

Parasocial Feminism and Social Media Communities: Subjective Empowerment and its Ambivalences

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Abstract

Contemporary digital feminist activism is often embodied and represented through individual influencer accounts, which enable a form of parasocial feminism, likely being effective due to parasocial mechanisms and their significance for the social self. This study explores the influence and meaning of parasocial feminism for followers. To this end, 46 narratives by social media followers of an influencer who is a German artist and practices a distinct form of parasocial feminism known as #volanismus (“#volanism”), addressing misogyny, inequality and suppression through drawings and performance art in the form of online responses to hateful social media comments. Applying a psychoanalytic paradigm, we investigate how content and parasocial community dynamics are subjectively experienced through explicit and latent layers of meaning. The findings reveal how parasocial feminism bears significant meaning on the subjective level for the self, but also in the form of practical relevance, shaping everyday life and social and relational dynamics (e.g., divorce, having another child, transforming sexual scripts). We discuss these findings in terms of resistance and group dynamics, with a particular focus on how social mechanisms are transformed under spreading parasociality, with social media communities becoming a key part of the social self and contemporary social organizing. We also highlight limitations, noting that online activism perpetuates an individualizing logic within contemporary liberal feminism and platform capitalism.

Keywords: social media, community psychology, feminism, online communities, parasocial relationships, parasociality, parasocial feminism

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Riassunto. *Femminismo parasociale e comunità sui social media: l'empowerment soggettivo e sue ambivalenze*

L'attivismo femminista digitale contemporaneo è spesso rappresentato da profili individuali di influencers, che consentono una forma di femminismo parasociale di potenziale efficacia grazie ai meccanismi parasociali e al loro significato per il sé sociale. Questo studio esplora l'influenza e il significato del femminismo parasociale per gli utenti del profilo. A tal fine, sono state analizzate 46 narrazioni di utenti di un profilo social di un'influencer tedesca che pratica una forma distintiva di femminismo parasociale nota come #volanismus ("#volanism"), affrontando la misoginia, la disuguaglianza e la repressione attraverso disegni e performance artistiche sotto forma di risposte online ai commenti odiosi sui social media. Applicando un paradigma psicoanalitico, indaghiamo come i contenuti e le dinamiche della comunità parasociale siano soggettivamente vissuti attraverso livelli di significato espliciti e latenti. I risultati rivelano come il femminismo parasociale abbia un significato rilevante a livello soggettivo per il sé, ma anche sotto forma di rilevanza pratica, modellando la vita quotidiana e le dinamiche sociali e relazionali (p.e., divorzio, genitorialità, pratiche e intimità). Discutiamo questi risultati in termini di resistenza e dinamiche di gruppo, con particolare attenzione a come i meccanismi sociali vengano trasformati dalla diffusione della parasocialità, con le comunità dei social media che diventano una parte fondamentale del sé sociale e dell'organizzazione sociale contemporanea. Evidenziamo anche i limiti, osservando che l'attivismo online perpetua una logica individualizzante all'interno del femminismo liberale contemporaneo e del capitalismo delle piattaforme internet.

Parole chiave: social media, psicologia di comunità, femminismo, comunità online, relazioni parasociali, parasocialità, femminismo parasociale

1. Introduction

Social media has become a key site of contemporary social dynamics and mechanisms, being central not only for entertainment or information seeking but foremost for orientation, identity formation, and communal belonging. Within this environment, gendered dynamics are rearticulated, and feminist practices emerge that are deeply entangled with parasocial relationships and group dynamics (Locke *et al.*, 2018). Such constellations may be described as arising from parasocial feminism, adapting the notion of the fourth wave of feminism and online activism (Akhila & John, 2024) to contemporarily signifying parasocial mechanisms, where artistic expression, digital interaction, and collective processes converge to challenge inequality and misogyny under the specific conditions of social media communication and related parasocial mechanisms (Jouët, 2018).

This contribution explores parasocial feminism through the case of Maris Rauch, a German feminist artist and influencer who works under the artist-name Volane, whose practice of #volanismus combines surreal artistic expression (e.g., paintings), feminist critique, and digital performance. Her work exemplifies how parasocial feminism materializes in online spaces,

linking aesthetic provocation and a business case of selling artworks with everyday community interaction in the profane environment of social media.

Volane's work merges graffiti, street art, photorealism, and performance into a distinct artistic practice. This aesthetic framework centers thematically on bodily functions and appearances, particularly female genitalia and related products such as menstrual cups, while emphasizing natural corporeality, including body hair, bleeding, skin folds, or gum inflammation. These motifs are integrated into a visual language of pragmatic sensuality and revealing "ugliness". Volane's representations juxtapose everyday and conventionally unattractive objects, including cigarettes, used tissues, or garbage, with fantastical hybrids such as rabbit heads on ice cream cones or oversized tampons in forest landscapes. Her art navigates loneliness in urban housing blocks, digital saturation, and consumerism, framing beauty in the unspectacular and absurd. The grotesque becomes a medium for critiquing neoliberal subjectivities and aesthetic (ab)norms.

However, Volanism extends beyond visual artworks into social media performance. Volane articulates a form of online feminist activism that combines artistic expression, political commentary, and educational engagement in (un-)learning. Her performances include reaction videos and responses to (hate) comments, where she stages resistance to perceived misogynistic discourse and online aggression. These acts, explicitly aimed at digital (self-)empowerment, are framed within a broader critique of restrictions and limited scope, societal expectations and norms regarding the roles of motherhood, femininity, gender, and agency, ultimately promoting peace and respectful coexistence as a value.

