can also inadvertently lead to the reproduction of patriarchal hegemony through specific practices and ideologies. For instance, the works of Lusted and Fielding-Lloyd (2017) critiqued the liberal approach to gender equality in sports organizations, arguing that it limits the development of women's sports by adhering to traditional gender roles and expectations. This critique can be extended to cyberfeminism, where the focus on women's participation in technology may still align with patriarchal expectations rather than challenging them. Also, the commodification of feminist ideals in digital spaces can lead to the commercialization of women's empowerment. Braun (2005) argues that the focus on female sexual pleasure can legitimize practices that reinforce normative heterosexuality and promote a generic model of bodies and sex. This commodification can dilute the radical potential of feminist discourse, allowing patriarchal values to persist under the guise of empowerment. With the politics of cyberfeminism focused on the commodification of feminist narratives, there is a proneness to shift from empowerment to consumerism (Kantar, 2023).

The evolution of the cyberfeminism movement shows the constant tension between empowerment and oppression in digital spaces. While digitalization ignites possibilities of empowerment and redefinition of oppressive gender roles, it also faces challenges of commodification of feminist ideals and reproduction of patriarchal hegemony, even amongst initiatives designed to dismantle it. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) understood this tension by seeing how patriarchal hegemony is subject to the existing discursive practices in

contested spaces, which are varied, contradictory, and complex—instead of seeing it as fixed and determined monochromatic factions. Their idea of a heterogenous counter-hegemonic bloc (in seeing the multiple, and sometimes, conflicting perspectives of liberal and radical cyberfeminism), which differs from the Gramscian notion of the hegemony (or counter-hegemony) of a unified group (often the working class), allows examination of the reality of diverse groups working together to topple the same hegemony. Hence, they argued that despite differences in claims and struggles, each should be recognized and valued, allowing for a dynamic and inclusive coalition amongst a broad spectrum of social antagonisms.

4. Probing the Philippine Case

The feminist movement in the Philippines can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century amidst the colonial influence and struggle for independence. With more accessible educational opportunities under the American occupation, women began questioning societal conditions, laying the earliest groundwork for early feminist activism (Hega et al., 2017). This continued after 1946, when the Philippines finally had its independence, and the feminist movement began to address critical issues beyond suffrage. In 1970, the rise of women’s organizations started when they advocated for labor rights, reproductive health, and poverty. The Women’s Movement in the Philippines (WMP) was founded in 1984 to unite various women’s groups to advocate for women’s rights and gender equality. Massive historical shifts have further advanced the Philippine feminist movements, such as the Marcos dictatorship (1972-1986), The People Power Revolution in 1986, and several events in the post-revolution period that showed the importance of women’s participation in political movements.

The feminist movement was not without challenge, especially with the colonial history of the Philippines, which has left a lasting impact on gender

dynamics. The imposition of Western values and norms often conflicted with indigenous practices, leading to a complex interplay of cultural identities. For instance, the works of Eduardo and Gabriel (2021) have elaborated that on Indigenous education policies, the historical marginalization of Indigenous peoples, including women, persists, and these policies continue to affect their rights today. Moreover, the Catholic Church plays a significant role in shaping social norms and policies in the Philippines (Biana et al., 2022). Its influence on issues such as reproductive health and family planning has often hindered progress toward gender equality. The Church's stance on contraception and abortion reflects patriarchal values that prioritize traditional family structures over women's autonomy (Bland, 2008). Building on these historical trajectories, it is evident that Philippine feminism has continuously adapted to the socio-political changes within the country, especially now with the advent of social media, which provided new avenues for feminist activism. The rise of digital platforms, while used in religious activities like virtual/ live-streamed mass, has also offered a new space for feminist activism, where the ongoing struggle against patriarchal hegemony is amplified and challenged in unique ways. This paper will explore two case studies demonstrating how digital spaces have empowered feminist movements and ideals and simultaneously catered for the persistence of patriarchal practice. It results in new forms of patriarchal hegemony where reassertion of patriarchal control through new tools, norms, and strategies has evolved contingent on the discursive struggles in digital spaces.

