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Ladies Only:  
 Redrawing the Lines of Gender Identity One Dance Party at a Time



*Figure 1- Housewife2Hostess advertises her Unicorn Dance Party.*

Through the small square window of Instagram, I am hailed by a type of womanhood that sparkles and dances, bakes trendy cookies, and makes of motherhood and homemaking a joyful, even lucrative career. No longer shuttered away in the privacy of the home without an audience to validate their domestic work, these women are fully in the public sphere and inviting others to join them at their “ladies only” dance parties. These Instagram personalities, who for the purposes of this project I will be calling Insta-Ladies, represent a cultural phenomenon grown out of Utah’s conservatism. It is my contention that Insta-Ladies and the followers they attract are wary of feminism but still seek to empower women—albeit safely under the umbrella of a

traditional womanhood that doesn't threaten, but rather serves patriarchal capitalism. They do so by packaging an old ideology in millennial pink and creative self-expression—delivered by women whose entrepreneurial success makes it difficult to accuse them of not being progressive role models for other women. However, in examining the rhetoric of their Instagram accounts and the parties they throw, we see a pattern emerge: Insta-Ladies and the communities they form rhetorically position themselves as a counterpublic of women in need of self-actualization and affirmation in a broader public sphere—and yet they reinforce a hegemony that calls women into a traditional femininity that reifies their dominated position in society.

To demonstrate this phenomenon, I will be examining two popular Instagram accounts who trend together, are local to Utah, and who both host dance parties for women.

TheAlisonShow and Housewife2Hostess are social media brands belonging to women who use Instagram as a delivery mechanism for their lifestyle, blog-like content, and to advertise the events they organize and host. At the time of writing this essay, Housewife2Hostess had 25k followers, while TheAlisonShow had 111k followers. I intend to show that these Insta-Ladies shape a public that appropriates the counterpublic rhetoric of female empowerment without countering the patriarchal norms that inaugurate their need for a counterpublic in the first place.

The Insta-Ladies gain followers by making of their very lives a performance of womanhood, motherhood, and femininity. Michael Warner tells us, “There is no speech or performance addressed to a public that does not try to specify in advance. . .the lifeworld of its circulation. . .” (422 “Abbreviated”). Which is to say, Insta-Ladies aren't merely a manifestation of a public, but rather creators of a public as well in the curated performance of their lives. However, their public is counter to a broader public in its rhetoric, and the audience that discourse calls into being is demarcated by gender and style. Robert Asen and Daniel C.

Brouwer affirm that counterpublics can be organized by “specificity of. . .gender” (7) that form “parallel discursive arenas” (Fraser [Quoted by Asen] 7). The discourse used by these Insta-Ladies on Instagram specifically addresses women, and a very specific kind of woman at that. This counterpublic of women is actualized in physical spaces when the Insta-Ladies draw upon their considerable fan base to sell tickets to their large dance parties—meaning that both online and off, women participate in a counterpublic framed by the Insta-Ladies. This is significant because as Warner states, “Counterpublics of sexuality and gender. . .are scenes of association and identity that transform the private lives they mediate” (57). The women who admire the Insta-Ladies and attend their events are affirmed and validated in their adherence to certain markers of femininity drawn by the discriminating hand of the Insta-Ladies themselves.

Housewife2Hostess and TheAlisonShow often dole out advice to their followers, with “self-love” and “tuning out the haters” being recurring themes in their messaging. They regularly post of their own doubts about what they do or who they are, implying that they feel judged, criticized, or otherwise insecure in their identities. TheAlisonShow posted on March 19<sup>th</sup> of this year, “There are a lot of people who do what I do. Lots of blonde, Utah women taking photos of themselves. . .sharing thoughts, hosting events, giving advice. . .So why on earth do I bother?” She goes on to explain that she has her own unique voice that should be shared, and then extrapolates that into encouragement for her audience to likewise share their voices. She turns these anecdotes into inspirational memes (see Figure 1.)



*Figure 2- TheAlisonShow turns self-doubt into affirmation for her audience.*

In these gestures of affirmation despite doubts, Insta-Ladies rhetorically position themselves and their followers as a counterpublic, but what exactly they are countering isn't immediately obvious. Warner points out that, "Counterpublics are often called 'subaltern counterpublics' but it is not clear that counterpublics are composed of people otherwise dominated as subalterns. . .many who participate in them are 'subalterns' in no other sense" (57). While these Insta-Ladies may appropriate the self-affirming language of a subaltern group, they aren't necessarily coming from a disempowered position. Housewife2Hostess and TheAlisonShow are both hetero, white, middle class, married, living in suburbia and are members of the dominant religion in their state. A brief perusal of their Instagram accounts makes clear that what they love is dancing, fashion, parties, their children, homemaking, and fitness. It's hard to imagine that their identities or their interests cost them cultural capital in a conservative state that values traditional gender roles and conventional gender performance. While there is certainly nothing wrong with trying to encourage other women to feel good about themselves, we must consider the context of their