Volane's work process is frequently shared in livestreams, where she explains techniques and discusses artistic decisions, blurring the line between teaching, art practice, and community participation. Through self-managed marketing and distribution, she simultaneously challenges established gatekeeping in the art world and leverages gig economy structures for artistic autonomy as she sells her artwork, courses, and prints through her website. Accordingly, Volane has cultivated an interactive online community with over 280.000 followers to date on Instagram.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Significance of Parasocial Relationships

Time spent on social media has grown substantially over the past decades, establishing itself as a dominant activity, with an increasing share of

everyday life and social life unfolding online (Kleeberg-Niepage & Degen, 2022; Scott *et al.*, 2017). Social media platforms, such as Instagram, function not only as sites of entertainment and distraction but also as spaces for accessing trends, information, and glimpses into the presentations of (supposedly authentic) lifestyles and the privacy of others (Abidin, 2016). This bears significance, as influencers' content is often perceived as more trustworthy than traditional media sources (e.g., TV, newspapers) or advice from family and peers (Degen & Simpson, 2022; Hasebrink *et al.*, 2021; Park *et al.*, 2022; Shareef *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, the platforms are increasingly perceived as pathways to professions, promising economic gain through visibility within the gig economy, which leads to an overall professionalization and enforcement of market-driven dynamics and enforced utilization of mechanisms (Jarman *et al.*, 2021; Fetter *et al.*, 2023; Newlands & Fieseler, 2020; Rodgers *et al.*, 2021). This includes the utilization of relational components of everyone involved, which can be discussed critically in terms of their direction, power dynamics, meanings, and related ethics in the context of algorithmic control and digitally enforced individualization (Johanssen, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

Research has drawn attention to the meaning and impact of social media use, primarily from the perspective of followers and ordinary users. Around the topic, different positions have emerged, fluctuating between rather pragmatic assessments of social media and potential benefits, e.g., access to information and decentralization on the one hand; and critical perspectives focusing on vulnerabilities and risks, including adverse effects on physical and mental health, as well as social impact, with social media increasing individualization and loneliness on the other hand (Hou *et al.*, 2019; Kessling *et al.*, 2023; Keum *et al.*, 2023). Other disciplines, such as critical political economy, have stressed the inherently exploitative core of commercial social media platforms, which function through a business model of user exploitation as user data is sold to advertisers and minimal remuneration in the case of influencers, compared to overall profit margins (Fuchs, 2014).

Digital media use has sometimes been described as driven by fear (fear of missing out), addiction, and loss of control (problematic social media use) (Cheng *et al.*, 2021; Roberts *et al.*, 2020; Tandon *et al.*, 2021). More recent work, however, foregrounds the relational significance of social media, being increasingly recognized as central to inner and relational processes, framed as a parasocial relationship (Degen, 2023b; Degen *et al.*, 2025).

The term “parasocial relationship” is adapted from traditional fandom

(e.g., movie/sports stars) relationships and their meanings, which articulate themselves on social media under contemporary conditions of everyday life. Within online environments, parasocial relationships, now between influencer and follower(s), acquire new characteristics shaped by quasi-privacy, individualization, and the integration of the influencer into micro-sequences and the embodied routines of followers, often quite literally as an extension of the body through the smartphone (Clark & Lupton, 2023). These conditions foster habitual modes of engagement, with parasocial communication embedded in images and audio, and meaning and impact mediated by affective cues, entangled with bodily regulation, being effective beyond explicable reflection (Bayer *et al.*, 2022; Degen, 2023b, 2024, 2025).

In the form of a parasocial relationship, social media use becomes a significant factor for subjects, serving basic psychological needs, including validation, comfort, and soothing (Degen *et al.*, 2025). On the social dynamic and relational level, social media bears significance for the social self, shaping identity through processes of social positioning, social belonging (Farivar *et al.*, 2022; Maxwell *et al.*, 2025; Paravati *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, both ordinary users and popular influencers on social media and related communities become a meaningful reference point, shaping attitudes and influencing behavior and decision- and meaning-making online and beyond (Leaver *et al.*, 2020; Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2022; Vrontis *et al.*, 2021). As such, digital reality shapes scope, norms, interpretation, and ultimately perceived truths and (materializing) realities (Schraube, 2024; Walls *et al.*, 2025; vanSlette, 2025).

2.2 Contemporary Social Media Between Backlash and Gender Activism

On social media, communicative processes are characterized mainly by simplification, fragmentation, and unification, in which complex phenomena are simplified into unequivocal positions and a polarized ad hominem logic (subjects are urged to identify with unequivocal stances and are understood to be tied to the stances in their entirety) (Shea *et al.*, 2025). Alongside (political) stances, influencer networks emerge, framing particular ideas. Such dynamics frequently generate echo chambers that validate internal perspectives while diminishing cross-group exchange, negotiation, and (constructive) discourse (Cinelli *et al.*, 2021). Discursive diversity is thereby reduced, and internal consensus becomes increasingly self-reinforcing (Interian *et al.*, 2023; Velasco, 2020).

This structure has the potential to foster polarization between groups that

consolidate around particular themes or even agendas, which in turn mobilize collective action. In some cases, this manifests in practices such as coordinated trolling or cancel movements, where online dynamics translate into material interventions online and beyond the digital environment (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Here, the mechanisms of validation and amplification within online communities not only shape attitudes but also activate collective behavior in the physical realm with tangible consequences. Scholars in science and technology studies have argued that such social dynamics are exacerbated by algorithmic clustering and other dynamics of grouping based on the notion of homophily (Chun, 2023), whereby friends, followers, themes, and ideas are clustered together in the service of creating “communities” of sameness, while actually amplifying discrimination and polarization.