4.1. Cyber Misogyny and Online Harassment: Digital Feminist Experience and Maria Ressa

An intricate interplay exists between local sociopolitical dynamics and broader female struggles and challenges. Studies of female journalism showed that women are portrayed and treated in stereotypical roles, which hinder their professional advancement and recognition (Kristina & Ramadona,

2019) With the male-centric nature of the media industry, women journalists often encounter systemic barriers that limit their career opportunities and recognition, evident in the disproportionately low representation of women in media leadership roles (International Women’s Media Foundation, 2020). Moreover, the rise of digital platforms has exacerbated the complexity of these dynamics. It democratized media production, allowing for greater participation, access, and visibility of diverse voices, including those of women (Kuznetsova & Tolbert, 2023)—but at the same time, it also serves as a ground zero for misogyny and hateful remarks, particularly against women who challenge the status quo. The situation of Maria Ressa exemplifies this duality. On the one hand, social media have been fruitful for her work—however, it also simultaneously exposed her to significant online harassment, reflecting broader societal issues regarding the treatment of women in public spheres (Fileborn & Trott, 2022)

Maria Ressa was renowned for establishing Rappler, a digital media platform in the Philippines. She was at the forefront of investigative journalism in the country, often covering controversial issues that target influential political figures, including President Rodrigo Duterte’s contentious war on drugs campaign. Her efforts have earned her international acclaim, including the Nobel Peace Prize 2021. However, it also made her a target for legal persecution and harassment, affirming the precarious situation of female journalists in the country’s hostile political environment (The Diplomat, 2021). Ressa has been accused of spreading “fake news,” malignantly delegitimized to destroy her reputation, and often discredited in her works (Posetti, 2021). While these are attacks on her professionalism, several reports indicate her own experience also showed how it affected her personal life, especially with the threats she receives from political opposition and by broader online users using slurs or misogynistic remarks like “she [Maria Ressa] is not attractive enough to be raped.” (Go, 2019). Social media, in this regard, becomes an unsafe place for empowered women where greater visibility could also mean exposure to

severe online threats. The anonymity of digital platforms contributes mainly to these, along with broader online gender-based violence (OGBV), where perpetrators can hide in fake accounts, leading to a hostile environment for women journalists. Ressa is only one of the many female journalists worldwide who are subjected to the broader trend of increased online abuse, resulting in stresses to mental health and professional efficacy (BBC News, 2020),

The case of Maria Ressa is only among the cases where the struggle between empowerment and oppression among Filipina journalists in the digital environment is depicted. These struggles resulted in new patriarchal norms, affirming their contingency with the discursive practices that evolved with the advent of digital technologies. These are summarized as follows:

- misogyny and gender-based harassment perpetuated online (Chen et al., 2020),
- weaponization of “troll farms” or the coordinated and, sometimes, state-sponsored harassment against female journalists (Ong & Cabanes, 2018),
- commodification of feminist discourse where ‘empowered’ personal struggles are sensationalized like Ressa’s, turning into marketable content rather than discussing systemic issues (e.g., press freedom, authoritarianism, and patriarchy) that preliminarily put female journalists into precarious situations (Repo, 2020),
- policing of female journalist identities through shaming tactics, where female journalists are criticized online based on their appearance, behavior, or personal relationships rather than their journalistic integrity (Siddiqua et al., 2023),
- exclusion from accessing traditionally male-related networks in digital spaces like national security and politics, replicating the traditional exclusionary practices (Kundu et al., 2021),
- transphobic and homophobic attacks in digital spaces that reinforce patriarchal and heteronormative norms towards LGBTQ+ voices (Reyes et al., 2024) in journalism.

The evolving nature of patriarchal hegemony only underscores the need to continually advocate against the deeply ingrained power dynamics, especially in the field of journalism. It is also worth noting how the social media landscape in the Philippines corroborates these experiences. The Philippine media is characterized by a vibrant but often tumultuous relationship with social media, where platforms like Facebook are widely used in the country, making them powerful tools for disseminating information and mobilizing public opinion. Ressa's high-profile position as a female leader in a male-dominated industry challenges established norms—and the misogynistic actions online can be seen as mechanisms to re-articulate discourses and achieve the dominance of a patriarchal idea. As the empowered woman threatens the existing ideological order in the structural “common sense,” there is an urge from the media end-users or netizens (not just men, in this regard, *per se*) to ‘neutralize’ this perceived social dislocation. Moreover, the considerable point mentioned above is how the Philippines’ sophisticated architecture of troll farms is being used by political oppositions to dissuade public opinion and silence social media critics, preying on people with vulnerable new media literacy (Maningo & Hlaing, 2024). Hence, the evolved forms of patriarchy that target Filipina journalists must be approached as well, based on the political-contextual situatedness and cultural narratives (as stated in the earlier section where Catholicism is weaved into the Filipino fabric) to understand holistically the perception surrounding female journalists and the dynamics by which they respond to these social realities.