rhetoric, and who that rhetoric leaves out. When, for example, Housewife2Hostess is advertising a party and writes, “Get a sitter or plan for your hubby [to] host a fun ‘Dad’s Night In’ with the kiddos” she is speaking to a very specific type of woman; one who is in a traditional marriage, is a mother, and who is assumed to bear the brunt of child care in her relationship—such that she must make special arrangements for her husband to watch his own children so she can leave the house. These Insta-Ladies are not speaking to (or for) lesbians, trans women, single women, single mothers, women without children, or any other identification that runs counter to a very traditional, cisgender, heteronormative female. This isn’t to say that they should or must champion identities so different from their own. Rather, I mean to highlight that within a counterpublic where they proclaim to unify women, they enculturate a specific kind of female identity that is politically benign within the conservative culture they inhabit.

The female identity promulgated by the Insta-Ladies does not challenge conventional expectations, nor is she interested in being explicitly political or transgressive. This is so despite that these women likely will encounter oppression and discrimination based on their gender—like living in a state that can claim the largest gender pay gap (Davidson). However, Asen & Brouwer explain that “inhabitants of marginal identities do not always oppose domination in their activities in wider publics; to insist that oppositionality inheres in marginal identities is to overlook these peoples’ mundane or hegemonically complicit activities” (8-9). Though they behave like a counterpublic, Insta-Ladies and their attendant communities aren’t gathered with the intent to oppose domination. If anything, they reify a “popular aesthetic” which as Pierre Bourdieu contends, is the “dominated aesthetic” precisely because it adheres to “implicit principles and rules which it betrays more than it states” (84). The implied principles of the Insta-Ladies are ones that fall in line with a patriarchal view of how women ought to be; skilled

homemakers, nurturers, eternally youthful, sexy yet wholesome, and always positive rather than critical. A closer look at their ladies only dance parties will support this analysis.

Housewife2Hostess describes her dance parties as being a “safe” place for women to take a break from life in an environment that has a “cool club-like feel (minus the creepers).” This aside made in one of her postings acknowledges that women don’t feel safe in certain public spaces, like dance clubs. Warner recognizes this reality when he states: “Women, accustomed to being the spectacle displayed to male desire, often experience the visibility of public space as a kind of intimate vulnerability” (24). The ladies only dance parties counteract that vulnerability, by creating a space where the women do not feel they are on view for men or susceptible to their advances—which belies their dominated position in a gender hierarchy. However, it is this dominated position that the Insta-Ladies do not or will not acknowledge despite their organizing of gender segregated events. Housewife2Hostess, for example, reveals her skepticism of feminism and the #metoo movement, which she shared in an Instagram “live” post. She expresses her dismay with these movements because, “sick creepy men are getting generalized as all men” and argues that feminism should be about equal rights for all people, not just women, because “drawing a line” by gender is problematic. These are ironic statements, given that she herself has generalized all men in clubs as “creepers” and because she has based her business of female empowerment on “drawing a line” between genders, despite her stating the same move to be problematic within her perception of feminism.

It can be said then, that the rhetoric of these parties anticipates women who are wary of men, but simultaneously act as their apologist. The counterpublic of the Insta-Ladies disavows any notion of a gender hierarchy, while paradoxically feeling the need to create “safe” spaces for women. This is yet another example of how the Insta-Ladies create counterpublics of women

whose aim is not to oppose their own domination in society. They rather seem to want to assure us that such domination doesn't exist, which, serves to maintain and re-establish an existing hegemony.

If one were to assume that these parties simply gave women what they wanted, it could be read that women want to play dress-up in infantilizing themes and to be told what things they should buy to improve the way they look. Past themes of these parties, that the women dress to match, have been the 80's, mermaids, unicorns, or fairies. Being that these parties are sponsored by companies looking to market to women, vendors set up booths or hand out "swag" so that party goers can experience their product. These products almost always include fitness-wear, cosmetics, dietary aids, "health" foods, or esthetician services like waxing. Despite the monetary motives that arguably exploit women's societal anxieties about their appearance, the parties themselves are billed as empowering, pro-woman events. When *Housewife2Hostess* advertises her parties, she frames them as opportunities for women to take a night off, be pampered, and remember who they were before they had children—which sounds liberating on the surface. However, as *Fem Magazine* has pointed out, the consumption of products intended to help us perform traditional femininity doesn't liberate women but rather pulls them back into marginalizing patterns.