Many online communities mobilize around everyday challenges, seeking comfort and developing strategies for dealing with them. One such alleged challenge is the perceived crisis of dating, intimacy, and identity within growing (neo-)nihilism and neoliberalization of relationships and intimacy (Degen *et al.*, 2024; Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2025; Plesa, 2024; 2025). Among the most publicly prominent and problematized groups within this theme are incels (“involuntary celibates”), who frame their exclusion from sexual and romantic relations as the result of systemic injustice and the apparent emancipation and liberalization of women (Johanssen, 2022). Similar narratives circulate in adjacent formations under the umbrella term of the “manosphere”, including pick-up artists or self-declared “alpha males”, where practices of lifestyle coaching and male self-care intertwine with the devaluation of women (Van Valkenburgh, 2021). Here, patriarchal fantasies are reproduced through online rituals of trolling, shaming, and re-traditionalizing femininity as young, dependent, and sexually inexperienced (Johanssen, 2022). These movements can be interpreted as collective economies of fantasy and disinhibition, where male communities derive cohesion by projecting anxieties (e.g., of devaluation and rejection) onto women, imagined as threatening or malicious (Johanssen, 2022). The parasocial dimension is central where posts are not directed toward real and concrete significant others (Gergen, 2009) (women) and relationships (negotiating needs and experiences, risking the self) but generalized toward collectivized figures of “womanhood” and “femininity” that function as antagonistic objects (generalized others: Gergen, 2009). However, men of the manosphere have also committed acts of targeted digital and physical violence against women. The related (online) hostility, ranging from mocking body types to policing life choices, thus becomes a parasocial practice of reinforcing (or attempting to regain) patriarchal dominance (Galpin, 2022; O’Malley *et al.*, 2020; Palma, 2023; Karthika, 2023).

Against these formations, counter-movements have gained significant momentum. While small-scale phenomena such as female incels illustrate a gendered mirroring of manosphere logics (Johanssen & Kay, 2024), the more consequential dynamic lies in social media and online feminist activism. Contemporary online feminism is often located on social media. It operates through campaigns such as #MeToo, #NotAllMenButAlwaysAMan, or @ByeFelipe, which expose misogynist practices and challenge visibility logics that perpetuate suppression and sexism (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Shaw, 2016). Strategies include documenting harassment through screenshots, collective ridicule, and reaction videos, thereby transforming parasocial antagonism into parasocial resistance (Snyder, 2022). Digital feminist activism is not necessarily parasocial as it is often grassroots and collectivity driven. In recent years, feminists have sought to reclaim and rearticulate notions of anger and other allegedly “bad feelings” circulated through social media (Boyce Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019) in response to a backlash against women’s and LGBTQ+ rights. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) has shown, a distinct form of feminism has entered the mainstream and public consciousness, partly brought about by the feminist online activism of the 2000s, which often remained liberal and white and has been appropriated by capitalism and forms of progressive consumption in the name of equality. A kind of popular feminism that has been met with an increase in misogyny (Kay, 2024).

Research on parasociality has predominantly adapted the original star–fan framework to social media environments, often by transferring existing constructs to the influencer–follower context. While this work has revealed essential continuities, only a limited number of studies critically suspend these assumptions and pursue inductive or exploratory approaches that allow new functions and meanings of parasociality to emerge, taking into account the fundamental changes in context and conditions of social media and its specific mechanisms and meanings, depicted in novel conceptualizations and changes in social life– entangling online and offline realms and logics.

The present study contributes to this area by grounding parasociality not in pre-defined categories, but in its lived, situated articulations from a phenomenological stance, bringing together novel insights on the mechanisms and meanings of parasociality and insights on parasocial feminism and the meanings and means of online communities for everyday life and social organizing, asking the following research question: What does social media feminist activism within the #volanism movement mean to followers?

3. Methodology

The study employs an exploratory-qualitative approach, integrating artistic and open-ended elements of data collection with the rigor of interpretive, long-standing analytic traditions that predate positivism (Brinkmann, 2017). This positioning is reflected in the formless, participant-driven impetus, which produces a natural and non-controlled sample. The analytical procedure, in turn, draws on psychoanalytic hermeneutics, allowing for an engagement with the symbolic, affective, and latent dimensions of participants' accounts (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Hollway & Jefferson, 2012; Johanssen, 2016). By combining this emergent, participant-led mode of data generation with interpretative depth, the study aims to extend existing research, providing a framework for rethinking and unlearning ingrained assumptions about parasociality in light of its contemporary manifestations.

3.1 Collection and Sample

To address the research question, 46 entries (28 short essays, one collage, one poem, and 16 comments) were collected from followers of the #volaneart community. The material was generated in response to a public call issued in early 2025 via one of the authors' Instagram accounts and the artist's own account, @volaneart. The call invited followers to submit personal reflections and introspections on what following Volane and engaging with her digital space meant to them. The wording was deliberately open: "To all followers of Volane, please support your local (pun intended) nerd and hand in a reflection in any form, length, and of any kind, on what following Volane and her space on social media means to you".

Participation was invited through the story function of the social media platform, which remains visible for 24 hours. After 48 hours, the submission rate decreased substantially, marking a natural cut-off point for data collection. We therefore included the first 46 submissions received within this initial period, ensuring a coherent data corpus collected under comparable conditions. Later submissions, which continued to arrive sporadically over several weeks, were excluded to maintain temporal consistency and analytical focus.

The data was submitted anonymously; therefore, age and gender can only be reported with caution. However, the essays appear to be written by five men and 21 women; one woman wrote a poem; the collage seems to have been created by a woman; and the comments cannot be assigned to a specific gender, though they seem predominantly written by women, except

for one that reflects a male perspective. In terms of age, participants refer to life stages of being in intimate long-term relationships, raising a family, or experiencing divorce, suggesting a distribution skewed toward predominantly middle-aged participants.