4.2. The Rise of Diverse Gender and Sexuality Representations in Philippine’s Pop Culture and Media

Popular culture (or pop culture) was traced by Bienvenido Lumbera, the Philippine National Artist for literature, from the Hispanisation of the Philippines. According to him, folk culture (culture in a specific time and place that developed through coping with nature) and nationalist culture (culture

created through colonial resistance) must be approached separately from pop culture. He stated that the Spanish conquest brought on the concept of what is “popular” through entertainment that connotes ideologies that adhered to colonial authorities and regimes. It came in the form of *sinakulo*, and *korido*, which assured the proliferation of Christianity, and the *komedya* and *awit* did the same for the monarchy. (Garchitorena, 2019) For him, popular culture is enmeshed with power potent enough to be wielded as a political weapon. With technological advancements, its medium evolved from plays and printed materials to radios and televisions, giving it a new approach. Its motifs have expanded from solely Biblical depictions and political propaganda to various genres and forms of storytelling—at times, even featuring unconventional themes. The internet and artificial technologies (AI) have added complexity to these dynamics, allowing media content to proliferate like wildfire. Now, we see diverse gender and sexual representations in pop culture and media, which were uncommon a few centuries ago.

The rise of the BL and GL characterize these changes—deviating from the usual theme of heteronormative romance. The BL genre refers to romantic stories amongst male characters, recently gaining popularity among younger audiences. Studies showed that viewers tend to acquire a sense of belonging and connection, facilitating identity affirmation through these stories as they relate to similar narratives and experiences they encounter (Darmawan et al., 2022). Moreover, the BL content’s accessibility on digital platforms has tremendously facilitated this genre’s rise, catalyzing broader discussion about gender fluidity, acceptance, and a sense of community among marginalized groups who share the same struggle over their gender and sexuality. Like BL, the GL narratives, on the other hand, focus on female characters’ romantic relationships (Tha-in et al., 2024). The BL/GL phenomena in the country are unique in a way that, aside from being able to challenge the traditional heteronormativity by being predominantly influenced by conservative Catholic values—it also often frames these genres within the lens

of the country's fascination with romantic dramas and soap operas, which are highly sentimental and emotionally driven. This is shown in films like *Gaya sa Pelikula* (2020), where romantic narratives are extended to deeper issues of gender identity, coming out, and struggle for acceptance—a political edge compared to other countries where these aspects are less pronounced, and the storylines adjusted for commercialized purposes. The GL/BL has been accompanied by the gradual incorporation of LGBTQ+ characters in Philippine television and films. Movies like *Die Beautiful* (2016) and *Mami and a Mother Too* (2018) have portrayed a transgender woman's struggle to navigate Philippine society. Music and pop icons have also often incorporated themes of gender and sexuality, such as Gloc-9's *Sirena*, which narrates the challenges faced by a Filipino queer population as they are faced with the family rejection and societal prejudice typical in the Philippine context. Drag cultures have also gained momentum in the country as influenced by RuPaul's *Drag Race*, intersecting with the vibrant LGBTQ+ community, advocacies of gender expression, traditional entertainment industry, and pop culture.

While these genres have strived to promote inclusivity and dialogue through representation and visibility, they have also perpetuated stereotypes and reinforced salient power dynamics. For instance, the BL series leans on fetishized representations that obscure realities faced by LGBTQ+ people (Coleman, 2021). The GL narratives tend to idealize relationships and present these relationships through a male gaze, raising questions on the authentic representation of legitimate sexual orientations and identities (Walsh, 2023). Additionally, the commodification of LGBTQ+ identities sometimes results in exploitation within the genre without the actual essence of scrutiny on structural imbalances and marginalizing power relations. Moreover, as media representations of diverse gender identities increased, so did instances of gender-based violence. These mechanisms perpetuate patriarchal control by intimidating and silencing those who advocate (or live by their non-conforming gender and sexuality identities) for gender equality or challenge normative

gender expectations.

Hence, the diverse gender and sexual representations in digital media have not been free from the illusive forms of patriarchal hegemony. The discursive practices in popular culture that initially fought against the subordinating patriarchy in cyberspace were met by its morphed counterparts, as contingent to existing discursive struggles: in vicious forms of commercialized empowerment, policing of gender norms (e.g., in drag's boundary-pushing ethos, there are still pressures to conform to specific beauty standards within the drag community), commodified inclusivity (e.g., LGBTQ+ stories are repurposed as commercial products that cater to the tastes of mass audiences), fetishizations of LGBTQ+ relationships, and digital gender-based violence and homophobia.