It is important to note that many of the products targeted at promoting traditional feminine roles and femininity are housed (pun intended) under a guise of liberation. . .it normalizes a female social role centered on appearance and status rather than intellectual growth and financial success. The commodification of femininity reveals how various marketing practices and strategies shape consumer

patterns, gender identities, and social roles that continue to perpetuate gender inequality. (Sewell)

In other words, the version of woman realized by and through Insta-Ladies and their sponsored parties is one that serves market interests more than it serves the women themselves. They are not simply giving women what they want, but rather *telling* women what to want. The products endorsed at these parties are ones that call women into stricter adherence to beauty standards and consumption of products as the way to form their identities and realize their ideal selves. For all that the parties and their hostesses may trumpet inspirational, pro-woman messages, this is not a purely empowering environment for women.

However much the attendees may feel discomfort at being made into market subjects at what is supposed to be a “night off” for women, this reality is obscured by the “collective public intimacy” and “ecstatic spirituality” experienced at the events that answers a “longing for unity” (Warner 26). With a D.J. pumping top 40 hits, and the Insta-Lady hostess acting as a master of ceremonies who hypes up the crowd, feelings of group affirmation and unity are part of the appeal. Warner elaborates that, “Inevitably, identity politics itself magnetizes such longings, affirming private identity through public politics and promising to heal divisions of the political world by anchoring them in the authentically personal realm and its solidarity” (26). Women’s private selves are moved into a public space at these parties, and being surrounded by other like-minded women encourages feelings of solidarity. This social experience functionally glosses over the limited or politically problematic hyper-feminized identity that is elevated at these events. TheAlisonShow says of her parties, “I love the encouragement, unity and power we have when we are united. Together we are unstoppable, and I think that’s why resistance tries so hard to tear us apart!” This comment captions a photo of a woman crowd surfing at one of the parties,

which is a favored photo op used by both TheAlisonShow and Housewife2Hostess. The latter says in an identical posting of her own, “As we raise each other up, together we create something more magical than we ever could alone.”



 housewife2hostess • Follow

housewife2hostess As we raise each other up, together we create something more magical than we ever could alone. T minus 13 until #WonderlandDanceParty, tickets in my profile link!

I hope you feel like you're crowd surfing into the weekend like 🥳🥳🥳🥳🥳🥳  
 @tabithapark

#party #friend #friends #besties #guys #girls #chill #chilling #kickit #kickinit #cool #love #partytime #memories #partying #night #fun #smile #socialenvy #music #PleaseForgiveMe #instaparty #instafun #funtimes #instagood #happy #bestoftheday #crazy

alenagolubovich Can't wait to see what you do!!

heyitsjenna Ahhhh you always go all out!! Seriniuslv wish I was local!

👍🗨️  
 293 likes  
 FEBRUARY 17

Log in to like or comment. ...



 thealisonshow • Follow

thealisonshow Happy #internationalwomensday !!! I LOVE BEING A WOMAN. I love the encouragement, unity and power we have when we are united. Together we are unstoppable, and I think that's why resistance tries so hard to tear us apart! Our world encourages comparison, separation, gossip and judgement. It's poison. I believe that as women one of the most powerful things we can do is not let those things divide us. Judgement and fear divide us, LOVE and

👍🗨️  
 2,341 likes  
 MARCH 8, 2017

Log in to like or comment. ...

Figure 3-4, Women literally lifting other women at the dance parties.

And indeed, it is true that the social nature of these events can be productive in transforming identities, by lifting up and celebrating a specific type of womanhood within a positive environment that is sheltered from external factors.

Women's private lives of the domestic sphere and gender identity are transformed when they are extended and validated in these public events. In a setting of positivity and validation, women identify with traditional forms of gender performance, guided by the self-actualizing rhetoric of a counterpublic. Communities called into being by the Insta-Ladies posit a universalizing conception of what it is to be a woman. But this version of woman keeps them safely within the bounds of patriarchal gender expression, and also makes them subjects who are easier to sell to in a market place of ever increasing products women can consume to construct their identities. The result being a fairly homogenous body of women who are de-politicized, and persuaded into conformity that makes them compliant subjects within patriarchal capitalism. All of this, of course, obscured and frosted over by glitter and fun.



*Figure 5- Party goers wearing party masks of their hostess.*

Analyzing Insta-Ladies and their parties reveals how a counterpublic does not always resist, and may even be complicit in, its own domination. Rhetoric within counterpublics that

seems to promote self-affirmation and actualization can in fact be re-inscribing oppressive lines of gender identity that keep their subjects marginalized. Insta-Ladies trade in on their adherence to a hegemonic order for capital gain, and in doing so persuade other women that this is an empowering version of feminine identity. If we find ourselves stepping into those lines, it is helpful to remember that they can be just as small and limiting as an Instagram square.

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