3.2. Analytical Procedure

The analysis integrates principles of psychoanalytic interpretation with related hermeneutics adapted to digital contexts. This approach treats followers' introspections not as direct accounts of experience, but as symbolic articulations shaped by unconscious processes, affective investments, and the affordances of the online environment. Psychoanalysis and hermeneutics assume that meaning emerges at the intersection of individual psychic structures and the socio-technical configurations of digital media (Johanssen, 2016, 2019, 2021).

Interpretation proceeded in iterative cycles of close reading, attending to both the manifest content of the essays and their latent dimensions, such as metaphorical framing, omissions, and affective tone. The hermeneutic movement between parts and whole enabled tracing recurrent symbolic constellations.

The analysis proceeded in iterative readings that moved between the manifest content of each text and its latent dimensions. Close attention was paid to the choice of words, metaphors, and affective tone, as well as to omissions and shifts in perspective. Interpretations were developed by situating these elements within the broader context of the follower–influencer relationship and the dimension of community, here the symbolic universe of #volanismus. Below, we present exemplary data alongside each dimension of meaning and relevance, describe the overarching mechanisms and meanings associated with them, and then discuss these findings.

4. Analysis: Narratives of Parasocial Feminism

Notably, the impetus for data collection was open-ended, asking for the meaning of Volane's account for her followers, and consequently could have been interpreted as addressing online behaviour; however, the data collected predominantly addresses the meaning beyond online activity, reaching into everyday practices and life in face-to-face settings.

“I was ashamed and divorced for the second time, seeing her (Volane) own her divorces, brought back pride for me”.

“I have surrounded myself with items from her merch: the tampon cushion, some wallpapers, and a mug. I find myself in an abusive relationship and am not yet ready to leave, also due to financial issues and dependencies, emotionally and practically. However, the items give me the strength to speak up and remember that we are many and there is a community out there, having my back, when the day comes. I do not have many friends, so this means the world to me, seeing how much support there is”.

“When my husband talks down to me, I try to react alongside the model of her videos and it works, it is like borrowing a voice, turning a bit into my own”.

On the manifest level, participants recount situations of relational subjugation, including divorce, abusive partnerships, and marital belittlement, that left them in states of shame, dependency, or silencing. Exposure to Volane’s public example of communication and (self-)empowerment is described as a counter-symbol that helps followers to reclaim dignity in circumstances typically marked by stigma, and related normative restrictions and punishment. Similarly, the presence of merchandise within the domestic space becomes a tangible extension of the role model and belonging to the community, a reminder of shared solidarity and a projected promise of future autonomy and power, carrying the symbolic charge of strength and collective/social support.

Latently, these accounts reveal a mechanism of symbolic anchoring, in which material artefacts and performance are introjected and enacted as psychic stabilizers (e.g., fosters hope) or concrete action (e.g., by mimicking strategies). As such, it functions both as a defensive and empowering manoeuvre, with the parasocial figure serving as a role model. As such, there might be (positive) effects on practices, demeanour, and confidence of the followers. Such practices illustrate a shift from internalized suppression toward an externalized identification that enables the assertion of the self in micro-sequences of everyday interaction as a form of (un-)learning.

Within the broader frame of social media communities, these practices shape the parasocial relationship in forms that traverse the symbolic, materializing in everyday behaviour and strategies (on the relational and pragmatic level: who one maintains relationships with), but also the constitution of the self and the body and embodied appropriation of performative models and regulation as a form of functional resistance (regulation): “She

calms me, when I am triggered”. As such, this facet addresses mechanisms of suppression and emancipation on the level of privacy and the subject and processes of identity building and the self.

“After my daughter was diagnosed with cancer, I discovered painting for myself during rehab in 2022. Afterwards, Volane further fuelled my enthusiasm when her art was shown to me on Instagram. Since then, I have become a real fangirl, with t-shirts, painting materials, brushes and much more from her. In her courses, I tried oil painting and learned to see – to really look. Since then, painting with her reference has become standard for me. I do not just admire her as an artist, I also love her personality. I would like to be as free as she is and take her as a role model, or at least work towards it ”.

“The friend I wish I had”.

“I love how encouraging she is, it is all about just getting started and doing it, not about being skilled or perfect”.

In manifest terms, the participant recounts needs for community, belonging, social support, and a role model for orientation, e.g., for practices and skill training, but also in terms of acquiring life (hobbies and being in the world) and coping in crisis. This explicitly situates the influencer’s impact within a vulnerable emotional state and existential needs, indicating not only pull factors (being attractive/empowering) but also pointing out push factors (e.g., loneliness/ individualization). The narratives centre not only around symbols and communication, but also strategies and a stance and values in life, questioning norms (deconstructing profane aesthetics and competitive comparison/ steady movement as end itself/ aimless striving).

The narrative centres on Volane’s encouragement, which is presented not as a demand for achievement but as an invitation toward process and persistence, targeting confidence, exploration, and ever becoming. The stated effect – “it brought me back to life” – marks a turning point and positions the influencer as a catalyst for psychic and creative reactivation, as well as experiences of meaning, movement, and creation as a form of being in the world in a meaningful (and meaningless in terms of aims) way. Conversely, it reveals the pressure and state of being lost in the world, constituting the need and dependency for life wisdom and role modelling, now by a parasocial place and figure.

Latently, the account reflects a dynamic of identification and introjection: Volane’s mantra becomes an internalized voice that counteracts paral-

ysis, functioning almost as a benevolent superego. The emphasis on “not being good” and the absence of the need for external acknowledgment suggest a shift away from optimization and external validation toward a self-sustaining form of agency addressing self-esteem and worth.