5. Policy Pathways: Reframing and Contesting Patriarchal Hegemony Through Radical Pluralist Approach

The cases illustrated how digital platforms serve as both empowering tools and purveyors of oppressive mechanisms, denoting a discursive struggle amongst gender and sexuality representations. Maria Ressa and the Filipina journalists used digital technology to increase visibility and combat women's lack of representation and access in journalism. In doing so, they were met with OGBV, harassment, and misogyny. With the emergence of diverse gender and sexuality themes in the Philippines' pop culture and media, the normative relationships and identities were challenged; however, they were also met with commodification and fetishization that still reecho the heteronormative standards. The outcome of patriarchal hegemony of transforming into different practices and retaining its ideological power showcases its contingency—where these practices reflect the continuous renegotiation and re-articulation of the same hegemonizing discourse to maintain control. From a policy perspective, the contestations and struggles of establishing gender norms and representations

in digital spaces denote the interplays of agenda-setting. Agenda-setting recognizes critical junctures (in the form of policy windows) to challenge the dominant narratives by seizing these opportunities to address systemic issues (Kingdon, 2003) in policy formations. Hence, it affirms the temporal and contingent nature of hegemony, as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) discussed, where the dominant narrative can be replaced by policy interventions or socio-civic movements and initiatives that have persistently rearticulated and challenged these narratives. Agenda-setting also helps explain how patriarchal hegemony adapts to digital spaces by controlling the visibility of gender representations (e.g., which gender issues receive attention and how they are framed). Here, it is tied to the broad scholarly discussions of path dependencies or tendencies to institutionalize approaches (may be in the form of policies) that are either implicit or complicit in maintaining the same traditional gender narratives (Pierson, 2000) while sidelining progressive or inclusive gender-based alternatives.

Derived from the cases, the pragmatic orientation should be based upon the intersectional considerations of analysis that complicate the representations and identities—and on how advocates (or the proponents of the cyberfeminism movement) exhaust their agencies. Multitudes of antagonisms were evident, although this entire paper has condensed those solely with empowerment and oppression, which are, but not limited to, LGBTQ+ representation and fetishization, digital inclusion and class/ socioeconomic exclusion, conservative values, and modern gender/sexuality narratives. The diversity of these struggles urges for a radical pluralistic approach, one that Rustin (1988) raised:

“Pluralism is radical only to the extent that each term of this plurality of identities finds within itself the principle of its validity, without this having to be sought in a transcendent or underlying positive ground for the hierarchy

of meaning of them all and the source and guarantee of their legitimacy. This radical pluralism is democratic to the extent that the autoconstitutivity of each term results from displacements of the egalitarian imaginary.”

The excerpt means recognizing the validity of multiple, independent subject positions without reducing them to a singular founding principle. This perspective discourages one-size-fits-all solutions. Instead, policies must reflect the diversity of experiences and identities, ensuring different groups can autonomously address their needs. A radical pluralist policy approach might proceed, for example, on regulations and policies that could be co-developed by Filipina journalists or LGBTQ+ advocates in the media industry, addressing their struggles with representation and safety in digital spaces instead of top-down media regulations that impose uniform rules. In pop media, interventions may focus on tackling the fetishization of LGBTQ+ identities and narratives by cultivating critical and inclusive communities. Media guidelines may be crafted to promote authentic representation and protect against harmful stereotypes. With this withstanding, the efforts amongst these diverse groups may fortify a strong counter-hegemonic bloc to challenge a dominant hegemony (such as patriarchy). While these groups may have different identities and struggles (e.g., women, LGBTQ+ communities, ethnic minorities), they can unite around a shared goal of disrupting the dominant power structure.

6. Conclusion

The paper examined the persistent and evolving nature of patriarchal hegemony, discussed here as a “new hat” in the digital spaces of the Philippines. Through detailing the experiences of Filipina journalists like Maria Ressa and the emergence of diverse gender and sexual representations in Philippine pop culture, it showcased how digital platforms offer an avenue

for empowerment while simultaneously facilitating new forms of oppression. These struggles connote the contingency of patriarchal hegemony, where it may structurally adapt and reassert control over marginalized identities. From a policy perspective, the contestations on identities and representation reflect the broader agenda-setting process where the visibility of gender concerns or prominence, how these concerns are framed, and who controls the narratives are of critical importance. By gradually seizing windows of opportunity, policies can work as mechanisms to disrupt traditional power structures. Before that, a genuine radical pluralist approach must be embodied to create a robust and unified bloc out of multiple overlapping identities. Ultimately, the plight against patriarchal dominance in the digital age, both in the contexts of the Philippines and the rest of the world, is not merely a struggle over gender and sexuality but a broader effort to reshape social norms and cultural values through inclusive and dynamic policy frameworks that reflect the reality of intersectional identities in a radically plural world.

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