In the context of #volanismus, this resonates with the movement’s rejection of normative measures of worth, re-signifying artistic expression and steady movement (aimless) as a form of embodied resistance, beyond personal coping or occupation. As such, such narratives address social belonging on the relational level of the social self, community, but also learning and orienting (role modelling), communicating a form of wisdom in a world, possibly lacking such competencies and ideas of being in the world, and experiencing meaning.

“I actually(!) left my husband. I could never really put a finger on what was so freakin’ annoying until she made it visible. I had the male dickhead blindness, and she made it go away with three videos”.

“I came out as a lesbian because of Volane”.

On the manifest level, participants recount decisive and irreversible life changes directly attributed to Volane’s content: leaving one’s husband or coming out in terms of sexual orientation— exposing and risking the self. These accounts emphasize moments of rupture, marked by surprise at one’s own action and the realization that previously diffused dissatisfaction or unarticulated desire can be named and acted upon. The parasocial encounter thus provides a symbolic intervention that transforms latent unease into clarity and conviction.

Latently, these narratives reveal a dynamic of disidentification from long-held relational positions, catalysed by the influencer’s symbolic gestures and interpretations, fostering new possibilities. What had been silenced or denied becomes durable and important, triggering profound restructuring of self-positioning, fostering integrity. The mechanisms resemble reflection and enlightenment, where repressed and unformulated thoughts become thinkable, enabling transformative action.

Within the framework of #volanismus, these shifts embody the enactment of feminist critique within the most intimate domains of social life. The parasocial relationship serves as a mediated form of consciousness-raising, breaking habitual blindness and legitimizing decisive steps toward emancipation. As such, this facet addresses processes of empowering enlightenment in the sense of critical theory and reflection on power structures and positioning, leading to concrete practical change in terms of rela-

tions, social dynamics, force and resulting agency. This entails differentiation, group processes (including identity and belonging), and aggression (e.g., to regain agency, assert dominance, and expand scope).

“Do not be like Peter, be like Volane”.

“Because of Volane’s account, I have reflected a lot, also about my role as a man. I realized how toxic I sometimes was myself, and I have left a lot of that behind. To this day, I am ashamed of some things I have done, sexually, too. I was forceful. That includes sexuality, but also the way I judged and commented on women’s bodies. Volane is cool, and she re-taught me femininity in a whole different way”.

On the manifest level, the participant positions himself explicitly in relation to gendered models of behaviour – rejecting “Peter”, framed as a stereotype of older German masculinity (“Boomer”), and aspiring instead to “be like Volane”. This contrast delineates a shift from normative male socialization toward an alternative model of interaction and orientation, especially in terms of (sexually) coerciveness and (self)-subjugation. The self-description as “a male Volane” signals not only admiration but an attempt to inhabit the influencer’s ethos, with consequences for intimate conduct such as refraining from imposing personal sexual scripts on his partner, questioning stereotypical gender roles, and addressing, e.g., male sensitivity and an ability to reflect.

Latently, the statement conveys a dynamic of repudiation and introjection. As such, male identification distances itself from inherited masculine codes by internalizing a counter-figure who functions as a relational and ethical compass. This process implies not only behavioural adjustments but a psychic reorganization of moral orientation, revealing inner compositions (e.g., desire) and restrictive mechanisms (e.g., shame). The acknowledgment of forcefulness in past sexuality reveals the depth of this transformation, as it re-signifies previous practices through the lens of accountability, overcoming defence mechanisms (e.g., projection, devaluation, denial).

In the context of #volanismus, this account demonstrates how parasocial relationships can become vehicles of gendered self-reconstruction and re-defining of orientation (across gender) roles, forces, and values. The influencer’s symbolic presence mediates an unlearning of normative masculinity and facilitates alternative identifications that reshape intimate and social relations. Here, the parasocial tie operates as a site of ethical and libidinal reorganization, extending the movement’s feminist critique into male subjectivities. As such, this effect addresses reflection and stance within social

relations and roles, making a difference in relationships and the broader social context, as a form of reflexive (and philosophical) development (e.g., the search for new masculinities).

“I had another child because she was never ashamed about being a mother and still having a personality and life. I was about to have an abortion, due to shame and fear, but then her podcast aired and she was all about love and unproblematizing being a mom of four, and now I am having that child, and I think it was the right decision”.

On the manifest level, the participant recounts a decisive reproductive choice – continuing a pregnancy – directly influenced by the influencer’s public stance on and representation of motherhood. The narrative contrasts an initial intention to have an abortion, framed as driven by “shame and fear”. Volane’s depiction of motherhood as compatible with personal autonomy and vitality, described as pivotal in reframing roles and ideas, revealing negative stereotyping, social threats, marginalization, and related distress directed at mothers (urging existential measures).

Latently, the account reflects a reorganization of maternal identity in the symbolic register. The original decision toward abortion is linked to internalized societal narratives in which motherhood constricts individuality and agency. Volane’s example functions as a counter-symbol – an alternative maternal figure in which creativity, autonomy, value without recreation pressure and paradoxes, and multiplicity coexist with parenting in an equalizing manner.

Within the context of #volanismus, this is an instance of parasocial influence operating at the level of existential choice. The influencer’s public performance of motherhood becomes a tool for dismantling stigmatized maternal scripts, enabling followers to construct an alternative narrative of reproductive agency, paving the way for acquiring motherhood in ways of subjectification, beyond the social role. The parasocial tie here mediates a psychic and symbolic transformation with enduring consequences for identity and life trajectory, demonstrating the depth at which such relationships can intervene in the follower’s lived reality. Overall, this perspective addresses life decisions and (existential) pressure within society, highlighting the significance of social support and role modelling for encouragement, to the extent that it seems relevant in terms of implicit and explicit violence, coercive mechanisms, and bodily and mental integrity and wholeness.

“I started wearing whatever I want because of her, and I also started saying what I want. And I have her with me, her merch but also in my habi-

tus, and finally I deeply reflected about how to be loyal towards other women really impacting how I think and act towards them”.

“I will just say it: I got a tattoo of her. Because of her, I have become a better father, I have reflected on myself, and I have learned a lot. I do not even want to imagine what kind of father I would have become otherwise. I am fully prepared, tampon plush toy and all, for when my kids get their periods. That would never have been on my radar before”.

On the manifest level, participants describe concrete behavioural changes across domains of appearance, expression, and positioning. These range from adopting new modes of clothing and speech (“wearing whatever I want,” “saying what I want”) to rethinking one’s stance toward gendered relations and loyalty to women, or even preparing as a father to engage differently with daughters’ bodily experiences. References to “having her with me”, whether through merchandise, a tattoo, or symbolic artefacts, point to the tangible and embodied presence of the influencer within everyday life, bridging culture and lived practice.

Latently, these accounts reflect processes of empowerment through symbolic incorporation and a reorientation of social positioning. Internalized constraints are loosened as clothing, speech, and parenting are re-framed not only as individual choices but as enactments of solidarity and respect, adding to a re-organization of the social by micro-changes (bearing the potential to add up as collective action). Material artefacts such as merch or tattoos signify more than consumer affiliation: they inscribe the parasocial tie into daily existence and embodied realm, communicating themselves (becoming a symbol in the world, and thus a part of possible recognition and spreading change— as such a tattoo can signal a moral stance, for those familiar with the movement). The reference to “in my habitus” resonates with Bourdieu’s notion of durable dispositions (Bourdieu, 2018), indicating that Volane’s ethos has been absorbed into embodied patterns of being, reaching beyond admiration to the restructuring of self-conduct and relational scripts.

Within the symbolic framework of #volanismus, these testimonies illustrate how parasocial relationships materialize as embodied self-expression, where identification, affective allegiance, and culture (e.g., loyalty, identification, group belonging) converge. The parasocial connection thus becomes part of the follower’s symbolic and bodily repertoire, enacted continuously in public and private life as a form of self-expression and incorporated habitus, with the potential of relational relevance and social change (group processes).

“Everything about Volane is like a fairy tale with a good ending”.

“Volane is a safe space for sensitive people”.

On the manifest level, this framing conveys both a personal attribution and a broader, almost communal meaning. The additional statement, “Everything about Volane is like a fairy tale with a good ending,” situates her presence within a narrative structure, associating her with resolution, security, and hope, constituting not only a space, but place (including traditions and culture).

Latently, this testimony reveals a psychic mechanism that resembles containment and reparative fantasy. The notion of a “safe space” suggests a counterbalance to experiences of (collective) vulnerability, hostility, or lack of recognition in other spheres of life, but also in terms of places, pointing out how followers might be lost in the physical realm (where to go?). Volane functions similarly to a transitional object and holding environment, offering symbolic protection and stability, something to turn to. The reference to a “fairy tale with a good ending” suggests a desire for narrative closure, in which ambiguity and threat are resolved into certainty and reassurance. This indicates an introjection of the influencer as an idealized figure capable of providing both safety and narrative coherence.

Within the symbolic frame of #volanismus, this account illustrates how parasocial relationships extend beyond inspiration or empowerment into affective regulation. Volane is positioned as a psychic container for vulnerability, transforming exposure in digital environments into an experience of shelter and solidarity. The parasocial tie is not described in terms of content consumption, but as a relational structure that offers refuge, continuity, and the promise of a favourable resolution, indirectly addressing transcendence. In this way, the influencer becomes part of the follower’s emotional architecture, a symbolic guarantor of safety. Here, the parasocial figure and the related community serve as a locus of solace, where followers withdraw from face-to-face realms and turn toward digital belonging, balancing distress and alienation. This underscores the significance of echo chambers and influencer-specific tone and scope, which shape a recognizable and steady environment with soothing effects. As such, the parasocial community becomes an important social mechanism for followers’ sense of self, depicted as group-specific and serving as a source of identity (for instance, through self-identification as “sensitive”).

5. Findings: Shaping the Everyday Life of Parasocially Entangled Relational Beings

The analysis revealed that followers' accounts operate on multiple, interwoven levels of meaning. On the most immediate level, participants describe inspiration and role modelling, as well as the resulting concrete actions, decisions, and behavioural shifts that they attribute directly to their engagement with Volane's content. Beneath these explicit changes lie latent processes on different levels of the self as (parasocially entangled) relational being. These include processes of parasocially altered identification, social belonging and orientation, and related experienced reconnect with inner values, beliefs, and wants, as a way to get in touch with intuition and integrity. On the relational level, the parasocial entanglement includes introjection and disidentification with roles and external expectations, including (re-)negotiations of (incorporated and external) social restrictions and scope. Being part of Volane's community materializes in followers' everyday lives in both tangible and intangible forms. Embodied changes appear in clothing choices, bodily comportment, and modes of self-presentation and behaviour (glancing at other women, changing who to focus on in meetings, and how and when to speak up). In some cases, Volane's presence is physically carried into daily life through merchandise and tattoos, or existential decisions, while in other cases it is incorporated into the "habitus" as a durable disposition shaping perception and conduct. As such, the parasocial figure and the related community (i.e., Volane) are internalized as a psychic and symbolic figure, an ego-ideal or counter-symbol, capable of displacing restrictive scope and relational scripts and self-subjugation.

Taken together, these dynamics can be clustered into four thematic constellations that articulate core psychological and social mechanisms of parasociality. Emancipation emerges in accounts where followers identify and resist oppressive dynamics that had previously constrained decision-making, enabling profound life changes and resistance against suppression and entrenched power relations. Prudence (competence to care for the self and others in sustainable ways) denotes the cultivation of orientation and practical wisdom in everyday life, where followers mobilize Volane's example to approach the world with enhanced reflexivity and to re-signify experiences of vulnerability and disorientation. Reorientation within gender roles highlights shifts in the negotiation of masculinity and femininity through alternative identifications, leading to transformations in intimate conduct, bodily practices, and sexual behavior, and fostering embodied and mental integrity. Self-expression and habitus designate processes through which followers integrate symbolic and material artefacts into their daily lives, embodying dispositions

of confidence, self-worth, and dignity. Finally, Volane is repeatedly described as a place of solace, a psychic and communal container that provides continuity, belonging, and validation, while simultaneously devaluing generalized others who embody oppressive structures.

Latently, these constellations reveal parasocial mechanisms that stabilize the self: confidence and self-esteem are fostered through identification with the influencer's ethos; validation and recognition are derived from her voice and the community's stance; predictable continuity in the online space serves as an anchor against experiences of alienation; and social belonging provides a framework for resisting devaluation in offline contexts. As such, parasociality is not limited to imagination or symbolic attachment but materializes as embodied reorientation, affective regulation, and the formation of a collective habitus, turning individual vulnerability into shared strength.

Across these clusters, the parasocial tie emerges as a mediated psychic attachment that fuses affect, symbolism, and practice. Through sustained exposure to Volane's persona, ethos, and community (including scope in expression, culture, and traditions), followers not only absorb but enact elements of her digital presence in their own lives. In this sense, parasociality is not confined to the realm of imagination but becomes materially and symbolically embedded in everyday conduct, shaping the parasocial self in profound and lasting ways.

Such forms of parasocial feminism have a distinct impact beyond digital platforms, as we have shown. Yet, a fundamental tension and ambivalence remain between individual and collective actions. At the same time, subjects might feel and act empowered on the micro level (decision in their everyday life), while empowerment remains tied to being a consumer in a transactional logic, kept in an individualized mode (being on the phone, usually alone, disconnected from others in a physical realm and oriented towards one parasocial figure).

6. Discussion: Potentials and Pitfalls of Parasocial Feminism

The findings highlight the empowering potential of parasocial relationships in the framework of parasocial feminism. For many followers, Volane functions as a figure of emancipation and resistance, offering not only symbolic wisdom but also a model for navigating structural and intimate constraints. Her presence fosters reflexivity, encourages a renegotiation of gender roles, and supports forms of self-expression that affirm both bodily and psychological autonomy.

Participants report tangible effects in their daily lives. These range from creative activation and emotional reorientation to fundamental life changes, including separation, reproductive decisions, shifts in sexual scripts, and parenting practices. In this way, the data not only echoes earlier research on the psychological relevance of parasociality, such as identity validation and emotional regulation, but also extends it by revealing how these processes of materialization acquire relational weight in everyday practice (Schraube, 2009).

At the same time, the data reveals a critical state of social organizing and relatedness, indicating a broader crisis of intimacy marked by diminished relational and sexual competencies. This is reflected in narratives of coercion, implicit violence, and internalized subjugation, relocating imbalances of power and violence into the subtle and implicit (e.g., in the form of incorporation). Intimacy, in these accounts, appears reduced to procedural skills and explicit negotiation, especially around consent, while deeper dimensions such as cultural literacy, embodied intuition, and sexual self-worth remain underdeveloped or disconnected. These findings resonate with current critiques that problematize the mechanization of sexuality and its confinement to rationalized, transactional frameworks (Degen, 2023a, 2025; Hartmann *et al.*, 2024).

Beyond the individual level, the data emphasizes the significance of community and social embeddedness. Followers describe Volane's online space as a site of solace and symbolic continuity, offering both validation and protection against relational alienation. Parasociality here extends beyond the influencer-follower dyad and is reinforced through communal affective dynamics, which resonates with social identity theories (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) that highlight the stabilizing function of shared meaning-making. Such online feminist spaces appear to offer an affective infrastructure that compensates for lacking face-to-face (offline) experiences of fragmentation and loneliness and growing (neo-)nihilism (Plesa, 2025). As such, they become effective through pull- and push-factors: on the one hand, users are drawn by inspiration, community, and empowerment; on the other, they are driven (pushed) by feelings of continued and reinforced isolation and social disconnection in non-digital realms.

Despite its transformative potential, the findings also reveal apparent limitations. The reported changes, ranging from self-optimization and confidence to life-altering decisions, remain distinctly individualized. They do not translate into collective mobilization or structural critique. This mirrors the concerns raised by critics of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), who argue that digital feminist activism often replicates the logics of platform economies: personalization, branding, and the commodification of authenticity (Saraswati, 2021; Willem & Tortajada, 2021). Volane's activism, while positioned against misogyny, follows recognizably entrepreneurial patterns. Parasocial intimacy is cultivated, symbolic capital monetized, and self-representation framed

through authority, authenticity, and autonomy. This reflects a central ambivalence: the same structures that enable empowerment – platform capitalism, influencer culture – also constrain its radical potential (Srnicek, 2017).

Feminist influencers are frequently contrasted with traditional activists, often dismissed as less serious or effective. While this critique highlights the softness of parasocial activism and its appeal to affective needs, it risks reproducing hierarchical distinctions that delegitimize feminized forms of labour. As Scharff (2024) notes, influencers may be embedded in broader activist networks, even when their output appears individualized. Yet their labour is often trivialized as “unskilled”, a gesture that reinscribes gendered devaluation. This means that exclusionary femininity is paradoxically affirmed through ideals of perfection, while femininity itself remains undervalued. Accordingly, such structural tensions are not addressed in the follower narratives. Users focus on Volane’s personal relevance and personal gain rather than articulating social critique or collective struggle, revealing ambivalences of parasocial feminism; while deeply affecting and subjectively empowering, it remains tethered to individualized frameworks that risk substituting symbolic connection for political transformation. Distinctions between the political and the economic are all the harder to draw in platform capitalism. Yet, it is interesting that they were not raised in the data and users emphasised Volane’s significance for their own lives rather than also speaking about collective struggles or social issues.

The dynamics of parasociality in this context reveal a structural ambivalence. Processes such as validation, emotional continuity, and esteem-building foster subjective stability and agency. At the same time, the emotional and ideological investment in a singular figure risk reinforcing dependency, narrowing the scope of engagement, and entrenching polarization, finally reinforcing individualization and isolation. Empowerment, in this model, is mediated not through collective identification but through symbolic alignment with a charismatic individual.

These findings suggest that parasocial feminism offers a distinct mode of affective and cognitive reorientation. It facilitates forms of emancipation and resistance that are deeply embedded in everyday life. Yet, its transformative power remains restricted by the limitations of platform capitalism. The emphasis on individualized empowerment then eclipses structural critique and impedes collective action.

In sum, the findings depict how parasocial feminism relocates central power structures and social functions into the digital, where they are renegotiated through mediated intimacy and symbolic belonging. This reconfiguration is not adequately captured by focusing on the symptom of “being online”. Instead, it demands an analysis of causality, reason, and meaning as they emerge from the subject’s perspective. Parasocial relations are not secondary or compensatory

but become central modes through which individuals orient themselves psychosocially and socially. Understanding these dynamics means approaching digital communities as spaces where intimacy, authority, and community are actively constituted, under conditions shaped by fragmentation, individualization, and platform governance, creating a sphere of ambivalences and contradictions between explicit and implicit (subtle) dynamics.

A limitation of the present study lies in the choice of platform. The material was collected exclusively on Instagram, which represents only one segment of the social media landscape and one mode of parasocial relation. Unlike TikTok, where ephemeral trends and algorithmic circulation outweigh the relevance of individual accounts, Instagram still privileges personal followership and narrative continuity. Consequently, the mechanisms of attachment and meaning-making observed here may differ from those found on more trend-driven platforms.

In addition, the account selected for this exploratory analysis was German and represented a distinct feminist voice from Germany. This context likely shaped both the kind of audience engagement and the thematic focus of responses. The sample, predominantly composed of middle-aged women, therefore limits the range of generalizability. Nevertheless, it provides insight into broader mechanisms and meaning structures that transcend demographic specificity.

7. Conclusion

The findings reveal that parasocial relatedness shapes the social self at its core, with influencers and their communities becoming meaningful reference points that expand identity through group processes, social belonging, and mechanisms of validation and soothing. As such, the study reveals how core functions of social life and community are relocated into the digital realm, which is of course not a neutral place, but entangling social processes with specific characteristics and conditions (polarization, underlying economic logics, one-sidedness, artificially produced unequivocally, and reduction and fragmentation, and many more). Parasociality on social media is effective through pull factors (available, predictable, reliable, effective forms of relationality) and also reveals push factors (individualization, loneliness, relationship problems). As such, the present conjuncture enables and increases the relevance of parasociality for subjects, indirectly constituting a critique of contemporary social life and the idea of community. Parasocial relationships, then, carry significant psychological meaning and practical relevance, functioning as corrective and transformative forces that

enable followers to address unmet social needs. Parasocial relationships become resources for self-repair and everyday resistance while contributing to collective identity. Importantly, the communal dimension fills gaps left by contemporary forms of social organization, replicating and relocating central mechanisms of social life into online contexts. As such, the community becomes functional in providing continuity, orientation, and a sense of belonging, yet it remains shaped by the conditions of platform capitalism, where individualization and commodification risk impeding the development of more radical forms of collective action.

The significance and mechanisms of parasocial relationships recently observed and supported with in-depth insights from this exploratory study point to several practical implications. First, the findings demonstrate how functions of the social self, social organization, and community are increasingly being relocated into the digital realm. This is crucial for understanding the meanings of the digital, which is often demonized or dismissed as merely problematic, accompanied by calls for subjects to reduce the time they spend online. Such perspectives overlook that online spaces fulfil substantial social and psychological functions that cannot simply be eliminated but must be understood in their causality. Prevention and intervention efforts could therefore address causes rather than symptoms of excessive or distressing online engagement.

Moreover, the results indicate that parasocial relationships operate beyond cognitive reflection, involving deeper affective and relational mechanisms. This insight is relevant for educational, psychoeducational, and therapeutic work. The assumption that “online is not real” is empirically inaccurate and conceptually misleading. Online interaction constitutes a form of reality and recognizing it allows for more adequate interventions. Rather than contrasting digital with face-to-face communication, examining what needs these mediated relations fulfil, what forms of connection they compensate for, and finally, how these can be reinstated in face-to-face settings becomes essential.

Finally, policies and educational approaches primarily aimed at restriction or behavioral regulation tend to address symptoms rather than structural causes. The more demanding and necessary task lies in addressing the quality and possibility of social life itself, its increasing fragmentation and individualization, and the need for meaningful forms of belonging and community as an alternative to the digital realm, in the best case, making it obsolete, without restrictions. Policies, therefore, need to engage with the question of how community and a sensual and social life – maybe even as forms of resocialization – can be envisioned and sustained beyond neoliberal capitalist dynamics and increasing nihilism, rather than merely mitigating their effects.

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